Ye Heirs of Glory

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Ye Heirs of Glory

by Kyele

Summary

For a prompt on the kink meme. Summarized: Set in a Dystopia AU, where the rise of the Church and the majority of the population being Betas has made Alphas and Omegas seem unnatural and ungodly. Something to be scorned and expunged from society… Not all parents are willing to condemn their children to such cruelty and so Alphas and Omegas have taken to hiding their genders, covering their scents in perfumes and oils and spices, drugging themselves through heats and using restrictive bindings for their knots.

Athos and Porthos are both hiding Alphas, Aramis and d’Artagnan are Omegas, and eventually the four come together as Musketeers in the Kings service. At first all is well, then their genders and fertile states are revealed…
For this prompt on the bbcmusketeers kink meme (note, the full prompt is long and fairly detailed).

The explicit rating is mainly for the dystopian AU (mind the tags), but there will eventually be sex. (Though if you are just here for the sex you will be disappointed. The sex is not for a while. On the plus side, if you’re here for the worldbuilding, hoo boy, are you in luck. I think my actual bulletproof kink is worldbuilding. I promise actual sex though. Just… eventually.)

Title from this hymn, because it wouldn’t be a Musketeers fic without some bonus Catholicism in the title.

For your listening pleasure, this now comes with a fic soundtrack courtesy of the incomparable theonenamedafterahat (bean-about-town)! Listen here, full jewel case art here! Thank you so much!
René d’Herblay

The Inquisition has had hold of Spain for centuries before René d’Herblay is born. It begins in Rome, but spreads quickly to the rest of Europe. Its influence waxes and wanes according to the country it’s in. Through much of Europe, the wealth and power of the noble houses limits the influence of Rome. To be noble in pre-Inquisition Europe had been to be a pureblood, scion of one of the ancient lines whose strength is carefully maintained by allowing no Beta to interbreed, Alphas and Omegas mating in an unbroken chain back to the time of Christ. Naturally, such noble houses oppose the new doctrines, and the struggle between Church and State drags on in some countries even to the present day.

In the region that will become Spain, however, the situation deteriorates quickly. Political instability in the area’s princedoms combines with fear of damnation and the rise of the Beta-dominated lower classes against the pureblood noble houses. A vicious civil war ensues. When it’s over, the Betas Ferdinand and Isabella sit the newly combined throne, and begin the newborn Spain’s history with fire and blood.

The old Castilian and Aragonese nobility convert or are murdered. Their land is parceled out among the children – Beta offspring – of crown loyalists from the uprising. The new Beta nobility are, in turn, ever more faithful to the Inquisition. They preach the need for purity and turn the scythe on any of their own people who are born throwbacks to an earlier time.

The Duchy of Alameda is one of the few ancient titles still in the hands of its original bloodline. It owes that distinction to its aggressive support of Beta purity. When the Inquisition had been instated, the twin doctrines of Beta supremacy and Alpha/Omega sterilization had been proclaimed to the far corners of the realm. The Alameda family at the time had had two offspring, an elder Alpha pup and a younger male Beta child. The Alameda Beta had promptly murdered his family and declared his support for the New Church.

Since then, the Alamedas have been the standard-bearers of a new type of purebreed. The young René can trace his heritage back through twelve generations of Betas. If his family does produce any pups, they aren’t sterilized and sent to a convent the way other families’ throwbacks are: they’re smothered in their cribs, a bloody tribute to Beta supremacy.

At least, that is the story everyone knows.

The true story is one that is whispered to René in quiet moments. Late at night, when the servants have all gone to bed, the Alamedan offspring gather for a second set of lessons. His mother – no, his carrier – cradles them in her arms and murmurs the truth into their ears.

For that is the truth. René has no mother; mother is a Beta term for the female who bears young, because for Betas, gender – male or female – is what governs their matings and their laws of inheritance. René has a carrier, an Omega who whelped him. The man he calls father is in fact no Beta male, but a true Alpha, and properly René’s sire. Alpha and Omega, not male and female. Sex, not gender. That is the truth of the Alameda clan.

The long-dead Alameda family had been murdered. That part of the story is true. But the knife had been wielded, not by their son, but by a traitorous servant. Much as René has no mother or father, the family had no son, no male Beta offspring. The younger Alameda had been an Alpha in his own right, whose sibling would have called him aleph, Alpha, in the old language of Alphaic/Omegan family relations. The younger Alameda had come upon the servant in the act of killing his family and slain the servant in his turn. Then he had turned his attention to the salvation of the Alameda line.
The Alamedas are the last pure family in Spain. They have maintained their power and their position through secrecy, lies and self-denial. They live as Betas in every way. Their purity – a different kind of purity than that proclaimed by the Betas – is its own protection. The sign of a true pureblood had always been a delicate, refined, retiring scent. Unlike the mongrels and mixed-bloods whose aggressive scents and low-cut garments had made them easy prey, a true purebred – a true Alameda – might conceal their true sex with simple perfumes and modest clothing. For generations they had survived, selecting their mates carefully from those who had fallen between the Inquisition’s cracks, and taught each new generation the tricks of hiding their true sexes.

This future of nobility in hiding is not available to René. He has always known that one day he must leave home. His death will be faked and he will be sent out into the world to find his fortune. He is an Omega, and there is no room for him here.

He’s survived puppyhood by appearing to the world as a Beta male. But that ruse will only support him until he comes of age. Then, as an heir of the noble Alameda bloodline, he will be expected to marry and procreate in the way of Betas.

An Omega cannot sire young. René’s parents could find him an Alpha female mate, and society might be fooled for a little while longer. But when the wrong belly grew round with pups everything would be over.

When René approaches puberty, his parents hug him one final time, press a purse into his hands, and send him over the border into France. With him comes his littermate Adele. Her problem is the same as his. With female gender characteristics, Beta society expects her to bear young. But an Alpha cannot carry.

They cross the mountains together. Back home in Alameda the family’s carriage goes into the lake. The servant driving the carriage escapes, but the bodies of the two middle Alameda children are never found.

The d’Herblays fetch up in Paris, for the simple reasons that a big city is easiest to get lost in and has many opportunities for talented youth. René is eager to disappear. As a Musketeer he is one among many. An Omega would not have been trained as a soldier, in the old days, but the Alamedas could not afford to hew to such stereotypes. Indeed, it’s by exploiting them to their advantage the family has survived for so long. René has been training with the sword and the musket since he could first walk. He knows how to compensate for an Omega’s lack of upper body strength with his corresponding increase in flexibility and speed, so that his swordfights end quickly before his opponents can overwhelm him. He understands how to counterbalance his poor recoil compensation with superior deftness and hand-eye coordination, so that he never needs to fire a second shot. And he learns to fake the aggressive behaviors he doesn’t naturally possess.

The life of a soldier is in all other ways ideal. Musketeers must be unmated, so he needn’t fear the unwelcome advances of beta women. Journeys to remote areas are common for training purposes, allowing him to hide his heats from society. And no one will look for an Omega in the armed forces.

He’s nervous about the danger of living in close quarters with so many other Beta males. But it turns out he’s not the only one who prefers to keep to himself. Captain Treville’s regiment seems to attract those who wish to start over. René fits right in. He doesn’t mind the new name, the new identity, the lies. He just wants to forget his past.

Adele, by contrast, wants to write her anger in fire across the bodies of her oppressors. She never forgets that Alameda should have been hers, and its wealth and power with it. But because of the Inquisition the duchy will instead go to the baby aleph they’d left behind in their carrier’s arms. He
will pass as a male Beta, and sire children upon a female Omega masquerading as a female Beta. A trick of gender, male Alpha instead of female Alpha, makes all the difference.

René worries for his aleph. (Sister, he'd been taught to say, and his parents had always called Adele daughter. But they're no longer in Spain, and in private René may say aleph for his Alpha sibling if he wishes it. He knows Adele prefers it. And she never called him brother, even in Spain, however often their parents scolded her. Their parents may have said son, but to Adele René had always been odem, Omega.) Adele’s anger consumes her. She refuses to build a new life and settle into it. Instead she sets out to find the Resistance. Every pup has heard the tales of the heroic group who hopes one day to overthrow their Beta oppressors. No matter how many times the Church roots out so-called Resistances and destroys them, no matter how small the group or how pitiful their strength, the rumor persists.

It’s the only fairy tale throwbacks have left. René doesn’t truly believe there’s any Resistance worth the name, no great shadowy group that’s remained hidden all this time, that might actually gather the power necessary to stand up to the Betas. He doesn’t even know if Adele truly believes it. But he comes to realize his aleph will never let it go.

Adele is the last piece of family René has left. He can’t abandon her, no matter how toxic their relationship becomes. Adele knows it, too, and exploits it ruthlessly. Under her direction he carries messages and brokers deals between unsavory people. He helps her transport and secure arms, trembling all the while and praying they’ll never be used. Prayer might have seemed like an odd choice for an Omega in hiding, but his carrier had taught René to love the Lord, and save his hatred for the Betas who had corrupted His teachings.

René finally balks when Adele manages to become the mistress of Cardinal Richelieu himself. The great Cardinal is the foremost representative of the Church, and therefore the Inquisition, in France. Richelieu’s hatred of the old order is legendary. He made his career by exposing Alphas and Omegas in hiding, starting with his own odem, the Omega sibling in hiding who had held the Cardinality before him.

It’s widely known that Richelieu has a killing ground out in the woods of his estate, where he hunts captured Alphas and Omegas to their deaths. The Cardinal had hunted his own odem out there. Stories are still told of how mutilated the body had been when the Cardinal’s hunting attendants had brought it back. René had heard – and it made him sick to hear it – that Richelieu’s odem had been four months gone with pups at the time of his death.

It is this hateful man René’s aleph proposes to spy on and betray. He can’t believe she’s serious.

“This is my opportunity,” Adele says, her eyes alight with fervor. “This is my chance to finally do something to help the Resistance.”

“Are you out of your mind?” René cries, falling back into their native Spanish in his great distress. “They say he has the greatest sense of smell of any Beta in recorded history! They say he can scent an Alpha at thirty paces, and an Omega at twenty! And you propose to get naked with him?”

“Don’t you see what an opportunity this is?” Adele says back. Her voice is low and passionate. “If I can learn his secrets – if I could take him down – all of France could become safe for our kind!”

“How will you accomplish that? The first time he takes you to bed he’ll see you’re not a Beta!”

“I’ve handled that,” she says dismissively.

René gasps. “For God’s sake, Adele, what have you done to yourself?” He can’t stop himself from
looking down her body. Horrific images run through his head of the terrible things the Inquisition has forced on Alpha and Omega pups for centuries – forcible removal of the so-called ‘unclean’ genitals, modification of what remains to match their twisted ideas of Beta purity –

Adele catches his hands. “No, no,” she says, horrified. “I’ve just told him I’ve got an illness – ”

“Then why would he take you for his mistress?” René demands. “Oh, God. He suspects!” A new set of images begin running through his head. The Cardinal will lure Adele back to his estate. He’ll drug her food to render her unconscious, and when she wakes up, she’ll find herself in his killing ground. She’ll run, and fight, but the Cardinal will hunt her down and butcher her like an animal. Just like he did his own odem. And then René will truly be alone.

“He suspects nothing,” Adele insists. Unexpectedly she steps forward, enveloping René in an embrace. “This is the biggest opportunity I could have hoped for,” she says in his ear. “Help me.”

René is powerless before her, as always. “Of course,” he says helplessly. “Just… just be careful. Please? For me?”

“I’m doing this for you, little one,” she says back. “I always have been.”

Aramis nods and lets her go. They have always wanted such different things.

Six months later, Adele leaves with the Cardinal on a visit to the Richelieu estates. She never comes back.
Olivier de la Fère

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Olivier de la Fère loses both his parents when his younger odem Thomas is barely a pup. Olivier is left as the Comte de la Fère even though he’s a minor, for there are no relatives who might try to hold it in trust. He’s barely old enough to have popped his knot. Under the old pack law, that would still have been old enough to inherit. But France had abolished pack law two generations ago.

The world thinks Olivier is a Beta, though, and in the wilds of the north, the old tradition of puberty meaning majority still holds. That lets him inherit despite his technical lack of majority. The villagers show Olivier as much respect as his age deserves. It’s more respect than they’d give if they knew his true sex, but he'd learned quickly, after his parents’ death, how to pass.

Olivier’s younger odem has no memories of their parents. Olivier shares every memory he has with Thomas. He tells Thomas of their carrier, whom he’d still called Cara in the old way, instead of Mama like the Beta children do, who'd been gentle and sweet and sung softly to them in the evenings as her mate had driven the cows home. And their sire, Sirrah – not Papa, never Papa, their sire had been an Alpha and would never have stooped to adopt the demonym of a Beta male – who had had strict standards of propriety and culture.

Never forget, Sirrah would say to Olivier. You are Alpha; your odem is Omega. If I catch you calling him brother, I'll tan your hide.

Brother means male Beta sibling, sister means female Beta: those terms had been forbidden in the traditional la Fère household. Only Betas had to care about gender. Alphas and Omegas are divided into reproductive roles by their sex, the Alpha siring young, the Omega carrying them. And in the Château de la Fère, the bloodline is still pure.

Sirrah would never have approved of Olivier passing as a Beta. But the world had been changing even before his death, and if a band of brigands hadn’t killed Olivier’s parents as they’d returned from a journey to Paris, the villagers might have risen up and done it for them.

Sometimes, when Olivier walks down the street, he can hear them murmuring. It was the Lord’s will that the old Comte died, they say. He was unclean. A throwback. Thank Heaven the boy is a respectable Beta.

Olivier doesn’t teach Thomas to love and revere the old ways. He teaches Thomas to call him brother instead of aleph, and if Olivier winces at the word, sometimes, looking to the place on the wall where the strap used to hang, it’s better than the alternative. Better this than Thomas dead at the hands of an angry Christian mob, and Olivier along with him.

They grow older. Times for their people grow worse. The sterilization laws are toughened, with cutting now mandatory for all Alphas and Omegas, even the ones who join the convents and monasteries like the Church demands. Olivier sees the instruments of sterilization laid out on the table at Mass, next to the bread and the wine, like holy relics in their own rights. Tools of torture meant to be turned on the throwback pups of Beta parents who had expected children and are furious with the difference. Jagged hooks to slide between an Omega’s legs and tear their womb out from within. Sharp blades to cut an Alpha’s knot off at the root, along with the rest of the genitals, like castrating a bull. Wicked needles to stitch up what remains and give the flesh an impotent mockery of Beta genitalia.
The nightmares wake Olivier up at night, sheer terror galloping through his veins. It’s not until he finds his sire’s liquor cabinet that he’s able to sleep again.

Then one day he meets a young Omega, alone and lost in the wilderness of his family’s lands, running from the mob five villages over that had slain the rest of her family when they’d been discovered. She’s helpless and alone and her heat scent smells like flowers after the rain. Discounting his carrier, she’s the first Omega he’s ever met.

Olivier mates with Charlotte there in the wilderness, like the Alphas and Omegas of old, with no witness but the Lord above.

He takes her back to his family’s château as his bride. She wears his mating bite on her shoulder like a brand. Not for the first time he wishes, desperately, that his parents were still alive. He knows how to hide himself as a male Beta, but what of his mate? Charlotte must pass as a female Beta. As an Omega, she’s got the right body for it, but the tricks of Betahood are complex and vary enormously by gender. Olivier doesn’t know how to begin to help her.

“Don’t worry, my love,” Charlotte reassures him, fastening up a modest dress with a high neckline that she’d taken from Olivier’s carrier’s closet. “I’ve stayed hidden this long. It will be well.”

Olivier smiles at her, relieved, too much in love to admit the possibility of failure.

They have four blissful years together.

Thomas grows older, rapidly approaching the danger zone of his first heat. Olivier is desperately trying to devise a way to help his little odem. He and Charlotte have the right genders to pass for Betas; he can sire pups, and she can carry them. Thomas is meant to be a carrier, but his gender characteristics are male, and that’s the first thing the Betas will see.

Nor can Thomas simply remain hidden at their family’s château. Up until now the villagers have been content for Olivier and Thomas to be largely cloistered, accepting grief as an reason for their isolation. That excuse is coming to its end. If they don’t start mingling with the village again and taking up their roles as lords of the manor, the people will grow suspicious.

In a stroke of genius, Charlotte suggests that Thomas learn to pass as a female Beta. Changing one’s gender characteristics is difficult, but Olivier has heard of its being done. If Thomas pads his chest, hides his vestigial external genitalia under dresses, and alters his facial structure with makeup, it might be possible. Since the death of the last Comte and Comtesse de la Fère, no one has seen much of Thomas. The villagers might possibly be persuaded that they’d misremembered the gender of the younger sibling.

Thomas is willing, so Charlotte begins coaching him. In the echoing emptiness of their château – still empty of pups, no matter how many times Olivier knots Charlotte through her heats – she dresses Thomas in concealing gowns, paints his face, and drills him on how to walk and sit and speak as a female Beta.

“No, no,” Charlotte scolds, watching as Thomas strides up and down the ballroom. The curtains on the tall windows are pushed aside for once to let in the morning sunlight. There hasn’t been a ball here in Olivier’s lifetime; the room dates back to before the Inquisition, when the nobility had mingled freely. Balls back then had been a place for young pups to meet and fall in love, while their parents had smiled and their pack heads negotiated the mating contract.

Now Thomas is tuning to face Charlotte. “What’s wrong?” he asks in the high, soft tones of a well-
bred Omega pup. He’ll have to relearn this tone of speech after his heat, when his voice would normally break and attain its adult octave. He’ll have to sound like a pup his whole life to pass as female.

“You’re walking too quickly,” Charlotte explains.

Thomas blinks, confused. “I was walking at my usual speed.”

“Yes, but Beta women are supposed to walk more slowly.”

“Why?”

“It’s a sign of submission. Remember, in Beta society the carrier is subordinate to the sire. They’re supposed to behave modestly and show deference at every turn.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Thomas says, exasperated. “How do they get anything done?”

“They manage to kill our people well enough,” Olivier says quietly from the corner.

Thomas tucks his hands under his arms and shivers. “Yes, brother.”

“Walking slowly is a sign that your doings aren’t important,” Charlotte explains. “Beta men walk quickly, because their affairs are always critical, even if they’re only going to the tavern. Beta women are expected to get out of their way. Try it again, and try to glide.”

Obediently Thomas tries again. Charlotte is more satisfied this time. “Now,” she says. “Eye contact. When you walked by me, you raised your eyes to mine. That’s fine to do with other Beta women. They spend a lot of time socializing; it’s their version of pack grooming. But with a Beta man you must keep your eyes averted. It’s well enough to look briefly, but if you meet his eyes, you must drop yours at once. To do otherwise would seem forward.”

“Which is immodest,” Thomas says, repeating from Charlotte’s previous lessons, “because it’s the role of the Beta man to make the first move in every encounter.”

“Exactly,” Charlotte praises, visibly proud of how fast Thomas is learning. “Walk by again, and this time pretend I’m a Beta male.”

Thomas obeys. Olivier watches as his gaze flicks up, meets Charlotte’s, and is quickly dropped again.

“Excuse me, young lady,” Charlotte says, lowering her voice to approximate the register of a Beta male and stepping forward slightly into Thomas’ path. “Which way is the inn in this village?”

Thomas comes to a careful halt, taking an extra moment to arrange the still-unfamiliar burden of Beta female clothing. Olivier sees approvingly that he stops at the appropriate distance for a respectable Beta woman when speaking to a strange, though polite, Beta male.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Thomas says in his gentle voice. He doesn’t point, merely inclining his head in one direction. “It’s just down the street there, past the blacksmith’s.”

“Why, so it is,” Charlotte says, nodding. But she doesn’t move on. Instead she takes a step closer to Thomas. “It’s a ways away, though. I might get lost. Perhaps you’d show me the way?”

Thomas frowns, trying to think of what to do next. Tentatively he says, “Oh…”

“Good,” Charlotte encourages in her normal voice. “If you’re not sure what to do, make a noise like
that and look noncommittal. The other person will usually give you a hint about what to do next."

“What’s my hint?” Thomas asks.

Charlotte winks and drops her voice again. “Forgive my forwardness, young lady, but it’s been a while since I had a chance to have a drink with a pretty little thing like yourself.”

Thomas gasps. “Why – you’re flirting with me!”

She smiles. “Does that surprise you so much?”

“Well, it’s just – it’s just – oh, I can’t! It’s too weird!” Thomas collapses into giggles.

Charlotte tries to look stern. “Well now, young lady, I have to say I’m terribly offended – oof!” Olivier comes over and catches her around the waist, swinging her around and setting her down again.

“Are you flirting with someone else?” he asks, mock-sternly.

“Just for the sake of teaching him,” Charlotte protests, laughing. It makes a pleasant counterpoint to Thomas’ giggle.

“That’s not very nice,” Olivier pretends to frown. “What happens to Beta women who flirt with other Beta men, when their mate finds out?”

“Husband,” Thomas corrects, eyes bright with amusement at the chance to correct his knowledgeable older sibling. “Betas say husband and wife, not mate.”

“Am I your wife, then?” Charlotte asks, batting her eyelashes up at Olivier.

Olivier stills. He can’t say yes. No matter how prudent it would be, no matter how many years he’s spent forcing himself to reject the old ways, this is one term too many.

“No,” he says firmly. “No, you’re not. No matter how much time we spend pretending, you’re still my mate, Charlotte.”

“And I always will be,” she says, smiling, and leans in for a kiss.

Thomas watches them both. And it strikes Olivier, suddenly, that one day his little sibling is going to want a mate of his own. How had the little odem he’d sworn to protect turned into this nearly-grown youth on the cusp of adulthood?

“All right,” Charlotte says at last, pulling herself away from her mate. “You’d better let us get back to practicing, if you want us to be ready for Thomas’ debut.”

“Of course,” Olivier says, pushing away his sudden realization, and going back to his position in the corner.

Charlotte and Thomas go on practicing all through the long winter and into spring. On the first day of summer, after much debate and discussion, she takes him into the village dressed as a female Beta for a controlled test.

Olivier spends the day in a cold sweat, but at nightfall they return home, laughing and smiling. The day had gone well. Charlotte is well known in the village; her charm has long since won her entry into the villagers’ hearts, in a way that Olivier, lord of the manor, can’t compel. Everyone had
warmed to Thérèse immediately, with Charlotte at her side.

They go back the next week, and then the week after that. No one suspects anything. Indeed, the gossip in the village is the most favorable it’s been to the children of the manor than it’s been for a long time. Olivier’s warmhearted bride and demure younger sister have won their hearts. They pat Thérèse’s arms and shoulders as she walks by, and say how sweet she is, and how much their sons are in love with her – not but what they don’t know she’s too good for them, they’ll add, smiling, but it’s nice to see young love. The matrons of the village begin to mother Olivier a little, though he’s well past his majority now. The men treat him with more respect. And they all ask Charlotte when they can expect to see children, to which she smiles and blushes charmingly.

Gradually Olivier relaxes. He almost allows himself to think all will be well.

The night it all comes tumbling down is painted in Olivier’s memory with broad strokes of fire and blood. In between the strokes are dark, empty places, where the details are missing. He’s missing half the tale; he only knows what he himself experiences, because no one else who had had a part in that terrible day can tell him the rest.

He knows Thomas and Charlotte had left at dawn and taken the cart into town to buy necessary household supplies. He knows they’d stayed away all day, until he began to worry. He knows he takes his sword and shotgun and starts towards town himself. He knows he takes the shortcut through the woods of the estate, in order to get there faster, and that must be why he does not meet the column of angry townsfolk on the road. He knows that the château, ablaze, lights up the night sky as brightly as if it were noon.

He knows what it feels like when his bond with Charlotte had stretched and begun to tear.

Olivier had run then, in fear – not for himself, but for his mate and odem – run so fast that he didn’t look where he was going, and tripped over Thomas’ body in the dark.

The tattered remains of Thérèse’s Beta clothing had been scattered everywhere. His body had been mutilated according to the rites of the Inquisition. Thomas’ face, oddly, had still been intact; framed in a pool of dried gore, Olivier’s baby odem’s eyes had stared up at Olivier, glassy, pleading with his aleph to protect him.

He remembers feeling the second stab within himself, the complete breaking of his mate-bond, and knowing that Charlotte must now be dead, too.

Olivier doesn’t remember what he does after that. Somehow he makes it to Paris. Blinded with grief, he crawls into the bottom of a bottle at the first inn he finds. There he stays, and there he would probably have been discovered and murdered in his turn, except that chance and God decree that it should be otherwise. One night the inn is raided. He’s arrested. For drunkenness, not for being a secret Alpha, though the strip searches in prison mean that one will follow the other soon enough. Olivier doesn’t care.

One of the arresting guardsmen does. He takes one whiff of the drunk Olivier, swears, and hauls him quickly into an alley. “Stay here and be quiet,” the guard hisses.

Olivier, obediently, passes out.

When he wakes up, he finds himself in the hotel of one M. de Treville, a very unusual nobleman from Gascony who runs a very unusual corps of Musketeers, and who proceeds to make him a very unusual offer.
I've been asked a few times why Olivier's mate is named Charlotte (instead of Anne), and if that means she's not Milady.

Yes, she is Milady. Although Anne de Brueil is one of Milady's aliases, the oldest name Dumas gives for her is Charlotte Backson. It's under that name that she lived before coming to la Fère the first time, and I'm proceeding on the assumption that it's her real name, though Dumas leaves that unclear.

In *The Three Musketeers*, she changes her name from Charlotte to Anne before she meets Olivier. In this fic, she doesn't.
The Musketeers prove to be exactly what Athos’ wounded soul needs. He doesn’t think he’ll ever quite heal from his broken bond with Charlotte, or Thomas’ murder, but he learns to bury the pain beneath the outward signs of a loyal solider. Even as he builds a new life for himself he’s comforted by the feeling of solidarity with the other Musketeers. He gradually grows to realize that, while his recruitment had been accidental, he fits in here. There’s not a man among them who doesn’t have some ancient pain shadowing his every step. Treville curates his Musketeers carefully. They’re all looking to start over in some way and forget the past.

Treville himself cares for his men as if they’re his own pups. It’s not a comparison Athos makes lightly, nor would he ever speak it aloud: the word *pup* is loaded, referring as it does to throwbacks. Betas call their offspring *children*. At least until they’re born. Then the terms proper to the offspring’s sex would have been used, according to the old ways. But a Beta bears children; an Omega carries pups.

And Treville is an Omega. Athos had known that the moment the Captain had made him an offer of a commission. With Charlotte and Thomas still haunting him, Athos had smelled it on the Captain easily. In retrospect that amazes him. Treville takes great care with his scent. And while Athos had been convalescing from his long depression in the Captain’s hotel, he’d seen Treville partially disrobed, seen the mating bite low on his shoulder. Alphas and Omegas emit pheromones for many reasons – territorial defense, posturing, to convey information like *danger* or *opportunity* to their packmates – but the primary reason, especially in the modern day, is to attract a mate. Once mated, a throwback’s scent diminishes considerably, unless they’re under great stress.

Athos can only conclude that he has an unusually strong sense of smell. Living in the remoteness of la Fère, he’d never had much to compare it to. But here in the city he discovers it to be true. He catches whiffs of other throwbacks that can’t possibly be as obvious to the Betas who surround them. Indeed, the handful of throwbacks he’s identified among the Musketeers also don’t seem to notice each other.

A gift of his bloodline, perhaps. Athos had been taught young that Betan interbreeding causes Alphaic and Omegan traits to be partially repressed. In the past, before the Inquisition, purebreds were the cream of society. Their offspring expressed their sex’s traits more strongly than the pups born from mixed lines that had interbred with Betas. Purebred Alphas are stronger, more commanding, more magnetic. More dominant. Purebred Omegas are faster, defter, quicker-witted. Sharper.

Most importantly in the modern world, a purer bloodline means a milder scent. And, perhaps, a better sense of smell? If so, it would be a self-reinforcing cycle. A pureblood wouldn’t be as attractive to a mongrel if the mongrel couldn’t scent them properly. It would keep the preference of the noble bloodlines for each other, perpetuating their heredity and power.

His nose’s primary value to Athos is the sense of security with which it provides him. Knowing his captain is an Omega who regards the Musketeers as his pack means that Athos has one fewer person from whom he must hide. And he can be assured that the Captain, at least, will not betray him.

It’s not the same thing as having his family alive. But it’s more than he’d ever thought he’d have again.

When Athos finally climbs out of the pit of grief and self-loathing, Treville hands him his commission and assigns him to one of the squads that perpetually keep a spot open for new recruits.
It’s a training assignment, the Captain explains. Athos will stay with this group for perhaps half a year, learning the ropes of Muskeetering, cutting his teeth on minor assignments like guard duty and policing Paris’ streets. When the Captain judges him ready, Athos will be reassigned to a more permanent squad and given real duties.

Over the next six months, Athos is drilled in everything a Musketeer must know. Lessons range from how to wear and clean his uniform, to how to mount guard, to how to behave in formal situations. Athos absorbs it all, eager for any kind of a distraction from the ruins of his former life.

“A Musketeer is an odd duck in the formal hierarchy,” their squad’s leader, a grizzled veteran named Laflèche, explains. “You’re not noble – no matter what title you might be hiding in your saddlebags – but you hold precedence just behind the nobility, and if there’s danger, your orders will rule. You must be firm without giving offense. The common people will respect you, but not in the same way they defer to the blood. You’ve got to be assertive. When you interact with the merchant classes it’s the worst. The precedence is murky enough that it’s difficult to resolve. You could assert your privileges, but it's best to be flexible and adapt your approach to each situation.”

Athos learns this firsthand when he takes too haughty a tone with a grocer and gets a basket of rotten apples thrown at his head.

“Next time, duck,” Laflèche advises unsympathetically, dabbing at the bleeding cut on Athos’ forehead. “And you might try saying please.”

His second squad member Havet is about Athos’ age in years, though he seems older from years of living hard, both before and after he became a Musketeer. He’s one of those souls blessed with eternal good cheer, though, and a bit of a dandy. Athos won’t have to worry about his uniform or equipment ever failing to pass muster after Havet is through with him.

“The other regiments all peacock shamelessly whenever they have the chance, because they may never get another one,” Havet says, teaching an uncharacteristically clumsy Athos how to wield needle and thread for the first time. “Whereas we appear regularly at court and guard the King and his household. Of course they’re jealous! Who wouldn’t be? And some of them, especially the Red Guards, are just looking for an excuse to prove that we’re not up to the task. The uniform may not seem like it matters, but they’ll argue that sloppy dress means a sloppy attitude and we can’t be trusted with the safety of the King.”

It’s a variation of an old argument his sire had used to make about nobility. Your clothes reflect your station, he’d taught the young Olivier. Even if someone has never met you, they’ll see from your dress and your bearing that you deserve respect. That’s the hardest part. The rest is just keeping respect, which is much easier.

It makes it easier for Athos to swallow the lessons in stitchery, though he’s still annoyed when too many finger-pricks give him trouble at swordfighting the next day.

Havet has a shadow in the form of his final squad member, Brasseur, another new recruit who’s barely old enough to shave. Brasseur looks nothing like Thomas, but it doesn’t matter; any male youth will remind Athos of his odem for years to come. It helps somewhat that Brasseur isn’t shy or retiring, like Thomas. He’s an eager young man, bursting with excitement and dying to make his mark on the world. He’s imprinted on Havet for whatever reason, and the other Musketeer has his hands full with him. Athos wonders sometimes why Laflèche doesn’t step in and help detach Brasseur from Havet. What will the young man do when their novitiate is up?

“The two of them will probably move out together,” Laflèche says when Athos wonders this aloud after sword practice one day. Swords are one area of being a Musketeer where Athos requires little
additional practice, so he and Laflèche have ended early, and are sitting on a bench in the practice yard watching Havet and Brasseur go another few rounds. The youth is from a farm out west and lacks the formal training with sword and musket that Olivier had received from puppyhood.

“I thought Havet was stuck on novice training duty until the Captain wasn’t mad at him anymore,” Athos says, remembering the various tall tales about Havet’s alleged misdeeds that the Musketeer himself had told over the various evenings of Athos’ novitate. The more wine Havet drinks the taller the tales become, and Athos still isn’t sure exactly what he’d done to earn his Capitan’s ire. Especially because, if Laflèche is to be believed, Havet has always been something of a scamp.

Laflèche just smiles. “Sometimes teaching goes both ways,” he says. “Brasseur’s been good for Havet. Steadied him down a lot. The Captain put Havet down here because he needed a break and a reality check. Looks to me like he’s got both.”

Athos nods, somewhat dubiously. In the yard, Brasseur scores a touch on Havet and the other Musketeer collapses dramatically, rolling around in the mud – unusually, without a care for his uniform – and bemoaning his imminent death in florid tones. If this is Havet being steady, Athos thinks it’s no wonder the Captain had to send him down to novice duty for a while.

“What do you think?” Treville asks Laflèche, amused.

Laflèche watches the two scamps tolerantly. “They’ll do,” he says, voice belying his fondness.

“And Athos?” the Captain goes on, as if Athos isn’t right there listening to every word they say.

Laflèche glances at the Musketeer novice sitting next to him. “More than,” he says with quiet confidence.

The Captain smiles. Then he shouts, “Hey, you two! Inspection!”

Havet and Brasseur spring to their feet and into parade position so quickly Athos almost can’t believe they were rolling in the mud moments ago. Treville stands as well and prowls around them, scowling broadly to hide the way his lips keep twitching.

“Absolutely disgraceful,” the Captain proclaims. “Are you Musketeers, or Red Guards?”

“Musketeers, sir!” the two bark.

“Seems to me that our uniforms are supposed to be blue, Musketeer Havet,” Treville says. “Yours looks awfully brown to me.”

Havet looks dismayed. “Yes, sir,” he says dismally. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

“Hmm. See that it doesn’t,” Treville says, backing away and finally giving them the wave to relax position. “Your new squad will be expecting you to look your best.”

“New squad?” Brasseur stutters. He glances sideways at Havet.

“You’ve been a novice long enough, young one,” Treville says to him. “And this one’s been stuck
on training long enough.” That’s to Havet.

“Yes sir,” Havet says. Neither look terribly happy.

Treville pulls out a single piece of paper from his doublet. “Your new assignment,” he says, extending it to a point about halfway between the two Musketeers.

Havet and Brasseur share a quick look. “Sir?” Havet says tentatively. “Which of our assignments is that, sir?”

Treville gives him a look of exaggerated surprise. “Did you really expect me to write it out twice?” he says incredulously. “Waste pen and ink like that, with our budget as short as it is? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, Musketeer, but you two are just going to have to share the same set of orders this time. This is a regiment in the King’s army, not a noble estate; we all have to make these little sacrifices sometimes.”

Brasseur breaks into a wide smile.

“Yes, sir,” Havet says, much more happily this time.

“Well, well. Isn’t someone going to take this from me?” Treville demands. He’s doing an admirable job of keeping his own amusement out of his voice, but it’s there in the way his lips keep twitching.

“Yes sir!” Brasseur says at once, taking the orders. “Thank you, sir.”

“Well, well.” Treville says again. He turns slightly and pulls out another piece of paper, extending it to Athos. “And here’s yours.”

“Thank you, sir,” Athos says, taking the orders. He turns the paper over once in his hand, then tucks it away to open later.

It’s odd. He’d been ready to end his novitiate, more than ready, but he finds himself hesitant nonetheless. It’s like starting over all over again.

“As for you,” Treville says to Laflèche, “I’ve got another two coming up from their families’ farms in the next month. Think you’re up for the challenge?”

Laflèche sighs, adopting a put-upon air. “I suppose if I could make Musketeers out of this lot, sir, I can make Musketeers out of just about anyone,” he says, mock-serious.

“Oi,” Havet laughs. Athos knows that laugh. If the Captain hadn’t been standing right there, Laflèche would have found himself in the mud just then.

Or possibly not. When Laflèche wants to, he has any of them pinned in seconds, without turning a hair. But he lets them get away with it every now and again regardless; he says it wouldn’t do to thump them all the time.

“Get out of here,” Treville says, laughing. “All of you. Take the rest of the evening and do whatever you like. Tomorrow you start your new duties.”

“Yes, sir,” they all say, and this time everyone’s smiling.

That night Athos and Brasseur buy the wine and thank their elder squad members for their help in teaching them the ropes of soldiering. Athos spends five minutes out of every ten wondering what his new squad’s assignments will be. His novitiate has been valuable, but nervousness aside, he’s
“Good luck,” Havet says, toasting Athos with his wineglass. It’s a fine Anjou. A little much for a novice Musketeer, but Olivier’s father had been meticulous about contingency planning. Athos’ lines of funding hadn’t died with Charlotte and Thomas. “May you cover yourself in glory, eh?”

“Thank you,” Athos says as seriously as he can, five cups in. It’s easier than it probably ought to be. Wine doesn’t make him merry, as it does for Havet. If anything it has the opposite effect.

“Time for you to get some rest,” Laflèche suggests to Havet.

“Aye, aye,” Havet says agreeably. He hauls himself to his feet, then pauses, blinking at the floor. Brasseur is sprawled there, snoring gently, his third cup of wine having proven too much for him. Havet could just step over the young Musketeer to leave, but it doesn’t seem to occur to him.

Laflèche sighs. “Here, now, Athos, lend a hand,” he instructs. Together they heave Brasseur up and drape him over Havet’s shoulder. “You take him home, now,” Laflèche tells Havet. “Make sure nothing happens to him, all right? He’ll have a deuce of a headache when he wakes.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Havet promises with exaggerated solemnity. He winks.

Not for the first time, Athos wonders about the two of them. He’s never gotten a whiff of throwback off them, but that doesn’t necessarily prove anything. Few Musketeers bother to bathe more than once or twice weekly, confounding even his delicate nose.

Laflèche watches them go, then sits back down. Athos pushes the rest of the wine bottle over to him. He’s probably had enough tonight.

The other Musketeer doesn’t take the offering. He just studies Athos, squinting in the dim light of the tavern. “You’re a smart young thing,” he says suddenly. “Very smart.”

“I am as God made me,” Athos murmurs philosophically.

“Exactly.” Laflèche points a finger at him. “That’s exactly the sort of thing I’m talking about. It sounds like you’re answering me, but you’re actually saying something completely different, something you don’t think I’ll understand.”

Athos blinks warily, straightening in his seat and trying to will the wine from his veins. How much has Laflèche had to drink? Athos would’ve said the older Musketeer had been matching them all cup for cup – excepting Brasseur, who’d passed out early – but Laflèche sounds far too sober for that.

“Your father should have taught you better,” Laflèche mutters to himself. Drunk as Athos is, he can’t suppress his flinch at the word father. And Laflèche sees it. Because, Athos is beginning to realize, he’s been watching for it.

“Well, listen to me, then, boy,” Laflèche says, deliberately using another Betan word to reinforce his point. “You’re about to go into the big wide world. Oh, don’t give me that look. Surely you’ve figured out by now that you haven’t spent the last six months with this squad because the Captain hadn’t anywhere better to put you.”

“He said a novitiate would do me good,” Athos says cautiously.

“He didn’t just mean it for soldiering,” Laflèche says.

“Ah.” Athos contemplates the still half-full bottle of wine. Perhaps he was wrong before. Perhaps
he’s not drunk enough for this conversation.

Laflèche sees the line of his gaze and moves the bottle away completely. “That’s one thing,” he says. “You drink too much.”

“It helps me sleep,” Athos says. It should be another of his evasions. But his eyes flick up at the wrong moment, and suddenly he’s remembering all of his nightmares at once. The perennial ones of the sterilization tools laid out at Mass, the older ones of his parents’ death, and the still-new ones of Thomas’ body and Charlotte’s gruesome fate. Athos hadn’t seen what kind of death his mate had been given, but his imagination has obligingly conjured up some hypotheticals for him to see when he closes his eyes at night.

Laflèche’s face softens. “We’ve all lost something to them,” he says quietly. “We can’t let it rule us. As soon as we do, they win.”

Athos has nothing to say to that. To him, it sounds like just another empty proverb.

The other Musketeer sighs. “You’re about to go out on your own,” he repeats. “Up until now you’ve been protected. God willing, you will remain protected. The Musketeers look out for their own. The Captain, now. He’s doing God’s work. You can always count on the Captain. You know that, eh?”

“Yes,” Athos agrees. He knows he can count on Treville.

“Good. That’s good. And now what I want you to know is: you can always count on me, too. All right? If you ever need anything, and I do mean anything, you come straight to me.”

Athos stiffens. Even through the wine, Laflèche’s words ring a very peculiar bell.

“You’re one of them,” he says in astonishment. “You’re with the Underground.”

“Keep your voice down,” Laflèche admonishes. He glances around the tavern. No one’s heard; the place is too noisy for a stray word to be audible from a distance. The older Musketeer probably chose this place for that reason. Still, he’s cautious.

And rightly so.

Every throwback pup knows of the Underground, even though many, at least those of noble birth, never have any direct contact with it. It exists in every country, Athos has heard, though more effectively in some than others. A network of throwbacks who help and look out for each other. They work to divert Inquisition attention, rescue pups from sterilization, and teach them to pass as Betas. In extreme situations, it’s said that they know secret ways to smuggle throwbacks out of the country, though in most cases escaping is even more dangerous than staying behind.

The lower-class pups benefit from the Underground’s existence the most. Village midwives are much more likely to hand over a pup at birth to the Inquisition for sterilization, confinement or death. In that area, as in so many others, the pups of the merchant and noble classes are more fortunate; their families can afford private midwives, like the ones who’d helped Athos’ carrier whelp he and Thomas. Some noble lines have loyal Beta midwives and caregivers whose lines had been with them since before the Inquisition, and who have stayed loyal despite the Church’s new heresy.

“I’m going to show you something,” Laflèche says. He glances deliberately downward, drawing Athos’ own gaze. Hidden beneath the overhang of their table, where it crowds against the wall, Laflèche is showing Athos his empty palm.

A quick flick of his wrist, and suddenly he’s holding a small chit, about the size of a coin. Unlike a
coin, it’s a dull, matte black – some kind of metal? – and is bisected with a red line.

Another flick, and it’s gone.

“Did you see?” Laflèche asks, returning to his wine as if he hasn’t a care in the world.

“Yes,” Athos says slowly. “But… surely that’s not what I think it is?”

“And why not?”

Athos keeps his voice down and resists the urge to glance around; too many wary looks and the innkeeper will suspect they’re up to something illegal, though he probably would be surprised to discover what. “Surely it would be dangerous for the members of a secret group to all carry an identifying token. Supposing the token were compromised, or the person carrying the token were captured with it on them?”

Laflèche laughs. Genuine, unrestrained mirth. “Oh, you young ones,” he says in amusement. “What could a token betray that our bodies don’t already?”

Athos feels his cheeks burn. Of course. Being discovered as a throwback is already a crime punishable with sterilization, torture and death. Possessing a token linked to the Underground would do no more than tell their oppressors that the Underground still exists. A fact of which they are no doubt perfectly aware already.

“But if the Church knows about the token, they could make copies,” he persists despite his embarrassment. “Then they could infiltrate your ranks.”

“They already do infiltrate our ranks,” Laflèche says matter-of-factly. “They’d do so whatever countermeasures we tried. The trick is making sure they don’t climb the ranks. Enemies in our outer circles are like rats fleeing plague; you can’t kill them all, and you’re safer if you can keep your eye on them.”

“I see,” Athos says, still smarting.

Laflèche sighs. “Pup, I can’t promise you that everyone carrying the token is on your side,” he says gently. “It’s an indicator. One among many. We don’t hand them out to just everyone; someone has to prove themselves, advance within the Underground first. Could spies manage it? Probably. Many of them? If so, we’d be done for already, and we’re still here. So use the knowledge carefully, but don’t dismiss it based on fear. In every throwback’s life a time will come when you have to decide who to trust. And I promise you, it won’t be an easy choice. I’m just trying to give you as many tools as possible for identifying your true allies.”

Athos nods again. Then something else occurs to him. “What about…” Athos’ voice trails off as he gives in and glances around the tavern in his turn. “The other?”

“What other?” Laflèche frowns.

“The other organization?” Athos ducks his head. “The violent one?”

Laflèche’s eyes widen. “You mean the Resistance?” he murmurs, voice barely audible.

Athos nods. The Resistance is even more of a legend than the Underground, and even harder to find evidence of. If the rumors are to be believed, they’re a militant branch of the Underground, whose members are working towards the eventual overthrow of the Inquisition. Violently if necessary.
The older Musketeer shakes his head, leaning back in his chair and sighing. “You’ve been listening to too many idealists,” he says, voice thick with regret. “Oh, hell, I can’t blame you. When I was your age I thought the Resistance might really exist too. It’s a nice thought. That someone might be out there getting ready to swoop in and save you, that all you had to do was just hold on long enough and change would come…”

Laflèche trails off. He reaches for his wine glass and sips from it, seeming to be lost in his own memories for a moment. Then he shakes it off and refocuses on Athos. “The Resistance is a story to make throwback pups sleep better at night,” he says, quiet and resigned. “If there ever were one, they were destroyed long ago. The only way change is going to come is if we make it ourselves. So that’s my advice to you, young one. Fight for change in whatever way you can. Don’t be afraid. There may not be any Resistance, but that doesn’t mean you’re alone. If you’re truly in danger, come to me, or go to the Captain. The Underground will get you out.”

“I understand,” Athos says. After a moment he adds, “Thank you.”

“Good,” Laflèche says. “Then there’s just one other thing I have to tell you. A warning. Probably it doesn’t need saying, but it’s important, so I’ll say it anyway. You watch out for the Cardinal.”

Athos freezes. The slow slide of ice down his spine is in harsh counterpoint to the sweat that suddenly breaks out on his forehead.

Cardinal Richelieu is the head of the Church in France. As such he bears the title Grand Inquisitor. That’s enough by itself to strike fear into the hearts of throwbacks. Worse, Richelieu doesn’t do as many other Cardinal-Ministers do elsewhere in Europe, and pass the administration of their countries’ Inquisition off to their aides and Bishops. Richelieu oversees it personally. To devastating effect.

No throwback can think of the Bloody Cardinal without a spike of terror going through their heart. The stories of his passion for hunting are legendary. Where most of the nobility prefers to chase after stags and rabbits, Richelieu hunts throwbacks. The hunting grounds on his family’s estates are legendary. Reports vary as to how many throwbacks the Cardinal has personally killed, but the lowest estimate is still in the dozens. The high guess is well into the hundreds. And it’s no secret that Richelieu’s thirst for their people’s blood remains unquenched.

“I heard,” Athos says, and has to stop and swallow. There’s one story in particular, about the Cardinal, that gets whispered about the most. And yet it’s also the one where the details change the most in each telling. Athos has always used that as an excuse to justify telling himself that it’s not true. That not even the feared and hated Bloody Cardinal Richelieu would be so evil.

But Athos doesn’t live in the wilds of la Fère anymore. He lives in Paris. He’s a Musketeer. The Musketeers are the sworn enemies of the Cardinal and his guards. One day Athos is going to find himself in conflict with them. And that means he has to know. He has to know what he’s protecting himself from.

Laflèche nods slowly. “You’re referring to the story about his brother,” the older Musketeer says.

“Is it true?”

“I’m not a youth,” Laflèche says, seemingly apropos of nothing. His eyes are sharp on Athos, though, not distracted, so Athos pays attention. “I’ve been in the King’s service, one way or another, for thirty years. I remember when the Musketeers were first founded. That was right about the time the current Richelieu became Cardinal.”
Athos reaches for his wineglass and takes another swallow, quickly. He has a feeling he’s going to need it.

“Before that, the current Cardinal’s older brother held the position,” Laflèche says. Then he taps the table significantly. “I say brother, but that’s not right.”

Odem. So the story is true. Athos stares down at his wineglass, too sick to drink again, wishing he’d never asked.

“His name was Alfonse,” Laflèche says. “Not that I knew him personally. But I attended his consecration, and they said his full name right out in the Basilica. So I remember. I don’t think hardly anyone remembers his name anymore. Just another one of Richelieu’s many victims.”

“Stop,” Athos begs.

“You asked,” Laflèche says inflexibly. “And you were right to ask. Someone has to remember. Or else all the dead just become drops in a river, indistinguishable.”

He pauses. Athos keeps his eyes down and doesn’t protest further.

“There’s not much to tell,” Laflèche says at last, seemingly taking pity on Athos. “The old Cardinal, Alfonse, went and got himself pregnant. *Pupped*, as they used to say for Omegas.”

Athos is familiar with the distinction. Betas get pregnant; Omegas are pupped. His sire had made the difference very clear to the young Olivier when Cara had first conceived Thomas. Sirrah had hated the growing use of Betan terminology to describe Omegan reproduction. He’d always insisted on the strictest precision in Olivier’s speech.

Laflèche is going on. “Somehow or other the current Cardinal found out. Exposed his odem and demanded the right of killing Alfonse himself. The King granted it – well, really, the Queen Regent did; our King wasn’t yet of age. Dunno that he’d’ve done any different, though. God bless his Majesty, but I’ve never heard of him saying no to Richelieu.” Laflèche falls silent for a moment, staring now at the whorls of the table.

“So Richelieu killed him?” Athos says lowly. “His own odem?”

“Hunted him down like a dog on their own family’s estates,” Laflèche says grimly. “They brought the body back and displayed it outside the gates of the Palais-Cardinal for a week. It was so mutilated it didn’t look like Alfonse anymore. Couldn’t even tell if it was Alpha or Omega. That’s what the Cardinal reduced his own odem to. Just a slab of meat.”

Athos bows his head. He crosses himself out of sheer reflex.

He can feel Laflèche watching him. “You still believe?” he asks, sounding sad.

“Shouldn’t I?” Athos says, quietly. “Why should I let them take anything else away from me?”

“Good for you,” Laflèche says after a moment. “Hold on to that belief, if you can. Not many of us do. But maybe it’ll help you.”

Athos doesn’t answer. After a moment Laflèche sighs and pushes back his chair.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you after all,” Laflèche muses. “But I’m getting old now, and I don’t think somehow I’ll ever get any younger. I thought someone else ought to remember. And you’re the first one to actually ask.”
“I’ll remember,” Athos says quietly. “You’re right. Someone should.”

He feels a warm hand on his shoulder for a moment, Laflèche’s grip tight and firm. Then the other man goes off to bed, leaving Athos alone with the rest of the wine bottle.

He reaches out for it, then stops. Maybe Laflèche’s right. Maybe he should stop.

He’ll stop soon, Athos tells himself. But tonight, he doesn’t want to have nightmares.
The Two Musketeers

The next morning dawns bright and clear with no respect for Athos’ splitting head. Wine or no wine, his dreams had been a tangled jumble of terrible images, Thomas’ body displayed on the gate at the Palais-Cardinal with the Omegan womb-ripper still dangling between his legs. Athos shudders, bile rising, and barely makes it to the chamber pot in time.

Athos’ mood isn’t improved by the realization that he’s overslept. By the time he dresses and makes it down to the practice-yard, it’s well past breakfast call at the mess. Not that he would have tried to eat anything. But it’s the principle of the thing: if he’s missed breakfast, he’s late for meeting with his new squad, too.

“There you are at last,” a contemptuous voice says behind him. Athos spins, regretting the move almost immediately as his stomach churns. “I was starting to wonder if you’d ever get here.”

Athos blinks dumbly, too muddled to assert his breeding and authority the way he usually does in strange situations. The Musketeer sneering at him is a few inches shorter than Athos, slender, with dark hair, piercing eyes, and an aura of breeding that dwarfs Athos’ own. Athos has nothing to be ashamed of with regard to his bloodline, but the other man makes him feel as if his ancestors had only just gained their title, and had a dozen Betas in their family tree besides.

“I apologize for my lateness,” Athos manages to say, gathering the tattered shreds of his dignity around him, “but – ”

“But you stayed out too late celebrating the end of your novitiate and forgot that you were supposed to do real work starting today,” the other Musketeer says, not bothering to let Athos finish. Each word is a carefully tuned knife. “Am I right?”

The cutting tone actually helps clear Athos’ head. The other Musketeer is trying to dominate him, but if there’s one thing his sire had taught the young Olivier, it’s how to assert himself. “My affairs are none of your concern,” he says, bored and haughty. He’s pleased to see the other man’s eyes flash with anger, and follows up his triumph by making a show of looking around the practice yard. “And I suggest to you that your anger is misplaced. I appear to be the second of our squad to arrive this morning, which means the other two are even more behindhand than I.”

“Oh,” the other Musketeer says, regaining his cool aloofness. “But of course, having just joined us, you are perfectly familiar with who is supposed to be where when. You are just asking that question to make sport, because you are cognizant of the fact that our squadmates are on two weeks’ leave, and the task the Captain has for us today is to be performed by the two of us alone.”

Athos backpedals hastily. The other man apparently has the vocabulary and diction of royalty, Athos had made a mistake in making this a battle of words.

“Then we had better get to the Captain at once,” he suggests instead, detouring abruptly around his new squadmate – whose name, Athos realizes, he still doesn’t know – and heading towards the Captain’s office. “Since he must be waiting.”

An angry shout follows him. After a moment Athos hears the pounding of feet as his new squadmate rushes to catch up. “See here – ” the man begins furiously.

Athos takes great pleasure in pushing open the Captain’s door, effectively cutting the other Musketeer off.
“Athos, Aramis,” the Captain greets them, conveniently supplying Athos with his antagonist’s name without forcing him to actually ask. “Come in. How are you feeling this morning, Athos? A little green?”

“It’s nothing, sir,” Athos says. He pretends not to hear Aramis’ teeth grinding.

“And you, Aramis?”

“Perfectly well, sir.”

“Excellent,” Treville says, smiling like someone who’s just heard a well-delivered joke. Athos suspects the Captain of having fun at their expense.

“What’s the duty, sir?” he asks, attempting to sound eager instead of desperate to get on with it.

“It’s a simple courier job,” the Captain explains. “You’re to ride south, to a small village called Aruin, just past Évry. You’ll pick up a package there and convey it back to Paris, where you will put it in the hands of the Duchesse de Luynes. None other. She will be expecting you and her servants will have instructions to admit you. You are to make all possible haste consistent with your safety and with the integrity of the package. Are my instructions clear?”

“Perfectly clear, sir,” Aramis says.

“Yes, sir,” Athos says.

“Good,” the Captain says. “Then take these.” He hands Athos the baton that will allow them pass checkpoints without question and without having their bags searched. To Aramis he gives the letter of identity that they are to present to their contact in Aruin. “Details of your contact are in the letter,” he adds as an afterthought. “I think you’re find you’re familiar with the individual.”

Aramis nods, looking askance at the baton in Athos’ hands. “Should you split those items up, sir?” Aramis says diffidently. “What if we become separated?”

“A good squad depends on each other and stays together,” the Captain chides. “And this way, if you are split up, you each have a tool you can use until you reunite.”

“Yes, sir,” Aramis says, sighing.

“Go,” Treville says. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir,” they both say, and manage to get out of the Captain’s office without breaking into an unseemly scuffle for precedence.

Once outside, they look at each other. A moment of sizing each other up results in the silent agreement that they’re going to table their animosity and work together, at least for now. “I will ready the horses,” Athos offers.

He receives a grudging nod. “I’ll gather our supplies,” Aramis says. “Shall we say, by the south gates of Paris, in an hour?”

“I’ll see you there,” Athos says, and goes off, determined not to let his insufferable companion break his cool again.

Aramis is waiting by the gates, as agreed, with supplies more than adequate to the journey they have ahead of them. The saddlebags are tied on and the two set out. In the fair weather of late spring a ride
is pleasant, and the silence that falls isn’t necessarily uneasy. Athos’ spirits improve as the weather clears, buoyed by the realization that he’s finally doing something more worthwhile than guard duty. It feels good to have a sense of real purpose. Even if it is just playing courier.

By mutual agreement neither speaks until the time comes to make camp. An awkward half hour ensues where both of them attempt to start the fire and no one attends to the horses. Fortunately both of their mounts are well-trained and restrict themselves to indignant whinnies instead of trying to run off back to Paris, but it forces them to confront each other.

“Would you prefer to tend the horses or make camp?” Aramis asks after a moment of mutual staring. His tone isn’t precisely conciliatory, but Athos chooses to focus on the part where Aramis offered him the choice.

“Horses,” Athos says after a moment, graciously leaving the fire to Aramis.

It’s not quite as noble as it seems. Athos’ cooking has improved under Laflèche’s tutelage, but that’s not saying much. They hadn’t had many servants at la Fère – only those they could trust – but they had had some, and Athos had never cooked for himself in his life until he’d joined the Musketeers. Fortunately the barracks includes a mess for when he’s in Paris. Out on the road, though, Musketeers are expected to be able to produce a range of simple camp dishes. Athos is banking on Aramis not being another exception in that regard.

The look Aramis gives Athos says that his motives aren’t quite so opaque as he hopes. Nonetheless, Aramis nods, and there even seems to be a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth when he kneels to take up flint and tinder again.

Rubbing down the horses and arranging their feed bags is calming work, and Aramis seems to relax as the evening wears on, too. The stew he’s made is simple but hearty. Athos shares the wine he’d thought to bring, and they chat lightly of trivial matters as the fire burns low.

“I’ll teach you how to make it,” Aramis says when he sees Athos going back for a second portion. Athos freezes with his hand on the ladle, thinking his companion’s about to insult him again, but instead Aramis smiles. “Old Demaret taught it to me when I was a novice. It’s practically the regiment’s official food. I’m surprised you got out of training without learning it.”

Athos settles back cautiously on his side of the fire, letting his bowl alone for a minute so it can cool. “Laflèche did mention something about a stew,” Athos says. “I think the other novice in our unit picked it up. In my case he was too busy teaching me which was the salt and which was the pepper.”

Aramis laughs a little, not unkindly. “As long as you have them straight now.”

“I have,” Athos assures.

A few minutes pass in quiet while they watch the fire crackle and spark. “Have you been with the regiment long?” Athos asks tentatively. “I heard Laflèche mention Demaret’s name, but I thought he’d retired some years ago.”

“Long enough,” Aramis says, like it’s no matter, but Athos spots the subtle stiffening in his posture.

Athos says nothing further. This must be the right thing to do, because after a moment Aramis relaxes. Unprompted, he begins to talk again, this time sharing a story about his first time standing guard in the royal palace. Aramis is careful with his dates, but from some of the figures he mentions in the story the other man must have been a Musketeer for at least five years, perhaps as many as ten.

“Did you really nearly end up half-naked in the Queen’s dressing-room?” Athos says skeptically,
half-a-dozen stories and the rest of the bottle of wine later. He’s starting to think Aramis’ tales are
taller than Havet’s. That, or he’s somehow managed to intrigue with half of the noblewomen in
Paris.

“Well, let’s just say that I’m not allowed in the servants’ quarters in the Louvre anymore,” Aramis
says with a wink.

Athos’ disbelieving look is ruined by the yawn that cracks his face wide open. A quick glance at the
moon reveals that it’s later than he’d thought. Full dark had fallen perhaps an hour ago, and they’ll be
moving at first light.

They bank the fire together and bid each other goodnight quietly. Athos wraps himself up in his
bedroll feeling somewhat more cheerful. Maybe things with his squadmate won’t go so badly after
all.

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Morning, and things take a turn for the worse again. Apparently it’s tradition in the Musketeers’
corps that the youngest member of each squad has the job of rising early, stoking the fire, and
preparing breakfast. The duty had rotated in Athos’ novice squad, and by the time he’d fallen asleep
he’d been exhausted. His fatigued mind had thought it was Havet’s turn.

Athos discovers his mistake when he’s tumbled out of his bedroll an hour past dawn by an irate
Aramis. Apparently the other Musketeer’s calm deserts him overnight and doesn’t return until he’s
gotten his coffee. Aramis is practically nonverbal in his growls. He shoves the coffee pot into Athos’
hands and stomps off towards the river, hopefully to go soak his head.

Athos sighs to himself and stokes up the fire. It was probably too much to hope that last night’s
détente would last.

They reach the environs of Évry around noon and detour around it. It’s on the tip of Athos’ tongue to
suggest that they pause to eat midday, but a look at Aramis’ face dissuades him. The other Musketeer
seems to have lapsed into something of a fugue. He rides silently, head down, and takes little notice
of his surroundings.

Bread and cheese on horseback, then. Athos has to laugh at himself a little. Generations of noble
descent, a strict upbringing in a traditional house, and this is where he ends up: a soldier on a lonely
road, eating in the saddle to save a few hours.

The laughter, soft as it is, rouses his companion. “Midday already?” he asks in seeming disbelief,
twisting on his horse to stare up at the sun as if he doubts it.

“Indeed,” Athos says neutrally. He resists the urge to tell Aramis that it comes at the same time every
day.

“Hmph,” Aramis says. He digs out his own rations and stares at them meditatively. “We shouldn’t
have stopped anyway,” he says aloud. “The Captain did say to make haste.”

Athos acknowledges this with a nod. Bread and cheese may not be the most enjoyable meal, but it is
consistent with their safety and the package’s integrity, the two criteria the Captain had laid out. So
he can comfort himself with the notion that he’s being a good Musketeer, at any rate.

Aramis scans the road around them again, this time more attentively. “Another couple of hours,” he
says authoritatively. Athos wonders if Aramis has been to Évry before, or if he’d just studied the map
that well. “When we arrive, let me do the talking.”
Athos makes a noncommittal noise in reply. He’s willing to let Aramis take the lead at first, especially if, as the Captain had indicated, Aramis has met their contact before. After that, well, he reserves the right to do what he thinks best.

They reach Aruin a few hours later, in accordance with Aramis’ prediction. It proves to be every bit as small a village as Treville had implied. Even la Fère, relatively isolated in the north of France, had been larger. There’s a blacksmith, a tavern, and a church – all the necessities of rural life. Beyond that Athos can see some empty stalls where extra produce and goods might be sold on market-day, assuming that the area’s farmers don’t just send all their cash crops on to Évry, and some modest shacks that will house the village’s few permanent residents. Another set of rooms behind the tavern will be what passes for an inn in these parts, less for the benefit of travellers and more for the use of farmsteaders staying the night over in Aruin before going on to Évry. Well, they, and royal tax collectors. Though even those officials might stay in the larger town and ride to and fro, counting the extra hours in the saddle worth the better amenities.

Aramis had consulted his letter of recommendation again before they entered the village. Now he rides calmly through it as if he’s been there a dozen times. Athos approves. In a small village like this, any outsider is going to be worthy of gossip, but they can at least try to minimize it. A King’s Musketeer sitting his horse smack in the middle of the single road, staring between a map and the handful of buildings, would have been chatter for a year. A King’s Musketeer running a routine errand will hopefully be talked over within a month.

Athos rides alongside. With their horses in step and their mouths closed, the two of them finally look like they belong in a squad together.

Aramis rides straight to the tavern and dismounts, tying his horse up at the common trough without so much as a flicker of his eyelid. The posts are rough, but the trough is large and the water is clean. A farmer will have more respect for its animals than many a city dweller. Athos makes sure to pat his horse affectionately before going in. It’s another piece of normalcy, hopefully helping to put the locals more at ease.

Inside, the tavern is small and crude, but not appreciably dirtier than its urban equivalents. Aramis claims a table in the corner. Athos joins him and waits.

A moment later a woman – girl, really – comes over. Aramis assesses her rapidly and then gives her a wide smile. “Two of your local, please,” he says charmingly.

The girl smiles back. Her teeth are good and her hair, though not elaborate, has ribbons braided in. That makes her likely the daughter of the tavern-keeper, who will also function as a sort of impromptu mayor, since Aruin isn’t part of any estate and will have no manor-lord to handle administrative duties. “Right away, sirs,” she says, moving over to the bar. It’s barely a few paces away, so she continues the conversation without pause. “King’s soldiers, aren’t you? Don’t get much call for you here.”

“A heading onward to the coast,” Aramis lies easily.

“Though Aruin?” The girl’s not exactly suspicious, but she does sound a little skeptical.

Aramis gives her that bright grin of his again and accepts the tankard she hands him, toasting her with it cheerfully. “Not exactly in the usual route,” he agrees lightly. “But my old squadmate, he grew up over in Évry, and said – say, do you know him? Besson, who used to be the grocer’s youngest?”

“I don’t get up to Évry much,” the girl sighs. Longing appears on her face, neatly displacing her
earlier suspicion. “My Pa says, in a few more years, I can start helping take the wine-barrels up. Is your friend comely? Are his brothers still in town?”

Athos hides a smile behind a tankard of his own as Aramis charms the girl with tales of the entirely fictional family of the Musketeer Besson. She’s forgotten entirely that Aramis never did tell her what Besson was supposed to have said about Aruin, and why that would lead Athos and Aramis to stop there on their way to their unspecified coastal destination. Tales of a grocer’s son transition seamlessly into tales of the soldiering life. She eats them up, wide-eyed, clearly lost in the romance of it all.

Athos has finished his tankard and is starting to wonder how Aramis plans to detach the girl and complete their mission when the door opens again. The girl starts up at the sound, and calls, “I’ll be right with you!” as she snatches up the two now-empty tankards and flees to a back room.

“No hurry,” the newcomer says. He’s dressed in the plain clothes of a farmer. He selects a seat of his own at another table and takes off his hat.

Aramis rises unhurriedly from his seat. “Good day,” he murmurs, making a sign to Athos to pay. Athos obligingly starts counting out coins, keeping one eye out as Aramis approaches the stranger and sets Treville’s letter down on the table, next to the stranger’s hat. The farmer in turn produces a small wrapped parcel and lays it down next to the letter. Then each man reaches for what he wants – Aramis the parcel, the farmer the letter – and tucks the new item away.

The exchange is scarcely completed when the girl bustles back in, clean tankards in her hands. “Here you are,” she exclaims. “And I’ve just started the chicken cooling off the roaster. Will you want potatoes or – oh, you gentlemen aren’t going, surely?”

Aramis and Athos are indeed moving towards the door. At her call, Aramis turns with a flourish and takes her hand, bowing over it like a nobleman and making her giggle. “I’m afraid we must return to our squad,” he says regretfully. “But the next time we pass this way we’ll return – and I’ll be sure to tell Besson to tell his father there’s a lovely young lady in Aruin, for any of his unmarried sons.”

“Oh – well – what about your change?” she says, taking refuge from her blushes in the realities of business.

“Keep it, my dear, keep it,” Aramis says majestically. Knowing an exit line when he hears one, Athos pushes open the door.

The horses pick up their heads and snuffle a little at the return of their masters. Athos runs an eye over the farmer’s horse, now tied up next to theirs, and gives a low whistle of admiration. He’d never heard this area was particularly renowned for its horse-breeding, but that animal is impressive. Perhaps it had been bought? But why?

With one eye on his own horse and one eye on the farmer’s, Athos almost doesn’t notice Aramis stiffen suddenly beside him. Only when his companion doesn’t mount as expected does Athos realize how tense his squadmate is.

Athos is immediately on guard himself, but doesn’t show it. Instead he turns so that he’s hidden from view and touches Aramis’ arm gently. “What is it?” he murmurs.

“Nothing,” Aramis says after a moment. “Probably nothing. I just thought…”

“Tell me,” Athos says. He can’t make it an order, but there’s steel in his voice nonetheless. If there’s danger he needs to know.
“I thought I recognized someone,” Aramis says. “But that’s silly. The person I thought I saw… he wouldn’t be in a farming village.”

It’s on the tip of Athos’ tongue to press for more details, but Aramis derails this by mounting. Athos does the same. From horseback, in full view of the town, there’s no opportunity to ask more questions. They ride out together, calm and confident to every outward seeming.

Athos lets a full hour go back after their departure from Aruin before he brings the incident up. “Who was it that you thought you saw?”

Aramis doesn’t answer at first. Athos thinks he’s not doing to, readies himself to press, but Aramis finally says, “A man I used to know.”

“And what is it about this man that would make you uneasy?” Athos says patiently.

“He used to be involved with my sister,” Aramis says, clearly picking his words carefully.

Athos frowns, mulling this over. “I take it your sister married someone else?” he guesses, trying to identify what’s making his companion so uneasy. “Did he perhaps not take it well?” It’s odd, though. Aramis has shared exactly nothing about himself or his past with Athos in the two short days they’ve been squadmates, but still Athos would have laid odds that Aramis had a noble background, even if it were minor. A farmer, particularly a well-to-do one, might possibly be an eligible match for such a sister. Especially in this new world of Beta inheritance where most nobles titles hadn’t been in their possessors’ hands very long anyway, and considerations of heredity and line purity were no longer relevant. But a farmer in a town like Aruin?

“She’s dead,” Aramis says shortly.

Athos flinches. Unwillingly the memories of Thomas come back to haunt him again.

“I’m sorry,” he manages to say. Neither of them speak again for a long time.

Midday comes and goes. The air between the two Musketeers thaws somewhat as they chew their travel rations and pass a small flagon back and forth. Athos debates whether to apologize for bringing up Aramis’ sister, but in the end decides to let it be. He’d had no way of knowing it was a sore spot, and Aramis’ reaction to seeing his sister’s old acquaintance had justified Athos’ asking. He’s not sorry he asked, exactly, just sorry for Aramis’ tragedy. Betas love their families just as much as throwbacks – it may be one of the only things they have in common – and he wouldn’t wish a sibling’s death on anyone short of an Inquisitor.

But what would he say? ‘Sorry, sometimes life is cruel’? He couldn’t exactly share his own sorrow for Thomas and commiserate. Athos of the Musketeers has no siblings. Safer by far that way. The Comte de la Fère died when his chateau was burned to the ground by an angry mob. If he were to reappear, someone would know the gossip, someone would have a friend in la Fère, someone would tell the Inquisition.

“My sister died a long time ago,” Aramis says eventually. “I shouldn’t… it never gets easier, but I’m usually better about it than that. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“You didn’t really snap,” Athos says truthfully. Not over this, anyway. Though he wouldn’t say no to an apology for the others times Aramis has been snappish. “It’s…”

He doesn’t know what to say after that. All right is patently false. No bother might encourage Aramis to continue being ill-tempered. Understandable opens the wrong kinds of doors.
Fortunately – or unfortunately – he’s saved from the necessity of finishing his sentence by the twitch in the corner of his eye. Carefully he turns his head, slightly, pretending to study the weave of his saddle-blanket. There. In the treeline. Possibly a bit of washing, hanging dry on the warm summer’s day… two hours from any habitation? Or a lost piece of cloth, abandoned by its wearer. Conveniently caught on a tree-branch at exactly shoulder height?

Or a cloak, betraying the existence of a concealed party of men.

Athos risks a quick glance at his companion.

“I see them too,” Aramis murmurs back, lips barely moving. “Keep riding. Perhaps it’s nothing.”

Athos lets the look on his face speak for itself. Unlikely.

Aramis snorts his agreement. But they keep riding as if they’ve seen nothing.

Perhaps thirty paces later, they round a bend in the road. Waiting just around it are a small group of well-armed men.

“What were you saying?” Athos says lightly, concealing his worry.

“I try to believe the best of others,” Aramis sighs in the same manner. “Alas, I am often disappointed.”

“Gentlemen,” their leader says. His wide smile reveals several missing teeth. “I’ll be having that package you’re carrying.”

“What package?” Aramis says superfluously.

“Don’t be like that,” the leader admonishes. He draws his sword to make his point more plain. “One way or another I’m taking the package. It’s up to you whether I take your lives as well.”

“I don’t suppose we could – ” Athos begins.

“Oh, don’t worry, they’ve surrounded us,” Aramis finishes.

A quick glance over Athos’ shoulder shows that it’s true. “Well. It’s nice to know they’ve done this before.”

“Always good to be mugged by a high quality of criminal,” Aramis agrees.

“Shut up,” the bandit leader snarls. “And hand it over. Or we’ll be taking it from you.”

The two Musketeers exchange a look. They require no words to agree on a plan.

“Hand what over?” Aramis asks innocently.

“They really haven’t been very specific,” Athos agrees. “Package? Why, that could be anything.”

“Perhaps they’re hungry. Gentlemen, you’re welcome to share our food.”

“You’re just saying that because I cooked last night,” Athos says, injured.

The leader is starting to redden. “I said – ”

Aramis ignores him, instead winking broadly at the brigands closing in on them. “It’s true,” he says.
“The boy here’s decent at some things, but cooking just isn’t one of them.”

“Hey now!” Athos says, painting his tone with affront. “Let’s let them be the judge of that.”

And he reaches back towards his saddlebags, flaring his cloak wide as he does.

There’s a shout – possibly the brigand leader catching wise, just a moment too late, of their intentions. It’s quickly cut off by the report of Aramis’ musket. Athos doesn’t bother to look; Aramis is accounted one of the finest shots in the regiment, and he has no doubt the brigand leader is gaping in astonishment at the hole in his breast where the ball would have struck home.

Athos has problems of his own. The back half of the encircling brigands are his problem, and they’ve closed in much further than he’d accounted for. His original plan of opening with a musket-shot of his own is thwarted by the need to draw steel and deflect the sword descending towards his neck. With a heave he unhorses the man who’d swung at him. He’s quickly trampled beneath his companions’ hooves.

“No honor among thieves,” Athos mutters, his sense of dignity offended.

Another brigand, perhaps seeing the value of the tactic, tries to unhorse him. Athos sidesteps and keeps his seat easily, gutting the man with a rapid slash and taking another out with the backhand. Two more go down in swift succession. They’re killing blows all. Athos had learned to fight from his sire, who hadn’t been interested in teaching his offspring the pretty rules of the salle. If Athos had drawn steel, the assumption had been, he was fighting to defend his life, his odem, and their entire line. No witnesses is the goal.

The last brigand tries to run. Athos rides him down and coolly stabs him through the back.

That done, looks around for his companion. Aramis is unhorsed, but only two opponents remain to him. Athos watches he fells one with a sword-thrust through the thigh and is able to devote his attention fully to the remaining one.

Athos knows better than to interfere. Aramis is no doubt more than capable of handling one more brigand, and he won’t appreciate Athos implying otherwise. He dismounts, intending to begin searching the bodies, though he hasn’t got much hope of finding anything that could tell them who sent these men to intercept them.

When Aramis is done killing his last opponent they can interrogate the survivor. It was clever of Aramis to leave one alive – Athos should have done the same, if he’d been thinking, but –

Aramis’ sword slides through the last one’s heart like a hot knife through butter. Athos isn’t watching. His attention has been caught by the one Aramis had only wounded, who’s rising up onto his good knee and drawing his pistol.

Athos hasn’t fired his musket yet; it’s in his hand before he thinks. A moment, a breath, and he fires. The remaining man crumples to the ground.

Aramis spins, sword ready, and sees the man on the ground. “No,” he shouts. “No, no, no! ¡Joder!” He rolls the man over, frantically checking for life, but it’s no use. The man’s dead.

Athos looks on regretfully. If it hadn’t happened so quickly, he would have shot to wound. But the man had been halfway to killing Aramis and –

“You idiot,” Aramis snarls.
Athos blinks and takes an automatic step back. A good thing, too, since Aramis comes to his feet shaking with rage. “We needed him alive,” the other man hisses. “We needed to question him!”

“He was about to put a bullet in your back,” Athos points out. “I don’t like it any better than you do, but it was necessary.”

His squadmate doesn’t seem to agree. “I had everything under control!”

“I know you did,” Athos says, trying to reach for a patience he doesn’t feel. “You just didn’t see the other brigand coming up behind you.”

“I could have taken care of it,” Aramis persists. “I didn’t need you jumping in. We needed him alive!”

“Forgive me for thinking you could possibly have been unaware of the enemy creeping up at your back,” Athos snaps. “Forgive me for trying to help you.”

“I didn’t need your help!” Aramis snaps right back.

“We were supposed to be working as a team. Teams help each other.”

“Teams trust each other, too. Maybe if you’d tried trusting me!”

Athos doesn’t want to be having this conversation. He just wants to finish the mission. It’s a shame about there being no one to question, and the Captain will probably have a few harsh words for them both, but realistically what could they have expected to learn? These men are common brigands, probably hired with a purse of gold in a tavern and no questions asked. Regardless, there’s nothing Athos can do about it now. All they can do is go back to Paris, deliver this Godforsaken package to the Duchesse, and then maybe find a hot shower and their respective bunks.

Athos pushes past Aramis and heads for his horse.

“I’m talking to you,” Aramis shouts. A hand grabs Athos’ shoulder and swings him around to face a furious Musketeer. “Listen. I appreciate what you were trying to do – ” there’s a world of contempt in that since word – “But if you really want to help me you’ll never do it again. I can handle myself in a fight. Do you understand that? I don’t need you to try to play some, some kind of hero – ”

Athos interrupts him, adrenaline suddenly singing through his blood. This conversation is getting dangerously close to the kind of territory he never wants to revisit. The kind of stereotype Aramis is painting on him is far too close to the truth.

“I promise to leave you alone and let you get shot in the back next time,” Athos says. “All right? Is that what you want to hear?”

“Why can’t you be reasonable?” Aramis shouts.

“Why can’t you be quiet?” Athos snaps, pushed to it.

Aramis’ face contorts with rage. “If you’d just try thinking with your head instead of your testosterone – ”

Athos snarls, provoked beyond reason, and swings at Aramis. It’s wrong of him, he knows. As a noble he should have more restraint. As a man he should have more honor. And as an Alpha in hiding, he should have more circumspection. But even the accusation of too much testosterone is too dangerously close to the truth, too very nearly an accusation of being too much of a knothead, that
anti-Alpha slur. Reason has nothing to do with Athos taking a swing at Aramis.

It probably also has nothing to do with Aramis ducking and swinging right back.

They trade punches, then Aramis takes Athos’ legs out from under him and they’re rolling together in the dirt and the blood of their dead enemies. Thank the Lord the road is empty; Athos is furious, and sick with fear, a dangerous combination that makes it hard to control his strength.

Aramis pulls two knives that Athos sends spinning away each time. The third knife Athos grabs from him. He’s barely hanging on to sanity. All he knows is he has to end this fast. He lets his strength out, just a little, just enough to pin Aramis on his back in the mud, and bring the knife up to keep him still.

“Yield,” Athos hisses, their faces so close together their noses are practically touching. Aramis twitches like he’s going to try and buck Athos off, despite the knife at his throat. Instinctively Athos sucks in a breath, ready to pin him again.

And freezes.

The breath in his lungs tastes of mud. And sweat. And blood.

And Omega.

Aramis snarls, and Athos realizes his face has given him away. Aramis knows Athos knows, and the knowledge seems to give Aramis the strength of two men. Aramis contorts beneath him and throws him off with sudden ease. In a twinkling of an eye Athos is the one who is pinned.

Aramis’ eyes are wild. “You – ” he gasps out. “You – you!”

He doesn’t seem to know what he’s saying. Or what he wants to say. The only thing that’s clear to Athos is the fear written all over Aramis’ face.

“Me,” Athos says back quietly. Forcefully. He lets the Alpha bleed into his voice. Catches his opponent’s wrists in his own and squeezes, too strong for a Beta; stares Aramis right in his wild eyes, willing him to understand.

Aramis’ grasp loosens suddenly, and he slides off Athos’ supine form to land on his backside with an ungraceful thump. Athos lets him go.

“You?” Aramis whispers.

Athos rolls to his feet, glancing up and down the road reflexively. It’s an old road, and they’d only passed two parties all day, but they’re still exposed. “Not here,” he says, tugging Aramis upright and seizing their horses’ reins. “Come, quickly.”

Aramis resists at first. “I won’t – ” he hisses.

“Fool,” Athos says without heat. It’s no effort to pull Aramis along with him despite the other Musketeer’s resistance. There’s no need to hide his Alpha strength from Aramis. And Aramis, after a moment, stops trying to pretend to strength he doesn’t have.

How does Aramis manage it, Athos wonders. Omegas are hardly the weaklings the Betas like to stereotype them as, but it’s true that upper body strength is not one of their gifts. How does Aramis manage to live as a soldier?
But even as he wonders it, he sees how. Aramis is the thinker, the fighter with finesse, the man who
wins his battles by wits and daring rather than by brawn. He ends fights quickly, before his
opponents can overpower him. In short, Aramis does it by playing to his strengths, as Athos plays to
his.

About thirty paces into the forest there’s a small clearing. The horses immediately make for the small
stream running through it. Athos ties them loosely to a low-hanging branch.

When he finishes, he turns back around to see Aramis crouched defensively, another knife twirling
between his fingers.

“How many of those do you have on you?” Athos asks in astonishment.

“Enough,” Aramis says. “Let’s get something perfectly clear from the start; I don’t want an Alpha.”

Athos blinks. “Okay,” he says cautiously. “I’m not particularly looking for an Omega, either.”

Aramis laughs bitterly. “All Alphas want Omegas,” he says.

It’s the refrain of the Inquisition. Alphas and Omegas are nothing but animals. In contrast to their
refined, evolved, civilized Beta cousins, Alphas and Omegas are base. Irrational. Unable to grasp
honor and respect. Omegas are mewling weaklings who exist only to knot, breed and whelp. Alphas
are aggressive knotheads who approach everything with violence, including their own mates.

“And all Omegas want Alphas,” Athos counters with the other half of the stereotype. And so, the
Inquisition claims, both have to be controlled for the good of society. Betas do all the work anyway,
so shouldn’t they reap all the rewards? And, just as one doesn’t allow a bull or a cow to live and
mate freely, neither does one allow an Alpha or an Omega to do the same. First it was convents and
monasteries, designed to beat a throwback’s spirit into submission to the Beta hierarchy. Then it was
sterilization, to reduce the number of throwbacks born, to reduce the mating drive Betas cited as the
cause of animalistic behavior. Finally, when the doctrine of the subhuman throwback was firmly
embedded in everyone’s mind, it was death. Death for them all, and nothing but Betas left to roam
the Earth.

“Really?” Aramis says skeptically. “You’re a pureblood – you must be, or I’d’ve smelt you sooner.
Every pureblood I’ve ever known wanted to breed to continue their line.”

“You’re a pureblood yourself,” Athos says with certainty.

“No,” Aramis says in instant denial. “No, just a mongrel.”

Athos shakes his head. “Don’t try to deny it,” he says. “It’s the only explanation for why I didn’t
smell it on you sooner.”

Aramis hasn’t stopped looking afraid at any point during this conversation, but at Athos’ insistence
the fear ratchets up another notch. “I mustn’t be,” he says finally.

“Why?” It’s not what they should be focusing on, but Athos is genuinely curious. Being a purebred
is advantageous. The physical benefits make it easier to evade the pogroms, if that’s what it comes to,
but their scent is naturally lower, enabling them to hide. When coupled with the scent reduction
associated with bonding, a mated Alpha or Omega is virtually undetectable to the naked nose.

So Athos is mystified at Aramis’ insistence that he wants no Alpha, and that his line includes Betas.
A mated purebred is safer in every way than an unmated mongrel.
Though pure blood didn’t do poor Thomas any good, he thinks bitterly. Nor mating my Charlotte.

“You have surprised one of my secrets,” Aramis says quietly. “Do me the courtesy of allowing me to keep the rest.”

Athos’ breeding kicks in, and he’s nodding before his conscious mind keeps up. Aramis is standing with his head ducked slightly, tilted to one side to expose his throat; his stance is open, and his weight is back on his heels. It’s classic Omegan appeasement behavior. It takes only one glance for Athos to know Aramis is doing it intentionally. But it works regardless. Athos’ hindbrain is wired to respond to Omegan social grooming, and his traditional upbringing reinforces that conditioning.

But he wasn’t going to press the issue anyway. Aramis’ secrets are his to keep. It’s only fair, since Athos expects to keep his, too, though they now share the knowledge of each others’ true sexes.

It’s going to make being in this squad together very interesting.

Aramis still looks tense. Athos casts about for something to say. Something that to redirect the conversation to safer territory, while reassuring Aramis that his secrets are safe, and that Athos regards them as being in this together.

Aramis opens his mouth, and what comes out is: “So I’m assuming you’ve never actually been naked in any noblewomen’s quarters?”

Aramis stares at him. Then he starts to laugh.

It’s contagious; soon Athos is laughing too. They share the hysteria, leaning against each other in a way Athos hasn’t had since Thomas had died. The feeling is amazingly comforting. His very bones seem to settle. Pack, his hindbrain says smugly.

The thought startles him and dispels the fit of giggles. Aramis trails off soon when there’s no answering mirth at his side.

“I’m sorry about killing them all,” Athos says sincerely, going all the way back to the beginning of the entire argument.

“I can’t blame you for protecting yourself,” Aramis sighs.

“We can search the bodies,” Athos suggests.

Aramis tips his head slightly to the side. “Hmm. Well, it’s better than nothing.”

The two Musketeers return to the road and do just that. Most of the bandits have nothing on them beyond ragged clothing, a few coins, and the stink of alcohol on their breath. They get a little luckier with the leader. He’s got a piece of paper in his pocket that proves to be a note of hand for forty pistoles.

“Half up front and half afterwards,” Aramis says, squinting at the handwriting – crabbed and sprawling; it must be deliberately disguised. “Common enough as a tactic. They’re to redeem this note in Évry.”

“Does it say where in Évry?” Athos asks. He wonders if they could disguise themselves convincingly as brigands and attempt to keep the rendezvous. Looking between Aramis and himself, he doubts it.

“No,” Aramis says, sounding put out. He’d probably had the same thought but been more sanguine
about their chances of passing as bandits. “And before you ask, it’s signed, but that’s no use.”

“Why not?”

“See for yourself.” Aramis passes the note over. Athos squints in his turn, then sighs. The note is signed only ‘Milady’.

“No family name,” Athos sighs. He’s not even really surprised.

“No way of tracing them,” Aramis agrees. He frowns in contemplation, laying one hand on the saddlebag where the package resides. “What could this be that’s worth sending brigands after us?”

“Who knows?” Athos shrugs. “It’s headed for a Duchesse, after all. It could be as simple as gold or jewels.”

“Or it could be state secrets,” Aramis says. The look on his face is speculative.

*Or family secrets,* Athos thinks. Every noble family has them, even the Betan ones. But he doesn’t want to suggest that out loud.

“Regardless,” he says instead. “Our duty is clear. We deliver the package, and speculate about it as little as possible.”

Aramis blinks. Then he nods. “You’re right,” he says. “But I think we should take a different route back to Paris.”

Athos pictures the geography in his mind. They’d followed the Seine south and a little east to get here. “Westwards?” he suggests. “Through Antony?” It will add a little time to their journey, but probably not another night.

Aramis swings back into his saddle. “An excellent plan. We can pick up our dinner there as we pass through.” He arranges his cloak, settles his hat, and gives Athos a grin. “Well, then. Shall we be off?”

With the new understanding between them, Athos finds the rest of the journey remarkably easy. When he’s not being prickly and defensive, Aramis is helpful, sharing tricks of the Musketeers’ trade as he works and lending a hand whenever Athos needs it. Aramis also proves to have a sharp eye and a sly wit. Athos finds himself laughing more than once. Every time he’s surprised by how good it feels.

Around the campfire on their one night on the road, they each tell a few stories of their past. Not the hard ones. It goes without saying between them that they’re both running from something more than just being born a throwback in a world that hates them. But it’s too soon to speak of Charlotte and Thomas, or of Aramis’ lost sister – sister, or odem, or aleph, whatever the case may actually be. The stories they tell are the happier ones, and make them both smile, if only for a little while.

Aramis and Athos arrive back in Paris without further incident. Making their way through the streets, they deliver the package to its recipient. The Duchesse takes one look at the two battered, travel-stained Musketeers and wisely decides not to ask any questions. She merely thanks them gravely, and gives each of them her hand to kiss.

They head back to the barracks together in mutual accord. Coming through the gate, both of them pause in astonishment. The practice-yard is full, as it usually is this time of day, but not with Musketeers at training. Men are running back and forth with purpose. Several groups of men are
wearing the uniform of the King’s Guards – Dessessart’s company, by their colors – readying horses and supplies of their own. Urgency is in the air.

“Aramis!” the Captain’s voice cries. “Athos!” Treville appears from the milling crowd and seizes them both, dragging them into his office. The door closing dampens the noise enough for them to be heard.

“You’re all right?” The Captain runs his gaze down them both and seems to answer that question for himself. “And the package?”

“In the hands of its recipient,” Aramis says, obviously mystified. “Captain, what’s going on?”

“A riot in Athis,” Treville answers. “You don’t know? The entire village is up in arms over the Inquisition’s new decrees, saying they don’t go far enough to root out the throwback menace – they’re blocking traffic on the Seine and roads in all directions. We’re being sent out to break them up. But you – did you pass Athis before the riots started? No, how could you have?”

“We went back a different way,” Athos says slowly, sharing a look with Aramis. “After we were jumped by a group of bandits, it seemed prudent to alter our route.”

“Bandits?” Treville’s gaze sharpens.

In a few words Aramis relates the tale, producing the letter he’d taken from the bandit leader. Treville seizes it and glances down it quickly.

“We weren’t able to take any of them alive,” Athos apologizes, regretting it even more. “We don’t know how they knew we were coming or what we were carrying.”

Treville presses his lips together. “Did you – ”

Shouting from the practice yard interrupts him. Other regiments are starting to mill in, and the situation is getting out of control.

“I have to deal with this,” Treville says. He folds the note up carefully and puts it in a box on his desk, which he locks, placing the key in his pocket.

“Do you need our squad?” Aramis asks.

“No. We’re only sending a handful. More to show the flag as the King’s personal regiment than anything else. Dessessart’s Guards will do most of the work. The rest of you are to stay here and guard the King.”


“Understood,” the two Musketeers chorus.

Treville eyes them both warily. Then he shakes his head and runs out of the room, roaring orders as he goes.

Alone for a moment, Athos and Aramis look at each other.

“A gang of brigands jumps us,” Athos says slowly. “And then a town along our return route breaks into a riot.”
“An anti-throwback riot,” Aramis adds, lips a thin line. “One unlikely to respect our personal boundaries.”

“But why both? Why not one or the other?”

“The brigands weren’t very well-armed,” Aramis points out. “One couldn’t have expected them to do much more than slow us down.”

“Giving someone else time to set off the riot?” Athos suggests grimly. “Possibly after they’ve made sure we’re heading back in the direction they expect?”

“And if the brigands do manage to do for us, well then, so much the better,” Aramis finishes. “What was in that package?”

“I don’t know,” Athos says. “And… honestly, I’m not sure I want to know. The Captain was clear that we weren’t to go looking.”

“We may get caught up in something like this again,” Aramis disagrees. “The Captain chose us for this mission specially. I think we’ve both guessed why. He may do so again for another mission.”

“If he does we’ll ask him then,” Athos suggests.

Aramis frowns.

“Come on,” Athos says patiently. “What could we do right now? Ask the Captain again? Go interrogate the Duchesse? Pray to the spirits of the dead bandits for answers?”

“Go the long way around back to Évry and try to trace this Milady?” Aramis suggests.

“Évry’s likely to be caught up in the rioting by now,” Athos says pragmatically.

Aramis sighs. “I don’t like leaving a threat alive behind me.”

It’s a sentiment Athos can wholeheartedly agree with. Especially since, if they assume the riot and the package are connected, it’s a safe bet that the whole is something to do with the throwback Underground. That means the threat they leave alive is potentially to more than just their lives.

But the Captain had asked. And Athos hadn’t needed Laflèche to tell them that the Captain’s in this deeper than either of the two Musketeers are.

Treville had saved him from ending up the same way as Charlotte and Thomas had. Sheltered him, pulled him out of his depression, and offered him a new start. He’s more than earned Athos’ trust.

“The Captain asked us to stay away,” Athos repeats. “I choose to believe he has a good reason.”

Aramis looks chastened. “You’re right,” he says after a moment, sighing. “I trust the Captain.”

“Then we should do as he says,” Athos says. “Perform our duties well in his absence – ”

“And emulate the famous post, which neither sees, hears, nor feels curiosity?”

“At least until we find ourselves threatened,” Athos says.

He opens the door to the Captain’s office and steps out onto the walkway, watching in bemusement as the practice yard empties out. Aramis joins him. It’s hard to believe such a large, seemingly disorganized group of men could move so quickly, but within perhaps ten minutes they seemingly
have the barracks to themselves. The evening shift will still be on duty at the palace; the off-duty will have been who were gathered to go after the riot. The solitude is a rare treat. Athos stretches, enjoying it, though he feels every ache from three days on the road in his bones.

Aramis seems to agree. “Well, that was fun,” he says, twisting his neck to crack it. Athos winces at the sound. “Let’s never do that again.”

“I don’t know,” Athos says in the same tone. Two days ago he would have reacted defensively, assuming that Aramis’ slightly disparaging tone was referring to Athos’ company. Now he knows Aramis is offended by the mud and dirt caking them both, as well as the time wasted and the questions that remain. Aramis is fastidious as a cat – Athos wonders, idly, if he’d been the one to train Havet – and the loose ends rankle him, despite their mutual agreement to obey the Captain’s wishes and let it alone.

It isn’t all bad, though. “We do seem to have gotten something out of it,” Athos points out, gesturing between them.

The smile Aramis rewards this insight with is quick but sparkling. “I suppose you’re referring to yourself,” he says, mock-condescendingly. “Lord preserve me from eager young novices dogging my footsteps!”

Athos surprises himself by laughing. The pun is edgy, though Aramis had avoided the loaded word puppy, but Athos feels curiously light. Soldiers make dirty jokes; that’s a fact of life. No one would pay it any mind.

“Lord preserve me from ancient relics assuming airs,” Athos replies back in kind, with a half-grin that takes the sting from the words. Aramis can’t have more than a year or two on Athos. He must have joined the Musketeers right after puberty, in order to have so much seniority for his age.

“This ancient relic wants a bath and a cup of wine,” Aramis says devoutly. “And he knows just who’s paying.”

“Hey,” Athos protests.

“Well-made boots, patrician features, and an air like you’re prepared to meet the King – you can’t tell me you haven’t got money.”

“I could say the same of you,” Athos retorts.

Aramis’ smile dims. “Not anymore,” he says shortly.

Athos knows better than to press. “Gambled it all away, I’ll wager,” he says airily. “Degenerate.”

It works; Aramis laughs. “As if you’ve never touched dice!”

“Ah, but I always keep back enough to buy the next bottle of wine,” Athos affirms. “And I suppose I can afford to share – if you bathe first.”

Aramis drapes an arm over Athos’ shoulder, smiling as he dislodges some of the dried mud caked there. Dirt rains briefly down Athos’ back. “That’s the wisest thing you’ve said all journey.”

There’s still much Athos doesn’t know about Aramis; still much, for that matter, that Aramis doesn’t know about Athos. But the faint pull between them is still there. Unmistakable. Pack.

Aramis isn’t Thomas. Athos’ odor had been sweet, and shy, and retiring. All traits their traditional
sire would have approved of, though he hadn’t lived to raise his Omega offspring. Aramis is a
different kind of throwback entirely. And yet, Athos thinks. A pack takes all kinds. He’s missed, so
much, having someone else. Someone else to talk to. Someone else like him. Someone else who

knows.

No, he thinks as they head towards the bathhouse, listening to Aramis talk about all the kinds of wine
he’s going to make Athos buy for him in repayment for the mud on his uniform. Aramis isn’t
Thomas. He’s himself; unique. But Athos thinks he may just be pack all the same.

“Anjou wine,” Athos says firmly, cutting into Aramis’ chatter. “I won’t waste coin on the other
stuff.”

“Oh, if you’re going to be fussy about it,” Aramis replies, flashing him that daredevil grin and
striding on ahead.

Pack, Athos thinks again, and goes to follows Aramis.
The whelping pens at the Notre Dame breeding plantation are located by the river. It’s probably a practical measure. Whelping is a messy business. Having the river handy makes for easier cleanup. But to the pup who is not yet named Porthos, the sound of the river burbling by is one of the few untainted memories he has of his puppyhood.

“Mind the river,” his carrier had used to say to them all, while they had still been allowed to stay with their carrier. “It keeps on flowing. No matter what they throw in it, the river carries it away. No matter what blocks it, the river just goes round. No matter how much they steal from it to turn their wheels, the river carries on. You be like the river. They’re gonna throw things at you, block you, steal from you. Keep on going.”

“Go where, Cara?” one of the pup’s littermates asks, in one of his earliest memories.

“Don’t know,” Cara says. “Hardly matters. River’s gonna carry us all away one day.”

As a pup he’d dreamed of being carried away by the river. He’d thought that that must mean freedom. He imagined all sorts of wonderful things he might find at the end of the river.

Perhaps five seasons after he’s whelped, a disease sweeps through the whelping pens. Measles, the overseers say. Two of his littermates die. Their bodies are thrown into the river.

“Carried away,” Cara says. She holds her surviving pups close and sings them a song about Jesus.

(Her voice is quiet when she sings. Throwbacks aren’t supposed to be God’s children. And no one expects a slave to have a place in Heaven.)
or extended heats are even harder on the body than regular ones. Even with the drugs, eight to ten cycles are the most an Omega achieves. Combined with different drugs that increase the odds of conception, though, six pups to a litter is average, or even a little below.

The pup who is not yet Porthos learns these things from the other pups in the adjacent pens, from the carriers who talk to each other, and from the overseers who don’t care what the pups overhear. Breeding isn’t special to them. It’s work. It’s the business of their lives. And it’s what the half of them who are born Omegas are destined for.

If the overseers do realize the pups are listening, they say the pups should be grateful. In the old days of doubles and triples the Omegas had to be bred more frequently. It’s these kinds of modern efficiencies that let carriers stay with their pups, at least for a while.

When his first odem goes into heat, perhaps eight or nine seasons after they’re whelped, they’re divided up by sex and taken away. Cara smells the heat on their oldest littermate first and has time to kiss and pray over them all once more before the overseer comes in.

The Omegas are taken to the holding pens, including their carrier. There they’ll be bred and the whole cycle will start again. An Omega generally has between three and five litters in the course of their lives, before they grow too old and even the drugs can’t make them fertile anymore. If they don’t die whelping first, after their heats fade they’ll raise the orphaned pups of other carriers who did. Round and round in an endless circle, until their bodies are thrown into the river, to be carried away with all the rest of the garbage.

The Alphas are taken elsewhere. They’re examined by a different set of men, Beta overseers who judge their fitness, stature, virility, and intelligence. Then they’re separated further. The strongest are sent on to the parent plantation as laborers. Some are taken to the holding pens, where they’ll be put to stud for three years before being moved on as laborers in their turn. A few, rare, lucky ones are selected as house slaves. The rest are to be sold at the auction.

The pup who is not yet Porthos is one of these last. He and the others like him are chained together and marched by the river until they reach the place where it meets the sea. There the auction is held. Three days later the pup is put on a ship bound for France with six others, none of whom are even from the same breeding plantation as he is.

Two days out of France a storm comes upon them without warning. The ship runs aground almost immediately. The water in the hold rises fast, and the pumps jam.

The pup closes his eyes and tries to remember the words of the songs his Cara had used to sing about Jesus.

One of the crew members throws him the key to their shackles before he climbs into the lifeboat. They pass it down the line, like pups playing a game. The ship’s breaking apart around them but no one leaves until they’re all free. Then they throw themselves into the sea. Some of them go in pairs or triples, holding hands, the ones who know each other.

The pup who is not yet Porthos goes into the sea alone. He holds his breath and lets it carry him away.

A fisherman picks him out of the ocean with his morning catch. The pup is half-drowned, but the fisherman knows what to do about that. The pup coughs out the seawater under the fisherman’s pounding hands. Eventually he’s able to drink a little.
“I know you must be hungry,” the fisherman says, “but you must wait half a day before eating. Otherwise you’ll just throw it back up and get sicker.”

The pup can’t help eyeing the fisherman’s catch longingly, but knows better than to disobey.

“Just lie there,” the fisherman says comforting. “I’ve still got a few more nets to pull. Then I’ll take you back to shore.”

They sail through the bay for several more hours. By the end of it, the pup is feeling well enough to sit up. When he sees the fisherman struggling with a heavy net he goes over to help automatically.

“It’s all right,” the fisherman says, trying to be kind. “I’ll just – Mon Dieu!”

The pup freezes, hands still tangled in the net, which is now safely in the bottom of the boat. He’s not sure what he’s done wrong. The fisherman had needed help, and this is what he’d been bred for; to be strong.

The fisherman comes down and kneels next to the pup. “Young one,” he says gently. “Where are you from?”

“Notre Dame,” the pup answers him.

The fisherman nods. “And where is Notre Dame?”

“By the river.” The pup is beginning to be scared now. He can sense that these answers aren’t what the fisherman wants to hear, but he doesn’t know what other ones to give.

The fisherman seems to understand that. “Let me try again,” he says, still gently. “Were you born at Notre Dame?”

The pup looks at him, confused. “What does born mean?”

The fisherman bows his head. “When two Beta parents have children, they’re born,” he says, like he already knows what the pup will say next.

“I’m not a child,” the pup says anyway. “I’m a pup. Cara whelped me, but my odem went into heat and we were all taken away.”

“I know,” the fisherman says. He looks down at the net.

The fisherman guides his boat far from his fishing place, around inlets and eddies, until he reaches an enormous harbor. There he ties up at one of the small piers. Before he does, though, he gives the pup a cloak to wear, and some instructions.

“Don’t speak,” he says. “If someone asks you a question, pretend you’re dumb. Point to me. All right?”

The pup nods.

The fisherman ties his boat up, then takes a net full of fish and slings it over his shoulder. His back bows under the weight. The pup wants to take it from the fisherman and carry it himself. He wants to
help this kind man who had saved him from the ocean and has promised not to take him back to Notre Dame. But the fisherman had been scared when he’d seen the pup’s strength. The pup doesn’t dare.

The fisherman leads them through the winding streets and past buildings that make the pup stare. Eventually, though, they reach a section that looks even worse than the whelping pens where the pup had spent nearly his whole life. Here the fisherman walks down an alley. Just when it seems that they’ve walked into a dead end, the fisherman pushes a cloth aside and knocks on a door.

The door opens after a moment. “What’s this?” the person behind it demands, staring at the fisherman and the pup in open antagonism.

“Delivery,” the fisherman says.

“Not expecting any,” the person says, still angry.

“I’m ahead of schedule.”

The angry man looks at them both. “Come back when you’re on it, then,” he says, starting to shove the door closed.

The fisherman twists sideways and drops the net of fish right at the angry man’s feet, where it blocks the door. “Tell Flea it’s important,” he says, and doesn’t back down when the angry man swears at him.

“What’s going on?” a new voice says.

A woman comes into view. The pup stares. She’s not very tall, and too skinny. But her skin is paler than he’s ever seen. Even the overseers and the fisherman have darker skin than hers, from working outside all day. This woman looks like she’s never seen the sun. Her hair is red. The pup has never seen anyone like her.

“Flea!” the fisherman says in relief.

The angry man starts to say something, but the fisherman steps over the fish and around the angry man like he doesn’t care. He takes the arm of the woman named Flea and tugs her into a dark corner, where he starts talking rapidly, gesturing as he does.

The angry man is left with no one to be angry at except the pup. He looms over the pup, trying to intimidate.

The pup isn’t scared. The worst that can happen to him is that he’ll die, and go into the river to meet Jesus.

They glare at each other until the fisherman and the woman named Flea come back. “Leave off, Henry,” she orders the angry man. “Take the fish round out back and put ‘em in my cart. I’m for going back to Paris early.”

“What about the deal?” the angry man – Henry – wants to know.

“Tell ‘em it’s next month,” Flea says. She raises an eyebrow when Henry hesitates. “Now,” she says sweetly, which does nothing to conceal the underlying threat.

Grumbling, Henry departs.
The fisherman crouches down next to the pup. “Flea is going to take you to Paris,” he says. “You’ll be safe there. She’s going to take you somewhere you’ll be safe. All right?”

The pup looks from the fisherman to Flea.

“You can talk now,” the fisherman prompts him.

“Can’t I be safe with you?” the pup whispers. Flea fascinates him, but he’s still scared of her. The fisherman had been nice to him. “I can lift more nets,” he tries.

The fisherman’s eyes are sad. “No, young one, you can’t stay with me,” he says gently. “If you did, you would be caught. Then they’d send you back. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

The pup shivers. He doesn’t want that to happen to him, either.

“All right,” he says. “I’ll go with Miss Flea.”

“Just Flea,” the woman corrects. “None of this miss.”

The pup looks at her dubiously. The overseers had been very clear about how pups were to address their Beta superiors. He’s not sure he can leave off the miss.

“Let him work up to it,” the fisherman says to Flea, as if he understands the pup’s dilemma.

She crouches down next to the pup, too. “Paris is a great place,” she tells him. “I live in a special part of it called the Court of Miracles. No one’ll care about your skin there. And I can fix the rest of it.”

If the pup had had any idea of how the world worked outside the plantations, he would have run then. Anyone else who had promised to fix the rest would have meant sterilization. But the pup has never heard of the Inquisition. All he knows is that the fisherman had helped him, and he says Miss Flea will help him, too.

“Will you come with me?” Miss Flea asks, holding out her hand. “To the Court of Miracles?”

The pup looks at the fisherman one last time, wanting to memorize his face. Pups in the breeding pens never know their sires. For the rest of his life, when he thinks of his sire, he’ll think of the fisherman.

The fisherman gives him a nod and an encouraging smile.

“Yes,” the pup says, and puts his hand in Flea’s.

Flea is the one to give him the name Porthos. She takes him to Paris and into the Court of Miracles as her apprentice. She teaches him everything he doesn’t know. The Inquisition is one of the first lessons. Another is the argot of the Betas, so that he knows what the slurs about his people mean when he hears others throw them casually around. Yet another lesson is in how people live and work and mate outside the limited confines of the plantation.

She teaches the young Porthos to pick pockets and run simple cons and act as lookout and decoy. And when the streets are quiet, she teaches him other things, he and several of the other urchins in the Court of Miracles. They learn how high society works, and how to mimic its tricks and ways, the better to fleece the nobility. The rudiments of soldiering in case they ever need to impersonate a guard. The basics of trade, and mathematics, so they can buy and sell goods and not get fleeced themselves.
Along with it Porthos learns some history. Some geography. How to read and write, an unimaginable achievement for a pup from the plantations.

Flea doesn’t care that he’s an uncut Alpha, and that she’d get a handsome reward for turning him in to the Church. She doesn’t care that his carrier had been a slave and he can’t prove his sire had been anything but, and that she’d get a handsome reward for turning him in to the slave-catchers. She doesn’t even care that he loves her, in the earnest, all-consuming way of puppyhood.

The Inquisition teaches that Porthos is little better than an animal. That his dark skin means he has no sentience and his knot means he has no soul. The Church says that violence is his nature. The slavers say that his aggression must be tamed. They all say that Flea should be afraid of him, and the more so because of his desperate, puppyish love.

Flea isn’t afraid. She should be. She’s a Beta woman, and the Church has spent centuries terrifying Beta women with gross caricatures of Alphas, violence and rapine and the cruel domination of God-fearing women like herself. But Flea looks past all of that and sees only a scared young pup with nowhere to go and no wish to cause harm.

She takes Porthos under her wing. In the Court of Miracles, no one cares that he’s an Alpha, at least not once Flea tells them he’s been cut – sterilized. It’s a believable lie. The scions of the nobility may still be able to hold on to their sexes, but the lower classes have been under the Inquisition’s thumb for a long time. It probably never occurs to them that an undercaste child might be born a throwback and not immediately turned over to the Church for sterilization.

As he grows older, Porthos learns how to bind his knot to mimic sterilization, and curb his more aggressive Alpha instincts. As long as they believe he’s cut, under their control, they view his strength as an asset. Several of the best gangs compete for his services. He’s able to remain something of a freelancer, and he does well for himself. He’s happy. At least, until the day he sees Flea kissing Charon in the corner of the Court.

It awakens something in Porthos that he’d never thought to expect. It’s not that he’s jealous; his love for Flea remains, but time has tempered it from a young puppy’s infatuation to a more mature respect and gratitude. In many ways she’s a second carrier to him. But he sees her joy and realizes that the life he’d built in the Court of Miracles could never bring him anything like it. The happiness he’s felt up until now has been a shallow, transient thing. Something new stirs in him. It says mate. Home. Family. All things he can never find here.

He’s not without the tools he needs to start anew, though. His first task as a pup in the Court had been as a pickpocket and decoy, during which he’d learned to pass as a Beta. His time in the gangs has taught him to fight with a sword and a pistol. And the connections he’s carefully developed tell him there’s a particular regiment in the King’s army that doesn’t ask too many questions.

Porthos doesn’t tell anyone he’s planning to leave, except Flea. No one else would understand his desire for a different life. They’re all here running from something and they’d do anything to avoid being taken back. In that regard, they’ve always understood Porthos. It’s one of the things that made them accept him as one of them. The difference is that Porthos will be running all of his life. Even in the Court of Miracles, he’s still running.

Flea sighs when he tells her he has to leave. “I guess part of me always knew you were gonna one day,” she says ruefully. “But I hoped.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, meaning it.

“It’s all right,” she tells him. “I know you gotta find the life that’s meant for you. And the person,
Porthos is too dark to blush, but the heat rises under his cheeks.

Flea laughs. “Kiddo, don’t think I don’t remember what it was like to be young,” she teases. Then she draws him to her and gives him a hug. “I ain’t never gonna have kids of my own,” she says wistfully. “And I probably ain’t actually old enough to be your ma. And I know you got a ma of your own, and I ain’t gonna tell you to forget her, neither. But – you’re family, okay? I always tried to do right by you, and I guess I must have done pretty well. Don’t forget your old Flea, wherever that river carries you next.”

“Miss Flea,” Porthos says to her, fondly, remembering the lost pup who’d been too scared to call her by name without the respectful prefix. It sounds like *Mama*. He doesn’t think his carrier would have minded.

“Go on now,” Flea says, swiping ineffectually at her eyes. “Go on and find your life.”

It sounds like the prayer his Cara had prayed over them all, the morning before they’d been taken away.

Porthos hugs Flea one last time. Then he goes.
“How’s de Guignes?” the Captain asks from behind his desk.

“Resting comfortably,” Aramis says. “But his leg’s going to be a long time mending. I did my best, but – ”

“No one could have done more,” Treville reassures.

Aramis isn’t sure he agrees with that. He isn’t a doctor. But de Guignes had refused the services of a real doctor, so Aramis had stepped in to fill the gap. It hadn’t been the first time a scowling, blustering Musketeer had turned to him instead of an outsider physician for their medical needs. And he is truly grateful that his parents’ library in Alameda had included secret copies of ancient Alphaic and Omegan medical texts, which he’d been required to study as a pup.

But a real doctor, even a Beta, could have done more. De Guignes’ wound is to the thigh, not to some particularly Alphaic part of his anatomy. And if de Guignes had had the good fortune to be born before the Inquisition had swept the land, he could have been seen by a doctor with access to the full body of Alphaic medical knowledge.

So much has been lost. Sometimes it makes Aramis want to scream. But he’s had a lifetime’s worth of practice holding his tongue.

“What about the two of you?” the Captain inquires. His gesture takes in Athos and Aramis both.

“We’re all right, sir,” Athos answers for them both. The duel that had injured de Guignes had been of the traditional kind, one on one, and conducted with honor. Neither of de Guignes’ seconds had needed to draw steel.

“I must punish you, of course,” Treville says solemnly. “Dueling is strictly prohibited.”

“Of course,” Athos murmurs. They both know nothing too serious will be forthcoming. Purportedly the duel had been fought over the matter of who had claimed the last table at an inn, but it had been the slurs against the regiment de Guignes’ opponent had hurled their way that had really provoked the quarrel. When it comes to the Musketeers, Treville is more territorial than the most aggressive Alpha. He isn’t really mad at them.

“Really what I need to do is get you both out of Paris for a while,” the Captain goes on. “The King can’t arrest whom he can’t find. If you’re gone for a few weeks, the whole thing will blow over.” He smiles. “And it just so happens I have the perfect assignment to take you there.”

As if on cue, there’s a knock at the Captain’s door. A moment later it’s pushed open and another Musketeer presents himself. “You summoned me, sir?”

“Yes, Porthos, come in,” Treville says. “Are the three of you acquainted? Porthos, these are Aramis and Athos.”

“We stood guard together at La Rochelle,” Athos says, nodding to the other Musketeer. “Porthos, I am glad to see you again.”

“You too,” the other man rumbles awkwardly. He’s large; Aramis’ first impression is of an ancient, massive tree trunk, with limbs in equal proportion. Porthos’ skin is dark, suggesting an African ancestry. Aramis’ thoughts immediately go to the state of the Inquisition in Africa. The situation on
the continent is bleak. The societies there are rabidly Catholic, and his family had never heard of any sort of Underground active there, as there is in Europe.

Focus, he scolds himself. It’s natural for his thoughts to go to the fate of his people, but it’s not relevant to the current conversation. If Porthos is African, he’s a Beta, however large he may be. It would be unwise for Aramis to let his guard down around him. In a squad with Athos and de Guignes, throwbacks all and all three known to each other, Aramis has grown used to relaxing somewhat around his squadmates. He chastises himself for it now, hearing his carrier’s scolding voice in his ears as well. Fool. He should never have allowed it in himself. He’ll have to break the habit immediately.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Porthos,” Aramis says, keeping his voice light and free of anything but cool courtesy.

“Right then,” the Captain says. “Now that you’re all acquainted, shall we get down to business? Porthos?”

So named, the other Musketeer nods, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “As it happens,” he begins, “I have a few… acquaintances… who work on the shadowy side of the law. Not doing any harm, you understand, but not strictly on the up and up. These people sometimes catch wind of things that are even less wholesome than themselves. When that happens, they’ve been known to mention the fact to me.”

“In exchange for your not mentioning anything about their doings?” Athos says, dry.

“I sometimes experience flashes of blindness,” Porthos says solemnly. “Along with a ringing in my ears that blocks my hearing. Something I was born with, no doubt. Probably no cure.”

“A sad case,” Treville says with equal gravity.

“About a month ago, one of my acquaintances came to me a little more upset than usual,” Porthos goes on. “Actually, a lot more upset. Now this particular acquaintance, he’s a dab hand with cards, see? Likes to play. Likes to shuffle. Sometimes the cards go his way. He’s a lucky fellow.” Porthos wiggles his fingers. “Someone else thought that maybe someone with clever fingers might have another use. They put him on retainer, as it were, and my acquaintance isn’t one to say no to money. Well, at first everything seemed normal – as these things go. But one day they asked him to open up something that it was pretty clear didn’t belong to them.”

“Shocking,” Aramis says, when it becomes obvious Porthos is waiting for some kind of response from his audience.

Porthos beams at him. “I know, right? Well, my acquaintance tried to say no. And you have to understand that no is a word people hear pretty often in this line of work. There’s what you might call a protocol to it. A way for suspicious-minded people to back out of a deal without someone getting antsy.” Porthos taps the handle of his musket idly.

“I take it your acquaintance’s employers didn’t follow the protocol,” Athos prompts.

“No indeed,” Porthos says sorrowfully. “In fact, they threatened the poor man! And in doing so they said a number of things, in their anger, which they probably oughtn’t to have said. Enough that my acquaintance became curious. And, after he got out of that situation – which of course he did – he went around and did a little digging.”

Aramis conceals his sigh carefully. The pedigree of the information is important, he understands that,
but he could do without this roundabout storytelling. “What did he find?” he asks, recognizing that Porthos is waiting for another interjection.

“Evidence that this went far beyond some theft and the occasional mugging,” Porthos says, dropping his storyteller’s cant – to Aramis’ relief – and falling back into the even tones of a report. “Evidence, in fact, of a plot. A well-organized group of men and women, who were using the funds to arm themselves secretly in a conspiracy against the King.”

“A Assassination?” Athos asks.

Porthos spreads his hands. “My source didn’t know,” he says. “Their ultimate aim is their secret. But he was worried enough to bring it to me, and I was worried enough to bring it to the Captain. And so here we all are.”

A well-armed, well-organized group of people plotting against the throne. Aramis considers this and a thought darts lightning-quick across his mind. He glances at Treville.

The Captain shakes his head, very slightly. No, this isn’t part of the Underground.

“Treason?” Athos suggests. “Rebellion?”

“Or just more riots,” Porthos says. He spreads his hands: who can tell? There has been a lot of civil unrest lately. The Inquisition is slowly encroaching, further and further into France. Half of the riots are people protesting the new edicts; the other half are people screaming that they don’t go far enough.

A strong national line on the subject would at least quiet dissent, even if it doesn’t breed agreement, but Louis XIII lacks the backbone for it. Ordinarily for such matters he relies on Richelieu, who has an iron spine. But when it comes to the Inquisition, they who rely on Richelieu to resist it lean against a broken reed.

“That’s what I need you to find out,” Treville says, recalling Aramis’ attention from dark-tinged thoughts of the Cardinal. “What their aims are, how dedicated they are, and how much of a threat they actually pose. It may be nothing. I hope it’s nothing. But we need to take it seriously.”

“My acquaintance was able to learn that the group here in Paris is only a small local cell,” Porthos says. “The center of the operation is in Le Havre.”

That makes sense. Le Havre is the busiest port in France, and Porthos had said this group is well-armed. They must be bringing their goods in through the harbor.

From where is an interesting question, though. The use of shipping implies an international backer. Spain? England? Either would be interested in France’s destabilization, though for very different reasons. Spain is rabid in their determination to bring the fire of the Inquisition to every nation on Earth. It’s always rankled them that their nearest neighbor is so comparatively unscathed. England, conversely, has managed to keep the Inquisition almost completely from her shores. She refuses to have dealings with any nation tainted by it. A position of which Aramis wholeheartedly approves, but it means she, too, is France’s enemy.

“You three will go to Le Havre,” Treville orders. “Discover the center of this plot, assess the threat, and act as you think best. Understood?”

“Understood,” Athos says. “I suppose we’re to leave after the new moon?”

“No, immediately,” the Captain says. “The situation may be critical – we simply don’t know their
Athos and Aramis exchange looks. “Is there any reason to believe the situation is critical?” Aramis asks carefully. “Because if there isn’t, then there’s no need for us to rush.”

He’s not suffering from a sudden case of laziness. It’s a problem of bad timing. Midsummer had been three weeks ago. In five days, Aramis has a week’s leave scheduled. Heat leave, though no one uses that term. Now’s a bad time for him to go harrying off to Le Havre.

“My informant believes so,” Porthos says gravely. “At first he didn’t think it was urgent, no. But just yesterday he got back in contact with me again. A shipment of gunpowder’s gone missing between Spain and France. It wasn’t on the ship when it docked at Le Havre. At least, that’s what the customs official says.”

Aramis frowns. Customs officials are human like everyone else, and can be just as greedy, but the penalties for their being caught taking bribes are severe. Porthos is implying that the customs officer has done just that. But a missing shipment of gunpowder will be treated seriously. They may not know that the matter has reached the ears of the King’s Musketeers, but they’ll know that there will be some sort of investigation. For the customs officer to risk his position like that – even assuming he’s sympathetic to the group’s ideology – implies that the group is close to acting. That they think their goal will be achieved before their treachery is discovered.

Well, that or they’re completely incompetent. But Treville can’t afford to assume.

“There you have it,” Treville agrees. “You must leave immediately.”

Yes, Aramis can see that. Unfortunately, Aramis’ biology doesn’t agree, and it’s not known for being responsive to arguments.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Athos says sternly, saving Aramis the trouble. “I seem to recall Aramis was already given a leave of absence that was to start shortly?”

“Oh, yes,” the Captain says. “I thought someone might mention that. Porthos, Athos, thank you for your time. I’d like a word with Aramis in private.”

Athos stares at him. “Of course, Captain,” he says coolly polite. “I’m sure you’ll arrange everything satisfactorily.” His gaze slides to Aramis. “I’ll see you later?” he asks.

“Yes, later,” Aramis agrees, hardly knowing what he says.

“Come on, Porthos,” Athos says. “I’ll want your help readying our supplies.”

Which will also serve to keep Porthos out of the way so Aramis and Treville can speak freely. Aramis is so very grateful to have Athos on his side.

The moment the door closes behind the departing two, Aramis steps into the Captain’s personal space and drops his voice.

“I realize you may not keep track of these things,” Aramis mutters, casting a wary gaze over his shoulder despite the fact that he trusts Athos with his life, “but I have a very pressing reason to take leave a week from now.”

“As a matter of fact, I do keep track,” Treville says gently. “But I have suspicions as to the nature of this group’s motives and funding, which mean I need you and Athos to handle this.”
“Athos can take care of it alone,” Aramis says. He hates himself a little for abandoning his squadmate, his packmate, so easily. But this isn’t a joke. He may be good about hiding his sex in the normal course of things, but heat is different. Heat turns everything up. Anyone with a functioning nose would be able to scent him. Not to mention that he’d have difficulty focusing on anything during his hormone peaks.

“Porthos will be too busy handling our informants to provide Athos with backup,” Treville rebukes. “I won’t send someone into this alone. I was going to send de Guignes, but he fought that duel, and now he’s out. I need you.”

“There are other throwbacks in the Musketeers!” he hisses. Athos and he between them have identified nearly a dozen, in the three years since they became a pack-pair.

“None of them with your background or experience,” Treville says. He looks sad. “You never have quite learned to trust me, have you, Aramis?”

“It’s not a matter of trust,” Aramis tries to defend, although the answer is no, not really. It’s not the Captain’s fault. Treville has been nothing but trustworthy – at least, until he’d declared his intention to send Aramis on a long-distance mission within a week of his heat starting – but Aramis’ ability to trust had died with Adele. It’s only recently, thanks to Athos, that it’s started to return. But by then it had been too late to start trusting Treville. After nearly a decade in the Musketeers, the Captain’s too much of an authority figure. It doesn’t matter that Treville’s a throwback himself. Rene d’Herblay’s parents had been throwbacks, and that hadn’t mattered. Hadn’t made them willing to fight for their own pups. Not if those pups hadn’t been exactly what the Alameda clan had needed.

“That’s all right,” Treville says, though the sadness lingers. Hurt. Aramis wishes there were something he could do about that. He knows the Captain views them all as his pack, almost as his own pups. But Aramis isn’t looking for a carrier figure. Not even if his rejection hurts the person who has given him this second start, the chance to build a life, to find family in the form of Athos.

“I don’t need you to trust me implicitly,” Treville goes on. “I just need you to believe that I know what I’m doing.”

“Then tell me what you’re doing,” Aramis says, refusing to be lured. “Because from where I’m standing it looks like you’re going to get me killed when I go into heat in the middle of a crowded town!”

Treville reaches into his pocket and produces a folded envelope. He hands it to Aramis.

“What is this?” Aramis asks suspiciously.

“Open it and find out,” Treville says.

Aramis does. Then he gasps.

“This is –”

Treville nods.

“But they’re –”

“Difficult to get,” Treville admits. “But you’ll need them.”

“Not just difficult,” Aramis breathes. “Impossible.”
Nestled inside the folds of paper are several dried leaves. Just enough for a single cup of tea. No different, from the untrained eye, to any other tea leaves sold at any other market stall in Paris.

Except. These leaves have one function and one function only: to suppress an Omega’s heats.

“How did you get these?” Aramis breathes.

“I have a source,” Treville says carefully.

“The Church controls the entire supply!” The leaves are useless to Betas; no one had protested when the Inquisition had burnt the fields and forbidden the crop’s sale or possession. The only remaining live plants are in Inquisition hands, where the leaves are grown and preserved for their use in detecting throwbacks, not protecting them. “Your source must be – ”

Treville smiles. “Of course we have people inside the Church,” he says, like it should be obvious. “How else would we be able to keep ahead of them?”

Or, it goes without saying, obtain illegal supplies like this. Once, the leaves – the drugs – in Aramis’ hands would be common as dirt, and obtainable just as easily. Every household would have had a supply of them. Every throwback pup would have picked them in the meadows, and made crowns of them to place on their heads or their odem’s. Ironically, they had been a symbol of fertility. Yes, when cut and dried, they worked to suppress heats. But chewed raw, or strained and the liquid drank, they had the opposite effect. It had been an aid to conception, in the old days, for Omegas whose heats were irregular, or didn’t come at all, or were beginning to fade with age.

Now merely a single dose is as much as anyone’s life is worth. “If I’m caught with these,” Aramis says, dizzy at the thought, “and they find out where I got them...”

“Would you rather go into heat in Le Havre?” Treville says tartly. “Take these with you. The night before your heat is supposed to start, make a cup of tea with them. Boiling water, mind. Steep for ten minutes. Then drink it at once.”

Aramis knows how the leaves work. He’s read the records. His carrier had told him that every Omega pup had used to know the recipes. The knack of picking and drying the leaves to unlock their heat suppressing properties. Or the trick of straining the leaves to bring on heat in an Omega who's past breeding.

Unmated Omegas had drunk their cups religiously, four times a year. Rakish Alphas had carried their own supplies so their conquests didn’t turn up pupped. Aramis had never expected to get hold of his own supply. But he knows how to use them all the same.

Something else occurs to him. “This isn’t the sort of thing you just leave lying around,” Aramis says slowly. “You don’t keep a supply here.”

“Good God, no,” Treville says, shocked. “The risk would be too high.”

“The risk would be astronomical,” Aramis agrees. “Which means you had to get this in specially. Except, until this morning, you didn’t know I would need it. You thought de Guignes would be taking this mission. You thought I would be taking leave.”

Treville winces.

“These are yours,” Aramis says in blank surprise. Now that he thinks about it, he realizes he’s never seen Treville take heat leave. He’d never noticed. He’d known Treville is an Omega, of course, but he’d never paid enough attention to the other man’s absences. Now he thinks back to the pattern of
ten years. There have never been four absences in a year that could possibly align with a heat schedule.

“I’m too public a figure,” Treville says ruefully. “If I disappeared every three months, someone would notice, no matter how good my excuses were.”

It makes sense. It makes perfect sense. The scrutiny, on someone like Treville, would be intense. And with how involved he is in the Underground, and how many throwbacks he’s protecting in the Musketeers’ regiment, the stakes are particularly high.

But. “You’ve been doing this for years,” Aramis says numbly.

“Since I became Captain,” Treville admits.

“Your source has been in place for that long?” Then Aramis realizes something else that entirely derails his previous train of thought. “Have you had any natural heats during that time?”

Treville looks amused. “Are you my doctor now, too?”

“Someone has to be,” Aramis snaps. “You’re obviously not seeing a better one. Treville, suppressing your heats for that long has consequences!”

“So does being found out,” Treville says simply. “It’s worth it.”

“It’ll kill you just as surely in the long run.”


Aramis waves this reference away impatiently, unconcerned, at the moment, with the Captain’s mysterious mate. “Athos saw your bite when he was a novice. How often is occasionally?”

Treville hesitates. “Maybe once every second year,” he says. “Or third.”

Aramis swears. “How old are you? How pure’s your line?”

Treville’s lips fold inwards. “We’re going to have to work on your tact.”

All right, Aramis knows it’s rude to ask an Omega their age and heredity. They’re the two biggest things that affect fertility, and, in the old days, were the direct measure of an Omega’s worth on the mating market. They’re why the ancient noble lines had guarded their purity so carefully. Why they’d kept such meticulous records of their heredity. Why mating contracts between high houses had been so complex, interbreeding so discouraged, and social mobility had been so limited – all things the Beta supremacy had cited as reasons for overthrowing the old order.

But in this case, rude as the question may be, fertility is exactly the point. Aramis folds his arms and stares at Treville.

After a moment the Captain sighs. “I don’t know my ancestry,” he admits. “My grandparents burned the family records when Henry IV first started making concessions to the Inquisition. As for my age – I was two years past my first heat when I came to Paris. That’s as much as anyone knows.” He shrugs again, this time not meeting Aramis’ eyes. “I was orphaned young.”

Aramis wants to say he’s sorry, but the Captain’s body language is standoffish. He clearly doesn’t want sympathy. Orphaning’s not uncommon for their people anyway. How does one comfort rain
for being wet?

He settles for saying, “The older you get the more you need to allow your normal heats to happen. The last few heats before estropause are vital to your hormone production in old age. If you suppress them, you could end up with chronic health issues.”

Treville laughs a little bitterly. “If I make it to old age I’ll have done better than a lot of our people,” he says flatly. “Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I chose this life knowing I wouldn’t get to settle down with my mate and play with our grandpups. Besides. I’m giving you this dose, aren’t I?”

“And you won’t just get another in time?” Aramis says suspiciously.

“I don’t know. The supply is very closely monitored. It’s often as much as my source can manage just to get me the one dose.”

Aramis sighs. It’ll have to do. And now that he’s calming down from his initial outrage, he remembers that it’s really none of his business. The Captain is a grown Omega who has been managing his life for more years than Aramis has been alive. Managing it quite well, in fact. He holds prominent positions in both the public world and, implicitly, in the Underground. There’s never been so much as a whiff of suspicion attached to his name. That’s success for their people in the modern day.

And, for that matter, he’s attracted a mate – fertility or no fertility – which means success in the old-fashioned sense, too, although he’d lose standing for the lack of pups.

Still. “Think about it,” Aramis says grudgingly. “It’ll be hard to keep up a soldiering lifestyle if you end up with brittle bones.”

“I’ll think about it,” Treville agrees. Aramis tries not to bristle at the fondness in his tone.

Aramis doesn’t care. He doesn’t. It’s just that it would make Aramis’ life a lot harder if Treville were replaced by another Captain. One who isn’t a throwback, wouldn’t understand Aramis’ unique needs, and might not have connections to the Underground.

Aramis folds up the leaves back up in their envelope and tucks it away carefully. “Was there anything else, sir?” he asks coolly.

“No,” Treville says. He goes back around his desk and sits behind it, regaining his own usual authoritative demeanor. “Dismissed, Musketeer.”

Aramis goes. He spends the rest of the day helping Porthos and Athos ready for their mission, and tries not to think about the envelope crackling against his ribs with every step.

Athos takes him aside after the last saddle-bag is tied off. He’s sent Porthos ahead to get a table in the mess. Aramis knows what he’s doing, but lets him. Athos is a worrier.

“You’re really coming on this mission?” Athos demands. He keeps his voice down in deference to the fact that they’re dancing around secrets, though the stables are empty – everyone’s already at dinner. “What did Treville say?”

“ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS,” Aramis says, taking the envelope out from his doublet and handing it to Athos. “He gave me this.”
Athos opens it and whistles. His hands are shaking slightly when he folds the envelope back up and hands it to Aramis. “Put it away, quick,” he says, glancing at the stable door. “Mon Dieu. How does he even get it? No, don’t answer that. Better I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “I assume you know how to use it.”

“Probably better than you do,” Aramis says, amused in spite of himself. He is the medic, and an Omega besides.

“Right. Right.” Athos stares at Aramis’ chest where the envelope had disappeared. Then he seems to realize he’s doing it and jerks his gaze away. “Right.” He doesn’t seem to have anything else to say.

“Tell me about Porthos,” Aramis says, trying to take his mind off it. Both of their minds. He’d think he’d be used to walking around with something that could betray him – what else is his own body, underneath the uniform? But somehow the envelope feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

“He’s a good Musketeer,” Athos says, at least somewhat distracted. “Conscientious, responsible. Never acted like guard duty was beneath him, even at the siege. There was a lot of scut work at La Rochelle. He didn’t complain.”

“Sorry I missed it,” Aramis says. For once he means it. The siege of La Rochelle had been a mess from beginning to end – ten minutes of excitement buried in and around nearly a year of boredom – and mostly Aramis doesn’t regret having been posted in Paris instead of out in the trenches. But it would have given him a chance to get to know this Porthos a little, before putting himself in such a risky situation with the other Musketeer.

But. “No you’re not,” Athos says, half-smiling at the familiar refrain. Aramis had been part of a small detachment of Musketeers left behind in Paris to maintain order and guard the Queen, who had not joined her husband on siege. Officially Aramis and the others who had remained had been chosen because of their exemplary records and calm personalities. Unofficially, well, anyone who goes into heat four times a year is a bad fit for an army at siege.

“No I’m not,” Aramis agrees. Of the various ways to be discovered, going into heat in the middle of the French army had to be one of the worst. Omega pheromones act like an aphrodisiac during heat. Alphas feel it more strongly, but Betas aren’t immune. An Omega caught in heat in a populated area often doesn’t survive to be handed over to the Inquisition: by the time they’ve been gang-raped by every Beta male in the vicinity, there’s nothing left of them anyway.

Caught in the middle of an army who’s been deprived of Beta female companionship for months on end? Aramis shudders, and it isn’t theatrical at all.

“You don’t have to worry about Porthos,” Athos says comfortingly. “He’s… well, you heard him talk about his acquaintances? I don’t know his story, but he’s got secrets of his own. Some kind of criminal background is my guess. I stood guard with him for three months, and he was always friendly, but he never had any friends. He won’t pry.”

“Good,” Aramis sighs. “That’s good.” He’s good at hiding his sex, and he’s familiar with the theory on how to use the suppressant leaves, but he’s never done it before. Couple that with a squadmate who likes to ferret out secrets and it would be a recipe for disaster. With a squadmate who respects boundaries… it might just work.

“The Captain’s taking a risk on this one,” Athos agrees, doing the trick where he reads Aramis’ mind. “I hope he knows what he’s doing.”

“Do you trust him?” Aramis asks. He can still hear Treville’s voice in his ears: *You never have quite*
learned to trust me, have you, Aramis? He’s claimed to trust the Captain before, but there’s always been a part of him that held back.


From somewhere Aramis finds a smile. “And I trust you,” he says. The feeling is odd, but distinctive. Still so new. And yet familiar. Trust is a habit that’s hard to break.

“Then let’s go get dinner,” Athos says, taking charge in the way he has. He’s less senior than Aramis, but even in their usual squad, de Guignes had deferred to Athos automatically from the first. There’s a magnetic air about him sometimes. Pureblood. Aramis’ parents would have approved. Aramis finds he doesn’t mind it as much as he might have thought he would.

Athos adds, “We’ll leave in the morning.”

“Right,” Aramis murmurs. He lets Athos guide him out, and resists the urge to touch his vest-pocket as he does, to make sure the envelope is still there.
The Flames of Fire

Le Havre is a sprawling, dirty place, smelling heavily of fish and with at least three more tavern-inns per block than any sane city should need. It makes securing rooms easy, at least. Porthos leads them to a place he claims to have stayed in often before, though he’s evasive as to when. A few smiles and coins slipped to the proprietress nets them a small suite of rooms, three private beds opening into a shared area. Aramis and Athos exchange glances but don’t comment. Porthos seems to be bankrolling them, and if he’s paying in favors instead of gold it’s not their place to speak.

“All right,” Porthos says, emerging from dropping his bags in his bedroom to throw himself on one of the chairs provided in the common area. “We need to discuss a plan of approach. As you’ve probably already guessed, I have some contacts in the area that will make a good place for me to start. But they’re not likely to talk freely around anyone in a Musketeers’ uniform, if you catch my drift.”

“I take it they don’t know you’re in the King’s service yourself?” Athos says dryly.

Porthos shrugs. “They know,” he says. “But there’s knowing and knowing, and in my case they don’t really know.”

“So what are the two of us to do?” Aramis asks, somewhat waspishly. The four days’ ride to Le Havre have been unusually grating. It hasn’t been anything their squadmate has said or done. It’s what Porthos hasn’t done – or rather, what he hasn’t been. Aramis has grown far too dependent on the freedom of working with Athos and de Guignes. He misses the hour or two after supper on the road, where the three of them had just sat around the fire and relaxed, no pretenses left among them. He’s spoiled. He even knows it. But Aramis finds the old reserve hard to assume, when he’s had a taste of letting it go, even for just a little while.

Porthos raises an eyebrow. “I thought you might trace the missing gunpowder from the other end,” he says mildly. “Musketeers’ uniforms might be out of place among my contacts, but I think the customs officers of Le Havre would find them to be very… tongue-loosening.”

“As might the owners of carts and store-houses,” Athos agrees. Fortunately his tone is mildness itself, which somewhat covers Aramis’ discontent.

“Here.” Porthos produces a few pieces of paper. “I sketched these out for you. These are some of the more common smugglers’ signals and markings.” He points to several seemingly random arrangements of scratches and explains each of their meanings in turn – this gang or that, where it might be going, even indications of the eventual buyer.

“This is very… detailed,” Athos says diplomatically.

Porthos shrugs. “I have friends in low places,” he says. “I used to be in some low places myself.”

“What makes you think these conspirators will use the same markings?” Aramis demands.

Porthos blinks. “I think they won’t be,” he says. “They’re not affiliated with any of the usual gangs. If they were, my informants wouldn’t be talking to me. This group are outsiders. I’m showing you this so you know not to waste your time on whichever gang’s running tea and cloth this year.”

“So these markings indicate that the underhanded dealings in question are not the sort of underhanded with which we are to concern ourselves,” Athos summarizes. He passes the papers
over to Aramis with a quelling look. To Porthos he promises, “We’ll memorize them. Thank you for sharing this with us.”

“No problem,” Porthos says after a moment. He glances briefly at Aramis, but must decide not to make an issue of Aramis’ tone. “I should warn you in advance that my hours will probably be irregular over the next few days,” he says instead to them both. “My informants don’t always go to bed with the sun. Shall we meet back here in three days’ time, at sunset, to pool our resources?”

“An excellent idea,” Athos agrees. “Good luck to you.”

“And to you,” Porthos says. With one more look between them, he picks up a disreputable-looking rucksack and leaves the quarters.

Athos walks softly over to the door and puts his ear to it for a moment. Then he takes Aramis’ arm and leads him back to one of the bedrooms. “What’s gotten into you?” he hisses.

“I don’t know,” Aramis says helplessly. Now that Porthos isn’t in the room, he’s much calmer. “I just – he makes me nervous.”

Athos sniffs the air experimentally. “You’re not early,” he says with confidence. Aramis had known that already – he’s familiar with his own pre-heat signs, after years of carefully timed leave and faraway campsites – but it’s still good to have the confirmation. “That’s not it,” he starts. Then he pauses. “Maybe that’s part of it,” he goes on slowly. “Not that I’m early – but that it’s going to happen at all, in the middle of the city. I know I have the leaves, and I have the recipes memorized, but…”

“You’ve never done it before,” Athos says understandingly. He reaches out to place a hand on Aramis’ shoulder. He’s not a touchy person – neither of them are – but the contact is inexpressibly comforting just now.

“Pack,” Aramis says suddenly. That’s the missing piece. Why he’s been so uncomfortable around Porthos, and why Athos’ touch is welcome where normally he’d shrug it off. “I’m about to go into heat, and there’s a stranger in my squad.”

“One who isn’t pack,” Athos says in understanding. “Or what?”

“Or it could be that he’s a potential sire.”

Aramis recoils. “I’m not looking for a sire! Much less a cabrón Beta –”

“Relax,” Athos says sternly. He shrugs a little. “I’m just saying. Maybe your biology doesn’t know the difference, and you’re on edge.”

“Or it does and that’s why I’m on edge,” Aramis agrees unwillingly. If Omegas were to instinctively avoid Beta males in the run-up to their heats, it would cut down on the interbreeding that dilutes Alphaic and Omegan traits in the resulting pups. Whether that’s a cause or an effect of the selective breeding their people have practiced for centuries is a different question.
“It’s unlikely we’ll see him for the next couple of days,” Athos says. “And by then, won’t you have taken the suppressants?”

Aramis does some mental calculations. They’re most effective about twelve hours before heat starts; heat can vary by a day or even two, and Aramis’ tend to be irregular in that regard, so he’ll want to time the dose very precisely. “No,” he says regretfully. “That’ll still be too soon.”

Athos sighs. “All right. Well, I’ll handle Porthos as much as I can, then. If you’re having trouble, just say nothing, or make up an excuse and get me, okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Aramis protests. He’s not a wilting flower. He never has been, and he certainly can’t afford to start being one now.

“Of course you will,” Athos says with perfect confidence. “You’ll do whatever you need to do, and I’ll take care of whatever’s left. That’s how a pack works. Right?”

“Right,” Aramis says. Confidence restored, he looks down at Porthos’ sketches, which he’s still holding. “Where do you want to start?”

They start down at the docks, because the gunpowder had left Spain aboard the Henrietta Maria, and that was the last time anyone could positively locate it. There’s a chance that another ship had rendezvoused with the Maria and cross-loaded the gunpowder, but it’s the less likely scenario. They’ll first try to find proof that the gunpowder did indeed reach France’s shores the old-fashioned way. If that fails, they’ll fall back on the alternate theory.

Fortunately that doesn’t seem like it will be necessary. “And the barrels were all still there when you docked?” Athos repeats. Earlier in this conversation he’d been much more circumspect with his questions, but their companion – an ordinary seaman from the Maria who’s been enjoying the cups of ale Athos has been purchasing – is now far too drunk for it to matter.

“Sure’s they were,” the seaman slurs in response. His nods are exaggerated, dipping his beard in his tankard with every bob. “Next to the salt pork, like I’s told you. ‘Course the salt pork was all empty by then. These weren’t, though. Barnabas ‘ad an hell of a time rolling ‘em.”

“And you actually saw Barnabas rolling them off the ship the night you docked?” Aramis inquires.

“’m and two others,” the sailor confirms. “I thought, ya know, of sayin’, whatcha doin’? But ’m just an ordinary, and Barnabas has ’is warrant, see? And he’d been givin’ me an ’ard enough time already, this voyage. If I’d’ve spoke up he’d’ve just scolded me for not trustin’ ’im to know ’is business, as he oughta, being such a longtime sailor and all. So I just minded mine to start with. Right? Ain’t that what I ought’ve done?”

“Exactly right,” Athos soothes. He beckons to the barmaid. “Friend, I hope you enjoy the rest of your leave. Have one more on us.” He places a few coins on the table. The Musketeers rise to go.

“Thanky,” the sailor says, already focusing on the new beverage in front of him.

“He’ll drink himself into a stupor within the hour and forget we were even here,” Athos murmurs as they emerge into the cool evening air.

“And now we have a name,” Aramis adds, smiling.

Finding the sailor had been a stroke of luck. They’d started with the customs officials two days ago, but they’d been a dead wall. The entire customs brigade were apparently in the process of moving
offices, and the paperwork was so hopelessly snarled it was impossible to tell what was chance, what was incompetence, and what was malfeasance. Their Musketeers’ uniforms had gained them access and a reluctant obedience, but it was going to take a team of auditors a month at least to make heads or tails of it. By which point the gunpowder, if it had even reached France’s shores aboard the Maria, would be long gone. And quite possibly the King with it.

Abandoning that approach after the first fruitless day, Athos and Aramis had instead made for the docks themselves. Records and customs officials were good things in their place, but it was the dockworkers and dock masters who really knew what was going on. It had taken another day of going dock to dock to find where the Maria had unloaded. Then a third day had been spent being sent from one person to another. But they’d finally found a sailor who’d actually been aboard the Maria that night, and thanks be, the man had been willing to talk, providing the Musketeers were willing to buy the ale.

Athos glances at the sun. Despite the sailor’s drunkenness, it’s still hovering above the buildings of Le Havre, though only barely. Perhaps an hour until full dark. They’re supposed to meet Porthos tonight to pool information.

“Porthos may be early,” Athos says, “or he may be late, but regardless I think we’ve earned our supper. Let’s go back to our rooms. Hopefully our companion has learned something useful as well, and we can put this whole matter to rest.”

Aramis nods, falling into step next to Athos. “That would be best,” he says fervently. There’s a quiet clock ticking in the back of his mind: soon, soon, soon. Still a week away, or even a little more, but too close for his tastes. In the normal way of things he’d be on leave already. Packing to get out of Paris, or even already ridden into the countryside. Setting up a small camp. Laying some snares so there’s fresh meat waiting after the heat breaks and he’s ravenous. He sighs, wishing for trees and sky.

Athos bumps their shoulders together. “Still doing all right?” he asks quietly, letting the noisy street cover his words.

Aramis nods. “I’ll be fine,” he says.

“Don’t fly off the handle tonight,” Athos cautions.

“Why not?” Aramis shrugs. “Porthos will just think I don’t like him.”

Athos’ lips thin slightly.

“All right, all right,” Aramis sighs. “You’re right. I’ll keep a handle on it, don’t worry.”

“Good,” Athos says. He starts to say something else, then cuts himself off.

“What is it?” Aramis asks quietly, tensing.

“I’m not sure,” Athos says slowly. He flicks his eyes expressively to the right.

Aramis follows his gaze. They’ve left the row of taverns by the docks and are now passing through a merchant street, stall after stall full of brightly colored wares and merchants hawking them loudly. Passersby mill through the stalls, exclaiming, and small barefoot children dart through the crowd. Some of them are merchants’ get running errands. Others are from the various official buildings, fetching and delivering. Still others are the usual riffraff, picking pockets and lifting valuables. Aramis can’t see anything unusual in the crowd.
“By the chandler’s stall,” Athos adds in an undertone.

Aramis looks to the appropriate place. Next to the racks of long, waxy candles, there’s a small gap. It looks like the two buildings behind the stalls used to connect, but now the façade is old and crumbling, and a makeshift alley seems to have formed out of an old corridor. In front of it, a small ragged girl is standing.

He frowns. The girl is standing still, and that’s unusual. There are plenty of ragged children in the crowd. But they’re all in constant motion. Their fingers flicker and their feet dart, and they’re pushed on their way by the passersby who shove past without a second thought. They’re all in the thick of the crowd, where the pickings are best. Why is this one standing, still, off in the gap between two stalls?

She looks up at them both. Satisfied she has their attention, she holds something up. A hat.

Aramis squints, then swears. “Is that –”

“It could be any Musketeer’s,” Athos says, “but in this case, yes, I’m fairly sure it’s Porthos’.”

“She wants us to follow her.”

Athos glances around the crowd, then shrugs slightly, freeing his sword-hilt from his cloak. “Porthos did say he had acquaintances in low places,” he says. But he frowns. “Aramis, maybe you should –”

“Don’t be a fool,” Aramis says. “Going alone would be idiotic.”

“Supposing it’s a trap, and I need rescue?”

“If you couldn’t handle it alone, I’m not likely to be able to either,” Aramis points out. He moves his own shoulders, an oblique reference to the differences between them. Aramis’ strengths don’t lie in contests of brute force. He’s a planner, and he works better with time and distance. “If anything, I should go alone, and you should be ready to rescue me.”

“Forget it,” Athos says reflexively. Then he gives Aramis a half-smile of apology. “All right. Then let’s go.”

As they approach, buffeted by the crowd, the girl smiles. Then she turns and disappears down the gap in the walls.

The two Musketeers follow. Aramis wonders how it is that no one seems to notice two grown soldiers squeezing behind a chandler’s stall, but soon realizes that the stall’s angles are very cleverly constructed. The two of them had seen the girl because she’d wanted to be seen. Generally, though, the various hanging cloths and buntings of the merchant stalls conceal the gap.

The girl is waiting for them on the other side. She holds a finger to her lips and beckons them to follow her.

Aramis exchanges a look with Athos. But they obey.

She leads them down three more alleys, through the ruins of what must once have been a fine courtyard, and then up to a dilapidated building. “In there,” she says, the first words she’s spoken to them, and gestures to the closed door.

Athos doesn’t move. “I think we’re fine where we are,” he says.
The girl frowns. “But –”

“That’s all right,” another voice says. From the shadows a man appears. He’s tall, with broad shoulders, and piercing eyes that seem to rake them both. He breaks their gaze to toss the girl a coin. “Go back to the Court,” he instructs.

The girl takes the coin and runs out of the room. Aramis’ eyebrows twitch up. He’s not an expert on the criminal classes, but the girl hadn’t even bitten the coin to make sure it was real, or questioned the man’s right to give her orders. He knows there’s a loose hierarchy among thieves. This man must be high in it.

Athos seems to have reached the same conclusion. “Your Majesty,” he says, and gives an ironic bow.

The man replies with a short laugh. “Just a prince,” he says. “And you can call me Henry.”

“Not a King?”

“The King’s in Paris,” Henry says. “I’m in charge of Le Havre, but Charon’s still King of the Court of Miracles.”

“Why have you brought us here?” Aramis demands.

“Your friend Porthos asked me to,” he says. “You are Athos and Aramis of the King’s Musketeers, are you not?”

“We are,” Athos says for them both. He rests his hand on his sword-hilt. “Why would Porthos ask you to bring us here?”

“Because he couldn’t come himself.” Henry pauses, considering, and seems to realize further explanation is required. “Me and my people, we haven’t got much respect for the law, as you can probably tell. But there’s law-breaking and then there’s regicide. Laws were made by man, but the King was put here by God. No thief in their right mind wants to mess with God.”

“That’s why your people went to Porthos when they heard about the plot against the King,” Aramis says.

“And that’s why we promised to bring a message to you if Porthos didn’t return by noon today,” Henry confirms.

“Where’d he go?” Athos demands.

“He talked with some of our rats. They’re thieves, of a sort, but they’re not fully of the Court. They mostly work legitimate as labor. Just sometimes they look the other way when our people go through, or tip us the wink about a fat cargo coming in. Couple weeks ago they were paid off by another gang. To look the other way, same as usual. But the goods weren’t marked proper to be smugglers, and the barrels were too heavy besides. Porthos thought it might be your gunpowder. So he tried to trace their route out of the city. Said if he wasn’t back by noon today to get hold of you both.”

“When did he leave?”

“Two days ago.”

Aramis swears again. “He’s either captured or dead,” he says grimly.
“Or his horse threw him and we’ll find him sitting by a fire swearing at us for not getting there sooner,” Athos says pragmatically. “No way of knowing until we look.”

“You will look then?” Henry says. “If you won’t, we will. Porthos may wear the King’s uniform, but I still owe him a debt.”

“You may leave his safety in our hands,” Athos assures the Prince. “The Musketeers don’t leave anyone behind.”

Henry nods. “Do you need anything?”

“No,” Aramis says.

“I’ll pass the word to my people just the same,” Henry says. “If you need aid, just approach the first beggar you see and tell them you want to give alms to Saint Michael’s. They’ll help you.”

“Thank you,” Athos says gravely, and bows again.

Henry waves this off. “Just help Porthos,” he repeats.

Their instinct is to leave immediately in search of their missing comrade, but prudence prevails. The sun has vanished below the rim of the land. There’s almost no moon left, and the clouds are often thick this close to the sea. They won’t do Porthos any good in the dark. Reluctantly, Athos and Aramis eat a good supper and retire early, recruiting their strength.

Dawn sees the two Musketeers riding out of Le Havre, rooms vacated and saddlebags packed. The maid that had brought their wine with supper had also handed them a pile of napkins, beneath which had been a rough map. Marked on it is the direction Porthos had followed, believing it to be the route the gunpowder had been taken. Written in a small corner is a name: the flames of fire. And a sigil. Three vertical, wavy lines, the center line taller than the left or the right. Looked at metaphorically it does imply a flame.

“The name of the group?” Athos had suggested the night before, studying it.

“He maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire,” Aramis had quoted from memory. “Hebrews 1:7.”

Aramis had pressed his lips together. “That bodes ill.”

“Religion was always going to come into it somewhere,” Aramis had said grimly. “Why else would the Captain have been so insistent on sending us on this mission?”

That evening had Aramis copied the map, name and sigil twice over so they each could carry an extra copy. They’d also gone back into town and purchased additional supplies. Now they’re both carrying enough food and water to make it back to Paris. Just in case the situation turns dire.

The area around Le Havre isn’t densely wooded, but a clinging scrub has climbed over every rock and hill. It makes for slow going off the main roads. Aramis recognizes that neither smugglers nor religious fanatics are likely to favor easily accessible places, but it doesn’t improve his temper as their horses pick carefully through the undergrowth.

The clock in his head is still ticking. The suppressant leaves are tucked safely away in the inner pocket of Aramis’ baldric, where they’ll stay with him even if he’s unhorsed, but he can’t help but worry. He tries to relax. The tension in his frame will affect his aim, if nothing else.
“There,” Athos says at last. He frowns at the copy of the map he holds. “I believe that that outcropping is the one marked on this map.”

“Which means somewhere around here is the area Porthos believed to be the fanatics’ base,” Aramis says. He looks around. There’s nothing to distinguish this particular clearing from the dozens of others they’ve ridden through. There’s the outcropping itself, but other than that…

“The land dips here,” Athos observes. “Isn’t that odd? Doesn’t the earth usually rise towards an outcropping like that?”

Aramis takes a second look. In fact, now that Athos mentions it… “Caves!”

Athos leans forward. “You’re right,” he says. They come a little closer, and now it’s obvious. The ground slopes down towards the outcropping, and the earth opens at its base into the mouth of a cave system. The gap is more than wide enough for a man to enter. Barrels could be rolled into it, too. At the moment, though, it’s covered with what seems at first glance to be brush. A second look reveals it to be a man-made trellis with the ubiquitous scrub cleverly woven into it.

“Well,” Aramis says. “Now we know the location of their base, and where they’re probably stashing the gunpowder.” He frowns. “So where is everyone?”

Athos starts to answer, then freezes. He turns his head towards the east. Aramis catches the same scent a moment later: a group of unwashed Betas, approaching fast.

“Speak of the devil,” Aramis mutters.

“Hide!” Athos hisses.

Aramis needs no urging. Nor does his horse. They trot quickly out of the clearing and continue for several hundred yards until they’re well out of sight and sound. At Athos’ signal, both dismount, tying up their horses, and creep back towards the outcropping on foot.

“There,” Aramis breathes.

The group that have come into view are unmistakably their quarry. They wear no insignia, but they’re armed and armored like soldiers. None of their gear matches, but it’s all obviously well made and well taken care of, which makes them unlikely to be brigands. And three of them match the sailor’s description of Warrant Barnabas and his two cronies.

The group draws rein just short of the outcropping. About half of them dismount, including Barnabas and his two. Those on the ground tie their horses up behind those of the half still mounted. There’s a visible distinction between the two groups. The mounted half wear ordinary clothes, the working garments of merchants, tradesmen and laborers. The unmounted half are wearing more soldiering gear.

“Ride back to town,” says one of those who had dismounted, who appears to be the leader. “Get the last shipment and bring it back here tonight. Supplies, too.”

“The last shipment?” another asks, one of the ones still mounted. “What about next week’s?”

“Cancelled,” the leader says. “Forget about it. We don’t need it. We have enough already. So pack up, okay? Once you bring in tonight’s goods no one leaves until the bomb is ready.”

“Then straight on to Paris!” a young boy cheers. He barely looks old enough to shave.
“And supremacy for Betas everywhere,” a more grizzled man says.

“No more of Louis’ wishy-washy approach,” a woman agrees. “How many hidden throwbacks still remain among us, hoarding lands and titles?”

“The entire nobility’s guilty,” the first boy says. “Even the ones who are Betas support Louis’ middle course.”

“The only way we’ll ever have the safety and peace we deserve is if the Inquisition is given full rein in France,” a weedy man in spectacles says. “And if this King won’t allow it, then we’ll get a new one who does.”

“Friends, friends,” the leader says. “Don’t let yourself get carried away yet. Remember, the work is still ahead of us. First the bomb. Then the King.”

“Then justice,” says the woman.

“Then peace,” says the boy.

“Then freedom,” says the leader. He holds up his hands. “Soon, my friends. Soon. Go now. Finish the work.”

“We’ll be back soon,” the grizzled man promises.

“Good luck, Vadim!” another cries.

The mounted group rides off, and the unmounted group descends towards the outcropping.

Athos beckons to Aramis. The two retreat to a distance safe for conversation.

“The flames of fire,” Aramis says in disgust.

“It’s worse than we feared,” Athos says. He looks disturbed. “Not just religious fanatics, but full-on Beta supremacists.”

“Regicidal Beta supremacists.”

“Terroristic Beta supremacists. A bomb will kill many more than just the King.”

“No doubt that’s the point. You heard them; they view the entire current system as guilty. They’ll want to wipe out as many ministers and noblemen as possible along with the King. That way they can replace them all with their own candidates who match their definition of ideological purity.”

“As if Louis’ concessions to the Inquisition aren’t bad enough already.”

Athos frowns. “Are you all right? You’re shaking.”

Aramis looks down at his hands. It’s true; if he had to fire his musket right now, he’d miss. “How can I be all right?” he asks harshly. “After listening to that –”

“I know,” Athos says. “I know.” He shakes his head. “But they’re conspiring to kill the King – and God knows how many else, with that talk of a bomb. Which means we get to take them down regardless of their motivations.”

“We can’t do it by ourselves,” Aramis says. Much as I’d like to, goes unspoken. “There were at least two dozen of them who went into the caves just now, and probably more inside.”
“If we could sneak inside, we might be able to disarm the bomb, though.” Athos is looking thoughtful.

“We need reinforcements,” Aramis disagrees. “We have to go back to Paris.”

“Do you know how long it takes to build a bomb?” Athos asks. “I don’t. Right now we know where these so-called Flames of Fire are. But as soon as they’re done building their bomb, they’ll disappear. There are a dozen routes to Paris from here. More. Once in the capitol they’ll vanish into the underground again. Then the next time we find them will be when the bomb goes off! We have to stop them now. We can’t take the chance that they’ll leave while we’re on our way to and from Paris.”

Aramis frowns, torn. Athos’ point is good. The Musketeers had found the Flames this time because the terrorists had needed to bring in supplies, goods, and gunpowder, which had required them to interact with the local merchants and Court of Miracles. Once they have their bomb they won’t need anything. They’ll vanish.

It’s possible that if he and Athos leave for Paris now, they’ll be able to gather reinforcements and return in time. Or it may already be too late. Without knowing, how can they risk the King’s life?

“Besides,” Athos adds. “We still haven’t found Porthos, either.”

Aramis waves this concern aside. “Wherever he is, if he isn’t dead, he’s unlikely to become so in the next week.”

“What if they’ve captured him? Would you leave someone behind in their hands?” Athos’ gesture is eloquent.

Aramis shudders. But: “He’s a Beta. He’ll be safe enough.”

“He’s a Musketeer. They’re willing to kill the King – regardless of Porthos’ sex, they’ll regard him as a sympathizer.”

“They can’t have captured him,” Aramis says. “With the way they were talking, if they had, one of them would have mentioned it.”

“Who knows how far back those caves go? Porthos could be hiding in there. He could be trapped. We can’t leave him.”

Aramis frowns.

“Besides,” Athos adds, “Supposing they realize we know? Leave early, change their plans?”

Aramis throws out his hands. “I don’t know!” he says, clamping down on the urge to shout his frustration. “What I know is that the two of us together can’t take that whole group. We just can’t, Athos, I’m sorry. And there’s no garrison closer than Paris for us to get reinforcements from. I hear what you’re saying about Porthos and the timing of the bomb, but if we both die here, the King is just as doomed!”

“Then what do we do?” Athos demands back. “I’m open to suggestions!”

“I don’t know!” Aramis cries.

The two of them stare at each other for a long moment, breathing hard.
“Tonight,” Athos suggests suddenly. “You heard Vadim; they’re bringing in the final shipment tonight. That’s our opportunity. While they’re distracted, we’ll sneak into the caves and try to disarm the bomb. If we do, good. If not, we’ll ride to Paris. All right?”

“Are you crazy? That combines the risks of both approaches. We open ourselves up to dying tonight and we risk the time delay of riding back to Paris!”

“I prefer to look at it as hedging our bets,” Athos says. “We split the difference. Only one of us goes into the caves. The other provides the distraction. That way, if the person in the caves can’t make it back out, we still have someone who can ride back to Paris. But if we *can* stop them now…”

“By revealing our presence early? Once they realize the King’s Musketeers are here, they’ll accelerate their timetable!”

“If we let them know we’re Musketeers, yes. But as long as they don’t see us, why shouldn’t they think it’s just a rival gang of smugglers who want to use the same tunnels they do?”

“Why would they think that?”

“The map. We can drop the map Henry gave us for them to find. The symbols used for the geography aren’t standard. I’ll bet anything they’re specific to the Court of Miracles. And that this group will recognize them, given their underworld connections.”

“You’ll be betting our *lives*,” Aramis hisses. “Not to mention the lives of the King, the court, and potentially every throwback in France!”

Athos turns his hands up, palms out. “You were the one who pointed out the bigger consequences here,” he says. “If we can find the bomb, grab it or destroy it somehow, we could end this before it even begins.”

“We don’t know anything about bombs! And what makes you think it’ll be something one of us can carry?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Athos asks.

“No,” Aramis admits. It’s a terrible plan. But it’s a terrible situation. If he had any better ideas, he wouldn’t be shy about sharing them. But his best idea had been riding back to Paris for reinforcements. And the possibility of losing the terrorists’ trail is too disastrous to ignore.

“Then we try it,” Athos says firmly.

Aramis searches for another reason to object. But Athos is right: none of their options are good.

“Fine,” Aramis says reluctantly, and glances at the sky.

In his mind, the clock ticks downward.

As the day draws on, Athos and Aramis discuss a number of possible outcomes and contingencies. The biggest thing to resolve is, of course, who is going into the caves and who is providing the distraction. From the start Aramis insists it must be he who goes into the caves. He doesn’t *want* to, of course, but he’s a pragmatist. And an Omega. Inside the caves, speed and light-footedness are going to be far more important than strength and endurance.

The problem with this plan, besides the obvious risk to Aramis, is that it requires Athos to potentially
leave his packmate behind. This would be difficult who whomever is on the outside, but it’s particularly hard to get past Athos’ Alpha hindbrain.

“Listen,” Aramis says patiently. “You’ll distract them. They’ll chase after you. Lead them deep into the forest, and when I’m sure they’re far enough away, I’ll search the caves. Do what I can and get out before they get back. Meanwhile you give them the slip and head back to Paris. Warn the Captain. If I can stop their plot completely, great. Otherwise, I can catch up to you on the road.”

“I don’t like the idea of leaving you,” Athos says stubbornly. “I like it even less than I like the idea of leaving Porthos, wherever he is, and you know how little I like that.”

“I’m faster than them,” Aramis reminds him. “I can outrun any Beta. I’ll be in and out before they know it.”

“And what if you’re not? In those close quarters you’ll have no room to maneuver!”

“I’ll be fine,” Aramis soothes. He’s not sure he’s telling the truth. But. “If they catch me, they’ll definitely catch you, too. And then we’ll be right back where we started. Both of us dead, and boom, there goes the King!”

“You’re more important than the King is,” Athos says, tone bordering on the petulant. Aramis smiles at him involuntarily. They’re the same age, and so Aramis often forgets how much later in life Athos was forced out of puppyhood. In terms of experience Athos is sometimes still so very young.

“Think,” Aramis says gently. “Louis isn’t a perfect monarch, but he’s resisted the Inquisition a good deal more than anyone else would do in his place. Imagine Monsieur on the throne.”

Athos must imagine it, because he shudders. The King’s younger brother has made no secret of his Catholic devotion. Nor of his wish for Louis to adopt a more hardline stance and give the Inquisition freer rein. Between Monsieur and the Cardinal, it’s a wonder that Louis hasn’t caved further. Monsieur on the throne would be a disaster. Bad as things are in France right now for their people, they need look no farther than Spain to see how much worse it could get.

“All right,” Athos eventually sighs. “But you must promise to be careful.”

“You too,” Aramis retorts.

After that they stick to tending their gear in silence. Aramis checks the positions of his various knives and tries to ignore the persistent sense that they’re all running out of time.

Finally the sun sinks below the treeline. Athos and Aramis eradicate all signs of their small camp and sneak back to the clearing, once again leaving the horses tethered.

They don’t have long to wait. Shortly after the last traces of light vanish from the sky completely, a distant rumbling signals the approach of the supplies.

Well, that, or thunder. But it’s a clear night.

Pinpricks of light appear over the horizon – not the sun, but lanterns carried by the riders to light the path for the cart. Its wheels are doing better than the horses had been over the terrain, but there are still ruts and divots in the land for them to avoid.

Aramis counts them quickly. In addition to the group that had been sent back to town earlier today, there appear to be another dozen or so men and women. The people who had been helping the terrorists in town, Aramis surmises, and isn’t really surprised to see that one of them is still wearing
his customs tabard.

As the cart approaches, another group emerges from the caves. They carry additional lanterns and set them around the clearing to light it. Worse, the cart doesn’t stop partway out as the two Musketeers had been expecting. Another half hour ticks agonizingly by as it’s carefully maneuvered through the rocks of the outcropping to pull to a halt right above the cave entrance.

“Damn,” Athos mutters. “Will you still be able to get in with all the light and obstacles?”

“Let me think.” Aramis pictures the clearing in his mind. “I’ll circle around the outcropping to the side. Give me ten minutes to get into position. Then distract them.”

“Right,” Athos says. He hesitates, then, shockingly, pulls Aramis into a quick hug. “For luck,” he says. “You still have that envelope?”

Aramis pats his baldric for answer. He can’t actually hear the precious leaves crinkle in their wrapping, but his imagination supplies the sound.

“I’ll leave your horse behind, of course, but they may find it. If you need anything from your saddlebags – ”

“Nothing,” Aramis says, impatient with Athos’ delaying. He has his knives, his sword and his musket. That, along with the suppressants, are all he needs. He knows Athos is still worried. But this had been Athos’ idea in the first place. And their window won’t be open forever. Time to be getting on with it.


“You too,” Aramis says.

Aramis takes his leave of Athos and circles around the clearing, moving carefully and staying low to the ground. The clearing itself is a bustle of activity. Men and women work in tandem to unload crates and take them down into the caverns.

Finally Aramis is in position. He hunkers down and waits for the promised distraction.

He doesn’t have to wait long. Within moments, a musket-shot shatters the night.

The effect is immediate. The orderly bustle of the clearing erupts into a kicked anthill. Men and women cry out. The leader from this morning, Vadim, races out of the caverns and starts shouting orders.

Aramis waits, watching for his moment. From the shouting, Athos won’t have a hard time convincing them that he’s a thief instead of a soldier: while half of them are shouting that “the King’s found us!”, the other half seem equally convinced that “it’s those damned riff-raff again!”.

A few more moments go by. The crowd in the clearing has swelled as more people pour out of the caverns, and those without weapons have managed to arm themselves. Now, Athos, Aramis thinks. Again.

Either Athos is psychic or his grasp of military tactics equals Aramis’. Another musket-shot splits the air, accompanied by a hoarse shout. With a unified cry, the group in the clearing orients on the sound and rushes off into the night.
Aramis pushes himself up and dashes for the cave mouth. At least Aramis’ heritage is good for something. No one is as fleet of foot as a purebred Omega. He covers the ground at a speed most Betas would find impossible, and is inside the caverns within seconds.

Once in, he ducks immediately into the first shadows he can find and quickly reconnoiters the area. The caves are made of the same stone as the outcropping, and appear to have formed naturally, although there’s evidence of manual widening in places. Iron rings have been set into the walls, and lamps hang from them, illuminating the area. It’s more than bright enough to see; Aramis would be able to read or write without significant discomfort. Stacked up by the entrance are several of the crates the Flames had been unloading, dropped here in the chaos.

He hesitates for half a second, then pulls out one of his knives and starts prying up the crate lid. It resists him at first – sealed? – but he puts more force into it, and the lid pops free.

Aramis takes one look at the contents and swears under his breath. Nestled in among straw are concentrated explosives. More proof, not that they’d really needed it, but nice to have if it ever came to the point of testimony. Aramis rather doubts it. This lot won’t stand trial; they’ll die fighting.

A scuff made by an incautious shoe is Aramis’ only warning. He spins, knife still in hand. A terrorist jumps out of the shadows, shouting, and tackles Aramis.

Or that’s his plan. Forewarned, Aramis jumps back, ducking and shoving the landing man into the piled crates of explosives. The crates wobble dangerously but stay standing. The terrorist shakes it off and lunges for Aramis again.

In these close quarters, letting the terrorist close would be fatal. Aramis discards his instinctive desire to take the man alive in the interests of self-preservation. Instead he steps to one side, and, as the terrorist lands, reaches around and slits the man’s throat.

The man drops instantly, gurgling as he tries to breathe through a windpipe rapidly filling with blood. The advantage of this type of killing is that the man can’t scream anymore. The Inquisition may enjoy hearing screams, but Aramis would just as soon not.

The terrorist had shouted, though, before he’d jumped Aramis. And from outside the cave mouth he can hear other footsteps pounding closer.

Aramis swears again and takes off running down the tunnels. He drops the knife as he goes. It’s a shame to lose it, but running with a naked blade is an invitation to a self-stabbing, and there’s no time to replace it in its somewhat complicated forearm drop sheath. Besides, he has others.

What he doesn’t have is a sense of direction. Athos’ distraction must not have lured all the Flames away, and if there are more of them waiting in these caves –

Aramis rounds a corner and skids to a halt. He’s temporarily outrun those behind him, but now his nose brings him a different warning: a group up ahead. He glances around. No side tunnels here. Had he seen any behind him? How far back were they? Is it better to run ahead or turn back? He hesitates.

“Quick! In here!” Porthos’ voice cries.

Aramis nearly jumps out of his skin. He spins around towards the sound of Porthos’ voice and stares. A section of wall he’d taken to be solid swings open wide, lantern and all, and a broad, scarred palm seizes him by the upper arm.

“Move, you idiot!” Porthos says, and yanks him into the tunnel.
The wall swings closed again behind Porthos, and immediately they’re plunged into darkness.

Aramis reaches forward. His questing hands encounter a baldric, after which they’re quickly taken by Porthos’ and guided to wrap around the other Musketeer’s sword-belt, linking them. “Shh,” Porthos whispers, the barest hiss of sound.

On the other side of the hidden door, footsteps pound by.

They wait a few moments longer. Eventually the footsteps slow, and turn back. Other sets come to join them.

“Did someone come by here?” a voice says.

“Just you,” another replies. “What’s all the shouting?”

“Some of those damn thieves tried to crash the party,” the first voice says. “Guess they wanted their tunnels back.”

“Run ’em off yet?”

“Think so. But one of ’em did for Anatole. Thought he might have run down here. But if you haven’t seen him…”

“Not a soul.”

“Then I guess he ran back out the front. Morbleu! I wanted to gut the bastard.” The terrorist sounds glum.

“There’ll be plenty of gutting in the days ahead,” the second voice consoles. “Come on. Let’s go move the rest of the goods.”

The footsteps recede, and Aramis breathes again. Athos’ plan seems to have worked. The terrorists are unaware of the Musketeers’ involvement. Athos must be well off to Paris by now. And Aramis has found Porthos – apparently safe and sound.

The bad news is that there seems to be no bomb yet, only component explosives. Aramis has no hope of carrying them all away or destroying them. That part of the plan will have to be abandoned. Athos, riding for Paris, is their best chance now. All that remains for Aramis and Porthos is to escape this place. If they lay low and stay in the area, they can follow the terrorists in the event that they leave early, and trace them so that Athos’ reinforcements can take them out.

Porthos doesn’t reopen the hidden door, though. Instead he sets off in the opposite direction. Aramis follows along carefully, fingers still holding Porthos’ belt to keep them connected. Porthos seems to know where he’s going, and it may not be safe yet to talk, so Aramis holds his tongue.

Porthos leads them further into the caverns, turning left once, then right and left again. The ground seems to be sloping downward beneath their feet. The air gets cooler and takes on a humid tinge. As they round the last corner, a light appears. The exit? But it’s the middle of the night outside, so why would there be light?

They get closer, and Aramis sees his mistake. The light is coming from a lamp, lit and sitting on a stone ledge cut into a blank wall. Porthos picks it up and presses his hand to the wall. It’s another hidden door: the entire stone slap swings wide at his touch, revealing a chamber within.
“Come on,” Porthos says, speaking in his normal voice. “Home sweet home.”

Aramis follows the other Musketeer. The chamber opens up wide, revealing itself to be a natural cavern, perhaps twenty feet by thirty, with high ceilings. The reason for the humidity in the air becomes plain when Aramis enters. The far wall doesn’t meet the floor. Instead an underground river burbles through a recessed divot in the stone, carved over centuries.

The floor itself has been smoothed, and against one wall crates have been stacked. Unlike the cargo the terrorists had been unloading, these crates show visible age. They’ll have been here a decade at least. Their tops are opened. Aramis walks over and sees preserved foods, wine, clothing, blankets. Supplies. He looks around and spots a pile of cloth in one corner that must be bedding. Another corner, tucked under an overhang above the river, is obviously in use as a privy.

“You’ve been here the whole time,” Aramis says in understanding.

Porthos nods. “I traced the Flames back here and realized what they were up to,” he says. “A few days ago there were only a small handful of them living here. I snuck in when they were out trapping. Unfortunately they came back before I could leave, and I had to take cover.” His mouth twists. “My bad luck. That was when the first wave of them arrived to take up permanent residence. They hadn’t been posting guards when I snuck in, but they started before I could leave. I’ve been stuck here since.”

“You couldn’t fight your way out?” Aramis is skeptical.

“They’re guarding all the exits,” Porthos repeats. “I’m good, but five to one aren’t great odds, and they’d have another dozen on me before I could finish the fight.” He regards Aramis with suspicion. “I’m not sure how you got in, actually.”

“I just came in the same entrance they were using,” Aramis protests. “It was unguarded. They were – ” he breaks off and swears, realization dawning. “They were chasing Athos.” In a few words he explains the plan to Porthos, including his belief – his fervent hope – that Athos is already well on his way to Paris, there to warn the Captain and the King.

“Pity I didn’t know that was going to happen,” Porthos muses. “I could have got out while you two were causing a ruckus.” He smiles slightly. “Of course, that would have left you here alone, and they’d’ve got you.”

“I could have hidden,” Aramis says, offended.

Porthos chuckles. “Not from this lot. They’re professionals.”

“Then how did you hide?” Aramis demands. “How did you know about this hidey-hole? For that matter, why don’t they know about it?”

Porthos spreads his hands wide. “Because I’m a better professional,” he says. “Or I used to be. Didn’t you know I was reared in the Court of Miracles?”

“You? You’re a thief?”

“Thief, lockpick, pickpocket, con man, scalper – you name it, I’ve done it. Including smuggling. Which is how I knew about this place. These tunnels weren’t dug by this particular band of thieves. We used to use them all the time on the run bringing in untaxed goods through Le Havre. We’d hide the goods in these holes while the customs officials marked the rest, then sneak them out of the city by night and put them back in the wagons bound for Paris.”
“Are some of the terrorists ex-thieves? Will they eventually find –”

“No.” Porthos shakes his head dismissively. “You don’t understand how the Court works. They’re criminals, sure, but they’re patriotic criminals. Louis is great for business, for one. For another, well, there’s the laws of man and the laws of God. Smuggling’s all right, but any member of the Court would fight just as hard as you or I to protect the King, odd as it may sound.”

Aramis remembers Henry saying no thief in their right mind wants to mess with God. It’s an unusual morality, but who is he to judge? The Inquisition would say that Aramis is going to burn in hell for being born an Omega, and yet he still thinks of himself as a Catholic, in his heart of hearts. If Porthos says the Court won’t betray the King, he’ll accept that assurance, at least for the time being.

Porthos is continuing, “The Le Havre run was discontinued before I left the Court. No profit in it anymore, once the Crown stepped up enforcement on the Paris end. These tunnels have been abandoned since then, I’d wager, and this group just came in and took them over. Without finding all their secrets – lucky for you and I.”

“Very lucky,” Aramis agrees fervently. He’s under no illusions about what would happen to them if this group knew King’s Musketeers were here. Worse, if they’d discovered his true sex... And he’d nearly stumbled right into them. It’s thanks to Porthos he’s still alive.

“Relax,” Porthos advises, possibly seeing Aramis tense at the thought of how close he’d been to discovery. “We often had to hide people down in these, too, seeing as how some of those on the cargo run were known to the law in the wrong sort of way. These tunnels are thick enough to muffle sound – or we wouldn’t be talking, see? – and stocked with food and water. Four weeks’ supply. By then this group will have moved out. You heard them talking about their bomb, I assume? When they move out, we can escape.”

“Four weeks?” Aramis demands, horrified. The throwback part of his mind stutters in fear. He’ll be in heat within one.

Suppressants, he reminds himself. It’s a kind of safety he’s never had. “What other supplies are here?” Aramis asks carefully. “I could murder a cup of tea.”


“What?” Aramis cries. The leaves are no good if prepared incorrectly. They might be worse than no good. He needs boiling water. “Surely we can –”

“I know you’re used to all the comforts of life, but you’re just going to have to rough it for a while,” Porthos cuts him off. His disgust at Aramis’ seeming delicacy is plain. “Shouldn’t be long. A plot like this, you have to move fast. I’ll be surprised if we’re stuck here longer than a week.”

A week. Aramis clutches this sudden hope with both hands. He might make it a week before his heat starts. And what Porthos says makes sense. They may be out of here even sooner than that. They may get out of here in time for Aramis to keep his secret.

Another consideration makes itself known, and Aramis berates himself for not seeing it sooner. “But this means we can’t leave until they actually start putting their plan in motion!” he protests. “We have to get out sooner! The Flames were chasing Athos – what if they catch him, or delay him? We have to try to get back to Paris to warn Treville and the King!”

“Better hope Athos isn’t delayed,” Porthos says bluntly. “I’m telling you there’s no way out until
they’re gone. Can’t you hear them?” He makes a sign to Aramis for silence.

In the quiet, noises slowly filter in. Low conversation. Rustling. The sounds of someone chewing.

“I thought you said these walls were soundproofed,” Aramis hisses.

“Relax,” Porthos drawls condescendingly. “The amplification only goes one way. Those are sound tunnels from the exits. An old smugglers’ trick. This way we can hear when the coast is clear. Good for knowing when it’s safe to leave. Right now we’d be killed before we’d gotten ten paces – without ever having warned the Captain or the King.”

“We’re stuck?” Aramis repeats, heart sinking.

“Completely,” Porthos confirms. “But you said Athos was uninjured, with a good lead and riding hard?” Aramis nods reluctantly. “Then we’ll be fine. If he’s still half the Musketeer he was at La Rochelle, France is perfectly safe.”

As if to show off his complete confidence in Athos, Porthos strolls over to one of the sealed casks in the corner. “Dried venison,” he reads the stenciling, after blowing off the dust. “Want some?” He takes his belt-knife and begins prying at the seal.

“Maybe later,” Aramis mutters. He takes one of the blankets instead and stalks off to a corner, claiming the space for his own.

“Suit yourself,” Porthos says cheerfully, pulling out the first piece.

Aramis lies down as if he’s going to sleep, hoping Porthos will ignore him as he tries frantically to think. He doesn’t doubt his companion when Porthos says that they’ve no chance of making it out as long as the exits are guarded. Porthos often seems to have the strength of three men, and he must know Aramis’ skill by reputation if nothing else. They could overcome most ordinary resistance. But these are old smugglers’ tunnels, and they’ll be riddled with traps. _No honor among thieves._ If Porthos says they’re stuck, Aramis must believe they’re stuck.

Which is fine. Aramis can deal with being confined in a small space for an extended period of time. As long as they have food and water, and a place to relieve themselves, it’s no problem at all.

Unless they’re here long enough for Aramis to go into heat. And then it becomes a problem. A very, very large problem indeed.

In the back of his mind, a clock ticks ever downwards.

Aramis closes his eyes and wonders desperately what in God’s name he’s going to do.
The Caverns of Le Havre

Chapter Notes

Additional content warnings apply to this part. First of all, rejoice, for the sex has arrived! (See, I told you we'd get there eventually). However, do be warned. Before we get to the good stuff there's a bad ten-second period where Aramis (still our POV character) truly believes he's about to get raped. Everyone's clothes are still on at that point, Porthos has no such intention, and our two Musketeers exchange clear, affirmative consent before they actually get interactive together, but it's a bad moment. Please read carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aramis turns the problem over and over again in his head until he’s made himself sick from stress, worry and sleeplessness. He keeps coming back to the same brick wall.

There are very few solutions to his current dilemma. The best outcome is that the terrorists depart for Paris before Aramis’ heat starts. Then he and Porthos can leave, and Aramis can get a cup of boiling water – the simplest of things, something no one would ever imagine being without, and yet the one thing he can’t have. The thing that’s going to betray him for its lack. It makes him want to scream.

On the second day, he’d gone through all the supplies in the cavern with them, searching for something, anything, to help him. Even very warm water might be good enough. He’s desperate enough to try it.

But there’s nothing. The cavern itself is cold from being so far underground. The wine is cool, the water in the underground stream downright chilly. There are blankets for the humans, but everything else doesn’t even benefit from the heat of the sun.

There’s no flint or tinder, either, nothing Aramis can use to start a fire. He’d lost his somewhere, probably in that fight with the terrorist at the entrance to the caves. Porthos might still have his, but if so, he isn’t telling.

If they don’t depart…

Aramis turns to prayer. There’s one other potential solution. In the dark of the night, when the lanterns are extinguished and Porthos is snoring from ten paces away, the other solution surfaces in Aramis’ mind. Whenever it does he pushes it away. It’s too terrible to contemplate.

Except, as the days go by and the terrorists show no sign of readying to depart, Aramis finds himself contemplating it more and more often.

If it weren’t for his impending heat casting its shadow over everything, Aramis would be enjoying the small vacation. Porthos is a surprisingly good companion. Every day reveals some new hidden depth, as the man tells jokes, teaches Aramis new card games – a deck having, of course, been concealed at the bottom of one of the boxes of stores – and even demonstrates the ability to play chess.

“Wonder who stashed this here,” he’d said, when he’d pulled the small set out from its blanket
wrappings. It’s just a folded piece of cloth with the squares marked on it, and two sets of smooth river stones carved with symbols, but it’s more than enough to play with. “I bet it was old Bicarat. He used to be in the Le Havre Court. Taught me, between smuggling runs when we were waiting for the ships to come in. Taught everyone who’d sit still long enough. Bicarat loved a game.”

Aramis hasn’t played since puppyhood. He’d always thought of chess as an intellectual pursuit, and he’d given it up after he and Adele had left Spain, worried about its being perceived as a sign of weakness.

Porthos proves that conception wrong pretty much immediately when he utterly demolishes Aramis in the first few games they play. Aramis is surprised at the first, dismayed at the second, and baffled at the third. Perhaps unwisely, he agrees to a fourth.

“Okay…” Aramis mutters to himself, staring at the board and trying to visualize the possible routes of Porthos’ attack. He reaches for his rook.

“What are you doing?” Porthos cries in astonishment, apparently unable to hold it in any longer.

Aramis freezes with his fingers wrapped around his piece. “Castling?” he tries.

Porthos shakes his head in utter dismay. “Put that piece down,” he orders. Aramis obeys before he realizes he’s doing it, and Porthos turns the piece of cloth around so that their sides are reversed.

“Now watch,” Porthos says. He moves Aramis’ bishop, then his own queen, Aramis’ knight, Porthos’ pawn, and then –

“Checkmate,” Aramis says in astonishment.

“Castling,” Porthos says in disgust. “Why do you always play so defensively?”

Aramis looks down at the board, then back up at Porthos. “Chess is a game about zoning,” he says, repeating the lessons he learned as a pup.

“Chess is a game about war,” Porthos says. “Yes, absolutely, zone control is part of that, but so is attacking. Feints. Forlorn hopes.”


“Daring!” Porthos says. “Risk!”

“Caution,” Aramis says. “Patience.”

“Loss,” Porthos says, and knocks Aramis’ king over.

“Survival,” Aramis snaps, and wishes he hadn’t.


“I don’t know,” Aramis says, telling the truth without meaning to. He comes back to his senses in time to stop himself from finishing the sentence: I don’t know how.

Ever since he’d been a pup, the focus had been on survival. Remaining hidden. Keeping his secrets. For one more year. One more month. One more hour, if that’s all there is. Whatever it takes. And then taking his secrets to his grave at the end of it all.
Adele had wanted to live. He doesn’t think of his aleph often, but he thinks of her now. She hadn’t ever been content just to survive.

And she’d been killed for it.

“Surviving is safer,” Aramis says, painfully aware they’re not just talking about chess anymore.

“Most of the time,” Porthos agrees. “But then the critical moment comes – and trying to settle for survival just gets you dead.”

Aramis tries to laugh. “How are you ever supposed to know what the critical moment is?” Adele had probably thought the chance to spy on the Cardinal was her critical moment. Just look how dead she’d gotten.

“That’s why we play chess,” Porthos says, as if it’s self-evident. “So we learn to recognize it when it comes.”

He starts setting the game back up. Aramis eyes the board warily. “I think I’ve had enough,” he says. “Besides, it’s late.” Not that they have much to judge that on except their own internal clocks, but both he and Porthos have been in general agreement so far about the passage of time.

Porthos nods calmly. “New lessons are hard,” he says. “The board’s not going anywhere. We’ll play again when you’re ready.”

Aramis frowns at Porthos and stalks over to the area he’s claimed as his bedroll. That hadn’t been what he’d meant. He isn’t running away. He’s just… strategizing.

He rolls himself up in his blankets and stares at the ceiling while Porthos puts out half the oil lamps to give them the semblance of twilight. His companion doesn’t know it, but Aramis is fast approaching his own critical moment. And he’s fighting against the growing knowledge of what he must do.

Two more days go by. Aramis wakes up abruptly midway through the next night, sweating, and resisting the urge to swear.

He’s far too warm, especially given the subterranean chill in the air. His skin feels clammy when he presses his palm against his forehead, but his temperature is up. He doesn’t need sophisticated measuring tools to tell him what his body already knows. Whether he’s early, or the smugglers are late, or he and Porthos between them have simply lost track of the exact passage of time, no longer matters: he’s in heat.

Technically, this phase is still pre-heat. His reproductive system is ramping up production, dumping hormones into his bloodstream in preparation for ovulation, estrus, and hopefully pupping. Aramis is starting to feel the effects already. If he were bonded, his mate would catch it in his scent. Another few hours and it will be obvious to everyone with a nose. Another few hours after that and Aramis’ own desperation will broadcast it to everyone with eyes.

Which means he’s run out of time. And choices.

Aramis sits up as quietly as he can and reaches for his sword-belt. He’d stopped wearing it daily after he really realized exactly how trapped he was. What use were a sword or a musket, locked in a cave with Porthos with no hope of escape? But he needs it now.

In the dark, his fingers dance nimbly over the supple leather and well-made stitching. He’d lost his forearm knife in the struggle with the terrorists, but it’s hardly the only blade he’s carrying.
This, then, is what it comes down to. Leaving would be tantamount to death. In that he believes Porthos. Unfortunately, staying is now also tantamount to death. Porthos will scent him, and then Porthos will kill him.

There’s only one way out of this that ends with Aramis’ survival.


It’s also the only option he has left.

*Self-defense,* he tells himself.

Taking a deep breath, he goes to put it to Porthos’ throat.

The other Musketeer appears to be sleeping soundly. *Appears* is the operational word. As soon as Aramis drops to his knees beside him – soundlessly, he’d’ve sworn to that – Porthos whips around, tangling Aramis’ hands briefly in his cape. A broad palm wraps itself around both of Aramis’ wrists and squeezes. Aramis feels the bones of his wrists grinding against each other; he bites his lip to stifle his cry, but he can’t stop his hands from spasming open, the knife falling between them with a muted clatter.

Porthos sweeps it up and has it at Aramis’ throat in an instant. Aramis closes his eyes.

The pressure remains, but the killing stroke doesn’t come. “I was wondering what you were planning to do,” Porthos rumbles. “Have to say I didn’t expect this.”


“Didn’t you just hear me? I said I didn’t know. Could tell you were up to something, you made that obvious enough, but I couldn’t figure what.” Porthos looks down at the knife, then back at Aramis. “How about an explanation?”

“Kill me if you’re going to,” Aramis says.

“Don’t suppose there’s another option here?”

“Well,” Aramis says thoughtfully, unable to resist, “you could kill yourself and save me the trouble.”

Porthos laughs – ruefully, in light of their predicament, but laughter nonetheless. Then he sobers. “I know you don’t like being trapped in here,” he says carefully, “but you can’t have thought killing me would get you out sooner.”

“That’s not it,” Aramis says. Then he bites his tongue. God, what is wrong with him? The strangest urges are rising in him. The urge to tell Porthos everything, to explain, to make sure Porthos knows it isn’t him – it’s Aramis who’s wrong, not Porthos –

*Heat,* Aramis realizes with a feeling of dawning horror. He’d been wrong earlier; this wasn’t the beginning of pre-heat, this was the *end.* His hormone levels are rising fast, and a dampness between his thighs says that he’s starting to produce slick. Any moment now Porthos won’t need to demand an explanation. Aramis’ scent will make all plain.

It explains the odd emotions. Aramis’ biology is getting ready to breed. He has no mate, so anyone in the area is a potential sire, as far as his body is concerned. Even the Beta male who’s going to slit his throat any second now, just as soon as he takes a breath.
One last try. Aramis twists his head sideways and drops to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He’s bargained for the thin slash across his throat, but Porthos cries out, shocked, and pulls the knife back before it does more than nick Aramis’ skin. Aramis doesn’t have time to process what that might mean before he kicks out with both feet, knocking Porthos off-balance and giving Aramis a chance to reclaim the knife.

Or at least that’s the plan. He catches Porthos squarely in the kneecaps, but the other Musketeer stays standing, though he grunts with pain. Then he reaches down, grabs Aramis, and hauls him to his feet.

No. Not to his feet. Porthos simply picks him up entirely. He holds Aramis suspended in midair, arms pinned behind his back, legs kicking futilely as he tries to understand how things could have gone so wrong so quickly.

Then Porthos freezes. He sniffs the air. Once, experimentally, then again more confidently. He buries his nose in the juncture where Aramis’ neck meets his shoulder – right over Aramis’ bonding gland, already swelling in anticipation of a bite that won’t come – and breathes deep.

Aramis is still struggling. But he knows in his heart it doesn’t matter. His one chance was with the knife, and he failed. Now any contest between them is one of brute strength. No matter how hard he works at building muscle, as an Omega, he’ll always be at a disadvantage.

And the look on Porthos’ face makes it plain that he knows.

“So that’s it,” he says in astonishment. “You’re – God.” Porthos takes another breath, deep, like he can’t help himself.

“Please,” Aramis says desperately. If there’s one single shred of compassion in Porthos, he’ll do his damnedest to reach it. “Porthos, please, you don’t have to – you can – ”

Porthos stares at him, eyes blown wide.

Then he manhandles Aramis to the ground. Pins him easily on his stomach, arms trapped beneath him, lower half beneath Porthos. It only takes Porthos one hand to hold him down. With the other he fumbles with his belt buckle.

Pheromones. With the way Porthos had buried his nose right over Aramis’ bonding gland, he would have gotten a lungful, and during heat Omega pheromones are stronger than the most potent Betan aphrodisiac. Aramis can feel Porthos’ erection pressed up against him as the other Musketeer yanks his trousers open, belt sliding away to land with a dull clank on the stone floor.

Aramis fights down the urge to scream, weep or blaspheme. “Porthos,” he cries out instead, low and desperate. “Oh, God, please don’t – ” he cuts himself off, biting his tongue to keep himself silent. He shouldn’t give the other Musketeer the satisfaction of hearing him beg. But the sheer shock of it strips him of his defenses. Somehow this had never crossed his mind as a consequence of Porthos learning his true sex. Death, yes. Capture and delivery to the Inquisition, yes. Rape – no. Somehow, no. Despite all the historical evidence to the contrary, he somehow hadn’t thought Porthos would be capable of this.

Aramis closes his eyes and presses his cheek into the floor, feeling the rough spots dig into the skin. He welcomes the small pain, bracing himself for the bigger one.

He’s not expecting the sudden rush of cold air that sweeps down his neck and back, the smallclothes he’d worn to sleep little protection from the cold outside the blanket cocoon he’d made. Nor is he
expecting the string of blasphemies in Porthos’ voice that seem to be coming from the other side of
the room.

He doesn’t miss his chance, though. Aramis may not know why Porthos has suddenly pushed off of
him and retreated to the far side of the cavern, swearing, but he’s going to take advantage of it. He
rolls to his feet and goes for the knife.

At least that’s the plan. In reality, Aramis doesn’t make it further than a crouch. He’s swamped with
a wave of dizziness so strong that he knows his hormones are spiking already. Having had Porthos
so close had tricked his body into thinking he was about to get bred; he’s rapidly approaching his
first peak.

“Stay away from me,” Aramis manages to say, gripping the knife like a lifeline, voice raw like
scraping over glass.

“Of course,” Porthos says at once. He’s as far away from Aramis as he can possibly get, given their
close quarters, and he’s pressing himself against the wall as if he’s trying to melt into it and get still
farther away. “Of course, if that’s what you want, anything you want – I’m sorry, God, I’m so
sorry.”

Aramis stares at him warily. Sorry? What kind of a trick is this? Betas are never sorry for what they
do to throwbacks.

you were offering – I thought you were asking – I’m so, so sorry.”

Aramis surprises himself by laughing. It’s a dry bark of a laugh, but his amusement is genuine.
Asking. Of course Porthos would think that. That’s what all Betas think about an Omega in heat.
He’s heard the jokes; everyone has. Soldiers are particularly crude, but jokes about throwbacks are
common as dirt. Asking for it. Sluts. On the ground waving their ass in the air like an animal. Well,
they are animals, aren’t they? Good for nothing but getting fucked and whelping brats.

Porthos’ face darkens rapidly. It occurs to Aramis that he must be speaking aloud, though he’s not
Aramis has just never been around anyone else during his heat before who might tell him he does it
too.

“You don’t say that about yourself,” Porthos orders. “Don’t you dare – don’t you ever. You are so much
more than that. That’s what they try to make of us, not what we are. We are all so much more than
that!”

Aramis stares at him. With the heat fogging his mind, it’s hard to think, but he had heard – Porthos
had said –

thought you’d guessed, while we were fighting – when I picked you up. I thought you were asking
me to help you through your heat. I would never – I won’t touch you, I swear, I would never do that
to you.” He shakes his head. Tears are standing in his eyes. “I know they say that’s all you’re good
for. But they’re wrong. They’re wrong, Aramis.”

Picked him up. Porthos had, hadn’t he? Aramis had been so desperate, already distracted by his
rising hormones, that he hadn’t realized the full import of that fact. Porthos had picked him up.
Effortlessly. A strong Beta could have lifted him, certainly, but it would have been a strain. A Beta
certainly couldn’t have continued holding him suspended for as long as Porthos had.
“You’re a throwback?” Aramis says. He has to form the words slowly. But he sees Porthos nod. He frowns, forcing his brain to work. “Uncut?” he asks. “How can you be uncut? There’s no Underground in Africa, is there?”

“No,” Porthos says. “My carrier was a slave. I was born a slave, too.”

“I don’t understand,” Aramis says. “How could she have hidden you as a slave?”

“Hidden me?” Porthos repeats. “She didn’t hide anything.”

“Then how?” Aramis asks. “Why didn’t they take you away and sterilize you?”

“Why would they?” Porthos says, sounding bewildered. “They’d gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I was an Alpha in the first place.”

“What?”

“The Church calls them animal traits,” Porthos says. He hasn’t stopped watching Aramis this whole time; there’s something desperate and longing on his face. “But to the slavers that’s exactly what we were – animals. An Alpha is stronger and can do more work than Beta in the same amount of time. An Omega can carry more loads back and forth. And they conceive more easily, have larger litters, more pups. More livestock.” He shrugs. “Betas just can’t compete. I’ll wager slave lines are purer than half the nobility in Europe right now.”

“Dios mío,” Aramis says in involuntary horror. “You mean they’re breeding throwbacks as slave labor?”

“You really didn’t know?”

“Slavery has been illegal in France since the days of Louis X.”

Porthos laughs mirthlessly. “Looks like you’re not up on Inquisition doctrine,” he says. “Anti-slavery laws only apply to those they consider people. Which doesn’t include throwbacks.”

“Dios mío,” he says again.

Porthos holds his hands out pleadingly. “Aramis, they treated my carrier like a brood mare,” he says quietly. “I’ll never know my sire. I was the only one to escape – my odems are back on that ranch, living the same fate. They’ll spend their entire lives moving between the whelping pens and the breeding huts.”

Aramis swallows, speechless.

Porthos’ eyes never leave Aramis’. “I am so, so sorry I touched you without your permission,” he says. Porthos’ sincerity is unmistakable; Aramis feels it ringing in his bones. “I thought, when you said please, and I could, that you were asking for my help. I will do anything you tell me to do. Anything at all.”

“Stay there,” Aramis says reflexively. “Just – just stay there for a moment.”

“Of course,” Porthos says again.

Aramis looks down at his hands and realizes he’s still holding the knife. Gripping it, really. Slowly he comes to realize he doesn’t need it anymore. Porthos won’t hurt him. And in all honesty, if all of this is some elaborate ruse to get him to lower his defenses, well, the peak is rising too fast. His hands
are trembling already.

He tosses the knife aside. Then, carefully, Aramis inches his way back to the pile of blankets that have been serving him as a bedroll, gripping the stacks of crates as he does to keep his balance.

Back on the ground, lying on some semblance of softness, Aramis finally exhales. The crates block Porthos from view. They’d restacked them on that first day to give each of them a modicum of privacy in their respective sleeping corners.

Aramis appreciates it now just as much as he had then. The feel of fabric on his skin is chafing him; he sheds his clothes as quickly as he can, considering that his fine motor skills aren’t in any better shape than his gross. Nudity brings its own set of problems, though. The cool air of their cavern chills him and he shivers, moaning.

From across the room there’s a sound, rapidly stifled. Porthos. Aramis shivers again, this time for an entirely different reason, and beneath him he can feel himself rapidly soaking the blankets on which he lies.

Aramis has never been in heat within scenting distance of someone before. He discovers rapidly, much to his dismay, that it changes everything. Every breath he takes is saturated with Porthos’ scent. That’s pheromones again – Aramis himself is pumping them out like crazy right now, and in the closed area of the caverns there’s nowhere for them to dissipate.

*The ventilation’s not that good in here,* Porthos had said. It’s the root of a vicious cycle. Aramis’ heat pheromones have nowhere to go. Porthos reacts to them instinctively, a virile Alpha in the presence of an unmated Omega. As he becomes aroused he releases his own pheromones into the air. Trying to entice the Omega to choose him as a sire. And when Aramis breathes them in, his body has its own reaction, convinced he’s about to get bred.

Alone in the woods, no compatible sires within scent, with his pheromones dissipating freely into the endless sky, heats alone are bearable. Hardly pleasant, but bearable. Here, in this cavern? Aramis’ hormones haven’t even fully peaked yet, and he feels so empty he’s weeping. Slick flows out of him like he’s a river on his own. His bonding gland throbs, angry and wanting, like a festering wound. And his hole flutters of its own accord, clenching over and over again against a knot that isn’t there.

Aramis tries to convince himself that he can take it. Shivers rack his body and his muscles spasm, but he’s had worse in all his years of soldiering. He’s not an animal at the mercy of his biology. He can ride this out.

Across the room, he hears Porthos groan. A wet, slapping sound makes itself heard over the endless burbling of the river.

He shouldn’t. It’s wrong. A gross violation of Porthos’ privacy.

But Aramis peeks.

Porthos is still against the far cave wall, as he’d promised to stay. But he’s slid to the ground. His trousers are still open, and he’s taken himself in hand.

Aramis stares, mesmerized. He has genitalia of his own; the first thing to affect embryonic development is gender, not sex, and Aramis therefore possesses several secondary male characteristics. But once sexual development kicks off, around the third month in utero, unrelated gender development for Alphas and Omegas largely halts.

It’s different for aligned throwbacks like Athos, or, for that matter, Porthos. They end up looking
very strongly gendered to Betan eyes, who misinterpret sexual characteristics for gendered ones. When sex and gender are unaligned with Betan norms the result is an appearance that tends towards androgyny. Aramis has lost count of the number of times he’s been called *pretty as a girl* by some drunkard in a tavern who didn’t know better than to hold his tongue.

Of course, the terms *aligned* and *unaligned* are inherently Betan in nature. Taken as an Omega, there’s nothing wrong with Aramis’ body. It’s only when he tries to force it into a Betan context that the so-called “problems” emerge.

It’s the ugly reality of the Inquisitorial world. The reason René and Adele d’Herblay had been forced out of their home, their family, and their lives. All throwbacks are unclean according to Church doctrine, but some are more unclean than others. Aramis’ cock may be erect and swollen with the hormone storm raging in his body. But it’s relatively small – since it serves no reproductive function – and isn’t usually reactive outside of heat. Just another one of the many things that would betray him if he tried to live as a male Beta, with his body built to carry.

Porthos, though. Porthos is an Alpha, meant to sire, and his sex and gender are aligned. Not to mention what he’d implied about selective breeding on the plantations. And his body shows it.

He’s hung like a horse. His shaft is darker even than his skin, a rich, deep brown that makes Aramis long to taste it. The knot at its base is nearly black. It’s already swelling as Porthos strokes himself, groaning.

Aramis is hit with a wave of desire so hard it’s nearly physical. But that isn’t what makes up his mind. That’s his body talking. He’s in pain, and he wants, but both of those are things he can resist. He’s had a lot of practice in resisting the needs of his body.

What changes his mind is the look on Porthos’ face. He wears an expression of wistful, despairing longing, laid overttop of a self-disgust so strong it’s heartbreaking. It’s the same face Aramis has seen in the mirror far too many times.

Aramis remembers how much he’d resented Porthos’ presence on this mission. Not for anything the other Musketeer had done – indeed, Porthos had been an exemplary soldier – but just for being different. For not being *one of them*. Aramis had known what it was to belong, having Athos as his pack and de Guignes as his squadmate. He’d hated Porthos for taking that away from him, however briefly.

Who is Porthos’ pack? Athos had said that the other Musketeer was friendly, but had no friends. An escaped slave, a throwback… who would he have trusted? Who *could* he have trusted?

Aramis can resist the demands of his body, yes. But he isn’t the only one in this cavern. Porthos is here, too. And Porthos is just as deserving of consideration as Aramis. Whatever the Inquisition might say of his knot and his skin tone.

*We are all so much more than that.*

“Porthos,” he calls.

Porthos’ head jerks up. He sees Aramis looking at him. His hands fly away from his cock like they’ve been burned.

Aramis shakes his head. “Come here?”

Porthos looks at him doubtfully. “Are you sure?”
“Yes,” Aramis says. “Please.”

Porthos starts to rise. Then he stops, looking down at himself, and hastily starts to do up his trousers.

“No,” Aramis says. “Come as you are. Please.”

Porthos looks like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. But he rises and begins moving towards Aramis. Slowly. Giving Aramis plenty of time to say no.

Aramis doesn’t say no. “Come here,” he repeats instead, and takes Porthos’ hand when the other Musketeer is close enough, tugging him down with Aramis in the nest of blankets. Porthos lets Aramis guide him down, but remains perfectly still, staying exactly where Aramis had put him.

“What do you want?” Porthos asks. “You have to tell me, Aramis. I won’t…”

Aramis shushes Porthos with a finger on his lips. Aramis smiles, and he knows it’s just the heat talking, but he feels an inexpressible fondness welling up in him for this huge, powerful, gentle Alpha, who won’t touch him without explicit consent.

“I want you to help me through my heat,” Aramis says, speaking as clearly as he still can. Speech becomes difficult during the peaks of heat, but Porthos’ presence calms him somewhat. As if his body, reassured that it will eventually get what it wants, has relaxed its assault to give him time to prepare.

“How?” Porthos asks.

Aramis gives in to temptation and puts his hand on Porthos’ erect cock. The Alpha gasps at his touch, hips stuttering forward involuntarily. It’s huge, velvet-soft under his hand, blood-hot and pulsing gently.

Aramis wants it inside him. He wants all of it inside him. He wants the head to be buried so deeply that it presses against his cervix, and the knot to swell so wide that they’re locked together for hours. He wants to feel Porthos on top of him, beside him, beneath him. All around him. He wants Porthos’ skin against his to keep him warm. Porthos’ hands on him holding him in place. Porthos’ lips on every inch of him, worshipping and coaxing him into the next round. Between peaks, he wants to doze, safe and secure in Porthos’ tree-trunk arms, utterly satiated and content.

Porthos smiles. “I can do that,” he promises.

“Then do it,” Aramis says simply, and kisses Porthos to seal the invitation.

Porthos opens his lips to allow Aramis entrance, drawing him inside and caressing Aramis’ tongue with his own. Meanwhile he’s running his hands down Aramis’ sides, making the Omega shiver with pleasure instead of chill. The cavern doesn’t seem so cold as it did a few moments before. Porthos is throwing off warmth like a furnace, and Aramis’ system is going into overdrive.

Porthos breaks the kiss long enough to shed his clothes, then coaxes Aramis onto his hands and knees. “That’s it,” he says gently, rucking up the blankets to pad Aramis’ knees. Aramis arches into Porthos’ touch, the lordosis instinct, and Porthos swears. “Just like that, God, that’s perfect. You’re perfect. Going to give you everything you want, Aramis. Everything you ever wanted. Take care of you as long as you’ll let me.”

“Porthos,” he pleads, too far into his peak to be embarrassed by his own needy tone. “Come on now, please, I need you inside me.”

Aramis feels the Alpha’s fingers at his entrance and swears. “Dios mío, Porthos, I’m wet enough to swim in, come on – ”

“Had to make sure,” Porthos shushes, running a soothing hand down Aramis’ spine. Aramis isn’t even fighting his hindbrain anymore; his back bows further, presenting shamelessly to the Alpha. “Won’t hurt you, Aramis. Won’t ever hurt you.”

Aramis whines.

“Yes,” Porthos says, voice nearly gone. “Yes, all right, here I come – ”

He slides inside like a hot knife through butter. Aramis thinks Porthos probably meant to stay shallow, at first, but Aramis has never been so wet in his life. Porthos sinks in right to the hilt without encountering the slightest resistance. The Alpha groans, a deep basso rumble that fills the cavern and even drowns out the river while it lasts.


Aramis is gasping with every gentle, rocking thrust Porthos gives him. The fog of heat is nearly overwhelming now, but Porthos’ question pierces it somehow, the odd note of genuine bewilderment cutting through to what’s left of Aramis’ higher brain. It’s important. More important than Aramis’ heat. More important than the slick, hot side of Porthos’ cock impaling Aramis. Maybe all those games of chess this last week had paid off, because Aramis senses, instinctively, that this is the critical moment.

It hadn’t been coming on this mission and taking the risk, suppressants or no suppressants. Nor going into the caverns after Porthos and becoming trapped. Nor trying and failing to slit Porthos’ throat during pre-heat. Not even the decision to call Porthos over and ask for his help. This. Aramis’ answer – or lack of answer – is about to shape his entire life.

If he’d been his usual self he would probably have bungled it. But caught in the throes of full-out estrous, breathing deeply in their mingled scents, and joined to Porthos in the most intimate way possible, Aramis has nothing left but sheer instinct – and the truth.

“Because we are so much more than that,” he gasps. “And I’d – forgotten. Surviving. All I was doing was surviving. But you’re right. You reminded me. I want to live.” He has to stop to suck in air. Porthos has gone still behind him, broad hands still gripping Aramis’ hips. “You make me want to live.”

Aramis’ voice breaks at the end. His hormones peak in a sudden, glorious rush. Instinct drives him to push back on Porthos’ cock. The Alpha feels it too; he thrusts forward. The bulge of his knot catches against Aramis’ rim, a brief shock of pain in the middle of pleasure. Then it’s inside, swelling fully, locking them close as Porthos fills Aramis up with heat and warmth. Aramis’ muscles lock too. He moans low, almost continuously, and his own sterile seed spatters out to join his leaking slick on the blankets.

Porthos manhandles them gently onto their sides. One hand tugs a relatively clean blanket out from the side and bottom of the pile, which he pulls up around Aramis’ front and tucks in. His back needs no further warmth. Porthos is warm enough for them both.

Aramis barely stirs as he’s moved. Knotted full, with the Alpha’s wide arms wrapped around him
like a protective barrier against the rest of the world, he’s already sunk into a light trance state. That’s biology kicking in again; there will be more rounds before his heat dissipates, and he’ll need his strength. The Alpha will keep watch. Porthos won’t sleep much for the next few days, until Aramis’ heat breaks, as much a slave to Alphasic biology as Aramis is to Omegan.

The whole time Porthos speaks soothingly to him. Aramis, already adrift in the post-knotting daze that comes to Omegas, only hears one phrase in five. But it’s enough to hear that Porthos’ promises are gentle and sweet, and full of hope for the future.

No one has ever spoken to Aramis this way. No one has ever thought his future bright enough to be worth making promises about. The only thing anyone has ever told him to look forward to before was tension and fear. The only goal his life has ever had is to obtain the least painful death possible for a throwback.

Porthos, though. Porthos believes it’s possible to do more than just survive. Porthos believes in many possible futures.

Aramis drifts off in the pleasant haze of Porthos’ dreams.

He comes back to awareness an indeterminate amount of time later, heat already rising again. Porthos is still beside him, though his position indicates that he’s gotten up and returned at some point during Aramis’ doze.


Aramis does. From the faint after-taste the flask had formerly held some kind of spirits. But the river water is clear and cool, soothing to his dry throat and fevered body. He drains the vessel.

“More?” Porthos asks, holding another up. He sets it back down when Aramis shakes his head.

“What about food?”

Aramis shakes his head again. “Not during heat,” he says.

“How will you keep your energy up?” Porthos demands, sounding worried.


“You’ll keep doing that? That’s normal?”

“Normal,” Aramis agrees. He stretches, rocking lazily against Porthos’ muscular body. “You don’t know?”

Porthos’ lips set in a thin line. “There was a lot of talk around the whelping pens, but it was more interested in breeding than the Omega’s comfort.”

Aramis reaches up instinctively, smoothing a finger over Porthos’ lips until they relax. “It’s all right,” he says. “I’m all right. You’re not hurting me.”

The other Musketeer touches Aramis’ face gently, like he’s not sure he’s allowed. Aramis helps him out by leaning into the touch. Given permission, Porthos caresses him reverently, fingers brushing over his nose, his lips, even his eyelashes.

“You have to tell me what you want,” Porthos says again. “I don’t want to hurt you. I never want to
hurt you. But I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Neither do I,” Aramis says truthfully. Heat alone in the wilderness is nothing like heat here, now, with Porthos. This cavern is ticking all the hindbrain boxes: den, mate, offspring. “You’re not hurting me. I want you. I want you to keep going. Keep doing this.” He turns his face to kiss the inside of Porthos’ broad palm, affectionate. Beneath his lips he feels the raised lines of old scars.

“Okay,” Porthos breathes. He’s looking at Aramis like he’s not sure Aramis is real.

“In fact, now would be good,” Aramis adds, arching against Porthos. His heat’s rising again. In this position, the curvature of Aramis’ spine brings their groins together. Aramis gasps at the sensation of Porthos’ cock against his. Lying next to each other, the difference in their sizes is even more pronounced. Aramis is quite respectable for an Omega, actually, but Porthos makes him seem small. And he puts the few other Alphas Aramis has seen in medical contexts to shame.

Porthos looks down too, and a new idea seems to occur to him. “Can I…?” he asks, trailing his hand down Aramis’ chest.

“Please,” Aramis breathes, fascinated.

Porthos’ hand is big enough to encircle both of their cocks, though truth be told Aramis’ isn’t much of a handful. The sensation is incredible. Porthos jerks them both with slow, languid movements. It fits well with the gentle ebb and flow of Aramis’ heat. It rises more than it falls each time, but he’s not peaking yet. It gives them the chance to take their time with each other.

Too soon, though, Porthos pulls his hand away. “Need to stop,” he gasps.

“So quickly?” Aramis teases.

Porthos pushes gently. Aramis goes with it, rolling into his back. Porthos follows the roll. He leans on his elbow and looms over the reclining Omega. “You don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he says quietly. “I can’t get enough of you.”

Aramis blushes, a full-body reddening. He hasn’t done that since he’d been a pup. But Porthos laughs, delighted.

“So lovely,” he praises. His hand trails back up Aramis’ belly to gently circle a nipple. Porthos blows on it, watches Aramis shudder. “So responsive.”

“Aramis, he whines.

Porthos gives him a mischievous look, then leans down to put his mouth on Aramis’ chest.

Aramis arches up into it, shocked. He’s tried touching himself there before, during his empty heats – he knows they’re supposed to be an erogenous zone for Omegas – but it’s never done anything for him before. He’d concluded he simply wasn’t sensitive there. But Porthos changes everything. Under his lips and tongue, it feels like Aramis’ nipple is connected directly to his hole, suddenly aching and wet.

“Aramis,” he says reverently, clutching the dark head to his chest. “Dios mío.”

Porthos pulls back, licking his lips. “Good?”

“Very,” Aramis agrees faintly.
“Good,” Porthos repeats, and goes for the other one.

When the Alpha pulls away finally, Aramis is a mess, sprawled leaking on the blankets panting and humping the air. “Please,” he gasps. “Please, Porthos – ”

“You need to tell me what you want,” Porthos says, this time with an edge of wickedness.

Aramis tries and fails to muster up a glare. “You,” he says in response. It comes out too open, too honest, and Porthos stills. “I need you.”

“I’m here,” Porthos says, pressing closer to Aramis, rolling the Omega up in his arms. “Aramis, I’m here. Tell me what you need. Anything, I’ll give it to you, just tell me.”

Aramis squirms. Porthos lets go, shocked and hurt, but the expression melts away when Aramis uses his newfound freedom to roll onto all fours. Lowers his head, arches his back, and presents himself. Not out of instinct this time. Out of desire. Because he wants to. All of him, the hindbrain and the forebrain, the Omega and the soldier. All of him wants Porthos.

“Take me,” he gasps. “Knot me. Make me yours.”

Porthos swears in a language Aramis doesn’t recognize. Then he obeys.

After that round, the heat lightens considerably. The first peaks are usually the strongest and the most likely to produce pups. Aramis’ heat is still in force, but the swells are shallower now, and there’s time for more conversation between knotting and dozing. This is the part of the heat where mated couples reaffirm their bond, and unmated couples grow closer, testing their compatibility.

Porthos wants to know the circumstances that had led Aramis to be in this situation, on a mission, trapped with a strange Alpha right before going into heat. He’s irate at Aramis and Treville both for letting Aramis get into this situation, though much of his anger dissipates when Aramis explains about the suppressants.

“No wonder you wanted a cup of tea so badly,” Porthos says in understanding. He chuckles a little. “I thought you were just a soft aristocrat’s son, unable to stand roughing it for a few days – not that this is even really roughing it.”

“I usually don’t have it this well during heat,” Aramis agrees. “I like to go into the woods. Just my bedroll and my fire pit under the stars.” He yawns. “Comparatively, this is the lap of luxury.”

“I’m glad to know my lap is good for something,” Porthos replies mock-seriously, and they both share a gentle laugh.

The conversation winds on. Inevitably it turns to the time they’d spent here so far together, to the fight that had revealed them to each other. Porthos wants to apologize again, and a dozen times again. He’s convinced that Aramis is still harboring entirely justified anger over the moment when Porthos had held him down. Nothing Aramis says seems to penetrate until he finally gets mad enough to snap.

“Do I or do I not know my own mind?” Aramis demands.

Porthos winces. “You do – ”

“And is it my mind to know?”
“Yes, but – ”

“My feelings? My body? My emotions? I am capable of knowing and governing them all?”

“Yes, Aramis,” Porthos says meekly.

“Then stop trying to tell me how I think or feel,” Aramis orders.

“Yes, Aramis,” Porthos says again. Hesitates. “So you really…?”

“*Madre de Dios,*” Aramis sighs. “If you ever touch me again without my permission, I’ll fillet you like a fish. Understand?”

Porthos blinks. “Yes,” he says tentatively.

“Am I filleting you right now?”

This time Porthos starts to smile. “No.”

“Is there something that would stop me from filleting you right now, if I wanted to?”

Porthos’ grin widens. “Not as far as I can see,” he says. Aramis’ sword-belt is right next to him, and at this particular low point in the heat there’s nothing wrong with Aramis’ fine motor control.

“Then I leave you to draw your own conclusions,” Aramis says, and tugs Porthos in for another kiss.

When it ends, Porthos says hesitantly, “There is one other thing I was wondering about…”

“Name it,” Aramis says, yawning widely. “I may even stay awake long enough to answer.” The urge to doze is tugging at him again. Another peak is coming.

“Where’d you learn that move?” Porthos wants to know.

“Which move?”

“The turn-your-neck-and-drop move. I’ve seen it a dozen times, but never from anyone who didn’t grow up on the streets.”

Aramis is so relaxed he doesn’t even think before talking. “My aleph taught it to me after we arrived in Paris.”

A moment later he realizes what he’s said and tenses up. “I mean – ”

“Your aleph?” Porthos blinks. Blinks again. Then his jaw drops. “*Athos*?”

“No!” Aramis yelps. The mood is very definitely gone now. “No, I mean – my – my littermate. We came to Paris together, years ago.”

“Oh.” Porthos processes this. “But *Athos* is an Alpha, isn’t he? God, I must be blind not to have seen it before!”

Aramis hesitates. Porthos is impossible to imagine as a blood traitor, but it still isn’t his secret to tell.

“Shh,” Porthos soothes. Aramis hadn’t realized he’d given any outward signs of distress, but it may have leaked out in his scent. During heat it’s hard to keep emotions to oneself. “I shouldn’t’ve asked. When we get back to Paris I’ll talk to him. We’ll figure it out.”
Figure out pack dynamics, he means. When a new Alpha joins a pack there’s always a brief period of jockeying for position. Aramis smiles drowsily to himself, imagining Athos sizing up Porthos all over again. Demanding that the other Alpha prove he’s a worthy mate for Athos’ odem…


He is. He hadn’t realized it, but he is. Because it’s all right, but it’s also all wrong. Adele should be the one demanding Porthos prove himself. She should be setting him ridiculous challenges, and grilling Aramis about the choices that had led him to find himself alone, in heat, with a strange Alpha she hadn’t vetted. Digging into Porthos’ background to make sure he’s good enough for an Alameda…

The thought is like a bucket of cold water. Aramis isn’t an Alameda. He hasn’t been an Alameda since he’d crossed the border into Paris. The Alamedan Omega had died when his family’s carriage went into the lake, and René d’Herblay had died when Richelieu had returned from his family’s estates without Adele.

“What’s wrong?” Porthos asks.

“My aleph,” Aramis says weakly. “The one who taught me that trick. She’s dead.”

Porthos drops his head to Aramis’, resting his forehead on the crown of his hair. “I’m so sorry,” he says quietly.

“We came to France together,” Aramis says. He’s not sure why he’s telling Porthos this. He’s never told anyone this, not even Athos, though Athos would have listened. “She wanted to join the Resistance, fight back against the Inquisition. She started with small groups but kept looking for bigger ones. Along the way she did a lot of things. Taught me some of what she’d learned.”

“What happened to her?” Porthos asks.

“She thought she’d found a way to spy on Cardinal Richelieu,” he says.

Silence. “I’m so sorry,” Porthos says again.

“Athos and I met much later,” he says, not wanting to dwell on it further. “He lost his family to the Inquisition too.”

“So you run together,” Porthos says in understanding.

“It’s better than running alone,” Aramis says. “It helps. He’s not my littermate, and I’m not his baby odem. But…”

“Spilt blood is still blood,” Porthos says. And it doesn’t sound like a proverb when he says it; he says it like someone who’s lived it, someone for whom it’s simple fact. “He’s your pack. So I’ll talk to him, when we get back, and we’ll figure it out.”

“All right,” Aramis says. His eyes are falling closed. True sleep during heat is unusual, but the need to doze is hard to ignore. His next peak’s definitely approaching.

“Rest,” Porthos says, seeming to sense this. “I’ll take care of everything until you wake again.” He noses affectionately at Aramis’ bonding gland, still swollen and visible through the skin.

“Keep your teeth to yourself,” Aramis murmurs as he drifts off to sleep.
“Don’t worry,” Porthos replies, kissing his forehead softly. “When you take my bite, you’ll be awake for it.”

Aramis blinks sleepily. He should have an opinion about that, he’s sure. He’s always been clear that he doesn’t want an Alpha.

The automatic rejection fails to materialize. Aramis wants to puzzle over what that means, but the heat drags him under, and he’s dozing before he has the chance.

In the event, they only need to knot one more time before Aramis’ heat dissipates. Aramis wakes up after a long doze to find his scent clear and the strength returning to his limbs.

Porthos is fast asleep on the ground next to him. As soon as the heat edge faded from Aramis’ scent, his own biology would have moved on to the next stage, knocking Porthos out to recoup his strength. Staying up during heat is very draining to an Alpha. The Omega can doze, and heat turns up the metabolism, making Aramis’ body more efficient at breaking down stored fat for energy. But the Alpha becomes hyper alert. Now that the heat is over their roles are reversed. Porthos will sleep deeply for eight to twelve hours while Aramis keeps watch.

Aramis takes the time to bundle up the blankets they’d made a nest of and give them a cursory wash in the river. The goal isn’t cleanliness as such, but he’d leaked rather a lot during his heat, and the slick is tacky against the blankets. It also still gives off faint pheromones, which Aramis would just as soon be without. Now that his heat’s broken they’re off-putting instead of pleasant. That done, he rummages through the remaining crates for food and more water. Porthos had gone through a number of them already. Aramis estimates they have another seven days’ supplies left. Twice that, if they go on half rations. Porthos’ original food estimates hadn’t taken heat into account. Aramis hadn’t eaten during heat, but he’s ravenous now. And Porthos will have been eating more than usual. An Omega’s body compensates for the stresses of heat by becoming more metabolically efficient, and by the constant light doze Aramis had consistently fallen into. An Alpha’s body, by contrast, simply takes in additional fuel. Porthos will be hungry again when he wakes. They should both eat now and worry about short rations later: they need to replace what they lost during the heat, or their respective endocrine systems will have trouble stabilizing.

Stomach filled, Aramis settles himself down near Porthos. The desire to remain near his Alpha still lingers in Aramis’ veins. He shakes his head, correcting himself. The Alpha. Porthos isn’t his. He’d helped Aramis, and Aramis would forever be grateful. But nothing ties them together now.

Unless he’s pupped. Aramis sits bolt upright in horror. He hadn’t even thought of that. They’d taken no precautions. In the old days Aramis would have had access to contraceptive herbs, but he hadn’t even expected to go into heat –

Porthos stirs, mumbling. Aramis gets a grip on himself. If he’s still feeling the urge to be near Porthos, there’s a decent chance that Porthos can still sense Aramis’ distress. He doesn’t want to wake Porthos. The Alpha needs his sleep.

*Jump off that bridge when you come to it*, Aramis tells himself firmly. If he’s pupped, they’ll deal with it. Treville obviously has connections. There are other herbs that can deal with a pupping, if…

Porthos snuffles, one hand creeping across the floor towards Aramis. Aramis sighs. Porthos, he feels sure, wouldn’t want him to take that route. Whatever Porthos might or might not feel towards Aramis – in the metaphorical cold light of day, heat-induced promises often count for very little – Porthos is unlikely to be willing to abandon pups.
Aramis feels a traitorous thread of warmth curl up in his belly. *It would keep Porthos around, at any rate*, a quiet voice murmurs in his mind.

Aramis shakes his head again, disgusted with himself. *I don’t want anyone around who has to be kept*, he tells himself firmly. *When Porthos wakes up, we’ll figure it out.*

Still, as he waits, he finds himself imagining it. He’d had four peaks. That’s four potential pups. But then there had been the stress surrounding his heat’s start, and his relative unfamiliarity with Porthos. He doesn’t feel like Porthos is a stranger – he’s comfortable with the Alpha in a way he’s only ever been with Athos and Adele – but his body doesn’t know that. They’re not mated, either. That lowers their chances.

Aramis can’t turn his head to look at his own shoulder, but he runs his fingers across the surface of his skin, where his bonding gland resides. It’s no longer grossly swollen, but the area still feels warmer than usual. A bite now would still take. His body thinks they’re compatible. His heart and mind are starting to agree.

He looks up suddenly, warned by instinct. Porthos is watching him.

“Thinking about it?” the Alpha asks.

Aramis removes his hand from his shoulder. Instead he picks up one of the flasks and hands it to Porthos. The spirit taste no longer lingers, after the number of times it’s been emptied and filled over the past few days, and Porthos drinks it down quickly.

“Aren’t you?” Aramis says finally.

“Oh of course I am,” Porthos says. He pushes himself to a sitting position, waving off Aramis’ abortive move to help. “I’m fine… well, as long as I don’t try to stand.” He smiles wryly. “Is there any more of that jerked venison?”

Aramis passes over the bag silently. Porthos digs in with relish. For a moment the silence is companionable, two people sharing a moment.

Finally Porthos sets the bag aside and says carefully, “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Aramis admits somewhat ruefully.

Surprisingly, Porthos smiles. “So you’re not against it,” he says in satisfaction. “Good. I can work with that.”

“Oh, can you?” Aramis feels the corners of his lips pull up, not entirely with his permission.

“If you’ll let me.” Porthos is watching him hopefully. “Aramis, I… I know Alphas have a bad reputation about promises made during heat. But I meant what I was saying. You’re amazing. I know this isn’t what you’d planned but I would be honored if you’d let me…” he shrugs. “Work with it.”

“Are you asking to court me?” Aramis asks, smile widening.

Porthos blinks. “Maybe?” he tries. “Is that… the right term?”

Aramis’ smile fades at the reminder. Porthos doesn’t know the old customs of their people. Who would have taught him?
“In the old days,” Aramis says carefully, “If an Alpha and an Omega thought they might be compatible, they’d court. Betas have their own variety of courtship, but… well. Money and inheritance aren’t issues we have to worry about anymore. But the packs would mingle. Make sure we were good for each other. If I were joining your pack, some of my packmates would come with me. Find mates among your pack, maybe. Or the other way around. It would be bigger than just the two of us.”

“And now?” Porthos asks. “Since the two of us are very nearly all there is?”

“I want to learn about you,” Aramis says. “I feel the connection, too. But I won’t rush into anything. I need to understand who you are, why you want me… I need to know you.”

“You need to know I won’t leave you behind the way your aleph did,” Porthos says shrewdly.

Aramis flinches. “Maybe,” he admits.

“How long does a courtship usually last?” Porthos asks, turning the subject deftly in response to Aramis’ visible discomfort.

“As long as it takes,” Aramis says. “We don’t need the approval of my pack head or yours…”

“Though I’m sure Athos will have a few words to say on the subject,” Porthos interjects.

“…but, traditionally, courting ends when the Alpha either withdraws, or the Omega accepts.”

Porthos smiles. “I’ll wait for your acceptance, then,” he says simply. “And I’ll work hard to earn it until then.”

“You’re awfully confident, Porthos of the Musketeers.” But he’s smiling. Something warm and wonderful is spreading through his body. Aramis has to remind himself that he’s only known Porthos for a few weeks. It’s far too early to be so confident.

And yet he is. He feels it in his bones. They’re right together. Porthos knows it, to, the way he’s smiling back at Aramis. Aramis needs to wait, needs to be sure, but he doesn’t doubt how it will come out in the end.

“I won’t miss my moment,” Porthos promises.

Later, after they’ve both dozed off together and woken up again, Aramis frowns down at Porthos’ chest and thinks of a question.

“Go on,” Porthos says. “Whatever it is. I don’t mind. I want to tell you everything.”

Aramis smiles again involuntarily. It seems to him he’s been smiling more in the past week than in the last ten years combined.

“Porthos,” he says slowly. “Is… is that your real name?”

“It’s the only name I’ve ever had,” Porthos says. “Pups on the plantation didn’t get names. Just numbers. When I first came to Paris, a woman named Flea took me under her protection in the Court of Miracles. She gave me the name Porthos. It’s the most real name I’ll ever have.”

“I was christened René,” Aramis says impulsively. “But it’s not… René died a long time ago.”

Porthos nodded. “I understand.”
Aramis doesn’t ask the next question.

Porthos answers anyway. “On the plantation, we stayed with our carrier, my littermates and I, until my odems had their first heats. Then they split us up by sex and sent those of us who were Alphas away. My alephs were sold off as laborers. So was I. I escaped. But I was alone by the time I did it.”

“Did you ever think of going back?” Aramis asks. “Trying to trace them?”

“Every day,” Porthos says. “But how?”

“Do you know the name of the ranch you were whelped on?”

“Sure. It was called Notre Dame.”

Aramis sighs, a long exhale of breath. “I don’t suppose – ”

“There are a dozen called Notre Dame,” Porthos confirms. “I have no way of knowing which was mine. And even if I did – what would I do? My carrier must be dead. Buy my odems? On a Musketeers’ salary?”

“Burn the place to the ground,” Aramis suggests darkly.

“And the next day there would be a panic at every other breeding ranch in Africa,” Porthos says. “Hundreds or thousands would be killed.”

Aramis has no answer to this. Porthos must see it. The Alpha reaches over and covers Aramis’ hand on his chest in his own, running his thumb down Aramis’ palm in a gesture that’s as much for Porthos’ comfort as Aramis’.

“I told you I’d thought about it,” he says quietly. “But the solution doesn’t lie in Africa. For every ranch that shuts down, two more will open. For every slave I might buy and free, eight more would be whelped. And my littermates aren’t somehow more deserving of being freed than any other slave. It’s sheer blind luck I escaped.”

“What are you doing, then?” Aramis asks. The problem seems insurmountable, but Porthos doesn’t speak like someone who’s given up. He sounds determined.

Porthos hesitates for a moment. “I suppose you’ve heard of the Underground?” he says carefully.

“You’re working for the Captain,” Aramis says in understanding.

“Yes,” Porthos says, sounding relieved. “You know, then… are you…?”

“As he needs it,” Aramis says. He’s suddenly ashamed of not doing more. “Maybe when we get out of this – ”

“My old squad disbanded,” Porthos says tentatively. “Our leader retired and took his pension. Another of us decided soldiering wasn’t the life for him. That just leaves me and one other. We weren’t particularly close. The Captain’s looking for new squads for us both, seeing where we fit. I think he thought – if this mission went well – I think he thought I might fit here.”

Aramis puts his other hand on top of Porthos’, holds his broad, scarred paw in his own fine-boned ones. “You fit with me,” he says, and decides to blame the hormones later, when he remembers this moment and is embarrassed.

Porthos smiles down at him hopefully, though, and somehow that makes it worthwhile.
Happy holidays to everyone who celebrates them! I'll be traveling out of town for the next two weeks or so, so the fic will be on hiatus until then. I'll see everyone again after Three Kings' Day with the conclusion of the bombing plot and the story of Aramis and Porthos' courtship. In the meanwhile, have a great rest of 2014... and remember: authors' favorite holiday gifts are comments! :)
Three days after Aramis’ heat breaks, the terrorists move out.

“Finally,” Aramis grumbles. “What were they waiting for, an engraved invitation?”

Porthos smiles. “Tired of me already?” he teases, touching Aramis’ cheek quickly to take the sting out of his words.

“Worried for Athos,” Aramis admits. “Given how long we’ve been here, I honestly expected the Musketeers to just come in and wipe the terrorists out.”

“The Flames will have booby-trapped the tunnels,” Porthos says sensibly. “Better to let your enemy come to you, if you can.”

Aramis laughs. That’s the same strategy Porthos employs at chess. It’s equally effective there.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s go find out what happened.”

Porthos picks up two of the oil lamps that are full, handing one to Aramis. Carefully they make their way down the corridors to the place where the false wall connects their bolt-hole with the main tunnels.

About halfway there, Aramis’ steps slow. He frowns, sniffing the air. There’s something odd, almost acrid, about it. “Do you smell that?”

Porthos turns in place. “Maybe?” He sniffs, too. “Is that – ”

Aramis moves more quickly. “It’s definitely something,” he murmurs after another few dozen paces. “I don’t think I’ve ever – ”

“I have,” Porthos says. Aramis eyes him worriedly; he looks paler than the lantern-light could easily account for. “I wouldn’t have noticed it without you saying something, though.”

“Why not?” As they reach the concealed door, Aramis doesn’t have to make any special effort to smell it anymore. It’s everywhere.

“Because I’m used to it.”

Aramis freezes. “From…”

“Yes.” Porthos touches the wall carefully, feeling for the catch. “It must be seeping through,” he
“Is that why it’s so faint?”

Porthos nods. “And that means that when I open this it’s going to get really bad,” he warns. “Take a deep breath, then hold it, and be ready to run.”

The door swings open. A wall of scent rolls over them both. Aramis gasps, gagging. “That’s disgusting!”

“Hold your breath as long as you can,” Porthos says. He takes Aramis’ hand and pulls. “Come on, quick, we need to get outside.”

Aramis declines to reply in favor of using his breath to move as quickly as possible. It’s difficult even to move towards the exit, the stench is so overwhelming. It seems to sap the strength from his muscles.

Porthos is less affected. He keeps a tight grip on Aramis, tugging him on when Aramis’ steps start to slow. His lungs are burning by the time the entrance comes in sight.

They burst from the tunnels, blinking in the early evening sunlight. Thank God it’s not high noon, Aramis thinks. Their eyes will need time to adjust to the sun’s light after spending so long with only oil lamps for illumination. He’s bent half over, hands braced on his thighs, breathing deeply to clear his lungs of that awful scent. Even now he can still taste it, rising from the caves behind them like a miasma. But the concentration isn’t so toxic out in the open woods.

“What was that?” Aramis gasps, as soon as he can.

“Throwback bane,” Porthos says grimly. “You felt how it affected you? Works on any Alpha or Omega.”

“But not on Betas? That doesn’t make biological sense.”

“It would probably work on them just fine if they could smell it,” Porthos says. “Way we were told on the plantation, Betas are missing the olfactory receptors for it. It just bounces right off them, doesn’t enter the bloodstream.”

“What did they use it for on the plantation?” Aramis asks, dreading the response.

Porthos shrugs. “Mostly as a keep-away. In mild doses it’s harmless enough. Just disgusting. They’d put it around the edges of the plantation to discourage wandering, or in the overseers’ quarters and the store-rooms to keep us out. If there were a riot, they could lob a smoke bomb laden with that stuff in the middle of the crowd. Once it gets dense enough – well, you felt it. First effect is everyone passing out.”

“Second effect?”

“Organ failure, probably. You always heard of a couple people dying. Weak hearts or lungs go first.”

Aramis shudders. Porthos sounds pragmatic about it, which is a horror in and of itself. Such a puppyhood as to make such deaths commonplace is worth shuddering over.

Then his brain catches up. “I’ve never heard of it,” Aramis says slowly. “And I should have, shouldn’t I? If this really doesn’t work on Betas – every village would have a bonfire twice a year, to
smoke out hidden throwbacks.”

“I’ve never heard of its being used in Europe before,” Porthos agrees. “I didn’t think it was known outside of Africa.”

“This group knows about it,” Aramis says. “They had it inside their base... they must have been using it as repellent.”

“They can’t have been,” Porthos points out, “because it wasn’t there when either you or I entered.”

Aramis considers this. “So it was brought in afterwards.”

“There weren’t any more shipments after you came in.”

“No. That was the last one. And the leader, Vadim, he said…” Aramis frowns, trying to recall Vadim’s exact words. “He said that there would be no more coming and going after the last shipment. That everyone was to come with the shipment and stay in the tunnels until they were ready to leave for Paris.”

“So it was in the last shipment. It was part of the bomb…” Porthos breaks off and swears. “It makes sense, doesn’t it?” he says tightly. “Why build a bomb that will destroy buildings and livestock, valuable things, when you can build a bomb that only outs throwbacks?”

“Jesus Christ,” Aramis says involuntarily. He thinks immediately of Athos, and de Guignes – the Captain – the half-dozen other throwbacks in the Musketeers. The regiment’s duty is to guard the King; how many of them would be present when the bomb went off? How many more would rush to the King’s aid and be exposed?

“One good thing,” Porthos says.

“What’s that?” Aramis says faintly, nauseated by the lingering smell and horror both.

Porthos points. “That thing leaves a scent trail a mile wide. We know exactly which way the terrorists went.”

“Then let’s go,” Aramis says, lurching into motion. “We have to stop them!”

They have no horses. Aramis’ mount is long gone, and Porthos had come on foot originally, trying to trace the terrorists from the Le Havre end. So they run. Aramis has speed and Porthos has endurance greater than any Beta, but they’re still no match for horses. The sun is setting before they’ve gone three miles.

“We have to stop,” Porthos says, seizing Aramis’ arm when he makes to start running again. “Aramis, this doesn’t make any sense. We have to be smart about this.”

“That bomb is on its way to Paris!” Aramis cries.

“And we’ll get there three months after it goes off, at this rate!” Porthos points out. “We have to go back to Le Havre.”

“That’s a full day in the wrong direction!”

“It’s also the only chance we have.”

Aramis growls in wordless frustration. He knows Porthos is right, but the idea of going backwards is too frustrating to contemplate when so many lives are at stake.

“Athos!” Aramis cries, having caught the familiar scent in the same moment. “Yes! Come on, quick!” He takes off running again. This time Porthos follows. Cresting a hill, they spy Athos riding towards them.

“Aramis!” Athos calls ahead. “Porthos! You’re all right!” He pulls up alongside them and dismounts, seizing Aramis in a fierce hug. Aramis returns it, clutching his packmate tight. Athos claps Porthos on the back and accepts the same in return, grinning in relief, eyes still lingering on Aramis.

“Thank God,” he’s saying. “I was so worried. You’re all right? You’re both fine?”

“Completely,” Aramis promises. “We got pinned down – the terrorists didn’t know where we were, but we had to stay put until they moved out. I’m so sorry I couldn’t get you word.”

“As long as you’re okay,” Athos says in relief.

“And you?” Aramis demands. “Are you okay? What about the bomb? Are you following them?”

Athos shakes his head. “I got back from Paris two days ago,” he says, calmer now. “With a full troop of Musketeers. We waited until the terrorists emerged from the caverns and ambushed them. They weren’t expecting to hit resistance so soon. We made short work of them. The bomb is under our control – it’s being dismantled right now.”

“Thank God,” Porthos says in relief.

Aramis has to close his eyes. He shakes his head once, letting the fear dissipate.

“Come on,” Athos says. “This way. I’ll take you back to our encampment.”

Porthos and Aramis follow him, and all three follow the scent from the bomb. The marks of battle become obvious fairly quickly. From what remains, it looks like the terrorists had tried to sneak out of the tunnels, but their attempt at stealth had been no match for an enemy who knew they’d be coming. Bodies are still scattered around, but the cleanup is well underway. Aramis’ practiced eye scans the battlefield. It had been quite the rout.

“Looks like we missed all the excitement,” Porthos says.

“I suspect you had plenty of your own,” Athos replies. He’s eying them both suspiciously.

“Later,” Aramis says, giving Athos a quelling look.

“We should report to the Captain,” Porthos says.

Athos clears his throat. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” he says apologetically. “You’ll have to report to me.”


“He had a pressing obligation to attend to,” Athos says significantly. “One that took him out of Paris.”

Porthos stares, blinking. Then his eyes widen. His gaze turns to Aramis, who probably looks as guilty as he feels.
Porthos vents a low whistle. “Oh,” he says quietly.

“It’s my fault,” Aramis says miserably.

“Not here,” Athos says. “Come back to my command tent.”

The three Musketeers cross the remains of the battlefield in silence, though some of the other Musketeers occasionally call out to Athos, and Athos shouts an order or an approval back at them. Athos gestures them inside the tent and ties the flap shut behind them for what sound dampening it may provide.

“Didn’t I see Havet out there?” Porthos says curiously. “Doesn’t he have seniority over you?”

“He was a senior in my training squad,” Athos agrees.

“Then how is it you’re in charge?”

Athos sighs. He flips his cloak back to reveal the bars on his uniform. “I got promoted.”

“Congratulations,” Aramis says, smiling despite his worry. “Lieutenant Athos, hmm? It has a nice ring to it.”

“Treville would have given it to whomever rode back to Paris,” Athos says self-deprecatingly. “Actually, he probably always meant to give it to you. You’ve been in the regiment much longer than I have.”

“I’m not cut out for rank,” Aramis disagrees. “I’d much rather serve under your command than have you under mine, Athos.”

Athos blushes slightly. “Thank you,” he says sincerely. He starts to say something more, then stops himself with the barest glance towards Porthos.

Porthos, no fool, catches it. He also starts to say something, then defers with a glance towards Aramis.

Aramis laughs a little at the sideways-glancing carousel. Then he sober. Reaching into his baldric, he pulls out the envelope Treville had given him. He holds it out, open, displaying the leaves still nestled inside.

Athos stares at it. He looks from the envelope to Aramis, back to the envelope, over to Porthos, then to Aramis again.

“Well,” he says finally. “I guess this explains why you two smell like each other.”

It’s Aramis’ turn to blush. “With the way we were caught hiding from the terrorists, there wasn’t any way for me to make them,” he explains. “Instead, I…”

“Aramis did me the great honor of allowing me to help him through his heat,” Porthos interrupts. He’s standing stiffly, like he’s on parade, or being inspected. Actually, given the fierce gaze Athos is leveling at Porthos, the latter is probably appropriate. “I am very grateful to have had the privilege.”

Athos folds his arms and looms. It’s like flipping a switch: suddenly Athos is twelve feet tall, four feet wide, and absolutely impossible to look away from. “I look forward to hearing you explain exactly how well you treated him,” Athos says icily.

Porthos doesn’t back down. He widens his own stance, and while he may not have Athos’
magnetism he makes up for it in sheer raw danger. “Then I recommend you ask him. He is, as it happens, standing right here.”

A muscle in Athos’ jaw ticks. “Aramis, are you all right?” he demands.

Aramis rolls his eyes. “For God’s sake, Athos. Yes, I’m fine.”

Athos frowns. “He didn’t hurt you?” Athos’ eyes rake Porthos again, this time taking in every last iota of strength Porthos is projecting. “He didn’t force you?”

Porthos flinches.

This is, for obvious reasons, the wrong reaction.

“No!” Aramis yelps, but no one is paying him any mind. Athos growls and tackles Porthos, who is briefly stunned but comes back to himself in time to twist and grapple in return. Thankfully the command tent is big enough that the two of them rolling around on the ground don’t just pitch straight through the tent wall and go rolling down the hill. An Alpha fight in the middle of a battlefield would be difficult to explain even to a group of notoriously incurious Musketeers. Instead the two of them wrestle back and forth, papers scattering everywhere. The quarters are too close for either of them to draw steel or musket, but Aramis doesn’t doubt that Athos, at least, would if he could. As it is, neither of them can manage a successful grapple on the other, and control of the fight changes back and forth half a dozen times without bringing either of them any closer to a victorious blow.

Aramis purses his lips and counts to ten, calming himself. The two Alphas aren’t in full-out berserker rage, thank goodness, but they’re too close to it for comfort. If Aramis could get close enough to touch, he could probably snap Porthos out of it. This close to the heat they’d shared Porthos should still respond to Aramis’ scent. But Athos will be unaffected – pack or not, they share no genetic tie – and one enraged Alpha is still one too many.

Aramis considers the problem a moment longer. Then he walks over to the tent-flap and unhooks it, sticking his head out. He glances down the hill and catches the eye of the first Musketeer he sees. Havet. Aramis waves to grab his attention, then mimics a big bucket of water.

Havet nods, turning his head to shout. A few minutes later a gangly dark-haired youth – Besson? Brasseur? – comes running up the hill with the requested bucket.

Aramis accepts it wordlessly and sends the boy on his way with a sign. Then he steps back inside the tent and dumps the bucket over both Alphas.

Athos and Porthos fall apart, sputtering and shaking. It only takes them a minute to recover themselves, but when they do they’re kept in place by a musket-barrel to their faces. Aramis regards them both over the sights of his two guns.

“Aren’t you going to be reasonable now?” Aramis asks.

“He – he – ” Athos sputters, nearly purple-faced with rage.

Aramis sighs. “No, Athos, he didn’t,” he says. Despite his own disgust at being treated like a possession – and a contaminated one at that – he keeps his tone gentle. Unspoken behind Athos’ words are his memories of his mate and odem. Athos doesn’t know what was done his mate, but it’s a safe bet sexual violence was involved; it’s the way of the Inquisition. Athos has buried his wounds so deeply that they’re rarely visible. But when they are…
“Porthos thinks he did,” Athos says stubbornly.

Aramis shakes his head and turns his gaze to Porthos. “What did I say to you?” Aramis demands.

Porthos has the decency to look ashamed of himself. “That if I ever touched you without your permission you’d gut me like a fish.”

“Fillet,” Aramis corrects. He’s much better with a knife than a simple gutting. Then he cocks his head to one side and looks back at Athos. “Porthos doesn’t look very filleted.”

“We can fix that,” Athos says darkly.

Aramis sighs. “Athos,” he says. “I am fine. Porthos didn’t hurt me. He misinterpreted something I said in the early stages of heat and manhandled me a little bit. This is right after I tried to slit his throat and shortly before I told him I wanted him to knot me so full I’d feel it between my teeth. Which he did, by the way. I was very pleased.”

Athos chokes, eyes widening. He looks like he doesn’t know what to react to first. “You – he – manhandled?”

“I was wrong,” Porthos says miserably. “I was so wrong. I’ll never forgive myself.”

“I certainly hope you will,” Aramis mutters. “Otherwise this is going to be a very short courtship.”

“Courtship?” Athos screeches.

“Keep your voice down!” Aramis snaps. “Yes, courtship. I’ve decided to let Porthos court me.”

“You have?” Athos demands furiously.

“I have,” Aramis confirms.

“Why?”

Aramis turns to look at Porthos. The other Alpha is still on his knees, wretched at the thought of having hurt Aramis, visibly longing for the chance to touch him again. “Because I want to,” Aramis says. “And I haven’t wanted anything in far too long.”

When he looks back at Athos, Athos’ eyes are suspiciously damp. “Are you sure?” he asks.

“Are you sure?” Porthos echoes.

Aramis smiles, lowering both his muskets and holstering them safely. “I’m sure I want to find out,” Aramis says. “And that’s a start.”

Athos sighs. Then he pushes himself to his feet and offers Porthos his hand.

The other Musketeer takes it. Athos doesn’t haul Porthos up at once, though. Instead he tightens his grip in warning. “Aramis is the one who gets to decide whether he’s hurt or not,” he says. “But if he ever decides he wants to fillet you, I’ll be helping him hide your body.”

Porthos nods and gets to his feet himself, somehow doing it without relinquishing Athos’ grip. “I’ll hold you to that,” he says, squeezing in return.

Aramis smiles to himself. Maybe this will work out after all.
The cleanup from the fight finishes quickly. It had been well underway when Aramis and Porthos had arrived, so that’s not surprising. What is surprising is what they find.

“The bomb is an actual bomb,” Aramis says blankly, staring at the piles of disassembled explosives.

Athos blinks. “Shouldn’t it be?”

“We thought it wasn’t,” Porthos says. He’s already explained about the so-called ‘throwback bane’; it had been the next thing Athos had asked about, once the matter of Aramis’ heat had been resolved. The smell had been driving Athos crazy all day. “We thought it was just a delivery mechanism for the bane.”

“Actual explosives,” Athos confirms. “But it makes sense, doesn’t it? When we heard them talking, they said that their goal was to kill the King. The King’s no throwback.”

Aramis frowns. “And they also wanted to kill as many nobles as possible,” he says slowly. “They said the entire nobility’s guilty, even the ones who are Betas.”

“Then why the bane?” Porthos sounds baffled. “If it wasn’t to protect their base against hypothetical throwback opposition, and it wasn’t part of the bomb, where did it come from?”

“It was part of the bomb,” Athos says. “The bomb was soaked in it. Its use was intentional, there’s no doubt about that. It just wasn’t the only part.”

“If it was intentional,” Aramis says slowly, “then how did they learn about it? The bane can’t be widely known. If it were – ”

Athos and Porthos shudder simultaneously. The survival of their people is directly tied to their ability to hide. Anything that threatens that threatens them all.

“We have to go back and search the tunnels,” Athos says. “Figure out how they learned about the bane and who else might know.”

Porthos nods. “I’ve never heard of it in Europe before. I wouldn’t have thought it could be made here.”

Aramis blanches. “I don’t think we can,” he says. “Send in a squad?”

“Do you really want anyone else, even Musketeers, to have any more knowledge about any of this than they need?” Athos challenges.

“It should be fine,” Porthos interjects. “The bane had to be renewed regularly. The concentration in the caves was so bad when we left because they had the supply with them. Now that the supply’s been removed it’ll be emptying out. If we wait for dawn to go back it should be bearable.”

“I’ll send the rest of the Musketeers on ahead back to Paris,” Athos says. “They can take the evidence back with them too. We’ll stay here to search the caves and tie up any loose ends we find.”

“Will that lot be all right on their own?” Porthos asks dubiously. “The most senior Musketeer I saw was Havet.”

“He’ll be fine,” Athos says. “I’m familiar with his style.”

“So am I,” Porthos says drolly.

“He’ll be fine,” Athos repeats. He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t have believed it, but he didn’t play a
single prank on the way here. Brasseur really has steadied him.”

“Is that his shadow’s name?” Porthos puts his eyebrows up. “You saw that one sniffing the explosives today, I trust?”

“I had my suspicions from when we were novices together,” Athos admits. “The two of them got very close then. Which is another reason I trust Havet to lead this group back to Paris. He’ll understand what’s at stake.”

“All right,” Aramis says somewhat reluctantly. He’s still dreading the thought of going back to those caves – the memory of that awful stench is clogging up the back of his throat – but he has to know. What were they doing with the bane? Where did they get it? How did they know what it was, if the knowledge of it has been confined to Africa heretofore? Is it about to be turned into a weapon against their people?

“I have to write orders,” Athos says. “You two make camp?” He looks between them. “And at least try not to give each other sappy looks while you do it?”

“We will be the souls of discretion,” Porthos promises.

“Wait,” Aramis says. “You searched the bodies, right?”

“Yes,” Athos says.

“And you didn’t find anything that could point us in the right direction?”

Athos frowns. “Not on Barnabas or the other two sailors,” he says slowly. “I didn’t search Vadim personally.”

“Maybe we should do that,” Aramis suggests.

“Yes, good idea.” Athos looks around the battlefield and squints. “I think we stacked the bodies over here.”

The three of them head around the last stages of cleanup to a small copse of firs. As promised, there’s a pile of the dead.

They go through them quickly. Aramis gives Barnabas’ body another quick going-over, just to be sure, but finds nothing of use. In fact, it’s what they don’t find that is most revealing.

“Nothing,” Athos says grimly after going through the pile a second time. “Vadim’s not here.”

“And you’re sure Vadim was still with the group when they left the caves?” Aramis asks. It’s unlikely that anyone would have left the caves without Porthos or he hearing, but it’s not impossible. But Athos shakes his head. “He was riding in the van,” he says positively. “I thought I took him out with my first shot. But…”

“If you did,” Porthos finishes, “Then where’s his body?”

“Maybe it’s been moved elsewhere,” Aramis says.

The look Athos gives him is dubious. Aramis doesn’t really believe his own suggestion, either. But he goes and fetches Havet, who checks in with all the other Musketeers. They all swear up and down that all the bodies are here.
“He escaped,” Porthos concludes grimly.

“He doesn’t have the bomb anymore,” Aramis says hopefully.

“How long will it take him to build another?” Athos asks rhetorically. “There’s no shortage of Betas who will find his ethos appealing.”

“We have to find him,” Porthos says.

“We have to go back to the caves,” Aramis says. “Maybe we can pick up his trail there. If not…”

“If not, then Le Havre,” Athos says. He shakes his head. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

The other Musketeers leave at daybreak. Athos has written out orders for Havet and enclosed statements from he, Aramis and Porthos about their experiences since leaving Paris. Just in case.

The three of them see the column off and wait for them to disappear into the horizon. Then they pack up their campsite and make for to the caves.

The return journey is considerably shorter. The group from Paris had brought remounts to travel more quickly, which means that Aramis and Porthos are horsed once again. They reach the caverns in only half an hour of light trotting.

“The terrorists really didn’t make it far, then, did they?” Aramis muses.

“I only wish they’d been stopped even sooner,” Athos says darkly.

They tie their horses up at the edge of the clearing this time, no longer in need of stealth, and approach the mouth of the caves with trepidation. Porthos goes first.

“All clear,” he reports, standing in the cave mouth and making a show of breathing deeply.

Aramis edges in and sniffs for himself. There’s still a little residue on the air, but not enough to be problematic. Porthos probably can’t even smell it. There’s nothing wrong with his nose in general, but he himself admits he was desensitized to this smell as a pup.

“Let’s go,” Athos orders. “Porthos, you’re in the lead.”

Porthos leads them through the caves efficiently. He opens up several more trap doors and trick walls as they go. None of them show any signs of use.

The caverns themselves are empty. The terrorists had taken everything with them when they’d left. There’s nothing here to show the place hasn’t been deserted since the Court of Miracles had abandoned it.

The better part of the day later, Athos swears grimly. “Nothing.”

“Hang on,” Aramis says slowly. “What about the secret cavern?”

“I opened them all,” Porthos says. “But there’s nothing to show that the terrorists even knew they were here.”

“You opened all the ones that were closed,” Aramis says. “But you didn’t have to open the one we used. The door was still open. We never closed it when we left. We were too busy trying to get away from the bane.”
Athos looks at Porthos. “Lead us back there,” he says tensely.

Porthos obeys. They’re deep in the tunnels, so it means they need to retrace their steps almost all the way back to the tunnel mouth.

They don’t get that far. Aramis had forgotten about the old smugglers’ trick of sound amplification. Vadim must have heard them coming: he lets them approach the door, and ambushes them from behind.

His chosen target is Aramis, who he must have decided is the weakest of the three. Whether it’s simply because of Aramis’ slighter stature or the more dangerous possibility that he knows their sexes is something to be explored later. In the moment, Aramis has only time to drop and roll away from the two hundred plus pounds of furious Beta male who lunges for him, teeth bared in a furious snarl and knife clutched in his hand.

Athos shouts in alarm, pulling his musket loose automatically. The quarters are too close for him to fire it, though, and Aramis is already ducking another swing from Vadim. Aramis pulls a knife of his own and feints, but has to pull back from a counter-thrust. He hates to admit it, but the terrorist is good with a knife. As good as Aramis, possibly. And judging by the way his eyes glitter with a manic light and his jabs are wide and aggressive, Vadim doesn’t have the respect for his own epidermis that Aramis does.

All of this becomes moot when Porthos hits Vadim from the side like a cannonball.

“There are three of us,” Athos says chidingly to Aramis, as they watch Porthos systematically demolish Vadim with his thick fists. “You don’t have to do everything on your own.”

Aramis blushes a little. “Shut up,” he mutters. “He was attacking me, I was responding.”

“Peacocking a little, too, I think,” Athos murmurs. “Showing off your knife skills?”

“I? I was peacocking?” Aramis gestures to Porthos, who is still working the terrorist over. Vadim is moaning in surrender; there’s no reason for Porthos to keep going except to prove something.

“Fair point,” Athos concedes.

They stand there a little while longer, watching Porthos go at it. Aramis is impressed in spite of himself. Call it old-fashioned and stereotypical, but he finds the display of strength to be quite… pleasing.

“Porthos,” Athos says after another few moments have gone by. “We do want to be able to question him.”

Porthos ignores this. Vadim gobbles something indecipherable.

“Porthos,” Athos repeats.

Aramis shakes his head. He steps forward and places a hand on Porthos’ shoulder.

His traditionalist upbringing is good for something. Omegan modal patterns of behavior have evolved over thousands of years to have a specific effect on Alphas. If Aramis and Porthos were bonded, with all the attendant biological changes that entails, Aramis’ touch alone would be enough to snap Porthos out of a full-on Alphaic rage. This close to their recent heat, scents still entwined, it suffices to jolt Porthos back to reality.
“Sorry,” Porthos mutters contritely, coming back to his feet and hauling Vadim with him. “I’m not usually such a caveman, I swear.”

“I believe you,” Aramis soothes. Every throwback reverts to a greater or lesser degree when it comes to mating, whether it be heat, courtship, or bonding. Aramis isn’t going to hold Porthos’ reaction against him. Especially not when, as Athos had pointed out, Aramis had been peacocking too.

“Now,” Athos says, stepping forward to take control of the conversation and fix Vadim with his steeliest look. “We have some questions for you.”

“Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever,” Vadim responds. “A sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.”

Athos frowns. “Your accomplices are dead,” he says. “We have your bomb. Your plot has failed.”

Vadim ignores this. “Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.”

“What’s he going on about?” Porthos growls.

“More Hebrews,” Aramis says. He pulls out a knife, slowly, making sure Vadim sees the way the lantern-light catches on its blade. “Perhaps he’s preparing himself for martyrdom?”

“He needn’t be martyred,” Athos says in a conciliatory tone of voice. “Surely Vadim will see reason, and confess his entire unholy plot.”

“And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands,” Vadim intones, eyes rolling back into his head.

“Doesn’t seem likely,” Porthos mutters. “Maybe we should see how effective his quoting is on the edge of a blade.”

“Vadim, Vadim,” Athos soothes. “You made a mistake. We understand. Just tell us everything, and we’ll –”

“They shall perish; but thou remainest!” Vadim cries.

“He’s not listening,” Aramis says.

Porthos shakes the terrorist. “Answer us, damn you!”

Vadim’s teeth chatter, but he continues stubbornly on. “They shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.”

Aramis swears. “Tell us where you got the bane!” he demands. The knife-blade is ugly and serrated as he hefts it.

Vadim spits at Aramis’ feet. “Minister for they who shall be heirs of salvation!” he cries, and makes an odd biting motion.

Aramis recognizes it an instant too late and lunges for Vadim. The terrorist convulses in Porthos’ grip. Shocked, Porthos jumps back, letting Vadim slump to the floor. Aramis dives after him, scrabbling to force his jaw open.

“What the hell?” Porthos shouts.
“Cyanide,” Aramis says grimly. “Hold him!”

Athos does, and Porthos forces Vadim’s jaw open, but by then it’s too late. He’s already frothing. Aramis pulls half a broken capsule from his mouth and throws it on the ground in disgust.

“Dead,” Aramis says unnecessarily.

“Did he have that the whole time?” Porthos demands.

“He must have.”

“But why?”

“He never had any intention of telling us anything,” Athos says.

“No,” Aramis agrees.

Porthos shakes his head. Athos just sighs.

“Now what?” Aramis says somewhat blankly. Vadim may not have ever had any intention of revealing his sources to them – the cyanide capsule makes that plain – but he was still the only lead they had. With his death, what hope do they have of tracing the origin of the bane’s arrival in Europe?


Aramis and Athos look at each other. In unison, they shrug.

Porthos strips Vadim methodically and hands off garments to Aramis and Athos as he does. “I’m getting a little tired of this pattern we seem to be falling into,” Aramis says to Athos, trying to lighten the mood. “Why is it that you have trouble taking someone alive?”

The twist of Athos’ lip says that Aramis’ attempt has fallen slightly flat. “Just lucky, I guess,” he mutters.

“Here’s something,” Porthos says, pulling a few sheets of paper from Vadim’s sleeve. “What are these?”

“Bring the lamp,” Aramis orders. Athos obeys, going to take one of the lanterns from its hook on the wall and bring it over to the three of them.

Porthos smooths the papers out on the floor next to Vadim’s body. “Bills of lading,” he says, eyebrows climbing. “These look official.”

“Look, or are?”

Porthos motions the lamp closer. He holds the papers up to the light and inspects them carefully. One fingernail pries at the customs officers’ seal. He sniffs at the wax, then the ink. “Are,” he says.

“What are they for?” Athos wants to know.

“These are foodstuffs,” Aramis says, taking two of the papers. “Bread, dried meats, wine…”

“Supplies for their hideaway here and the journey to Paris. Next.”

“These are cloth,” Porthos says. “Clothing, or padding for the bomb.”
“And this one…” Aramis picks up the last paper and squints at it. It’s a list of common chemicals. None in any amount that would be notable to a customs officer. No dangerous combinations that Aramis knows of. “What is this?”

Porthos takes it from him. “This is the recipe for the bane,” he says.

“So Vadim does have it,” Aramis says grimly. It had always been the most likely scenario. But a part of him had still hoped that he’d been given the bane intact, as a nameless drug already compounded, and that Vadim had had no idea what it was.

“Le Havre is France’s biggest port,” Athos reminds them. “If the bane were going to reach our shores, Le Havre is where it would happen. There’s still time to contain this. Porthos, what does that bill tell you about how Vadim got the recipe?”

Porthos holds the bill up to the light. “It tells me where he was buying his goods.”

Athos nods. “Then that’s where we go next,” he says. “We find out who sold the goods, and if they knew what he had – and then we do what has to be done to contain it.”

“Are you suggesting…?” Aramis asks carefully.

“Objections?”

“None,” Aramis says. “Just… making sure.”

“Good,” Athos says. He looks over at Porthos.

“None here,” Porthos rumbles.

“Then let’s go,” Athos says. “We can still make Le Havre by dark if we hurry.”

The gates of Le Havre are still open as the sun dips to touch the horizon. The Musketeers ride through unmolested. In fact, the usual guards seem to be much reduced in number. And Aramis can’t spot a single customs official.

“What’s going on?” Athos calls. “Where is everyone?”

The head remaining guard on duty squints up at them suspiciously. The sight of their regimental uniforms loosens his tongue. “All off dealing with the fires,” he says. “Bad series of fires down by the docks. Dunno how it started, but boy, did it spread! Took out half the warehouses on Apothecary Row.”

“Apothecary Row?” Porthos asks. Surprise is evident in his voice. “They’re right by the water, aren’t they? Surely the fire can’t have been that bad?”

The guard shakes his head. “Half the warehouses are cinder,” he repeats. “Fire brigades were delayed somehow. Nothing to salvage by the time they arrived.”


“Anytime, for the King’s service,” the man returns, waving them on as a merchant caravan appears on the road into the city.

The three Musketeers walk their horses in further. “Care to bet on the name of one of the destroyed
warehouses?” Aramis murmurs, thinking of the name on the bill of lading Vadim had carried.

“I think I’ll keep my money,” Athos says grimly.

They reach Apothecary Row soon enough. If anything, the gate guard had been understating the case. Fully three-quarters of the row shows significant damage, on both sides of the street. The warehouses closest to the docks are the least affected, but that’s not saying much. It means that they might be worth repairing instead of rebuilding. The first half of the row, as promised, is little more than ash.

Porthos stops his horse in front of the first building on the northward side. The street itself is packed full. Wealthy merchants shout at the fire brigade, who shout back. City officials try vainly to separate the two. Uninvolved Havrais gawk openly at the devastation and speculate about the fire’s cause and its ultimate effects on the town’s economy. It would be impossible to proceed through the crowd, but it’s also unnecessary. They can see everything from where they are.

“Mon Dieu,” Athos murmurs.

Aramis stares, astonished at the sheer devastation. The fire must have raged unchecked for hours to have done this much damage. Melted brass and bronze fixtures have cooled in odd shapes among the wreckage. A few twisted beams show where roofs had caved in. Scraps of cloth float like ash on the sea breezes. Priceless goods have been reduced to unidentifiable clumps on the ground.

“A dead end,” Porthos says.

“Someone got here before us,” Aramis says.

“It may have been an accident,” Athos says, but it doesn’t sound like he believes it.

“Or...” Porthos says, trailing off.

“What?” Aramis prompts.

Porthos shrugs a little. “Let’s face it,” he says. “If Vadim’s supplier hadn’t yet sold the recipe to anyone else, killing the supplier and destroying their records would very effectively contain the threat.”

“You don’t think – ” Athos says.

Aramis lowers his voice and turns into his comrades, forming a small bubble of privacy amidst the hubbub of the crowd. “You think the Captain sent someone?”

“Why shouldn’t he?”

“He did send someone,” Athos says. “He sent us. We didn’t do this.”

“Why does it have to be the Captain?” Porthos too lowers his voice. “Why shouldn’t it have been someone else?”

“If it had been the Underground the Captain would have known about it,” Aramis says with finality. Treville tries to present himself as a mid-level operative at best, but it’s been a long time since Aramis began to suspect him of being higher up. This mission had all but confirmed it. If Treville’s connected enough to obtain suppressants – more, to obtain them regularly – he’s got to be in the Underground’s inner circle.
Porthos lowers his voice still further. “What if it weren’t the Underground?” he whispers. “What if it were a different group?”


Porthos nods.

Aramis shakes his head. “There’s no such thing as the Resistance,” he says with quiet finality. He doesn’t know much about the throwback Underground, beyond his suspicions about Treville and the missions he’s run for the Captain over the years. But he knows that it’s all there is. Adele’s death had taught him this. There is no such thing as the Resistance, and believing otherwise just gets you killed.

“Then who?” Porthos demands. “Who else would have done this? If not one of ours – ”

“Then one of theirs,” Aramis murmurs.

A fearful silence falls. Around them the sounds of the crowd filter through.

No one had wanted to say it, but it had been on all of their minds. If the fire hadn’t been set by an operative of the Underground to contain the bane, then the logical conclusion – the inescapable conclusion – is that it had been set by an operative of the Inquisition. To cover their tracks while they import the bane, and stop the Underground from stopping them.

Aramis shivers slightly. Almost reflexively he starts scanning the crowd. His eyes skip from peasant to city official to wealthy merchant and back again. They skip right over the dark-haired woman in a blue cloak standing on the fringes of the far end of the street, closest to the docks.

Then he blinks.

The woman is standing still, visible only in profile. She’s wearing a beautiful blue cloak with stunning embroidery. It’s the embroidery which draws his eye. Adele had always loved fine stitching. Some half-forgotten instinct prompts Aramis to look back, to study the stitching so he can tell his aleph about it later.

The thought makes him flinch. It’s been a long time since Adele’s death has caught him so off guard. He starts to turn away. Then the woman turns her head, and Aramis can see her face.

There’s no reason for the two of them to make eye contact across the crowd. But they do.

And Aramis recognizes her. He shouldn’t; he’s only seen her once, years ago. But her face had stuck out in his mind because of the circumstances.

It had been right before he’d met Athos. He’d been on duty in the Louvre when the King had needed the Cardinal for some political matter or other. Aramis had been the one sent to collect Richelieu. It had been his first time in the Palais-Cardinal. Musketeers in general had very little business there, and Aramis had always made more than the usual effort to avoid it.

Aramis had delivered his message to the Red Guard on duty and been left standing in the entryway of the Palais-Cardinal while someone fetched Richelieu. While he’d been standing there, there had been a sudden commotion. A door had flown open a short walk down one of the corridors. A woman had run out of it and disappeared down the hallway. A few minutes later, she and another man had run back in.

And in between the woman leaving and the woman and the man running back in, Aramis had peeked inside.
Even at the time he’d known it had been foolish. What had he been hoping to accomplish? It had been an automatic reaction, prompted by years of careful training to *always keep your eyes and ears open, René, always be on the watch. You never know what the Betas are going to do next unless you pay attention. It could be the difference between life and death.*

And maybe, just maybe, part of it had been in testament to his lost aleph. She’d wanted to spy on Richelieu. Anything the Bloody Cardinal wanted to hide had to be something Aramis wanted to know.

Behind the door the woman had run out of had been a sickroom. The fire had been built high, and a table against a wall had been filled with various vials and medical implements. And in the bed had been the patient.

She’d been badly injured, that much had been obvious, though in fact he had seen very little of her. Nothing more than her face and a single hand had been visible. But that had been enough to show that the woman had been tortured. Aramis had wanted to know more – was the woman a victim of the Cardinal? Could he help her? – but the pounding of footsteps had alerted him to the return of the first woman and the man, and Aramis had slipped out and returned to his place.

He’d taken the next opportunity that had presented itself of going back to the Palais-Cardinal. But though he’d been able to snatch a moment to peek into the sick-room door, it had been to no avail. The room had been empty. The woman had been gone.

Aramis had assumed, regretfully, that the woman had died. He’d put her down as yet another victim of the Bloody Cardinal. But the sight of her face had been seared into his memory.

And now he sees it again, staring at him beneath a beautifully embroidered blue cloak, in the middle of a burned-out street in Le Havre. Looking at the ruins of a fire that had not been an accident.

He slides off his horse.

“**Aramis!**” Athos shouts.

“**What are you doing?**” Porthos cries.

Aramis listens to neither of them. He takes off into the crowd.

Dimly he’s aware of the elbows jostling him as he shoves through the mass of people. Vaguely he hears the curses thrown his way by the townsfolk. In the back of his mind he’s aware that Porthos and Athos are trying, futilely, to follow him. But all of that is secondary to the need to **get to that woman.**

Three years Aramis had thought that the woman must have been another victim of the Cardinal. But now that conclusion turns on its head. She’s here. Alive. Which means she must have been **recovering** at the Palais-Cardinal that day. Which makes her Richelieu’s creature. The Inquisition’s creature. And, in all probability, the setter of the fire.

Aramis grits his teeth and shoves harder at the crowd blocking him. He’s determined not to let her get away.

Unfortunately, she has the lead of him. On open ground, with no witnesses, Aramis would run her down easily. No one is faster in a dead sprint than a pureblooded Omega. But the crowd prevents him from using that speed to his advantage, both because of their sheer density and because he has no wish to be drawn and quartered in the town square. The woman had been standing on the fringes of the crowd already. Dismounted, he can’t see how easy it must have been for her to slip away. But
it’s easy enough for his frustrated mind to picture it when he finally fights his way through to see nothing.

“¡Joder!” he hisses to himself, furious. “Shit, shit – ”

“Aramis!” Porthos shouts, coming up beside him. He grabs Aramis’ shoulder frantically. “What is it?”

“That woman!” he pants. “She set the fire!”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen her before. At the Palais-Cardinal.”

Porthos swears. “What does she look like?” He spins, scanning the crowd. Aramis does the same.

A moment later the crowd shifts. God must smile on him. In the corner of his eye, he catches the barest glimpse of blue fabric.

“There!” he shouts, taking off again.

The crowd is thinner here on the fringes. Aramis presses his advantage, running as fast as he dares. Porthos begins to fall behind as Aramis weaves through the pedestrians, chasing the blue cloak.

“Get Athos,” Aramis shouts over his shoulder. Porthos hesitates, and Aramis wants to swear. “Do it!” he shouts instead. Then he focuses on the chase.

Porthos’ hesitation costs him another few precious seconds. He barely sees the blue cloak disappear around a corner, and has to skid precariously in order to make the turn. It sends him down an alley. Clothes hanging from lines catch him in the face. Carelessly discarded refuse turns under his feet and forces him to slow down further to watch his footing. He loses sight of the cloak. But the end of Alchemy Row only leads to one place. Aramis keeps moving towards the river.

The alleys of Le Havre twist and turn. Aramis isn’t a native. He wishes futilely for the urchin from the Court of Miracles who had led them to Henry. Or even that Porthos were able to keep up with the chase. Anyone who knew more about what to expect from the treacherous back streets.

Eventually the alleys open back into roads, then into docks. Aramis nearly trips and falls headlong into the ocean when his feet tangle up in a pile of cloth. Breathing hard, he struggles up to his knees and snatches at the thing that had tripped him. The light of the setting sun glints off the water onto a richly embroidered blue cloak.

Aramis looks up. It’s hard to see anything through the way the sunset lights the waves on fire. But he can make out the black outline of a lantern on a small boat being rowed out to sea.

Aramis swears. They’ve lost her.

The ride back to Paris is a quiet one. They have no need to pretend with each other anymore, and that makes it easier, but the thought of the bane possibly being in the hands of the Cardinal dampens any ease they may find.

“We have no proof she’s a Cardinalist,” Porthos says the first night out of Le Havre, when they’re sitting glumly around the fire staring at the sparks. “Just because you saw her once in the Palais-Cardinal – ”
“Saw her *injured,*” Aramis says sharply. “There are only two reasons for someone to be injured in the Cardinal’s palace. Either he injured her, or she was recovering there.”

“All right, then maybe he injured her,” Porthos says.

“And then he allowed her to recover?” Aramis shakes his head. “The Cardinal’s the last one for half measures like that. If he’d borne her ill-will, she’d be dead now.”

“You said the woman you saw was in very bad shape,” Athos reminds him. “Are you *sure* it was the same woman?”

“I’m sure,” Aramis says stubbornly.

“Because maybe –”

“I’m *sure,* Athos.”

Porthos glances between them both. “What am I missing?”

Athos hesitates. “Aramis has a theory,” he says carefully.

“I don’t work much for the Underground,” Aramis says. “But every time I do, something goes wrong.”

Porthos blinks. “Things go wrong for me too,” he says. “But… isn’t that just what being a spy means?”

“It’s more than that,” Aramis says. “It shouldn’t be *every* time, *every* mission. It’s like there’s someone dogging our steps. Someone who suspects we’re more than we seem. Someone who’s trying to catch us in the act, find proof. Or, failing that, thwart us.”

“And by *someone* he means the Cardinal,” Athos adds.

“Who else?”

“I don’t say he’s wrong,” Athos says to Porthos. He shivers a little, though the night is warm and the fire is high. “I’m sure the Cardinal is always looking for evidence of hidden throwbacks. And I’m sure he’d love to prove that the Musketeers have ties to the Underground.” The rivalry between the Musketeers and the Red Guards, of course, being legendary. “But ego aside, I don’t know that Richelieu actually suspects us any more than he suspects everyone else.”

“Richelieu doesn’t have to suspect us more to send agents against us,” Aramis says, falling back into the patterns of this well-worn argument. “Even if there were no Inquisition, he’d still oppose us just because we’re Musketeers!”

“If the Bloody Cardinal were actually set against us, he’d have proof by now,” Athos disagrees. “Why would someone with his resources constrain himself to the sort of opposition we’ve encountered? A few brigands here, a rumor there? He’s the head of the Inquisition in France! Richelieu doesn’t need hard proof to send an army of spies against us that would expose us in an instant.”

“And he hasn’t,” Porthos says positively. “I’ve seen what it looks like when the Inquisition turns their full attention on someone or something. If Richelieu truly suspected the Musketeers, we wouldn’t be sitting around a fire guessing about it.”
“But haven’t you encountered resistance on missions for the Underground?” Aramis demands.

Porthos frowns. “I don’t know,” he says. “I’ve never encountered any definite proof that anything ranged against me has been deliberate – as opposed to the work of random chance, in a world that’s already stacked against me, just for being who I am.”

Athos nods. “Aramis has been trying to convince the Captain of this for years,” he says. “But we don’t take many Underground missions.”


“I understand,” Porthos says gently.

“But it’s wrong of me,” Aramis adds. “I realize that now. When we get back I’m going to tell the Captain that.” He turns to Athos, who’s looking at him in surprise. “I wanted to tell you. I want to do more. For our people. I’ve been a coward – ”

“Not a coward,” Porthos contradicts. “You were doing what was right for you. That’s all right.”

“But this is right, too,” Aramis says. “I’ve been mourning long enough. It’s time to do something.” He hesitates. “That is, if you’re with me, Athos,” he adds. “I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Nor I,” Porthos says.

Athos shakes his head. “I’m willing if you are,” he says.

Aramis blinks. “Were you holding back for my sake?” Because if so, he has more to feel guilty about than he’d realized.

But Athos shakes his head again. “No,” he says. “I was holding back for my sake. But you’re right. I’ve been in mourning long enough, too. And if you’re ready to give it a go, I am, too.”


“I will be glad to fight along with you both,” Porthos says, and for a few minutes they smile at each other across the campfire, and bask in its warm glow together, forgetting their worries.

When they arrive at the regiment’s barracks, Treville takes one look at their glum faces and ushers them into his office immediately, closing the door. “All right, what’s wrong? From what Havet tells me the mission was a total success.”

“From Havet’s point of view he’s entirely correct,” Athos says. “The terrorist group has been wiped out and the bomb threat neutralized.”

“Then what’s got you three looking so dismayed?”

Porthos produces the bill of lading with the recipe for the bane. He hands it over to Treville without comment.

Aramis opens his mouth automatically, intending to explain, then stops. Treville’s already run his gaze down the bill and nodded to himself.

“You know what that is,” he says instead.
“I do,” Treville agrees. He turns and takes three steps over to the grate, where a fire burns. Gravely he feeds the paper into the flames.

“Did you know it was involved in this plot?” Athos demands.

“I didn’t know it when you left. I’ve learned it since, though.”

“When we found this recipe on the ringleader, we tried to track down their source,” Aramis says. “But someone had gotten there before us. Someone was cleaning up the tracks. And while we were there, we saw someone else. A Cardinalist agent.”

Treville’s gaze sharpens. “Are you sure?”

“No,” Athos steps in. “Aramis saw a woman in the crowd and chased her, but she escaped before we could ask her any questions.”

“Then what makes you think she’s a Cardinalist?”

“Because every time we take one of these missions for you, something goes wrong,” Aramis cries.

“Not this again,” Treville says, exasperated. “Aramis – ”

“When we go to Évry, someone hires brigands. When we go to Amiens, someone tells the innkeeper we’re coiners. When we go to Beauvais we’re ambushed by mercenaries disguised as road workers! And when we go to Le Havre – ”

“Someone burns down a building and frames you as arsonists?” Treville finishes.

“We weren’t accused of anything,” Athos murmurs.

“You should take this seriously,” Aramis says, ignoring Treville’s tolerant tone. “It makes sense, Captain. Who else would burn down the warehouses to keep us from discovering their involvement? Who else has a greater interest in giving the Inquisition more tools with which to discover hidden throwbacks? She must work for the Cardinal!”

“Aramis, enough,” Treville snaps. “I’m getting tired of hearing this at the end of every mission. I understand that you’re worried about being discovered – we all are – but there is no grand conspiracy to oppose you every time you set foot out of town!”

“You really think these are all coincidences?” Aramis challenges. “It’s not just me. I’ve talked to some of the other squads. They’ve run into interference, too. Not every time. But often enough. Porthos alone – ”

“I’m sorry, did someone promise you that Musketeering would be risk-free?” Treville cries. “Yes, we have enemies! Yes, the Inquisition is everywhere! This is not a revelation!”

“Look me in the eye,” Aramis demands, “and tell me you’re not afraid of the Cardinal.”

Treville plants both hands on his desk, leans forward, and stares Aramis in the eyes. Says, voice deadly serious, “I am not afraid of the Cardinal.”

Aramis stops short, staring at the Captain in blank surprise. Next to him, Porthos and Athos both exclaim in surprise.

“I may not agree with Aramis’ overarching theory,” Athos says, glancing apologetically at his squadmate, “but in this case I think we need to consider – ”
“Aramis saw the woman in the Palais-Cardinal, don’t you think that at least warrants – ” Porthos cries.

Aramis is silent. He’s thinking furiously.

Three years ago, when Aramis had seen the woman in the Palais-Cardinal, he’d concluded that she was an enemy of the Cardinal’s whom Richelieu was having tortured.

Three days ago, when Aramis had seen the woman in Le Havre, he’d concluded that she was an operative of the Cardinal’s who had been recovering from undefined injuries.

“ – even the possibility that the bane may be in the Inquisition’s hands!”

“ – the barest investigation into – ”

Now, in a sudden flash of insight, Aramis realizes that both interpretations might contain an element of truth. That the woman might well be a Cardinalist spy – and yet, simultaneously, an operative of the Underground.

The Captain is saying calmly, “Gentlemen, I know you’re all under a lot of stress. But what’s more likely? That you have a mysterious Cardinalist nemesis dogging your steps? Or that the fire was one of a dozen that happen yearly in such a crowded, busy place as Le Havre, and the timing, however unfortunate, was a coincidence?”

Of course we have people inside the Church, Treville had said when he’d given Aramis the suppressants. How else would we be able to keep ahead of them?

“She’s one of yours,” Aramis says abruptly.

Treville freezes. Out of the corner of his eye, Aramis knows Athos and Porthos are looking at him in shock. But he keeps Treville’s gaze.

“Isn’t she,” Aramis says.

There’s a moment where Aramis thinks the Captain is about to lie to them again. But his gaze flicks quickly between his three Musketeers, and he seems to realize that Aramis, at least, isn’t going to let this go.

“You came in here terrified,” Treville says at last. “Because you thought the bane was about to get loose on European soil.”

“That’s right,” Porthos says from Aramis’ side.

Treville shakes his head. “And you thought – what? That after decades in use in Africa, this was the first time anyone’s ever tried to bring it to France?”

“We did think that,” Athos says slowly.

“Well.” Treville shrugs. “It’s not. It comes to France every few months or so.”

“But I’ve never heard of it in Europe,” Porthos objects. “Aramis and Athos didn’t even know it existed until this mission!”

“That’s because we spend a great deal of time and effort making sure of that,” Treville says. “It’s one of our primary goals.”
Aramis sputters. “You mean – ”

“I think you know what I mean,” Treville says sharply, cutting Aramis off.

“So the woman who burned down the warehouse,” Athos says. “She wasn’t a Cardinalist operative.”

“No,” Treville admits. “She was one of us.”

“And the potential outbreak?” Porthos wants to know.

“Contained. This time.” Treville frowns. “You shouldn’t have gone after the bane. I hope you didn’t endanger yourselves, or anyone else.”

“Like your operative?”

“Yes,” the Captain agrees, not rising to the bait.

“You should have told us she was in the area,” Athos hisses. “How were we supposed to – ”

“You weren’t.”

“Captain,” Porthos says. “You sent us to Le Havre for a reason. Surely you could have told us what to watch out for?”

“If I’d’ve known the bane was involved in the Le Havre plot I wouldn’t have sent you at all.”

“Well,” Athos says. “I can tell how much you trust us.”

“It’s not a question of trust,” Treville says. “It’s a question of practicality. We operate in compartments. Surely you understand that.”

“And there’s a separate compartment for dealing with the bane?”

“Yes. And they’re very good at what they do. I wouldn’t send a Red Guard to do a Musketeer’s job, and I don’t send Musketeers to do this kind of work. I know you’ve helped the Underground before. Believe me, we’re grateful. But there are some things you’re just not trained for.”

“And some things we don’t need to know,” Athos says. “Isn’t that right.”

“That’s exactly right,” Treville says. He sighs. “Maybe that hurts you to hear, but that’s how soldiering works, gentlemen. No matter which side of the law it’s on.”

Athos presses his lips together. “All right,” he says grudgingly. “I suppose I can understand that.”

“Aye,” Porthos grumbles.

“Aramis?” the Captain asks. “Have you anything to add?”

“No,” Aramis says slowly. It all makes sense. It doesn’t mean the Cardinal wasn’t involved – they still haven’t answered the question of how Vadim got hold of the bane in the first place – but it relieves him of the fear that the Cardinal is about to unleash it as a new weapon against throwbacks. He doesn’t like that Treville sent them into this without knowing about the bane’s existence, but Aramis has no reason to disbelieve the Captain when he’d said that he’d had no idea the bane was involved. And if Aramis hates that yet another mission has loose ends left behind, that he’s being asked to hand the cleanup over to another and trust that it will be done properly, well, that’s the sort
Treville nods, accepting Aramis’ answer. Only then does Aramis remember that there’s something else he’s been meaning to say.

“Captain,” he says. “I can accept that you’ve got to watch everyone’s involvement. But did it occur to you that we might want to be more involved?”

“No,” Treville says, surprised. “You in particular, Aramis, have always wanted to keep that sort of thing at arms’ length.”

It’s true. Aramis had known of Treville’s Underground affiliations when he’d joined the regiment. And he’d been willing to handle the occasional mission, like the courier run to Aruin. But he’d always been clear that Treville was not to involve him further. That had been Adele’s mission, not Aramis’, and he’d had no desire to repeat her mistakes.

Now he glances at Porthos and thinks again of what a coward he’s been. “I was wrong,” he says quietly.

The Captain nods. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says gently. “Athos, do you feel the same way?”

“I go with my squadmate,” Athos says.

The Captain looks at them all and nods to himself. “I understand,” he says. “I will keep you in mind. And thank you.”

“Please do,” Porthos says.

“And speaking of that,” the Captain adds. “How did the three of you work out together?”

Porthos and Athos both look at Aramis, letting him answer the question. Aramis considers several different approaches before he reaches into his baldric and withdraws the folded envelope Treville had given him before leaving Paris. He passes it back over to the Captain, precious contents untouched and safe inside.

“We worked out very well indeed,” Aramis says. “And I am very interested to see if we continue to work out.”

Treville opens the envelope and peeks inside. Then he carefully folds it up again and tucks it away in his own vest. “I see,” he says, the hint of a smile peeking out.

“You planned this,” Athos accuses.

“I’d have arranged for a spare dose for myself if I had,” Treville says wryly. “Getting out of Paris on short notice wasn’t easy. It’s been a long time since I had to deal with a heat alone.”

“You don’t seem surprised, though,” Porthos observes.

“Let’s just say I had a hunch,” Treville says. “Mind you, I didn’t think you’d go straight to spending heat together. But I thought you’d fit.”

“We do,” Aramis says.

“Should I be congratulating you?”

“Not yet,” Aramis demurs. His gaze skitters back over to Porthos.
“We’ll let you know,” Porthos says.

“I may need some help hiding the body,” Athos says to Treville, sounding put out but fond.

Treville laughs. “Ah, to be young again. All right, you lot. Anything else you’re worrying about? I assure you, the situation with the bane is in good hands.”

“Then no,” Aramis says for all three of them.

“Then get out of here. Take a few days’ leave. Don’t leave the city, though. Just in case.”

The group starts to file towards the door.


Aramis does. Treville waits for the other two to leave, then taps his vest carefully, where he’d put the envelope Aramis had returned to him. “I’m assuming you didn’t bring any contraceptives with you to Le Havre,” he says quietly. “Do you need…?”

“I don’t know yet,” Aramis says. It wants another three weeks before he’ll find out if he’s pupped. And it may want somewhat longer than that before he’s reached any kind of a decision.

“If you do, come to me,” Treville says. “I can help you.”

Aramis nods. He’d expected as much, but he’s relieved all the same.

When nothing more seems to be forthcoming, Aramis turns to go, but pauses. For a moment Treville’s gaze had turned wistful. And it occurs to Aramis suddenly, which it never had before, to wonder.

He’d always taken for granted that his Captain had simply chosen not to have pups. Treville is mated, after all. If he wanted pups, surely he could have pups. Surely it’s choice that keeps him empty?

“Forgive me for asking,” Aramis says carefully, “but have you ever…?”

Treville looks up, startled. “Me? No,” he says, laughing a little, trying to pass it off. “No, no. Contraceptives beforehand for me.”

Aramis nods slowly. It’s not that he thinks that an Omega’s only purpose in the world is to whelp pups. Until the mission to Le Havre, Aramis would have said he had never intended to carry. And he’d certainly respect the Captain’s choice. Aramis has, in fact, been respecting and agreeing with the Captain’s choice for over a decade.

But Porthos had turned Aramis’ choices upside down in less than a month. Already Aramis finds himself thinking wistfully of dark-skinned pups with Porthos’ broad shoulders and Aramis’ curly hair. And now it occurs to Aramis to wonder what youthful decisions Treville might be regretting, too.

“Always?” Aramis presses.

The Captain shrugs stiffly. “I’m just too much of a public figure,” he reminds Aramis. His face is impassive with what must be long practice.

It makes sense. If Treville can’t even get away enough to have natural heats, carrying pups would be completely impossible.
And Aramis has no real reason to think the Captain regrets it. He’s probably just projecting.

“I’ll come back if I need anything,” he still finds himself saying. It doesn’t hurt to let Treville treat them all like his pups from time to time. Not really. Not if it helps the Captain, after everything the Captain has done for them.

“Glad to hear it,” Treville says brusquely. He clears his throat. “Go on, then.”

Aramis goes. But he lingers outside Treville’s office before rejoining the others, fingers brushing the flatness of his stomach, and thinks about sacrifice.
They take the promised days off together, not doing anything in particular, but figuring out how they fit together as a trio. Athos and Porthos spend a good part of it alternately wrestling and drinking. Aramis watches in bemusement. Alphaic bonding rituals have never made much sense to him.

Athos and Aramis also drop by to see how de Guignes is doing. Their injured squadmate is delighted to hear they may have a fourth member at last. They’ve been understrength for a while now. Of course, none of them had pressed too hard for the spot to be filled, enjoying the companionship of a throwback-only squad. But Porthos’ addition will mean that – once de Guignes is back in fighting trim – they can all stop pulling extra duty.

It’ll be months before that happens, though. De Guignes had broken his leg pretty thoroughly in that ill-fated duel. He’s still confined to his bed or a chair. The Musketeers spend a long evening together playing cards and drinking wine, and leave de Guignes cheerful and full of hope for their future exploits.

After their leave ends it’s back to regular duty. They mount guard in their turn, watching over the barracks, the Louvre, and the King. Treville doesn’t bother to rework the roster; Porthos merely takes over de Guignes’ old slot, which suits everyone fine.

Three weeks and a day after they’d returned from Le Havre, Porthos knocks on Aramis’ door first thing in the morning.

“Well?” he asks as soon as Aramis has beckoned him in and shut the door. Porthos has brought Aramis a tray from the mess hall, but he sets it aside and takes Aramis’ hands in his, looking searchingly at his face.

Aramis lets his eyes drop. “No,” he says. “I’m not pupped.”

Porthos sighs wistfully. “I suppose it’s for the best,” he says after a moment. “But…” he shrugs ruefully. “Sure doesn’t feel like it at the moment.”

“I know how you feel,” Aramis admits. He’d spent most of the last four weeks praying he wouldn’t encounter any of the signs. This morning he’d woken up relieved. A full moon after his heat his temperature remains constant, he isn’t experiencing any cramping, and he’s not producing slick. He didn’t conceive.

The relief had lasted for about five minutes. Then it had turned to regret. He’d spent so much time trying to think about what he’d do if he were pupped that it seems wrong to escape the problem so
easily.

And if he’d spent half that time fantasizing about what his and Porthos’ pups would look like, well, that’s between Aramis and God.

Now Aramis squeezes Porthos’ hands. “With how stressed I was, conception was always unlikely,” he makes himself admit. “And we’re not bonded. In general, not an ideal situation.”

“I know,” Porthos mutters. He picks the tray back up and hands it to Aramis. “Here, I brought you breakfast.”

“Thank you,” Aramis says, taking a slice of toast to oblige Porthos. Porthos, for his part, picks at the eggs.

“You do want to, though?” Porthos says abruptly. “I mean… one day?”

“Carry?” Aramis clarifies.

Porthos nods.

“I’d thought about it before,” he admits quietly. “Until I met you, I never expected there to be anyone for me.”

“But surely you’ve thought about it now,” Porthos says. The hope in his face is painful to look at. “This last month, I mean.”

Aramis has to look away. He shrugs. “I suppose, if I’d ever have thought I’d mate, I’d have expected to carry. But my upbringing was… traditional. I’m not sure how much of that is my family and how much of that is me.”

“I see,” Porthos says carefully.

“You would want me to?”

“I would never make you do anything you don’t want to do,” Porthos says at once. Then he ducks his head. “I would like it, though,” he adds, voice barely above a murmur. He’s staring at Aramis’ midsection. It doesn’t take great insight to know Porthos is imagining it.

“Why?” Aramis asks, genuinely curious. “To bring pups into a world like this…”

“Because we can’t give up,” Porthos says earnestly. “Because we can’t let the Betas kill us before we’re dead. Because you and I could offer more to pups than a lot of throwback parents. Because the work of overthrowing the Inquisition probably won’t be completed in our lifetime, and someone has to carry it on.”

“Have you no reasons for the two of us?”

Porthos draws closer. “Because you’re perfect,” he says, “and I can’t think of anything more amazing than the pups we’d make together.”

Aramis touches his own stomach, moved. “I’m not making any promises,” he warns. “But… I would like to meet those pups.”

Porthos’ hand covers his. “Maybe not now,” he agrees. “But… one day?”

“Maybe,” Aramis says. “If we’re mated… maybe one day.”
Porthos smiles and hands Aramis another piece of toast.

Athos takes Porthos’ involvement with Aramis as a personal challenge. They wrestle in the courtyard by day and practice swordfighting in the evenings. Dawn finds Athos testing Porthos’ marksmanship. At night, Athos gets Porthos drunk – drawing on his own impressive alcohol tolerance in the process – and pumps him for information on his past, his future goals, and his character.

Aramis lets it happen at first. Watching how Porthos reacts to Athos is revealing in and of itself. Observing how the two shift and push until they find the places they fit teaches Aramis a lot about both his packmates.

Eventually, though, watching runs its course. Then Aramis starts to intervene, sending Athos off to bed early and keeping Porthos for himself.

Aramis means for their conversations to be equal. He really does. But once Aramis starts asking questions he finds it hard to stop. He picks and pries at Porthos’ past until a dam seems to break, and Porthos’ life pours out. From a narrow puppyhood on the whelping plantation to the brief terror of the auction and the sudden widening of the open sea.

“And then you came to the Court of Miracles?” Aramis asks.

Porthos nods. It’s late, or, more accurately, early. Porthos isn’t drunk anymore either. He’d sobered up hours ago. But he’d kept talking.

“Flea was to me what the Underground would have been to other throwbacks,” he says. “She taught me how to pass, taught me my trade. Gave me an education. It’s thanks to her I made anything of myself, after I escaped from Africa.”

“I’d like to meet her,” Aramis says wistfully. He can’t now, he knows. Porthos has taken him to the Court once already, but Flea is spending more time in the south now. In the eight years since Porthos had left the Court she’s borne Charon three children, and her face has become too well known to the Provost. She’s staying away in the regional Court of Bordeaux until her children are older and the heat dies down.

“Our next free leave we’ll go down to Gascony,” Porthos promises. “She’ll want to meet you.”

“I hope she approves,” Aramis says, only half-joking. The rules of the old world won’t apply to a Beta thief. Aramis’ bloodline and nobility won’t matter to her. He has no rank in the Court of Miracles. Porthos, though, could be said to be a Prince by adoption in the royalty of the underclass. Which makes Aramis, in an odd twist of fate, the unworthy one.

It’s a strange match they’re making between them. René d’Herblay’s father would have thrown a landless African Alpha out on his ear, and Aramis isn’t sure Charon wouldn’t do the same to a nameless Spanish Musketeer.

Porthos shakes his head. “She’ll love you,” he says, and smiles like he’s already imagining their meeting.

If the evenings are for talking and the meeting of the minds, the days are for the meetings of the body. Not sexually – though Aramis thinks about it – but physically, in the open air of the Musketeers’ practice yards. Athos seems to be determined to put Porthos through a grueling endurance regiment in order to be sure that Porthos is strong enough to protect a mate. Aramis would object to the notion that he can’t protect himself, but Athos isn’t thinking of daily life. Athos is
thinking of a village mob, drunk on religion and full of their own invincibility. He’s thinking of pitchforks and torches. He’s thinking of a chateau blazing brightly enough to rival the setting sun and a mutilated body left to lie in the woods.

Aramis, for his part, thinks of caverns by a harbor town. He thinks of ten terrifying seconds when he could feel Porthos’ weight above him and hear his belt buckle jingle. Living under the Inquisition, every Omega learns young to fear their heats. The loss of control makes them targets for any Beta male in the vicinity. Aramis had been lucky: his parents had taught him how to protect himself, and he had had Adele by his side during his first heat. Many Omegas aren’t so lucky. Those not whelped into pureblood families or taken in by the Underground may have little or no idea what heat truly means until they experience their first. And by then it’s often too late.

Porthos knows it, too. On the plantation Omegas are bred in their very first heat. It’s rape of a different sort than that experienced by a hidden throwback in Europe. On the plantation it’s open and institutionalized. In Europe it’s secret, usually perpetrated by a Beta friend or sibling who happens to be in the right place at the right time. But it’s rape all the same.

It’s this deeply rooted knowledge that informs Porthos’ treatment of Aramis. And it’s the thing Aramis works hardest to break through. It’s not that he doesn’t appreciate Porthos’ strength or compassion. He’ll gladly benefit from Porthos’ protection when he’s biologically unable to protect himself. But he isn’t a delicate flower to be hidden away, treasured, and handled with kid gloves. He can’t afford to be. And he can’t afford an Alpha who treats him like he is.

So he drags Porthos out onto the practice fields and hits him until Porthos finally hits back. One barrier at a time Aramis breaks Porthos down. Wrestling first. Then musketry, horsemanship, swordsmanship. Knifework he saves for last. The astonishment in Porthos’ eyes when Aramis dodges, trips him, and lands nimbly atop him with a knife pressed to his throat breaks down the final walls between them. After that, Porthos doesn’t hold back.

The summer days begin to shorten. Soon the autumn winds will sweep down from the mountains of northern France. And soon it will be time for Aramis to ask the Captain for his quarterly leave. Tonight the moon is full; tomorrow it will begin to wane. When it’s gone, Aramis’ heat will come again, and with it, his opportunity to bond.

He thinks about it, sitting in the barracks, the late afternoon sun slanting down into the practice-yards. Half the yards are shaded by its angle. The other half are in full sun. Aramis sits on one of the benches along the far wall, bathed in the fading light. In the center of one yard Porthos and Athos are wrestling. The yards are full of Musketeers at training, so they’re both being careful of their strength. Neither of them are holding back when it comes to style, though. Both Athos’ excellent classical technique and Porthos’ repertoire of dirty tricks are on full display. Porthos is stronger than Athos, but with that advantage nullified, the match is fairly even. They’ve gone back and forth half a dozen times already. They look set to do it another half-dozen before the light fades completely and they’re forced to stop.

The Captain will write Aramis leave for two Musketeers, if he asks it.

In the yard, Athos gets Porthos down in a hold. Porthos taps out immediately. Athos lets him go, standing, then reaches down a hand to help Porthos stand. And Porthos takes it.

The Church paints Alphas as aggressive, territorial berserkers, unable to control themselves in the face of their animalistic instincts. Like all the best lies, it has its root in truth. Alphas are unfortunately prone to rages. It takes a lot to trigger a rage, like a threat to one’s mate or pups. And Aramis defies the Church to produce a Beta male who wouldn’t react the exact same way in that situation. But the aggression and the territorialism are real. Athos had nearly killed Porthos when he’d thought Porthos
had hurt Aramis during his heat. Aramis had stopped him, but Athos hasn’t been quick to forgive or forget. There have been times since then that Aramis has been afraid Athos means to kill Porthos under the guise of testing him, the aleph’s traditional role in the ancient dance of courtship.

But that had changed at some point in the last two months. Changed so subtly Aramis hadn’t even noticed it. Changed to the point where Athos now offers Porthos help getting up, and Porthos accepts it.

Athos has accepted Porthos.

Aramis smiles at the two of them, watching as they reset and begin another bout. He enjoys seeing them both so relaxed with each other. He and Athos have helped each other, but it’s good for them to have another packmate.

Aramis pauses. The word had come to mind so naturally he hadn’t realized it. If Porthos had asked him this morning, Aramis would have said he’s still considering Porthos’ courtship. Not that Porthos would have asked. Porthos hasn’t asked Aramis for anything Aramis hasn’t offered first. He’s careful, and kind, and endlessly patient.


And Aramis has been trying to be serious in return. Consider every angle, figure out every last one of his own feelings, plan out every possible future. Because Porthos deserves to be treated with the same kind of respect he’s been showing Aramis.

Aramis looks fondly out at the two and realizes he’s been overthinking it. His heart doesn’t work by logic. And it’s time and past he admitted he’s already given it to Porthos. He’s just been too busy being serious to realize it.

This bout ends in a draw, their holds sliding off each other and spinning them both out of control. Both Alphas haul themselves back to their feet, rather muddier than they’d been when they’d started.

Porthos says something, and Athos laughs. The two of them flick brief glances Aramis’ way. It must have been about him. Probably his wrestling technique. Aramis is classically trained in most of his disciplines, but not wrestling. His puppyhood instruction in wrestling had boiled down to don’t do it. Everything he knows about hand-to-hand he’s picked up over his career as a soldier. It results in an odd, eclectic style, adapted to make the best of Aramis’ strengths and avoid his worst weaknesses. The sheer surprise of his mismatched techniques has been enough to win Aramis more than a few matches he should really have lost.

The sun dips lower. They’ll go to the baths soon. The three of them will have dinner. Then Athos will go to bed, leaving Aramis and Porthos to themselves. And in the morning, when Aramis wakes up, Porthos will still be there.

It’s their new routine. Aramis likes it. He wants it to go on forever.

Aramis watches Athos and Porthos a moment longer, contemplating. Then he goes to the Captain and asks him for leave.

Two weeks later, when the moon is half gone and on the wane, Aramis and Athos pack up the horses for a seven nights’ journey. The second horse isn’t for Athos, but the whole pack helping the Omega prepare for their mating journey is an old, old tradition. Their pack may just be two at the moment, but Aramis’ needs are light, and Athos’ help is more about companionship than labor.
They do it at night when no one else is around. Not that anyone would have asked questions about two Musketeers readying for a journey. But something in Aramis wants to keep this private. It should be just between them. Between pack. Not something shared with every Musketeer in the regiment.

As they roll blankets and tighten buckles, Athos talks. He tells Aramis everything Athos has learned about his prospective mate in the last three months of their courtship. Porthos will have showed a different side to Athos than he will have to Aramis. Not out of malice or artifice, but just because two Alphas interact in a very different way than an Alpha and an Omega who are courting. Athos will have been judging Porthos by a different set of criteria. Yes, he’ll have opinions about the other Alpha as a mate for his adopted odem. But they’ll also have been negotiating the careful dance of Alphaic pack dynamics, with all its attendant undertones of dominance and leadership that come with their biology.

Now Athos is sharing that information with Aramis, giving him all the information possible to ensure that he can make a decision with full knowledge. Aramis soaks it up. He has no intention of changing his mind, but every story is a new insight into his future mate, and he doesn’t think he’ll ever get enough.

They finish packing when the moon is high in the sky. Athos stacks the saddlebags and belts them on neatly, then ties the horse’s reins to the railing to free his hands for a moment.

“Little odem,” Athos says on a sigh, wrapping Aramis in a hug. He doesn’t use the sibling term often, in the same way that Aramis doesn’t call him aleph, though in their new pack those are the roles they play. The terms are just too loaded for them both. Athos isn’t trying to replace Thomas any more than Aramis is trying to replace Adele. They’ve left the terms alone by mutual accord, out of respect for their dead.

Aramis wonders if Porthos will call Athos aleph. He wonders how Athos would feel about it. If he’ll use the term in return. Athos had only had the one sibling; calling someone else aleph would be something completely new.

“I don’t need your blessing,” Aramis says, half-defiantly, old habits of independence reasserting themselves one final time. He hasn’t been this prickly since he had first met Athos, before they’d discovered each other’s true natures and decided to run together as a pack-pair. But on the night before he goes out on his mating journey it’s easy to run into old habits.

It probably hadn’t helped that Treville’s eyes had been suspiciously bright when he’d signed the order for leave. Aramis had accepted the parchment with a thickening in his own throat, and hadn’t objected when Treville had placed hands on each of Aramis’ shoulders, a silent question. Aramis had looked down, which had been permission, and had let his Captain give him the traditional benediction.

It’s fitting that Treville should do it. Aramis has no carrier to kiss his forehead. His small pack has no head Omega to speak the blessing. Certainly no one else could have given Aramis the two envelopes tucked safely in his saddle-bags. The one marked with the black cross contains contraceptives. The one marked with the red circle holds the same drugs Aramis had taken to Le Havre, but in their raw form. The form that brings fertility. It’s his choice which to take, for in this besieged new world it’s no longer expected that his mating will bring offspring to the pack. And Treville had made it clear that, whichever choice Aramis makes, he’ll have the Captain’s full support.

The gestures had meant more to Aramis than he had known how to accept, and he’d fled Treville’s office without speaking. He hopes the Captain had understood what Aramis hadn’t been able to say. But it’s making him short with Athos, too, and Athos doesn’t deserve it.
Aramis makes himself breathe out and say the rest. “I don’t need your blessing. But I should like to know I have it all the same.”

Athos smiles at him. “You have it,” he says simply.

In the dimness, a shadow detaches itself from the wall and comes to stand with him. You have mine, too, little odem, Adele’s ghost whispers. Bring your mate home to us.

I will, he promises her.

Aramis untangles himself from Athos and leaves the stables on quiet feet. Under the pale glow of the moonlight he crosses the practice yards, into the shadow of the barracks. Two flights up and five doors down. He doesn’t knock, just opens the door and slips inside.

Porthos awakens as soon as he enters. The Court of Miracles makes for light sleepers. “Aramis?” he rumbles quietly, still half asleep.

Aramis swallows his nervousness and extends his hand. “Will you come with me on a journey?” he asks. He means the words literally – the horses are saddled and waiting with Athos – but also figuratively. Before the Inquisition, noble houses had raised the rites of courtship to an art form. The lower classes had been less formal, throwback and Beta alike, but Aramis isn’t so far from his birth as he sometimes like to pretend. The exact words of a mating proposal aren’t stipulated, but the form and the intent are. The journey Aramis speaks of now is one that, God willing, will last the rest of their lives.

Now Porthos is awake. “Truly?” he breathes. His eyes dart from Aramis’ outstretched hand to his face. Whatever he sees there must convince him that he’s not dreaming. He nearly falls out of bed in his eagerness. Face splitting in a wide smile, he seizes Aramis’ outstretched hand and says breathlessly, “I will follow you wherever you lead me.”

Aramis lets out a breath of his own. He’d never truly thought Porthos might refuse him – Porthos, who had nibbled covetously at his neck that first heat three months ago, and sworn to bury his teeth there one day. But life had taught him to never trust in his own sureties. So he’d wondered. Not often, but as Porthos had given way time and time again, agreeing to a courtship and distance and all the baggage of Aramis’ past, he had wondered.

Soon he will never have to wonder again.

“Come,” Aramis says, leading Porthos onwards.

They mount in silence, each taking the reins from Athos in their turn. Aramis’ sense of solemnity seems to have infected them all. Athos contents himself with giving Porthos a significant look, to which Porthos nods. Aramis supposes that Athos won’t have been behindhand in making sure Porthos knows what Athos will do to him should he mistreat Aramis.

That sort of coddling should offend Aramis. Would have, earlier. But something settled in him the moment Porthos had accepted his hand and his proposal. His skittishness is gone. Now he is calm.

They ride out of the city, passing the checkpoint peacefully thanks to their Musketeers’ cloaks and trappings. Porthos keeps his silence and asks no questions, even when Aramis turns west out of the city, following the same road that had led them to Le Havre.

Aramis doesn’t intend to take them all the way back to the coast. He turns north off the road soon enough, once Paris has disappeared into the dark behind them and there is nothing but the woods of
the King’s forest. The trees are thick and well-tended. The grass is springy under the horses’ hooves. Aramis has been here before several times, guarding the King when he rides or goes hunting. Even in the dark, it’s not hard to find the little stream he remembers.

“Here,” Aramis says, dismounting at its banks. It’s the first word either of them have spoken for hours.

They make camp companionably, but neither of them sleep. Together they watch the sun rise.

As it breaks fully above the ground, the sky turns grey, then pink. Then, between one blink and the next, it becomes a brilliant, brilliant blue.

Aramis reaches over and takes Porthos’ hands, breathing deep in contentment.

Porthos wraps an arm around him. “Whither thou goest, I will go,” he murmurs.

Aramis freezes. “You’ve read that?” he breathes.

It’s from the Bible. The Book of Ruth. But Ruth no longer exists in the official book. The Inquisition had gone through the Scriptures early on and removed anything they deemed heretical, ‘evidence of the long-running corruption of the throwback contagion’. One of the enduring mysteries of the Inquisition had always been how they could purport to be Christians while ignoring the words of their own God, who had proclaimed **I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.** But the Inquisition had declared all such passages the work of the devil, and excised them. Betan children read from a stunted Bible, their scriptures and catechism carefully modified to proclaim a new covenant.

The story of Ruth, by itself, had always seemed like an odd choice for excision. René had asked his sire about it one day. Aramis still remembers how sad Sirrah had looked when he’d said the verses had once been traditional at highblood mating ceremonies.

“Flea had a copy in the Court of Miracles,” Porthos explains. “When I was about twelve, there had been a raid on a warehouse that contained contraband. Such things are valuable to the right people. The Underground buys most of it; they’ve always had strong connections to the Court. That time Flea bought one and gave it to me. She said I deserved to know the truth about God.”

Aramis feels tears prick the back of his eyes. He’d read the true Bible as a pup, of course – the Alameda house had had several carefully preserved copies – but his relationship with God had always been rocky. He’d been taught to believe, and as a pup he’d obeyed this dictum. But since leaving his home he’d wandered. He’d doubted. In his heart he’d always loved God. Yet after living in the cold world, after seeing firsthand what he’d previously been protected from, after knowing the true depths of the Inquisition’s cruelty, Aramis had found it hard to go on with a puppy’s uncomplicated belief.

“You are the strongest evidence I have of God,” Aramis manages to say finally. His throat closes up as soon as he’s said it, and he has to bury his face in Porthos’ chest immediately after.

He doesn’t mean to weep. Somehow he just can’t help it. Porthos holds him through it, stroking his hair gently, and murmurs the rest of the verses.

“Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. And the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and I.”

Porthos leans down and kisses Aramis, tears, snot and all. There’s no pack around them. They’re not
celebrating their mating with their old pack, before one of them leaves it behind. Nor with their new pack that is being joined. They’re alone together in the wilderness, in the heart of the journey. And though that, too, had been a common enough way of doing things in the old days, Aramis had expected to feel a little sad and lonely even through his joy.

Instead he feels at peace. Aramis kisses Porthos back and knows that this is right. It doesn’t matter that they’d only met three months ago. Nor that both of their experience with other throwbacks is limited. It only matters that they are together, as God has intended.

If Aramis had been whelped five hundred years ago, he would have been raised in his traditional household as a lord of the blood. René would have come out with his aleph in the new moon following his first heat. He would have danced at every ball for a year and a moon, and then the young Alphas of Spain would have asked his sire to court him. René would have chosen his favorite from the list after Sirrah had discarded the unworthy. Perhaps their courtship would have ended in a mating, or perhaps they would have gone their separate ways, and another Alpha would have had their chance. But however many lordlings would have pursued him, however many seasons he’d have had and however many courtships, it would all have come here in the end. Here to Aramis and Porthos together. He doesn’t know how it would have happened that Porthos would have come to Spain, or how he would have dared to approach René d’Herblay de Alameda, or what bloodline or advantage Porthos could have brought to meet Sirrah’s high standards. He doesn’t know whether René would have left Alameda to make the long journey back to Porthos’ home clan, or whether Porthos would have forsworn his old pack to join his bloodline to the Alameda clan. But no amount of variation in the story could have affected the ultimate ending.

“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to His word,” Aramis whispers. “For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

They kiss for quite some time, losing themselves in each other, but eventually necessity separates them for a time. Even love has to pause to accommodate prosaic needs like the privy and a meal. Aramis lays the fire while Porthos gathers wood.

“The part you quoted at the end,” Porthos says, bringing another handful of logs over. Aramis has already set up the stewpot. It’s much larger than a single meal would justify; he’s planning to prepare several meals’ worth, to save themselves the effort later on. “It’s from the Annunciation to the Beta Mary, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Aramis admits, blushing slightly. He hadn’t been thinking about the fertility implications of the passage at the time. It had just been the verse with the right words. But of course Porthos had noticed.

“Does this mean…?”

Aramis has to shake his head. He holds up the envelope with the black cross on it, already empty of its contents. “I’m sorry, Porthos. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It’s all right,” Porthos says at once. “I was just wondering.”

He goes back to gathering wood. It’s endearing how determined he is to appear as if nothing is wrong. It’s even more endearing how Aramis is able to tell otherwise.

“I chose it because it symbolizes a new start,” Aramis says, watching Porthos’ muscles flex as he works. “And because, for Mary, it’s about taking a leap of faith. She’s of the tribe of Levi, but born a Beta, so in those days she would have been considered… less. Wrong, even. All the original tribes were supposed to be pure. A Beta birth would have been a hop out of kin. She’s the throwback in
the society of her time. And yet she chooses to believe God’s messenger when he says she will bear Jesus. When the angel comes to tell her, she could have rejected him, and God would probably have passed her over and chosen another. It must have been tempting. She’d have been an outcast all her life. And she had to have known that bearing Jesus would make her more of one, not less, at least during her own lifetime. But she did it anyway. She believed anyway.”

“And that’s important to you,” Porthos says.

Aramis looks away, staring into the fire. “That’s what I’d like to be true about myself,” he says quietly.

Porthos comes closer and lays a hand on his shoulder. “From where I’m standing it already is,” he says.

Aramis has to wet his lips to speak. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Porthos nods. Then he says, “I’ll have to go a little farther out to get the rest of the firewood.”

Aramis doesn’t point out that the pile is well stocked. Porthos is giving him some space, and he appreciates it.

He feeds a few more twigs to the fire and stirs the gently simmering stew. In spite of it all, Aramis has to laugh a little at the irony of quoting Mary. The Inquisition adores her. The Beta woman who had defied the cultural rules of her time and become one of the Church’s highest saints. She’s practically their patron.

In the old texts Mary’s sex is critical to completing the Trinity. God is the Alpha and the Omega, and so therefore also were the offspring of Abraham, and the Beta peoples of the ancient world had not been part of the covenant. But Jesus had been born of a Beta, and been a Beta himself. In the act of his incarnation he had been supposed to open the door to salvation to all. No longer just the descendants of the twelve pure lines of the original covenant, but the Betas, too. All peoples everywhere.

The Inquisition has twisted God’s promise a thousand ways and justified themselves with Mary, saying that when Mary bore Jesus the Betas were given the Kingdom of Heaven entirely. That Alphas and Omegas were excluded from it in penance for their faithlessness to God.

It’s baffling. The Inquisition draws most of its hateful teachings from the writings of Paul the Apostle. And yet even Paul had written to the Galatians: Ye are all the offspring of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither pureblood nor mongrel, there is neither Alpha nor Omega nor Beta, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Aramis leaves off stirring the stew and gives in to the impulse to lay his hand over his stomach. How much things have changed in sixteen hundred years. Now Abraham’s seed are the unclean ones, and heirs of nothing.

Porthos wants pups. Aramis wants to give them to him. But how can he ever bring pups into this world, when the only legacy he can offer is one of persecution?

Mary did it. But I don’t think she could have done it if she’d known what would be done to her son.

Beneath his hand his stomach is flat and hard with muscle. The latter is the legacy of a life as a Musketeer. If Aramis carried, would he be able to resume a soldiering life? Or would the loss of tone
prevent it? It’s hard enough already to build muscle as an Omega. Carrying is hard on the body. It drains the carrier of nutrients and vitality that can be hard to regain. And that’s setting aside the logistical problems surrounding a nine months’ gestation, and the neonate period during which it would be difficult for Aramis to be separated from his pups. A year, perhaps, all told. How would he cover up such an absence? Aramis isn’t usually one to think a problem is insurmountable, but if there were an easy way to carry and then resume a Musketeering lifestyle, Treville would have taken it by now. The Captain is respected, the King’s favorite, noble and rich both. He’s well connected to the Underground. And Aramis doesn’t think anymore he had been wrong in guessing that the Captain longs for pups. Not given the look on Treville’s face when he’d handed Aramis the envelope with the red circle and promised to support Aramis in whatever he chose. If Treville with all his advantages still can’t manage to carry, what hope for Aramis?

Aramis’ hand moves of its own accord from his stomach to his shoulder. The skin there seems to tingle, awaiting Porthos’ bite, though that has to be an illusion. His bonding gland is dormant outside of heat. They’ve had the ceremony, but the reality of their mating won’t come until his first peak rises.

Porthos has been clear about what he wants. And Aramis has told him what he believes to be the truth: *maybe; one day*. If Aramis isn’t sure, there’s still time to back out. It would hurt Porthos terribly – and Aramis’ heart might never recover – but it would be more honest than promising Porthos *one day* if Aramis doesn’t mean it, or if he isn’t sure.

Why? Why bring more pain and misery into the world?

*Because we can’t give up,* Porthos had said. *Because we can’t let the Betas kill us before we’re dead. Because you and I could offer more to pups than a lot of throwback parents. Because the work of overthrowing the Inquisition probably won’t be completed in our lifetime, and someone has to carry it on.*

Good reasons all. But not enough. Not for Aramis. Mating with Porthos is his act of defiance against the Inquisition. It’s his repudiation of the fear he’s been living under and his reaffirmation of his own self-worth. That’s not something pups can bring Aramis. That much has to come from himself.

*Because you're perfect,* Porthos had finished. *Because I can’t think of anything more amazing than the pups we’d make together.*

Aramis thinks of those pups again. Imagines them. Sees them laid on his chest newly whelped, still bloody from the whelping, eyes blinking open to take in the world. Sees them toddling their first steps, turning back to smile at their parents and make sure they’ve observed the momentous occasion. Sees them learning to run and ride and fence. Sees them finding mates of their own, and happiness, and even making pups of their own.

Then Aramis blinks, and the visions change. Now he sees his offspring learning to pass as Betas, male and female. He sees them sitting in a pew hearing verses from a mangled Bible. He sees them caught, exposed, tortured, killed –


*We have so much to offer.*

*Don’t let them kill you before you’re dead.*

The Inquisition might kill his pups. It might kill Porthos, too. But Aramis isn’t going to let that rob him of the happiness he might find with Porthos before that happens.
The Inquisition might kill Aramis yet. But Aramis has never regretted being whelped.

It has always seemed so selfish to him to bring pups into this world when all he can offer them is pain. Now he thinks, suddenly, how selfish it is to deny those hypothetical pups life because Aramis is afraid.

“Aramis?” Porthos’ voice calls. A moment later the Alpha himself emerges from the trees into their small clearing, dropping off a pile of wood large enough to last them all week. “Are you all right? You looked – distracted.”

Aramis looks up at him and smiles. “I was just thinking,” he says, “of how beautiful our pups are going to be.”

Heat timing isn’t precise. Aramis’ heat might begin today, or it might begin half a week from now. It’s prudent to leave the city early, lest his heat surprise him and he risk exposure. And it’s nice, too, to be alone with his mate-to-be, to relive the time that had brought them together and strengthen their rapport in advance of their bonding.

Decision finally and irrevocably reached, the silence of their journey deserts Aramis. Instead Aramis talks. It’s almost a compulsion. He sprawls on the forest floor, head in Porthos’ lap, and speaks until his voice is hoarse. His entire life story spills out of him. His earliest memories of his carrier and littermate. The first time he looked at Adele, really looked, and said *aleph* and knew what it meant. The first time he called his carrier *Cara*. And the last.

He tells Porthos the secrets of the Alameda clan. Things he’s never told anyone, even Athos; things he’d been meant to take to his grave. Aramis doesn’t care. Porthos deserves to know everything. He speaks quietly of the terrible weight of history that had overshadowed his puppyhood and pushed him out of his family. He tells Porthos of his first heat, the one that no amount of ancient medical texts or his carrier’s stories had really prepared him for.

And he speaks of Adele.

Those stories are the hardest. Porthos tries to say that it’s all right, Aramis doesn’t need to, but Aramis shakes his head. This is important. For three months Porthos has borne with Aramis’ insistence on courtship. Allowed Aramis to dig into his own history and lay him bare in his need to know that Porthos would never leave him. This is reciprocation. This is fair.

So he tells Porthos of his littermate. That his earliest memory is of laying on the grass on the Alameda estates, staring into her eyes and seeing her staring back. Her encouragement and support as he had learned the tricks of Betahood. The way she’d taught him the aggressive behaviors a Beta male is supposed to have. The way she’d always insisted he call her *aleph*. How helpless Adele had felt when René had gone into heat for the first time, alone and away from their carrier and any other Omegas, from anyone who might know what to do. As his sibling she’d been immune to his heat scent. But he’d begged, and pleaded, and wept, and there had been nothing she could do.

More quietly, he tells Porthos how she’d died. Then he breaks down sobbing, that terrible wound tearing wide open again. Porthos holds him – as Adele had done, so long ago, for the young René – rocks him, and lets him weep until all the tears are finally gone and he sleeps, at last, for a time.

He wakes up after dark, body tingling and alive with sensation. The moon is the barest crescent in the sky. There are no clouds, though, so its light shines clear through the small clearing by the river where they’ve made camp.
Moved by an ancient impulse, Aramis rises from Porthos’ embrace and makes his way towards the river. Porthos awakens when he moves, but remains on the bank, watching, as Aramis disrobes. Naked, he goes into the water.

He feels like he’s dreaming. The usual physical signs of oncoming heat are all present, but they feel distant. Removed. Instead he focuses on the feel of the water swirling around him. The current is gentle, but it pushes at him nonetheless. The river accepts his presence because it has no choice. But it refuses to allow him to stop its endless course towards the sea.

He bathes languidly. Partway through he remembers that purification would have been part of the ritual, in the old days. The Omega making themself clean and ready before the first heat of the new bonding. Aramis looks up, catching Porthos’ eye from where he still watches on the riverbank. Watching over him. Waiting for his mate to come.

Aramis rises out of the water and goes to him.

“Beautiful,” Porthos growls. Aramis’ scent is rising; he can smell it himself. Porthos has obviously been breathing it for a while. His voice is rough and deep, Alpha nature coming to the fore.

Aramis kneels beside Porthos and reaches for his tunic. Porthos allows it with no more than an approving growl. Most times, he’d make a quip about old-fashioned notions. Neither of them are particularly traditional. Most of the time.

“Want you,” Porthos continues as Aramis bares him to the waist. He reaches out and tangles one strong hand in Aramis’ hair, pulling him close and kissing him. “Dreamed of you.”

“Yes,” Aramis gasps. He fumbles for Porthos’ trousers, ineffectually.

Porthos seems to sense that Aramis’ heat is sapping his ability to focus. He takes over, drawing Aramis down to lay next to him in the bedrolls they’d put together the first night of their camp, removing the rest of his clothing himself.

Once they’re both naked, Porthos kneels next to Aramis, blocking out the faint light of the crescent moon. By the stars alone Aramis admires him. He looks like a sculpture out of antiquity. Broad shoulders, muscled arms, strong hands. A warm heart. An open mind. An upright moral code.

Porthos touches him reverently, like he’s made of glass. Most times, Aramis would protest. But he reminds himself of the matches they’d had in the practice yards and knows that it’s not because Porthos thinks he’s weak. It’s because Porthos thinks he’s precious. Aramis soaks it up as Porthos strokes and pets, teases and caresses. His nipples rise to peaks under Porthos’ talented fingers, and are coaxed still stiffer by Porthos’ lips. Porthos trails downwards and puts his mouth between Aramis’ legs. First on Aramis’ straining cock, and Aramis bucks up, gasping with how good it feels. Then lower, lapping up the slick that’s already running down Aramis’ legs, down to his hole.

The first feel of Porthos’ tongue inside him reduces Aramis to a writhing, moaning heap. His heat ratchets up several levels at once, going from the languor of early heat straight up to the dizzying heights of peak heat. He twists and bucks, fists clutching the fabric of the bedroll, and finally sucks in enough breath to beg. “Porthos,” he cries. “Porthos, please.”

Porthos gives a final lick and takes his mouth away. Aramis keens with the loss. He’s empty. He’s so empty. It’s not just a physical emptiness, either. Porthos is right here but Aramis can’t feel him. Aramis should be able to feel him. He should have the sense of Porthos in his heart, eternal and comforting, making him whole. “Please,” he begs again, hardly knowing what he means to ask for first.
“Shh,” Porthos says, running his hands up Aramis’ flank. “Love, you don’t have to beg me. Only ask, and I’ll bring you the world.”

“Just you,” Aramis gasps. “Please.”

“I’ve got you,” Porthos promises.

His hands are gentle at Aramis’ waist. Aramis needs the help to roll into position; he’s so far gone with heat and desire his muscles aren’t cooperating. Once on his front, though, lordosis is automatic. Instinct drives him into position and holds him there as Porthos presses up behind.

He doesn’t slide in immediately, though. Aramis groans in frustration as Porthos drapes himself over Aramis’ back, rigid cock sliding between Aramis’ thighs instead of where he so desperately wants it. “Porthos, Jesu.”

Porthos leans forward and presses a kiss against Aramis’ bonding gland. Aramis hisses at the touch of his lips, his entire body bowing in an effort to get the skin between Porthos’ teeth. Traditionally the Alpha’s bite comes at the moment of knotting, but that’s just convention. Porthos could bite him now. Porthos could have bitten him ten minutes ago, in fact, and Aramis isn’t entirely sure what Porthos is waiting for.

As if he can read Aramis’ mind, Porthos laughs a little, breathlessly. “We’re doing this right,” he says.

“Then get on with it!” Aramis demands.

“My Omega.” The fondness and the smile are evident in Porthos’ voice, his scent. “I did promise you I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Then fucking - me cago en la leche!”

Porthos slots himself home with a single smooth motion. Aramis drops his head to the ground, breathing hard, every nerve alive and tingling with sensation. He moans. “Move,” he orders breathlessly. “Come on – ”

Porthos obeys. In the caverns, when they’d been trapped, still so new together with Porthos so unsure, the Alpha had been careful of his strength. Now he knows Aramis’ mettle and gives it to Aramis like they both want. Even for an Alpha, Porthos is strong. Stronger than Athos. Stronger than Adele. He grips Aramis’ hips between hands like vices and pounds into him like the force of his thrusts are the lifeline keeping them together.

Aramis cries out with mindless pleasure. Every cell in his body is singing. This is right: Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, under the stars as God intended.

Porthos’ growl fills the night. Aramis contracts around him automatically, the bulb of Porthos’ knot beginning to catch on his rim. His nerve endings are on fire. He wants to feel it all, feel the pressure cresting within him as Porthos bites him, as Porthos spills deep inside and makes them one.


“Now,” Aramis gasps.

Porthos shoves home. His knot swells, locking them together, and in the same moment he sinks his teeth into Aramis’ shoulder.
The night goes white around them both.

Aramis wakes slowly. He’s comfortable, perfectly warm, lying on something soft. A heartbeat thumps next to his hear, saying safety, caring, love. Each breath is full of the scent of his mate. And there’s something curled up under his heart that makes him break into a wide, disbelieving smile. Completion. He’d never known what he’d been missing.

Gentle fingers are stroking over his shoulder. Each touch sends a warm hum thrumming through him. It’s not the same as arousal; more like a quiet well-being. Aramis pries his eyes open and shares his smile with Porthos.

Porthos smiles back. He stops tracing Aramis’ mark and reaches for something. Aramis opens his mouth to protest the loss of Porthos’ touch. But stops, mouth still open, when Porthos produces a small hand mirror and holds it up for Aramis to see.

“Oh,” Aramis breathes, reaching over to touch his own shoulder, seeing his fingers reflected in the mirror. It doesn’t look like the skin had been broken and bleeding just a few hours ago. Porthos’ mark looks like it’s been there forever. No scarring, just the barest feel of raised tissue under the pads of Aramis’ fingers. The marks are dark in the faint light. Under sunlight they’ll be a deep red. Blood color. Arranged in the pattern of Porthos’ teeth where they’d sunk into Aramis’ skin.

Aramis can’t stop touching it. He stares at the mirror and marvels in astonishment. Porthos had been touching this earlier. This had been the source of the warm, thrumming feeling he’d had when he’d woken up.

He’d known, intellectually, about the biological changes that come after bonding. The bite breaks the skin for a reason: Porthos’ saliva enters Aramis’ bloodstream, sensitizing his body to the specific Alpha who is now his mate. Henceforth his body will reject the genetic material of any other. His immune system will treat it as a foreign invader, and attack and destroy it. Only Porthos’ seed will be able to survive long enough in his body to engender pups. Only Porthos’ knot will trigger the secondary hormone storm during heat, the one that increases the chances of conception in safety and ends the heat early in danger. Porthos’ scent will be easier to pick out from a jumble or from a distance. Porthos’ touch will bring comfort and reassurance. During whelping Porthos’ presence will help him relax, ride out the pain of contractions, and give him the energy to push.

No one else can do that for Aramis now. They’re joined, body and soul, until one of them dies.

Intellectually Aramis had known all of this. But he’s utterly unprepared for how it feels.

“I love you,” he murmurs, still full of astonishment.

Porthos sets the mirror aside and leans close, kissing Aramis – once on the lips, and a second time atop his mark. “And I love you,” he says, burying his nose in Aramis’ shoulder and breathing deep.

Aramis isn’t the only one changed by bonding. Porthos would have tasted Aramis’ blood when he’d bitten, and the placement of the bonding gland would have ensured the mouthful had been full of very particular hormones. Porthos is attuned to Aramis, now, too. Porthos’ knot won’t swell for anyone but his mate. He’ll be able to sense Aramis’ heat coming well in advance of any overt physical signs. Sense other things, too. Fear. Distress. Adrenaline. All the benefits evolution had built into the mate-bond over centuries, to allow them to protect each other from the many dangers the world holds. Aramis’ scent and touch will calm Porthos, mute his aggression, even pull him back from the difficult-to-control rages Alphas are susceptible to. Mated Alphas are said to be stronger, have more endurance and more control. The bond goes both ways.
“The heat’s over?”

Aramis stretches, feeling his body respond. “Yes,” he says definitely. Bonding usually ends heat, though not always. Aramis suspects the presence of contraceptives in his bloodstream has something to do with it, and for a moment he regrets choosing the cross-marked envelope and brewing the right tea. But resolutions aside, their position is too tenuous for pups right now. One day…

Porthos strokes Aramis’ abdomen regretfully, and Aramis knows he’s thinking the same thing.

“One day,” Aramis says aloud. This time it’s not an evasion. It’s a promise.

“Well,” Porthos says, “I suppose I shouldn’t complain about getting to keep you to myself for a while longer.” But his voice is wistful.

“We’ll figure it out,” Aramis says, and leans in to kiss his new mate. “No one’s a Musketeer forever.”

Chapter End Notes

This is effectively the end of Part One. Next chapter we’ll skip ahead several years and meet d'Artagnan for the first time. For those of you waiting patiently for the Athos/d'Artagnan plot, or the actual mpreg for that matter, thanks for sticking around! Your patience is about to pay off!
Charles of Lupiac in Gascony

Gascony is part of France, of course, but there are parts of France and there are parts of France, as old Gaston always says. Gascony has always picked and chosen which parts of France it wants to keep and which it wants to discard. For a long time, the sterilization laws are one of the parts Gascony chooses to ignore.

Around the time of Charles’ father’s birth, Paris begins to crack down more strenuously on uncut Alphas and Omegas, and the changes start to creep in. At first, families simply send their uncut pups to the convents, where they’re supposed to be safe. The laws had always said Alphas and Omegas could choose cloistering over cutting; as long as they don’t reproduce, the thinking had been, what’s the difference? But shortly after Charles’ parents’ marriage, the laws change again. Sterilization becomes mandatory even in the convents. And the convents themselves, rumor goes, will soon cease being optional.

Several families flee Charles’ home village – Lupiac, in Gascony – hoping to find countries where the laws aren’t so strict. Others, with nowhere to go, stay and pray things will get better. Some families even embrace the changes. Those are the ones that frighten the young Charles of Lupiac the most.

Charles’ parents are both Betas. They help their friends flee, giving them money and supplies for the journey and wishing them well, but they themselves have no immediate reason to go. And with all of their resources tied up in helping their friends, they can’t afford to leave, either. Better to stay behind and help others, they reason. They’ll be safe.

The birth of an Omega pup, after six heartbreaking miscarriages, is a bolt from the heavens. Charles is a hop out of kin, one of those freaks of genetics that led scientists to theorize – when scientists were still allowed to study and theorize about Alphas and Omegas – that nature has mechanisms for keeping the number of the sexes roughly balanced. Perhaps that’s it; perhaps the centuries of Alpha and Omega sterilization have left their numbers dangerously low in the current generation, and that explains an Omega born to a line that’s been Betas as far back as anyone knows. Or perhaps there’s simply an Omega somewhere in Charles’ family tree, someone lost to the mists of time, whose gene chose the worst possible time to express.

By the time Charles is born his parents no longer have the resources to flee. All they have left in the world is their land, which barely supports them as it is. They look at each other and say that surely things won’t go on as they are for long. Surely things will change. Surely it will only be a little while longer before everyone comes back to their senses and the world is safe for their single, solitary, precious Charles.

Charles grows up in a shadow world, halfway between reality and a lie. His sex is not openly acknowledged, but his parents’ sympathies are known from when they helped their friends flee. And as Charles approaches puberty with his body still slender, his feet still fleet and his hands still deft, he can feel the eyes following him down the street.

His first heat comes upon him when he’s sixteen. That would be late for a pureblood, but for a mongrel like him it’s actually early. His parents send him out into the wildlands, away from civilization. As a mongrel his scent is unusually strong. Vulgar, it would have been called in the old days. Not refined and unobtrusive like a pureblood’s scent. The smells of country life usually cover him well enough – the manure on the Lupiac farm is particularly pungent, thanks to what they put in the cattle’s feed – but once his heat starts, nothing on Earth would be able to mask his pheromones. Charles takes his bedroll and pack and makes camp twenty miles from anyone. He sweats out his
first heat alone, achingly empty and jerking his vestigial cock futilely beneath a cold uncaring sky.

He returns to find his family is dead.

Old Gaston approaches him while he crouches in the ruins of his family’s farmhouse - Gaston, who had been old when Charles’ father was born, and is old, still, now, when his father is dead. Gaston gathers Charles into a rough embrace, patting the youth’s hair with his gnarled old hands while Charles cries harsh tears into his jerkin.

“Party of fanatics came through,” Gaston says at length. “Someone must’ve tipped ’em off your parents were sympathizers. They came in and burned the place. Said it was God’s justice.”


Gaston shakes his head. “I don’t know, son – hold on, now – that’s the truth. I don’t know. You’re right that I could guess. I won’t.”

“Why not?” Charles shakes his head wildly, tears flying off his cheeks to disappear into the ashes. “My parents are dead!”

“Your parents were dead the moment they decided to hide what you are,” Gaston says, gentle but unflinching. “They knew it, too. Boy, listen to me.”

“I’m not a boy,” Charles says recklessly. The term doesn’t belong to him; it’s properly for male Betas only. In the books he’s read, Alphas and Omegas had their own terms to describe their sexes, their family relations, their society. “I’m an Omega.”

“And everyone knows it,” Gaston says. “They can’t prove it, but they know it. This was only a matter of time.”

“So is that why you won’t tell me who it was?” Charles demands. “Because it was inevitable?”

“Because I can tell you who I think it was, but who it was doesn’t matter,” Gaston says. “Because who it was depends on who they asked. Most people in the village would’ve told them, if they’d been the ones asked first.”

“No,” Charles whispers, stunned. It can’t be true. They wouldn’t have sold his parents out – sold him out – not the people he’d grown up with, not Marie the seamstress or Jacques the baker or –

“Yes,” Gaston says inflexibly. “It’s time to wake up. You’re right; you’re not a boy, you’re a pup. And this village isn’t safe for pups anymore. Once it would have been. Your parents weren’t wrong about that. But it started to change twenty years ago, and it hasn’t stopped changing since. Things never do stop changing once they start. Your parents didn’t realize that, and I guess they couldn’t teach you what they didn’t know. But you should have got out years ago. You have to get out now, before the villagers realize you weren’t here for the raiders to burn, and come back to finish the job themselves.”

“I haven’t anywhere to go,” Charles says desperately. “Nor any money to get there, or to live on – ”

“That’s why I’m here,” old Gaston says. “A long time ago, your parents gave me your inheritance in trust. Guess they did know, at least briefly, that they might not be here to give it to you yourself.”

Charles stares at him, lost.
Gaston wipes at d’Artagnan’s eyes. “Hush now. It’s time to be strong.”

Charles’ inheritance amounts, in the end, to three gifts.

The first gift is the income from the farm. With Charles’ supposed death, the farm passes to a distant cousin. Gaston explains that there is no cousin. The entire entailment is a contingency plan his parents had provided for in the event they needed to flee. Charles signs papers in the name of his nonexistent cousin directing Gaston to hire an overseer and manage the farm as the local lord. The profits will be forwarded on to Charles in Paris, with none of the villagers ever the wiser. The farm’s income had never been enough to support a family in a new land. But it might be enough, with careful management, to support one person in Paris. Especially if Charles supplements it with employment.

The second gift is the horse that Charles had had with him when he’d passed his heat in the forest. Gaston produces all the necessary accouterments to turn him from a farm pony into a war-horse, and Charles from a farm boy to a soldier.

“And the third gift?” Charles asks, trying to be brave and not let his voice tremble. The sword-belt Gaston has provided sits oddly on his hips, but at least the sword in it is his own; he’d taken it with him into the forest, along with his pistol, just in case.

“The third is this letter,” Gaston says, tucking it into his doublet. “No, young one, it’s not for you.”

“Then what kind of gift is it?” Charles wants to know. “Who is it for?”

“The farm next to yours,” Gaston says, seemingly apropos of nothing.

“Troisville?” d’Artagnan blinks. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Who owns it?”

“The Comte de Troisville, I suppose. He hasn’t been here my whole life. He left before I was born.”

“The Comte was friends with the King when they were boys,” Gaston says. “Now Monsieur de Treville – which is the name he goes by in Paris – is the Captain of the King’s Musketeers.”

“He changed his name,” Charles says, puzzled.

“After he left the village as a boy,” Gaston confirms, tapping the letter significantly. “Now why do you suppose that was?”

Charles’ eyes widen. “You mean – ”

“This letter is for Captain Treville,” Gaston says. “Take it to him; show it to no one but him. And you will have a place in his regiment.”

Charles stares from Gaston to the letter and back again. A thousand thoughts tumble through his mind, too fast to grasp. Finally he catches one, and blurts, “Should I change my name, too?”

“You’d better,” Gaston agrees.

“But what about the rest of it?” Charles gestures to himself. “My accent, my clothes – there’s no way I can change those.”

“So don’t,” Gaston says simply.
“But won’t someone figure out what I’m running from?”

“Ahh, now,” he says solemnly, and leans close, like he’s about to share a secret. “As to that, there’s one thing I’ve learned in this life that you can always rely on.”

“What?” Charles asks.

Gaston’s eyes crinkle as he smiles. “No one ever remembers yet another Gascon farmer.”
The Woman of Wissous

Charles – d’Artagnan, he reminds himself – arrives in Wissous two weeks after Gaston had sent him on his way from Lupiac. He’s exhausted from the journey, tired, travel-stained and sore. He wants a hot bath and a soft bed. Given the coins in his pocket, he should probably make camp outside the city again. But he’s been doing that for two weeks. Alone, jumping at every noise, imagining bandits or righteous mobs behind every crackle of sticks. If he falls asleep at all, he wakes screaming from his nightmares. The coins are worth it if the presence of four walls around him lets him sleep.

He leads his horse to the inn, ties it up and goes inside. The proprietress eyes him warily. He’s aware he doesn’t make a very prepossessing figure. His clothes scream farmboy from Gascon, while his slight build and average musculature whisper easy pickings.

“How much for a room?” he asks.

“One crown per night,” the woman says, eyes darting openly to his purse. “And you share the bath.”

Charles winces. But the alternative is camping again. Tomorrow he’ll make Paris. He’s already going to have to ask Captain Treville for a place in his regiment based on nothing but a shared Gascon heritage and a note from his parents he hasn’t read. It can only help his cause to be somewhat cleaner and relatively more rested when he makes his case. Viewed properly, the crown is an investment.

“Fine,” he says, and he’s proud of himself when his voice remains steady.

The woman takes his coin, though she bites it to be sure. “And what name shall I write?” she asks, taking up her pen and book.

“D’Artagnan,” he answers her. Then he goes back outside to stable his horse before a stable hand can do it and charge him extra.

The name d’Artagnan had been his mother’s. It belongs to a respectable line of merchants in Tarbes, two days’ ride from Lupiac, where his father’s father had taken their farm’s produce for sale. The d’Artagnans have been Betas as far back as anyone can remember. They’re known for their prosperity. Conveniently, they’re also know for their large families. There are d’Artagnans everywhere in Gascony. All respectable Catholic Betas. One more of them won’t raise any attention. No one should connect Charles with the black sheep of a merchant’s daughter who had married a poor farmer in Lupiac.

And it’s a way of keeping her alive, a little.

D’Artagnan takes care of his horse, then himself. The bath is small and the water appears filthy. He’s no stranger to hard work, though, whatever his lack of muscle tone may proclaim. He tips the soiled contents of the bath out the window and refills it from the buckets standing nearby. The water they contain is only lukewarm – if d’Artagnan had to guess, he’d say they were intended for the proprietress’ bath later, at which point they’d have become warmer – but they’re clean, and that’s all he cares about. He skips the communal towel (the use of which, apparently, is free) and dries himself with a sheet from the bed. The bed at least is clean. He falls into it and sleeps without dreams for the first night since his heat.

In the morning he intends to leave without eating breakfast; it’s a livre he doesn’t have to spend. But just as he’s descending the stairs, a woman’s voice calls to him.
“There you are, my friend!” she cries, rushing straight towards d’Artagnan. He stops automatically and looks at her. The woman takes advantage of the opportunity to thread her arm through his and starts leading him towards a table, where he sees one chair already draped with a blue cloak.

“I’m sorry,” d’Artagnan falters, trying without success to remove his arm from hers. “You’ve mistaken me – ”

“Nonsense,” she says, smiling. “You are d’Artagnan, aren’t you?”

He tenses. “Yes – ”

“Of course you are. Jean told me all about you. Sit down; I’ve already ordered us breakfast.”

D’Artagnan sits automatically, too shocked to react at first. The woman sits across from him, leaving the chair with the blue cloak empty. She’s wearing a richly embroidered dress in a cream fabric. Her dark hair tumbles in curls to her shoulders. She’s smiling at him like a lover, and he blushes automatically, a reflex he’d trained himself into as a child. Beta males are expected to blush when Beta females smile at them.

Then his wits reassert themselves. “I don’t know anyone named Jean,” d’Artagnan says, keeping his voice down. “And I don’t know you.”

“I know,” she admits cheerfully. “But I couldn’t have you making a fuss so that everyone could hear. Besides, you need some breakfast, and you weren’t going to buy any yourself.”

“I – ” d’Artagnan cuts himself off as the proprietress bustles over. She seems to like him a lot better now that she thinks he’s a friend to the mysterious woman in the embroidered dress who obviously has money to throw around.

“Here you are,” the proprietress says, setting plates down. “Breakfast. Enjoy. Four livre.” She holds out her hand.

D’Artagnan’s eyes practically bug out. “Four?” he demands. “You told me – ”

“Here are six for your trouble, good woman,” the lady interrupts, grinding one heel on d’Artagnan’s foot. “And for your discretion.”

The proprietress grabs the coins and, shockingly, attempts a curtsey. “Of course, my lady,” she gabbles. “Of course! Anything your ladyship needs – ”

“Only to eat in peace.”

The proprietress retreats immediately, still nodding and waving.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” d’Artagnan says quietly. “Now she’ll tell everyone in Wissous about you.”

The lady in the cream embroidered dress shakes her head in amusement. “Manners, d’Artagnan,” she scolds. “Aren’t you supposed to be a gentleman? A gentleman would address me as my lady.”

“I’m a farm boy,” he says.

“No, you’re a gentleman,” the lady contradicts. “Lord d’Artagnan, whose income from his farm supports him completely and enables him to pursue a career as a soldier in Paris. Perhaps even a Musketeer?”
He tenses. Under cover of the table, his fingers creep towards his sword-hilt.

“Now, now,” the lady murmurs. She passes d’Artagnan a cup of coffee. “Eat,” she advises. “It might be the last good meal you’ll have for a while.”

D’Artagnan’s fingers freeze around the cup’s handle. “Are you threatening me?”

The lady smiles at him over her own cup. She doesn’t answer.

D’Artagnan puts the cup down. “I’m not eating anything,” he says defiantly. He may have grown up in the wilds of Gascony, but Gascon villagers gossip like any other folk. He’s heard the stories. There are things the Inquisition can put in his drink, or his food. Things to make his scent stronger, or send him into heat out of season, the better to discover him as an Omega. He’d be a fool to touch anything this woman hands him.

“Don’t be stubborn, d’Artagnan,” the woman says sharply. “You need to eat.”

“I don’t even know your name!” he says back. “And how do you know mine?”

“Simple; I read it in the ledger,” the lady says, drinking her coffee. “The proprietress was quite distracted last night by an altercation among the stable-hands. I had time to go through her entire office.”

“Are you a spy?”

“Yes.”

D’Artagnan chokes on nothing. He hadn’t expected her to admit it.

She smiles at him again, though. “You’re going to do just fine,” she says in satisfaction.

“At what?” he asks warily.

“Why, whatever you put your mind to, of course. I do recommend Musketeering, though. It’s an excellent career. And quite a safe place for the right kind of people.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” d’Artagnan says automatically.

“Of course not,” the woman agrees. She rises from her chair and collects her blue cloak. “I’ve already paid for the food, as you saw, and for your room as well. No, don’t complain,” she adds, holding up a hand to forestall his speech. “It’s the least I can do, given how much harder I’m making things for you. I need a distraction, you see, so I’m afraid I’ve rather set you up for it. Keep your head and you’ll be fine.”

“A distraction?” d’Artagnan can’t help the quick glance he gives the inn’s common room, though out of the corner of his eye he sees the woman shaking her head. Then the rest of what she’d said catches up to him. “You paid for my room?”

“I’d give you a purse outright if I thought you’d take it. No?” She raises an eyebrow.

Mulishly d’Artagnan shakes his head. She may indeed owe him, for sitting them down at breakfast together and drawing the attention of the proprietress with her generosity when all d’Artagnan wants is to remain unobserved and unremarked. But he doesn’t trust her food; he trusts her money even less.

The lady sighs. “I thought so. Then you’ll just have to settle for my advice.” She comes around the
D’Artagnan freezes. He doesn’t know how to react. Her chest presses against his. Her arms surround him. There’s something in her scent that’s spicy and exotic, faintly – he sniffs, frowning. Now that he thinks about it –

She disentangles herself, smiling, and drapes her cloak over her hands. “Good luck, d’Artagnan,” she says, and sails out of the inn.

D’Artagnan stays in his chair, too stupefied to move. You can’t be sure, he tells himself over and over again. You can’t be sure. But there had been something in her scent that had been different from the Betas he’d been surrounded with all his life. Something like –

The doors of the inn bang open. D’Artagnan jumps to his feet, startled. His hand goes automatically to his sword-hilt. Then he freezes again. There’s a musket-barrel pointed at his face.

Half a dozen men in red cloaks have entered the room. Five of them have guns drawn and are pointing their weapons at various tables around the common room. The sixth man stands calmly in the middle of the room.

Shockingly, no one except d’Artagnan seems at all surprised by this behavior. The other patrons of the inn have all remained seated, ignoring the guns pointed in their direction, waiting patiently for the sixth man to speak.

And speak he does. “First Sunday of the month,” he announces. “Inspection time.”

“You’re early,” a man in the dress of a prosperous merchant calls across the room. He gestures down to his place. “I’m not done breakfast yet!”

“Shouldn’t you be down at the market stalls?” another woman says, agreeing with the merchant. “You’re going out of order, Lieutenant.”

The Lieutenant appears unperturbed. “Got to change it up from time to time,” he says. “Those damned throwbacks’ll figure us out if we don’t, and then there will we all be?”

There’s a rumble of agreement from the room at large.

D’Artagnan wants to sit down again, to stop drawing attention to himself by standing. But he’s afraid the movement alone will be enough to catch the Lieutenant’s eye.

It doesn’t matter. The Lieutenant turns towards d’Artagnan anyway. “Welcome to Wissous, stranger,” the man says, sauntering over. “I’m sure you won’t mind if we start with you.”

D’Artagnan watches the man move closer, feeling like a rabbit who freezes at the sight of a human. Now that the Lieutenant’s turned towards him, d’Artagnan can see the seal marked on the man’s uniform below his Lieutenant’s bars: a cross flanked with a sword and an olive branch. The seal of the Inquisition.

“You’re a Gascon, aren’t you?” he says with interest, taking in d’Artagnan’s clothes. “Ever been this far north before?”

d’Artagnan manages to shake his head. He should reply no, sir, but he can’t make his mouth work.
“That Gascon pride,” the Lieutenant sighs, shaking his head. With a quick motion he grabs d’Artagnan and slams him up against the wall.

“When the direct representative of the Holy Inquisition asks you a question, you say, no sir,” one of the guards bellows.

D’Artagnan presses his lips together, fear half-transmuted to anger at the man’s bullying. He wants to shove the man off of him. He wants to draw his sword and spit the man where he stands. He certainly, certainly does not want to just stand here and submit to this representative of the hated Inquisition.

But practicality rears its head. The man had said inspection. D’Artagnan knows what that means. It’s a throwback hunt. They’re uncommon in Gascony – or they had used to be uncommon – but other jurisdictions employ them more often. The Lieutenant had said first of the month, implying that they’re a regular thing here in Wissous. But the merchant had said that the inspection is going out of order, which means that the woman’s plan has worked. Her generosity and apparent wealth have drawn attention, leading to this focus on d’Artagnan.

Which means that d’Artagnan is in danger. Above all else, he must prioritize his own survival. Even if that means bowing his head.

His eyes blaze, and the Lieutenant chuckles. But d’Artagnan grinds out, “No, sir.”

The Lieutenant steps back, letting d’Artagnan go. Two of his men grab d’Artagnan’s arms before he can do anything else. “Good boy,” he says. “Now hold still, and this won’t hurt a bit.”

The two men guffaw.

D’Artagnan fights to keep still, not to tremble and give himself away. He reminds himself that most inspections don’t involve full-body searches. A strip search would reveal him surely, but the taboos of the Church mandate against it. Nudity is immoral. Touching the naked body outside of the sanctity of marriage is a mortal sin. A full Inquisitor has special dispensation, but the Lieutenant and his men aren’t Inquisitors, only guards in the service of the Inquisition. They’re bound to keep the Church’s rules at the risk of their immortal souls. That’s why rank-and-file members of the Inquisition have to rely so heavily on informants, spies, and methods like drugging a suspected throwback.

One of the guards begins patting down d’Artagnan over his clothes. Another leans forward and takes a deep sniff. A moment later he stumbles back, gasping.

“Shit!” he shouts, eyes watering.

His companions laugh. “He’s a Gascon after all,” one of them says.

“They bathe their children in shit instead of water;” another adds.

“Half of them marry pigs because the pigs can’t tell the difference!” a third man laughs.

D’Artagnan grinds his teeth. He has pride – quite a lot of it, actually – and it demands he teach those men a lesson about Gascons that they won’t soon forget. He quashes that impulse. Hard as it is, d’Artagnan must appear meek. He reminds himself that the joke’s already on them: the scent they find so repugnant is cheating them of their prey.

The guard patting him down glances at the Lieutenant for permission. The officer makes the sign of the cross. Forgiveness in advance. For what? D’Artagnan wonders.
The question is answered when the man’s hand cups his genitals, then squeezes so hard d’Artagnan yelps, tears springing to his eyes. The man takes his hand away immediately. “No knot,” he reports, wiping his hand on his pants like he’s dirty.

D’Artagnan takes in a breath, fighting to keep from shaking. He’s never been so glad to have been born an Omega. Short of fingering his hole, they won’t find the evidence they want unless he gives it to him. Most of his physiological changes are internal, though if they brought a Beta woman before him and demanded that he perform, his lack of an erection would be suspect at best. But an Omega has an easier time passing outside of heat.

Within heat is the problem for his sex. D’Artagnan’s only lived through one so far. But he knows that if someone had come upon him during one of the peaks he’d experienced, he’d have been unable to do anything at all to protect himself.

Everything has a price, it seems. Twelve weeks of the quarter he’s safer as an Omega, but for those few days of heat, he’s a babe in the woods.

“Search his pockets,” the Lieutenant orders. “You two, go upstairs and search his rooms.”

D’Artagnan blinks the involuntary tears from his eyes and glares at the Lieutenant. The man can’t make d’Artagnan’s body betray him, short of violating the Church’s taboos and jeopardizing the Lieutenant’s own soul. But there’s always the chance a throwback might be carrying possessions that expose him. If this man discovers evidence to implicate d’Artagnan, he’ll have d’Artagnan arrested and taken before the Head Inquisitor of this canton, who can authorize further measures.

But if d’Artagnan stays still and keeps his wits, he’ll survive with nothing damaged but his pride. There’s nothing on him that might betray him as a throwback. No family heirlooms or records, no –

The man searching his pockets makes a noise of discovery. “Lieutenant?” he says, withdrawing his hand.

D’Artagnan’s blood runs cold.

The man is holding a letter. The letter Gaston had given him. The letter d’Artagnan is supposed to present to Captain Treville – the head of the King’s Musketeers and, if Gaston’s hints are to be believed, another throwback. The letter that is supposed to give d’Artagnan entry into the Musketeers himself.

D’Artagnan hasn’t read the letter. Gaston had told him not to, and fool that Charles is, he’d trusted Gaston. But it’s possible – even likely – that its contents are about to cost him his life.

He tenses, glancing around the room as the guard hands the Lieutenant his letter. Two of the guards had been sent upstairs to search the room he’d inhabited last night. That leaves four, including the officer.

The Lieutenant has unfolded the letter. His eyebrows shoot up. “Well, well,” he says. “What have we here?”

D’Artagnan thinks frantically. If he can shoot one of them, he might be able to take the other three with his sword. Assuming they don’t just shoot him first. Assuming the other townsfolk in the inn just stand by and do nothing instead of leaping to the Inquisition’s aid –

“My dear Jean,” the man reads out loud. “I hope this letter finds you well –”

D’Artagnan freezes. What is this?
“I have profited by our cousin’s journey to Paris to write you these few lines. I hope you will write back to tell me he is arrived safely. I’m not sure what our brother was thinking letting him travel alone. He’s a smart lad, but far too cocky for his own good.” The Lieutenant looks over at d’Artagnan, chuckling. “I must say I agree.”

D’Artagnan just stares. This isn’t his letter. This is some other letter. What has happened? Had Gaston lied to him? Had he given d’Artagnan the wrong letter by mistake?

No. No, it can’t be. But this letter – addressed to someone named Jean? He doesn’t know anyone named Jean!

But the lady. The lady in the cream embroidered dress. She knows someone named Jean. She had said, drawing d’Artagnan over to her breakfast-table, Jean told me all about you.

The Lieutenant reads on. “Regardless, we are all doing well, and the children remember your visit fondly. The farm news is less good. The mare has foaled, but the hens are laying poorly, and George is worried about mites. I’ll write again when we know for certain. In the meanwhile, think well of your loving sister

ELLA.”

Nothing incriminating. D’Artagnan remembers how to breathe.

“How touching,” one of the guards says mockingly.

The Lieutenant folds up the letter again, tapping it thoughtfully against his chin. “Just Ella?” he asks. His gaze rakes d’Artagnan from top to toe. “What’s your family name, boy?”

“D’Artagnan,” Charles answers as calmly as he’s able, with his racing heartbeat and racing thoughts.

“A respectable name,” the Lieutenant says with a nod. “There’s a branch of the family here in Wissous, in fact. Mercers. But if her family name is so respectable, why does she not sign it?”

“My cousin only thought of sending the letter with me as I was saddling my horse,” d’Artagnan invents rapidly. He wonders that the Lieutenant can’t hear his heart beating through his side. “I could only wait long enough for her to scrawl a few lines. I suppose she had rather write news of the farm then repeat her full name, which my cousin knows regardless.”

The Lieutenant nods slowly. He opens his mouth as if to ask another question, but he’s interrupted by the two guards he’d sent upstairs coming back down.

“Nothing to report, sir,” one of them says.

“Clean as a whistle,” the other one agrees.

The church bells toll. The Lieutenant starts, as if realizing the time.

“All right,” he says brusquely, shoving the letter back at d’Artagnan. “Go on then. We’re busy. We’ve got the rest of the town to search today.”

D’Artagnan stuffs the letter back into his pocket, still reeling.

The Lieutenant turns away from him. “Who’s next?”

The attention of the room shifts elsewhere. The Lieutenant and his men begin working their way through the rest of the occupants of the inn’s common rooms. They’re obviously locals; the guards
move through them quickly, and the inspection is cursory. They already know these people aren’t hidden throwbacks. But the inspection will also work to identify anyone who might be helping or harboring them, and scare off those who might think to do it.

No one is watching d’Artagnan any longer. No one pays any mind when he leaves, and runs to the stables, saddling his horse with trembling hands.

The woman. She must have stolen his letter. Switched it for this dummy one about farm life. Then set the local Inquisition on him to give her time to escape. That spying –

How had she known about the letter? How had she known what it contained? How had she known that he would be carrying it on him?

Questions without answers. Questions for which d’Artagnan needs to obtain answers. His life may not be safe until he had them.

He needs to find her. And his only clues are in the advice she’d given him.

*Go on to Paris. Go to Captain Treville, as you’d intended. Tell him everything. Including this meeting.*

D’Artagnan buckles on his saddlebags and checks to be sure they’re secure. He also checks that the letter – the second letter – is still safe in his pocket. His original is gone, and with it possibly his entry into the Musketeers. This second letter is all he has now with which to secure his future in the world. The woman had instructed him to take it to Captain Treville. D’Artagnan will do just that.

*And when we meet again, ask me about the sign of the red wavy line.*

D’Artagnan mounts his horse. He’s going to go to Paris. He’s going to speak with Captain Treville, and tell him everything that had happened here. And then he’s going to find the woman in the cream embroidered dress, and demand some answers from her.
D'Artagnan

He reaches Paris in the afternoon. The gates to the city are thrown wide open, and the road has become steadily more crowded the closer he gets. In fact, the crowd grows so thick that as he comes within sight of the gates he begins to have trouble moving. D’Artagnan rises in his seat, trying to see over the wagons that line the roadway. Is there a delay at the gates? Is a cart overturned, perhaps, or some merchant arguing with the customs officials? He doesn’t see anything of the sort. In fact, the road itself is completely clear. It’s just the edges of it that are crowded, lined with people standing or sitting horses five deep on either side.

D’Artagnan looks back down the road. No one is coming up behind it. He returns his gaze to the gate itself, just in time to see the red-and yellow standard appear. Drums begin to beat, trumpets to blow, and all around him the crowd begins shouting.

“Vive le Roi!” they cry. “Vive le Cardinal!”

A vanguard of horses appears from within the city. D’Artagnan looks enviously at them. Half of them wear red uniforms, members of the Cardinal’s Guards. The other half are in blue. Musketeers.

Behind the horses comes the royal carriage. D’Artagnan gawks as curiously as everyone else. He’d love to catch a glimpse of the King and Queen. Particularly the King. Louis XIII is the one who consistently refuses to throw France’s borders completely open to the Inquisition. He gives ground in dribs and drabs, and over the last twenty years it’s gotten worse. But he still resists the ultimate surrender, and for that alone d’Artagnan would cheerfully die for Louis. To see him would be something.

But d’Artagnan is disappointed in his hope. The carriage windows are shut and the curtains drawn.

*Maybe when I’m a Musketeer, d’Artagnan thinks. The Musketeers guard the King’s household, do they not? Surely that must include guarding the King himself. Probably that duty is reserved for the most senior and high-ranking of them. But still, perhaps, one day.*

D’Artagnan smiles at the thought and looks up from the carriage. Then he freezes stock-still. His horse dances restively beneath him, protesting his rider’s stiffness, but d’Artagnan can’t move.

Riding alongside the King’s carriage is Cardinal Richelieu.

*The Bloody Cardinal*, the townsfolk of Lupiac had always called him, the Red Eminence. The titles had always been spoken with respect and admiration. Tales of Richelieu’s latest capture or discovery had been told around tankards of ale in the tavern, traded between farmers’ wives at market, or shouted across the streets by shopkeepers

*Did you hear?* they’d say, nodding to each other. *The miller’s son just had it from the tinker, in Aruin last fortnight. The Cardinal’s caught another one.*

The names change, but the tales are always the same. The Great Cardinal becomes suspicious of someone or other. Nobility, clergyman, merchant, it never seems to matter which. Nothing is enough to protect someone once the Cardinal gets on their scent.

*How the Cardinal first becomes suspicious of hidden throwbacks is a secret shrouded in great mystery. Not that that had ever stopped anyone from speculating. Every time the Cardinal had been reported to have caught another throwback, all the old ideas had been trotted out and gone over again as if they were new.*
It’s divine inspiration, Vicar Albert had always said. The Lord sends his Eminence visions to help him root out the unclean animals who still pollute our society.

Richelieu has spies everywhere, Jacques the baker had said, nodding wisely. They watch for people who act suspiciously and tell him everything they see.

He smells them, Marie the seamstress had proclaimed. Everyone says throwbacks have the best noses, but the Cardinal’s got them all beat! He can smell an Omega at three paces –

Ten paces, Yann the greengrocer might call.

Thirty paces, the Mayor would say definitely. And everyone had always fallen silent after that, nodding in admiration.

If the hour is late enough and men drunk enough, the truly grisly tales come out. The fires in the tavern burn low, and the townfolk speak softly. Charles’ parents had always told him to stay away when the tales turned dark. But if he happens to be in the tavern at the wrong time, there’s no way to leave without raising the wrong kind of questions.

Tales of the Bloody Cardinal had been the ghost stories of d’Artagnan’s youth. How Charles d’Albert, the Duc de Luynes, had been caught while on campaign in Longueville and executed before his entire regiment. How M. le Comte de Soissons had been assassinated by one of his own men – actually a spy of the Cardinal’s. How the Marquis de Cinq-Mars had actually dared to conspire against the Cardinal, but had ended his days in the hunting grounds at Richelieu nonetheless. And, before being taken there, had under torture betrayed his mate de Thou to the same fate.

The men of Lupiac had never been deterred by the presence of any of the village boys. Just the opposite. They had enjoyed the opportunity to fill young ears with grisly tales of torture and execution.

The Duc de Luynes, now, they kept him alive for three days and nights, Jacques the baker had used to say with relish. Thought for sure he’d betray others, but he never did.

What about his widow? someone else had occasionally asked.

Exiled, Jacques would have said in reply.

She’s back at court now, Yann the greengrocer would have added. Got herself a new husband. Volunteered for interrogation with the Cardinal himself to prove she weren’t no sympathizer.

All I have to say is, the Duc de Chevreuse had better watch his back.

Unless he’s one of them too, someone else would have muttered darkly, and everyone would have crossed themselves.

And now here d’Artagnan is, years later, standing by the gates of Paris as the personal bogeyman of his people rides past. Mounted on a high horse and riding next to the King’s carriage while the people of France cheer his health.

D’Artagnan’s hands clench on the reins. For a moment the idea of doing something foolish darts through his head. The Cardinal’s strength is said to be in spies and information, plots and devious, twisty contingencies. Who knows how his defenses would handle a sudden assault from nowhere? One lucky thrust with d’Artagnan’s sword, and throwbacks everywhere can sleep soundly –
Then the idea gives way to sudden fear. Thirty paces, the Mayor had always said. How far away is d’Artagnan? How far away is the road?

The crowd has pressed in around him. He can’t move. Any attempt to break free, whether forwards or backwards, will only draw attention. And suddenly attention is the last thing he wants.

D’Artagnan watches, trapped, as the Cardinal raises his hand in acknowledgement of the crowd’s good wishes. His Eminence’s eyes scan the crowd benevolently. D’Artagnan drops his own and tries to will himself invisible. His breathing sounds too loud in his ears.

Gradually the shouts of the crowd taper off. When d’Artagnan looks up again, the royal carriage has passed, and with it the Cardinal. A few retainers still ride by, as do pack-animals, but the show is most definitely over. The crowd is breaking up as people return to their business.

D’Artagnan focuses on breathing, in and out, calm and slow. It takes him a few extra minutes to pick up his reins and signal his horse into motion.

He rides into Paris slowly, trying to calm himself. He feels disgusted by his own fear. As a boy he’d never been afraid. But every child thinks they’re immortal. Every child thinks their parents are immortal, too. He’d lost more than one kind of innocence in the forest during his first heat. Now he knows fear.

D’Artagnan has to ask directions to the garrison of the Musketeers, and everyone he meets gives him the same skeptical look, like they can’t imagine what business a youth on horseback speaking with a thick accent has with the army’s most elite regiment. By the time he finds the right place the sun is dipping low. So is his courage. He’s lost the letter Gaston gave him. He’s acutely aware of his own rustic appearance. He almost turns away to find lodgings, telling himself he’ll try again in the morning. For all he knows Captain Treville is one of the Musketeers who’d ridden out with the King and the Cardinal. For all he knows this is a fool’s errand regardless.

A squad of five men in the livery of the Red Guards – the Cardinal’s private army – jog past. Their leader spots d’Artagnan and hoots derisively.

“Go home, farm boy!” he shouts, to the laughter of his companions. The leader grins at d’Artagnan, white teeth flashing in a dark face.

D’Artagnan’s spine stiffens and his courage returns in a flash of wounded pride. “Say that to my face!” he demands, reaching for his sword.

The leader gives d’Artagnan a look of naked disbelief. “A Gascon!” he says.

“Then you should go right in!” another man calls. “The Musketeers are short a pig, I hear, since Bernajoux spitted that hothead of theirs, whose name I forget – ”

“De Guignes,” a third member of the squad says.

“That’s right,” the first man says. “So leave off, Bernajoux.” This is said to the leader. “Let the Gascon go. One pig’s much like another.”

All the fear and impotent fury translate suddenly into recklessness. D’Artagnan leaps off his horse, sword in hand. “If one pig is much like another,” he cries, “you’ll have no trouble facing me as you did this de Guignes!”

“Now that’s well said,” a voice comes from behind d’Artagnan. “Don’t you think so, Aramis?”
“Quite so,” a second voice – Aramis – agrees mildly.

“And if they don’t mind facing this boy, they surely won’t object to facing the rest of us,” a third voice rumbles.

Everyone turns. A side-door has opened from the Musketeers’ garrison, and three figures belonging to the voices have emerged.

The leader of the Red Guards – Bernajoux – spits at the new arrivals’ feet. “Well, well, if it isn’t the three Musketeers,” he says in a jeering tone.

“There are three of us,” the first man agrees.

“And we are Musketeers,” the second man concurs.

“How clever of them to have noticed,” the third man says. “But you know, there do seem to be four of us.” He indicates d’Artagnan with a wave of one large hand.

“Now, Porthos, they’re Red Guards,” the first one says, making a tsking sound. “Counting to four might be a little beyond their abilities.”

“He’s not a Musketeer,” another of the Red Guards says boldly. “Which makes this none of your business.”

“He looked like he was coming inside,” the third one – Porthos – says. “What do you say, Commander Athos?”

“Business of the Musketeers is our business,” Athos says. He turns slightly, and d’Artagnan can make out the marks of rank on his cloak. The extra bars elevating him to a Commander are bright and shiny, as if brand new, in contrast to the well-worn Lieutenant’s bars that are arranged beneath them. The promotion must be recent.

“And if you’re going to fight in the name of de Guignes,” Aramis adds, voice suddenly cold and deadly, “it is most definitely our business.”

One of the Red Guards squints at the newcomers, then swears. “You’re the other three from the duel,” he says in disgust.

“And you’re the coward who stabbed de Guignes in the back while he was fighting your companion,” Athos says coolly. “I told you I would remember you.”

“You didn’t do anything about it at the time, did you?” Bernajoux shoots back.

“And whose fault is that?” Aramis snaps. “I seem to recall someone went shouting through the streets for the King’s Guards!”

“To come arrest us for illegal dueling,” Porthos growls.

“It was most ungentlemanly,” Athos says darkly. He places his hand on his sword. “I think perhaps you need a lesson in manners.”

“Do you?” Bernajoux mirrors Athos’ gesture. “How unusual. I was thinking precisely the same thing.”

“Proof of the divine,” another of the Guards retorts. “A Musketeer willing to stand their ground.”

There’s a tense, stretched moment where no one moves a muscle. Then someone yells, and everyone’s swords come out.

Athos and Bernajoux go right for each other, which annoys d’Artagnan somewhat, since it was he whom Bernajoux had first insulted. Still, Athos had alluded to a prior grievance. D’Artagnan contents himself by charging for the Guardsman who had called him a pig. The man evidently expects to have no trouble with d’Artagnan; it’s therefore quite a surprise to him when d’Artagnan disarms him on his third pass.

“Just like spitting pigs back home,” d’Artagnan mocks. The man glares and looks like he’s going to return the insult with interest, but then, surprisingly, begins to laugh.

“Fair enough,” he manages to gasp, holding up his hands in the universal signal of concession.

That attended to, d’Artagnan looks around to see if his newfound allies want any help. Aramis has already put two men on the ground, one only disarmed but the second bleeding rather profusely from a thigh wound. He’s working with Porthos now to tag-team another two. Athos is still trading blows with Bernajoux. They’ve exchanged only minor scratches.

D’Artagnan marches up to behind his preferred foe and taps Bernajoux on the shoulder. “Excuse me,” he says politely.

Bernajoux disengages and turns to stare at d’Artagnan in astonishment. “Are you talking to me?” he demands.


It makes it even more satisfying when d’Artagnan’s fist smashes into his face.

“That’s for calling me a farm boy,” d’Artagnan says.

Bernajoux recovers his balance. “You are a farm boy!”

D’Artagnan punches Bernajoux again. He’s still holding his sword, but this is far more satisfying. “And that’s for calling me a pig.”

Bernajoux swears, dancing back and grabbing for his bleeding nose. “Boisrenard called you a pig!”

D’Artagnan nods in acknowledgement of this. But: “You didn’t seem eager to stop him,” he points out.

“If Boisrenard wants to say that the entire Gascon people are the sons and daughters of pigs, that’s on him!”

d’Artagnan nods again. “Quite right. And this is on you.” He swings again.

This time Bernajoux ducks and lunges at d’Artagnan, expression dark as his skin. “I’ll teach you – ”

Athos sticks out one foot and neatly trips Bernajoux. “No,” he disagrees. “This time it’s you who shall learn a lesson.”

The Musketeer studies the prone body of the guard, head tipped to one side. Then with a neat,
economical motion, he stabs his sword downward – straight through Bernajoux’s upper sword-arm. The downed Guard howls.

D’Artagnan regards Bernajoux dispassionately. “And that, I believe, was for de Guignes,” he says. Athos gives him a very small smile. “Indeed.”

D’Artagnan returns a smile of his own. That attended to, D’Artagnan looks up and around. Aramis and Porthos must have finished with their two opponents as well; they’re gone, though a trail of blood remains. Boisrenard – D’Artagnan’s original opponent – is still where d’Artagnan had left him. Now, seeing that the fight is evidently over, he gets to his feet and gestures at Bernajoux, eyebrow raised in a silent question.

Athos nods at him. Boisrenard picks up his sword and sheathes it, then comes over and helps his injured leader up.

“This isn’t finished,” Bernajoux gasps.

“Then I look forward to its conclusion,” Athos replies coolly, watching as the two men hobble away.

D’Artagnan shakes his head. Reaching over, he picks his horse’s reins up again. The placid animal hasn’t moved a step despite the noise and ruckus. For a moment d’Artagnan envies him.

“That was a good fight,” Athos is saying. His dry tones have a slightly lighter air to them. “It’s been a while since we had such a good fight.”

“What, last week doesn’t count?” Aramis says back. He rolls a shoulder contemplatively. “I thought last week was pretty good. Well, the first half of it, anyway.”

“But the second half ended with de Guignes bleeding all over the cobblestones,” Porthos points out. “Today’s was better.”


The three Musketeers, reminded of his presence, turn back towards him with one movement.

“He will be,” Athos says.

“But it’s the second bad wound that leg’s taken,” Porthos says. “He’ll heal, but probably not all the way back to fighting trim.”

“So when those men said the Musketeers had a vacancy…?” d’Artagnan asks. He’s trying not to sound too hopeful, out of respect for the man these three obviously consider a friend, but it does sound like just the break he needs.

“News of de Guignes’ retirement has spread quickly,” Athos says coolly. “I believe the Captain has half-a-dozen applications on his desk already.”

“Ah.” D’Artagnan deflates slightly.

“Perhaps the boy has a letter of recommendation,” Porthos suggests.

D’Artagnan considers lying – he just needs to get in front of Captain Treville long enough to plead his case – but after a moment shakes his head instead. It’ll be easy to prove as a lie if they press him, and that’s hardly the way to start his career. Assuming he is going to have a career.
“Then I really don’t see what you hope to accomplish here,” Athos says dismissively.

“I had one,” d’Artagnan protests. “But it was stolen! A woman I met in Wissous – ”

“You should learn to watch out for women,” Athos says. “Maybe this will be a lesson to you.”

“What would a whore want with a boy’s letter of recommendation?” Porthos asks.

“She wasn’t a whore,” d’Artagnan says. “She was dressed like a lady, and she must have picked my pocket, or else – ”

Prudence, temporarily laid aside for the duration of the fight, suddenly reasserts itself. D’Artagnan closes his mouth before he says any more. You’ve probably said too much already, he scolds himself. The last thing he wants to do is imply that he has something to conceal.

The other three give each other quick looks. It’s just like the way d’Artagnan’s mother and father had used to look at each other: as if they were having an entire conversation with just their eyes.

Then, just like that, the mood of the trio changes.

“Well, as I always say, there’s nothing wrong with letting a boy dream,” Aramis says cheerfully.

“And he did just stab the Cardinal’s Guards,” Porthos adds.

“I suppose there’s no harm in letting him tell his story to the Captain,” Athos agrees.

Aramis claps a hand on d’Artagnan’s shoulder and steers him into the garrison. “What’s your name, farmer?”

D’Artagnan’s head is spinning from the sudden change of fortune, but he doesn’t forget to be insulted by the term farmer. He stiffens again, throwing his shoulders back.

“D’Artagnan of Gascony,” he says. Just inside the gate are the stables. He follows Aramis’ directions him to tie his horse up at the trough outside.

“Gascony’s a big place,” Porthos rumbles from behind d’Artagnan. “Any place in particular? Or just the hills and valleys?”

“Tarbes,” d’Artagnan says, a prepared lie. His mother had been born there. It’s full of d’Artagnans. And if he’s caught in the evasion, it’s easy enough to explain that he hadn’t expected anyone to know such a small place as Lupiac, that he’d named the larger nearby city in the same way someone living in the Rue Ferou might describe their neighborhood as the Luxembourg.

“I’m sure it’s a lovely place,” Aramis says. He leads d’Artagnan up a set of stairs and down a sort of exterior hallway that rings the yard. D’Artagnan takes off his hat and touches the letter in his pocket, wondering if he ought to admit to its existence or conceal it for a while longer. Athos and Porthos bring up the rear.

“Certainly seems to breed up the right kind of boys,” Porthos says.

“And now he shall receive his reward,” Athos says. He leans past d’Artagnan and knocks on a door.

After a moment, a voice within calls, “Enter.”

The three Musketeers obey, and d’Artagnan finds himself standing in the office of Captain Treville.
“What’s this about?” the Captain demands. His gaze settles immediately on d’Artagnan. “And who’s this?”

“A Gascon farmboy we found mouthing off to some of the Cardinal’s guards,” Aramis says lightly. “Something about pigs.”

“And de Guignes,” Athos says darkly.

“Naturally we had to step in,” Porthos says.

“Naturally,” Treville sighs. “How many of the Cardinal’s men did you send to the physicians’ this time?”

“You wound us!” Aramis says, placing his hand on his chest. “You mean you think we left some of them alive?”

“I certainly hope you did,” Treville says, “or else the Cardinal will have you up for murder.” Despite his serious tone, his eyes twinkle. D’Artagnan realizes with a great sense of relief that the Captain is amused.

“It was difficult, but we did manage to restrain ourselves,” Athos says. “The worst injury was to their pride.”

“Well, that, and the various sword-thrusts they received,” Porthos murmurs.

“Non-fatal all,” Aramis adds quickly.

“I see.” The Captain nods gravely. “And you’ve brought this farmboy in here because…?”

D’Artagnan bristles a little at the repeated use of the term farmboy, but it doesn’t stop him from recognizing an opening when it presents itself to him. “My name is d’Artagnan, from Tarbes,” he says quickly, stepping forward. “And I’ve come to try and join the regiment. Sir.”

Treville’s eyes rake him from top to toe. D’Artagnan is suddenly convinced that the Captain knows everything there is to know about him, from his true sex to the earthenware bowl he’d broken when he was a toddler, playing with it despite his mother’s strict instructions. It would be more frightening if Treville weren’t already the only person d’Artagnan has left to trust.

“You three, wait outside,” Treville says abruptly.

The three Musketeers obey, though not without casting curious glances at d’Artagnan as they go.

The last one out, Aramis, closes the door behind him. D’Artagnan returns his attention to the Captain, who is studying him in turn.

“Well?” the Captain prompts after a moment.

D’Artagnan blinks. “Yes, sir?”

“Don’t you have something for me?”

D’Artagnan winces. “Like a letter?”

“Yes, that’s usually it.”

He winces again. “I. Uh. Well, there’s something of a story there…”
“A story,” the Captain repeats, brows lowering.

As quickly as possible, d’Artagnan explains what had happened in Wissous. He leaves out the contents of the second letter, still not sure about its purpose, but tells the Captain everything else. Treville’s eyebrows creep steadily upwards the entire time, until he’s staring at d’Artagnan in frank disbelief.

“I don’t really see how you expect me to believe a single word of that,” Treville says frankly when d’Artagnan’s finished. “In fact, I’m grasping for a good reason not to have you thrown out right now.”

D’Artagnan blanches. “I swear it’s the truth,” he says desperately. Once again he curses the mysterious woman. Without his letter, what means of support is there for him in Paris? The income from the farm won’t support d’Artagnan on its own. He has no trade, no skills except in farming. Becoming a soldier is already a stretch. He’s familiar with a gun, of course, from hunting. His father had taught him the basics of swordfighting, and judging by the fight minutes ago he’s not totally useless. But even the regular army might turn their noses up at him as he is now. His hope for the future had been dependent on his letter of introduction. And all he has now is this useless second letter, with its stupid messages about mares and hens –

While d’Artagnan’s mind is spinning rapidly, his eyes are darting around the room, as if sight might spur thought. As he scans over the Captain’s desk his gaze falls on some orders that lie in two stacks. One pile of orders are unsigned, clearly awaiting the pen. The others contain Treville’s signature. Even upside-down, the Captain’s penmanship lets d’Artagnan read his full name: Jean-Armand du Peyrer de Treville.

And then the light dawns. Out loud d’Artagnan says, “Jean.”

The Captain looks up in astonishment. “I don’t believe we’re on a first-name basis,” he says repressively.

D’Artagnan hesitates once more. But the woman of Wissous had already shown herself to be knowledgeable about d’Artagnan, both his history and his future plans. She’d saved his life once. And, in retrospect, she’d as much as told him to put the letter in Treville’s hands.

“What if I were to tell you that the mare has foaled?” d’Artagnan asks. “But the hens are laying poorly, and George is afraid it’s mites?”

Outwardly Treville doesn’t turn a hair. But d’Artagnan has the sudden conviction that all of the Captain’s attention is suddenly focused on him.

“What would make you say that?” the Captain inquires, deceptively mild.

Slowly, d’Artagnan withdraws the second letter from his pocket. The Captain’s eyes land on it at once, sharpening.

D’Artagnan hands it over. The Captain nearly snatches it from his hands. He scans down it rapidly, then a second time more slowly.

“The woman you spoke of gave you this letter?”

“Yes, sir,” d’Artagnan does.

“Tell me again about this woman.”
D’Artagnan repeats the story, describing the woman to the best of his recollection.

The Captain nods. “And did she tell you to give this letter to me?” he asks.

“Not exactly,” d’Artagnan admits. “But it was implied.”

“Ah.” The Captain sits back down. His tone remains mild. “Well, I’m sure you’re used to thinking that your farm’s concerns are the center of the universe. But I’m afraid they’re of very little consequence to me.”

D’Artagnan’s first impulse is to stiffen and say something rash, but he checks himself. The Captain’s words are dismissive, true. But d’Artagnan’s instincts tell him a different story.

Now more than ever, his instincts are all he has.

“Of course,” d’Artagnan says respectfully. Taking a chance. “I apologize. I suppose I’m not quite used to the big city yet.”

“That’s all right,” Treville says, smiling a little. “You’re young, so there’s plenty of time to learn.”

“And opportunity?” d’Artagnan ventures to ask. “Will I have opportunity to learn?”

“I dare say you will,” Treville says. “I like the look of you. And I like the sound of you, too. I shall give you a trial.”

D’Artagnan lets out a relieved sigh. He won’t starve on the streets just yet. The woman he’d cursed moments ago may yet turn out to be his patron saint. And his instincts are apparently in fine form – which is good, since he’s depending on them to make his fortune.

“A trial is all I ask, Captain,” he promises, giddy with relief. “I promise, you won’t be disappointed.”

“That remains to be seen,” Treville cautions. Raising his voice, he bellows, “Attention!”

d’Artagnan straightens automatically, but a moment later he realizes this command isn’t directed at him. Behind him the door opens again and the three Musketeers of earlier enter the room.

“Captain?” Athos asks.

“This young man wishes to enter the Musketeers,” Treville says. “I’ve decided to give him a trial.”

The three Musketeers flick glances among themselves almost too quickly for d’Artagnan to see.

“Yes, Captain?” Athos prompts after a moment.

“A trial,” the Captain repeats. “And as your squad has a vacancy, I’m placing him with you.”

“With us?” Aramis says in surprise.

“We’re not a training squad,” Porthos says.

“And he’s not a novice,” the Captain says. “Not yet. I am still evaluating his candidacy.”


“They’re all full,” the Captain says.

“Really,” Aramis says.
“That’s right,” the Captain says blandly. “So I’m placing him with you.”

Another round of glances.

“After the way he defended de Guignes you ought to be pleased,” the Captain observes. “It’ll save you extra duty.”

“Of course,” Athos says carefully.

“Glad to hear it,” Treville says dryly. “Aramis, Porthos, take d’Artagnan out and get him settled. Room, equipment, the usual.”

“Just as if he were a novice?” Aramis asks.

“Just as if,” the Captain agrees. “Athos, stay a moment.”

Aramis cuts his eyes at Porthos. “All right then,” he says resignedly, turning towards the door.

“Come on,” Porthos says, clapping his hand on d’Artagnan’s shoulder and steering them out.

D’Artagnan glances back. He’d dearly love to hear what Treville is about to say to Athos. But Porthos’ grip is strong, and he knows that whatever they’re saying isn’t for his ears. Yet.

“Are you coming?” Aramis asks, obviously impatient.

“Yes,” d’Artagnan says, letting himself be brought. First things first. He’ll impress Athos, Porthos and Aramis – and Treville. He’ll prove that his bona fides are real and that he can be an asset to the Musketeers. Then he’ll figure out what is really meant by the sign of the red wavy line, and the passages in the letter that had made such an impression on the Captain.

And maybe after that I’ll figure out what I’m going to do with the rest of my life, d’Artagnan thinks wryly.

“Then come on,” Aramis says. Porthos at his heels, d’Artagnan follows.

“All right, Captain,” Athos says as soon as the door is closed. “What’s really going on?”

There are three training squads with a position open. And the Musketeers don’t offer trials to Gascon boys off the street without so much as a letter of recommendation. Which d’Artagnan had freely admitted to not having.

The tale of the pickpocket had been just unusual enough that Athos had thought it best to bring the whole matter to the Captain’s attention. And now the Captain says the boy is to be placed with Athos’ squad. If the Captain hadn’t invited Athos to remain behind, he would have done so anyway, and demanded some answers.

The Captain picks something up off his desk. A single sheet of paper. Athos’ eyes fix on it immediately.

“I thought d’Artagnan said he didn’t have a letter of recommendation for you,” Athos says slowly. “He said it was stolen from him by a pickpocket in Wissous.”

“The woman he met in Wissous did indeed steal his original letter,” Treville agrees. “But she replaced it with this one.”
Treville hands it to Athos. Athos accepts it, but doesn’t look at it immediately, still considering. “What kind of pickpocket returns a letter to replace the one they stole?”

“The kind of pickpocket who knows that the Inquisitorial squads in Wissous conduct regular inspections on the first Sunday of the month, and was able to guess what kind of letter d’Artagnan might be carrying.”

Athos stiffens. “Yesterday is the first Sunday of the month,” he says.

Treville nods.

“Was the letter d’Artagnan carried dangerous?”

“Dangerous enough.” Treville leans back in his chair.

“Why would a letter of recommendation be dangerous?”

“Usually such a letter would have been written recently, using the newest code phrases. But d’Artagnan tells me his letter was prepared for him by his parents over ten years ago, with the help of a now-retired operative named Gaston. I strongly suspect the phrases it uses have since been broken by the Inquisition.”

“The letter would have betrayed him.”

“It wouldn’t be the first letter the Inquisition has taken off a throwback youth coming to claim a place in the Musketeers.”

“So the woman in Wissous saved his life,” Athos says slowly. He brushes past the confirmation of what he’d already half suspected – that, underneath the country manners and suspiciously strong smell of shit, this d’Artagnan is a throwback. Instead he asks, “She’s Underground?”

“Yes. And that’s not all. The woman in Wissous didn’t just save d’Artagnan. She also used d’Artagnan as a courier to deliver the letter you’re holding. You’ll notice it’s addressed to me? It isn’t just a dummy to deceive the inspectors – it’s a warning.”

“Then I think I’d better read it,” Athos says.

“Please do.”

The letter appears short, but Athos takes the time to examine it carefully. The paper is thick. Obviously expensive. The ink is dark and has set well. The handwriting itself appears distinctive, curled and spiked oddly. Athos would recognize it if he were to see it again.

But it’s the contents that really catch his attention.

Treville had taken Aramis at his word after the mission to Le Havre. The last seven years have seen Aramis, Porthos and Athos – and de Guignes, may he recover well and retire in peace – becoming ever more involved in the Underground. Aramis had been the one to start them all down this path, but it’s Athos who has found himself leading more missions, handling more delicate situations, and learning more of the code phrases and counter-signs that the Underground uses to protect itself. Athos is no fool: he knows Treville’s beginning to train him as a future leader in the Underground. And the most recent promotion to Commander elevates Athos to the position of Treville’s second in the Musketeers. If they all have their way, nothing bad will to happen to their Captain. But he’s wise to be prepared.
And in this case, the Captain’s preparation means that Athos recognizes the code-phrase about the hens. They’re laying poorly: that means that the letter contains a warning of danger. Mites are suspected: that means that it’s the Inquisition – not surprising. The part he doesn’t understand is the given name. George would tell him the form the danger is suspected to take, but Athos doesn’t recognize the name.

He looks up from the letter, a question on his face.

The Captain looks grave. “George is the Christian name of the Comte de Rochefort,” he says. “Or, to give him the title by which he is more widely known – the Inquisitor of Lille.”

Athos resists the urge to swear. To say that that’s bad news is to put it mildly. Lille is the southernmost of the Dutch provinces that border France to the North. Many Frenchmen don’t pay attention to the policies and politics of other countries, but living in la Fère, Athos had grown up hearing about the Inquisitor of Lille almost as often as he’d heard stories about Cardinal Richelieu. Stories of the two go well together, since they’re engaged in a lifelong competition to outdo the other when it comes to cruelty and oppression of throwbacks. They go back and forth from allies to enemies as easily as most people change garments, all plots and counter-plots and maneuvering for advantage. Sometimes it’s hard to say which state is worse for the throwbacks living under their thumbs.

“The timing is unfortunate,” Athos says, understating it rather dramatically. “We have enough problems at the moment. The last thing we need is the Inquisitor of Lille poking his nose in France’s business.”

The last two years or so have corresponded with a significant uptick in Underground activity. The unrest in Gascony is only the latest in a growing list of threats faced by their people. Every town, city or region that becomes unsafe triggers a new wave of throwbacks who need the Underground’s help. Sometimes the family will only need additional protection and cover. But more and more Athos and his team have found themselves helping smuggle endangered throwbacks out of their homes and over the borders.

If the escaping throwbacks are lucky they can go to Savoy, where the Inquisition’s foothold is weak. If they’re unlucky, they take ship from Bayonne, Le Havre or Marseille, bound for England or the Colonies. But if they’re truly unlucky they must try to sneak into the Dutch United Provinces to France’s north.

Overall the United Provinces aren’t a terrible destination for throwbacks. Worse than Savoy or England, to be sure, but better by far than France right now. But crossing into the Provinces from France lands throwbacks first in the province of Lille, where, thanks to Rochefort, the Inquisition has nearly as much power as it does in France.

“At least we have warning,” Treville points out.

Athos acknowledges this with a nod. Advance warning is more vital now than ever. The French Underground has had to expand more rapidly than is entirely safe, even for their lax definition of safety. As the danger has increased, so have the fatalities. Last year they’d uncovered a Church operative who had penetrated well into the middle circles of the Underground. Worse, the man hadn’t even been French. He’d been Dutch.

“The Inquisitor’s trying to get his hooks into France,” Athos says.

“Probably,” Treville agrees. “He’d love nothing more than to show up the Cardinal.”
“But how?” Athos looks back down at the letter. “What does this line mean about the mare foaling?”

“Nothing to do with this.”

“But it is a code phrase?” It must be; it fits the pattern.

Treville clears his throat. “It’s a personal message to me.”

Athos’ glance flicks up. The Captain meets it squarely, but there’s the faintest tick at one corner of his jaw.

There’s an opening here, but it’s one that Athos has no intention of taking. Aramis would take it, if he were here; he’s always been curious about the Captain’s mate. Even Porthos would probably offer himself as a sympathetic ear if the Captain wanted to talk.

Athos doesn’t know how to be sympathetic. What he does know, and better than the other two hopefully ever will, is exactly how many different kinds of secret there can be.

There are secrets among the Underground that anyone who carries the token gains. There are the secrets of its middle circles that Athos, Porthos and Aramis have learned over the last seven years. There are the secrets of its inner circles, of which Athos has only lately been starting to catch a glimpse. And there are the secrets of Athos’ own small pack, some of which the Captain knows and some he doesn’t.

Then there are the secrets Athos doesn’t know. There are the secrets of the other throwback squads in the Musketeers, and the secrets of the throwback families living under the Inquisition’s rule, which Treville generally keeps but will reveal if it means protecting them from a greater danger. Then there are the secrets of the Underground’s high command, which may be identified by the way Treville shakes his head slightly and directs the conversation elsewhere.

And beyond them all are Treville’s personal secrets. Athos recognizes them only because he has such secrets of his own. Even with Aramis and Porthos there are some things he’s never shared. He’s told them of his past, yes. But only the bare outlines. Athos says my mate, my odem, my château. He has never said Charlotte, Thomas, la Fère.

The Captain is just the same. Any Musketeer may know the basic outlines of Treville’s past. Born on his family’s estates in Gascony. Mother died in childbirth. Father died six years later of pneumatic fever, leaving the younger Treville in the care of a brother only three years older than himself. The brother dying in a hunting-accident shortly after reaching his majority. The young Comte coming to Paris and joining the young Louis’ retinue. Impressing Louis with his bravery and swordsmanship. Being rewarded by the King, after the Queen Mother’s regency had ended, with the Captaincy of the newly-formed Musketeers. Leading the regiment ever since with honor and dutifulness.

But lurking in the spaces of that history are secrets whose mere existence Treville guards jealously. The deaths of his father and mother Athos believes, but that of the brother is more suspicious. A hunting-accident is a convenient way to cover up a bullet wound. Raiders? The Inquisition? Treville protecting himself from a sibling in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Then there’s Treville’s service to Louis. What exactly had the Captain done to impress the King so? The Musketeers themselves – they’d always been intended as an elite regiment, true, but one among many. How had they become Louis’ personal guards?

And that doesn’t even begin to touch the bigger questions. How had Treville become involved with the Underground? Had it begun in Gascony? After he came to Paris? Before or after he became
Captain of the Musketeers? And where – how – in all of that had he come to meet and mate with the mysterious Alpha whose bite Athos had once seen on the Captain’s shoulder, over a decade ago now?

Athos is sure of only two things. The first is that the Captain’s mate is involved in the Underground as well – as deeply or more deeply than Treville himself. The second is that Treville’s greatest fear is not of dying, or of having someone under his command discovered, or even of being discovered himself and tortured to death in the public square while the Inquisitor of Paris demands the names of other throwbacks. Treville’s greatest fear is that the identity of his mate will be discovered.

And because Athos knows this – with the intuition of someone who has once held on to secrets just as personally momentous – he simply nods his head. He does not ask about what personal message is meant by the mare has foaled. He does not ask about who might have sent the message. He does not ask about the Captain’s mate.

Instead he clears his throat and says, “Then we have no other intelligence about what the Inquisitor of Lille might be up to?”

Treville’s expression lightens. Athos had been silent for quite a few minutes while processing the Captain’s response of it’s a personal message, and Athos realizes that the Captain had been preparing to rebuff further questions.

“As a matter of fact we do,” Treville says, taking gladly to keeping the focus on business. “We know that, whatever it is, it involves coming to Paris in person. This morning in the Louvre I was stopped by the Cardinal, who told me that he was preparing for a visit from his old friend the Inquisitor.”

Athos snorts. Old friend indeed. The Cardinal and the Inquisitor can’t stand each other. Apparently it had been hatred at first sight in the seminary. The two of them may pretend in public, and they often ally for temporary advantage, but neither of them ever stops looking for ways to stick in the knife.

Sometimes Athos appreciates the irony of it. If Richelieu and Rochefort were ever united in their means and methods, they could probably transform the Inquisition entirely. But as long as the two remain divided enforcement remains inconsistent from city to town to country village. The Cardinal places his faith in informants, midwives and priests. The Inquisitor of Lille prefers to discover throwbacks with torture, drugs and regular inspections. Thus a pup may move from town to village and back again, evading the inconsistent checkpoints and inspections as they go – with the Underground’s help.

Still, if they were ever to agree –

“I trust the Cardinal’s reports of friendship are premature?” Athos asks delicately.

“Yes,” Treville says positively. “They’re as much at odds as ever, I’ll stake my life on it.”

Athos nods, accepting this. When it comes to Cardinal Richelieu, the head of the Inquisition in France, the Underground naturally spends a great deal of time and effort on their intelligence. If Treville says that Richelieu is not about to permanently ally with Rochefort, Athos may believe it.

“So the Inquisitor of Lille is coming to Paris,” Athos summarizes grimly. “No wonder you wanted to take in d’Artagnan. Even just carrying this letter for a day, sight unseen, he’s in danger. Anyone could have seen him with this woman – this Ella.” Ella won’t have been her real name, of course, but it’s easier to call her so than to keep saying the woman.

“In fact, many people did,” Treville says ruefully. “d’Artagnan says that Ella deliberately drew
attention to them both, so the inspectors would focus on d’Artagnan and leave her time to escape with the other, more incriminating letter.”

“But if you want to protect him, why not just admit him as a novice? Why this trial?”

“If I admit him as a novice, I need to put his name down on the books. I need to give it to the King.”

“And if you do that you also give his name to the Cardinal.”

“And the Inquisitor. And, for that matter, every servant, spy and foreign power in the Louvre.”

Athos nods.

“I need to keep d’Artagnan secret for a while. That’s why I’ve taken him in, but only provisionally. And that’s why I’ve placed him with you instead of a novice squad. You’ll keep him under wraps until we know more.”

Athos considers the matter farther. The entire story hangs together, there’s no denying that, but it’s also woefully lacking in corroboration. Absent testimonials from Ella or Gaston, they really only have d’Artagnan’s word on several critical things. Which means…

“There is another possibility,” Athos says carefully.

Treville nods. “That this d’Artagnan is himself a spy for the Inquisition. That the entire story is fabricated from beginning to end, possibly by the Inquisitor of Lille himself. That another high-ranking member of the Underground has fallen into the Inquisition’s hands and been broken, and the code phrases have been put into this letter in an attempt to get me to betray myself. Along with every throwback under my command, every other member of the Underground’s leadership, and every code phrase I know – thereby allowing them to roll the rest of us up easily.”

Athos coughs. “That about sums it up, yes.”

“It’s crossed my mind,” Treville deadpans.

“If Ella works for the Underground, surely you can contact her?”

“Not quickly. I have no idea where Ella will have gone next. I don’t usually direct her missions, and the person who does is currently out of reach.”

“Surely you can at least contact Gaston to corroborate that side of d’Artagnan’s story?”

“I can. But that will take time. There are riots in Gascony. Pockets of pro-Inquisition sentiment are breaking out everywhere. Anyone I send will have to be circumspect. It may take weeks.”

“And in the meanwhile, d’Artagnan will be here in Paris, potentially doing us harm,” Athos finishes.

“Exactly.” Treville spreads his hands. “The timing is suspect. Riots in Gascony, just when a Gascon youth arrives on my doorstep. Ella’s master out of contact just as her whereabouts are also in question. The Inquisitor of Lille’s visit to Paris – which usually means he thinks he’s about to one-up Cardinal Richelieu. One-up him with what? The information delay in corroborating d’Artagnan’s story – is it an accident? Or is it to give this d’Artagnan time to do his work?”

“Then you should send d’Artagnan away now,” Athos says. “Give him money, if he needs it. Or send a few of us with him. Better still, have Porthos find him a temporary place in the Court of Miracles. He’ll be safe enough there. In a few weeks, if his story checks out and the danger is past,
there will be plenty of time to admit him to the regiment then.”

“If he’s telling the truth, then he’s fled Gascony one step ahead of the riots,” Treville says. “His parents are dead. He has nothing. He’s vulnerable. And he’s come to me for help. I have to help him.”

Athos hesitates. “You don’t have to,” he says finally. “I know you want to. I know you care about us all. But sometimes, for the good of everyone, you have to let someone go.”

“No,” Treville says simply. “That’s the Inquisition’s way of doing things. Destroying individual lives in the name of a so-called higher morality. I won’t do it.”

“But what if d’Artagnan’s a spy?” Athos lays the letter back down on Treville’s desk. “What about all the other lives here under your protection?”

“Any of you who come to me could be spies,” Treville says gently. “So you’re a throwback. So what? There are throwbacks who work for the Inquisition. Blood traitors whom they use to infiltrate our ranks and try to catch us out. All I knew about you when you were brought to my hotel was that you were an Alpha. You could just as easily have been a spy as this d’Artagnan. The only difference between the two of you is the complexity of your stories. But a honey-pot may be simple as well as complex. That’s the purpose of the novitiate – well, one of the purposes. I took a chance on you. And I’ll take a chance on this youth, too, though not blindly.”

Athos sighs. “Then what do you want us to do?”

“Take him on as a trial candidate. He’ll replace de Guignes as the fourth member of your squad. Treat him as any other novice. Not a hint that anyone or anything in the Musketeers more than they seem – including yourselves.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Athos promises. If he were alone he might consider taking the risk of revealing himself. It would be a fast way of finding out which way d’Artagnan’s loyalties really lay, and Athos is confident of being able to take the young Gascon in a fight if need be – if d’Artagnan is a throwback, he’s an Omega, with a build like his. But Athos isn’t alone. He has his small pack to think of, first, and also his responsibilities to the Underground. Any of them could be compromised by Athos’ rash actions. So he will follow the Captain’s orders and keep his silence.

“Good,” Treville says. “And then, when the Inquisitor of Lille comes to town, I’m assigning you four as his personal guards.”

“Is that wise?” Athos can’t help but challenge. “Surely it would be better for us to keep away while you check out this Gascon’s story.”

“It may take weeks,” Treville repeats. “If the Inquisitor is really up to something, we may not have weeks. If d’Artagnan is a spy, and I give him access to the Inquisitor, sooner or later he will betray himself. It will be up to you to watch for anything that might indicate his true allegiance, one way or the other.”

“And if d’Artagnan is a spy?” Athos inquires. “If we discover him in the act of betrayal?”

Treville’s eyes glitter coldly. “Do whatever is necessary,” he says.

Athos bows. “Understood,” he says.
A Novice Musketeer

Being a novice in the Musketeers, it soon turns out, is an exercise in being made to feel as incompetent as possible.

(Of course, d’Artagnan’s companions would be the first to point out that he isn’t even technically a novice. He’s a trial novice. D’Artagnan isn’t sure if that makes it better or worse, and prefers not to dwell on the supposed distinction.)

That first afternoon, after getting him settled with a bunk and a stall for his horse and some basic soldiering gear, his three provisional squadmates take him straight out onto the practice yard. D’Artagnan is given approximately three minutes to learn where everything is located – from powder and shot to leatherworking tools for his horse’s tack to the long galley where meals are served. Then Athos, Porthos and Aramis get down to the serious business of grinding d’Artagnan’s face in the dirt as many times as possible.

Porthos does it in hand-to-hand, and gets up shaking his head in disgust.

“I thought you were a farmer!” he says, poking d’Artagnan’s chest. “Who pushed the plow in Tarbes, your mother?”

D’Artagnan tries to take Porthos out at the knees for that one. He just ends up with another mouthful of dirt for his trouble.

“Tried that move before,” Aramis mutters.

“Still doesn’t work,” Athos agrees.

That makes d’Artagnan feel a little better. A very little.

Porthos hauls d’Artagnan back to his feet. “Now watch,” he orders, and sweeps d’Artagnan’s legs out from under him with a single motion.

The sky spins lazily overhead. After a moment, Porthos’ face appears in d’Artagnan’s vision.

“Mrph?” d’Artagnan asks.

“Did you see it?” Porthos wants to know. “Get up. Try it on me now.”

“Mrph,” d’Artagnan says sadly.

Once Porthos deems d’Artagnan sufficiently tenderized – he feels like a roast intended for supper – Athos runs him through his paces swordfighting. The phrase runs him through is very nearly literal on several occasions.

“I did ride half the day just to get here,” d’Artagnan defends himself from his position back on the ground. On the plus side, he’s on his back instead of his belly, and his mouth is blissfully dirt-free. On the minus side, he’s staring at the point of Athos’ weapon. “And then Porthos –”

“Your enemies aren’t going to wait for you to have a shower and a rest,” Athos chides.

“And it’s very likely you’ll have to fight injured at some point in your career,” Aramis calls from the sidelines. “You’ll need to be able to work through pain.”
“I didn’t even really hurt him,” Porthos mutters.

“Try it again,” Athos advises.

D’Artagnan scowls, but scrambles back to his feet. The next bout doesn’t go any better.

“Have you ever actually fought anyone with a sword?” Athos cries.

“You saw me do it when I first got here,” d’Artagnan points out. “I disarmed that Guard, remember?”

“Besides that,” Athos huffs.

D’Artagnan gives this question more thought than it probably deserves. “The baker’s son,” he says after a few moments, straightfaced. His tone is mildness itself.

"The baker's son," Athos repeats blankly. He sounds like he wants to believe d'Artagnan is joking, but can’t quite convince himself.

“Once or twice,” d’Artagnan agrees. Now his lips are twitching. "With sticks."

“Madre de Dios,” Aramis murmurs from the sidelines. Porthos is nearly helpless with laughter.

At least Athos appears to be too shocked even to swear. It’s a good look on him, d’Artagnan thinks idly. Makes his eyes look awfully blue. And those elegant hands –

“All right,” Athos says finally. "Get up again. And for heaven’s sake try this time."

D’Artagnan sighs as he obeys. Who knew being a Musketeer would involve so little musketry?

“My turn,” Aramis announces as twilight settles in the yard.

“What’s your area?” d’Artagnan asks hopefully. “Musketry?” He’s always been good with a gun. Steady hands and good twitch reflexes make for excellent aim. And he’s had a lot more practice hunting than he’s ever had sword-fighting.

“Oh, we’ll get to that,” Aramis says. “But right now I wouldn’t trust you with a firearm.”

D’Artagnan wishes he had a retort for that. All he has is an unwilling sense of agreement.

Instead Aramis produces a knife and offers it to d’Artagnan.

“You have got to be kidding,” d’Artagnan says blankly.

Aramis raises an eyebrow. “Knives not good enough for you?”

“I am more likely to cut my own wrist right now than anything else,” d’Artagnan says devoutly.

“Oh, no, we’re not going to use these on each other,” Aramis says, sounding amused. “Not after that hand-to-hand performance I saw you give with Porthos.”

“Need to work on his throws,” Athos says to Porthos, aside.

“Need to work on his falls,” Porthos says back. “Boy can’t even slap the ground properly. Any tavern drunk in Paris could have him out cold in a twinkling.”

“That won’t do. If there’s one thing Musketeers have to do, it’s win tavern fights.”
“Gentleman?” Aramis says, not raising his voice. The two others fall silent regardless.

“If I’m not using this on you,” d’Artagnan says, shaking himself free from the pleasant fantasy of stabbing each and every one of his tormentors, “What am I using it on?”

Aramis steps aside and sweeps his arm out theatrically. On the far side of the practice yard, already shrouded in dimness from the disappearing sunlight, are some archery targets.

D’Artagnan looks at Aramis. He looks at the knife. He looks at the targets. Then he looks, pointedly, at the setting sun.

“It’s just too easy in broad daylight,” Aramis says, teeth flashing in a wide grin.

D’Artagnan sighs. Then he throws the knife, experimentally.

At least it’s satisfying to watch Porthos duck.

Mercifully, d’Artagnan is allowed to crawl into bed after supper that first night and sleep dreamlessly until dawn. He’s even permitted to eat breakfast before the training begins again. He’s as pathetically grateful for that as he can be, considering that no sooner are the plates and cups returned to Godeau (the purveyor of the Musketeers) than Porthos has d’Artagnan flat on the ground again.

“Slap the ground,” Porthos instructs. “As you fall. Okay? Get up and try again.”

D’Artagnan spits out his mouthful of dirt and begins to seriously think about trying to become a King’s Guardsman instead. He’s heard Dessessart’s company has a vacancy.

“Perhaps you’re being too hard on him,” Athos suggests mildly from the sidelines.

D’Artagnan flushes hot, then icy cold. “I do not wish to be coddled,” he hisses.

Athos regards him dispassionately. “Then get up.”

It’s harder than it should be. It’s harder, physically, than just about anything d’Artagnan has ever done. Every part of him aches, from his toes to his skull. Last night’s rest has only made him aware of exactly how exhausted he is. He’d be exhausted even if he hadn’t been put through the wringer yesterday. He’s not sure there’s properly a word for how tired he is now.

But Athos is watching him coolly, a challenge in those eyes, and d’Artagnan gets up.

He’s come too far to fail now. His parents are dead, his farm in ruins, the life behind him destroyed. He only has what he can take and hold on to. He only has the future.

But d’Artagnan is not helpless. He’s young. He’s strong. He’s stubborn as an ox. And so help him, but d’Artagnan will march up to the Cardinal himself and confess to being a throwback before he lets himself fail the challenge he reads clearly in Athos’ cool, cool blue eyes.

It takes a few days – actually, it takes much of a week – but things do start to improve. D’Artagnan finally figures out what Porthos means by *slap the ground*, in exchange for which Porthos stops knocking him down quite so often under the guise of teaching him. Aramis sets knife-fighting aside as a lost cause and switches gears to musketry, at which point d’Artagnan manages to win back some of the ground he’d obviously lost in Aramis’ respect. And Athos actually admits that d’Artagnan, though a novice at real sword-fighting, is at least a fast learner.

“Though you still have a long way to go,” he says in some exasperation. “How on earth did you
manage to disarm Boisrenard with your technique this bad?"

“Boisrenard didn’t expect a farmer to have any technique at all,” Aramis says for d’Artagnan. “You can get a lot farther by defying someone’s expectations than you can with technique alone.”

“I still think you’re exaggerating about how bad I am,” d’Artagnan says grumpily.

Porthos shakes his head. “He’s not.”

“We’ll fix it,” Athos says. “Don’t worry. You just need more practice. Let’s try getting you up an hour earlier – we can do drills before breakfast.”

D’Artagnan groans. It makes Athos smile. And d’Artagnan, for reasons he doesn’t care to examine too closely, promptly forgets his dismay.

He even forgets to be upset about the extra drills. At least, until Athos drags him out of bed the next morning an hour before dawn.

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It turns out that military life is very unlike farm life in the amount of privacy available. On the farm, d’Artagnan had been alone for long stretches of the day, working one field while his father worked another or going out hunting or into town. In Paris the only time he’s alone is when he’s sleeping or bathing. The rest of the time, at least one of Athos, Porthos or Aramis are guaranteed to be present. Usually all three.

To his surprise, d’Artagnan discovers that he likes it. It’s nerve-wracking at first; he’s convinced that he’s going to say or do something to give his sex away, just because he’s not used to having to keep his guard up so long. But it becomes clear to d’Artagnan very quickly that each of the three men surrounding him have their own secrets. Their names are obviously aliases – Athos is the name of a mountain, for goodness’ sake – and if Athos and Aramis aren’t noble by birth d’Artagnan will eat his pony. It means that they all respect his circumspection. It means that no one pries.

As for the rest of it… d’Artagnan’s never had a sibling. He thinks he might kind of like it.

Aramis is the toughest on d’Artagnan, but he’s also d’Artagnan’s favorite teacher, because his fighting style is most similar to the one d’Artagnan needs to adopt. Porthos tries to solve everything with his strength and is baffled when d’Artagnan can’t do the same. Athos clearly had been born with a sword-belt on and isn’t quite sure what to do with a novice whose first instinct in a bar fight is to smash a tankard over someone’s head instead of perforating them with his rapier. Aramis seems to get it a little bit better. His techniques all focus on dexterity rather than sheer strength. There’s something about knife-fighting that d’Artagnan will probably never get, but the first day after Aramis shares a few tips about wrestling with d’Artagnan, he manages to last a full two minutes against Porthos before having his now-customary dirt snack.

As the day-to-day experience of being a novice probationary Musketeer improves, so too does d’Artagnan’s understanding of his companions. This isn’t due to any relaxing of Aramis’, Athos’ or Porthos’ guards. But d’Artagnan is both observant and determined, and eventually he starts to pick up a few things.

All three are obviously close, but Aramis and Porthos are closer still. They’ll often slip off together when Athos is keeping d’Artagnan busy. D’Artagnan isn’t foolish enough to ask Athos where they go, but they always come back happier. Porthos is generally of a cheerful disposition, so this doesn’t mean much in his case. But Aramis is more generally reserved. There’s even an odd bitterness about
him that comes out when he thinks no one’s looking. He smiles often, but the only times d’Artagnan sees him laugh are when he’s with Porthos.

It doesn’t take a worldly-wise sophisticate to connect the dots. D’Artagnan can hardly be the first throwback youth to leave home and seek a place in Treville’s Musketeers. Between Porthos’ strength and Aramis’ Omega-friendly fighting style, it’s no stretch to deduce the most logical reason for the two of them to sneak off together periodically.

And if they’re so obvious about it that d’Artagnan can figure it out, Athos must know, too. Which means, at a minimum, he has no problem with throwbacks. At least in the abstract sense.

What d’Artagnan desperately wants to figure out is whether Athos might be interested in any throwbacks in particular.

The cool, elegant, mysterious Musketeer had been the focus of d’Artagnan’s attention right from the start. At first it had just been a practical measure. Athos is the leader of their squad; his opinion of d’Artagnan will carry the most weight with Treville. Making Athos see him as something other than a stumbling puppy is important.

But with the way Aramis and Porthos are so wrapped up in each other, d’Artagnan ends up spending most of his time with Athos, and he starts to have other reasons to want to attract Athos’ notice.

Athos is different from anyone d’Artagnan has ever met. Perhaps that doesn’t mean much – Aramis and Porthos aren’t exactly just like the villagers in Lupiac – but there’s something almost unreal about Athos. His swordsmanship is textbook. His manners are impeccable. His nobility is obvious in every detail of his presentation. He’s like a hero from a novel, or an icon from an earlier time.

Beneath the elegance and poise, something else is lurking. Athos never speaks of his past. Even Aramis and Porthos will occasionally make references to their lives before the Musketeers, even if they’re obviously being vague. Athos behaves as if he came into existence the moment he took the commission.

But when they visit the taverns, Athos is the first to start drinking and the last to stop. His alcohol tolerance is frightening. So is his disregard for pain. D’Artagnan’s been in two bar fights already and one scrum in the market square, when they’d been on guard duty and two rival merchants had taken exception to each other. He’s seen Athos wade into the heaviest fighting and ignore everything from a beer bottle thrown at his back to a hefty dowel swung at his legs. It’s like Athos doesn’t even feel it. Like he doesn’t notice.

It should frighten d’Artagnan. But he’s seen what real darkness is like. It’s the stories the men of Lupiac would tell in the tavern at night. It’s the indifference of the people of Wissous when the Inquisition’s guard had groped d’Artagnan to prove he’s no Alpha. It’s the ashes of his childhood home and the burned bodies of his parents.

Athos has been through something. D’Artagnan has no idea what, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that Athos survived. What matters is that Athos understands.

What matters is that sometimes, Athos looks at d’Artagnan. Really looks, like he’s seeing something more than just a farm boy from Gascony. And when Athos looks at him like that, d’Artagnan feels something other than the endless circle of grief and fear and sheer, stubborn pride.

D’Artagnan feels like he matters.

And he wants Athos to keep looking at him.
Two weeks after d’Artagnan is admitted to the regiment on a trial basis, all of Paris buzzes with the news of an illustrious visitor – the Comte de Rochefort. A sumptuous dwelling is being readied for him in the Luxembourg. Banquets and parties are being planned. And everyone is speculating about his purpose.

D’Artagnan has never heard the name before the rumors begin. He quickly learns that the man is apparently the spawn of Satan and Cardinal Richelieu. At least, that’s his perspective on the matter. The folk of Paris have a somewhat higher opinion of the man.

Done nearly as much to rid us of the throwbacks as the Cardinal himself, God bless them both, housewives chatter excitedly.

France should adopt more of his methods, men agree in taverns.

Tales of the Inquisitor, two a penny! urchins cry, sensing opportunity, darting through the streets and waving broadsheets in people’s faces.

It soon appears that Rochefort’s reception will not be entirely unmixed, though. Some people resent his encroachment upon French territory. In other parts of Paris d’Artagnan hears their mutterings.

Cardinal does a fine enough job on his own, some men say. Don’t need some upstart mucking up the works.

And why’s he only an Inquisitor when our Richelieu is a Cardinal? their wives will ask knowingly. Just shows you which of them Rome thinks more highly of.

But Rochefort wouldn’t come unless he had some plan, servants whisper, repeating their noble masters and mistresses. He must have someone in his sights, and he’s going to show up the Cardinal and Rome by outing them. But whom?

The gossip and speculation runs through everyone from the lowest Vicomte to the King himself – though that last is scornfully dismissed by the older generation. Louis was christened naked, they remind others. By order of the old King – to prove he’s no throwback.

Naked? some of the more puritanical among their listeners repeat, aghast. Surely not!

A good idea, others approve. More folk should follow that example.

Just wait, their elders advise. For my money they’ll do the same with the Dauphin, if the Queen ever produces an heir.

The grumbling that meets this last statement is the only thing everyone in Paris can agree upon. King Louis and Queen Anne have been married a long time, and even in Gascony there has been rising discontent over the continuing lack of a son – or, for that matter, of any child whatsoever.

D’Artagnan is at least somewhat heartened to hear that this Inquisitor Rochefort won’t be welcomed with entirely open arms. The countervailing sense of Rochefort’s being an intruder will give d’Artagnan room to maneuver if he should happen to come upon this man while helping his squadmates stand guard. Although still not a Musketeer, or even an official novice, d’Artagnan does just as much work as any of Athos, Porthos or Aramis. He’s never more than three steps from one of them – even his room in the barracks is just down the hall from theirs – and whatever their duty is, he does it, too.

At least Captain Treville isn’t charging d’Artagnan for room and board. But rebuilding the farmhouse isn’t going to be free, and d’Artagnan is dreading the first letter from Gaston asking for
money, if he can’t convince the Captain to take him on at pay first. Even still he’ll probably need to ask for an advance.

What he needs is an opportunity. Some way to show the Captain that d’Artagnan is worthy of being a Musketeer. Mucking out stables is all very well – and d’Artagnan’s farming background is at least being good for something – but standing guard at the palace or being a watchful, authoritative eye in the square on market-day isn’t going to impress Treville. D’Artagnan needs something else, something a little higher profile.

Still. Guarding the Comte de Rochefort isn’t exactly what d’Artagnan had in mind.

Captain Treville calls them all in one morning and gets right to the point. “The Comte de Rochefort is arriving in Paris the day after tomorrow,” he says. “He’s not allowed to bring his own guards across the border, so he’s requested that the King provide him with some. I’m assigning the four of you.”

D’Artagnan’s heart rate skyrockets. For a moment he’s torn between ecstasy at the opportunity and sheer terror at the thought of being close to a man who views himself as being in direct competition with Cardinal Richelieu. It therefore takes him a few extra beats before the improbability of the situation dawns on him.

He looks around, expecting one of his companions to point out the obvious issues with the Captain’s assignment. Instead all three are nodding complacently.

Tentatively, d’Artagnan says, “Captain? Won’t, ah, won’t the Cardinal be assigning guards to the Inquisitor?”

Treville raises an eyebrow. “The Inquisitor wouldn’t let anyone working for the Cardinal within ten feet of him,” he says bluntly. “Their rivalry isn’t exactly an amiable one.”

Ah. Well, that explains that, at least. But is no one going to protest that their squad is understrength – that d’Artagnan is still not even quite a novice?

He sneaks another glance around the room. No, obviously not. Aramis looks bored, Porthos resigned, Athos bland and unruffled.

D’Artagnan considers the merits of bringing it up on his own. But he doesn’t want to blow the opportunity. It’s dangerous – while d’Artagnan can’t possibly be the Inquisitor’s primary target, Rochefort would no doubt love to pick up an extra throwback or ten while on his journey – but no opportunity is without danger. And who knows when another one might come along? Better to hold his tongue and hope to make his fortune.

“All right then, get on with it,” Treville orders when it becomes obvious no one else is going to speak. The foursome file obediently out.

“So who is this Comte de Rochefort?” d’Artagnan asks as soon as they’re back outside, seated around their usual table in the common area. “The rumors make him out to be an enormous figure. Why such a fuss over a French nobleman, even if he is also an Inquisitor?”

“He’s not French,” Athos says. “He’s Italian.”

“But Rochefort is a French title,” d’Artagnan says, confused.

“He has a different title in every country,” Athos explains. “The French title is a relatively recent gift, on the occasion of the Queen’s marriage.”
“Before that he was most commonly known as the Conde de Toreno,” Aramis says. He’s taken out his knives and is sharpening them, one by one. There’s a grim note in his voice that d’Artagnan doesn’t quite understand.

“That’s a Spanish title, isn’t it? Is that how he knows the Queen?” d’Artagnan asks.

“The Inquisition has complete control of Spain,” Aramis says. Now d’Artagnan recognizes his tone: bitterness. “Rome sends a special spiritual conductor to every member of the Spanish royal family when they reach puberty. Toreno – Rochefort – was the Queen’s.”

“He gained the Spanish title when he arrived in Madrid,” Porthos takes over. “When Anne was betrothed to Louis, he was given the French title and began to divide his time between Spain and France, in order to teach the Infanta what to expect after her marriage.”

“So now he lives in Paris?” d’Artagnan frowns. “But the Inquisitor of Paris is named Bonacieux.” Who answers to the Cardinal, of course, as the Grand Inquisitor of France, but that still doesn’t explain where this Rochefort fits in.

Athos shakes his head. “He escorted the Queen to her marriage, but that was where his duties ended.”

“The Cardinal doesn’t need any help keeping the Inquisition’s boot firmly on all of our throats,” Porthos mutters.

“So after the Queen was married, Rochefort received a new assignment,” Aramis finishes. “He is now the Inquisitor of Lille.”

D’Artagnan strains his mind for his half-forgotten geography lessons. “That’s in the United Provinces?”

“Just barely over our northern border,” Athos says. “It may as well be France. They have more in common with us than with than the Dutch Republic.”

“The Cardinal probably has designs in that direction,” Aramis mutters. “Setting aside the land and politics, he’d love to have Rochefort under his thumb.”

“Rochefort’s dangerous,” Porthos says. “His reputation may lag Richelieu’s in France, but the Dutch Underground fears him greatly.”

“Then why is he only an Inquisitor?” d’Artagnan asks. His grasp of Church ranks may not be as precise as, say, Aramis’, but even he knows that there’s a wide gulf between an Inquisitor and a Cardinal.

“Politics,” Porthos says laconically.

“Richelieu tells Rome what they want to hear,” Aramis explains. “He focuses his efforts on the nobility, who scare the Church the most. His reports tell a story of progress. He’s rooted out this many hidden throwbacks, increased the Inquisition’s power in such a way, expanded the anti-throwback laws thusly.”

“Etcetera, etcetera,” Porthos says with a rolling gesture of one hand.

“So Rome loves Richelieu,” Athos says. “Rochefort, by contrast, is a pessimist. He has successes of his own, but he doesn’t focus on them. Instead he wastes his time warning the Church about how dire the throwback threat still is.”
He spends his life convinced that the throwbacks are days away from rising up and overthrowing the Inquisition,” Porthos says.

“If only,” Aramis mutters.

“He makes himself look bad,” Athos finishes. “So he remains an Inquisitor.”

“And believe me, he’s not happy about it,” Porthos adds. “He hasn’t been back in France in years. Not since the Queen’s last –”

Porthos falls silent as abruptly as if he’s just had his head cut off. D’Artagnan looks at him in surprise. Porthos looks chastened, and Athos is shooting him a dirty look.

“What?” d’Artagnan ventures to ask.

Aramis glances at the other two and sighs. “Since the Queen’s last miscarriage,” he says flatly.

“Oh,” d’Artagnan says softly.

“It’s no secret that Rochefort is displeased that the Queen hasn’t yet produced an heir,” Aramis goes on. “He views it as a personal failure, that he didn’t properly teach her her duty when she was the Infanta under his care.”

Aramis says it’s no secret, but Athos and Porthos are fidgeting like Aramis is betraying something important. D’Artagnan’s naturally curious. But he’s not a complete clod – at least, he likes to think so – and he knows when to back away from an obviously touchy subject.

That being determined on, d’Artagnan says, “So this is the man we are to guard.” He shrugs a little and gives the other three his best wry smile. “I can’t imagine who would want to hurt him.”

That gets him three answering smiles, though they’re noticeably faint.

“Well, look at it this way,” Aramis says, in the tones of a man making the best of a bad situation. “It’ll be easy duty.”

Porthos groans. “You had to say it.”
The Inquisitor of Lille

“Just breathe,” Athos counsels.

Easy for you to say, d’Artagnan thinks, trying nevertheless to follow this excellent advice. You’ve probably done this a thousand times before.

“How much longer do we have to wait?” Porthos grumbles.

D’Artagnan twitches. “Is now really the time for that?”

“Relax,” Aramis drawls. “No one pays attention to us at these events. We’re window dressing.”

“We’re standing in the throne room of the King of France,” d’Artagnan hisses.

Athos yawns. “And we’re also the only ones here,” he points out. He actually leans against one of the walls. “The King and his household are still dressing, the Queen and hers are at prayers, and the Inquisitor has barely reached the gates. Relax.”

D’Artagnan’s mouth opens and closes several times, soundlessly. “What if they walk in?” he demands finally, abandoning the effort of keeping his own voice down. The servants give d’Artagnan curious looks, but he ignores them, much as Athos had ignored them when he’d said we’re the only ones here.

“The King of France doesn’t just throw open a door and stroll in,” Aramis says in amusement. “We’ll hear the retinue approaching.”

“The trumpets will be a dead giveaway,” Porthos agrees.

D’Artagnan’s jaw drops. “They do the trumpets inside?”

“No, they don’t do the trumpets inside.” Athos gives Porthos a look. Porthos, unrepentantly, laughs. “Those are for public appearances only.”

“Athos, you’re no fun,” Aramis says. “We could have told him they had trained monkeys carrying the King’s train.”

“He wears the full train – oh,” d’Artagnan realizes, a little embarrassed.

“Aramis, Porthos, please restrain yourselves,” Athos sighs. “d’Artagnan, try not to be so credulous?”

“Just because the two of you probably had Kings at your baptisms,” d’Artagnan mutters.

“This isn’t difficult,” Athos says patiently. “All we do is stand here. In a moment the King and Queen will arrive, separately.”

“They’ll ignore you,” Porthos interjects.

“Then the Inquisitor will arrive.”

“He’ll ignore you, too,” Aramis contributes.

Athos glares at them both. “At some point the Inquisitor will ask the King about his guard retinue. The King will signal the Captain, and the Captain will point us out.”
“Then they go back to ignoring you,” Porthos says.

“If there’s any talking to do, I’ll do it. When Rochefort leaves, we leave with him. Simple. All right?” Athos finishes.

“All right,” d’Artagnan says, unconvinced.

Aramis starts to say something else, then pauses, head tipped to one side. “I think I hear trumpets,” he says.

“I thought you were kidding about the trumpets!”

“He is,” Athos says in a long-suffering tone. “But they are coming.”

He pushes off the wall and stands straight. D’Artagnan scrambles to follow this example. Aramis and Porthos fall in easily as breathing, and d’Artagnan envies their poise.

The door opens – not the main doors, double-wide and set in the middle of the throne room for easy access by large processions. This is one of the three smaller doors that are set into the wall, behind the dais for the thrones. One leads to the King’s private chambers. Another goes to the Queen’s. The third is a servants’ access. Servants have been going in and out of that in a bustle, freshening the flowers and making sure there are enough chairs in the right places and the curtains are pushed back to admit enough light. But now that door is closed. The King’s door is the one that opens.

The Musketeers all bow. D’Artagnan hastily copies them. Several pairs of feet go by in d’Artagnan’s vision. When Athos straightens, d’Artagnan does the same, and is greeted by his first sight of the King’s court.

First, a small handful of noblemen enter, just behind the King. Athos murmurs titles in d’Artagnan’s ear as they do. Some of the names d’Artagnan recognizes; most he doesn’t, and there’s no way he’ll remember them all. One by one they arrange themselves around the room, leaning on various pieces of furniture and looking bored.

A small guard is next. Those men d’Artagnan all knows, at least on sight, thank goodness. Treville has already entered, with the King, and posted himself to one side of the King’s chair.

Louis XIII is in the act of throwing himself in his throne, looking and acting more like a petulant child than a King. D’Artagnan blinks, thrown. The King is richly garbed, of course, and he’s sitting on the throne of France, so that much of the awe and mystique is intact. But Louis is draped over the throne carelessly. One hand waves languidly. And he’s complaining in none too quiet a voice about the early hour.

“So really there’s no reason the Inquisitor couldn’t arrive after noon like a reasonable man,” Louis says, apparently finishing a sentence he’d begun before entering the room. “And it would be much less inconvenient for me.”

“I completely agree with your Majesty,” the other man beside the King says. D’Artagnan’s gaze skips over and he freezes. He’d been so preoccupied with the idea of finally being in the same room as the King, and not incidentally about to be in the personal orbit of the Inquisitor of Lille, that he’d somehow failed to consider the obvious. That being that wherever the King goes, there also goeth his first minister. The man in charge of France’s foreign policy, the Inquisition, and the Church.

“Really, Cardinal, you should write to Rome and complain,” Louis says.

“I shall certainly do so if your Majesty instructs,” Richelieu replies, “though I think, sadly, they do
not pay as much attention to the Inquisitor’s manners as they should."

“Sometimes I don’t know what this world is coming to,” Louis says with a sigh as great as if he’d lived a century.

An elbow brushes d’Artagnan’s side. “Breathe,” Athos murmurs again.

D’Artagnan realizes he’s been holding his breath. He forces himself to relax and let his lungs function again. Slowly thought filters back in. The Cardinal isn’t looking anywhere in d’Artagnan’s direction; true to Aramis’ and Porthos’ predictions, the Musketeers are being entirely ignored.

_Thirty paces_, the mayor of Lupiac had always said. Well, that at least must be an exaggeration. Porthos and Aramis must have been in the Cardinal’s presence a hundred times before. They’re still safely hidden. Neither of them are acting like their lives are on the line – well, not any more so than usual, anyway.

_Richelieu focuses his efforts on the nobility_, Aramis had said. That makes sense. The Musketeers are of no more interest in this gathering than the curtains or the chairs. D’Artagnan just needs to avoid drawing any outward attention to himself.

_Breathe_. What d’Artagnan needs is a distraction. Something to focus on that isn’t the presence of the Cardinal mere paces away, radiating menace even at rest, like a coiled snake sunning itself on a rock.

A distraction serendipitously presents itself in the form of the door to the Queen’s chambers opening. Everyone bows again, and Louis rises to go over and take Anne’s hands. The monarchs smile at each other and exchange _good mornings_. Then they both are seated in their thrones. Anne’s group of nobleswomen scatter themselves likewise around the room. One woman in particular remains near the throne, standing almost as close to Anne as Treville does to Louis.

“The Queen’s confidante, Doña Constanza de la Vega, who came with her from Spain,” Aramis murmurs in his ear.

“Most of the Queen’s companions were sent away after her marriage,” Athos adds in an undertone. “Constance was allowed to stay because her father was originally French. A merchant. The King thought Constance would help Anne make the transition to the French language and French ways.”

“Is there word of Toreno yet?” the Queen is asking somewhat breathlessly. D’Artagnan is momentarily at a loss until he remembers: the Inquisitor’s Spanish title is the Conde de Toreno. Anne will probably be used to calling him so, from when he’d been her spiritual conductor in Spain.

“He came through the gates an hour ago, your Majesty,” Richelieu replies. “He should be arriving soon.”

“Looking forward to seeing him again?” Louis inquires. He doesn’t sound entirely pleased at the thought.

“Oh – somewhat,” Anne says cautiously, seeming somewhat taken aback by her husband’s tone.

“It’s always pleasant for a lady to be reminded of her girlhood,” Richelieu suggests. This diplomatic statement makes Louis smile and Anne relax slightly.

The conversation turns from there to banal topics – where the Inquisitor will be staying, the ball being held in Rochefort’s honor in four nights’ time, the hunting-party to be formed the week following. D’Artagnan keeps his gaze blank and distant but his ears open. The King often veers into fractiousness, and the Queen into impatience. Each time the Cardinal skillfully steers them back to
calm waters. D’Artagnan is impressed in spite of himself. No wonder Richelieu is so highly valued by the King – and so powerful.

Of course, it’s that same power that he uses to oppress d’Artagnan and everyone like him. That reminder is enough to kill most of the remaining awe d’Artagnan feels over being in such rarefied company. Everyone in this room may outwardly appear beautiful, but inside they’re rotten. Even the King. D’Artagnan had been prepared to worship the man who resists Cardinal Richelieu and the Inquisition. Now d’Artagnan begins to wonder if Louis’ policy of half-measures and compromise is more a sign of weakness than a clever political maneuver.

After a few minutes, the conversation by the throne lags, and silence settles over the room. The Cardinal turns briefly aside and speaks a few words to one of the Red Guards who accompany him.

The King leans over and touches the Queen’s hand. “If you’re nervous – ” he murmurs.

The Queen shakes her head. “Not precisely,” she replies. “It’s only that – Toreno was the force who shaped my childhood.”

The King’s face darkens. The Queen quickly adds, “And you are the force who shapes me now. Which is why I am not nervous.”

That makes Louis smile. From d’Artagnan’s angle, he can also see the corner of the Cardinal’s mouth twitch up, though he will be hidden by the monarchs. It proves to d’Artagnan what he’d already expected; that however absorbed the Cardinal may appear to be, Richelieu is always listening.

Just don’t draw attention to yourself, d’Artagnan repeats silently, and you’ll be fine.

Suddenly there’s a bustle in the room. D’Artagnan looks around in surprise.

“Inquisitor’s coming,” Porthos mutters.

Two servants hurry to the main doors. They grasp the handles, pause – listening to something d’Artagnan can’t hear – and then pull the doors open in smooth unison.

Into the room, followed by his entourage, comes the Inquisitor of Lille.

The noblemen and servants bow – the Musketeers likewise – although, d’Artagnan observes, the King and Queen do not. Neither does the Cardinal. The Queen does, however, stretch out a hand to Toreno as soon as he appears. And his first action is to smile at her, although he does not take her hand immediately. Instead he pauses the appropriate steps from the throne and offers the monarchs of France a bow.

“Your Majesties, I am honored by this reception. I had no idea that you would condescend to take such notice of my humble visit. I am merely a servant of the Church, one among many, who passes through on his way back to Rome.”

“Your humility does you credit,” Louis says, “but such an illustrious servant as you can hardly be said to be one among many. We are glad that you break your journey here, and will enjoy your company for as long as it is offered.”

“It is good to see you again, my old friend,” the Queen adds. Her nervousness from earlier must have been more due to the King’s attitude than Toreno’s visit: her tone is warmth itself, and the smile on her face proclaims her to be happy.
Now that he’s addressed the King, the Inquisitor is free to take the Queen’s hand, which he bows over and kisses. “And yourself, your Majesty.”

“You must call me Ana María, as you used to do,” Anne invites. “No one calls me so now but Constanza.”

“Surely it would be better for your Majesty to keep your focus in the present,” Rochefort disagrees. “France is your home now. Constance had better call you Anne.”

Anne’s smile slips, and she lowers her hand to her lap. At her side Constance looks down – not quickly enough to hide a frown of displeasure.

“Regardless,” Rochefort continues, “I am no longer your spiritual conductor. And I trust that your Majesty has no further need of one. I am sure you remain firm in your calling and the ways of righteousness.”

“You can hardly doubt it, Rochefort, from knowing who is by her side,” the King answers for Anne. “Cardinal Richelieu maintains the strictest standards for all of France.”

Rochefort’s lips thin visibly at the reference to his rival. Up until now the Inquisitor has managed to avoid looking at or acknowledging the Cardinal in any way. With the King’s intervention it’s unavoidable. Rochefort looks over to Richelieu. The two churchmen exchange chilly smiles and miniscule inclinations of the head.

“Always a pleasure,” Richelieu says smoothly.

“Indeed,” Rochefort says just as smoothly.

“It must be a nice treat for you, Rochefort, getting to spend time with our Cardinal,” Louis says cheerfully. “Perhaps there’s a red mitre in your future one day, eh? I’m sure Richelieu wouldn’t mind sharing a few pointers.”

At d’Artagnan’s side, Aramis nearly chokes. On the dais Constance hastily shoves a fan in Anne’s hand for the Queen to hide her face behind. Richelieu’s smile spreads wider, losing none of its frost.

Louis seems blithely unaware that his words might have been construed as an insult. “Now, I understand you’ll be with us for a few weeks,” he says briskly. “Is this all your companions?” The King’s gesture encompasses the retinue which had accompanied Rochefort. It comprises three churchmen of varying degrees, a secretary, and a few servants who remain outside the room but are visible through the still-open doors.

“I travel lightly, your Majesty, as befits a man of God,” Rochefort says. This is obviously intended as a dig against Richelieu, who is not known for his austerity, but the shot is weak. Richelieu takes no outward notice, although d’Artagnan is sure the insult has been counted in the Cardinal’s private tally nonetheless.

“Since I know you were unable to bring guards of your own into Paris, I’ve asked Captain Treville to loan you out a few men,” Louis continues. He gestures to the Captain, who takes an obliging step forward. “You are acquainted with the Captain, are you not, Rochefort?”

“I have had that pleasure, yes. I hope you’re well?”

“Very well,” the Captain says.

“Who do you have for the Inquisitor, Treville?” the King inquires.
“I have made my second-in-command available to his Excellence, your Majesty, and his squad,” Treville says. He gestures to the four men propping up the wall. D’Artagnan can’t help but tense as all eyes swing towards them. Fortunately the main focus is Athos, whose bars of rank are obvious, and who steps slightly forward now. All four bow. It’s a relief to be able to hide his face, and d’Artagnan wishes he didn’t have to straighten quite so soon.

“Commander Athos,” Rochefort says, one eyebrow raising. “When last I was in Paris, you were a Lieutenant, were you not? Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thank you, your Excellency,” Athos murmurs.

“You have a good memory, Rochefort,” the King says.

“I have always found it useful in my position,” Rochefort replies.

“The Inquisitor has had a long journey,” Richelieu says, effortlessly taking control of the conversation. “I am sure he needs to rest and change before joining your Majesty at dinner.”

“Yes, of course,” Louis agrees. “But I will expect you to give a great deal of your time to us, while you are in Paris, Rochefort.”

“I had hoped to spend some time exploring the city, your Majesty,” the Inquisitor says carefully. D’Artagnan tenses again, and the rumors he’d heard dart again through his head. Rochefort wouldn’t come unless he had some plan, everyone had said. He must have someone in his sights, and he’s going to show up the Cardinal and Rome by outing them. Don’t jump to conclusions, d’Artagnan chides himself. Maybe Rochefort just wants to walk on the Pont-Neuf. Hah. Somehow d’Artagnan doesn’t believe himself.

Thankfully the King is entirely tone-deaf to the currents running underneath the surface of Rochefort’s reply. “Who cares about the city?” he says, apparently also tone-deaf to the Parisian pride of everyone within earshot. “Come now. We’re holding a hunting-party for you, you know, and a ball. Not to mention that dear Anne has been simply longing to see her old mentor again. I really must insist.”

Trapped, Rochefort bows with as much grace as he can muster. A sour twist to his mouth remains. Fortunately the King appears not to notice, nor to hear the flatness in Rochefort’s voice when he replies, “Of course I am entirely at your Majesty’s disposal.”

“Excellent.” The King claps his hands, gleeful as a child. “We shall look forward to seeing you at dinner.”

“Very much forward,” the Queen echoes, somewhat less enthusiastic than she had been before Rochefort had actually arrived.

Rochefort at least knows a dismissal when he hears one. He bows again. The King and Queen rise, which means that everyone else bows too, and Rochefort departs.

Athos falls into step behind the Inquisitor’s secretary. The other three fall into step behind Athos. Rochefort pays them no more mind than he would a worm until they’re arrived at Rochefort’s temporary dwellings in the Luxembourg.
“Well, Musketeer Athos, we meet again,” Rochefort says, walking into his sitting room and tossing his cloak to a servant. “And who are your squad?”

Athos introduces them one by one. D’Artagnan is last, and Rochefort is visibly surprised by his youth.

“You’re taking them young these days,” he observes. “Do you even shave, boy?”

Porthos and Aramis chuckle, saving d’Artagnan from the necessity of a response. The truth is no, not yet, and he may never have to; male Omegas tend to produce less body hair than male Betas or male Alphas. Of course, Aramis has a decent close-cut beard. So there’s hope for d’Artagnan yet. He’d been feeling a little scruffy lately, in fact. Though given Rochefort’s comment it may all be in d’Artagnan’s head.

“He’s new,” Athos says laconically.

“Hm.” Rochefort studies d’Artagnan a moment longer, then seems to dismiss him from thought, turning to circle around to his desk and pick up a small pile of letters that have already been delivered. “Well, Athos, let’s keep this simple. Have your men here by the first hour after dawn every day. Stay out of the way unless someone’s trying to kill me. If I find out you’re spying for the Cardinal – ”

“We are Musketeers,” Athos says frostily. Aramis and Porthos bristle. D’Artagnan does his best to emulate them.

“I can see your uniforms,” Rochefort says silkily. “But I put nothing past that man. He could convince the devil to inform for him; I am sure he could convince Musketeers.”

“Your Excellency need have no fear,” Athos says, still cold.

“Well, then it will do you no harm to hear me speak, will it? So. If I find out you’re reporting to the Cardinal, I will accuse you all of being throwback sympathizers and take you back to Lille as prisoners of the Inquisition. There. Do we understand each other?”

D’Artagnan tenses. Aramis and Porthos are like coiled springs next to him. But Athos doesn’t turn a hair.

“Perfectly, Monsieur,” he assures the Inquisitor.

“Excellent.” Rochefort slits the first letter open and seats himself to read it. “Then we shall get on very well.”

Despite this inauspicious beginning – and despite Aramis having provoked the wrath of God with his assertion that guarding Rochefort would be easy – the first week of the Inquisitor’s visit passes away in remarkable quiet. Rochefort’s habits are simple. He rises early, retires early, and spends the rest of the time divided between the Louvre and his dwellings in the Luxembourg. Most of the time, guarding Rochefort actually amounts to guarding a closed door.

“Do you think he’s really discussing Church secrets in there?” Porthos wonders one day as they stand outside yet another room. “Or just gossiping about his servants?”

“I doubt the Queen cares much about Rochefort’s servants,” Aramis murmurs. Anne and Rochefort are having lunch together and ‘discussing old times’, as the Queen’s lady Constanza had put it when she’d come to summon the Inquisitor.
“Right now we’re Rochefort’s servants,” d’Artagnan points out. “I imagine the Queen already knows as much about us as she cares to.”

“I imagine the Queen also knows as much about the Inquisition as she cares to,” Athos says.

“Growing up with the Inquisitor?” Porthos grimaces. “Cheerful thought.”

At the end of the week comes the King’s hunting-trip, which takes them all out of the capitol for several days. D’Artagnan finds the whole thing incredibly boring. Louis’ version of hunting, with huntsmen and packs of hounds and a dozen servants to every nobleman, seems more like a carefully orchestrated play than an actual sport.

Athos shrugs when d’Artagnan expresses this opinion. “You’d have trouble taking down a stag alone in the woods with a shotgun,” he points out.

“True,” d’Artagnan concedes, “but why would I want a stag?”

“Venison?” Porthos suggests.

“Rather have rabbit,” d’Artagnan admits. He braces himself for a farm boy joke – something about his uncultured palate, probably – but to his surprise none comes. Porthos simply launches straight into a tale of a rabbit stew he’d eaten at a tavern recently. Unsurprisingly, it ends in a bar fight somehow. More surprising is the way Aramis and Athos merely nod along.

D’Artagnan finds himself laughing at Porthos’ story along with them both, no farmboy jokes in sight. Maybe he’s starting to earn their respect.

They return to Paris at the end of a moderately successful trip. Now that the main events of Rochefort’s stay are concluded, court life begins to settle back into its usual tracks. Rochefort starts spending even more time behind closed doors, meeting with a select group of nobles and churchmen. Despite being his nominal guard d’Artagnan feels like he barely sees the Inquisitor.

D’Artagnan’s starting to get antsy, too. Rochefort’s stay in France has no particular end date, but no one had expected it to last more than two or three weeks. The Inquisitor is only pausing in Paris on his way to Rome. There may be no particular urgency for him to get there, but there must be a reason Rochefort decided to travel there in the first place, and soon enough he’ll get back on the road. With him will go d’Artagnan’s best chance to distinguish himself.

He finds himself scrutinizing the faces of the people who come to visit Rochefort, imagining that each of them might be the deadly enemy from which d’Artagnan could heroically rescue the Inquisitor. Of course, it might be better for throwbacks everywhere if Rochefort were killed. That puts d’Artagnan in something of a bind. He starts devising elaborate scenarios by which the Inquisitor is seemingly saved but dies a week later anyway. Possibly of a gut wound – something appropriately painful. And with d’Artagnan still being the hero.

Imagining it gives him something to do, anyway.

A few days later, though, d’Artagnan no longer needs his imagination to conjure up means by which a nobleman could die despite being surrounded by guards. Rochefort is still safe and sound under Athos’ squad’s protection, but all of Paris is buzzing with news of the death of Madame de Bois-Tracy. Details are still sketchy. She’d reportedly been travelling back to her estates from Paris – she’d attended the ball last week, one of a dozen dozen ladies whose names had been poured into d’Artagnan’s ear by his three companions – and been set upon by armed men. Everyone had been killed, from the lowest servant to the lady herself.
Brigands is the most commonly spoken explanation. The braver souls tell tales of court intrigue, alleging that Mme. de Bois-Tracy had involved herself in palace politics and gotten in over her head. Whispers in corners spin darker stories: she had been a spy, she had been being blackmailed, she had owed money to the wrong people who had killed her for failing to pay.

The King and Queen attend her funeral looking shocked and sad. The Cardinal makes noises about increasing the highway patrols. The Captain doesn’t offer an opinion on the matter, but shakes his head in response to a question Athos puts him in a voice too low for d’Artagnan to hear.

Rochefort makes his opinion on the matter known to everyone. This attack on a decent, law-abiding Beta noblewoman is nothing more nor nothing less than continued evidence that armed mobs of throwbacks continue to roam the countryside of France, dangerous and feral and out for blood. Everyone will be threatened until draconian measures are put in place.

He takes this version of events to the Queen, who says that of course she supports Toreno wholeheartedly but that her husband remains unconvinced. He takes it to Louis, who yawns and tells Rochefort he’s a bore. He takes it to the various nobles of Louis’ court, who are appropriately shocked in Rochefort’s presence but dismissive the moment he turns his back.

In what must be a fit of insanity, Rochefort even takes the matter up with Richelieu. The Inquisitor is so worked up he forgets to order the Musketeers to wait outside as he usually does. Standing out of the way against a wall of the Cardinal’s office, wishing he could just sink into it and disappear, d’Artagnan hears everything.

“I’ve been talking to everyone,” Rochefort says. He’s got a stack of papers in one hand and keeps waving them in Richelieu’s face, to the Cardinal’s obvious annoyance. “And I tracked down the criminal rolls and the old broadsheets, too. The conclusions are obvious!”

“That the throwbacks are about to rise up and murder us all?” Richelieu doesn’t look up. He’s engaged in writing in a small notebook; he’d been doing it when Rochefort had barged into his office in the Louvre and hadn’t bothered to stop.

“There have been three attacks in the capitol alone in the last year,” Rochefort is says forcefully. “There is rioting in the countryside. Louis won’t take me seriously, but he’ll listen to you. You have to help me persuade him that something should be done!”

(Of course,” Richelieu soothes. “I will represent the need for additional highway patrols and guards to him in the strongest possible terms – ”

“No, dammit!” Rochefort bangs his fist on Richelieu’s desk, making the papers – and d’Artagnan – jump. “Playing defense won’t do any good!”

The Cardinal merely looks up calmly. “Then what did you have in mind?”

“Force. Reprisal. We have to gut the Resistance – ”

“The official position of the Catholic Church is clear,” Richelieu scolds. “There is no such thing as the Resistance.”

“You and I both know that’s not the case,” Rochefort hisses.

“I know nothing of the sort,” Richelieu retorts. “I was sorry to hear of Madame Bois-Tracy’s death, but I hardly think that it’s the work of some hidden, united force of throwbacks.”

“Look past this single incident,” Rochefort urges. “The pattern is disturbing.”
“Are you sure you aren’t simply projecting?” Richelieu sets his pen aside and leans back in his chair. “There’s been a great deal more unrest in the United Provinces than in France lately.”

“It’s all part of the same thing! It may be farther along in the Dutch Republic, but – ”

Richelieu chuckles derisively. “My dear Comte, surely you need look no further than your country’s lax policy towards Inquisitorial enforcement to explain the unrest.”

“Your policy can hardly be said to be lax, Cardinal,” Rochefort says. Richelieu inclines his head in acceptance of the compliment, but Rochefort goes on. “How many incidents has France had in the past year?”

“I hardly think – ”

“Four attempted bombings, I hear?”

“Unsettled peasants, distressed by the poor harvest.”

“An assassination attempt against the King.”

“The enmity of the Rochellais does not require the existence of a Resistance to be explained. All the world knows their funding comes from heretical England, which still resists the Holy Inquisition.”

“Riots in Gascony!”

“The Gascons have been evading the sterilization laws,” Richelieu says coldly. “They are being brought to heel.”

D’Artagnan doesn’t flinch, but it’s a near thing.

Rochefort bangs his fist again on the Cardinal’s desk. “Richelieu, take off your blinders and look around you! The level of chaos in France is rising, just like that of the United Provinces. Everywhere there is fighting and civil unrest. There are more fires. More highwaymen on the roads. More murders and more disappearing people.”

“There is always crime in times of unrest,” Richelieu says dismissively. “And many of the victims are criminals themselves.”

“Many, but not all. Think, Cardinal. Surely you’re not blind to the trends. I tell you, it’s all part of a pattern! The increase in overall crime is masking an increase in targeted crime. Look at your victims. They are God-fearing nobles whose support bolsters the Inquisition’s power. Prominent merchants whose taxes fund your regime. Province officials who enforce the laws at the local level. All of them are at risk. You ignore these things at your peril!”

The door to Richelieu’s office opens. Two Red Guards appear.

“Your Eminence’s audience with the King,” one of the Guards says.

Richelieu rises to his feet. “Yes, I’m on my way.”


The Cardinal turns his head to study Rochefort. “I will consider it,” he says. Richelieu still doesn’t look terribly worried, but his tone is thoughtful.

“Do that,” Rochefort snarls. He lets the sleeve go and sweep from the room. The Guards step aside
to let him pass.

The Musketeers fall into step behind him.


“Well, he’ll see. When I unmask – he’ll finally see how deep the threat goes. No such thing as the Resistance. Pah! When I’ve proven Richelieu wrong I’ll finally have the power I need to act. Here and in Lille.”

D’Artagnan keeps his eyebrows from rising by a sheer effort of will. He focuses on keeping his footfalls even and his belt from jingling. Rochefort is in such a taking it’s like he’s forgotten the Musketeers are even there – d’Artagnan has no wish to remind him.

At the foot of the stairs Rochefort turns left, heading down a hallway d’Artagnan’s never seen before and stopping before a small, low doorway. D’Artagnan’s practically holding his breath in his determination not to make a sound and recall his presence to the Inquisitor. This could be it. His opportunity to prove his worth to the Musketeers. Old Gaston had implied that Captain Treville is a throwback. Aramis and Porthos certainly are. Athos is either a throwback himself or a sympathizer. Surely they’ll all appreciate knowing the plans of the Inquisitor of Lille – and the identity of the person Rochefort intends to unmask!

He can see it all in a burst of fervor. The Inquisitor’s plans revealed – and stopped. A life saved. Himself, d’Artagnan, admitted formally to the Musketeers. His future assured.

He’s so wrapped up in the vision that he nearly jumps out of his skin when Athos coughs loudly.

Rochefort spins, startled. He stares at the four of them with an expression that rapidly morphs to anger.

“What are you Musketeers still doing here?” he demands. “I told you to go back to your garrison!”

“No, you – ” d’Artagnan starts to say. The rest of his sentence is lost when Porthos accidentally takes one step too many and knocks into d’Artagnan’s back, temporarily winding him.

“Our apologies,” Athos says serenely. “We were unsure of your meaning.”

“Well, be sure!” Rochefort snaps. “Get out of here, and don’t come back until tomorrow morning.”

“As your Lordship wishes,” Athos agrees.

The three Musketeers bow; d’Artagnan copies them hastily. Then they all retreat. D’Artagnan sees his vision vanishing in a puff of smoke. He tries to drag his heels, but Aramis has a firm grip on d’Artagnan’s sleeve and Porthos is practically treading on d’Artagnan’s boots a step behind him. There’s no opportunity to delay.

The moment Aramis releases d’Artagnan – which happens to be when they’re out on the street – he whirls on his three companions. “What are you doing?” d’Artagnan demands. “Why did you draw his attention to the fact that we could hear him? Why didn’t you tell Rochefort he’d never ordered us away? Why did you hustle me out of there instead of trying to hang back and hear more?”

“We’d heard quite enough already,” Aramis says grimly.

“I beg to differ,” d’Artagnan says through gritted teeth.
“A man like Rochefort doesn’t share secrets willingly,” Porthos says.

“He’d have realized soon enough that we were still there,” Athos agrees. “Better to leave before we hear too much.”

“This way we minimize the damage,” Aramis says.

“And minimize the information gained,” d’Artagnan cries.

Something closes off behind Athos’ eyes. D’Artagnan feels it like a slamming door. Athos’ expression and pose never desert him; d’Artagnan hadn’t even realized how much Athos had apparently been opening up to him over the last fortnight, until it all vanishes in a single eyeblink.

D’Artagnan opens his mouth to try to say something – he’s not even sure what – but Athos cuts him off.

“Our job is to guard the King, not to spy on his visitors,” Athos says. He’s not being particularly cutting, but the absence of warmth in his tone stings nonetheless. “You still have a lot to learn, d’Artagnan.”

“Forget it,” Aramis intervenes, taking Athos by the shoulder and tugging him away. “Let’s just go back to the barracks.”

D’Artagnan ignores this. He sets his jaw mulishly and glares at Athos. “Your job is to guard the King, not to spy on his visitors,” he says. “I am not even a real novice. I have to do whatever I can to prove my worth!”

“You won’t accomplish it that way,” Athos says.

“Athos, let’s go,” Aramis insists. “Porthos –”

Porthos shakes his head. A silent look passes between Aramis and Porthos.

“You two go on,” Porthos says. “I think I need to visit the market. D’Artagnan will come with me.”

Aramis nods. “Perhaps that’s a good idea,” he says. “Athos?”

Athos doesn’t budge, even when Aramis tugs on his arm again. He just keeps looking at d’Artagnan. He obviously expects d’Artagnan to speak again, to defend himself.

D’Artagnan wants to. The words crowd up behind his tightly closed lips. It’s so easy for you, isn’t it? You’re secure in your place in the world, you haven’t anything to prove. Meanwhile I’m here on sufferance. I’m not as strong as any of you, I’ve no experience, my swordsmanship is apparently a joke – I’m following you all around like a puppy and the first thing everyone can see from my clothes is that I’m not really one of you. You look down on me but I have to take every chance, there’s nothing else for me to go back to or fall back on, only what I can earn with my hands and my mind and my willingness to work –

There’s no point. D’Artagnan had thought Athos would understand, but if he doesn’t, then there’s nothing d’Artagnan can say to change that. Some lessons have to come from life.

The silence stretches on. Just before it becomes uncomfortable, Athos uncrosses his arms and nods to Aramis. “Let’s go.”

The two of them walk off together. D’Artagnan watches them go forlornly until they turn the first corner and are lost.
“Come on,” Porthos says behind him.

D’Artagnan turns, regarding his companion warily. Porthos doesn’t sound as cold as Athos. But there’s still something wary in his stance that hadn’t been there before.

All his chances gone, just like that.

“Lead the way,” d’Artagnan makes himself say as calmly as possible. He’s desperately trying to think of a way forward. He’s failing.
The Four Musketeers

The market is quiet at this time of day, and Porthos doesn’t seem inclined to make his usual small-talk. Instead they walk through it in silence. Porthos doesn’t pause at any of the stalls, but D’Artagnan doesn’t bother to call the Musketeer on it. He can tell when he’s being gotten out of the way.

Really, he’d been a fool to think that a few weeks would be enough for any of the other Musketeers to count him as a friend. D’Artagnan has been trying to find acceptance among their ranks. He knows what he wants. But what do the three of them want? Do they want d’Artagnan to become a permanent fixture in their group? Or have his provincial manners and lack of swordsmanship inclined them against him? Do they even care?

They certainly don’t trust d’Artagnan. Don’t view him as one of their own. Why should they? He isn’t one of them. They’d fought together when they’d first met, but what does that really count for in the grand scheme of things?

D’Artagnan has nothing to convince them of his worth. Not even old Gaston’s letter. And that’s a sore point, too. He’d told the Captain the story of Wissous. And d’Artagnan had thought that the Captain had believed him. But on reexamination this belief seems absurd. If the Captain had believed d’Artagnan, he’d have admitted d’Artagnan to the regiment. Instead Treville had only offered him a trial. Based, d’Artagnan well knows, on the contents of the second letter. Perhaps Treville has been waiting to see what else d’Artagnan might say and do. When Treville realizes that d’Artagnan is only the naïve dupe of the woman in Wissous, he’ll show d’Artagnan the door – probably with an insincere expression of thanks and a suggestion that d’Artagnan not return.

Dreams of glory aside, D’Artagnan’s best chance has probably always been to convince his three provisional squadmates that he, d’Artagnan, has some qualities worth respecting. But he’d let himself get distracted by ambition. And so he seems to have instead convinced them that he’s an eavesdropper and a sneak.

Not to mention a poor swordsman and a worse wrestler. Athos and Aramis are probably back at the barracks right now telling Treville that, despite their efforts, d’Artagnan simply isn’t Musketeer material.

In the market-square, a donkey brays. It startles d’Artagnan out of his fugue. But after a moment it becomes apparent that it’s just the animal being annoyed by having to pull a large load, not a sign of trouble about to start. D’Artagnan sighs, rolling his neck to crack it. Just his luck. At least a fight would have given him something to do.

D’Artagnan scans the crowd again, hopefully. Nothing. Peace and prosperity all around. The mercer’s shop across the way has its doors flung open and a large roll of fabric is being carried out. The greengrocer is hawking her wares in a screeching voice that’s giving d’Artagnan a headache. And the chandler is haggling over a parcel of candlesticks with a woman in a blue cloak.

D’Artagnan’s gaze, already sliding past the woman, catches on her cloak and snaps back. He studies her more closely. Her back is to him; he can’t see her face. Her hair is bound under a red kerchief, but a few black curls escape.

Can it be?

He has to remind himself that many women in France wear blue cloaks. Many women in France
have dark hair. And to see the woman of Wissous again, in this particular market-square, would be too big a coincidence to occur.

*But then again, how much of a coincidence was it that she was there in Wissous at the right time and the right place? Too big of one. Or else none at all.*

“*I’m going to take a leak,*” d’Artagnan says abruptly to his companion.

“*Don’t wander far,*” Porthos says repressively.

D’Artagnan nods an acknowledgement. Then he begins making his way through the crowd.

It’s slow going. Foot traffic may be light, but the square is jammed with carts. D’Artagnan’s not more than halfway across when the woman in the blue cloak concludes her purchase and tucks the candles away. D’Artagnan suppresses the urge to swear and tries to increase his pace, hoping the woman has more shopping to do.

She doesn’t seem to. She walks two stalls down to one of the alleys leading away from the square, and d’Artagnan thinks he’s about to lose her. But just before she goes down it she turns her head and looks d’Artagnan directly in the eyes.

*It’s she. There’s no mistaking it. And she tips her head very slightly, a clear invitation, before disappearing down the alley.*

It takes d’Artagnan another minute to make it to the mouth of the alley. By the time he does, the woman is no longer in sight. He hesitates, casting a look back at Porthos. The Musketeer is distracted by two carts that seem to be on a collision course.

*No opportunity is without danger,* he reminds himself.

Making a decision, he slips into the alley.

A soft hand touches his shoulder. He whirls around and finds himself face to face with the woman of Wissous.

“*Hello, d’Artagnan,*” she says. “*I see you followed my advice.*”

“*Much good it did me,*” he says, heart beating fast.

“*It seems to have done you a lot of good. Aren’t you a novice now?*”

“*A trial novice,*” d’Artagnan spits. “*And probably not for much longer. I need my original letter back!*”

The woman shakes her head. “*That letter was dangerous for you, d’Artagnan. It’s safely burnt now.*”

“*Burnt! No, it can’t be!*”

“I *told you it was dangerous,*” the woman snaps. “*You don’t want it back, believe me. I have something better for you anyway.*”

Glancing over her shoulder first, she pulls another note out from her cloak.

“*Oh, great,*” d’Artagnan says bitterly. “*I didn’t come to Paris to be your mule, my lady. Nor did I come to be laughed at by the Musketeers!*”
“This will help you,” the lady says.

“I don’t need any more of your help,” d’Artagnan hisses.

“Don’t be a fool. Don’t you see that the problem is the Musketeers doesn’t trust you?”

“I can see that well enough. What I don’t see is how bringing him another mysterious letter is going to help my case.”

“That’s because you’re not thinking broadly enough.” The woman smiles. “Come now. Aren’t you going to follow my advice?”

“I did! And look where it’s gotten me!”

“It looks like it’s gotten you exactly where it needs to be,” the woman says. “Safely under the protection of the Musketeers.”

“I don’t – protection?”

“Surely you’ve realized that the Musketeers don’t hand out trials to every boy from the countryside who weaves an amusing tale. You’re where you are for a reason, d’Artagnan. Don’t start doubting me now.”

D’Artagnan glares.

The woman laughs a little. “Come now. You haven’t anything to lose anyway. So tell me: what advice did I give you?”

He probably doesn’t have anything left to lose. “You told me to come to Paris,” d’Artagnan recounts grudgingly. “To give the letter to Captain Treville. Which I did – ”

“Yes, yes, and you feel quite ill-used because he didn’t offer you a lieutenancy outright.” The woman waves her hand dismissively. “What else did I say?”

d’Artagnan pauses. He’s still angry, but now he’s curious, too. Almost despite himself he finds himself racking his brain for the necessary information.

“You told me to ask you about the sign of the red wavy line,” he says slowly.

“That’s right.” The woman looks around her, carefully. Then she reaches down her cleavage and pulls out a necklace. On it is strung a single bead. D’Artagnan stares at it until the woman laughs.

D’Artagnan flushes again. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“Don’t be,” she replies. “it’s a useful reflex to have in your position.” She removes the chain from her neck entirely and opens it. The bead slides into her palm. “Look,” she instructs.

D’Artagnan looks. The bead is circular and approximately coin-sized. It’s painted matte black and bisected with a red wavy line.

“That’s what you meant?” he asks, disappointed. “You were talking about your jewelry?”

The woman holds out her hand. “Take it,” she says.

“Why?”
“Because you’re going to follow my advice one last time. Listen. Take the token and the letter. Bring them to your Captain.”

“And I suppose that will solve all my problems,” he mutters.

“No, Charles,” the woman says gently. D’Artagnan’s head snaps up at the use of his Christian name. The woman’s gaze is fixed on him; the pressure of her eyes catches his and holds him still. There’s something sad and compassionate in her gaze. “I’m afraid that all this token will do is change out your existing problems for new ones. Considerably more serious ones at that.”

“Then why?” d’Artagnan demands. “Why give it to me?”

“Because I have no choice,” she says simply. “I need this letter to get to Treville as quickly as possible. And I need it to be believed when it gets there.”

“And you can’t take it yourself because…”

The woman’s smile is rueful. “I think you can guess why,” she says. “You’re in danger just from having been seen with me in Wissous. I daren’t be seen in Paris.”

A different thought strikes d’Artagnan. He reaches out and touches the chit, gently. “Is this…” he whispers. He has to stop and clear his throat. “Is this what I think it is?”

“That depends on what you think it is,” the woman says cheekily. She tilts her hand, and the token falls into d’Artagnan’s open palm. With her other hand she holds out the letter.

“On the plus side,” the woman says, glancing quickly over her shoulder, “this will pretty much guarantee your commission.”

“That’s something at least,” d’Artagnan mutters, hopeful but unwilling to show it.

Then a sudden suspicion strikes him. “That’s at least the third time you’ve looked around behind you,” he adds. “Are you by any chance…”

“About to use you as a distraction again?” The woman gives him a rueful smile. “I’m afraid so.”

“Now wait just a second,” he sputters.

“d’Artagnan!” a voice shouts. Porthos.

“Your friend is coming,” the woman says. “The two of you should have no problem handling this.”

“You can’t just keep dumping problems on me!” d’Artagnan cries.

“D’Artagnan!” Porthos bellows again, much closer. D’Artagnan spins automatically. Then realization hits him and he turns back again –

Surprise, surprise. The woman is gone.

“D’Artagnan.” He turns again, and Porthos is striding into the alley, looking furious. “What are you – look out!”

d’Artagnan decides to blame the fact that he keeps turning back and forth on his sudden dizziness. Otherwise he’d have to admit it’s caused by the blow he takes to the back of the head, and that wouldn’t look good for his chances of being a Musketeer. Letter or no second mysterious letter.
He lets the blow propel him a few steps back towards Porthos, converting its force into momentum and taking some of the edge off. Porthos, for his part, takes a few steps forward so that he and d’Artagnan are side by side.

“You don’t want to do this,” Porthos says warningly to the group of half-a-dozen footpads who had snuck up behind d’Artagnan. Porthos places his hand on his sword-hilt, which also coincidentally makes his pauldron clear and obvious. “We’re Musketeers. Leave now and I won’t – ”

The lead footpad charges, followed by his compatriots. Apparently he’s not impressed.

D’Artagnan doesn’t even bother to go for his sword. He’s far more comfortable with his fists, and besides, in the close quarters of the alley there’s no room for fancy thrusts. Instead he lowers his head and rams his shoulder right into the soft fleshy stomach of the first man to come close enough. That footpad sits down hard, and d’Artagnan dodges around him to kick the next one in the genitals. An uppercut to the jaw knocks that one reeling.

The third one has a knife.

Porthos, at d’Artagnan’s side, has already laid one man flat with a single solid blow and is in a fair way to doing the same with a second. The one d’Artagnan had head-butted lurches to his feet, but Porthos kicks him in the gut a second time without even looking back. The man collapses, vomiting this time.

All right, d’Artagnan thinks, taking a careful step back. One footpad with a knife. You can do this.

The man takes a test swipe. D’Artagnan dodges easily enough. But that seems to give the footpad d’Artagnan’s measure, and he comes back in with a flurry of blows that are difficult to dodge in the confined quarters. D’Artagnan manages it at the cost of a minor scrape up his left arm. He swears and tries to draw his sword, but has to jump back before he can finish the motion. He lands awkwardly as his foot contacts the vomiting footpad. Scrabbling for balance, d’Artagnan stumbles back against the wall and doesn’t get his arms up in time. In the moment his guard is down – Athos was right, he thinks in dismay – the footpad stabs him neatly in the side.

There’s a furious roar, and suddenly the footpad with the knife is gone – thrown clear down the alley by a furious Porthos who suddenly seems ten feet tall and twice as broad. All of the remaining footpads charge him, but they all bounce off the Musketeer. Porthos bellows in anger, laying out fearsome blows right and left.

D’Artagnan tunes them all out. Instead he focuses on the wound, pressing his hands to it, bizarrely fascinated by the blood that stains his hands. He’s on the ground now. He doesn’t remember sitting down.

Dimly he hears the sounds of men fleeing. There’s more than one set of pounding footsteps, so the retreat must belong to their enemies. This is confirmed a moment later when Porthos squats down next to d’Artagnan and swears.

“D’Artagnan, lad, are you all right?” One of Porthos’ hands presses over his. The other touches d’Artagnan’s forehead, pries open one of his eyes – when had it gotten closed? – and peers worriedly at him. “Don’t pass out on me. Here, let me look.”

He coaxes d’Artagnan’s hands away from the wound and inspects it. Then he takes off his baldric, wads it up, and presses it against the wound. “Hold that there,” Porthos instructs. “Now, I’m going to help you stand.”
“Dizzy,” d’Artagnan manages.

“That’s just the blood loss,” Porthos says reassuringly. “First real wound, eh? Not to worry. Some stitches and a few days in bed will see you right as rain.”

D’Artagnan’s vision whites out briefly when Porthos hauls him to his feet. He must stagger, though he’s barely aware of it, because he blinks back to reality with one arm slung around Porthos’ shoulders and his whole body slumped against his squadmate.

“That’s it,” Porthos encourages. “One step at a time. We’ll take the back alleys, get you stitched up –”

Stitched up. Stitches. D’Artagnan finds new strength and drags his feet to a halt. “No doctors,” he pants in sudden fear. They’ll see. They’ll know. The wound is on his side but not too far from his stomach – if it’s deep enough to expose –

Porthos. Porthos is with him. Porthos is a throwback, Porthos will understand.

“I can’t –” d’Artagnan gasps. “I’m not –”

“Shh,” Porthos soothes. “It’s all right. No doctors. Aramis is a deft hand with a needle. He’ll fix you up, all right?”

“Aramis,” d’Artagnan murmurs. Yes, that will be all right. Aramis is like him.

“That’s right,” Porthos says in some amusement. “Just relax, lad. We’ll take care of you.”

“Athos?” d’Artagnan tries to say. He means to ask, what will Athos think? He means to ask, does Athos know? He means to ask, will Athos think less of me for being an Omega? Athos doesn’t seem to think less of Aramis, but there’s a long history between them. D’Artagnan is just the young puppy from the countryside who had only been beginning to gain his respect, and who’d apparently lost it completely mere hours before.

“Athos won’t betray you any more than Aramis or I would,” Porthos says reassuringly. He looks like he starts to say something else, then bites his tongue.

Maybe Porthos just means that Athos wouldn’t betray anyone who’s wounded and in his care. Maybe it’s foolish for d’Artagnan to interpret that as a specific declaration of support for d’Artagnan in particular. But he’s bleeding from a wound in his side that’s going to require stitches, and dizzy besides from blood loss, so d’Artagnan figures he’s entitled to interpret that in whatever way he likes best.

“Good,” he pants.

“Come on then,” Porthos repeats. “One foot in front of the other.”

D’Artagnan obeys. Somehow they move.

He doesn’t remember much of the journey back to the barracks. Fortunately they’re not far, though as far as d’Artagnan is concerned they might as well be in the colonies. He just focuses on putting one foot ahead of the other, as Porthos reminds him, and lets his companion handle the directions. For a while he floats in a not-entirely-unpleasant haze of greying vision and endorphins.

He’s jolted out of it by the shock of a wooden bench under his rear and the sudden loss of the support of Porthos’ arm.
“Aramis!” Porthos bellows. It’s far too close to d’Artagnan’s ear for comfort. Or maybe it’s just that everything seems louder somehow.

There’s no immediate answer. D’Artagnan gathers his strength and looks around the practice yard. He sees other Musketeers, but not his squadmates. Several of those other Musketeers have stopped to stare, and one or two are running off towards other parts of the garrison.

“Aramis!” Porthos shouts again. Something catches at the end of d’Artagnan’s vision. A door opening. Then Aramis appears.

“What?” the elegant Musketeer demands. Then he spots d’Artagnan. “¡Joder!”

“Grab your kit?” Porthos asks.

Aramis vanishes back through the door. Athos appears in his place and runs out towards them.

“Is it serious?” Athos demands. Without waiting for an answer he drops to his knees in front of d’Artagnan and pries at d’Artagnan’s hands, looking for himself.

D’Artagnan smiles involuntarily. Athos is worried about him. It’s nice.


“Did it hit anything major?”

Porthos shrugs. “Aramis will have a look.”

Athos looks around the practice yard. “Not here,” he hisses.


This time it takes both Athos and Porthos to help d’Artagnan stand. Between them they half-carry, half-drag him up the stairs to his quarters. Not for the first time, d’Artagnan appreciates Porthos’ strength.

Although, actually, Athos is doing just as much work as Porthos. That’s impressive. D’Artagnan’s hand moves of its own accord, touching the muscles of Athos’ arm, imagining the strength coiled there. Alpha, some half-heard instinct whispers in d’Artagnan’s mind. Protect. Safe.

“What are you doing?” Athos asks, keeping his voice down.

“You’re strong,” d’Artagnan tells him seriously. It’s possible that he’s lost more blood than he’s realized.

“You’re delirious,” Athos says, confirming this fear.

“Probably,” d’Artagnan admits. “Still nice.”

Porthos makes a sound oddly between a cough and a sneeze. Athos glares at him. D’Artagnan smiles, letting his head fall back to rest against Athos’ shoulder.

A shift, a spin, and d’Artagnan is on his bunk. He protests the loss of his companions, but his protests are silenced a moment later when Athos’ cool hands settle on his hips.

“Alpha?” he murmurs, not even realizing what he’s saying until Athos’ whole expression freezes.
D’Artagnan’s wits return in a rush of clarity, and he opens his mouth again, ready to say whatever it takes to walk that back.

But Athos nods. It’s miniscule, and if d’Artagnan hadn’t been watching for it he’d’ve missed it, but he is and he doesn’t.

Something unclenches in d’Artagnan’s chest. Safe, his instincts repeat. He feels himself relax.

“Good, hold him down just there,” Aramis instructs. Then he starts to lift the wadded-up baldric from d’Artagnan’s wound. D’Artagnan groans at the first tug and tries to flinch back.

Athos’ fingers flex around d’Artagnan’s hips, keeping him still. For the first time d’Artagnan feels their true strength. He has a sudden flash of Athos’ hands holding his hips down for an entirely different reason and has to swallow.

“I’ll need some water,” Aramis says over his shoulder to Porthos.

The big Musketeer nods and goes out of the room.

“What happened?” Athos asks d’Artagnan.

“Footpads,” d’Artagnan says.

Athos and Aramis exchange a look. “Footpads attacked a Musketeer and a novice?”

D’Artagnan feels a burst of warmth at the word novice. Not probationary, and certainly not get-out-of-here-we-don’t-want-you. Novice. It has a nice ring to it. Not as nice as Musketeer, of course, but one thing at a time –

“D’Artagnan?” Athos prompts. Right. He’d been asked a question.

“They were chasing the woman,” d’Artagnan explains vaguely. “She used me as a distraction. Again.” He’s starting to get a little tired of it. But at least in this case it’s supposed to be to his benefit, too. Which reminds him. He starts to reach towards the letter in his vest-pocket.

Athos catches his hand. “Don’t twist that way,” he scolds. “What is it?”

D’Artagnan blinks. He shouldn’t – should he? The woman had said to give the letter to Treville. She hadn’t said anything about Athos. But maybe that’s just because she doesn’t know Athos. She’d trust him if she knew him. Surely it’s all right to ask Athos to give Treville the letter?

“’S for the Captain,” d’Artagnan says doubtfully.

Aramis and Athos exchange a quick look.

“What is, d’Artagnan?” Aramis prompts.

D’Artagnan tries to think. The woman had said it’s urgent. Who knows how long it will be before Aramis lets him out of bed? Maybe he can get the Captain to come visit him and give it to him then. But what if the Musketeers throw him out before then? He has to convince them to let him stay, and they already don’t trust him.

“Tell me,” Athos encourages gently.

D’Artagnan gazes up at him wistfully. Athos is looking at him again. He really doesn’t want Athos to stop looking at him. D’Artagnan just wants to curl up with Athos and feel safe. Protected. Even
Surely it’s okay to trust Athos.

“Another letter,” he mumbles. “In my vest-pocket.”

Athos reaches in slowly and extracts the letter. As he does, the token falls out onto the bed.

“Aramis?” Porthos calls. The door opens and Porthos reappears, this time bearing a bucket. “Here’s your water.”

“Put it down here,” Aramis directs.

“What’s this?” Athos picks up the small item that had fallen from d’Artagnan’s pocket. He looks down at it and his eyes widen.

“Proof,” d’Artagnan manages. He intends to explain further, but his tongue feels suddenly very thick in his mouth.


“Hush!” Aramis says sternly. “He’s passing out.”

“Then stop him!”

“Better he’s unconscious for the stitching,” Aramis disagrees. “It’s just blood loss, Athos, he’ll be fine. D’Artagnan, relax. Go to sleep.”

D’Artagnan doesn’t want to go to sleep. He wants to keep watching Athos watching him. Being worried about him. But the tide of darkness is too strong. He falls into it backwards and it sweeps him away.

Aramis waits for d’Artagnan to finish passing out. Then he soaks the baldric off, exposing a cut about three inches long that’s mostly crusted over on its own. He has to wet another rag to swipe the dried blood away and get at the underlying wound. A few moments pass as Aramis examines it, during which time Athos has to press his lips together very firmly to stop from demanding to know how serious it is.

Instead he studies the youth in the bed. In sleep, d’Artagnan sheds his assumed gravity and looks like the puppy he’s only recently grown out of being. Athos feels something in his chest wrench at the sight. It’s odd that he should be affected: d’Artagnan is nothing like Thomas. And it’s been years now since every youth on the streets had made him think of his odem.

Still, it must be Thomas who is on Athos’ mind. The feeling stealing over him must be a fraternal one. D’Artagnan is barely past puppyhood, at least ten years Athos’ junior in age, and probably more so in experience. Any other sort of feeling would be wrong.

“Nice and clean,” Aramis says finally, looking up from the wound in satisfaction. “Sharp knife. Missed anything major. Stitches, bed rest, light food for a few days. He’ll be fine.”

These last words are delivered directly to Athos. Athos scowls and looks away. He hadn't been worried. He just didn’t want to have to go to Treville and explain that he’d gotten the novice – provisional novice – seriously injured under his watch, that’s all. After Treville had placed d’Artagnan with them to keep him safe. Unless he’s a spy, of course, in which case –
“What’s the letter?” Porthos interrupts, pointing to the folded paper still in Athos’ hand.

Athos looks down, examining it. “He says the woman gave it to him,” Athos answers. “Right before the footpads jumped him. You didn’t see it happen?”

“No,” Porthos says grimly. “D’Artagnan said he was going off to take a leak. I was watching, but I lost sight of him for a minute in the crowd. When I found him again he was in an alley, about to be attacked.”

“He said the woman used him for a distraction.”

“What woman?” Aramis asks.

“I assume this is a continuation of the tale of the woman from Wissous,” Athos says after a moment’s consideration. “Another letter; another meeting with the mysterious woman. D’Artagnan did say the woman used him again.”

“And there’s still not a shred of proof this woman actually exists,” Porthos says in disgust.

“He did get stabbed this time,” Aramis murmurs, mostly focused on his needlework.

“A clean wound that won’t even leave a scar,” Porthos scoffs. “Any spy worth their salt would do as much and more.”

“But we do have proof,” Athos says. He holds up the chit that had fallen from d’Artagnan’s pocket. It’s an exact copy of the one Athos, Porthos and Aramis all carry. The token of the Underground.

Porthos and Aramis digest this in silence.

“D’Artagnan’s definitely a throwback,” Aramis adds after a moment. “Not that there was much doubt. But I was just making sure that knife didn’t nick his left ovary.”

Athos and Porthos both nod. D’Artagnan’s good about hiding his scent, in that they’ve never caught a whiff of Omega on him. But while the overpowering smell of shit probably hadn’t raised any red flags living as a farmer in the country, it’s unusual here in Paris. They’ll have to do something about that, if – as now seems likely – d’Artagnan’s story is proven true. He’s skating by at the moment on the virtue of his country manners and farmer’s clothing. But a Musketeer novice is expected to smell like he bathes at least weekly.

“You’d better take that letter to the Captain,” Porthos says.

Aramis nods his agreement without looking up. “This will be a while longer,” he adds. “Bring back some soup when you come – d’Artagnan will be hungry when he wakes. Nothing too heavy, mind.”

Athos frowns. He wants to suggest that Porthos go instead and he stay with d’Artagnan. But he can’t come up with a good reason for that. Athos is the leader of their squad; it’s his duty to report to the Captain. D’Artagnan is in his particular care. Besides, where Aramis is, Porthos stays. That leaves Athos to go and talk to Treville.

“All right,” he says, getting to his feet unwillingly. “But if something changes –”

“Athos, you’re talking like you’ll be gone all day,” Porthos says in amusement. “What do you think is going to change in an hour?”

Athos glares. “Still.”
Aramis flicks him a glance, mirth tugging at the corners of his mouth. “We’ll let you know if anything changes,” he soothes.

“Fine,” Athos growls. He sweeps out of the room with his head high, and tries to ignore the distinct feeling that he’s just been patronized.

The Captain is in his office, as Athos had expected. And Treville must be expecting Athos in his turn, because as soon as he sees Athos he motions Athos in and sets aside the report he’d been reading.

“What do you have for me?” he demands.

Athos raises one eyebrow, but contents himself with handing over the letter and the token. Treville closes his hand around the token and tears open the letter. He reads it quickly. Then he closes his eyes and lets out a long, slow breath.

“You were expecting a message, then?” Athos says.

“I was,” Treville says, opening his eyes again. He gets up from his desk and walks over to the fire, where he burns the letter in its entirety, not stopping until the last scrap is ash.

“Bad news,” Athos surmises.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

Treville doesn’t answer right away. Instead he says, “How did you get that letter?”

Athos relates the tale as he understands it. He’d already told the Captain about what he and the other Musketeers had overheard Rochefort say, and how d’Artagnan had been far too eager to eavesdrop. Athos had been almost convinced that d’Artagnan really is an Inquisition spy. It had surprised Athos how much that had hurt. Somehow, when he hadn’t been paying attention, the bright-eyed, eager not-quite-novice from Gascony had snuck into Athos’ small pack and brightened up an otherwise grey existence. Athos had had no intention of getting attached, but somehow he had anyway.

Treville had been understanding but firm. Athos had been ordered to collect d’Artagnan again and keep him in the barracks until Treville ordered otherwise. Their guard duty had been cancelled until further notice. Treville would be considering what is to be done.

The Captain had probably expected Athos’ visit to his office to be a report that d’Artagnan is safely corralled and they’re awaiting further orders. Instead Athos explains what d’Artagnan had told them about meeting the woman in the marketplace, the subsequent fight, and the letter that now exists only as ashes in the fireplace.


“Good,” Treville says. “He’s in danger now more than ever. And the three of you, too, since I’ve now placed you together where people can see. Take particular care from now on.”

“Captain,” Athos says slowly. “What was in that letter?”

Treville doesn’t answer right away. He looks into the fireplace, apparently deep in thought. Athos
watches him and realizes suddenly how old the Captain actually is. Most of the time Treville seems like a rock, eternal and unchanging. But in the flickering firelight, lines of worry deepening around his eyes, he suddenly looks ancient.

“Rochefort,” the Captain says at last.

Athos nods slowly. They’d discussed this briefly when Athos and Aramis had reported on the conversation they’d overheard.

“Do you know who his target it?” Athos asks. “Is that what the letter told you?”

Treville grimaces. “I knew that already.”

“You did?” Athos stiffens. “Why didn’t you tell us when you assigned us to him?”

“Calm, Athos. I didn’t know it then. I knew it as soon as you did.”

“I did? I still don’t know his target!”

“That’s because you’re not thinking.” Treville goes back to his desk and sits down wearily. “Too hung up on d’Artagnan, I think.”

Athos bristles. “What am I missing, then?” he demands.

Treville spread his hands. “Rochefort is an experienced Inquisitor with decades of experience. He’s dangerous, canny, and resourceful.”

“That’s right,” Athos says. “So?”

“So earlier today you were in my office, earnestly telling me about something you overheard him say.”

“No one is immune to eavesdropping,” Athos says.

“No,” Treville agrees, “but they probably know better than to mutter their secret plans out loud in front of an audience they’ve conveniently forgotten is present.”

Athos, in the act, of speaking farther, freezes. His thoughts skim back over today’s events. Once he sets aside everything involving d’Artagnan – which, to his shame, is much of what’s on his mind – Treville’s implication becomes devastatingly clear.

“Rochefort wanted us to hear that,” Athos says in horror. “But why?”

“What would you do with the information?”

“Give it to you, of course.” Athos’ eyes widen. “You don’t think – ”

“I’m very much afraid I do think,” Treville says grimly.

Athos instinctively looks around him, checking for danger even though they’re secure in Treville’s office. “He suspects you?” This is bad. There aren’t even words for how bad this is.

“More than suspects.” Treville gestures to the fire and the ashes of the letter he’d burnt. “He knows. He can’t prove it yet, but he knows.”

Athos gropes his way for a spare chair and sinks down into it. His thoughts spin in a dozen
Finally he asks, “Then why hasn’t Rochefort done anything about it?”

Treville gives Athos a pitying look. “He just did.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

Treville nods slowly, leaning back in his chair. “You mean, why hasn’t he denounced me?”

“Rochefort’s a full Inquisitor; he doesn’t need ironclad proof. The only thing stopping him from denouncing anyone he pleases is the political consequences of being proved wrong. If he has reason to believe he won’t be wrong in your case – ”

“Think, Athos. If I were his target, why would he make sure you knew it?”

Athos frowns. “To frighten you?” Even to his own ears it sounds weak. Treville doesn’t frighten easily. Besides, cornered prey is potentially deadly prey. Why give advance warning? Why take the chance that the prey might escape, or turn the tables on you?

Treville shakes his head. “Think,” he repeats. “You overhear him – you come straight to me. And then I – ”

“Go straight to someone else,” Athos says in sudden understanding. “Rochefort hasn’t denounced you because you aren’t his target.”

“He believes he has bigger fish to fry,” Treville says wryly.

“The rest of the Underground?” That’s more plausible, but only if Rochefort believes that Treville has superiors to whom he might report. If Rochefort knows that Treville’s in the innermost circle he’d have no reason to hesitate. Treville alone probably knows enough to dismantle the entire Underground. All Rochefort would need would be free rein and enough time. The Captain won’t be easy to break, but everyone has their limits. Then Rochefort would have the names of everyone else who leads the Underground, and could destroy them all.

It would make sense if Rochefort doesn’t know the position Treville holds in the Underground. But Athos doesn’t underestimate the Inquisitor that way. So what? What might he be unsure of extracting from Treville? What might be –

Athos’ eyebrows shoot straight to his hairline.

“Your mate,” he says out loud. “Rochefort expects you to go tell your mate.”

Treville nods.

Of course. And that just confirms something else Athos has suspected for a long time.

“Your mate runs the Underground,” he breathes.

It makes sense. It all makes sense – Treville’s connections, his access to suppressants, his position in the inner circle. A dozen small things line up in support.

And it explains why Rochefort doesn’t just denounce Treville and torture the identity of the leader of the Underground out of him. It’s biologically difficult for a throwback to betray their mate. Even after the mind and spirit break, the mate-bond remains intact.
Rochefort has a problem that Treville alone can’t solve. If Treville manages to withhold the identity of his mate, Rochefort would be still be able to destroy the current Underground, but its core could remain intact to begin again.

“So that’s the game.” Athos leans back in the chair, nodding slowly to himself. “That’s the information Rochefort doesn’t think he could torture out of you.”

“I’d die first,” Treville says with a simplicity that’s chilling. “And that’s not good enough for the Inquisitor. If he got me, he could take down most of the Underground, true – but not the part he really needs.”

“He needs to pull it out by the roots.”

“And so you see, I’m perfectly safe.” Treville’s smile is entirely free of mirth. “Right up until the moment Rochefort gets what he wants.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“We? Nothing.”

Athos straightens. “Nothing –”

Treville shakes his head. “Athos, you’re a fine soldier and an excellent operative. Who knows how many lives you’ve saved? But this is over your head.”

“This isn’t about cells and circles and compartments of information,” Athos says hotly. “This is about a threat to your life. And that’s never going to be over my head.”

Treville’s face softens. “Thank you,” he says. “You don’t know how much I appreciate that. But you must understand how delicate this situation is.”

“I understand that we’re not going to charge his dwelling with swords drawn and muskets firing,” Athos says. “But whatever the plan is, I want in on it.”

“Right now there is no plan,” the Captain says. “Right now it’s a waiting game. Rochefort expects me to lead him to my mate. I won’t do it. But that makes it difficult to strategize.”

“So how will you get around that?” Athos’ mind starts spinning. “With enough intermediaries –”

“Rochefort is leaving Paris at the end of the week.”

“What?” Athos blinks. “Why would he leave now?”

“Because his snare is set, and now his presence will only delay matters. Once he’s gone –”

“You’ll feel secure enough to open communications.”

“Or so Rochefort thinks.”

Treville nods. “Or so he thinks.”

“But if you can’t communicate –”

“It’s a game of cat-and-mouse,” Treville says. “And I’m the mouse. I have to be careful, and not move too quickly. Athos, when there is a plan, I promise to let you in on it, all right? At least as much as I can. But right now what I need from you – what I need from all of you – is to do nothing.
To not betray in any way that we suspect what might be going on.”

“You expect us to just go on doing our duties as if nothing had happened,” Athos says.

Treville nods.

“For how long?”

“For as long as it takes.” Treville shrugs. “Rochefort really is on his way to Rome. He was summoned; he can’t ignore that. It’s another month’s journey there, a month’s journey back – and who knows how long he’ll have to stay? We may spend a year maneuvering before anything comes to a head.”

Athos imagines living for a year with an axe hanging above his Captain’s neck and shudders. Then he imagines living for a year with an axe hanging over his own neck – his own and his pack’s and everything he’s built – and shudders again, harder, on Treville’s behalf.

“Will you be able to do it?” Treville wants to know.

Athos gives the question the consideration it deserves. He doesn’t want to answer too quickly and place himself in a false position. But in the end there’s only one answer he can give.

“Yes,” Athos says firmly. And he fully acknowledges that, with that word, he’s swearing to do whatever it takes to protect his Captain – and everyone under his Captain’s command, both in the Musketeers and the Underground.

“Thank you,” Treville says gravely.

“I’ve done a lot of dangerous things at your order,” Athos says in resignation. “And yet I think this might be the hardest.”

“Just think how it feels to be in my position,” Treville says ruefully.

Athos has nothing to say to that. A brief silence falls, freighted with tension and concern.

Eventually Athos shrugs stiffly. “I’d better go back and check on d’Artagnan,” he mutters. Then he looks up suddenly. “You do think – about d’Artagnan – he isn’t –”

“No, I’m no longer worried he’s a spy,” Treville says. “Ella wouldn’t give him her token if she weren’t sure.”

“And you trust Ella?” Athos has to be sure. For his squad, he tells himself. For his pack. For the Captain’s safety. And since all of those are true, there’s no need for him to consider any other reasons Athos needs to be sure d’Artagnan can be trusted.

“Completely,” the Captain says. “I’ll add d’Artagnan’s name to the novice rolls. He can stay with your squad. You seem to have formed a rapport. And I don’t want to risk another squad by associating them with him.”

“Good,” Athos says. In spite of the dangerous situation they find themselves in, relief is sudden and complete. D’Artagnan can be trusted. D’Artagnan is safe. D’Artagnan will stay with them.

“You can tell him the good news yourself,” Treville adds.

“All right. Thank you. And watch your back.”
“I will,” Treville says.

Athos turns to go.

“Athos,” Treville calls. The Captain tosses something to Athos, who catches it reflexively. It proves to be the token Ella had handed d’Artagnan at their last meeting. The token of the Underground.

“For d’Artagnan?” Athos asks.

“For d’Artagnan,” the Captain nods. “And Athos – you might want to consider apologizing to him.”

Athos starts to say that it isn’t necessary. Now that the danger is past, D’Artagnan will never have to know that the others had doubted him.

Treville smiles sadly. “I think you’ll find he does know,” he says gently. “I think you’ll find it hurt him.”

“He takes things too seriously,” Athos mutters.

“Like someone else I know,” the Captain murmurs. He holds up a hand to forestall Athos’ objection. “Just say you’re sorry, all right? And watch his reaction.”

“All right,” Athos says, already turning away again. D’Artagnan is waiting for him.
The conversation Athos has just had with Treville leaves him worried – even afraid. But preoccupied as Athos is, he still doesn’t forget to swing by the mess and collect a bowl of broth for d’Artagnan. Godeau is somewhat mystified by Athos’ request at first but becomes immediately understanding when Athos explains about d’Artagnan’s wound.

“Take these too,” Godeau advises, pressing two fresh-baked rolls onto Athos. With another hand he reaches for a bowl and starts filling it up. “They’ll help settle the stomach. You’re looking after him?”

“My squad is taking care of d’Artagnan, yes,” Athos says. He’s surprised by Godeau’s attitude; the Musketeers’ purveyor is notoriously tight-fisted.

“That’s a good lad there,” Godeau says, adding another ladleful of broth to the already-full bowl. “Scours out the dishes proper when he’s on KP. And never forgets the spoons. Not like you highborn lads.” Godeau squints at the bowl and nods in satisfaction, then claps a lid over it and hands the lot to Athos. “If you need anything else come back,” he directs, shooing Athos towards the door. “Don’t matter if it’s late. I’ll put something together.”

“Thank –”

The door slams behind Athos.

“ – you,” Athos finishes, bemused. He starts back across the practice yard, shaking his head. D’Artagnan’s knack of softening up curmudgeonly old Musketeers is obviously not limited to Athos alone.

When he reaches the barracks he enters d’Artagnan’s quarters quietly and finds the youth still asleep. Aramis and Porthos are holding a quiet conversation which breaks off when Athos enters.

“Put those over here,” Aramis directs, gesturing to a small table he’s obviously had brought in while Athos has been gone. Novice quarters don’t have much in the way of furniture; they’re basically a bunk, a small chest, and a chamber pot. Athos thinks he recognizes the table as belonging in Aramis’ quarters. Most of the furniture that had originally been there has found its way to Athos’ or Porthos’ quarters over the years. When they’re all together they congregate in Athos’ quarters, which are biggest, rank having its benefits. When they separate Aramis goes back to Porthos’ quarters. Porthos had originally been in favor of his moving in with Aramis, citing proximity to the mess hall, but Aramis had expressed a preference for privacy.

“Any change?” Athos asks as he sets down the food.

“No change,” Porthos says. He shares an amused glance with Aramis.

Athos looks away. The two of them have their own language of looks and touches. Athos should be used to it. But no matter how many times he’s seen them communicate silently, in the seven years since they’d bonded, it never fails to make Athos feel lonely.

To distract himself, he looks over at d’Artagnan. The youth’s sleep doesn’t seem to be restless or feverish. He merely looks as if he’d thrown himself on the bed at the end of a long day of training, too exhausted to bother taking off his clothes. Athos tugs a chair up next to the bunk and starts unlacing one boot. D’Artagnan will sleep better without them.
“When will he wake?” he asks.

Aramis shrugs. “A few hours, probably. Now that you’re here you can watch him.”

“Of course,” Athos says, barely watching as Porthos and Aramis take their leave. They’re giving each other speaking looks again. Athos ignores them as much as possible.

The sound of the door closing makes d’Artagnan stir slightly. He tries to roll over and fails. Athos leans over and lays a hand on d’Artagnan’s shoulder, stilling d’Artagnan. It won’t do for him to tear those stitches. At Athos’ touch, some of the lines on d’Artagnan’s face ease away, and he smiles a little in his sleep.

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Athos says out loud. He’s trying for a scolding tone, but it mostly sounds fond, even to him. “Getting yourself stabbed like that. What were you trying to prove? Well, as far as I’m concerned, the only thing you proved is that you need to spend more time working on your knife-fighting with Aramis.”

D’Artagnan murmurs something. He seems to slip into an even deeper sleep.

Athos sits back in his chair. “No more injuries,” he instructs his charge. “You’re an official novice now. It would look bad if we let you get injured.”

He takes off his hat and sets it aside, next to the table with the bowl of soup and two fresh-baked rolls. Athos eyes the rolls somewhat wistfully. Godeau makes them fresh every day, but by the time Athos gets to the mess hall they’re usually cold. But in the end he doesn’t take one. They’re for d’Artagnan, and he’ll probably want them both. This kind of wound makes one hungry. Though he’ll have to be careful what he eats for a while.

“Treville thinks I owe you an apology,” Athos goes on. “Well, I disagree. We had perfectly good reasons for suspecting you as we did. And a little misdirected suspicion won’t be the worst thing you have to face in life.” He falls silent for a moment, gaze distant, thinking of his past. Then he shakes off the image.

There’s no need to look into the past for terror, anyway. The future promises more than enough. Rochefort knows about Treville. The Inquisitor may not yet know how far the Underground extends – he may not yet know about the Musketeers – but if he has his way, if he’s allowed to arrest the Captain, Rochefort will learn it soon enough. They’re all in danger.

“You should leave,” Athos finds himself saying out loud.

Even in his sleep, d’Artagnan stirs and frowns.

“You should,” Athos repeats. “It’s dangerous here.”

But that’s a fool’s thought. There’s danger everywhere. And Athos may not yet know all the details, but he knows d’Artagnan has nowhere else to go.

“We’ll take care of you,” Athos says instead.

He reaches out again, then stops. He’d meant to pat d’Artagnan’s shoulder. It’s a gesture he uses regularly. To a young novice fumbling his sword-forms, it’s encouragement and reassurance that even this can be mastered. To a fellow Musketeer after a long mission it’s recognition of a job well done. When the gesture is shared with Aramis or Porthos it’s one of respect and esteem. Affection, even. Bonding between pack.
D’Artagnan is staying with their squad. D’Artagnan is a throwback in need of protection, and Athos hadn’t even thought twice before agreeing to protect him. If Treville had tried to move d’Artagnan elsewhere Athos would have protested. Would have fought to keep d’Artagnan with them.

D’Artagnan is theirs. D’Artagnan is pack, now.

And hard on the heels of that realization follows a second.

Athos doesn’t just want to clap d’Artagnan on the back or sling his arm around d’Artagnan’s shoulder as a gesture of camaraderie and bonding. He doesn’t just want to protect d’Artagnan as a member of his pack, the youngest, the innocent. He doesn’t just care about d’Artagnan’s well-being as he would Aramis’ or Porthos’. Athos cares about d’Artagnan as d’Artagnan. As more. As –

He wants to pull d’Artagnan close and never let him go. He wants to trace those full lips, caress those cheeks, feel that lithe body pressed against his own. He wants to hear d’Artagnan say his name. Not yell it across the practice-yards; not in a tone of respect for Athos’ years of experience or obedience to his bars of rank. Athos wants to hear d’Artagnan murmur it in quiet moments. Laugh playfully as he calls it. Smile to himself secretly as he says it, because it’s precious to d’Artagnan, because he –

Athos flings himself away from d’Artagnan and back into his chair as if the youth in the bed has turned into a viper and bitten him.

No, he thinks, panting. No!

He’s been down this road before. He knows where it ends. It ends with a mutilated body and a burning chateau and a lifetime of guilt.

D’Artagnan tries to toss and turn again. Athos has to grab d’Artagnan to hold him still. For a moment he’s afraid d’Artagnan is feverish; his skin feels warm under Athos’ hands. Then Athos realizes that he is the one who’s flushing warm. Aramis had cleaned more than just the wound while Athos had been gone, it seems; the pungent smell that usually hangs around d’Artagnan is much reduced, and his natural scent comes through more clearly. Athos has been so distracted he hadn’t even noticed. But his body’s been paying attention. D’Artagnan smells rich and peaty, like wheat falling under the scythe at the height of summer. Like earth being tilled in the fields. Athos takes another breath without thinking. Then he releases d’Artagnan, who’s quieted again, and steps back from the bed.

He wants d’Artagnan. And, judging by the looks d’Artagnan has been throwing Athos when he thinks Athos isn’t looking, d’Artagnan wants him, too.

Athos isn’t foolish enough that he can’t tell the difference between his feelings and d’Artagnan’s, though. D’Artagnan is barely out of puppyhood. His parents are dead, his farm burned, his old life gone. He’s been thrown out into the wider world with nothing but his wits and his luck to make his way. Paris is like nothing d’Artagnan has ever seen before; the youth from Gascony gawks at everything, and is simultaneously enthralled and unsettled by the very difference of life here.

And in the middle of that all comes the Musketeers. The place d’Artagnan has set his hopes on to become his new home, and the people d’Artagnan obviously hopes will become his new family. Now that they know d’Artagnan is not a traitor, Aramis and Porthos will start treating him like a little odem. D’Artagnan will learn fighting from Aramis and street smarts from Porthos. He’ll look up to them both.

And Athos?

It’s all too predictable. A young Omega from the countryside comes to the big city and has his head turned by the first unmated Alpha he meets. D’Artagnan is naïve, innocent, and vulnerable. Athos
would be the worst kind of Alpha to take advantage of that. It would be despicable enough if Athos were younger and less scarred. For Athos to take up with d’Artagnan as Athos is now – old, broken, with the blood of his mate and odem already on his hands – would be unconscionable.

D’Artagnan’s infatuation is as natural as it is transient. Time will take care of most of it. As d’Artagnan becomes more secure in his place in the squad, he’ll need the emotional crutch of a crush less. As his horizons broaden, he’ll start to see that he has more options than an old, broken-down Musketeer commander. And inevitably he’ll learn the secrets of Athos’ past. At least, such of them that Athos has ever shared. That should put paid to any lingering affections d’Artagnan may hold.

In the meanwhile, Athos must be the honorable one. He’s a grown Alpha; he can certainly control himself. He’ll have to be circumspect, of course. He’ll have to maintain a certain distance. He’ll have to make sure to give d’Artagnan’s crush absolutely no fodder. But he’s sure it can be managed. The alternative is sending d’Artagnan away, into another squad, and that’s something Athos isn’t prepared to do. The world is a dangerous place, and right now the Musketeers are even more so. If d’Artagnan can’t be sent away entirely – and Athos knows the youth won’t go – then Athos must keep d’Artagnan right here, where Athos can protect him.

D’Artagnan frowns unhappily in his sleep.

“It’s for the best,” Athos says aloud.

He takes his seat again. D’Artagnan shouldn’t be let to sleep and wake alone after taking his first real wound. Athos would do as much for any other squadmate, so he will allow himself to stay with d’Artagnan.

But after that he must make his position clear. He must begin as he means to go on. D’Artagnan will be a novice under his care, and then a raw Musketeer. He’ll be the youngest member of the pack. He’ll be Athos’ little odem.

And that’s all.

“It’s for the best,” Athos repeats. He settles down to watch d’Artagnan sleep, and if they’re both restless for the next little while, well, perhaps they can be forgiven.

Ten months later, D’Artagnan stands outside Athos’ door and tries to force his heart to calm with sheer strength of will. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this doesn’t work. It continues to gallop like a herd of horses spooked by a thunderstorm.

_Breathe_, he reminds himself for the thousandth time. What’s the worst that can happen? Only that Athos says no. And then it will be just as if I had never asked.

Athos won’t hold having asked against d’Artagnan, he’s sure. Athos isn’t like that. He’s far too well-bred to hold something over anyone’s head like d’Artagnan foolishly fears.

So why can’t d’Artagnan calm down?

_Either ask him or resign yourself to going alone_, d’Artagnan tells himself. That’s the push he needs: he raises his hand and knocks on Athos’ door.

A moment later, Athos’ voice calls, “Come in!” He sounds surprised. That’s fair. No one usually bothers Athos after he retires for the night. Aramis and Porthos always disappear together; they wouldn’t disturb Athos. Indeed, d’Artagnan had used to think that the reason for Athos’ habitual reserve might be more to protect the privacy of his packmates than his personal preference.
D’Artagnan had soon been disabused of that notion. Athos is more than taciturn enough on his own; he doesn’t need an excuse. Over the six months of his novitiate D’Artagnan had tried various approaches to spending time with Athos off duty. And to do Athos justice, he’s happy to help d’Artagnan with a particularly difficult sword form or tutor him on the finer points of court etiquette so that d’Artagnan doesn’t put his foot in it when they’ve got guard duty in the Louvre. But any invitation of a more personal nature – even if it’s just to share a tankard at the closest tavern, along with a half-dozen other Musketeers – ends in rejection. Polite rejection, well-bred rejection, delicately worded rejection. But rejection all the same.

D’Artagnan had first concluded that the problem lay in d’Artagnan’s being a novice. Perhaps Athos had felt it would be inappropriate for a Musketeer to relax around their trainee. So d’Artagnan had patiently waited out the six months of his novitiate. Four months ago, after he’d knelt before the king and received the pauldron from his hand, d’Artagnan had been wined and dined by the entire regiment. Even Athos had come. D’Artagnan had thought it a promising sign, and the very next night, he’d tried suggesting to Athos that they stop by the market-square together – claiming the need for some new piece of equipment as an excuse.

Athos had been polite. He’d behaved in a well-bred manner. He’d chosen his words delicately. But he’d rejected d’Artagnan all the same. And he’d gone on doing so for the four months since d’Artagnan’s novitiate had ended. Ten months now d’Artagnan has been in Paris, and he’s still not sure if Athos thinks of him as anything more than a colleague.

And now d’Artagnan is disturbing Athos’ customary repose. In order to ask him something significantly more important and personal than simply to drink a tankard together as friends. But Aramis says it’s necessary that d’Artagnan ask someone, and he won’t consider anyone but Athos. And besides, if d’Artagnan’s fated to break his heart over Athos anyway, he may as well ask him straight out and find out now.

So d’Artagnan responds to Athos’ baffled invitation by pushing open the door and invading Athos’ personal space.

“D’Artagnan,” Athos says in some surprise. He’s seated at a small table; a bottle of Spanish wine is open on it. The Musketeer is still fully dressed for the day, but the covers on the small bed against the far wall are turned down and messy. Probably Athos had just never bothered to straighten them when he’d risen this morning. But their disarray draws d’Artagnan’s gaze, and, full of the knowledge of the reason he’s here, d’Artagnan can’t help a faint blush.

“I just came to ask you something,” d’Artagnan says. “I won’t stay. I’m sorry to have disturbed you, but – but – I needed to do it immediately.” While my courage lasts, he doesn’t add.

“I’ll help in any way I can,” Athos says at once, sitting up straighter. “Just tell me the problem.”

Problem. Well, it is, isn’t it? D’Artagnan laughs a little, self-consciously. “Wait till you hear what it is first,” he says.

“You’ll have my help regardless,” Athos rebukes him gently. “Sit down and tell me about it.”

D’Artagnan shakes his head. If he sits down, his knees might give out and he won’t be able to stand again. Better just to get this over with.

“It’s my heat,” he blurts out.

Athos’ face shutters immediately, and d’Artagnan wants to kick himself. He’d meant to work up to this slowly. He’d spent hours with Aramis talking about the best way to approach Athos, and
learning all the various ways an unmated Omega had used to go about inviting unmated Alphas to share their heats.

*Breeding will out,* d’Artagnan thinks in self-disgust. *The moment I actually look at him all my polish rubs right off and leaves me with the peasant underneath.*

But it’s done now; all he can do is go forward. He takes a deep breath and begins again.

“Aramis went with me last time. And he says – he says I can’t keep going alone. He says I need someone to come with me. An Alpha.”

When d’Artagnan’s second heat had approached, two months after he’d arrived in Paris and still a novice, Aramis had offered to accompany d’Artagnan. D’Artagnan had gratefully accepted. Aramis hadn’t come along to help d’Artagnan through the heat in the traditional sense; that requires an Alpha’s knot. But Aramis had guessed, correctly, that d’Artagnan had never had anyone explain the facts of life for an Omega to him. His mother had tried, but she couldn’t understand what she’d never lived. D’Artagnan’s first heat had been a frightening, strange experience. Aramis had offered to provide extra protection during peaks, explain what would happen as it happened, and share everything he’d learned from going through heat alone before he’d met and mated with Porthos.

The trip had been eye-opening. Aramis had answered every question d’Artagnan put, even the foolish ones, and his advice had made this second heat much more bearable than the first. But even a *more* bearable heat, according to Aramis, is still far rougher than it should be. It had still been agony in the worst moments. Too hard on his system, according to Aramis. Dangerously hard.

The next time they’d gone out together, just before the end of d’Artagnan's novitiate, Aramis had brought along some special aids. They’d helped a little. Not much. Not enough. Aramis had told d’Artagnan frankly that it couldn’t go on like that. That he needed to find someone to go with him on the next heat – someone who *could* help in the traditional sense – or else d’Artagnan would be risking permanent damage.

And so here d’Artagnan is. Facing the only Alpha he wants. The Alpha who is currently staring at him like he’s grown a second head.

“If you’re asking me to help you find an Alpha to accompany you,” Athos says carefully, “I can certainly suggest a few others, but really Captain Treville –”

“I’m not asking that,” d’Artagnan interrupts. He takes a deep breath. *Now or never.* “I’m asking you to come with me. To help me through my heat.” A fragment of Aramis’ lessons surfaces in his mind, and he adds, “Without obligation or expectation, for our mutual pleasure and enjoyment.”

Athos doesn’t seem to appreciate this formality. He says, “Me.” He says it blankly, like he can’t believe it.

“Yes. You.”

“I am sensible of the honor you do me,” Athos says carefully. “But surely there is someone else for whom your heart calls.”

D’Artagnan feels the force of this rejection like a punch to the gut. No matter how many times he’d told himself that Athos would certainly refuse, that Athos barely tolerates d’Artagnan and has no interest in him beyond Musketeering, d’Artagnan had apparently still gotten his hopes up. He’d allowed himself to fantasize about what it would be like together. And so now it hurts more than it should.
“There is no one else,” d’Artagnan says recklessly. He hasn’t anything else to lose as far as this conversation occurs; he may as well lay it out. “If you won’t come with me, I’ll go alone.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best,” Athos says. “Surely you don’t need –”

“I will be the judge of what I need,” d’Artagnan cuts him off. “And I am relying on Aramis’ medical advice.”

“Aramis isn’t a doctor.”

“He’s the next best thing,” d’Artagnan retorts. He finds it highly ironic that Athos is the one trotting out the well-worn *not a doctor* line, when their squad’s leader is usually the one coaxing Aramis into stitching someone up over Aramis’ grumbling. “But it doesn’t matter, since you won’t help me.”

This is meant to sound strident, but a lost note creeps into d’Artagnan’s voice at the end. He hates himself a little for that. Athos’ rejection hurts, there’s no doubt about that, but d’Artagnan will survive it. He doesn’t mean to sound quite so much like he’s helpless without Athos.

The catch in his voice does seem to trip Athos up, though. Impassive as he usually is it appears he’s not entirely immune to the emotional response. D’Artagnan could try to exploit that advantage. Press on and attempt to convince Athos to come, make him feel guilty…

No. It’s too manipulative for d’Artagnan’s taste. However much he wants Athos to come with him as a heat-companion, d’Artagnan will only have it if it’s completely voluntary. D’Artagnan’s already resigning himself to the growing realization that Athos will never return his feelings. Tempting as it is to beg for one heat together, one set of memories to comfort himself with until he can master his traitorous heart, the price is just too high.

“I thank you for your consideration,” d’Artagnan says formally, falling back on Aramis’ coaching to escape the hole he’s dug for himself by coming here. He bows slightly – a junior Musketeer to his commander – and goes to withdraw.


D’Artagnan pauses. He doesn’t particularly want to – he really wants to be alone right now, to process his feelings of rejection and determine a new course of action – but Athos is still his superior. And that had had the form of an order.

“I told you I’d help you no matter what the problem was,” Athos says. “I meant that.”

“That’s very good of you,” d’Artagnan says stiffly, “but as this is a personal matter –”

“You’re my packmate as well as my squadmate. You have a claim on my assistance either way.”

“I do not require *assistance,*” d’Artagnan says, still on his dignity. “I require a congenial companion. You have made it quite clear that you do not feel yourself able –”

“Will you let me finish?” Athos snaps.

D’Artagnan presses his lips together, but says nothing.

Athos takes a deep breath. “It’s not that I wouldn’t be able to help you,” he says finally, oddly diffident. “It’s just – are you sure there is no one else you want? If you came to ask me first because of a sense of duty, or propriety – I am the head of your pack – well, that’s taking honor too far. All right? If there’s someone else you’d rather ask…”
Athos trails off. D’Artagnan shakes his head, once, decisively.

“Think about it?” Athos asks. He almost sounds like he’s pleading. “And I will do the same? Surely there’s someone more suitable we can find.”

“And if there’s not?” d’Artagnan unbends enough to ask. An undefined emotion begins to steal over him: it feels like hope.

“You’re not going alone,” Athos says firmly, and d’Artagnan allows himself to smile.

“Thank you,” d’Artagnan says. If nothing else comes of this, he knows Athos values him enough to not want him to suffer.

“Then we’ll both think about it,” Athos says. “All right?”

“All right,” d’Artagnan agrees.

Then he goes to find Aramis.

When D’Artagnan leaves he takes Athos’ ease with him. The bottle of Spanish wine is still open on the small table, but for once Athos feels no urge to drink. He pushes his half-full wine glass away and stands, pacing in the small space of his quarters.

_I’m asking you to come with me, d’Artagnan had said. To help me through my heat. Had d’Artagnan understood what he had been asking? He must have. Aramis had suggested it to him originally; Aramis wouldn’t have failed to inform d’Artagnan. And it’s plain, too, in the form of the request d’Artagnan had chosen: without obligation or expectation, for our mutual pleasure and enjoyment._

There are many ways an Omega might ask an Alpha for their company during a heat. Each of them express a different goal and purpose behind the request. Engaged couples often spend a heat together as a final way to test their compatibility before mating. Courting couples also might spend heat together, though that had been a custom of the lower classes. Some noble clans had believed that an Omega should go through their first heat with a close friend. There was a form for that kind of request, too.

D’Artagnan had chosen the form with the least attachments. As if Athos were a rakish young lord with a reputation, and d’Artagnan sought the pleasure of his company for one heat. So that afterwards Athos would have added to his reputation, and d’Artagnan would have gained the advantages of a liaison with such a figure. He’s essentially asking for a one-heat stand.

Athos considers, for a moment, that d’Artagnan might really want such a one-heat stand. He dismisses the thought almost as soon as it forms. No, d’Artagnan wants more, he’s sure of that. Athos has known what their pack’s youngest wants of him since the beginning, when d’Artagnan had first looked at Athos with his heart in his eyes. Every invitation and approach to intimacy since then has been with that goal in mind. D’Artagnan may have chosen the one-heat-stand form of the request, but Athos suspects it’s only because d’Artagnan knows Athos would certainly balk at anything more serious.

Athos has tried to make his indifference as clear as possible over the last ten months. Somehow d’Artagnan isn’t taking the hint. Athos suspects, in his more honest moments, that Athos hasn’t been as clear as he tries to be. The problem is that Athos isn’t indifferent. Sometimes he can’t push d’Artagnan away as firmly as he knows he ought to. Sometimes he lets himself look. Sometimes he even lets himself dream.
Athos’ thoughts dwell on that incredible inner strength which shines through d’Artagnan like the sun through clouds. His eyes linger on the slender body, the youthful energy, the play of muscles under tanned skin. His heart opens, just a crack, and basks in the warmth of d’Artagnan’s so-obvious affection.

Foolish. Dishonorable. And unfair to d’Artagnan. Athos is the first unmated Alpha d’Artagnan has ever met; a crush is natural. But Athos ought not to be encouraging it. In time it will fade. D’Artagnan will meet another Alpha, a younger, less broken Alpha, who will be able to give d’Artagnan what d’Artagnan deserves. Someone untainted by tragedy. Someone who doesn’t know the taste of death and despair. Someone who doesn’t empty a bottle of Spanish wine every night, who doesn’t already know the feel of an Omega’s skin breaking beneath their teeth, who has something better to give a mate than a burned-out chateau and an eventual death in a Musketeer’s uniform.

So why didn’t you just say no? Athos’ heart wants to know. Why did you promise to think about it?

A moment of weakness. For a moment, Athos had been captivated by what d’Artagnan had been offering. A single heat. A few days in the woods together when d’Artagnan could belong to Athos. It had been enough to tempt Athos; it would be enough to tempt a saint.

But that moment of weakness must be a moment only. Athos must go back to d’Artagnan and tell him no. He must make his no as plain as possible, so that d’Artagnan abandons not only this current, foolish offer, but ceases to make any other offers in the future.

Athos sits down on his bunk and makes himself think about it. Makes himself picture the look of rejection d’Artagnan will wear when Athos finally makes it clear that his crush will never be reciprocated. Makes himself think about the way d’Artagnan will withdraw, both immediately and thereafter. There will be no more attempts on d’Artagnan’s part for them to spend time together. No more asking Athos for advice or tutoring on all the ways of Paris that d’Artagnan is still so ignorant of. No more solicitousness for Athos’ well-being.

Worth it, of course. D’Artagnan has a bright future ahead of him. Athos can’t possibly drag d’Artagnan down by shackling him with an aging, broken Alpha that d’Artagnan will fall out of infatuation with soon enough.

But hard. Harder than Athos had expected, now that it’s finally come to the point. Perhaps that’s why he’s let it drag out so long.

He’s jolted from his thoughts by the sound of his door opening. Athos looks up, ready to snarl at whoever is violating his privacy, but falls silent when Aramis’ slim form slips inside and closes the door again.

“I thought you might need someone to talk to,” Aramis says, walking over and sitting down next to Athos on his bunk. Their shoulders brush against each other companionably. Despite his unease, Athos feels something inside him uncoil at the familiar presence of his packmate.

“You sent d’Artagnan to me?” Athos asks.

Aramis nods. “He consulted with me before he asked you,” he says.

“He – what? Why?” Athos turns to face Aramis, putting his back against the wall and drawing his legs up into a loose tailor’s seat. “Why would you send him to me?”

He means it to sound honestly curious, not accusing, but realizes he’s missed the mark when Aramis’
eyes widen suddenly. “Athos –”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t…” Athos sighs. “I just meant, if he talked to you, why didn’t you talk him out of it? I know he’s got that crush, but –”

“This isn’t about the crush,” Aramis cuts him off. “This is about his medical needs.”

“Truly?” Athos can’t help but sound skeptical. “Certainly a companion makes heat more pleasant – but I’ve never heard of an Omega absolutely needing one.”

Aramis’ mouth twitches again. “Sometimes I forget exactly how sheltered you are,” he says ruefully. “Your blood may be as blue as mine, but you were really isolated up in la Fère, weren’t you?”

Athos feels his cheeks redden. He dislikes feeling like an untutored pup, but he can’t deny he’s been playing catch-up from the moment d’Artagnan had approached him with his request.

“Explain it to me, then,” he says with deceptive calm.

Aramis glances up at the ceiling, obviously gathering his thoughts. “Heat isn’t easy,” he starts. “Well, you knew that already. In fact it’s very rough on our bodies. There’s a whole complicated series of hormone waves that go through an Omega. One to trigger the heat, another set for the peaks, more to stimulate fertility. When everything works properly, heats are bearable. But there are a wide variety of heat-related disorders that can afflict Omegas.”

“A disorder?” Athos grasps at the understandable concept. “D’Artagnan’s ill?”

“Not ill exactly,” Aramis disagrees. “The problem is his bloodline.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Athos says in surprise. D’Artagnan may be a mongrel, but pure blood is no panacea, as they both know to their sorrow.

“Only medically,” Aramis says. “What an Omega calls heat, a Beta woman would call a thyroid disorder. Beta women have a different fertility cycle. Omegas can sustain the hormone storm of heat because centuries of selective breeding have favored resilience and strength. Beta breeding has selected for different traits. If one were to artificially induce heat in a Beta woman it would probably kill her.”

Athos stiffens. “Are you saying d’Artagnan’s life is in danger?” he demands.

“His line have been Betas as far back as anyone can remember. He’s biologically an Omega, but he doesn’t have the genetic advantages a pureblood does. I’m saying that heats are harder on his body than they should be –”

“So he needs help,” Athos finishes.

“Yes.”

“But would I even be enough?” A different kind of fear begins to grip Athos. “I’m not his mate.”

“That’s up to you,” Aramis says wryly. He and Porthos have both been staunch advocates for d’Artagnan’s attempts to woo Athos, much to Athos’ dismay. At least they’ve both kept their support private, for Athos’ ears only, instead of outright encouraging the youth.

Athos gives Aramis a quelling look regardless.

Aramis smiles briefly, then sobers. “As for enough, I don’t know. Certainly it would be better for
him to go through his heats with a bondmate. But a knot without a bond is still better than nothing. It
should keep him from having a heart attack mid-peak, anyway.”

“Mon Dieu,” Athos says faintly. Aramis has put two images into his head with wildly different
results. First Athos imagines d’Artagnan in the throes of heat, well into his peak. D’Artagnan would
be naked, of course, that young brown body freely exposed to Athos’ hungry eyes. Slender and
dehceptively delicate, d’Artagnan’s core is the bedrock of Gascony. There’s a strength in him that
Athos has never seen. D’Artagnan laughs, he cries, he loves and he hates. He feels passionately.
Athos, who has been frozen inside for years, feels himself unwillingly beginning to thaw.

But the second image. That imagined body writhing on the ground. Not in need and desire, but in
agony. The heart that beats so strongly with life racing out of control. Then stilling, suddenly, in
death.

“Athos, I know this comes as a shock to you,” Aramis says, misinterpreting the cause of Athos’
silence. “But I’ve seen now what heat is like for him. And this is my recommendation.”

D’Artagnan has been in the capitol ten months now. After their initial misunderstanding had passed
off and they’d finally become comfortable with each other as a squad, d’Artagnan had opened up
about his past. He’d told them of the death of his parents. Of growing up an Omega with no other
throwbacks to guide him. D’Artagnan’s parents, as well-meaning as they had been, had simply lacked much of the necessary knowledge. D’Artagnan had accepted
Aramis’ offer gratefully, and they two had spent the week in the woods together.

Athos remembers now how haggard d’Artagnan had been when they’d ridden back in, and how
worried Aramis had seemed. D’Artagnan had taken unusually long to recover from that heat. Aramis
had said nothing about it to Athos at the time, and Athos had simply put it all down to d’Artagnan’s
youth and inexperience. The only pubescent Omega Athos had ever known had been his own odem,
and Thomas, God rest him, hadn’t lived long enough to experience his first heat. Charlotte had been
older when they’d met. Aramis older still. And so Athos had assumed that dealing with heat was
something that an Omega learned to do over time. That Aramis would teach d’Artagnan, and soon
enough d’Artagnan would be as proficient as Aramis had used to have been.

But apparently not. Apparently d’Artagnan’s case is different – apparently he needs assistance. And
he’s come to Athos to ask it. Even with the way Athos has been repressing d’Artagnan at every turn,
even though anyone else would have taken the hint and gone elsewhere, d’Artagnan still wants
Athos. It makes Athos feel warm right through to his bones.

“If you can’t do it – ” Aramis starts.

“I didn’t say that,” Athos says quickly. He knows what he should do. God help him, he knows it.
But he can’t. He simply can’t. Even the thought of d’Artagnan going elsewhere for this particular
kind of help is repugnant. D’Artagnan knows no other unmated Alphas. If Athos refuses him,
d’Artagnan will have to go to a stranger. At best an acquaintance. An acquaintance won’t know
d’Artagnan’s true value. A stranger won’t take care of him properly, the way d’Artagnan deserves.
Only Athos can make sure that d’Artagnan is cared for given the help he needs.

“I thought you’d feel that way,” Aramis says with satisfaction. “That’s why I sent him to you.”

Athos gathers himself up enough to shoot Aramis a dirty look. “Don’t tell me you’re trying to play
matchmaker, Aramis,” he says repressively. “You know very well why I’m staying away.”

“Because you’re an idiot,” Aramis retorts. Then he softens. “I’m not sending him to you to play matchmaker. I’m sending him to you because you’re the only unbonded Alpha in the pack. Our youngest needs help, and you’re the only one who can provide it.”

“Is this sort of thing typical?” Athos asks, trying to avoid a direct response.

“D’Artagnan is an extreme case. But heat difficulty is something our people have always had to deal with. When we had access to the full range of Omegan medicine it was easier. There are drugs to moderate heats, if they’re too strong. Or suppress them entirely. A different drug strengthens heats if they’re too weak.”

“Why would you want them to be stronger?”

“Weak heats are just as bad as strong heats. It’s a very delicate system. Upsetting the balance in either direction has consequences. Even suppressing for too long is a problem. Suppressants were a young Omega’s drug, in the old days. Once an Omega mated they’d stop taking them. They get more dangerous the older an Omega is.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re very well designed,” Athos says. It’s supposed to be a joke, but it sounds weak to his own ears.

Aramis just gives a little shrug. “It’s what makes carrying possible,” he says. His voice catches partway through.

Athos leans forward and puts his hand over Aramis’, wincing with guilt. He’s so distracted by his own storm of emotions that he hadn’t realized what other pain he’s dragging up.

“It will happen for you one day,” Athos says clumsily, cursing his own foolishness.

“Aramis – ”

Aramis withdraws his hand. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he says shortly.

Athos looks at Aramis helplessly. Ten years Aramis has been at his side, the second in his pack, the support in his squad. They’ve shed blood together. Saved the King together. Fought the Cardinal together. Nearly died together. But Aramis is hurting now, and Athos can’t do anything about it, because it’s Aramis’ own body that’s betraying him.

Seven years ago, when Porthos had joined their squad and their pack, Athos had rejoiced for his adopted odem. At the time Aramis and Porthos had chosen to delay breeding because of the uncertainty of their lives. But three years ago the couple had decided that the time had come. They’d all three gained seniority in the Musketeers, and with it the increases in pay and savings that made more things practical than had been so in their youths. The pack could support Aramis now in a yearlong leave of absence so Aramis could carry and whelp in safety. They could afford off-base rooms in the Rue Ferou that would accommodate them all. They could hire a respectable Beta nursemaid – and sympathizer – who would join their household to provide legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Through Treville’s connections, they’d met and spoken with the other unaligned throwback couples who had managed to raise pups under the eyes of the Inquisition.

Athos had been as much a part of the planning as Aramis and Porthos. He is the head of their pack; just as Aramis and Porthos are his adopted blood, so their pups would be, too. All of their safeties
would be his ultimate responsibility. Athos had been preparing to do whatever it took to protect the
offspring. All of them had thought they’d been ready.

But three years later, Aramis remains empty. At first they’d put it down to chance. Bad luck. Then
Aramis had started to wonder if years of contraceptives had hurt his ability to conceive. Or if there
were something wrong with him. His heats, or his hormones, or his ova... Aramis started doing more
research into Omegan reproduction, aided again by Treville’s Underground contacts. Athos can’t
help but wonder if this is where the knowledge of d’Artagnan’s condition comes from.

It had been hard on them all, but Aramis had taken it the hardest. Even now they have no real answer
as to why Aramis can’t conceive. They’ve tried some remedies. But the necessary drugs are tightly
controlled by the Church. Treville’s connections are good, but so is the Inquisition. And the hard
truth of the matter is that the Underground’s first priority has to be protecting existing lives, not
engendering new ones. A heartbreaking early miscarriage eighteen months ago is as close as they’ve
come to making Aramis and Porthos’ dream a reality.

Athos grieves with them. But Aramis has pulled back into himself, closed off and withdrawn. The
best thing Athos can do for him right now is respect his wish for silence.

“I will help d’Artagnan in any way I can,” Athos says instead. And for the moment it’s easy not to
think about how terrible an idea it is. How very much he wants d’Artagnan, and what a bad idea it is
for him to have him, even briefly, even just during d’Artagnan’s heat. It won’t be enough, Athos
knows. It will just make his desire worse. But it will also help d’Artagnan. For that reason alone
Athos can’t say no.

And Aramis smiles a little, too, which is something worth accomplishing. “That’s what I hoped
you’d say.”

“It’s a terrible idea,” Athos says honestly. “D’Artagnan still hasn’t moved on.”

“He may never do so.”

“He’s too young to mate.”

“And how old were you?”

“Too young.”

“If your mate still lived, would you still love her?”

Athos doesn’t answer for a long moment. “Olivier would,” he says at last. “But Olivier died a long
time ago.”

“Olivier may have died, but Athos is very much alive,” Aramis says gently. “Doesn’t he deserve
happiness, too?”

“It’s d’Artagnan’s happiness I’m concerned with,” Athos says, sidestepping this ridiculous question.
“And as far as that’s concerned, it’s better that I keep my distance.”

“Believe it or not, I, too, am concerned with d’Artagnan’s happiness,” Aramis retorts.

Athos just shrugs a little. He doesn’t expect to change Aramis’ mind. Soon enough reality will
change it for him.

Aramis makes a noise of disgust. “You’ve had enough distance,” he says, rising to leave. “I think a
little closeness is just what you need.”

Aramis pauses for a moment to allow Athos to respond, but Athos doesn’t have anything to say. With a tip of the head, Aramis goes. Back to his quarters. Back to his mate. Back to the person who has sustained Aramis through his griefs and troubles for seven years, who has pledged to sustain him for the rest of their days. What Athos feels in that moment is no longer mild enough to be called loneliness. It’s jealousy, pure and simple. Not for Porthos or Aramis in particular, but for what they share. What Olivier had once had. What Athos had thought himself immune to the desire for. Until d’Artagnan had stumbled into Athos’ life and set his longing eyes upon Athos for the first time.

The door has closed gently behind the other Musketeer. In the grate the fire burns low. Athos stays awake a long time, staring at a half-empty bottle of Spanish wine, trying not to dream.
Two weeks later Captain Treville makes out temporary orders for all four members of their squad. He’s started doing that regularly for heat leaves. If Treville loses the dangerous game he’s playing, Rochefort will comb through everything Treville’s ever touched in search of hidden throwbacks. The Captain doesn’t want to take any more risks than he has to. Leave for one or two can be dangerous, especially if it’s repeated regularly enough. Leave for four is much more innocuous.

“And there’s still no word of Rochefort?” Athos asks before he accepts the orders. He and d’Artagnan must leave regardless, but Aramis and Porthos could stay behind if things are beginning to heat up.

Treville shakes his head. “The Inquisitor has been detained in Rome again. A Vatican council is in desperate need of his wisdom. He’ll be tied up for another few months going through dusty old manuscripts with barely enough breaks for sleep and food, never mind intrigue.”

“There seem to be a number of such councils setting up in recent months,” Athos notes. “What were these people all doing before?”

“Probably entirely unrelated things,” Treville says blandly. “I’d venture to say they’d never have even seen the need for their councils if not for Rochefort’s presence.”

“Convenient, then, that he is present to open their eyes.”

“Most convenient.”

Secure in the knowledge that matters are stable on the Rochefort front, the foursome ride out of Paris together and split up beyond St. Denis. Aramis and Porthos are going on to take the waters at Forges, ostensibly for an old wound of Porthos’ which has never quite healed. Athos suspects Aramis is hoping for a beneficial effect on his fertility. For Athos’ part he has little faith in such things, but he’d never say as much to Aramis.

Bidding their friends farewell, Athos and d’Artagnan ride west out into the countryside. D’Artagnan leads them. After a few hours they reach a small clearing by a stream, and d’Artagnan dismounts.

“Aramis showed me this place,” he says. “It has everything we’ll need.”

Athos follows d’Artagnan’s example, tying his horse up to a tree, then looks around. The center of the clearing has a small firepit dug out and ringed with stones. The stream runs clear and cool, good for drinking as well as bathing. There’s plenty of groundfall to burn. And he’d seen evidence of small game in the last hour of their ride. He’ll lay some snares so they’ll have fresh meat after the heat breaks.

D’Artagnan ties his horse up, too, and starts untying his saddlebags. Partway through undoing a buckle he pauses.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, still facing his horse. “For agreeing to come with me.”

Athos swallows past a suddenly dry throat. “I will help you in any way I can,” he repeats his mantra. He’s spent as much of the ride here as possible resolutely ignoring exactly what that means.

D’Artagnan isn’t the first Omega Athos has been with during heat. He’s spent years repressing the
memories of Charlotte, but one by one they’ve all come tumbling back. With each hoofbeat, as they put Paris behind them, another image has returned. The smooth white column of Charlotte’s throat tilted in mute appeal. The dark red marks of his bite on her shoulder. The bow of her back as she had presented to him. The feel of her around him. The pressure around his knot as it had swelled to lock them together.

“Still.” D’Artagnan finishes undoing the buckle and pulls the saddle-bag free. “It means a lot to me.”

*It means a lot to me, too,* Athos thinks but doesn’t say. D’Artagnan doesn’t know the details of Athos’ past, only the general outline of it that Aramis or Porthos have told him. And so d’Artagnan can’t know what an incredible gift his trust is. Athos feels all too acutely the depth of his previous failures. Thomas dead in the forest. Charlotte dying under torture, her pain echoing through him until their mate-bond had torn asunder. His ancestral home, that should have been passed down to the pups Athos will never sire, destroyed.

Over the years the nightmares have faded. He’s stopped seeing Thomas’ body every time he blinks. Stopped feeling Charlotte’s pain every time he stands still. But he still empties a bottle of Spanish wine religiously every night. And he still feels the phantom ache of Charlotte’s touch when he sees Aramis and Porthos ride out of Paris four times each year.

D’Artagnan knows some of this. Not all. Not enough. But he knows Athos had had a mate, and an odem, and that both had been exposed and killed. Despite that, d’Artagnan had asked Athos for his help. Had trusted Athos with himself at his most vulnerable.

Athos wants to tell d’Artagnan that he isn’t worthy of that trust. But Aramis is right: there is no one else to do it.

*Be honest,* Athos tells himself savagely, watching d’Artagnan’s graceful movements as he kneels to spread his bedroll. *You wouldn’t let anyone else do it. You want him. And you’ll take any opportunity to have him.*

Athos should have said *no* when d’Artagnan had come to him. Failing that, he should have said *no* to Aramis, and made Aramis tell d’Artagnan. He shouldn’t be here, sinking ever deeper into an obsession that can never be satisfied or reciprocated. He should have insisted that d’Artagnan find someone else, even if that meant going outside the squad, outside the pack. D’Artagnan will have to do that one day anyway in order to find a mate. One who’s young. Whole. Unbroken. Worthy.

*He wants you,* a quiet voice murmurs. It sounds disturbingly like Aramis’.

*No.* Athos shakes his head, dismissing the thought. It’s not that Athos is blind to d’Artagnan’s admiration. D’Artagnan wants him now, yes. His crush has lasted far longer than Athos had first anticipated. But everything has its limits. D’Artagnan won’t always want Athos. Eventually d’Artagnan will forget Athos, and find someone more suitable.

*Then what are you doing here? What is he doing here?*

“*Athos?”*

Athos starts badly. D’Artagnan is looking at Athos, a frown creasing his lips.

“Yes?” Athos manages.

“Can you get some firewood?” d’Artagnan gestures to the pot he’s filling with water from the stream. “Aramis says this will go more easily if I make a big pot of stew first, so we can eat from it the whole week.”
“Excellent idea,” Athos says through dry lips. He goes, and tries not to feel d’Artagnan’s worried gaze following him as he does.

Athos returns with the firewood in due time, and d’Artagnan cooks for them both. It’s practical: Athos has never really been more than a passable cook, and his repertoire is limited to the handful of campfire meals every Musketeer learns by necessity. Athos will cook in his turn when they’re on campaign, yes, but generally Aramis or Porthos share the mess duties between them for shorter journeys. After many failed attempts to teach Athos even Aramis had to admit it’s simply not Athos’ gift.

So that’s why d’Artagnan is cooking. It has nothing to do with traditional sexual roles. It certainly won’t be a clumsy attempt on d’Artagnan’s part to show what he has to offer as a mate. It would be foolish if it were. These days no one chooses a mate because of bloodline, family status or accomplishments. This isn’t a medieval romance.

Athos tells himself this firmly and accepts the bowl d’Artagnan hands him. He doesn’t dwell on the hopeful expression on d’Artagnan’s face, or the pleased note in d’Artagnan’s voice when Athos expresses his appreciation of the meal.

D’Artagnan tries to draw Athos out several times over the course of the day. Athos rebuffs these attempts gently but firmly. D’Artagnan obviously wants to know Athos better, but Athos makes it just as obvious that he doesn’t want to share. D’Artagnan eventually subsides. The Omega isn’t hurt, though. That would mean that he’s more invested in this than Athos realizes. And he isn’t, so it doesn’t hurt him that Athos is unwilling to open up. Athos is sure of this.

Despite these facts, Athos has a hard time falling asleep that night.

The next morning d’Artagnan is silent over breakfast. He’s still made coffee, though. Athos has to smile when d’Artagnan presents him with the first cup. D’Artagnan hadn’t had the usual novitiate in a training squad, but Athos, Aramis and Porthos between them had done a creditable job of passing down the most critical traditions. The importance of being up early to make coffee is one tradition that Aramis in particular had emphasized.

Athos takes a deep breath, savoring the coffee scent. Then he frowns. There’s something else lingering around the cup.

“Give me your wrist,” Athos says to d’Artagnan. He realizes once the words pass his lips that that’s the first thing he’s said to d’Artagnan since he praised the stew last night.

D’Artagnan gives Athos a quizzical look, but sets down his own freshly poured mug and extends his arm to Athos in silent obedience. The set of his eyes and mouth are stubborn. If Athos had to guess, they say something like you have made it clear how you wish this to go, and I’ll make you choke on it before I bend.

Athos sighs internally. He wishes this didn’t have to be so hard. But d’Artagnan can’t be indulged in his puppyish crush. The best way to end his infatuation is to give it absolutely no fuel.

Then what are you doing here? the damnable voice of his conscience demands. Athos ignores it in favor of pushing back d’Artagnan’s sleeve and bringing his wrist to Athos’ nose. The scent is unmistakable.

“You’re in pre-heat,” he announces.

D’Artagnan’s forehead creases in confusion. He pulls his wrist out of Athos’ hands and smells it
himself. “I can’t tell a difference,” he says.

“You’re not used to it,” Athos says. “It’s early. You’ll have another few hours before you really start to feel the symptoms.”

D’Artagnan takes another deep breath. “All right,” he says dubiously.

Athos has to smile. “When’s the last time you knew what you smelled like underneath that awful perfume you use?” he has to ask. It’s not teasing. That would be too intimate. It’s just an honest question. And Athos is honestly curious. D’Artagnan’s come a long way from the country youth who’d hidden his scent under the pervasive smell of shit, but even with access to the best apothecaries in the city d’Artagnan still prefers something far stronger than any of his squadmates.

D’Artagnan frowns, though. “We can’t all be purebloods,” he says defensively. “You three might be able to get away with using more pleasant perfumes, but my scent goes right through anything short of aniseed.”

“I see,” Athos says, trying to be delicate. It doesn’t work. D’Artagnan’s frown only deepens.

“I’m sorry my perfume is so offensive,” he says stiffly. “Or is it my scent that you can’t stand?”

“Neither,” Athos says, startled. “Your scent may be strong, but so are you.”


“Truly,” Athos says. He means to stop there, but something makes him go on. “You smell like the fields after they’ve been tilled. Like animals standing together in a herd.”

“Farming things,” d’Artagnan says, mouth twisting.

Something makes Athos reach out for him. D’Artagnan would resist, but Athos takes him by the wrist and pulls him in, tucking d’Artagnan into his chest and burying his own nose in d’Artagnan’s neck.

Pre-heat heightens scent. D’Artagnan’s aniseed perfume fades somewhat under its assault. The sharper notes also recede, muted by the sudden richness of it all. D’Artagnan smells like the country. Rich earth and fresh herbs and green growing things. Like life.

D’Artagnan’s trembling slightly in Athos’ hold. Athos rubs soothingly, trying to get d’Artagnan to relax. He doesn’t expect the youth to go suddenly boneless, but that’s what happens. Athos finds himself supporting nearly d’Artagnan’s whole weight as d’Artagnan leans in, tilting his head back so he can breathe Athos in in turn.

“You smell of iron,” he says. “And wood smoke.”

“Fire and blood,” Athos says quietly. “Destruction.”

“I was thinking more of the blacksmith’s forge, back in Lupiac. Creation, not destruction.”

Athos doesn’t know what to say to that. He’s spent the last ten years defining himself by a series of isolated moments, from the way Thomas’ blood smelled on his hands to the flames consuming the chateau at la Fère. Whenever he thinks of his scent, he thinks of that terrible night, and how much it seems as if one had always been leading to the other.

“Athos,” d’Artagnan interrupts. “I know you hate to be here. I want you to know how grateful I am
that you came anyway.”

Athos frowns. He’s been trying not to encourage d’Artagnan’s puppy crush, but he never wants d’Artagnan to think that his being here is a hardship. “It’s not like that,” he tries to explain. “I don’t hate it.”

“It’s okay,” d’Artagnan murmurs. He sounds drowsy, like he’s already sinking under the waves. Athos sniffs again: the markers are stronger, but still decidedly pre-heat. Still, it’s rising quickly.

“I understand,” d’Artagnan goes on. “It was selfish of me to ask you. But I couldn’t stand the thought of doing this with someone else.”

“It’s not selfish to do what you need for yourself,” Athos says firmly. He won’t have d’Artagnan starting down a path of self-denial in the name of some higher good. D’Artagnan must always place his own needs first and do what it takes to meet them.

“I meant to ask you before the heat got started…” D’Artagnan’s eyes are bright as he looks at Athos, more unguarded than Athos has ever seen him. Pre-heat has that effect, sometimes. Lowering inhibitions for the Omega and anyone within reach. Another way the Omega draws in potential sires.

“Ask me what?” Athos prompts when it seems that d’Artagnan is starting to drift.

“To – I don’t know – I didn’t know how to say it. To pretend.”

“Pretend what?”

“To love me,” d’Artagnan says. Outside of heat he’d be ducking his head, maybe worrying at his lip, embarrassed. But now he just looks earnest and wistful and so breathtakingly hopeful that Athos’ heart clenches. “If you could – just for the next two days? Pretend you care about me. Treat me like you mean it. That way I could remember it, you see. I know it’s – you’re making yourself be here – although Porthos says it’s never a hardship to go through heat with someone – but Porthos loves Aramis – and you barely tolerate me. And I wanted to ask you – it’s okay, it’s all right, I don’t mind – at least I won’t mind – but I know you didn’t want to come this time, and you won’t come any more times after this. So if you could pretend you love me, so I have the memories of it for the future, I would – that is – it would mean a lot.” D’Artagnan catches his breath. “Please,” he adds.

Athos opens his mouth and finds he can’t speak. D’Artagnan’s artless plea cuts something deep inside him open, some wound that bleeds into the places of himself he keeps hidden. All he can do for a moment is clutch d’Artagnan closer. D’Artagnan doesn’t protest or make any attempt to free himself: if anything, he presses in closer, with a soft small moan that goes right to Athos’ knot.

Athos tamps that spike of arousal down. Even in pre-heat, d’Artagnan is immeasurably enticing. But he can’t afford to give in to his hormones just yet. D’Artagnan has shown Athos part of his heart, and Athos has to make sure it’s safely tucked away first.

“D’Artagnan,” he begins carefully. “Please, you must understand. I do a great deal more than tolerate you. I know our beginning was difficult, but you are a member of my squad, and my pack. I care for you. Please don’t think otherwise.”

“Good,” d’Artagnan says fiercely. “Oh, that’s good – I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

That catches Athos by surprise. Grateful? “it’s not a matter of gratitude,” he says. “You have earned my regard on your own merits.”

D’Artagnan pulls back a little, enough so that he can look Athos in the eyes. “Regard?” he asks in
some confusion.

“You’re loyal, dedicated, a hard worker and a fast learner,” Athos says as firmly as he can. “I have great respect and esteem for you.”

“Thank you,” d’Artagnan says gravely.

“And there will be no need for me to pretend anything,” he adds, “because I do care for you very much.”

“Thank you,” d’Artagnan says again. But his eyes slide away from Athos’. “That’s very good of you.”

Athos catches d’Artagnan’s chin and turns the youth back to face him. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want your regard,” d’Artagnan bursts out. “And I don’t want your caring, either. I want your love. And if I can’t have it, then I’ll just learn to live without it. But don’t try to pretend that regard and love are the same thing.”

Once again Athos is at a loss. “You don’t want my love,” he tries.

D’Artagnan pulls back further. “I’ll be the judge of what I want,” he says. He looks hurt and proud and so terribly young.

“D’Artagnan, look at me,” Athos says, exasperated. “I’m older than you – too much older. I’ve seen too many things. You deserve someone who’s closer to your age, your experience. Someone who’s not already covered in scars, literal and emotional!”

“I am looking at you,” d’Artagnan says softly. “That’s not what I see.”

“I’ve already cost one Omega her life because I let her tie her fate up with mine,” Athos says. “And another died because he was whelped my odem. I won’t make the same mistake a third time.”

D’Artagnan’s eyes flash dangerously. “I am not a mistake.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Isn’t it?” d’Artagnan pulls the rest of the way away from Athos. “Why are you here, then?”

“I – ” Athos starts.

D’Artagnan watches him expectantly.

“You need someone,” Athos says at last. “I’m the only unmated Alpha in the pack. So it’s my duty to help you.”

D’Artagnan freezes. For a few moments there’s silence as he works up the ability to speak.

“Duty,” he says at last. It’s not accusing, or angry, or even sad. It’s just a single word delivered in the most neutral tone imaginable.

For a moment Athos feels an absurd flash of pride. All those lessons on how to keep one’s emotions concealed while on guard duty appear to have paid off.

Then his mind catches up. “That is – ”
“I understand,” d’Artagnan says, still in that terrible calm voice. “It’s commendable of you to put your personal feelings aside on my behalf.”

“That’s not – it came out wrong!”

“Then what did you mean?”

Athos’ brain shorts out entirely. D’Artagnan’s face is a blank mask, but his distress leaks out in his scent and colors the air around them. Athos is consumed with the need to soothe it. But he’s also caught in the knowledge that he’s caused d’Artagnan’s dismay, and he can’t find a single word to say.

After a moment d’Artagnan nods. “Another mistake, then,” he says coolly. Then he turns away. “I’m taking a walk.”

“D’Artagnan!” Athos scrambles to his feet, starting after the youth. He’s stopped by d’Artagnan’s upraised hand.

“I’m taking a walk alone,” he clarifies. His glance over his shoulder is disdainful. “You needn’t worry. I’ll be back in time for you to perform your duty.”

“It’s not just duty,” Athos says desperately. “D’Artagnan, I didn’t mean – ”

Too late. Athos is speaking to the grass and the trees. D’Artagnan is gone.

True to his word, d’Artagnan does come back in time for Athos to perform. He just doesn’t bother to do so before he’s well into his first peak. There’s no more opportunity for conversation, however fervently Athos wants to repair the damage of his hasty, ill-considered words. There’s no way for them to discuss how they want to handle the reality of a shared heat or to negotiate preferences or boundaries. Just d’Artagnan loping back into the clearing, already half out of his clothes, panting and desperate like the worst Omegan stereotype imaginable.

And Athos, God help him, doesn’t do as he ought and retain a cool head. He’s been breathing heat pheromones for half an hour before d’Artagnan actually appears, and he’d spent most of that time pacing, searching the surrounding areas for the Omega. For the heat scent to have been that strong, for Athos to have been able to smell d’Artagnan despite the distance between them, Athos had been convinced that something was wrong. That d’Artagnan had stayed away too long and had gone through his first peak alone.

He’s proven wrong when d’Artagnan returns. But that just worries Athos more. D’Artagnan’s scent shouldn’t be so strong so soon; he’s pumping out pheromones like an Omega in full distress, not one who’s just beginning to climb the first peak. Athos sees now exactly why Aramis had been so worried. D’Artagnan’s heat is much too strong already, and it’s only going to get stronger. Frankly, Athos is amazed that d’Artagnan has made it through any heats on his own.

“Athos,” d’Artagnan says on a rising note, and throws himself into Athos’ arms.

The moment d’Artagnan does so, all rational thought flees. Athos is at the mercy of the Omega in his arms. It’s true that d’Artagnan is naïve and inexperienced, but somehow that just makes it more appealing. There’s nothing practiced about the way d’Artagnan’s fingers scrabble over Athos’ buckles, trying to get to skin underneath. Nothing artful about his broken pleas. Athos had been afraid that he would find d’Artagnan’s lack of refinement off-putting when the moment finally came. Instead he finds the raw, untempered desire a more potent aphrodisiac than any of Charlotte’s old winning ways.
Athos guides them both down; carefully, instinct insists, but quickly. D’Artagnan doesn’t understand what Athos wants at first and resists, twisting to try and stay close to Athos. Only once Athos gets him down and joins him on the ground does d’Artagnan relax somewhat. He’s not still, though. The energy that characterizes d’Artagnan’s every movement is still present. It’s just focused now on d’Artagnan’s drive to remove his own clothes, and Athos’, and press them together as closely as flesh and bone will allow.

Together they manage to get their garments off. Then Athos has to stop and stare. The Omega squirming so appealingly beneath Athos is young and strong and beautiful. D’Artagnan’s scent is drenched in need and heat; it screams of fertility. The skin newly bare to Athos’ view is tanned and supple. The muscles ripple underneath. Everything about d’Artagnan repeats the same promise over and over: *I would be your equal, I would protect our pack, I would give you strong pups.*

A small, small part of Athos rails against the unfairness of it all. He wants to go back and erase the last day. Start it over and do everything right. Discuss the way they’d go through this heat before it starts. Athos doesn’t know what d’Artagnan prefers. Hard? Gentle? Straightforward, or teasing? Is d’Artagnan willing to let Athos’ hands wander all over his body, followed closely by tongue and teeth? Or would he prefer to keep their relations more impersonal, focused on the biological minimum of knotting?

But wait. Athos does know, at least a little, what d’Artagnan wants. D’Artagnan had told him, right before Athos had put his foot in his mouth and sent d’Artagnan away to bleed off his hurt and rejection alone in the forest.

*I want you to pretend to love me,* d’Artagnan had said. *Pretend you care about me. Treat me like you mean it, so I have the memories of it for the future.*

D’Artagnan hadn’t known – because Athos had never let him know – that Athos has no need of pretending.

D’Artagnan twists and whines in a wordless plea. The scent of distress is climbing, even with Athos saturating the air with what should be the calming scent of a compatible, willing Alpha. Athos can’t slow this down, no matter how much he wants to. D’Artagnan had brought Athos here for a reason and this is it: to get his knot into d’Artagnan as soon as possible, cut off the rising tide of heat before it drowns d’Artagnan completely.

Athos keeps one arm wrapped around d’Artagnan, holding him in place, though the Omega bucks and twists against Athos. Athos’ other hand moves downward. He traces d’Artagnan’s smooth musculature briefly, unable to resist, then nudges d’Artagnan’s erect cock out of the way and slides two fingers directly into his dripping hole.

D’Artagnan nearly jackknifes entirely out of Athos’ grip. Athos frowns, exerting more of his strength to keep d’Artagnan still. This is another puzzling reaction. Surely d’Artagnan had tried fingering himself before during his heats. D’Artagnan may have had to go through his first heat without help, but Aramis would have brought some aids along for the subsequent ones. And d’Artagnan’s inventive; surely he’d…

The mystery is solved when d’Artagnan takes advantage of Athos’ moment of distraction to break out of his grip entirely. D’Artagnan uses his new leverage to climb practically on top of Athos, shoving his nose unerringly in one of the scent glands just below Athos’ collarbone and breathing deep. Of course. Scent changes everything; it’s how throwbacks identify family, pack, mates. Betas, with their weak noses and their weak scents, rely much more on sight. But a throwback pup’s first sense is smell. They learn the scents of their carrier, their sire, their littersmates and other siblings. Eventually they learn to distinguish their wider pack and the multiple packs that make up a clan.
D’Artagnan may have gone through heat before, but Athos wonders with a sudden, guilty start if d’Artagnan has ever truly scented an Alpha in his life. He wouldn’t have grown up with other throwbacks. He’s certainly never been around one who wasn’t well covered with some kind of perfume.

D’Artagnan breathes again, deep and rhythmic. More of the tension goes out of his frame. He’s almost relaxed now, sprawled across Athos like Athos is a particularly comfortable pillow.

“Shush,” Athos murmurs soothingly, letting d’Artagnan breathe. “I’m right here.”

He doesn’t attempt to move d’Artagnan yet. They’ll have to rearrange for the actual knotting, but d’Artagnan’s scent has quieted somewhat. With his nose buried in Athos’ neck d’Artagnan’s body seems to finally realize that he’s not alone for this heat. The scent of distress recedes somewhat. Not completely – it still lurks underneath, like a storm-cloud hovering on the horizon – but Athos can take a little more time to make sure d’Artagnan is ready.

He lets his left arm curl loosely around d’Artagnan’s shoulders, stroking d’Artagnan’s hair, as d’Artagnan breathes deep and shudders with every twist of Athos’ fingers inside him. He’s wet as a river but still so tight. The first knot is hard, Charlotte had always said. She’d never seemed to blame Olivier for their first heat. But Olivier had been a young Alpha, every bit as inexperienced as Charlotte, and he knows that their first knot together had been a raw, fumbling thing. If nothing else, Athos can do better for d’Artagnan.

D’Artagnan’s making soft, breathy sounds he’s probably not aware of. He’d probably be ashamed if he were. But to Athos he’s beautiful, and Athos can’t stop looking at him. He adds a third finger without taking his eyes from d’Artagnan’s face and watches d’Artagnan’s lips part in a pleased gasp. Athos’ thumb gently massages d’Artagnan’s rim, helping him stretch, and d’Artagnan’s eyes flutter with the sensation. It’s beautiful.

D’Artagnan groans when Athos withdraws slightly, and his scent jumps in distress. Athos soothes him with a kiss. It’s as instinctive and natural as breathing. It’s only after it’s done, and d’Artagnan is blinking down at him with red-stained cheeks and a look of astonished joy, that Athos remembers that he’d meant never to kiss d’Artagnan, or hold him like this and stroke his hair, or do anything other than what’s absolutely necessary. Or else d’Artagnan would realize…

D’Artagnan must catch something in Athos’ face – or, more probably, Athos’ scent – because his look of joy falters, then fades. This far into his peak d’Artagnan’s running on sheer instinct, and his instincts have always been good. He can tell that Athos is about to withdraw. He’s already bracing for the blow.

Athos can’t bear it. He kisses d’Artagnan again.

D’Artagnan stills in shock, then surges up, prying Athos’ lips open with his own. D’Artagnan kisses like he fights, energy and motion and absolutely nothing held back. It’s intoxicating. Athos falls into it, and it’s long moments before he remembers that there’s something more he needs to be doing.

Athos lets d’Artagnan keep kissing him while his fingers go back to work. Instead of entering d’Artagnan, he massages the Omega’s rim and the area surrounding it, the muscles that are about to stretch wide over Athos’ knot. Getting the knot inside d’Artagnan is only half the battle. The other half is d’Artagnan’s. His muscles have to both have enough elasticity to lock around the knot and enough strength to contract around it. D’Artagnan is strong – Athos isn’t worried about that part – but if he’s too tense he’ll tear instead of stretch. Athos works the whole area, loosening d’Artagnan up until d’Artagnan is whining with need and his scent is spiking too much to delay any further.
Athos withdraws his fingers and gently disengages from d’Artagnan’s artless kisses. D’Artagnan protests with a wordless keen. Athos shushes him, rolling them over so d’Artagnan is beneath him.

“Hands and knees, beloved,” Athos says breathlessly. The endearment slips out of him without his conscious intent, but he can’t bring himself to regret it. “It’s time.”

D’Artagnan shivers all over. He wriggles into position eagerly, presenting without a hint of shame. Then he proves he’s young and flexible enough to twist his neck around and give Athos the most erotic come-hither look Athos has ever seen.

It would tempt a saint. It certainly tempts Athos.

Athos retains just enough self-control to slide in slowly – as slowly as possible, given that d’Artagnan shoves back enthusiastically and moans in a way that goes straight to his knot. Athos groans. This isn’t going to last very long. Fortunately that’s the point – at least at the moment.

D’Artagnan takes Athos beautifully, all the way to the hilt in one long, slow push. D’Artagnan folds his arms and lowers his front all the way to the ground to get a better angle. Athos watches d’Artagnan’s hole flutter around the knot with a sense of wonder. Charlotte had always closed up completely around him, like she was a conjurer performing a disappearing trick. D’Artagnan doesn’t quite manage that. Athos can still see the base of his knot through the thin stretched skin at d’Artagnan’s entrance. Athos rocks back and forth gently, fearing even to thrust, afraid that the skin is about to tear. But it doesn’t. It stretches and flutters but holds.

D’Artagnan probably couldn’t speak if his life depended on it, but the impatient moan and wriggle of his hips does it for him. *More*, they demand. *Move. Now.*

Athos surprises himself with a breathless laugh. He braces himself with his hands against the cool forest floor, leaning forward and nuzzling d’Artagnan briefly at the base of his neck. D’Artagnan shivers and moans again, thrusting his hips up futilely, trying to get some action.

“I’ve got you,” Athos promises. He pulls out slightly – careful, still careful – then rocks back in. D’Artagnan moans again. Still in pleasure; Athos is listening intently, but he hears no sour note of pain. Encouraged, Athos repeats the motion, building up a small rhythm. D’Artagnan’s scent fills his nose. His eyes are treated to the incredible vision of d’Artagnan’s beautiful body awash in pleasure. D’Artagnan’s hole contracts around his knot. Athos shoves himself fully inside, more out of instinct than conscious thought. His knot catches on d’Artagnan’s rim, which stretches nearly white, and for a moment Athos is caught in the fear that he’s left it too late, that he’s missed the knot. But it slips in with an agonizingly pleasurable slide, and then it’s at full swell. They’re tied.

Athos’ orgasm builds up in him like a tidal wave. D’Artagnan doesn’t wait for it; he cries out and shakes apart underneath Athos, without Athos even laying a finger on his cock. It shudders through them both through the place where they’re tied together. D’Artagnan’s muscles squeeze tight almost to the point of pain, then relax suddenly, and Athos spills himself deep with a groan he can’t hold back.

The feeling of coming inside d’Artagnan is indescribable. The sense of release is physically pleasurable, but it’s decidedly secondary to the fireworks that go off in his mind and heart. For this moment, this knot, this heat, d’Artagnan is indisputably his. It’s Athos’ knot in his hole, Athos’ seed climbing up his channel questing for the ovum. Athos has the privilege of holding d’Artagnan close as he dozes. Athos is who d’Artagnan trusts to guard him against anything and everything, to help him when he most needs it.

Right now it doesn’t matter that d’Artagnan is young and Athos is old, that d’Artagnan is unbroken
and Athos is scarred, that d’Artagnan deserves better and Athos deserves nothing. Right now all Athos can think about is the Omega in his arms. His strength, his beauty, his resilience of spirit and faith in the goodness of others. D’Artagnan deserves every good thing this world has to offer. Athos is going to make sure d’Artagnan receives them.

As the first orgasm dies down between them, some of Athos’ reasoning faculties return, and he maneuvers them down onto their sides on the ground where they can rest. D’Artagnan is already lost to the world, dozing peacefully in Athos’ arms. Athos tugs one of the saddlebags over – thank God, they’re within reach – and after a few fumbling mishaps manages to get a pile of clean clothes under d’Artagnan’s head and a blanket over them both. They’ll stay tied for another hour at least. Longer, if d’Artagnan successfully milks subsequent orgasms from Athos. Even when it breaks d’Artagnan won’t wake from the doze. Not until he starts climbing the next peak. Fortunately Athos will have time to ready the area a little better for that second peak. A blanket beneath them, for one thing. Water within reach for them both. Not that either of them are thirsty right now. But they will be.

Right now Athos doesn’t need to do any of those things. He just needs to stay with d’Artagnan. Part of him is reflexively scanning the area for any signs of danger. But more of him is focused on the Omega dozing on his knot. Peaceful and beautiful and trusting, all his barriers down. The thought hits Athos suddenly: this could be forever.

Athos wants it to be. He wants it with an intensity that scares him. He’s hasn’t just been lying to d’Artagnan with his words and actions: he’s been lying to himself, too. He doesn’t just want d’Artagnan the way any older Alpha might want a beautiful younger Omega. Athos wants this specific Omega, this sometimes brilliant, often stubborn, occasionally frustrating Gascon youth who had stormed into the garrison eleven months ago and turned Athos’ world upside down. He wants to keep d’Artagnan in his arms, by his side, in his pack. Forever.

D’Artagnan sighs softly in his doze. His muscles clench and relax where he’s joined with Athos, pulling more of Athos into himself. D’Artagnan wants Athos. And maybe Athos has been lying to himself, too, about the depth of d’Artagnan’s feelings. Because d’Artagnan having a puppy crush had been far easier to deal with than the idea that d’Artagnan might genuinely love Athos for something more than being the first unmated Alpha he’d met in Paris. So Athos has let the weeks go by and turn to months. He’s let the months mount up and nearly become a year. Willfully ignorant of the passage of time which would force him to confront the truth: that they are well beyond the realm of a puppyish crush.

D’Artagnan had been immature when he’d first come to Paris. It had been Athos’ responsibility, as the older, steadier person, to slow d’Artagnan down. To insist that d’Artagnan wait and consider all his options and not rush into anything. Eleven months ago d’Artagnan’s grief for his family had been brand new; his fear and uncertainty over what would be his future had colored everything he’d said or done. D’Artagnan hadn’t been making good decisions about anything, let alone what he might want from a mate.

But now he’s a Musketeer. His career is assured. The loss of his family has mellowed slightly, the bitterness turning into the quiet, patient heartache that Athos is far too intimately familiar with. D’Artagnan’s gained strength in his spirit to go along with the strength in his arms. Maturity. Even, dare Athos think it, the beginnings of wisdom.

D’Artagnan is young. But he’s an adult. Maybe he'd gotten thrown into adulthood too soon, but it’s over and done with now. D’Artagnan has had no choice but to grow up and to do it fast. He’s strong on his own two feet, independent if he needs to be, with a support network that extends beyond Athos and his pack. D’Artagnan’s proven himself as a capable Musketeer and a good man. He’s more than earned the right to make his own choices.
And if this heat is proving nothing else, it’s proving that d’Artagnan’s feelings aren’t going to fade quietly and decorously away. Athos could reject d’Artagnan once and for all. But that wouldn’t set d’Artagnan free. It would just give d’Artagnan another quiet ache to carry around. Even if d’Artagnan finds someone else and moves on, it will remain, the way Charlotte will always remain in Athos’ heart.

Charlotte. Oh, God. Athos mourns her loss still; how can he even think of another, after he had failed his first mate so completely?

D’Artagnan tenses in his arms, tossing and whimpering. At first glance it could be mistaken for a natural reflex. The Omega trying to provoke another orgasm from his Alpha, to lengthen the time they’re tied together and increase the chances of a successful breeding. Athos knows better. Athos can feel the tension, the fine shivers in d’Artagnan’s slender frame.

“Shush,” Athos whispers, stroking one hand gently down d’Artagnan’s trembling flank. He leaves it resting on d’Artagnan’s hip, a comforting weight.

D’Artagnan subsides, though the tension doesn’t leave him entirely. Afraid, Athos realizes. Even in his doze d’Artagnan can sense Athos’ turmoil. And Athos has taught him this, over the last year: that when Athos is in turmoil, it ends with d’Artagnan being pushed away. Because Athos has been punishing d’Artagnan for Athos’ own shortcomings.

“Hush,” Athos whispers again. “Oh, d’Artagnan, I’m so, so sorry.”

D’Artagnan has reached out to them all so many times. Aramis and Porthos have responded, opening their pack to d’Artagnan and taking him in. But Athos has rebuffed him at every turn. D’Artagnan hasn’t stopped trying. But he’s stopped expecting anything to ever change.

One day d’Artagnan will stop trying. Athos has been reminding himself of this nearly daily for the past eleven months. He’s been looking forward to it, in fact. Anticipating it as some sort of triumph.

How utterly foolish he’s been. All Athos had ever been going to accomplish with his continual rejection is to turn d’Artagnan into someone just like him: bitter, alone, and old before his time. When instead Athos could have opened his arms and his heart and let them both come alive.

“I’m so sorry,” Athos says again. He strokes down d’Artagnan’s flank again, petting, and d’Artagnan uncurls slightly. Athos wraps d’Artagnan up in his arms and lets himself accept the feel of the pliant body against his own.

If it were only Athos who felt this way, he’d accept the new ache as the price of d’Artagnan’s eventual happiness elsewhere, and gladly. Athos carries so many ghosts already; what’s one more? But d’Artagnan must not suffer unnecessarily. Perhaps their courting will come to nothing – perhaps d’Artagnan will find out that having is not, after all, so pleasant a thing as wanting – but Athos can no longer make that decision alone.

“I’ll do better,” Athos promises. “I’ll try. I’ll let you try. We’ll try together.”

He wonders if d’Artagnan can hear him. Some Omegas do remember what they hear while dozing; others don’t. He should have asked Aramis before they’d come. He should have asked Aramis many things, and d’Artagnan many more.

But now – and Athos almost smiles to think of it – now there will be time to ask later.

“I wish I knew why you’d chosen me,” Athos says wistfully. “There are so many better choices. I don’t know if I can be what you need, d’Artagnan. I’ve been doing a fairly poor job up until now.”
D’Artagnan yawns.

“I’ll take that as a reprimand,” Athos murmurs. Against all probability he finds himself smiling, and he gives in to the impulse to drop a kiss in d’Artagnan’s hair. “I’ll do better,” he says again. “I’ll do right for you, d’Artagnan, I promise.”

There’s more to say, but it can wait until d’Artagnan is coherent again. The important part’s already been said.

D’Artagnan seems to agree. He yawns again. Then he burrows impossibly deeper in Athos’ arms and seems to drop into a deeper doze.

Athos is still smiling. “Sleep now, beloved,” he whispers. “I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

He tucks the blanket more firmly around d’Artagnan. Then he goes back to scanning the forest, marking time patiently, until his Omega needs him again.
A couple of days later than usual, I know, but this chapter was a beast. It’s practically double-length; there was simply no good place to split it.

Now would be a good time to re-check the warnings. This chapter hits a number of them. In general the warnings will be more regularly applicable as we begin to focus on the overarching plot, so please keep that in mind going forward.

D’Artagnan rouses as the sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky with shades of red and coral. Athos turns around from shaking out a blanket to find d’Artagnan sitting up, watching the sunset with quiet admiration.

“How does it compare to the sunsets on your family’s farm?” Athos asks quietly.

D’Artagnan lifts one hand and tips it from side to side. “Well enough, I suppose,” he says. “I’ll tell you a secret, though. I rarely saw the sun set. By the time dusk fell I was usually too exhausted to be outside watching. My father used to say I would have more energy when I grew older, that I’d start packing on muscle, but somehow it never happened for me.”

“He was judging you by Betan standards. You need a different approach to strength training. Aramis can show you the best way.”

“He’s already helping me with a weights routine.”

“Good.”

D’Artagnan falls silent again. Around them, the clearing is filling up with the sun’s dying light. And something else. The smell of heat is rising.

It’s not urgent yet, though. Athos finishes shaking out the blanket and folds it up again, setting it on top of the others. D’Artagnan is still sitting where he’d been dozing, naked on the ground. Athos has been preparing a better area a little closer to the fire. The day had been warm, but it’s still barely spring. They’ll be glad of the fire when the temperature dips overnight. And of some insulation between themselves and the ground.

When the sun’s gone, d’Artagnan sighs. Then he turns around to face Athos and looks surprised. “Did you do all that?”

Athos waves a hand dismissively. “It’s not much.” He’s stoked up the fire, so it should last though d’Artagnan’s next peak without needing attention. Near the fire – close enough for warmth, not so close to singe bare skin – he’s laid out some of their blankets and arranged the saddlebags nearby. Water and food are within easy reach. Everything is as ready as it’s going to get.

Honestly, heat in a forest is not Athos’ idea of comfort. He understands why they must leave Paris. But he regrets la Fère and the places like it, the places that were once safe for their kind, which have been slowly dwindling in number as the Inquisition presses ever onward.
“It’s nice,” d’Artagnan disagrees. He rolls to his feet and starts towards Athos, then gasps in surprise and nearly sinks to his knees. Athos, prepared for this from previous experience with stubborn Omegas, catches d’Artagnan by the forearms.

“Careful,” he scolds, leading d’Artagnan the last few steps forwards and settling him back down atop the layers Athos had spread atop the groundcloth. He hasn’t bothered to pitch a tent, though he’d brought his on general principle in case the weather turns foul. But it’s better to let the pheromones dissipate in the open air. The groundcloth makes good insulation, though, and the tent itself is folded and sandwiched between the groundcloth and another blanket, providing an extra layer of comfort.

“I’m sorry,” d’Artagnan mutters, blushing endearingly in the firelight. “I was just, uh, not prepared for that.”

For the burn of knotting muscles stretched open for the first time, he means. “It’s all right,” Athos says comfortingly. “It’s like any other muscle. Sore the first time you work it, but as long as you take proper care it’ll grow accustomed soon enough.”

“Oh,” d’Artagnan says, still looking into the fire. “Yes, of course.”

“Here.” Athos hands him a water skin. “Drink.”

“I don’t feel thirsty,” d’Artagnan says dubiously.

“I know. But it will do you good.”

D’Artagnan shrugs and obeys. He drinks perhaps half the skin, then blinks at it, surprised.

“See?” Athos smiles at him, taking the skin and setting it away. “Now relax. There’s a little ways to go yet until your next peak. Conserve your energy.”

“Can I…” d’Artagnan blushes a little and scoots closer to Athos.

“Of course,” Athos says.

D’Artagnan comes closer still. Athos thinks he means to slide in for an embrace, but d’Artagnan surprises him by turning, lying down with his head in Athos’ lap.

“All right?” he asks.

“Yes,” Athos repeats. He drops his hand to his lap, cards it through d’Artagnan’s hair. D’Artagnan sighs.

They stare up at the stars for a while. Athos lets his mind wander slightly, gathering his thoughts and his courage. He needs to open himself up to d’Artagnan. It’s hard to know how to start. The silence stretches long. It’s not tense. But Athos is uncomfortably aware of how much he still has to say.

At last d’Artagnan sighs, breaking the quiet.

“What do I need to do to make this last forever?” he asks wistfully. There’s an air about the question, like it’s supposed to be teasing, but if that’s true then d’Artagnan misses the mark. It’s impossible to mistake d’Artagnan’s meaning for anything but the genuine, serious, longing question it is.

Nothing, is Athos’ immediate response. This time he bites down on the word before it can leave its mouth. He can predict, this time, how d’Artagnan will take it: as a rejection. Nothing you could do will be enough, is what d’Artagnan would hear. Athos has grown so used to Aramis and Porthos,
who know his ways, that he’s finding himself completely at sea when it comes to talking to d’Artagnan. Athos’ preferred single-word answers don’t work for d’Artagnan.

Athos manages to stop himself from saying the wrong thing, but that doesn’t magically give him the right words to use. He fumbles after them as quickly as he can. Not quickly enough. D’Artagnan takes Athos’ silence as its own answer and smiles wryly, turning his gaze away and back to the stars.

“You’re right, of course,” d’Artagnan says, as if Athos had said something aloud. “I suppose I can’t change that much.”

In Paris, d’Artagnan never shows this kind of emotion. He can take a loss on the practice yards with a smile, a hit in a tavern fight with a witty comeback, or the casual disregard of the nobility with a cool air of detachment. But it must all be a front. During heat, d’Artagnan can’t hide himself.

Athos reaches down and turns d’Artagnan’s face back towards his. “You needn’t change a thing,” he says clumsily. Athos cups d’Artagnan’s cheek in his hands and wills d’Artagnan to see his sincerity. “Firstly because you are complete as yourself, and any Alpha who would demand that you change is unworthy of your attention. And secondly because – because – ”

“Because?” d’Artagnan asks. He reaches up to cover Athos’ hands with his own, holding them in place, holding his breath.

“Because I think you are perfect the way you are.” The words are hard to speak, but as they leave Athos’ mouth it’s like they tear something open in him and everything comes tumbling out. “Because I like everything about you, even what you think are rough edges. I like your scent, I like the way you talk, I like your country manners. I like that you’re different. I like that you have a new way of looking at things, that you’re not biased the same ways we all are from years of Musketeering. I like that you work so hard at everything you do.”

D’Artagnan blushes bright red. “Athos,” he whispers, awed. “What are you saying?”

“I’ve been pushing you away,” Athos admits. “I’ve been afraid. D’Artagnan, you’re so young. You could have so many others. I know I was the first Alpha you met when you came to Paris, but I thought that once you met others, you’d wake up and realize that your interest in me was a passing phase. I thought – ”

“You thought wrong,” d’Artagnan interrupts. He pulls himself up to a sitting position, and since his head had been in Athos’ lap he ends up pretty much sitting in it, arms winding around Athos’ body to keep himself upright, noses practically brushing. “I’m not some country hick who had their head turned by the bright lights of the city! I know what I want.”

“Someone who’s never seen a jewel may admire the first rock they see, but they soon realize that a diamond is better than a crystal,” Athos says ruefully. “I’m not exactly a prize.”

“I’ll thump whoever told you that,” d’Artagnan says in that direct straightforward way of his. “Why won’t you see your own value?”

“I’m old – ”

“Experienced,” d’Artagnan interrupts.

Athos raises an eyebrow. “Scarred.”

D’Artagnan traces one pale line down Athos’ chest, a souvenir from La Rochelle, a decade old now. “Brave.”
“Damaged.”

“Strong.” D’Artagnan shakes his head. “I know there are things in your past that you wish you could forget. I know you made mistakes and people died. But that doesn’t make you broken. Am I broken?”

“Of course not,” Athos says fiercely.

D’Artagnan spreads his arms wide. “I was born an Omega and my parents died,” he says steadily.

“That’s not the same thing. You were a pup. It wasn’t your fault. There was nothing you could have done.”

“I went into heat. That’s old enough to inherit under the old laws, isn’t it? Besides, what about my parents? They were grown. Should I blame them? Say they should have left when I was born, or turned me over to the Church to save themselves, or had me sterilized?”

“I had responsibilities,” Athos tries to explain. “And I failed at them. My mate and odem died.”

D’Artagnan nods. “So did my parents,” he says gently. “But I survived. I’m here, and I’m alive, and I’m going to keep on living. Don’t you think it’s about time you started doing the same?”

Athos gives in to the urge to reach out and touch. D’Artagnan smiles at the feel of Athos’ fingers on his cheek and turns into Athos’ hand, nuzzling the scarred palm fondly.

“I want you,” d’Artagnan says, enunciating each word carefully so there can be no mistake. “I’m not a pup. I’m not fresh from the countryside. I’m not even a novice anymore. I’m grown, and I’m a Musketeer, and I know what I want.”

“Then I offer myself as one who hopes to be worthy of your interest, and ask your indulgence to prove my worth in courtship,” Athos says.

D’Artagnan’s cheeks turn pink. “I would be honored,” he says. There’s a moment where his accent wavers slightly, changing from d’Artagnan’s usual Gascon cadence to a mimicry of Aramis’ more refined one, and they both laugh a little.

“If I didn’t already know who’d been teaching you manners…” Athos jokes. He feels a little giddy at the step they’ve just taken. It’s small enough on its own. But after decades of standing still anything is momentous.

“I’ll show you manners,” d’Artagnan retorts, launching himself forward and wrestling Athos to the ground with the aid of surprise. D’Artagnan ends up on top of Athos and takes advantage of his position by kissing the older Alpha senseless.

Athos kisses back. Lets himself enjoy the feel of d’Artagnan pressing against him. Runs his hands down the endless expanse of him, slender lines and smooth tanned skin. Wonderful. All of him, wonderful.

For some inexplicable reason d’Artagnan wants Athos. Even with his baggage and his scars, the difference in their ages and their experience. Even knowing how badly he’d failed Charlotte and Thomas. Athos doesn’t know how or why. But he’s tired of fighting it. He’s certainly tired of making d’Artagnan unhappy. He’ll be honest with d’Artagnan. He’ll make sure d’Artagnan knows everything there is to know about Athos’ past over the course of their courtship. But if, at the end of it all, d’Artagnan still says he wants Athos –
“Hey,” d’Artagnan interrupts, pulling away from the kiss. “Are you okay?”

He looks worried. Athos leans forward and kisses him again.

“More than,” Athos promises.

Letting his strength go is always a pleasure of itself. It aches sometimes to be careful in every move he makes, from sparring in the practice yards to something as simple as opening a door. Now Athos lets it out for a moment, long enough to tumble d’Artagnan off him and reverse their positions. D’Artagnan hits the blankets with a satisfying thump and stares up at Athos, wide-eyed and breathing hard.

There’s nothing to be done with that but to kiss d’Artagnan again. So Athos does.

D’Artagnan groans and twists, trying to tug Athos closer. “Athos!” he pleads.

Athos lifts himself up, arching a teasing eyebrow. A deep breath confirms what Athos had already suspected: the heat is rising again. D’Artagnan is flushed enticingly beneath him. His scent lures Athos in closer, beckons him with seductive promises of their compatibility, how good they’d be together.

“Please,” d’Artagnan pleads, breath catching as Athos gives in and puts his mouth on that appealing expanse of skin. D’Artagnan’s stomach is closest, so that’s where he tastes first, flat planes of muscle that stretch from groin to ribs. No scent glands here. Instead just d’Artagnan, salt and sweat and a faint earthy flavor.

D’Artagnan catches Athos’ head between his hands and tries to urge him downwards, but Athos resists. He goes up instead, and d’Artagnan keens when Athos fastens onto one pert nipple. Athos sucks and licks, aware that his hands have migrated to d’Artagnan’s hips and are holding him down. D’Artagnan obviously approves of his, bucking eagerly, making Athos press down harder until he’s using his full strength and d’Artagnan relaxes with a heartfelt moan of approval.

“Need you,” he begs. D’Artagnan thrusts his hips wickedly, rubbing their groins together. “Now?”

“You’re barely starting the peak,” Athos says comfortingly. This, at last, is something he understands. He’s familiar with the ebb and flow of heat, and how time dilates for Alpha and Omega both. He can tell the difference between a want and a need when hormones are high and self-control is low. And he knows how to make the pleasure build and build until it crests at exactly the right moment.

“So?” d’Artagnan demands.

“Come here,” Athos says, tugging d’Artagnan up from his supine position. One of the better things about the blanket-nest Athos had constructed is the large tree conveniently located next to it. Athos sits down his back against the tree and guides d’Artagnan into his lap. D’Artagnan tries to slide himself down on Athos’ cock, but Athos sees this coming in time and manages to settle d’Artagnan differently. Athos’ cock nestles comfortably up between the cleft of d’Artagnan’s buttocks, present but trapped.

“Athos,” d’Artagnan pouts, bouncing up and down slightly. Athos slides his hands down d’Artagnan’s flanks, petting, then takes d’Artagnan’s hips with a firm grip. D’Artagnan flushes and swears in words he must have learned from Porthos.

“You’re mouthy during heat,” Athos says with a grin. “I like it.”
This makes d’Artagnan still. His eyes flick up and catch Athos’, wide and shocked. “You do?”

“I do,” Athos confirms, softer this time. He’s rewarded by d’Artagnan’s smile. Not the brash one befitting a Musketeer that d’Artagnan flashes around the streets of Paris, but a private one, sweet and glad and just the two of them.

Athos slips his fingers between their flesh, playing with d’Artagnan’s cock. “All right?” Athos asks. Some Omegas don’t like this, but d’Artagnan seems pleased, if his squirming is anything to go by.


“Probably because I know what I’m doing,” Athos jokes. He’s spent a lot of time alone with only his right hand for company. D’Artagnan, by contrast, is only a year past his first heat. And any masturbation d’Artagnan may have done will probably have focused on his hole instead of his genitals. Vestigial organs in unaligned throwbacks aren’t usually erogenous zones outside of heat.

In heat, though, d’Artagnan’s cock is proving most interested in the proceedings. D’Artagnan moans and rolls his hips forward, shoving into Athos’ hand and nudging up against his belly.

“I love your experience,” he says, managing to sound eager and sly at the same time. “Why don’t you show me what else you know that I don’t?”

Athos is startled into a laugh. “Minx,” he accuses fondly. D’Artagnan smiles, and Athos can’t help himself. He has to kiss that smile, to taste it and experience it firsthand.

D’Artagnan comes willingly. And when Athos breaks the kiss, d’Artagnan allows Athos to settle him against Athos’ chest, his weight supported by Athos’, trusting and pliant. Which frees up Athos’ second hand to slip down d’Artagnan’s back and tease his hole.

“Ohh,” d’Artagnan moans, curling farther into Athos as he’s stimulated from both ends. A little fluid is leaking from d’Artagnan’s cock, sterile vestige of the testes d’Artagnan had never developed. By contrast, Athos’ cock is already soaked, not with his own fluid but with the slick leaking from d’Artagnan’s hole. The lubrication glands are as overactive as every other part of d’Artagnan’s heat, it seems.

“Do you like that?” Athos whispers teasingly into d’Artagnan’s ear.

D’Artagnan shivers with the pleasure of it, rocking back and forth on Athos’ lap, eager for more. “Oh, yes,” he cries. “Yes, please, Athos – ”

“Shh,” Athos promises, “I’ve got you.”

D’Artagnan’s scent is growing stronger. They’ll have to knot soon. Athos speeds his movements, abandoning teasing in favor of pushing d’Artagnan farther up the slope to pleasure.


Love. Athos groans. He has to release d’Artagnan’s cock and pinch the base of his own, staving off the knot that tries to inflate at the endearment. D’Artagnan whines at the loss, twisting up and kissing Athos.

“Now?” he begs.

“Now,” Athos agrees breathlessly. His nostrils flare; d’Artagnan’s heat has jumped ahead.
dramatically. They’re nearly to the crest. Athos needs to be inside him. But first Athos needs to say –

“Wait,” d’Artagnan says breathlessly. He touches a finger to d’Artagnan’s lips. “Wait and tell me when you’re inside me.”

Athos groans again at the mere image. “Here,” he gasps, trying to maneuver d’Artagnan into lordosis. D’Artagnan’s too uncoordinated to help, though, unbalanced in Athos’ lap. Finally Athos simply picks d’Artagnan up entirely as the easiest way to position d’Artagnan the way he ought to be. D’Artagnan’s pupils blow wide in sheer lust. Athos has to coax him onto his hands and knees; d’Artagnan is abruptly too boneless even to move.

“Athos,” he whimpers. “Athos, please!”

“Almost,” Athos pants. He gets d’Artagnan positioned properly and has to grip the base of his cock again, hard, at the sight of that young brown body presenting to him. D’Artagnan is incredibly flexible: the arch he achieves would be the envy of every prostitute in Paris, assuming any of them were throwbacks.

“Now,” d’Artagnan demands.

Athos fumbles with himself, lining up and sinking home in a single thrust. D’Artagnan’s cry rings off the trees and echoes back to them, music to Athos’ ears. Athos drives into him hard and fast, not holding back his strength, and d’Artagnan responds in kind. The Omega thrusts back in demanding counterpoint. This time Athos reaches around, stroking hot eager flesh. One stroke – two – then d’Artagnan’s peak twists to its height and he spills helplessly over Athos’ hand.

“Athos?” he cries.

“I love you,” Athos gasps.

Athos sinks one last time into that welcoming flesh. Then his knot swells, and he’s coming inside d’Artagnan, locked together whole and perfect and complete.

Athos doesn’t doze – Alphas aren’t wired that way – but as the hours slide by he does fall into a light meditative state. His senses are as alert as ever but his metabolism slows, conserving energy. His mind wanders. He daydreams. Athos imagines returning to the garrison and admitting to Aramis and Porthos that they had been right all along. Envisions courting d’Artagnan. His mind spins a curious mixture of the possible and the improbable: the two of them dueling together in the practice yards, strolling under the moonlight at Olivier’s estates, drinking in Parisian taverns, going back to Gascony together on their mating journey with d’Artagnan’s parents alive and well and overjoyed to receive them.

In the dancing firelight Athos dreams of a world that had never been and never will be. In the darkness la Fère gleams, a jewel of the countryside, in a France that has never heard of the Inquisition. Twelve couple dance down a ball-room brilliantly lit. At one end of the room sires sit together around card-tables; at another, chaperones chatter over hors d’oeuvres. The whole is overseen by d’Artagnan, carefree and happy, long established as la Fère’s chatelain and round with pups. Athos’ parents sit in the corner of the room nearest the fireplace surrounded by their many friends and neighbors. In the center of the glittering throng Thomas dances slowly with Charlotte, the two of them smiling together over some secret Athos will never learn.

The sound of a branch breaking jolts Athos to full wakefulness. The beautiful, impossible dream flees. For a moment Athos is caught in his longing for it. Then his rational mind catches up. He’d
heard something. What?

*An animal?* His rational mind scoffs: foolish as his daydreams have been, surely jumping over an animal moving through the forest is worse?

But no. Athos’ mind may play tricks but his instincts aren’t fooled as easily. He’s been listening to the sounds of the forest all day and all night. He’s accustomed to them. Whatever had snapped Athos out of his daydream hadn’t been a natural sound.

D’Artagnan stirs. He’s got his own set of instincts, attuned not to their surroundings but to Athos. And Athos is tense now, every sense straining, his sudden wariness leaking into his scent.

“What is it?” d’Artagnan mutters.

Another branch creaks. And then Athos hears it, barely: a quiet curse.

“Trouble,” Athos says in reply, voice low. He reaches for their muskets and passes d’Artagnan his, tucking it carefully under d’Artagnan’s body where it won’t be easily seen. “How’s your muscle control?”

D’Artagnan holds up a hand, testing. It’s not perfectly still, but – “Steady enough,” he says.

“Shoot center of mass if you need to,” Athos instructs. He slides his arms out from around d’Artagnan, freeing them. “Pretend to still be dozing. If they’re tracking us by scent – ”

“You know how much I love being the distraction,” d’Artagnan tries to joke. He wraps one mostly-steady hand around the stock of his musket and gives Athos a careful nod.

Athos kisses d’Artagnan’s forehead and passes him Athos’ musket, too. *Just in case,* he tells himself. Athos is naked; he can’t carry powder and shot to reload, so it’s better to leave the gun with d’Artagnan. A sword needs no reloading. He ignores the part of himself that wants to tear apart the intruders bare-handed regardless.

“Perhaps they’re just lost,” Athos says instead, trying to reassure.

“You don’t believe that,” d’Artagnan says. *And neither do I,* he doesn’t add. “Go.”

Athos slips away from d’Artagnan in the dark and fades into the treeline, holding his sword. Briefly he regrets the musket. But only briefly. There are at least two men in the forest – the noise of their passage has been overlapping, and few men would curse aloud if there were no one there to hear them. One musket-shot is therefore worse than useless. It would take out the first man easily, but then Athos would be left to face the other or others with no element of surprise. Athos could have taken both muskets, but then he couldn’t carry his sword, and he’d be in trouble if one of his shots missed their mark or if there were a third man.

He circles around, leaving the fire’s light and moving towards the sound he’d heard. Soon Athos can pick out movement and, after another moment, voices.

“Where is’t, Da?” a piping voice demands in a whisper. “By t’smell, we should be right ontoppa it!”

An older man chuckles quietly. “Some of ’em smell stronger t’an others, Maurice. ’S all breeding. This ’un must be a right mongrel.”

“Could smell it alla way from the road,” a third voice growls. “I ain’t never smelled one so strong.”
“’Ow many you smelled, Uncle Patrice?”

“Least half a dozen, m’boy. Now hush. They can still hear you iffn you talk too loud. You just stay here and let your Da and I bag it, right?”

“You promised I could ’ave a fuck,” the boy’s voice protests.

“You’ll have a fuck,” Patrice promises. “But your Da and I gotta make sure it’s safe first.”

“Even animals have claws, Maurice,” Da says in agreement. “You remember that, you hear?”

“Yes, Da.” The boy sounds sulky.

Distantly, Athos is aware that he’s angry. Furious, even. And, even more distantly, frightened. A group of Betas stalking them in the forest at night: it’s like something out of Athos’ worst nightmares.

Detachment lets him function. The effects of heat make it easier, lets Athos run on pure instinct and set his rational mind aside. And he can still smell d’Artagnan clear as day. At first he’d thought the smell of heat merely lingered in his nose and skin. But now Athos realizes that it’s everywhere. The nearest road through the King’s forest is at least two miles away. But Patrice had been able to smell it even from there…

Athos sets that thought aside. That thought’s for later. Now, Athos can hear the telltale sounds as the three Betas split up. Patrice and Da will be moving on ahead, closing in on d’Artagnan. The boy has been left behind. Easy pickings.

Maurice can’t be far past puberty, and he looks even younger on the forest floor, bled out from a thrust to the heart with a look of utter surprise painted on his features. The boy had never had a chance against a trained fighter. The only mercy is that it had let Athos make it quick.

Athos stares at the body on the floor and thinks that in a different world, a better world, Maurice wouldn’t have had to die. Perhaps he could have been taken to the Church – a real, gentle, loving Church – and with time and patience his evil might have been undone. He might have been reborn as a better person, all his hate washed clean. Perhaps in a different world, Maurice’s family would never have taught him hate in the first place, and Maurice would never have tried to sneak through the King’s forest at night because his father and uncle had scented an Omega in heat and thought it would be a fine thing to rape them. And then Maurice wouldn’t be dead, and Athos wouldn’t have another youth’s blood on his hands.

Maurice looks nothing like Thomas. Features, coloring and build are all as dissimilar as can possibly be imagined. But the look of surprise on their faces is universal.

Athos doesn’t have time to think about that. Maurice had never been the real threat. Da and Patrice are, and they’re moving closer towards d’Artagnan with every beat of Athos’ heart.

Their trail is easy to pick out, even without the added advantage of knowing where they’re heading. Athos moves quickly and quietly through the night. The trail splits as it approaches the clearing. Athos makes a snap decision and moves right.

*Right* leads him, within a few paces, to a rough-looking man crouched behind a tree right at the edge of the clearing. D’Artagnan is in view, apparently dozing peacefully and unawares. Athos can see where the line of d’Artagnan’s body is curved around the muskets, but there’s no glimpse of wood or flash of metal to betray that d’Artagnan is armed. The man Athos is watching chuckles to himself, a piggish, self-satisfied sound.
Athos takes a moment to study his opponent. The man is wearing hunting leathers. No sword, but a knife gleams at his belt and the weapon in his hand is a fowling-piece. Athos frowns, thinking.

This is the King’s forest. Well out of the way of Louis’ actual hunting grounds, but protected lands all the same, which makes them idea for heat purposes. No one is supposed to come here except the hunt-master, his assistants, and the King’s hunting-parties. Athos hadn’t stopped to consider it before, but now he realizes. These men are poachers. They’ve taken one kind of game already. And now they want to take another.

Athos and the man he’s stalking have approached the firepit from the north. D’Artagnan is facing them, though his eyes are closed in pretend sleep, with the fire at his back. Naturally, therefore, it’s the other man – the one Athos isn’t near – who emerges from the treeline, planning to sneak up on d’Artagnan from behind and take him out.

Athos represses the urge to swear. He’d chosen wrong. If he could have taken the other man from behind, d’Artagnan would have had a clear line of fire in front of him to the man Athos is currently stalking. As it is, d’Artagnan will have to twist in order to shoot. That means he’ll need more warning. That means –

Athos drops his sword and tackles his man from behind. The two of them tumble right out into the clearing, noisy and obvious. The man’s fowling-piece fires. Wide, but Athos feels the force of it going by.

He roars. The man beneath him shouts. “Fuck, s’an Alpha! Patrice! Patrice, get over here!”

The only answer the man gets is the report of d’Artagnan’s musket. Athos can’t risk the glance, but a wild tumble sideways puts the scene in Athos’ vision anyway. Patrice is down, gut-shot and bleeding profusely. D’Artagnan’s on his feet, sword in hand, ready to finish the job.

Athos has no doubt that d’Artagnan will handle Patrice. So complete is his faith that his world narrows to the man still wrestling with him, and Athos sees red. This, then, is the one Maurice had addressed as Da. The man who’d fathered a little boy and taught him to view throwbacks as animals, to be hunted, raped and killed. The man who’d brought his son here to end his life bleeding in the forest from a thrust to the heart.

Athos had felt regret over Maurice’s death. He feels none at all about slowly and methodically ripping Da to shreds.

The shaking on his shoulder is something he ignores at first. It’s unimportant, secondary to the need to hurt, kill, protect. Then it gets stronger, interfering with Athos’ motor control. He growls impatiently, going to bat the offender away. Instead he finds himself caught and pulled away from his prey. Athos snarls, ready to wheel on the offender, when the familiar scent reaches his nose and he stops short, shocked at himself.

“Athos,” d’Artagnan says again. Dimly Athos realizes d’Artagnan’s been calling to him for a while now. “Athos, can you hear me? Please, snap out of it.”

Athos tries to say something and finds that his throat is raw. Instead he reaches out for d’Artagnan. D’Artagnan seizes Athos’ hand in both of his and clutches it tight, breaking into a wide, relieved smile.

“Are you back with me?” he asks.

Athos manages a nod. The tinge of red is receding from his vision. In it place comes a sudden
“Did I – ” he asks, though it hurts to talk.

“He’s dead,” d’Artagnan says gently. “They both are.”

“All three,” Athos corrects wearily. “They had another with them. A boy. His first hunt.”

D’Artagnan freezes for a moment, shocked. Then he shakes his head and tugs on Athos’ hand. “Come closer to the fire,” he says. “You’re shaking.”

It’s adrenaline, not chill, but Athos does as d’Artagnan says. He doesn’t turn around him. He doesn’t want to see the state he’d left Maurice’s father’s body in.

It’s been a long time since his last full-blown rage. Rages are as dangerous heats are to Omegas; the Alpha loses rational control, becoming driven by instinct and an adrenal system nearly out of control. Necessary to claim and defend territory, clans, packs, mate and young. But fatal to a people trying to hide.

“You pulled me out of it,” Athos says to d’Artagnan, distantly surprised. Generally only an Alpha’s mate can snap them out of a rage early, much as an Omega’s mate can pull them out of heat early in times of danger. Sometimes their carrier can, or a littermate. But an unmated Omega?

“Here.” D’Artagnan presses a flask of water into Athos’ hands and settles him down next to the fire, back on the blankets. “Let me just deal with the bodies, okay?”

“I’ll help,” Athos tries to protest.

D’Artagnan shoves him back down. “I don’t want you raging out again,” he says. He’s obviously trying for a dry tone. Instead he just sounds worried. Worried and fond. No one’s sounded worried and fond in that precise combination since Olivier’s family had died.

Athos allows himself to be settled. He watches d’Artagnan shake out two blankets and roll the corpses into them, then roll them further off into the woods where the animals will deal with them. Athos avoids looking at the mess he’d made of Da. D’Artagnan’s right: Athos really shouldn’t rage out again. He’s grateful when d’Artagnan leaves the blankets behind, out of sight among the trees. They have enough, and the sight of it might have unpredictable effects, as angry and anguished as Athos feels.

“Are you okay?” Athos asks instead, when d’Artagnan returns and starts washing his hands clean.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Come sit next to me and I’ll be all right,” Athos says truthfully. The adrenaline is fading from his system quickly, leaving behind a primal need to make sure d’Artagnan is okay.

D’Artagnan nods and obliges. He’s visibly shaky when he sinks to the blankets at Athos’ side and makes no objection to Athos gathering him up and holding him rather tighter than is probably comfortable. Instead d’Artagnan clutches back. They’re both drawing strength from each others’ presence and closeness.

“I don’t feel hot anymore,” d’Artagnan says eventually. “Or prickly. Is that normal? Shouldn’t I be close to my next peak?”

Athos noses at d’Artagnan’s skin, then shakes his head. “Your heat’s over,” he says.
“But there were only two peaks!”

“We were interrupted.” Athos shudders a little, still bleeding off the rage hormones. “Heat can end early if there’s danger. The adrenaline probably did it.”

“Oh.” D’Artagnan sighs. “I suppose it’s for the best, but…” he shrugs a little, ruefully.

“I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“Another day, another fight,” d’Artagnan says, falsely cheerful.

It’s a lie and they both know it. This hadn’t been a clean fight, in the practice-yards or against the Cardinal’s guards in the streets of Paris. This had been something from the barbaric times of their ancestors. One on one like animals in the forest at night with people as prizes on the line.

D’Artagnan is still trembling slightly. And he doesn’t feel calm. But he’s staring into the fire and picking absently at the nap of the blanket beneath them instead of saying anything.

“D’Artagnan,” Athos prompts carefully. “Are you truly all right?”

D’Artagnan ducks his head farther, keeping Athos from seeing his face unless Athos lets him go. Which he won’t do.

“I’m scared,” d’Artagnan admits finally. “Athos, how did they know I was here?”

“They scented you,” Athos says quietly.

“From how far away?”

Athos doesn’t answer.

“Athos? How far away were they when you found them?”

“Perhaps a hundred paces,” Athos says. It’s the truth, but it’s also a lie.


“They scented you from the road,” Athos interrupts.

D’Artagnan turns to stone in Athos’ arms. “That’s two miles off at the closest point.”

“I know.”

“Athos, they – they had me from two miles away?”

“They were poachers,” Athos tries. “They hunt for a living –”

“Bullshit,” d’Artagnan interrupts angrily. He pulls back a little, and now Athos can see his face. Anger, yes, but underneath it terror. Terror and a creeping despair. “Two miles! If two miles isn’t enough, what is? Four? Eight? Where can I go that’s that deserted, and still safe? How can I get there and back four times a year without raising suspicion? And what do I do when someone tracks me there anyway?”

D’Artagnan’s voice is rising steadily, and his breath is coming faster. Athos takes him firmly by the shoulders and shakes slightly. This at least has the effect of getting d’Artagnan to look at him instead of staring blindly out into the forest.
“There are other ways to dampen heat,” Athos says, trying to sound confident, though there’s a sour feeling in his own stomach that’s disturbingly like fear. “Suppressants. We can talk to the Captain –”

“Aramis tried that already,” d’Artagnan says helplessly. “Before he sent me to find an Alpha to spend heat with. The Captain said he’d try, but they were getting harder and harder to get.”

“The Captain gets them every quarter,” Athos says mulishly. “He can make something happen for you.”

“He doesn’t get them every quarter,” d’Artagnan says. “Not anymore. Didn’t you notice?”

Athos freezes. He thinks rapidly back over the past year. D’Artagnan has taken up most of his time, d’Artagnan and Aramis and Porthos. Not to mention his duties as a Musketeer and his work for the Underground. But now that he’s thinking of it…

Treville had gone out of Paris unexpectedly a month ago. An emergency on his estates back on Gascony, he’d said. And three months before that he’d been at his desk as usual. But six months before that had been the training exercise at Loire, unusual for the time of year, and nine months before Treville had been oddly delayed coming back from Le Havre.

“Morts tous les diable,” Athos says softly. He hadn’t noticed. Even knowing the added danger Treville is in with Rochefort’s attention focused on him, even with everything Athos owes Treville, Athos had let himself get so wrapped up in his own concerns that he hadn’t even realized that Treville’s access to suppressants had been so severely curtailed. His Captain has been in danger and Athos hasn’t noticed it. Has Treville even been able to unite with his mate during those heats, or had he gone through them alone? Which would be worse? Alone Treville is as vulnerable as any Omega. With his mate, he might be safe from garden-variety dangers, but the threat of Rochefort magnifies immensely. Probably best would be for Treville to have gone with other members of his pack. But whom might that be? The Musketeers are the closest thing Treville has to a pack, as far as Athos knows, and Athos is Treville’s second in command. If the Captain hadn’t felt safe enough to ask Athos to go with him, who else would he have asked?

“It’s the same with contraceptives,” d’Artagnan adds. “Aramis doesn’t care, but –”

D’Artagnan cuts himself off suddenly. Too late. Athos’ attention jerks away from the Captain and back on the Omega next to him.

“D’Artagnan,” Athos asks carefully. “Are you saying that you didn’t bring any contraceptives with you?”

“I brought them with me. I argued, but the Captain insisted I accept them, so I did.”

Athos begins to nod, relieved. Then the precision of d’Artagnan’s word choice catches up to him. “And did you then use them?”

D’Artagnan’s gaze slides away.

“D’Artagnan!”

“Better me than him,” d’Artagnan bursts out. “I asked Aramis. He says Treville’s too old. If he tries to whelp, without medical help, it could kill him. If the Captain can’t even get suppressants regularly, where’s he supposed to get oxytocics? Besides, the Inquisitor is hot enough on our tail already without pups painting Rochefort a bright line!”

Athos boggles. “Aramis knew about this insanity?”
“Aramis thought I was just worried about the Captain. He didn’t know what I was planning to do. And I don’t care what you think either,” d’Artagnan adds, tilting his chin up defiantly. “The Captain will have to take the contraceptives once he knows I haven’t used them. He’ll be fine, and I’ll be – I’ll be fine too, of course.”

“You – you –” Athos is a taciturn man, but right now all the words he wants to speak jam up behind his tongue. D’Artagnan hadn’t taken any contraceptives. He could be pupped right now. They’d had two peaks together. With d’Artagnan’s overactive heats, who knows what the odds are? And d’Artagnan – what had his plan been? What if Athos hadn’t had feelings for him? What would have become of d’Artagnan and the pups? Athos is sick just thinking about it. D’Artagnan is so young. And he’d had no guarantee Athos wouldn’t reject him. How could d’Artagnan have taken care of them all, if he’d ended up alone?

“D’Artagnan –”

“Don’t,” d’Artagnan says. Begs. “Athos, please don’t. I know you’re upset, I know you’re hurt. You have every right to be. Especially after – what you said, earlier – please believe me, I had no idea that you’d ever feel that way about me. And I know that this changes everything. You don’t have to court me. You don’t have to do anything. I didn’t do this to try to trap you.”

Athos wants to pace. But that would mean getting up, and he wants to pace less than he needs to be near d’Artagnan right now. He also wants to scream. He oughtn’t to do that, either. It leaves him with no good way to let off the emotions bubbling under his skin.

“Athos –”

Athos holds up a hand. “Just tell me something,” he says, keeping himself under control with an effort. “Did you really think I wouldn’t care?”

D’Artagnan sets his jaw mulishly. “I thought you’d care,” he says. “About the pups, of course I thought you’d care. But I won’t be reduced to my fertility. And I had no idea you might actually – well.” He shrugs a little, awkward and ashamed.

In the firelight d’Artagnan flickers through a thousand faces at once. The youth he’d been on his first day in Paris, scared and alone and determined. The trial novice, scared and determined and ready to risk everything. The novice, worried about his place in the pack, hardworking and tenacious and stubborn. The barely-fledged Musketeer, unsure and dismayed by Athos’ reserve. The terrified Omega, facing down too-strong heats, a scent that reaches for miles, and no access to the medicine that might help him.

Athos’ own anger slips away in the face of d’Artagnan’s fear. In every memory, behind every mask, d’Artagnan is scared. So many things have changed about him since he’d first set foot in Paris. But not the fear. The fear remains.

And Athos can’t erase d’Artagnan’s fear. No one can do that except d’Artagnan himself. But Athos can do something else, something d’Artagnan won’t accept from anyone else. He can help shoulder it. He can take half of it onto his own shoulders. Athos can promise to stand by d’Artagnan’s side, and face d’Artagnan’s problems alongside him, and give and receive shelter in turn until they both come through into safe harbor.

“Ask me,” Athos says. There’s something reckless in the air between them, something that crackles like thunder. Athos feels brave and daring and eager. He feels young, too. He feels different. He feels renewed. He feels as if all his chances are in front of him still, as if his choices have all come back around to be made again, different, better, stronger.
“Do you care for me?” d’Artagnan demands.

“Yes,” Athos says without hesitation.

“Even without the pups?” His gaze drops, skittering away.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to be with me?”

“Always.”

“Do you want to build a future with me?”

“Forever.”

D’Artagnan looks up. Their gazes catch and hold, desire between them, the fire beside them, the possibilities unfolding before them and stretching off into the horizon.

“Then come on a journey with me,” d’Artagnan says. It’s not a question.

“I will,” Athos answers regardless.

There’s a moment of sheer, fierce joy that crackles in the air like lightning. Then d’Artagnan is in Athos’ arms, or perhaps Athos is in d’Artagnan’s, and their lips are on each other’s, and if either of them needs to breathe they no longer remember it.

D’Artagnan pulls away with a gasp after a few minutes or an eternity. He reaches up and touches his neck. “Is it – can we still – if my heat’s done – ”

“The gland remains active for a few hours after heat,” Athos says breathlessly. “It’s not traditional, but – ”

“I don’t want to be muddled for this,” d’Artagnan says. “I want to remember.”

“I, too,” Athos admits. He doesn’t remember mating with Charlotte. He remembers meeting her, alone and nearly in distress, in the woods of la Fère. He remembers her begging him for help. He remembers climbing the first peak together. But the rest of the heat is a blur, and when they’d both woken up she’d worn his bite already, neither of them remembering the actual mating.

He wants to remember d’Artagnan. He wants to write the memory deep in his soul, indelible as the marks he’ll leave on d’Artagnan’s shoulder.

“Here,” Athos says, tugging them both down onto what’s left of the blankets. They’re somewhat disarranged from the fight, and there are fewer of them now, but it’s enough for softness. “We don’t want to be standing when we do this, believe me.”

“All right,” d’Artagnan agrees, coming willingly. He arranges himself on his side, stretched by the fire, and looks up at Athos through long lashes. “Like this?”

“You’re doing that on purpose,” Athos accuses.

D’Artagnan chuckles. “Yes.”

“Good,” Athos says impulsively. He likes that d’Artagnan wants to be beautiful to him. He wants to always be captivated by d’Artagnan.
Athos drops to his knees, then leans over d’Artagnan. “Tilt your head,” he murmurs. “And take a deep breath.”

D’Artagnan obeys. “I love you,” he says.

“And I you,” Athos promises. He hesitates one final moment, hovering over d’Artagnan’s bared neck, watching the play of firelight over the creamy skin. No one on earth will ever see this sight again.

Then he bites down.

His senses contract, focused on the moment of connection. Then, when d’Artagnan’s blood hits his tongue, they explode outward in a kaleidoscope of sensation. It’s like the pounding of adrenaline after a fight. Like the animal satisfaction of a warm bath or a good meal. Like the pleasant, safe blur of a bottle of Spanish wine and a deep and dreamless sleep.

D’Artagnan cries out. He arches beneath Athos, deliberately or instinctively shoving his shoulder deeper into Athos’ mouth. Athos growls without conscious intent. It reverberates through the forest, a primal cry: he is mine, I am his, and God have mercy on they who dare try to tear us asunder.

Athos’ jaw unlocks. He releases d’Artagnan’s shoulder as gently as possible. Instinct drives him to lick the pinprick wounds. They close almost instantly under his tongue, leaving behind dark marks that look like they’ve been there forever. They’re like old scars in the firelight. Like brands.

D’Artagnan’s eyes are shining wet. He reaches up to touch the marks as soon as Athos withdraws slightly. At the first touch of d’Artagnan’s fingers to his shoulder, the tears in his eyes spill over.

“Oh, beloved,” Athos says, genuinely distressed. “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not sad,” d’Artagnan answers, smiling through his tears. “Can’t you tell?”

Athos frowns in distress. He can’t feel it. He can’t feel anything. The place where Charlotte had lived, next to his heart, is still empty. It’s just as Charlotte had left it. Is something wrong with Athos?

“Shh,” d’Artagnan says. He presses his fingers to Athos’ chest. “Not there. Here.”

And suddenly Athos feels it: a joy so intense it’s almost weightless. D’Artagnan’s joy. It’s not in the same place within Athos’ heart that Charlotte’s bond had lived. Charlotte’s grave is undisturbed, peaceful, a tribute to the mate he’d failed and the young Alpha lord who had loved her, lost her, and died with her in spirit. Athos’ bond with d’Artagnan rests next to it, an addition, not a replacement. And the place it resides is new. It belongs to d’Artagnan alone, and in that place there are no bad memories.

“There,” d’Artagnan whispers. “Do you feel me?”

Athos buries his face in d’Artagnan’s neck again and breathes deep. D’Artagnan smells of love and life and passion and the pups he might even now carry. Best of all is the way the scent is already changing. It’s adding elements of Athos’ scent and losing the rough mongrel edge. Mellowing. Now that d’Artagnan has found a mate, he needn’t smell so strongly. He’ll be safer. It’s the least of the ways Athos plans to protect him.

“I feel you,” Athos whispers.

“And I feel you,” d’Artagnan says. He smiles.
“I love you,” Athos adds. He does. And he will do everything for d’Artagnan that flesh can do. He only hopes –

“I’ll never regret this,” d’Artagnan says shrewdly.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Athos swears, tugging his companion – his *mate* – close to him.

They drift off to sleep together, surrounded by the warm night, warmer skin, and the dreams they’re sharing between them.
This part comes with an additional content warning for containing a description of Aramis’ miscarriage. It's told as a recollection from Porthos' POV and is not completely explicit but more than enough to trigger. I'd say I pulled about 20% of the possible punches.

It's entirely contained in the last section of the chapter and is skippable from a plot standpoint; obviously you'll be missing some emotions but if you're skipping it for trigger reasons you can probably reasonably supply them yourself. Again, it's in the LAST section. If you're skipping it, just close the webpage after Athos goes back to his quarters after talking with Aramis and Porthos in theirs. When the POV switches to Porthos you've gone too far (though there's a good paragraph of padding you can use to back out before the scene really gets rolling). Please, please read carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dawn rouses them the next morning, and they begin packing up the camp together. D’Artagnan goes about wearing a soft smile that doesn’t fade even when he’s raking ashes out to rebuild the fire or scrubbing out the stew-pot. He sees a similar expression on Athos’ lips whenever Athos looks at him. Even more incredibly, d’Artagnan can feel that same tugging sensation in his heart. Athos’ joy lives within him, now, too. It changes everything. Aramis had told him about the mating bond. A little, when he’d asked. Porthos, a little more. But none of it had prepared him for the reality of it. D’Artagnan no longer has to wonder and guess and doubt Athos’ feelings for him. Athos may be outwardly stoic, but inwardly he’s smiling, too.

“We’ll beat Aramis and Porthos back to Paris,” Athos says thoughtfully. “We’re supposed to be out here for another few days.”

D’Artagnan’s hands still on the saddlebag he’s packing. For the first time the reality of what he’s done comes crashing in on him, and a wave of nerves follows in its wake. “They’re all going to have questions.”

“You’re going to have to tell them what you did with the contraceptives.”

D’Artagnan sighs. “Will Aramis forgive me, do you think?”

“I’d be more worried about the Captain, if I were you. He’s the one who sacrificed to give you those contraceptives you didn’t take.”

“I know, and I’m grateful. But I was actually thinking… Athos, I’m probably pupped, aren’t I?”

He’ll have to wait a month to be sure. D’Artagnan had asked, during his last heat when Aramis had been ready and willing to answer any questions d’Artagnan might have about his biology. He knows what symptoms to look for. And none of them are supposed to show up this early. But d’Artagnan had woken up this morning feeling different, and he could put it down to being mated, but he knows that’s not it. He can feel where Athos lives within him, within his heart. And he can feel that Athos isn’t alone.
Pups. Two of them; he’s sure of it. One from each peak. When he thinks about it, thinks about bringing those pups into the world – having them, and holding them, and raising them with all the love and knowledge about themselves d’Artagnan had never had – he feels ready to shout from the rooftops in glee.

But the rest of his pack – Aramis and Porthos, who have tried for so long in vain – how can it be anything but painful for them?

“Maybe it’s just as well we’ll beat them back,” Athos says quietly. No doubt he’s thinking the same as d’Artagnan. “We can talk to the Captain first.”

“Athos, what are we going to do?” He doesn’t just mean how are we going to tell the others.

“What were you planning to do, if I’d rejected you?”

“Leave,” d’Artagnan admits. He hadn’t thought he’d be able to stay – not just because of the physiological changes that would make it impossible to hide his true sex, but because of the rejection he’d expected to face. Even with Athos’ love a constant presence in his heart, d’Artagnan can’t quite believe any of it is real. He’d never thought Athos would forgive him for tricking him about the contraceptives. He’d expected Athos to be furious. To accuse d’Artagnan of trying to trap him into mating, as some Beta women did with the men they wanted to marry.

In his calmer moments, d’Artagnan had entertained the thought that Athos might be cold-blooded about it. That he’d understand and appreciate that d’Artagnan has been trying to help the Captain, not snare Athos for himself. He’d hoped that Athos might want to be involved in his pups’ life, and been willing to offer d’Artagnan some support to that end.

To undertake this journey with Athos at his side is more than d’Artagnan had dared to dream.

D’Artagnan owes Treville everything. And he knows, from the stories the others tell, that he’s not the only one. But his three packmates have grown so used to the status quo that none of them can see the danger staring them right in the face. Perhaps the Captain has overcome threats like the Inquisitor before, and d’Artagnan is panicking over nothing. Or perhaps they’ve simply become inured to routine threats and don’t realize how dangerous the Inquisitor truly is.

Regardless, someone had had to act. D’Artagnan had seen the opportunity and taken it. He’d been prepared to deal with the consequences. And if, at the same time, he’d gotten the family he’d always longed for – how could he have said no?


“At least.” D’Artagnan shrugs. “I wasn’t entirely sure I’d be welcome back after.” It had hurt to imagine it, leaving behind his home for a second time, but if that had been what it had taken to protect those to whom he owed so much then d’Artagnan would have done it without looking back.

“Of course you would be welcome,” Athos says at once. “Of course – how would you raise the pups, without your income from the Musketeers?”

“Plenty of farms in France,” d’Artagnan says steadily. “I’d find someone who needed another pair of hands and spin them a sad story about my dead wife. We’d be all right.”

“Until they noticed you were going hunting every three months like clockwork,” Athos says bluntly. D’Artagnan blinks. Athos had actually sounded angry. And he feels hurt.
“D’Artagnan, even if I didn’t love you, I’d never have thrown you out,” Athos says roughly. “You would always have had a home with us.”

*Home.* D’Artagnan choke a little and has to clear his throat. “That means a lot to me,” he says, voice scratchy. “Thank you.”

“I mean it,” Athos insists. He reaches out and lays a hand over d’Artagnan’s, still tangled in the saddlebag’s buckles. “Your home is with me, and mine with you.”

D’Artagnan lets go of the saddlebag to wrap his arms around Athos. He feels Athos’ slide around him. Athos’ touch alone sends the tension ebbing out of him.

*Home.* Family. Pack. Pups. D’Artagnan had always believed that those things couldn’t all coexist. Now, wrapped up in Athos’ arms, he starts to wonder if maybe they can.

—

They ride back to Paris at a leisurely pace. D’Artagnan chatters steadily, talking of everything and nothing. Athos learns more about Gascon farming techniques than he’d ever wanted to know. And more about the various personalities that had inhabited Lupiac than he’s glad to learn. In the silences between d’Artagnan’s speeches, Athos entertains fantasies of going to Lupiac and teaching certain townsfolk object lessons. Impossible, but it makes him feel better.

D’Artagnan doesn’t seem to mind that Athos is silent far more than he talks, and that d’Artagnan must tell ten stories to Athos’ one. D’Artagnan treats every piece of information Athos shares about his own past with reverence. The smiles he gives Athos tell Athos d’Artagnan understands how hard it is for Athos to share even this much.

“When I left Lupiac I changed my name,” d’Artagnan says suddenly, breaking a silence that had settled comfortably between them. “Now I suppose I’ll be changing it again?”

His voice tilts up at the end, a question. It hits Athos suddenly: d’Artagnan doesn’t know Athos’ real name. They’re mated and d’Artagnan doesn’t even know this about him.

Athos reins his horse in so he can give d’Artagnan his full attention. “Don’t,” he says roughly. He has to clear his throat before he can proceed. “I – I have another name, yes. And a title. They’re yours by right. But that lord – the lord I was – he’s dead, do you understand? He died with his family. I’m Athos now. Just Athos.”

“All right,” d’Artagnan says softly. “I understand.”

Athos nods and takes up his reins again. They ride a little farther in silence. The memories churn in his mind, though, stirred up by d’Artagnan’s innocent question.

“Olivier,” he says abruptly. “I was christened Olivier.”

“Charles,” d’Artagnan offers in return. “It’s odd, though, I don’t like to be called that any more. I don’t even think of myself that way. There are too many bad memories.”

“Where does the name d’Artagnan come from?”

“It was my mother’s.”

Athos nods.

“Thank you for sharing yours with me,” d’Artagnan adds.
“You deserve it,” Athos says. “And my title –”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“You deserve it,” Athos repeats. “Besides – it’s unlikely, but there may come a time when you need its protection.”

D’Artagnan nods. The reins dangle loosely from his hand; he looks up at Athos expectantly.

“I was – am – the Comte de la Fère,” Athos says. His lips form the words oddly. It’s been so long since he’s said his Christian name or title aloud that they sound almost wrong, hanging heavily in the air as if they’ll fall before reaching d’Artagnan’s ears.

“La Fère,” d’Artagnan repeats, though, so he must have heard. “That’s in the north?”

“Not far from Lille, in fact,” Athos admits.

“I’ll remember,” d’Artagnan promises. He hesitates. “Can I ask you one thing more?”

“Anything,” Athos says. Probably that’s reckless, but the smile it brings to d’Artagnan’s lips is worth it.

Still, d’Artagnan hesitates before speaking. “You were mated before,” d’Artagnan says finally. Hesitantly. “I know – your mate and odem, they were killed, but – were there ever any pups?”

“No,” Athos says heavily. The old pain flares again, briefly, catching him off guard: he’d thought it long since faded to dust. “No, never any.”

“So no one survived,” d’Artagnan says sadly.

“No one,” Athos agrees. “Not even Olivier.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Athos says. He’s surprised by how much that means to him. “It was a long time ago, but… thank you.”

“Someone should remember it,” d’Artagnan says earnestly. “We’re not really dead as long as someone remembers us.”

Athos manages a nod. D’Artagnan’s words dredge up an old, old memory. One he hasn’t thought of in years. The night his novitiate had ended, sitting the tavern with his old mentor Laflèche. Coming into direct contact with the Underground for the first time.

Laflèche had warned him about the dangers that would face him as a Musketeer. And he’d spoken about the need for remembrance – for bearing witness to the history of the crimes against their people. They’d been talking about the Cardinal, that night, and Richelieu’s murder of his own odem. Alphonse-Louis du Plessis de Richelieu. Athos still remembers the name Laflèche had spoken. But the lesson goes beyond a single instance. It applies to every throwback who has ever lost something to the Inquisition. Even to Olivier de la Fère and his family.

I’m getting old now, Laflèche had said that night so long ago. I don’t think somehow I’ll ever get any younger. I thought someone else ought to remember. And you’re the first one to actually ask.

Laflèche had retired from the Musketeers a few years after that conversation. Athos had never forgotten his old mentor, whose advice had been so valuable in helping Olivier construct the
Musketeer he had become. Laflèche had remained involved with the Underground right to the end. When the Captain had passed along word of Laflèche’s death, Athos had taken leave and gone to visit his grave in the south of France.

“My mate was called Charlotte,” Athos says quietly. “My odem, Thomas. They deserve to be remembered too.”

“I’ll remember them all,” d’Artagnan promises. “Olivier, Charlotte and Thomas de la Fère.”

“And now Charles,” Athos adds. “Don’t leave yourself off.”

“Charles de la Fère.” D’Artagnan smiles. “Charles and Charlotte. Something you want to tell me?”

“I had no idea of your Christian name,” Athos protests, shocked.

“Shh. I’m sorry. It was meant as a joke – a poor one.” D’Artagnan reaches over and grips Athos’ shoulder apologetically.

Athos manages a shaky laugh. D’Artagnan lets it pass without comment. A few minutes later, he starts talking again – this time about Bordeaux wines – and the moment is smoothed over. They leave it behind with all the rest as the miles before them dwindle to zero.

They pass through the gates to Paris in early afternoon and reach the garrison with an hour to spare before sunset.

“Dinner,” d’Artagnan says in anticipation, swinging off his horse and casting longing eyes towards the mess hall. “I wonder what it is. I feel like I could eat anything.”

Athos chuckles slightly. “You did just go without for two days,” he says tolerantly. “Though after you stuffed yourself on stew this morning –”

“Hey, I’m eating for three,” d’Artagnan protests, careful to keep his voice down. “At least I think I am.” He shakes his head, distracted. “How do I know for sure how many I’m carrying? When they’re born?”

“Whelped,” Athos corrects automatically. D’Artagnan uses Betan terms for almost everything, probably a result of his upbringing. His parents may not have even known many of the correct words for Omegan reproduction. But Athos still winces to hear d’Artagnan refer to himself as having been born. “There are a dozen old wives’ tales on the subject. Aramis will know which ones are reliable.”

“Right,” d’Artagnan says, dimming a little. “Assuming he’s willing to even look at me.”

“I don’t pretend that this will be easy for Aramis. But you’re selling him short. He’ll be happy for you.”

D’Artagnan sighs. “I just wish…”

“Three years of trying isn’t that long in the grand scheme of things. He’s nowhere close to estropause. There’s time for him. And you should focus on yourself,” Athos adds, glancing significantly at d’Artagnan’s flat stomach.

That makes d’Artagnan smile. “Well, in that case, I should go eat. Handle the horses?”

“Hey,” Athos protests reflexively.
D’Artagnan tosses him the reins and a cheeky grin. “Sire’s duty,” he says with a lofty air, and strolls off towards the mess hall.

Athos grumbles a little to himself for form’s sake as he leads the horses to the stables. Once he’s out of sight of the main garrison, though, he lets himself smile. *Sire. Sirrah.* Athos imagines it said aloud in a young pup’s piping tones and his smile widens.

He lets himself bask in it for a moment. Olivier and Charlotte had wanted pups. Partly for the sake of continuing the la Fère line, but for their own sake, too. To grow their pack. After the death of Olivier’s parents he had had only himself and Thomas. A large pack had always seemed like a promise of love and togetherness.

Charlotte had had a larger pack. She’d grown up with her parents and her sire’s aleph, an odem of her own and two cousins. They’d all been slaughtered except for her. She had missed having family around her. Thomas had adored Charlotte, and Charlotte had loved him back fierce and uncompromising, but she’d made no secret of her wish for more.

When she’d died, the dream of pups had died with her. Athos knows more than he cares to about the complicated emotions of parenthood denied. He’d accepted his solitary future long ago. Even when Aramis and Porthos had mated and declared their intention of having pups one day, Athos had thought himself at peace. But he’d be lying if he says that Aramis’ journey through infertility hasn’t stirred up uncomfortable feelings of his own.

Athos blows out a long breath and turns to hang the horses’ tack up on the wall. He nearly jumps out of his skin when he sees the Captain leaning against the closed door to the stables.

“You’re back early,” Treville observes.

“Yes,” Athos says stupidly. He can’t think of what else to say, so he just stands there until one of the horses whickers in annoyance at having his care interrupted.

Treville takes the tack from Athos and hangs it up himself. Then the Captain picks up a spare curry brush and approaches d’Artagnan’s mount.

Athos shakes off his stupor and turns back to his own horse, who gives him a decidedly baleful stare before lowering his head and allowing himself to be brushed. He murmurs an apology that the horse seems to accept, nosing briefly at his shirt. Next to him the Captain works d’Artagnan’s mount with long, sweeping strokes of the brush.

“You’re going to want to increase your perfume,” Treville says after a moment. “Bonding goes both ways. I’m sure d’Artagnan will benefit from the scent reduction, but you’re carrying a few of his markers now, too.”

“Right,” Athos says, mentally kicking himself for not having thought of that sooner. He should have borrowed some of d’Artagnan’s perfume this morning. Though he’ll want something different for general use. Aniseed doesn’t suit him.

“I have to say, I’m a little confused,” Treville goes on. His tone is mild. Athos isn’t deceived. “I seem to recall you saying something about d’Artagnan’s being a puppy crush, and your intentions to stay away?”

“I was wrong,” Athos says. *May as well get it over with at once.*

“Mmm,” Treville says noncommittally. “I also remember something about a courtship being traditional. I’m getting old, so maybe I’m stuck in my ways, or my memory is going – ”
Athos winces. “Captain, I’m – ”

“D’Artagnan’s been after you since the moment he set foot in the garrison,” Treville interrupts, cutting Athos off without raising his own voice. “So perhaps we could consider the last eleven months to be an extended courtship. And perhaps, since his parents are dead, you didn’t consider that you should seek any kind of permission. Perhaps there isn’t anyone who might consider themselves a substitute parent for d’Artagnan. Perhaps there isn’t anyone he considers as a substitute – ”

Athos drops the brush. “That’s not – ”

“But what I don’t understand,” Treville overrides him, “what completely boggles my mind is why you would think it’s a good idea to take him off into the woods, bite his neck, and knock him up without so much as a conversation!”

The Captain’s not shouting. It would be better if he were. It would be a release for the emotion plain even through Treville’s control: anger and betrayal and fear.

Athos winces. “I was planning to tell you – ” And he’d thought d’Artagnan had been going to get something to eat, not to go and talk to the Captain alone.

“I’m sure you were. But d’Artagnan ran into me in the mess – literally; he’s gone off to change clothes, by the way, I dumped a tankard of ale on him – and once he started apologizing he didn’t seem to be able to stop.”

Now that Athos concentrates, he can feel d’Artagnan’s turbulent emotions through their bond. D’Artagnan’s full of guilt. Not over the contraceptives themselves, Athos would bet – d’Artagnan is convinced he’d been in the right on that score – but d’Artagnan is perceptive, and he would have been quick to see how shocked and hurt Treville would be that d’Artagnan would just run off into the forest and get himself mated without reference to the rest of his pack or extended clan. Not to mention pupped.

“Did you know?” Treville is demanding. “Did you tell him not to take the contraceptives? So help me, Athos, if you pressured him – ”

“I thought he’d taken them,” Athos snaps, stung by the unfairness of his accusation. “He didn’t tell me until after!”

“Maybe you should have asked!”

Athos bristles. He opens his mouth to say something he’ll probably regret later. But in doing so, he turns to face his opponent properly, and all the anger suddenly rushes out of him. Even in the dim light of the stables Treville looks tired. The Captain is obviously angry, but it’s not just the righteous anger of the surrogate parent who believes their pup’s been hurt. This anger is being driven by fear. That’s something Athos can sympathize with far too well.

“I should have asked about a lot of things,” Athos says quietly.

Treville blinks, startled. “What?”

“Do you know why d’Artagnan didn’t take the contraceptives?” Athos waits, but Treville doesn’t answer. Athos nods. “You do, don’t you?”

“I suppose he had some damn fool idea like he was helping,” Treville mutters.

“Helping you.” Athos turns away briefly to set the brush down and lay a blanket over his horse, who
whickers in thanks and starts munching his feed. That done, Athos steps away from the stall and leans against the stable wall.

Treville watches Athos warily, crossing his arms over his chest and saying nothing.

“I didn’t go out intending to mate with d’Artagnan or sire pups on him,” Athos says, choosing his words carefully. “I went out because he needed me. And it served as a wake-up call to me. Eleven months isn’t a crush. I’ve been doing a better job hurting d’Artagnan by staying away from him than I could possibly do by courting him. I told him as much, and he agreed to consider my suit.”

“Glad to hear you finally realized it.” Treville nods, but doesn’t unbend. “Still doesn’t explain how he came back like this.”

“I didn’t know he hadn’t taken the contraceptives,” Athos repeats. “But – ”

“If you tell me this is about the pups, so help me God – ”

“It’s not,” Athos interrupts. “Not only. I love him. And he needs me.”

“He loves you in addition to needing you. You know that, right?”

“I’ve always known that,” Athos finally admits. “I just couldn’t face it.”

“What made you face it now?”

A sliver of remembered fear slides down Athos’ spine. “We were attacked.”

“What?” Treville straightens out of his lean. “By whom?”

“Poachers hunting in the forest. They scented d’Artagnan from the road and attacked us.”

“Are you hurt?” Treville’s anger has temporarily vanished. “Is he hurt? What happened to them?”

“They’re dead. Neither of us are hurt.” Athos sighs. “I suppose we’ll need a new place to go for heats.”

“And you’re sure they were poachers?” Treville demands intently. “Did you search them?”

“No, we didn’t – oh my God,” Athos realizes. “You think they were – ”

“I trust nothing right now.”

Athos’ mind works. He calls himself three kinds of a fool for not thinking sooner that these poachers may not have been what they seemed. The Inquisitor’s spies might still be active in France even without his presence. The Dutch man who’d infiltrated the Underground last winter had probably been Rochefort’s; whom else might the Inquisitor have suborned?

But… “Their dress and equipment were correct,” Athos says slowly, remembering Da’s clothing, Maurice’s body, Patrice’s fowling-piece. “All well-used. They had already taken game. And from their conversation they’d done this before, to Omegas they’d caught in the forest, many times. Nothing is impossible, but I don’t think they were anything other than what they appeared to be.”

“Still,” Treville says worriedly. “It’s bad luck either way. There aren’t a lot of safe places nearby for heat. Losing one is a problem.”

“On the bright side, it forced me to confront my intentions.”
“Well, I’m glad something did,” Treville says, obviously trying for cheer. It falls flat. The Captain’s worry is evident in every line of his body.

“Captain,” Athos says carefully. “Why didn’t you tell me that your supply lines were compromised?”

Treville sighs. “I suppose I should have expected d’Artagnan would tell you.”

“I should have noticed myself.” Athos is still ashamed of himself for that. The evidence had all been right in front of him. Treville’s first absence might easily have been overlooked, especially when it had been followed by six months of normalcy. But the next two absences, coming three months apart, and six months after the first… it’s the sort of the thing the Inquisition would notice. Athos should have seen it too.

“I didn’t want you to know,” Treville says dismissively.

“Why not?”

“Because you would have worried, and there’s nothing you could do.”

“You don’t get to worry about us without letting us worry about you in return. That’s not how it works.”

Treville smiles at that. “Keeping you from worrying unnecessarily is exactly how it works. I’m fine.”

“For now.”

“I’ll go on being fine, Athos. I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

Athos shakes his head in frustration. “You’ve been doing this with the aid of regular suppressants. Without them – ”

“What? What’s going to happen? The Inquisition will spot the pattern?” Treville spreads his hands, and his smile turns sardonic. “It’s too late for that.”

“There’s more than one Inquisitor in the world. Rochefort may know, but what about Richelieu? Or Bonacieux?”

“Rochefort will block everyone else for me. That’s the beauty of the thing. He needs me out in the wild and unmolested. Otherwise he doesn’t get what he wants.”

“He’s the reason your supply lines have dried up, isn’t he?”

“Of course he is. I can’t make contact with anyone I want to protect. There are some workarounds, a few cut-outs we can use, but we have to save them for vital matters.”

“Your life is a vital matter!”

“I’m not going to die because I have to have a few natural heats,” Treville says wryly.

“You’ll die if you’re caught alone mid-peak by a gang of Betas,” Athos snaps. Treville’s more than capable, but timing is everything during heat. The best soldier in the world couldn’t fight off a gnat if they’re an Omega caught at the wrong moment.

Treville’s lip twists. “That’s not death,” he says, unexpectedly serious. “You just wish it were.”

A dark suspicion opens up in Athos’ mind. “Captain – ”
“Regardless, your concern is misplaced,” Treville cuts him off. “I haven’t been alone, so you needn’t worry.”

“That’s exactly what Rochefort wants!” Athos cries. “All he has to do is figure out who’s been disappearing from Paris at the same time as you!”

“Athos, I appreciate your concern, but we’re being careful.”

“Next time you’re taking one of us with you instead.”

Treville looks at Athos in surprise. “Am I?”

“It’s not safe,” Athos insists. “You shouldn’t go alone and you can’t keep leaving Rochefort a trail to find your mate. Take one of us next time. Take all of us.”

“That’s sweet,” Treville says after a moment. “But – ”

“Athos?” The door Treville’s leaning against creaks. “Captain?”

Treville sighs. But he steps aside and lets d’Artagnan in.

“I was wondering what was taking so long,” d’Artagnan says. He’s changed clothes, presumably from when Treville had spilled ale on him. His hair is tied back instead of hanging loose around his shoulders. Perhaps it’s just imagination, but in the dim light of the stables Athos thinks d’Artagnan already looks softer around the edges.

“The Captain and I were just having a conversation,” Athos says carefully.


“Congratulations on your mating,” the Captain says formally. “And your expectations.”

D’Artagnan flinches a little. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask you about the contraceptives,” he says in a rush. “I was just – that is – we’re all worried about you, Captain.”

Treville glances over at Athos. “I’m coming to realize that.”

“You spend a lot of time worrying about us, of course we worry about you,” d’Artagnan says. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a somewhat crumpled envelope, which he hands to Treville. “You need these more than I do. Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad,” Treville sighs. Indeed, the anger has ebbed from his tone completely, leaving only tiredness behind. “Just worried. D’Artagnan, you’re too young for this.”

“I’ve got all of you to help me. I’ll be fine.” D’Artagnan smiles, sweet and trusting. Treville presses his lips together.

“We’ll have to start planning your leave of absence. And where you’ll live when you come back.”

“We can talk about that when Aramis and Porthos return,” Athos says. “D’Artagnan, have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should get some rest. You’re still recovering from heat.”
“I’m fine,” d’Artagnan protests. “I feel much better than I did any of those other times.”

“That’s the post-mating boost,” Treville says reminiscently. “Gives you a false high. You’re not actually recovered from the heat; you’ll drop soon. Best to be in bed when it happens. You’re both still on leave. I won’t put you back on the roster until Aramis and Porthos have returned.”

“Come on,” Athos says, taking d’Artagnan by the shoulder and starting to steer him out.

“Athos,” Treville says, a warning in his tone.

“Yes?”

Treville gives him an eloquent look.

“I will,” Athos promises.

“See that you do,” Treville says.

“What?” d’Artagnan asks.

“Nothing,” Athos lies, and goes to help his mate to bed.

Aramis and Porthos return the next day, as originally scheduled. Athos is just grateful that the four of them hadn’t planned to meet back up at St. Denis. They’d considered it, but heat duration is always unpredictable, and they’d agreed in the end to just make their separate ways back to the garrison.

D’Artagnan has spent the night and most of the day in bed. As Treville had predicted, the post-heat lethargy had hit him hard, and they’d curled up together in Athos’ quarters, which no longer feel too large. Athos wakes up at his usual time and stares around his room with new eyes. The space is no longer too big, but the furnishings are designed for one full-time inhabitant and two – lately three – guests. They’ll need more for when d’Artagnan moves in. Will his issued furniture migrate in here, as Aramis’ had? That doesn’t amount to much. What else might they buy together?

But they won’t be living here after d’Artagnan whelps. They’ll have to move out of the garrison; it’s no place for pups. They’ll need a nursemaid who can be trusted. Athos wonders if Mme. Pepin is still available, or if she’d found another household after Aramis’ miscarriage. They’ll need to start from scratch when it comes to searching for lodgings. The rooms Athos, Porthos and Aramis been looking at before would all be too small now. They’d been expecting to house three adults and one, perhaps two litters. Now there will be four adults and… who knows how many pups? It no longer seems likely that Aramis will carry more than once, but d’Artagnan is young enough to carry several times, if he wishes it. If the pack can sustain so many offspring. Each pupping increases the danger, but if d’Artagnan longs for more…

One thing at a time, Athos tells himself firmly. Their first pups had been conceived mere days ago. It’s getting ahead of themselves to think about subsequent litters.

And when he finds himself facing down Aramis and Porthos, side-by-side and wearing identical expressions of disbelief, Athos finds it hard to think beyond the next moment.

“Athos,” Aramis says patiently. “You’re not making any sense.”

That’s fair. Athos had intercepted Aramis and Porthos at the gate and dragged them back to his quarters as soon as they’d done putting up their mounts. At the time it had been enough to give them the we need to talk signal. Now that Athos has them sitting in their usual chairs in his quarters,
though, he’s been reduced to meaningless gibberish.

“What are you trying to say?” Porthos asks. He glances back and forth from Athos, who’s also seated in his usual chair, to d’Artagnan, who’s still in bed.

“We,” Athos starts, dragging his thoughts back to the present and trying to focus. Tell them. You have to tell them. “Well. That is.”


“Why is everyone so focused on my eating habits?” their youngest says rhetorically. “Yes, I ate.”

“You have the appetite of a regiment and the eating habits of a squirrel,” Aramis says. “And you’re not used to your post-pubescent calorie needs, either. You’re down a pound at least from when you left.”

“He’s eating,” Athos interrupts. “That’s not the point.” Though he makes a mental note of it just the same. He hasn’t been tracking d’Artagnan’s nutritional needs closely, but if d’Artagnan is pupped it’s time he started. Is it enough just to eat more, or are there other things he needs? Specific things? Athos starts mapping out the offerings at the nearest market-squares to the garrison.

“All right then, what is the point?” Porthos asks with commendable patience.

Athos’ train of thought jerks to a halt. He stares at Porthos and tries again to speak. And fails. Again.

D’Artagnan glances at Athos and sighs. Then he reaches up, unlaces his shirt, and yanks it over his head. Athos’ bite stands out against his skin, obvious and unmistakable.

“We decided to mate,” he says bluntly.

“Ah,” Porthos says.

“Ah,” Aramis says.

The two of them share a quick glance. It’s fond and a little amused.

They suspected we would, Athos realizes suddenly.

Porthos breaks out into a wide smile. “Congratulations.”

“It’s about time,” Aramis adds, more or less confirming Athos’ suspicions.

It should make Athos feel better. It would – if not for the second bombshell that’s about to drop.

“That’s not all,” d’Artagnan barrels on. “I think – that is – ” now it’s his turn for words to fail him. He glances at Athos, probably hoping Athos will jump in and rescue him, but the best Athos can do is give him a supportive look. D’Artagnan squares his shoulders and looks back at the other two.

“I think I might be pupped,” he says.

Aramis shakes his head. “I’m sure you noticed some differences in how you feel post-heat,” he starts. “But those will be caused by your mating. Contraceptives aren’t perfect but the chances of you conceiving – ”

“I didn’t use them,” d’Artagnan interrupts.
There’s a moment of silence. Then Aramis says, “What?”

“I didn’t use them.” D’Artagnan draws his knees up to his chest like he’s still a pup, leaning back against the bed’s headboard. “I took them with me but I didn’t touch them.”


“You didn’t believe the Captain any more than I did when he said he’d be able to get more next month,” d’Artagnan bursts out.

Aramis flinches.

Porthos frowns. “What are you talking about?” He turns to his mate. “What’s he talking about?”


“Did you not notice either that he’s had three heats in the last year?” d’Artagnan demands. When Porthos shakes his head, d’Artagnan rolls his eyes and shares a look with Aramis that plainly says Alphas. “Well, contraceptives are in the same boat. Treville got one dose last month and he made me take it with me. He swears he’ll get suppressants in time for himself next month. I don’t believe him. And neither does Aramis.”

Porthos’ eyes turn to Aramis, who reluctantly shakes his head. “He was lying,” Aramis admits. “But, d’Artagnan, that doesn’t change the fact that you were supposed to take these.”

“Yes, and then leave the Captain without. What if he gets pupped?”

“We don’t even know if Treville’s going with his mate.”

“Who else would he be going with? Or do you think he’s going alone?”

Aramis frowns. “I don’t know,” he says sternly. “What I do know is that the Captain’s a grown Omega who makes his own decisions, and he decided to give those contraceptives to you.”

“Well, the Captain can just get in line, then, because as far as I can tell we’re all grown Omegas who make our own decisions,” d’Artagnan retorts. “And this was mine.”

“This isn’t the sort of decision you make alone,” Porthos breaks in. “What did Athos think about it?”

All eyes swing to Athos, who can’t suppress a wince. “Well…”

“I didn’t tell him,” d’Artagnan admits, saving Athos from having to cast that shade on his mate.

“But I support him in it entirely,” Athos adds firmly.

“Are you just saying that because it’s too late to change it?” Aramis challenges.

“Partly,” Athos has to admit, glancing apologetically at d’Artagnan. “I would have suggested we wait. But I love d’Artagnan.” He has to stop there for a second, and breathe through the astonishment of how those words sound spoken aloud in front of others. How easy they’d been to say. How true they feel on his lips.

Athos takes another breath and goes on. “I love d’Artagnan, and I’ll love our pups just as much. So that’s not a problem for me. As for the rest? D’Artagnan’s not the only one who owes the Captain something. When I found out Treville’s been dealing with this alone I…” Athos shrugs a little. “I
may have yelled at him.”

“Wish I’d seen that,” Porthos says.

Athos has to grin. “It was rather amusing. I told him one of us – or possibly all of us – were coming with him next time.”

“Good idea.” Porthos agrees. “I can’t believe he’s been taking those kind of chances.” He frowns, looking at Aramis and d’Artagnan. “Or that you two knew about it and didn’t tell us.”

“It’s the Captain’s decision,” Aramis says. He looks troubled, though.

“He’s making a mistake, thinking we wouldn’t do whatever it takes to help him,” d’Artagnan says earnestly. “Or maybe he just thinks there’s nothing we can do. Either way he’s wrong.”

“Or maybe he’s trying to protect us,” Porthos says.

“He wasn’t going to see reason about it. So I did something.” D’Artagnan shrugs.

“Pups aren’t something you undertake because you’re trying to make a point,” Aramis objects. Now that the initial shock is wearing off, Aramis is beginning to look upset. Athos had been afraid of this. A quick glance at Porthos shows that the other Alpha is aware of the rapidly shifting dynamics. Porthos has already moved closer to his mate and is taking Aramis’ hand as Athos watches.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” d’Artagnan cries, shocked. “How could you say that?”

“That’s all you’ve talked about so far,” Aramis snaps back.

Porthos moves his chair closer still and wraps an arm around Aramis’ shoulder. “Let him talk,” he advises.

D’Artagnan’s shoulders hunch defensively. Athos rests his hand on d’Artagnan’s ankle, warm and comforting. D’Artagnan gives him a grateful smile.

“My parents never tried to hide my sex from me,” d’Artagnan says. “I knew I was a carrier as far back as I can remember. And I knew what unaligned meant before I could read. My parents loved me. They wanted to protect me. They spent my entire childhood telling me that I must never, ever, under any circumstances, get pregnant. Pupped. Whatever. They said it would be too dangerous. They said a lot of things were too dangerous. I had to keep my hair cut short, and build as much muscle as I could, and wear padding to make my shoulders look broader. I was never to be the first to quit at any physical activity. I must never win a footrace. I mustn’t practice my shooting or archery where anyone might see me, because my aim was too good, it would raise suspicions.”

D’Artagnan pauses to take a breath. Athos glances over at Porthos and Aramis, ready to cut them off if they should try to interrupt. Neither do.

“All those rules my parents had for me,” d’Artagnan whispers. “They were so afraid. They spent their whole lives afraid for me, and every time something happened, every time a throwback was discovered and executed in another village or we heard about the Cardinal doing the same in Paris, there were new rules. But none of it was enough! Raiders came through and burned the farm. Killed them. Someone in Lupiac told the raiders about me. I don’t know who. Old Gaston knows, but he wouldn’t tell me. Do you know why he wouldn’t tell me? Because anyone might have done it. Because, despite all the rules and all the hiding and all the fear, all of Lupiac knew about me all along. Or – if they didn’t know – they suspected. They suspected enough to tell a group of raiders to burn my parents and me to death. So what good did any of it do?”
Athos moves next to d’Artagnan on the bed and wraps his arms around his mate. D’Artagnan’s not crying. It would be almost easier if he were. His body shakes minutely in Athos’ arms, but his eyes are dry.

“After they died I had nothing. I don’t just mean in terms of money or land. I had no home. No family. And I had no prospect of ever having a family again. No pack, no mate, no children – pups – because I was still so scared.

“The Captain gave me more than just a job,” d’Artagnan finishes. “He gave me a second chance. A new home. And a family. All of you – I can’t tell you how important you are to me. And this, too.” He lays a hand on his belly. “I thought I could never have this. I didn’t even let myself dream about it when I was young because it would hurt too much. Now here I am, and suddenly it can all be real. Suddenly I can have it. You took me into your pack – Athos loves me – ” d’Artagnan smiles at him, and Athos smiles back, heart melting. “I can carry. It’s a dream come true. And, on top of that, I can help the person who originally made it all possible. If you think even for a second that I would walk away from that, that I wouldn’t reach out and grab my chance the second it was offered, you are absolutely out of your minds.”

Silence greets this pronouncement. Then Aramis gets up and hugs d’Artagnan. Since Athos is still holding d’Artagnan, this results in Aramis hugging both of them, a little awkward given his arm length and Athos’ broad shoulders. Porthos solves the problem by wrapping his tree-trunk arms around all three of them at once. Then there’s a few moments where they all laugh rather helplessly, and Athos pretends not to notice Aramis is brushing a few tears away into the forgiving, absorbent fabric of d’Artagnan’s discarded shirt.

“All right then,” Porthos says finally. “In that case there’s nothing more to be said. The pack is expanding. We should celebrate.”

“Maybe another night,” Athos says, glancing between Aramis and d’Artagnan. The former looks torn between joy for d’Artagnan and his own private sorrow. D’Artagnan looks exhausted. His emotional outburst has clearly taken it out of him.

“Another night,” d’Artagnan agrees. He tries to hide a yawn, poorly.

“Go to sleep,” Athos says fondly. He starts to slide out of bed to give d’Artagnan room.

“Hey,” d’Artagnan protests. “Where’re you going?”

“I just need to have a quick word with Aramis and Porthos,” Athos says. “I’ll just be a moment.”

“What for?” d’Artagnan tries to demand. “If it’s about the pups – ”

“Not exactly,” Porthos starts.

“We just need to yell at him a little,” Aramis says. “Pack tradition.”

“You know. ‘Treat him well or we’ll hurt you.’ That sort of thing,” Porthos explains.

“Shouldn’t you be giving me that talk?” d’Artagnan asks in bemusement.

“Oh, we will,” Aramis says cheerfully. It only rings a little false. “But in your case we’ll wait until you’re feeling better.”

“We’ll have him back to you in no time,” Porthos promises, steering Athos out the door.
“Go to sleep,” Athos says over his shoulder.

Aramis closes the door behind him before Athos can see if d’Artagnan obeys.

They don’t talk as they walk across the courtyard. Athos feels the worry bubbling up under his skin. It’s hard to tell in the fading light, but Aramis looks pale. Paler than usual. Porthos is radiating an odd standoffishness. It makes Athos uncomfortable.

Porthos unlocks the door to what are technically his quarters and ushers the other two in. Athos takes his usual spot on the bed, leaving the chairs to Porthos and Aramis. Then he wishes he hadn’t. He’s never felt uncomfortable in his packmates’ quarters before, but suddenly he’s hyper aware that this is their den, their bed, and that their pack is one founded on choice instead of blood. They’d chosen to run together all those years ago and they could choose to leave just as easily –

“Stop it,” Porthos says, thumping down on his chair. “Honestly, Athos, don’t you know better by now?”

“Spilt blood is still blood.” Aramis sounds as if he’s quoting something. “You idiot, we’re not going to run off just because you did something rash.”

Athos looks down at his hands to avoid Aramis’ gaze. “Are you mad at me, little odem?”

“For following your heart – never.” Aramis sits down on the bed next to Athos, visible out of the corner of one eye. “To be honest, I half-expected you two to come back mated. But pupped? On your first heat together, without more time to think or prepare –” Aramis sighs.

“I know,” Athos says quietly. “I know, but –”

“He’s so young,” Aramis whispers. “I worry he doesn’t know what he’s getting into.”

“If I’d known in advance…” Athos’ voice trails off, and he shrugs helplessly. “It’s done now. He’s my mate, and God help me, I won’t give him up. Or the pups.”

“We’re not asking you to,” Porthos says at once.

“No,” Aramis agrees. “Just asking you to be careful with him. That’s all.”

“Going to gut me if I don’t?” Athos dredges up a smile from somewhere, thinking of his own dire warnings to Porthos on the occasion of his bonding with Aramis.

“I'll have to get in line,” Porthos says wryly. “Captain’s got first dibs.”

Athos winces theatrically. “Captain’s already read me the riot act.”

“You must admit you deserve it,” Aramis says.

“Oh, I do. That didn’t make it pleasant.”

The moment briefly turns fond and reminiscent. All three smile. The Captain’s tirades are legendary; every Musketeer, no matter how careful, is subjected to them sooner or later. As the Captain’s second Athos has come in for a fair share. This one had been better than most, honestly. Treville had been too worried and distracted over the Inquisitor to do the job properly.

“We need to keep a closer eye on the Captain,” Aramis says. “Did you really tell him he was taking us along the next time he needs heat leave?”
“We’re his clan, aren’t we?”

“Of course we are,” Porthos says firmly. “It’s a good idea, Athos. Of course we’ll go with him. Lucky he’s off sync with us.”

Athos nods. Aramis and d’Artagnan’s heats are offset by about six weeks; the Captain is off by another three. As for going with the Captain to provide protection, it’s really the least any of them can do. In the natural way of things Treville would get to spend every heat with his mate. But even in the old days there would be times when that hadn’t been possible, and, as Aramis had told Athos before d’Artagnan’s last heat, suppressants are a young Omega’s drug. The consequences of taking them increase with age. So an Omega might have to sweat out the occasional heat alone, often with the aid of various sex toys, and protected by a close family Alpha. Usually a sibling or cousin would have gone along – blood relations being unaffected by an Omega’s heat scent – but a particularly close friend or relation-by-mating can stand in. Prolonged exposure to an Omega in a pack or clan setting does the same job that blood does. Athos hasn’t been affected by Aramis’ heat scent for years. He’d used to accompany Aramis before Porthos had entered their lives.

Athos is sure the same principle will apply for Treville. The Musketeers are really very similar to the clan structures of old, multiple small packs banding together under a common leader for the common good. They’re not linked by blood, but not all clans are united by a shared bloodline. Some are simply packs that have agreed to share territory, or packs that have spun off from their original clan for lack of room and resources and come together to found a new clan in a new place. The Musketeers certainly fit the latter definition. And Treville is most definitely their head, though for him to act in that role alone would have been nontraditional.

Of course, it’s not as if Treville is actually unmated. His heat scent won’t entice anyone but his mate, so Athos and Porthos don’t need to worry even if they hadn’t spent enough time together to consider Treville clan.

Another thought occurs to Athos. All of this technically means their clan does have a head Alpha – Treville’s mate – whom none of them have ever met. For a moment Athos tries to envision the Alpha who might try to assert leadership over the Musketeers. It’s insane on its face, but this person had measured up to Treville’s high standards, which gives Athos pause. And they apparently run the Underground. So maybe it’s not a completely ludicrous thought.

It is, however, besides the point. The point is the Captain. Athos is strangely relieved that Porthos had also not noticed Treville’s recent absences connected with a heat schedule. It means he’s not the only one who’s failed. But Athos has every intention of correcting that going forward.

“I just can’t believe he’s been doing it alone all this time,” Athos mutters aloud, shaking his head.

“What’s done is done,” Porthos says, returning to the subject at hand. “Between the four of us we can manage it.”

“Pity he can’t live away from the garrison,” Aramis says. “It would make things easier.”

“Speaking of which – we’d better start house-hunting again.”

Aramis manages a smile. “Something with a bigger kitchen than last time,” he says. “And a few more rooms. There’ll be more of us now.”

Athos is so grateful to his packmates he can’t express it. He can’t imagine going back to being alone again; though he’d still have d’Artagnan, and their future pups, losing his packmates would have laced any happiness with a bitter sting.
His throat closes up and all he can manage is a nod. Porthos claps him on the shoulder and Aramis hugs him, unusual for the Musketeer who prefers not to touch, though Aramis lets go quickly afterwards.

“We’re in this for the long haul,” Aramis says. “I wish you wouldn’t doubt us.”

“I know it’s not easy,” Athos says guiltily.

“I won’t lie and say my feelings aren’t mixed,” Aramis says quietly. “But I’m still happy for you. And you’re still my pack.”


“Thank you,” Athos says. He means to go on, but his throat closes up again.

Aramis and Porthos give him a minute, instead looking at each other and having a quick conversation without words. At the end of it Porthos nods.

“Better get back then,” Aramis says to Athos. “D’Artagnan will be wondering.”

“We’ll start looking in the morning,” Porthos says.

Athos nods and gets to his feet. It’s true; d’Artagnan will be wondering. And Athos doesn’t want to spend a minute away from d’Artagnan that he doesn’t have to. And, too, Athos isn’t so mate-struck he can’t take a hint: Aramis and Porthos want to be alone.

“Good night,” Athos says to them both, taking his leave.

“Good night,” Porthos replies for them both.

Athos steps outside and closes their door behind him. Then he has to pause for a moment and just breathe. Slowly the fear of losing his pack recedes.

It doesn’t entirely go away. It will never go away completely; it lurks under Athos’ skin all the time. The legacy of a puppyhood filled with loss. Even as an adult he can’t erase it. But he can master it, and after a few minutes he does, shoving it back into the box where he usually keeps it contained.

Around him the garrison is shrouded in twilight. There’s still plenty of light by which to see. Paris never really sleeps, and the novices are already going around with candles lighting the lamps. Some nights after midnight, when the lamps have been put out and there’s a cloud over the moon, it does get truly pitch dark. But Athos never has trouble finding his way. He’s lived in this garrison over a decade, nearly as long as Olivier had lived in la Fère; longer, if Athos counts from when his memories begin instead of when he’d been whelped. He knows these walls like the back of his hand. He could walk the garrison blindfolded.

But he doesn’t need to. When Athos turns his steps back towards his quarters, he’s following the tugging of his heart. Wherever he goes from now on, he will always know which way he’s going, because he will always feel the pull of d’Artagnan calling him home.

Porthos closes the door behind Athos. He doesn’t turn around right away. Instead he takes off his pauldron and surcoat, still dusty from the road, and lays them aside. Next he unties his baldric and sets it down, too. Still without looking around he sits down and undoes his boots.

When he finally does look up, Aramis has also disrobed down to his undergarments. He’s in the act
of climbing into bed. When he’s settled he holds one hand out to Porthos, a silent invitation.

Porthos goes. He wants to say something. He wants to know the words to make this better. To take away his mate’s pain. But he’s tried every word he knows in the past three years. He’s tried to have and share hope. Patience. Faith. Then he’d searched the depths of his soul for anything that might ease the grief and pain they’d both felt as Aramis had bled their hopes away one terrible night after the moon had grown full. But in the end, nothing helps so much as simply holding onto Aramis and letting Aramis hold on to him in return.

So that’s what he does.

It’s been a long time since Cara had sung to the nameless pup about Jesus by the river at Notre Dame. Porthos still remembers every song she’d taught him. He hums them over to himself as prayers, better and truer than anything the Betan children learn in catechism. Aramis had said once he finds Porthos’ voice comforting. For that, Porthos would hum until his voice were gone.

Aramis has never asked him to. And usually Aramis falls asleep well before that point. But Porthos has done it once. Just once.

They’d been so happy when Aramis had conceived. Two and a half years ago, now, that had been. Not that long after they’d started trying. Aramis had joked about being lucky. It had been the last time he’d joked on the topic.

Their happiness had lasted two months. Then Aramis had woken up early one morning, barely past midnight, groaning in pain. Porthos had roused too, of course. But he hadn’t understood what had been going on. Not at once.

Aramis had. He’d been weeping even before Porthos had woken up.

“What’s wrong?” Porthos had wanted to know. Instinctively he’d looked for blood. Surely Aramis had been injured. But there hadn’t been any blood. Not yet. Later there would be. But right then there had only been Aramis shaking in his arms.

“Contractions,” Aramis had said, flat and numb and empty.

Even then Porthos had been confused. “But it’s too soon,” he’d said blankly. “You’ve got another seven months to go.”

Aramis had shaken his head. “Not anymore,” he’d said. “It’s over.”

“Stop them!” Porthos had said. “Can’t you make the contractions stop?”

“No point,” Aramis had said, shaking with another one. “Porthos, if I’m having contractions, it means they’re already dead. This is just my body trying to get rid of the waste.”

Then he’d broken down in helpless sobs for a while, leaving Porthos with nothing to do but hold him and cry, too.

“Should I get Athos?” he’d offered at one point, thinking with the illogic of shock that more emotional support might help.

“No,” Aramis had said. “No, just – just don’t go anywhere. Please.”

“Of course not,” Porthos had sworn, horrified.
It had lasted perhaps four hours. Aramis went through all the usual stages of whelping in a grotesque parody of what should have been a joyous occasion. After the first hour went by with nothing to show for it but more intense contractions, Aramis sent Porthos to wake Treville and beg for a particular drug. The Captain had had it, and he’d handed it over without asking a single question. The look on Treville’s face said he knew why Aramis had needed it anyway.

“It’s for the pain,” Aramis had explained, pale even in the lamplight. “I wasn’t going to take anything, sometimes it can hurt – hurt the pups – but it doesn’t matter now. And it will make things to go faster.”

He’d taken the drug, and then, exhausted, he’d catnapped for an hour. Porthos sat up the entire time, holding Aramis, singing to him, feeling the tremors wracking Aramis’ body grow slowly stronger and happen closer together.

Aramis had started bleeding around the third hour. “Something ruptured,” he’d said. “Something broke. *I’m* broken.”

Porthos had stopped keeping track of whether Aramis were crying. It had become easier to notice the brief moments when Aramis had stopped, out of pain or simple exhaustion, when Porthos could wipe his cheeks clean and they would stay clean for a few moments more. This hadn’t been one of those times.

Eventually Aramis had told Porthos to get a basin and put it under him. “I need you to do something for me,” he’d said. “It’s hard. I don’t think I can do it myself. Can you?”

“Anything,” Porthos had promised at once. He hadn’t thought anything would be too hard for him to shoulder, if it would help Aramis. He hadn’t known.

“I need you to look,” Aramis had said. “When it’s over – when – I need you make sure that there’s nothing – nothing left. That it all came out.”

“How will I do that?” Porthos had asked blankly.

“Look in the basin. When I tell you. If it all came out – you’ll know.”

“Whatever you need,” Porthos had promised, still not knowing what this meant.

An hour later, Aramis had told him to look. Porthos had obeyed. Then he’d understood.

Looking hadn’t even been the hardest part. The hardest part had been picking the basin up later – after Porthos had cleaned Aramis up and put him back to bed, exhausted, to find what sleep he could – taking it out to the midden, and throwing it out. Like its contents were nothing. Like they were just another kind of trash. And then shoveling a pile of manure on top of those contents, in case anyone were to come and look.

Burying them. He’d thought maybe he should say a prayer or sing a hymn. But then someone might have wondered why Porthos had been weeping over the midden two hours before dawn. And he hadn’t had any faith in him, just then.

Porthos had left the basin. He couldn’t bear to touch it again. He’d spent ten minutes washing his hands at the pump, ice-cold water sluicing over his skin, before he’d given up and recognized that he hadn’t been going to find the baptism he wanted there either.

So he’d gone back to his quarters. Wrapped his mate up in his arms, and hummed the songs his Cara had taught him until his voice gave out and the sun kissed the clouds in a sky so blue he wouldn’t
have known that a single thing had been wrong anywhere in the world.

Athos had knocked on their door the next morning with breakfast and three reliefs of duty signed by Captain Treville. For the first few days Aramis couldn’t even get out of bed. Physically he’d been weak; emotionally he’d been a mess. Nor had he wanted Porthos to leave his sight. Athos had brought them everything they’d needed, and eventually joined Porthos in coaxing Aramis to get up a little, to go to the bathhouse, to walk around the practice-yard.

The official story had been that Aramis had been injured. It’d been true enough, Porthos had often thought. Aramis had been wounded more deeply than anyone could see, even Porthos.

Treville had come every day, usually in the evenings after the day’s duties were done. After the first shock wore off and Aramis had been willing to be without Porthos, Treville would send the Alphas away and stay with Aramis alone for a few hours. Porthos had never learned what he and Aramis talked about during those times. But he suspects. None of their clan’s Omegas have been lucky with offspring.

Eventually they’d gotten through it. Eventually Aramis had smiled again. Eventually he’d laughed. Eventually they’d gone back out together for another heat, and Aramis had opened the envelope with the red circle on it with hope in his eyes.

But there’s something else in Aramis’ eyes now, something that isn’t hope. It’s present in his smile and his laugh. It had never been there before. It’s never missing from them again.

Porthos goes back over his memories of those short hopeful weeks obsessively. He wants to know what had gone wrong, as if knowing could somehow prevent it from happening again. As if knowing could somehow prevent it from having happened at all.

In retrospect there had been signs that the pupping hadn’t been quite right. Aramis hadn’t gotten tired; some Omegas didn’t, he’d said, unworried, but now Porthos wonders if Aramis’ body had known even then that the pups weren’t viable. Right after their heat, Aramis had started craving unusual foods, eating more vegetables than usual and skipping dessert. Porthos had tried to encourage him to eat the foods he loved, insisting that self-denial served no point, but Aramis had just shaken his head.

“They don’t even taste good to me at the moment,” he’d promised. “Honestly, Porthos, I don’t even want any!”

But the evening before Aramis had miscarried, he’d eaten more like his normal self. Porthos hadn’t even noticed until much later, when he went back over his memories, searching for warning signs he’d missed. He adds it to his short list: monitor appetite. But what will he do if Aramis doesn’t want the food? He can’t make Aramis want a particular meal. And Aramis’ appetite never goes back to the way it had been, either. It’s changed along with everything else.

It’s not just Aramis. Eventually Porthos starts seeing the changes in himself, too. He catches sight of himself in a mirror one day and realizes how much more he looks like his carrier now. It’s in the eyes. Now they have the same eyes. They’ve always been the same color, but now they’re the same in what they carry around inside, visible beneath the brown to anyone who knows how to look.

Porthos isn’t used to feeling helpless. For a long time after the miscarriage it’s a struggle to feel anything else. But when Aramis laughs again, when he helps Porthos pitch camp by the river for their heat, when his hormones climb and he presents and Porthos feels that spike of love and longing that seems to come from the depths of his soul, Porthos starts to think that maybe they’ll get better.
And they do get better. But the better they get isn’t the same as the good they used to be. They’ve got scars now where the eye can’t see. D’Artagnan’s pupping is only going to bring it all up again, rake up the grief of the past and make it new.

Aramis murmurs something incomprehensible and rolls over in his sleep. Porthos follows, keeping their bodies close. He doesn’t expect to sleep tonight. But that’s okay. He’d rather stay awake and watch over Aramis, reassure himself that his mate is safe and healthy. He knows how dangerous miscarriages can be. No one has ever said it out loud, but he knows how close he’d been to losing everything that night.

So Porthos stays awake, watching Aramis sleep, and goes on humming until morning.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of part two. Thanks to everyone who’s been reading and leaving such lovely, encouraging feedback so far! I can’t tell you how much it’s been helping keep the momentum going. I couldn’t write this fic without such a supportive group of readers. I hope you’ll all stick around for the thrilling conclusion :) Those spoiler tags are going to start being unmasked pretty soon!

Also: Does anyone do icons, or know someone who does icons? My standard AO3 icon is starting to look a little bland to me. I’d love to commission a Musketeers one.
The first three months of d’Artagnan’s pupping pass by in an uncomfortable blur. The Captain has to put him on light duty almost at once; he can’t guard anything while he’s vomiting, and there are days when just getting out of bed is almost more than he can manage.

“First trimester is the hardest,” Aramis says encouragingly. “Just stick it out three months and you’ll feel a lot better.”

“Easy for you to say,” d’Artagnan moans, forgetting himself briefly in how utterly miserable he feels. He feels worse when Aramis’ mask cracks briefly and d’Artagnan is reminded again of how gladly Aramis would trade places with him in an instant.

“Sorry,” d’Artagnan mutters, not sure of what else to say or do.

“It’s all right,” Aramis says falsely. “Don’t worry about it. Think of the pups.”

D’Artagnan’s first instinct, that he’s carrying two, had been confirmed along with the pupping itself. Right on schedule at the end of the first month he’d started cramping violently and producing slick out of heat. Aramis had done something incomprehensible and pronounced d’Artagnan pupped with twins. D’Artagnan is already thinking of names. At least, when he isn’t asleep or too nauseated to think.

With d’Artagnan on light duty their entire squad’s slate is reduced – no more missions out of Paris, and the others are sticking to guard duty at the Louvre and market squares. It’s necessary for more than just d’Artagnan’s suddenly compelling need to sleep fifteen hours a day. They have to prepare for the sudden upheaval all of their lives are going to face. They need a new place to live. A sympathetic nursemaid to lend their household legitimacy. There are papers to be secured and records to be forged. Everyone is busy.

The new lodgings are the most immediate concern. Aramis says d’Artagnan will probably start to show early given how skinny he is. That means they need to move quickly. As soon as Athos stops hovering and Porthos starts letting Aramis out of his sight, Aramis shoos off the Alphas to go find them a new den. Aramis stays behind with d’Artagnan. D’Artagnan tries to convince Aramis this isn’t necessary, but to no effect.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you can barely get of bed to use the pot,” Aramis says. “If I leave you here alone you’ll sleep right through meals. You need to be eating at the very least.”

“But you must care about where we’ll be living,” d’Artagnan protests. Surely Aramis doesn’t want to spend every day cooped up with a sick Omega flaunting exactly what Aramis is missing.

Aramis shrugs gracefully. “I’ll let Athos and Porthos narrow down the choices before I look. I don’t need to see every house to lend in all of Paris. They’re nesting; it’s what Alphas do. Let them.”

D’Artagnan eventually stops protesting when he realizes that all he’s doing is making it worse for Aramis. Aramis is thrilled for them, nearly as much in love with d’Artagnan’s pups as d’Artagnan himself is, and he helps d’Artagnan with an unselfishness that’s saintly. But some mornings Aramis’ eyes are suspiciously red-rimmed, and no matter how much Aramis claims he’d simply slept poorly the night before, the look Porthos gives Aramis before leaving them alone speaks louder than words.

Porthos, d’Artagnan notices, hasn’t touched him since he’d returned from his heat pupped. The first casualty had been d’Artagnan’s wrestling lessons, ostensibly on the basis of their being dangerous to
the pups. But gone, too, are the friendly claps on the back, the helping arm after an evening at the tavern, the hand up when d’Artagnan needs it. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out why. Porthos doesn’t want even the littlest bit of d’Artagnan’s scent where Aramis might encounter it unexpectedly.

The two of them have started to retire earlier than usual, usually right after the evening meal. One interpretation of this is that they’re kindly giving Athos and d’Artagnan time alone. The other is that being around d’Artagnan is hard for them. Both are probably true.

It’s why d’Artagnan had tried to send Aramis off to go house-hunting along with the Alphas. But he has to admit that he feels better, at least emotionally, with Aramis around. There’s something primal and comforting about the presence of another Omega, something that even Athos can’t provide.

Aramis’ knowledge helps stave off many a nightmare that d’Artagnan’s ignorance would otherwise saddle him with. Aramis explains that the rough pupping is unfortunately to be expected as a side effect of d’Artagnan’s largely Betan heredity. It’s fundamentally the same problem d’Artagnan had experienced with his overactive heats: he may be an Omega where it counts, but his bloodline is dangerously dilute. He lacks most of the evolutionary advantages his sex has bred for over the centuries. His internal organs are having more trouble rearranging to make room for his growing uterus. His heart, liver and kidneys are straining to pick up the extra load. His bladder is situated just that little bit too high that means d’Artagnan’s become closer friends with his chamber pot than he’d ever wanted to be.

“And this is supposed to get better in the second trimester?” he asks Aramis dubiously when this is explained to him.

“Believe it or not, yes,” Aramis says. “Your uterus will move up out of the pelvic cavity, so a lot of the pressure on your bone structure will be relieved – that’s actually what’s causing your nausea, not your stomach. That’ll move up too. Most importantly, your organs will have finished growing. Your heart and kidney capacity are being built out right now to keep up with your pups’ demands. By the second trimester they’ll have finished that growth. You’ll be much less tired, less winded, the works.”

D’Artagnan tries to picture these changes and fails. “My organs are growing,” he says blankly.

“Most of your reproductive system is still immature until you’re pupped the first time,” Aramis says. He’s grinning a little, like d’Artagnan’s shock is amusing. D’Artagnan supposes it’s better than Aramis being maudlin. “Wait until your milk comes in.”

“Oh God,” d’Artagnan says. He goes back to sleep at this point, largely out of self-defense.

As usual, though, Aramis is dead on. It doesn’t happen all at once, but things do start getting better once that third month passes, and right around fifteen weeks d’Artagnan wakes up and gets out of bed without thinking. It’s only once he’s standing that he realizes that he’s neither sore, exhausted nor out of breath.

Athos wakes up when d’Artagnan gives an imprudent victory cry.

“Don’t get any bright ideas,” Athos says immediately. “You’re not exerting yourself.”

“I’m hungry,” d’Artagnan says gleefully. “Let’s get breakfast!”

“Let’s talk to Aramis first,” Athos says, like the wet blanket he is.

To d’Artagnan’s joy, Aramis says that d’Artagnan can eat whatever sounds good to him.
“Your own appetite is a remarkably good predictor of what’s good for you at any given time,” Aramis says to Athos’ betrayed glower. “If you’re low on iron, you’ll crave liver. If you’re low on vitamins, you’ll want vegetables. And if your system can’t handle something it will put you off. Notice how d’Artagnan still didn’t take any ham?”

Athos looks at d’Artagnan’s plate. Indeed, there are no meats of any kind on it.

“Didn’t want any this morning?” Porthos asks.

D’Artagnan sighs at Aramis’ knowing look. “Didn’t smell right,” he admits. “I thought the grease might be off.”

“Nothing wrong with it,” Aramis says, eating his own portion with every appearance of enjoyment. “It’s just you.”

D’Artagnan frowns for a moment, then shrugs and goes back to his eggs. At least it means Athos stops glowering quite so darkly.

D’Artagnan’s appetite and energy improve steadily for another two weeks. By the end of the fourth month he’s doing light workouts again. No weights or strength training of any kind, and anything hands-on is still out of the question. But crossbow, knife-throwing and musketry are all back on the table. Backed by Aramis, d’Artagnan overrides his mate and works through basic sword forms, too.

“Remember how bad my swordsmanship was when I first came to Paris,” d’Artagnan reminds Athos when Athos plops himself down on a nearby bench, looking like he intends to glare at d’Artagnan the entire time. “We don’t want to let me backslide that far, do we?”

A ghost of a smile appears on Athos’ face. “I suppose not,” he says grudgingly. “Just be careful. All right?”

“All right,” d’Artagnan agrees. He’d intended to be anyway, so it’s an easy promise to make, though he suspects his definition of careful might be different than Athos’.

Fortunately Athos doesn’t have long to brood over d’Artagnan’s newfound energy. Shortly after the argument over fencing, Treville leaves Athos in charge of things in Paris and takes half the regiment out for a weeklong training stint. The Captain usually schedules these conditioning trips biannually, with each squad assigned to either the spring or fall journey, when the court is quiet and the diplomatic season is over or not yet begun. Treville had suspended the last two journeys with pretexts about the need for increased security around the King. Rochefort is the real reason, of course. D’Artagnan wonders what it means that Treville feels secure enough to restart the journeys.

Athos tries to talk to the Captain about it, but is rebuffed. Treville’s been growing prickly as the situation with the Inquisitor drags out and progress has apparently stalled. D’Artagnan doesn’t know the details; the Captain insists that they’re all safer that way, though if matters continue much longer Athos and Porthos are probably going to try to force the issue. There had already been one near-fight over the subject of Treville’s last heat. The arguments over who was and was not going where and with whom had ended with Aramis and Porthos going into the Court of Miracles one night and returning with a cross-marked envelope. Still, everyone is aware that the issue isn’t settled, only delayed. D’Artagnan is just hoping that the Inquisitor is dealt with before it comes up again.

Athos, Porthos and Aramis are frustrated and tense. D’Artagnan views things differently. Despite the argument, the Captain’s worry and affection are obvious. The other three want to know everything. But d’Artagnan understands the protective value of ignorance. He doesn’t take the opportunity to ask
questions of his own when the Captain drops by in the evenings. Athos wants him to; Treville dotes on the pups-to-be as much as Aramis does, and while Treville views the other three members of d’Artagnan’s pack as niblings he obviously looks on d’Artagnan more as a surrogate pup. But d’Artagnan knows asking won’t do anything but drive Treville away. He refuses to do it. Treville’s too proud to ask for help, but the Captain needs the four of them more than ever.

Sometimes d’Artagnan wakes up from an evening doze to find Treville and Aramis nearby, talking quietly. He’d thought at first that the Captain might be opening up to the other Omega. But Aramis says they’re talking of other things when d’Artagnan asks, and then gives d’Artagnan a look that says to leave it be.

The argument’s rendered temporarily moot when the Captain leaves Paris with half the regiment for the weeklong training sting. The quiet gives d’Artagnan a little breathing room to enjoy and appreciate the place that he’s called home for the past year and a quarter. He’ll have to leave it soon. Porthos and Athos say they’ve narrowed down their house search to a small handful of candidates. Next Aramis and d’Artagnan will go to see them. They’ll make the final choice and move out. Not a minute too soon, either. D’Artagnan already looks like he’s been enjoying the hot crossed buns they sell in the market-square a few times too often. Pretty soon he’ll need to go into seclusion entirely. Once he’s showing he can’t go out in public. A story will be put around that d’Artagnan is seriously ill, and he’ll have to remain inside until he’s safely whelped. So he makes the most of the time he has left. Walking through the garrison, strolling through the market, breathing the fresh air and looking up at the sky.

Athos says one of the houses they’re looking at has an enclosed courtyard. D’Artagnan’s already privately favoring that one. He’s still a country youth at his core. He can’t imagine being trapped indoors, unable to feel the sun on his skin, for four months or more. A window’s just not the same.

“We should go look at the houses tomorrow,” Athos says one evening. “The Captain will be back soon. Once he is we should move.”

Most of the half-regiment had already ridden back in, in fact. But on the way back, while stopped for the night just outside Bordeaux, a noble family travelling to the city for a prolonged stay had asked for an escort on the road to Paris. Judging the family’s need for protection to be relatively light, Treville had sent the bulk of his Musketeers back on ahead. Those squads had ridden in two days ago. Havet and Brasseur had stayed behind to provide muscle, while Treville had stayed to lend an air of authority to the proceedings and remove any implied insult from the small size of their group. They’ll be moving more slowly than the Musketeers on horseback, but even so, Treville should be back in the next day or two.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” Aramis points out. “Many won’t do business. Best to wait another day.”

Athos frowns, and his gaze slides sideways. D’Artagnan rests one hand on his stomach self-consciously. He’s really not showing through his clothes yet, but Athos runs his hands over the bump every night as they lay in bed together, and d’Artagnan can tell it worries his mate.

“One day’s difference in making the decision probably won’t affect when we actually move,” Porthos says, always the voice of reason. “We’re safe enough here for the time being.”

D’Artagnan has to smile at that. It’s always astonishing to him when he thinks of how many other throwbacks are present in the regiment. He’d always guessed, from Gaston’s hints, that there were others. But Athos, Porthos and Aramis have been working with the Underground since d’Artagnan had been breeched. Athos in particular has been sure to equip d’Artagnan with a few names so he has someone to turn to in an emergency if his own pack isn’t around.
Athos’ worry is still plucking at d’Artagnan’s heartstrings, though. “I’ll start packing tomorrow,” d’Artagnan suggests. “Stay out of the way most of the day. All right?”

“All right,” Athos says grudgingly.

Aramis and Porthos roll their eyes at each other, equal parts amused and irritated at Athos’ seeming ingratitude. But d’Artagnan knows differently. He slides his hand over to Athos’ and squeezes it in silent reassurance. Athos’ eyes smile at him, and d’Artagnan knows his mate is grateful.

D’Artagnan smiles back, then returns to his meal, already planning an early night. His life is about to change again. Best to be well-fed and rested before it does.

Athos awakens early the next morning and finds one hand on his sword-hilt before conscious thought catches up. For a moment Athos frowns at it, disturbed. Being woken by nightmares, heart pounding and adrenaline thumping, isn’t unusual. Though it had been happening much less often with d’Artagnan’s body safe in his arms and d’Artagnan’s soul twined with his. But nightmares or no, Athos almost never finds himself waking up with a weapon already in hand. His training had been too strict for that. Weapons were only to be taken up when they were about to be used, and no nightmare, no matter how strong, could be grounds for that.

Especially not if Athos is to share a bed with his mate. D’Artagnan is stirring awake, disturbed. He blinks long delicate lashes open and takes in the sight of Athos sitting up in bed, sword in hand. This naturally provokes him to further wakefulness.

“What’s wrong?” he demands.

“A nightmare,” Athos says apologetically. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me…”

D’Artagnan shakes his head, holding up a hand. “No, wait. Listen.”

Athos obeys. The sound of jingling tack reaches their ears. Athos shakes his head, about to say something else self-deprecating – horses being ridden around the Musketeers’ garrison are hardly an excuse for Athos to lurch out of bed and grab at his sword – when voices start shouting.

D’Artagnan’s eyes meet Athos’. Then they’re both out of bed and dressing.

It takes them only a few minutes to get into uniform; then they’re hurrying outside and down into the practice-yard. A crowd has already gathered. At its center are Havet and Brasseur. The two Musketeers are dirty and travel-stained. There’s a half-healed cut on Havet’s jaw. Brasseur has a rust-stained bandage wrapped around his right bicep. Two stable-boys are leading away two lathered and blowing horses.

Most worryingly, the Captain is nowhere to be seen.

“What happened?” Athos demands, pushing through the crowd. It parts before him when the other Musketeers realize it’s Athos at their backs. D’Artagnan stays on his heels. Partway through, Aramis and Porthos appear at his side.

“We were attacked,” Havet says tersely. His usual humor is entirely gone. His face is grim, and he’s standing stiffly, like his ribs hurt him. Every time he shifts position, Brasseur makes an abortive movement, like he wants to grab Havet and support him. Or it may be that Brasseur doesn’t want to be more than a few inches from Havet – a sentiment that Havet clearly shares, if the way their hands keep brushing is any indication.
“The Captain was kidnapped,” Brasseur adds. “They grabbed him and carried him off.”

“Why didn’t you go after him?” someone shouts.

“It happened right as we were attacked,” Havet says defensively. “We had to take care of the other attackers first, and then we came straight back here.”

“You mean you just left him?” someone else in the crowd demands.

Brasseur falters. “Well, he told us to – ”

Havet places a comforting hand on Brasseur’s shoulder. “Captain Treville had his reasons,” he says, visibly steeling himself. “He told us to go on ahead because – that is to say, he knew that – ”

“You don’t have to explain,” Athos interrupts. He steps out more fully the ranks of massed Musketeers, turning to face the crowd and raising his voice. “When the Captain gives an order, he expects it to be obeyed. No matter how little sense it may seem to make at the time. If he’d ordered me to run, I would have run.”

The crowd mutters and shuffles its feet, somewhat chastened by Athos’ declaration of support, but still furious over the threat to their leader.

Porthos comes forward to stand by Athos, the two Alphas shoulder to shoulder. He doesn’t speak, just glares out over the crowd, which quiets still further.

“The important thing now is getting him back,” Aramis says from the front row. He doesn’t step forward. Instead he consciously displays several of his more Omegan traits, sensing the mood of the crowd is trending towards barbarism. They work best in close proximity, and indeed, an aura of calm begins to spread from where he stands.

“That’s right,” someone says.

“Listen to Aramis,” another voice agrees.

Athos relaxes his pose slightly and turns back to Havet and Brasseur. “Tell us everything,” he orders.

The tale is simply told. Havet and Brasseur had remained with Treville to escort the noble family and their belongings to Paris from Bordeaux. They’d moved slowly – even more slowly than such a convoy usually did – and around the third day Treville had started to become suspicious.

“They were always talking when we weren’t looking,” Brasseur explains. “Some of the things they said – well, it was the usual slurs – nothing any of us here haven’t heard before. Except…”

“Except they were always watching to see how we’d react,” Havet says. “Watching us, like they expected us to snap.”

“The Captain told us that if the situation went sour we weren’t to try to fight, but to take our horses and go straight back to Paris,” Havet says. “But when we were attacked, it wasn’t from within. It seemed like actual brigands. So we fought, but – ”

“I saw it happen,” Brasseur says. “One of the so-called noblemen snuck up on the Captain from behind and coshed him.”

“And you left him there!” another voice shouts. The crowd stirs again.

“We both tried to get to the Captain,” Brasseur defends. “But another wave of brigands came from
the trees and carried him off, and then –”

“And then you did exactly the right thing,” Athos interrupts again, taking back control of the gathering. He runs his gaze over the crowd. “If Havet and Brasseur had been taken too, we’d be pulling their mutilated bodies out of a ditch a week from now, never knowing how or why. At least now we have a chance to rescue the Captain.” He raises one cool eyebrow. “Or would you prefer to stand around debating the matter all day?”

D’Artagnan steps forward. “We’re with you,” he says clearly.

Several other people shout agreements, ashamed to have been beaten to it by a youth barely out of his novitiate. Their voices soon join together in one clear swell.

Athos allows it to go on for a minute, then raises a hand for silence. “We’ll split up into groups and search along the route the Captain took,” he says. “If we travel lightly we can cover ground more quickly – it sounds like the attackers were heavily laden?”

“That’s right,” Havet says. Brasseur nods.

“Break into your squads,” Athos instructs the crowd. “Go equip yourself with everything you’ll need for two days. Pack as lightly as you can. Then come back here and I’ll have your search areas waiting.”

Under Athos’ firm guidance, the Musketeers rally quickly. Aramis raids the Captain’s office and produces his maps of Paris and its environs. Athos divides up the area around Treville’s last known location into manageable search grids and hands them out to each squad when they come to report readiness, first come first served. Slowly but surely the practice yard empties out.

The potent combination of anger and fear makes for carelessness. For that matter, Brasseur and Havet were barely circumspect enough in their speech to avoid outright confession. Consequently, many Musketeers forget themselves in the next few hours. Some don’t cover their scent up as well as they usually do. Others fail to properly rein in aggressive instincts in their posture. Still others don’t slow their movements when arming themselves or running to and fro.

“I hope they get it together before they hit the road,” Porthos mutters, watching a Musketeer named Besson lift an entire barrel of gunpowder and cart it across the yard without regard for who might be watching.

“I’m not sending out anyone who’s not calm enough to pass,” Athos says reassuringly. “They’re worried, and they feel safe here. Their attitude will change once they leave the garrison.”

Aramis and d’Artagnan come over to where they’re sitting, map open before them. They’ve been raiding the Captain’s quarters for any specialized medical supplies it may contain. They don’t know what shape Treville will be in when they find him, and it pays to be prepared.

Aramis sits down with the bag he’s carrying and begins sorting through the small jars and pouches. D’Artagnan takes the seat opposite and starts working over his knives with a small whetstone.

Athos looks at this. Says, “You’re staying here.”

D’Artagnan ignores this completely. “So I’m assuming we all agree that this is the Inquisitor making his move.”

“What else could it be?” Porthos says rhetorically, checking the priming on his muskets. “The world’s most lucky highwaymen?”

“Not a chance,” Aramis says. “The Inquisitor must have gotten tired of waiting.”

“Probably he realized that the Captain had tumbled to his plan and was never going to lead Rochefort to his mate,” Porthos says.

“Hang on,” Athos tries to interrupt.

“But Rochefort is still in Rome,” d’Artagnan says. “He wrote the Queen last week and said he’d be there another season.”

“His agents may be in France,” Aramis says. “There’s no need for Rochefort to handle this personally. Even if he were here he wouldn’t get his hands dirty. It’s not his style.”

“What’s his game now, though?” Porthos wonders. “He can’t seriously expect Treville’s mate to get wind of the kidnapping and charge off to rescue him, can he?”

“We’re charging off to rescue him,” Aramis says slowly. “What if the Captain’s mate is a Musketeer?”

The other three Musketeers pause to consider this. Athos takes the opportunity to bring his fist down on the table with a resounding thud.

“Can we please talk about d’Artagnan?” Athos cries.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” d’Artagnan says mulishly. “I’m going with you.”

“You’re four months pupped,” Athos hisses, glancing around the courtyard warily despite the fact that he’s starting to suspect there are no Betas in the regiment. “The Captain was almost certainly kidnapped by the Inquisitor of Lille. If we go to rescue him we may end up in a similar situation. You need to stay where it’s safe!”

D’Artagnan folds his arms over his chest and opens his mouth to speak. Their packmates beat him to it.

“Somewhere safe? And where would that be?” Aramis inquires, tone deceptively mild. “Here in the middle of Paris, two steps from the Palais-Cardinal, in a garrison manned only by the token guard you’re planning to leave behind?”

“Better than falling into the Inquisitor’s hands!” Athos cries.

“Athos, how do you think this is going to end?” Porthos challenges. “The Captain and the Inquisitor are fighting it out. If the Captain goes down, we all go down too. The Inquisitor isn’t going to overlook the Musketeers if Treville’s unmasked. We’ll all be picked up by the Inquisition. Our best chance is to help the Captain.”

“That doesn’t mean d’Artagnan needs to put himself in the Inquisitor’s path,” Athos says stubbornly. “Some of us have to stay behind. Why not him?”

“Think,” Aramis hisses. “If we can rescue the Captain and defeat the Inquisitor, good. In that case it doesn’t matter who stays and who goes. But if we fail, if the Inquisitor wins, the only chance any of us will have will be to vanish. Change our names, change our professions, get as far away from our old lives as we can.”
“That’s going to be next to impossible for anyone who’s still in Paris when the balloon goes up,” Porthos says grimly. “Anyone who’s already at large in the countryside might manage it. But staying behind is a death sentence if the Inquisitor comes out on top.”

“Besides, won’t I be safer with you?” d’Artagnan speaks up, transparently playing to Athos’ protective instincts. “Who would you rather I be with – a group of random Musketeers, or my pack?”

“That’s not fair,” Athos protests.

“None of this is fair,” Aramis says inflexibly.

“We all want d’Artagnan’s safety,” Porthos says. “And he’s safest coming with us.”

“And even if that weren’t true,” d’Artagnan says, “I’d still be going with you. Because I owe the Captain too much to stay behind. I wouldn’t even be pupped if it weren’t for him. I wouldn’t be mated, I wouldn’t know any of you – I’d probably have died back in Gascony, when someone realized the raiders hadn’t gotten to me and come back to finish the job.” D’Artagnan sets his jaw and stares Athos right in the eye. “So I’m going.”

Athos holds d’Artagnan’s gaze for a moment. Then he drops his own and sighs, conceding the argument.

“Glad that’s settled,” Porthos rumbles.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” Athos begs.

“Of course I will,” d’Artagnan says, reaching out and taking Athos’ hand. “And you’ll be with me the entire time.”

Athos swallows. But he nods.

“When they were threatened, the Captain sent Havet and Brasseur ahead, though the smarter tactical move would have been to stay together and fight as a group,” Aramis says, steering the conversation back to military matters. “That suggests that he knew who was chasing them, and why.”

“Given what Havet and Brasseur said, the odds favor it,” Porthos says. “Remember, they said their travelling companions were taunting them with throwback slurs even before they were attacked.”

“The Captain’s not a fool,” Athos says. “He would assume any trap or attack to be the work of the Inquisitor. He’d behave accordingly.”

“That goes both ways,” Aramis says. “The Inquisitor’s men will know how to restrain him appropriately.”

The average Omega is rather more flexible than a Beta or an Alpha. If Treville’s captors were unaware of his true sex, they might not account for that properly. An Alpha in a similar situation can take advantage of their strength. But it only works by differing from the expected Betan baseline. The Inquisition has special sets of restraints for throwbacks. Special cells in special prisons. Special tortures, too.

“Captain knows what he’s doing,” Porthos says firmly. “He’ll probably be in the act of escaping when we catch up to him.”

“We’re all assuming he’s still alive,” d’Artagnan says quietly.
A brief pall falls over the table.

“He must be,” Aramis says at length. “Rochefort could have had Treville killed any time he wanted, just by denouncing him as a throwback. The whole point has always been to entrap Treville’s mate, too. And if Rochefort had killed Treville, the Captain’s mate would know it. The whole thing would be for nothing.”

There’s another brief hush at the table. Athos stares at the map fixedly, ignoring his companions’ worried gazes. The place in his heart where Charlotte sleeps forever aches suddenly with remembered pain.

“So the Captain’s probably still alive,” Porthos says at last.

“Which gives us time to find him.” D’Artagnan finishes loading his musket. He slants a look at Athos. “Preferably before his mate realizes what’s going on and does something ill-considered.”

“Assuming his mate doesn’t know already.”

“We have to assume that,” Aramis says, sliding his knives into their sheathes. “Otherwise we may have already lost.”

Porthos nods and picks up his pistols.

Athos looks up from the map. They’re all four armed and ready, the last squad still in the practice yard. He nods. “Then what are we waiting for?”
The Château de Bragelonne

There are advantages to being second in command. Athos had asserted the right of directing the Musketeers’ search and rescue efforts, and that had enabled him to save the most promising direction for himself and his compatriots. They take their leave of the garrison, leaving Brasseur and Havet in charge of a reduced group, still grumbling at being left behind. They may understand the need to guard their den, especially if the Inquisition has caught wind that the Musketeers are riddled with throwbacks, but no one likes remaining behind when their Captain’s in danger.

“Should maybe have left more Omegas,” Porthos comments as they ride out of Paris in formation. “They complain less.”

“Every sex has their own strengths and weaknesses,” Athos says calmly. “A balanced group is almost always best.”

They head almost entirely due south, only a little west, following the road for the first few hours. Then, at Athos’ gesture, they depart into the wild forests surrounding this part of France. The King’s hunting grounds lay in a different direction; these woods are untamed, and the wildlife runs free.

It had been early morning when Havet and Brasseur had ridden into the Musketeers’ garrison, disheveled and desperate. Another few hours had elapsed before Athos’ party could set out, and the days are still short. The sun is dipping below the treeline soon after they leave the road. No one wants to stop, but practicality does not bend to emotion.

“The light is gone,” Athos announces finally. “We need to make camp.”

Predictably, the other three wheel on him, objections spilling from their lips. Athos raises a hand to stop them all. “We can’t see a thing,” he says. “Nor can we hear.” The only thing noisier than a battlefield is a forest at dusk. “Have any of you caught a scent?”

“No,” Aramis admits. Porthos and d’Artagnan likewise shake their heads.

“Then we’re done for the night,” Athos says simply. “Make camp.”

There’s a little more grumbling, but the others are used to taking direction from Athos. Even Porthos doesn’t argue with him much anymore, despite all the old stereotypes about two Alphas butting heads. They set up camp mostly in silence. There’s no need to speak, everyone well versed at this point in the tasks assigned to them, and tonight no one wants to break the silence.

They roll their bedrolls out in two sets, with the banked coals of their fire between them. It’s not much in the way of privacy, but they’ve lived their lives with less. Athos wraps his mate up in his arms and cradles him until dawn. Aramis and Porthos are lying much the same, and the sky neither can nor wishes to care.

The following day they start out eagerly, but the morning goes by without any progress. They pause briefly at midday to eat a cold meal, then return to the hunt.

“How far do we go from Paris?” Aramis asks, as the sun descends from its zenith.

“Another two or three miles,” Athos says, consulting his map. “Then we’ll double back in case there’s something we missed – ”
In front of them Porthos stiffens and raises a hand. Instinctively Athos and Aramis fall silent. They creep closer to their squadmate, joined on the other side by d’Artagnan.

“What is it?” Athos whispers.

Porthos’ nostrils flare. “Bane,” he says grimly.

Everyone stiffens. Athos scents the air, too. Now that he knows what he’s smelling for, he catches it. Faint. Distant. But unmistakable. It’s been more than a decade since he’d smelled it last, but Athos doesn’t think he’ll ever forget it.

“Well,” d’Artagnan says in the tone of someone determined to look on the bright side. “Now we know for sure that the Captain’s alive.”

“The bane doesn’t usually kill,” Porthos agrees. “It just incapacitates.”

“They wanted him weak but alive,” Aramis says.

“D’Artagnan,” Athos blurts out. D’Artagnan turns towards him, but Athos is looking at Aramis. “The bane – will it hurt the pups?”

Aramis frowns. “It shouldn’t,” he says after a moment of consideration. He glances at Porthos. “Unless it’s had something added to it specifically for that purpose.”

Porthos takes another breath. “Smells normal to me,” he says and grimaces. “At least as normal as it’s supposed to.”

“And now we can track them,” d’Artagnan says, entirely too cheerfully for Athos’ tastes. What if Porthos and Aramis are wrong? What if –

Athos has to stop and take a deep breath. He’s reacting irrationally. He reminds himself that Porthos had grown up around the bane. Omegas at the breeding plantations were exposed to it daily. If it were harmful to pups, Porthos would certainly know.

“We need to figure out which way they came and which way they were going,” Athos says, voice mostly steady. D’Artagnan gives him a sympathetic look nonetheless.

They end up splitting up and quartering the area. The scent trail leads in two directions. One leads back to the road as it continues south of Paris, eventually leading towards Bordeaux. The other splits off deeper into the forest.

“All right.” Athos gestures for the squad to regroup. “Does everyone have it?”

“Don’t see how we couldn’t,” Porthos mutters.

Athos ignores this. “Then let’s go.”

They start moving, slowly but this time with purpose. The scent trail leads them deeper into the forest. As they go on, though, the woods seem to thin, and old signs of cultivation begin to make themselves known.

“I think this used to be an estate,” Porthos says eventually. He points. “Look how the timber used to be maintained.”

“And there’s signs of crown management and controlled burns to clear out undergrowth,” d’Artagnan adds.
“Look!” Aramis cries.

Ahead of them there’s an abrupt break in the treeline. Athos slows his horse, unwilling to give up their cover, and peers through it.

“A château,” he says in surprise. It’s obviously an older building, built in the fashion of the last century, and somewhat fallen into disrepair. But the roof appears intact and there are no obvious caved-in walls. It will probably keep out the weather.

And the scent trail leads right to it. Which means it’s almost certainly a trap.

Athos needs more information. “Aramis, Porthos,” he says. “Circle around left. We’ll go right. Keep within the treeline. See if the trail ends here, or if it emerges again.”

“Watch out for the bane,” Porthos says. “They lay it down in small clusters that look like dung, except too pale. If you disturb those they can knock you out.”

The other two Musketeers nod and move out. Athos keeps on eye on the forest at one on d’Artagnan. It’s foolish but he can’t help but be worried for his mate and pups. D’Artagnan shows no signs of being affected by the bane, though, beyond wrinkling his nose. Eventually they circle around and meet Aramis and Porthos again.

“The whole thing’s a muddle,” d’Artagnan says in disgust. “With the bane it’s hard to be sure of anything. You?”

“The same,” Aramis admits. “They must have been using this as a base of operations for some time. There are scent trails all over the place. But they were here recently. That’s as much as I’m sure of.”

Athos considers the problem for a few minutes, checking for hidden angles he might have missed, but really there’s only one option. They have to take the château. Countering a trap with subtlety requires time they don’t have. There’s no positive outcome from leaving the Captain in their enemies’ hands a moment longer than is necessary.

“I don’t suppose I can convince you to stay back,” Athos says to d’Artagnan.

“Don’t suppose you can,” d’Artagnan says back.

“Here,” Aramis says. He unstraps his long gun and hands it to d’Artagnan. “You take the covering position. Stay in the rear.”

“That’s your spot,” d’Artagnan protests. “And you’re a better shot than I am!”

“You’re more than good enough,” Aramis counters. “Please?”

D’Artagnan wilts under this combined assault. “All right,” he mutters, accepting the weapon and falling back to the rear.

“All right,” Athos says, drawing his musket and trying to put his worry out of his mind. “We keep our stealth for as long as we can. Try to take at least one alive. We need to find out what the Inquisitor’s plan is.”

“Come on,” Porthos growls. “I don’t want to leave the Captain in their hands a minute longer than I have to.”

They follow the treeline around slightly before breaking cover, allowing them to approach the house
at an oblique angle where very few of the windows can see them. Keeping as low as they can, taking advantage of the cover provided by the overgrown remains of the lawn, they creep slowly towards the château.

Silence from the house.

Athos pauses partway there, taking stock. No snipers on the roof. No rifle sights peering out from the broken windows. No flood of brigands pouring from the door.

They keep going. They’re fifty paces from the door. Forty. Thirty.

“No resistance yet,” Porthos mutters. “Where have they all gone?”

“I don’t like this,” Aramis says.

After a few more minutes Athos stands up fully and gestures the others to do the same. “Wherever they are, they’re not here,” he says in disgust. “Come on. Perhaps they left something behind that will tell us where they’ve gone.”

He starts moving towards the château more purposefully, abandoning stealth. The other three hurry to catch up.

“What if it’s a trap?” d’Artagnan says.

“Then we’ve already sprung it,” Athos says grimly.

“It’s more likely they caught wind of our approach and decided not to be here,” Aramis says.

The door of the abandoned château is hanging off its hinges. The entire place is awash with generations of neglect.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s been here in ages,” d’Artagnan says miserably, shoving a broken piece of furniture aside.

“Don’t be fooled,” Aramis says, gesturing to the ground. There’s a thick layer of dust on the wooden floors, but it’s been much disturbed lately. “Footprints. They’ve been here, all right.”

Athos looks around, getting his bearings. Above the grand staircase the family crest is still visible, carved in relief on the wood. With a sinking heart he recognizes it.

“This used to be the Château de Bragelonne,” he says. “The line was related to mine generations ago. They were wiped out in the early days of the Inquisition.”

There’s a respectful hush. Aramis finally breaks it by saying, “We need to search the place.”

Athos nods. He starts back towards where he knows the kitchen will be. Porthos peels off in the direction of the servants’ quarters. Aramis and d’Artagnan head for the stairs.

The kitchen is as deserted as the rest of the house. He passes straight through it towards the large doors set against the far wall. The pantries for a house this size are full rooms in their own right. They’ll be well insulated, to preserve the food, and well barred, to prevent theft from the servants. An ideal prison cell.

The first two are empty, their doors hanging open. But the third is locked from the outside. And next to it Athos sees a small pile of too-pale dung. The bane. Keeping whoever is in the third pantry incapacitated.
Athos tugs on the door; it moves slightly, and the extra chains someone has affixed to it clank. “Captain Treville?” he calls. “Can you hear me?”

There’s no answer. But as he pulls, the seal around the door breaks, just for a moment, just for the tiniest sliver. The scent of distressed Omega is suddenly everywhere. It’s even strong enough to briefly overcome the bane, and Athos may not be a doctor, but he knows how bad a sign that is.

Athos curses. “Porthos!” he shouts, as loudly as he can. “Aramis, d’Artagnan!”

The sound of pounding feet tells him at least one of his companions has heard his call. He lets go of the door handles and takes a firm grip on the chains, reaching deep inside himself for his hidden strength. They don’t have the key, but the chains are obviously of poor quality, already rusting slightly. Athos takes a steadying breath and pulls with all his strength.

Nothing. He relaxes his muscles, letting the tension ebb, and readies himself for another go.

“Athos!” Aramis calls, running into the kitchen. He zeroes in on the chained pantry immediately. “The Captain?”

“I’m not certain,” Athos says, “but someone is inside, and in distress.”

Aramis scents the air and pales. “Oh, no.” He grabs d’Artagnan’s arm as the younger man runs into the room. “Go back to the horses,” he orders. “I need my saddlebag.”

D’Artagnan glances quickly at Athos, who nods. He turns and runs, fleet as only an Omega can be. Aramis hurries over to a cupboard in another corner. The layout of a kitchen is the same in every noble house, it seems, because Aramis immediately starts pulling blankets out and unfolding them.

Athos draws his strength together and pulls on the chains again. This time they creak, and the rust flakes off of one of the middle links as it flexes under his hands.

“Here,” Porthos says. He comes over and lays his hands on the chain next to Athos. “Together.”

The two Alphas lock eyes. Breathing in unison, they pull again.

Iron shrieks with a note that makes all three wince. The center link snaps, pieces flying past Athos’ shoulder. The entire chain slithers to the floor. Athos ignores this in favor of pulling the pantry door wide.

“Captain!” Porthos shouts. He shoves Athos aside in his haste to get in. Treville is slumped in the far corner of the pantry, head lolling to the side, unconscious or close to it. He moans faintly without opening his eyes. Porthos picks him up at once and carries him out, not bothering to pretend the effort strains him.

“Here,” Aramis says, shaking out yet another blanket.

“He’s burning up,” Porthos disagrees.

“He’s probably got a fever,” Aramis says. “D’Artagnan is bringing my bag, but we have to get him warm.”

Porthos blinks and shakes his head. “What’s wrong with his scent?”

“Distress,” Aramis says grimly. Porthos, setting the Captain down on the blanket Aramis has laid out, flinches and lets go as soon as he safely can.
“It doesn’t smell right,” Athos objects. He’d thought the same thing, when he’d first cracked the seal on the third pantry. He’d thought it was distress. And Athos can still smell the markers of fertility and need, but there’s something else cloying and wrong laying over it all.

Distress is a function of heat. If an Omega isn’t knotted through their heat, the hormones building up in their body lack their intended outlet and have to dissipate through other means. Omegas do have alternate release mechanisms for the excess hormones, but they’re uncomfortable at a minimum – painful, in most cases – and stressful on the system. It’s survivable, or else their people would have been wiped out long ago. But it’s counter to the biological function of heat, and the same mechanism that makes an unbonded Omega’s heat scent enticing to potential sires broadcasts that distress loud and clear. All four Musketeers are getting the full force of that distressed scent right now.

There’s just a few problems. Firstly, the Captain is mated. His heat scent, distressed or not, shouldn’t affect anyone but his Alpha. Yet Athos feels nearly sick with every breath. Porthos obviously feels the same, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot and opening every window in sight.

Secondly, Treville’s scent is far too strong. Certainly the Captain’s kidnappers won’t have let him apply his usual perfume, and he’ll be stressed from being kidnapped and held captive. Heat will have boosted it and distress will have boosted it again. But not this far. Not for a mated Omega whose normal scent has always been mild.

And thirdly – the Captain shouldn’t be in heat. They’re three weeks off his cycle. Heat timing can be unpredictable, but not that unpredictable.

Aramis is looking grim, though. “It smells exactly right for induced heat,” he says. “There are drugs that can do this. Cousins to the suppressants. The Inquisition uses them for detection. They have no effect on Betas. But when eaten or drank they send an Omega into heat out of season.”

“I’ve heard of them,” d’Artagnan says from the doorway. He’s pale. “The Inquisition doesn’t just use them for detection, do they?”

“No.” Aramis reaches out; d’Artagnan puts his saddlebag into his hands. A gesture and the two switch places.

“Keep him off the floor if you can, we need to keep his temperature up,” Aramis instructs. D’Artagnan nods.

Athos nearly offers to do it. D’Artagnan has been learning Omegan physic from Aramis and could help better as a second pair of hands. But the idea of touching the Captain now, with the scent of false heat staining everything, makes Athos’ skin crawl. It’s wrong on every level. Treville is clan; there’s nothing appealing about his scent. Besides, Athos has a mate, and it’s not Treville. Treville has a mate and it’s not Athos. And the cloying scent of the drugged fertility is repulsive.

“What else do they use the drug for?” Porthos demands.

Aramis is digging rapidly through his supplies. “They also use it as a form of torture. A drug-induced heat is much stronger than normal. It’s agonizing. Hormone levels go up, kidney and liver function go down… if not sated, it can cause permanent damage. Our bodies can’t sustain it.”

“How permanent?” Porthos says.

Simultaneously Athos demands, “What kind of damage?”

Aramis looks between them and decides to answer them both. “Organ failure. Limbic system shutdown. Death.”
Porthos turns and punches the wall. Athos swears under his breath.

“The same things that were going to happen to me, if I didn’t get help through my heats?” d’Artagnan asks fearfully.

“In your case it was only a chance,” Aramis says. “In Treville’s case it’s a certainty. His system could handle the drugs or the hormones, but not both.”

Aramis pulls something out of his bag and stands up, grabbing a kettle and a flask. He washes the kettle in three different waters while the other occupants of the room stare at him, numbly, and then fills it with water and whatever he’s pulled from his bag.

“More drugs,” d’Artagnan explains quietly. “To slow the heat’s progression.” He hasn’t moved from his position holding the Captain. The scent of false heat must be less repulsive to other Omegas, Athos thinks, distant and unimportant.

“Is there something that can cure it?” Athos asks.

Aramis doesn’t look away from his task. “Only one thing,” he says simply, pouring the liquid from the kettle into the flask.

He doesn’t have to be more specific. In dangerous situations where an extended heat isn’t safe, a mated Omega’s heat can be ended early when they knot with their Alpha. A normal heat will eventually run its course even without knotting, of course, or else no unmated Omega would survive heat alone, and the Betas would have had an even easier time of killing them all off. But a knot short-circuits everything, triggering the hormonal release that prematurely ends a heat.

It’s the same thing that had driven d’Artagnan to ask Athos to accompany him on his last heat. In d’Artagnan’s case the problem had been caused by his own biology, and his heats are survivable independently, at least while d’Artagnan remains young and healthy. But Treville is pushing fifty at least, and while he’s still fit, a lifetime of soldiering leaves marks on the body. And Athos doubts that the Inquisition had had the courtesy to give Treville a survivable dose.

“That’s Rochefort’s plan,” Athos says out loud. “And that’s why no one was here defending the château. It’s a trap, all right, but not one with guns. We’re meant to find Treville. And then we’re meant to bring him to his mate.”

“Yes,” Aramis says. “If we want to save his life.”

“Can one of us do it?” Porthos says, sounding like he has to force the words out of his mouth.

Aramis nearly drops his flask. He wheels on Porthos out of sheer Omegan pair-bonded instinct, ready to savage his mate for the proposed betrayal. He takes two threatening steps towards Porthos before he blinks and his rational mind visibly reasserts itself.

“Even assuming either of us were able to let you,” d’Artagnan says from the floor, “the Captain’s bonded. His body won’t accept anyone but his mate.”

He means it literally. Either of the Alphas could force the Captain, of course. In their barbaric past, Alpha rape of an Omega in heat was unfortunately common. But a strange Alpha is no different than the crude wooden sex toys of their forefathers. When an Omega takes the mating bite, their Alpha’s saliva enters the bloodstream, and the Omega’s hormone system changes, becoming tuned to their Alpha. Only their Alpha’s knot will trigger the hormone release that ends the heat.

D’Artagnan doesn’t look up when he speaks. Athos aches suddenly to go over to him and take him
in his arms. For d’Artagnan to even be able to speak of letting his Alpha go with another takes incredible strength. Everything about Omegan biology has them wired to reject the notion. With violence if necessary – as Aramis had just demonstrated.

“We must take Treville to his mate,” Athos says resolutely. It’s a trap, of course. He knows it. Everyone here knows it. But it’s a well-laid one. If they don’t do it, their Captain will die, and Athos doesn’t consider that an acceptable outcome.

“But what about the Inquisitor?” Aramis demands. “Surely you don’t believe any of this is an accident. Rochefort probably has men waiting to follow us as soon as we leave here.”

“So we kill them,” Porthos rumbles.

“I doubt there will be so few of them that we can accomplish that,” Aramis says.

“Perhaps not by ourselves,” Athos says. “But let’s not forget the Captain and his mate lead the Underground. They must have protections set up. If we can get to their den – ”

“And what’s to stop our hypothetical followers from sneaking off and reporting to Rochefort instead of obligingly remaining to be killed?”

“Aramis?” d’Artagnan’s voice rises in worry. “I think he’s getting warmer.”

Aramis seems to remember what he was doing and drops to kneel beside Treville, flask still in hand. With d’Artagnan’s help he begins to pour its contents down the Captain’s throat.

“It’s a dangerous gamble,” Porthos murmurs to Athos.

“I know,” Athos admits. “But the alternative – ”

“I’m with you,” Porthos says quickly. “I was just hoping someone was going to come up with a better idea.”

Treville has barely roused, drinking instinctively when the liquid passes his lips. But then something must go down the wrong way. He sputters, coughing, and his eyes fly open.

“Back away,” Aramis says waringly over his shoulder. Athos and Porthos heed this instruction, backing nearly out of the room entirely to keep their scents away. In this state, the Captain might react violently to strange Alphas. It doesn’t matter that Treville’s known Athos and Porthos for years, that they’re clan, practically pack. Right now anyone not his mate is strange. By contrast, the two Omegas surrounding him will be comforting, touching the dim part of the throwback hindbrain that remembers when Alphas and Omegas ran in packs.

“Captain, it’s Aramis,” the Musketeer is murmuring soothingly. “We came and found you. D’Artagnan is here too. I need you to drink this.”

Treville still seems disoriented, but drinks the rest of the flask readily enough. When it’s empty he pushes it away. “Where are – ” he winces with the movement, then gasps, shaking. “What was in that?” he demands.

“They gave you something,” Aramis says. “Do you remember?”

The Captain blinks repeatedly, trying to think. “Yes,” he says slowly. “Yes, they… oh, God.” Realization and horror spread over his face.
“What you just drank will slow it down,” Aramis says. “But there’s no drug that can stop it completely. You need your mate.”

Athos steps ever so slightly forward, drawing the Captain’s attention. “We have horses and supplies outside. Just tell us where to take you.”


“It’s a very well-laid plot,” Athos agrees. “And it’s going to kill you if you don’t tell us where to take you.”

“Rochefort did this to force my hand,” Treville says. “He thought I’d be selfish enough to put my own life first. He’s wrong.”

“It’s not just your life,” d’Artagnan says heatedly. “It’s the lives of everyone in the regiment.”

“The only thing that’s been protecting all of us is that Rochefort has been hoping to expose your mate as well,” Aramis says.

Porthos nods. “If you die without giving up their identity Rochefort has no reason not to denounce us all.”

“No...” Treville is sagging backwards, eyes dragging closed again. Aramis doesn’t seem surprised. Something in the second drug must be a sedative. It makes sense; calming the system would slow the effects of the induced heat. “I can’t. Put us all in danger.”

“We’re already in danger,” Athos says urgently, trying to get through. The logic is obvious to him. They have nothing to lose. If Treville dies, the Musketeers are doomed anyway. If they bring Treville to his mate they have a chance. Not a good one. But better than nothing.

Either the logic is less obvious to Treville, or the drugs he’s been given are clouding his mind. Either way the Captain shakes his head. “No,” he repeats.

Treville’s speech is beginning to slur. Aramis leans closer. “Just give us a direction,” he urges. “Just a direction for now. We’ll start moving, figure something else out when we get closer.”

“No,” Treville says again. The word is faint but resolute. “I made a promise... I knew what might happen.”

“Please, Captain,” d’Artagnan begs. He picks up Treville’s hand and lay it directly over the faint curve of his stomach. “Think of what will happen to us all if you die.”

The shot goes home. Treville raises his head and meets d’Artagnan’s gaze, suddenly stricken. He wavers. Athos can see the indecision tearing Treville apart. The slightest push will decide him.

Athos takes a gamble. Letting the growl of a purebred Alpha enter his voice, he rumbles, “Tell us.”

It’s despicable of him to press Treville this way. An Omega in distress is vulnerable, and the Captain is his clanmate, with a claim on his loyalty. Athos should be protecting Treville, not playing on Treville’s baser evolutionary instincts to get him to betray his mate. It reduces them both to the animals the Inquisition makes them out to be: irrational, ruled by instinct, untrustworthy. Incapable of asserting their rational mind over their base natures. Unable to sustain higher-order concepts like honor and duty.

But Athos would do worse to protect his mate and pups.
And it works.

“West,” Treville gasps. “Go west.”

Then he passes out.

They ride west for half the day, Treville’s slumping body propped up against Aramis’, before the Captain rouses again.

“We’re past Orléans,” Aramis says to him at once, drawing rein. D’Artagnan comes over. Between them, they help the Captain off Aramis’ horse and settle him against a tree. “Heading towards Le Mans. No sign of pursuit yet.”

Athos bites back the instinctive protest that rises to his lips. They’re not nearly far enough from Bragelonne for him to be comfortable stopping. There may not be any sign of pursuit yet, but none of them truly believe they’re not being tracked. And they have no idea how much farther it is they have to go. But Aramis is the one most qualified to judge the effects of the drug on their Captain, and Aramis seems to think the best thing to do is stop for a moment.

“Good,” Treville says faintly.

“Here.” D’Artagnan hands the Captain another flask, presumably containing the same drug Aramis had given him back at the Château de Bragelonne. The Captain drinks half of it without complaint. Then he stops, lowering the flask to his lap, and looks up at the foursome looming over them.

Athos steels himself to move closer, ignoring the still-cloying scent of false heat. The pheromones designed to lure the Captain’s mate to him are off-putting to any strange Alpha, doubly so given that Athos is bonded elsewhere. He comes as close as he can and drops to one knee, putting them on eye level. Then he says, gently, “We need you to give us more precise directions now.”

West covers a lot of ground. Athos is nowhere near certain that they’re heading in the right direction. He’s gambled that a southwesterly course is correct, since it takes them towards more populated areas. But Porthos might be right when he’d argued that a hidden Alpha is more likely to be found in a less populated area.

Athos has always been of the private opinion that Treville’s mate is a public figure of some sort, which means that a larger town is likely their destination. Aramis had agreed with Athos, and d’Artagnan had abstained. So Athos had led them southwest, Porthos muttering darkly all the while. And Athos would be lying if he says he isn’t worried, too. If they don’t turn aside eventually, their southwesterly course will take them dangerously close to the environs of Richelieu, the Cardinal’s estates, where no Alpha or Omega who has set foot has ever returned.

They need better directions. “Please,” Athos adds, in case it helps.

Treville meets Athos’ gaze. He’s more lucid now than he was at the Château, and he regards Athos with a hint of betrayal that the Musketeer knows he’s more than earned.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” the Captain says. “I shouldn’t have told you even to go west. I won’t tell you any more.”

“If you don’t, you’ll die,” Aramis says inflexibly.

Treville nods. “I understand that.”
“But surely you don’t want to die!” d’Artagnan cries.

“There is a lot more at stake here than simply my life.”

Athos keeps his tone level with an effort. “Believe me, we understand that. But you must know we’re not going to give up on you.”

“Damn straight,” Porthos growls in agreement, not bothering to try and sound calm.

“It’s not just the Inquisitor,” Treville says. “If you knew…” he trails off and shakes his head. “There are things going on that you’ve never known about,” he says. “Bigger than me, than the Musketeers…”

“Bigger than the entire Underground?” Porthos demands incredulously.

“Yes,” the Captain says, steady and firm.

“We don’t understand,” d’Artagnan says pleadingly. “Can’t you tell us what’s going on?”

Treville’s gaze darts over to d’Artagnan, and his face softens. Athos watches the motion. The younger Omega is a weak spot for the Captain. Treville looks on d’Artagnan like the pup he’s never had, and the pups d’Artagnan carries are a hope made flesh. Muddled by the unnatural heat, the Captain can’t quite keep his emotions hidden, and the look that briefly flashes across his face is naked longing.

Aramis knows it, too. He nudges d’Artagnan subtly.

Their youngest takes the hint, dropping to his knees next to the Captain. “Please,” d’Artagnan says again. His own face opens into raw honesty. “I don’t want you to die, too.”

There’s an old hurt in that voice. Athos feels himself ache with it, and Treville responds instinctively, wrapping an arm around the young Omega and shushing him gently. But when he looks up his face is set and determined.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” the Captain repeats, more firmly this time. “It’s your lives I’m protecting too. If you leave now you can make it over the border to Savoy before Rochefort closes it. You’ll be safe there.”

“What about everyone else?” Porthos demands. He takes a step forward, making himself loom taller, drawn up to his full height and standing wide like the Alpha knights from the own stories. “Captain, there are dozens of us under your protection in the Musketeers. What will happen to them if you let yourself die?”

“There are contingency plans.”

“And the Underground?”

“Someone will take my place,” Treville repeats. “As long as Rochefort doesn’t get my mate, he can rebuild.”

He. That single pronoun, more than anything else, tells Athos how dire the situation is. Athos has known the Captain for over a decade. In all that time Treville has never so much as implied his mate’s gender.

“How many people will die in that time?” Porthos cries. “Rebuilding won’t be fast or easy – how
many of our people who need help won’t get it?"

“Fewer than if the Underground were destroyed entirely,” Treville says. He looks from Porthos to Athos, and nods to himself. “You’ll all be fine.” He smiles at Aramis and looks down at d’Artagnan. “I know you won’t believe me,” he says, “but it’s safer this way, I swear.”

Porthos growls.

Athos can feel an answering rumble spread in his own chest. He clutches his sword-hilt tightly to try and keep hold of his anger. But he can’t possibly be expected to react calmly to Treville declaring his intention to lay down and die.

It’s too much. Too many of their people have died already. Pups murdered in their cribs. Innocents, trying to live their lives, caught and exposed and killed. Dedicated Alphas and Omegas like Lafleche, who devote their lives to a cause and die seeing it no farther advanced. What good will Treville’s death do? What will it buy? Yes, another will take his place. And that person will die in their turn. Over and over again until the sun goes black, except that with each generation the Inquisition will grow savvier, extend their reach farther, and one day there will be nowhere left to hide. In a war of attrition the Inquisition will always win.

It needs to end. It needs to end now.

Athos opens his mouth open to say something he’ll probably regret. Then his nose twitches.

*Bane*. Distant. But coming closer. Their no-longer-hypothetical pursuers must not have noticed that Treville’s party has stopped moving, and closed the distance too far. In doing so they’ve revealed their presence. And suddenly none of them have time for this conversation anymore.

“Back on the horses,” Athos says, tense. “We’re being pursued.”

Treville passes out again as soon as he tries to stand. Aramis and d’Artagnan catch him between them, swaying with the unexpected burden.

“Not much longer now,” Aramis says worriedly, touching the Captain’s forehead.

Athos’ mind races. Simply knowing they’re being pursued, unfortunately, does nothing to change their options. They’d made their bet when they’d taken Treville from the château. If they had been going to leave the Captain to die they should have done it then. Now they’re committed to trying to find Treville’s mate and hoping that he can salvage this situation. That he, whoever he is, has the power to destroy their pursuers before they can return to the Inquisitor with the knowledge Rochefort seeks. And that he can do it while simultaneously saving Treville’s life.

“Wake him up again,” Athos orders. “We need directions.”

“I don’t think he’ll give them to us,” d’Artagnan says.

“Try.”

Aramis tries. But the Captain can’t be roused, even when d’Artagnan tips the other half of Aramis’ brew down his throat and splashes his face with the dregs.

“His temperature’s risen too high,” Aramis says at last. “He’s beyond anything but his Alpha now.”

“Damn it,” Porthos swears. “Can’t you do anything?”
“I wish I could,” Aramis cries in frustration. “But – I’m not a doctor, not really! Everything I know I got from old texts my family had preserved, or the Underground... but Omegan medicine hasn’t advanced since the Inquisition began. And anything not written down has been lost.”

“Then what can we do?” Porthos demands.

“Keep going west,” Athos says steadfastly.


“It’s all we have,” Athos says, more sharply than he intends. “I don’t intend to give up.”

“We can’t go back anyway,” d’Artagnan says practically. “Not with the kidnappers on our trail.”

“We go on,” Aramis agrees. “It’s the only way.”

Athos quickly runs over the terrain in his mind. “We’ll continue on to Le Mans. It’s big enough that we may be able to lie low and shake our pursuers. And perhaps we can find something there that will help slow the Captain’s heat further. To wake him up again so he can tell us where to go.”

“Yeah? And what’s going to make him change his mind about telling us?” Porthos wants to know.

“He’ll be closer to death,” d’Artagnan says doubtfully. “Maybe it will make it more real.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Athos asks.

Porthos glares at him, but shakes his head.

“Then help get the Captain on Aramis’ horse.”

Porthos does, though he has to visibly steel himself to touch Treville, the cloying smell nearly overwhelming as Treville’s temperature ratchets higher and higher. When the Captain is mounted, everyone else resumes their seats, and they set out again.

Four tense hours later Porthos urges his horse alongside Athos’. “They’re catching up,” he mutters.

“They know the terrain,” Athos says resignedly. “They can move faster than we can.”

Porthos’ eyes flick back over to his mate’s horse. “Maybe if we split up?” he suggests. Athos can see what he’s thinking: better to allow himself to be captured than to risk Aramis falling into their hands. Athos can’t say he disagrees. He would have felt that way regardless, but knowing that these are the Inquisitor’s men…

“Wait.” Athos turns towards the wind, sniffing intently. It’s just changed direction, and a new scent comes with it. Alpha. And close, for him to have smelt it over the bane.

“One of us?” Porthos murmurs, sounding hopeful.

“Stay here,” Athos says over his shoulder. Aramis nods and steps his horse over to a small clump of trees for what little extra protection they might provide. Athos had meant the order to apply to d’Artagnan, too, but his mate follows Athos and Porthos, and Athos has no time to argue. They barely get out of sight of Aramis before the figure Athos had scented bursts from the trees.

Athos draws his musket automatically; Porthos does the same. D’Artagnan goes for his but stops
abruptly, eyes widening.

“Ella!” he cries.

The strange Alpha reins in her horse and holds up her hands in the same motion. “D’Artagnan, it’s good to see you again,” she says. “Would you please tell your friends I’m not a threat?”

“This is Ella,” d’Artagnan says to Athos. “She saved me in Wissous, and she gave me her token in Paris. She’s with the Underground. She’s not a threat.”

Athos nearly sags with relief. He lowers his musket and holsters it. “I take it you’ve come to help.”

“Yes,” Ella says. “You know you’re being pursued?”

“They gave themselves away when we paused briefly,” Porthos says. “They have the bane.”

“I know,” Ella says grimly. “And I know they’ve drugged Treville, too.”

“Oh!” D’Artagnan says. “You’ve come to lead us to his mate?”

“Close,” Ella says carefully. “I’ve come to take him to his mate. The rest of you – ”

“Are coming too,” Athos interrupts.

“You can’t.”

“Watch us,” Porthos rumbles.

“No, listen to me,” Ella says in frustration. “The – the Alpha in question – ”

“We’re aware that his identity is a closely guarded secret,” Athos says coolly, and doesn’t miss Ella’s flinch at Athos’ use of a gendered pronoun. “For this reason, and by the evidence of your presence, his defenses must be excellent.”

“Naturally,” Ella says warily.

Athos nods. “We’re getting behind these defenses.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Ella says. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Athos says. “Because I’m not letting you take the Captain by yourself.”

“Listen to me – ” Ella repeats.

“No, you listen to me,” Athos cuts her off. “I don’t know exactly how many men the Inquisitor has following us, but I know there are more than enough of them to overcome and capture us all. I know that the Inquisitor is tired of playing a waiting game, that he’s gearing up for a fight, and that there’s going to be blood on the ground before it’s done. I know wherever you’re going, it’s probably the best-defended place in France for throwbacks right now. I know that I am going to at least get d’Artagnan and Aramis behind those defenses. And I know that I’ll kill whomever I have to in order to do it.”

“Athos,” d’Artagnan says, shocked.

“Damn straight,” Porthos growls approvingly.
Ella says, “Aramis?”

Athos swings back to her and frowns.

Ella looks between them all. “Aramis is here?” she says, a queer little catch in her voice.

“That’s right,” Porthos says warily.

“You brought him?” Her voice rises. “What were you thinking? He’s in danger!”

“We’re all in danger,” d’Artagnan snaps.

“He’d have been safer in Paris!”

“Not according to him,” Athos says.

“I can’t believe you – where is he?” Ella doesn’t wait for an answer. She snatches up her reins again and heads straight back towards Aramis’ position.

“Hey!” Porthos shouts. Athos wheels his horse around, but Ella had caught them all by surprise. They’re just that little bit behind her when she rides straight up to Aramis.

“What’s going on?” Aramis demands.

“What are you doing here?” Ella demands right back. “You’re supposed to be in Paris! Milady was supposed to get you before she brings – ”


“Well, I’m not!” Ella shouts, ignoring all of them. “And I’m trying to keep you from getting dead, you idiot!”

Aramis stares at her. “You’re not dead,” he repeats.

Ella brushes this aside impatiently. “No, but – ”

Aramis raises one hand, and Ella falls silent. “You’re not dead,” Aramis repeats. “I haven’t seen you for twenty years. And the first thing you want to tell me when I find out you’re alive is that I am the idiot?”

The Alpha on the horse looks taken aback. “Well – but, René – ”

“Aleph, I am so mad at you I can’t even speak,” Aramis says furiously. Then he walks his horse over to Ella’s and reaches out for her.

Adele reaches back. Her eyes are suspiciously bright.

The hug is fierce and uncompromising. It ends abruptly when Treville, still unconscious, slides in the saddle and nearly out of Aramis’ grasp.

“Dios mío, what is wrong with me?” Adele cries. “We have to get moving! They’re still on our trail!”

“I take it you’ll let us come with you,” Athos says sweetly. There are a number of questions that
need answering, but they can wait until he’s gotten his pack to safety. And Athos has no intention of being behindhand in seizing this unexpected advantage.


Adele pales. “Oh – but –”

“Aleph, what’s wrong?”

Adele suddenly looks like a rat in a trap. Her horse dances back a step, and for a wild moment Athos thinks she’s going to bolt.

The sound of a hound baying in a distance has d’Artagnan moving his horse closer to Athos’, shivering. Athos tightens his grip on his reins. Their pursuers are growing closer.

Adele realizes it too. She scents the air and her face sets in determination. “Swear you’ll believe me,” she says rapidly.

“What?”

“You’re not going to like it,” she insists. “When you learn the truth – you’re going to think –”

“We don’t have time for this,” Porthos cries.

Adele growls at him. “You can still go back to Paris,” she says desperately to Aramis. “Milady can get you over the border. You’ll be safe in Savoy!”

“Forget it,” Aramis says sharply. “I’m not leaving you, and I’m not leaving the Captain.”

“René, I tried to keep you out of it, but it looks like I don’t get that choice anymore. But think. Please, think! Once you’re in, you’re in. You don’t get any more choices!”

Aramis gathers up his reins. “All the more reason to stick with the one I have,” he says, quiet but firm. “I’m with you, aleph. Whatever it is. I trust you.”

Adele lets out a little gasping huff of breath. Her gaze flicks over to the other three.

“Wheresoever he goeth, I go,” Porthos says. Adele’s gaze turns briefly stricken, but then her shoulders straighten and she looks at Athos.

“You can save our Captain?” Athos asks.

“Yes,” Adele says.

“Then we’re in,” he says. D’Artagnan nods his agreement.

Adele looks down and shakes her head. “I’d say on your head be it, but it’s going to be on mine if you change your mind.” Despite all of their affirmations, she’s still visibly torn.

A stiff wind brings the scent of bane strongly to all of their noses. Their pursuers are closer than Athos is at all comfortable with. He growls at Adele, angry at the continued delay.

Adele nods. She crosses herself. Then she looks up.

“Come with me,” she says, wheeling her horse around. “And quickly!”
Adele knows where she’s going. Their speed picks up as they follow her, and soon the sounds of their pursuers fade back out of hearing. Sometimes they gallop across open fields, low on their horses’ necks to make themselves smaller targets. Sometimes they walk through dense forests, the horses picking their way across underbrush so thick it comes up to their knees. They wade through streams and trot across meadows, turning and twisting across their own route to confuse their pursuers and leave them exposed to the Underground forces Adele assures them are in the area.

The twisty route confuses more than just the Inquisitor's men. Even Athos, with his knowledge of the area around Bragelonne, is quickly lost.

“Are we heading back towards Paris?” he asks during one of the breaks, when they draw rein and let the horses rest.

“No,” Adele says. “Farther out. We’re nearly there now.”

“Is it an estate?” Aramis asks.

“Yes,” Adele says, then closes her mouth, as if she regrets even saying that much.

Athos isn’t surprised. The estate of a noble passing as a Beta has always been the most likely destination. Though that scarcely stretches to cover the intense need for secrecy both Treville and Adele seem to feel. It’s about to be a moot point, too, which makes Athos wonder why Adele is still holding on to her silence.

_Swear you’ll believe me_, she’d said. What could possibly be so devastating?

“We should get moving,” Porthos says, glancing up at the sky. It’s darkening. Rain is coming.

They press ever onwards. Athos is paying closer attention now that they seem to have lost their pursuers, and he sees that south and west are winning out over north and east. They aren’t going to Le Mans, though. They follow the waterways, heading deeper into the Anjou region.

Several times Adele signals them to draw rein and wait while she goes ahead. She always returns after a few moments and gestures them onwards.

“Have the Inquisitor's men circled around?” d’Artagnan asks worriedly.

Adele shakes her head. “No. We’re passing through the outer checkpoints now.”

“The defenses?”

Adele nods. “Our pursuers are being taken care of,” she adds with grim satisfaction.

Eventually they pass through a well demarcated treeline as the sun starts to set in the distance. There are no sign-posts, but it’s obvious they’ve entered cultivated land. The timber is well-tended and there are paths through the grounds now for them to follow.

“How did you survive?” Aramis asks Adele as they ride. “How did you escape from the Cardinal?”

“That’s a long, long story, little odem,” Adele says evasively. “And we don’t even have time for a short one. How’s Treville?”
Aramis glares at her, not fooled by this piece of misdirection. But d’Artagnan is distracted. He leans over and checks Treville’s pulse and shakes his head. “Critical,” he says in worry.

“Not far now,” Adele says, urging her mount onward. “I just hope Milady and Himself aren’t far behind.”

“The Captain’s mate isn’t waiting for us?” Porthos demands.

“Milady is bringing him as fast as she can,” Adele says. “But they had farther to travel than we did.”

“So you know him,” D’Artagnan says.

“I work for him directly,” Adele admits. “I have since – well, since I didn’t die.”

“And Milady?”

“She, too.”

“Adele,” Aramis says in exasperation.

Adele looks over at him and dredges up a smile from somewhere, though her worry and fear are obvious in her scent. “Later,” she says. “If we survive this, I promise I’ll tell you everything, all right?”

“You’d better,” Aramis says. “If you hold anything back – ”

“It’s more going to be a question of whether you want to hear anything I have to say,” Adele says grimly.

Porthos and Athos exchange worried glances behind everyone else’s backs. Athos mislikes Adele’s attitude. She behaves like the Musketeers are going to snap any minute and put a sword to her throat. She’s an operative of the Underground. She’s saved d’Artagnan’s life twice. She’s saving their Captain’s life now. She’s Aramis’ lost aleph. What is she so afraid of? Athos doesn’t know, but he’s fairly sure he’s not going to like it.

They press onward, weary but determined. They cross a meadow and enter another forest. This one is clearly a hunting preserve of some kind. Animals are visible, fleetingly, through the trees. Birds take flight from the crowns and vanish quickly into the dark mass of rainclouds.

“Makes you wish you had a fowling-piece,” Aramis murmurs. Porthos grunts an agreement, no doubt thinking of the bread and cheese that have made up their last two meals.

“Or a hunting pack,” Athos says, catching sight of a deer. He squints, looking more closely. Something about it is niggling at his brain.

“We used to hunt red deer like that in the woods around Gascony,” d’Artagnan says, following Athos’ gaze. “I didn’t know they roamed this far north.”

The realization crashes into Athos’ mind. Before he knows what he’s doing his hands have tightened on his reins, pulling his horse to a dead stop. His musket is in his hand and pointed at Adele.

“They don’t,” he says hoarsely. “The person who owns this estate must have had them imported.”

Confused, the other three Musketeers stop too. Aramis’ eyes focus on Athos’ musket and widen. “Athos, what – ”
“Isn’t that right,” Athos says. “Adele.”

She stares him down over the barrel of his musket, proud and silent.

“Red deer aren’t special,” d’Artagnan says, confused. “Who would have them transported just for the purposes of hunting?”

“A famous hunter,” Athos says. “Someone who hunts, not just for leisure, but as their entire life’s work. Someone for whom the color red has a special significance.”

Porthos swears. Aramis gasps. D’Artagnan turns pale, almost instinctively moving his horse three steps in Athos’ direction, putting his mate between himself and danger.


“Traitor!” Porthos shouts. With a snarl, he urges his horse forward towards Adele.

“No, Porthos, please,” Aramis cries. He tries to move his own horse forward, but has to stop when the dead weight of their unconscious Captain causes his balance to sway precariously. It works just as well to distract Porthos; the Musketeer is out of his saddle and at his mate’s side instantly, steadying them both.

“I recognize these woods now,” Athos says. “I’ve been here once before.”

“So it’s true?” Aramis asks numbly. “These are the Cardinal’s estates?”

“She’s led us all to our deaths,” Athos says grimly.

“I was asking my aleph,” Aramis says, voice breaking. He stares at Adele across the small clearing where they’ve stopped.

“Yes,” Adele answers him. “These are the Cardinal’s estates.”

“You’ve killed us all,” Aramis whispers, staring at her in open horror.

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me!” she cries furiously. “I told you to give me Treville and get across the border – ”

“These aren’t just the Cardinal’s estates,” Athos cuts in. “They’re his hunting grounds.”

“That’s right,” Adele admits.

“You’ve led us to our deaths,” Aramis says again, disbelieving.

“No,” Adele repeats. “René, no. Listen to me. You promised – ”

“What’s there to listen to?” Porthos says scathingly. “The Cardinal’s the head of the Inquisition in France. And you’re working for him. That’s how you survived – he turned you into a double agent, didn’t he? A blood traitor. He’s kept you in his pocket all of these years waiting for the ultimate payoff.”

“And we walked right into it,” Athos says clinically. He’s shutting down his emotions methodically, one by one, the better to function with. Otherwise everything would be jumbling in his head. Every nightmare of Betan oppression comes back to roost at once: Thomas’ death, and Charlotte’s, and the Cardinal’s well-publicized crimes against their people. D’Artagnan is a constant presence in his mind. Their bond thrums gently between them, and for a moment he thinks he can hear his pups’
heartbeats where they grow inside his mate.

“Adele,” Aramis says pleadingly. He reaches for her; she flinches, and Porthos steps in between them, growling. “Aleph. Why? Why would you bring us to Richelieu?”

“Because he’s the only one who can save your Captain’s life,” Adele cries.

The forest glade rings once with her words, then falls abruptly silent. Even the wildlife seems to be holding its breath.

Athos breaks the stillness first. “Liar,” he says simply.

“The Cardinal is our enemy,” Porthos growls. “He’s the enemy of our entire people. Why would he mate with one of us?”

“You’re just lucky the Captain’s unconscious,” d’Artagnan snarls. “Otherwise he’d be killing you where you stand for such slander.”

“Or he’d be corroborating my story,” Adele says. Her eyes keep flicking over Athos’ shoulder to look deeper into the woods. “We’re not safe here. We’re not deep enough into the forests, many of the defenses are still in front of us – we have to keep going!”

“We’re not going one step farther until you tell us what your plan really is,” d’Artagnan says bravely.

“And what you were planning to do to us,” Porthos adds.

Aramis alone is silent. He stares at his aleph with betrayed eyes and doesn’t speak.

It’s to him Adele addresses herself. “René, you know I’d never do anything to hurt you,” she pleads. “Won’t you tell them? I’m trying to save all your lives.”

“That’s exactly what the Captain said,” Porthos scorns. “You both seem to have some funny ideas about what saving our lives really means!”

Athos, in the act of opening his mouth to speak, pauses. Now that d’Artagnan says it, there do seem to be some similarities in what Treville had been saying, before he’d slipping into this coma, and what Adele is saying now.

Hardly evidence. Of course Adele would protest that she’s trying to save their lives. It’s the best lie to tell. Treville’s statements were the more mysterious of the two. But the echo between them…

“What exactly is it that you’re saying?” Athos says to Adele abruptly, cutting her off mid-plea as she begs her odem to listen to her. “Are you really trying to claim that Cardinal Richelieu is the head of the Underground?”

“No, you fool, Treville is the head of the Underground!” Adele snaps. “Richelieu is the head of the Resistance!”

Athos stares at her. So do the rest.

The Resistance?

Rumors of a secret throwback Resistance have circulated since the Inquisition first emerged from Rome and spread like a cancer through Europe. Carriers murmur it to their pups to comfort them at night. Adolescents dream about joining it and making a difference. And one by one, as they reach adulthood, every one of them learns better. It’s a fairy tale. The last one their people has left. But no
more real because of that.

Some throwbacks try to turn the fairy tale into reality. Every now and then, the Church uncovers some small group with a stockpile of weapons and a dream of future glory. They’re summarily exterminated before they can do any real harm to the Inquisition.

Even Olivier had believed in his youth. But he’d learned better after Charlotte’s and Thomas’ death.

Aramis laughs, a soft sound entirely free of mirth. “At least your story hasn’t changed,” he says. “You were trying to join the Resistance when you left for Richelieu the first time. I suppose you’ll say you succeeded.”

“I had no idea the Cardinal was involved with the Resistance when I went to spy on him,” Adele says to her odem, pleading. “He brought me to his estates and into the hunting grounds and I thought I was going to die. But he didn’t kill me. He took me to a hidden place in the center of the forest and told me the truth. And he offered me the chance to work for him. I’ve been working for him ever since. I faked my death to keep you out of it.”

Adele reaches down her shirt and withdraws something small, and black, and dangling on the edge of a chain. She holds it up for everyone to see.

At this point, Athos is probably beyond surprise. He certainly isn’t surprised to see that the object is a coin-sized chit, matte black, bisected with a red wavy line.

“That proves nothing,” he says. “D’Artagnan’s still carrying the token you gave him in Paris. Obviously you have the ability to get or make as many of these as you need.”

“And does that fact mean nothing to you?” she demands. “You accepted the token for d’Artagnan!”

“It wasn’t because we trusted you.”

“No, it was because you trusted your Captain. Isn’t that right? What did he say about me?”

Athos frowns, suddenly unsure.

_Ella wouldn’t give d’Artagnan her token if she weren’t sure, Treville had said._

_And you trust Ella? Athos had asked._

_Completely, Treville had said._

Athos had accepted the Captain’s trust in Ella without question. Had, in turn, trusted d’Artagnan without question. It had been Ella’s word they’d all taken for d’Artagnan. Ella’s testimony that d’Artagnan hadn’t himself been a blood traitor. And it’s to that trust that Athos owes his present happiness entire.

More to the point – Treville trusts Ella completely. If she’s a blood traitor working for the Inquisition, she’s had plenty of time to dig into Treville’s secrets. Twenty years of time.

But so have Athos, Porthos and Aramis. And until today they hadn’t even known the gender of Treville’s mate. It’s not impossible that Ella – Adele – hadn’t been able to discover this one last thing. The entire tale of Cardinal Richelieu could be a fiction played out to lure the squad and the Captain into one final trap. Richelieu and Rochefort working together is unusual. But for this – for the Underground – wouldn’t they?
Wouldn’t they, for the Resistance – if it’s real?

“So if I’ve got this straight,” Porthos says. “Your story is, basically, that the Bloody Cardinal – Richelieu, the zealot, the murderer – is in fact an Alpha.”

“Yes,” Adele says.

“And he’s our Captain’s mate,” d’Artagnan says.

“Yes,” Adele says.

“You’re saying that there really is such a thing as the Resistance,” Aramis says in disbelief. “And Richelieu is its head?”

Adele holds his gaze. “Yes.”

The wind whistles through the trees, softly, heralding the oncoming rain.

It’s ridiculous. Ludicrous. No one’s cover is that good. Some of Richelieu’s crimes must be real. And no one could be so dedicated to a cause, not even to the Resistance, that they could justify the deliberate murder of some in order to protect the rest.

And yet. If there were only one word to use to describe Richelieu, ruthless would certainly be it, Alpha, Beta or Omega.

“Please,” Adele says again, pleading. “You have to believe me. It’s the only chance your Captain has. It’s the only chance any of us have.”

The Resistance. The Resistance is a story to make throwback pups sleep better at night, his old mentor Laflèche had said, and Athos had always believed him. Laflèche had been a member of the Underground for seventy years. If anyone had been in a position to know, it would have been him.

“There’s no such thing,” Athos says aloud. “It’s a fairy tale. No one is waiting to swoop in and save us. The only way change is going to come is if we make it ourselves.”

“Isn’t that the very definition of a Resistance?” Adele challenges him. “A group of people uniting to make change?”

Dangling from the chain in Adele’s hand, the small black chit stares at Athos accusingly.

_Pup, I can’t promise you that everyone carrying the token is on your side,_ Laflèche had said to the novice Athos had been, a long time ago. _It’s an indicator. One among many. We don’t hand them out to just everyone; someone has to prove themselves, advance within the Underground first. Could Church spies manage it? Probably. Many of them? If so, we’d be done for already, and we’re still here. So use the knowledge carefully, but don’t dismiss it based on fear. In every throwback’s life a time will come when you have to decide who to trust. And I promise you, it won’t be an easy choice. I’m just trying to give you as many tools as possible for identifying your true allies._

Not an easy choice. Athos could have laughed aloud. He’s never doubted Laflèche’s advice, but hard barely begins to cover this choice.

On the one hand, to leave now is certainly to consign the Captain to death. Treville hasn’t stirred despite all the commotion; he’s pale, and the rasp of his breathing is audible even across the clearing. If he’s to have any chance at all he needs his mate within hours. If Adele can’t lead them to the right Alpha, Athos won’t be able to do any better in the time remaining.
The consequences for failure don’t end there. If Adele is telling the truth, and Athos kills her, who knows what kind of asset to the Underground – God, to the Resistance – will he just have deprived them of? That’s not discounting the fact that, again assuming Adele is telling the truth, Athos will just have condemned the mate of Cardinal Richelieu to an agonizing death. Resistance or no Resistance, Athos can expect a very short, very painful life and a very long, equally painful death to follow. If he’s lucky, he’ll be able to convince the Cardinal that d’Artagnan had nothing to do with his decision…

Athos glances over at his mate involuntarily. D’Artagnan has everything to do with his decision, and if Richelieu really is an Alpha in hiding, and a freedom fighter, he’ll know it. Treville had been ready to die to protect his mate’s secrets, whatever they might be. He said he’d made a promise. What sort of Alpha would demand such a promise of his Omega? What sort of Omega would give it?

The same sort of Omega who would form a regiment of the King’s army and fill it with wayward throwbacks right under the Inquisition’s nose. The sort of Omega who would mate with an Alpha he never got to see or share heats with. Who would take suppressants at every heat despite the damage they cause as he gets older. Who would forgo ever carrying pups in order to protect his position and his mate’s. No wonder Treville had been willing to take so many chances. Willing to die, in the end, if necessary, to protect his secrets.

And, by following Treville’s orders, they – Athos, Porthos, Aramis and d’Artagnan – would have been acting as operatives of the Resistance this entire time. Not just the Underground, but the Resistance itself. Ignorant and unknowing and safe that way.

It all hangs together. Wild and improbable and utterly beyond belief, but God help him, it all makes sense.

And yet. Athos looks at d’Artagnan and can’t help but think, what if? What if this plausible-seeming tale is all yet another trap, concocted by a man who’s never been short of twisty plots? What if Athos has just betrayed himself further by showing his recognition of the Underground’s token? What if, by following Adele, he condemns not only his Captain, not only himself, but his mate, and his unborn pups, and the only pack he has left?

Around Athos, the other members of his squad are coming out of their own fugues, reacting according to their natures. D’Artagnan is first to break the silence, letting out a long whistle of astonishment.

“If you’d told me this under any other circumstances I wouldn’t believe you,” he says. “And if anyone else had told me this I wouldn’t believe them, either.”

“I know,” Adele says. “I know it’s hard to believe.”

D’Artagnan shakes his head. “I wouldn’t have what I have now if it weren’t for the Captain’s trust. I was willing to risk my life and my pups to rescue him because of that. And Treville wouldn’t have trusted me if you hadn’t told him to. Which means I owe you just as much. Not to mention you saved me in Wissous. I wouldn’t even have a life to risk, much less a mate and pups, without your assistance.”

“You don’t owe me anything for that,” Adele says. “I helped you because it was the right thing to do, not because I thought you’d owe me. That’s not how the Underground works.”

“All the same.” D’Artagnan looks over at Athos. “I think we should go with her.”

Athos manages a nod in acknowledgement. His own thoughts are still spinning. To buy more time,
he looks to Aramis and Porthos for their input.

“Once you’re born a throwback you don’t have a lot of choices left anyway,” Porthos says, as if he’s
talking to himself. He lays a hand on Aramis’ calf. “Decide,” he adds quietly, not looking away from
Aramis. “I’ll follow.”

Aramis doesn’t speak. And Athos can tell that he isn’t going to speak. Aramis’ face is an agony of
hope and fear. He wants only an excuse to follow his aleph, but he’s spent the last twenty years
reviling Richelieu for her death, and he’s paralyzed by the sudden turning of tables.

Porthos will go where Athos leads. D’Artagnan thinks they should follow Adele. Aramis cannot
decide. Where does that leave Athos?

The tales of Richelieu’s crimes all ring in Athos’ mind. He thinks of Thomas, and knows in his
bones that there’s no way he could ever have harmed a hair on his head, no matter what the greater
good. And yet the Cardinal had murdered his own odem.

The two are irreconcilable. Therefore Adele must be leading them into a trap.

_They brought the body back and displayed it outside the gates of the Palais-Cardinal for a week_,
Laflèche had said.

Wait. Laflèche had said something else.

_It was so mutilated it didn’t look like Alfonse anymore. Couldn’t even tell if it was Alpha or Omega.
That’s what the Cardinal reduced his own odem to. Just a slab of meat._

A new thought strikes Athos. What proof had there been, actually, that the body everyone had seen
had been Richelieu’s odem at all?

Adele had been supposed to die in the hunting grounds, too. Yet here she is. How many other
throwbacks might have slipped through similar cracks in everyone’s expectations? Alfonse had been
an unusual case. Most of the time, Richelieu doesn’t bother to bring back the bodies.

Doesn’t bother? Or are there not any bodies to begin with?

Athos looks back over at Aramis. At Treville. The Captain sags against Aramis, barely breathing.

_West_, Treville had said, reluctantly. And hadn’t he and Porthos argued over how close that took them
to the Richelieu estates?

“Please,” Adele says again. “We have to hurry.”

_There is a lot more at stake here than simply my life_, Treville had said. _There are things going on
that you’ve never known about. Bigger than me. Than the Musketeers. Bigger than the entire
Underground._

How much proof does Athos require? Treville been willing to die to keep this secret. To protect not
just his mate, not just his Musketeers, but every Alpha and Omega in France. In Europe. Every pup
whom the Underground found in time, saved from sterilization and taught how to pass. Every adult
in danger of exposure who the Underground smuggled away, out of France through the secret routes
to new lives in the few countries where the Inquisition had no foothold. Every pup not yet born who
might yet be born, and live, and learn the ways of their people. And everyone who might be
benefited by the existence of a Resistance and the hope that represents.
Adele might be leading them into a trap. But the Captain’s example is clear. Their four lives are a small thing to risk, balanced against the potential harm of walking away, and the good they might do by staying.

“We go with you,” Athos says, barely recognizing his own voice.

“Thank God,” Adele says fervently. She makes no attempt to hide her obvious relief.

“If this is a trap after all,” Porthos says, “I will personally tear you limb from limb before I die.”

“I’d let you,” Adele says. “Though I think you’d be better served – ”

“If we’re going then let’s go,” Athos says, cutting into this discussion before it can turn nasty. There’s tension simmering between Porthos and Adele. Its cause is obvious, and it’s going to spill over at some point, but now is not the time.

“That chivvies everyone into motion. Adele resumes her place at the front of the train. Athos makes sure to remain right behind her, out of sword-range but well within musket-shot. The tilt of Adele’s head says she knows what Athos’ doing, but she doesn’t comment on it. Another point in her favor.

This time, as they ride, everyone is silent. They’re all processing in their own ways.

If it’s true, it’s the revelation of a lifetime. The Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu, famed throughout France and Europe as one of the most zealous sons of Rome, may actually be an Alpha in hiding. The mate of their very own Captain of the Musketeers. The head of the throwback Underground. And the leader of its Resistance.

If not for the evidence of Aramis’ long-dead aleph, supposedly murdered by that same Richelieu and yet alive and well before them, Athos would never have even begun to consider it.

As Adele leads them off into the forest again, something else niggles at Athos’ mind about Adele’s words. He’s close enough to speak normally, and a quick glance behind shows that the other three are riding enough farther back not to hear. He lowers his voice regardless.

“You said the Captain’s – that the Cardinal isn’t waiting for us?”

“He was in Paris when we got word of the Inquisitor’s move,” Adele says.

“So were we,” Athos points out.

“Yes, but unlike you, Richelieu didn’t have a good reason to mobilize forces to search for Treville. We had to wait until one of the Musketeer squads found him.”

“So you were following us from the start.”


“What were you doing?”

“Waiting for word at Évry. Once we learned you’d found Treville at Bragelonne, Milady went back to Paris and I came after you.”

“Why?”
I beg your pardon?"

"Why come after us?" Athos repeats. It’s been weighing on his mind since Adele had appeared. He
knows why he and his pack had chosen Treville’s life over the larger, more abstract considerations of
the Underground and, apparently, the Resistance. But their reasons are personal. Why should Adele
do the same?

"If I hadn’t, your Captain would die," she says.

Athos dismisses this with a shake of his head. "Treville seemed to think that his duty was to die
rather than lead Rochefort to his mate. And yet you came after us. We’re being followed by the
Inquisitor’s men, and neither of us are big enough fools to think they haven’t guessed where we’re
going already and sent a report back to Paris. The cat’s out of the bag. Rochefort’s about to get what
he wants. So why? Why give up the secrecy you’ve worked so hard to achieve? Why win the battle
at the expense of the war? Why not protect Richelieu and let Treville die?"

Adele doesn’t answer right away. She gazes up at the steadily darkening sky, then at the road ahead
of them, measuring the distance to go before they reach what limited safety the Cardinal’s estates
might provide.

Finally she asks, “What would you want to do, if your mate were murdered by the enemy of your
people?”

Athos knows the other Alpha means to reference d’Artagnan, but it’s Charlotte who appears in his
mind’s eye. He remembers every thought filled with youthful rage. Every curse he’d hurled at God
and the Betas who’d killed her, who oppressed his entire race. Every deranged fantasy of revenge.

Adele, watching his face, nods. “Now imagine that you had the power and the resources to actually
do some of those things,” she says. “Imagine what Richelieu would do if Treville died here at
Rochefort’s hand. I’d like to think he could control himself, but I can’t take the chance. It could
destroy the entire Resistance.”

*Head of the Resistance,* she’d said of Richelieu. Athos shakes his head. He’s chosen to risk his
pack’s lives on her word, but he still can’t quite believe it.

"If the Resistance has existed for all this time,” Athos asks, “Why hasn’t it acted?"

“Surely you must see that the Resistance is a cannon that can only be fired once,” Adele says.
“Rochefort is unusual. Most churchmen truly believe there is no such thing. The small groups they
stamp out from time to time confirm them in their belief. This allows us to operate in secret. If they
ever found out they were wrong, our only advantage would be gone.”

“But what good is it? The Inquisition grows in strength, our people are killed – ”

“The Inquisition is stronger than we are. They will always be stronger than we are. There are simply
too many of them. We can’t win in a pitched battle. We have to take them from within.”

“How?”

“Infiltration. We’ve spent decades putting the right people in the right places, getting in deeper with
every passing generation. Richelieu is a Cardinal. His sire was only a Bishop. Perhaps one day his
successor will be Pope. Imagine what could happen then.”

Athos imagines it. It’s not impossible. It’s actually shockingly probable. But – “Being Pope would
technically give someone the authority to end the Inquisition, but changing hearts and minds isn’t that
easy. It would be civil war.”

“That’s where the guns come in,” Adele says grimly. “But guns by themselves aren’t enough. Guns plus legitimacy – that’s what we need. We have the guns. It’s the legitimacy we’re lacking.”

“I think any Pope who would try to end the Inquisition would be murdered by their own Council before they could issue the bull,” Athos says.

“That depends on who else is on the Council,” Adele says significantly.

Athos stares at her. Adele smiles.

“And take it another way,” she adds. “Richelieu has Louis’ complete trust. If the Queen ever produces an heir, Richelieu will have enormous influence in choosing the Dauphin’s bride. Imagine if the Dauphin married a Savoyan or English princess who’d be sympathetic to our cause. When the Dauphin ascended the throne he could proclaim France a free country like Savoy and England. With the army on our side it would be much easier to throw the Inquisition out of France and keep them out. One country at a time we could retake Europe.”

That sounds considerably more plausible, Athos has to admit.

“It explains why Richelieu and the Queen have never gotten along,” he murmurs. “She’s Spanish, and Rochefort practically raised her. She’d assassinate Louis herself before she let him expel the Inquisition.”

Adele nods. “The Queen Mother had considered Elizabeth Stuart for Louis, you know. But the English King didn’t want an alliance with a Catholic country. If they’d married, Richelieu might have ended the Inquisition in France during his lifetime.”

“That must frustrate him.”

“It does.” Adele sighs. “There was nothing Richelieu could have done; they’d been married nearly a decade before Richelieu ever joined Louis’ council. But Richelieu thinks of it every time he has to give something up for the sake of secrecy.”

“Or every time he has to ask Treville to give something up,” Athos says shrewdly. He’d lived a little of that, when he’d been a nobleman keeping Charlotte and Thomas hidden. He’s already readying himself for the day he’ll have to ask some sacrifice of d’Artagnan for the safety of their pups or pack.

Adele nods. The two of them share a look, for a moment united in a uniquely Alphaic understanding.

It occurs to Athos suddenly to wonder if Adele has a mate. He opens his mouth to ask her, but he’s interrupted when they crest the hill they’re climbing. Below them the ground drops away. Nested into a small valley, well-hidden by the surrounding terrain, a neat hunting-lodge is suddenly in view.

The others ride up to the crest, drawing rein next to Adele and Athos.

“Alphas and Omegas,” Adele says to the group with a dramatic sweep of her hand, “the Headquarters of the Resistance.”

The lodge proves to be well-equipped and larger than it seems from the outside. Porthos volunteers to take the horses off to the stables, narrowly beating out Athos’ offer to do the same. Porthos gives Athos an apologetic look but doesn’t suggest they change places. Athos supposes the duty of staying with the pack does properly fall to him, as its head, but he can’t help shooting Porthos a wry, wistful
glance as the bigger Alpha leads the horses off. The scent of distressed heat is bearable under the sky, but Athos isn’t looking forward to being trapped indoors with it. Still, it’s necessary. Aramis and d’Artagnan have their hands full with Treville. Since neither Athos nor Porthos can help with the Captain, guard duty falls to them.

Athos no longer really believes that Adele is a traitor. But he’s not leaving his packmates alone with her until he has absolute proof.

D’Artagnan and Aramis carry Treville into the lodge between them and place him down immediately on a comfortable chaise lounge in the large central room. Doors line the back wall, no doubt heading towards bedrooms. One larger set of doors to the west probably indicate the master suite. To the east, the common room opens into a large kitchen area. Aramis hurries in that direction as soon as Treville is settled.

Adele kneels before the main fireplace, large enough that two people could sit inside it comfortably, and starts building a fire.

“There are linens in that closet,” she says, pointing to a smaller door next to the entry to the kitchen.

“Get some blankets, d’Artagnan,” Aramis instructs from where he’s lighting the stove. “We should keep Treville as warm as possible.”

“Athos, can you take over here?” Adele asks. “I’d better get the fire in the master bedroom started as well.”

“Should we just move the Captain there?” d’Artagnan suggests, cheeks pinking faintly. “I assume that’s where he’ll end up.”

“The fireplace there is smaller. This will warm faster, especially if Aramis starts the stove as well. If warmth is important Treville had better stay here.”

“It’s basically palliative at this point,” Aramis admits, returning to the common room long enough to dig in his saddlebags. “I’m playing for time.”

“How long does he have?” Athos asks, coaxing the flames in the main fireplace along with kindling and leaves. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Adele pause in the doorway to the master bedroom, waiting for his answer.

“I wish I knew,” Aramis says simply, returning to the kitchen.

Athos and Adele share another look. Then she shakes her head and turns away.

Athos finishes building the fire and gets up, stretching sore muscles. D’Artagnan has taken a seat on the floor next to the chaise lounge. He’s murmuring quietly to the Captain, voice too quiet to make out. There’s no evidence that Treville can hear him. But it seems to be comforting d’Artagnan, so Athos lets it be.

Being indoors with Treville isn’t being as problematic as Athos had feared it would be. Athos can smell heat and distress, but they’re not overwhelming. That alone scares Athos more than anything else. Nothing has happened to ease Treville’s condition. If his scent is less pungent, it’s because his body is already starting to shut down.

Aramis comes back into the main room with another flask. With d’Artagnan’s help he pours it down Treville’s throat. At least the Captain is still able to drink.
Aramis seems to sense Athos’ eyes on him. “Treville’s a fighter,” he says quietly. “He’s hanging on.”

Porthos has come in quietly. He lingers near the door, seemingly unwilling to come in any farther. “When will we know it’s too late?”

“When his scent fades completely, it’ll be too late.”

Adele has come back out into the main room. The door to the master bedroom remains open behind her, giving them all a look at a comfortably decorated, well-lived-in space. Athos can see elements that echo Treville’s quarters back at the garrison. A small table with everything he’d need to care for his weapons. A spare uniform. A desk.

“This place is very well-stocked,” Athos says, trying to distract everyone from the mood. He settles into a chair near the fire and feels his feet starting to warm at last. “But it doesn’t seem designed for servants.”

“No, the servants stay in the main house,” Adele says. She, too, claims a chair. “Most of them don’t know about the Cardinal. This place is only for the Resistance. We shift for ourselves when we’re here.”

“But it looks lived-in,” d’Artagnan objects.

“Richelieu only uses the main house when he’s here on business. The rest of the time he stays here. The servants don’t even have to know he’s on the estates.”

“I assume it’s stocked for heat,” Aramis says.

“Of course,” Adele says. “Actually – you haven’t seen the gardens, have you?”

“I have, just now,” Porthos says. “You should look, Aramis. It’s not just food they’re growing out there. I saw medicines too. Throwback medicines.”

Aramis’ eyes widen. He looks over at Adele, who nods.

“We supply ourselves in every way,” Adele says. “Didn’t you wonder how Treville was able to get suppressants?”

“He has a source inside the Church,” Aramis says, obviously without thinking. Then he does and laughs mirthlessly. “A source inside the Church! Dios mío, of course he does!”

Adele smiles a little. “A very highly-placed source indeed,” she agrees, mock-seriously. Aramis shakes his head in disbelief at himself, and d’Artagnan very nearly smiles. If not for the gravity of the situation, it would be a good joke.

Any humor that might have been in the air vanishes a second later when Treville starts to convulse. Aramis swears and grabs his shoulders, holding him down.

“D’Artagnan, get –” Aramis begins. D’Artagnan doesn’t wait for the end of this sentence, grabbing the Captain’s legs before Treville falls off the lounge entirely. The fit only lasts a few seconds. But it seems like an eternity before Treville stills, and Aramis and d’Artagnan relax.

Adele, Athos and Porthos don’t. They’re frozen in place, watching in horror and dismay. Alpha instincts demand action. But there’s nothing any of them can do.
Aramis touches the back of his hand to Treville’s forehead again and pales. He leans closer, scenting. Then closer again. Athos tastes the air himself and is dismayed to realize that the Captain’s scent had faded from it so gradually that he hadn’t even noticed.

“Is it too late?” Adele whispers.

Porthos, closest to the door, turns his head like he’s heard something. He leaps to his feet and strides out of the cottage.

Aramis’ nose is nearly buried in Treville’s neck. He takes another breath, then pulls away. “Nearly,” he says grimly.

Porthos has left the door open. Athos gets up to close it again. Then he freezes.

There should be a clap of thunder. It should be storming. It should be dark outside, rain pelting hard on the window-panes. Lightning should cleave the sky as Cardinal Richelieu stands silhouetted in the doorframe. But the rain is still only a promise, and though the sky is a mass of dark, threatening clouds, there is neither thunder nor lightning. Just the faint, damning scent of an Alpha, rolling out before the Cardinal like a carpet.

“Jean?” Richelieu cries, striding forward into the room. “Jean!”

Behind the Cardinal, Athos briefly glimpses a woman in a blue cloak leading two horses away. Porthos cuts off this view by coming back into the lodge and closing the door. He’s bristling, practically snapping his teeth.

Athos feels the same way. Dimly he realizes he’s on his feet, stance wide, shoulders squared. His hindbrain is frantic: a strange Alpha has suddenly appeared, invading the space that is supposed to be keeping Athos’ pack safe. The Alpha isn’t stopping for the customary exchanges that would appease Athos’ instincts and assure Athos that the strange Alpha means no harm. Instead the strange Alpha is heading straight for Treville, who is vulnerable, in distress, and under Athos’ protection.

Athos does growl, instinctively. And he steps forward to block Richelieu’s path.

His rational brain tugs at the controls, insisting that he step back, give Richelieu some space, allow Richelieu to reach his mate. This rationality points out that Richelieu’s scent bears a remarkable similarity to Treville’s own. That a Musketeers’ uniform hangs in the master bedroom. That Porthos had seen throwback medicine grown in the lodge’s gardens. That there is no longer any doubt that Richelieu is everything Adele has said he is.

And if that weren’t enough, three additional things happen in close proximity. Richelieu growls right back at Athos, the deep, basso rumble no Beta could reproduce. Richelieu’s scent takes on notes of distress, reacting to Treville’s presence and Athos’ interference. And Treville stirs, nostrils flaring, as Richelieu’s scent reaches him.

“Athos,” d’Artagnan is saying insistently. “Athos, listen to me. It’s all right. Everything’s going to be all right. But I need you to step back. Please, Athos, step away. Come over here with me, okay? I need you to come with me. Let Richelieu by. Please, Athos.”

D’Artagnan’s sweet scent reaches Athos’ nose. Earthy, rich, ripe with pup. Athos takes a deep breath.

His head clears, at least a little. D’Artagnan is tugging on Athos’ arm, hand sliding under Athos’ sleeve to make direct contact, skin to skin. Athos hasn’t quite managed to get between Richelieu and Treville, or there would probably be a fight underway already, but he’s close enough to it that
Richelieu is practically vibrating with suppressed aggression. The Cardinal is darting rapid glances between Athos, Treville, and Porthos. Porthos hadn’t gotten quite as far into Richelieu’s path as Athos had, probably because both Aramis and Adele are holding him back, but it’s clear Porthos had had the same reaction Athos had had.

And the Cardinal is obviously ready to try to rip both of them apart if that’s what it takes to protect his mate. Probably the only thing stopping him at the moment is Treville, whose scent has spiked suddenly, reacting to the presence of the one person who might help him. Treville’s distress is obvious and will be playing havoc with Richelieu’s emotions, which will conflictingly demand that Richelieu attack the strange Alphas and simultaneously go to his mate right now.


Any other time that would have Athos responding instantly, turning to do whatever d’Artagnan requires. The presence of a strange Alpha keeps Athos’ attention focused elsewhere. But d’Artagnan’s plea cuts through more of the fog. Athos’ rational mind reasserts itself further. One by one he forces his muscles to relax, allows d’Artagnan to pull him back.

The moment Athos is fully clear, Richelieu springs forward. He passes straight by the Musketeers without a backwards glance, only growling something at Adele as he passes. Adele responds with a sharp nod. Athos doesn’t think Richelieu even sees it; he’s entirely focused on Treville.

Athos should probably look away. But instinct demands that he keep his focus on the strange Alpha who might act unpredictably – might hurt his pack or mate or pups. Athos is fighting those instincts, but he only has so much strength to expend, and it’s more important that Athos remain still and not attack. Looking away is a battle Athos doesn’t have to fight with himself. So Athos watches as Richelieu swoops down on Treville, shoving one bare wrist immediately under Treville’s nose and sliding the other beneath him, pulling Treville in to be enveloped in Richelieu’s embrace. The Captain doesn’t react.

“Jean,” Richelieu says again, pleading and desperate. “Jean, please.”

“Go,” Aramis says urgently, still holding onto Porthos. “Go, knot him!”

Richelieu growls again. Athos sees what’s happening. Aramis is as strange to Richelieu as the Cardinal is to everyone in Athos’ pack; Richelieu’s caught between his mate’s need and his own instincts to secure the area first.

Adele, another Alpha, tumbles to this sooner than Aramis. She twists, putting herself between Athos’ pack and the Cardinal. “Everything is safe,” she says urgently. “I’ll take care of everything, I promise, just – ”

It’s enough. Richelieu sweeps Treville up in his arms, turns, and carries him straight into the master bedroom.

Adele darts across the common room and pulls the door closed behind them. And then they’re all staring at the blank, uncaring wood of the door, left to wait and hope.
He’s born on the Richelieu estates far from prying eyes. Both the midwife who attends his carrier and the priest who baptize him have been in the family’s service for generations. They’re Beta lines through and through, but their first loyalty is to their feudal lords. They falsify his christening records and swear to the diocese and the prefect that Armand-Jean du Plessis de Richelieu is male, which is the truth, and a Beta, which is a lie.

Armand is the fourth of what eventually prove to be five living offspring. All are duly registered as Betas. By Beta heredity, his parents’ second child is the heir, the oldest Beta son. When Armand is born the Inquisition’s grip on France is still shaky. But one of the ways Henry IV has held off Rome has been a steady series of concessions. Beta-exclusive male-preference primogeniture has been the law for forty years.

The truth is, as always, more complicated. Three of the five offspring born to François and Susanne are throwbacks. Their female children, Armand’s oldest and youngest siblings, are the only true Betas. Alfonse-Louis and Andreas-Henry are Omegas. Armand-Jean breaks the mold by being born an Alpha.

The Richelieu family has been on their land since the Crusades. When the Inquisition began in Rome and spread rapidly to Spain, they viewed its heresy with alarm – as did most of the noble lines in Europe – but, most importantly, with action. Some families had fought the heresy openly and been destroyed for it. Some had fled, abandoning their homes and their people. Others had tried to hide and been caught out. The ancient Richelieu clan head had chosen a different path. The Underground had been founded on their land and passed down through the generations, a sacred trust that protects not only their bloodlines but every throwback in Europe.

Hiding, Susanne teaches her offspring, is not like putting on one garment for the sake of the world and then taking it off at home. Hiding begins at home. Hiding begins early and continues late. The Richelieu family had begun hiding its bloodlines three full centuries before the Inquisition touched France’s shores. The connections to powerful Beta families it’s developed over the years keep it safe. Its control of the Bishopric of Luçon keep it one step ahead of the Church’s latest measures of discovering hidden throwbacks. And its extensive intelligence network give it the opportunity, and the Godly duty, to protect the others of their kind, as far as they are able.

Every country under Inquisition occupation has an Underground. The Richelieu family are the center of the Underground in France. In Spain, the Underground barely exists; they’ve been trying to connect with it for three generations without success, eventually forced to conclude that it’s been all but wiped out by four centuries of Inquisition control. In other countries they have more luck. The Undergrounds form a loose alliance that stretches throughout Europe. Everyone’s goal is the same. Locate throwbacks at birth, protect them from discovery, teach them how to pass. And, if their situation becomes critical, spirit them away from danger into one of the few countries where it's still safe to be an Alpha or Omega.

“Why don’t we all just leave, Cara?” the young Armand had asked Susanne one day, when he’d been perhaps five years of age.

“Armand,” Susanne had scolded. “Language.”
“Sorry. *Mama,*” Armand had said obediently. That had been one of the first lessons. Use Betan terms in all things, not Alphaic and Omegan terms. His carrier is to be called *Mama,* for her gender, as a Beta woman would be called. His sire is *Papa.* He must not say *Cara* for his Omega carrier or *Sirrah* for his Alpha sire. His siblings are brothers and sisters, not alephs and odems. In order to pass, they must prioritize their genders in their pronouns and identities, not their sexes.

“But *Mama,*” Armand had persisted, using the favored term this time, “If there are places where it’s safe to be ourselves, why don’t we all go there?”

Susanne had taken the young Armand’s hands and sat down next to him, placing them on eye level. She had looked him right in the eyes and said, “Our people won’t stop being born, Armand. Even Beta parents may have a throwback child. What would those children do if we’d all leave? Who would protect them? Someone must stay.”

“Why must that someone be us?”

“Because we have the ability; that gives us the duty.”

Armand had considered this. “But *Mama,* even if we must stay, why do the others stay? Couldn’t more of us leave?”

“More of us could leave,” Susanne had agreed. “But leaving is dangerous, too. The Church searches travellers at the border, trying to discover hidden throwbacks. So we must leave by the secret paths. But every time someone uses a secret path, they risk exposing it, and losing that path forever. If we used them when we didn’t need to, then one day there would be no paths left, and what would we do?”

“But staying is dangerous too. They search here too!”

“Right now, for us, there is no life without danger,” Susanne had explained. “The person who leaves successfully is safe. But if they try to leave and fail, they die. A throwback who tries to flee is considered too aggressive to try to keep caged. Whereas if they stay and pass, they’re safe. If they stay and are discovered, they’re sent to a convent. Staying is harder. But the penalty for failure is less.”

Armand had nodded. Then he’d asked the most difficult question, the one that had been plaguing him day and night. The one to which he’d found no answer, no matter how hard he’d prayed.

“*Mama?*” he’d asked. “Why do they hate us?”

Susanne had just looked at him for a long moment, and Armand had realized suddenly that she couldn’t answer his question. That there is no answer to his question. Hatred doesn’t have a why; it simply is.

She’d hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry, Armand,” she’d said.

François is killed when Armand is eight years old. He’ll remember the night until his dying day, when their dinner had been interrupted by Susanne suddenly crying out, standing and running from the room. Her offspring had remained seated at first, darting nervous glances at each other. Armand had looked to his older odems and sisters for guidance, until he’d realized that no one had known what to do.

Taking the lead, he’d gotten up and gone after their carrier. The rest had followed him silently.
They met the family priest outside the door to Susanne’s chambers. “I’m sorry,” the man had said gently. “You mustn’t go in.”

Through the door, Armand can hear their carrier weeping. Part of him already knows.

“It’s Sirrah, isn’t it?” Nicol had asked, using the forbidden term in her fear. “What’s happened?”

The priest had looked them over and sighed. “I’m sorry. Your sire is dead.”

“How?” Alphonse had demanded.

“I don’t know,” the priest had answered. “Your carrier felt their bond break.”

“But he was just travelling home from Paris,” Andreas had said blankly. “He wasn’t doing anything for the Underground on this trip. He said so.”

The family priest had hesitated. Then he’d said, “Come with me,” and lead them into the center of the Richelieu family estates, to the secret chambers that none of the offspring had known about.

This is how Armand learns of the Resistance.

Susanne holds the family together with sheer force of will. The struggles of those years remain etched in Armand’s mind, indelibly, as the core of his hatred of the Inquisition. His carrier works as hard as two people to make up for François’ death. She runs the Underground and the Resistance in between raising them all. It’s not hard to see where she gets the energy. Every year Susanne grows thinner and her eyes blaze brighter. She feeds her causes on hatred and her family on her life itself. By the time her heart gives out, shortly before Armand’s twentieth birthday, it’s almost a relief. It’s long since become clear to her family that Susanne will only ever know peace again in death.

One by one Armand’s siblings reach their majority and leave the estates to begin their life’s contribution to their family’s cause. Armand’s sisters are true Betas; they take advantage of their sex to marry into the wealthiest, most prominent families in Europe. Their new status and connections will keep the next generation of Richelieus safe and enable the work to continue. The last event Susanne attends in life is Nicol’s wedding.

After Susanne’s death, Alphonse goes to seminary and is consecrated Bishop of Luçon. His duty is to rise in the Church and take over leadership of the Underground. It’s a delicate balancing act between overt zealotry and quiet resistance. In public he must be the pious Beta preaching the heretical Gospel of Beta supremacy and working to uncover the hidden throwback threat. In private, he passes word to the Underground of Rome’s new measures for throwback detection and diverts attention from their activities. He places loyal midwives and priests where they can divert throwback pups turned over to the Church away from the Inquisition and funnel them safely into the Underground, where they will be raised in secret and taught to pass. And he keeps the secret travel ways open between France and its neighbors so those who can no longer be concealed can escape.

Meanwhile Andreas goes to court. He becomes an ambassador and spends the majority of his time overseas. While there, he works to funnel newly arrived Alphas and Omegas into new lives, concealing their status and helping them take the next steps in their journey to freedom. He maintains the Richelieu family’s links with the Underground and Resistance movements of other countries and makes valuable contacts for the future.

Armand joins the army and becomes the family’s intelligencer, taking over leadership of the Resistance. He has a gift for the work. Secrets and lies become his playthings. Alphas are naturally dominant, but Armand’s magnetism would have been unusual even in the old days. People are
drawn to him. They fall easily under his sway. And Armand takes advantage of it, shamelessly, to protect his family and his people.

When Alphonse succeeds to the Cardinality, the Bishopric reverts to the family, where it ends up in Armand’s hands. Andreas’ work overseas is too valuable for him to abandon. Armand’s work, by contrast, can easily continue after he assumes the mitre.

Andreas has another reason for not wanting to return. While overseas, he met and mated with the throwback pup of a minor noble of Bavaria. They have three pups already, all being trained to continue the family’s work.

Alphonse and Armand work hard to make sure Andreas remains concealed. Someone has to provide the next generation of Richelieus, and that duty seems to have fallen to Andreas. Alphonse suffered a fall from horseback as an adolescent. The family’s midwife says he’s unlikely ever to conceive. And while there’s nothing physically wrong with Armand, the life he lives is not conducive to ever finding a mate.

He’s not looking for one. His odems would thump him for even thinking it, but Armand is an Alpha, and written in his blood is his need to protect the Omega who might ever become his. Anyone who mates into the Richelieu family becomes part of the Underground at the very least. Anyone who mates with Armand is in danger, a target for those who know the Resistance is more than a pup’s dream. And even if none of that were true, Armand can’t forget the conversation he’d had with his mother all those years ago. When he’d realized how irrational the Betas’ hatred is – when he’d realized exactly how trapped all of Susanne’s offspring are – he’d known he could never bring anyone else into this life.

If Andreas hadn’t mated, Armand would do it. He knows his duty. But his odem has provided the family with three pups already and every indication points to more in the future. Too many are just as dangerous to their family’s long-term survival as too few. So Armand closes his eyes and his ears to the looks and words of the hidden Omegas he meets. He breathes his own perfume and ignores their scent. Armand’s alone, and it’s safer that way, for him and for his hypothetical mate and offspring. Besides, he still has Alfonse.

Armand is in Gascony, helping a miller escape towards the border to Savoy, when Alfonse writes him urgently to return to Paris.

“Armand.” Alfonse smiles in greeting. He’s probably trying for warmth, but Richelieu the younger can see the tension lines in Alfonse’s face.

Outside the day is warm. It’s late fall, but the weather is more reminiscent of summer. It’s one of those rare weeks of warmth that presage a hard winter.

Inside the Basilica de Notre Dame the air is cool and dim. And a shiver slides down Armand’s spine at the worry in his odem’s eyes.

“Alfonse,” Armand replies, taking his odem’s hands and exchanging kisses. “What is it, that you wrote to me so urgently to come?”

“Not here.” Alfonse glances around, then uses their joined hands to tug Richelieu along behind him. They walk the halls of the Basilica together. Everyone from acolytes to priests to parishioners bows respectfully at Alfonse’s red robes. Armand, wearing the much less impressive dress of a Bishop, still garners respect from walking alongside his odem.
The Cardinal leads Armand into the cloistered area of the Basilica. In the back, through his offices, he presses the secret catch under his desk and leads Armand still farther, into the passageway that opens.

Down here the heat of the sun has no power, even at high noon in midsummer. These tunnels are ancient. Their original purpose was probably to hide Christians from pagan oppression in the early days of their faith. How ironic, today, that they are the center of the Underground. Protecting throwback Christians from their own Church.

“Do you remember our contingency plans?” Alfonse asks.


“Calm, Armand. I am not suspected. Not yet. But I will be, soon. I must get out before then.”

“What? Why? How is it that you can know you will be suspected, but not be able to do anything about it?”

“Because it is my own biology that will give me away.”

“You’ve been dealing with your heats for years.” Alfonse’s position gives him access to the necessary suppressants. And all Paris knows of the devotion of its Cardinal, who will ride to the far corners of France to answer the calls of the most humble of petitioners. No matter how long the journey, or how long Alfonse must stay away. And if some of those petitioners are invented, and if Alfonse’s valet is, in actuality, his mate – those truths are between Alfonse and God.

“Last time I dealt with it far too well,” Alfonse sighs. “I’m carrying.”

“What?” Armand sputters. He can’t stop himself from staring at Alfonse’s stomach – too soon to see anything, if it was his last heat that got him pupped, but not for much longer. “How?”

Alfonse laughs, slightly hysterical. “Well, when an Alpha and an Omega love each other very much –”

“I’m serious, Alfonse!” Armand swears and controls his voice with an effort. Hidden as they are, it still pays to be prudent. “The midwife said you couldn’t carry. That was why you took the Cardinalship, because you’d never –”


“All right.” Armand spins around, starts pacing. He always thinks better in motion. “All right. We’ll get Andreas here at once, he’ll get you out –”

“I’ve already written to him.”

“Good.”

“He can’t come.”

Armand stops dead. “What?” he says again, for the third time in as many minutes.

“He can’t do it, Armand. There must be something in the air. He’s pupped, too.”

“Iesu Christe,” Armand swears. “What are we to do?”
“I think a better question,” Alfonse says gently, “might be, what are you to do.”

Armand’s eyes flick up. The light dawns. “Me,” he says slowly. “You’re saying it should be me.”

“It has to be you,” Alfonse says. “There’s no one else to do it. Andreas can’t come back. Our sisters are embedded elsewhere. Besides. It will give you a great deal of credibility for when you’re Cardinal.”

Him. Armand blinks, numb. He has to do it. He has to expose his oldest sibling – beloved odem – denounce him, despise him, and appear to have him killed.

And then he has to step into Alfonse’s role. Become the Cardinal. Manage, somehow, to marry his intelligence work with his odem’s work in the Church. Armand staggers under the sudden weight that’s been placed on his shoulders. Once Alfonse is exposed, his time in France is over. He can be smuggled out of the country, can go elsewhere to raise his pups and continue the work, but he can never take an overt role again. His time on the world stage is over.

Armand’s is about to begin.

“God help me,” he whispers.

“I know you can do it, aleph,” Alfonse says intensely.

“It’s too much.”

“Now’s not the time for a crisis of faith,” Alphonse scolds. “You’re the head of our family, the Underground, and the Resistance. You will do it because you must.”

Armand has worked as an operative for the Resistance all his adult life. He’s infiltrated convents to free their people, destroyed sterilization tools, bombed Inquisitors’ homes and burned prisons to the ground. It’s the work he’s best at. His Alpha gifts mesh well with it. It’s kept him busy, and it’s kept him on the move. He’s the only Richelieu in his generation not to have a mate. He couldn’t have one, with the work he does, but the work is his calling.

As the Church and the Underground had been Alfonse’s. But Alfonse can’t do it anymore, not with pups in his belly ready to tell his secret to the world. Those pups are the one thing that trumps all. The next generation of Richelieus must be brought forth, or their family’s work will falter and fail.

“It has to be you,” Alfonse repeats.

“I know,” Armand says despairingly. “I know.”

Armand-Jean du Plessis de Richelieu, Bishop de Luçon, exposes his brother as an Omega before the entire court. The Red Guards haul Alfonse into the throne room and throw him down before the young King and the Queen Mother, naked and four months pupped for all the world to see. Armand heaps verbal abuse on his odem’s head, pacing around him in a frenzy so that no one can dart in and turn the abuse physical. When the King orders Alfonse’s execution, Armand demands the right to carry it out himself, and declares his intention of taking Alfonse out into the woods and hunting him down like the animal he is.

Later, when Alfonse is carted out of Paris in a barred wagon, still naked and shivering in the rapidly arriving winter cold, Armand rides at the train’s head as the newly consecrated Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu. It’s three long days to the Richelieu estates, during which – with so many eyes on them – he dares not speak to his odem, or offer him any comforts. Alfonse must endure. It’s the price they
pay for being born to their bloodline.

Once they gain the estate, Armand wastes no time in ordering Alfonse released into the woods. Several others suggest it might be better to wait until morning; the sun is already setting in the horizon. Armand replies that he has every intention of waiting to start the hunt until morning, but he will not house the prey under his roof. No, not even in the barn.

They bow respectfully, full of admiration for his zealotry. They needn’t know about the fully equipped cottage on the property Alfonse reaches half an hour after his release, where his mate is already waiting, frantic with worry.

The next day Cardinal Richelieu leads out a hunting party. He tracks his odem down in the muds and the snows of his family’s traditional hunting grounds and butchers him like an animal.

The court is silenced by Armand’s righteous cruelty. That’s what sticks in their minds when they ride back to Paris. They forget that, while hunting, Armand’s smaller party had quickly become separated from theirs. They don’t notice that none of them had actually seen Armand kill Alfonse. They do remember that the body Armand brings back had been mutilated beyond recognition, and tell it as another story of Armand’s fervor.

None of them see Armand embrace Alfonse for the last time, tears in his eyes, or hear Alfonse whisper blessings in Armand’s ear. They don’t know about the route into Bavaria Alfonse will take or the life he will build there with his mate and pups. Alfonse will continue the work, and his pups will be taught of their family’s duty, but Armand will never see his odem again.

Cardinal Richelieu rides back to Paris slowly. His reputation as a bloody zealot is there waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

With this chapter I've finally updated the spoiler pairing the first tag. Whew! I had no idea it was going to take me this long when I first outlined this fic! It was really therapeutic to change the tag, actually :) Thanks for sticking with the fic so far and leaving all the lovely comments - they keep me writing!
Pignerol Prison

Pignerol Prison is burning.

It’s terribly satisfying. Richelieu has done jailbreaks like this a hundred times, but never on a prison as well-guarded as Pignerol. It’s where the Inquisition stores what it considers its most high-profile prisoners. Some of them are heretics. Others are atheists. A few are Protestants. But most are throwbacks. Alphas and Omegas, held under the usual sentence of death, but kept alive because the Inquisition isn’t done with them yet. Because there’s something more the Inquisition thinks it can get from them. In some cases it’s as simple as money from the victim’s family. In other cases it might be because the Inquisition believes the prisoner will betray others. In the worst case, it’s a different kind of information the Inquisitors want. Members of the Resistance usually die rather than allow themselves to be captured. But sometimes the Inquisition gets lucky. That’s when throwbacks die by the thousands.

Richelieu has had his eye on Pignerol for years. Alfonse had thought it too dangerous a target and refused to use his position to get Armand the information he’d needed. But now Armand is the Grand Inquisitor of France. He has access to everything he requires.

(It’s been three years since Alfonse had had to leave France. Armand is only just now starting to feel like the title belongs to him. He hopes he’ll never get used to the loneliness.)

The information alone hadn’t made the job easy. Pignerol is the Inquisition’s premier prison for a reason. Security here has been raised to an art form. Penetrating it, in a way that won’t lead immediately back to Armand, has taken immense time and effort. Getting the prisoner list had taken six months. Suborning the right guards, another year. Finally two Resistance members had volunteered to be captured. Carrying forged papers that purported to hint at a throwback conspiracy against the King and the Queen Mother, they’d bounced through a few other prisons on their way to Pignerol. One of them had died under torture in the Bastille. But the other had ended up here, and funneled them the last bit of information they’d needed.

Arranging a prisoner transport to give the Resistance an opening in Pignerol’s security had been the easy part. Armand can’t commit his signature to paper, but he doesn’t need to make his orders explicit: a side benefit of his new position is a crop of eager young clerics who dog his every step and leap zealously into action the moment Richelieu mentions a whim aloud. In this case, Richelieu had had only to bemoan the callous unconcern of the Inquisitor of Lyon, who simply refused to invest the proper sums in the prison-convents of his province. His sycophants had leapt at the hint. Within days, every prisoner of any note is being transferred out of Lyon and into other, more secure prisons. Like Pignerol.

The prisoner being transferred tonight is of particular interest. Edmond Dantès had been a member of the King’s army before exposed as a throwback at a Lyonnaise checkpoint. Dantès had been travelling to Paris from his old regiment in Marseille in order to take up a commission in the brand-new regiment of the King’s Musketeers, formed under the King’s companion and friend the Comte de Treville, who were to be specially charged with guarding the King and his household. The idea of a throwback getting so close the King – an armed throwback, no less – had had all of France buzzing.

Dantès’ outing had led to a delicate balancing act on Richelieu’s part. On the one hand, as Grand Inquisitor of France, Richelieu could fairly have been blamed for the risk to the King’s life. It’s theoretically his job to make sure that there are no throwbacks anywhere in France, whether in civilian life, the clergy, or the church. The mere existence of Edmond Dantès outside a prison-
On the other hand, and fortunately for Richelieu, Louis had been particularly obstinate on the subject of the Musketeers. He’d declared loudly that he was forming the regiment so that he didn’t have to rely on Inquisitorial soldiers such as Richelieu’s Red Guards – “I want the men guarding me to be loyal to France, not God!” he’d proclaimed – and resisted any attempt on Richelieu’s part to be involved in the formation of the regiment. That had given Richelieu valuable breathing room. He’d been able to publically wash his hands of the Musketeers’ regiment well before Dantès’ unmasking. After that, spinning Dantès to his favor had been relatively straightforward.

Ultimately, Richelieu had been able to be shocked by the King’s attitude, dismayed by his apostasy, and – most importantly – thoroughly vindicated when it had become clear that Louis had endangered himself by rejecting Richelieu’s aid. When Dantès had been outed, Richelieu had been at the center of a groundswell of public and noble support. He’s using it to bring pressure to bear on Louis with the aim of gaining new powers over the military. If Richelieu succeeds, the ultimate result will be increased safety for throwbacks serving in the army and the formation of new, clandestine regiments whose purpose is to protect the very people Richelieu is nominally charged with destroying.

Edmond Dantès, though he doesn’t know it, has done his people a great service. He’s about to do them another one by being transferred to Pignerol. And at the end of it, Dantès will walk free. Richelieu enjoys the irony.

Dantès’ transfer is critical in opening a hole in Pignerol’s security. Suborning Pignerol’s guards had proved difficult. Bribing the men whose job it is to transport prisoners, by contrast, had been trivial. The six men whose duty it had been to guard Edmond Dantès had turned over their written orders and official cloaks at a little town twelve miles away from Pignerol. In return they’d accepted a handsome sum of gold. They’ll probably drink there until dawn, at which point they’ll realize their mistake. Some of them might have the sense to flee. If they’re fast and canny they may even evade Inquisitorial justice. The rest will be made examples of by the Inquisitor of the province. Richelieu doesn’t care much either way.

Getting inside the prison is easy while masquerading as Dantès’ guards. Setting off the explosives and filling the prison’s main corridors with thick smoke is also easy. The difference between throwback and Betan biology doesn’t only work in the Inquisition’s favor. There may be no direct equivalent to the debilitating compound known as the bane, but that doesn’t mean Richelieu can’t load up a smoke bomb with a mixture that will leave most Betas unconscious on the ground. The Resistance members, by contrast, are able to move through the prison with only a minor cough and some watering of their eyes – a small price to pay.

Once inside, they split up. They’ll take everyone from the building. But not everyone will make the second journey, the one back to various safehouses maintained by the Resistances. Anyone not a throwback is dragged from Pignerol, swooning, and taken deep into the woods. In the fresh air, they’ll revive within the hour. Enough time for them to escape before the Lyonnaise militia appear, if they’re quick.

It’s as much as Richelieu is willing to risk for them. None of the Betas in Pignerol have any love for throwbacks. There are Betas in the Resistance, a few, and more in the Underground. But blood traitors, as the Inquisition views such Betas, are rarely afforded the mercy of imprisonment; they’re usually executed shortly after capture, with great pomp and circumstance. The Betas in Pignerol may not deserve the Inquisition’s mercy. But neither do they deserve a share of the Resistance’s limited resources.

Richelieu’s team moves quickly through the prison, working together with the ease of long practice.
Within an hour the prisoners have been freed from their cells. The team splits up then. The throwbacks are quickly divided into three groups and set off for three separate halfway houses with a single Resistance member for escort. Three others – Cahusac, Bernajoux and Boisrenard, Alphas all – stay behind to cart the freed Betas into the woods. With no need to hide their strength, they make short work of the task. And Richelieu himself goes back through the prison one more time, making sure that they have left nothing behind.

The smoke hangs thick in the air. Richelieu has covered his nose and mouth with several layers of muslin, thin enough to breathe through, that keep the worst of it out. Over it all Richelieu wears his usual headscarf with its sheer veil covering his eyes. It makes his vision hazy, but no more so than the smoke does already, and it’s better than the eye-watering effects of the smoke. It serves the dual purpose of masking his identity. The guards are all unconscious, but the throwback prisoners hadn’t been. They have no need to know the identities of their rescuers. It’s unlikely that any of them are part of a deeply-laid, long-running plot to unmask the Resistance. But it’s not impossible. And even if, as is probable, all of them are exactly as they seem – innocent victims – anyone may have a careless tongue. They got caught in the first place, after all. Richelieu has survived this long by keeping his identity as closely held as possible.

He finishes his sweep of the main areas and checks the position of the moon in the sky. The escaped prisoners won’t be far enough away yet to set the torches. Which means he has time for a quick riffle through the warden’s office. Inquisitorial law technically forbids the man from storing anything sensitive on-site. But Richelieu has seen to it that the punishments for this offense are minor and irregularly enforced. In all probability, the warden at Pignerol will have been lax. With luck, his papers will even contain something Richelieu doesn’t already know.

Richelieu approaches the warden’s office with his lockpicks already out. Three paces away he slows. The office isn’t locked. The door hangs a finger’s-width ajar.

It could be nothing. The warden could have forgotten to lock it the last time he’d left. In the chaos, perhaps? But the chaos hadn’t started until the carriage containing Dantès had been inside the prison gates. The warden had been waiting in the courtyard to meet them. He’d have had time to leave his office in a tidy fashion. Which should have included locking the door.

Richelieu replaces his lockpicks in his belt. In their place he draws a knife. Keeping it close to his body, he stretches out his hand to open the door.

He’s expecting to be jumped the moment he steps through the door. No doubt this is why his attacker chooses to pounce before Richelieu’s fingers even make contact with wood.

The knife goes spinning away almost immediately, and Richelieu’s wrist and fingers tingle from the force of the blow, which had hit a set of nerves very precisely. Several things are immediately apparent. Richelieu’s attacker is used to fighting opponents of superior strength. The strike that had disarmed Richelieu had been executed with incredible precision. And with astonishing speed. The person Richelieu is fighting has their nose and mouth covered too, but they’re unmistakably male. Despite this, the stranger twists away from Richelieu’s attempt at a submission hold with a flexibility not commonly associated with male Betas.

As the stranger does, he tears Richelieu’s headscarf off, leaving Richelieu’s forehead and eyes exposed. The muslin still covers Richelieu’s nose and mouth, protecting him from the smoke, and probably from identification. But with no further impediment to Richelieu’s sight he can see that his opponent is well-built, broad-shouldered, and possessed of a set of blazing blue eyes that send an answering fire racing through Richelieu’s body.

Over all the smoke, Richelieu can’t smell a thing, but he doesn’t need his nose to guess his
opponent’s sex. His opponent’s fighting style says it all. And yet this Omega is matching Richelieu blow for blow. Not with strength but with speed, dexterity and cunning. If they weren’t in the midst of a soon-to-be-burning Inquisitorial prison, Richelieu would laugh in sheer delight. It’s been years since he’s felt this alive.

The distraction proves to be Richelieu’s undoing. The stranger pushes Richelieu against the wall and shoves a forearm under Richelieu’s chin. It’s an effective immobilizing technique that relies on controlling Richelieu’s breathing instead of the stranger’s brute strength. More proof, as if Richelieu needs it. Eye to eye they stare at each other, both gasping for breath through the oxygen-stealing smoke.

“Who are you?” the stranger demands. His voice is rough. Part of that must be the smoke. But Richelieu would also bet on the stranger having taken a throat injury at some point in the past.

“You can’t really expect me to answer that,” Richelieu says as calmly as he can. He’s been told his voice has a pacifying effect on people. He’s used it to his advantage in the past.

It doesn’t seem to work on the stranger, who just swears at him profusely. Richelieu frowns. The stranger’s raspy voice makes it hard to be sure, but Richelieu thinks, just for a second, he catches the trace of an accent.

“Why are you here?” the stranger asks instead.

Richelieu raises an eyebrow for the stranger’s benefit.“The prison cells are empty, there are explosives everywhere – I should think that would be obvious.”

“It really is a jailbreak?”

“As you see.”

“Who?” When Richelieu doesn’t answer immediately, the stranger presses in closer, making Richelieu work harder for breath. “Who was your target?”

“I don’t need a target to want to burn this place to the ground,” Richelieu points out.

“Let’s try a name,” the stranger says. “Edmond Dantès.”

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb. He was due to arrive tonight, but I can’t find him anywhere. He wouldn’t have been in a cell. Did you get to him first? Where is he? What have you done to him?”

“You came here for him?” Richelieu can’t entirely keep the incredulous surprise out of his voice.

“I have to find him,” the stranger says. “It’s my fault he’s here!”

“So you – what? Decided to break into the most secure prison in France in order to free him? Alone? With no backup?”

“I dare do all that may become a noble,” the stranger replies.

Involuntarily Richelieu smiles. “You realize Macbeth ended up dead at the end of the play, don’t you?”

The stranger must grin, too, because the visible sliver of his face lights up. His eyes crinkle with mirth. Richelieu is absurdly pleased to have caused it.
The moment passes as quickly as it had come. “What have you done to him?” the stranger repeats, eyes narrowing.

“Nothing,” Richelieu says with perfect truth.

The stranger shakes his head, shoving closer. “Tell me!” he orders.

Richelieu takes advantage of his opponent’s closeness to bring his hands up and seize his opponent’s collar. A quick spin and now it’s the stranger who is against the wall, Richelieu holding him in place not with a clever trick but with the simple, overwhelming gift of strength.

And the stranger knows it. His eyes widen. “Mon Dieu,” he swears. “I thought, when we wrestled, but I wasn’t sure –”

Richelieu raises an eyebrow.

“You’re the Resistance?” The stranger swallows. “You’re real?”

“I am a ghost,” Richelieu says. “You’re having an hallucination right now. And it’s time for you to go to sleep.”

He lifts one hand to knock the stranger out.

“Wait,” the stranger says desperately. “Wait, first, just tell me – Dantès. He’s all right? You haven’t hurt him? You’re going to make sure he’s safe?”

Richelieu hesitates. But after all, the stranger had risked his life sneaking into Pignerol for Dantès, a throwback in danger. Richelieu had already decided that the stranger’s motives are pure when he’d decided to let the stranger live. Given that, there’s no real harm in giving him this comfort.

“We’ll do our best,” Richelieu says carefully. He can’t promise that Dantès will be safe. No throwback is ever truly safe. But – “He’s on his way across the border now, with every other throwback who was held in this prison.”

“Thank you,” the stranger whispers. He nods and closes his eyes, waiting for the blow.

Richelieu delivers it. The stranger slumps, unconscious. Richelieu lowers him carefully to the ground.

Before leaving, he takes a moment to secure the area, tucking his discarded headscarf into his belt and being sure they’ve left no other traces of their fight or presence. That done, Richelieu hefts the unconscious stranger and carries him out of the prison.

The stranger dangles limply over Richelieu’s shoulder. This close, he’s able to finally catch a whiff of scent. Unsurprisingly, what lies underneath the smoke is the clear, sweet musk of an Omega. The stranger’s scent is an odd mix of the natural and man-made, freshly trimmed lawns and the tang of cordite. It’s nothing like Richelieu’s own or that of any of his family. But it’s inexplicably pleasant regardless. A moment of beauty in the middle of this prison of horrors.

There’s a small copse a little ways down the main road. Richelieu drops the stranger there. The trees will screen him from easy view. Richelieu hadn’t hit him hard; another ten or so minutes, and he’ll come to, in plenty of time to escape. The militia response times in Lyon are deplorable. It will be a clear hour after Richelieu’s team sets the prison ablaze before anyone can be expected to come looking.
Richelieu hesitates over leaving the stranger here, though. He’s a throwback, after all. Should Richelieu take him elsewhere? But where? Over the border? There’s no evidence the stranger is in trouble. Indeed, he’d come to get Dantès out of trouble. The stranger had evidently felt that he could take care of himself. Richelieu had better not interfere.

Without conscious intention, Richelieu’s hand hovers over the stranger’s face. The stranger’s headcloth had slipped slightly down while he’d been draped over Richelieu’s back, revealing close-cropped hair in an indeterminate shade of brown. A military cut. The stranger is a soldier. A member of Dantès’ regiment? Perhaps even –

Richelieu snatches hand back like he’s been burned. He stands and takes several steps back before he can act without thought again. His cheeks burn with shame. What had he been thinking? Nothing is more precious to a throwback than anonymity. For him to have even considered pulling off the stranger’s veil to see the face beneath – bad enough that Richelieu had scented him. That could perhaps not have been helped, not if Richelieu were to carry the stranger out of Pignerol before it burns. But that’s enough. That’s too much. Richelieu will be able to identify the stranger by his scent should they ever meet again, and that’s more than the stranger had ever consented to.

He’s thoroughly ashamed of himself. He turns and leaves without another glance.

The other three Alphas are waiting by the gates to Pignerol, torches already lit. Bernajoux hands Richelieu one without comment. But Boisrenard raises an eyebrow.

“Get into a fight?”

Richelieu blinks. “I did, in fact,” he admits. “Someone else was in the prison. Another throwback.”

“Ahh,” Bernajoux says knowingly. “And they didn’t have a covering, did they.”


Boisrenard gestures. “You gave them your spare,” he says simply.

“Oh,” Richelieu says, startled. He’d forgotten that the stranger had torn the cloth from his eyes. Richelieu has given it away in the past to protect the nose and mouth of another throwback, relying on the partial face covering to maintain his anonymity. But not this time, and there’s no reason to be taking the extra risk. His hand goes to his belt.

And brushes empty air.

Richelieu freezes. Slowly he looks down.

His headscarf is gone.

It could have fallen out of his belt. Richelieu might not have tucked it as securely in place as he’d thought he had. But even as his mind spins its explanations, Richelieu dismisses them. They’re reasonable. Probable, even. But he knows better in his gut.

The stranger. The Omega he’d carried out from the prison. Unconscious – at least at first. But at some point he’d woken up. At some point he’d decided to play possum. And at some point he’d stolen Richelieu’s scarf.

The fabric itself means nothing. The stranger had already seen Richelieu’s eyes, after all. And Richelieu had already decided to let the stranger escape with that information.
But what the fabric contains –

Boisrenard, Bernajoux and Cahusac split up towards the prison. Mechanically Richelieu grips his own torch and moves to light his quadrant on fire. They collect their horses and ride back to Paris, Pignerol burning behind them. But the whole time Richelieu is thinking of the stranger who now knows his scent.
Paris, as predicted, is in an uproar over the destruction of Pignerol. The news reaches the city barely hours after Richelieu returns. As far as anyone in Paris knows, Richelieu had never left. It’s not unusual for their Cardinal to excuse himself from court for a few days to immerse himself in spiritual matters. The key is making sure those disappearances are staggered, so that no one could possibly confuse them with a regular heat schedule. Richelieu’s an Alpha, but it doesn’t matter if his enemies get his sex correct in exposing him. A throwback is a throwback at the end of the day.

There are two monks and an abbé who will swear, if necessary, that Richelieu has been with them at various points over the last week. Richelieu’s personal guard will say the same thing. The difference is that his guards will be telling the truth. Cahusac, Bernajoux and Boisrenard were all present at Pignerol. Only Jussac, of Richelieu’s personal guard, remained in Paris.

Jussac is also the only true Beta among them, a descendent of one of the ancient families loyal to the Richelieu line since the Crusades. The first de Jussac had been squire to the first de Richelieu when they’d ridden to the Holy Land in the seventh wave. His descendent Robert de Jussac has been Armand’s companion for twenty years. Robert’s older brother had followed Alfonse to Bavaria, where he’d briefly been united with their younger sister in Andreas’ service, before Alfonse had made the decision to go on to Russia and found an Underground there. Now Robert, like Armand, is the only member of his family left in France.

Upon his arrival in Paris, Richelieu is forced to immediately delve into the chaos left in the wake of Pignerol. Louis is demanding his presence, as if Richelieu is a magical talisman who can repel throwbacks merely by existing. Anne is demanding action of the sort Richelieu must extoll in public and prevent in private. The entire balance of the court will be upset for a while as the nobility feels themselves threatened.

The one bright spot is the absence of Marie de’ Medici. Armand has no idea how Alfonse had coexisted with her for so long. Armand had discovered shortly after ascending to the Cardinality that the Queen Regent is short-sighted, bad-tempered, and bloodthirsty – far too dangerous a combination to tolerate. It had taken Armand nearly all of the last three years to rid himself of her. Last summer, he’d finally been able to provide the King with incontrovertible proof of her plotting, including an assassination attempt on Louis himself. That had been the final blow. Louis hadn’t been willing to have Marie killed – a shame; Richelieu had been thoroughly trained in Inquisitorial methods of torture while in the seminary, and he would have enjoyed finally putting those methods to use on an enemy of his people – but Louis had signed the exile, and Marie knows what will happen if she ever returns. Pignerol is the first major affair of state Richelieu has had to manage without her interference. It’s amazing how much easier everything is.

Even so, Richelieu’s time and attention are wholly occupied by his public persona. Fortunately, he has allies. Jussac gains his revenge from having been left behind during the Pignerol raid by riding out early one morning in the direction of Marseille. Edmond Dantès’ path to Pignerol begins there, and so, therefore, must Richelieu’s investigation into Dantès’ would-be rescuer. The stranger had had short-cropped hair – a military cut. The overwhelming probability is that the stranger is himself a member of Dantès’ old regiment. If so, Jussac will find him. If not, Jussac will find something that will lead Richelieu to his stranger.

Richelieu must find him. Whoever the stranger had been, he has Richelieu’s true scent now. That’s a state of affairs that cannot be allowed to continue.

A very small, very detached part of Armand is afraid. Terrified, even. For himself, of course.
Richelieu is many things but he’s not ignorant, and only the ignorant don’t fear the Inquisition. So part of his fear is personal. But he’s also terrified for his family’s work. Richelieu has no siblings left working for the Resistance or the Underground; he has no mate and no heirs. If he were to die, to be caught and exposed, there is no one waiting to take over the work.

His family has connections throughout Europe. Someone, eventually, would come to France and pick up the pieces. But the loss of life in the meantime would be incalculable.

So Armand is afraid. But he can’t afford to indulge it, so he locks it away and refuses to acknowledge it, besides making sure Jussac knows what to do in the event of exposure.

Jussac, impatient to be on the road to Marseille, hears Richelieu out with a long-suffering expression of forbearance. “I really think you’re making too big a deal about this,” he says when Richelieu runs down.

Richelieu bristles. “There is someone out there who could identify me!” he cries.

“Only if you get careless and let them in close enough to scent,” Jussac points out.

“Nevertheless. What if it’s part of a greater scheme? What if – ”

“You’ve got to reach pretty far to make this part of a scheme, Armand. Think of all the moving parts. This stranger’s got to be at the right place, at the right time, got to get you to let your guard down – ”

“Exactly!” Richelieu insists. “Can something that complex possibly be a coincidence?”

“Much more likely than it being a plot,” Jussac says promptly. “A plot would have been simpler.”

“A simpler one would have failed,” Richelieu points out, he thinks fairly.

Jussac rolls his eyes. “The first time you’ve let an Omega get closer than musket-shot and you’re convinced it’s an Inquisitorial plot,” he mutters. “No wonder you’re not mated.”

“I’m not mated because I don’t want to be mated,” Richelieu says stiffly. “And the sex of my stranger is, frankly, irrelevant.”

“ Took you in a fight, didn’t he?”

“I allowed him to pin me in order to begin a conversation.”

“And then he outwitted you. I like him already.” Jussac looks thoughtful.

“You’re supposed to find him in order to protect the Resistance, not to play matchmaker,” Richelieu hisses.

“I am more than capable of doing both,” Jussac says cheerfully. He takes advantage of their long history together to leave before Richelieu stops sputtering.

“He’s not taking this seriously enough,” Richelieu mutters to himself, deciding that it would be beneath his dignity to chase after Jussac in order to yell at him.

Cahusac, dutifully propping up a nearby wall as the guard on duty, coughs. The air must be dry today. Richelieu shakes his head and goes back to his paperwork. He sets his worry aside, along with Jussac’s words.

His focus is poor, though. Now that Jussac’s put the thought in his head, Richelieu’s mind keeps
wandering back to his memories of the stranger of Pignedol. The appealing scent of him, gunpowder and forest. Like a hunter. Or a wild animal. Armand dwells for a moment on the piercing blue eyes that had assessed Armand bluntly. The sharp mind that had made itself known in the stranger’s every word and look. The way the stranger had outwitted Armand in the final analysis and stood up to him in their contest of strength.

And the stranger had fought well, using an effective style that minimized his weaknesses and emphasized his strength. Neither the stranger nor Richelieu had truly been fighting to kill. Armand wonders who would have won if they had been. His mate would certainly have to be able to take care of themselves, given the danger they’d be in…

Richelieu shivers, contemplative mood effectively destroyed. Reality has a way of rearing its ugly head. Armand hasn’t remained unmated because he’s lacked opportunity, or because he’s uninterested in the complementary sex. He lusts like any other Alpha. And he longs like any other human being. For contact. For understanding. For love.

If Armand stretches his mind back far enough, he can remember his parents’ match. The companionship they’d shared, the help they’d given each other, the love that had attended them at every look and touch. It had been a love that had only grown with every new barrier placed before them. The work they’d done had fed it. As had the five pups Susanne had brought into the world.

As a pup Armand had been full of dreams for his eventual family. He’d imagined his future mate in all their potential combinations. Blond or brunette? Brown eyes or blue? Male or female?

Omega or Beta? Some throwbacks are brought up with the old prejudices against intermarriage, but François and Susanne had been too practical for that. An Omega would be more traditional. But as Armand’s odems know too well, being unaligned is dangerous. A Betan wife would be another layer of protection Armand could acquire. Preferable, even, in his parents’ view, to an unaligned Omegan mate.

But whatever form Armand’s mate had worn in his puppyhood imagination, still they had always existed, along with litter after litter of pups. Susanne would be ashamed of the Armand who exists today. Offspring are the future of the Richelieu line. Armand might protest that Alfonse and Andreas are bearing enough for them all. Andreas’ oldest, Mazarin, is already quick-witted at only five years of age and shows signs of being suited for a church career. He might be the next Cardinal de Richelieu. But Susanne wouldn’t accept that. Susanne would say that Armand is failing at his duty, and depriving himself of vital support and companionship aside.

And whatever Richelieu may say to Jussac out loud, inside he knows he’s isolated. He knows he’s overwhelmed. He even knows he’s lonely. In his darkest moments that puppyhood dream of a family is very bright indeed.

But everything has its price. Armand needn’t stretch his memory at all to recall what had happened to Susanne after François’ death. To remember what had happened to their whole family. Susanne had burned up from the inside with the force of her grief. Armand and his siblings had had to grow up too quickly. The lesson of the Richelieu bloodline is that the work is paramount. Nothing – not family, not love, not grief – may come between it. To accept a mate would be to sentence them to death or worse. To sire pups –

Richelieu shakes his head impatiently. He’s being foolish. His puppyhood dreams are just that: dreams. This is reality, and in a world with the Inquisition, Armand’s loneliness is the price he pays to help his people. Andreas and Alfonse have already been forced out of France over love. Armand cannot afford to share their fate.
He writes letters dutifully until the candles burn low. Then he retires, still dutifully, to his empty bed. Richelieu’s control is complete. Only his dreams betray him.

Sunday a few weeks later finds Richelieu leading early Mass for the King’s household. He’s bleary-eyed from several nights of poor sleep. The causes are myriad. Richelieu has been stretching himself thin, coordinating a whisper campaign aimed at Louis to persuade him that the entire Dantès affair demands greater Inquisitorial scrutiny into military affairs. Jussac had returned to Paris a few days ago mystified, apparently no closer to discovering the identity of the stranger of Pignerol, bringing back only a few tenuous leads. And for the past few nights Richelieu has been troubled by dreams of riding through an endless, green forest, chasing an ill-defined figure on a chestnut horse. The most disturbing part of these dream are that they aren’t disturbing at all. Armand isn’t chasing an enemy or a stranger. He’s always laughing as he urges his horse onwards. His quarry will look back over his shoulder, piercing blue eyes laughing back, promising all manner of delights should Armand run him to ground. Sometimes Armand does. Sometimes his dreams make him blush.

Even waking, Richelieu keeps thinking he can smell cordite and grass. He stumbles his way through Mass like a priest fresh out of seminary. His only comfort is that no one notices. Everyone else in the church is every bit as bleary-eyed as Richelieu, hung over or still drunk, present only for form’s sake. The King actually dozes off several times and has to be nudged awake by one of his companions to stand or kneel at the prescribed times. The devout Queen would have noticed Richelieu’s distraction, but she isn’t present this morning. She often prefers to read mass separately with only her private confessor and companion Constanza. She’d never say it where Richelieu might hear, but he suspects that even the Bloody Cardinal isn’t zealous enough for Anne’s taste.

So great is Richelieu’s distraction that it takes him until after the sermon to realize that one of the figures at the King’s side is wearing an unusual uniform. It’s the usual leather underneath, with a blue cloak and a wide-brimmed hat set decorously to the wearer’s side in deference to God. The whole is accented with a brown leather pauldron stamped with a fleur-de-lis. This, coupled with its wearer’s identity, finally lets Richelieu deduce the meaning of the uniform. This must be what the King’s Musketeers are to wear. The Comte de Treville is showing it off today for the first time.

Jean-Armand du Peyrer de Treville has been at Louis’ court for nearly as long as Armand has, but Richelieu hasn’t paid him much attention until now. In Richelieu’s defense, he’s been extremely busy establishing himself and all of the connections he needs to take over Alfonse’s role as Cardinal and head of the Underground in addition to his existing leadership of the Resistance. It’s been a busy three years. When Louis had decided to surround himself with a posse of sword-toting young nobles eager for a place at court, Richelieu hadn’t felt it worth while to intervene. Most of them had been harmless minnows more interested in getting close to the King than making any sort of trouble. Most of them have indeed left Paris again, having been recalled to their families’ lands to take up their true profession. A few have graduated from hanger-on to full-fledged courtier. Apparently Treville has recently decided to make soldiering his life’s work, and Louis has rewarded this show of loyalty with the formation of a new regiment and the captaincy thereof.

Now that Treville’s come to prominence Richelieu has looked more deeply into his character and his past. The Cardinal’s not entirely sure he likes what he sees. The newly-commissioned Captain is from an estate in Gascony that’s mostly farmland. Little is known of the current Comte as a result. He had only come into the title recently, upon the death of his older brother, the former Comte, in a hunting accident. So remote is the estate in Gascony that the current Comte’s age is not even known for certain. Early twenties is as close as anyone can say; between the mother’s death in childbirth and the father’s shortly thereafter of fever, the records are a hopeless muddle.

What Richelieu does know about Treville makes him wary. The Comte’s father had supported
Henry IV in the Wars of Religion, on the Catholic side. Outwardly that’s a point much in this young Treville’s favor. Privately, Richelieu dislikes having so many staunch Catholics so close to the throne. He’d much prefer someone lax in the practice of their faith. Armand’s ability to protect his people depends in large part upon his ability to control the King. The Spanish Queen is already a major sticking point, and Richelieu finds himself in opposition to Anne over nearly every issue. The removal of the Italian Queen Mother had been supposed to help matters. But not if Marie’s immediately replaced by an ardently Catholic Captain of the King’s personal guards. Especially not one who has the advantage of being Louis’ chosen companion instead of his mother.

What Richelieu has learned of Treville’s past is equally disturbing. The mother’s death in childbirth he discards. The pneumatic fever for the father could go either way. But the so-called hunting accident for the brother is almost certainly a lie. Richelieu’s spies report that the brother had never hunted a day in his life. Despite this, he had supposedly gone hunting alone with his brother on a bright spring day. The casket had been closed at the funeral. Which makes this Treville a power-hungry murderer as well as a devout Catholic. It’s a potentially toxic combination.

Richelieu is still considering what to do about it.

The King wakes up after Mass and reconvenes his court back at the Louvre palace, Richelieu included. Armand is working his way steadily into the King’s trust, filling the hole that had been left when Alfonse had been exposed as a throwback and Marie de’ Medici as a power-hungry lunatic. It’s going well, if Richelieu says so himself. Today Louis doesn’t hesitate before gesturing Richelieu to the seat by the King’s side. It’s the one traditionally reserved for the First Minister of France. At the moment the title is vacant, having been abandoned by Concino Concini in the wake of Marie’s exile. One day Richelieu will sit in it by right and not just the King’s whim.

Louis yawns. “Excellent sermon today,” he says to Richelieu.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Richelieu replies, doing his best to look flattered, though he knows the King had in fact slept through the entire thing. “I am gratified to think you may have benefited from my humble words.”

“You’re an excellent orator. We are lucky to have such a moral center for the court of France.”

“Your Majesty is most kind.”

“Yes, I am, aren’t I?” Louis laughs a little, pleased. He liked being generous. He likes being thought generous even better. “Well, now you have a chance to be kind to me in return, Richelieu. I want your advice.”

Richelieu keeps his outward expression serene. Inwardly he’s smiling in triumph. The King is coming to rely on him.

“I am at your Majesty’s service,” he says.

“It’s about the Musketeers,” Louis goes on. “When I formed them, I said – well, you know what I said.”

_I want a guard loyal to me, not God!_ the King had joked. It had scandalized the court. Pressure had poured in from all sides for the King to recant and allow Richelieu to continue to supply Louis’ guards, as the French Inquisition has always done. But in one of those curious twists that characterize the King, Louis had only been made more obstinate by his court’s outrage. He’d insisted that his Musketeers would be an entirely secular organization with no Church oversight whatsoever. Until now Louis has managed to make that stick. But Dantès will prove the Musketeers’ undoing.
“I admit I was surprised by your Majesty’s decision,” Richelieu says now, taking care to keep his face and voice neutral.

“Yes. Well.” Louis drummed his fingers against his arm-rest. “My intentions were good, Cardinal. You must understand that. I had very good intentions. I may have expressed them badly, but my heart was pure.”

“I never doubted it, your Majesty,” Richelieu soothes, thinking rapidly. Does this mean –

“I’m going to have to eat a bit of crow now,” Louis admits. “Treville isn’t going to like it, either. But I have no choice. There’s too much at stake.”

“No doubt your Majesty refers to the unfortunate incident of the throwback Musketeer,” Richelieu says with appropriate gravity. Inwardly he’s crowing in triumph. The whisper campaign has borne fruit.

Louis’ face darkens. “I couldn’t believe it,” he says. “When I heard that a Musketeer had been detained at the Lyonnaise checkpoint – I thought my courier was having a joke at my expense.”

“It came as a shock to us all, your Majesty.”

“Well. Now everyone’s talking about it. No, not just talking. Talking I can deal with. They’re acting. And I can’t have it, Cardinal. I can’t have anyone questioning my faith.”

“They’re not questioning, your Majesty,” Richelieu reassures his monarch. “They simply don’t understand. They’re like children. They need guidance. And they look to your Majesty to provide it.”

“Children.” Louis smiles faintly. His gaze slides past Richelieu’s to look over the Cardinal’s shoulder, to where the Queen is sitting. “Yes. I suppose I must think of them as my children.”

Richelieu hastily side-steps this entire fraught direction of conversation. The King is well known to long for children, but the Queen has so far remained empty. Richelieu has spent many an evening reassuring Louis that he is young, and Anne is young, and they will no doubt be blessed in time. At first such evenings had been torturous for Richelieu, forced to promise the King that he would one day experience what Armand longs for and must deny himself. Now he’s inured to it. But raking the matter up again won’t help Richelieu reach his ultimate goals.

So instead he says, “Children need guidance. Is there some way I can help your Majesty provide it?”

“Yes. Yes, there is. There’s simply going to have to be some oversight into the Musketeers. Nothing major, Richelieu. I don’t want you getting carried away. But it will reassure the public immensely if they know you’re on the case.” Somewhat bitterly Louis adds, “Your piety is beyond reproach.”

“As is yours, your Majesty,” Richelieu says immediately. “I never entertain the slightest doubt of it, I assure you.”

Louis relaxes at these words. “Thank you, Richelieu. That means a great deal to me.”

“Of course. And I will be happy to provide any oversight you need.”

“Limited, Cardinal, strictly limited. We’ll need to work out how limited. And I’ll need your help telling Treville. He won’t like it.”

“I’m sure the Comte won’t dare gainsay your Majesty,” Richelieu murmurs.
Louis grins. “You don’t know him, do you? No, I suppose you two have never really had the chance to get acquainted. Well.” The King pauses. “Yes, well, there are good reasons for that, of course.”

“We do move in different spheres,” Richelieu agrees. The Church and the army have historically not had much to do with each other. As a result, Richelieu’s ability to protect throwbacks in the military is extremely limited – as Edmond Dantès had recently illustrated. Well, God willing, that’s about to change.

“He won’t like it,” Louis repeats resignedly. “But he’ll have to see it’s the only way. – There he is now. Treville, come over here! We want you.”

The Captain has just entered the throne room, still in uniform. At the King’s order he begins making his way through the throng of assembled courtiers.

Richelieu allows himself to raise an eyebrow. “If nothing else, your Majesty, I must say the uniforms for your Musketeers were well chosen.”

“Oh, don’t be so stuffy, Cardinal. All right, I was wrong to keep you out of their formation. As this whole Dantès business has shown. To think, they tell me Pignerol is still burning! How can a prison burn for so long? What keeps the fire going?” Louis shakes his head.

“The fire has spread to the trees nearby, your Majesty,” Treville says, having drawn close enough to hear Louis’ final words. “It is not the prison itself but the forest that is burning.”

Louis sucks in a breath. “That will hurt the lumber production for this year,” he mutters. Thereby impacting the taxes for the entire region. Richelieu is already planning for the inevitable budget fight when it becomes clear that France’s revenue will be well below projections. Richelieu will see to it that there is great public pressure on Louis to cut funding to the Inquisition. The Cardinal will fight this vigorously, of course. When he finally relents he will be seen as a great martyr. Louis will be grateful that Richelieu has put France first. The devout Catholics will revere their Cardinal for standing up to secular corruption, though ultimately futilely. The Inquisition will accept Richelieu’s strategic cuts with resignation.

“I am sure God will provide,” Richelieu says to Louis serenely.

“Never mind the lumber,” Treville says impatiently. “My concern is your Majesty’s safety. You need a personal guard more than ever. My Musketeers – ”

“Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Treville,” the King says. He looks somewhat evasive. “I suppose you know there’s been a lot of concern over – that is – well – after your man Dantès – ”

“He wasn’t my man,” Treville says swiftly, shooting Richelieu a dismayed look. “An old friend of my father’s had suggested Dantès to me. I’d never met him.”

“Of course not,” Louis soothes. “I’m sure if you had you would have realized straight away that Dantès, er, well – ”

“Wasn’t a man at all,” Richelieu suggests smoothly.

Treville presses his lips together. “If you want to be crude about it.”

Richelieu raises an eyebrow. “There is nothing crude about correct terminology.”
“I see no need to fill the King’s ears with such obscenities,” Treville snaps. He takes a breath and seems to regain his calm. “Yes, naturally, I am aware of the concern in the wake of Dantès’, er, revelation. But I can assure your Majesty that the matter is well in hand.”

“People are asking questions, Treville,” Louis says pleadingly. “Too many questions. Something has to be done.”

Treville stiffens. “Unless your Majesty thinks all future recruits to the French army should first parade naked through the streets of Paris – ”

“We’ll keep that idea in reserve for the future,” Richelieu steps in. “But, as his Majesty was saying to me earlier, a screening program of some sort might not go amiss. As you’re aware, the Inquisition has methods for detecting throwbacks.”

“No innocent Catholic deserves to be put through your methods, Cardinal,” Treville growls.

Richelieu assumes an aura of calm he doesn’t feel. “No innocent has anything to fear from the Church. Come now. What are you afraid of, Captain?”

“Religious overreach,” Treville snaps. “This is a guard charged with protecting the King. Not a militant arm of the Inquisition.”

“The protection of his Majesty is a holy task,” Richelieu counters. “The King, in his wisdom, may have decided to form a guard independent of the Inquisition – which I continue to deplore –”

“Oh, leave it be, Richelieu,” Louis sighs.

“ – but that does not relieve me of my holy duty to ensure that no more like Edmond Dantès make their way to his side.”

Treville gives Louis an appealing look. “But your Majesty decreed –”

“I know, Treville, but that was before Dantès.” Louis stands up, clearly wanting the conversation to be over. “It has to be done. This is a royal order.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Treville grinds out. His eyes are blazing with fury. Something about them strikes a dim chord in Richelieu’s mind, but he forgets his train of thought when Louis pokes him in the shoulder.

“We are going to be reasonable about this, do you hear me, Cardinal?” the King says. “This isn’t a witch-hunt.”

“Of course not, your Majesty,” Richelieu soothes. Indeed, a witch-hunt is the farthest thing from his mind. Armand’s goal is to make the military safer for throwbacks. Not that the King need know that.

Louis frowns at Richelieu. Richelieu looks back, nothing but respect and obedience written on his face.

“All right then,” the King says finally. “I’ll expect both of you this evening to discuss the details.”

Richelieu blinks “So soon? Surely it would be better to wait a few days, to allow me a chance to draw up a proposal –”

“The Captain’s leaving Paris tomorrow,” Louis says carelessly. “He’s going to check on the Pignerol situation for me. The reports I’m getting are worthless. Really, I need to train better observers.”
“Perhaps I can offer the services of some of my people,” Richelieu suggests.

“Yes. Perhaps.” Louis stares at a point past Richelieu’s shoulder, apparently lost in thought. Richelieu waits patiently. The King falls into fugues like this often; never, so far as Richelieu can determine, to any purpose.

After a moment Louis shakes it off. “Well, think about it for the rest of the day, if you like,” he says. “I’ll summon you later.”

The King turns to go, shooting Treville an apologetic look even as he gestures for Treville to fall in beside the King. The Musketeer, for his part, glares daggers at Richelieu before he follows Louis out of the room. One hand lingers on his sword. Richelieu doesn’t think that’s a coincidence.

Richelieu watches them go, frowning slightly. Treville’s reaction is unexpected. From everything in the Captain’s background, Treville should have welcomed increased Inquisitorial oversight of France’s military. Treville, after all, has no idea that Richelieu plans to use the military to hide throwbacks. Yet the Captain seems displeased in the extreme.

Perhaps it’s a case of Treville’s personal fiefdom being challenged. He’d certainly put a lot of time and political capitol into having the Musketeers formed and given into his sole charge. He might view Richelieu’s interference through a political lens, not a religious one, and feel threatened as a result. Particularly since Louis is obviously going back on a previous promise to invite Richelieu’s involvement.

Still. Something is afoot here that Richelieu doesn’t like – nor understand. A dangerous combination. For the moment, Richelieu had better move carefully around the Captain of the Musketeers.

The evening is, for lack of a better term, an unmitigated disaster.

Richelieu had spent the rest of the day putting together the first sketches of a proposed oversight plan. It’s nothing compared to what he could have developed with more time. But Richelieu’s been aiming at increased oversight of the military for some time now, and he’s put a lot of thought into how he’d like to go about it. It lets him go into tonight’s meeting with something, at any rate, which is a good deal better than nothing at all.

Or so he’d thought. He realizes very quickly that he’s miscalculated. Coming into the room without a plan would have given Treville room to maneuver. Not that Richelieu has any intention of being gainsaid in the final analysis. But a show of amity will be important for the King at least, and for Treville, of whom Richelieu honestly does not wish to make an enemy. From that standpoint the evening is a failure. Treville starts off prickly and goes into full-on hostility when he realizes that Richelieu has come into the room with a plan mostly formed inside his own head.

The merits of the plan aren’t even discussed. They’re not at issue. The issue turns out to be what Treville calls Richelieu’s high-handed interference and what Richelieu calls his reasonable foresight. This disagreement quickly becomes central to the entire discussion.

The shouting begins fairly quickly. The meeting only goes downhill from there.

Louis lets it go on for about half an hour. At first he’s amused, sipping his wine and watching Richelieu and Treville break out the conversational knives like it’s a play he’s enjoying after supper. When his Captain and his First Minister start taking off strips of skin and digging into the meat below, though, Louis starts to look almost frightened. In the back of his mind Richelieu thinks he should figure out how to scale it back. But there’s something about Treville that seems to go right
through Richelieu’s carefully crafted masks and defenses to bring out the raw heart of him.

“Enough!” Louis finally shouts. He slams his hand down on the arm-rest of his throne and stands up, forcing a halt to the argument when both Treville and Richelieu have to stop to bow. “I don’t know what’s gotten into the both of you, but this fighting is pointless.”

“If his Eminence would only – ” Treville begins.

Louis holds up a hand. “I don’t want to hear it,” he says sharply. “No, not from you ether, Richelieu,” he adds when Richelieu, perhaps unwisely, opens his mouth.

Richelieu and Treville fall silent, continuing to glare at each other. Louis sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” Louis repeats, this time to himself. “But we’re obviously not going to settle this tonight. Go home, both of you. Take the next few days to think on your positions. Treville, when you get back from Pignerol, we’ll try it again. And next time I expect there to be considerably less shouting. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Treville grinds out.

“Of course, your Majesty,” Richelieu says through gritted teeth.

Louis gives both of them a look. “I’m disappointed. Yes, I must say it. I depend upon you both. To see you fighting like this disappoints me to no end. You must do better. You will do better. France demands it. And so do I.”

The King sweeps out of the room before either of them can answer.

Richelieu takes a deep breath. “Perhaps a break is merited,” he says after a moment. “We shall both be calmer for some more time to think.”

“If you don’t back off then no amount of calm is going to help,” Treville snaps. Richelieu has to concentrate to understand him. As the conversation had turned to argument and the argument grown more heated, Treville’s accent had thickened. He’d started off speaking a Parisian dialect with only a trace of the country lurking in his vowels. Half an hour later Treville’s speech is more Gascon than French.

“You can’t veto every one of my proposals the moment I make them,” Richelieu says, exasperated. “You’re going to have to consent to some oversight. Unless you want to find out one day you’ve entrusted the King’s safety to a pack of barbaric Alphas and hormonal Omegas with swords!”

Richelieu has to fight the urge to wince as soon as the words leave his mouth. His ears ring with the imagined smack either of his odems would have dealt him for that slur. As the Grand Inquisitor of France, of course Richelieu isn’t supposed to hold a high opinion of throwbacks. But he’s always used his mandate as a gentleman not to be crude as an excuse to avoid spouting the worst stereotypes of his people. Treville, it seems, brings out the worst in Richelieu.

And the reverse seems to be true, too. Treville turns white with shock, then, rapidly, red with anger. His hand convulses around his sword-hilt. For a moment Richelieu honestly thinks Treville is going to draw on him.

The moment passes. But what happens next is almost worse.

“You son of a bitch,” Treville hisses.
Richelieu doesn’t stop the flinch this time. The insult Treville’s just hurled at him has been double-edged since antiquity, and remains today one of the worst things that can be said to another. It’s the conflation of two worlds. The son of a bitch is a pup. In the old days the insult would cut whomever it was leveled at; the Beta would bristle at the insult to their heredity, the implication that they’re the defective offspring of a pure line. The Alpha or Omega would be offended by being called a son or daughter, Betan terms that imply their bloodline is less than pure.

And today? Treville has basically called him a throwback. In the world of the Inquisition there is no greater slur.

Red-hot anger and ice-cold fear sizzle down Richelieu's spine.

“I don’t think I heard that, Captain Treville,” the Grand Inquisitor of France says, every word dripping with icy menace. “Perhaps you’d care to repeat it.”

Treville snarls, stalking closer. He gets right into Richelieu’s personal space and sticks his finger into Richelieu’s chest. He may be shorter than the Cardinal, but that does nothing to harm his aura of menace. His eyes blaze blue as the heart of flame. And he says again, enunciating carefully: “You son of a – ”

He freezes.

“Treville!” the King’s voice calls, echoing back down the hallway. “Treville, are you still in there? Come here, I want you.”

“Just a minute,” Treville shouts hoarsely. He’s staring at Richelieu like he’s seen a ghost. Richelieu blinks, honestly thrown by the sudden change in attitude. The anger is leaching out of Treville’s aura to be replaced with something Richelieu can’t identify.

Taking the breath is instinctive. Richelieu’s spent his whole life learning to pass as a Beta, but that doesn’t change his biology. Scent is still his primary sense. He’s learned to suppress the reflex to scent others – Betas generally don’t, with their weaker noses – but with Treville so close, and the shift in tone so puzzling, even a Beta would take a breath to try and gain all the information he can.

Treville’s perfume comes through clearly. It camouflages his natural scent. That’s not unusual in and of itself. Most Betas wear perfume of some kind or another, a way to generate the stronger scent they don’t produce naturally. In the old days most Betas had used scents that identified them with their clan or profession, so that they broadcast their allegiances on the nobility’s preferred channels. In the new regime Betas wear perfumes that make them smell pleasing to each other, aping the attributes of the throwback bloodlines they’d replaced.

But this close, Treville’s natural scent slips out past the covering floral scent. He’s been shouting at Richelieu for the past half hour, after all. He’s gotten angry. His emotional control has slipped. And underneath the floral tones Richelieu catches the distinct scent of cordite and grass.

Shocked blue eyes look up at Richelieu. The same blue eyes he’d seen through a haze of smoke at Pignerol. The same scent. Treville is the stranger who’d gone there to try to rescue Edmond Dantès. The one who’d stolen Richelieu’s scarf.

And, judging by the way Treville’s eyes widen, the Captain has caught Richelieu’s true scent, too.

“You,” Treville whispers in shock. “You?”

Richelieu opens his mouth – to say what, he doesn’t know. It doesn’t matter. He’s interrupted by Louis regardless.
“Treville!” the King calls, exasperated. His footsteps are coming closer.

Treville and Richelieu spring apart in the same instant. The King appears in the doorway – unlocked, may God preserve them both – and looks at the Captain of his Musketeers and his First Minister suspiciously.

“What is going on?” Louis demands. “Treville, why didn’t you follow me?”

“I just had one more matter to discuss with the Cardinal,” Treville manages to say.

Louis makes a *tsk* sound. “I told you both to take a break,” he scolds. “No more talking until you’re back from Pignerol, Treville. That’s an order. Do you understand?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Treville mutters.

“And you too, Cardinal?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Richelieu agrees. He’s amazed his voice comes out as steadily as it does.

“Come on, then, Treville. I want you to talk about the new barracks I’m building you. Richelieu, good evening.”

“Good evening, your Majesty,” Richelieu manages to say. He bows, grateful that he doesn’t have to continue to control his expression. The floor tiles won’t betray Richelieu’s astonishment.

When he straightens up, the King and the Captain have gone.
Richelieu paces the floor of his office at the Palais-Cardinal impatiently. The King had retired from court two hours ago. He’s probably asleep by now. Certainly the night guard will be on duty. The Captain of the King’s Musketeers will be at leisure.

“Cahusac knows to send Treville in immediately?” Richelieu says again.

Jussac nods. He’s leaning against the wall just next to the door, watching Richelieu pace. If the wrong person walks through that door Jussac will have them on the ground with their throat opened before they can shout. If the right person walks through –

“Relax,” Jussac says. “Treville will come.”

“For all I know he’s talking to Bonacieux right now,” Richelieu snaps.

“I doubt it. Treville’s not that kind of person.”

“The Treville you think you know is a lie. You don’t really know him.”

“Neither do you,” Jussac points out, correctly. “But I know he risked his life to save Dantès. So he’s brave. And he got your scent, which means he’s smart. Cool under pressure. That’s not the sort of person who becomes a blood traitor. You have to be a coward for that.”

“Perhaps,” Richelieu says, unwillingly relieved.

A knock sounds on the door. Jussac opens it a crack and speaks a few words, then nods and opens it fully.

“The Comte de Treville,” he announces.

Richelieu takes a deep, entirely involuntary breath.

Treville saunters in to Richelieu’s office as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. He’s still dressed in full regalia, showing off the new uniform Louis had chosen for his Musketeers. Treville has accessorized it further with a stylish blue scarf. Richelieu can guess why.

“I admit, I didn’t think it would be you,” Treville says as he enters.

“I’m astonished to hear it,” Richelieu says dryly. It’s not entirely for effect; his mouth is very dry. “You certainly seemed surprised.”

“I wanted to find you, but I had no idea how to go about it.”

“Well. I congratulate you on your success.”
“I’m sure you do. And I’m sure you want to know what I plan to do with the information I now possess.”

“I am naturally curious. But I’d be lying if I said that was the primary question on my mind.”

“No, it wouldn’t be, would it?” Treville smiles, showing his teeth. “Why don’t you go ahead and get that primary question out of the way?”

Richelieu considers his options, then shrugs. Treville isn’t beating around the bush. There’s no sense in Richelieu doing so either. Treville is a soldier; straightforward seems to be in his character. Richelieu can respect that. So he reaches into the top drawer of his desk, withdraws his pistol, and aims it at Treville.

“Go on,” Treville encourages. “Ask your question.”

The Captain isn’t showing any signs of distress or dismay at having a weapon pointed at his face. Richelieu raises an eyebrow. Treville could just be preternaturally cool under fire. A hidden throwback who’d been a member of Louis’ private retinue – it’s a fair bet this isn’t the closest Treville has ever come to death. But still. Treville acts like he has an ace up his sleeve. Richelieu wonders what it is.

Nothing for it but to find out. Richelieu dons a faint smile, and says, in the sing-song tone of a pup reciting a nursery rhyme, “Give me one good reason why I should let you live.”

Treville returns the smile in kind. Slowly, carefully enough that Richelieu doesn’t interpret it as a threat and fire prematurely, Treville raises his hands to his throat. To the scarf he wears, in fact. Richelieu had already suspected that it contains a hefty dose of the perfume which masks Treville’s scent. This is confirmed when Treville removes it. Along with something else Richelieu had not expected.

Pre-heat.

“I’m surprised you didn’t guess it already,” Treville says wryly. “From one throwback to another. What on earth would the King need me to look at for him at Pignerol? The way the trees are burning? It’s an excuse. I can’t exactly take traditional heat-leave.”

Richelieu’s eyes fly open wide. For the first time in a long time he’s genuinely flabbergasted. “The King – the King –”

“Knows about me,” Treville says calmly.

“For how long?”

“Since I came to court. I had no hope of concealing it without his help. If a member of his retinue disappeared every three months without fail it would raise questions.”

Richelieu stares at Treville. A thousand ideas dart rapidly through his head. If the King knows, if the King permits this –

“The Musketeers!” he blurts out. Suddenly Louis’ attitude makes perfect sense. If the King knows Treville is a throwback, and has for whatever incomprehensible reason decided to defy God and the Cardinal in order to protect him, what better way to do it than to give Treville control of an entire regiment? With the current haphazard state of Inquisitorial oversight of military matters, the commander of each unit decides how throwback hunts are conducted. As Captain, Treville could hide himself easily. And it explains why Louis had been so insistent that Richelieu have no
involvement with their formation. Indeed, a number of things make a great deal more sense.

Treville acknowledges this with a nod and a smile. “The Musketeers.”

How far does it go? The Captaincy of an entire regiment gives Treville the opportunity to protect more than just himself. Has Louis considered this? If they can be kept safe – a regiment full of throwbacks could be the best protection the King has. They’d have nothing to lose. And they’d be loyal beyond measure to the person who gives them shelter.

“Shall I take it that you are no longer planning to kill me?” Treville prompts after Richelieu is silent for a few moments too many. “If so, the least you could do is offer me a chair.”

Treville’s smiling triumphantly. Richelieu can’t blame him. It’s wrong, Richelieu knows, a potentially fatal weakness. But he can’t kill an Omega in heat. Even if it’s just pre-heat. Even if it’s obvious that Treville has chosen to press the issue tonight, instead of waiting until his apparent return from Pignerol, deliberately to manipulate Richelieu through his instincts.

Even if, intellectually, Richelieu knows that it doesn’t matter. He’d known Treville is an Omega when the Captain had walked into Richelieu’s office; the question isn’t whether Treville is a throwback, but whether he’s a blood traitor. Heat changes nothing.

Heat changes everything. Treville’s scent may be the only thing about him that’s vulnerable. But the idea of raising a hand to an Omega in heat is repellent.

Richelieu lowers his pistol, setting it back in its drawer. Distantly, Richelieu notices that his hand is trembling.

It’s stupid. Treville’s is hardly the first heat scent Richelieu’s ever caught. His odems and carrier don’t count – they’d been his blood, his pack – but in his work with the Resistance he’s often been around strange Omegas. No one can choose when they’ll be exposed by the Inquisition; Richelieu has had to smuggle Omegas in full heat over the border, or hide them until patrols have passed, squeezed into hidden rooms or underground sewers or tiny hay barns. Some of them had actively tried to seduce him. Others had simply been driven close to distress by their fear and anxiety. Some had thought they’d owed him something in gratitude for his help. Richelieu has seen it all. And he’s turned it all down.

So there’s no reason for Treville’s scent to make him feel like a young Alpha who’s just popped his knot. No reason at all. Richelieu takes a deep breath to calm himself. His intent is to breathe in his own perfume, generously layered on the inside of his collar for just this sort of situation. But something goes awry. Instead he gets a lungful of Treville, and has to work very hard to retain his outward calm.

“I thought so,” Treville says softly as Richelieu lowers his pistol. On the surface his tone sounds satisfied. Beneath it, though, something empty and resigned lurks.

“Where do you intend to go, if not to Pignerol?” Richelieu demands. It’s not the question he means to ask. He means to focus on the all-important question of Richelieu’s identity, which Treville possesses, and what Treville intends to do with this knowledge. But with that damnable scent still lingering in his nostrils Richelieu finds himself distracted.


“It’s safe for you there?”

“Of course not.” Treville’s laugh has little mirth. “Why do you think I left in the first place? But it’s
Richelieu presses his lips together. *Safer than Paris* is not sufficient. Frankly, it’s unacceptable. Richelieu’s primary calling, until Alfonse’s departure, had been the Resistance, not the Underground. But that doesn’t mean he’s never had to see the aftermath of what happens when an Omega is caught in heat without protection. He doesn’t usually have nightmares, but…

“That depends on where you are in Paris,” Richelieu finds himself saying. “There are rooms here that are equipped for safety.”

Treville blinks in what appears to be honest surprise. “Me? You’re really… you’d offer that?”

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of answering my questions,” Richelieu says sternly.

“Believe me, I knew that if I walked in here, I wasn’t walking out without satisfying you.” Treville shrugs. “Ask your questions. But when you’re done, I’ll ask mine.”

Richelieu nods. Then he looks past Treville’s shoulder to where Jussac is still waiting, just inside the door. “Prepare a chamber for our guest,” he instructs.

Jussac nods. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he says significantly.

Treville waits until the door is closed again. Then he saunters up to Richelieu’s desk and drops into the visitor’s chair placed opposite it.

“Ask,” he says.

“You turned up unannounced at the site of a secure operation. What were you doing there?”

“Rescuing Edmond Dantès.”

“Edmond Dantès wasn’t being held at Pignerol.”

“He was being transferred there. I had no idea you were using that as a pretext for a jailbreak.”

“You should have had no idea that he was being transferred there.”

“Prison transfer records aren’t particularly secure. One of your clerks didn’t see the value in keeping his mouth shut – at least not compared to what I offered him.”

Richelieu makes a noncommittal noise. “So we’re back to this. Once again I am asked to believe that you single-handedly infiltrated the Inquisition’s most secure prison in order to rescue one man.”

“I thought you said throwbacks weren’t men.”

“Do you really think I meant that as an insult?”

Treville’s lips thin. “You made a similar comment later.”

Despite himself, Richelieu winces. “I was wrong,” he admits. “I was angry and spoke without thinking.”

“Is that really what you think of yourself?” Treville demands. “Barbaric?”

“No more than I really think you’re hormonal,” Richelieu says, and has the satisfaction of watching Treville’s expression blank suddenly. It had been a guess, but he’d guessed right: that comment,
hormonal Omegas with swords, had been what had really gotten to Treville.

“I’m sorry,” Richelieu says again. “And for what it’s worth, I think it’s wonderful that you would go to such lengths to rescue Dantès. I just have to be sure.”

“It’s my fault Dantès was exposed,” Treville repeats. “I persuaded Louis to form the Musketeers so there would be a regiment in the King’s army that was safe for throwbacks. You must know, better than anyone, how dangerous the army is for our people right now.”

“I do know it,” Richelieu says earnestly. “That’s why I’m trying to persuade Louis to give me greater oversight into military screening. Right now the process is so haphazard no one can be safe. If I can get control of the process, standardize it, build the right loopholes in – ”

Treville laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s why I was trying so hard to keep you away from the Musketeers,” Treville says, still chuckling a little. “So I could do the same thing.”

Richelieu relaxes, smiling a little. “Well. I think we’ve finally discovered the root of our disagreement, then.”

“And how,” Treville agrees.

“I see,” Richelieu says. He does. If Treville is telling the truth, it’s a powerful reason. Others have joined the Resistance for less.

He studies the Captain more closely. So little about Treville’s history gives any clue to his true character. Not a devout Catholic at all. Nor a bigot. The father’s death probably was of natural causes after all. But –

“Your brother,” Richelieu says abruptly. “How did he die?”

Treville’s face closes off like the slamming of a door. “That’s private,” he says shortly. “And if you’re done asking all of your other questions, I’ll go ahead and ask mine.”

“All right,” Richelieu says, taken aback. He’s not done asking, but he’s obviously stepped on a land mine, and in the moment it takes him to recover Treville seizes the conversational reins.

“I’ll cut to the chase,” he says. "I want in.”

Richelieu stares. “In? In on what, exactly?”

“Oh whatever you have going on.” Treville glances back at the door, as if reassuring himself that it’s really closed, and leans closer regardless. “I’m not stupid. At Pignerol you had half a dozen people with you. You acted as if you were used to working with each other. You had hand signals, a plan of attack, clear escape routes. I’m a soldier. I noticed. This wasn’t the first time you’d done such things, was it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Richelieu says dismissively. Despite his outward disdain, his heart begins to beat faster in his chest. Damn it, how had Treville noticed all of that? How long had he been there, in the shadows, watching them work?

“No? Then let me make it clear. I saw a well-trained, well-armed, experienced group of commandos
break and burn a well-fortified building. Meanwhile in Rome last week, the Pope executed twelve throwbacks caught with outdated hand cannons and a barrel of powder, which his Holiness claimed was a throwback resistance. Shall I go on, or is that clear enough for you?"

“Perfectly,” Richelieu grinds. “There will be no need to speak further, I thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Treville returns. He plants his hands on Richelieu’s desk and leans in. “I want to join the Resistance. You can make that happen for me. Vouch for me, take me to its leader – ”

“Why should I do that?”

“You can’t still think that I’m a threat!”

“Why not?”

“I told you. I told you what you wanted to know. I was at Pignerol to rescue Dantès – ”

“If destroying the Resistance were easy the Church would have done it by now,” Richelieu snaps.

“But – ” Treville starts.

The startled jump Treville makes when the door swings open is oddly gratifying. Jussac enters as usual, not batting an eye at the odd tableau.

“The usual room has been prepared,” the Red Guardsman announces.

“Thank you, Jussac,” Richelieu says. He stands. “Perhaps you had better retire now, Captain.”


“You can hardly expect me to decide that so quickly,” Richelieu points out. “After all, I have yet to see what you’re capable of. Nor what you can offer me in return.”

“What I can – ” Treville’s eyes widen. “You can’t be serious.”

Richelieu raises an eyebrow. “I assure you, I am deadly serious. You cannot have been unaware that there must be certain qualifications?”

After all, if desire were enough to gain admission to the Resistance, their ranks would be tripled – and they’d be exposed in about ten seconds flat. Richelieu evaluates each new member carefully. Treville’s position and damnably enticing scent do not procure him an exception. The Resistance survives by being lean. Even if a recruit is willing, and has the necessary mental fortitude, and is not deemed to be a security risk, still they will not be admitted to the Resistance unless they bring some necessary skill set to the ranks. Just as the more elite regiments of the King’s army does not admit every youth with a sword, neither does the Resistance admit every throwback with a grudge.

As Treville should be in a unique position to understand. His Musketeers are meant to be the best of the best. And Richelieu doesn’t truly doubt that Treville will fail to prove his certifications. If the Captain could infiltrate Pignerol, he’ll certainly have other skills of value. But Richelieu has no intention of making a snap decision. He will follow his usual screening process to the letter. And if that’s because of snapping blue eyes and an appealing scent – rather than in spite of them – that’s between Richelieu and God.

“My dear Captain,” Richelieu adds, when Treville doesn’t respond immediately. “You can hardly be surprised.”
“No,” Treville says after a moment. He sounds as if he has to force the words out. “I suppose I’m not. I thought that perhaps the Resistance might be different than every other organization, but why should it be, after all.”

“The Resistance is different in a number of ways. Which we will discuss – after your heat is done.”

“Not a lot of talking during heat, in my experience,” Treville agrees resignedly.

Richelieu can understand that. Being trapped in the home of a strange Alpha can’t be Treville’s ideal way to spend heat, even if it is safer than whatever he’d planned in his home province.

“Do you have a mate somewhere?” Richelieu asks dubiously. Treville would probably have said something already, if there were an Alpha in Gascony waiting for his arrival. But the Captain’s acting oddly all of a sudden. Richelieu doesn’t know what to think.

“No. You don’t have to worry about that. No one’s going to bang down your door trying to defend my virtue.”

Someone knocks on the door again. Jussac opens it. Cahusac leans partway into the room and speaks rapidly to Jussac in an undertone.

“Excuse me, your Eminence,” Jussac says to Richelieu. “A small matter has arisen – if I might be excused for a moment – ”

“Go on,” Richelieu says, waving Jussac out. “I will escort the Captain to his quarters myself. The usual room, you said?”

Jussac nods. “Are you sure, though?” he asks dubiously.

“Yes, yes. We’ll be fine. Go and deal with whatever it is.”

“Yes, your Eminence.” Jussac gives Richelieu a stern look as he leaves, Cahusac at his heels.

“So you do this often,” Treville says.

Richelieu drags his thoughts back to his guest. “Excuse me?”

“You have a usual room,” Treville clarifies. The scarf is still dangling loosely from one hand. Richelieu expects Treville to put it back on. His scent is starting to grow overpowering. Perhaps it’s because of their proximity to each other, but the scent is starting to change, too, the sweetness of pre-heat giving way to the spicy lure of heat itself.

Treville doesn’t put the scarf back on. Instead he lays it carefully on Richelieu’s desk and raises his hands back to his neck, where he begins to unbutton his tunic.

“I offer shelter to anyone in need,” Richelieu says, distracted. “What are you doing?”

Again, Treville offers him that cheeky/resigned smile. “I’m in need,” he says. “And you’re offering me shelter.” The wink he delivers leaves no room to interpret his meaning.

Richelieu jumps to his feet and pushes away from his desk, shocked. “Stop!”

Treville ignores this. “No point in waiting,” he says. His cheerfulness is obviously false. “Can’t have you changing your mind.”

“Changing my mind?” Richelieu’s voice climbs. “I haven’t made up my mind!”
“Don’t play coy,” Treville snaps, suddenly angry. He finishes unbuttoning his tunic and stops, gripping the edges of the fabric with both hands and glaring furiously at Richelieu. “And don’t try to back out of your end of the deal, either.”

“There is no deal!” Richelieu shouts. “You can’t just waltz in here with a list of demands and a heat scent that could stun the Pope and expect me to roll over for you! That’s not a deal, that’s – that’s –”

“That’s the way things are done,” Treville says, completing the sentence. “You said it yourself.”

“I said –”

“You want me. I can tell. Well, you can have me. As long as you give me what I want.”

Treville gives a gentle shrug. His tunic slides off his shoulders to fall on the ground. And Richelieu’s brain stutters completely to a halt.

Naked to the waist, Treville is lightly tanned, broadly built, and well-muscled. There’s no hair on his chest, just about the only external sign from the waist up that Richelieu is looking at an Omega instead of a Beta. Armand catches himself wondering how Treville had built up that musculature. His eyes briefly rest on a scar low on Treville’s ribcage – made by a rapier, by the looks of it – then dart up against Armand’s will to linger on the dusky nipples. They’re already lightening to a rosy pink as Treville’s heat rises and his blood redistributes itself. Richelieu orders himself not to look higher. He doesn’t want to see the smooth, unmarked expanse of Treville’s right shoulder. He doesn’t want to – He does want. Oh, Deus, does he want. There’s nothing he has ever wanted more than to stride forward and seize, claim, take, breed –

Jussac comes back in without knocking. “Never mind, your Eminence, Cahusac has it in hand.”

Richelieu freezes in place, already mid-step towards Treville. Why hadn’t Jussac knocked? Richelieu isn’t an exhibitionist. Jussac may be a Beta, and loyal, but right now all of Richelieu’s instincts scream that Jussac is competition. Only one of them can have the Omega. Richelieu growls, making his claim clear.

“That’s right,” Treville whispers. He holds out a hand. Palm up, wrist up, scent glands exposed and filling the air. “You can have whatever you want.”

And that stops Richelieu dead in his tracks. Because now he can smell it, clearly, in Treville’s rising scent. Self-hatred. Resignation. Despair.

Richelieu swallows hard. “Jussac,” he says, voice barely above a whisper. “Please escort our guest to his chamber. Lock him in. And don’t tell me where the key is.”

“Right,” Jussac says grimly. To Treville he says: “Come on.”

“Wait,” Treville says. “What do you mean, lock me in?”

“Exactly what I said.” Richelieu moistens his lips. “You’ll spend your heat alone.”

“But what about –” Treville waves his hands at himself. “Don’t you want me?”

“No,” Richelieu says. It’s a lie. A surprisingly hard one to tell, for a man who usually lies as easily as breathing.
It’s also the truth. He doesn’t know what’s going on here, and now’s not the time to find out. But he knows that Treville doesn’t really want Richelieu. He knows that Treville doesn’t offer himself willingly. And he knows he’ll be damned if he lays a finger on Treville regardless – no matter how terribly, seductively, *sinfully* enticing that heat scent may be.

Treville’s eyes widen. He looks suddenly afraid. The situation’s not progressing the way he had obviously expected. Richelieu understands the feeling. Neither of them are in control right now.

“Come on,” Jussac says gruffly. “Talk about it later. Let’s get you behind a closed door for now.”

“But…” Treville protests faintly.

“I think that would be best,” Richelieu manages. His self-control is stretched nearly to the limit.

Treville looks at him desperately, almost pleadingly. It’s getting harder to remember that the Omega doesn’t actually want to do this.

“Go,” Richelieu orders. Somehow he manages to turn his back. It doesn’t do anything for the scent. He can still smell Treville as Jussac steers him out of the room.

The sound of the closing door cuts off the last of Richelieu’s control. He collapses into his desk chair and stares at nothing, trying not to breathe.

The next two days pass in a blur. Richelieu begs off court attendance, neglects his correspondence, and turns the planning on two delicate operations almost entirely over to Jussac. There are a dozen things Richelieu should be doing at any given moment. But the only thing that can hold is attention for more than a few minutes is the Omega in heat in the guest wing of the Palais-Cardinal.

Treville had offered himself to Richelieu. Richelieu spends a lot of time desperately reminding himself of the empty resignation that had underlay every word Treville had spoken on the subject. Of the damning statement *you can have me – as long as you give me what I want.*

Treville hadn’t offered himself freely. He hadn’t done it out of love, or mutual desire, or even just curiosity and a preference for spending heat with an Alpha instead of getting through it alone. Treville had done it as an exchange. A bargaining chip. He’d offered his body and his heat as if it were just another form of currency, and he’d made it clear he’d expected to get value for it in return.

It makes Richelieu furious, for reasons he doesn’t care to examine too closely.

Balked of the ability to speak to Treville directly, Richelieu pours his frustrations into completing a deeper investigation into Treville’s character and background in record time. A single key piece of information makes everything clearer: the bloodline is not called *Treville*, but *Troisville*, in the Gascon dialect, after the name of the estate. That knowledge makes the records Richelieu needs much easier to find. It also explains several gaps in Treville’s family history. The Troisville line had never been high nobility, but it had been old blood nonetheless.

Richelieu closes the old genealogical books with a sigh and goes to replace them in their secret vault. A fire in Treville’s grandsire’s time had destroyed most of the local records – probably not accidentally – but the Richelieus had kept copies for as many families as they could. One day, God willing, those records will be useful to prove descent after the Inquisition has been destroyed and throwbacks can come forward to claim their rightful inheritance. And in the meanwhile, it lets Richelieu verify Treville’s lineage, which lets him trace Treville’s personal history, which lets him prove, finally, that Treville is not a blood traitor.
So that much is settled. And his spies are easily able to validate the breadth of Treville’s skills. The Captain would be a great asset to the Resistance. There’s nothing stopping Richelieu from admitting Treville. Nothing except the disquiet in his own heart.

Late on the morning of the third day, Jussac takes custody of several dispatches Armand has written and adds, “The Captain’s come out of it now, by the way. Went down to bathe this morning. Ate a good breakfast, too.”

Richelieu doesn’t react outwardly. “Thank you, Jussac,” he says repressively. “I’ll go pay him a visit, then.”

Jussac gives him a knowing smile regardless. Richelieu ignores it.

He waits until Jussac has left, bearing the dispatches, before walking down the hallway to the guest quarters and knocking on the correct door.

There’s no immediate response from within the chambers. Briefly he wonders if Jussac had been mistaken and Richelieu has come too soon. But finally Treville calls, “Come in.”

Richelieu obeys. He takes in the state of the room at a glance. Thank God, Treville’s redressed. He’d been half afraid he’d find the Musketeer still naked, still determined to tempt Richelieu into sin. Treville does sit on the room’s palatial bed, surrounded by its disarranged coverings and radiating the fading vestiges of his heat scent. But he doesn’t look seductive. He looks like a cornered animal, ready to bite.

“Do you need anything?” Richelieu still asks. He finds himself counting water pitchers automatically: one, two, three. Only three? Treville must be thirsty. He can get –


“What kind of explanation?” Richelieu asks warily.

“I just spent two days in this room alone. I’d like to know why.”

“Ironically, my question to you is similar,” Richelieu says carefully. “I’d like to know why you expected anything else.”

Treville grins self-deprecatingly. “Well, not to sound immodest, but no one’s ever turned me down before.”

There it is again, the flash of white-hot anger Richelieu’s spent the last two days trying to understand.

“Has the sample size been particularly large?” Richelieu bites out.

Treville stiffens. “Large enough,” he snaps. “I suppose you’ve never had to do whatever it takes to survive. Look at you. Throwback royalty, huh? Probably whelped on an estate with all the comforts of the old nobility. Heir to the Richelieu line. Blew up your first prison when you were five.”

“Fifteen,” Richelieu says, showing his teeth. “In point of fact.”

“Excuse me, your Eminence. Fifteen. Well, that explains it then. I suppose you were too busy playing Maquis and Inquisitors to come and do anything for those of us who weren’t whelped lucky. I had to fend for myself, and I’ll never apologize for surviving.”

“I’m not asking for an apology,” Richelieu hisses. “I’m asking for names.”
Treville, on the verge of saying something else, stops. “Names?”

“Anyone venal enough to take a bribe needs to be dealt with,” Richelieu says loftily.

Treville snorts. “Oh, please. You’re just offended that anyone would barter sex for survival. Well, fuck you. I couldn’t give you a list if I wanted to. There have been too many to count.”

Richelieu flinches.

“And that offends you,” Treville muses, watching him. “Why? Are you that puritanical? Or is it a little more primal than that? Want to keep all the Omegas for yourself? Well, you had your shot at me. But I guess I’m too tainted to pass muster.”

“I’m getting you another water pitcher,” Richelieu says. It’s that, or say something he’ll truly regret. “Wait here.”

“Richelieu – ”

Richelieu sweeps out of the room. It takes him several minutes of deep breathing before he feels steady enough to walk down to the kitchens and back. Treville doesn’t attempt to follow him. When Richelieu returns and sets the new pitcher down next to the three empty ones, Treville is still in exactly the same position he’d been when Richelieu had left.

“You need to drink,” Richelieu says, pouring from the new pitcher into the goblet. It’s crystal, inset with gems, and meant for holding wine at a fancy dinner party. Richelieu holds many such parties. They’re showy affairs, filled with the nobility of blood and the aristocracy of hate. Richelieu loathes them beyond words. Filling the priceless goblet with water from the kitchen pump and handing it to the Omega in his bedroom is the first decent use the goblet has ever seen.

Treville takes it warily. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Drink.”

“Is this some kind of Alpha thing? You’re trying to take care of me?” Treville considers the goblet. “Is that what you want? To play protective family Alpha? I can do that.”

“I want you to have a drink. I’m sure you’re thirsty. Alfonse always was after heat.” Richelieu winces as soon as the words are out of his mouth. He hadn’t meant to talk about Alfonse. The memories are still too raw and painful.

Naturally, Treville notices. “You didn’t really kill him, did you?” he demands. For the first time Treville sounds upset about something other than Richelieu’s rejection of Treville’s body. “If you did – ”

“I didn’t.”

“What happened to him?”

“Drink your water and I’ll tell you,” Richelieu bargains.

Treville laughs, an ugly sound. “Why would you want to tell me anything so personal? Aren’t you still deciding whether I’m a threat?”

“You’re not. My people have spent the last two days to some purpose.”

Treville blinks rapidly, thinking. “Oh,” he says faintly. “Oh, I was thinking too small, before, wasn’t
I? You’re not going to take me to the leader of the Resistance. You are the leader of the Resistance.”

Richelieu bows ironically.

“All right,” Treville says. He drinks the water, then looks at Richelieu expectantly.

“Alfonse is in Russia.” Richelieu takes a chair and drags it a little away from the wall. He may as well sit down; this conversation might take a while. “The hunting grounds are a sham. There’s a safehouse in the center. The old farm house, from when my family first settled on the land. Later it was converted into a hunting lodge. My great-grandfather made it the headquarters of the Resistance, when the Inquisition first came to France.”

“An old farm-house, hmm? Kitchen garden, well, stables –”

“Everything it needs to be self-sufficient,” Richelieu agrees. “Endangered throwbacks can stay there for weeks while they wait for their chance to slip over the border.”

“How long did Alfonse stay there?”

“Only a day.” Richelieu clears his throat impatiently; it’s gotten tight all of a sudden. “He and his mate took one of the protected routes into Savoy, but they couldn’t stay so close, not when Alfonse’s face was known from here to Rome. Savoy maintains its neutrality dearly; they’d be crushed if it became known they were harboring a fugitive of Alfonse’s stature.”

“Where did he end up?”

“Russia.” Half the world away, it seems like. Too far to ever come home. Too far for Armand to ever visit. Gone forever.

“The pups?”

Richelieu looks away. “One lives. One… whelped sleeping.”

“I’m sorry,” Treville says. For the first time he sounds sincere.

“I answered your question,” Richelieu says, brushing this aside. He’s not ready to deal with Treville’s sympathy. “Now you answer mine.”

“That wasn’t the deal. The deal was I drink the water, and you answer my question.”

“The deal is, you answer my questions, and I decide whether or not to have you shot.” It’s mostly a joke. Richelieu’s already told Treville he’s determined Treville is not a threat.

“You won’t shoot me,” Treville says, no doubt remembering Richelieu’s words as well. “I’m just a poor, vulnerable Omega who’s dependent on your protection.”

Treville sits up straighter and brings his knees up to his chest, making himself look small and young. And, yes, vulnerable. But not in the way that Treville probably thinks. Treville doesn’t stop looking as if he’s two steps away from physical violence. But he starts looking as if he’s been in this position many times before, in a strange sire’s bed, bargaining for his life.

“Does that work?” Richelieu asks through a dry throat.

“You’d be surprised how often,” Treville says tightly.

“Tell me,” Richelieu says impulsively.
Treville looks taken aback. “Surely you know better than I do,” he says, apparently forgetting that he’d accused Richelieu of being whelped with a silver spoon in his mouth not that long ago.

“Tell me anyway.”

“I’m an Omega,” Treville says, as if Richelieu could somehow, unfathomably, have been unaware of that fact. “The Inquisition says I’m a mindless, heat-muddled, sex-driven animal. That my only purpose in existence is to swing off an Alpha’s knot. Or a Beta’s cock, if they’re lucky enough to catch me. I’m a Beta woman’s biggest fear and a Beta man’s biggest wet dream. Oh, sure, they’re supposed to turn me in to the Inquisition. But every one of them thinks: an Omega’s not that dangerous, an Omega doesn’t have a brain anyway, if I just keep my mouth shut I can have the perfect sex slave.”

Richelieu can hardly breathe. “So – ”

“So they close their mouths and open their pants,” Treville says crudely. “They get what they want, and I get what I need.”

“Which is – ”

“A border guard looking the other way. An official’s signature on a paper he hasn’t read. A midwife’s word that a pup was stillborn.”

“But – ” The implications leave Richelieu dizzy. “But those are all things the Underground does!”

“Yeah? Then where was it when I was growing up?”

Richelieu stares at him. “Here,” he says weakly. “It’s been here all along.”

“Well, I never saw it. And I never knew anyone else who had, either. You say it exists – all right. But it’s not doing enough. Throwbacks were slipping through the cracks. Someone had to do something.”

“And that someone was you?”

“Who else?”

Richelieu doesn’t have an answer to that. Nor does he have an answer to the feeling of failure sitting like lead in his stomach.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. It’s not enough. It’s nowhere near enough.

Treville shrugs. “Things are better here in Paris, I’ll admit. Good thing, too. In Gascony, if you say you slept with an Omega, everyone just thinks you’re bragging. Someone in Paris might be taken seriously.”

“So you haven’t been – ” It would explain why news of it has never reached Richelieu’s ears.

“Louis is open-handed. I’ve been able to buy everyone I needed to off the old-fashioned way. They never had see my face, much less my hole.”

Richelieu flinches.

Treville sees it. He sighs. “Leave it be. Unless you’re going to tell me the Underground is in your charge too, I don’t see what you have to apologize for.”
Richelieu doesn’t say anything. After a moment Treville’s eyes widen.

“You?”

“I – ”

“But what about the Resistance?”

“I – ”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me you’re doing both?”

“Well – ”

“You’re insane,” Treville says flatly.

Richelieu bristles. “It’s a temporary state of affairs,” he defends.

“Really.” Treville presses his lips together. “How temporary?”

“Well – ”

“What happened to the person who used to run the Underground?”

“Alfonse is in Russia,” Richelieu repeats, and doesn’t wince.

“Oh,” Treville says after a moment. “I see. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all – ”

“But who were you going to replace him with?”

“I don’t know,” Richelieu admits. Even the thought makes something yawn open inside him. Alfonse is not replaceable.

Treville’s gaze softens. “You’re entitled to your grief,” he says after a moment. “But not at the expense of other peoples’ lives. Did you know people were dying?”

“No,” Richelieu says, stung. “No, I – I thought everything was still okay.”

“Something like the Underground – if my own experience is any judge – it needs constant attention. People don’t stay bribed. Pups aren’t whelped knowing how to pass. Papers don’t forge themselves. It’s a full-time job. More than a full-time job.”

“The Resistance is like that too,” Richelieu points out defensively.

“And that’s what you’re used to,” Treville says shrewdly. “You’re familiar with its needs, so you’re putting them first. And I bet the results – or lack thereof – are more visible, right? A mass execution in the heart of Paris, and you know you’ve failed. A prison burnt to the ground and its prisoners freed, and you know you’ve succeeded. But the pup who’s drowned in the well by its mother dies in silence. News of an Alpha lynched in a small town never reaches your desk. The Omega who spreads their legs for their father to buy his silence keeps it a secret because they’re so ashamed.”

Richelieu’s throat closes up. He wants to say something, anything, to make his failure less. But there’s simply nothing to be said.
“Maybe things were better when your odem was still around,” Treville says after a moment. “I wouldn’t know. I only came to Paris after his death.”

“But when you were young?” Richelieu manages to ask. He’s terribly afraid he already knows the answer.

Treville just shrugs. “I don’t hold that against you,” he says, side-stepping the question. “I’m noble. The Underground was never going to help me. My line was supposed to protect me. Not your fault they didn’t.”

Richelieu tries to see it that way. He gives up after only a moment. There’s no point. He’s never going to view a crime against any throwback as being anything other than his own personal failure. But Treville hadn’t answered the question. And Richelieu has to know.

“Your father?” Because that last example had sounded personal. Too personal.

“No,” Treville says, shaking his head. “No, my father did the best he could for me. My mother died giving birth to me, so it was only him. He hid me from everyone, even my older brother, until he died.”

Richelieu zeroes in on the critical part of this sentence immediately. “Your brother?”

Treville’s little huff of breath has nothing of laughter to it. “He was nineteen when I had my first heat. He’d already fucked half the girls in the village, swaggering around with his title and his friends. He thought an Omega slut was nothing more than his due as the Comte.”

Something creaks. After a moment, Richelieu realizes it’s the chair in which he’s sitting. At some point he’d gripped the armrests tight with both hands. The wood is flexing beneath his fingers.

The hunting-accident that hadn’t been an accident. The lies. The cover-ups. They all make sense now, in a terrible, terrible way. The brother’s death hadn’t been down to a bloodthirsty younger sibling willing to murder their way to a title. Treville would have been a frightened young Omega protecting himself from a predator. A predator who had been supposed to protect his odem – but in a world with the Inquisition, such ties too often count for worse than nothing.

“The closed casket?” Richelieu asks after a moment, when he’s gone himself somewhat more under control.

Treville looks down for a moment, as if he’s ashamed. “I got carried away,” he whispers. “I’d never – he was my first. I may have gone a little crazy after my heat cleared. I – I didn’t just kill him.”

Richelieu imagines a dozen mutilations the younger Treville might have inflicted on the rapist who’d stolen his innocence. “Good,” he says vehemently.

Treville glances back up. Their eyes catch and hold. Tentatively, Treville smiles.

“This is hokey. I’m sure you’d’ve taken much better care of me than my brother did. He didn’t have a knot.” Treville waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Richelieu knows it’s meant to be a joke, knows Treville is trying to lighten the mood, but he can’t help recoiling at the suggestion. Revulsion washes through him. It’s bad enough that Treville had had to survive his brother’s lust. Worse that he’s had to sell his body a dozen times over to protect people that Richelieu has failed. That Treville still believes that Richelieu might want to add his name to the list of Treville’s rapists –
“I don’t mean it like that,” Treville says wearily, watching Richelieu’s reaction. His smile’s disappeared, too. For an insane moment Richelieu wants to reach out his hand and catch it, put it back on Treville’s face.

Treville goes on, “You’ve made your position on that perfectly clear. Well, I won’t apologize for doing what I had to do, even if it apparently means I’m beneath your touch. Forget the Resistance. You need me for the Underground. You don’t have the time or the resources to run both organizations yourself. Frankly, I doubt you know how to run the Underground. With how quickly you had to get your odem out of town, did he even have time to teach you? So you’re going to hand it over to me.”

“I – what –” Richelieu sputters. He doesn’t know which allegation is more ridiculous: that Richelieu thinks Treville is somehow sullied by his past, or the idea that he’s going to hand half of his clan’s life’s work off to Treville simply because the Musketeer demands it.

“Yes, to me,” Treville repeats. “I know what needs doing. God knows, I’ve been doing it. Give me your contacts, give me your resources, give me your blessing, and I’ll save the lives you can’t. If you give a damn about any of us you’ll put your pride aside and do it!”

“It’s not about my pride!” Richelieu hisses. “It’s about making sure – it’s a sacred trust!”

“People are dying,” Treville says coldly. “You can’t save them all. I can help. If you don’t let me then it really is about pride.”

Richelieu gapes at him. “How dare you! Just because I won’t turn it over to the first throwback to waltz in here and ask –”

“Then tell me what you want!” Treville cries. “Tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

Richelieu sets his jaw. “If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it my way,” he says firmly. “A trial. You begin by taking over some of the routine elements. The sort of things I can rebuild if it goes wrong.”

“Your faith in me is inspiring,” Treville mutters.

Richelieu ignores this. “You’re going to stay in constant contact with me. You’re going to talk to me. Regularly. You’re going to keep me involved at every step of the way.”

“You sound like you want to live at my side,” Treville snipes.

“I’m certainly going to find that out,” Richelieu snaps.

Treville gasps. He pales in anger, and for a moment Richelieu thinks Treville’s going to take a swing at him.

The moment passes. Instead Treville says, cutting, “I suppose now I know what all your fine words about morality are worth.”

Richelieu ignores this. His conscience is clear: he’d demand the same oversight of anyone he put in charge of the Underground. Treville will learn that soon enough. Well, that, or Richelieu will have to have him killed after all.

Instead he says, “Do we have a deal?”

Richelieu holds out his hand.
Treville ignores it. Instead he spits on the floor at Richelieu’s feet, the way the lower classes do to seal bargains, and smiles grimly when Richelieu recoils.

“That’s your problem right there,” Treville says. “That’s why you need me. Yes, your Eminence. We have a deal.”
Nearly three months after Pignerol Prison had gone up in flames, Richelieu and Treville are sharing dinner together at the Palais-Cardinal, as has become their habit. It’s not one they advertise, despite the many legitimate excuses they have of working together. Louis gets worried if Treville spends too much time alone with Richelieu. Since revealing Richelieu’s sex to Louis is completely out of the question – Treville admits frankly he’s lucky Louis has kept him hidden for so long – Richelieu and Treville conveniently fail to mention their close working relationship to the King.

Much like they don’t advertise the fact that much of the business that gets taken care of in their meetings isn’t, strictly speaking, the King’s business. Though Treville thinks that Louis would approve of the Underground if it became known to him beyond the usual rumors. Treville insists that Louis is more liberal than Richelieu thinks. Richelieu is willing to bow to Treville’s superior knowledge of the monarch, but he’s inherently more conservative in his approach than Treville is, and he continues to assume Louis’ enmity when planning policy. Besides, behind the King stands the Queen. Behind the Queen stands Spain – and the Inquisition.

“I just think you’re selling Louis short,” Treville says for the hundredth time, taking up his goblet from across the table. Dinner is nothing more than a few chicken bones on each of their plates and a half-full bottle of wine they’re sharing across the small table. The full dining-room at the Palais-Cardinal can seat sixty. The private dining hall accommodates perhaps four. Usually it contains one. But lately, more often than not it’s contained two. Richelieu likes it.

He likes it a little too much, truth be told. He squashes such thoughts ruthlessly when they come to him. Richelieu tries not to make a habit of self-deception. He knows he cares for Treville beyond friendship. Over the last three months, their relationship has deepened. With every revelation of Treville’s character Richelieu’s regard and admiration has deepened. If Richelieu were a free man he’d offer his suit. But the Resistance is a jealous mate. Richelieu can have no other.

“In the final analysis Louis won’t defy Anne,” Richelieu disagrees, as he always does. “So it doesn’t matter.”

“He might. If it were important enough. He might.”

“What’s important enough? Louis doesn’t measure importance the way we do. He’s an odd King,” Richelieu muses.

“It won’t be nations or armies that would move him. It would be something else. Something smaller. Something… individual. He doesn’t think about the big things. I’m not sure he can hold them all in his mind at once. But the small things, the personal things – those he identifies with far too well.”

“Don’t I know it,” Richelieu says with a rueful sigh. “Trying to keep him focused on affairs of state is like trying to convince a mayfly to plan for next week’s rainstorm.”

“Louis may be odd, but he’s empathetic if it’s the right thing,” Treville insists. “If it were about Anne, maybe. Or their children. Assuming they ever have children.”

“Please, don’t start that, too. I had to spend most of yesterday reassuring the King on that very point.” Richelieu sighs. It had been an unusually trying conversation. He’d long since grown used to considering other people’s offspring with equanimity. But yesterday that detachment had been hard to summon.
"Do you know what the problem is? The King visits her bedchamber regularly, from what I saw when I still lived at the Louvre."

"The Queen has sought advice from several experts on fertility," Richelieu says. "Unfortunately, such learned men tend to be aged, and do not travel well. All of their advice has come by correspondence. If one of them could examine her in person the case might be altered. She goes to take the waters regularly, I know. And masses are said for an heir every fortnight. Beyond that – "

"Sometimes it just doesn’t happen," Treville says sadly, tracing patterns in wine on the wood of the table.

"The Queen is young," Richelieu says. Hesitates. Adds – "And so are you."

Treville quirks a smile that says that Richelieu hadn’t been wrong in guessing the direction of Treville’s thoughts. But he doesn’t answer right away. His gaze seems to turn inward for a moment, abstracted.

In the silence, Richelieu’s thoughts have a chance to wander. The idea presents itself to Richelieu’s mind for the first time: Treville pupped. It’s not that Richelieu hasn’t known that Treville is a carrier. But he hadn’t ever thought about that in concrete terms. About what exactly that might mean for the direction Treville’s life takes.

Now Richelieu thinks about it. His mind conjures up an image of Treville, late in his carriage, close to bursting with new life. Richelieu’s mouth goes dry at the imagined sight. It’s tender and erotic at the same time, sending a warmth through Armand that he’s spent a lifetime not feeling. Perhaps the best part of the image is the smile Armand’s imagination has painted on Treville’s face. It will be one of Treville’s rare true smiles, Armand thinks, open and sweet and hopeful, the kind that never fails to make Richelieu want to reach out.

But the whole thing is bittersweet. Because somewhere in the back of the picture lurks the mate who’s put that smile on Treville’s face, those pups in his belly, their mark on his shoulder. Imagination fails to conjure up the image of the Alpha who is worthy of Treville. Richelieu can only stretch his mind so far. Treville is already outside the bounds of imagination; the Alpha who will capture his love is unfathomable. Richelieu envies that person, that unknown mate, with a passion that’s nearly hatred. That person will have everything Richelieu can’t have. A mate. Pups. Family. The freedom to dare.

They’ll have Treville. Whom Richelieu would give anything for, except those things that are not his to give.

Treville breaks the silence first. "Maybe it’s too soon for me to ask this," he says. "But… you sound as if you’ve given a lot of thought to children. Or should I say pups?"

"I have," he admits.

"And?" Treville looks oddly… worried.

"I – would like to," Richelieu says slowly. "I can hardly tell how much. But I can’t."

"Can’t, as in – "

"As in won’t," Richelieu adds hastily. "There’s nothing physically stopping me. But… my work. It’s too much. The risk, and the danger…"

"I understand," Treville says.
“And even more than that… being an heir to my line… it’s a life sentence. There’s no escape. For myself, personally, I find the work suits me. But it didn’t suit Andreas. It nearly killed Alfonse. Nicol – she married for alliances, and her husband sent her off to a convent, accused her of adultery, so that he could keep his mistress in Paris.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be. It doesn’t change anything. Nicol’s still legally wed. She still has the title and the power. She can do as much by letter from the convent as she ever could in person at court. So as far as the family line is concerned, her marriage is a complete success. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

Understanding is starting to shadow Treville’s face. “And if you had pups, there’s a chance they could end up the same way.”

“Not just a chance,” Richelieu says, trying to make Treville see. “If it’s what was best for the work, I would have to sentence my pups to that kind of life, or let down ten generations of my family.”

“So you won’t have them,” Treville finishes.

Richelieu takes a swallow of wine. “Andreas and Alfonse between them are whelping plenty. The family won’t miss my contribution.”

Treville nods slowly to himself. “I understand,” he says in a murmur. “Perhaps… perhaps it’s just as well.”

“Just as well for what?”

“ Forget I asked,” he says, more loudly. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?”

“Your schedule for the next month or so.” Treville sets his wine-glass down, but continues toying with the stem, seeming oddly diffident. “I’m considering a journey of sorts. It’s been a while since I was on my estates.”

“Oh,” Richelieu says, startled. He hadn’t expected – especially after Treville had said he hadn’t felt safe there – but of course Treville would need to go back to Gascony from time to time, to manage his affairs. Richelieu had simply never considered such a thing. He’d never considered that he might be in Paris and not have Treville around.

Foolish, Richelieu scolds himself. “I’m sure I can manage everything by myself for a few weeks,” he says aloud. He manages a small smile. “Surely you’ve scraped together some small faith in me by now?”

Treville smiles back, but it seems distracted. “I didn’t mean that exactly,” he says. “Actually I was asking…” he trails off and swallows.

Richelieu waits patiently. It’s no good pushing Treville when he’s like this, Richelieu has found. Best to let Treville gather his thoughts and speak in his own time. Richelieu has another sip of wine in the meantime.

“I was just thinking to myself,” Treville goes on after a moment. “And I know you’ll say it’s going too fast. After all we’ve only been courting three months now.”
Richelieu freezes. *Courting?*

“But I thought – if you weren’t particularly busy next month – and if there weren’t anything afoot on the Resistance side of things – well, I thought we might –” Treville blushes.

“Three months?” Richelieu says, mouth dry.

“I suppose it’s romantic of me,” Treville mutters. He clears his throat and meets Richelieu’s eyes. “I was counting from Pignerol,” he admits. “I know you didn’t formally start courting me until later, but – well, it seemed –”

“Later?” Richelieu interrupts. “When is later?”

Treville looks surprised. “My last heat,” he says after a moment. “When you refused to touch me, and offered me shelter instead.”

*Offered me shelter.* Yes, Richelieu had, hadn’t he? He’d given Treville a safe place to stay and extended his protection as an Alpha. Such an event would have been suggestive at least in the old days. It wouldn’t have automatically led to the beginning of a courtship, of course. Treville might have been young and Richelieu old. Richelieu might have been mated. Widowed. Promised to another. Or Treville might have. But for two complementary throwbacks of about the same age, with no other entanglements, it would have been suggestive.

“And then when you said –” Treville blushes again. Richelieu stares, mesmerized. “What you said after. I didn’t expect it. I thought you were going to throw me out. Or have me shot for trying to get in on your family business. I didn’t expect you to offer your suit. You certainly didn’t do it in a traditional way! I had half a mind to punch you one, I’ll admit. But I’m so glad I didn’t.” He smiles up at Richelieu, open and earnest. “I had no idea it was possible to be this happy.”

Oh. Oh, God.

*If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it my way,* Richelieu had snapped. *You’re going to stay in contact with me. You’re going to talk to me. You’re going to keep me involved.*

You sound like you want to live at my side, Treville had sniped back.

I’m certainly going to find out, Richelieu had said.

That had been when Treville had looked as if he might consider punching Richelieu. In retrospect Richelieu understands the impulse completely. Treville might dignify it by saying Richelieu had *offered his suit,* but Armand hadn’t actually been anywhere near so polite. He’d practically forced his suit on Treville. Treville would probably have thought Richelieu meant to mate him by force if Richelieu hadn’t just turned down the opportunity to do exactly that only two days prior.

Since then the two of them have practically been living in each others’ pockets. They’ve hammered out agreements about the military, the Underground, and the Resistance. They’ve met each others’ allies. They’ve worked together at court. They’ve shared meals. And secrets. Aside from Jussac, no one in France knows as much about Richelieu as Treville now does.

It’s been sheer greed on Richelieu’s part. He may not be able to have Treville, but that hasn’t stopped him wanting. The Underground had given him the perfect excuse. He’s exploited it shamefully.

And it’s just possible that Armand has not been as good about hiding his growing feelings as he’s thought he has been. If Treville were to have picked up on them – with Armand’s ill-chosen words already echoing in Treville’s mind –
They *have* been courting.

“Treville,” Richelieu falters. “I –”

“That’s another thing I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” Treville interrupts, leveling a playful finger at Richelieu. “Don’t you think it’s about time you called me *Jean*?”

Something sick opens up in the pit of Richelieu’s stomach. *Jean.* Richelieu wants nothing more than to call Treville *Jean.* Armand wants to smile at Jean and tell him that he’s right, they really should count the date of their courtship from Pignerol, that’s much more romantic than what Armand had been doing. Armand wants to go back to their meal and their wine and their open, honest conversation. He wants to go talk about Jean’s Gascon estates and Jean’s plan to visit them in the next few weeks — oh – oh, *Deus in caelo, the next few weeks.* Armand has been so very, very blind. Jean is going into *heat* again in the next few weeks. And suddenly Armand realizes to what purpose Jean has been asking about Armand’s upcoming schedule.

Jean means to ask Armand to come with him. Back to Gascony. For Jean’s heat. Because Jean believes they’re courting.

Richelieu shoves back from the table, standing so suddenly he sways and has to clutch the table to keep from falling. He feels like he’s going to be sick. He *is* sick.

“Armand?” Jean’s voice spikes with worry. He shoots to his feet, too, and comes around the table. “Are you all right?”

Calloused hands tug at Richelieu’s wrists, feel his pulse and temperature. Richelieu tries to pull his hands away. He can’t let Jean — let *Treville* — waste any more time or affection on him. Richelieu is already the worst scum on the face of the planet. He has to end this now, before Treville goes any farther in his hopes.

“I have made a terrible mistake,” he manages to say.

“Hey, hey, it’s all right,” Treville soothes. “Here, just sit back down.”

Richelieu wants to run from the room. But his legs wouldn’t support him, he knows. So he lets Treville help him sit back down.Stubbornly he tugs his hands away from Treville’s as soon as he’s seated.

Treville, frowning, crouches next to Richelieu. From that angle he has to tilt his head up to meet Richelieu’s eyes. He’s close enough that Richelieu can catch his scent. Beautiful. Perfect. Everything Richelieu wants.

Everything Richelieu still can’t have.

And why can he scent Treville? Treville is usually more careful than that. But Richelieu realizes that he’s been catching it frequently when they’re alone together. Treville has been letting Richelieu scent him. He’s been sharing that part of himself as he’s shared all the other parts. Because he’s believed that they’re courting. Exploring the possibility of a future together. Considering their suitability on the ultimate journey.

“How serious is it?” Treville demands.

“What?” Richelieu gasps.

“The mistake you’ve just realized you’ve made,” Treville says. The set of his face is grim.
“Overwhelmingly,” Richelieu whispers. For a moment he can’t breathe with the magnitude of it.

I had no idea it was possible to be this happy, Jean had said. How had Richelieu been so blind? When had Treville started to have feelings for him? How serious were they? The Lord send that they fade quickly. Treville must be free to seek out a better, worthier mate.

Treville’s lips press together until they’re nearly white. “Resistance or Underground? How many lives are we talking about? Should I call Jussac?” He goes to stand.

“No.” Richelieu reaches out and catches Treville’s sleeve. “No, none of those. No one will die. It’s – personal.”

“Personal?” Treville’s eyes widen. He looks even more afraid. “Armand, surely it’s not – tell me you’re healthy. Please, God – ”

“Physically there is nothing wrong with me,” Richelieu manages. The worry and fear in Treville’s eyes nearly undoes him. Almost he abandons his path. Almost he gives in to selfishness and embraces what he so desperately wants.

Their courtship may have been a lie, but Armand’s feelings are true. How could it be otherwise? Jean is everything Armand could ever want and more. Brave. Determined. Dedicated. Loyal. Selfless. Giving. Dauntless. An entire dictionary would not suffice to describe Jean’s positive qualities. There are other words Armand could use, too. Words like beautiful. Words he’s never allowed himself to think of another living soul. Words that Armand will never be able to use again without thinking of Jean.

But Treville deserves better. He has so much to give. He must give it to someone who can accept it as it deserves and return to Treville what he deserves. Richelieu must not deceive Treville any longer, no matter how much he longs to.

Perhaps it’s just as well, Treville had said. Now Richelieu understands why Treville had been asking about pups. He’d wanted to see if Richelieu would give them to him. And he’d been ready to give them up.

Richelieu can’t let that be true. Not for Treville. Not for Jean. There can still be happiness in Jean’s future. He can have a life that doesn’t end in a dark dungeon beneath an Inquisitor’s chambers after weeks or months of agony. One not spent in fear and hiding. One that doesn’t involve giving up his dreams.

Even the little things are beyond Armand’s ability to give. Armand wouldn’t be able to get away to join Jean for regular heats. He wouldn’t be able to hold Jean close every night or smile at him every morning. Armand wouldn’t be able to give Jean pups. Jean deserves all those things and more.

Treville reaches out and takes Richelieu’s hand again. “Just tell me,” he says bravely. “We’ll get through it together.”

“There is no we,” Richelieu says. Suddenly he’s completely calm. Treville’s bravery gives him courage, too. Richelieu cannot shackle this incredible Omega to him. Treville deserves a real Alpha. A better Alpha. One who dares do all that may become him. Not one who dares more, and is none. “That’s the mistake. I have not been courting you.”

Treville goes still. Only his eyes move, flicking down and then back up.

Richelieu withdraws his hands from Treville’s – gently, because he can, because Treville is no longer consciously attempting to hold on to him.
“I apologize for the misunderstanding,” Richelieu says. His voice sounds curiously distant to his ears. “It had never been my intention to offer my suit to you. In the conversation you recall, I was only discussing the Underground, and my stipulations for your leadership of it.”

“You –” Treville whispers. He still isn’t moving.

Richelieu finds he doesn’t know what to do with his hands now that they’re free. He flattens them against his thighs for want of a better idea. “I will of course understand if you no longer wish –”

“You never –” Treville can’t seem to finish a thought.

“The error is mine,” Richelieu continues. The strange calm continues. “Please understand – I have no plans to mate, now or at any point in the future. The Resistance is my mate. And you –”

“I’m damaged,” Treville says, seeming to find his voice and his old bitterness in the same moment. “I thought you’d changed your mind. I thought you’d learned to look beyond my past. But you’re still the same Alpha you were when you first rejected me. You still look at me and see a damaged, broken, sullied whore.”

“No!” Richelieu cries, something sharp lancing through his heart at the accusation. “No, of course not –”

“I wasn’t good enough for your knot. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised I’m not good enough for your bite.” Treville stands up, and it’s his turn to stumble, now, legs probably stiff from so long crouching. “What was all of this, then? What were the last few months? Why did you pretend you cared for me?”

“I do care for you,” Richelieu says desperately. Something has gone wrong here. Treville isn’t supposed to be doubting himself. This is Richelieu’s fault. Armand is the one who’s broken, not Jean. Not Treville, who is backing away from Richelieu on still-shaky legs, shaking his head in incredulous disbelief.

“I can’t believe I fell for it,” he says to himself. The self-hatred is so thick in his voice that Richelieu flinches as if he’s been slapped. “I can’t believe I thought – has it all been a lie?” Treville is staring directly at Richelieu as if he’s staring at the devil. “Did you ever think of me seriously? Was there even once in the past three months that you’ve thought of me as a potential mate?”


It’s the truth. It’s a lie. He’d only ever allowed himself to think of it once. One afternoon of beautiful dreams. Then Armand had packed all of those thoughts up and buried them in the darkest corner of his mind, never to be thought of again.

Treville doesn’t seem to notice the distinction. “I’m such a fool,” he says bleakly. He’s backed up all the way to the door. One hand fumbles blindly for the knob.

“Wait,” Richelieu blurts, horrified at the thought of Treville going out in this state. The Captain doesn’t have his cloak or scarf, and the night is cold. Even more importantly, as Richelieu’s nose continues to attest, Treville hasn’t applied his usual perfume. Someone might scent him. “You’re not decent!”

Richelieu means it in the classical sense: that is, Treville’s underdressed. But Treville hears it another way. The Captain of the King’s Musketeers goes white to the lips.

“You son of a bitch,” Treville chokes, so furious he can barely speak.
It’s the second time Treville has said that to Richelieu. The first time had been painful. There are no words for how much worse this second time hurts, though, because now Treville knows the truth. Now Treville knows what he’s saying to Richelieu. And now, Treville means it.

“Please wait,” Richelieu says desperately.

“Go to hell,” Treville snarls. He throws open the door and storms out – out of the Palais-Cardinal, and quite possibly out of Richelieu’s life forever.

Jussac bursts in on Richelieu’s private study three hours later. “What did you do?” he shrieks.

Richelieu looks up with an effort. Absently he notices that the candles have gone out. He’s been sitting in darkness. He should probably do something about that.

Jussac must reach the same conclusion. He storms out and comes back a moment later holding a taper. He goes about lighting the various candles in seething silence. Richelieu watches in vaguely detached amusement.

“Have you eaten?” Jussac looks at the table, still sitting with its chicken-bones and empty wineglasses. “All right, there’s that, at least. So now you can tell me what’s going on.”

Richelieu doesn’t answer. He’s staring off into space again, remembering the look on Treville’s face when he’d said go to Hell.

Not Treville’s most frightening look. That had come when he’d said you son of a bitch. But Richelieu’s already spent a few hours tormenting himself with that one. He’s decided to give it a break and move on to the next in line.

“I just got back from the palace,” Jussac says when it becomes apparent Richelieu isn’t going to speak. “Apparently the formation of the King’s Musketeers has been temporarily halted.”

This jerks Richelieu out of his stupor. “Halted?” he croaks. “Why?” It’s the first words he’s spoken since he’d begged Treville, futilely, to wait.

“The Captain of the Musketeers has been called away by a family emergency. The Comte de Treville has left court to go back to his estates in Gascony.”

That draws Richelieu’s attention further. “They’re not safe!”

Jussac blinks. “Who or what is unsafe?”

“Troisville. His estates in Gascony. They’re not safe.” Treville had said so, months ago. And Richelieu believes him. After all, that had been where…

The thought of Treville’s brother makes Richelieu flinch. And yet Treville had been planning to go back there for his next heat. Surely that meant that things had changed?

Ah, but Jean had been planning to invite Armand along for that heat. With an Alpha’s protection many things become safe. Like ancestral manors in the middle of the countryside.

“Yes, that’s true. Richelieu knows that’s true. He orders himself sternly to get a grip. Treville will be
perfectly safe. After all, he’s kept himself safe this far.

*By selling his body for the protection he needs,* a traitorous part of Armand’s mind whispers.

“The Captain said he’d be back in a month’s time. Bernajoux was at court when the Comte told the King he had to leave. Treville took Bernajoux aside and told him to tell you that he’d be back for the Underground, but he needs to figure out a way to be in the same room with you without doing to you what he’d done to his brother – whatever that means.”

Richelieu pales.

Jussac goes on, “I’m not worried about his physical safety. I *am* worried about his mental state. Judging by the state you’re in, I’m right to worry. What on earth would make Treville run off like this? The Musketeers are his pet project! The King was about to issue the first round of commissions! You were going to stuff the regiment full of throwbacks and form other throwback squads in other units – and – Armand, are you even *listening* to me?”

“Things change,” Richelieu manages to say. “Plans change.”

“You know, I might believe that if I couldn’t see your face,” Jussac says after a moment. His voice softens. He pulls up a chair – Treville’s vacated chair – and sits in it. “Armand. What *happened*?”

“I made a mistake,” Armand says.

“No kidding,” Jussac deadpans.

Another few moments pass in silence.

“Would you like to tell me the nature of your mistake?” Jussac prompts.

“I – wait,” Richelieu says slowly. “Before I do, tell me – answer me one question.”

“If I can,” Jussac says readily.

“My relationship with Treville. How would you describe it?”

“Which one? Your professional one or your personal one?”

Richelieu closes his eyes. That more or less answers the question already. But: “My personal one.”

“I thought it was going well.” Richelieu opens his eyes in time to see Jussac shrug, looking somewhat helpless. “I mean, it hadn’t been going on for very long. But I always had you two figured for a short courtship anyway.”

So Jussac had thought they’d been courting, too. Richelieu closes his eyes again. He isn’t really surprised. He’d already admitted to himself that they more or less *had* been. He hadn’t really thought Jussac would react with surprise and claim that Treville had been making the whole thing up. Still.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jussac blinks. “Tell you what, exactly?”

“That – ” Richelieu cuts himself off and sighs. No, he really doesn’t want to ask why Jussac had never, in the past three months, thought to use the words *courting* or *courtship* in Richelieu’s hearing. Probably Jussac had been trying to be discreet, for approximately the first time ever.
That’s unfair. Jussac is the soul of discretion. He’d never have become Richelieu’s trusted lieutenant, second in command of the Resistance, if he hadn’t known how to hold his tongue. But it’s a first for Jussac to apply this discretion to Richelieu’s private life.

Jussac is watching Richelieu closely. Something makes his eyes widen in horror. “You’ve never refused him!”

“I – no – what would make you say that?” Richelieu cries. He sits bolt upright at the sheer shock of the question. “No, I haven’t refused him!”

“Oh, good – ”

“Thank God, it hadn’t gone so far as that – ”

“Wait, what?”

Richelieu fixes Jussac with an icy glare. “I said, thank God it hadn’t gone as far as that,” he repeats. “I discovered the mistake in time.”

Jussac spends a few moments considering this. Carefully, he says, “Armand. This mistake you keep referring to. It wouldn’t, by any chance, be the sort of mistake where you told Treville you didn’t care for him and pushed him away?”

Richelieu flinches.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jussac roars. For a Beta, he does that very well. It’s probably from all the exposure he gets to Alphas. Jussac has to ride herd on Cahusac, Bernajoux and Boisrenard, the other members of his squad. Not that any of them are bigoted. But they’re a raucous group, loud in their pleasures and even louder in their arguments. Jussac has needed to develop a mighty bellow simply to be heard.

“Treville thought I was courting him,” Richelieu tries to explain.

“You were courting him!”

“Not on purpose!”

“What do you mean, not on purpose? How do you court someone by accident?”

“He misunderstood. When we were talking about the Underground, and how I wanted to keep an eye on him as he started taking it over, keep him near me…”

Jussac holds up a hand. “You are far too ambiguous in your speech. I’ve said it before. But you’re rarely ambiguous in your feelings. Richelieu, any idiot could see you love Treville!”

“Love isn’t enough!” Richelieu cries.

Jussac stares at him. Slowly he lowers his face into his hands and shakes it back and forth.

“The nature of my mistake became clear to me tonight,” Richelieu says, retreating into the comfort of formal words and sonorous proclamations. “I naturally took immediate steps to rectify it.”

“Rectify it,” Jussac murmurs to himself, as if he can’t believe it.

“I could not let Treville labor any further under the misapprehension – ”
“If you even try to say you don’t want to spend the rest of your life with him, I’ll knot-punch you so hard it won’t matter if you want pups or not,” Jussac says furiously.

Richelieu winces instinctively. “I was going to say… it doesn’t matter if I care for him or not. I can’t mate him. And to continue a relationship under those pretenses would be dishonest.”

“And why can’t you mate him?” Jussac demands, giving off a fine impression of a man who corrals his temper with both hands, a chair and a whip.

“The danger –”

“Is his to accept.”

“The risks –”

“Still his.”

“The sacrifices –”

“I’m noticing a theme here.”

“Will you listen to me?” Richelieu cries furiously. “Tonight he was talking about the Queen’s infertility. And then he was talking about his own future.”

“Thinking about you being in it, no doubt –”

“Robert, he wants pups.”

Even Jussac pauses at that. He knows Richelieu’s stance on the subject. And he knows by now, after twenty years, Richelieu will never change it. Certainly not for something as selfish as his own happiness.

“Still,” Jussac says at last. “He’s unaligned and a soldier besides. Surely he’d already realized that pups would be… difficult. If he’d rather be with you –”

“I can’t ask that of him.”

“It’s his to give, Armand.”

“He doesn’t want to give it.”

“Did you ask him?”

Richelieu sets his jaw and doesn’t reply.

Naturally, Jussac takes this as an answer. “You owe him the courtesy of asking him before you break off your courtship.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Richelieu says heavily. “You said that he’s already left for his estates.”

“I said he **announced his departure.** At court, a few hours ago. He can’t possibly have left Paris yet.”

“He’s a soldier. He’ll travel light.”

“Not that light. Armand, listen to me. Go to his hotel. Talk to him. Ask him. You don’t get to make his decisions for him. If he’d rather be with you than have pups, that’s his choice to make.”
“He told me to go to Hell,” Richelieu says. “He called me – ”

“He was angry. Ask him.”

“He said he – ”

“Armand. Ask him.”

“It won’t matter.”

Jussac rolls his eyes. He gets up from his chair and walks over to Richelieu. Then, with a swift move, he pivots on one foot and kicks Richelieu’s chair out from under him.

Richelieu goes sprawling, then bounces back onto his feet, instinctively throwing a punch. Jussac ducks and gets under Richelieu’s guard, shoving him against the dining room wall.

“Just ask him!” Jussac shouts. “What harm can it do? It sounds like he already hates your guts. What do you have to lose?”

Richelieu, about to shout back at Jussac, abruptly loses all of his anger. It ebbs out of him through the empty space in the room where Treville had been, laughing and smiling, only a few hours ago. Because Jussac’s right. He’s absolutely right. About all of it.

“Nothing,” Richelieu says, stunned. “I have nothing to lose.”

“So go,” Jussac urges. He shoves Richelieu towards the door. “Go on!”

Richelieu finds himself walking. Then he finds himself running.

He bursts out into the courtyard of the Palais-Cardinal and stops, panting. The night is cold. He’s only wearing his robes. Almost immediately he starts to shiver.

The whinny of a horse – Richelieu’s favorite gelding, Strider – cuts through the night. Richelieu turns. Cahusac is leading Strider through the courtyard. Next to him, Boisrenard holds a riding-lantern, and Bernajoux carries Richelieu’s cloak.

“Here you go,” Bernajoux says, helping Richelieu into the cloak.

“Up you get,” Cahusac adds, turning the stirrup.

Richelieu mounts, dazed. Boisrenard hands him up the lantern.

“Good luck,” Boisrenard says.

“Go on,” Jussac says from the doorway. He gives Richelieu an encouraging nod, and points towards the gates.

Richelieu swallows. “Thank you all,” he says. Then he gathers the reins and kicks Strider into motion.

The ride through a night-shrouded Paris is short. Treville’s hotel is close to the Louvre, and so is the Palais-Cardinal, though in another direction. During the day the streets are crowded and full. Merchants at stalls sell their wares. Carts laden with goods trundle over the cobblestones. Pedestrians duck around the lot, snarling traffic as they please. This far past midnight none of that is present. Richelieu rides through a monochrome world, lit only by the torches of the night watch.
The hotel at the Rue des Vieux-Colombier isn’t dark, though. It’s lit up as bright as day. The courtyard is bustling with activity.

Richelieu draws rein and slides off his horse. He approaches the first servant he sees. “I wish to see the Comte de Treville,” he says.

The boy looks at him, eyes widening. “I – I’m sorry, your Eminence,” he stammers. “You’re too late.”

Richelieu’s heart sinks. “Too late?”

“Y-yes, sir. The Comte – he’s left. Gone back to Gascony in a frightful hurry. All this is his things being packed to go after him. He didn’t take hardly anything with him at all. Said he’d camp under the stars before he spent another night in Paris.”

Gone. Too late. The words echo in Richelieu’s mind, signifying his ultimate failure.

“Can I help your Eminence with anything else?” the servant boy asks fearfully. “Stable your horse? Some wine?”

“No,” Richelieu says numbly. “No, I thank you.”

His hand fumbles in his purse automatically. The coin flashes in the torchlight as he tosses it to the boy. The boy catches it and kisses it instead of biting it, out of respect for the Church, bowing deep.

“Thank you, your Eminence!”

“God bless you,” Richelieu says out of sheer reflex. He doesn’t hear any reply the boy might make. He’s already turning his horse around. He doesn’t tug the reins, but he doesn’t have to. Strider knows his way back home. Richelieu just has to stay in the saddle.

All he can think of are the words too late.
The next day dawns grey and rainy, as if in sympathy for Richelieu’s mental state. The first thing he thinks upon waking is I hope Treville’s not camped out in this. Then he shakes his head at himself, disgusted. If there’s one thing that’s abundantly clear it’s that Treville isn’t Richelieu’s to care for.

Jussac comes in with the morning dispatches. “Will you breakfast here or on the road?” he wants to know.

Richelieu pauses with the first letter halfway open. “On the road? Where am I going?”

Jussac blinks. “Gascony, of course.”

“I’m not going to Gascony,” Richelieu says, focusing on the letter-opener in his hands. It’s proving unusually dull this morning. Jussac will have it sharpened.

“What? Of course you are. You didn’t talk to Treville before he left, so – ”

“Treville made his position perfectly clear last night,” Richelieu says wearily. “He didn’t even wait for his sheets to be packed, Robert. He told his servants he’d rather make camp than stay another night in Paris.”

“He was hurt,” Jussac says. “Of course he was. But that doesn’t mean – ”

“He’s made his meaning perfectly clear.” Richelieu manages to get the letter open, finally.

“Armand – ”

“You were right,” Richelieu interrupts. “I was an idiot. Being with me, having pups, his future – those were his choices to make, not mine. And I went ahead and made them for him. I boxed him in to doing what I thought was best. Just like everyone else he’s ever met.”

“Well, don’t you think you ought to tell him that?”

“I left Treville exactly one choice, and that’s how he deals with me going forward. He told Bernajoux he’s gone to figure that out. If Treville comes back and says he’s willing to listen, I’ll tell him that. If he comes back and says he wants to handle all of our dealings through intermediaries, I’ll respect that. Whatever he decides.”

Jussac stares at him in frustration. “This is quite possibly the worst time for you to start caring what Treville thinks.”

“Robert, leave it.” Richelieu turns away. “Just leave it.”

Though Richelieu would prefer to remain at home, he goes to the Louvre for the afternoon court regardless. He’s not going to pine like some Alpha from the old romances. Treville’s going out of the capitol gives them both the time they need to regain their equanimity. Treville will overcome the urge to mutilate Richelieu – though Richelieu thinks, in his darker moments, that he deserves it – and Richelieu will overcome the urge to throw himself at Treville’s feet and beg forgiveness. Treville will return, and the two of them will go back to the work of saving their people, as it should always have been right from the start. As allies. Nothing more.
Richelieu has made his choices. He’s made Treville’s choices, too, for good or for ill. Now all that’s left is for them both to live with the consequences.

Court is quieter than usual. The sudden absence of the Comte de Treville seems to have thrown off its balance. Louis looks odd without the figure by his side. Somehow over the last three years, Treville has become a natural extension of the King, even before Richelieu had known anything about Treville other than his title.

Louis dismisses his courtiers early. He’s obviously feeling the Comte’s absence. He would, wouldn’t he? They’d been friends. Odd to think of the King having a true friend, as opposed to a sycophant. But Richelieu knows that if anyone would have been capable of it – of seeing Louis as a person first, and not the crown – it would have been Treville.

And that’s far too maudlin. Richelieu cuts the thought off as it forms, and nods his obedience to Louis’ gesture commanding Richelieu to wait as the other courtiers slowly filter out of the throne room.

“I wanted to speak to you for a moment, Cardinal,” Louis says. He beckons Richelieu closer and gestures to the First Minister’s chair. Richelieu settles in it warily. There’s something in the King’s features he mislikes.

“I am at your Majesty’s service,” he murmurs.

“I suppose you’ve heard that my friend Treville had to leave court suddenly. Issues on his estate, I heard.”

“I had heard the same, your Majesty.”

“I just wanted to know if you’d heard anything else. Treville had to leave rather suddenly. I didn’t know anything was amiss until yesterday night.”

“I’m afraid I don’t keep up with court gossip so much, your Majesty,” Richelieu lies. “It’s unbecoming for a man of the Church.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. And I suppose… it’s nothing to do with the Church, naturally…”

Richelieu blinks. Then he nearly stares outright as Louis’ meaning breaks in on him. The King is asking, in his clumsy way, if Treville’s rapid departure from Paris had been on account of Treville’s being a throwback. If Treville is suspected by the Inquisition. If Richelieu is behind Treville’s need to be elsewhere.

Almost, Richelieu laughs. Louis is right for all the wrong reasons. It is Richelieu’s fault that Treville had left so abruptly. And it is because Treville is a throwback. Or, more specifically, a member of the complementary sex. Because he and Richelieu had been courting, and it had ended badly.

Richelieu can’t tell the King any of this, of course. And he disapproves of the King’s questioning on general principle. Louis lacks subtlety; if Richelieu really were the zealot he appears, Louis would be coming dangerously close to exposing Treville’s true sex. But he’s warmed by the knowledge that Louis cares. It’s a credit to the King’s character, if not exactly his discretion.

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Richelieu replies to Louis’ question, playing dumb. “I suppose I can check the subscription rolls. If he’s having cash flow problems with the estate, he may be behind in his dues…”

“Ah,” Louis says in barely-disguised relief. “Yes, possibly. But I wouldn’t worry about that,
Cardinal. I’m sure, if that’s it, it will get sorted out soon enough.”

“Of course,” Richelieu murmurs. “I never entertained a doubt of it, your Majesty.”

“Good. Good.” Louis stands. Richelieu does the same, and bows. “Well, thank you, Cardinal. That will be all.”

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Richelieu says. He bows himself out.

Days turn to weeks. Jussac continues to try, periodically, to convince Richelieu to go to Gascony. Cahusac, Bernajoux and Boisrenard all take their turns as well. Richelieu is unmoved.

“You were the one who told me that Treville is entitled to his own choices,” he snaps at Jussac finally. “I think Treville is making his choice perfectly obvious.”

Jussac snatches the letter he’d been supposed to take and deliver from Richelieu’s hands furiously. “Idiots,” Richelieu hears Jussac muttering as he stomps out. “Both end up alone for the rest of their lives, and they’ll deserve it, too.”

Richelieu ignores this. He ignores Bernajoux’s clumsy attempts at drawing Richelieu out over wine, Boisrenard’s somewhat more gently worded questions, and Cahusac’s blunt suggestions. Richelieu ignores the King, who grows visibly more annoyed with the empty space behind his shoulder where Treville had used to stand with each passing day.

He especially ignores the calendar. It progresses none the less, counting forward to the day Richelieu has been dreading. Treville had once told Richelieu that his heats, unlike many Omegas’, are remarkably regular. And it’s no accident that Treville has planned his absence to last a full month. Richelieu has been dreading the morning he’ll wake up with the incontrovertible knowledge that Treville has gone into heat, alone, unprotected, five hundred miles from Armand and anyone else who can help him.

Richelieu spends the day in Church, celebrating a wedding mass for Charles d’Albert, Duc de Luynes, and Marie de Rohan. It does nothing to improve his mood. Nor does the need to play the heavyweight Cardinal when he knows perfectly well that Charles and Marie will retreat to Charles’ estates for a second, private, considerably more ancient ceremony that will end with Charles’ teeth in Marie’s shoulder.

Armand doesn’t go to court that day or the next. Not even Jussac dares to comment.

The third day dawns. Treville’s heat will be breaking now. Richelieu observes the sun from the window in his quarters. So the world has kept on turning after all. Curious.

Jussac enters a few moments later, carrying the usual dispatches. Richelieu reaches for the one on top. It bears the purple seal of the Inquisitor of Paris. He opens it automatically, practiced eye skipping past the usual pleasantries to get to the meat of the letter beneath.

Bonacieux summarizes yesterday’s news and flags a few particular reports for Richelieu’s personal interest. Being at the top of the hierarchy has its own disadvantages. Richelieu can’t examine every report of a throwback sighting personally. He simply doesn’t have time, for one, and for another it would be suspicious for him to micromanage his underlings. He can, however, express general preferences for what he wants forwarded to him. Bonacieux is young for the post of Inquisitor, barely more than a boy. Richelieu had nominated him because, in addition to being the least competent man Richelieu has ever met, Bonacieux had also been the one most callow and eager to grovel before the great Cardinal Richelieu. That gives Richelieu leeway to use a bit more oversight
than he usually would.

The Inquisitor reports nothing of significance in Paris. There’s the usual accusations. Neighbors pointing fingers at each other over unrelated disputes, hoping to get lucky. None if it will come to anything. At the bottom, though, Bonacieux has added something that makes Richelieu break out in a sudden cold sweat.

The Inquisitor of Toulouse has apparently sent word of a throwback captured in the south of Gascony. Normally such things wouldn’t rate the attention of the Grand Inquisitor of France. But the Inquisitor of Toulouse reports that he’s been informed the throwback in question is a noble. Toulouse adds that he hasn’t personally verified this claim yet – the supposed throwback is still being held by local authorities in whatever village is reporting the capture – but that Toulouse will be investigating, and promises to send more details soon.

Richelieu reads the line a second time. Then a third. At some point, he realizes, he’s sat down. He’s only thinking of one thing.

“Richelieu? Armand? What is it?”

Slowly Richelieu looks up. Jussac is hovering over him, worried. Silently Richelieu hands him Bonacieux’s report.

Jussac skims it quickly and swears. “Armand – ”

“Ready the carriage,” Richelieu says hoarsely. “We leave at once.”

“Horses would be faster.”

“I may need the trappings of my authority,” Richelieu says. They both hear what he doesn’t say: If Treville isn’t already dead.

Jussac just nods, face tight. He goes to make the preparations without another word.

Richelieu look around the room, trying to think of what else might be done.

The King. He must notify the King.

He can’t go in person. He’s dimly aware that his façade is sorely lacking. No one must see him until he can compose himself.

Richelieu’s gaze falls on the pile of letters, still sitting unopened in front of him. A letter. Not as effective as an audience under normal circumstances. But these circumstances are definitely not normal.

He spends far too long thinking of what to write, and finally just scrawls a few lines telling the King that he’s been called away by urgent Church business. Another half-dozen letters follow to various others in Richelieu’s inner circle. Allies at court. Deputies in the Resistance. Deputies in the Underground. The usual lieutenants will be coming with Richelieu. If it turns into a fight, he wants Jussac and the commando squad at his side.

By the time Richelieu’s sealed the last letter, Jussac reports that the carriage is ready. This time it’s Boisrenard who draws the short straw. Richelieu entrusts him with the parcel of letters and the duplicates of Richelieu’s seal and signet that technically don’t exist. They violate a dozen Church ordinances. Having had them made had been nearly as serious a crime as being an Alpha. But it will let Boisrenard act in Richelieu’s name in the ultimate emergency.
Jussac dismisses the usual coachman and gets up on the box himself. They’ll take no strangers with them on this trip. Bernajoux has Jussac’s stallion and Richelieu’s Strider on a lead behind his own mount. Cahusac has two pack-horses. And Richelieu has a cushioned prison in which he must sit, and be patient, and endure all the terrible visions his imagination can conjure to torment him with.

It’s a long journey to Toulouse.

The Inquisitor of Toulouse welcomes Richelieu with surprised delight. “Your Eminence honors us all with your presence,” he says, bowing reverently. “I am truly sorry to tell you that your journey has been wasted.”

Richelieu’s heart, which has spent more time stopped with terror than beating normally for the last five hundred miles, suddenly starts going double-speed. “Wasted?” he repeats. “My dear Toulouse, what can you mean?”

“I assume you came following the report of a noble throwback being captured in the area.”

“You assume correctly.”

“I am terribly sorry, your Eminence. Yes, terribly sorry. That report should never have gone out. We didn’t have confirmation at the time, and I had meant to instruct that it be delayed until we did, but my scribe got overexcited and sent it on regardless.” The Inquisitor shakes his head. “I can assure you he’s been thoroughly disciplined,” he adds, as if that matters.

“So the supposed throwback…?”

“Oh, there really was a throwback. Just not a noble one. A farmer from Tarbes.”

“I see,” Richelieu says neutrally. “Are they…?”

“Executed this morning,” the Inquisitor says promptly. He points down past his dwelling, towards the town square. Richelieu squints. The Inquisitor’s home is set a little ways down a side street, not on the square itself. But Richelieu can make out a gibbet. And a forlorn figure swinging from it. Richelieu is too late to help them. Whoever they were, they aren’t Treville, and for that Richelieu feels a relief so great he trembles. But they’re still someone, a throwback Richelieu has failed to protect.

*Requiem Aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis,* he prays silently. *Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them.*

“So that’s that.” The Inquisitor shrugs. “Sorry you’ve come all this way for nothing. Of course, you must accept my hospitality for tonight, and for as long as you choose to stay. We’ve pretty good hunting in this region. Decent fishing, too, if you prefer that.”

“Thank you,” Richelieu says, tearing his gaze away from the poor farmer on the gibbet. “If the matter is settled, I will not stay long. My duties in Paris are never-ending, I fear.”

“I completely understand,” Toulouse sympathizes. “But come. You’ll stay tonight, at least. Let me get your men quartered and we’ll have a fine dinner.”

Richelieu allows himself to be guided into the Inquisitor’s dwelling. He meets the Inquisitor’s daughter, who runs his household, and manages to favor her with a smile as well as a nod. This mark of approval greatly pleases Toulouse, who wines and dines Richelieu until the Cardinal must actively
refuse more, and then sends him off to sleep in a bedchamber more fit for a King than a servant of God.

It doesn’t matter. Tomorrow Richelieu will go back to Paris. It will be years before he ever has to see these people again.

He’s glad Jussac, Bernajoux and Cahusac are quartered elsewhere. He couldn’t handle their well-meaning questions or comments right now. Richelieu feels rubbed raw from all the emotions of the last five hundred miles. It takes him a long time to fall asleep, and when he does he dreams of cutting Treville down from the gibbet in the Toulouse town square, cold and still and dead.

The next day they take their leave, thanking Toulouse for his hospitality and positively refusing his offers of entertainment if they’re to stay longer. Toulouse had obviously enjoyed the prestige of having the great Cardinal Richelieu under his roof. He’s openly looking for some act of great devotion to perform where the Cardinal can see. But he’s too savvy in the ways of Church politics to press too hard when Richelieu says he really must be returning.

“Come back and see us sometime, Cardinal,” Toulouse says, waving farewell. “I’ll see if I can’t rustle up an actual noble throwback for you to hunt, eh? Something with more sport than a farmer.”

“Thank you, Toulouse, your zeal is praiseworthy,” Richelieu says. He keeps the smile on his face until the town limits are well out of sight. Then he leans back into the coach cushions with a sigh.

Toulouse’s attitude aside, Richelieu’s still weak with relief that Treville is apparently safe. He’s not entirely proud of it – it seems wrong to be so glad that another throwback is dead – but his selfishness refuses to go away, no matter how many times Richelieu rebukes himself.

It’s only been a few weeks since Treville had left Paris, but that’s more than long enough for Richelieu to have realized the depth of his mistake. Bad enough that he’d tricked Treville into intimacy by making promises he’d had no intention of keeping. Worse to have expressed himself so badly over that disastrous dinner, and left Treville with the false impression that Richelieu despises him. And yet, he’s come to realize, bad as those mistakes are, he’s made one still worse.

Richelieu has always known that his life would require sacrifices. He’s made them willingly enough, before now, though that serves more to illustrate how little he’s understood the things he’s been giving up rather than being a testament to his self-control. But the one thing Armand’s always been aware of is how little choice he’s actually had in the matter. He was born a Richelieu, and that’s ruled his entire life. He and his sisters and odems have followed the same path. It’s the path of their parents. Their ancestors. It’s the good they do in the world. And it’s led the rest of Armand’s generation to death, or exile, or ruin.

It’s for that reason Armand refuses to sire pups. And why he’d never had any intention of mating. The question is one of choice. Once born, a Richelieu doesn’t have many choices left. Armand can’t stand the notion of taking those choices away from his pups.

How ironic, then, that’s turned around and done exactly that to Treville.

A pup doesn’t choose to be whelped. It can’t consider its options and decide whether or not to shoulder the burden of the Richelieu line. An adult can. An adult can understand. Can say, of their own free will, I accept.

Armand had refused to let Jean make his own choices. He’d taken the decision for his own and made it for them both. Forced his will on Jean’s, as so many other sires had forced things on him in the past. Armand’s name is on the list after all. He loathes himself for that more than he’d believed
Eventually the increasing warmth of the sun draws Richelieu out of his reverie. He lowers the window-shades on the carriage, letting some fresh air in, and takes in the sparse countryside with a dismal air.

“T’ll be glad to get back to Paris,” he says to Jussac, who’s still sitting in place of the coachman.

“Of course, your Eminence,” Jussac says neutrally.

Richelieu straightens. With anyone else that tone of voice might have passed for normal, but he’s known Jussac since they’d been youths together. “Robert?” he inquires, deliberately using the informality of Jussac’s Christian name.

“We’re going back to Paris, just like you commanded, your Eminence,” Jussac says. Now his tone is full of false innocence. And he addresses Richelieu by his title, hiding behind protocol.

Suspiciously, Richelieu looks around, seeing nothing but the usual Gascon countryside. “Now why don’t I believe you?”

“Your Eminence has a naturally suspicious mind,” Jussac says, sadly, as if it’s a personal failing on Richelieu’s part.

Richelieu looks around again. Then he frowns. “Where’s Cahusac?”

“He rode on ahead a little while ago,” Bernajoux volunteers.

“Your Eminence is no doubt aware that Cahusac is also from Gascony,” Jussac murmurs. He’s being as precise and formal as if they’re in front of the King and the court, not riding alone through deserted countryside. “I believe he wishes to see if his family are at home.”

“His family are from Mont-de-Marsan. A hundred miles west of here.”

“He may find it necessary to stop along the way,” Jussac concedes.

“Fortunately he knows someone in the area,” Bernajoux adds.

Richelieu freezes. “You don’t mean – ”

“T here he is now,” Bernajoux interrupts.

Indeed, Cahusac is riding into sight. Alone, thank the Lord, but Richelieu is suddenly deeply suspicious about where Cahusac has been.

Jussac clucks to the horses, slowing their pace and steering the carriage off to the side of the roadway. “Time for midday, I think.”

“It wants an hour to noon,” Richelieu says through gritted teeth.

“I’m hungry,” Jussac says innocently.

“So am I,” Bernajoux agrees.

“But your Eminence need not eat,” Jussac adds, stopping the carriage completely and climbing down off the box. “Perhaps you’d care for a ride instead?”
“Just the thing after a long morning spent sitting,” Bernajoux agrees.

The carriage isn’t going anywhere. Richelieu bows to inevitability and exits it, drawing his dignity around him like a cloak. As he does he takes in his surroundings more carefully. He doesn’t know one hill in Gascony from another. He does know that the road they’d followed to Toulouse yesterday had been considerably wider and better-paved than this one.

“We seem to be taking a different route back to Paris than the one we used to get here,” Richelieu observes.

“Well, there’s no hurry, is there?” Jussac says cheerfully.

“No? Let me think. I could be in the capitol of France, with direct access to the King, the Resistance, and the Underground. Or I could be… here. In the middle of nowhere.”

“You’re not in the middle of nowhere,” Bernajoux protests. “You’re in – ”

“Ah, Cahusac!” Jussac hails, cutting Bernajoux off. Richelieu’s suspicion deepens even farther. “Have a pleasant ride?”

“Lovely,” Cahusac replies, drawing rein behind the stopped carriage. “It was good to stretch my legs.”

“You were riding, not walking,” Richelieu says. “And Jussac said you were going to visit your family.”

“Right,” Cahusac says, glancing quickly at Jussac. “But…”

“But since it was so far to Mont-de-Marsan, as you pointed out, your Eminence, Cahusac obviously decided to return,” Jussac intervenes.

“Exactly,” Cahusac agrees quickly.

“Pity he didn’t think of that before he rode out in the first place,” Richelieu says acidly. “Let’s eat as we travel. I’m not in a mood to dawdle.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, your Eminence,” Jussac says blandly.

“Why not?” Richelieu asks, heart sinking.

“Didn’t bring any travel rations,” Bernajoux says. “If we want to eat, we have to cook.”

“What?”

“We brought stew makings, and I picked up some game,” Cahusac says. He turns his horse, revealing two rabbits and a pheasant tied to the side of his saddle.

“It’ll only take a few hours,” Bernajoux says cheerfully. “I’ll go get some kindling.” He dismounts, tossing his reins to Jussac, and heads off into the brush.

Richelieu fixes his gaze on Jussac. “A different route. No travel rations. A few hours to make stew.”

“Therefore your Eminence will understand why we stopped a little in advance of noon,” Jussac says serenely.

Richelieu closes his eyes and prays for patience. It doesn’t come. Abandoning the attempt as futile,
he opens them again. “Jussac,” he says slowly. “Where, exactly, are we?”

“Take a ride, Armand,” Jussac says, dropping the pretense. “It’ll do you good. A mile or two farther west ought to do it.”

Richelieu looks around again. Now that he’s looking carefully, the evidence begins to emerge from the background. This isn’t a public thoroughfare. That’s why it’s not widened and paved for merchants’ carts. This is a private road. On private property, no doubt. And it presumably leads to a private dwelling.

“This is Troisville, isn’t it,” he says quietly.

Jussac nods.

“And a mile or two down that road?”

“Is the manor house. Where your Captain’s been hiding.”

“He’s not my Captain,” Richelieu says steadily. “And if he’s been hiding, it’s with good reason.”

“You must have hurt him pretty badly,” Jussac agrees.

“It’s done now.”

“It can be undone.”

Richelieu shakes his head. “I don’t see how.”

“Then you’d better go to the end of this road and find out, hadn’t you?”

“What do you expect?” Richelieu demands. “For us to pretend that the last month didn’t happen?”

“Can’t do that,” Bernajoux says. He comes back up to the side of the road and drops an armload of sticks next to the carriage. “Got to go forward, not back. Only way you can go.”

“There is no forward. Not for us.”

“There’s always a forward,” Jussac insists. “Armand, you were wrong. You even know it, for a wonder. So go and tell him.”

“He doesn’t want to hear it.”

“You don’t know that!”

“He left!” Richelieu shouts. “He left Paris! If he wanted more of an explanation, if he wanted to hear more, he would have stayed, and he didn’t. He left. He’s heard all he wants to hear. And I am going to respect that, God damn it! I have ruined enough things for him already. I treated him like what he wanted didn’t matter. I decided the danger was too great. I decided that he’d rather have pups than be with me. I made all his decisions for him and I pushed him away like he meant nothing and I am going to have to live with that. There is exactly one choice I left him and that is the choice of how and on what terms he will have anything to do with me from now on, and so help me God, I am not going to ruin that one final thing!”

Richelieu stumbles to a verbal halt, breathing somewhat hard, and realizes that Jussac, Cahusac and Bernajoux are all staring at him in wide-eyed silence. That’s unusual. They don’t usually let Richelieu rant for so long without interrupting.
Then Richelieu realizes they’re not really looking at him.

He closes his eyes. “Jussac – ”

“Oh, yes, he’s right behind you,” Jussac assures Richelieu.

Praying for patience hadn’t worked. Richelieu changes tacks and prays for fortitude.

Then he turns around.

“You know, I’ve been sitting here trying to think of what to say to you,” Treville says conversationally. He’s in the middle of the road, mounted on a gorgeous bay gelding, watching them all like they’re actors in a play. “At first I was going to be furious with you for trespassing. You must admit, it doesn’t look good, invading my last point of retreat like this.”

“Treville – ”

Treville goes on as if Richelieu hadn’t spoken. “I also thought you might be here because you doubted my commitment to the Underground. That offended me. I told Jussac I’d return after my heat and I meant it. I told him I’d figure out some way we could work together, and I meant that, too. I’ve worked too hard to protect throwbacks to throw away a chance like this because you jilted me.”

Richelieu winces.

“You’re doing good work,” Bernajoux says.

“Things are better now that you’re around,” Cahusac adds.

“Thank you,” Treville says to them both. Then he returns his attention to Richelieu. “So then I thought you’d changed your mind about us. Our courtship. Honestly, it would have been a little romantic. You coming after me. Part of me liked that. Part of me liked that a lot.”

Richelieu’s traitorous heart skips a beat. But he holds his tongue.

This proves to be the correct response, because Treville goes on. “Then I realized that you hadn’t come here on purpose, so I went back to being mad at you. You should be paying better attention to your surroundings. Did you really ride in a closed carriage for a few hours without knowing where you were going? What if your lieutenants had been turned by the Inquisition? You could have been led straight into a prison-convent like a lamb to the slaughter.” Treville’s voice gets increasingly angry as he paints this scenario.

“We’d never,” Jussac protests.

“Anyway,” Treville resumes, getting a grip on himself. “If you hadn’t come here to see me, there was no reason for me to think you’d come to regret anything about the way we’d parted. So I was going to tell you to get the hell off my land. But – ”

He falters.

“But then Richelieu started going on one of his rants,” Bernajoux says helpfully.
“Yes, thank you, Bernajoux,” Richelieu mutters.

“Did you mean it?” Treville demands.


Treville stares at him. Richelieu meets the gaze as well as he can, for once in his life trying to keep nothing hidden.

Jussac walks over to the back of the carriage and unties Strider from where the horse has been grazing placidly. He tosses the reins to Richelieu.

“Fine morning for a ride,” Jussac says.

Richelieu looks up at Treville.

The Captain considers. “So it is.”

By mutual accord, the two of them ride away from Richelieu’s stopped carriage in silence. Treville leads them off the road almost immediately. They walk the horses through lightly rolling hills and loose scrub until they reach a small ridge. Treville dismounts, not bothering to tie up his horse. The bay moves a few steps off and starts grazing. After a moment, Richelieu emulates Treville. Strider will have no inclination to wander off, this far from his stable. Not with his master nearby and another horse right here for company.

The two horses whiffle at each other, exchanging scents. After a brief moment of consideration, they settle down near each other and graze companionably.

“If only it were that easy,” Treville sighs. He’s been watching the horses, too.

“Where are we?” Richelieu asks.

“Nowhere in particular. Troisville. There’s a lot of land like this, in this part of Gascony. Not worth farming. Nothing to be mined. Won’t support livestock. It’s just sort of here.” Treville shrugs. He walks over to the top of the ridge, where the bedrock has risen from the earth and forms a stony outcropping. Treville sits down on it, letting his legs dangle, and gestures Richelieu to join him. The Cardinal does so, albeit more awkwardly.

“How did you know I was here?” Richelieu asks after a moment.

Treville grins with half his face. “Your Cahusac may be fine at sneaking into prison, but it’s been a long time since he’s tried to hunt another Gascon. I spotted him easily enough and followed him back to you.”

Richelieu frowns. “Cahusac can walk across a room without disturbing a puff of smoke,” he objects.

“Then maybe he wanted me to see him. I did consider that.”

“And you came anyway?”

Treville’s shoulders set into a wary line. “I had to know,” he says. “If it was really you. If you’d really come – if you really – ” He shakes his head, more at himself than at Richelieu. “I had to know,” he repeats.

“I’m here,” Richelieu says carefully.
“But why?” Treville waves a hand before Richelieu can respond. “We’ve covered why you’re on my land. But why are you in Gascony at all?”

“I’m returning from Toulouse.”

“So why were you in Toulouse?” Treville frowns. “Wait. Wait, I did hear – you were visiting the Inquisitor?” He turns to look at Richelieu, agitated. “Did you have anything to do with that poor farmer who got exposed?”

“Only by being too late to save him,” Richelieu sighs.

Treville bows his head for a moment. “I heard last night,” he admits. “I would have done something, if I could have, but by then it was too late for me, too.”

A moment of silence passes. Respect for the dead.

Then Treville says, slowly, “You don’t usually travel five hundred miles for a single farmer.”

“I know you think I don’t care –” Richelieu begins, hearing an accusation in Treville’s words.

“No, I don’t mean that. I know you care. It’s just that you can’t be everywhere at once. In the time you’ll be away from Paris, how many more people will be in danger? It simply doesn’t make sense for you to go haring off after a single report from the countryside.” Treville’s voice slows as he talks, like he’s working through these points for himself for the first time. “But then why did you come?”

Richelieu doesn’t answer.

“I did hear,” Treville says even more slowly. “One of my servants did say that the original rumor was that it hadn’t been a farmer who’d been caught, but a noble.”

Richelieu flinches. He can’t help it. He doesn’t mean to show any reaction – doesn’t want to make this any harder than it already is – but he’d spent five hundred miles imagining all the ways he might have found Treville’s body in Toulouse, and the images aren’t going to go away that quickly.

“Surely that rumor didn’t make it all the way to Paris,” Treville says disbelievingly.

“The Inquisitor of Toulouse has a clerk who doesn’t know when to stop writing,” Richelieu mutters.

“Every time I think I’ve got you figured out,” Treville mutters to himself. Then, more loudly, he says: “A noble isn’t somehow more worthy of your attention than a farmer, you idiot.”

Richelieu stiffens. “That’s not –” he starts to protest. Then he stops. After all, Treville is right. However it’s sliced, Richelieu had still come five hundred miles for one man, and frankly not given a damn about what might have happened in Paris in his absence.

*This* is why he had never meant to fall in love.

“I thought you were in danger,” Richelieu says instead, past caring about foolish things like dignity.

“I’m fine,” Treville says. Something ugly passes over his face. “Besides, if I were in trouble, I’d just spread my legs and fuck my way out of it, like the whore I am.”

“Shut up!” Richelieu shouts. Anger flashes through him, sudden and bright as a brushfire. His fists clench at his side. “Don’t say that! Don’t ever say that about yourself!”

Treville recoils. The Captain’s on his feet and several steps away before Richelieu realizes that
Richelieu’s standing, too. That he’s nearly shaking with the force of his anger.

“That’s the Inquisition talking,” Richelieu says furiously. “They’re the ones who want to control you – your life, your sexuality, your choices – ”

“Then I guess you’re well placed, Grand Inquisitor. You wanted to control my choices, too.”

The anger ebbs as quickly as it had come. Richelieu’s shoulders slump and he looks away.

“I did,” he admits. “I was wrong.”

“Are you saying that because you believe it, or because you don’t like the outcome as much as you’d hoped?”

“I never expected to like the outcome.”

“You’re an idiot,” Treville says plainly.

Richelieu finds himself laughing mirthlessly. “I know.”

They stand there in silence for a moment. The wind whistles between them, highlighting their distance.

“I don’t think you’re a whore,” Richelieu adds quietly. “I never did.”

“You’ve been acting like my past offended you since the moment I first offered myself to you.”

“Your past does offend me,” Armand cries. “Of course it does! Someone hurt you. Many someones. Even if you weren’t – you’re still a throwback. I’m supposed to have protected you. My family failed you. We failed many of our people, and you were there helping the ones we weren’t, and you sold pieces of yourself you should never have had to give away. I didn’t even know you and I’ve been failing you your whole life.”

“If I weren’t what?”

“Pardon?”

“Right before you went into your little rant there, you started to say, even if I weren’t. If I weren’t what?”

Armand stares at him. “I don’t know,” he says finally. “There isn’t a word for it.”

“Try,” Treville demands.

He tries. He really does. But how can he describe it? Perfect isn’t right. Treville isn’t perfect. He has flaws like anyone else. It’s just that Armand doesn’t care. Precious might come closer, but it implies that Treville’s some kind of porcelain figurine, and that’s all wrong for the throwback who’d had an Alpha with twice his strength pinned to a wall within minutes of their first meeting. Special, maybe. But that word’s not quite big enough to contain everything that Treville is. Treville keeps fighting when he’s got nothing left to gain, tears off pieces of himself to sell if that’s what others need, is even now getting ready to pick up the shards of his life and carry on because the Underground needs him. There is no single word big enough to encompass him. It would take all the words in all the languages that ever were.

Which is an answer of its own, Armand realizes.
“Everything,” Armand says firmly.

“Then why?”

“Why what?”

“Why wouldn’t you have me?” Treville meets Richelieu’s gaze head-on, challenging. “If I’m so fucking everything.”

Armand has to swallow. The burning flame of sacrifice is bright in Treville’s gaze. It’s that, more than anything else, that lies between them. Treville has had to make so many sacrifices already. Armand can’t stand to be the cause of a single one more.

“You want pups,” Richelieu says. Forces himself to say. He wants to stop talking and reach out. Embrace Jean, if Jean will let him. He wants to believe it can be okay. But there’s one thing that can never be okay.

“I do,” Jean admits.

“That’s why. I can’t give you pups. Not ever.”

“I admit, I’d been hoping,” Treville says softly.

Richelieu’s heart breaks.

“I did think that maybe you could… I don’t know… maybe in among all your power and your wealth you knew some way to make it possible,” Treville goes on, voice breaking into a self-mocking laugh. “I know. It sounds foolish, saying it out loud. But I thought, if anyone could find a way, it would be you. When you said you couldn’t, of course I was sad. But it was like coming back to Earth. A part of me had known all along that you couldn’t change the way things are.”

“And how are things?” Richelieu manages to ask.

Treville looks up. Their gazes catch and lock. Treville’s eyes are bright with unshed tears, but clear, too.

“I’d made my decision long before I ever truly knew you,” he says simply. “I chose a soldiering lifestyle, remember? There’s no room for pups in that decision. I’m a prominent court figure now. I’m to be Captain of the King’s personal guard. How could I disappear for a year to carry and whelp? What kind of carrier could I be to my pups? How would I raise them? How would I go back to soldiering, after? I have to fight for every ounce of muscle tone I have. And the way my body would change – I’m already a little too broad-hipped for a Beta. A little too round in all the wrong places.”

Treville breaks their gaze to look down at himself, wry, and shake his head. “I’m unaligned. I have to pass as a sire. If I had stayed a country lord, if my parents had lived, if my brother hadn’t – carrying might have been possible. But only barely then, and not at all now.”

“I’m so sorry,” Armand whispers.

“Me too,” Treville admits, voice catching. “Me too.”

Without thinking Armand reaches for him. And Jean, perhaps also without thinking, lets himself be held.
“If I could make it happen for you, I would,” Armand says. “If I could intercede with God to change just one thing – ”

Jean reaches up and puts a finger over Armand’s lips. “Then you’d change the way the Betas feel about our people,” he says. “And then none of us would have to hide.”

Armand tries to smile. He’s not sure if he succeeds.

“I still want to help you with that,” Jean adds. “Even if the – us – is impossible. I won’t abandon the Underground. You need me, anyway. It’s probably falling apart since I had my little temper tantrum.” He shakes his head.

“Stop that,” Armand orders. “Stop saying such things about yourself. You’re not selfish or rash or any of those other things you keep thinking. Jean, please. You’re not.”

Jean looks away. “I think, if you’d told me that a few weeks ago, I might even have believed you.”

“What will it take for you to believe me now?”

“I don’t know.” Jean tries to laugh, unsuccessfully. “I suppose the same magic wand that it would take to get me to believe – well.”

“Believe what?”

“Believe that you might care for me again,” he whispers.

“I don’t know about that,” Armand says. “I don’t think that exists.”

Jean nods. Steps back from Armand’s embrace. “That’s all right.”

Armand reaches out and gathers Jean’s hands up in his. Dares to say, “I never stopped caring for you. Jean, I was enchanted by you from the moment you pinned me at Pignerol. I started realizing I cared for you when you held out your hand to me in Paris and all I could think about was how much all those other sires had hurt you. And I realized exactly how much I loved you when you told me to go to Hell.”

Jean laughs. It’s an odd, wet, snuffling sound that makes Armand realize Jean’s crying. Armand opens his mouth again to soothe him, horrified at the thought of having made Jean weep. Something salty touches his own tongue, and he realizes he’s weeping too.

“Only you would fall in love with someone for consigning you to eternal damnation,” Jean says, still laughing.

“That’s not when I fell in love with you,” Armand protests. “That’s just when I realized exactly how head over heels I was.”

“Well, either way. You must admit, it’s an odd thing for a Cardinal to say.”

“I’m already violating the Church’s tenets in so many other ways it hardly matters.”

“Aren’t we all.” Jean sobers. “I came out here to stop loving you.”

Richelieu makes himself nod. It’s no more than he’d expected.

“I didn’t succeed.”
Richelieu opens his mouth several times before he manages to say, “You didn’t?”

Treville shrugs. “I’d manage it eventually,” he says, half-defiant. “I’m good at getting over disappointments.”

Armand winces.

“But I’d rather not have to get over this one,” he adds. “If I don’t have to.”

“Jean,” Armand whispers.

“What? Don’t tell me you’ve thought of another objection,” Jean says, face darkening.

“Another sire might know a way for you to carry safely,” Armand says. He hates even the thought of it. He’s been tormenting himself for weeks with the image of Jean, bred with another Alpha’s seed. But – “I don’t know how likely that is. Not likely at all, I shouldn’t think. But it’s more possible than it will ever be with me.”

“If anyone is going to overcome the Inquisition in my lifetime, it will be you,” Jean says with quiet faith. “And I think your chances of doing it will be much improved with my help. If we succeed, I’ll carry your pups with joy. If we fail, I’ll bury my heart with yours, and burn at your side in Hell without a single regret.”

Armand has to close his eyes. It’s too much. It’s everything he’s learned to want and everything he’s always feared he could never have. And he wants to say something in return so that Jean knows it. But words fail him, and all he can do is pull Jean to him and clutch him tight, as if with this one embrace he can protect them both from all the hardships ahead.

“Maybe Louis will have a passel of children and name us both godfathers,” Jean says after a moment, rubbing a suspiciously wet cheek against Armand’s shoulder.

“Something’s better than nothing, at any rate,” Armand says. “I think I’d like that.”

“I’ll suggest it to him if the Queen ever gets pregnant.”

“I’ll do the same.”

“If his two warring ministers agree, then who is the King to refuse?”

Armand frowns. Jean’s unintentionally made a very cogent point. The two of them can’t suddenly be in accord. Especially not since Louis knows about Treville’s sex but not Richelieu’s. Louis will expect Treville to loathe Richelieu. Any apparent friendship between them will be deeply suspicious. It might even expose Richelieu. They won’t just be unable to share their mating with the world. They also won’t be able to pass as close friends, the way other unaligned throwback couples do. Their positions forbid it. In public, they’ll have to appear as the bitterest enemies.

Richelieu soberes, pulling away enough to look Treville in the eyes. “Jean – please think. Are you sure? Being a throwback is hard enough to begin with. Associating yourself with me –”

“I already said I won’t abandon the Underground,” Jean interrupts. “At that point, I’m already tying my fate to yours. Any happiness I may gain in the balance is a gift from God.”

Armand can’t help it. He smiles. He hasn’t properly smiled in months. It feels like it’s going to crack his face open. It feels good.
“Hey,” Jean says, snapping Armand out of his sudden distraction. “You’re forgetting something.”

“I am?”

“Yes. You haven’t formally offered me your suit. I’m not accepting any substitutes this time. No more mistakes. You’ve got to say the words.”

“Oh!” Armand scrambles after his scattered wits. He lets Jean go and takes a few steps back, putting a proper distance between them, and offers an elegant bow.

Jean laughs through his tears. He takes off his scarf and flutters it at Armand, a joking parody of the courtesans of old.

Armand has to take a moment to search his mind for the proper forms. None of Susanne and François’ offspring had been allowed to grow up ignorant of their culture and their heritage, of course. But Armand had never fought to retain those lessons. Indeed, he’d done his best, over the years, to forget them.

Now he wants them back. He reaches for the most formal of them. The oldest rites. Alfonse and Andreas had always found those a little stuffy. But Armand had liked the stateliness of them. In his secret heart, he’d thought them best. And Jean deserves the best.

And they dictate that Armand be speaking, not to Jean directly, but to his family – his sire and carrier. He already knows Jean hasn’t anyone left in the world. But the form demands he ask.

“Do you have any blood family of whom I’m unaware?” he begins.

“I do not,” Jean says, a little sadly.

“Adopted pack? Clan?”

“Neither.”

“Is there anyone who stands in the place of sire or carrier for you?”

“I am alone in the world,” Jean says formally. “I speak for myself; there is no other.”

“Then I offer myself to you directly, as a sire who wishes to be considered in your life’s journey.”

“And what advantages do you offer me?” Jean challenges. “What is your family and your bloodline? How will you protect and care for me and – and others?”

Armand flinches a little. That line is supposed to end and the pups I might give you. Jean leaving it off is an acknowledgement of what they’re giving up.

“Just ignore it,” Jean begs, breaking formality.

It’s an effort. But Armand swallows all the words that want to come.

“My family is noble,” Armand says instead, wrenching himself back on course. “My bloodline is – pure enough.”

The formality doesn’t call for a detailed genealogy on the spot. If Jean truly cares, he can examine the Richelieu books while they court. Somehow Armand doubts Jean will.

“Your protection?” Jean prompts.
Armand holds out both hands. “My protection is a dual-edged sword. In some ways I can offer much. I can divert Inquisitorial attention. Channel funds. Investigate those in whom you might place your trust. I have access to controlled substances. Medicine. Contraceptives. Suppressants.”

Jean draws in a sharp breath. “Suppressants,” he says in a tone of awe. “My military career.”

“But it comes with downsides. The Underground is a perennial target for the Inquisition. My involvement with them makes me, and ultimately you, vulnerable.”

“I accept that risk.”

Armand steels himself. “The secular classes believe there’s no such thing as the Resistance. The overwhelming majority of the lower-ranked in the Church and the Inquisition agree. But there are those in the upper echelons who know better. The College of Cardinals – a few high-ranking Inquisitors – and the Pope. They all know the Resistance is real. And they will stop at nothing to uproot it, and its leader.”

“And you are its leader.”

“I am the single most wanted person in all of Christendom,” Richelieu says with simple truth. “They will spare no expense and observe no scruples to gain my identity. In that quest, my loved ones are not merely forfeit. The Inquisition has cruelties that make the death of our Lord Jesus Christ look merciful in comparison. And if they discover you, and what you are to me, they will invent newer, crueler tortures just for you.”

Jean nods. The mirth is gone from his eyes, and he looks grave. Armand is grateful for that. Grateful that Jean is taking this seriously. If Jean says that it’s too much – changes his mind now, refuses to accept Armand’s suit – Armand will understand.

But Jean says, “You said you’d loved me all along. Do you think that, if I refuse you, you’ll stop?”

“I – I would try,” Armand flounders. “Surely – with time – ”

“And if you were to succeed,” Jean continues. “Do you think that the Inquisition, having discovered your identity or mine, would care that you had stopped loving me? Or would it be enough for them that you had once done so?”

Armand falls silent. They both know the answer to that question.

“Then I will consider your suit,” Jean says. “On one condition.”

“Name it,” Armand says instantly.

“I misspoke earlier when I said I was alone in the world. There is one other person who knows my true sex and counts me as family regardless.”

Armand’s eyes widen. “You mean – ”

“The King.”

“You want me to ask the King to court you?” Armand is dizzy at the thought.

“You needn’t do it in so many words. But yes.”

“I – but – the risk – ”
“Yes. Yes, that’s it exactly. The risk. That’s the whole point.” Jean takes another step back, increasing the distance between them. “Armand, I thought you loved me once, and you told me it was a lie. Now you’re here and you say you love me again. Or still. How can I trust that it’s the truth?”

“You doubt me?” Armand whispers.

“My heart tells me to believe you. But my head tells me that I believed you before.” Jean shrugs. “So I ask this of you.”

“You ask me to take a risk.”

“Yes. If you will do this – oh, I know you’ll word it cleverly, I know you’ll be careful, I know you’ll minimize the risk to almost nothing. But it will still be there. And you’re far too careful to take any sort of risk you don’t have to. If you’ll take that risk for me, I’ll know that you truly want me.”

“I’ll do it,” Armand swears. Part of his mind is shouting: what are you saying? You can’t! The risk – the danger – Louis – Anne –

For once, his love is greater than his fears. He will do this. The alternative is simply not worth contemplating.

“I’ll be waiting in Paris,” Jean says. He comes forward, closing the distance between them, and kisses Armand once. Only once. Lips closed, chaste, brief. It’s like a bolt from the heavens.

Then Jean is walking past him. Out of the clearing. On his horse and back to Troisville.

Armand turns to watch him go. It’s a preview of things to come. Even if Armand succeeds in becoming worthy of Jean, they’ll spend more of their lives parted than together.

But Armand will be happier apart from Jean than together with anyone else. And if Jean feels the same – if Jean chooses the same – then perhaps desire and practicality can find common ground, just this one time.

He goes to mount Strider. It’s a long journey back to Paris, and he’s got a request to make of the King.
Their return to Paris is uneventful. Armand resists the urge to seek out Treville and make sure that he’s arrived safely. Court gossip assures Richelieu that Treville has, because it’s already in full swing guessing about what had caused the Comte’s sudden emergency and subsequent return. Financial difficulties seems to be the prevailing theory. Richelieu makes a mental note to encourage that where and how he can.

Treville himself reappears in his usual spot by Louis’ side without fanfare. Once or twice his eyes meet Richelieu’s across the throne room, but Treville’s expression never changes. Nor does Richelieu expect it to. The next move is his: Treville is waiting for Richelieu to act.

He chooses his moment carefully. As Treville says, he can minimize the risk. Louis is placing more and more trust in the Cardinal; Richelieu frequently has opportunities to speak to the King alone. Of course, alone won’t quite do – Treville must be present, too – but that’s easily enough arranged. A quiet moment when it’s only the three of them, and Richelieu has only to ask the King for Treville’s cooperation on something or other. The King will give his permission. Easily done, and really not a very great risk at all.

Richelieu imagines it all out. The few steps it will require to arrange. The straightforward request. The King’s ready acquiescence. The minimum necessary to meet Treville’s wishes.

Armand sets this plan aside. Instead, he waits until the King returns to palace to hold court after Mass on Sunday, as usual. The throne room is at its fullest at such times; everyone who had attended church with Louis is allowed, by custom, to come spend a few moments more in the King’s presence afterwards, and brag about it in their homes later. Plenty of eyes. Plenty of ears.

Not a lot of business gets done on those days for that very reason. The King will say a few ceremonial words. The Cardinal a few more. Petitioners may attempt to approach the throne. Today there’s somewhat more going on than usual. After the delay caused by Treville’s temporary absence, the first round of commissions are finally ready to be granted for the formation of the King’s Musketeers. The chosen dozen are present in the throne room too. One by one they come forward, kneel, and are handed papers making them officers. Two – a veteran named Laflèche and a youth with obvious noble blood who answers to de Mere – receive commanders’ bars and will serve as Treville’s seconds. The other ten accept lieutenancies. They’ll each recruit three additional soldiers to form four-man squads, with future expansion provided for in the Musketeers’ charter as their duties expand.

Treville himself, of course, is called forward to formally be announced as their Captain. The King says some very flattering things about Treville. Everyone applauds. The Cardinal is called upon to bless them all in the name of the Church and the Inquisition, and adds a few formulaic words about their duty to protect France from all threats, including religious ones. Treville, still kneeling, makes a wry grin that only Richelieu and the floor are in a position to see.
That done, the crowd finally starts to disburse. They stop when Richelieu says, “One other thing, your Majesty.”

“Yes, what is it?” Louis asks. He covers a yawn somewhat ineffectually. It’s nearly time for the midday meal, and the King gives the Cardinal a look that very plainly says this had better not take long.

“The formation of your Majesties’ Musketeers is a momentous occasion, and I hope it heralds a future where the Church and the military find a new and better accord – ”

Louis doesn’t even bother to hide his second yawn. “Yes, yes, Cardinal, you gave this speech already. What do you want?”

“Captain Treville,” Richelieu says, promptly and without any further explanation.

There’s a sudden muffled clanking behind the Cardinal’s left shoulder, as if someone dressed in military uniform has stumbled at an inopportune time and knocked into a wall or someone else wearing similar gear. Richelieu ignores it, keeping his expression and bearing serene.

Now Louis is paying attention. “What do you want with him?” he asks, somewhat suspiciously.

“At your Majesty’s instruction, he and I have worked closely together during the chartering of your Musketeers. I have grown to appreciate his character and skill. Your Majesty chose his Captain very well.”

Treville appears in Richelieu’s peripheral vision. He appears to be attempting to catch Richelieu’s attention. Richelieu ignores this.

Louis relaxes somewhat, flattered. “I’m pleased to hear that, Cardinal. As I recall, your initial attempts to work together were somewhat strained.”

Richelieu’s lips tighten. “Indeed.”

“Cardinal – ” Treville attempts to cut in.

Richelieu raises a hand for silence. “That’s precisely why I wish to speak to you, your Majesty. I’m afraid that, in my zeal to protect those in my charge, I may have abused the Captain’s good will. However, we’ve since come to a much better understanding of each other, and of how we can both serve France. I wished to ask your Majesty’s blessing for us to continue to do so, and in fact, to expand our relationship.”

Treville nearly chokes.

Louis looks thoughtful. “I see what you’re saying, Cardinal. Yes, you make a good point… the regular army has very little oversight right now, I think.”

“Very little, your Majesty,” Treville jumps in. “The Cardinal and I have discussed it at length. We both agree it would be in their best interests to be better-regulated. That is what the Cardinal means to say.”

“And the Cardinal speaks for you both, Treville?” The King glances at his friend somewhat curiously. “You support him in this? You think this is what’s best?”

“I – ” Treville glances over at Richelieu. Then he looks back at the King and squares his shoulders. “I do, your Majesty.”
Louis shakes his head a little in disbelief. “I would never have thought it. Well, Treville, I trust you to know your own mind – ” he shrugs. “So if you think this is truly the best outcome…”

“I do,” Treville says again, more firmly. He lets his gaze soften a little. “Truly, your Majesty.”

“Then you have my blessing. Both of you.”

Richelieu bows. “Thank you, your Majesty,” he says.

Louis gives him an odd look. “Just be careful,” he instructs. “The Captain may be satisfied with your plans, but I’ll still be keeping an eye on you, Cardinal. Remember what I said about overreach.”

Richelieu lets himself smile. “I will take your words to heart, your Majesty,” he promises sincerely.

“All right then.” The King shakes his head again. “Well, if that’s settled, I want to dine.”

Richelieu and Treville both retreat a few steps, giving Louis room to stand. They bow with everyone else and fall into their usual places in the King’s entourage. Once clear of the throne room, though, Treville murmurs something to his seconds and steps out of the throng. Richelieu doesn’t need Treville’s pointed look to know to do the same.

The King’s entourage proceeds without them. The lesser nobles and commoners who don’t have places at the King’s table are being escorted out of the palace in a different direction. Treville tugs Richelieu off into a side corridor, quiet and deserted at this time of day, the clerks and servants all at their meals.

“You wanted to speak to me?” Richelieu inquires urbanely.

“Don’t give me that,” Treville hisses. He’s looking a little wild-eyed, Armand notices. “Did you just stand in the throne room of the Louvre, in full view of half the nobility of France, and ask his most Christian Majesty for his blessing?”

“I dare do all that may become a noble,” Richelieu replies. He dares to reach out and take Treville’s hand. Dares to raise it to his lips. Dares to kiss the back of it, and breathe deep, chasing the faintest, barest, wholly illusory scent of him.

“The risk was incalculable,” Treville breathes.


“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“I know. That’s why I had to do it.”

“I would have been satisfied with less,” Treville protests.

“You have spent far too long being satisfied with less,” Richelieu says intensely. “And if you mate with me, you’ll spend the rest of your life doing the same. For this one thing, you didn’t have to.”

Treville’s lips part slightly. The faintest blush rises on his cheekbones, and the flare of his eyes is electric.

“Will you look favorably upon my suit?” Richelieu asks.

“I’m not letting you get away a second time. I couldn’t take it.”
The bottom drops out of Richelieu’s stomach. “You’ve changed your mind?”

Treville shakes his head. “That’s up to you,” he replies.

“But I’ve done as you asked,” Richelieu says, dizzy.

“And I’m asking you to clear your calendar for Michaelmas,” Treville says. “I’ll be going on a journey. The only question left is whether or not you’re coming with me.”

Three months pass in a blur that leaves Richelieu’s senses whirling. He’s never exactly lived a life of leisure, but transitioning full control of the Underground to Treville had been supposed to leave Richelieu with more time to focus on the Resistance. Probably that would have been more effective if their collaboration hadn’t been sharing time with their second courtship. If it weren’t for the fact that lives are on the line, Richelieu would probably never have gotten anything done.

Getting away from Paris without raising suspicion takes a lot of careful planning. Richelieu is known to come and go often in the pursuit of throwbacks, which provides its own form of cover, but at a price: when he’s known to be out of the capitol, tongues wag night and day trying to guess at his target. Treville, meanwhile, has to contend with the calendar. His last absence from court had been abrupt and widely talked of. Another disappearance three months later is dangerous by itself. And Louis is a wild card. He knows Treville’s true sex, so he’s willing to help cover for Treville. But if Richelieu leaves Paris at the same time Louis is sure to jump to the wrong conclusions.

Assistance comes from the least likely of sources. Queen Anne receives a letter from her childhood tutor, who is now the Inquisitor of Lille, which includes the usual dire warnings of throwbacks positioned in critical places throughout France. Such letters always arrive with great fanfare; Richelieu estimates that at least a quarter of their purpose is to carry on the decade-long cold war that has been waging between Armand and George. Lille would like nothing better than to parade some poor throwback through Paris and under Richelieu’s nose while loudly trumpeting Richelieu’s failure. George had been a spiteful, sadistic, peacock in the seminary and no matter how many titles he’s amassed since he hasn’t outgrown any of those tendencies. Armand’s even greater success had only fanned the flames of an antipathy that had begun in the Augustinian classrooms of their late adolescence.

The result is that George puts nearly as much time and effort into the Inquisitorial duties of France as Armand does himself. As the Inquisitor of Lille, George never loses the opportunity to make Richelieu’s life difficult in Vatican councils. As the Comte de Rochefort, he cultivates friendships among the staunchest Catholics at court. And as the Conde de Toreno, he writes often to his dear Anne, whom he regards at the very least as the daughter he’ll never have.

Anne, in her turn, reveres Toreno as the incarnation of the Archangel Michael on Earth, vigilant with his holy sword to defend Anne and all good Catholic women from the ravages of the horrible throwback threat. When his letters arrive, Anne always reads them out to her ladies, who promptly tell their contents to everyone else in Paris. The next day usually sees Richelieu himself being subjected to a reading of the letter in front of the entire court. Then Anne will demand to know what Richelieu is doing about whatever threats Lille had invented this time.

For someone who pours as much effort into France as Lille does, without the excuse of being a throwback or sympathizer himself, Lille is often shockingly off-base with his accusations. Only a handful of times has he actually identified a throwback or uncovered a Resistance plot. If Armand hadn’t made it his business to see every single one of his classmates at the seminary naked at one point or another he’d suspect Rochefort of being under cover himself. Alas. George is a sadist with power and a holy excuse: the worst kind of man.
To counter this, Richelieu has adopted a pose of bored indifference and generally refuses to do anything more than the most cursory review of Lille’s claims. Even a blind chicken finds a piece of corn once in a while; one day Lille will find his corn, and Richelieu will need all the years of cover he can muster in order to protect France and the Resistance.

This time, though, George inadvertently provides Armand with the perfect excuse.

“Cardinal, you’ve been standing there dumb as a post the entire time,” Anne scolds, folding Lille’s letter back up after reading it aloud. She gives Richelieu an unimpressed look. “What do you think of what Toreno has written? Does none of it worry you?”

“As ever, your Majesty, I can assure you that the situation is completely under control,” Richelieu says.

Anne scoffs. “How you and Toreno can have such wildly different viewpoints I will never understand. What about his concerns about Gascony? He says they’re evading the sterilization laws right and left. He says that there is a throwback hidden in every family!”

There’s a cough from the sidelines of the court. “Your Majesty, I can assure you that’s not true,” a noble from Toulouse hastens to say. “Perhaps the hills and wildlands of my home make it a trifle easier for such animals to delay their capture, but they are all caught in the end.”

“Hmm.” Anne tips her head to one side, considering, and switches her attention back to Richelieu. “What do you say to that, Cardinal?”

Richelieu sketches a bow in the direction of the convenient nobleman. “I have the completest faith in the Inquisitor of Toulouse, and all the other Inquisitors in the area, your Majesty.”

“Faith. Assurances. Richelieu, when is the last time you even spoke to the Inquisitor of Toulouse?”

Opportunity strikes like a bolt of lightning. Richelieu lets a smile spread over his face. “I was a guest in his home not two months gone, your Majesty.”

Anne blinks, visibly taken aback. “You were?”

“Perhaps your Majesty was unaware of the close ties I maintain with my subordinates all throughout France,” Richelieu says with an air of martyrdom.

“Two months gone?” The nobleman of a moment ago purses his lips, frowning. “You weren’t the one behind that rumor, were you?”

“What rumor?” Anne demands.

The nobleman bows to the throne. “Word had circulated that a throwback had been found hiding as a noble in Gascony.”

“Why didn’t I hear about this?” Anne cries.

“It turned out to be exaggerated,” Richelieu says calmly.

“Yes, a farmer or some such,” the nobleman agrees.

“Still. An adult, it sounds like –”

“Whom I personally saw hanging from a gibbet in Toulouse square,” Richelieu says, wording his statement carefully so that it remains the truth. Lies are troublesome to maintain; best to save them for
when they’re needed.

Anne’s gaze sharpens. “So you agree with Toreno,” she says, sounding surprised. “You also think there’s a threat in Gascony.”

“One farmer is hardly a threat, your Majesty,” the nobleman protests.

Richelieu ignores him, intent on the sudden opportunity. “These things increase with distance,” he says cautiously. “In Paris, I heard of a nobleman. In Lille, your old tutor probably heard of an army. And yet in Toulouse itself there was only a farmer. I have told you before, your Majesty, that though Lille no doubt means well, he hears only distortions.”

Anne presses her lips together. “Yes. So you’ve said. And yet – ”

“And yet your Majesty still worries,” Richelieu completes. “Well, perhaps it will reassure you to know that the Inquisitor of Toulouse has already invited me to celebrate Michaelmas with his family, and that I intend to accept the invitation.”

“You do?”

“I do indeed,” Richelieu smiles.

“And while you’re there, you’ll look into Toreno’s claims,” Anne says, as if she can’t quite believe it.

For answer, Richelieu bows. “I am at your Majesty’s command,” he says heroically.

The other nobles of the court break into a scattering of light applause. Richelieu does not smile. He does, however, incline his head gently in acknowledgement. So his legend grows.

“Well,” Anne says at last. “I’ll expect a full report, of course, Cardinal.”

“Of course,” he agrees. “And the next time I see the Inquisitor of Lille, I shall have to express my gratitude to him.”

Anne’s eyebrows rise. “Your gratitude?”

“For his attention to detail,” Richelieu says smoothly.

“Yes. Right.” Anne studies him for a moment, then stands abruptly. “I’m fatigued. I will retire until supper.”

She exits abruptly. Richelieu waits until she’s gone to smile.

Richelieu writes to Toulouse that night; a reply arrives a week later. It’s exactly as Richelieu had foreseen. Toulouse is delighted at the opportunity to advance in Church politics. The great Cardinal celebrating a quarter-day feast in his province is an enormous opportunity. Toulouse promises a celebration Richelieu won’t soon forget.

That much Richelieu can be sure of.

Treville comes by the Palais-Cardinal late that evening. Ostensibly he’s here to discuss the fitting-out of the Musketeers’ regiment, and exactly how much money from the French treasury Richelieu is going to release to him. Tonight the Captain enters Richelieu’s office chuckling.
“So, you’re going to spend Michaelmas in Gascony?” he asks, eyes sparkling. “What an astonishing thing.”

“Isn’t it?” Richelieu lets himself grin a little. “The next time I see George, I’ll have to thank him for the opportunity.”

“I would love to see the Inquisitor’s face.”

“I’d rather see yours,” Richelieu admits.

Treville blushes a little. The next few minutes aren’t spent talking.

“I’ll have to spend the feast day itself in Toulouse, and at least a week afterwards,” Richelieu says when they turn their attention back to more practical matters. “A fortnight would be better.”

“That’s all right,” Treville says. “As I told you before, I’m very regular. My heat will be done two days before the quarter-day. You’ll be in Toulouse right on schedule.”

Now that they have their excuses ready, the planning becomes straightforward, if no less involved. The great Cardinal Richelieu will leave Paris a full week before the quarter-day. He’ll travel in great state, with many servants and Guards and a large baggage-train that will be a full week on the road. Armand himself will split from the caravan on horseback and meet up with Treville. Riding alone and lightly laden, they will go to Richelieu’s estates and spend their mating heat there. Then Richelieu will have to leave and ride hard to catch up with his convoy a day out of Toulouse. With so much hustle and bustle on the road, and so many people coming and going, no one should question that the Cardinal himself is rarely seen on the journey. It’s a tactic he’s used before.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Richelieu says, and he doesn’t mean Michaelmas in Toulouse.

“Just be careful,” Treville says worriedly.

“My dear, I’ll be fine.”

Treville still looks concerned. Richelieu distracts him with a kiss.

The last week before their departure slows to molasses. Treville is rarely to be found, busily setting up his new garrison. The policies and procedures he puts in place are designed from the ground up to enable him to hide throwbacks and continue his leadership of the Underground. Laflèche and le Mere start turning up in odd places doing odd things, though Richelieu himself is never directly present to observe them, nor will he ever be. The Underground and the Resistance are separate except at the very highest levels. None of Treville’s lieutenants will ever know Richelieu’s identity. Richelieu’s know Treville’s, but that’s where it will end.

Treville’s escape from Paris proves to be easy enough to arrange. Louis is furnishing the muskets for Treville’s regiment directly. One day Louis worries publically that the muskets are not being made correctly; he orders Treville, speaking before the whole court, to go ride out to the smith’s and inspect them personally. The muskets are conveniently being made outside of Paris. Treville grumbles a little about its being a waste of his time, but bows acquiescence in the end, and his journey is fixed to take place a little before Michaelmas.

“You’ll be back in time for the quarter-day?” Louis adds, voice still pitched to carry. “The Cardinal will be out of Paris, so you must not desert me as well, Treville.”

Treville smiles. Richelieu, watching from the sidelines, schools his features to prevent him doing likewise. The King wants to make sure that Treville won’t possibly be caught up in whatever dragnet
Richelieu means to impose on Gascony. Not for the first time, Richelieu is grateful that for the King’s protection.

“I will attend Mass with your Majesty,” Treville promises.

“Good,” Louis says, appeased. “See that you do.”

The night before they are to leave Paris, Treville slips out the back courtyard of his hotel and down side streets to the Palais-Cardinal. There’s a discreet entrance to one side that looks as though it’s meant for servants, though actually it’s the way various Resistance members come and go when they don’t wish to be seen. Treville uses it to gain entrance and takes the back corridors to Richelieu’s private chambers.

“Beloved,” Armand says, starting to greet Jean with a kiss. He’s interrupted by Jussac’s significant cough.

“Not until after,” Jussac scolds them both.

Armand turns pleading eyes to Jean. Jean smiles, but says, “You can wait ten minutes.”

“Come on, lovebirds,” Jussac says indulgently. He heads out the door. Jean and Armand follow him. In this private section of the Palais-Cardinal, Armand doesn’t let go of his beloved’s hand.

The Cardinal holds services at the Basilica, of course, but there’s a private chapel here for Armand. Armand’s faith isn’t all a matter of his public persona. Most throwbacks he’s met think he’s a fool, but he doesn’t believe God has abandoned his people. How could he, when he can see God’s hand so clearly in the success his own family has had resisting the Inquisition? They are not where they are because of chance. From the first de Richelieu who rode to the Holy Land to Armand-Jean du Plessis, they are the servants of God, and as long as they do not fail in their faith they will not fail in their struggle. The Devil may interfere with human affairs for a time, but Lucifer loses in the end.

Jean pauses just inside the chapel’s doors, looking around him in admiration. It’s beautifully decorated. Armand loves beautiful things. Jean, blinking up at the gold-leaf and gasping at the Botticelli hanging by the altar, is the ultimate proof of that.

Armand and Robert go to the front. Robert doesn’t make it widely known, but he’s ordained, too; he’s officially Richelieu’s private confessor. Jussac kisses the stole and drapes it around his neck, tugging his crucifix out as he does. Richelieu, by contrast, lays his aside. He doesn’t come here as a priest.

“Jean?” Armand asks, turning and beckoning.

Jean starts, recalled to his purpose. He blushes slightly and comes forward. He takes Armand’s outstretched hand, and then his other, and the two of them turn towards each other before the altar.

“Are none of your other lieutenants coming?” Jean asks.

Armand shakes his head. “They’re good people, and I trust them, but they’re not pack,” he says. “I found I preferred to keep this private. That is, if you…”

“I prefer it too,” Jean says with a smile.

Robert clears his throat and opens his prayer-book. “Turn to face me, please.”
The words of the service go by quickly, simple and familiar. Robert uses an older form, omitting the flourishes and curlicues that the Inquisition has introduced and made common. There are no complicated recitations of fidelity to twisted doctrines. Just old wisdom and older truths. Armand and Jean promise to love, protect, and support each other; to turn to each other first for help against all obstacles; to forswear secrets and to pursue the truth. They promise to be undaunted by the obstacles of the world, whether fire, flood, sickness or poverty. They promise to never give up. They promise to forgive.

With Robert prompting, Jean speaks his vows first, from the old verses that are no longer in the Betan Bible. He tears up while doing it, but his voice remains clear and steady as Jean swears himself and his future to Armand.

“Armand,” Robert says quietly.

Armand needs no prompting. “Whither thou goest, I will go,” he begins. “Where thou lodgest, I will lodge.”

He has to pause, to breathe, to swallow. “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there – there will I be buried – ”

Armand stops, gasping. He’d started out as steadily as Jean had, but his voice had gotten quieter and quieter, and it breaks finally when he thinks of their probable future, and the graves they’ll one day fill. Being buried together shouldn’t be a luxury, but it is. In the age of the Inquisition, it is. Far more probable that they’ll die alone, in pain, and be tossed in a pit where the other can never find them. Which of them will stumble suddenly in the middle of the street, feeling the other’s pain? Which of them will wake up in the middle of the night with tears running down their face? Which of them will leap up from the dinner table with a cry, as Armand’s carrier had done once, and try by running from the room to outrun their grief? Which of them will be left to carry on alone until their heart gives out and they are buried, alone, in a cold grave that can bring no solace?

“No, no,” Jean whispers. Slowly Armand becomes aware that he’s shaking. Jean’s hands are cool on his cheeks, brushing his tears away. “Beloved, please. Look at me?”

Armand obeys without thinking. Jean is crying, too, but he’s also fierce and uncompromising and beautiful. He tugs Armand close heedless of the protocol of the ceremony and shushes him like a carrier with his pup.

“We’ll meet that end bravely, if it comes,” Jean murmurs. “But in the meanwhile we’ll have each other. And afterwards, too, whether in Heaven or Hell, we’ll have each other there.”

Armand breathes. Jean’s words settle somewhere deep in his soul and he knows their truth. The Inquisition can destroy their bodies, but never their souls. They can transcend pain and death.

“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,” Armand remembers.

“And His Kingdom will have no end,” Jean says back.

Armand nods. He even manages to smile a little.

Jean bumps their noses together. “Hey, Jussac, can I kiss him yet?”

Robert looks down at the book in his hands and frowns. Then he closes it with a decisive snap. “Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us,” Robert proclaims and makes the sign of the cross over them both. “Okay, now is good.”
“Good,” Jean echoes, and kisses Armand to seal the promise.

Parting after that is difficult, but slipping away from their respective minders goes off without a hitch, and they reunite in a little forest past St. Denis. Together they reach the borders of Richelieu shortly before sunup. Dawn is breaking when they crest the final hill to the old farm-house. Richelieu’s not a superstitious man, but he can’t help but feel energized by the first feeble rays of light that break over the roof. It’s a time when the old, primal instincts of their ancestors may be let out to play. Armand has overcome all the obstacles placed before him; Jean has consented to be his; now he brings his mate-to-be to the place that will be their home.

“Later we’ll go up to the manor,” Richelieu tells Treville, drawing rein at the foot of the hill. “It’s—well, I grew up there, so I suppose that makes it special in its own way. There are concealed rooms with weapons and books and portraits of my ancestors. And it’s yours as much as any of this is. But since I took up my life’s work, this has been my true home.”

His gesture takes it all in. The sturdy farm-house, well built generations ago and well-maintained since. The stables standing a few hundred yards from the main house are more modern and can house a dozen horses. The kitchen garden is tended by a trusted servant and grows medicine as well as food. Inside, Armand knows, the house is well-furnished and comfortable in a way the manor never can be.

“Show it to me?” Treville asks.

They go inside together after stabling their horses. Armand takes Jean’s hand as they go over the threshold. It’s bad luck for the carrier to trip. Armand doesn’t truly believe in such things, but at moments like this he can never quite remember why.

Jean smiles at him. “You’re such a traditionalist,” he says.

Armand shrugs a little stiffly. “No point in taking chances,” he mutters.

Jean leans forward and steals a kiss. “I love it. Now show me our home.”

The words *our home* suffuse Armand with warmth. Jean’s being poetic; they both have many homes, and of all the places they’ll spend time, this will be least among them. Jean’s offices in the Musketeers’ barracks and Armand’s rooms at the Palais-Cardinal will claim more of their lives than this place. In the eyes of society, the manor-houses on both of their estates rightly possess the title. No one else would consider an old farm-house to be a proper home for either of them.

And yet all of those other places belong to other people, the masks and personas they wear to protect themselves. The Captain of the Musketeers will live with his regiment. The Cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, lives in his palace. The Comte de Treville has his seat in Gascony; the Duc de Richelieu’s estates are in Indre-et-Loire. Armand and Jean are only allowed to exist in stolen moments, and most of those moments will take place here, where they can be alone, and safe, and together.

Armand shows Jean everything there is to see. Truthfully, it isn’t much. There’s a large open room for planning and staging operations, with chairs and lounges set around a large fireplace. It’s open to a kitchen that can feed dozens.

“Armies march on their stomachs,” Jean says, with the air of one quoting a proverb. “I suppose the Resistance is no different. Do you often run missions out of here?”

“Three or four times a year, perhaps,” Richelieu says, considering.
“You can’t sleep that many people.” There are three guest bedrooms, each with a double bed, and then, of course, the master suite.

“We clear out the chairs and people bunk on the floors. It’s usually only for a night or two.”

“What about throwbacks who are escaping France?”

“They’re who the guest rooms are for.” Richelieu gestures to the far wall, where three doors open onto the addition his sire had had put on. The original farmhouse had only had the master suite, for the heads of the family; everyone else had slept in front of the fire.

Jean nods. He inspects the bedrooms themselves, noticing the large windows – “Big enough to climb out of?”

“Just in case.”

“Wise.” – and checking the closets.

“Trap-doors in the floors and ceiling.” Armand demonstrates. “There’s no basement, but a crawlspace emerges out by the stables. The ceiling – ”

“Over the roof and down by the well.”

“Exactly.”

The kitchen itself has a back door that’s not exactly hidden, but tucked behind the icebox so that it’s not easily seen from the entrance, a possible escape route if the house isn’t surrounded. And the master suite has its own door, too, as well as a bolt-hole accessible from under the bed.

“This one isn’t attached to a crawlspace. It’s a last resort,” Armand says. “If you can’t make it out any of the other exits – ”

“You hide here and hope they don’t find you.” Jean frowns. “The Inquisition knows to check for such things.”

“It was the first safety hatch built here, in my grandsire’s time. Inquisitorial methods weren’t so good then. It’s still better than nothing. Particularly if someone else is diverting the attackers’ attention.”

“Hey.” Jean says sternly. “No heroics.”

“I won’t promise that. You wouldn’t promise me that, if I were foolish enough to ask it.”

Jean looks down. “No. I wouldn’t.”

To distract him, Armand waves to the rest of the room. “I know it’s not much,” he says, suddenly a little self-conscious. Perhaps Treville would have preferred the manor-house after all. It’s much more spacious and modern. This house may be well enough for a soldier or a Resistance fighter, but for a nobleman – for Armand’s mate –

“It reminds me of my old nanny’s house, in Troisville,” Jean says softly. He’s looking around; his expression is gentle. “My father hired her after my mother died. She’d been the midwife in his generation. Saved babes that others would have lost, and for that, everyone pretended they didn’t know she was a throwback. My father hiring her was viewed as charity. She died when I was eight. Natural causes. She taught me how to pass.”

“Oh,” Armand says. He’d wondered about that, occasionally. Treville, by his own admission, had
never encountered the Underground until he’d come to Paris. Jean has no living throwback family or
friends. Armand hadn’t asked, for fear of bringing up bad memories, but he’s glad to here that there
had been someone in Jean’s past who had cared about him. Someone who’d protected him.

“Let’s stoke up the stove,” Jean says, smiling at Armand and tugging him back out into the main
room. “I want my breakfast.”

Jean cooks simply, a soldier’s plain fare. Armand checks to be sure all the proper supplies are in
place: food, firewood, blankets. He lays a fire in the bedroom and fills waiting flasks with water from
the well. In his sire’s time, there had been a caretaker who lived here. That servant had died shortly
after Alfonse had left, and the duty is now shared between three maids up in the main house, who
check up on the place every week or so. Armand will need to find a new caretaker soon. Only a few,
core servants at Richelieu know the truth about the family. The rest are simply employees of a
nobleman who spends most of his time in Paris. The challenge will be finding someone he can trust.

Jean starts eating with every appearance of enjoyment, but slows about halfway through his meal,
frowning. By the time Armand is finished Jean is reduced to pushing food around his plate.

“Are you all right?” Armand asks, concerned.

Jean looks up and smiles. “It’s starting,” he says.

Armand breathes deep. Yes, there, the faintest test of sweetness is starting to leak into Jean’s scent.
He wouldn’t have noticed it unless Jean had spoken. Now that he’s got it, though, it lingers in his
nostrils, pleasant and seductive.

Jean picks up his teacup and drinks the last of its contents. It’s not his usual tea. Contraceptives are
grown in the garden here, next to the suppressants Jean will take back to Paris with him for his next
heat. Armand watches Jean drink it, bitter mingling with the sweet of Jean’s pre-heat scent. He wants
to lean across the table and knock the cup out of Jean’s hands. He wants to take Jean back into their
bedroom without any barriers between them. He wants to see Jean grow heavy with pups. He wants
to hold Jean’s hand during the whelping, and then hold their pups afterwards, and laugh and cry in
equal measure as they take center stage in his life.

Jean sets the teacup down, empty. His eyes flicker up to meet Armand’s. Armand doesn’t need to
say a word. He knows they’re both thinking the same thing.

Their life already has a center. And it’s the Inquisition.

“One day,” Jean says quietly.

“One day,” Armand agrees, though he doesn’t believe it.

“Let’s go riding,” Jean says, rising from the table and walking quickly past Armand, as if he doesn’t
want Armand to see his face. “Get some fresh air before my heat.”

Armand has to clear his throat. “All right,” he agrees. But it takes him an extra moment to stand up
from the table.

The ride quickly turns into an impromptu tour of the estates’ defenses. Treville scrutinizes them all
with a soldier’s eye and suggest several improvements. Richelieu promises that they’ll be
implemented as soon as may be.

When the sun has passed its zenith and started its descent, Treville’s scent changes, too, growing
stronger and more intense. They ride back to the farmhouse without discussion. Once again Armand helps Jean over the threshold. This time Jean doesn’t laugh about it. He’s already growing a little uncoordinated.

Armand lingers in the main room for a few moments, starting the fire in the main house and making sure the door and windows are firmly closed. Jean goes straight back into the master bedroom and begins to strip. He leaves the door open as he does.

“Where are you?” Jean calls after a few moments.

“I am here,” Armand answers, going to him.

Jean, naked now and gleaming in the rays of the afternoon sun, takes Armand’s hands and tugs Armand over to stand before the fire where it’s warmest. He starts undoing Armand’s buckles and protests when Armand tries to help.

“Let me,” Jean says. “I want to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It feels like I should. Like this is part of the gift we make of ourselves to each other.” Jean smiles. “It’s rude to open someone else’s gift.”

“I’m no gift,” Armand protests. If anything it’s the other way around.

“To me you are. My bridegroom. There should be a procession, like there would have been in the old days. People carrying lanterns standing along your path. A great feast at the other end, and I’d be waiting for you in your manor – ”

Armand can’t listen to this. He kisses Jean instead, cutting off the flow of words.

Jean responds beautifully, gasping and slipping his tongue in Armand’s mouth before Armand can do the same to Jean. But then Jean ducks back out of the kiss and goes around to Armand’s back, continuing his work of removing Armand’s leathers.

And speaking. He says wistfully, “There would be people on the hills around the manor watching for your approach, and when they saw you they’d call down to the servants. Just past midnight, you’d come. And the priest would ring the church-bell, and everyone who lived on the estate and everyone who’d come to see our ceremony would go and eat the marriage-feast except for you and I. You’d leave them all behind. You’d come up to our chambers. I’d be waiting and then there would be no one there but us.”

“And when we came out we’d find the village pups had scattered rose petals outside our rooms, and we’ll follow them to breakfast,” Armand says somewhat bitterly. “And then nine months later we’d welcome pups of our own. Jean, what’s the point of dwelling on the way the world used to be?”

Jean comes around and looks at Armand so sadly that Armand immediately regrets his bitterness.

“Because that’s what we’re fighting for,” Jean says earnestly. “The life of the world to come.”

“The world will never be like that again. That world is gone. We may build a new one, but it will be different.”

“Yes. From the outside. Its trappings and rituals will change. But its heart needn’t. What’s true and essential from the old world will still be true and essential in the new world. If we remember it.”
Armand tugs Jean into his arms. “I think you will keep my hopes for the future better than I ever could,” Armand says, muffled by Jean’s shoulder. He turns his head slightly to nose at Jean’s neck and breathes the sweet-spicy scent deep. “Hold on to them for me?”

“I will,” Jean promises. He tugs Armand back, and Armand steps out of the last of his leathers and lays his mate out on their bed.

Time passes while they’re just kissing, repeated presses of lips together, adventurous darting tongues and hands that roam each others’ bodies. It could be minutes; it could be hours. It could be days. Armand stops tracking time by the movement of the sun. Time now is marked by the changes in Jean’s scent, as slowly but surely the lure of pre-heat fades and is replaced by the demands of true heat.

They climb the first peak together. Armand kisses every inch of Jean’s body he can reach, even the ticklish spots behind Jean’s knees and right above his hipbones. Jean makes Armand lie back and explores all the differences an Alpha’s body has. He’s curious as a youth in his first heat, just learning what pleasures adulthood may hold.

“Every time I’ve ever been with someone before, it’s been quick,” Jean confesses shyly. “The lamps were usually out, or it was dark. They didn’t want to see or be seen. I know the mechanics of it but I’ve never just looked before. And they were all Betas.”

Armand wants to be furious over that, over all the people who have mistreated Jean, but in the rising wave of heat that fury is swamped by the greater need to give Jean whatever he requires. So Armand lies back obediently and lets Jean discover him. From the waist up, there’s very little to distinguish an Alpha from a Beta male, though Armand is stronger than his wiry build would imply and there are internal differences. His lung capacity is greater and his heart is stronger; he can produce more adrenaline, and he reacts to different substances differently than a Beta male. But from the outside, the changes are all lower. Jean hefts Armand’s cock – only half-hard at this stage of the proceedings, but still bigger than Jean’s own – and tugs at the folds of skin where his knot is uninflated. Even more fascinating are the testes Jean lacks. Jean rolls them in his hands and Armand gasps; delighted, Jean does it again, until Armand has to beg him to stop. Jean wants to taste and scent and play. He wants to probe beneath them to the sensitive skin that leads to Armand’s vestigial hole, only good for waste elimination, tight and unlubricated and altogether different from Jean’s own.

Armand lets it go on for as long as he can stand, but eventually the fires Jean is stoking rise too high to ignore, and he has to tug his mate-to-be away from his body and claim his own turn to explore. Jean accepts this with a cheeky smile. Supine on the sheets, Jean seems almost to melt into them, and a faint shiver goes through his body. They’re more than halfway there already.

Jean is a contradiction. As a carrier, nature has given him broad hips, thick nipples on well-rounded pectorals, a small, vestigial cock and a slick, inviting hole. But Jean hadn’t been satisfied with these gifts alone. To them he’s added muscle tone and definition, broad shoulders to match the hips and a flat stomach. Armand spends more time than he really should there, caressing, until Jean tugs him gently away. It does neither of them any good to dwell on what they can’t have.

At Jean’s urging, Armand goes lower. He tongues the small cockhead and listens to Jean’s delighted gasp, doing it again and again until Armand opens wider and takes the entire cock in his mouth. It bumps gently against his back teeth, a pleasant mouthful, and he sucks on it until Jean’s voice breaks completely, begging. When Armand pulls away Jean is trembling harder, nearly at the top of his peak, on the edge from Armand’s attentions.

“One day I’ll make you come from that alone,” Armand promises roughly. He’d do it now if he could, just to feel Jean fall apart in his mouth. But heat requires a different approach.
Jean moans in response to that. Armand watches Jean’s face; some Omegas babble during heat, but Jean appears to be in the other camp, who become temporarily wordless. He may not be able to speak, but he implores Armand with his eyes, and Armand ducks his head back down between Jean’s legs and puts his mouth on Jean’s hole.

Jean tastes as he smells, a concentrated version of his scent lacing the slick that dribbles from his hole and stains the sheets and Armand’s lips. It’s the shock of fresh-cut grass and hay in summer meadows. The smoky eddies of slow-match curling around a siege-camp at dawn. The tang of gunpowder and blood. The odor of fertilizer, of dead things giving way to new life.

Jean’s hips buck up, and he twists, trying to turn, trying to present. He’s all but sobbing. Armand breathes deep, taking in the scent of him, and knows: it’s time.

Armand pulls away. Jean keens with the loss of him, but goes eagerly into position now that nothing is holding him back. The arch of him makes Armand swear and grab at his knot, holding the skin close against the base of his cock to keep it from inflating. Night has fallen while they’ve explored each other; the stars glitter outside the open window, and a shaft of moonlight illuminates them both. Behind Armand the fire burns brightly. The colors play odd tricks in the half-light. The gland on Jean’s shoulder, which would be red under the sun, looks like a week-old bruise.

Jean cries out again, begging in the only words he has left. He arches still further, bumping against Armand. His neck twists; over Jean’s shoulder, their eyes meet.

Please, Jean begs silently. Now.

Armand surges forward, control gone. He knows how wet Jean is, how wide open and eager, and doesn’t hold back. They slide together like a tongue and groove. Perfect. Made for each other. Jean voices his approval. Armand groans.

The slick clench of Jean’s channel around Armand is almost too much to bear. In only a few strokes Armand’s knot starts to inflate again, catching on Jean’s rim with every thrust. Armand doesn’t try to stop it this time. In heat, Jean can’t come unless knotted, and Jean is nearly at his peak now, desperate, shoving back into Armand’s every thrust. The bruise on his shoulder darkens further. Impulsively Armand leans forward and kisses it, caresses it with his tongue, until Jean twists with enviable flexibility and catches Armand’s lips with his own.

It’s the kiss that does it, its innocent sweetness a poignant counterpoint to the ancient rhythm of their bodies. Armand feels his knot swell and breaks the kiss, crying out. Jean shoves back to take Armand home. Jean’s arms give out, dropping him limply to the sheets. Armand follows, and as he fills Jean up with his seed he leans forward and claims his mate.

After their mating, life takes on a sweetness Armand had never thought it could contain. Seeing Jean across the room at court is a joy. Hearing his voice, even when they argue, is a pleasure. Touching him, when Jean sneaks into the Palais-Cardinal or Armand sneaks out, is unspeakable.

For a while, Armand keeps expecting the honeymoon phase to come to its end, as all things must. Surely one day he’ll no longer want to smile at the merest whiff of Jean’s scent. Surely one day Armand’s heart will stop beating faster at the sound of Jean’s voice. Surely one day Armand will no longer burn at every moment to lay his fingers against his mate’s skin.

Ten years later, Armand wakes up after a heat – the first heat they’ve shared in eighteen months – to see Jean smiling next to him, keeping watch faithfully, though in the heart of the Richelieu hunting-grounds there can be little danger. That’s when Armand realizes it: this feeling is never going to go away.
Shortly thereafter, Adele worms her way into their lives one accident at a time. At first it’s amusing. Then it’s faintly worrying. When she becomes Richelieu’s mistress, he catches her true scent immediately and takes her straight to his estates. He can’t have an unaffiliated throwback too close to him. She’ll never stop snooping and prying. She could bring the whole thing down. Richelieu intends to reveal only what he must, that he has connections to the Underground, and have her smuggled safely out of France.

Adele has other ideas. She demands entry into the Resistance. Richelieu initially refuses. But Adele resists every plan to get her out of France. Eventually she coaxes Jussac onto her side. Richelieu puts up token resistance, but he’s already lost.

Jussac takes to Adele instantly. They form a common bond that seems equal parts loyalty, resilience, and mutual long-suffering forbearance. Richelieu tries to protest that he doesn’t need another babysitter. Jussac retorts that Armand most definitely needs an aleph.

Not long after that, Cahusac locks eyes with a reckless Betan woman who firebombs an Inquisitorial depot in Lyon. Jeanne’s never heard of the Resistance until Cahusac shows up on her doorstep. He drags her back to Paris, where they spend the next six months alternately fighting and having sex. Cahusac marries her at Easter and accepts Richelieu’s offer of a new start in Bavaria. They’re sorry to go, but Jeanne has an aleph and an odem who can’t stay in France, and Andreas needs trustworthy warriors and trained midwives as desperately as everyone else.

Richelieu misses his lieutenant. Bernajoux and Boisrenard miss their packmate more. But everyone deserves a happy ending, and it makes them all feel better to think that at least one of them will get it. Adele takes Cahusac’s place, or rather elevates it, becoming a second Jussac at Richelieu’s side.

Twenty years after Armand and Jean bond, Adele catches wind of a small riot in the north of France and goes to investigate. She’s gone for a week, first to the small village in question, la Fère, and then working her way south through various towns tracking a suspected survivor. At the end of the week she sends for Bernajoux and Boisrenard. They all reappear together at the Palais-Cardinal with a litter. On the litter is an Omega more dead than alive. Adele begs Richelieu for his help with tears in her eyes.

Charlotte de la Fère takes nearly a full year to recover from her ordeal. Adele leaves her bedside only a handful of times, when the Resistance absolutely demands her presence, and always under protest. When Charlotte is finally well, she refuses Richelieu’s offer of an escape to Bavaria. She wants revenge against the institution that had destroyed her life.

Ella and Milady are his most loyal field operatives. And slowly but surely, Adele and Charlotte become his pack, too. Richelieu’s blood family is gone. They will never return. Alfonse is in Russia, Andreas in Bavaria, Nicol trapped in a convent for the rest of her life. Susanne dies in childbirth shortly after Armand mates. But Jean, Robert, Adele, and Charlotte form a new pack. They mean Armand doesn’t have to do it all alone.

He can never quite tell any of them what this means to him. Fortunately, they each take their own ways of assuring him they know regardless.

Thirty years after Armand and Jean bond, Milady and Jussac burst into Richelieu’s rooms in the Palais-Cardinal, both talking at once. Milady is pale in a way Richelieu has never seen her. Jussac is gasping. The story spills out of them quickly. Not easily. It’s not an easy story to tell.

Thirty years and sixty minutes later, Richelieu is on a horse leaving Paris, riding as fast as he’s ever ridden in his life. Praying, too, as hard as he’s ever prayed in his life. Begging God that Jean will hold on, that he’ll fight, that he’ll still be alive when Armand reaches him. That Armand isn’t going
to arrive only to be greeted by death.

Their mate-bond starts aching before Armand’s gone two leagues. Over the next eighteen hours it stretches nearly to the breaking point. Richelieu has a vision of it as a sturdy length of sailor’s rope. One by one, the strands connecting Armand to Jean begin to split.

By twilight, there are only a dozen left. By sunset, half that. When Armand tumbles off his horse in front of the hunting-lodge that’s housed the Resistance for generations he can no longer tell if there are any left, except that he can still feel Jean’s agony, so Jean must be alive.

But when Richelieu sees him lying there, so still, his heart fails in his chest. It doesn’t start beating again until Jean moans.

Thirty years and twenty-one hours later, Armand doesn’t have time to be gentle. He doesn’t have time to be reverent or worshipful or tender. He doesn’t have time to stoke the passion between them until it burns bright or bring his Jean up to the very edge of his peak before tumbling them both down it together. Armand barely has time to unlace Jean’s trousers or shed his own robes. If it had been left to Armand’s heart and mind, he wouldn’t even be able to perform. He’d fail his mate at this critical moment, because there is nothing erotic about Jean, pale and unresponsive in his arms.

Biology alone comes to their rescue. Even unconscious Jean responds to Armand. Jean’s heat scent reaches to the deepest part of Armand’s core, through their bond, to cause Armand’s knot to swell within his mate.

Then it’s done. The first peak is past for good or for ill. If Armand is not too late, Jean will return to him, waking when the next peak begins. If Armand is too late then Jean will never wake up. He’ll simply drift further and further away from Armand until their bond fades to nothing and Armand knows that he’s alone.

One way or another, he can only wait.

Now Armand may be tender. He lowers himself to the sheets next to his mate. Cold. Jean is still so cold. Armand wraps Jean up in his own arms, giving willingly of his own heat. He presses a kiss to Jean’s bonding mark. It throbs faintly beneath Armand’s lips. It gives him hope.

For the next several hours, hope is all he has.

Chapter End Notes

And this is the end of part three. After this we will return to the present time and the machinations of the Inquisitor of Lille.

Thanks again to everyone who’s been reading, commenting, cheerleading, tumbling, and otherwise helping keep this train on the tracks and moving forward. It truly would have ended up in a ditch months ago if not for all of you :) You are awesome.
The Hunting Grounds, Part One

Chapter Notes

PSA: This chapter would be where the "graphic references to mutilation" tag earns its keep. Read carefully.

After Richelieu and Treville disappear, there’s a surreal moment when everyone else simply stands around and stares at each other, waiting for someone to speak or act.

Then the pheromones in the air spike abruptly. They’re overwhelming even though the door. If they were just the Captain’s there would be no problem, but somehow, in all their planning, they’d forgotten to account for the fact that the Captain’s mate is a stranger to them all. Athos and Porthos gag simultaneously.

Adele leaps into action. “Right, okay. Porthos, if you go around the side of the house there’s a pile of lumber. Can you chop us some firewood?”

“Absolutely,” Porthos says fervently, and bolts, having apparently decided dignity is the lesser part of being away from that heat scent right now. Athos agrees with the sentiment. He has no urge to touch the Captain, but a different set of instincts are still spoiling for a fight. And then there’s the cognitive dissonance of knowing that the Alpha Athos can smell – strange, not pack – is Cardinal Richelieu. No wonder Porthos wants to be elsewhere. Athos wants to be elsewhere, too, and he fixes Adele with a pleading look.

She hesitates. Then, oddly serious, she says, “Athos, you’d better go around to the stables. Milady will be seeing to the horses – you can lend her a hand.”

Athos has taken three steps towards the door before he recognizes how odd this is.

“Did someone else come with them?” d’Artagnan asks in puzzlement, obviously having realized the same thing.

“No, just the Cardinal and Milady,” Adele says. “Here, I’ll show you to some spare bedrooms. You can have these alone the far wall –” she starts to point.

“Why does Milady need help stabling two horses?” d’Artagnan interrupts.

Aramis shakes his head and pushes one of the doors Adele had indicated open. It reveals a moderately sized bedchamber, decently appointed, obviously intended for guests. “Because Athos needs to be out of the cottage.”

“Why doesn’t Adele need to be out of the cottage?” d’Artagnan asks, putting his finger right on the crux of the matter in that way he has.

“Pack,” Aramis says, as if that explains it all.

Actually, it does. Heat scents carry all sorts of markers. Athos and Porthos aren’t affected by Treville’s – clan dynamics take care of that – though the drugs and the distress are making Athos uncomfortable. But Alphas have a heat scent of their own, a scent-based keep away signal, a
warning that the vulnerable Omega is protected. And Richelieu is most definitely not clan. It makes being in the same lodge as the Cardinal very difficult. That should ease off after the first peak – thank goodness, or Athos and Porthos would be camping outside tonight – but for the moment it makes it hard for Athos not to flee.

Adele, by contrast, is standing calmly in the middle of the common area, breathing easily, and directing d’Artagnan towards another door. Because she’s a member of Richelieu’s pack. And Treville’s.

The Captain, the Cardinal, and Aramis’ long-dead aleph. And, Athos would bet anything, the mysterious Milady. What a combination.

Adele glances back over her shoulder. “You’d better go,” she advises Athos. “I’ll come and catch up with you in a few minutes.”

“Now it takes three people to stable two horses?” d’Artagnan demands, still mystified.

“They’ll need me,” Adele says cryptically. “In the meanwhile, I need to talk to you both.” She shepherds Aramis and d’Artagnan both into the room she’d designated as Aramis and Porthos’. Then Adele reaches for the doorknob, giving Athos a significant look.

“She’s waiting for you,” Adele says.

Athos wants to demand an explanation. But then the pheromones spike again. Athos nearly chokes, and sprints for the door.

Outside, Athos takes deep, gulping breaths of clean air. He looks up automatically. Storm clouds are still massed overhead, but by the taste of the air rain is at least an hour away. Porthos has obviously located the woodpile. The rhythmical thunk of axe meeting wood echoes in the clearing.

The stables are visible from the front door, a sturdy looking structure nestled next to the lodge. Athos follows the dirt path around. As he does, a thousand questions run through his mind, each jockeying to be asked of Milady first. Why did you send brigands after Aramis and I outside of Évry? Were you the woman in the blue cloak Aramis didn’t recognize, who burned down the warehouses in Le Havre? Were you the woman he saw recovering in the Palais-Cardinal all those years ago? What happened to you? How did you come to be there? What’s your story?

Athos pushes the stable door open. The horses, unsurprisingly, are already in their stalls. Rubbed down and combed, blanketed, troughs full. Adele hadn’t sent Athos here to help. She hadn’t sent him here just to get him out of the house, either. There are a dozen other chores that always need doing around a place like this. She could have sent him to draw water from the well or spread manure in the small garden on the other side of the house or check the snares he’d seen spread as they approached. As Adele had said, a place like this, in order to remain secret, will have to be largely self-sufficient. That means no shortage of work.

So why had Adele sent him here?

On the far wall of the stables, the horses’ tack hangs, gleaming and well-oiled. From the shadows beneath it, a slim figure emerges, stepping deliberately into the shaft of light let in by the door Athos still holds open.

“Hello, Olivier,” Charlotte says gently.

Athos freezes. Every muscle in his body locks tight, from his knees keeping him upright to the
fingers still gripping the stable door. Even his eyes freeze. He wants to tear them away. But they stay where he’d pointed them, pointed directly at the ghost from his past.

“Charlotte,” he gasps.

“I know,” she says, still gentle. Charlotte had been like that. Gentle and kind. And dead. “I was surprised, too. When the Cardinal first told me you were alive I called him a liar.” She laughs a little, though she doesn’t sound amused. “Can you believe that? It’s true! I called him a liar right to his face. After everything he’d done for me. But you see, I couldn’t believe it…”

“Charlotte,” he repeats. He can’t think. How can it be? It’s impossible. He’d felt it. He’d felt their bond tear, standing over Thomas’ body while the château burned in the background and lit up the night sky.

His vision darkens abruptly. He can’t breathe.

“Olivier?” he hears Charlotte call, worried. Small hands seize him and tug on him. He goes with them, barely knowing what he does.


His vision starts to clear. Dimly he registers that he’s no longer in the stable. A few steps away from it had been a fallen log, mossy with time. He’s sitting on it now, head between his knees. Charlotte’s hand is on his back, rubbing soothing circles.

Abruptly everything in his body revolts. Athos explodes to his feet, shooing her away from him. “You’re dead!!” he shouts.

“No,” she says quietly. “I’m not.”

“How did you survive?” Athos demands. He stares at her – alive, how can she be alive? His ears are still ringing with the shouts of the villagers who had burned down his ancestral home. The scent of blood is in the air – Thomas’ blood – wet and sticky on his hands where he’d clutched his baby odém’s body, trying to find some sign of life and hope. And in the space below his heart he can feel again the terrible rending sensation that had been his bond with Charlotte.

Something new seizes him. Horror. Because if Charlotte isn’t dead –

“Did you do it?” he whispers. “Did you sell us out?”

“No!” she cries, shocked. “No, of course not! Olivier, how can you – ”

“Shut up,” he grinds out. “I don’t want to hear it. After everything you’ve done – ”

“Everything I’ve – ”

“The bandits at Évry, the bane at Le Havre – ”

“Don’t tell me you’ve become such an idiot that you can’t tell I was helping you!”

“Don’t tell me you’ve become such an idiot that you think I’ll believe that!” he shouts back. He seizes her by the arms, tight, even when she cries out in pain.

“You’re alive,” he says. “And Thomas is dead. Tell me how to reconcile those two facts.”
Quick as a snake, Milady brings her arms up and breaks his hold, retreating several steps. “I didn’t betray you,” she says, voice tight with agony. “I died that night, too. Maybe we all did. Maybe there are no more la Fères.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Look at you,” he says scornfully. “When did you learn how to fight? To hire brigands and smuggle goods and pick pockets? After you left la Fère? Or before? Was any of it true? Or were you just playing me all along?”

“It was all true!” she cries. “Olivier –”

“Tell me what happened!” he shouts, demanding. “Tell me how you’re still alive when Thomas is dead!”

“You want to know?” she shouts back. “I’ll tell you!”

Her hands are at the collar of her gown before Athos can register the movement. For a wild moment he thinks she’s choking herself. Then she grips the fabric and tears it wide, buttons flying everywhere.

Athos stares. He can’t help it. Somewhere, distantly, he’s aware that he’s begun to weep. The old part of his heart that had never quite healed from his bond with Charlotte is alive with agony.

“They had me for three days,” Milady says. Quietly now. She’s staring down at her own body, fingers tracing the long-healed scars. The gesture is almost compulsive. The scarring is thickest on her abdomen, of course, where her womb would have been ripped out. But it spirals out in all directions from there. Up to her chest, where the teats that would have nursed pups have been cut away, leaving mounds of flesh topped by a dense mass of scarring that grotesquely impersonates what’s missing. And down, too, to the space between her legs. The muscles that would enable her to take an Alpha’s knot, to contract around it and milk it to heighten the chances of pups, are gone. Those same muscles would also help her whelp – pups are larger at birth, on average, than children, and Omegas need the extra boost. All gone. It leaves the space oddly bare, concave in a way that must be pleasing to Betas but will feature in Athos’ nightmares for the rest of his life.

He understands now why she had said Charlotte de la Fère was dead.

Athos has to take several minutes to pull himself together. Then he walks the few steps back to the mossy log, and sits down.

“Tell me what happened,” he says. This time there’s no judgment in his tone.

After a moment Milady tugs the halves of her ruined dress back up to cover herself and joins him.

“It was Thomas,” she says without preamble.

Athos flinches.

“He didn’t mean to,” Milady adds, as if that makes any difference. “He’d been going off on his own occasionally when we went into town. It made me nervous, but if he were really going to be able to pass, he needed to be able to do it without one of us nearby. One day he was going to find himself alone no matter what we did, and what then? If he’d never practiced it before he’d be sure to make a mistake.”
“You don’t have to justify yourself to me,” Athos says wearily.

“I think we both know that’s a lie,” Milady answers, and clutches her dress more tightly at her neck.

He doesn’t reply.

“Thomas was seeing someone,” she goes on eventually. “The blacksmith’s son. I don’t know what made Thomas think that this boy would be sympathetic… maybe he was just in love. Everyone does stupid things when they’re in love. It’s the one thing we all have in common, throwbacks and Betas alike.”

“Thomas told the boy,” Athos says. It isn’t a question.

“The first indication I had that anything was wrong was when three of the town’s strongest men grabbed me and dragged me to the church,” Milady says. She’s not looking at Athos, staring fixedly down at the intricate stitching on her dress. “But later I heard them talking. The blacksmith’s son had told Thomas that he didn’t care Thomas was an Omega, but that he had to get his father’s blessing. Thomas – it sounded like he tried to persuade the boy otherwise, but the boy insisted. When the boy left, Thomas ran.”

Athos catches himself wondering if the long-ago boy really had loved Thomas regardless of his sex, or if he’d just made up the excuse about the father to get help capturing the Omega. It doesn’t matter, not really. But Athos finds himself hoping the villain was the blacksmith and not the boy. He hopes Thomas really had been loved, even if it had just been puppy love, before his death.

“They chased Thomas down in the woods of la Fère. Butchered him where he lay and left his body there, then continued on to the château to get you. They told me they burned the château down and you with it. I thought you were dead.”

“I was worried about you,” Athos says lowly. “I was already heading towards the village to find out what had become of you. But I felt – through our bond – ”

“They killed Thomas so quickly it was like they felt cheated,” Charlotte goes on as if she hadn’t heard him. “They decided to take their time with me. When I passed out, they gave me drugs to wake me back up again, keep me awake. That first night when I woke up our bond was already gone. I didn’t find out why until later. That night I thought it was because Olivier was dead, as they’d told me.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Olivier must have been,” Charlotte says simply. “My mate would never have deserted me.”

Athos flinches again, feeling the sting of her words like a physical blow.

“They spent two days doing this to me,” she goes on, still staring down at the scars – hidden by her gown, but her fingers are tracing over them anyway, like she knows their location by heart. She probably does. How many nights has she spent mapping out her ruined body? How many weeks, months, years had it taken for her to heal from what the Inquisition had done to her?

“They were going to crucify me on dawn at the third day, according to their scriptures,” Charlotte finishes. “But one of the lay priests had connections to the Underground. He said I must be sent to a convent. The villagers didn’t want to let me go. But he said that, if they killed me themselves, they’d stain their souls. So they let him take me. He brought me south, pretending to be my brother. I was passed between several contacts on my way to Paris… I don’t remember much of it. All I remember is the pain.”
Athos is weeping again. He wishes futilely that he were drunk.

“The Underground brought me to a healer in Paris, but she said there was nothing she could do for me except make me comfortable while I finished dying. At that point, as long as she gave me drugs for the pain, I didn’t care. Thomas was dead, you were dead – I’d ruined you both – I begged God to kill me quickly. I wished I’d killed myself along with the rest of my family, instead of coming to la Fère and bringing all this misery on you.”

“Charlotte –” Olivier is on his feet before he knows he’s moved, reaching for his mate to comfort her.

“Milady!” she screams back at him. “Charlotte is dead! She died that night.” She heaves breaths. “Along with the rest of her family.”

“I’m right here,” Olivier says helplessly.

“Liar,” she hisses viciously. “Tell me, did you think twice before you abandoned me and fled to Paris? How long did you mourn my name before you took up with that young Omega who came here with you? If he took off his shirt, what would I see? Your teeth marks on his neck? How round is his belly, Olivier?”

Athos staggers. Then he bows his head.

“I thought so,” she says, voice dropping. “I thought so.”

Athos sits down again, moving like an old, old man.

“Adele found me,” Milady says. It’s like she’s telling a story about a complete stranger. “She said she knew a doctor who would be willing to try to save me, but it would be agony. The doctor would have to cut me back open and fix what the Inquisition had done, at least as much as they could. She said that anything I was given to numb the pain would probably kill me. That even if I lived, I’d never be able to carry, I might never even go into heat again, and if anyone saw me unclothed they’d probably scream.”

“Why did you say yes?” Athos whispers.

“Revenge. I told Adele that if her doctor gave me back the use of my limbs, I wouldn’t rest until I’d destroyed the Inquisition root and branch. And she took me to the Cardinal.”

“The Cardinal saved your life.”

“The Cardinal created me. And he gave me the tools to pursue the only purpose I had left. I’ve been his agent ever since.”

“How long?” Athos asks.

“I just told you –”

“Not that. Not how long since you entered into his employ.”

“Then what?”

“How long since you knew it was me?”

Milady seems to search his face. Athos can still read her, a little: she’s looking to see if he really wants to know.
“Since that Gascon of yours came to Paris,” she says finally. “Ella asked me to keep an eye on him after he joined your squad. I saw you with him. And I knew.”

“Why didn’t you – ”

“I think you’ll understand,” she says coldly, “if I tell you I wasn’t quite right for a few months after I realized you’d survived, and abandoned me.”

“I thought you were dead,” Athos repeats.

“Is that supposed to be enough?” Milady asks.

“Charlotte?” a new voice calls.

Athos starts badly. He spins, nearly falling over in his confusion, turning to face the approaching figure.

It’s Adele. Athos had been so distracted he hadn’t heard her coming or caught her scent.

“Adele,” Milady says. “It’s all right. Everything’s fine.”

“Everything doesn’t sound fine,” Adele disagrees. She’s looking suspiciously at Athos, like all of this is his fault.

He catches that thought and looks at it again. It is all his fault.

Then another thought strikes him. Adele had known. This is why she’d sent him to the stables instead of one of the dozens of other tasks that probably needed doing: not to work at all, but to talk to Milady.

Why would Milady have told her? Athos hasn’t told anyone about his past, not really, not beyond the bare facts. He’d always kept it impersonal. No names. Just nouns. My mate. My odem. My château. Only to d’Artagnan had he ever said Charlotte, Thomas, la Fère.

Adele had called Milady Charlotte. Like the revenge-driven agent isn’t what she sees when she looks at Athos’ former mate.

He doesn’t want to ask. There’s no way to do it without sounding accusing in his turn. But he has to know.

“If I looked at your shoulder right now,” Athos says quietly, “What would I see?”

She’d only exposed her torso to him before, when she’d shown him her scars. Not her arms. Was his old mating bite still there? Or would he see someone else’s teeth marks in her skin?

Adele snarls, taking a step towards him aggressively. Athos settles his stance automatically, preparing to defend himself, knowing in the back of his mind that this is as definite an answer as actually seeing the marks.

But Milady shoots to her feet and catches Adele around the waist, holding her back. “No, Ella, don’t,” she says. “Don’t, please.”

“I see,” Athos says quietly.

“No you don’t,” Adele says savagely. “You want to know what you’d see on her shoulder? Nothing, that’s what. They cut out your bite. That’s what broke your mating. Those bastards cut out her entire
bonding gland. The hormone storm alone –

“Ella, please, please,” Milady pleads. She’s weeping now, the icy façade gone.

“You’re mad at her because you think she’s mine,” Adele snarls. “But she isn’t. She never can be, no matter how much she wants to be, no matter how much I want her. She’ll never mate with anyone again. It wasn’t enough for them to destroy her fertility. They had to take away her ability to mate, too.”

“That’s not part of sterilization,” Athos says blankly. It’s almost certainly the wrong response, too clinical, but it’s the only thing he can think of to say. In the wake of Charlotte’s and Thomas’ deaths, he’d spent a lot of time imagining the many things the Inquisition would have done to them. But this is a level of cruelty beyond anything his fevered mind had invented.

“She told you.” Adele’s voice cuts like a whip. “They took their time with her.”

“Ella, stop,” Milady commands. All three of them have tears running down their faces, but Milady’s voice is steady. “Love, please. It’s over. It’s in the past. We can’t change it.”

“He doesn’t get to stand there and accuse you of being unfaithful,” Adele cries. “Not after what they did to you, not after what he left you to.”

“I accused him of the same thing,” Milady admits. “I shouldn’t have. He thought I was dead. What was he supposed to do? Bury himself along with me?”

“Maybe,” Adele whispers.

“I’m sorry,” Athos says, finally finding his voice in the face of all this horror. “Charlotte, Milady, I didn’t know. I felt our bond break and I thought – I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry.”

Milady takes a deep breath. “I forgive you,” she says. The words sound like they’re torn from her.

“I don’t,” Adele mutters rebelliously.

“Shush, Ella,” Milady says. She wraps her arms around Adele more firmly. Clinging, some part of Adele says. Drawing strength from her new Alpha.

It’s bittersweet, seeing her like this. There’s part of him that screams at the sight, saying that Charlotte is his. That he should lunge across the intervening space and savage the Alpha who presumes to touch his mate. That Charlotte would love him more for it, for protecting her –

The thought is as effective as a bucket of cold water dumped over his head. Olivier hadn’t protected Charlotte. He’d failed her. And he has no right to say a word against her having built a new life, with a new purpose, and with whatever happiness she might still be able to find.

After all, hadn’t he done the same? Unconsciously he touches his chest, feeling the warm place within where his bond with d’Artagnan nests. Next to his love for d’Artagnan he can see his bond with Charlotte for what it had been. Young. Puppyish. They’d been the only other throwbacks each other had ever known, discounting family. They’d met and mated in the throes of heat. And it would have been enough, if the Inquisition hadn’t come for them. It would have been enough for Olivier and Charlotte.

“I am so sorry,” Athos says again wretchedly.

“I think you should go back inside now,” Adele says. She presses her lips together. “I came out here to tell you – your Omega is asking for you.”

Milady flinches. Athos falters.

Adele glares.

“All right,” Athos whispers. “Yes, all right.”

He flees, trying not to hear Charlotte weeping as he goes.

D’Artagnan’s waiting for Athos inside, as promised. Thankfully the air is breathable; Treville must be past the first peak. He doesn’t think d’Artagnan would react well to Athos running straight out of the cottage again. One look at d’Artagnan’s face tells Athos what conversation Adele had been having with he and Aramis, while Athos confronted the ghosts of his family.

“That Omega used to be your mate,” d’Artagnan says without preamble.

“Yes,” Athos admits, seeing no point in trying to hide it.

D’Artagnan nods. Leaning against the doorjamb, it should be a position of ease, except for the crossed arms and defensive stance. Usually aggression is an Alphabetic trait, but under certain circumstances an Omega can be even more vicious. This is most certainly one of them. D’Artagnan feels threatened. His pair-bond is under attack, his pups are in danger of finding themselves without a provider, and he lacks safe territory. Hence the defensive stance in front of the bedroom assigned as theirs. Here in this strange place, d’Artagnan only has the territory he can take and defend. He’s instinctively preparing to defend this room. Against his own mate, if necessary.

The large communal space is empty. The doors that lead to other rooms are all closed. Charlotte and Adele are by the stables. Richelieu and Treville are cloistered. Aramis must have gone to join Porthos at the woodpile. No one else would have wanted to be around for this.

Athos structures his own body language carefully. Loose, open stance, palms showing, inclined subtly towards his mate. “Charlotte and Olivier de la Fère died a long time ago,” he says.

“How who are you?”

“Athos.” He stops and thinks about it further. Says, “Your Athos.”

“You used to be her Olivier.”

“Her Olivier is dead.”

“What would she say if I asked her?” d’Artagnan demands.

Athos tries very hard to control his flinch. He doesn’t succeed. “She’d say that her Olivier betrayed her and left her in the hands of their enemies,” he says heavily. “She’d say that Charlotte is dead, too.”

D’Artagnan sighs. “Oh, Athos,” he says sorrowfully. He uncrosses his arms and reaches for his mate, drawing him into their bedroom and closing the door behind him. “Here I am being worried that you’re going to replace me, when I should be comforting you.”
“You’re not replaceable,” Athos says. He doesn’t know much, but he knows that.

“Neither is she,” d’Artagnan says, correctly.

“I don’t know what to do about that,” Athos admits.

“Do? I don’t know what you could do.” D’Artagnan tugs Athos over to the bed and gets them both down on it.

“‘You’re not replaceable,’” Athos repeats.

D’Artagnan doesn’t answer at once. He’s looking down at the places their bodies meet. When they lie together like this, the gentle swell of d’Artagnan’s belly is more obvious. It’s one of the primary points of contact between them physically.

It doesn’t take a seer to know that d’Artagnan is wondering if it’s also the thing that connects them emotionally.

“Adele told me what the Inquisition did to Milady,” d’Artagnan says, confirming Athos’ suspicions. “She can’t carry, can she?”

“No,” Athos says. The shudder is entirely involuntary, strong enough to shake them both.

“And I can.”

“I thought she was dead,” Athos says. A quiet desperation is starting to bubble up in him. “D’Artagnan, I didn’t take up with you because I wanted pups.”

“You never considered me more than a bothersome puppy until suddenly I was pupped myself.”

“D’Artagnan!”

“I spent months trying to get you to look at me. Just once to look at me as something besides a novice and a farmboy,” d’Artagnan whispers. “I thought – when we shared that heat together – I thought you were finally seeing me as someone worthy. But now I wonder if all you were seeing was my fertility.”

“Everything about you is to be cherished,” Athos interrupts. “Everything. Yes, including your fertility, because it’s part of you. But I would cherish you without it too.”

“You wouldn’t put your teeth in my neck until you’d gotten your pups in my belly. Have I ever been a person to you? Or just an incubator?”

“Don’t you dare!” Athos shouts. He pushes away, suddenly furious. Furious and desperate. “Don’t cheapen yourself, or what you mean to me!”

D’Artagnan doesn’t reach out to pull Athos back in. He just watches Athos sadly. Lying here, despairing and afraid, belly gently rounded, d’Artagnan suddenly looks ten years older.

Athos can’t stand it. D’Artagnan is young. Too young, he’s often thought. But what throwback can afford to be young? D’Artagnan had thought he’d found a safe harbor, but now he thinks he’s falling into the same trap that has caught so many of their people. Forced to grow up too quickly, forced to take on impossible burdens alone – one parent raising two pups, because the other is dead, or distant, or lost –

Repentant and ashamed, Athos returns to the bed, clutching d’Artagnan’s hands between his own.
“D’Artagnan, I’m so sorry I spent all that time pushing you away. I’m sorry that I hurt you. I’m sorry that you had to go to such extremes to snap me out of it. And I’m sorry that I’ve ever given you any excuse to think that my love for you isn’t real.”

“Lot of hormones swirling around that day,” d’Artagnan says quietly. “And instincts. I was in heat. You’d just fought off three attackers to protect me. I know my scent is strong. And we’re compatible.” So compatible, he doesn’t say, that they’d conceived in their first heat together, their mating heat.

Athos reaches down and tips d’Artagnan’s chin up, urging him to meet his eyes. “When Charlotte died Olivier died with her,” he says. “I thought – I became Athos, but Athos was just a cover. A front. He wasn’t real. The real parts of me I thought were all buried in the soil of la Fère, with my parents and odem and mate. Athos was just someone I could be while I waited to die.”

D’Artagnan makes a low, protesting noise. “What about us? All of us?”

“Aramis and Porthos changed that somewhat,” Athos admits. “Having a pack again, even a small one, that helped. But they had each other. It wasn’t – ” he breaks off, trying to figure out how to speak what’s in his heart. “I – ”

“You need someone to protect,” d’Artagnan says. “Your sire raised you to be traditional. You didn’t know how to define yourself except as part of someone else.”

“That’s not – ”

“It’s all you ever talk about,” d’Artagnan interrupts. “Your line, your pack, your odem, your mate, your duties, your responsibilities. You’re never your own proper noun. You’re always in the possessive. When I came along, you could define yourself in terms of me. Us. Your Omega. Your pups. So you became real.”

“That’s not what it is,” Athos says.

“When you looked at me I felt like I was something more than the sum of my history. More than just a farmer, a Gascon, an orphan. More than my labels. I wanted you to keep looking at me forever. But you didn’t think of me that way. You made me feel that way, but you didn’t see it yourself. I asked you on that heat – and you came – and I thought I’d changed your mind. I thought I’d made you see in me the same things you made me feel. But now I think that maybe all you saw in me was a second chance.”

“That’s exactly it,” Athos says, trying to make him understand. “We are all each others’ second chances. Throwbacks don’t often get them. We make one mistake, and we’re dead. Or worse. But we found each other. The four of us as a pack, and the two of us as mates. We are each others’ chance to make something out of the ruins the Inquisition has left us with.”

“And that’s love?” d’Artagnan says dubiously. “A second chance?”

“For forgiveness, grace, mercy, redemption. That’s love.”

D’Artagnan looks thoughtful. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Athos blinks. “That sounds familiar,” he says, chasing the memory.

“It’s from the Bible. Aramis used to read it to me while I was so sick the first trimester I couldn’t get out of bed.” D’Artagnan laughs a little at the memory. “He was shocked that I’d only ever had the
Beta catechism. Honestly, I didn’t even know anything was different.”

“We’re different,” Athos says, reverting to the core problem. “Olivier loved Charlotte. Olivier loves her still. But Athos loves you. And Ella loves Milady.”

“I did see that.” D’Artagnan sighs. “I half thought you were going to come back in here bloody from fighting with her.”

“You’re the one that I want.”

D’Artagnan smiles a little, though it’s still sad. “I suppose I’ve lived with her ghost this whole time already.”

“D’Artagnan –”

“Just –” d’Artagnan lays a finger over Athos’ lips. “Just let me get used to it. All right? We’re stuck here for a few days anyway while the Captain goes through heat. We’ll all need to figure out who we are in relation to each other.”

“A few days?” Athos doesn’t want to be distracted, but – “Surely his heat will end now that he’s with the Cardinal?”

“Not as long as those drugs are in his system. He’ll stay in heat until they’re purged. Aramis says a few days at least.”

“Oh,” Athos says dumbly. He’d thought, naively, that once Treville had been properly knotted that his heat would end and they could all go home. He hadn’t considered that the drugs might prolong heat even in distress.

“Yeah,” d’Artagnan says ruefully. “It’ll be tense, I guess. Adele and Aramis – you didn’t see them. Aramis doesn’t even want to talk to her. She tried to hug him and he shoved her away. Then Porthos had her up against a wall before I could blink, and Adele didn’t even fight him.”

“Oh no,” Athos says. His worry splits and grows again: worry for d’Artagnan, for Treville, for Charlotte, and now for Aramis and Porthos. He feels pressed down with all his cares.

“Adele said, you wanted me to tell you what happened. But Aramis said not now, I can’t listen to it now, just go away. Adele didn’t want to go, but Porthos practically shoved her out the door. And I said– I didn’t think it would be a good idea for the two of them to become enraged – so I asked Adele if she could get you for me, and she went.”

“That was good thinking,” Athos manages to say. D’Artagnan has a knack for diplomacy, it seems.

“It was all I could think of,” d’Artagnan says self-deprecatingly. “And – I did want you. Adele had told us about Milady. I needed to know…”

“You are my mate,” Athos repeats. He lets himself reach out to touch, to cup d’Artagnan’s cheek, and d’Artagnan lets himself be caressed with a soft longing sigh. “I won’t lie to you and say that seeing Charlotte again hasn’t made all my grief new. But there’s nothing left between us but grief. You are my mate, my partner, my hope of heaven.”

D’Artagnan has to close his eyes and swallows hard. “Oh, Athos,” he whispers.

Emboldened, Athos draws d’Artagnan into his embrace. “If you need time, I’ll give it to you,” he promises. Athos lays one palm gently over d’Artagnan’s shoulder, tracing the gentle raised scars of
his mating bite, D’Artagnan’s pulse pounding under Athos’ fingertips. “But whatever you do with me, know that I am yours.”

“I will try to remember it,” d’Artagnan promises. He relaxes a little in Athos’ arms, though, which Athos has to take as a good sign. He yawns, too.

“Tired?” Athos asks. They’ve had a tumultuous several days, and a long hard ride at the end of them.

“Yes. But I don’t know if I can sleep.”

“Can I do something?”

D’Artagnan yawns again. “Talk to me?” he asks.

“About what?”


Athos licks his lips. “Are you sure?”

D’Artagnan nods. “When it was just us – when all of that was in your past – I didn’t mind not knowing, so much. If you weren’t ready to tell me I had no reason to push. But if it’s going to be part of our present –”

“You deserve to know,” Athos agrees. It’s a hard request, but a fair one. And d’Artagnan deserves this and so much more.

So he takes a deep breath. For the first time in over a decade, he consciously dredges up memories he’d tried to bury forever.

“I was whelped in the spring,” he begins quietly. “Cara was sick for a long time after I was whelped – the midwife said she shouldn’t carry again too soon, that’s why Thomas and I were so far apart – but she was well enough by the time I remember. She used to take me out into the meadows, when the sun was bright, and she’d sit under the tree while I ran and played…”

At some point d’Artagnan falls asleep. It doesn’t matter. Athos goes on talking until sunrise, painting bright pictures of a world he’d used to know.
The smell of frying bacon wakes d’Artagnan from a surprisingly peaceful sleep. He’d have bet that he’d spend the night tossing and turning. The hunting-lodge may be snug, but it’s still strange. The scents are different. Some of them lack the comforting tang of pack. And d’Artagnan’s worried for just about everyone sleeping under this roof.

Despite that, he seems to have slept well enough. He turns his head and smiles fondly at the sight of Athos, snoring slightly next to him, dead to the world. Athos’ quiet murmur and the stories he’d told had been a constant presence throughout d’Artagnan’s dreams.

D’Artagnan had woken briefly at one point, long past midnight, and realized that the quiet thread underpinning his dreams had been Athos. Still awake, d’Artagnan’s mate had been deep into a story of a time Thomas had been learning to ride, though by Athos’ account it’s hard to say who had been more wobbly-legged between the Omega and the yearling. Athos had been staring out the window, a soft smile on his face, as if for once the memories didn’t bring him pain. D’Artagnan had laid still and listened, giving no sign that he’d been awake. Eventually he’d drifted back off to sleep as Thomas had mastered the canter.

Such a contradiction. Who is the Alpha in bed with d’Artagnan? The gruff Musketeer who neither has nor needs companionship? The grieving widower who’d buried his heart with his mate and his odem? The passionate lover who’d taken d’Artagnan through his heat, killed to protect him, sworn to share his life with him? The tender companion who’d stayed up past midnight to whisper stories to d’Artagnan, because d’Artagnan had asked?

All of them, of course. Though how Athos can manage being so many people is difficult for d’Artagnan to understand. But no, d’Artagnan is wrong, isn’t he? Athos isn’t all of those people. Athos is only some of those people. Olivier de la Fère is the others.

The Alpha in bed with d’Artagnan right now is Athos. The Alpha who’d whispered to him all night, who’d fought for him and protected him and mated with him, is Athos. Athos is d’Artagnan’s. And as long as Olivier had been dead, that had been enough.

Now Olivier might be coming back to life again. Coming back to life for Charlotte. And what happens to Athos then?

Carefully, not wanting to disturb Athos, d’Artagnan slips out of bed. He uses the pot and dresses, then goes out into the main room.

“Good morning,” a gentle voice calls across the room. D’Artagnan follows it into the kitchen. Charlotte is standing in front of the stove, wearing an embroidered dress barely visible beneath a
giant apron. She’s frying the bacon. Other platters sit, covered, presumably full of food.

“Can I help?” d’Artagnan offers almost without thinking. He’s not quite awake yet: maybe that’s why. And he’d grown up in a farmhouse much like this one, so he knows exactly how much work there still is to be done, though he supposes that Richelieu doesn’t have livestock that need tending or crops that need planting.

“Can you help?” Charlotte parrots, turning slices quickly.

D’Artagnan stiffens a little. “I know my way around a kitchen,” he says, annoyed.

Charlotte turns in surprise. “I didn’t mean that. I just thought – aren’t you nauseated? Jean says your morning sickness – ”

“Oh.” D’Artagnan blushes a little, embarrassed. “No, thank you, I’m fine. It’s gotten a lot better lately. I mean, some mornings, yes – I still feel it – but today I’m fine. And that bacon smells very good,” he adds.

“Thank you,” Charlotte says, seeming pleased. “Well, if you’re up for it, I haven’t started on the toast yet.”

She gestures to a sideboard, where two fresh baked loaves are cooling. D’Artagnan locates a knife in the second drawer he tries – the layout of a farmhouse doesn’t change much, no matter who lives in it – and starts cutting slices.

“You’re due in the fall?” Charlotte asks after a moment. Her voice is tentative, like she’s not sure whether d’Artagnan will respond civilly or rip her throat out. D’Artagnan turns his head and sees Charlotte glancing over, too, but she’s not looking at d’Artagnan’s face. She’s looking lower, and her expression is sad and wistful and excited all at once.

D’Artagnan abruptly feels like a heel. He’s behaving irrationally – instinctively – and he’s more than that. If he starts clawing at Charlotte’s face over Athos then he isn’t any better than the Inquisition makes him out to be.

“Just after Michaelmas,” d’Artagnan says. He offers her a smile. Tentatively Charlotte returns it.

“Twins.”

“Yes, I – have you thought of names yet?”

“Not really.” D’Artagnan finishes the first batch of slices and transfers them to the toasting-rack. A thought occurs to him. Somewhat suspiciously he says, “You seem to know a lot about my pupping already?”

Charlotte looks away. “Treville talks about you all sometimes. We don’t discourage him. Maybe we should. But Adele always wants to know about René, and – ”

“And you wanted to know about Athos?”

“Not at first,” Charlotte admits. “At first I couldn’t bear to hear about him.”

“You must have been furious,” d’Artagnan breathes. It hits him suddenly, the flip side of all of this. If d’Artagnan has been angry, how must Charlotte feel, knowing that her mate had abandoned her and taken up with a much younger Omega? Mated with him – sired pups on him, for God’s sake –

“At first I was.” Charlotte starts piling bacon up on a platter. “I was angry for a long time.”
“You’re not still angry?” D’Artagnan tries to keep the doubt from his voice, but it leaks through anyway.

Charlotte shrugs one shoulder, ruefully. “Part of me is. I try not to let it out too much. I don’t like the person I am when I’m angry.” She covers the bacon platter with another. Still not looking at d’Artagnan, she adds, “I get angry when I’m working for the Resistance. It’s an outlet.”

D’Artagnan nods. Now that he can understand.

“Here’s the toast,” he says.

“Take it out to the table,” Charlotte directs. “Adele will be back from feeding the horses soon.”

There’s an inescapable note of fondness in her voice that makes d’Artagnan’s ears prick up. “You and Adele…?” he asks carefully.

Charlotte pulls out silverware, setting the table. “As much as we can be,” she says. Now she sounds bitter. “What the Inquisition left to me.”

“More than enough for me,” Adele says. She’s come in, the sound of the door opening swallowed up by the chink of silverware. “Your Olivier’s a fool.”

“My Olivier is dead.”

“Well, don’t throw yourself in a grave with him,” Adele says fiercely.

D’Artagnan hangs back as Adele shucks her boots and goes to fetch plates. She and Charlotte move around each other with the ease of long practice, setting the table and bringing in platters of food from the kitchen as if they’ve done this a thousand times before.

There’s a fondness and comfort to their airs together, too. A relaxation as they go through what must be a familiar routine. And yet it has an edge to it. Adele keeps walking that little bit too close to Charlotte, finding excuses to touch her. And Charlotte darts worried glances when she thinks Adele isn’t looking.

_They’re afraid, too_, d’Artagnan realizes. Adele is carrying the same fear d’Artagnan is: that Charlotte will leave her and try to go back to Olivier. But what’s Charlotte afraid of?

Charlotte tugs on a drawer and swears a little under her breath, shimmying it sideways to get it open. She starts pulling out simple cotton napkins. “It’s still sticking,” she says to Adele in annoyance.

“I’ll fix it when I can get grease from the manor,” Adele says. “If it matters?”

“Why wouldn’t it matter?” Charlotte frowns. “We use it every day, Ella.”

Adele shrugs stiffly. “Only when we’re here.”

“We live here!”

“At least we do now.”

Charlotte’s jaw drops a little. She takes a step towards Adele – it looks almost involuntary – and her eyes widen.

Adele doesn’t see this. She’s turned her back and is busily laying out plates.
“Ella?” Charlotte whispers. “Love, where else would we go?”

Adele either doesn’t hear or chooses not to answer.

In that moment, Charlotte’s heart appears in her face for the world – or d’Artagnan – to read. His breaks for her all of a sudden. She looks lost and frightened.

D’Artagnan sees it all in a rush. Adele is afraid Charlotte will leave her, and she’s already bracing for the blow. But in doing so she’s pushing Charlotte away, and Charlotte doesn’t want to go. Charlotte’s so terrified of losing the only home and family she has left that if Olivier threw himself down at Charlotte’s feet and begged her to go home to la Fère she’d spurn him and run straight to Adele’s arms.

Whether Olivier has any intentions of doing so is a different problem. D’Artagnan’s problem. But Charlotte isn’t competition. Charlotte, ironically, is in the same position d’Artagnan is in, minus the pups. They’d both been thrown out into the world lost and alone, no friends, no family, no path to follow. Then they’d found a new life. Had seized it with all their might, forcing their way into an established situation to make a place for themselves.

But they’re aware, so eternally aware, of how tenuous it is. The newest Musketeer, the newest Resistance agent, barely into the circle. Vulnerable. Least. Always afraid of losing their position. Always alert to the slightest change in pack dynamics. Always watching for the signs that say it will be time to pick up again and run.

D’Artagnan had thought his mating and his pups might have put him beyond those fears. Charlotte rakes them all up again for him. And Charlotte – what does she have to hold her position? She can’t mate again, Adele had said. She can’t carry. She has knowledge of the Resistance, true. But that’s cold comfort in a world with the Inquisition.

Charlotte isn’t going to fight for Olivier. She’s too busy fighting for Adele.

“So you live here,” d’Artagnan says. His voice is too loud in the sudden silence. Both Adele and Charlotte turn to him, surprised. “I should have guessed! It’s so well kept up. It must be wonderful for the two of you to have a place like this to retreat to.” He lets a wistfulness creep into his voice. “Here you can be safe together.”


Charlotte offers Adele her most earnest smile. D’Artagnan can see where it trembles around the edges, but perhaps Adele, blinded by fear, cannot.

“It’s wonderful to be here with Ella,” she says to d’Artagnan, never looking away from her mate. “I always feel so protected when we’re together.”

D’Artagnan doesn’t quite bite his tongue. From anyone else Charlotte’s statement would be the outside of too much. Somehow Charlotte sells it. Or maybe she just knows by now what Adele loves best to hear. Regardless, Adele softens.

“Someone has to care for the house.” Adele sets down the last cup with a soft clank. “And neither of us had any other homes left.”

“It’s a new start,” Charlotte says softly. “Out here it’s peaceful. There are no bad memories.”

*There are bad memories now,* d’Artagnan doesn’t say. He doesn’t have to say it. At that moment one of the bedroom doors opens. Aramis appears in the doorway. Adele’s gaze flies to him as if
magnetized. Charlotte looks down, sad.

“Is there food?” Aramis asks after a moment. He doesn’t meet Adele’s gaze.


Aramis obeys. Porthos follows a few moments later, sitting down next to Aramis. Aramis has put himself at one end of the table. Adele starts towards the seat opposite Aramis. Porthos sees this and raises his eyebrows.

D’Artagnan looks at Aramis. He’s staring fixedly at the table, ignoring his aleph. D’Artagnan rapidly weighs what little he knows of Aramis and Adele, then claims the seat across from Aramis. Adele slides in next to d’Artagnan, managing to make it look as if she’d planned it the entire time.

Charlotte brings in the last plate and sits next to Adele. That leaves Athos sitting across from her when he appears a moment later, and about as far from d’Artagnan as the table will allow. Athos doesn’t look terribly pleased about this. Neither is d’Artagnan, come to think of it. But Charlotte does her part by resolutely refusing to look at her former mate.

Everyone stares across the table at each other in silence. The food sits in the center, untouched.

D’Artagnan sighs to himself. Then he claps his hands loudly, attracting everyone’s attention.

“Lord, bless this food to our use and us to your service, in Jesus’ name, amen,” d’Artagnan says, just as he had used to do as a pup in Gascony. Then he smiles and reaches for the first platter. “Bacon! Delicious. Thank you for cooking, Charlotte.”

“You’re welcome,” Charlotte falters.

D’Artagnan gives her a significant look.

She straightens her shoulders. “Yes, it was my pleasure,” she says more strongly. She reaches for some toast.

Everyone else seems to come out of their fugue. Hands reach for platters, agreeing by mutual accord to pretend the moment of silence had been piety instead of discomfort. No one starts talking, though.

“Do you cook for large groups often?” d’Artagnan tries. He maintains eye contact with Charlotte, making it clear that this is directed at her, and trying to encourage her with his eyes to keep the conversation rolling.

“Oh, well, sometimes,” Charlotte answers. She attempts a smile that wobbles but holds. “We have Resistance squads stay sometimes, on their way to other objectives. And then sometimes we have guests who are on their way out of the country.”

“Surely they help out,” d’Artagnan suggests.

“They do. But it’s easier to ask them to draw water or feed horses. Besides, I like doing it.” Charlotte’s voice lightens, becoming a little more relaxed as she talks. “This is my household. I like making it a home. I like being of use.”

“You’re of use in many ways,” Adele protests, shocked out of her silence. She swivels her head to stare at Charlotte.

“Oh, I don’t mean like that,” Charlotte says. Now she sounds fond. This must be an old argument:
good. “I just mean – we can’t burn down a prison every day. And you know how I get when I feel like I’m not doing anything.”

“Someone’s got to cook every day,” d’Artagnan agrees.

Charlotte smiles at him in agreement. “Exactly! And it’s the sort of thing I never used to do.” She falters a little. “Before.”

Involuntarily, she glances at Athos. He’s watching her, too. He doesn’t look away.

“Not exactly the life of a Comtesse,” Athos says after a moment. His voice is a little gravelly, but d’Artagnan can tell he’s trying.

Charlotte can tell it, too. “No servants,” she agrees.

“And yet,” Athos says. “I think your bacon is better than we used to eat at la Fère.”

Charlotte’s smile reappears, dimmer than before, but present. Hopeful. “Well, I’m not a Comtesse anymore.”

“Technically –” Aramis starts truculently.

D’Artagnan talks right over him. “I meant to ask about that,” he says. “What happens to the title now?”

“Whoever wants it may have it,” Athos says. “It burned with the chateau.”

“Olivier!” Charlotte cries. “How can you say that? It’s still yours, of course. And it’s yours too,” she adds to d’Artagnan. “Goodness knows, I don’t want it. It would do me as much harm as good now anyway. A Resistance member needs to keep a low profile – as low as possible.”

“To protect yourself,” d’Artagnan nods.

“And our loved ones.” Charlotte glances sideways towards Adele. “The Inquisition doesn’t care who it hurts. They’ve caught some of us before. Our families pay.”

“So you pretend you’re dead?” Aramis demands. “To protect your families? Is that what you tell yourself?”

“It’s the truth,” Charlotte says. “Most of us don’t have families anymore by the time we come to the Resistance, but if we do…”

“They’re in danger,” d’Artagnan completes.

“Maybe that’s a danger they can choose to accept,” Porthos says. His voice is quiet, but no one mistakes him for calm.

“There is no choice,” Adele says. “You either know about the Resistance or you don’t. If you don’t know, you’re safe – at least as safe as any of us are. If you do know, you’re in danger. There’s no such thing as making a choice.”

“It sounds to me as if there is,” Porthos growls. “It just sounds like it’s a choice you made for him.”

“There was no other way to do it!” Adele cries. “If I’d told him, he’d be in danger. There’s no choice after that! He can’t say, oh, thanks for telling me, aleph, but I’d rather not run the risk, so can we just pretend you’d never said anything? He’d know! That would be enough for the Inquisition! The only
way for him to not know is for him to not know!"

“He would have gone with you!” Porthos cries.

“I was the Cardinal’s mistress for six months before I ‘died’,” Adele says. “It never occurred to you to wonder what those six months were for?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Richelieu tried to get me out of France as soon as he realized my sex. I fought him on that. I wanted to stay. I needed to stay. I needed to find out if René would ever come with me. For six months I tried everything I could think of short of asking him outright. And every time he told me no.”

“He wouldn’t!” Porthos shouts. Both the Alphas are on their feet now. D’Artagnan’s attention is on Aramis, though. Aramis, who is still sitting, shrinking in on himself, shame written on his face.

“‘No, Adele, I won’t help smuggle weapons into Paris.’ ‘No, Adele, I won’t investigate a report of a lynching in the slums.’ ‘No, Adele, I won’t carry a message to Tours’ – ”

“Just because he didn’t want to do any of those things himself – ”

“Don’t even try to tell me he was okay with me doing them either. All René ever talked about was the risks I was taking, and was it worth it, and why couldn’t I just settle down – ”

Aramis jerks to his feet as if pulled. “I didn’t want you to die!” he cries suddenly. “And you died anyway!”

“Yes!” Adele cries. “Yes, that’s exactly it! I was dead anyway! Either way, as far as you were concerned, if I didn’t live my life exactly the way you wanted me to I was dead to you regardless!”

Aramis dashes tears away from his eyes impatiently. “I just wanted what was best for you.”

“Listen to yourself. God, you’re such a hypocrite,” Adele snarls. “You’re mad at me because I didn’t tell you about the Resistance. I let you think I was dead. You said I took away your choices, but that’s all you ever wanted to do to me. There was exactly one right mode of living as far as you were concerned.”

“Everyone can make different choices,” Porthos says.

“I tried to find a way for my choices and yours to coexist,” Adele says, ignoring Porthos and speaking to Aramis directly. “I couldn’t. You rejected every attempt I made. When I realized that our lives were incompatible, when I realized that I had to hurt you anyway, I let Richelieu fake my death. I thought that you might as well be hurt and safe as opposed to hurt and endangered.”

Porthos puts a protective hand on Aramis’ shoulder. “You’re making him out to sound like the Inquisition.”

“From where I was standing there wasn’t any difference,” Adele says coldly.

Aramis chokes. Porthos looks moments away from leaping across the table at Adele. Athos is on his feet now, too.

“If you’d told him the Resistance is real – ” Athos begins.

“He was telling me he didn’t want to know! I asked René for help and he told me to stop asking! I tried to bring him in and he pushed me farther away! René, nothing you’d ever said or done to me
indicated you’d accept the danger. You just wanted to hide, to live under a rock for the rest of your life!

“And you wanted that for me too!” Aramis shouts. “You wanted to put me under that rock in the name of safety!”

“My first partner, Mireille, she had a family,” Adele hisses. “The Inquisitor of Tours had her mate Nadia gangraped in the public square – ”

“Adele!” Charlotte and d’Artagnan cry simultaneously. Now everyone is standing.

“They gave Nadia drugs to make her receptive – the same drugs they gave your Captain,” Adele goes on, ignoring them both. “Then when Mireille had been broken, the Inquisitor killed Nadia in front of her, and threw their two pups alive into the bonfire. Mireille tried to go in after them and they shot her – in the gut, not the head or the heart – and she burned to death there bleeding while her pups screamed – ”

Aramis turns and runs from the house. Porthos follows, face like a thundercloud.

“So you’ll have to forgive me if I did not want that for you!” Adele screams after him.

Charlotte moves, too. Adele doesn’t look like she’s planning to run after Aramis but Charlotte wraps her arms around Adele seemingly just in case. Then d’Artagnan catches a glimpse of Adele’s face and wishes he hadn’t.

He looks away. He catches Athos’ gaze as he does it. Athos is just looking at him, stoic, like he’s heard stories like this too many times to horrify him.

The smell of bacon abruptly makes d’Artagnan feel sick.

“Let’s clean up,” d’Artagnan says. His voice shakes a little. He doesn’t think he can be blamed.

The compost heap is too far away. Aramis vomits into a convenient pile of ferns instead, and ends up lying on his back underneath the trees, trying to breathe. The sky spins in his vision.

It’s cloudy still. There will be more rain today.

Porthos catches up to Aramis a moment later. He sinks to his knees next to Aramis and pulls Aramis into a loose embrace, stroking Aramis’ hair back from his face and offering his handkerchief for Aramis to wipe his mouth with.

“She shouldn’t have said that to you,” Porthos growls. “It’s past time she and I had a conversation.”

“Don’t,” Aramis says. He feels wrung out and limp. “I don’t want you two to fight.”

“If she keeps acting like this it’s going to be inevitable.”

“Like what?” Aramis watches Porthos’ face, so expressive, close off. “How is she acting, Porthos?”

“Like you owe her an apology.”

“Maybe I do.”
“No, you –”

“She’s right.” A familiar burning sensation sets in behind Aramis’ eyes; after all these years, he’s far too aware of what it feels like when he’s about to cry.

Porthos frowns. “About what?” he asks carefully.

“I’m a coward,” Aramis admits. “I did want to hide under a rock. When we got to Paris I just wanted to keep as low a profile as possible. She didn’t. We fought about it so many times.”

“But you helped her. You told me you did.”

“Yes. A few times. Under protest. I know I made it sound like I helped her willingly. I wanted you to think the best of me. But it wasn’t like that.”

Porthos nods slowly. “How was it, then?”

Aramis rolls his head away, staring past Porthos up into the sky. He’s spent twenty years not thinking of the brief time he and Adele had shared in Paris. Partly because memories of Adele had been too painful. But partly also, too, because of how ashamed he’s been of them.

“I was scared,” Aramis says after a moment. “We’d just left our home, and I – I was such an Alameda then. Obsessed with secrecy and staying hidden. Adele was always different. Even back in Spain. She’d never use Betan terms for anything, she insisted on calling me little odem, no matter how many times Papa beat her for it… listen to me! Twenty years later and I still say Papa! That’s what it was like. Hiding was everything. It was all we knew. Or at least it was all I knew.”

“Adele wasn’t content to hide,” Porthos prompts. “You’ve told me that before.”

“No, never,” Aramis whispers. “She said there had to be something better, that we couldn’t settle. She started trying to find ways to make a difference. And I fought her on it. I fought her every step of the way. She tried to keep me with her and I resisted. Sometimes I’d do what she asked. Because she’d asked it, or because I felt brave that day, or because I was too scared of the consequences of not doing it. But I made her feel bad about it every single time. I made her feel guilty for trying to do something to help instead of just bowing our heads and not breathing every time the Inquisition looked our way.”

“You were scared. That’s okay. You think the rest of us have never been scared?”

“You do something in spite of your fear. I didn’t. When Adele became Richelieu’s mistress she said Help me. She said I’m doing this for you. And I told her I would help her.”

“See? You overcame your fear.”

Aramis shakes his head. “No, I didn’t. I said I’d help, but I never did. I suppose by then she already knew about Richelieu… and she was trying to figure out if she should bring me in on it, too. Well, I made it very clear that she shouldn’t. And six months later when she was dead it was my fault.”

“She isn’t dead. And she made her own choices.”

“She wouldn’t have had any choices left if it were up to me. Don’t you get it? I tried to force her into living the life I wanted her to live – and so she had to leave me behind – and I spent all those years thinking she was dead – ” He’s crying in earnest now, sobbing really, and Porthos is rubbing soothing circles into his lower back but it’s not enough. “I did it to myself!”
“But what about the last ten years?” Porthos asks, sounding bewildered. “After Le Havre, you were the one who said we should take a more active role with the Underground. You said – ”

“I said I was a coward,” Aramis reminds his mate. The shame of it swamps him again. He’s managed to dim that shame somewhat over the last ten years. The penance he’d set himself, of fuller involvement in the Underground, had soothed his conscience. Aramis had even thought, foolishly, that Adele might have approved. He’d salved his wounded pride with the thought that he was honoring her memory somehow.

“You also said that you had been dealing with Adele’s death,” Porthos says comfortingly. “It’s no shame to have needed a break.”

“Needing a break would have been one thing. But I had never started anything. At first I told myself it was because I needed to hide. And then I was using Adele’s death as an excuse. It took me ten years – it took me you before I realized just what a coward I was being.”

“Back then I told you that doing what was right for you was all right. I still mean that. Aramis, it’s okay if you take a different path than your aleph.”

“Not if it’s a coward’s path.” Aramis shakes his head.

“It’s not a coward’s path,” Adele says from the treeline. Aramis looks up to see her standing there, uncertain if she’s allowed any closer.

Porthos growls. “Go away. He’s not ready to deal with you.”

“If René tells me to go I’ll go,” she says. “René, I’m so sorry. I should never have said those things to you.”

“Yes you should have,” Aramis whispers.

“No, I was wrong. I was scared and I let my fear speak for me.” She starts towards him. Porthos growls again, and Adele rounds on him. “What have you been saying to him?”

“Nothing,” Aramis gasps. “Oh, knock it off, both of you, please, I can’t take it!”

Porthos looks down at Aramis and visibly lets the tension in his muscles go. “We can fight later,” he says to Adele, though still with a warning edge in his voice.

“I look forward to it,” she retorts. But her hands are gentle as she comes close and takes Aramis’ hands in hers.

“I’m sorry,” René says to her. “I look back and I don’t even recognize the person I was when we first came to Paris. I was frightened of my own shadow. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and pull the ground in after me. It wasn’t just you. For years after you died I refused to have anything to do with the Underground.”

“I’m sorry too,” Adele says. “I knew my death would hurt you and I did it anyway.”

“At least you had a good reason,” René says.

“I was motivated by fear too,” Adele admits. “I – the story I told you, about Mireille – ”

Porthos growls warningly.

Adele nods at him. “I know.” She considers her words carefully before she goes on. “Mireille… she
was my, well, chaperone in the Resistance, for lack of a better term. Showing me the ropes, and making sure I wasn’t really a blood traitor underneath it all. And she died about four months after I started working for Richelieu. Her death – and Nadia’s, and their pups’ – that’s what really made me decide to leave you behind. Because all I could think about was that if I didn’t, the same thing would happen to you one day.”

René shivers.

“I won’t let it,” Porthos promises Aramis, tightening his grip.

“Mireille would have said the same thing,” Adele says quietly.

“Twenty years ago if you’d asked me if I were willing to run that risk I would have said no,” René says. “You were right, aleph. I wasn’t even willing to run the smaller risks for working with the Underground. I would have told you no and I would have been furious with you for even asking.”

“You’re braver than you think,” Porthos insists.

“No, Porthos, I wasn’t,” Aramis says, trying to make Porthos understand. “Maybe I am now – and if that’s so I have you to thank for you – but back then I wasn’t. Back then I was René d’Herblay de Alameda, and all René knew how to do was be afraid.”

Aramis looks up at Adele. “How did you do it, aleph? You were never afraid.”

“I was afraid all the time,” Adele says. “I just – I don’t know. Being afraid didn’t make me want to hide. You were all afraid, you and Sirrah and Cara and our other siblings, and it governed everything you did. And you all kept trying to make it govern me, and I don’t know why, but it just didn’t take. Even as a pup I remember thinking but why should that stop us? I don’t know why I was made differently than you all. But when I realized I was I knew I had to get away from you before I hurt you any farther.”

“I was furious with you,” René – Aramis – says lowly. “And yet, the person I am now, if I’d been in your shoes, I don’t think I can say I’d’ve made a different choice.”

Adele squeezes his hands. “Thank you,” she falters. “I don’t think I can tell you what that means to me.”

Porthos sighs.

Aramis lets himself lean back against Porthos’ strength. After a moment he asks, “Aleph?”

“Yes?”

“Why didn’t you come back for me?”

“What?”

“I know, at first, I pushed you away. I don’t think I’ll ever stop being ashamed of that. But later, when I did start working for the Underground, you must have learned about it. Treville’s training Athos to be his replacement one day, so you must have known, you must have realized that I’d had a change of heart.” Aramis’ eyes drift away. “Why didn’t you come back for me then?”

“Oh, René,” Adele says softly. “I’m afraid you’re not the only d’Herblay who’s been a coward at one point or another.”
Aramis nods slowly.

“I knew you’d be furious with me. I knew you’d have every right to be furious with me. I just couldn’t bear it,” she admits. “And I had such good excuses. That was when things began to get more dangerous, when more people started dying… I’ve nearly been captured half a dozen times since Le Havre. When I saved d’Artagnan of yours in Wissous, if the Inquisition patrol had stuck to their usual schedule, they’d’ve had me… they were late that day. A horse had thrown a shoe. That’s all there was, one horse throwing a shoe, between life and death. Six months before that? That was when we’d found the Dutch spy in the Underground. He was trying to cross from Treville’s camp to Richelieu’s. He had figured out that the Resistance was real, he had the name of one of our youngest recruits – he was this close to getting in. It’s the worse breach we’ve had in twenty years. And it was just so easy to tell myself that I was staying hideen for your safety, even after you’d proved that you were willing to take the risk, rather than to admit I was terrified.”

Aramis closes his mouth. He doesn’t know what to say to that. And maybe he’s learned something over the last twenty years after all, because he just nods, slowly, instead of trying to speak.

A raindrop lands on a fern nearby. He glances up automatically. The sky is darker now.

“I’m sorry,” Adele says again. “I should have trusted you. But the last time I’d seen you you’d been so afraid, and – ” She trails off, looking ashamed.

“And you had trouble believing anything had changed,” Porthos finishes for her. Adele glances over to him; their gazes meet, and for the first time Aramis seems something like understanding in Porthos’ face. “I know. When you’re apart from someone, they stay in your mind just as they were the last time you were together. Time may pass, but the image you have of them, that stays the same.”

Adele’s gaze softens. “Your family?”

Porthos nods. “They’re dead now,” he says quietly. “At least I assume they are. I don’t know for sure. But everything I know about what their lives must have been like says they must be dead. My alephs for certain; laborers don’t live much past their prime. My carrier. One or two of my odems might still be alive, if they were lucky whelping. I know that they’ve lived lives away from me, that they’ll have grown up - grown old - and probably died. But when I’m not careful, when I’m not paying attention, I still think of them all as they were the day we were all taken away.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Adele says. Aramis leans closer into Porthos, lending his mate strength with his presence.

Porthos shakes his head. “I don’t understand voluntarily leaving your family behind,” he admits. “It’s the last thing I can imagine doing under any circumstance. But I understand not realizing he’d changed. And I understand wanting to keep someone safe. Me, I protect Aramis by staying close to him. I’d never let anything happen to him that hasn’t happened to me first.”

“And I protected him by leaving,” Adele says. “When it came to the Resistance, there was no other way.”

Aramis nods. “I promise to work on forgiving you for that,” he says.

“That’s all I can ask.”

“It won’t happen right away.”

“I know,” Adele whispers.
Another group of raindrops sprinkles down through the trees. The wind is kicking up.

“Let’s go back inside,” Porthos says sensibly. He reaches out to Aramis in the same moment Adele does.

The two Alphas freeze for a moment, looking at each other. Sizing each other up.

Aramis solves the problem by taking both of their hands. With Porthos on his left and Adele on his right, he barely has to exert any effort to get up; they haul him to his feet between them as if he weighs no more than a pup. Nor do either of them seem to be in a particular hurry to let go.

The sky chooses that moment to open up on them. It’s not a gentle rain, but a hard, driving one. Aramis yelps.

Porthos tugs on Aramis’ hand, breaking into a jog. Aramis pulls on Adele. They tumble through the door of the hunting-lodge in an uncoordinated mass of limbs and nearly end up sprawled in a puppy pile in front of the main fireplace.

The other three members of their group are standing and sitting around the fire. They look as if they’ve been frozen. Charlotte has a teacup halfway to her lips. D’Artagnan is in the act of sitting down. Athos is halfway to him with a pillow for his back.

“Hey now,” Aramis protests, feeling his involuntary grin fade slightly. “Surely you’ve had to run in out of the rain before.”

Charlotte shakes her head. “Breathe,” she says.

“I am breathing!”

“Scent,” Athos corrects.

Aramis blinks. He, Adele and Porthos all obey.

The rain muddles things slightly, as does the mud they’ve all three tracked in. The woodsmoke from the fire is easier to discard. At least, it is until Aramis realizes that not all the scent in the air is generated by nature.


“The Captain?” Porthos whispers.

“It started a few minutes ago,” d’Artagnan says. He seems to break out of his stupor and finishes sitting down. Athos springs back into action with the pillow, then claims the seat next to d’Artagnan.

“This is good, right?” Charlotte asks. “This means he’ll be okay?”

Charlotte’s looking at Adele. Aramis’ aleph would have been the one Charlotte’s pack had relied upon for their medical knowledge. They’d read the same books as pups, learned about their people’s physiology under their carrier’s careful tutelage. But their parents had expected that the two of them, René and Adele, would stay together in their new lives. They’d trained each of them to specialize in their own sex.

Adele has probably expanded her knowledge in the intervening time. Aramis himself has picked up as much as he could about their people, Alpha and Omega both. Adele will have done the same. But Adele still doesn’t answer Charlotte directly. She looks at Aramis instead, letting him be the one
Treville’s scent is rising. He’s alive. Still in heat, as expected – the drug will take days to process out of his system – but climbing the next peak. Which means that he’s fighting the drug. They got him to Richelieu soon enough. Treville’s going to beat this thing.

Aramis’ smile returns. “Yes,” he says to Charlotte. To all of them. “This means he’ll be okay.”

Charlotte’s grin splits her face. She jumps up and hugs him, bright and quick. Then she hugs Adele. Then, somewhat to Aramis’ surprise, she hugs d’Artagnan. And d’Artagnan hugs her joyfully back.

Athos’ eyebrows climb. So do Adele’s.

“He’ll be okay,” Charlotte says to d’Artagnan, tucking a stray lock of hair behind d’Artagnan’s ear.

“Yeah,” d’Artagnan says back, hugging her around the middle. They smile at each other, sharing their joy.

Aramis leans back into Porthos. He doesn’t let go of Adele’s hand, tugging her back into the embrace, too. Surrounded by his family, warmed by the heat of the fire and breathing the proof that his surrogate carrier will survive, Aramis feels himself relax a little.

Maybe, just maybe, everything will be well.
With the rain continuing to batter down on the roof, no one wants to go back outside. All six of them settle around the fire in various attitudes of relaxation. It’s peaceful, at first, and the good mood engendered by the proof of Treville’s survival carries everyone for a while. But eventually Athos stops stroking d’Artagnan’s hair and says, “We should talk about Rochefort.”

D’Artagnan makes a sleepy sound of protest. He’s sprawled over a chaise lounge with his head in Athos’ lap, lulled halfway to a nap by the warmth of the fire and the comforting scent of pack.

“There’s been no word from Paris,” Adele says. She’s sitting on the floor in front of Charlotte, who’s been braiding ribbons into her hair. Aramis is deeply involved in the selection of these ribbons, and the two of them have been chatting idly about Adele’s fashion preferences and how they’ve changed over time. Embroidery seems to have been a common theme. Aramis has shared a few stories about Adele’s childhood love of fancy dress, which have made everyone laugh, though they can all hear the moments when his voice slows and he picks up the story somewhat later in relative time, obviously skipping moments too painful to recall. Charlotte has been matching Aramis with stories from the last twenty years. The infamous blue cloak that she and Adele share has featured in most of them, to d’Artagnan’s amusement.

“Nothing passed through the Underground or the Resistance?” Athos asks.

“You’d know if there were. No one’s come here since Richelieu and I arrived,” Charlotte points out.

Athos shrugs. “We don’t know all your methods.”

“There’s been no word,” Adele says.

“Then let us assume, for the sake of argument, that your forces were able to conceal our destination from Rochefort,” Athos says. “What happens next?”

Charlotte and Adele exchange looks. “What do you mean?”

“We can’t stay here forever,” Athos says as gently as possible.

“The whole garrison mustered to go search for the Captain,” Porthos says. “They won’t have found him. They’ll be worried.”

“They may do something rash,” Aramis says worriedly.

“We can get them a message,” Adele says. “If you’ll write it, it can be sent through the Underground.”

“Or we could deliver it ourselves,” Porthos says. Adele stiffens at this, but Porthos presses on anyway. “The Captain’s in good hands. Now that we know he’ll make it, what’s preventing us from going back to Paris? We don’t want to all ride back in a bunch anyway. It’ll just give the Inquisitor more ammunition.”

“Do you want to leave?” Charlotte asks tentatively.

Porthos glances at Aramis. “I’m just asking the question.”

“No one leaves until Richelieu and Treville are functional again,” Adele says firmly.
“We won’t be held prisoner,” Athos says, quietly but with an undertone of steel.

“Please understand, it’s not that,” Charlotte says at once. “It’s for all of our safeties.”

“We know too much,” Aramis says from next to Charlotte. “That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

“Surely they know they can trust us,” Porthos protests to his mate.

“It’s got nothing to do with that,” Adele says.

“Ella, be honest,” Charlotte says. “It does have a little bit to do with that, and there’s no good pretending it doesn’t.”

“You know we wouldn’t do anything to harm the Resistance!” Athos cries.

“It’s been twenty years,” Aramis says quietly. “People change.”

“Whose side are you on?” Porthos says grumpily.

“We are all on the side of the truth,” Charlotte interrupts. “Right?”

“Of course,” d’Artagnan agrees at once, pitching his voice to calm. “We just don’t understand. Will you explain?”

Adele and Charlotte exchange looks. Carefully, Adele starts talking.

As she does, several things become clear. As they’d already known, the snug hunting lodge in the center of the Richelieu hunting rounds is more than just a safehouse for wayward throwbacks who need a place to hide while the storm blows past. It’s the headquarters of the Resistance.

And they know now that the Resistance is not the puppyhood fairy tale Athos had always believed it to be. The Richelieu lodge is the nerve center of a massive, well-organized, shockingly powerful movement that has somehow managed to remain completely secret for nearly five centuries. Adele explains that their roots lie with movements that go all the way back to the Inquisition. Some of those early movements were disbanded, others succeeded in keeping the Inquisition from their countries’ borders, and still others were caught and destroyed. The ones that survived eventually linked up, country to country, beginning around the time of the current Cardinal’s grandsire. It’s been the life’s work of generations of Richelieus going back to the beginning of the Inquisition itself.

Learning this, Athos realizes with a cold certainty that none of them will be allowed to ride back to Paris, now or at the end of Treville’s heat, with only a few promises of silence. There’s too much at stake. Athos doesn’t know the exact shape of the decision they’ll have to make yet. But it’s obvious that they can no longer remain only Musketeers, running the occasional side mission for the Captain with no questions asked. The Resistance has them in its circle now, and the only escapes from it all end in death.

Adele’s stories fill in gaps in their Captain’s life that none of them had even known were present. They also paint an entirely different picture of Richelieu than the persona of the Bloody Cardinal. It’s easy to imagine a young, angry Treville breaking into the Inquisition’s most secure prison to rescue a Musketeer in danger. It’s much harder to imagine Richelieu doing the same. It’s practically impossible to imagine Richelieu doing the same regularly, as the leader of an organized group of vigilantes.

The Musketeers are all trying, with various degrees of success, to conceal and overcome this disbelief. The evidence of their noses is unmistakable. But there’s a lifetime of fear to overcome.
Adele and Charlotte deal with their questions as patiently as they can. They share their personal journeys, their own experiences of the Resistance, as well as the quieter moments when their little pack might relax. They explain thoughts and motivations that had remained hidden before. Several situations take on a startling new light, and others are revealed to be all shadow and no substance, a play put on for the sake of appearances with little to do with reality.

“What about the previous Cardinal?” d’Artagnan asks finally. “The one Richelieu exposed as an Omega, and hunted and killed?”

Charlotte smiles. “Alfonse? Alive and well, in Russia.”

“Andreas lives, too,” Adele adds.

“Richelieu’s oldest brother?” Porthos asks. “The one who was killed by brigands?”

“Odem,” Charlotte corrects. “He’s in Bavaria, mated, with two pups and a child. Actually, you know of one of them.”

“We do?” Aramis asks in surprise.

“The eldest is Mazarin, who Richelieu is training as his successor.”

D’Artagnan gapes at the news. “Mazarin is a churchman!”

“So is the Cardinal,” Adele points out.

“The Resistance couldn’t survive without having infiltrated the Church to its highest levels,” Charlotte adds. “We learn about their methods of detection and control, so we can figure out how to evade them.”

Porthos’ thoughts are running down another track. “Richelieu’s raising his odem’s pup as his successor?” he asks. “Why hasn’t he sired any of his own?”

Charlotte opens her mouth, then closes it again.

“How could he?” d’Artagnan says quietly. It’s phrased as a question, but d’Artagnan doesn’t say it like he wonders. His hand steals to his own stomach, its swell visible now even through his shirt, and d’Artagnan frowns down at his fingers like he’s forgotten how they’d gotten there. “It’s a dangerous enough world to bring pups into without being head of the Resistance.”

“He’s going to have to come to terms with it,” Adele says ruefully.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh God,” Aramis says in horror. “I hadn’t even thought.”

“Would someone like to explain what’s going on?” Athos asks, as patiently as he can.

Adele and Aramis exchange looks. Adele gestures to her odem to go ahead.

“The drug they gave the Captain,” Aramis explains. “It’s not something the Betas discovered on their own. It used to be a standard part of Omegan medicine. An Omega who was having difficulty conceiving, or whose heats weren’t coming right, would go gather the leaves at midnight with a silver leaf, under the full moon. Properly administered, they weren’t dangerous. They were simply a stimulant.”
“A heat stimulant,” Athos clarifies.

“And a fertility stimulant.” Aramis stares into the fire as if it holds the answers to all of life’s questions. It lets him avoid the shocked stares of everyone else in the room. Porthos slides closer to Aramis and wraps an arm around his waist.

“How effective a stimulant?” d’Artagnan asks at last.

Aramis smiles bitterly. “I’ve been trying to get my hands on it for years. It’s almost impossible to grow; the Inquisition have the only hothouses in France. And it’s their most tracked and controlled substance, because it’s an infallible method for detecting Omegas.”

“And it’s one of their most effective means of torture,” Adele adds quietly.

D’Artagnan’s other hand finds its way into Athos’. Athos squeezes it, shivering without conscious intent.

“So the Captain’s pupped,” Porthos says slowly.

“Almost certainly,” Aramis agrees.

There’s a moment of silence as everyone absorbs this. Athos takes stock of the room. Surprise is visible in everyone’s face or posture, even Aramis’ and Adele’s; they know about this drug, but they obviously hadn’t put two and two together until d’Artagnan’s artless question.

It’s Aramis and Adele Athos watches most closely. Yes, they’re surprised. But fast replacing that surprise is worry. Athos feels that same worry sinking like a stone in his stomach.

D’Artagnan is stiff next to him, clutching his hand. After all, this had been why d’Artagnan had refused to use contraceptives in the first place, when he’d gone into heat last: to save them for the Captain, to keep Treville from getting pupped himself.

Carrying is hard on anyone who does it. But there are factors that increase the risk, and Treville’s got more or less every one of them. Chief among them are age and bloodline. Treville’s strong and fit, a career soldier, but the endocrine system doesn’t respect muscle tone. His body may simply fail to ramp up to meet his pups’ demands. If it doesn’t, the pupping may end in a miscarriage. Or it might end in hemorrhage and death.

“How old is the Captain?” Porthos asks, obviously thinking in the same direction.

“No one knows exactly,” Charlotte says.

“Old enough,” Adele says. “It won’t be easy.”

“You said you have a garden around back,” Aramis says to Adele. “If there’s room in it – ”

“Yes, we can start planting oxytocics,” Adele says almost immediately. “Let me see – we can dig up the cabbages – ”

There are herbs that can help boost Treville’s system and make his body do what it might not do on its own. They’re difficult to grow but not impossible. Cara had used them when carrying Thomas, too, though she hadn’t been nearly so old as Treville. That much is solvable at least.

But bloodline won’t be so easily fixed.

Treville’s an Omega, mating with an Alpha. He’s at least equally likely to conceive pups as children.
But the Troisville line has a lot of Betas in it.

Betas hate throwbacks for many reasons, but Beta carriers have two particular ones that have dominated their thinking for generations. One is that sires, historically, have preferred Omegas. Omegas had therefore been competition for mates. And the Betan focus on gender had meant that while Beta men might hold positions of power and respect even in the old regime, Beta women had only been able to advance societally through marriage. With marriage to Alpha nobility closed off Betan women had lived decidedly circumscribed lives.

The other reason is that pups are much harder to whelp than children. They’re larger, and the labor they trigger is rougher. Omegas have biological mechanisms evolved to accommodate these needs. Additional whelping muscles, wider hips, additional flexibility. Beta women who don’t have those aids, who through throwback ancestry or marriage try to whelp pups regardless, die at far higher rates.

The preference of the old nobility for a pure lineage hadn’t only been a societal construct that functioned to keep Betas from positions of power. For centuries purity of blood had been a matter of life or death. Omegas without Betan heritage had survived whelping; those with it, for a long time, had largely died.

Athos has been kept up more nights than he can count, worried for d’Artagnan and his mongrel heritage. Aramis has assured them both repeatedly that d’Artagnan’s case is promising. D’Artagnan is young, which will help immensely. His muscle tone is good. Despite his bloodline, d’Artagnan’s as flexible as Aramis. And d’Artagnan’s overactive endocrine system is the best of all possible signs for a favorable outcome. At least, so Aramis swears. With a well-trained midwife, Aramis insists, d’Artagnan will be fine. Bloodline or no bloodline.

But Treville? Who is not young, who does not share d’Artagnan’s condition, whose bloodline may barely be better than d’Artagnan’s –

“I’ve been studying for d’Artagnan,” Aramis is saying. The d’Herblay siblings are talking rapidly, often interrupting each other, obviously agitated now that the matter’s been brought to the fore. “But age is going to be a factor – ”

“The Richelieu library,” Adele jumps in. “It’s nearly as good as the one at Alameda, maybe there’s a text – ”

“Is there anyone else? Anyone with practical experience?”

“We’re short on crisis midwives at the moment,” Charlotte says in worry. “We had a good one but she – ”

“Did she go abroad? Can she come back?”

“She was killed with Madame de Bois-Tracy,” Adele says grimly.

There’s a moment of silence for this.

“Exactly how pure is Treville’s line?” Aramis asks. He has the determined air of someone reverting back to first principles.

“We don’t know,” a new voice says hoarsely. Everyone looks up and over, shocked. Adele, Athos and Porthos jump to their feet.

Clinging to the doorframe, looking as if he’d fall over without the support, is the Cardinal.
“I came for water,” Richelieu says, glancing back over his shoulder. “Jean’s dozing – he barely woke up at all – but he’ll be thirsty, so I…” He sways forward and nearly falls. Athos and Adele catch him by the arms and help him to sit. The two of them exchange looks, for a moment completely in harmony, fond and a little amused.

An Alpha’s always exhausted during heat. Much more so than an Omega, whose bodies are largely sustained by the tremendous amount of hormones that rage through their bodies, metabolizing stored fat with incredible efficiency and pushing them into a light trace that reduces the need for sleep. An Alpha lacks those benefits; their evolutionary role during heat, beyond the obvious, is to guard the dazed Omega. This requires alertness. Alphas rarely sleep during heats. Instead they crash afterwards.

Judging from Richelieu’s haggard appearance and seeming inability to walk across the room, this heat is shaping up to be a doozy.

“Here,” Porthos says, returning from the kitchen with two sealed flasks and an open cup. He sets the flasks down on the table and shoves the cup into Richelieu’s hands. “You need water too. And you’d better not try to stand up again for a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Richelieu says, raising it to his lips and drinking quickly.

Athos takes the moment to study the other Alpha. Stripped of his robes, exhausted and generally disheveled, he looks very little like the Bloody Cardinal, that icon of the Church who inspires fear in the heart of every throwback in France. Even knowing now that it’s a front, Athos can’t think of that icon without a shudder. But the Alpha sitting before the fire now projects none of that menace. He’s tired, and worried for his mate, and beginning to visibly age. Athos feels an unwilling pang of sympathy for how much Richelieu looks like Athos’ own sire, shortly before his death.

Richelieu finishes the water and sets the cup down. “I heard you talking,” he says quietly, and looks at Aramis and Adele. “I know what the stimulants do, but Jean’s off-cycle. He’s always so regular. Surely that matters? And – and he’s got to be close to estropause. Mightn’t it not work?”

Aramis looks back at Richelieu steadily. “I’m not a doctor,” he says, a familiar, well-worn refrain that makes d’Artagnan smile briefly.

“But you’ve studied the medical texts that have survived. You’ve gained practical experience as a Musketeer. You may be the closest thing to a obstetrician our people have, René d’Herblay, eve de Alameda.” Aramis winces at the name, the old-fashioned style of Alphaic inheritance, and Richelieu’s tone softens. “Aramis. Please, just tell me the truth, or whatever part of it you know.”

“I don’t know where the kidnappers got their supply, or how they prepared it, or how much they gave the Captain,” Aramis says. “But, given how fast the Captain’s heat came on, and how quickly it progressed, and how strong his scent got… I would be very surprised if he doesn’t end up pupped.”

Richelieu closes his eyes for a moment. Adele lays a hand on the Cardinal’s shoulder, and Charlotte takes his hand.

“You probably already know… at his age it’ll be a hard whelping,” Aramis adds quietly. “More so the less pure his line is.”

Several expressions pass over Richelieu’s face in rapid succession. Athos tries, but he can’t read any of them.

“Is there anything I can do?” the Alpha asks at last, opening his eyes again.
“To make it easier? I’m sorry. I don’t know.” Aramis’ shoulders move in a loose gesture of negation. “I’ll do whatever I can,” he adds, holding the Cardinal’s gaze steadily. “Does your line have a midwife?”

It’s a reasonable question; all of the old lines that have managed to hide their throwback offspring depend on the aid of loyal Beta lines to help whelp and register their pups. But Richelieu shakes his head. “She and her children went abroad with my odems,” he says. “I… it seemed best. I never meant to mate, much less…”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, seeming to run out of energy and dropping his face into his hands. Athos meets Adele’s eyes across the room. She nods slightly.

“Can you stand yet?” Athos asks as gently as he can. “You’d better get back in there.” It won’t do the Cardinal any good to dwell on it. The situation is bad, but little can be done about it now, and Treville will be needing Richelieu again soon.

“I think so,” Richelieu says faintly. When he goes to actually try it there’s a bad moment or two where he can’t quite get his balance, and Aramis shoots Athos a dirty look, but after a minute Richelieu steadies on his feet. He turns his head back towards the door he’d come out of and his nostrils flare, scenting.

Treville’s heat must be rising again. Richelieu snatches up the unopened flasks and strides back across the room, all traces of his earlier unsteadiness gone. Athos is familiar with the phenomenon. The drive to mate is strong enough to override nearly everything else. The pheromones an Omega puts out during heat act on an Alpha like a stronger form of adrenaline, banishing weakness and injury to increase the chances of successfully breeding.

Adele sits back down, this time on the chaise next to Charlotte. Aramis stays where he is, on the floor before the fire, and Porthos joins him there.

“Well,” d’Artagnan says, trying to lighten the mood. “Aramis, look on the bright side. You’ll have a chance to practice your midwifery on me before you have to tackle the Cardinal’s pups.”

Athos snarls involuntarily. He knows d’Artagnan doesn’t mean to imply his own life is disposable, but the Alpha in him hears the threat to his mate and unborn pups regardless.

“Calm down,” Aramis says to Athos with some asperity. “He’s young and strong. I keep telling you, he’ll be fine. It’s the Captain I’m worried about.”

“And Rochefort,” Porthos says darkly.

A chill settles through the room, despite the fire.

“Even if Rochefort doesn’t know about Richelieu, he knows about Treville,” Athos recalls with a sinking feeling. “There’s no way Treville’s absence from Paris will be seen as anything other than what it is.”

“So he might survive whelping only to end up dead at Rochefort’s hands?” Porthos shakes his head. “Over my dead body.”

Aramis shivers. “That’s assuming Treville even makes it to term. If Rochefort starts hunting Treville as soon as he has to withdraw from public life – ”

“We don’t even know for sure if Treville’s carrying yet,” Adele interrupts, looking alarmed at the way Aramis is growing paler. “Yes, he’s been drugged, but you said yourself you don’t know how
his kidnappers prepared it or how much they gave him. You were right to warn the Cardinal, but let’s not borrow any more trouble until we’re sure.”

“Richelieu’s going to borrow plenty of trouble for us,” Charlotte says. Her shoulders and lips are tight with worry.

“Why?” d’Artagnan asks.

“It’s just Richelieu.” Adele sighs. “He’s good at worrying.”

“He worries a lot,” Charlotte adds.

“To be fair, it does seem as if worrying is his job,” Athos says.

“It’s not a good worry,” Adele tries to explain. “Not a healthy worry.”

“Doesn’t the Captain help?” d’Artagnan asks.

“Yes, usually. And so does Jussac. But this problem is with Treville, and we left Jussac in Paris.”

“We can’t do anything about it now,” Charlotte says practically. “Adele is right. We should wait and see.”

Athos glances at d’Artagnan. His mate is frowning down at himself, troubled, fingers tracing patterns over the swell of his stomach. Richelieu’s not the only one borrowing trouble.

“It will be all right,” Athos tries.

D’Artagnan shakes his head. “You have no way of knowing that.”

“Aramis?” Athos appeals.

Aramis tries to smile. “It will probably be all right,” he says weakly. His gaze skips from d’Artagnan to the closed bedroom door Richelieu had disappeared back through. He stands abruptly. “I need a walk.”

“It’s still drizzling,” Adele protests.

“Sounds bracing,” Porthos says. He stands, too, and fetches their cloaks. “I’ll come with you.”

Adele opens her mouth and closes it again. A look of frustration crosses her face.

“Poor Aramis,” d’Artagnan sighs, once Aramis and Porthos are safely gone. He shares a look with Charlotte, who also looks sympathetic.

Athos winces a little himself. Even setting aside the matter of Rochefort, all this talk about pupping and whelping can’t possibly be easy for Aramis. It will be made doubly worse by the fact that Aramis is, as Richelieu had said, the best obstetrician available. Aramis will have to help d’Artagnan and Treville. He’ll want to help them, as his behavior towards d’Artagnan has already shown. But treating d’Artagnan has been a strain on Aramis. Adding Treville might be too much to ask.

“You are aware…?” Athos asks delicately.

Adele nods abruptly. “Yes,” she says. She looks like she wants to say something else, but doesn’t. The look she shares with Charlotte is troubled.
“You should talk to him,” d’Artagnan says earnestly.

Adele shakes her head. “Don’t you think I want to? Things aren’t right between us just because we had one conversation. I don’t know if he’d even want to talk to me about it.” She stares down at the floor, voice dropping. “I don’t even know how to try.”

“Don’t think of it that way,” d’Artagnan says. “Aramis doesn’t like talking about it, you’re right. But that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t appreciate sympathy and a comforting shoulder. Especially from you. Aleph or not, you and Charlotte are the only ones here who aren’t part of the problem in some way.”

Athos chokes a little at describing them as part of the problem, but for all the bluntness of the expression, it’s true. Athos and d’Artagnan are expecting; so, in all probability, will be Richelieu and Treville. Porthos has been Aramis’ rock for years, but Porthos had been the one who’d first wanted pups, and no matter how many times Porthos swears otherwise, Athos knows some part of Aramis feels like he’s failing his mate.

Adele and Charlotte aren’t part of any of that. In fact, though there’s still hope for Aramis with the right medicine, Charlotte can never carry. They can give Aramis an empathy no one in his pack can offer.

Adele flicks her glance over to d’Artagnan and smiles. “Giving me pack advice, little one?”

Athos blinks, looking at them all with new eyes. D’Artagnan hadn’t realized his was even doing it, probably, given how empty his puppyhood was of anything approximating the cultural norms of their ancestors. But giving pack advice is exactly what d’Artagnan had been doing. Some long-buried instinct had prompted him to speak up and assume the natural role of the baby Omega of the pack, smoothing over ruffled feathers and helping keep everyone and harmony. For d’Artagnan to offer counsel to others in his pack, when one of them is hurt or in pain, would have been as natural as breathing in the pack structure of old.

Athos looks around the room. In Paris the Cardinal lives as a Beta, but here, in the safehouse on the Richelieu killing grounds, he’s built a small pack. Just four people. Tiny by the standards of their ancestors. But, as Athos has reason to know, four is big enough when it’s more than you’d thought you could have.

When noble Alphas and Omegas had mated in the old days, the Omegas hadn’t been sent alone to their new pack as the Beta females are today, leaving their families and assuming a new identity. The Omega’s friends and seconds had come with them. Some might have chosen to stay behind, if they’d had mates or friends they’d been loathe to leave. But most would have been eager to start out on a new life, and find mates among their Omega’s new pack.

Here, in the odd situation in which they’ve all been thrown, the process has begun so naturally that Athos hadn’t even noticed it.

It’s far from perfect. There are almost as many things as divide them as unite them. But they all love Treville, to begin with. They all care about protecting throwbacks. And they are all threatened alike by the Inquisitor of Lille. Small as it is, that may be enough to go on with.

The decision Athos had sensed before, dimly, starts to take on a clearer shape now. He’s been looking at its component parts. Do Olivier and Charlotte reconcile, or leave each other in the graves they’d dug a decade ago? Do René and Adele forgive each other, or remain trapped in the cycles of anger? Do Porthos and Adele kill each other or become blood alephs? Does d’Artagnan accept that Athos chooses him, or dissolve their bond?
Does Athos’ pack join the Resistance, or stay apart? Do they fight, or hide? Do they accept Richelieu as Treville’s mate, and the Alpha who can lay claim to the clan of the Musketeers, or reject him?

Momentous decisions. And yet they start here, in the smallest, most natural of ways: d’Artagnan choosing to give advice, and Adele choosing to take it. Each involving themselves in the concerns of the other.

“Yes, he is giving you pack advice,” Athos answers for d’Artagnan.

He sees the moment when Adele blinks and really considers what she’s said. The moments tick by as she runs through the same line of thinking Athos had just pursued, and comes to its natural and obvious end.

Adele’s eyes come back into focus. She smiles in disbelieving joy. “Well then, little odem,” she corrects herself. “Why don’t you tell me what how you think I should approach René?”

Flasks in hand, Richelieu pushes the door closed and locks it behind him methodically. The habits of a lifetime hiding his sex fuse with his primal imperative to protect his Omega, heightened during this abnormally strengthened heat. Once that’s done, though, he realizes that it’s also a stall.

Jean’s taught him better than that. Armand forces himself to turn around and confront the Omega in his bed.

“How much of that did you hear?” he asks.

“Everything,” Jean admits. He holds out a hand, beckoning Armand back to bed. Armand hands him one of the earthenware flasks instead.

Jean laughs a little, twisting the cork free. “Pampering me already?” he asks, tipping his head back to let the cool liquid slide down his throat.

It should be a joke. Lighthearted teasing between mates who have just received good news. It’s not. Armand watches Jean drink, the smooth exposed line of his mate’s throat, and thinks how easy it would be for the Inquisition to slit it wide open. Jean’s lifeblood would pour out, and with it the life sustaining their unborn pups. They’d die quickly. All things considered, a merciful death, by the standards of the Inquisition.

Rochefort wouldn’t give Jean such a merciful death. Underneath his robes and his lip service to God’s compassion, the Inquisitor’s a sadist through and through. He revels in pain and spends his spare time devising new and ever more inventive tortures to inflict upon the throwbacks who fall into his clutches. Too many times Richelieu has had to keep his mouth closed and pretend indifference or even approval while looking on atrocities he’s been helpless to prevent. And if Rochefort gets his hands on Treville, he’ll make the worst of them look kind in comparison to what he’ll do to Richelieu’s mate.

“Armand,” Jean says warningly, resetting the cork and setting the flask aside. “Don’t do that. Don’t get lost in your fear.” Jean holds his hands out again, beckoning, and this time Armand lets himself answer his mate’s call.

The sheets are chilly where he should have been laying. There’s an unpleasant feel of sweat from their exertions. They’ll need to be changed. Later. Jean is awake and talking, thank God, but they’re still in the first, intense phase of his heat. Armand catches the scent easily. He breathes deep for what comfort it may provide.
Jean slides against him languorously, still in the valley of his need. Armand revels in the contact. The strong, steady thump of his mate’s heartbeat is reassuring. Like this he can forget how still Jean had been, how close to death, when Armand had first reached the hunting lodge. Like this there is nothing but heat and need and love.

Another quarter of an hour, Armand estimates, before the heat will begin to drag them under again. Long enough for the conversation they need to have. But somehow he doesn’t know how to start it.

His mate has no such problem. “Will it be so terrible?” he asks gently. Clear blue eyes meet Richelieu’s, and reflected in them the Alpha can see all the pups they’d never made in the almost thirty years of their bonding. Each of those empty heats had taken something from Treville, something Richelieu had never been able to give back to him. His Omega had always yearned for pups.

Had always known, too, how impossible that yearning is. As the Captain of the Musketeers, he’d treated each of his men as his own pups, and channeled the longing to carry into the defense of the many hidden throwbacks who found their way to his command over the years. As head of the Underground Jean’s been a surrogate carrier to every orphaned pup who’s passed through his network, for the hours or days or months that pup might remain in his care until a more permanent family could be found. And as Richelieu’s mate, he’s fought for the defense of all the pups who might be whelped to other carriers, now and in the future.

Richelieu hasn’t done anything to persuade his mate that pups would be possible. He’d never even intended to mate; Treville had simply been like gravity, irresistable, and so Richelieu had fallen. But to sacrifice pups to their life had been the one thing Armand had always been adamant that he could not do.

But now – now –

“We’ll go somewhere safe,” Richelieu promises now. He splays his hand on Treville’s bare stomach and imagines he can already feel his pups move. “We’ll leave France.”

“We can’t,” Treville says gently. He lays his own scarred, calloused palm atop Richelieu’s. “Who will protect our people if we leave?”

“I –” don’t care, the rest of the words die in his throat. He can’t say it. He does care. He’s too much a Richelieu to leave. But –

“I don’t want our pups to have to hide,” Armand whispers, burying his face in Treville’s hair so the traitorous words come out muffled. “I don’t want them to live in fear. I want them to be able to choose their own path. I want them to be able to call you Cara.”

It’s an old, old hurt. Armand had thought it forgotten, scarred over and lost to a puppyhood long past. But it comes rushing back now. Every scolding for using the forbidden word. Every time Armand had wanted to reach out to his carrier for comfort but been kept away by the reserve that had always been necessary. He’d never quite gotten used to the feel of the word Mama on his tongue; eventually he’d stopped using it altogether.

None of them had ever been permitted to call Susanne Cara. Armand can’t bear the thought of doing the same to his own offspring. Of denying them that vitally necessary bond. And of everything else it represents: the hiding, the lying, the erasure of their very identity. Of Jean’s identity, and Armand’s, and their pups’.

“But you do want them?” Jean asks, sounding so terribly unsure. “Even though we are who we are –
even though it means bringing them into this life – you don’t want me to – ”

After all, there are drugs that can deal with a pupping. They’re grown in the garden outside, a lifeline for the Omegas and Beta female sympathizers who need to protect themselves and their freedoms. Unlike the fertility drugs Rochefort has plied Jean with, abortifacients are easy to grow.

Armand opens his mouth. He wants to reassure his mate. Needs to. But he doesn’t know how to say what’s really in his heart. Does he want pups? Of course. He’s told himself he hasn’t for so long, the same way he’d always told himself he didn’t want a mate. But one is just as much a lie as the other. How could he not want to give Jean what Jean so obviously desires? How could he not want to continue his line? How could he not want to see his offspring with Jean’s clear blue eyes and clever wit?

But now everything comes tumbling out, and with it his deepest fears. He imagines Jean, round with his pups, and his inner Alpha bursts with pride. Then Richelieu sees his mate hiding here in the lodge for nine long months. Longer. No excuse could cover the Captain of the King’s Musketeers being gone for so long. Not with Rochefort already hot on his trail, waiting for a chance to pounce.

They’ll have to fake his death, but once faked, it can’t be undone. Treville will be gone. Jean will be forced into the shadow world, along with so many others of their people whose gender and sexual characteristics fail to align with the expectations of a Beta-dominated culture. How often will Richelieu be able to get away from Paris? How many times during the long gestation will he be able to see his mate? Jean will be trapped here by his growing belly, unable even to venture out under a pseudonym. And the whole time he’ll be at risk because of his age and bloodline, wholly dependent on the inadequate medical care still available to their people, throughout the long gestation and the hard, difficult whelping.

What if Jean doesn’t survive it? What if their pups tear him open, and he dies, bleeding, as so many of their ancestors did? What if their pups lodge sideways in his womb, and have to be pulled out by the midwife, still and cold and dead? What if Armand loses them all because of his greed?

Jean’s soft hands are stroking his hair; he’s making gentle shushing sounds against Richelieu’s lips. Armand realizes he’s been speaking aloud this whole time. A torrent of his greatest fears, the nightmares of a lifetime under siege, all spilling out of him at once.

“I’m sorry,” Armand says, the words tasting like ash on his tongue. He’s not even sure what he’s apologizing for: the choices in their lives that have brought them to this place, his own fears, or his inability, for the first time in his life, to identify the correct path forward. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shh,” Jean says again. “Armand, please.”

It needn’t even end in their deaths, Armand thinks. Living can be terrible enough. Say Jean survives whelping and the pups all grow healthy and strong. Say they all pass successfully as Betas – say even that they have children instead of pups, that they are Betas. The inheritance of the Richelieu line is a lifetime of labor conducted in secrecy and constant fear. Will their pups be forced into following the life path laid down for them by their heritage? Will Armand be like his carrier, teaching his offspring to call him Papa? To call Jean Mama? To deny their very identities in a world that refuses to allow them simply to live?

Armand blinks tears from his eyes. “I want them to call you Cara,” he says again, the only thing he’s sure of.

Jean smiles. “Then they will,” he says. He breathes out deliberately. The scent of pheromones saturates the air; his heat is rising. “Once more,” he says, stretching his neck and tilting his head to
expose the mating bite low on his shoulder. Armand’s bite, the outward, physical symbol of their bond. It still looks as fresh as the day that Jean had taken it, so many years ago, when they’d both been so young and full of hope. “Come on, Armand. Now, while I’m still fertile. Put another pup in me.”

“Iesu Christe,” Armand groans. A wave of desire sweeps through him. It’s not just the heat. The scent of his mate, the sight of him, and the thought of filling him with pups are all intoxicating. Despite his fears, he can’t help reaching forward and rolling Jean onto all fours beneath him.

“Yes,” Jean gasps, dropping his forehead to the sheets and arching his back. The classic *lordosis* pose comes harder to him as he ages. He may not have many more natural heats left; estropause comes later to purebloods, but as Armand had told the group outside, even Jean doesn’t know how pure his line is. The records had been too effectively destroyed, a protective measure that leaves them dangerously ignorant. But even purebloods aren’t fertile much past fifty. Jean is approaching that milestone rapidly, and fertility fades with age even before an Omega’s heats end.

This artificial heat may be their last chance to breed. The thought drives Armand forward, suddenly desperate. In that moment, Armand doesn’t care about the Resistance or the Underground, Rochefort or the Inquisition or France. Nothing matters but he and Jean, coming together in the old way that the Inquisition will never be able to eliminate, not as long as there is a single Alpha and Omega pair left in the world.

“Love you,” Armand gasps. He buries himself deep within his mate, knot already swelling. Ready to lock them together and release another load of seed, questing to find the ovum this wave of heat will have caused to descend. “Jean, *te amo.*”

Jean is beyond words. But he twists his head to smile brilliantly up at his mate, and that’s everything Armand needs.
The Hunting Grounds, Part Four

Each of the Musketeers deals with the confinement in their own way. Adele sneaks into the manor house and comes back with books. Aramis is soon buried in several medical texts that he’d previously thought lost. Charlotte receives d’Artagnan’s help with all the mundane tasks of daily living that he’d learned to do as a boy on his family’s farm. Porthos, meanwhile, spots half-a-dozen tasks that need a strong arm and a knack for practical things. He fixes a hole in the roof of the little woodshed, digs up several stubborn roots, and helps Adele dig out a second well. They come back covered in far more mud than is necessary, with several bruises more than can be explained by stubborn rocks, but also with a new ease in their postures that seems to speak to an understanding reached. Aramis sighs over them both, and Charlotte scolds while she boils water, but Athos is glad they’ve found the space to work out at least a few of their issues.

And to decide upon a pecking order. The hierarchy in the small lodge is unsettled, and that’s been keeping all the Alphas on edge. Porthos has never had a problem running second to Athos – Porthos is not one of those strutting Alphas who thinks that to serve is somehow antithetical to their nature – but Adele in particular had stuck in his craw. And Adele had been unwilling to bend to Porthos, either. Not – as far as Athos can tell – because Adele has a problem with serving per se. She runs second to Richelieu and seems perfectly happy doing so. But showing throat to Porthos would have implied the same to Athos, and with Richelieu unavailable, she’s obviously unwilling to cede her pack’s position to that extent.

That matter, between Adele and Porthos, seems to have been at least temporarily settled. It leaves Adele and Athos to eye each other cautiously. They’re being more polite about it, but the matter is unresolved between them, and they know it.

And Athos has nothing to do but worry about it. He’s at a loose end; unlike his packmates, he has nothing to offer the small household here, and little to occupy his time. There had only been a few servants at la Fère, the last of his family’s old loyal Beta lines, but he and Thomas had needed so little that a few servants had sufficed. As a Musketeer Athos had of course learned the rudiments of housework – in the barracks they all take chores and contribute – but his only real skills are horse-tending, and any time he tries to go to the stables, he finds Charlotte there already. She seems to love it there, dimly lit and surrounded by huge, well-trained beasts, and he has no wish to disturb her solitude.

“Come on,” Adele says to him at last, when the third day dawns and Athos has done nothing more productive than dawdle his way through meals. “I’m riding up to the house to fetch more supplies. It’ll go faster with another pair of hands.”

And it will give us a chance to talk, Adele doesn’t say.

But… “Shouldn’t we stay close?” Athos says, glancing at the door Richelieu had carried Treville though two days ago. “Surely it will be over soon.” And then a great number of things will happen. Athos has questions for the Cardinal, the Cardinal no doubt has questions for Athos, and Treville will probably want to yell at them all, individually and also as a group.

Adele takes him by the elbow and steers him firmly out the door. Her grip is tighter than it needs to be, and Athos has to fight the urge to throw her off. To snap and snarl and possibly tackle her. A fight would bleed off some of his restless energy, and the tension between them hasn’t eased off much since she’d come across he and Milady in the forest.

“Your Captain was drugged,” Adele reminds him. “One of the side effects of what they gave him
will be an unusually long heat.”

“Ah.” Athos nods. “How long?”

“At least another day. Maybe two.”

Athos winces in sympathy. Sharing an Omega’s heat may sound desirable to a young Alpha who’s just popped his knot, but Athos is old enough now not to underestimate a heat’s massive drain on the bodies of both involved. The usual length of heat is more than long enough.

“That’s tough,” Athos says in sympathy. “A heat that long is more pain than pleasure.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Adele says tightly. “Charlotte doesn’t – ”

She cuts herself off. Athos glances at her face and feels like kicking himself. He’d forgotten. For a few moments, he’d forgotten about what had been done to Charlotte. And doesn’t that just make him the worst sort of Alpha.

“It’ll be all right,” Athos says clumsily. He feels like he has to say something, but he has little idea what. Giving this sort of advice, smoothing over interpersonal tensions and mending broken relationships, is usually the gift of one of the Omegas in a pack. Alphas’ reputation for being self-centered and selfish is one of the few things not entirely fabricated by the Inquisition. No doubt there’s some evolutionary reason for it, but Alphas tend to be oblivious to the currents of pack dynamics until something blows up, whereas Omegas are often able to spot trouble as it festers and settle everyone down before someone ends up hurt. He’s seen Aramis and d’Artagnan both use this gift to defuse tricky situations, but that doesn’t bring him any closer to knowing how to do it.

“Thanks for trying,” Adele says after a moment. “But I don’t think it’s a matter of being all right.”

At the stables, Adele goes in to bring out the horses while Athos readies the cart. It takes her longer than it should. Athos remembers seeing Charlotte in the barn, feeding a horse sugar cubes and letting it slobber all over the front of her high-necked dress, and composes himself to patience.

He’s still not sure what to make of Adele. His instincts are all against her, but they’re not to be trusted in this case. They’re mad because she’s with Charlotte, because she lied to Aramis. But Athos has d’Artagnan, now, too; he’s not any different. And if lying to Thomas would have protected him, would have saved him from the Inquisition, Olivier would have done it without a second thought.

“Sorry,” Adele mutters when she reappears, leading the horses. “It took me a minute to find the tack.”

“I was just finishing up myself,” Athos lies, and ignores the tear tracks still visible down her cheeks.

They hitch up and drive to the manor in silence. It’s only an hour away as the crow flies, but they go by twisty routes that triple the time. The paths they drive take them past various checkpoints who all assure them that the way is clear, the manor is empty of all but trusted servants, and no one has been spotted approaching the estate.

Technically no harm would come of them being found in the Richelieu manor. Adele’s death had never been officially recorded; she’s merely one of the thousands of people who disappear in France every year, no body found and no cause ever determined. It’s reflex to put such deaths down to the Inquisition, but Adele could easily explain her disappearance and reappearance differently. She’d never formally been exposed as a throwback. It’s one of the things that had made the Richelieu killing grounds so legendary in throwback circles. No one had ever been able to prove how many were actually killed there. The ambiguity had made them a dozen times more frightening than even
the highest confirmed tally ever could.

Athos’ out is even easier: he is well known to be searching for his Captain, who had disappeared on the road four days ago now. Still, though, why would he think to look for the Captain here, of all places? The rivalry between the Musketeers and the Cardinal is well known. Suspicion would immediately rise that the Cardinal had had something to do with Treville’s disappearance, and, while that’s now technically the truth, it’s a string Athos has absolutely no wish to pull.

They pull up to the entrance to the kitchens, around the back where the servants go. “Food first,” Adele says. “Then tools, then papers and books.”

The Richelieu kitchens are well-appointed and the larders well-stocked. In design the manor house is no different than a dozen others of similar age. The château at la Fère had been smaller, but built on essentially the same lines. Athos has no trouble finding the sacks of preserved meats, loaves of bread, or bottles of wine.

Adele breaks the silence first. “You have questions,” she says. “This is your opportunity to ask them.”

Athos hesitates. This is an approach he hadn’t expected. A discussion of pack dynamics, yes, but Adele’s phrasing had left her open to other questions. More dangerous ones. Ones about the Resistance.

“Why would you want to answer my questions?” Athos asks, playing for time and information.

“What wouldn’t I?” She hefts a cask of ale into the cart.

“Because then you’d have to kill me?”

Adele’s lips twist into a wry smile. “We’re already past that point,” she says ruefully. “You know too much as it is. Either you’re going to sign on, join the Resistance, or you’re already dead.”

The matter-of-fact way she says it is chilling. Athos follows her back inside. “Musketeers don’t die easily,” he says.

“No more do Inquisitors,” Adele shrugs. “You’re in the heart of the Cardinal’s power here. The defenses don’t just work to keep our enemies out.”

Athos’ heartbeat picks up. It’s not that he’s surprised, not exactly. What Adele is saying has been obvious to them all for a few days now. But it had been easier to deal with as an abstract event. To think that when the Captain and the Cardinal emerge from their seclusion, they’ll figure out what has to be done. To think that all their options are still open.

Foolish, of course. But very human.

“Still,” Athos says carefully. “Your precautions could fail. Why tell me more than I need to know?”

“Because I want you to make the right choice,” Adele says, low and intent. “Because we’re too small. Too few.”

“The Resistance?”

“The leadership. My pack.” She picks up a lamp from a side table in the kitchen and beckons Athos onwards. “Come with me.”
Curious, he follows her. She leads him through the servants’ quarters and into the main house. It’s opulent, furnished in the style of generations long ago, and huge. The main staircase alone rises in a majestic vault as big as the entire cottage buried in the killing grounds.

Adele takes it up two flights and turns off on a landing. The staircase continues up another floor. Those will be guest rooms. This floor is bedrooms too, but intended for the family, not guests. Motioning Athos onward, Adele goes down to the end of the hall and pushes open the doors to the master suite.

It’s enormous. Opulent. A monument to the power and prestige of the Richelieu clan.

It also looks entirely unlived-in.

“Richelieu never stays here,” Adele says quietly. “He hasn’t even had the portraits changed.” She gestures to the two large framed portraits hung on either side of the bed. They depict a stern-looking man and woman. The Cardinal’s parents, Athos presumes.

“Were they really Betas?” Athos asks.

The portraits say they are. Both subjects are garbed in purple, representative of the intermediate sex. The male holds a whip and the woman a bouquet. They’re painted standing in a richly appointed chamber, holding hands over each other’s hearts in the fashion of Beta marriages. So, yes, the portraits are of Betas. But Athos knows too well how deceptive appearances can be.

“They were throwbacks,” Adele confirms.

“How did they die?”

“François, on a mission for the Resistance. Susanne from illness. Grief, really.”

“And Richelieu’s never removed the paintings.”

Adele doesn’t answer immediately. She crosses the room and reaches up to one of the old-fashioned wall sconces there. They’re empty, of course – the manor now uses lamps instead of torches – but Adele tugs it downwards, and a hidden door swings open wide.

“Come,” Adele says again, and Athos follows.

The door opens onto a long, narrow corridor. Athos doesn’t know where it leads. It may not lead anywhere. Its destination is not the point. The portraits are. Hanging on the walls, disappearing around a corner, are images of all the Richelieus marching back into history.

These portraits are traditional. They’re painted one per generation, showing the entire clan, assembled in the grape arbors that are the original wealth of the Richelieu line. Clan heads in each generation are identified by the rods they hold. Obsidian in the Alpha’s hands, for strength; ivory in the Omega’s, for knowledge and wisdom. Adult Alphas wear red. Omegas, blue. Pups cluster near their parents with colored ribbons in their hair. Mated pairs stand together, the Alpha with their hand over the mating bite, the Omega with their hand covering their Alpha’s, reciprocal and equal. Adult Omegas are crowned with laurel, stars hovering above their heads showing the number and sex of their offspring.

Only in the last seven or so generations do purple-garbed forms appear. First a Beta husband. Then a Beta wife. Eventually Beta children, male and female. In addition to the color of their garments, everyone holds or wears at least one other item or symbol emblematic of their sex. The portraits alone are a treasure trove, the history of an ancient bloodline, and more than enough to have
everyone depicted in them put to death.

“Small litters run in the Richelieu family line,” Adele is saying as Athos walks slowly down the portrait gallery, taking in the faces. “All of the Cardinal’s generation are singletons.”

“That must help them hide,” Athos murmurs. Multiples are viewed with suspicion these days, although even Betas can have twins or triplets.

“It just trades one type of danger for another,” Adele says. “They need to maintain the family size. That means more carrying, more whelping.”

Athos nods slowly. Preeminent in all of their minds right now is how dangerous that can be.

“They’ve always done it, though.” Adele sweeps the lamp up and down the gallery to show off all the portraits. “Never fewer than four siblings in a generation. The Betas marry out to expand the family’s alliances. The throwbacks remain and run the family business. Some of them go out of France to run the Resistance in other countries, like Andreas. Others are forced out by the threat of exposure, like Alfonse. So those that remain have to have large families. The work demands it.”

“Richelieu hasn’t sired any offspring,” Athos says slowly. “I know Treville’s never been pupped.”

Adele makes a frustrated noise. She stops before the most recent picture. Athos recognizes a much younger Cardinal seated with four siblings. “Alfonse and Andreas are trapped outside France,” she says. “Nicol and Susanne married for alliances. Armand’s been trying to run the entire thing alone.”

“With your help.”

“And Treville’s. And Charlotte’s,” she agrees. “But we’re still few. Too few.”

Athos turns to face her. “And you think we’ll help fix that?”

“I think that Charlotte thought Olivier was an honorable man. I think René is brilliant. I think Porthos has a strength I’ve never seen before, both physical and spiritual. I think that even that d’Artagnan of yours shines so brightly it hurts to look at him.”

Athos lets out a long breath, shaking his head.

“Richelieu and Treville used to shine like that,” Adele adds quietly. “When I first met them, they did. But that was twenty years ago.”

“So you want to answer my questions,” Athos says in understanding.

“Richelieu won’t replace the public portraits because he can’t put Treville in the other one. He won’t sire any offspring because he won’t sentence them to this life. He won’t live in the manor house because it’s too empty without family.” She holds the lantern up higher, illuminating the gallery, the empty spaces at one end where the future generations have yet to be painted. “Richelieu thinks he can hand the whole thing over to Mazarin when he dies. All right, Mazarin’s smart, there’s no reason he can’t lead the Resistance. But he can’t do it alone. He’ll need other people to help him, people he can trust. Who are those people going to be?”

“His siblings? Alfonse’s offspring? The sisters’?”

“No enough,” Adele says in frustration. “And they’re all obligated elsewhere.”

Athos nods slowly. “I think I understand,” he says. Adele and Charlotte can’t have pups, either. Not
after what the Inquisition had done to Charlotte. Treville may be carrying now, but the cold, hard truth of the matter is that at his age, with his questionable bloodline, there’s far too good of a chance that neither he nor the pups will survive whelping. The end of Adele’s pack is staring her in the face. And with it, potentially, the entire Resistance. Unless something is done to secure the next generation.

Treville views the Musketeers as his clan, the extension of his pack. They, in return, largely revere him as the carrier figure most of them had never had. D’Artagnan is devoted to Treville, and there are two pups in his belly. Athos has ties to Charlotte as well as the Captain. Aramis is still Adele’s little odem, and he longs for pups of his own, too. Porthos has been working for the Underground – and presumably the Resistance – for longer than he’s been Athos’ packmate. Why shouldn’t Adele see them as the solution to her problem?

It’s already begun happening in the most natural way. D’Artagnan is smoothing ruffled feathers and giving pack advice. Porthos is nesting, that old Alphaic instinct to secure and protect territory during pack expansion. Aramis is training himself in midwifery in preparation for two whelpings. Charlotte has absorbed the four newcomers into the household she runs with barely a ripple. And Adele has brought Athos here, giving him the chance to ask his questions and begin negotiating new pack dynamics.

In his focus on the here and now, Athos has forgotten: Richelieu is the head of Adele’s pack, not Adele herself. It’s all well and good for the six of them to take tentative steps towards reconciliation. But there is another layer of compatibility that has to be tested. This isn’t any longer about whether Adele will show throat to Athos. It’s about whether Athos will show throat to Richelieu.

“I do have questions,” Athos says carefully. “But asking them doesn’t imply agreement. I can’t make any promises. I have to do what’s best for my pack.”

“I know you do,” Adele says quickly. “I know. But I think you’ll come to see that this is what’s best.”

“Answer my questions first,” Athos says. “Then I’ll decide.”

“Of course,” Adele says. She already looks relieved.

It’s late afternoon by the time Athos and Adele return to the center of the hunting-grounds. The whole household turns out to help unload and stow the supplies. Charlotte separates out a basket’s worth of basic foodstuffs and stands with it in the center of the room until everyone else takes the hint and goes outside. Adele keeps them all busy moving barrels into a small storehouse for the next half hour. When they do venture back inside, Charlotte is busily chopping carrots, and the basket is gone. Everyone pretends not to notice the heat markers still hovering in the air.

D’Artagnan and Porthos leave off hauling at that point and pitch in around the kitchen, as the only Musketeers Charlotte deems knowledgeable enough to assist. Aramis and Athos are firmly barred from anything cooking-related on the grounds of being “far too noble to know a spoon from a sieve, and shame on you both, after ten years without servants!”

“I can cook, you know,” Aramis calls over his shoulder, somewhat annoyed. Athos has accepted his fate philosophically and is now stoking up the fire. But then, even within their own little pack Athos is generally not allowed to cook. Aramis takes his turn in the rotation with everyone else, though, and no one – not even the Comte de la Fère – has turned away any of his stews.

“Campfire meals don’t count,” Charlotte says firmly.
“You’re making stew!”

“It’s different in a real pot.”

Aramis appeals to his mate. “Porthos, tell her you like my stew.”

“I like your stew,” Porthos says promptly. “…but there’s nothing wrong with a little variety.”

“Variety, fine, but I can at least chop vegetables.”

“D’Artagnan can chop vegetables, too,” Charlotte says.

“Everything he knows about knifework I taught him!”

“And very well indeed,” Charlotte says sweetly. “So why don’t you enjoy the fruits of your labors and relax?”

“Come on, little odem,” Adele says, tugging Aramis out of the kitchen. “I’m not allowed in there either, unless it’s to scour the pots.”

“But – ”

“If you really want to make yourselves useful you can go get me fresh herbs from the garden,” Charlotte says. “A handful of parsley, a sprig of mint, and two of thyme.”

“Is this just to get us out of the house?” Aramis grumps.

Charlotte doesn’t dignify this with a response. D’Artagnan grins to himself, but it’s hidden by the ice-box.

“Come on,” Adele says. She hands Aramis his cloak.

“Bring in some firewood while you’re at it,” Athos says. “We’re fine for now but I’ll want to stoke it up after the sun goes down.”

“I will,” Adele promises.

Aramis sighs. “All right.”

Outside, the sun is still above the trees, but it hangs low. It will probably set while they eat. Aramis frowns at it and tugs his cloak more tightly around himself. It had still been warm when they’d left Paris – had it only been a few days ago? – but now the chill in the air reminds him that it’s autumn in truth.

“Will you get the parsley and the thyme?” Adele asks. “The mint grows around the side.”

“Not in the garden?”

“It started off in the garden, but you know how mint gets. We figured if the mint was willing to grow around the side, it might as well, and we’d use the space for cabbages.”

“Right.” Aramis walks slowly down the rows of the well-tended garden. He picks the parsley easily enough, but has to circle back around for the thyme; it’s somewhat overgrown. Along the way he pauses to study the cabbages. They’re barely visible. It doesn’t matter: they’ll be dug up soon and replaced by the various oxytocics that France’s soil will support. Ergots will be best, he thinks, planning out the crops in his mind.
Something else catches his eye. Aramis frowns, squatting down, and touches the dirt tentatively. No, he’s not wrong. Scattered among the cabbages are what appear to be the ruins of a different planting. Something else had been growing here but failed. That would explain why the cabbages had been planted so late in the year…

“René?” Adele comes back around, mint in hand. “Do you have them?”

“Not the thyme,” Aramis says, distracted. “I was looking at the cabbages.”

“Oh, yes. We can start on them tomorrow, perhaps?”

“Yes.” Aramis goes to stand, then stops again. There’s a nearly-intact leaf on the ground. He picks it up and stares at it.

“I’ll get the thyme,” Adele says.

“Aleph?”

“Yes?”

“What were you trying to grow here?”

Adele’s footsteps slow. “Cabbages,” she says.

“And before them?” Aramis stands, looking at his aleph. Adele looks back.

He can see the moment when she considers lying to him, and the moment where she decides to tell him the truth. It’s partly aided, no doubt, by the intact leaf Aramis is holding. He hopes it’s also aided by a distaste for lies, even well-meant ones.

“Fertility stimulants,” she admits.

Aramis nods slowly.

“I thought if I could grow them here, Treville could get them to you and – ”

“They need a warmer climate,” Aramis says gently. “And a still one. No one’s ever grown them in France without a hothouse, at least that I’ve heard.”

Adele looks stubborn. “So maybe I’ll be the first,” she says. “After all, we can grow suppressants. If they’re not dried they bring fertility too – ”

“They’re two completely different plants,” Aramis lets the dead leaf drop. It had died in the juvenile stage of development, immature, and useless to him. “You know that. You had the same lessons I did.”

“I just wanted to help,” Adele whispers. “I know you tried fresh suppressants with no success – ”

“They’re a boost to fertility, not a replacement for it.”

“You’re not infertile,” Adele protests. “You conceived once – ”

Aramis flinches.

“I just wanted to help,” Adele repeats.
“Thank you,” Aramis says after a moment. “But there will be no help for me until the Inquisition is gone.”

*Never,* that means. Aramis would be lying if he’d said he’d made his peace with that. He still hates it when he lets himself think about it. Still rages against the fate that had first made him long for pups and then decreed he should never carry them. Life would have been so much easier if he’d remained as he had been once. Unattached and uninterested in attachment.

But that person had been just as juvenile and immature as the leaf lying dead at Aramis’ feet. Yes, it would have been easier to live that way, perhaps. But it would also have been a repudiation of all of Aramis’ potential. That juvenile would never have agreed to run with Athos. Never have mated with Porthos. Never have forsaken his youthful cowardice and joined the Underground. Never have found Adele again. And he can’t find it in himself to regret any of that, despite the sorrow it’s left in his heart.

Adele reaches for him tentatively, so obviously unsure if he’ll permit her touch. He does, though. For the first time in twenty years René lets his aleph embrace him. He lays his head down on her shoulder and sighs, his arms coming back around her in turn.

“I’ll overthrow them for you,” she murmurs.

“By yourself?” Aramis tries to laugh. It comes out wrong, like a sob.

“I’m sure that Porthos of yours will help me.” She nods back towards the house, behind Aramis, where familiar footfalls have been approaching.

“Of course I will,” Porthos says from behind Aramis. Aramis tries to turn to greet him, but Adele’s holding him too tightly. He wriggles a little, wanting Porthos’ arms around him, too. Porthos solves the problem by embracing Aramis from behind.

“I can’t believe you tried to grow stimulants here,” Aramis mutters. “It’s such a waste of space.”

“You’re not a waste,” Adele protests. “I couldn’t do nothing. I almost never got to see you – only when I could be sure you wouldn’t see me, too – and Treville wouldn’t talk about you beyond the bare facts. He said it would have been a violation of your privacy. But the facts were enough to tell me how you must have been hurting, and I couldn’t stand the thought of being here, with access to so many things other throwbacks are denied, and not at least trying to help you.”

“You still shouldn’t have done it.” The familiar burning sensation is back behind Aramis’ eyes – René’s eyes – and he scrubs them against Adele’s shoulder, trying to hold it back. “You could have done so much more good with that strip of garden. Suppressants, abortifacients –”

“We grow those too.”

“You could have grown more.”

“The problem isn’t how fast we can grow them,” Adele says sadly. “It’s how fast we can get them to the people who need them.”

“We used to distribute them in the Court of Miracles,” Porthos says. “A lot of Underground work went on there.”

Adele nods. “It’s been getting harder lately. The Provost has been taking an interest.”

“Yes. Flea – their Queen – she raised me. She says the new Provost is more the Inquisition’s creature
than Louis’.”

“The old Provost’s retirement was unexpected. We suspect Rochefort got something on him,” Adele says ruefully. “Bonacieux nominated the new one. Richelieu couldn’t block it without giving himself away.”

“Maybe we can help with that,” Aramis says. “When we’re back in Paris. Porthos has connections with the Court, and as Musketeers we can run interference with the Provost.”

“You’d do that?” Adele asks.

“Don’t play coy, aleph. I know we’re not getting out of here alive without joining the Resistance.”

“I wouldn’t let Richelieu hurt you,” she says fiercely. “You are the one thing that’s non-negotiable.”

René has to smile at that.

“One of two things, I hope,” Porthos says in his gentle rumble. “Don’t forget your Charlotte.”

Now it’s Adele’s turn to look down, hiding her face in her odem’s shoulder. “I hope so,” she says faintly.

Aramis sighs. “Aleph, are you being an idiot?”

“What? Of course not.”

“You look like it.”

“How do you know what I look like anymore?” she cries.

Porthos starts to bristle. Aramis leans back against him, calming him, and simply stares at Adele until Adele relents.

“You’re still my little odem,” she mutters to herself. Somewhat more loudly she says, “I – well – I’m just worried – ”

“You’re just worried that Charlotte’s going to run straight back to Olivier,” Aramis completes.

“She still idealizes him,” Adele bursts out. “He saved her after her parents died – ”

Porthos starts laughing.

Adele flushes an ugly red. “What’s so funny?” she hisses, looking about two minutes away from physical violence.

“If Charlotte gives her heart based on who’s done her the greatest service, I think you’re first in line,” Porthos says.

“I – what?”

“You told us yourself when we first arrived,” Aramis says gently. “You saved Charlotte’s life after la Fère. You brought her to the Cardinal and to a doctor who would try to save her. Without you she’d be dead.”

“Well – ” Adele seems to flounder.
“I also think Charlotte has other considerations in mind,” Porthos says. “But you do have that base covered, just in case.”

“You interceded with the Cardinal to get her into the Resistance,” Aramis adds. “He wanted to send her out of the country, didn’t he? You changed his mind.”

“Charlotte did most of that,” Adele protests.

“Do you think she would have done it if you hadn’t already shown that it could be done?” Aramis asks.

“Or if she didn’t want to stay with you?” Porthos adds.

“I suppose I never thought of it that way.” A small smile appears on Adele’s lips.

“Is this why you and she have been moping around after each other?” Aramis asks. “Aleph, Charlotte adores you.”

“She adored Olivier first. What if she goes back to him?”

Porthos’ gaze softens. “Of course she won’t,” he says gently. “Charlotte loves you. Can’t you see it when she looks at you?”

“She thinks you hung the moon and the stars,” Aramis says. “She behaves like the night is freezing and you’re the only fire left in the world.”

“Oh,” Adele says stupidly.

“And before you and Athos start fighting over her, you should take another look at him, too.” His eyes cut over Adele’s shoulder. Athos has just appeared around the side of the house, looking somewhat mystified to see them all standing together in a huddle.

“He’s besotted with that d’Artagnan of his,” Adele says, half-angry. “I don’t understand it, René. How could he have had Charlotte and still want someone else?”

“People change,” Aramis says.

“Love doesn’t,” Adele disagrees.

“Then there’s your answer,” Athos says from behind Adele. “Olivier and Charlotte were never really in love.”

Adele yelps and spins to face him. “You!”

“At this rate we’ll all eat outside,” Athos says as an aside to Porthos. “I’ll just stay out here, and then someone will come to look for me in my turn, and one by one we’ll all trickle out.”

“Sorry,” Porthos says, not sounding it. “We had important matters to discuss.”

Athos nods and returns his gaze to Adele. “We were young,” he says without preamble. “Charlotte and I. We were all each other knew. We loved each other for it, but, in retrospect, we loved as children did. If she had never died I would have stayed with her and loved her and protected her to the best of my ability, I swear it to you. But we’ve both gone through too much. Olivier and Charlotte are dead.”

“My Charlotte isn’t dead,” Adele says.
“Your Charlotte is a different person entirely,” Athos says gently. “As am I.”

Adele sags back against Aramis. “You truly do not intend –”

“People change,” Athos repeats. He turns on his heel. “I am going back before anyone else gets sent after you. You should return shortly regardless. Don’t worry about the firewood.”

Adele watches him go. Then she turns back to Aramis and Porthos. “Charlotte – she really – ?”

“She’ll try and fish the sun down out of the sky if you ask it of her,” Aramis says, hearing a strange sad note entering his voice.

“Hey,” Porthos protests, squeezing Aramis tighter. “You never told me you wanted the sun.”

Aramis covers Porthos’ hand with his own. “What I want you can’t give me,” he says simply. It has the form of an insult, but it’s the simple truth. It feels selfish even to say it out loud. Porthos has given Aramis so many gifts. Has given him everything. Not even Porthos can give him pups. But out loud he adds, “We have so many blessings already.”

Adele reaches out again and hugs them both, tightly. To Porthos she says, “I’m glad to call you aleph, Porthos du Vallon.”

“Tell Charlotte you’re not going to leave her,” Porthos says.

“What?” Adele’s eyes widen in astonishment. “Why would she think –”

“You’ve been behaving oddly,” Aramis says. “She doesn’t know what to make of it. You’re pulling away and she can sense it. It’s made her doubt.”

“Oh my God.” Adele looks stricken. “I can’t believe – Charlotte must never doubt me.”

“Then tell her so,” Porthos urges.

Aramis sniffs. “After dinner,” he suggests. “I think the stew is ready.” Athos must have just opened the door to the farm-house: the scents of beef and vegetables are suddenly clear and enticing.

“Probably best,” Porthos agrees. “Charlotte seems to get territorial over mealtimes.”

“And we’d better not be late,” Aramis says. “Come on, Porthos, aleph.” He steps a little away from Porthos, but leaves their hands intertwined, and offers his other arm to Adele.

She takes it, prim and proper. She and Porthos escort Aramis back to the house as solemnly as if it’s René d’Herblay’s debut and he’s appearing in the door of the ballroom, out in Society for the first time, with his littermate on one side and his intended on the other.

Aramis has to smother a laugh at the image. Then he thinks better of it. Too often as throwbacks their joy is silent and only their sorrow can be heard. Here, at least, he can laugh out loud.

Adele and Porthos give each other bemused looks over his head. Aramis ignores them. Pups or not, he has more than he’d ever hoped he could have, and that includes a place where he can give voice to his gladness.

They go inside, and the rest of their family are waiting for them. Waiting to eat and drink and be glad together. Even the scents are a source of joy, reminding them all – underneath the beef and vegetables – that their Captain will live, and that the Inquisition is not so invulnerable as it seems, if its highest official in France is on their side.
“If God be for us, who can be against us?” Aramis murmurs.

“No one,” Adele says. She drops Aramis’ arm with one last smile, and goes into the kitchen, helping Charlotte carry platters out, and for the first time in days not flinching from her proximity.

Porthos guides Aramis to the table. Athos and d’Artagnan are already seated. Charlotte and Adele carry out the last plates and join them. There’s space on Aramis’ right, and Adele takes it confidently.

“Why don’t you say grace tonight?” Porthos suggests to him. It’s usually his duty when their pack is alone together, but Aramis has abrogated it the last few days, too unsettled to speak words of gratitude. Now Aramis nods.

Around the table, everyone joins hands.

Aramis takes a moment to look at them all and smile. Then he bows his head and gives the thanks that are in his heart.
D’Artagnan wakes with the change in scent already in his nostrils. The air smells clean in a way it hasn’t in days. Athos is still slumbering next to him, and the familiar undertones of *mate* and *pack* are present. But they’re mild and unassuming, as they should be in the normal way of things. The more insistent markers of heat are absent.

He doesn’t bother to dress, simply throwing a shirt on over his loose breeches and running straight out into the common room.

“Captain,” d’Artagnan says breathlessly. “Treville. Oh, thank God you’re well.”

Treville smiles, weary but willing. He’s seated in the most comfortable chair the lodge affords, drawn close to the fire though the morning is warm, and covered in blankets besides. Richelieu is sitting next to him holding a piece of toast up to Treville’s mouth. The Captain bats it away as soon as he sees d’Artagnan, to Richelieu’s obvious dismay.

“You need to eat,” Richelieu says, sounding frustrated.

“I’m stuffed. If I eat any more I’ll burst.”

“Jean – ”

“Armand.”

The Cardinal subsides, though he looks vaguely mutinous. It’s not an expression d’Artagnan would have ever expected to see on Richelieu’s face.

“Don’t stop on my account,” d’Artagnan says, earning himself an approving nod from Richelieu. D’Artagnan chooses a nearby seat and spends a moment just basking in his relief. Aramis and Adele had *said* that the continuation of regular heat meant that Treville would survive, but believing it and seeing it are two different things.

Treville quirks an eyebrow and opens his arms. D’Artagnan seizes the opportunity and leans forward to embrace Treville, though he refrains from pressing too closely and disengages quickly. Richelieu is back to looking mutinous. It fades somewhat when Treville gives him a look of fond exasperation.

“I’m so relieved,” d’Artagnan says again.

“Thank you,” Treville says. “I’m certainly glad to be alive myself. Though – ”

Richelieu cuts off whatever Treville had been going to say with the judicious application of toast.

“If you want to yell at them, wait until after breakfast,” Richelieu admonishes. “It’s more efficient to do it as a group anyway.”

“Should I wake the others?” d’Artagnan wonders out loud. Surely they’ll be just as eager as he is to reassure themselves that Treville is well.

“You may as well help me cook first,” Charlotte calls from the kitchen. “Plenty of time to wake them up after the food is ready.”

D’Artagnan hesitates. Intellectually he *knows* that turning his back isn’t going to make Treville go up in a puff of smoke, but…
Treville grins, like he knows what d’Artagnan’s thinking. “Go on,” he says. “You can make me some more tea while you’re at it.”

Richelieu snatches up a teacup and shoves it at d’Artagnan. “You didn’t say you were out!”

D’Artagnan backs away hastily. Treville is one thing, but Richelieu – the Bloody Cardinal – glaring at a teacup –

“Eggs,” Charlotte directs over her shoulder as d’Artagnan enters the kitchen. “Set that cup there, kettle’s nearly boiled…” she lowers her voice. “Treville doesn’t actually want any more tea, you know. But Richelieu’s always fussy after heat and this time he’s taking it to extremes.”

“Will he have the kettle executed, do you think?” d’Artagnan tries to make it sound like a joke, but he can hear the genuine fear in his own voice and winces. He takes up the first eggs and breaks them, trying to cover his slip.

He knows better. He does. He’s surrounded on all sides by the proof that Richelieu is not, in fact, the bogeyman of Charles’ childhood nightmares. So why can’t his gut get with the program?

Charlotte reaches past d’Artagnan to pick up a dishcloth and conveniently doesn’t bother to step away again. It’s transparent, but having her so close does calm d’Artagnan on an instinctive level. Aramis would say that affiliative behaviors between Omegas had been the glue that had held old clans together. That as their two separate packs try to exist in close proximity, the urge towards social grooming is strong. And that d’Artagnan, as the result of his young orphaning, is going to be especially desirous of forming bonds with others.

D’Artagnan supposes Aramis is right. He also thinks he’d always wanted a lot of siblings.

“He’s not like that,” Charlotte says. “That’s the front he puts up, but in private he’s very different. You’ll see.”

“So far I’m not having a lot of success in seeing the difference,” d’Artagnan admits.


“I’d rather stay – ” in here. Next to you. Away from them.

She gives him a look like she understands. But she says, “Please?”

D’Artagnan sighs, but takes the platter and turns around. He keeps his gaze averted, focusing on settling the stoneware on the table with as little noise as possible, before incautiously flicking his eyes up.

Oh, his lips form, without conscious intention.

When d’Artagnan had been sitting with them, Richelieu had been prickly and frustrated, a combination guaranteed to inspire anxiety in any throwback. Despite being off-guard, he’d still had a presence about him that made it impossible to forget that d’Artagnan was in the presence of the most powerful man in France.

But that must have been a front, because when d’Artagnan glances involuntarily over at the couple sitting by the fire, the menace is gone. In its place is a bone-deep weariness and a visible fear. And yet, as Richelieu looks at Treville, there is also a love so naked and unabashed that d’Artagnan blushes by proxy.
Now that d’Artagnan’s caught this unguarded moment, his empathy kicks in, and he sees the situation from the other side. Richelieu, after all, is the one who’d just nearly had his mate killed. He’s had to take Treville through a dangerous heat while back in the world the man who’d set all these events in motion is probably already preparing his next move. The Inquisitor of Lille is powerful, and dangerous, with the ear of the Queen of France and his gaze locked on Richelieu’s mate. What things had Richelieu had to leave undone in order to ride to Treville’s rescue? With Adele and Charlotte here, how small is the trusted circle in Paris trying to keep disaster at bay? How much must those concerns be weighing on Richelieu’s mind?

And yet Richelieu isn’t leaping into action, writing letters, shouting orders or calling for a horse. Instead the older Alpha is sitting in an uncomfortable chair. It’s rickety and not very well padded, but it’s also light and easy to move, and it’s been moved next to the heavier, better-padded, far more comfortable lounge that Treville sits in. All Richelieu’s attention is focused on his mate.

Now that d’Artagnan thinks of it, the heat pheromones had still been present when he’d gone to bed last night; Treville’s heat must have broken overnight, and that would have been the first sleep Richelieu had gotten in five days. Despite that, he’s awake now, obviously unwilling to leave Treville alone. This place is supposed to be their sanctuary, d’Artagnan recalls with a guilty start. Charlotte and Adele have been going out of their way to make Athos’ pack feel welcome, but Richelieu has missed all of that. To him they must still seem like invaders. For the first time in days d’Artagnan feels himself to be so.

There’s a tray of food on Richelieu’s lap, but none of it is going in his mouth. It’s all for Treville. D’Artagnan recalls Charlotte with her basket of foodstuffs and reassures himself that Richelieu must have eaten something, but it’s obvious where Richelieu’s priorities lie.

D’Artagnan’s staring. He can’t help it. Some sixth sense must tell Richelieu there’s eyes on him – some instinct from court or spy missions or both – and the Cardinal turns. His expression settles rapidly back into hard, acerbic lines.

“Something you need?” Richelieu demands.

“Armand, hush,” Treville remonstrates, laying a hand on Richelieu’s arms. Richelieu turns back to Treville quickly, looking worried.

“Just, ah, food,” d’Artagnan manages. “Nearly ready.”

“Thank you, d’Artagnan,” Treville says. “Armand, why don’t you wake the others?”

“No need,” Athos says, emerging from the bedroom he’s been sharing with d’Artagnan. “Captain, I’m so glad you’re well.”

“Alive, you mean,” Treville says. But he smiles.

“Indeed,” Athos agrees.

“Shall I wake Aramis and Porthos?” d’Artagnan offers.

Athos shrugs. “They’ll be with us shortly; I could hear them dressing.”

“In that case, help me to the table,” Treville directs. He starts tossing blankets off himself. Richelieu catches them and sets them aside, then leans over and hefts Treville bodily out of his chair.

“Armand!” Treville protests, laughing. “I’m tired, not injured!”
“I insist,” Richelieu says quickly. He probably means it to sound imperious, or possibly flirtatious. If so, he misses the mark rather wide. It comes out pleading, and worried, and far too lost.

Treville sobers quickly. “Love, I’m fine,” he insists. “Adele told you so this morning, didn’t she?”

“I want Aramis to look at you too,” Richelieu says stubbornly.

“Nevertheless, I can walk.”

Richelieu settles Treville down in one of the two new chairs that have been placed around the table and holds out a hand behind him. D’Artagnan blinks at it for a moment before the light dawns. He grabs one of the blankets from the chaise lounge and hands it to Richelieu, who tucks it carefully around Treville.

“Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you have to,” Richelieu says. This sounds as if it’s part of an older argument. That’s confirmed when Richelieu adds, softly, “Besides. It’s bad luck for the carrier to trip.”

Treville softens immediately. “Oh, love.”

The moment’s broken when Adele, Aramis and Porthos all appear at roughly the same time from two different doors. Between the clatter of Adele shucking her muddied boots and Aramis and Porthos coming up to table, only d’Artagnan notices the look Treville gives Richelieu, and the kiss Richelieu gives him quickly in return.

Aramis says grace, and plates are passed and filled rapidly. Richelieu glowers when Treville declines more than some toast and eggs. D’Artagnan sneaks a quick glance over his shoulder and has to suppress a smile. The plate Richelieu had been feeding Treville from by the fire is more than half empty. Even for as long a heat as Treville had had, stuffed is probably an accurate description, if Richelieu’s been shoving food on Treville like this since before dawn.

As the eating winds down, there’s a few moments of relative silence, where the Musketeers all dart glances at each other and also at Treville. The Captain seems oblivious to this, though the corner of his mouth keeps twitching upwards. Richelieu’s bemusement is more obvious. Charlotte and Adele are openly smiling.

Porthos breaks first. “How are you feeling, Captain?” he asks eagerly.

“Very well, thank you,” Treville says serenely.

Richelieu coughs. “By which he means hungry, exhausted – ”

“All perfectly normal after heat,” Aramis interrupts.

Richelieu turns the death glare on Aramis. “As I was saying – he needs to take it easy.”

“For a day or two, as usual,” Aramis agrees. “And if you don’t mind, Captain, I’d like to keep an eye on you for that time.”

“Please,” Richelieu says at once. “And if you could examine him to make sure there will be no lasting ill effects – ”

Treville frowns. “You can look me over when we get back to the garrison, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay here much longer,” he says, taking a sip of his tea. “We shouldn’t all ride back to Paris together. Your squad had better go now, and then I’ll catch up when I’m recovered.”
D’Artagnan freezes. All around the table everyone suddenly falls silent, and avoids eye contact as if it’s the Inquisition.

Slowly Treville lowers his teacup to the table. “What did I miss?” he asks ominously.

Adele and Charlotte glance at each other. Richelieu sighs.

“You were kidnapped by Lille’s men,” he says carefully. “They drugged you –”

“Yes, to draw you out, I know,” Treville interrupts. “But it didn’t work. Did it?”

“No,” Charlotte says at once. “No, of course not.”

“Otherwise I wouldn’t be here,” Treville says.

Another round of careful looks.

“Armand?” Treville demands, voice suddenly steely. “You did make sure that Rochefort couldn’t trace you here before you came, didn’t you?”

Richelieu looks evasive. “Mostly,” he says at length.

“Mostly?” Treville cries. “What does mostly mean?”

“We took care of Rochefort’s men,” Adele jumps in.

“The ones that were holding me?”

“And the ones that were following you.”

Treville’s eyes widen. “Following?” He swivels his gaze back to Richelieu. “Rochefort had men following me?”

“He drugged you and abandoned you at Bragelonne,” Athos says, drawing Treville’s attention. “We found you there, as you recall, and attempted to take you to your mate. You wouldn’t give us precise directions –”

“Because I knew Rochefort was trying to draw Armand out!”

“– but Adele arrived in time to provide them.”

Treville’s betrayed gaze switches to Adele. “After making sure that Rochefort’s men could learn nothing?”

Adele straightens her shoulders. “If I had waited for that you would be dead,” she says baldly.

“Adele’s waiting wouldn’t have made a difference,” Richelieu says, recalling Treville’s attention. “The matter was in hand shortly thereafter.”

“You don’t know that,” Treville whispers. “You don’t know what messages they might have sent back to Paris or elsewhere –”

“The cleanup was thorough.”

“How do you know that? How do any of you know that? You’ve all been here for the past four days!”
“Jussac has been back in Paris. He’s sent no word,” Charlotte says.

“For all we know Rochefort is biding his time.”

“Jean.” Richelieu reaches out and takes his mate’s hand. “The chances of exposure are small – ”

“But – ”

“And not worth your life,” Richelieu insists.

“That’s not the promise I made when I mated with you,” Treville says. “Armand, if Rochefort caused me to betray you, I could never forgive myself.”

“And if I had let you die for my own protection, I could never forgive myself,” Richelieu says steadily.

“It’s not just you!” Treville cries. “It’s the entire Resistance!”

“Without you there is no Resistance anyway.”

“It doesn’t need me. Most of the time I work with the Underground anyway – ”

“I need you.” Richelieu raises Treville’s hand to his lips and kisses it, his eyes never leaving Treville’s face. “Without you, I couldn’t lead anything.”

“You led it for years before me,” Treville says. “You could pick up, begin again – ”

“If Rochefort had caught me, I would die, and Mazarin would have led our people,” Richelieu replies. “If Rochefort had caught you, I would have gone after you – ”

“He’d have killed you!”

“And Mazarin would have led our people. So you see either way it is the same.”

“Rochefort would suspect Mazarin, too.”

“Outwardly there is nothing to connect us. As far as he knows, Mazarin is the younger son of an Italian nobleman who caught my eye in seminary. I will not taint Mazarin any more than Alfonse tainted me. Less, with no apparent blood relationship between us.”

Treville closes his eyes briefly. “I still can’t believe you took the risk.”

“We tried everything else first,” d’Artagnan breaks in. He’s been silent while Richelieu and Treville talked, but the sadness in Treville’s face and voice are too much. He can’t help trying to defend himself. “We thought of taking you back to Paris – ”

“But the Inquisitor would simply have snapped you up and had you killed,” Athos says.

“Or of finding other drugs that could stop your heat – “

“But no such drugs exist,” Aramis says.

“Porthos even thought of trying to sate you himself – ”

“D’Artagnan!” Porthos cries.

Adele spins. “You thought what?”
Richelieu and Treville are staring at Porthos in shock. “You did?” Richelieu asks after a moment, surprised.

Porthos actually looks afraid. D’Artagnan swallows, feeling the sudden sensation of free-fall that means he’s done something very wrong.

“He was just thinking of ways to save you. As we all were, Captain,” d’Artagnan tries.

“D’Artagnan, hush,” Aramis says. He’s looking at Porthos in worry. “Porthos –”


“Porthos, wait,” Treville says. “I’m not –”

Porthos doesn’t wait. He flees the table just shy of a dead run, not even closing the door behind him.

Richelieu jumps to his feet. He’s held in place by Treville’s grip on his hand.

“You’re not seriously mad at him!” d’Artagnan cries. “He was only trying to help!”

“I know that,” Treville snaps. “Armand –”

“Yes,” Richelieu says after a moment. He sits back down, looking troubled.

Aramis gets up from the table and walks over the door. D’Artagnan thinks he means to go after Porthos. But he’s wrong. Aramis only closes the door again, then returns to the table.

“What am I missing?” Charlotte asks, worried.

“Porthos worries,” Aramis says distractedly. He may have sat down again, but he’s looking at the door like he wishes he were outside with Porthos. “He thinks he’s got something terrible inside him that’s going to get out one day and hurt us all. No matter how much I – I could spend the rest of my life telling him differently, but I’d never outnumber the voices of his childhood.”


“And d’Artagnan’s bringing Porthos’ suggestion up –” Adele starts.

“Porthos has been uneasy about it since Bragelonne,” Aramis confesses. “It’s been weighing on him. I thought he’d put it aside but –”

“I’m sorry,” d’Artagnan says uselessly. “I should have known better. Should I…?”

“No,” Aramis says. “No, not yet. Porthos needs some time. In an hour or two he’ll be ready to be talked to. Not sooner.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Treville says.

“Thank you,” Aramis says.

Adele slips an arm around Aramis and hugs him. D’Artagnan tries not to think that Aramis looks smaller, somehow, without Porthos by his side.

“Come on,” Charlotte says, touching d’Artagnan’s elbow gently to get his attention. “Let’s clean up. I don’t think anyone’s going to eat anything else.”
“I’ll help,” Athos says. He picks up a platter and carries it into the kitchen. For once, Charlotte doesn’t make a joke about Comtes and servants. It’s all too obvious that Athos is trying to give the others space. Richelieu is helping Treville back to their bedroom. Aramis is hugging Adele. They’re best left alone.

D’Artagnan follows Charlotte and Athos into the kitchen slowly. He wishes, futilely, that he’d learned just once how to mind his tongue.

Porthos goes through the pile of logs ready to be split far too quickly. Usually the rhythmic thunk of axe meeting wood calms him and allows him to think. Not today. Today his thoughts bank up against his frustration and fly wide, like the splinters thrown by his axe. No matter how he tries, he can’t catch a single one.

He stacks the cut wood quickly in the small shed and cleans the axe. He doesn’t go back inside, though. Aramis must still be talking with Treville and the others; he hasn’t come looking for his mate. Porthos is grateful for the solitude.

Usually he hates being alone. He’d had far too much of that as an adolescent, after his escape from the plantation. The pup he’d been would never have thought he’d miss anything about Notre Dame. But the isolation of those first years in the Court of Miracles, for a pup who’d never spent more than a few waking minutes without his littermates and his carrier within arm’s reach – even with Flea’s help, it had been overwhelming. To this day Porthos doesn’t like solitude.

But right now he doesn’t want anyone near him.

He wanders down to the stables, and a little beyond, where a small stream cuts just past the edge of the clearing. It ducks under a naturally occurring pile of rocks shortly after and is probably the source of the water that the wells draw on. Porthos had noted its location earlier before he and Adele had gone to dig the second well, and they’d managed to seat it closer to the farmhouse than the first one by following the stream’s underground flow.

Porthos isn’t thinking about that afternoon now, where he’d brought something useful into the world with the strength of his hands and the sweat of his brow, and won Adele’s respect, too, in the bargain. His thoughts are stuck farther back. They linger in the Chateau de Bragelonne, and the moment when he’d said, can one of us do it?

Such an innocent-seeming question. Only when put into context does it become monstrous. Only when one considers the unconscious, distressed Omega on the ground and the Alpha speaking the words. When the Omega becomes Captain Treville, who had given Porthos a way to leave the isolation of the Court. Helped him find a pack. A mate. A place he might call home.

It’s a double violation when the Alpha becomes Porthos, who breaks that trust, along with violating the most basic strictures of human decency.

Porthos remains sitting by the river while the sun tracks across the sky. Distantly he’s aware that he’s becoming hungry. He hadn’t eaten much at breakfast before d’Artagnan’s disastrous words. But he can’t bring himself to go back to the cottage. He can’t convince himself he’s not a danger to others.

He’d chosen to come here because he’d expected the stream’s burble to be comforting, but for the first time in Porthos’ life it has the opposite effect. It doesn’t sound like the river that had run past the whelping pens of Notre Dame. It sounds like the underground stream that had cut through the caverns where he’d first shared a heat with Aramis. Porthos can hear it in his mind even now. Hear again, as part of a memory that’s never faded, Aramis’ voice. Echoing in the underground caverns of
The first time he’d met Aramis, trapped in those caverns with Aramis going into heat, Porthos had told Aramis that’s what they try to make of us, not what we are. Porthos has tried to live by those words his whole life. But it’s been hard. He’s never escaped his past, not really. Not the formative years when every second of every minute of every day had ground into his soul the knowledge of just how little he’s worth. He and every pup on the plantation, in the whole of Africa, in all the world.

He can cling to the name Flea had given him so long ago. The commission that Treville had entrusted him with. The marks on his mate’s neck that Aramis had allowed him to place there. But it’s all just window dressing on a pup who still struggles to believe, sometimes, that he’s not going to wake up one day back on the plantation, young and alone and bound for a lifetime of slavery.

“You look like someone who didn’t quite get what he was expecting,” the Captain’s voice interrupts his thoughts. Treville lowers himself to the ground next to Porthos, tossing a few twigs into the river to make the mossy bank more comfortable. They bob gently in the stream before being carried out of sight.

“When d’Artagnan said what he said in there – what were you expecting?” Treville prompts when Porthos doesn’t answer.

Porthos shrugs, still looking at the point in the treeline where the river disappears. “Rage. After Aramis and I went through heat together the first time, Athos tried to kill me.” He laughs humorlessly. “Of course, Aramis thought I was going to rape him, too. I guess I can’t escape my heredity, can I?”

“Hey.” Treville’s hand is warm on Porthos’ arm. Porthos recoils instinctively, glancing around to make sure no one has seen. He half expects Richelieu to reappear and swoop down on him for daring to touch the Cardinal’s mate.

Treville lets Porthos skid back a few feet, watching him sadly. “Do people always assume the worst of you?”

“Generally,” Porthos says. He gestures to himself. “Just look at me.”

“I see a Musketeer, and a good person, who’s given his life into the service of his people.”

“You’re unusual, Captain.”

When Porthos doesn’t say anything else, Treville sighs. “I would have thought Aramis would have knocked some of this nonsense out of you by now,” he says with some asperity.


“I think all mates feel that way about each other,” Treville says gently.

Porthos’ smile fades. “Captain, I suggested raping you,” he says flatly. “When we found you and you were all drugged up – ”

“Well, I assume you were thinking it would save my life.”

“No one else suggested it. I was the only one whose thoughts went there. Aramis thought of medicine, Athos thought of finding your mate – ”
“And you thought of breaking my heat.”

“By raping you.”

“If I hadn’t been mated, it would have been the surest solution. Athos had no way of knowing he’d be able to find my mate in time. And Aramis will be the first to admit that most throwback medicine is guesswork these days.”

“Still,” Porthos mutters.

“Porthos, you’re the only one blaming yourself. I’m not, and I’m the one you proposed raping. Armand isn’t, and he’s got all those stereotypes to live up to about Alpha bluster and outrage.”

“I don’t understand it,” Porthos says lowly. “You should never want to see me again. The Cardinal should be coming after me, trying to tear me to pieces.”

“We’ve both had to live with worse,” Treville says simply. “It’s the price we pay for doing what we do.”

Porthos frowns. Treville could be alluding to any of a million small hurts he’d no doubt taken as part of the Underground. The injuries Porthos knows of and the dozen more whose stories he only knows from the Captain’s visible scars. There are probably more where Porthos can’t see. Some of them must have been life-threatening. The Captain could mean those. But somehow Porthos doesn’t think so.

He doesn’t ask. But he looks the question.

Treville sighs. “There’s no statistics, of course,” he says. “But you know as well as I do that heat is the primary betrayer of Omegas trying to pass. Most of us get caught at some point.”


Treville’s shoulders move in a shrug. “My older brother.”

“Is he –”

“Oh, don’t worry, I killed him quite thoroughly dead.” Treville grins briefly, though the satisfaction is tangled up with grief and regret and a thousand other complicated emotions. “But you know how it is with motor control and heat. He caught me well into a peak. I killed him after, of course, but…”

Porthos bites his lip. “I’m sorry,” he says helplessly.

Treville shrugs again. “Don’t be. There’s no point in all of us carrying around all of this sorrow for each other. I’m not unusual. There are more like me than not. You don’t know how lucky your little pack is. Aramis and d’Artagnan both escaped. That’s an unheard-of blessing.”

“I heard you say once you came to Paris a few years after your first heat.”

Treville nods. “After I killed my brother, I had no wish to stay in Gascony. I had no other family. I hired an overseer for the estate and came to Paris once I was sure the finances were secure enough to support me. My father had been in Henry’s service, and Louis wanted to surround himself with boys his own age, boys he could trust. One thing led to another and here I am today.”

“How could you keep your sex a secret that close to the King?” Porthos demands, shocked.

“I didn’t,” Treville says steadily. “Louis has known from the start.”
“From the – ” Porthos breaks off. “But – ”

“Louis wants to be a good man,” Treville muses. “His trouble is that he doesn’t know how. And there are too many people around him who want him to be a bad man. He listens to my advice, when he can, but he’s walking a dangerous line. There are enough people in France who want him to be harsher on throwbacks as it is.”

Another thought makes Porthos’ head spin. “Does the King know about the Cardinal?”

“God forbid,” Treville says, swift and horrified. “I’m lucky Louis has kept my secret this long. Not that I think the King would betray me – not on purpose – but sometimes he just can’t help himself. He acts differently around me. If he knew about Armand it would be fatal.”

Porthos nods. “Your secrets are safe with me,” he says, though surely Treville knows that, or the four Musketeers would already have been buried in a shallow grave.

“I know,” Treville says with a half-grin that means he knows exactly what Porthos is thinking. “But to get back to the point… I’m not angry with you, Porthos. I want to live. First and foremost, I want to live.”

Porthos should accept that. Should leave it at that and be grateful. But he finds himself saying: “Not more than you wanted to protect your mate.”

There is a lot more at stake here than simply my life, Treville had said. He hadn’t even sounded sad and resigned, as if he intended to do his duty but regretted it. He’d sounded calm, and confident, and unwavering in his faith.

It had been for the sake of the Resistance, of course. And the Underground. And all the throwbacks who depended on them for their present survival and future hopes. But it had also been for Richelieu. And if none of those other considerations had existed, Porthos thinks, Treville would still have done it, to protect his mate.

Treville stares out over the lake. “You’d do the same for Aramis.”

“That’s not the point.”

“No. It’s not.” Treville sighs. “If you had been able to help me – if your knot could have sated my heat – it would have meant there’d been no need to put Armand at risk. Do you see? It would have been the best possible outcome.”

“But – ”

Treville raises a hand to cut Porthos off. “Your suggestion was practical, pragmatic, and risk-averse. Those are good qualities. In fact, those are ideal qualities. Do you think there’s a throwback in the Resistance who wouldn’t have thought the same? Do you honestly think Adele wouldn’t have done it, if it would have worked? Or Bernajoux or Boisrenard?”

“I don’t know,” Porthos says wearily. “But someone else being willing to commit rape doesn’t absolve me.”

“Stop it,” Treville says, sounding angry for the first time. “Listen to me. I’ve been raped. I’ve traded my body for survival many times over. I have been at just about every stop on this road you’re travelling, and let me tell you, you are nowhere on the route. If you had been able to save my life by knotting me, I would have viewed it as an act of mercy.”
“Captain –”

“By equating what you suggested with what my brother did to me, you’re devaluing his offense,” Treville talks right over him. “I don’t know how old I was when I had my first heat, but I can’t have been more than sixteen. I had gone out into the woods when I started feeling odd – my old nurse had warned me what to look out for – but I didn’t think to cover my tracks. My brother followed me out there. He may have suspected even then; I’d packed food for a few days, because I didn’t know if I’d want it, and he probably thought that was odd. He stayed out of scent and watched until I was far enough up the first peak I couldn’t stop him. Then he pounced.”

Porthos squeezes his eyes closed. The tears leak out anyway.

“After he died I inherited the estate. I hired an overseer; my brother had been a terrible lord, and the finances were heavily involved. The overseer came down from Bordeaux and walked in on me dressing the third day at the manor. He said, if I wanted him to keep his mouth shut, I’d bend over. I did.”

“But – surely you could have –”

“Fought him off? Of course I could have. The man had probably never touched a sword in his life. But he was the best overseer for three counties when it came to the rescue of financially distressed properties. I needed his expertise.”

“At that price?” Porthos whispers, horrified.

Treville shrugs. “I thought, what does it matter? It’s not as if he’ll be the first. And I think I knew even then that he wouldn’t be the last.”

Porthos’ lips part, silently. He doesn’t want to hear the rest. But at the same time he knows he needs to. To bear witness, if for no other reason. Very few others on Earth could know the events Treville is relating.

“After he’d saved my property he moved on. I was afraid to let him go, knowing my secret, but he laughed at me. He said, you think you’re the only one? And the way he looked when he said it – I believed him. It wasn’t in his interest to expose me, you see. People like me were his clientele. He was far more interested in the sweet piece on the side than he was in religious justice. And he was prominent enough that questions would be asked if he disappeared. So I let him go.”

Porthos growls. He can’t help it.

Treville adds, almost as an aside, “He died a few years later. A riding-accident. Thrown from a horse and dragged thirty yards. At least, that was the story. I never looked into it farther. I wanted to be able to believe that one of his victims had finally stood up to him.

“After that it got easier. And my reasons got better. Underground work, mostly. Doing it for others made it easier to bear. Physically, too. No one had to get violent, since it all seemed to them that I was willing.”

“You weren’t,” Porthos says vehemently. “You surely don’t think –”

“Violence isn’t what makes something rape,” Treville says, sounding far too weary. “From the politest clerk to my brother holding me down in the woods, it was all the same thing. Rape’s as much about power as sex anyway. None of them were interested in what I might want. That’s the difference between you and them, Porthos. You were thinking of me. Twenty years you’ve known me, or thereabouts, and you knew that I’d want to live. If that was the only cost, if it didn’t betray
others, I’d want to live. And you tried to give that to me. I’m grateful.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Porthos whispers. “I think the only reason you see it that way is because of your past. Maybe what I did, what I thought of doing, was less awful than your brother or your overseer or all the others since. But that doesn’t mean – ”

“– that I know what I want any longer?”

Porthos’ jaw snaps shut.

“If you won’t have faith in yourself, I can’t make you, though I wish you’d see yourself for the good person you are,” Treville says, sounding frustrated. “But I absolutely will not stand for you trying to tell me what I should and should not want.”

“I’m sorry,” Porthos mutters, abashed.

Treville sighs. “Think about what you’re sorry for,” he advises. “I’m not saying you don’t have a reason to apologize to me, but it’s not the one you think, and I won’t accept anything less.”

Porthos’ jaw tightens, but he nods.

“I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” the Captain says, getting up.

Perhaps an hour passes. The sun rises further. Soon it will be time for the midday meal. Someone will come looking for him. Porthos will have to figure out what to say to them. He’ll have to pack this all up inside and try to move past it, even as he’s still so terribly unsure.

Footsteps reach his ears shortly thereafter. They’re unfamiliar, though, and Porthos frowns. Even if Aramis hadn’t come himself – and Porthos knows that Treville and Aramis must have told each other everything by now – surely Athos would have come, to try to urge Porthos back to normal. Or d’Artagnan would have come to soothe and comfort. They’d never have sent Charlotte or Adele.

They haven’t. It’s Richelieu himself who settles down on the bank next to Porthos. Between them the Cardinal sets a small basket.

“Your midday,” Richelieu says. “Aramis and Jean say not to make yourself come back in before you’re ready. Well, Jean says so. Aramis says you’d better come back in by nightfall, or he’s coming out with blankets to spend the night by the river with you.”

Startled, Porthos laughs.

“Jean told me what’s eating at you,” Richelieu goes on. “I thought it might be best if I took a personal involvement, since you seem to be approaching this from a rather old-fashioned mind-set.”

Porthos nods. Treville is more than capable of fighting his own battles, but he seems not to want to fight this one. So Richelieu is going to step up and do it for him. It makes sense.

He’s glad, in a way. This is what he deserves. Treville’s refusal to so much as yell had unsettled Porthos badly. And though much of him can recognize the truth of what the Captain had said, there’s a part of Porthos – the part that’s still the pup from Notre Dame – that doesn’t know how to move on without being punished for his transgression. Richelieu will take care of that. An Alpha whose mate had been threatened, while vulnerable and in heat, by another? Richelieu will beat Porthos into a bloody pulp, and that will be that.

The Cardinal scrutinizes him. Porthos doesn’t breathe.
After a long few minutes, Richelieu simply sighs. “All right,” he says.

Porthos freezes. “All –”

“You heard me.” Richelieu’s gaze slides past the Musketeer, fixing somewhere off into the forest. “I understand your intentions.”

“I didn’t mean –”

“I know,” the Cardinal repeats. He still doesn’t look at Porthos. “You were trying to save Jean’s life. I understand that. It took a lot of guts and bloody-mindedness to suggest it. More to confess it. I respect that, actually.”

“You respect –” Porthos isn’t sure when he became incapable of forming full sentences, but it’s like he can’t get enough air in to finish a thought.

Richelieu gives Porthos a wry look. “I’ve spent a lifetime doing terrible things in the name of a greater good,” he says simply. “You’ve heard the stories, I’m sure. Most of them aren’t as bad as they seem. But they’re bad enough.”

“How bad can they be?” Porthos whispers.

“It’s a day for secrets, I suppose. I know Jean told you his.” Richelieu sighs. “You’ve heard about my odem? Alfonse?”

“We heard he lives,” Porthos whispers. “In Russia.”

“Yes. But only after being humiliated in front of the entire court. I had him dragged naked in a cage to our estates in the middle of winter. He and his mate left the next day to get over the border. It was months before they made it to Russia, and Alfonse whelped early because of it.”

“Is he –”

Richelieu blows out a long breath. “One of the pups was stillwhelped,” he says quietly. “Alfonse says it’s the will of God. But I can’t forgive myself for it.”

Porthos crosses himself involuntarily.

“Anyway.” Richelieu pushes himself to a standing position, dusting off his clothes. “I’m not angry with you for what you suggested. If that had been what it had taken to save Jean’s life, I hope you would have done it. Blamed yourself after if you must have – I suppose that’s selfish of me, but I don’t care – as long as Jean had been alive at the end of it.” The Cardinal’s voice breaks slightly.

Porthos opens and closes his mouth several times. No sound comes out.

“You’re a good Musketeer,” Richelieu goes on. “At least from what Jean tells me. And the work you’ve done… well, let’s just say it hasn’t all been for the Underground. You didn’t know it, but you were taking your orders from me half the time. And you’ve saved a lot of lives. Focus on that, Porthos of the Musketeers, not on things that can’t be helped.”

“I’ll try,” Porthos manages, throat dry.

“Good.” Richelieu touches him briefly on the shoulder, almost like a benediction. Then he leaves Porthos to his thoughts.

Porthos stays by the river a while longer. He thinks, as he’s been instructed. And he remembers.
He remembers Treville saying *If that was the only cost, if it didn’t betray others, I’d want to live.*

And, as if an echo from the past, Aramis: *Surviving. All I was doing was surviving. But you’re right. You reminded me. I want to live. You make me want to live.*

Aramis had said other things, too, in those same caverns that still haunt Porthos. Such as: *Do I or do I not know my own mind? And is it my mind to know? My feelings? My body? My emotions? I am capable of knowing and governing them all?*

Then again, Treville: *I absolutely will not stand for you trying to tell me what I should and should not want.*

And, *I see a Musketeer, and a good person, who’s given his life into the service of his people. By equating what you suggested with what my brother did to me, you’re devaluing his offense.*

It’s hard. It’s so hard. The overseers of Notre Dame had done their work so well that even freedom, respect, friendship, and love haven’t been able to undo it completely. Porthos still believes, at some fundamental level, that he is no different than Treville’s brother.

*I’m not saying you don’t have a reason to apologize to me,* Treville had said. *But it’s not the one you think, and I won’t accept anything less.*

Treville wants Porthos to repudiate that belief. To declare and affirm that he, Porthos, is different. Is not a monster. Is a good person.

Aramis sees him so. But Aramis is special. Unique. Beloved. Porthos has always known he’d spend the rest of his life trying to become the Alpha Aramis sees him to be.

Put like that, how can Porthos turn away from Treville’s challenge? He may not ever fully succeed. But he must at least try. Or else Aramis had made the wrong choice all those years ago, and if there is one thing Porthos cannot bear, it’s letting Aramis down.

From a distance of years Aramis’ voice whispers, *I love you. You are the strongest evidence I have of God.*

When the sun reaches the trees, Porthos goes back inside.

Treville accepts his apology.

That night, as usual, Aramis lets Porthos hold him close in their shared bed.

“Love you,” Aramis murmurs, snuggling closer.


Maybe Porthos can do this after all.

Nausea wakes d’Artagnan out of a fitful sleep just past midnight. He’s alone in the bedroom provided for he and Athos. That’s unfortunately been common; Athos is having trouble sleeping. He says he has a lot on his mind. He says walking helps him think.

Athos has always been someone who’s firm in his certainties. Coming here has shaken nearly all of them. Aramis’ aleph alive, the Cardinal not a villain, Athos’ old mate also alive…
The Resistance not a fiction, but in deadly earnest. And also earnest, and deadly, and with his eye fixed upon them all – the Inquisitor of Lille.

Their pack stands at a crossroads. And Athos has always taken his responsibilities as their leader seriously. It’s an advantage and a necessity in the world of the Inquisition.

D’Artagnan’s issues are closer to home. He’s not worried about his pack’s future; he trusts Athos to secure it, and he’s not ambivalent about growing closer to Richelieu’s pack. Not anymore. He’s worried about his pack’s present, though. He’s worried about Porthos, and Aramis, and Treville.

D’Artagnan had apologized to Porthos for bringing the whole mess up. And Porthos had accepted d’Artagnan’s apology, with the open, forgiving heart that’s so characteristic of him. For good measure, d’Artagnan had apologized to everyone else, too. Adele had been the only one who’d grumbled even a little. She, like d’Artagnan, is still new to the currents that run under Porthos’ genial exterior. Aramis had set them both straight and sent both d’Artagnan and Adele off to bed.

With all of this on his mind, though, it’s no wonder that d’Artagnan is having trouble sleeping.

His stomach is churning as if to reflect his mental turmoil. D’Artagnan has had just about every possible side effect of being pupped that Aramis has ever heard of and another few Aramis hasn’t. Many have eased off now that he’s in his second trimester, but the morning sickness had never gone away completely. It’ll vanish for days at a time and then reappear when d’Artagnan least expects it. It’s affecting him now, and it drives him out of bed and out of the cottage entirely. There’s a chamber pot in each room, but just the smell of his own vomit makes it impossible for him to get back to sleep. Better to go outside and throw up in the forgiving woods, where the familiar smells of earth and air and green growing things can cover it up.

D’Artagnan’s well into a second bout, pushing his hair back futilely from his face and cursing his own carelessness in leaving his hair-tie by the bed, when cool hands gently sweep past his temples and gather up the silky strands.

Athos is d’Artagnan’s first thought, but he’d’ve felt his mate’s approach. Charlotte or Aramis are the next logical choices, but for all their compassion, neither can bear to spend too much time around d’Artagnan when he’s like this. Porthos is impossible right now.

Out of ideas, d’Artagnan glances sideways and nearly falls over when he sees the Captain.

“Shh,” Treville murmurs, kneeling next to d’Artagnan. “It’s just me, don’t worry.”

D’Artagnan wants to answer this, but his stomach heaves and he has to go back to throwing up.

Treville stays with d’Artagnan, holding his hair and gently rubbing circles on his back. “This is what I have to look forward to, hmm?” Treville jokes lightly. “Suddenly contraception doesn’t look so bad.”

D’Artagnan smiles involuntarily. The heaves are settling down now. Treville seems to notice; he helps d’Artagnan a few steps away and onto a low, mossy stone.

“Here,” the Captain says, handing over a flask. D’Artagnan unstoppers it and drinks the cool well-water eagerly, pausing to rinse and spit a few times into the roots of an ancient tree.

“Thank you,” d’Artagnan says gratefully.

“You’re quite welcome,” Treville returns. He glances around, seemingly at a loose end. “Well, I’ll leave you…”

“No, wait,” d’Artagnan says impulsively, catching the Captain’s sleeve. “Stay a while longer. I, uh, I
may need help getting back to the cottage.”

It’s a thin excuse, but Treville accepts it, settling into a loose tailor’s seat across from d’Artagnan with his back against a tree.

“It hasn’t gotten any better?” the Captain asks.

D’Artagnan shrugs. “Most of it has. The cramping and the swelling and the odd cravings have. But I guess the vomiting wants to make a comeback.” He laughs a little. “I don’t like to admit it. Athos gets fussy if he thinks I’m not feeling well.”

Treville laughs, too. “We all do things like that,” he says. “We don’t want our loved ones to worry.”

The smile slips off d’Artagnan’s face. “I am so very sorry about earlier,” he says again. “Porthos is a good person.”

“I know that,” Treville reminds him. “I’ve known him the better part of twenty years. Since he was barely out of puppyhood, in fact.”

“He seemed to be doing better,” d’Artagnan ventures.

“I hope so,” Treville sighs. “I hope some of what I said stuck.”

“What did you say to him?”

“That’s private,” Treville says gently. “You don’t need to carry either of our secrets. You have enough of your own.”

“That’s the sort of thinking that got us into this mess in the first place,” d’Artagnan points out. “We had no idea who your mate was, or that the Resistance really existed, or – any of it.”

“For your own safety.”

“Safety for us. Danger for you.”

“A trade we make every day as soldiers,” Treville says. “We put ourselves at risk to protect civilians. And working for the Underground, we risk ourselves further, to protect throwbacks.”

“And then you take it further still, for the Resistance.” D’Artagnan hesitates. Asks, “Captain – it wasn’t that you didn’t think you could trust us, was it?”

“No,” Treville says immediately. “No, never that, d’Artagnan.”

D’Artagnan nods.

Treville’s gaze shifts down to d’Artagnan’s stomach. Since they’ve arrived here, d’Artagnan hasn’t bothered to try to conceal it, and in his thin sleeping clothes his bump is especially obvious.

“Are – are you feeling anything yet?” he asks tentatively.

“No,” D’Artagnan touches his belly automatically. “No, I’m not.”

“Sorry, I – ”

“Aramis says that’s okay. He says some people don’t feel anything until later. But I’m nearly halfway along. All of the Beta women in Lupiac had always quickened by now. And I keep
thinking, what if something’s wrong? Aramis – what if what happened to Aramis happens to me?” D’Artagnan blinks, realizing he’s teared up a little. He swipes at his eyes impatiently.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“That’s all right,” Treville says. “And – if it helps – well, I’ve seen a lot more puppings than Aramis has, I’ll bet, though I’m sure he’s read more books. And I can tell you that Omegas tend to quicken later. You shouldn’t take the Beta women of Lupiac as your guide.”

“Truly?”

Treville nods. “Truly.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.” D’Artagnan laughs a little at his own foolishness. “I suppose I should have asked you, instead of assuming Aramis knew everything there is to know.”

Actually, he can’t think why he hadn’t asked Treville sooner. Treville had never made any secret of his fondness for all of his Musketeers. Athos’ pack first among them, and d’Artagnan in particular. D’Artagnan knows Treville views Athos as his successor and d’Artagnan as the pup he’d never had. Treville had supported them all in every step of their journey, from d’Artagnan’s first arrival in Paris to his current circumstances. He’d probably have loved to be more involved, if he’d thought he’d have been welcome.

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” Treville says, gaze sliding away.

Like he’s used to it. It makes d’Artagnan sad. The Captain so obviously cares for his entire regiment, but the Musketeers tend to turn to each other first and the Captain second. Even Athos’ pack is guilty of it, and they’re closest to Treville of all the Musketeers.

“Can I ask you something?” d’Artagnan asks impulsively.

“Of course,” Treville says readily enough.

“Whose idea was it to put our squad on guard duty for the Inquisitor of Lille?”

He’d always wondered. He’d never thought he’d ask. It hadn’t seemed important enough to bother the Captain with. But now d’Artagnan realizes that Treville is glad to be asked. To be involved. To be counted as family.

Treville smiles. “Mine.”

“Not the Cardinal’s?”

“Oh, no.” Treville’s smile broadens, turns fond. “Actually, we had quite the fight over it.”

“Fight?”

“Armand hates risk,” Treville says. “He thought placing any throwbacks around the Inquisitor was too big a risk. He wanted me to send one of my Beta squads.”

“You have Beta squads?” d’Artagnan hadn’t meant that to come out sounding quite so disbelieving as it did, but – well. In the chaos immediately after Treville’s kidnapping, it had started to seem as if the Musketeers are simply a cover for throwbacks to hide in.

“A few,” Treville says, sounding amused. “Sympathizers who need a place to hide. Siblings. And cover for the rest of us.”
“Oh.” D’Artagnan frowns. “But you had a reason for sending us in particular, right? I mean – Athos – he’s training to take over the Underground, one day.”

Treville nods. “And it was a test for you, as well. At the time we still weren’t sure of your loyalties.”

“So you had good reasons. Surely the Cardinal understood that?”

“Armand gets wrapped up in his fears.” Treville’s smile dims. “He’s got such a lot of them, and he lets them hold him back.”

D’Artagnan may not have known the Captain as long as the other three members of his squad, and he may be a farmboy from Gascony, but he’s not stupid. He can figure out when they’re not just talking about squad duty assignments anymore.

He opens his mouth to reply – though what exactly he’ll say is something he’s still figuring out – but he’s interrupted. The sound of hoof-beats approaching startles them both. D’Artagnan and Treville scramble to their feet, both unsteady, Treville from exhaustion and d’Artagnan from his expanding waistline. Neither of them are armed. D’Artagnan tenses, cursing himself for a fool, and readies himself to run back to the lodge.

“No, wait,” Treville says sharply. “I know that canter – Jussac!”

A man in the uniform of Richelieu’s Red Guards draws rein and slides out of his saddle in the same motion. D’Artagnan recognizes him dimly; the Red Guards are a monolith to him, an interchangeable morass of faces and fear, but some of those faces he has seen more times than others. This man is often by Richelieu’s side. Is, so Adele and Charlotte say, the final member of Richelieu’s pack, his friend since puppyhood, descendent of a loyal and trusted Beta line.

“My God, you look worn out,” Treville swears. “What’s happened?”

“Wake everyone up,” Jussac says grimly. “It’s Rochefort.”

D’Artagnan turns and runs back into the lodge. He’s not as fast as he usually is, and he hears Treville demand of Jussac, as they both follow him in, “What’s he done?”

“He learned you’d survived when his guards never returned to Paris with your body,” Jussac says. “He must have gotten tired of waiting for you to come back on your own and wanted to force you out.”

Neither of them are keeping their voices down. D’Artagnan’s hardly started across the room when doors start opening. Half-dressed and bleary-eyed, the other occupants of the lodge stumble out, staring at the Guardsman who’s ridden all night from Paris.

“How could Rochefort do anything from Rome?” d’Artagnan asks.

“He’s been working with Bonacieux,” Jussac says. “By letter, for the last year, seducing him with promises of power and advancement.”

“The man’s a craven fool,” Adele mutters.

“And Rochefort would promise Bonacieux anything to get at the Resistance,” Charlotte says, grim and frightened.

“Jussac,” Treville repeats more forcefully. “What’s Bonacieux done?”
“He’s denounced the entire Musketeers’ regiment,” Jussac says. “Half of them are in the Bastille already. The other half are scattered outside of Paris, and it’s even odds whether we find them first or Bonacieux’s men.”


D’Artagnan himself turns and hastily catches Treville by one arm. The Captain’s as pale as his nightclothes. He sways, nearly fainting. Richelieu leaps forward to catch his other arm. Together they settle him into a chair.

Then they simply stare at each other, temporarily frozen, as the lodge around them erupts into chaos.
The Hunting Grounds, Part Six

Chapter Notes

Special shout-out to mellyflori, without whose timely assistance this chapter would have ended up dead at the bottom of the Seine where I'd chucked it in frustration. Many thanks!

The brief moment of paralysis doesn’t last. Richelieu springs into action, unlacing Treville’s shirt and calling for brandy. Charlotte brings it, spilling half of it in her haste. Treville’s color returns somewhat, though he remains pale, staring at Jussac in utter horror.

“Start at the beginning,” Richelieu orders. “Leave nothing out.”

The chaos around them dies down as everyone else falls silent, one by one. Jussac becomes the center of attention.

“After Richelieu rode out of the capitol Bonacieux started acting oddly,” Jussac says. Charlotte brings him brandy, too, and he takes a drink before pushing the cup back into her hand and shaking his head. “He reshuffled the patrol divisions within Paris, and tried to shuffle Red Guard dispositions, too, though Bernajoux stopped him. I changed the Guard dispositions myself so there was a Guardsman near every Inquisitorial squad.”

“Are all the Guards your people?” Athos asks.

Jussac shakes his head. “No, but even the ones that aren’t Resistance or Underground are more loyal to the corps than to Bonacieux.”

“Go on,” Treville says impatiently.

“For a few days, that seemed to be that. Bonacieux didn’t ask any questions about the Musketeers, or you, Jean. In fact we were able to keep news of your disappearance fairly quiet. Whoever Athos left behind – Havet? – must have done some fancy footwork. The King was told you were escorting a party of nobles back to Paris and they were being unusually slow on the road.”

“Five days too slow,” Porthos mutters.

“No one questioned it. Not even Bonacieux. We couldn’t figure out why he’d reshuffled the squads, though, and that worried us. I sent people out to tell any Musketeers out of Paris to stay out of Paris, just in case. About half of them did. Some of them had already returned or returned before they could be contacted.

“After a few days the King started getting curious, but Athos had apparently sent a letter – ”

“With my help,” Adele says quickly before Richelieu can look more than surprised.

“– and Havet must have talked to the King in private, because Louis stopped asking questions in a hurry. But Bonacieux started getting even more restless. A few of our people overheard him talking, a few times. Never about anything in particular they could make out. But always this sense of impatience. Like something was about to happen,” Jussac looks at Richelieu. “I had his residence
searched while he was at court. He came back early and very nearly caught Boisrenard. But we
found some of his correspondence with Rochefort. It was older – the most recent letter was dated six
months ago – but it was full of seductive promises of the favor Rochefort would show Bonacieux, if
only – ”

“If only Bonacieux would help Rochefort root out the Resistance,” Richelieu says grimly.

“And put one over on you, Armand.”

Richelieu shakes his head. “George has always wanted to,” he says. “I know he saw this as his
chance.”

“Rochefort must have told Bonacieux about you, Jean. The letters were full of you. How brave
Bonacieux was for his patience, and for holding back from denouncing you outright, because
Bonacieux was so visionary he could see the bigger picture. Page after page of cheap flattery.”

“Was Bonacieux behind the kidnapping?” Aramis asks.

Jussac shakes his head. “The last letter talked about a signal. That Bonacieux would know when to
act. The kidnapping must have been handled by someone else. Bonacieux’s job was to track you out
of the capitol and identify your mate. When that didn’t happen, Bonacieux ordered the Inquisitorial
squads to go find Tревille’s body. If Bonacieux could produce it, he could prove you’d been a
throwback, first. And second, he could prove to Rochefort that you’d died of the drugs you’d been
given and Bonacieux had never had a chance to discover your mate.”

“But when no body could be found – ” d’Artagnan starts.

“Bonacieux realized that Tревille wasn’t dead.” Jussac nods. “Bonacieux panicked. He was afraid
he’d ruined Rochefort’s plot and probably his own future. He’d picked up enough from Rochefort to
know or guess that you’d stuffed the Musketeers full of throwbacks. He denounced them all in open
court.”


“Bonacieux had ordered the squads to go arrest everyone in the garrison before he left for court,”
Jussac says grimly. “We had a little warning, from the Guards stationed nearby, but not much. We
got maybe half-a-dozen out who were elsewhere in Paris, before the word spread. No one in the
garrison had a chance.”

“But they’re not dead,” d’Artagnan says with determined hope. “You said they were in the Bastille.”

“Where God knows what is happening to them,” Tревille whispers.

“The Cardinal’s absence is now widely known,” Jussac says. “Louis sent for you and I had to admit
you were out of Paris.”

“Shit,” Porthos says feelingly.

Jussac shakes his head. “Louis seemed almost relieved that you weren’t present, Armand, and
ordered that nothing be done until you’d returned. But I’m to bring you back immediately.”

“When did you leave?” Richelieu asks.

“Last night.”
“You must have ridden hard.”

“You horse?” Charlotte asks. She glances towards the door.

“I’m afraid there can’t be much done for him, poor beast,” Jussac admits.

“Thirty-six hours,” Treville says slowly. “Perhaps forty-eight.”

“Until what?” d’Artagnan asks blankly.

“Before I can reasonably be expected to be back in Paris,” Richelieu says.

“So that’s how long we have – ” Athos starts.

“Minus the necessary travel time,” Adele adds.

“To plan our approach,” Richelieu says.

At the same time, Treville says, “To get in and back out again.”

There’s a pause. Richelieu looks down. Treville looks up. They stare at each other. Both open their mouths at the same time.

“We don’t have time for plans,” Treville says, getting there first.

“We can’t very well go without them!” Richelieu says.

“Of course we can! And what’s more, we have to! You heard Jussac. My Musketeers are already in prison. Every minute we wait is a minute longer they’re in the Inquisition’s hands!”

Everyone shudders, perhaps involuntarily. Adele and Aramis both cross themselves.

“Nevertheless, if we get caught going on we’re of no help to anyone,” Richelieu says.

“Armand, we’re talking about breaking into a prison. We do this all the time!”

“This isn’t any prison,” Adele cries. “This is the Bastille!”

“So what?” Treville scoffs. “We broke Pignerol!”

“That was you?” Porthos asks in a tone of awe.

“Pignerol was in the middle of nowhere,” Richelieu says doggedly. “The Bastille – ”

“What does that matter?” Treville interrupts. “I’m not proposing we fight our way in, Armand! We use the smoke – ”

“What smoke?” Athos cuts in.

“There’s a smoke we use that incapacitates Betas,” Charlotte explains. “Think of it as our answer to the bane.”

“No hue and cry,” Treville goes on. “We get in, rescue everyone, get out – ”

“And no one notices a line of prisoners leaving the Bastille in broad daylight?” Richelieu cries.

“We can disguise them!” Treville argues. “Or – ”
“Forget that,” Jussac says. “We never even get that far. Someone will notice the Bastille’s gone silent before then.”

“There’s always traffic in and out of the Bastille,” Aramis says slowly. “Food and drink being brought in –”

“Orders coming out,” d’Artagnan says.

“People going to and fro,” Charlotte says.

“Visitors, priests, guards –” Jussac says.

“Obviously our window isn’t very big,” Treville says impatiently. “But we don’t need it to be very big! Certainly, if we meant to take our time about it, it would be a problem –”

“It’s not just going to be small, it’s going to be practically nonexistent!” Adele cries. “The guards rotate out every hour!”

“In a prison like Pignerol, where all the guards live on site, we can incapacitate everyone at once,” Charlotte says. “But the Bastille –”

“The guards keep private dwellings, and their garrisons are separate,” Athos says. “I don’t care how good this smoke of yours is, we can’t cover all of Paris in it.”

“So we need to isolate the Bastille somehow,” d’Artagnan says. He turns to the table, where Jussac is already spreading out a map of Paris. “What if we –”

“We don’t have time for this!” Treville shouts.

D’Artagnan flinches. When he turns back around, his body language is tense and defensive. And hurt. Athos feels anger of his own starting to flare and seizes his temper with both hands. The Captain is worried, he reminds himself. Understandably so. None of them like to think about their comrades in the hands of the Inquisition. Treville is speaking from a place of anger and fear. But he mustn’t take it out on d’Artagnan.

“Captain,” Aramis says carefully. “We won’t do the other Musketeers any good if we get ourselves caught along with them.”

“I have more faith in us than that,” Treville says coldly.

Porthos moves a hand, drawing Treville’s attention away from Aramis. “I know that you’re worried about everyone,” he says in a conciliatory tone. “We all are. But it’s like you said before, Captain. There is more at stake than any one life – or any hundred lives, if it comes to that. We can’t rush in no matter how much we want to.”

“Athos?” the Captain demands.

Athos doesn’t trust himself to speak, still battling with his temper. He simply meets Treville’s gaze as openly as possible.

“Will none of you ride to your comrades’ aid?” Treville cries.

“Jean,” Richelieu says, reaching for his mate. “I know how much you care about the people in danger right now. But please, think. If we ride right now, if we launch a frontal assault against the Bastille, we risk everything. We reveal our capabilities, our numbers, our resources –”
“And why should we not?”

Everyone turns to him.

“Why can’t we?” Treville goes on. “What are we waiting for? What’s the point of all of this?” His gesture takes in more than just the nine of them in the old Richelieu farm-house. It takes in the Underground and the Resistance, all of it. “Just look at who’s in this room! You, me – half the armed forces will follow me and the other half won’t know any better until it’s too late – Armand, why not now? Why can’t this be our moment?”

Richelieu looks at Treville sorrowfully. “Beloved, I wish it could be,” he says gently. “But nothing has changed except that the people who have fallen to the Inquisition are Musketeers.”

“But –”

“Suppose we were to take the Bastille by force,” Richelieu interrupts, still gentle. “We could do it, we have the forces. Suppose we occupied Paris. Marched on the Louvre. Took control of the city and the court. Yes, you’re right, we could probably manage it. But then what?”

“What do you mean?” Treville says weakly.

“The government would be in our hands, but not the monarchy,” Adele says.

“We have the force to take it,” Charlotte agrees. “But not the legitimacy.”

“Louis would never support us,” Richelieu says baldly.

“I believe Louis could do it,” Treville insists. “He’s never liked the Inquisition. His policy –”

“Is based on appeasement,” Richelieu disagrees. “You know how much work I’ve had to do behind the scenes just to get him to defy me!”

“Yes, I do! And if he suddenly didn’t have to defy you, think how much more he’d do!” Treville holds his hands out, pleading. “Armand, you’re half the reason he gives in to the Inquisition as much as he does.”

“And the other half is the Queen,” Adele says quietly.

Aramis nods. “She’s Spanish. She has all the worst prejudices of Spain.”

“But why does that matter?” d’Artagnan asks. “I haven’t been at court long, but the King and Queen don’t seem particularly close.”

“It comes and goes,” Adele says. “I’ve been in and out of the court for decades. He does the most inexplicable things sometimes just to win Anne’s attention.”

“And then sometimes it seems like he goes out of his way to anger her,” Porthos agrees.

“The Inquisition is one of the Queen’s most revered causes,” Richelieu says. “Jean, you know how she is.”

“Rochefort’s letters,” Charlotte says significantly.

“We could force the issue,” Richelieu says. “We could make Louis choose. Us or the Queen. Whom would he choose, Jean?”
“It’s not a choice between us or the Queen!” Treville cries. “It’s a choice between good and evil!”

“You know that’s not how Louis thinks. He can’t grasp the big picture. To him everything is personal. Small.”

Treville presses his lips together. “I think better of Louis than you do, I suppose,” he says at last.

“I wish it were different,” Richelieu says.

“I know you do.”

There’s a moment of silence. No one else dares speak. They’re all too uncomfortable already just from having witnessed a far too private conversation.

“I’m going for a walk,” Treville says finally. His voice is tight, like he’s trying not to show some very great emotion.

Richelieu starts towards him. Treville holds up a hand to stop him, visibly tense.

“Alone,” Treville clarifies.

“Jean – ”

“Don’t,” he says sharply. The Captain takes a deep breath. “Just don’t. Later. All right? Later.”

“All right,” Richelieu whispers.

Treville nods. He doesn’t close the door particularly loudly behind himself, but everyone jumps as if it had been slammed.

Richelieu stands there for a moment longer. Then he turns around him and walks back into his bedroom. That door closes quietly, too.

Adele, Athos and Jussac exchange long glances.

“All right,” Athos says at last. “So. The task before us is to devise a means of penetrating the Bastille and extracting the surviving Musketeers.”

“Without revealing our presence, our numbers, or our capabilities,” Adele says.

“And doing so soon enough that there’s anyone left to save,” Porthos says grimly.

Charlotte looks up. “Do you agree with Treville?” she asks tentatively.

Porthos looks grim, but eventually shakes his head. “We’re soldiers,” he says at last. “We know what our lives are worth, and sometimes what they aren’t.”

“You’re not worthless,” Charlotte says fiercely.

“If the Resistance tips its hands too soon, it will delay the freedom of our people by generations,” Aramis says with quiet resolution. “That’s not worth a hundred lives. No matters whose they are.”

Porthos nods.

Athos glances at d’Artagnan. He thinks, to himself, that it matters a very great deal. He understands why Treville is so insistent that this is the time to move. The Musketeers are Treville’s pups, his clan.
If it had been d’Artagnan in the Bastille, or God forbid their pups, Athos isn’t sure he’d have enough self-control to listen to anyone else.

It isn’t. He reminds himself of that. D’Artagnan is safe. Their pups are safe. Both are here at Athos’ side where Athos can protect them. And whatever plan they come up with is going to include provisions that ensure that they remain protected.

Athos returns his attention to the other members of the group. “All right. So those are our constraints. Let’s tackle the entrance first; what can be done to sneak into the Bastille?”

Hours later, everyone has to admit they’re not making a lot of progress. Several schemes for gaining access to the Bastille have been proposed and mooted in rapid succession. It’s no better guarded than Pignierol or the Château d’If or any of the other prisons the Resistance has broken in the past, but its location is unique. Any means they can devise for gaining control of the prison are fatal to stealth.

Richelieu has rejoined them, suspiciously clean-faced. Unfortunately, his presence hasn’t been the magical spark that generates the successful idea. They’re just as stuck with him as they’d been in the first half-hour without him.

“Maybe we should set that aside for the moment,” Adele says at last.

“And do what?” d’Artagnan demands, frustrated. “Every minute we waste here – ”

“Going in circles won’t help the people in the Bastille,” Jussac says. He’s the only one who still has anything like a cool head. Now he nods. “Adele’s right. We’re getting nowhere. Let’s change tacks.”

“Meaning?” Porthos demands truculently.

“Assume we do gain access to the Bastille. What then? Where are the Musketeers being held? What are our exit routes? Let’s start from there.”

“Good idea,” Athos agrees. “All right. The throwback cells are at the top…”

This part of the planning stage goes faster. Charlotte and d’Artagnan vanish and reappear with cold meat and cheese and preserves. Everyone eats absently, still talking about secondary routes out into the city. In this direction the Bastille’s location works for them. Instead of being surrounded by open fields and country, where the escaped prisoners will be at a disadvantage if pursued, the Bastille offers easy access to the warrens of Paris. And the Musketeers are creatures of Paris: even without the Resistance’s help, there’s very few of them that could be found if given even an hour to go to ground in.

“The Court of Miracles will help,” Porthos adds. “Even the King’s troops don’t enter the Court lightly. The thieves will hide the escapees for hours or even days and spirit them out of the city in small groups, particularly if they’re willing to help haul goods or dodge customs patrols.”

“They’ll be willing,” Athos says.

“All right, at least that much is workable,” Jussac says at last. “It won’t even take that many people. Us, Bernajoux and Boisrenard – ”

“Charon will want to send a few men along, especially if the Court’s being asked to provide shelter,” Porthos interjects.

“That’s enough,” Richelieu says. “Too many is just as dangerous as too few.”
“But we still haven’t solved the problem of getting in,” Charlotte says. “This is a good plan, but it still relies on having an hour to work in before the alarm is sounded. Right now we haven’t got five minutes.”

This casts a pall over the table. Athos frowns, turning the problem over and over again in his head, trying to find an angle he’s missed. Trying not to hear the tick of the clock, or remember Treville saying, accusatorily, *Will none of you ride to your comrades’ aid?*

He doesn’t even know which Musketeers are imprisoned and which are safe; Jussac doesn’t have names. Havet is almost certainly in the Bastille right now. Athos had left Havet in charge; Havet wouldn’t have left. And Brasseur wouldn’t have left Havet. They’re probably in that hell-hole together, undergoing God knows what.

Athos’ thoughts briefly skitter towards d’Artagnan before he cuts that line of thought off completely. It doesn’t bear thinking of. And it doesn’t matter that Athos had been novices with Brasseur, or had learned to throw a man and take a fall from Havet. It could have been any of them in the Bastille. And the ones Athos knows personally are no more deserving of rescue than the ones Athos only knows from the muster-book and the occasional bout in the practice-yards.

Seven years ago Brasseur had whelped twin Alphas. Both aligned. They live with Brasseur’s sister, who is a maid in the household of the Duchesse de Chevreuse, and claims the supposed boys as her own. Out of wedlock, so the world believes, but who cares about such things in a *soubrette*? They’ll be safe there, at least. But Havet and Brasseur are the ranking Musketeers in Paris. How long has it been since Bonacieux had denounced them all? Twenty-four hours, perhaps? The odds are far too good that those pups are already orphans.

“Musketeers,” d’Artagnan says suddenly.

Athos comes back to reality with a jolt. “What?”

D’Artagnan turns to him, excited. “Musketeers! That’s how we do it!”

“What do Musketeers have to do with anything?” Adele wants to know.

“That’s how we get into the Bastille. We use Musketeers!”

“What are you saying?” Charlotte asks.

“We can’t get into the Bastille by stealth. If there were going to be a way we’d have found it by now. But the problem with going in by force isn’t that it’s unworkable from a tactical standpoint. As Richelieu said, we can seize the Bastille well enough. The problem is what happens afterwards. If the Resistance seizes the Bastille, it’s committed. The Resistance has exposed its existence and its strength. All right, the Resistance can’t use that approach. But what if someone else could?”

“Someone like Musketeers,” Richelieu says in wonder.

Porthos’ eyes widen. “We ride at the front of the column,” he says. “Blue cloaks – stamped pauldrons –”

“One for all and all for one,” d’Artagnan says. “Of course the Musketeers who were free would come back to rescue their comrades! Jussac, you said that only half the regiment had been caught, right?”
“About that,” Jussac nods.

“That leaves more than enough to plausibly attempt the Bastille.”

“But the free Musketeers are scattered throughout half of France by now,” Adele points out. “The contingency plans will already be in motion. They’ll be on their way out of the country.”

“Rochefort doesn’t know most of us on sight,” Aramis says slowly. “The only Musketeers he’d be likely to recognize are the Captain and the four of us.”

“Why the four of you?” Richelieu demands.

“Because we were detailed as his guards the last time he was in Paris,” Athos says in realization. “In fact, we – at least some of us – have been his liaisons during every visit the Inquisitor has made.”

“If he sees us, or if his guards see us – ” d’Artagnan says.

“And a lot of other people in blue cloaks and leather – ” Porthos adds.

“What other conclusion can there be than that we’re all Musketeers?” Aramis finishes.

“You’re forgetting Rochefort’s suspicious mind,” Adele says. “He doesn’t need proof to see the Resistance everywhere. He rather needs proof that we aren’t Resistance.”

“That’s what our presence provides!” d’Artagnan says in excitement.

“Rochefort isn’t going to be guarding the Bastille himself,” Porthos points out. “He’ll have to get his accounts from his guards anyway. If we convince them we’re Musketeers, that’s what they’ll tell Rochefort.”

“We’ll have all of Paris saying that we’re Musketeers,” d’Artagnan says. “Why should we be stealthy about any of this? We’re finished in France anyway, thanks to the Inquisitor. The other Musketeers may have a chance to start new lives with new identities, but as Athos says, Rochefort knows our faces. The four of us aren’t safe anywhere he reaches, so we may as well flaunt our presence in the raid. If every fishwife and mercer in Paris is talking about how the Musketeers broke into the Bastille, Rochefort won’t have a leg to stand on!”

“It would certainly give me more than enough ammunition to squash Rochefort,” Richelieu says slowly.

“And so the Bastille is seized – not by the Resistance – but by a different group of throwbacks already known to be in existence, well-organized, and capable of decisive military action.” Jussac nods to himself. “It could work,” he says in amazement. “It just might work.”

Adele grins. “We take the Bastille, hold it for an hour – two hours – even three hours, it will take that long for the reserve garrisons to be mustered – ”

“Long enough for us to get everyone out,” Charlotte says.

“And then we disappear into the Court and out of the city along with the other freed Musketeers, and the Resistance is safe!” d’Artagnan says triumphantly.

“We’ve been thinking like the Resistance,” Porthos says. “Stealth. In and out, no proof. But that won’t work here.”

“So we do it the opposite way,” d’Artagnan says. “We break into the Bastille with banners flying
and guns blazing.”

“After all,” Aramis says sensibly, “none of us have anything left to lose.”

“Except your lives,” Jussac says.

That gives everyone a moment of pause. They’re soldiers, and none of them would hesitate at riding into battle. But this is a different kind of battle than those fought honorably under the open air. This battle would not just be to the death. Falling here would mean more than a sword-thrust through the lungs or a ball to the heart. It would mean falling into the hands of Rochefort.

“We needn’t all go,” Athos says. “I would be enough – ”

“Don’t be a fool,” Aramis interrupts. “You’re not going alone. I’m coming to guard your back.”

Porthos looks at him. “If you’re caught – ” he starts.

“I know what they’d do to me,” Aramis says.

“The same thing they did to the Captain,” Porthos says. “For a start.”

“Many of our comrades are already facing that fate,” Aramis says with quiet conviction. “If I can save them without endangering a thousand others, I will let no risk stand in my way.”

“René,” Adele breathes.

“I’ve been a coward too many times already in my life,” Aramis says to her. “I’ll never know how much it’s cost me. At least this way I’ll have no regrets.” He looks to Porthos. “Are you with me?”

Porthos nods. Love and pride are clear on his face, and in his voice when he says, “We’re on this journey together, you and I.”

Aramis nods.

D’Artagnan turns to his mate. “Athos? What say you?”

Athos frowns. “If we do this, we will never be able to live openly in France again.”

“That was true already!” d’Artagnan cries.


“We will get you all out,” Richelieu promises. “To any country you wish that’s safe for our people.”

“Oh,” Adele falters.

Athos glances at them. Adele looks heartbroken. Charlotte is giving Richelieu a speaking look.

“If they wish to go, I will not stop them,” Richelieu says to her.

“What alternative would we have?” Porthos asks in apparently genuine surprise.

“You could stay here,” Charlotte says.

Athos blinks.
“What, here? In this farm-house?” Aramis asks.

“Or elsewhere on the estates,” Adele says. Now that Charlotte’s spoken, she’s found her voice. To Athos she says, “There’s plenty you could do for the Resistance even without the ability to work undercover. The raids are carried out in secrecy anyway – no one would see your faces. Or you could foster orphans on their way out of the country,” she adds, turning to Aramis. “Or – ”

“Ella,” Charlotte says gently, cutting off the flow of words.

“You don’t have to leave,” Adele says. “If you don’t want to.”

Athos looks between Adele and Charlotte. He takes rapid stock of his own pack – Porthos is surprised but not unwilling, Aramis is shocked and hopeful, and d’Artagnan is intrigued. Athos examines his own feelings and finds himself only mildly ambivalent. What Adele is proposing is surprisingly appealing. The idea of leaving doesn’t appeal to him, either. France is his home. Once, long ago, he’d been a noble, and the duty that Olivier had inherited had been less easy to lay aside than the title. To abandon France – no matter the danger – seems wrong.

He’d become a soldier by accident. But having become one, he’d tried to use the position and the opportunities for the best. Vengeance for Charlotte had dominated his early actions, to his shame. But with the Underground, Athos, Porthos and Aramis – and now d’Artagnan – had been doing good. With the Resistance, they could do still more.

Athos looks over at Richelieu, raising an eyebrow.

“You would be most welcome,” Richelieu says. The sincerity is impossible to miss. “We could use a dozen like you.”

“We’ll think about it,” Athos says. “We’ll think about it very seriously.”

Richelieu nods.

“But first the Bastille,” d’Artagnan says. “I take it you’re in, Athos.”

“I am,” Athos nods. “But…”

Something unhappy steals over d’Artagnan’s face. “Don’t say it,” he pleads.

“I have to,” Athos says. “Won’t you at least consider – ”

“No. No, Athos, I won’t.”

“If not for your own sake then for our pups’,” Athos says.

D’Artagnan flinches.

“There will be too many orphans as it is, after this,” Athos says. “And our pups – ”

“Don’t ask this of me.”

“– they wouldn’t even have the luxury of being orphans, if you die – ”

“No!” d’Artagnan shouts. “No, Athos, damn you, you will not do this to me!”

“How can I not?” Athos asks, and now he’s pleading. “D’Artagnan, you – ”
“I will not be reduced to my fertility,” d’Artagnan hisses. “I am a Musketeer.”

“You’re more than that!” Athos cries. “You’re my mate, too!”

“Am I?” d’Artagnan demands.

AthosPale. “What do you mean?”

“If I were your mate you’d care about what I thought. You’d care about what I felt and what I wanted. So far I haven’t heard a single word from you about that. It’s just been about the pups. Your pups.”

“Our pups! You made them with me, surely you care about them –”

“I care about them. I care about them too much to stay here, Athos. I care about them too much to let them grow up in a world that is any less safe for them than it absolutely has to be.”

“I –”

“And I care about them too much to let them be raised by a sire who thinks of me as a brood mare,” d’Artagnan interrupts. “I’m not noble. I wasn’t raised traditionally –”

“What on earth makes you think I care if you were?” Athos cries.

“You want someone who will do what you say. Someone who will obey you, and consent to being tucked away in a little corner, and that’s not me, Athos. That’s never going to be me. And if you can’t accept that then –”

“Then what?”

D’Artagnan falters. His words are strident, and there’s no hint of give in his tone, but his body language is afraid. He’s got his arms wrapped around himself defensively and his eyes blaze with hurt. Athos aches to soothe him. But –

“Then I suppose I was wrong to choose you,” d’Artagnan says simply.

Athos flinches.

Peripherally, he’s reminded of the fact that there are others in the room. Charlotte lets out a low, shocked cry. Adele clutches her protectively. Aramis is openly glaring at Athos. Porthos looks torn. Richelieu and Jussac are impassive.

“We’ve been mated a little over a year,” d’Artagnan goes on. “In that time you’ve asked me to hold back more times than I can count.”

“I just want to take care of you,” Athos says desperately.

“I don’t need that kind of care,” d’Artagnan says. “Porthos wants to take care of Aramis, but I’ve never heard of him trying to change who Aramis is to accomplish that. Do you think Richelieu’s ever tried with Treville? Shall we ask how that worked out?”

Richelieu shakes his head slowly. He looks rueful and ashamed.

“In your heart you still want me to be Charlotte,” d’Artagnan says. “Not Milady – Charlotte. Your sweet, docile, submissive Omega. Someone who will retire from soldiering to raise your pups, who will compromise and conceal and give in. I’ve been that person, Athos. My whole life I was that
person, changing who I was. I’m not insane. I won’t run naked through the streets of Paris to prove a point. I want to live. But there are some things more important than living. This is one of them.”

“Beloved,” Athos whispers. “I never meant to ask you to change.”

“I am going on this raid,” d’Artagnan says, equally quiet. “If I live through it, please God, I will not leave France. I will join the Resistance, and I will keep fighting until the Inquisition is gone or I’m dead. If God smiles, I’ll die in my bed. But however He decrees it, I won’t give up. Not even if I have to set you aside to do it.”

Athos has to close his eyes. He doesn’t know what to say or do. He doesn’t want d’Artagnan to change. D’Artagnan is himself, glorious and unashamed, and he must never be taught to see himself otherwise. It’s his very differences from the Charlotte of old which make him so desirable. Contrary to what d’Artagnan thinks, no one retiring and submissive could appeal to Athos now. Only d’Artagnan’s incredible strength can triumph over the nightmares of Athos’ past.

And yet.

You need someone to protect, d’Artagnan had said. Your sire raised you to be traditional. You didn’t know how to define yourself except as part of someone else.

D’Artagnan hadn’t been wrong when he’d accused Athos of wanting to tuck him away in a corner. Athos’ instincts have been in overdrive since d’Artagnan had conceived. He has been hovering. Smothering. Fussing. And it’s not just a natural Alphaic reaction to having sired offspring. Athos could claim that, but it would be a lie, and they both know it. It’s more. It’s Athos’ past and Athos’ fears coming back to poison his present.

It’s all you ever talk about, d’Artagnan had said. Your line, your pack, your odem, your mate, your duties, your responsibilities.

Never forget, Sirrah had always said. There had been so much that Olivier hadn’t been to forget. Names. Terms. Ways of life. Sirrah had been obsessed with holding on to the trappings of the old world. As if calling him Sirrah or Thomas odem would have brought back the past. As if learning the old courtship rituals would have summoned a mate. As if hiding the genealogies of the la Fère line would have prevented the Inquisition’s encroachment on their family.

As if it’s doing anything other than holding them all back. The new world won’t be brought about through fear. Fear is the weapon of their enemies. Turning away, saying no, living to cower another day – that will get them nowhere. And Athos knows this. He’d always known it, deep down. Putting it into practice had taken longer. Joining the Underground had been the first step. Mating with d’Artagnan had been the second. Following Adele in the forest, gambling his pack’s life on the certain knowledge that doing nothing is just another slower kind of death, had been a full embrace.

For himself. Athos had embraced it. But despite that, he’s still been expecting d’Artagnan to live in the old ways. Even as he, Athos, moves on. Prepares to go on this raid. Plans to join the Resistance himself. He still expects his mate to stay behind and live in fear.

“I’m an idiot,” Athos says baldly.

That startles a laugh out of d’Artagnan. “You are,” he agrees. His posture relaxes ever so slightly.

“Forgive me, beloved,” Athos says. “I was wrong to ask it. I love you. All of you, exactly as you are. And I pray that you will still let me join you on your life’s journey. But whether you fight at my side as my mate or my comrade, I will be honored to have you there.”
Charlotte gives a faint cheer.

Richelieu nods. “Well said,” he approves.

“It’s about time,” Adele mutters.

D’Artagnan smiles. It’s a little shaky, and he doesn’t quite relax all the way, but Athos still nearly wilts in relief. There’s forgiveness in that smile and a willingness to try again. It’s as much as Athos deserves.

“Fight beside me at the Bastille, and we’ll talk about it after, if after there is any more to be said,” d’Artagnan says.

“I will,” Athos promises.


Jussac coughs. “That’s all very well, but we’re never considered taking the Bastille through a frontal assault,” he says. He walks back over to the kitchen table, where the maps are still laid out, and studies them critically.

“Then let’s consider it,” d’Artagnan says. “Athos –”

“Yes.” Athos walks over to the table. Tentatively he holds out his hand.

D’Artagnan looks at it for a moment. Then he takes it, and lets Athos tugs d’Artagnan close in to his side.

“Armand,” Jussac says. “Hadn’t Jean better be involved in this conversation?”

Richelieu considers this, then nods.

“I’ll go get him,” Porthos volunteers. “I could use some fresh air.”

“Take Starlight?” Charlotte asks. “The dappled roan with the patch like a star on his nose? You’ll find Treville faster if you’re mounted, and Starlight could use the exercise. He’s kept here and…” she shrugs.

“I haven’t had much time for riding lately,” Richelieu says tightly.

“Sure,” Porthos says, keeping his tone light and agreeable. “I’ll do that.”

“Thanks,” Charlotte says.

Richelieu sighs. “Yes, thank you, Porthos.”

“It’s all right,” Porthos says. “I know you’ve had a lot on your mind lately.”

Richelieu manages a smile, which Porthos returns. Athos watches this byplay with interest. He’d thought he’d seen signs of this after Porthos’ day by the river. Now he’s sure. Porthos and Richelieu have managed to decide hierarchical issues between them already.

Adele was right, he thinks ruefully. She’d predicted, the day they’d talked at the manor, that Richelieu’s presence would accelerate rather than slow the process of their packs merging. Athos had been worried that Richelieu would upset the delicate balance they’d been trying to find. And it had
seemed so at first, with Richelieu stiff and unsure over breakfast that first morning after Treville’s heat had broken. But d’Artagnan’s careless words have been turned to good, it seems, if these are the results.

Porthos and Richelieu are settled. And D’Artagnan and Aramis appear completely at ease. Aramis has had several world-shaking revelations in as many days. Perhaps it’s little wonder that accepting Cardinal Richelieu as a member of his clan isn’t so difficult in the grand scheme of things. And d’Artagnan’s too empathetic to not have embraced Richelieu. D’Artagnan loves the Captain too much, and Treville so obviously loves Richelieu – and Richelieu so obviously loves Treville. And d’Artagnan loves all family – clan, pack, idiot mate and all.

That just leaves Athos.

In truth, he’s reached his decision. His instinct had realized what would happen and urged him forward from the very beginning. The rest had just been about his mind catching up. After the visit to the Richelieu manor with Adele, his final doubts had been laid to rest.

He’s heard and seen enough to believe that Richelieu can offer Athos’ pack better protection than Athos himself can. The costs will be high. Resistance work will be even more dangerous than Underground work. But it seems clear that Athos’ pack are willing – nay, eager – to assume those risks.

And the benefits are innumerable. Protection at the highest levels of the Church and the court of Louis XIII. Access to the Resistance’s network. Paths out of the country, if their situation becomes acute.

Military power. An alliance with Richelieu will mean an alliance with the Red Guards and the Resistance’s commando squads. Athos respects Jussac and Adele as equals. Their loyalty and affection would be valuable indeed.

And there’s more on offer than just strength of arms. Richelieu has access to all the knowledge of their people that has been preserved since the advent of the Inquisition. Information could mean the difference in life or death for a throwback. Especially one in a dangerous situation. Like Treville. Or d’Artagnan.

Athos had assumed leadership of his pack on the belief that he’d been the one best able to provide for their needs. Porthos had had no inclination for the responsibility. Meanwhile Olivier had been raised to lead. He’s had the title, the bloodline, the wealth. He’s had the willingness to do what needed to be done.

And Athos doesn’t believe he’s done badly. But if there’s another pack they wish to run with – and that other pack’s leader is better suited – there’s simply no question on the matter. Athos’ pack deserves the best. All that remains is to formalize the decision.

With half the Musketeers’ regiment in the Bastille and a rescue operation well into the planning, they’ll need to do it soon. When they leave this place there can be no confusion about the chain of command. And Athos isn’t naïve enough to think he can agree to follow Richelieu’s commands on the battlefield without that translating to their pack dynamics as well.

When Treville comes back, then. That will be the right time to make the offer.

Athos looks up and catches Aramis’ eye. Aramis has a knowing look on his face. He nods to Athos. “You’re right,” he says, displaying the uncanny talent he sometimes has of knowing what’s passing through Athos’ mind. “It’s time.”
“For what?” Adele asks, half-distracted.

She’s cut off by the slam of the front door. Porthos appears in the entryway, windblown, as if he’s been running.

“Charlotte, you said I should take Starlight? Dappled roan, star-shaped patch on his nose?”

Charlotte looks up from the map of Paris and the Bastille she’s studying, surprised. “Yes, that’s right.”

Porthos shakes his head. “There’s no such horse in the stable,” he says.

“What?”

“There’s two bays, four blacks, a chestnut, and a dun. No roan.”

D’Artagnan does the math fastest. “That’s only eight horses,” he says. “There are nine of us.”

Charlotte sets down the flag marker she’s holding, carelessly consigning the twenty Red Guards they represent to a watery death in the Seine. She stares at Jussac for a moment, not saying anything. Then she turns and runs out of the lodge.

“What? Charlotte, what?” Adele asks, going after her. Athos jumps up from the table and follows. So do the others.

They follow the path around to where Charlotte is standing in the door of the stables, a hand over her mouth.

“What is it?” Richelieu demands, coming to the front of the pack.

Charlotte turns to face him, pale. “Starlight is gone.”

“But we’re all still here,” Jussac says blankly. Then he, too, goes pale.

Athos runs his gaze over the assembly, counting heads. It’s purely a formality. He already knows what he’s going to find. Or, more accurately, whom he’s going to not find.

“Treville,” Adele says.

“Jean,” Richelieu whispers. “No, he wouldn’t – ”

“Yes he would,” Charlotte interrupts. “You know he would.”

“But – ”

“I knew he’d do something but I didn’t think it would be this,” Adele says, sounding furious at herself. “Damn it!”

“I should have guessed too,” d’Artagnan whispers. “I knew how much he – and yet I never thought he’d actually – ”

“Can he really have gone back to Paris?” Aramis says, sounding horrified. “Can he really be trying – ”

“He must know he can’t storm the Bastille on his own,” Jussac says.
“The King,” Charlotte says. “He thinks Louis will defy Anne if he learns –”

“If Louis learns what?” Porthos demands. “You don’t think –”

“Treville would never betray anyone else,” Adele says swiftly.

“Then what?” d’Artagnan asks.

“The pups,” Richelieu says hoarsely. Pale doesn’t even begin to cover it; the Cardinal looks like a stiff wind would blow him over. “The King wants children. The Queen’s had four miscarriages. Jean must think that if he tells Louis about the pups the King will defy Anne.”

“And he’s forcing your hand,” Athos says. Richelieu’s gaze swings to him. Athos meets it. “You said earlier that if Treville were in danger, you’d go after him, no matter what. This is one way to get you to act.”

“He’ll be killed,” Adele whispers.

“Even if Louis won’t defy Anne outright he’ll still help smuggle Treville back out of Paris,” Charlotte protests.

“He’ll never have the chance,” Jussac says grimly. “Anne will turn him over to Rochefort’s men immediately.”

“Or rather Bonacieux’s men,” d’Artagnan says.

“I have to go after him,” Richelieu says. “I have to get him out of there.”

“Armand, think,” Jussac says. “You need a better plan than just riding after him!”

“He’ll be dead if I wait.”

“That’s the same logic that led to Treville getting on Sturlight in the first place.”

Richelieu shakes his head. “I know that, Robert, I know, but –”

“But it does, after all, make a very great deal of difference whose lives are in danger,” Athos completes.

Richelieu glares at him. “Something you want to say, Musketeer?” he challenges.

Athos holds up his hands, palm-up, empty and unthreatening. “We got ourselves into this position by pretending that emotion and attachment didn’t enter into our decisions,” he says. “We’ll never get out of it unless we acknowledge that it does.”

“Meaning what?” Jussac asks.

“Meaning that we acknowledge that none of us are going to be of any use planning anything,” d’Artagnan says.

“We’ll all be too worried about the Captain,” Porthos agrees.

“But that doesn’t mean we’re out of options,” Athos says. “The plan we’d devised inside – it’s a good plan. We can use it still.”

Adele nods. “We’ve already worked out what to do once we get into the Bastille, and d’Artagnan
solved the problem of getting in –”

“My plan was *ride up to the Bastille and start shooting,*” d’Artagnan protests.

“Problem?” Aramis asks, raising an eyebrow.

D’Artagnan grins. “Not a bit.”

“Besides, it’s twenty hours to Paris riding hard,” Adele says. “Plenty of time to work out the details.”

“But no time to gather additional forces,” Jussac says.

“We can pick up Bernajoux and Boisrenard when we enter the city,” Adele says. “We’ll be a little short-handed, but –”

“I won’t be with you,” Richelieu says. “I’ll need to go after Jean – to the palace.”

“We’ll have to split our forces,” Athos says, calculating rapidly. “We can talk about it as we ride –”

“We?” Adele asks.

“I can’t ask you to come with us,” Richelieu says. “I – this is a pack affair. I’m not going after Jean as the leader of the Resistance. The leader of the Resistance would never do this. I can’t ask anyone to come with me.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Jussac says crisply.

“Of course we’re coming,” Adele says. Charlotte nods at her side.

“And so are we,” Athos says boldly.

“That’s right,” Porthos says. He’s caught on to Athos’ intentions. “We care about the Captain too, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“After all we did bring him here,” d’Artagnan adds. “At great personal risk – since we didn’t know you weren’t going to hunt us all to death.”

Aramis says quietly, “Nor is Treville the only one here that we care about.”

He meets Adele’s eyes. She breaks into a wide, disbelieving smile.

Richelieu looks between the four of them. “Are you really saying –”


“I think we’re offering a little more than that,” Aramis says. He reaches down to his belt and draws one of his many knives. It’s the intricately carved one, his favorite. Adele’s eyes widen in recognition.

Aramis offers the blade to Athos, hilt-first.

“You don’t have to do everything alone,” d’Artagnan says to Richelieu, nodding his approval to Athos meanwhile.

“Damned if we’re going to sit by regardless,” Porthos adds, “so we may as well be smart about it.”

Athos accepts Aramis’ knife. He flips it around, awkward in his left hand, and twists. The skin of his
palm parts beneath the well-sharpened blade.

“You can’t be serious,” Richelieu says.

Jussac looks over at the thin line of blood welling up from Athos’ outstretched palm. “Looks pretty serious to me.”

“Five days ago you hated me.”

“Five days ago we hated everything you stood for,” Aramis corrects.

“And that hasn’t changed,” d’Artagnan agrees.

“We just have a different target now,” Porthos says.

“Either take my hand or give me a bandage,” Athos says.

Richelieu stares at him.

Jussac crosses his arms over his chest. “Armand?”

“You’ve been scheming towards this, haven’t you?” Richelieu demands.

“I just got here,” Jussac says. “But Charlotte and Adele have, yes.”

“We’re too few,” Adele says. “We need them. And – ”

“And you want your families back,” Richelieu says.

“You’re our family too,” Adele says.

Charlotte slips an arm around Adele’s waist. “We don’t want to have to choose between you.”

Richelieu sighs. He holds out his hand to Jussac. Jussac promptly produces a knife. The Cardinal slices his own palm open without taking his eyes from Athos’ face.

They clasp hands silently. There’s no biological effect to it, as there is to mating. Familiarity with each others’ scents and attunement to each others’ rhythms will come with time and exposure. Eventually – especially if they den together – they’ll gain the same advantages that blood packs are born with. But socially the deed is done. As of now, they are one pack, united.

The next part is the hardest for Athos. There’s not a doubt in his mind that Richelieu can do everything Athos can do for his pack, and a great deal more besides. But it’s still hard. He’s never done this for any other Alpha before. His instincts shriek bloody murder when Athos bares his throat, convinced that the Cardinal’s about to tear it out.

Richelieu doesn’t, of course. Though the way his eyes widen and his grip tightens in astonishment are actually very satisfying.

“Don’t mess it up,” Athos says succinctly.

Slowly, Richelieu nods.

“All right then,” Porthos says.

It’s like his words break a spell; Richelieu and Athos drop their handshake and turn to face him.
Athos tugs off his scarf to wrap around his palm. Jussac hands Richelieu a handkerchief.

“All right what?” Charlotte demands.

Porthos heads into the stables. “Let’s go to Paris, storm the Bastille, and rescue the Captain.”

“Right,” Adele says, right behind him.

“You saddle the horses, we’ll get supplies,” Charlotte says. She beckons to d’Artagnan and Aramis. The three of them head quickly into the farmhouse.

Athos and Richelieu share a look.

“Now I know why you deferred to me,” Richelieu deadpans. “You’re going to enjoy watching me try to protect this bunch, aren’t you?”

“My three resist protection at every turn,” Athos admits. “And I suspect yours aren’t much different.”

“Not at all.” Richelieu sighs. But he looks a little happy, just the same, though it quickly vanishes beneath his obvious worry for Treville.

“Shall we go?” Athos suggests, turning to follow the crowd into the stable. Worry isn’t going to do anyone any good. Only action will help matters now.

“Yes,” Richelieu says. He brings up the rear. “Yes, let’s go together.”
Paris, Part One

As the originator of the plan, d’Artagnan claims the right to ride up to the barred gate that marks the exterior of the Bastille. His glare, when he’d first made this point, had dared anyone else to speak. No one had. Athos had, however, supported d'Artagnan's claim enthusiastically.

He likes to think he’s not a complete idiot.

There are about two dozen of them approaching the Bastille. After sneaking into the city through one of the Underground’s routes, they’d stopped briefly at the Palais-Cardinal to pick up additional supplies – mainly powder and shot – and redistribute their forces slightly. The Bastille party had added Boisrenard, Bernajoux, and their respective squads of Guardsmen. The Louvre party consists only, after much furious debate, of Richelieu and Jussac.

“You can’t be serious,” Adele had exploded. “You’re as bad as Treville!”

“None of you can be seen at the palace,” Richelieu had said patiently to the others who had ridden out from the hunting-lodge. “The Musketeers would be arrested at once on suspicion of being throwbacks – ”

“We’re not under suspicion,” Adele had argued, gesturing between herself and Charlotte.

“You also have no official position,” Richelieu had pointed out. “What possible excuse could I have for bringing you with me?”

“That doesn’t apply to Bernajoux and I,” Boisrenard had said. “Why don’t we go with you? We’re Guardsmen, no one will be surprised if we’re there.”

“Except that I’m not usually in the habit of sweeping through the halls of the palace with an armed escort,” Richelieu says.

“This time you are,” Adele says. “You’re going there to arrest Treville, remember?”

Athos nods his support. This is the best plan they’d been able to come up with in their frantic ride from Indre-et-Loire. Rather than attempting to conceal Treville’s presence in Paris – almost certainly a lost cause, if Rochefort’s spy network in Paris is worth anything at all – Richelieu will position himself in the familiar stance of opposition to Rochefort. Treville is tainted by the same denouncement that the rest of the Musketeers are under. Indeed, Louis had sent for Richelieu over the matter of throwbacks in the Musketeers. It is nothing but logical that Richelieu would return to Paris in all haste and arrest the Captain of said Musketeers personally.

And his zeal to do so can easily be explained as the consequence of his long-running enmity with the Inquisitor of Lille. It will be obvious to everyone with eyes that Lille had suborned Bonacieux and unmasked Treville, not only to uphold the teachings of the Inquisition and the purity of the Beta sexes, but also to triumph over his old enemy Richelieu. Richelieu has every reason to attempt to insert himself back into the process as rapidly and decisively as possible.

If Treville is found before he can reach the King, the Captain can be discreetly spirited out of Paris and Richelieu can trumpet Treville’s capture after the fact. If Treville is currently in danger, Richelieu can appear in full regalia as the Grand Inquisitor of France and take possession of the dangerous throwback by virtue of his position. If Treville is already imprisoned – well, that’s where Athos and the Bastille party come in.
But: “You need enough people to take and hold the Bastille,” Richelieu says. “I’m going to the Louvre on the strength of my reputation – I don’t need warriors for that. You can’t say the same.”

“Armand,” Jussac says. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Richelieu’s smile is bitter. “That’s what you told me thirty years ago,” he says. “Now it may be Jean’s ruin.”

“Tell me you regret it,” Jussac challenges.

Richelieu is silent for a long moment. At last he says, “Ask me again in twenty-four hours.”

No one had argued after that. Richelieu and Jussac had left, and the others had gone to prepare for their assault on the Bastille.

The Palais-Cardinal is well stocked. The Musketeers had brought their weapons with them to rescue Treville, so all they need is powder and shot. Adele and Charlotte have their own personal equipment, as do Bernajoux and Boisrenard and their squads. Then all that remains is to kit the others out to look as much like Musketeers as possible.

It’s easier than Athos would have thought. Treville had been in the habit of keeping several sets of spare uniforms at the Palais-Cardinal. Not just for himself, though that had doubtless come in handy, but also as a disguise for endangered throwbacks needing to be smuggled out of the city. The Captain of the Musketeers could pass checkpoints with ease, and if he brought with him various others dressed in Musketeers’ garb and sitting on horses, who would guess they were actually fugitives?

The Guards simply exchange their red cloaks for blue ones. That leaves only Charlotte and Adele needing full uniforms. Adele is easy to fit once she stops bowing her shoulders and takes the padding from her chest. Charlotte, a true carrier, is hardest to fit. But not as hard as any another unaligned Omega might be. It’s a terrible irony: the mutilations the Inquisition had visited on her makes it easier for her to pass. Once Adele has bound what remain of Charlotte’s breasts and Jussac has tugged the cloak just so, only her hairstyle betrays her. Aramis and d’Artagnan tie it in a multitude of small braids, deft fingers flying, and tuck the whole beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

While this has been going on, Porthos and Aramis had dressed plainly and vanished to make the necessary contacts with the Court of Miracles. An hour later they return, nodding. Charon and Flea have promised their aid.

That settled, Bernajoux and Boisrenard take their squads out to saddle their own mounts and spares from the Cardinal’s stables for the Musketeers. Athos blinks twice as he watches them walk away. For a moment he’d sworn he’d seen –

“You’re not crazy,” Adele says. “They’ve been lovers since before I knew them.”

“No one does this work without having something to fight for,” Charlotte says. “Memories of the past, or hope for the future – ”

“Or both,” Athos says in understanding. The Inquisition may make the most noise about throwbacks, but their charter extends to cover many things deemed immoral by the Church.

Adele nods. Charlotte smiles. “We’ll meet you in the courtyard in a moment,” she says. She takes Adele’s hand. The two of them walk together down a small corridor.

D’Artagnan comes over to Athos as they leave. “Everything all right?” he asks.
Athos looks at his mate. “You are my hope for the future,” he says impulsively.

D’Artagnan smiles back. “I love you too.”

Athos kisses him. Then he nods.

“Let’s go out to the courtyard,” he says.

“Aramis and Porthos – ”

“They’ll catch up.”

D’Artagnan frowns for a moment. Then his expression clears. “Of course,” he realizes.

Behind them, Porthos watches them go, then turns back to Aramis. “I want you to know,” he says. “I have never regretted a single thing about our life together. If I were given the choice, I’d do it all again. The bad times as well as the good. I’d rather have you than anything else on this Earth.”

“God sent you to me,” Aramis says. “He looked into my heart and saw that I was lost and alone, and that I needed someone to lead me back to Him. And maybe – because He loved me – He wanted me to know what love felt like. And He sent me you.” Aramis comes closer and tips his eyes up. “I wouldn’t give you up for all the pups in Christendom,” he says.

The kiss, when it comes, is as sweet as the one they’d shared the morning after their mating heat. Aramis is clothed, but Porthos can’t help leaning down and kissing Aramis’ shoulder, too, where the mark is placed. He thinks he can feel it warm beneath his lips. Aramis’ scent lingers strong here. For the first time in memory, they haven’t bothered with their usual perfumes. Today they ride as they are, open and unashamed. Today they are heroes.

They separate slowly. Aramis’ eyes are bright. Porthos has seen them that way more times than he can count. Sometimes it’s been joy; sometimes sorrow. He loves Aramis’ eyes either way. He loves every part of Aramis. Porthos still can’t believe that this incredible person has chosen to share his life with Porthos. But he’s spent his life trying to be worthy of Aramis’ love and trust. Now he thinks that maybe he’s managed some small part of it.

“Then come with me,” Porthos murmurs.

“One more journey,” Aramis agrees.

They rejoin the others in the courtyard. The Guards are young and rowdy, ready for a great adventure. Their spirits are infections. Even the older and wiser soldiers feel their hearts lift.

Athos goes over the plan again. Everyone recites the key parts back and counts their ammo one last time. They turn out their cloaks so the robin’s-egg blue doesn’t draw attention too early. Aramis says a prayer.

Then they’re ready.

Athos walks his horse to the front of the column. He looks back over his troops and thinks that the Captain would have something to say. It wouldn’t be anything fancy, perhaps, but it would be honest and steady and worth holding on to. The Cardinal would certainly have no problem finding words.

It’s not Athos’ gift. Finally he just says, “Move out, then.”

And they do.
Richelieu and Jussac arrive at the Louvre on horseback and dismount in the courtyard, each tossing their reins to a stable boy wearing the King’s livery. Properly, Richelieu should have come in the carriage. But the carriage is slow, and Richelieu could never have made himself sit still in it. Riding burns some of the excess adrenaline. It helps him keep himself under control.

For a moment he envies the group storming the Bastille. They have nothing left to hide. What must it be like to stride freely in the world, not restraining one’s strength or speed or skill? To act free of pretense and allow one’s natural abilities to shine through? Even in private Richelieu still constrains himself, automatic and natural as breathing. So do they all. The Inquisition is not forgiving of mistakes.

Richelieu shakes himself free of these thoughts, striding briskly up the stairs and into the heart of the Louvre. Now is not the time to indulge in melancholy. Now is the time to focus. If he’s to have any chance at all of rescuing his mate, Richelieu must have his full wits about him.

At least Armand knows that Jean isn’t in any pain. Nor is there any fear echoing through their bond. Jean’s been hiding his emotions from Armand since Jean had left the Richelieu estates. But pain, Armand knows to his sorrow, would still come through despite Jean’s best attempts to hide it.

There are so many things in their past they both try to forget. Richelieu prays this doesn’t become one more.

It’s too early in the morning for the King to be holding court; Louis will not be much past breakfast, and is therefore most likely to be found in his quarters, preparing for the day and talking with his favorites. Treville will be looking for the King, too. Perhaps Treville has already found him. How many hours’ head start has Treville had? Three? Four? How long had he walked the Richelieu grounds before deciding to take horse to Paris? Had he thought long, weighing his options? Or had he walked straight out of the hunting-lodge and into the stables?

But Treville will have had to sneak into Paris. And God send he’d had the foresight to sneak into the Louvre as well. That will have slowed him down. There’s still a chance that Richelieu can intercept Treville before he throws himself into Louis’ power. They who lean on the King lean on a weak reed, and one far too easily swayed. But Jean and Louis had been boys together, Louis had given Jean the Musketeers: Jean thinks highly of Louis, and even now refuses to believe that Louis might fail him. Armand only wishes he could believe it, too.

The corridor leading to the King’s chambers is quiet. Richelieu is grateful. He doesn’t trust what he might do if some passing courtier attempted to speak to him, some dandy eager for news or gossip or patronage from the powerful Cardinal. The pounding of his own heart is loud in his ears. The pounding, and the sound of his footsteps and Jussac’s, and the sonorous ring of a clock sounding in the distance.

“Stop,” Jussac hisses, so abruptly and with such an air of command that Armand halts without even thinking.

“Here, quick,” Jussac adds, urging Armand into a nearby alcove. “Turn to me. We’re discussing a matter of state. That’s right.”

“What is it?” Armand demands, voice low and practically trembling with suppressed adrenaline.

Jussac looks quickly around, moving his eyes without moving his neck, which is how Armand knows it’s serious. “What do you see?”

Armand copies Jussac, falling automatically into habits honed by a lifetime of undercover work. But
“Nothing.” There’s no object out of place, nor no person either: no courtiers, no officials, not even so much as a servant –

Oh. Oh, God.

“Nothing,” Jussac agrees tightly. “Since we’ve entered the palace I can count the number of people we’ve seen on one hand. And at least half of those looked as if they were out of uniform.”

“The palace should be full of people,” Armand says through numb lips.

“So where have they all gone?” Jussac says, more a statement than question.

“It’s a trap.”

Jussac swallows. “I think so.”

A dozen considerations whirl through Armand’s mind. They boil down rapidly to two truths: first, that he must not risk the Resistance entire; and second, that he will not desert his mate.

It makes his decision plain.

“Leave,” Armand orders. He fumbles with a chain around his neck. Strung on it is the small crucifix that Susanne had given him when he’d left for the seminary, so long ago. It’s a physical remembrance of Armand’s puppyhood and a cherished memento of the blood family Armand had lost. More importantly, Richelieu has established it as a symbol of his authority among his inner circle. There’s nothing about it that would betray whomever holds it, but it is, in effect, the crown and seal of the Resistance.

Richelieu presses it into Jussac’s hand. “You are head of – of my organization, now. Lead our people well.”

Jussac takes the crucifix automatically. “But – ” he begins. He closes his mouth over the rest of the words. He won’t urge Armand to abandon Jean. Armand won’t, in the first place. And Robert wouldn’t respect and love Armand if he would, in the second.

Knowing that, Robert will also know there is nothing more to be said.

“One body more or less won’t make any difference here,” Armand says anyway.

“I’ll give this back to you later,” Robert says, even as he tucks the crucifix away in a belt-pouch.

“I’ll see you at the Gates, Robert.”

There are almost certainly people watching them. Armand can’t embrace his brother, not if he wants Robert to get out of the palace without tripping the Inquisition’s trap. He can put a hand on Robert’s shoulder, though, and Robert can touch it briefly and nod. It’s more than many throwbacks get before going to their deaths. It will have to do.

Robert turns and goes. Armand squares his shoulders, resuming the haughty mien of the Cardinal de Richelieu, and strides ever onwards towards the King’s chamber.

The ride through the city is nerve-wracking. They appear as any other group of soldiers, and in Paris the sight is as common as dirt. Without any obvious insignia they’re even less interesting. The Cardinal’s Guards always draw attention, as do the King’s. The Musketeers had, too, and still would, though now for different reasons.
But in their plain clothes, with their cloaks hidden, they’re taken for a noble’s private guard or perhaps for mercenaries. Carts cut in front of them without regard or respect. Errand-boys dart back and forth. Everyone’s calm is stretched. But it holds. They’re trained and disciplined and they know how much is on the line; it holds.

They enter the Bastille’s district as the sun climbs high. Here they attract even less attention. No one wants to appear too curious about the Bastille; its prisoners are too political for anyone’s health.

Everyone calms down as they ride closer to the prison. The anticipation is past. It’s time for action now.

The outer ring of the Bastille has a gate that is left open during the day. They wait patiently by it while a cart trundles out. Then they ride through it and dismount. Athos and Adele go immediately back to close and bar the gate.

“What are you doing?” a passing merchant asks, shocked into forgetting his usual studied incuriosity. “Those gates stay open until sunset!”

“No today,” Athos says.

“But the warden –”

“The warden answers to me now,” Athos growls. He makes no effort to hide his strength or keep the rumble out of his voice. Adele, next to him, flares her cloak so its underside – actually its outer layer – becomes visible. The others in the courtyard catch the signal: they, too, show their true colors.

“Musketeers!” the man cries in fright, stumbling back. “Throwbacks!”

“Tell the Cardinal the prison is under our control now,” Adele snarls.

The merchant’s face turns an alarming shade of puce. He flees, shouting for help as he goes.

“Well done,” Porthos says from behind them. “That’ll spread the tale wide, right enough.”

“And mentioning the Cardinal was a nice touch,” Charlotte adds. Adele pinks slightly at the praise.

“Well, gentlefolk, that’s the first bridge crossed,” Athos says. “We have yet to gain the prison itself, however. D’Artagnan? Bernajoux? If you please?”

D’Artagnan grins, toothy and shark-like. He marches straight up to the inner gate and knocks. Then he steps to one side and draws his musket. Bernajoux takes his place.

This gate is closed and locked the day round. At d’Artagnan’s knock, however, the small barred window at its top slides open.

“What do you want?” the man guarding the prison demands.

Bernajoux inclines his head. He’s still wearing his usual hat, and the insignia of the Red Guards is clearly visible.

“Business of the Cardinal,” he says, urbanely. “Open this door, in the name of the Church and the Inquisition.”

Dangerous words. Words that must never be allowed to be repeated or overheard. Words that induce the man to open the door immediately.
D’Artagnan and Aramis fire simultaneously. Either of them would have been sure of the kill; taken together, they leave nothing to chance.

“The wages of sin are death,” Bernajoux tells the fallen guard, mock-sadly. Two of his squad grab the body and drag it briskly out of the way. Bernajoux takes off his hat. With a quick motion he tears off the insignia of the Red Guards.

“Come on,” Adele says urgently. “That will have gotten everyone’s blood up.”

They pile through the door quickly. The bottom level of the prison contains no actual prisoners: it’s mainly administrative, and they round up the bureaucrats who work here quickly. They’re a disorganized bunch without many military skills and no inclination to stand up to armed invaders. The warden might have given them trouble – he’s a retired cavalier – but he’s nowhere to be found. His office is empty. Several of the bureaucrats say that he usually goes into the city at this time of day to visit his wife.

Without the warden’s leadership and authority, the resistance on the bottom level is disorganized at best. Boisrenard’s squad takes point and rapidly disposes of the guards on duty at the armory. Adele and Charlotte, sweeping deeper into the Bastille, encounter four squads off-duty who have congregated in the Bastille’s mess hall for an early midday. Aramis and Porthos are right behind them; between the four of them half of their opponents go down rapidly. The other half promptly surrender. They’ve realized they’re facing throwbacks, and that they’re no match for an Alpha’s strength or an Omega’s dexterity.

That, and they’re concerned for their immortal souls. “Don’t touch me!” one of them blurts out as Adele approaches to disarm him. He’s little more than a boy, shaking in fear, probably never even having thought to question the Inquisition’s propaganda.

“Drop your weapons then,” Charlotte orders. The boy does so, too terrified to even think about disobeying.

Aramis shakes his head. “It’s like we’re the monsters,” he says wonderingly. The boy stiffens.

“To them we are,” Adele says. “We’re the bogeymen.”

“Their stories are full of us,” Charlotte says. “Surely you’ve heard them.”

“We had different bedtime stories on the plantation,” Porthos says grimly.

“Come on,” Aramis says. “Let’s get them out.”

Keeping prisoners of their own is more effort than it’s worth, given their limited manpower. Boisrenard’s squad force-marches the surviving guards and bureaucrats back out the inner gate and strands them in the courtyard.

“Soldiers will come to retake the Bastille,” one of the bureaucrats gibbers as they’re shoved out of the inner gate. “You’ll all be hung! Broken on the wheel! Drawn and quartered!”

“The outer gate is jammed,” Adele says calmly. “You can’t get out – and in a moment we’re going to make sure you can’t get back in. When your precious reinforcements come, and find you all milling about in the courtyard like a bunch of sheep, what do you think they’re going to do? Free you? Or assume that you’re part of the invasion force?”

“We’ll tell them who we are!” another one cries.
“I sincerely hope you do,” Porthos says. “You don’t seem to have realized your position, gentlemen. Congratulations – you’re part of the Bastille defense force now.”

“Oh my god,” the scared young man whispers. “You’re using us as human shields.”

“Call out to your soldiers,” Adele says. “Make them realize who you are. They won’t set the Bastille aflame with you still in it. Well. Probably. If you’re convincing enough.”

Porthos shuts the inner door on their pale faces and sets about jamming it, too. “That was a little graphic, don’t you think?” he asks mildly.

Adele shrugs. “We need them to convince the reinforcements not to do anything drastic,” she replies. “Best to make the men out there realize exactly how intertwined their fates are with ours from the outset than coddle their feelings and all end up dead.”

“Is it done?” Athos asks, appearing behind them.

“Yes,” Adele says.

“They’ll slow down any rescue parties Bonacieux sends?”

“Very effectively, I should think,” Porthos says ruefully.

“Then come on,” Athos says. “We have control of this level, but the access stairway to the cells has been barred. The rest of the prison knows we’re here, and they’re dug in against us.”

“We expected as much,” Adele says in resignation.

“Our packmates and Bernajoux’s squad are working on getting access to the stairwell.”

“And we?” Adele asks.

“Well, having just barred the door, I thought we might make sure of our alternate method of egress,” Athos says.

Porthos glances out an arrow-slit, checking the position of the sun. “Charon should be in place now,” he agrees.

“Then let’s get started,” Athos says. “It would be problematic if we went through all this trouble only to still be stuck here when Bonacieux’s troops retake the Bastille.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” Adele mutters, leading the way deeper into the Bastille.

They retrace their steps through the Bastille back to the kitchen and mess halls. On the way they pass the central stairs. The heavy doors that guard access to it lock from either side, as a security measure. The guards stationed on the upper levels, alerted by the commotion below, have utilized that precaution to barricade themselves access to the Resistance.

Aramis is going over the door, tapping gently. Charlotte and d’Artagnan are with him, as are Boisrenard and two of his squad.

“What are you doing?” Porthos asks, curiously. It looks almost like lock-picking, a skill of his from adolescence, but the door isn’t locked in the traditional sense. The Bastille is older than such things; the door is barred and barricaded, too securely for even Alpha strength to budge.

“This door isn’t properly built,” d’Artagnan says distractedly. “The balance on it is wrong. The way
the iron bars are distributed –”

Athos holds up a hand. “What’s the bottom line?”

“We can shift it with the right leverage,” Charlotte says.

“Do you need anything?”

“Time and a few strong hands when the moment comes,” Aramis says.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Boisrenard says. The two with him nod.

“All right. Stay sharp in case anyone managed to hide out. We’re going to check the escape route.”

“We’ll be fine,” d’Artagnan says. “Go on.”

The three of them make their way farther into the Bastille, picking up the rest of Boisrenard’s squad along the way. Bernajoux’s squad are already distributed. They’ll be directing the defense of the Bastille from this level until it comes time to abandon their positions and leave with the freed prisoners.

Past the kitchens are the accesses for food and other supplies. Large items like barrels of beer come through the main gates, but the prison’s needs are too large to rely on cart traffic, not when every time those gates are opened the prison’s security is compromised. And yet, a tradesman’s access would be even worse. The solution is a series of dumbwaiters and pulleys that bring goods through the small windows in the kitchens, crossing the deep gulch that’s been dug around the back of the Bastille. The windows aren’t themselves large enough for a person to squeeze through. But with three Alphas attacking the stonework and three Guardsmen prising at the mortar it only takes about an hour to widen them all sufficiently.

That accomplished, Porthos leans out and whistles. At the same time he waves his bandana.

Across the gulch is more of Paris, portions of the city that had sprung up around the Bastille as the prison itself had grown. The pulley system had similarly grown from the original single revolving line to a complex system capable of hauling fairly heavy loads. Not as heavy as a person, naturally. But that’s because the ropes and lines of the system aren’t strong enough, never mind the baskets. The anchor points themselves are sound. It’s just a matter of rethreading them.

Now, in response to Porthos’ whistle, several figures emerge from a house on the far side of the gulch. Porthos waves and nods. In the lead are Charon and Flea. They wave back. He can’t see their grins, but he can imagine them.

Gaining their help had been easier than Porthos had expected. Jussac’s written promises of Red Guard aid running interference with the Provost had been well received. Charon had given Porthos and Aramis the names and descriptions of two men and three women, members of the Court, who are imprisoned in the Bastille now. Promising to rescue them along with the Musketeers had gone a long way. Porthos himself had been owed more than few favors.

But Charon had said, too, that he’d have helped for less. Many of the thieves were tickled pink at the thought of putting one over on the King. And Flea had told Porthos that she’d needed no bribe to strike a blow at the people who’d harm her pup’s found family.

Porthos smiles to himself, impossibly warmed. Then he waves everyone back.

“Stay clear of the windows,” he says.
“Why?” one of the Guardsmen asks, obeying even as he wonders.

Not a moment too soon. He’s barely out of the way when an arrow is fired straight through the window. Porthos catches it handily and gives it three deliberate tugs.


The Guardsmen takes the arrow, puzzled. “What now?”

His companion figures it out first. “Next arrow!” he says.

Porthos catches that one too and hands it off to the second Guard. “We’re going to rebuild the pulley system so it can carry a man,” he explains.

“Actually, we’re going to rebuild it so it can carry a *throwback,*” Athos says.

Adele grins. “And then we’re going to use it to get every throwback held here – including ourselves – out of prison.”

The two Guardsmen exchange a quick look. Then they both grin wide.

Those people you see across the way are from the Court of Miracles,” Porthos adds. “You can trust them. They’re not throwbacks themselves, but they’ll help.”

“That’s all right,” one of them says. “Half of us are Betas, too.”

“I’m one,” the other says.

“You don’t have to tell us that there are Betas out there working for the angels,” the first one finishes.

Porthos smiles. “Glad to hear it,” he says honestly.

He’d worried, a little. Only a little. Richelieu runs a tight ship, with no room for pride or prejudice to get in the way of the higher goals. The Cardinal clearly loves Jussac as a brother and relies upon him as one of his trusted lieutenants. So Porthos hadn’t truly expected to find anti-Betan bigotry festering in the hearts of Red Guardsmen. But Flea is the woman he’ll call *Mama,* and Porthos has never forgotten the gruff voice and kind eyes of the fisherman who’d saved him all those years ago. The scared pup he’d been hadn’t thought to ask the fisherman’s name. He’d gone back to Le Havre, years later, and tried to find him with no success. The fisherman had been old when he’d rescued Porthos, and fishing isn’t a profession that lends itself well to growing older. But Porthos prays for his surrogate sire at every Mass. Lights candles for him in the Cathedral on holy days. And in his honor and Flea’s, Porthos will make sure that throwbacks remember that not all Betas are Inquisitors.

Now Porthos nods approvingly and turns to catch the third arrow. “Let’s get to it, then,” he says, and hands it off to Athos.

Richelieu doesn’t knock on the doors to the King’s chambers. Nor does he wait to be announced. There’s no one to announce him anyway; the servants whose job it would be are missing. There are no guards to bar his path nor courtiers to twitter at Richelieu’s appearance. Now that Richelieu is looking for it, now that he’s not so clouded about with his own worries and fears, he can see the trap easily.

Had Jean seen it? Had Jean realized what had been happening, but chosen, regardless, to walk into danger? He might have. For the lives of his Musketeers, he might have. Or he may not have noticed.
Jean is clever beyond any three Inquisitors, especially if that Inquisitor is Bonacieux. But he’s also tempestuous and passionate and far, far too empathetic. With his Musketeers in danger Jean would have had a hard time focusing on the bigger picture. If that weren’t so, Jean would never have come to Paris at all. Armand can only hope that Jean hadn’t abandoned his common sense along the way.

Richelieu pushes open the door to the King’s chambers and enters.

“Treville, there’s nothing I can do,” Louis is pleading. “The Inquisition has proof!”

Richelieu takes in the situation carefully. The King is not even dressed yet, wearing a splendid nightgown and slippers. The ruins of breakfast are still sitting on one table. No servant has come to take them away. No gentleman of the bedchamber has entered with the King’s daily dress. No minister has come with the King’s schedule, nor priest with the King’s daily devotional. The only guard in the room is Treville. Preposterously, impossibly, counter to centuries of tradition, Treville has stumbled upon the King alone in his bedchambers and is pleading his case.

Somehow neither Treville nor the King have noticed this impropriety. If Richelieu believes in miracles – and as a Catholic he is obliged to – then he must believe in the equivalent power, used for ill, possessed by Lucifer and his minions. It must be at work here. Only that could explain the staggering blindness exhibited by two people so thoroughly steeped in the routine of court life.

And indeed, if not for Jussac, Richelieu might have walked in here just as blindly. Jussac had noticed the oddity of the palace atmosphere and the scarcity of people; Richelieu hadn’t. He’d been so focused on his mate, so worried, that it had completely passed him by.

A terrible suspicion begins to prickle under Richelieu’s skin. This trap is subtle and well-laid. There had been enough people in the palace hallways that Richelieu had been kept from noticing the wrongness in the palace’s atmosphere. Jussac had said that half of those people had walked like soldiers. Richelieu, absorbed, had been ignorant of their gait. And if he hadn’t been warned by Jussac, would Richelieu now notice that the King’s chambers are shockingly empty, the usual daily duties neglected? Or would he simply have been relieved at the unexpected opportunity? Would he have walked in, kissed Jean in relief, betrayed himself?

There is a wit and cleverness here that Bonacieux could never possess. This isn’t the work of a clumsy spy listening at door-knobs or a bribed serving-maid giving evidence against her mistress. Richelieu can tell an old master by the sweep of their brush; he can tell a Rochefort when he sees one.

Louis is still talking. “I can claim that you had no idea so many of your men were throwbacks, and the ones they don’t have proof on I can protect. But half of them are in the Bastille already, and exposed. I ordered that nothing be done until the Cardinal gets back but – ”

“Louis.” Treville seizes the King’s outstretched hands. “You aren’t prejudiced. I know you aren’t. You’ve known I was an Omega my entire life. You protected me. You gave me the means to protect others. Help me now.”

Louis isn’t listening. He’s looking over Treville’s shoulder, straight at the Cardinal, and his face is frozen in horror.

Richelieu enters the room more fully. “Good afternoon, your Majesty,” he says. There’s horror freezing his own guts, now, too. Whatever may have transpired before Richelieu’s arrival – please God, not much – Treville had just betrayed himself out of his own mouth. Safe enough, if only Louis and Armand are listening. But Richelieu is certain now that the walls have ears.
“How long have you been standing there?” the King whispers.

“Long enough,” he says, letting those words speak for themselves. There’s only one thing that might possibly save them now: if Richelieu – if the Bloody Cardinal can carry the situation on sheer force of personality, and drag Treville out of this room under cover of arrest, before the Inquisitor can spring his plot –

“No,” Louis says. “No!” He tugs his hands free of Treville and comes around him, striding right up to Richelieu.

“You haven’t been standing here at all,” the King says. “You aren’t here. You never came here! You heard nothing, do you understand me? That’s a royal order. Nothing!”

“Louis,” Treville tries.

“I won’t have it, Cardinal, do you hear me? I forbid it. You heard nothing. I absolutely forbid it – you’re not going to take Treville away and do those terrible things to him! You’re not!”

“It’s all right,” Treville says.

“I won’t let him hurt you,” Louis says stubbornly.

“Louis,” Treville says again. “It’s all right.”

“No. No, it’s not all right. Nothing is all right! This terrible Inquisition, my people, France –” Louis shakes his head in denial. Richelieu sees in amazement that actual tears are standing in the King’s eyes. “I won’t let you hurt him,” Louis repeats.

Richelieu takes a moment to marvel at the devotion Treville has managed to inspire in Louis, who is in all other respects a weak King. But then, Richelieu would never have expected this vehement rejection of the Inquisition from the King. Richelieu wouldn’t have thought Louis would have the backbone for it.

In playing the part of the righteous Cardinal, he’d made it impossible for Louis to show this part of himself to Richelieu. He’d glad to find that it exists. More than glad. Because it means that things are suddenly possible that hadn’t been possible before. Richelieu’s spent a lifetime teaching himself patience. It only takes a moment for him to learn hope.

That hope must be for later. When this is over, when Rochefort is vanquished, there may be time to find out how far Louis will go to protect throwbacks. But now is not the time. There’s still a sword hanging over all of their necks, though Richelieu is the only one who knows it. He implores Jean with his eyes and through their bond: danger, danger, danger.

There’s no way to be more specific, but Jean’s eyes widen. Treville looks around himself, a startled note entering his demeanor. He’s noticed. The emptiness of the room, the dirty breakfast-tray, the closed wardrobe.

Fear spikes through the bond. Fear and adrenaline. Jean looks at Armand, a question in his eyes.

Richelieu nods. He beckons to Treville, who walks over to Richelieu. Louis sobs, trying ineffectually to stop Treville. The Captain gently moves him aside and comes to Richelieu, allowing the Cardinal to seize his mate’s arm and pull him close under the guise of restraining him.

“No,” Louis wails. From his point of view, it looks as if the Cardinal’s about to take the Captain away, and do to him all the terrible things the Inquisition has always done to Omegas. “No, you
mustn’t!”

It nearly hurts Armand to ready the formal denouncement. These are the words that will destroy the public face of Richelieu’s mate, the one that Jean has worked so hard to develop. Perhaps the King can be brought to join their cause; perhaps a solution can be found to the problem of the Queen. Perhaps it need not be so very permanent. But there is no time for any of that now. Now there is only life and death, and a very narrow chance for the former instead of the latter.

Richelieu opens his mouth to speak.

Rochefort beats him to it.

“No need to worry, your Majesty,” the Inquisitor says silkily. “I’m sure the Cardinal has no intention of actually harming Treville.”

Across the throne room, the private door leading to the Queen’s hallway stands open. Everyone spins to face it. Treville pales. Louis gasps. Richelieu feels a dreadful weight settle over his shoulders – the weight of failure.

Through the door, as if vomited up from the deepest pits of Hell, comes the Comte de Rochefort. And he's smiling.
Paris, Part Two

It takes half a precious hour for Porthos and his team to re-rig the dumbwaiters to be able to carry a throwback, even with five willing pairs of hands. Porthos is sweating by the time it’s done. They test it with Charon first. Even from the Bastille Porthos can see Flea arguing with him over this. Probably something about how she’s lighter. It doesn’t matter. Charon isn’t the sort of King to lead from the rear. If there’s something dangerous to be done, he does it first every time, and usually without thinking.

This time it works. Charon arrives in the Bastille with a huge grin on his face. “That was amazing!” he enthuses. “I could charge a sou for a ride on that! If we add a bigger basket and run it forwards as well as backwards – ”

Porthos claps him on the shoulder. “Save the moneymaking for when our lives aren’t in danger,” he says, amused.

“No money to be made when we’re dead,” Charon shoots back. He laughs at his own wit.

“How many others are we bringing across?” Athos breaks in, one eye on the passage of time.

Charon sober. “I could only gather a dozen on such short notice,” he admits. “If you can get by here with the people you have, I think my thieves are better used securing your exit route. Especially as we’ll have to send your Musketeers away in groups with an escort, so there will be fewer of us over time.”

“I agree,” Athos says. “But you should station a few people on this end of the route as well. We’re leaving a squad on this level to stand off the reinforcements, but – ”

“Agreed,” Charon says. He leans out the window and flashes a complicated series of hand signals across.

Three more baskets are run across in quick succession, bringing with them two men Porthos doesn’t recognize and a woman Porthos does.

“Mama,” he greets, kissing Flea’s cheek.

“I’m so proud of you, Porthos,” she says, hugging him tight.

“I’m afraid we don’t have much time,” Adele says apologetically. “If you – ”

“Who are you?” Flea interrupts.

“Mama, this is Adele, Aramis’ aleph,” Porthos says.

Flea assesses Adele quickly. “The one who faked her death?”

Adele winces. “To protect him – ”

Flea decks Adele. Adele doesn’t even try to defend the blow; she goes sprawling.

“That’s for causing Aramis pain,” Flea says sternly. Then she leans over and offers her hand to help Adele get up.

Adele accepts it warily. When she’s on her feet, Flea kisses her cheek, right over the small gash her
ring had opened.

“That’s for protecting him,” Flea says. “Keep it up and we’ll get along fine.”

“Yes ma’am,” Adele stutters.

“You may call me Mama if you like,” Flea adds. “Or not, if you don’t. But Porthos has never found
that having a mother conflicted with having a carrier. No harm in having both, I say.”

“Thank you,” Adele falters.

“They’d better be going, love,” Charon says to her.

Flea sighs. “I never see you anymore,” she says to Porthos. “When this is over, come and visit us.
The boys miss you.”

“Yes, Mama,” Porthos says fondly.

“We’ll send the escapees down to you in waves,” Athos says. “Your people will probably be first,
since the high-security cells are on the top level.”

“You’re not going straight to your people?” Charon asks. “I thought each level could be barricaded
off individually – why waste time breaking the lower levels?”

“Aside from rescuing your people?” Porthos asks.

Charon grins. “Fair point.”

“We have some lower-security prisoners of our own to rescue,” Athos says. “Regardless, those
barricades were made by the guards, and can be unmade by them, too. If we don’t take the prison
level by level, they’ll flood out behind us.”

“We’d be caught between two forces and cut off from our escape route,” Porthos explains.

“I suppose this is why you’re the soldiers and I’m the King of Thieves,” Charon sighs. “All right, do
what you think best. We’ll be here for you, never fear.”

“Thank you,” Athos says, shaking his hand. “We’ll be off to it, then.”

“Be careful,” Flea calls after them.

“We will!” Porthos promises. He makes sure to give her a smile as he leaves.

On their way back to the center of the Bastille Bernajoux flags them down.

“First wave of reinforcements just got here,” he reports. “Looks like two squads of Inquisition troops
and three from the regular army.”

“What are they doing?” Athos asks.

“So far? Arguing among themselves over who has jurisdiction, looks like,” Bernajoux looks
bemused. “I’ve never seen the King’s Guards care so much. Usually they just roll over as soon as a
special regiment comes along. But I can hear their lieutenant shouting clear across the courtyard.
Something about how this is the King’s prison and the King’s troops are going to be in command.”

“I take it the leader of the Inquisitorial troop doesn’t like this,” Porthos says.
He’s furious. It sounds like they’re well convinced that we’re all Musketeers, and the Inquisitorial troop’s lieutenant says that makes this their problem, since they’re trained to deal with throwbacks.”

“I have to admit, if I were in the King’s Guard’s position, I’d find that convincing,” Adele says.

“The King’s Guards disagree with you.”


Bernajoux shakes his head. “They’re M. de Chambert’s regiment,” he says.

“He’s a favorite of the King,” Adele says slowly. “But he doesn’t have a lot of originality, and neither do his officers. That lieutenant wouldn’t be arguing if he didn’t have orders to argue.”

“Orders from M. de Chambert?” Porthos asks.

“M. de Chambert wouldn’t act independently either.” Bernajoux looks thoughtful.

“Chambert’s also comrades with the Captain,” Athos says. “If Treville’s been outed as a throwback —”

“I wish we knew,” Adele says in frustration. “He could be in a cell above our heads right now!”

“Then we’d better get up there,” Porthos says practically. “It sounds as if the situation down here isn’t going to change quickly.”

“They haven’t formed up, much less attempted a sortie,” Bernajoux confirms. “I don’t think they’ve even realized the men in the courtyard are hostages instead of soldiers.”

“Unusually good luck,” Adele frets.

“Better take advantage of it,” Athos says.

“And if it goes bad?” Porthos asks.

Athos shrugs. “We’re committed as it is. We’ll do what we can, and if God is willing, we’ll prevail.”

“You’re right,” Adele says resignedly. “Let’s go see if they’ve made any progress with that door.”

“Stay on guard,” Athos says to Bernajoux.

“Don’t worry about us,” Bernajoux says. “We know what we’re doing.”

The three of them make their way back to the center of the Bastille. As they do, they hear a thunk and a thud from ahead, as of a large piece of metal coming free and hitting the ground. Athos, Porthos and Adele round the final corner to see Aramis straightening from his crouch with a satisfied smile on his face. The door to the staircase is now off its hinges entirely. Boisrenard is in the act of hefting it and setting it carefully aside.

“Good timing,” d’Artagnan says cheerfully. “As you can see, we’ve just gained entrance to the rest of the Bastille.”

Charlotte peers up the column. “They’ve put out the lamps, and it’s black as pitch up there,” she reports.

Boisrenard reaches up and yanks a lamp free from the wall of the lower level. It’s chained in place,
but the iron is rusting and it’s no match for Alpha strength. He hands it to Charlotte with a courtly little twirl.

“Thank you,” she smiles. Holding it up, she sticks her head back into the opening.

“Charlotte!” Aramis cries, yanking her back.

“It’s fine! Well. Not fine exactly. They’ve barred all the doors – ”

“And there are arrow-slits and holes for boiling pitch!”

“The designers of the Bastille anticipated that guards would have a little more time to dig themselves in in the event of an attack,” Adele says calmly. “The main armory is on this level. So are the only fires. They have no way to heat pitch or tar once they’re cut off. And the arrow-slits are placed wrong for firearms. The way the stairs curve block their sights. They were built for arrows, not shot.”

“Surely the armories have crossbows.”

“Surely they do. But crossbow proficiency isn’t a requirement for being a prison guard anymore. And no one maintains them. I’d be surprised if one in ten of them could fire.”

“To think this is the place we’ve all been so terrified of all these years,” d’Artagnan says in amazement.

“From the inside it’s secure enough,” Athos says grimly.

“But from the outside – ”

“It was well-designed when it was built, but it’s hopelessly out of date now,” Boisrenard agrees. “Richelieu’s killed half-a-dozen plans to modernize the building.”

Porthos whistles in admiration. “How’d he manage that?”

“Empty treasury,” Adele says. “Better places to put funds. And prisons are boring, to quote Louis directly. He doesn’t care about them.”

“Besides, what’s everyone so afraid of?” Charlotte asks with a wicked grin. “Anyone assaulting the Bastille would have to march straight through Paris first. More than enough time for the King’s Guards to intercept them, along with his loyal Musketeers – ”

“Not to mention the Red Guards,” Boisrenard interjects.

“Such an assault force would never make it to the gates,” Adele says.

“Unless they were coming from inside Paris to begin with,” Porthos points out. “Unless they were trusted, as we are.”

Charlotte’s grin grows wider. “But Porthos,” she says innocently, fluttering her lashes. “Everyone knows there’s no such thing as a throwback Resistance.”

Porthos laughs incredulously. “So no arrows, no musket-balls, no boiling pitch – ”

“They may be able to throw a few loose pebbles down on us, but that’s about it,” Charlotte says.

“Until we break down the doors on each level,” Adele clarifies. “Then it’s a fight like any other.”
“We’re good at winning those fights,” Athos says.

“Then what we standing around wasting time for?” d’Artagnan checks his musket and loosens his sword in its scabbard. “The more time we stand around down here the more time the guards have to dig in up there.”

Aramis nods. “Gentles, our challenge awaits.”

D’Artagnan steps forward. Then he stops and turns, waving Athos on ahead.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he says.

Athos can’t help kissing him. Then he draws his sword in one hand and his musket in the other.

“Come on,” he says to his troops.

One by one, they walk deeper into the heart of the Bastille.

The first few floors are easy enough to capture. Security in the Bastille increases with height; the prisoners closest to the bottom are – relatively – unimportant. Cavaliers held on dueling charges, or military misdemeanors such as being absent without leave. Minor nobles taken in for debt until their overseers or cousins can bail them out. Courtiers who had misstepped in the games of power and are cooling their heels until Louis’ displeasure abates. To be a prisoner in the Bastille, one’s crimes need not be important, only oneself. For those who can pay the pistole it can be a very comfortable place to wait out the required span of exile.

The guards on those floors are token; the invading forces actually have a harder time with the personal valets and lackeys that the prisoners have been allowed to bring with them. They react with hostility to the Musketeers swarming the levels, thinking them a threat to their masters. It’s lucky they aren’t allowed weapons. On one floor, a scrappy Picard in the colors of the Marquis de Mayeux nearly knocks Boisrenard’s head off regardless, and Athos has to duck several well-aimed blows from another valet. Sounds from the other levels indicate that the other squads are encountering similar resistance.

Eventually the shouts of their masters convince the lackeys and valets to lay off, and they suffer themselves to be gathered up. Athos and Boisrenard have a quick discussion on what to do with them while the others go cell-by-cell, checking for sympathizers and members of the Court of Miracles to be freed and spirited out of the Bastille.

“Pity we barred the door to the courtyard,” Boisrenard says.

“We could lock them in with their masters,” Athos says doubtfully.

“We don’t have that kind of time.”

“We don’t have anywhere else to put them.”

“The prison guards said you’re Musketeers here to free your comrades,” the Marquis de Mayeux calls from his well-appointed suite at the end of the hall, breaking in on Athos and Boisrenard’s debate.

Athos turns. “That’s right,” he says warily.

“I recognize you. M. Athos, isn’t it?”
Athos bows.

“Treville’s second in command,” de Mayeux muses. “So it’s true?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t. Put that lot in here with me. I’ve enough room.”

“Why would you suggest that?”

De Mayeux smiles. “Because I know something you don’t.”

“And what is that, Monseigneur?”

“Two days ago a new prisoner was brought into the Bastille. I don’t know who it was – it’s being treated as a state secret – but Planchet here is permitted on the other levels, and he saw a very curious thing.”

“And what’s that?”

De Mayeux gestures to the Picard who had so thoroughly decked Boisrenard. “Tell them.”

The lackey clears his throat. “They’d changed all the guards,” he says. “I’ve got to know all the guards here fairly well, but these were new ones. Just on the upper levels.”

Boisrenard raises an eyebrow. “The upper levels? As in –”

“High security,” Planchet confirms.

Athos and Boisrenard exchange looks. High security, to them, means only one thing: the throwback cells. Oh, there are standard cells on the top floors, as well. Throwbacks aren’t the only dangerous people the Crown and the Church might lock up. But the upper floors are where the torture chambers are, and where the Inquisitors do their dirty work.

“So they have got Treville,” Boisrenard says grimly.

“But why change out the guards?” Athos frowns. Something’s not adding up here. “The upper levels are usually guarded by Inquisitorial squads anyway.”

“Bonacieux may not have trusted their loyalty. He tried to tap into the Red Guards already and was blocked by Bernajoux – maybe he was afraid of that happening again with the usual troops and wanted to put his own men in position.”

Athos nods slowly. He has to remember that, for Bonacieux, this isn’t about the lives of the throwbacks involved. This is about power and prestige and rank within the Church. Athos can’t afford to get distracted by the knowledge of what sort of men take the insignia of the Inquisition, and what sort of implements they’ll have had access to, alone with their authority and several dozen imprisoned throwbacks for two days.

“So Bonacieux’s loyalists, then,” Athos says.

“Or Rochefort’s,” Boisrenard says grimly.

Planchet coughs. “Pardon me, messieurs, but I should have said – the new men are King’s Guards.”

Boisrenard turns. “What?”
The lackey nods. “Still in uniform.”

Athos fixes the lackey with a stern eye. “What regimentals did they wear?” he asks. By some miracle he keeps his tone calm. Inside, though –

Planchet glances at his master.

“Dessessart’s company,” de Mayeux says, answering Athos’ real question.

Athos’ eyes widen.

“So as I was saying a moment ago,” the Marquis goes on, “You can put that lot in here with me. We’ll see to it they don’t do anything foolish.”

The Picard nods in support of his master.

Aramis chooses that moment to appear, breaking into Athos’ shock and speaking before he or Boisrenard have even finished turning towards him.

“Have you worked out what to do with all these spare lackeys and valets running about?” he calls, huffing breathlessly. “We’ve got the rest of low security cleared, but there’s about thirty men we’ve nowhere to stash.”

“Yes, we were just talking about that,” Athos manages. He drags his mind back to the problem at hand. Once they get this sorted out they can go up to high security and see the rest for themselves.

“This gentleman was just suggesting we put the prisoners in with him,” Boisrenard adds, gesturing to de Mayeux.

Aramis nods. “If there’s room for them, that sounds best,” he says. Stepping closer, lowering his voice, he adds, “That is, if you don’t think he’ll cause trouble?”

Athos glances at Boisrenard, who shakes his head.

“He didn’t have to tell us anything,” Boisrenard says. “And we really don’t have the time to dither.”

“Tell you? What did he tell you?” Aramis demands.

Boisrenard starts filling Aramis in. Athos steps back from their whispered conversation and reclaims de Mayeux’s gaze, nodding his acceptance.

“Thank you, Monseigneur,” Athos says. “For your kind offer, and also your information.”

The Marquis inclines his head in return. “I ask only that you recall its giver.”

“I will do so,” Athos promises.

Behind him, Aramis jogs back off to the upper levels, to spread the news.

Fifteen minutes later all of the surviving guards from the lower levels of the Bastille, along with the valets and lackeys and assorted other servants, are being ushered into the suite of the Marquis de Mayeux. The prisoners from the Court of Miracles have been freed, along with a handful of other sympathetic Boisrenard has identified, and are being transported out of the prison by Charon’s people. And de Mayeux’s news has gone through the members of the Resistance like wildfire. Everyone is whispering about it. No one knows what to make of it. Athos repeats the story to Charlotte and Adele upstairs as they transfer prisoners, then again to Porthos and Bernajoux on the
lower levels when he checks in with them on the status of the troops outside the gate – still arguing about precedence and jurisdiction.

Everyone he tells presses Athos for more answers. It’s a pity, then, that Athos hasn’t any to give.

_Two days ago a new prisoner was brought into the Bastille_, de Mayeux had said.

His lackey Planchet: _they’ve changed all the guards._

And de Mayeux again: _Dessessart’s company._

It makes no sense. The obvious conclusion is that the mysterious prisoner is Treville himself, picked up by Rochefort’s men when he’d attempted to reenter the city and imprisoned here to be tortured and broken by the Inquisitor. The problem is that there’s no way for that to have happened _two days ago_. Two days ago, Treville had been sitting in a comfortable chair by the fire in the lodge at the center of the Richelieu hunting-grounds, safely surrounded by his pack, and being fed toast by the Cardinal himself.

But Athos has to wonder: how precise is de Mayeux’s sense of time? His cell has windows, but imprisonment can still do odd things to someone. Perhaps what he calls _two days ago_ had only been yesterday morning, exactly right for Treville.

Ahh. But de Mayeux’s lackey, Planchet, had confirmed the date. The lackey has the run of the prison, and will in the normal course of things be allowed to venture out and back in, too, on errands from his imprisoned master. Planchet is unlikely to have lost track of the date.

Then again, who else could the prisoner possibly be _but_ Treville? And now it becomes a question of subterfuge and misdirection. Bonacieux, and Rochefort through him, have clearly been anticipating capturing Treville since Bonacieux had first realized Treville hadn’t died of the drugs he’d been given. Neither de Mayeux nor Planchet have claimed to have seen the prisoner directly; they only know when changes had begun to be made to _accommodate_ the prisoner. Those changes may well have begun in advance of Treville’s actually being captured.

But now the presumption of its being the Captain falls apart again. Because if Athos is to believe that the preparations were being made by Bonacieux, for the purpose of holding Treville, why on Earth or in Heaven would the Inquisitor have _replaced_ the guards? The throwback cells are guarded by the Inquisition by long tradition. Inquisitorial troops compete for the position; it’s prestigious and carries the Pope’s blessing as well as extra pay and privileges. And even if the men would stand for it, the entire purpose of capturing Treville is to squeeze him for knowledge. The Inquisition’s torturers are the experts in extracting information from throwbacks, not the King’s Guards.

Perhaps Bonacieux needs secrecy for some reason. Perhaps he means to torture Treville himself and requires no assistance. Perhaps he knows that the Inquisition in France answers ultimately to Richelieu and not to him, and doesn’t want the Inquisition troops nearby because, for him, this is more about a power struggle within the Church than an actual holy crusade to stamp out the Resistance. _Rochefort_ is the one who believes the Resistance exists. Bonacieux may simply be playing along in order to seize power.

And yet – even assuming all of that is so – why would Bonacieux choose _Dessessart’s company_? Dessessart’s sympathies are kept secret, but no one has attempted to conceal that he’s Treville’s cousin. Bonacieux would be a fool to bet that piety would beat blood when there are a half-dozen other companies of the King’s Guards he could call upon instead.

Unless the King had, for some reason, made no other companies available to Bonacieux. Unless the
King had chosen Dessessart’s company for a reason. Perhaps even the same reason that Chambert’s company argues over precedence with the Inquisitorial troops outside the Bastille and delays their attempt to reclaim the prison. But what could that reason possibly be?

“None of it makes any sense,” Athos says aloud in frustration as d’Artagnan appears looking for him.

“Then stop thinking about it,” d’Artagnan says practically. “I’ve just come to tell you – everyone’s safely in de Mayeux’s cell, and we’re regrouping in the stairwell. We’re ready to tackle high security, if everything is safe here?”

Athos looks back around a corner and down a long hallway to Bernajoux. The Red Guard catches his eye and gives him a thumbs-up.

“No changes here,” Bernajoux calls. “Charon says the escapees are all away from this wave; they’re standing by for the Musketeers. And at this rate the reinforcements are going to pitch camp outside the gates instead of charging them.”

“Thank you!” Athos calls back. He turns to d’Artagnan. “We’re safe enough here. We’re regrouping in the stairwell, you said?”

“On the landing just below high security,” d’Artagnan confirms, heading back up. He lowers his voice. “Athos, does any of this make sense to you?”

“No,” Athos confesses. “I can’t understand the presence of Dessessart’s company.”

“Me neither,” d’Artagnan says.

Aramis emerges from locking up de Mayeux’s cell. “Are the guards outside the Bastille still arguing over precedence?” he asks.

Athos nods.

“More riddles,” d’Artagnan says, frustrated.

“To me the biggest question is the identity of the special prisoner,” Aramis says. “How can no one from the Inquisition be guarding throwback prisoners?”

“We’ll find out shortly,” Adele says as Aramis, Porthos and d’Artagnan join she, Charlotte and Boisrenard on the landing. Voices carry easily up and down the Bastille’s central stairway; the three on the landing will have heard the three Musketeers’ conversation easily.

Adele beckons them all down from the landing and into a small guard-room just off the stairwell. It’s not on a proper level; it’s set between the top of low security and the bottom of high security, as an additional guard measure between the two. Earlier Charlotte and Adele had rousted out its complement of four guards and sent them down to be locked up in de Mayeux’s suite with the rest. Now the Resistance fighters gather in it to discuss de Mayeux’s information and their next move.

“What’s the plan?” Charlotte asks, getting straight down to business.

Athos presses his lips together. “If the next levels really are being guarded by Dessessart’s troops,” he says carefully, “then all we should really need to do is… knock.”

“And they’ll let us in? Just like that?” d’Artagnan asks skeptically.
“Dessessart is Treville’s cousin,” Aramis says. “And unless I’m very much mistaken…”

“His regiment is full of throwbacks too,” Adele confirms.

“On the other hand,” Boisrenard says, “If de Mayeux’s lackey was wrong –”

“Or lying,” Charlotte puts in.

“– then knocking would cost us the element of surprise.”

Athos nods. “In which case we are all very likely to end up dead.” Unlike the lower floors, high security is well-manned and armed to the teeth. Taking the cell block is possible, with superior tactics and the element of surprise. Without those things, they’ll take heavy casualties in the very best of situations.

Militarily, of course, heavy casualties are an acceptable outcome. Athos doesn’t know the identity of the special prisoner. He must therefore operate under the worst-case scenario. He cannot rule out the possibility of the prisoner’s being Treville. In that case, the Resistance must get him out of there or die trying. The information in Treville’s head is simply too valuable to allow to fall into the Inquisition’s hands.

Athos is a soldier. He knows this. He knows the value of a soldier’s life. But the people here with Athos aren’t just soldiers; they’re pack. Clan. As he’d told Richelieu back in the hunting-grounds, it makes a very great deal of difference whose lives are in danger.

Adele is watching Athos steadily. She’d formally deferred to Athos during their long ride back to Paris. This is the first test of their new hierarchy. She’s waiting patiently for Athos to point out a course, though the glint in her eye says she’s reserving the right of protest to herself.

“If we attack first some of the guards will be killed before we can determine their identity,” Athos says slowly.

He doesn’t only refer to their opening salvo of musket-shot and swordplay. The doors to the upper levels are more strongly made than the ones that had barred the entrance to the low security cells; no amount of strength nor clever application of leverage will get through them. They’ve adopted an alternate approach that is its own source of danger to the guards on the upper level.

Athos looks over at the door. Two of Boisrenard’s squad have already rolled a small cask of gunpowder up from the armory below and jammed it into the doorway. A hole dug in its side accommodates an oiled length of cord, trailed across the landing into the small guard-room where Athos’ team are currently debating.

The room is set between two levels, structurally sound. From here they can detonate the gunpowder and blow the door. Opening up their access to high security. Confusing and disorienting their opponents. And killing or maiming anyone within the blast radius.

No issue, if their opponents are Inquisitorial guards, who have long ago declared that they will offer no quarter but death to Athos’ people. But a very large issue if the people on the other side of the door are Dessessart’s regiment. Those people are throwbacks. Many of them of them work for the Underground. Some of them may even be Resistance. All of them are deserving of mercy. Killing Inquisition troops is self-defense; killing Dessessart’s troops would be murder.

Athos looks back at his pack and Boisrenard. “I am going to knock on this door,” he says evenly. “You all are to stay in the guard-room. If the Guards are Dessessart’s people, I’ll signal. If I shout – or if I am shot or stabbed – blow the gunpowder.”
D’Artagnan spins on him. “It will kill you!”

“Only if they’re our enemies – in which case the gunpowder will just be doing what they’d do regardless, since I’ll be out there on my own.”

“No,” d’Artagnan cries. “Of all the foolish, reckless, idiotic –”

“We can’t attack without knowing whom we’re fighting,” Athos says simply. “I won’t have Dessessart’s people die in the name of Treville’s.”

“And I won’t have you die in the name of anyone!”

“I think de Mayeux was telling the truth. I think those are Dessessart’s Guards in there. I think we owe them the same duty we owe any other throwbacks – whatever uniform they wear.”

D’Artagnan falters. “But –”

“Do you disagree?” Athos takes a moment to look at the rest of the people in the small guard-room. “Do any of you?”

“No,” Charlotte says reluctantly.

“I don’t,” Adele says.

Aramis looks rebellious, but finally shakes his head.

“No,” Boisrenard says.

Athos looks back at d’Artagnan.

“You know I don’t,” d’Artagnan cries. “But – why does it have to be this way? Why does it have to be you?”

“If not I, then whom?”

“I –” d’Artagnan hesitates. “I could –”

“I too am a Musketeer,” Athos says gently. “I too have a duty. And I, too, refuse to let this world be any less safe – for any of us – than it has to be.”

D’Artagnan makes a lost noise. He kisses Athos with tears in his eyes and a far-too-tight grip on Athos’ shoulders. Then he throws his arms around Athos and just clings for a minute.

“You’d better be right,” d’Artagnan whispers against Athos’ neck. “You’d better walk away from that door in one piece.”

“It is in God’s hands,” Athos says gently. He looks up, meeting Adele’s gaze across d’Artagnan’s shoulder. “If I’m wrong, you know what to do?”

She nods. There’s no rebellious glint in her eye now, only a fierce pride.

“Vaya con Dios,” she says.

“For what it’s worth,” Boisrenard adds, “I agree about de Mayeux.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Aramis says thickly. “At least duck after you knock, all right? And cover your
head. I can fix most of you but I can’t fix your head.”

“All right,” Athos says fondly. He sees no need to mention that, with as much gunpowder as is needed to take down that door, there’s no question of anything being left of Athos.

Charlotte gently tugs d’Artagnan away from Athos. D’Artagnan lets himself be tugged, but starts clinging to her instead. She wraps her arms around him and shushes him.

“Good luck,” she says to Athos simply.

“Thank you,” he says to her. To them all.

And to d’Artagnan, just in case: “I love you.”

“I love you too,” d’Artagnan says, muffled by Charlotte’s hair.

Athos nods at his pack and Boisrenard. Then he turns and walks across the small landing and up the three stairs that lead him to the door to high security and the top of the Bastille.

He takes a deep breath. He murmurs a quiet prayer. He thinks, fleetingly, of Thomas and Charlotte – Charlotte as she had used to be, when she and Olivier been young and mated and in love. Of Olivier’s parents. Laflèche. De Guignes. Havet and Brasseur, who are somewhere above him, and God willing still alive. Of everyone he’s ever wished he could have done something more to save. Of everyone he’s been able to help. Of his pack. Of the Captain. He thinks of the sad times, then puts that sadness away. He thinks of the happy times, and lets himself smile.

Then Athos raises his hand and knocks.

Across Paris, Rochefort enters the Louis’ chambers as if it’s he who reigns here and not the King who shrinks from him.

“Forgive my intrusion, your Majesty,” Rochefort says to Louis. He doesn’t take his eyes from Richelieu. “The business of the Church compelled me.”

The Inquisitor’s usual soft tones are exaggerated, nearly to a drawl. It’s the snarl of a hunting cat who’s found its next meal. It’s the way Rochefort usually sounds when he thinks he’s managed to put one over on Richelieu. And, now more than ever, it’s a very, very bad sign.

“You’re surprised to see me,” Rochefort acknowledges, holding Richelieu’s eyes. His own glitter with suppressed glee. “You thought I was still in Rome.”

“Yes, why aren’t you in Rome?” Louis asks, frowning. “The dispatch we received – ”

“A small transcription error, your Majesty,” Rochefort says smoothly. “My clerk apparently misunderstood me.”

It’s a blatant lie and everyone knows it. But it’s irrelevant now.

“Regardless,” Louis says. “This is a French matter.”

“And it is being handled by Frenchmen,” Rochefort says urbanely. “I have given no orders personally. Everything is being done at the behest of the Inquisitor of Paris.”

“Answer to the Queen of France,” Rochefort completes. He steps to one side, clearing the entrance to Louis’ room. “By whose grace I am here today.”

Richelieu’s gaze returns to the door. Anne of Austria has appeared, Constanza ever at her side.

He’s not surprised. It’s inevitable. Rochefort could not have kept his presence and actions concealed from Richelieu’s network – now or in the last six months – without the help of one of France’s monarchs. Anne has been helping Rochefort this entire time. Helping him suborn Bonacieux. Helping him kidnap Treville. Helping Rochefort lay the plot to unmask the Resistance and wipe out the hope that remains to their people.

“Anne, neither of you should be here,” Louis says to his wife. He’s casting compulsive glances between her and the Inquisitor of Lille. “Leave.”

“No,” Anne says. She’s pale, and she’s clutching the hands of her confidante Constanza hard enough that the poor woman must be in pain. But Constanza doesn’t try to pull away, and the Queen’s voice is quiet but determined. She says, “I have to know if what Toreno says is true.”

“And what does Toreno say?” Richelieu cuts in, seizing the conversational reins and – hopefully – the upper hand. The emphasis he lays on Rochefort’s Spanish title is meant to remind everyone that the man has allegiances beyond this room. That he is, to put it bluntly, less trustworthy than Richelieu himself.

Perhaps the situation can still be saved. Perhaps there will be no need for violence.

Unfortunately, Rochefort’s smile only grows wider. “I really didn’t expect it to be you, you know,” he says to Richelieu, shaking his head in bemusement. “When I laid this little trap for the leader of the Resistance, I had no idea who was going to fall into it, I truly didn’t. Honestly, my money was on the Comtesse de Larroque.”

“There’s no such thing as the Resistance,” Richelieu says automatically.

“Of course there is,” Rochefort chides. “And I’m looking at its head right now.”

Every instinct Richelieu has screams for him to stiffen, make himself look bigger, challenge the Beta who dares to threaten Richelieu. Richelieu fights them down with the strength of a lifetime. Instead he pastes his most incredulous look on his face and turns to the King with exaggerated surprise.

“Your Majesty,” Richelieu says, “the Inquisitor has gone mad! I always knew he was a little odd – with his obsession with this so-called Resistance – but to think he seems to actually believe –”

“No, no, Richelieu,” Rochefort cuts in, shaking his head sadly. “It’s a good effort, I’ll admit, but it simply won’t do. I have you dead to rights.”

“What is he talking about?” Louis demands. The question would seem to be addressed to either Richelieu or Rochefort, but it’s Anne the King looks at, confused and beseeching.

“Toreno has told me,” Anne begins, then has to swallow. Her gaze flits compulsively among the other three players in the drama.

Constanza puts an arm around her shoulders and murmurs something encouraging.

“He tells me that he has long suspected Captain Treville of being –” Anne falters.

“An Omega,” Rochefort says. “It’s all right, Anne, I know it’s a filthy word – but you have the
courage to say it.”

“Which is of course a complete lie,” Treville interjects.

“Toreno also suspects there of being such a thing as a throwback Resistance,” Constanza says, “and that the Captain is part of that too.”

“But Rochefort doesn’t come here accusing the Captain,” Louis says, bewildered. “He comes here accusing the Cardinal.”

“Obviously your precious Captain Treville has to have a mate somewhere,” Rochefort says condescendingly. “No Omega could accomplish all of this alone. Lead the King’s Musketeers? Run not one, but two covert organizations? Far beyond the skills of brainless slut.”

The flash of pain in Richelieu’s heart nearly causes him to stumble. It’s not physical. It’s an echo, the reflection of what Treville is feeling right now. Rochefort has obviously been going down this path longer than either of them had known. He knows just how to hurt Treville. Not just to dismiss his accomplishments, but to drag up the worst stereotypes of his sex, the ones Jean’s spent a lifetime trying to live beyond. To let Rochefort stick his dirty fingers into the open wounds of Treville’s past and twist.

Once again Richelieu has to shove down every instinct he possesses. Turning to take his mate into his arms and comfort him would be fatal. It’s hard. But somehow Richelieu maintains his incredulous stare.

“This is a fascinating look at the operations of a diseased mind,” he says dismissively.

“A diseased mind,” Rochefort says thoughtfully. He nods. “You know, Cardinal, I think I must agree with you. Any mind that thinks a Resistance has any hope of succeeding must truly be diseased.”

“You were saying something about the Captain’s mate,” Anne says. She’s so pale that Richelieu is isn’t sure she’s not going to faint. Constanza is supporting her, else she’d sink to her knees.

Spanish, Richelieu thinks with a sinking feeling. The Queen isn’t usually a cruel woman. But all of her childhood prejudices will be out in full force at the mere mention of throwbacks. And she’s conditioned to trust Toreno, her spiritual guide since adolescence.

“It was obvious to me from the start that Treville’s mate must be the real power behind the French Resistance,” Rochefort agrees. The man is so self-satisfied he’s practically preening. “The trick has been to discover that person. They’d covered their tracks well. So well that at times I doubted myself. But then I obtained confirmation that that person did exist. My agent died to bring it to me, but I received it nonetheless.”

The Dutch spy, Richelieu recalls. The man must have done more damage, gotten farther into the Underground, then they’d known at the time. Far enough to have learned beyond a doubt that Treville was mated, at least.

“So I laid a trap,” Rochefort finishes. He smiles. “Capture the Captain and drug him up. Then leave him for the Musketeers to find, and watch as they led me straight to his mate.”

“Toreno tells me that they took Treville to your estates, Cardinal,” Anne says to Richelieu. “Is it true?”

“I have no idea where the Musketeers go,” Richelieu says through numb lips. Treville’s silent at his
side, pouring all his strength into Richelieu so Richelieu can keep fighting this battle. But the quiet stillness in their bond tells him Treville already knows it won’t do any good.

“Oh, don’t worry, I do know,” Rochefort says silkily. “My men followed Treville and his Musketeers straight to the Richelieu estates. Right into your famous hunting grounds. And then, at the same time, you left the city in quite a hurry. What called you away so urgently?”

“You are of course aware that I have my spies,” Richelieu says, trying to project an aura of confidence. “I heard some garbled reports that there were throwbacks approaching my estates. Doubtless I have your men to thank for that? But when I arrived, it all turned out to be nothing.”

“A fine story,” Rochefort acknowledges.

“I believe the Cardinal,” Louis says unexpectedly. “Of course that must be what happened. Rochefort, your diligence is to be commended, but – ”

“But of course your Majesty must make his own decision,” Rochefort finishes. He sounds far too cheerful for Richelieu’s tastes. “And as your Majesty is so wisely called the Just, he will of course wish to examine all the evidence.”

“How tiresome,” Louis says with a hint of his usual petulance. “If you really think it necessary to parade witnesses before me…”

“No, of course not,” Rochefort says with a solicitous bow. “I would never sport with your Majesty’s valuable time in such a way. I’m sure we can settle this matter much more easily.”

“Truly?” Louis sounds cautious. Richelieu shares the sentiment. “What did you have in mind?”

“In my capacity as the Inquisitor of Lille, based on reports I have received from Inquisition operatives and sworn to before a Church tribunal, I formally accuse the Cardinal de Richelieu of being a hidden throwback,” Rochefort proclaims. “Specifically, an Alpha. I challenge him to produce irrefutable proof of his innocence on the spot, or be taken into Inquisition custody for interrogation.”

“Proof?” Louis says blankly.

Anne’s gaze seems to burn where it’s fixed on Richelieu. “He disrobes,” she says.

“The presence or absence of a knot is easy to discern from visual inspection,” Rochefort condescends to explain. He raises an eyebrow. “What do you say, Cardinal?”

Richelieu doesn’t respond.

Rochefort’s smile grows wider. “Why do you hesitate? A few moments of your time, a small chore, and I am sent back to Lille in disgrace. Surely you are eager to seize this opportunity?”

It’s over. Richelieu knows it in the ball of lead that’s formed in his stomach. In the despair that sits just below his heart, his and not-his. In the way Rochefort’s tongue darts out to touch his lips, like he’s already tasting their blood.


“Can be waived with dispensation,” Rochefort cuts in. He’s not even bothering to disguise his glee as righteous indignation any more. “If you won’t grant yourself a dispensation, I’ll do it for you.” He makes the sign of the cross in Richelieu’s direction. “Ego te absolve. There. Any other excuses?”
Richelieu tries to think of something. He even goes so far as to dart at look at the King, a mute appeal. But though Louis looks anguished, he doesn’t speak. He only looks at the Queen.

And Anne of Austria looks back. Cold, implacable, with the full force of her Spanish heritage behind her. It doesn’t matter what Louis proclaims. Even assuming Rochefort were to bend knee to the French throne, Anne won’t. She’ll press the issue. They have no escape.

The Queen turns her gaze on Richelieu.


Rochefort’s smile is proud. “As I have so often told you, Ana, it will set you free.”

“The truth?” Richelieu whispers.

Anne nods, regal and determined. “And neither you, nor anyone else, is leaving this room until I get it.”
Athos hadn’t know what to expect when he’d knocked on the door to the high security levels of the Bastille. He’d known what he’d hoped and what he’d feared. What he’d expected is something else entirely, something he doesn’t fully understand.

In the event, it doesn’t matter. What he gets is silence.

The door is thick and heavy, an ancient, gnarled wood. It soaks up the force of Athos’ knuckles and gives back barely an echo. Athos frowns. It’s ridiculous to be balked by a door, of all things. He beats on the door again, louder, using the curl of his fist instead of his knuckles. Maybe he overdoes it: this time the sound of his hand meeting wood echoes through the stairwell.

A moment goes by. Two. Three. He finds himself holding his breath, and makes himself let it out.

There’s a hole cut into the door at about face-height, a small rectangle just enough to expose a face, and it’s barred and covered with a sliding piece of wood. That piece of wood slides open now.

“Athos!”

The relief that rushes through Athos is so strong he nearly staggers. The face on the other side of the door isn’t an Inquisitorial guard. It isn’t even a member of Dessessart’s company. It’s Brasseur, and he looks surprised and thrilled in equal measure.

“Hang on,” Brasseur says. “Hang on – ” His face disappears, and Athos can faintly hear the sounds of a barricade being dismantled.

The door opens. Brasseur tumbles out, nearly knocking Athos backward with the force of his enthusiastic embrace.

“Are we glad to see you!” he says. “What on Earth is going on?”

“An excellent question,” Athos manages. He turns, awkward with Brasseur’s continued grasp, and waves towards the guard-room.

The rest of Athos’ part comes out to join them. D’Artagnan shoots Brasseur a dirty look for being so handsy with Athos, though he’s so obviously relieved that Brasseur just laughs and lets Athos go, holding his palms up in a gesture of submission. D’Artagnan promptly grabs Athos himself.

“You’re an idiot,” d’Artagnan tells him. “I can’t believe I just let you do that.”

“I was right,” Athos points out. “And you can hardly claim the right to put yourself in danger without according me the same.”

“If this is how you feel all the time then no wonder you keep trying to lock me up,” d’Artagnan says fervently.

“Is Dessessart’s company here?” Aramis is asking. “We heard from de Mayeux – ”

“Yes, there’s here,” Brasseur says. He beckons the group in. “We’re all here.”

“Who is ‘all’?” Adele asks.

“Funny you should ask,” Havet says, appearing.
Athos takes rapid stock of them both. Havet has an arm in a sling – Aramis is already fussing over it – but other than that he seems fine. Brasseur is in even better condition: nothing worse than a few scrapes and bruises. For two people Athos had fully expected to find horribly murdered, it’s nothing short of miraculous.

“What on earth is going on?” Athos asks, unconsciously echoing Brasseur.

Havet gives them all a half-smile. “We were hoping you could tell us,” he admits. “We can’t figure it out.”

“Has your rescue arrived?” Dessessart appears at the end of the corridor. He bows precisely. “Good day, M. Athos, messieurs and mesdames.”

Athos returns the bow. Dessessart has always been a stickler for propriety, and if there’s no imminent danger, it costs nothing to indulge it.

“We are here to rescue our people, yes,” Athos says cautiously. “But I must say we expected a great deal more resistance in doing so.”

Adele coughs. “To say the least.”

“When the Inquisition arrested us all we expected to be hung at dawn,” Havet agrees. “But no sooner had they locked us all up here in the Bastille than Dessessart’s company arrived with orders from the King.”


Dessessart reaches into his pocket and produces a parchment, embossed with Louis’ seal and signature. “That we are to take immediate responsibility for the prisoners on the upper levels of the Bastille; that we are to treat them in accordance with the laws of France; that the guards formerly assigned to these levels were to remove themselves immediately, and report to their commander for reassignment; that this duty remain in effect until decreed otherwise by the King himself, or by a messenger, whose sign I would recognize.”

“The laws of France,” Athos murmurs, frowning. That’s a significant clause. There has always been a distinction between the laws of France and those of the Church and the Inquisition. In giving way to the Inquisition, Louis – and Henry before him – has always been careful not to change the laws of France itself. Instead there have been agreements that one set of laws or the other were to prevail in certain situations. Most notably the ones involving throwbacks.

It’s a subtle but significant distinction. It leaves France’s laws intact and ready to reassert themselves in case the Inquisition is ever expelled. The Underground had always given Louis credit for that, respecting him for resisting the Inquisition somewhat, though not enough, never enough. Athos knows now that Richelieu himself has been behind as much of that as the King, though always from several removes. But the King has taken advantage of it now.

“Come on,” Brasseur says, interrupting Athos’ thoughts and beckoning them further down the cell block. “I assume you’re here to rescue us.”

“You assume correctly,” Aramis says.

“Then for God’s sake let’s get moving before reinforcements come.”

“Reinforcements are already here,” Boisrenard says. “But they’re not charging the gates. The King’s Guards are stalling them.” His gaze slides to Dessessart.
“What an amazing thing,” Dessessart says blandly.

“Still, we don’t know how long it will last,” Adele says in worry. “I agree we’d better get moving.”

“The rest of the troops are in the guard-room,” Havet explains, leading them deeper into the high security levels.

“The cells are empty,” Charlotte says, looking around.

Dessessart coughs politely. “I saw no need to keep the Musketeers confined more than necessary,” he says. “Certainly, no one was to be allowed to leave this cell block until new orders came, but as everyone was willing to offer their parole, a certain amount of latitude seemed desirable.”

The sound of laughter echoes down the corridor. The Bastille corridor. Athos admits defeat. The world is turned on its head; he may as well accept it.

The corridor reaches an intersection. Two other corridors branch off, containing more cells. Here in the center is a large guard-room and armory. Seated around the large trestle table, three Musketeers are playing at cards with four of Dessessart’s guards, while their comrades comment in loud voices. At the sight of Athos’ party they all throw down their cards and leap to their feet, cheering. The Musketeers are mobbed by enthusiastic comrades. The Guards hang back a little, as do Adele, Charlotte and Boisrenard. But everyone is smiling. Everyone is happy.

“Everyone looks all right,” d’Artagnan says in amazement.

Athos runs a critical eye over the group and comes to the same conclusion. “No one’s been tortured?”

“No one,” Havet confirms. He gestures awkwardly to his own bound arm. “I got the worst of it when we tried to fight off the arrest squads at the garrison. Since we arrived here no one’s been maltreated.”

“I’m surprised no one was hurt resisting arrest,” Aramis says.

Brasseur sighs ruefully. “They had the bane. Most of were incapacitated and couldn’t fight back.” His gaze slides to Havet and acquires a look of fond pride. “Havet fought the longest.”

“You were all under my protection,” Havet protests. “Anyone would have done the same.” He doesn’t look proud. He looks worried, and glances at Athos as if waiting for his reaction.

Athos doesn’t need d’Artagnan’s nudge to give Havet an approving look in return. “No one could have done better,” he reassures the other Musketeer. “Everyone’s in one piece; you’ve worked a miracle.”

“Let’s start getting them downstairs to Porthos,” Adele says. Her gaze flicks to Dessessart’s. “Unless Monsieur wishes to protest?”

“Monsieur requires only to be presented with the appropriate sign,” Dessessart replies. He holds out one hand.

Adele looks at it, confused. Athos figures it out first. He reaches into his pocket and produces the token of the Underground. Ceremonially, he places it into Dessessart’s hand.

Dessessart accepts it. Then he folds up the orders he’s still holding, carefully, and tucks them in his pocket. “My duty is done,” he says formally. Then he smiles. It makes him look approachable. “And
if you wouldn’t mind, I believe my troops would like to join the rescue.”

“You would be most welcome,” Athos says.


“You mean the special prisoner?” Havet asks. He shares a look with Dessessart. “I don’t know what to do with him, to be honest.”

“So it’s not the Captain?”

“What? No, of course not!” Havet looks shocked. “Wait – are you saying the Captain isn’t with you?”

Now it’s Athos’ and Adele’s turn to share a look. “He was,” Athos says carefully. “But he came back to Paris when he heard about your being arrested. We were afraid he’d been captured, too.”

“He’s not here,” Brasseur says. “Our prisoner is – someone else.”

“Who?” Athos demands.

Havet and Brasseur exchange looks.

“Can I tell them?” Brasseur asks, sounding far too gleeful at the prospect of the Inquisition troops overrunning Paris.

“We’d better let them see for themselves,” Havet says. “They won’t believe us otherwise. God knows I still don’t believe it.”

“What are you talking about?” Aramis asks, exasperated.

“Come on,” Brasseur says. “It’s a day for miracles, and you haven’t seen them all yet.”

Havet turns back to the Musketeers. “You all get ready to move,” he orders. “We’ll be back in five minutes and start the evacuation then.”

“Guards too,” Dessessart adds.

Everyone jumps into motion. Brasseur beckons the rescue party past them, down one of the cell corridors.

Once again the cells are all empty. Except, Athos sees, the one at the end. It’s not only locked and barred. A thick, heavy curtain has been draped across its door, preventing any intercourse.

“We thought for certain the special prisoner must be the Captain,” Aramis says in blank confusion. “But you’d never have kept him locked up still while the rest of you were free.”

“Oh, no,” Havet says.

“This prisoner is being held by order of the King,” Dessessart says. “I doubt you will try to free him, M. Athos, but I must inform you that if you were to try you would be obliged to kill me in the attempt, and likewise all of my Guards.”

“Kill you?” Athos says blankly. “Good God, who can it be?”

“See for yourself,” Brasseur says, and sweeps back the curtain.

Athos doesn’t see how Aramis or Boisrenard react. He merely stares, shocked. 

Glaring out at them all from within the cell, looking absolutely murderous, sits the Inquisitor of Paris. 

“My God,” Boisrenard says blankly. 

Bonacieux spits. He’s got good aim; it sails through the barred door and lands inches from Boisrenard’s foot. The Resistance fighter looks unimpressed. 


Dessessart coughs. “The Inquisitor is imprisoned on two charges of high treason.” 

“Two?” Charlotte cries. 

“Yes ma’am. One against the Crown, and the other, against the Church.” 

“The Church?” That’s Adele. There seems to be only just enough wit among all of them to speak once, and it’s passing through their group like a talisman. 

“For denouncing us,” Brasseur explains. “The proper form was for Bonacieux to speak to the Cardinal first. He doesn’t have authority to go directly to the King. By doing so, technically, he committed treason against the Inquisition.” 

“A minor detail,” Bonacieux snarls, speaking for the first time. “Any monarch who was a true son of the Church would have disregarded it!” 

“Louis is King, not the Inquisitor,” Aramis says sternly. “It is not for you to question his policies.” 

“Rochefort will bring the King to heel,” Bonacieux says. “Louis will bend knee to the Church, the way your precious Cardinal had never made him, and Rochefort and the Queen will guide policy from now on.” 

“He’s been going on like this for two days,” Brasseur sighs. “Something about a throwback Resistance, and the Captain.” 

“And the Cardinal, if you can credit that,” Havet adds with a laugh. “It’s the best joke I’ve ever heard. Something to keep our spirits up while we’re locked up here, at any rate.” 

“It’s no joke,” Bonacieux hisses. “Ask them. They know.” 

“Know?” Havet turns to look at Athos. “Know what?” 

“They know the Resistance is real,” Bonacieux says. “They know about the Cardinal.” 

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Athos says, falling back on his mien of greatest nobility and austerity. D’Artagnan had joked once that when Athos gets like this, anyone under his gaze feels like the lowest of insects. Athos certainly hopes it’s true now. 

“Liar,” Bonacieux spits. “Not that it matters. Soon enough our positions will be reversed. Rochefort will triumph over Richelieu at last. And in gratitude for my help, he will give me as long as I wish with any of you.” 

“Louis will never let that happen,” Adele says, but she sounds unsure.
Bonacieux smirks. “Rochefort’s been tutoring me in some new techniques,” he says, ignoring Adele’s protest. “Richelieu was always too soft on you animals. Of course, now I understand why. But Rochefort has been attending to my education quite thoroughly. Who shall I start with? You?” Bonacieux’s gaze slides sideways and alights on d’Artagnan. He’s grown quickly in the almost two weeks since they were in the capitol. From a distance, covered in his cloak, d’Artagnan had passed well enough to ride through the streets of Paris. Up close the swell of his stomach is obvious.

Bonacieux smiles. “You,” he says, voice dark with promise.

Athos snarls. Without intending to he takes a step closer to the bars. Bonacieux starts laughing.

Dessessart reaches for the curtain. “Unless you’ve any other questions – ”

“She’s okay,” Adele says tersely.

Dessessart glances to Athos, who nods. The curtain is lowered back in place. It doesn’t stop them hearing Bonacieux’s cackle.

Havet glances between Athos and Adele. He opens his mouth to speak, then visibly thinks better of it. Instead he leads them back down the corridor, well out of earshot of Bonacieux or the men playing cards in the guard-room.

“All right, Athos, you’ve gotten your answers,” Havet says. “We’re all here, we’re unharmed, and Bonacieux is in a cell for treason, so don’t worry about that. Now it’s your turn. What in blazes is going on? Where have you been? Where’s the Captain? And why are you all pale as ghosts at the mention of the Cardinal?”

“All the same,” Adele says.

Athos considers. “D’Artagnan, Aramis, Charlotte, Boisrenard – start evacuating the Musketeers,” he says. “M. Dessessart, would you oblige me by doing the same?”

Dessessart nods. “I believe I shall,” he says, a little ruefully. “Dangerous to know too much. Only first, tell me – my cousin – your Captain – is he all right?”

“I don’t know,” Athos says evasively.

Adele is more direct. “He’s in danger, but he is not without allies.”

“He’s always in it up to his neck, whatever’s going on,” Dessessart sighs. “We spent a summer together as children, you know. Before his father died. I’ve always been fond of him. I could never follow him down the path he walks, but I’ve done what I could, and I’d hate to see anything happen to him.”

“If there’s anything you can do we’ll be sure you learn it,” Athos says. “But if he’s not here after all – then I’m very much afraid – ”
“Don’t say it,” Dessessart says. “Jean’s survived a lot. He’ll survive this, too.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” Aramis murmurs.

“Just so.” Dessessart bows. “I’ll go see to the evacuation.”

Aramis, Charlotte and Boisrenard follow him away. D’Artagnan lingers for a moment.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

Adele sighs. “Expand the circle of secrecy a little farther,” she says regretfully, and turns to Havet and Brasseur.

All things considered, Havet and Brasseur take it fairly well.


“Never mind that,” Havet says. “The Resistance is real?”

“As stone and sun,” Adele says.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Brasseur swears.

“And Rochefort – ” Havet starts.

“This whole affair, from the Captain’s kidnapping to now, has been part of Rochefort’s ploy to expose Treville and Richelieu,” Athos summarizes. “It didn’t work entirely, but – ”

“It still might,” Havet says, nodding.

“Where is the Cardinal now?” Brasseur asks.

“He went after Treville,” Adele says. “We believe that Treville went to the palace to ask Louis to intercede on your behalf.”

“None of us thought it had a prayer of working,” Athos confesses. “But now I wonder.”

“Dessessart had orders to protect us,” Havet says thoughtfully. “Bonacieux’s in a cell.”

“And downstairs there are two regiments of the King’s Guards, under Chambert, stalling the Inquisition’s troops,” Athos says. “Jurisdiction, they’re claiming. We couldn’t figure out why. But now I think it’s to give us time to rescue you.”

“Dessessart knew to expect you,” Brasseur says. “He wouldn’t admit as much outright, but in that prim way he has, he gave us to understand that a rescue was coming.”

“And here you are.” Havet grins suddenly. “So the Captain will be fine, too. You’ll see. The King will smuggle him out of the palace. We’ll meet up with him. Get out of France – ”

“Or work for the Resistance!” Brasseur says in excitement.

Athos finds himself smiling. He thinks for a shining moment that they might succeed after all. And if Louis is on their side then who knows what else might be possible?

Rochefort will bring the King to heel, Bonacieux had said. He’ll bend knee to the Church, the way your precious Cardinal had never made him, and Rochefort and the Queen will guide policy from
Athos feels his smile slipping away. Suddenly his instincts clamor. Bonacieux had seemed very sure of himself. Athos had dismissed it as hubris. But now he finds himself thinking twice.

“Athos?” Adele asks, quickest to notice his change of focus. “What is it?”

“Bonacieux,” Athos says slowly. “Something he said…”

“What, about Rochefort triumphing over Richelieu? Of course he’d say that.”

“Something else,” Athos says still more slowly. He’s racking his memory for the exact words. “He said…”

_Rochefort and the Queen will guide policy from now on._

“Oh my God,” Athos says faintly.

The Queen. The _Queen._

They’d missed it. They’d been so focused on Rochefort and Bonacieux that they’d missed it entirely.

Rochefort is working with the Queen.

But if that’s so then –

Athos turns on his heel and strides back down the corridor. When he reaches the end he tears back the curtain that shields Bonacieux from the rest of the prison. It flutters to the ground, forgotten.

Bonacieux looks up and shows his teeth. “Something for you, throwback?”

“Rochefort is working with the Queen,” Athos says.

“Of course.” Bonacieux spread his hands. “The Infanta has always loved her mentor dearly.”

The way Bonacieux pronounces _loved_ makes Athos’ stomach turn. He sets it aside ruthlessly.

“You said Louis would be brought to heel,” Athos says. “How?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Why shouldn’t you?” Adele says, coming up behind Athos. “If you’re confident it will work, if you expect us to die shortly, then why not speak?”

“Give us the chance to understand how you’ve beaten us,” Brasseur says. Obsequious fawning must be the correct tack to approach Bonacieux on: the man visibly brightens. “Show us your superiority, and let us admire it.”

Bonacieux preens. “Well,” he says after a moment. “After Rochefort wisely took me into his confidence, I naturally learned a great deal about his plans. Things he doesn’t even know I know.”

“You said Louis would be brought to heel,” Brasseur says. He manages to look admiring; Athos wonders how he can do it.

“Rochefort has been tracking the Resistance for a long time,” Bonacieux says. “He knew it must be connected to the Underground, but for the longest time he couldn’t figure out how. Eventually he got
a spy deep enough in their workings to realize that it went all the way to the very top. To its leader.”

“Captain Treville,” Athos says.


“And so the trap was laid for said mate.” Athos makes himself lean back and look bored, though his instincts are screaming. “We know this already.”

“Ahh, but you don’t know how it was done,” Bonacieux says.


“I?” Bonacieux smiles. “Well, I’d love the credit, but as a Christian I am obliged to correct you. Rochefort handled that himself.”

“How?” Havet cries with unfeigned surprise. “Rochefort is in Rome!”

Bonacieux starts laughing.

“He isn’t,” Athos says with a sinking heart. “He’s here in Paris. He’s been here all along.”

“But how?” Adele whispers. “We would have heard – we would have known – ”

“Unless he had a patron and protector even more powerful than the Cardinal,” Athos says grimly.

“Louis wouldn’t – ”

“I’m not talking about Louis.”

Bonacieux laughs harder.

Athos says, “The Queen.”

Adele, Havet and Brasseur turn pale.

“The Queen has been protecting Rochefort all along,” Athos says woodenly.

“She smuggled him into the country,” Bonacieux agrees, still smiling wide. “She provided the purse and the power for him to hire all the brigands he needed outside of Inquisitorial channels, to avoid tipping anyone off. Even now she’s helping Rochefort capture your precious Captain and his precious mate.”

“Louis – ”

“I told you, Louis is being brought to heel,” Bonacieux says. A cold note enters his voice. “Louis may not have known about Richelieu, but he’s been protecting Treville and all you Musketeers this whole time. Guardsmen, too. Why, there’s even proof he knew about the Underground and hasn’t been working to stamp it out.”

Athos thinks of Dessessart, holding out his hand for the Underground’s token as proof of Athos’ party’s intentions. Thinks about the line in Dessessart’s orders: that this duty remain in effect until decreed otherwise by the King himself, or by a messenger, whose sign you will recognize. Thinks about the King commissioning new troops regularly, though France is at peace, always without looking too hard into anyone’s backstory.
“Louis thinks the Queen doesn’t know,” Bonacieux says. “Thanks to Rochefort, she does. Naturally she’s outraged at her husband’s corruption. They will confront him with it and with the true sex of Louis’ beloved Cardinal. They’ll force Louis to recant. To repent. To set himself once again on the path of righteousness.”

“To be blackmailed, in short,” Adele spits.

“And then Anne and Rochefort will rule France together, with Louis – and you – as their puppets,” Athos says.

“I am no one’s puppet!” Bonacieux cries. “I am the only one who was willing to listen to Rochefort! To give him the support he needs!”

“Where is Rochefort now?” Adele demands. “With the Queen?”

“They should be unmasking your precious leaders even as we speak,” Bonacieux says triumphantly. “The palace will be filling with soldiers, under the Queen’s orders. There will be no escape for either your Captain or the Cardinal.”

“No,” Brasseur whispers.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see them again very soon. You’ll all share a large cell – for a very short while.” Bonacieux starts laughing again.

“We have to do something,” Adele says.

“But what?” Athos cries.

“Rescue the Captain, of course,” Havet says.

“There’s no rescue or escape for any of you,” Bonacieux cackles.

Athos goes to throttle him, them makes himself stop. They don’t have time for that.

“Come on,” he says again, leading his group down the hallway and out of earshot of Bonacieux. His mad laughter still echoes in Athos’ ears, though, even after it fades with distance and the heavy stones that have absorbed many a scream.

“How can we rescue them?” Adele says. “If the palace is crawling with Inquisitorial troops – ”

“So we storm the palace,” Havet says. “Haven’t you been listening? There are more of us than we ever thought! Musketeers, Dessessart’s Guards – you said there were two regiments downstairs – ”


“Dessessart and Chambert will know other regiments in the army that can be trusted,” Brasseur picks up. “With Bonacieux in that cell and Richelieu – God, Richelieu on our side, I still can’t believe it – the Inquisitorial troops will be in disarray. The Red Guards – ”

“The Red Guards won’t march on anyone’s order but Richelieu’s,” Adele says. “They’re all sympathizers anyway.”

Havet looks stunned. “ Truly?”

“Two squads of them are here with us,” Athos confirms.
“God is for us,” Havet murmurs, shaking his head.

Brasseur crosses himself. “And so who can be against us?” he asks earnestly. “Bonacieux can talk all he likes about the Queen summoning Guards, but I’ll wager there aren’t more than a regiment who will act without the King’s seal or the Cardinal’s. Enough to capture two throwbacks, all right, but nowhere near enough to stand up to all of us. Forget running away. This is where we make our stand!”

“Storm the palace?” Athos is dizzy. “Storm the Louvre?”

“That, or abandon France entirely,” Havet says. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to leave it to Rochefort and Bonacieux.”

“Will Dessessart’s troops follow us?”

“They will,” Brasseur says. “What about the Red Guards you brought with you?”

“They will,” Adele promises. There’s something flaring in her eyes, something fiery in her voice. Passion. Determination. Belief. Athos feels it lift his own heart. Feels it begin to grow in him, too. Maybe they can do it.

“And the Musketeers?” Athos asks.

Havet puts his arm around Brasseur’s shoulders. They both look at each other, then at Athos.

“We will,” Havet says.

Athos takes a deep breath. Then another. Then a third.

Storm the palace. Rescue the Captain and the Cardinal. And the King, for that matter. Rescue Louis from the blackmail of Rochefort and the Queen. Honor the oaths Athos had taken as a Musketeer, the duty he’d inherited as a noble, and the identity he’d been born with as a throwback.

Bring about the change he wants to see in the world. Create a France where he and his pack can live in peace, and raise their pups in safety.

“Let’s go round up our troops then,” Athos says, looking up. Looking around the circle. Everyone looks back at him, the same fire in their eyes that he feels in his veins. “They’re going to need to know about the change of plans.”

Anne’s support, so openly and boldly declared, seems to release something in Rochefort. His posture seems to relax, growing open and indolent in anticipation of victory. He turns to Richelieu.

“What have you to say for yourself?” Rochefort asks.

Richelieu doesn’t answer. There’s nothing to say.

“I thought so,” Rochefort gloats. He strides closer, right into Richelieu’s personal space. Treville tenses. Instinctively one hand goes to his belly. This time Richelieu can’t help a corresponding shift in stance. It only makes Rochefort’s smile grow wider.

“I’m going to start with you,” Rochefort says to Richelieu. His tone is almost conversational. “I’ll do it personally – forget that fool Bonacieux. I’ll tie you to the wheel and break every bone in your body. Did you know there’s even a bone in your knot? It makes a sound like a balloon popping
when it explodes under the hammer.”

The satisfaction is rolling off Rochefort in waves. It saturates his scent and the air around him. Richelieu nearly gags.

“But I won’t kill you then,” Rochefort continues. “You can live on a long while like that. In agony, of course. But that’s all right. I’ll take your mind off your body. I’ll let you watch what I do to him.”

Rochefort’s gaze shifts to Treville. Jean sets his jaw and meets Rochefort glare for glare. Jean’s close enough that Armand can feel him trembling faintly, and Jean’s fear curls in Armand’s heart like a living thing – for himself, for Armand, for the longed-for pups within Jean that will never be whelped. But Jean doesn’t back down.

“I have a hundred tortures specifically designed for an Omega,” Rochefort promises darkly. “I’m going to use every one of them on you, in order, well past the time you beg me for death. You’ll tell me everything you know, but it won’t be enough. You don’t know anything worth learning anyway. Richelieu’s too smart to have told you anything; your kind can’t keep a secret. But you’ll suffer, and beg, and scream, until your mate has told me everything I want to know. Then and only then will I even consider letting you die.”

Richelieu feels the moment when Treville’s control snaps. Jean’s pushed past reason into emotion, all anger and humiliation and sheer bone-deep fear. But if Rochefort had expected Treville to simply break, he’s disappointed. Omegan instincts are no match for a lifetime of training and experience. The Captain of the King’s Musketeers goes for his sword.

Rochefort is forced to jump back a step, eyes widening slightly. But: “I wouldn’t if I were you,” he snarls. The Inquisitor glances to one side, where – to Richelieu’s astonishment – the Queen is holding a musket. And she’s pointing it right at Richelieu. At her side, Constanza levels another at Treville.

“Anne!” Louis shouts. “What are you doing?”

“What I have to,” the Queen says.

“Throwbacks are notoriously good fighters,” Rochefort says. “And they are known to become violent when their sin is revealed.”

“Imagine that,” Jean says coldly.

“But this is what guards are for!” Louis cries.

Rochefort shakes his head. “There are guards elsewhere in the palace, just in case,” he replies. “But guards may be overcome; guards may be defeated. These two would be willing to raise your hands to ordinary guards. I doubt they will raise their hands to their Queen.” He shifts so he’s talking to Richelieu directly. “And if you dared, you would be guilty of regicide, and I would need no other excuse to destroy you.”

The codicil is unnecessary. Richelieu can read the situation plainly. A move against Rochefort now becomes a move against the Queen. A move against the Queen is a move against the King. With one stroke Rochefort makes everyone their enemies, even those, like Louis, who might have been swayed. There is no room left to divide.

Nor to conquer. Say Richelieu kills them all, Louis and Anne and Rochefort. Say he and Jean manage somehow to escape the other troops in the palace. What good will it do them? Richelieu makes no doubt that there is an army ready at their northern border with the Dutch Republic.
Probably one at the Spanish border, too, given George’s Spanish title and ties to Anne’s brother’s court. France would find herself beset on two sides, rejected by Rome, and fighting a simultaneous civil war between those who’d supported the Inquisition and those who would support the Resistance.

“Say something,” Anne says to Richelieu. “Admit it. Admit the truth.”

“You mustn’t expect throwbacks to understand the value of confession,” Rochefort says to her patronizingly.

France might – might – win such a war. Assuming the Inquisition’s support in France is less than Rochefort believes. Assuming the French army will follow Treville, instead of turning on him for his role in Louis’ death. Assuming the French nobility will follow Richelieu and whomever he can find to put on Louis’ throne instead of destroying themselves in petty infighting. Assuming they could quickly negotiate for aid from other countries that have rejected the Inquisition.

Assuming Jean and Armand even survive the act of betrayal and regicide. The palace had been empty when Richelieu had walked its halls. Is it still empty? Or is it filling, slowly, with soldiers and Inquisitorial guards loyal to Rochefort? The Inquisitorial troops will take an order from Bonacieux just as readily as they will from Richelieu. The Red Guards won’t, but Rochefort doesn’t need them. There are more than enough regular troops to overcome two throwbacks.

“For the love of God, say something!” Anne cries again.

Armand needn’t turn his head to look at Jean. Their bond is open between them. Jean knows as well as Armand that there is nothing left to be done. Jussac is safely away. The group storming the Bastille has an excellent chance of escaping, despite Rochefort’s machinations. The freed Musketeers will make excellent Resistance fighters. They will continue on under Jussac’s leadership and Mazarin’s, and one day their people will be free. All that is left to Armand is to die with as many of his secrets still intact as possible.

Jean slips his hand into Armand’s. Armand squeezes it in return, hoping that Jean can feel the love that still burns for him in Armand’s heart.

“There is nothing to say, your Majesty,” Richelieu replies. “The Son of man goeth as it is written of him.”

Presumptuous, of course, to compare himself to Jesus. To use the words of the Son of God as his own. But as Richelieu stares into the face of his own personal Judas, he can’t help but feel the comparison apt.

Rochefort smiles. “It had been good for that man if he had not been born,” he replies, voice thick and heavy with self-satisfaction.

“Anne,” Louis breaks in as Rochefort starts back towards Richelieu. “Why are you doing this? How can you – do you even know how to use a musket?”

“Toreno taught me its use,” Anne says. Her voice shakes, but her aim appears rock-steady. “So that I could defend myself.”

“No one else was willing to listen to me about the Resistance back then,” Rochefort says triumphantly. He’s reaching out his hand now, stretching to seize Richelieu and drag him apart from Treville. “But I made sure the Infanta would not be left unprotected. And now everyone is going to know – ”
He’s cut off by the report of the musket in Anne’s hands going off.

Armand spins. He’s unhurt – has Anne –

Jean is staring at him in the same horror. Armand’s hands skim his mate’s body quickly and come away clean. Distantly he’s aware Jean is doing the same to him. But somehow neither of them are hurt.

An agonized groan comes from behind him. Richelieu pushes his mate behind him for what little safety his body may provide. Then he turns back around in time to see George, Comte de Rochefort, Conde de Toreno, the Inquisitor of Lille, fall to his knees.

His hands are pressed to his chest. Between his fingers a crimson tide begins to weep.

The musket in Constanza’s hands shifts targets. Now it’s pointed directly at the fallen Inquisitor.

“Anne,” Rochefort gasps. “What have you done?”

“Defended myself,” Anne says. She drops the empty musket.

“But – ”

Anne walks over to Rochefort. She doesn’t hurry; her measured footsteps echo off the walls. When she reaches him she stares down at him dispassionately. The blood continues to flow from the wound. For a moment it’s the only thing moving in the room.

“It’s funny,” she says distantly. “I never believed you about the existence of the Resistance. I wish I had. I wish I had known sooner that there was still hope left for me on this Earth.”

“Anne – ” Louis cries. “Anne, don’t – ”

Rochefort is staring at the Queen in astonishment. He tries to speak, but only gurgles. Blood flecks his lips. But the look on his face – shock, betrayal, disgust – speaks for him.

Anne leans forward. “This is the truth,” she growls. Richelieu feels the Queen’s voice as a cold touch on his spine. Next to him, Treville shivers, instinctively pressing closer to his mate.

Alpha, Rochefort’s lips shape. Blood begins to trickle from a corner of his mouth.

“I grew up with you next to me,” Anne hisses. “Every day I had to listen to your poison being dripped in my ear. Your lies and your blasphemies about my people. And if I wanted to keep my life, I had to smile, and repeat what you said, and thank you for your lessons. But every day I was dreaming of this!”

She kicks him in the gut. Rochefort instinctively doubles over, then falls to his side, unable to remain on his knees. He heaves, vomiting blood onto the polished tiles.

“Before you die,” Anne says, bending over him, “you shall know me as I truly am.”

Rochefort tries to push the Queen away. He fails, and turns paler still with the effort. His eyes are beginning to cloud over. Even the flow of blood from the musket-wound has slowed. Not because the wound is beginning to clot itself, but because there is almost no blood left to flow.

Anne sees it, too. She seizes him by his robes and pulls him in close. Despite their proximity, her voice fills the room.
“You were right about one thing,” she says. “God is great. He has given me my vengeance. And you – you are going to the fiery hell you deserve.”

Rochefort chokes, convulsing. The Queen lets him go in disgust. He slumps to the floor. Dead.

“Sic semper tyrannis,” the Queen says, spitting on the corpse. In the background, Constanza lowers her musket and sets it aside.

Then Anne turns around and faces them all. Her carriage is erect. Her eyes are flashing. And even beneath her gowns – carefully tailored, Richelieu sees, now that he knows what to look for – her shoulders are broad and her stance is wide, like the Alpha knights of old.

“Anne,” Louis whispers. “What have you done?”

“Your Majesty,” Richelieu says, and bows profoundly.

When he straightens, it’s to see her regarding him with a regal air. “It seems today is a day for secrets, Cardinal.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” he agrees.

The Queen glances down at Rochefort. “The Inquisitor made some very wild accusations about you,” she says. “I see the truth of some of them.” Her eyes drop to where Richelieu still holds his mate protectively close.

“Yes, your Majesty,” Richelieu agrees a second time.

Anne nods. “How far does the truth go?” she asks. “You are both throwbacks, and mated – that much I can see is true. But the rest of it. Is the rest of it true?” Her majestic aura doesn’t waver, but hope creeps into her voice. “Outside of his fevered imaginations – is there – are you – is there truly such a thing as the Resistance? Could we truly stand up against Rome? Right now, right here, in France – if we proclaimed it – could we throw the Inquisition out, and stand against its return?”

The breath sticks in Richelieu’s throat, and he can’t speak.

“Well?” the Queen asks, taking a step forward in supplication. The hope is on her face, now, too, and it’s almost painful to see. “Is it true?”

Louis comes forward to join her. “Yes, Cardinal, is it true?” he asks.

“Your Majesties,” Richelieu begins. Then he has to stop and take a deep breath. Is he really about to do this? Risk the work of his life? Of his families’ lives going back a dozen generations? Potentially the lives of every throwback in France – in the world?

Treville’s hand slips down to his and gives it a comforting squeeze. “Go on,” he murmurs. It gives Richelieu the courage to dare.

“It is true,” Richelieu says simply. And then he gets to watch as Louis claps his hands in glee, Anne lights up in vindication and triumph, and the world rearranges itself around them all.
“Rochefort always said the Resistance was real, but I never believed him,” Anne says.

She’s sitting in the King’s chambers. Constanza had run out and brought back hot tea – for the Queen’s nerves, she’d said. The Queen isn’t usually nervous. But she’s been living under a great pressure and then had it suddenly removed. It would send anyone’s senses reeling. God knows, it’s certainly leaving Richelieu’s head in a whirl.

By Anne’s permission – and Louis’ – Treville is seated in the chamber’s other chair. Treville wouldn’t have asked for himself, but Richelieu has no such qualms. Anne had said, “Yes, of course, certainly, oh my God, when are you due?” when Richelieu had explained, all before Louis could even get a word out. And Louis – far from being mad at the slight to his authority – had laughed, fondly, and handed Treville a cup of tea with his own hands.

Richelieu isn’t entirely sure he’s not dreaming.

Neither of us had ever seen any evidence of any kind of Underground, much less Resistance,” Constanza says.

“Toreno would always go on and on about the Resistance, but it was all shadows and phantoms. Never anything concrete. Not until a year ago. Then, suddenly –” Anne falters.

“He told you about me,” Treville says quietly.

Anne shakes her head. “No, not exactly. Not in so many words. He didn’t give me your name; I suppose he thought I wouldn’t keep it a secret. For all that he thought he loved me – said he loved me – he still thought of me as weak. As a woman.” She spits the Betan term like she hates it; Richelieu supposes she must.

“You didn’t know about me already?” Treville asks. Surprise colors his tone and manifests in the way he turns to the King. “Your Majesty didn’t –”

“You hadn’t told me I could tell anyone,” Louis says, offended. “I didn’t tell you about Anne, either, did it?”

Treville’s gaze softens into fondness. “Forgive me, your Majesty,” he says. “I never meant to separate you from your Queen.”

“Of course you did,” Anne interrupts. Both men turn back towards her, where she nods at them. “And you were right too, if you didn’t know about me. Why, you must have thought I was your greatest enemy!”

“We did,” Richelieu admits. “If we’d known – if we’d had even the slightest clue…”

“I imagine you’d have acted very different,” Anne says. “The Lord knows I would have, if I’d had the slightest clue about you, either.”
“I can’t believe you never told me, Treville,” Louis says, looking injured.

“My love, he could no more have told you about his mate than you could have told him about me,” Anne says.

“Still,” Louis says ruefully. “The sheer waste of it all…”

“Thirty years,” Richelieu whispers. He shares a long, troubled look with Treville, thinking of them. The sacrifices. The secrecy. The silence. All of it so ultimately unnecessary. Anne and Louis would have repudiated the Inquisition in a heartbeat, if they’d known that Cardinal Richelieu would have been on their side.

“It is a particular sin to allow the grief for what is lost to poison what blessings remain to us,” Constanza murmurs, sounding as if she’s quoting something.

Anne shakes herself out of her stupor. “Anyway. Toreno said that the Resistance was real. That he’d identified the mate of its leader, and that soon he’d have identified its leader, too. And for the first time I thought – what if it is true?”

Even now, the memory of that thought illuminates her face with a hope that’s almost painful to see. It smooths away the marks of time and care, and suddenly she looks almost transcendent, as one who beholds the promise of Heaven.

“So you agreed to assist the Inquisitor,” Richelieu says. He pictures it easily: Anne gazing adoringly up at Toreno. Telling him everything he’d ever wanted to hear. And George, the fool, lapping it up. Meanwhile Louis would be giving orders to balk the Inquisitor. And Constanza would be standing decorously at Anne’s side, sharpening the knife for Rochefort’s breast.

“Oh, when Toreno asked for my help, I leapt at the chance!” Anne says, breathless with remembered hope and excitement. “I told myself, if it’s all a fever-dream, then no one will get hurt – ”

Treville comes half out of his seat suddenly. “My Musketeers! They’re still in the Bastille – Bonacieux – ”

“It’s all right,” Anne cries, pressing Treville back down. “They’re unharmed, and safe, I swear it.”

Treville stares up at her. He probably doesn’t realize he’s still clutching her hands. “How?”

Louis grins like a little boy with a secret. “I had all the guards changed out!” he says triumphantly. “And Bonacieux arrested for circumventing your authority, Cardinal! He’s in a cell himself! The Inquisition guards are all out guarding market-squares; it’s Dessessart’s Guards in the prison, and they are under very strict orders not to touch anything or anyone. Or else I’ll consider them as having usurped the Church’s authority and throw them in a cell next to Bonacieux.” Louis giggles outright. “I even left room in Dessessart’s orders in case someone attempted a rescue! Didn’t I do well?”

“It was a very effective threat,” Anne says, smiling herself. “Everyone is quite terrified of you, Cardinal. The idea of facing your wrath has kept everyone on their best behavior.”

“But what were you going to do when I actually got back to Paris?” Richelieu asks, dizzy.

Anne’s smile fades. She exchanges a look with her husband.

“They were going to have you killed,” Treville says blankly.

“Only if he refused to leave France peacefully,” Anne says quickly.
“Because once Toreno had led you to the Resistance, you would have the necessary power and support to be rid of the Inquisition,” Richelieu says in understanding.

“That’s what you were lacking all along,” Treville says.

“We have the legitimacy of the throne, but that doesn’t mean the court will follow us or the armies will support us. But the Resistance could supply what we lacked. Toreno always believed it was strong. And when Toreno hatched his plan to uncover its leader’s identity – I knew – it had to be a high noble in charge, someone powerful and influential. Otherwise Toreno wouldn’t have needed to go to such lengths to expose them.”

“Everything you needed, in other words,” Richelieu says.

Anne nods.

“I had to pretend to be a fool,” Louis says somewhat mulishly. “Rochefort wasn’t to have any idea I was in on the scheme.”

“You acted your part wonderfully, my love,” Anne says.

“You did,” Richelieu adds, watching Louis soften and beam with pride. “Not just now, either. I never had the faintest idea about the Queen. Your Majesty protected her secret amazingly.”

“I have many talents,” Louis says, trying and failing to appear modest.

Constanza lifts her fan to her face. It doesn’t manage to entirely conceal her fond smile.

“So you were behind Rochefort the entire time,” Richelieu says. “No wonder I didn’t catch wind of his scheme until it was too late.”

“We were protecting everyone he might hurt,” Constanza protests. “No one was in danger.”

“Jean was in danger,” Richelieu begins. Anger flickers in him briefly. Anne may have protected the Musketeers, but Rochefort’s plan to expose the leaders of the Resistance had involved dicing with Jean’s life, and Anne would have known it.

“Armand, leave it. It’s no more than I bargained for when I joined the Resistance. And you can hardly argue with the results.”

Richelieu deflates. Jean’s right, and what’s more, Armand knows he won’t get anywhere arguing with his mate about it. He may hate that Jean was put in such danger. But Richelieu would have ordered any member of the Resistance into that danger if he’d known about the plan and the prize to be won. Its being Jean who’d been endangered doesn’t alter that calculation.

Besides, as Jean has proven, he’ll throw himself into danger just as dire of his own accord.

That thought sparks another, and Richelieu says to the King, “Your Majesty, may I borrow a runner to send to the Bastille?”

“The Bastille?” Louis blinks, surprised.

Treville’s eyes widen. “Surely you didn’t let them!” he cries, turning to face Richelieu accusingly.

Richelieu smiles ruefully. “I’m afraid I did,” he admits to his mate. To the King again: “There may be a minor… disturbance… underway.”
“What sort of disturbance?” Louis asks warily.

“Throwbacks storming the Bastille with the intent of freeing the Musketeers,” Anne says calmly. “It’s all right, my love, Constanza brought me word of it already. I sent Chambert’s regiment to stop the Inquisition interfering.”

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Richelieu says, startled.

“Yes, thank you,” Treville says, much more warmly.

“Don’t thank me; it’s terribly useful,” Anne says crisply. “The idea of throwbacks storming the Bastille will draw out every Inquisition soldier and overzealous supporter in all of Paris. It’ll save us having to root them out. We can just send the rest of the army over to the Bastille now, arrest the lot, and have them force-marched out of France within the week. Where shall we send them, Cardinal? I’d say Spain, but that would just hand my brother additional troops.”

“May I suggest Bavaria?” Richelieu says after a moment’s consideration. “The feuding of the Baltic states will keep them occupied.” He makes a mental note to write Andreas to expect the influx.

“Excellent plan,” Anne approves.

“What about Bonacieux?” Treville asks.

“We could let him rot in the Bastille,” Constanza suggests.

“And be a martyr?” Richelieu shakes his head. “Brilliant as the Queen’s plan is, using the Bastille to draw Inquisition supporters out of the woodwork so we can expel them, still we must expect that some will slip through our fingers. We don’t wish to give those who remain any focus behind which they can rally.”

Anne presses her lips together. “Exile’s too good for him,” she says angrily.

Richelieu shares the sentiment. But: “We must stake out the higher moral ground,” he says regretfully. “If we do to him what he would have done to us, satisfying as it seems now, the eventual cost in human suffering will be high.”

Treville sighs.

“I’m sorry,” Richelieu adds.

“No, you’re right,” Anne says resignedly. “Exile, then.”

“I’ll see to it,” Louis says. He walks over to the door, pulls it open, and calls for a servant. One promptly appears.

“I take it, then, that the palace halls are not slowly filling with Inquisition soldiers,” Treville says dryly.

Anne smiles. “Hardly.”

“May I ask you something?” Richelieu asks.

Anne looks surprised. “Yes, of course.”

“Your plan was brilliant,” Richelieu says carefully. “Rochefort was completely fooled – as was I. But I can’t understand something. When you walked in on the King and Treville, you were
expecting a third person, weren’t you? You were expecting Treville’s mate. When you walked in and I was there, why didn’t you act then? Why did you wait?”

“Ah. Yes. That.” Anne sighs. She looks down for a moment, and a troubled cast comes over her features. Constanza kneels next to her and takes her hand, squeezing it and making her smile again.

The Queen says slowly, “When you came through that door, Cardinal, I thought I was lost. I couldn’t believe that you were Rochefort’s target. Please understand, I’ve spent my adult life being terrified of you –”

“I can understand that,” Treville says ruefully.

“I thought that Rochefort must have discovered me. That he had teamed up with you in order to expose me.”

“Oh,” Richelieu says in sudden understanding. “Yes, I can see that.”

“But then Rochefort kept going after you,” Constanza jumps in. “He didn’t act like you were his ally. He acted like it was all true and he’d really caught you.”

“God knows I know what that looks like,” Anne says bitterly. “I’ve seen Rochefort in that moment far too many times before.”

“And so you started to believe?” Treville asks.

Anne’s gaze shifts to him. “You helped,” she says. “The Cardinal has an excellent poker face – but you were afraid.”

“Anyone would be,” Treville protests.

“Yes,” Constanza says, “but if it were a trap to ensnare Ana, you’d be just as afraid of Richelieu as Rochefort. You weren’t.”

Treville frowns, but nods, slowly.

“I still wasn’t entirely sure at the end,” Anne admits. “But I had to make a decision. And Rochefort went to seize Treville, and I saw the look on your face, Cardinal…”

“Thank you for intervening, your Majesty,” Richelieu manages through a dry throat. He doesn’t even try to stop himself for reaching for Jean. After the danger they’ve just come through the touch of his mate’s skin is vitally reassuring.

“Well, messieurs and mesdames, our circle expands,” Louis’ voice breaks in on them cheerfully. He’s walking back across the room with a host of familiar faces at his back.

He adds, “I’ve sent off troops to round up the crowd massing at the Bastille. But you can stop worrying about your Musketeers, Treville. It seems they had a back way out and they’ve come to us.”

Treville tries to stand up again. Anne pushes him back down briskly and shares an amused look with Richelieu. Richelieu returns it with a grateful grin, then turns and observes their new visitors. They’re all bowing respectfully to the King and Queen.

“Thank God you’re safe,” Treville says in relief.

“We’re fine, Captain,” d’Artagnan says.
“We had an interesting time of it in the Bastille,” Bernajoux reports. “First Chambert’s Guard regiment showed up to stand off the Inquisition, and then Boisrenard found Bonacieux in a cell in the high security levels.”

“Yes, the Queen’s just been catching us up on current events,” Treville replies.

Athos regards the corpse of Rochefort with a single elegant eyebrow lifted. Then he raises his gaze to meet Richelieu’s, with a quick flick of his eyes towards the King and Queen. “Apparently Rochefort had many more enemies than he realized?”

“Including their Majesties,” Richelieu says, gesturing. “You are observing an example of the Queen’s excellent marksmanship at this very moment.”

Athos returns his gaze to the corpse. He studies it a moment further, then nods. “A very fine shot, your Majesty.”

“I’ve been practicing for it my whole life,” Anne says. She’s wearing the most self-satisfied look Richelieu has ever seen, and she meets Athos’ gaze with one of utter serenity. Then the corners of her lips twitch up.

“I’m just annoyed I didn’t get to do it myself,” Louis mutters. “Repulsive little weasel. Thank goodness, we’re rid of him and his hate at last.”

Several Musketeers break out into wide smiles of their own. Even Athos looks pleased in his quiet way. Charlotte and Adele seize each other’s hands. D’Artagnan laughs aloud with delight.

“Where is everyone else?” Treville asks. He’s not attempting to get up again – though Richelieu can tell he’s thinking about it – but Treville is running his gaze over all of the assorted Musketeers and Resistance fighters standing in the King’s chamber, checking for injuries, evaluating their status, worried about those who aren’t present.

“Havet and Brasseur are riding herd on the other Musketeers,” Athos reports. He’s maintained his usual outward reserve, but d’Artagnan’s hand has somehow found its way into his.

“Flea and Charon are finding them places to lie low,” Porthos adds. He’s not even attempting to hide that Aramis has his arm around his waist.

“Though I’m beginning to think that’s unnecessary,” Adele remarks, regarding the cooling corpse of Rochefort with unmistakable satisfaction.

Aramis tsks. “Shall I call a servant to take this away, your Majesty?” he inquires.

“I rather like it where it is,” Anne says, mischief dancing in her eyes. “I think it adds something to the décor.”

“Dear,” Louis protests. “I’ll trip over him every time I walk across the room.”

Anne sighs. “Oh, very well.”

Charlotte sticks her head back out the door and calls for another servant.

“We could string it up in the practice-yards,” Porthos offers. “Use it as target practice for a while.”

A footman appears. “Yes, your Majesty?”

Louis waves a hand at the corpse. “Have that hauled away,” he directs. “It is to be displayed above
the gates to Paris, as a warning to anyone else who tries to follow in the Inquisitor’s footsteps.”

“Very good, your Majesty,” the footman replies, not turning a hair. He bows and vanishes.

“What about the crowd massing outside the Bastille?” Bernajoux asks. “It’s not just Inquisition troops anymore. Word of throwbacks invading the Bastille is all over Paris. Common folk are joining the crowd too.”

“At least the ones that support the Inquisition,” Boisrenard says. “The ones that don’t are hiding behind closed doors. If something isn’t done quickly it will turn ugly.”

“Especially once the fanatics realize the nature of the people who chose not to join their mob,” Charlotte says, biting her lip in worry.

“I’m having troops sent out to round up the Inquisition soldiers and the supporters massing outside the Bastille,” Anne tells them. She looks over to Richelieu. “Cardinal, I wonder if you might be in the position to lend the Crown some forces?”

Boisrenard lets out a brief cheer. It’s quickly suppressed when Bernajoux steps on his foot.

“It would be my pleasure, your Majesty,” Richelieu replies. He turns to his people. “Bernajoux – Jussac was with me, but I sent him away before confronting Rochefort, believing it to be a trap. Can you locate him, please, and ask him to oversee the expulsion of the Inquisition? Boisrenard, return to the Palais-Cardinal at once and muster the Red Guard.”

“Right away, your Eminence,” Bernajoux said.

“At once, your Eminence,” Boisrenard agrees.

“If it takes you a few extra minutes,” Richelieu adds, “I think France will still be in one piece.”

The two faithful lieutenants share a grin. They bow to the monarchs, then leave the throne room so fast they’re practically running.

“Odds on them making it out of the palace before they start celebrating?” Charlotte murmurs.

“I’d set the line at two minutes,” Adele replies.

“Pity there isn’t a message we need to be taking somewhere,” Charlotte says wistfully.

Porthos coughs.

“So here we are,” Richelieu says, returning his attention to the rulers of France.

“This is beyond my wildest dreams,” Anne says.

“What shall we do?” Treville asks.

“Change the world,” Constanza says, as if it’s that simple.

Richelieu looks up and meets Louis’ eyes.

Louis smiles. “I’m game for it if you are, Cardinal.”

Treville and Richelieu exchange looks. Constanza looks up expectantly. Anne beams at them both.
“Your Majesty,” Treville says, “It would be our genuine pleasure.”

“Yes indeed,” Richelieu breathes, heartfelt.

From behind them there’s another cheer. It doesn’t matter who had raised it; after a moment, everyone has joined in.

“Then come on,” Louis calls, striding off down the hallway that connects his chambers to the throne room. “We’ve got a revolution to stage.”

Revolution, in the end, turns out to be shockingly simple when the monarchs, their ministers, and the leaders of their military are all in accord. It takes only a few hours to generate the core tenets of what they’re already calling the “Great Proclamation”. An order from the King abolishing the Inquisition, dismantling the systems of Beta oppression, and restoring the rights as citizens of throwbacks throughout France.

Not that Richelieu truly believes it will be that easy. The Inquisition may have begun with a piece of paper – a papal bull – but it won’t end that way. It will end with the sword. But the Resistance has known that for generations. Rome won’t find them unprepared.

Everyone contributes something to the document. Richelieu makes foreign policy, while Treville outlines military considerations. Athos makes cogent points about the ancient rights of the pureblood houses and how they’ll handle the shift away from Betan primogeniture. D’Artagnan speaks for the noble poor, those with small estates whose titles come with little in the way of wealth. Adele has spent many years among the merchant families and is soon assigned as the representative of their interests. Porthos needs no such assignation to fight for the poorer classes. Aramis argues for the need to preserve France’s centers of culture and learning, to preserve and recover lost knowledge. Charlotte is the one to remind them that their lofty attentions will go nowhere if their economy collapses and no one can afford to buy bread.

The Queen is always right in the thick of the discussion, Constanza close at her side. At first no one questions it. But after a few too many references to her own past, someone finally asks the question. Predictably enough, it’s d’Artagnan. Obviously no one had ever taught him discretion in his puppyhood.

“Your Majesty,” he says hesitantly, after the Queen has said something particularly sharp about Betan dress codes and brushed angrily at her own dress while doing so. “You speak as if you had some… personal experience… with the matter?”

Anne blinks and looks up. It’s as if, having revealed her secret in the presence of Richelieu and Treville, she had expected it to travel among the others by telepathy. Given the way information has often seemed to disseminate throughout the Musketeers it’s not even that unreasonable a lapse.

“As a matter of fact,” she begins. She’s interrupted by Louis’ touch on her arm.

“Perhaps we should keep that particular matter quiet,” the King suggests in what’s clearly meant to be a murmur. “It need not go any further than it already has, at least until things are more stable.”

Anne shakes her head, smiling sadly at him. “Still trying to protect me?” she says. “Do you have so little faith in yourself?”

“You’re always telling me to be more practical,” Louis says. It has the air of a long-suffering argument, but the way he watches the Queen is different, somehow. “Anne, it’s still a fool’s hope.”
“Not with such people on our side,” Anne says. “If it’s going to be done at all in our lifetime, it will be done now. And I’m tired of hiding.”

Athos has been watching the interplay. Now he takes two deliberate steps closer to the Queen and extends his arm.

Anne doesn’t protest when Athos gently takes her hand in his. Nor does she pull away when the Musketeer raises it, turning her arm to expose the scent glands of her inner wrist, and brings it to his nose.

One breath is evidently all the proof Athos needs. “You’re an Alpha,” he says unnecessarily.

Behind him, Porthos gasps.

“And you?” Athos asks, turning towards Constanza, who remains next to her mistress.

“I am a Beta woman,” Constanza says. “I have been Ana’s confidante and protector since my mother died, God rest her.”

“But you can’t be!” Aramis bursts out. Richelieu turns to look at him; he’s pale and shocked. Adele looks equally stunned. “You’re – you’re Spanish!”

“We are,” Anne says. “The Inquisition hasn’t managed to wipe us all out, even in Spain, though God knows they tried.”

“But no one has any notion of it!” Aramis cries. “How did you hide?”

Anne sighs, moving towards her throne and sitting on it. Her manner isn’t that of a Queen about to rule. She’s merely a tired woman, resting for a moment.

“I was born far away from Madrid and all of the Inquisitorial safeguards,” she says. “My mother the Queen was travelling when she went into labor. There was no way to make it back to the castle in time. Her usual attendants weren’t with her. They stopped in a local village, barely big enough to have a name… A local midwife had to be found. Maria.”

“My mother,” Constanza adds. Her face softens, a look coming over it in which loss is mingled unmistakably with fondness and love.

Anne touches the cross around her neck in reminiscence. “And my savior.”

“She concealed your sex,” Aramis says.

Anne nods. “When Maria saw what I was, she made excuses to the Queen to keep me away from her, saying I was sickly, that I needed to be nursed up. Eventually Maria convinced the King to take her into the Queen’s service as my nanny. My mother had intended to raise me herself, but there was enough social pressure against it anyway that Maria was able to persuade the King… Maria kept anyone from realizing what I was, and when I was old enough, she taught me how to pass.”

“But why didn’t she smuggle you out?” Adele demands. “Tell your mother you’d died in the whelping, and pass you to the Underground?”

“There is no Underground in Spain,” Anne says simply. “There was nowhere I could go.”

Aramis and Adele exchange horrified looks.

“My mother went back to Madrid to raise Ana,” Constanza picks up the tale. “I came to the palace
with her. When my mother grew sick for the last time, I was allowed to became one of Ana’s ladies-in-waiting, in gratitude for my mother’s service.”

“The only lady not sent away after Anne’s marriage,” d’Artagnan says in sudden understanding.

“Anne could hardly remain surrounded by a pack of Spanish Betas who would denounce her the moment they got a whiff of anything wrong,” Louis protests. “Anne couldn’t send them away herself without raising suspicions. But it was easy for me to play the capricious new husband.” He grins mischievously, looking for a moment like a little boy.

“For thirty years Constanza and Louis have been the only ones who knew about me,” Anne finishes.

Aramis’ jaw drops open. Adele whispers, “Dios mío.”

Anne’s eyes sharpen. “You speak Spanish?”

“We are Spanish,” Aramis says heavily. “We’re – ” he glances at his aleph, and swallows.

“In your youth,” Adele says, choosing her words carefully, “you may have heard of a tragedy that befell a prominent noble family of your home country. A carriage that went into a lake, and two of their children drowned.”

“Yes,” Anne says, frowning. “But I’m afraid I wasn’t very sorry it happened, may God forgive me for it. The Duchy of Alameda are the most prominent noble supporters of the Inquisition in Spain.”

“And the Cardinal is the head of the Inquisition in France,” Adele says gently. “Do you remember the names of the children who died?”

“I would know them if I heard them,” Anne says cautiously.

“My name is Adele,” she says. “And though he goes by Aramis now, when we were whelped he was christened René.”

“Oh God,” Anne says blankly. “You’re d’Herblays.”

“The Underground isn’t dead in Spain,” Aramis says. “But our family had no idea you needed our help.”

“Is that why you came here?” Louis interrupts. “To help the Underground?”

All attention swings to the King. At first glance, Louis’ stealing the conversational spotlight is selfish behavior, characteristic of his weakness. But a glance at Anne has Richelieu revising that opinion. The Queen is dashing tears from her eyes with Constanza’s handkerchief, and is grateful to have the focus turned away from her.

Adele is shaking her head. “We came here because we couldn’t pass as Spanish nobles,” she says. “Our genders are wrong. We were given enough money to start new lives and sent over the border to France.”

“That’s awful!” Constanza cries. “Couldn’t they hide you? Find new lives for you within Spain, where you could remain a family?”

“It was the way of our clan,” Aramis says simply. He glances as his aleph. “It never occurred to us to question it.”

Richelieu nods slowly. Of everyone else in this room, he is in the best position to understand. It
differs from his own family’s methods only in degree. They have all done what they had to do to protect themselves from the Inquisition.

“Being ruthless has kept the Alamedas safe and pure for over four hundred years,” Adele says, finality clear in her voice. “Nothing was going to change just for us.”

“I’m sorry for you, though,” Aramis says to the Queen. “My family would have helped you. I wish we’d known.”

“Perhaps it worked out,” Anne says, glancing at Louis.

“This is why you don’t have any children,” d’Artagnan blurts out.

“How could we?” Anne says. “Neither of us can carry.”

“The miscarriages?” Aramis demands.

Anne shrugs. “Lies. I was never pregnant to begin with.”

“But how did you think this was going to end?” d’Artagnan cries. “The discontentment over the lack of an heir increases monthly. What were you going to do?”

“She never expected it to get this far,” Richelieu says slowly. “She expected to be discovered when she was sent to France to marry.”

“No one in Spain knew what I was, except for Constanza,” Anne says. “I thought there was no Spanish Underground; I couldn’t see any way out. We tried twice to escape before leaving Spain and twice more on the road. But no one leaves two Beta women alone, especially not if one is of noble birth. We failed. And I thought…”

“You thought I would expose you,” Louis says to her. “But I didn’t. I wouldn’t.”

Richelieu looks at Louis in astonishment. “I think perhaps I’ve never really known you,” he says humbly. “My King, I’m so sorry. I should have trusted you sooner.”

“It’s all right,” Louis says. “I was frightened. I’ll admit it. When Anne and I were locked in our bedchamber to consummate our marriage, and I found out her real sex, I didn’t know what to do. I nearly destroyed her by shouting in sheer shock. Fortunately she had the sense to clap a pillow over my face.”

“She might have been tried for regicide,” Richelieu says, dizzy.

“Locked chambers,” Anne reminds him.

“We had all night to spend together,” Louis says. “We couldn’t consummate anything, obviously. So we just… talked.”

“I expected to die in the morning,” Anne says quietly. “So I had no reason to hold anything back.”

“She told me everything. Her whole life story. What it was like to hide her sex, to grow up in Spain, to be taught at every turn that everything she is was wrong. It was eye-opening.”

“You already knew about me,” Treville says. “What was different about her?”

“She didn’t try to sugar-coat it,” Louis says ruefully. “You did, you know, Treville. You were trying to protect me. Everyone’s always trying to protect me. So you never told me the whole truth, what it
was really like to live as a throwback. I would never have dreamt of turning you in, of course, but in Anne’s case – ”

“You love her,” Treville says in sudden understanding.

Louis reaches out and takes Anne’s hand. “I do,” he says simply.

Anne smiles down at him. “As do I, my love.”

“But you can’t have offspring,” d’Artagnan says in blank confusion.

“Offspring aren’t the only purpose of a mate,” Charlotte says. All eyes turn towards her, and she steps forward, drawing their attention still closer. Her fingers toy with her gown, reminding everyone of what the Inquisition did to her, the scars that still linger where they destroyed her womb and her fertility. “Love isn’t less valid if it exists between two people.”

“Or three,” Anne says, lifting Constanza’s hand in her free hand.

“But what about the succession?” d’Artagnan persists.

“Something will be done,” Adele says, taking her mate’s arm. The two share smiles, quick but genuine. “Isn’t this a time for new ways, anyway?”

“Yes,” Treville says, sliding his arm around Richelieu’s waist. “Yes, it is.”

“So come,” Anne says, coming down off her throne and joining them at the writing-table. “Let us decide what the new future will look like.”

They work through the night and well into the next day, writing down ideas, debating contingency plans, arguing over language and clauses until all of their heads spin. Jussac comes in as dawn breaks on the second day. He reports that the Inquisition troops and supporters – the ones they can find, anyway – have all been rounded up and are being held in various makeshift prisons to await deportation from France. The King’s Guard has been mobilized, along with the Red Guards and the Musketeers, to hold them in check until they can be marched across the borders under careful guard.

That settled, Jussac permits himself to smile. “And I’m so glad to see you’re all right,” he says in relief, addressing first Richelieu and then Treville.

“We are,” Richelieu says. “Your Majesty, in addition to being the Captain of the Red Guards, you should know that Robert de Jussac is also the Commander of the Resistance, and my oldest companion.”

“Then you are very welcome to our councils,” Louis says. He signals a servant to bring up another chair, and hands Jussac the parchment they’ve all been scribbling on. “Tell me, Robert de Jussac, what do you think of this?”

Jussac looks down at the parchment and nearly drops it in astonishment. “God in Heaven,” he whispers. He shoves the parchment blindly back at Louis and puts his face in his hands.

Richelieu clears his throat and looks pointedly around the room. One by one everyone else looks away, too, giving Jussac his moment of privacy. No one ever comments on the tears leaking slowly from between Robert’s fingers.

As the sun dips below the Paris skyline on the second day, the last pen is finally laid down. The
language has been settled, the enforcement agreed upon, and the whole copied over fair by a palace scribe. The proclamation is drafted.

There's a moment of silence where they all simply look at it, gathering around Louis' massive writing-desk and staring at the result of all their labors.

“Do you think it will make a difference?” Anne asks eventually, looking down at the sheets of parchment that have yet to be turned into something real and lasting. “Do you think a single declaration can really be the spark that changes the world?”

Louis reaches out and takes her hand.

“Let us try,” the King says.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of part four. All that remains is the epilogue.

After the epilogue is posted, I hope you will all come join me on my tumblr for some DVD commentary! The fic is too huge for me to go through line by line, but I'm throwing open my askbox for questions of any sort. Whether it's you're curious about a plot point, a background character, the broader world, or what was going through my mind when I wrote something, I'd love to hear from everyone :)

And if you're looking for more reading in this universe, I can't recommend Kat's fic and now these three remain enough. It picks Cahusac up from the end of part three and tells his story, as well as bringing characters like Bernajoux and Boisrenard more into the spotlight. It takes place behind the scenes of the main fic and I love the depth it brings to the characters and the world. Check it out, you won't be disappointed!
Epilogue: One Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Nine months later)

“How did it go?” d’Artagnan asks the moment Athos comes in. Athos’ mate is seated in a comfortable chair in the antechamber to their rooms in the Palais-Cardinal, reading yet another text on Omegan medicine, their offspring asleep in another room.

Athos rolls his shoulders, shrugging off the still-uncomfortable weight of the Comte de la Fère. His resumption of his noble title has been a crucial part of maintaining Louis’ new proclamation. The expulsion of the Inquisition is as much a political matter as a military one, and every ancient noble who will stand forward proudly and declare themselves a throwback is another pole of support for Louis. But that doesn’t mean that Athos is comfortable resuming the role he’d left behind with his odem’s death.

“Well enough,” Athos says finally. “The Duc de Bouillion is leaving France for Sedan. He says he won’t try anything, but he can’t stay here.”

“That must have hurt the King,” d’Artagnan says.

“Some,” Athos agrees. “But he’ll be all right as long as Frédéric keeps his word and leaves in peace. We’d be hard pressed to fight another front.”

Predictably, Louis’ proclamation had not been well received in all quarters. In one stroke he’d abolished the Inquisition within France’s shores, outlawed the convents and the sterilization of throwbacks, and modified the laws of citizenry and inheritance to apply to all people.

Rome is furious. The other nations with strong Inquisition presences are building their armies. France has spent the last nine months scrambling on the military side of things, bracing for a war that might rage for thirty years.

The political situation is similarly chaotic. Many of France’s former allies had repudiated their treaties as soon as news of Louis’ proclamation had reached their ears. It’s balanced in some cases by new alliances with other countries who had resisted the Inquisition. Since Louis’ proclamation, a new treaty has been signed with Savoy, and they’re in talks with England. But the enmity of Spain is not a threat lightly to be counterbalanced.

Within France, peace is holding generally, but civil unrest is widespread. In an attempt at fairness, Louis had proclaimed new inheritance laws that ignored sex and gender alike in favor of strict primogeniture. It probably is the best way, Athos can admit, but in the short term it pleases absolutely no one. Beta children have been suddenly disenfranchised in favor of long-hidden Alpha and Omega siblings, whom they had always been taught were animalistic throwbacks. Omegas who had never expected to inherit have suddenly found themselves the heirs to businesses and titles. And younger Alphas, who had expected to assert their birthrights under the old laws of Alphaic primogeniture, are furious at still being denied.

Squads of Louis’ army are circulating continuously throughout the interior, putting out fires and fighting brigands. Civil servants are mediating inheritance and property squabbles that have multiplied tenfold overnight. And every noble scion with any shred of connection to one of the
ancient lines has poured into Paris, Alpha, Beta and Omega alike, to scheme and backstab for position in the new regime.

“It’s a mess,” Athos summarizes to d’Artagnan now. “But…” he shakes his head, amazed. “The peace has held for another day. We haven’t been invaded. There is not yet civil war. And we are all still alive.”

D’Artagnan smiles. “Another day,” he says, kissing his mate chastely on the lips.

A cry makes itself heard from behind one of the closed doors. From the pitch it’s Thérèse, their Alpha pup. She and her brother Charles had been born three months ago. They had benefitted not only from Aramis’ scholarly knowledge but also the practical experience of Jeanne, a trained crisis midwife who also happens to be the wife of Cahanac, one of Richelieu’s old lieutenants. Cahusac and Jeanne had left France after their marriage. But the Resistance is a hard thing to leave behind. After ten relatively peaceful years raising their offspring, they’d joined Mazarin’s household when Richelieu’s alphew had gone to Italy to enter the seminary. Mazarin himself is on his way back from Italy – a career in the Catholic Church under Richelieu’s patronage no longer being in his future – though he plans to stay some months first in Bavaria where his carrier Andreas and the rest of his family still live. Ultimately Mazarin intends to settle in Paris and continue his work under Richelieu. Both the newly independent Church of France and the domestic and foreign policy of Louis’ court need a strong, canny heir.

Under Aramis and Jeanne’s cool direction, d’Artagnan’s labor had been easy, lasting only five hours before pup and child alike had been brought safely forth and nestled in their carrier’s arms. Merely having a more experienced midwife present had been an enormous relief to all involved. Jeanne now spends much of her time travelling through Paris and the surrounding countryside, helping carriers who need her experience and training others in throwback medicine while she waits for her family to rejoin her with Mazarin.

For his part, Athos had spent every minute he could spare for the first five months after Louis’ proclamation cleaning and preparing these chambers for his small family. Porthos and Adele had helped, the Alphabetic nesting instinct spreading among all of them as they’d reaffirmed their bonds as a pack. Even Richelieu had found time to join them, having the cribs brought up from his family’s estates and erected in the small room selected to be a nursery.

“Won’t you want them for your pups?” d’Artagnan had asked in shock, when he’d found out what Richelieu had done.

The Cardinal had shrugged this off. “There are more cribs in France than just these,” he’d said, evading the real question deftly and fooling absolutely nobody.

Thérèse squalls again. D’Artagnan shakes his head and disappears behind the nursery door. Athos follows him more slowly, lingering in the doorway and watching him soothe Thérèse. She’s much more active than her brother, already showing the naturally aggressive instincts of her sex. But Charles usually manages to get what he wants in the end by using his big brown eyes – Thomas’ eyes – to his advantage. It’s a pattern Athos suspects will endure all of their lives.

Athos thinks again, as he has a dozen times since d’Artagnan’s heat left him carrying, about going back to la Fère. Rebuilding the château of his ancestral line and raising his family there.

Once again he discards the idea. His pack is here. Athos isn’t the only one among them with an hereditary estate, but their life’s work will keep them all in Paris more than anywhere else, and so they have all chosen to build their dens here, too. The Palais-Cardinal has been massively expanded with wings to accommodate their growing pack. Richelieu and Treville remain in the main house, as
head Alpha and Omega, where for the past few months everyone has been involved in building the nursery for their soon-to-be-arriving pups. Athos and d’Artagnan have laid claim to the west wing, Porthos and Aramis the south, Charlotte and Adele the north.

There had been talk of building an east wing for Richelieu’s alphew Mazarin and his household. But with Mazarin’s pack growing nearly as fast as Richelieu’s, it had eventually been deemed more practical to start a new den. Bernajoux and Boisrenard are overseeing the house they will eventually move into, rejoining their packmate Cahusac. The space they’ll leave will be filled soon enough with those Musketeers who wish to claim clan affiliation with Treville and Richelieu. Havet, Brasseur, and their two pups are chief among them. There must be something in the water: both Brasseur and Cahusac’s wife Jeanne are expecting, too.

The east wing and several annexes remain empty land and a set of plans in the Cardinal’s desk. One day their pups will grow and find mates of their own, and they’ll need the space. Impossible to imagine Thérèse and Charles that grown up, though. Right now they’re just two downy bundles, back to sleeping peacefully as d’Artagnan comes back out and closes the door softly behind him.

“How was your day?” Athos asks his mate.

“Well enough,” d’Artagnan replies. He smiles a little, which Athos is glad to see. Handling two infants is a full-time job, and while he knows d’Artagnan loves their offspring dearly, it’s been hard for the young Omega to be sidelined during such a crucial time in the history of their people.

“Constance visited,” d’Artagnan adds.

“How’s she doing?”

“Scared,” d’Artagnan says ruefully. “She wanted to know what it had been like being pupped. I told her the truth, but maybe that was a mistake. She really didn’t like the part about the vomiting.”

“Not all carriers vomit,” Athos points out.

“And I told her that, too. But she was looking pretty green already by that point. Good thing we hadn’t had lunch. She went back to the palace instead of staying to eat.”

“Hopefully she felt better there,” Athos murmurs. He doesn’t doubt that she did. Constance is carrying the heir to France. Every servant and most of the nobles in the Louvre will drop everything if Constance sneezes.

Anne’s confidante is the solution to the problem of neither French monarch being a carrier. The young woman is absolutely devoted to Anne, and she’d always been well liked in court circles for her sweet, gentle nature. Louis had already been fond of her; for over thirty years Constance had been the only person in France, beside the King himself, who had known Anne’s true sex. It hadn’t taken much of a nudge from the Cardinal for both rulers to agree that Constance should carry the heir.

Supposedly the pup is Louis’, but Athos recalls the way Anne had grasped Constance’s hands when confronting Rochefort, and it makes him wonder. But whatever the arrangement, Louis’ approval is obvious and enthusiastic, so Athos keeps his wonderings to himself.

“Any news of Treville?” he asks instead. Their clan’s head Omega is two full weeks beyond the usual gestation period, with no signs of being close. Everyone is worried. Jeanne affects exasperation and tells Richelieu that every baby arrives on their own schedule, but even she’s taken to going about lately with her lips pressed tight together and her bag of supplies close at hand.
D’Artagnan shakes his head. “Nothing yet.” He manages another smile. “I suppose he saw what fun I’ve been having, and decided to put it off a little.”

Athos hides a smile of his own. If d’Artagnan has been finding it difficult to set politics and soldiering aside for a time, Treville is going to find it absolutely impossible.

“I hear the Richelieus’ nanny is on her way back from Russia,” Athos offers. Alphonse’s and Andreas’ offspring are all well grown now, and both of the Cardinal’s older odems are past their bearing years. The Beta lines that had served as midwives and caregivers for generations of Richelieus are returning to France, now that France is once again safe for those who follow the old ways.

The Cardinal had written to his odems to invite them to return, too. But they’ve both built lives elsewhere, and the struggle for their people won’t end with France’s liberation. There are still throwbacks born in other nations who depend on the Underground to survive. Their work isn’t done yet.

Athos doesn’t regret it. Between the joining of his pack with Richelieu’s, Mazarin’s anticipated return from Italy with his household, and the pack of Musketeers that also claim clanship, Athos has more family than he’d ever dared hope. He hates to admit it, but more would be overwhelming.

Though he’ll gladly accept the services of an experienced nanny for their young. Pups are going to outnumber adults soon with the way the carriers in their clan are all expecting.

“I’m glad help is coming,” d’Artagnan admits. “I love my offspring – ”

“I never doubted it for a second,” Athos soothes, holding his mate close. “I understand completely. I also want to make the world a safer place for them.”

“That’s it exactly,” d’Artagnan says, burrowing closer. “I have to know they’ll never face what we did. I need to be sure, Athos. I need to see it for myself.”

“You will,” Athos promises. He kisses his mate again, much less chastely this time. “You will.”

Asleep curled around each other, Athos and d’Artagnan are awoken just past midnight, not by the wails of their offspring but by the banging of their chamber door as it’s thrown open against the far wall. “Lady Jeanne bids you come quickly,” the servant cries, bearing in a taper and lighting the lamps quickly. “Madame’s labor has started.”

D’Artagnan nearly falls out of bed in his haste. “Will you be all right?” he asks his mate, jumping into his trousers and reaching for his shirt.

“We will all be fine,” Athos assures him, reaching for his own clothes. Roused by the noise, Charles and Thérèse begin to stir. “Go on.”

D’Artagnan kisses him quickly, then runs out the door. He’s been studying Omegan medicine from Aramis and Jeanne, and from the books that the various noble houses of France have preserved, which have become available in the wake of Louis’ proclamation. The Cardinal is having all of the ancient texts that have survived copied many times over, and distributed widely to all who wish to read them.

“It’s a little late to become a doctor,” Aramis had said in amusement, when d’Artagnan, then eight months pupped, had demanded access to all the medical texts available.
“I need to know what’s going to happen to me when I go into labor,” d’Artagnan had said in determination. “I need to know what to do with my pups.”

Aramis had hardly been able to argue with that. Now d’Artagnan, with the added weight of personal experience, is in a fair way to becoming a competent field midwife. Jeanne says he has a gift for it and that there would be a career waiting for him if he ever decides to stop Musketeering.

Athos finishes dressing and goes to pick up his offspring, who have progressed to full-blown wailing. Charlotte comes in in time to stop Thérèse from rolling right off the table where her sire had just put her.

“She’s rolling over already?” Charlotte says in astonishment. Then something closes behind her eyes and she passes Thérèse hastily over to Athos. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Athos says, wishing he knew the right words to comfort his former mate. Charlotte loves her clan, and its offspring in particular. But she’s never able to look at them without being reminded of what the Inquisition had stolen from her.

“I wanted to tell you not to worry about going to the Louvre today,” she says, carefully looking anywhere but at Charles and Thérèse. “Jussac says there’s no need. I’m going with Adele and I’ll handle your part. You focus on taking care of your offspring and helping Jean, all right?”

“Thank you,” Athos says sincerely. He doesn’t question Charlotte’s desire to be away from the Palais-Cardinal when Treville whelps. She’d stayed away for d’Artagnan’s labor, too. It’s counter to the usual Omegan instinct towards carrying and nurturing, but it’s far too painful a reminder of what she’s lost.

“Send a runner if anything happens,” she says. Charlotte darts forward to give him a quick hug, and her scent still smells like flowers after the rain, though the downpour has changed from a gentle shower to a terrible storm. But she’s not his anymore, and so it’s easy to let her go, let her run out of the room and back to Adele. Athos looks down at Charles and Thérèse and allows them to fill his heart, pushing all of his old losses aside for a time.

The day drags on long. Charles and Thérèse seem to sense something is afoot and compensate by being particularly demanding. By nightfall, Athos is exhausted and no longer able to resist their cries. He takes them across the Palais-Cardinal complex to the main building and down the long hallway.

Richelieu’s office has been turned into a staging area. Piles of linen and empty basins are stacked on top of the desk, and the fireplace is stoked high for the benefit of the iron pot suspended over it. Various servants come and go. Even through the thick oaken door that bars the way to their bedchamber, Athos can hear Treville. The Omega sounds like he’d be screaming if he had the voice left to do it. Even the groans Athos can hear are agonized.

“What’s going on?” Athos asks a passing servant, keeping his voice calm so his offspring don’t catch on to his worry.

“I’m not sure, my Lord,” the servant says. “I can ask your mate to step out?”

“Please do,” Athos says, putting his fear of being selfish aside. D’Artagnan has been in that chamber since just past midnight. If there’s any real danger, he won’t come out; otherwise, it’s Athos’ responsibility to make sure his mate is cared for too.

The servant goes back in. A few moments later, d’Artagnan appears. He’s drawn and tired. The strain around his eyes eases slightly when he sees Athos and the babes. D’Artagnan takes Charles
into his own arms and sinks down on a settee, breathing slowly.

“What’s going on?” Athos asks again.

“It’s taking too long,” d’Artagnan says quietly. “There’s no way to tell what’s really going on, but Treville should at least be pushing right now. Aramis is worried too.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Jeanne thinks drugs may help. Relaxants. To loosen the passage.”

Athos frowns. “When is Jeanne going to give Treville the relaxants?”

“We did it just before you arrived. Treville will sleep soon. Jeanne says that’s normal. He’ll wake in a few hours and then hopefully…” d’Artagnan trails off. Pasting a smile on his face he goes on, “So it’s good, your getting here just now. Aramis says I’m not to come back for a few hours. Is there anything to eat? I’m starving.”

Athos sets Thérèse down next to d’Artagnan and goes to the kitchen.

He finds Porthos already there, putting together trays. Athos goes to help him in silence, pulling down cheeses and smoked meats. Simple food. The servants could cook, but no one has the stomach for anything beyond plain fare.

“Aramis says it’s not going well,” Porthos says eventually, breaking the silence.

Athos hums noncommittally. It doesn’t take the insight of an oracle to see how worried Porthos is. Not just for Treville, either, though Porthos would be as devastated by the loss of their pack’s head Omega as any of them. But Aramis is six months pupped himself. His and Porthos’ long struggle to conceive had finally borne fruit shortly after Louis’ proclamation. Once the Inquisition had been expelled Aramis could gain access to the necessary remedies. In fact, he’d benefited from the same drug that had been used to such devastating effect against Treville, though this time properly gathered and dispensed.

Porthos obviously doesn’t like the stresses Aramis is putting himself under to help Treville whelp. Aramis isn’t exactly young himself for a carrier. And Porthos can’t possibly be calm about the idea that his mate might be watching another Omega struggle and die in the whelping even now, pups still trapped within him.

Athos shuts down that line of thinking fast, before his mind starts changing the image around to feature d’Artagnan, or, worse, Charlotte. “Aramis is a pessimist,” he says instead.

“Oh yeah?” Porthos growls. “What does d’Artagnan say?”

Athos hesitates. “He says Jeanne still has things they can try.”


Athos doesn’t answer. He takes two of the trays, and Porthos takes the others. They walk back to Richelieu’s office in silence. D’Artagnan thanks them for the food and they all eat, still silent, no one willing to speak first and let the fear spill out.

The chamber behind them is silent. Treville must be sleeping. Aramis emerges eventually, looking tense and worried. Porthos immediately guides him to a chair and puts food and water into his hands.
“How it’s going?” d’Artagnan asks nervously. Porthos glares at him for interrupting.

A mouthful of cheese is chewed and swallowed before Aramis answers. “No change,” he admits, shoulders slumping. “The first pup may be stuck… it hasn’t passed down into the whelping passage yet, and it should have.”

“How it’s going?” d’Artagnan asks nervously. Porthos glares at him for interrupting.

“Any bleeding?” Athos makes himself ask, and doesn’t resist the urge to hold Thérèse closer.

“Not yet,” Aramis says. “But there’s been no progress in three hours, despite everything we’ve tried.”

“A mouthful of cheese is chewed and swallowed before Aramis answers. “No change,” he admits, shoulders slumping. “The first pup may be stuck… it hasn’t passed down into the whelping passage yet, and it should have.”

“Let him eat,” Porthos says, holding a sausage to Aramis’ lips.

D’Artagnan breathes out shakily, pressing into Athos and staring down at Charles as if the sight of his own child will erase the fear of what might be happening behind the closed door. D’Artagnan’s experience of whelping had been relatively easy. Jeanne had said she’d never seen an Omega so flexible, bloodline be damned. She’d had Thérèse out of d’Artagnan inside an hour. Aramis, under her direction, had taken longer with Charles and grumbled about it to cover his relief. Treville isn’t being anywhere near so lucky.

Aramis finishes the food Porthos had handed him and shakes his head when his mate tries to press another serving on him. “I’ll just throw up if I try,” he says wearily, draining the flask of water Porthos had provided.

“Shall I go in for a while?” d’Artagnan offers. “Let you rest?”

Porthos immediately voices his approval of this idea, drowning out Athos’ own frown of disapproval, but both their opinions become moot when Aramis shakes his head. “Your pups need you,” he says. It’s true; Thérèse and Charles are whimpering, demanding their carrier. “Jeanne and I are taking shifts. Treville is still sleeping. I’ll be all right.”

“Send for me if I’m needed,” d’Artagnan orders.

Aramis ruffles his adopted odem’s hair. “Of course,” he says, and Athos doesn’t point out how badly he’s lying.

Porthos doesn’t either. He just helps Aramis get back to his feet, ungainly with his own swollen stomach. “Is everything all right still otherwise?”

“If this goes on for much longer I think France will dissolve into civil war,” Athos says, trying to lighten the mood. It falls flat. Richelieu hasn’t left Treville’s side since his labor had started, which is as it should be, but the new order in France isn’t stable enough. Treville’s labored sixteen hours so far with nothing to show for it. So far there haven’t been any political crises Jussac and Charlotte haven’t been able to deal with, but if it takes another sixteen…

Two hours later they get the word that the stuck pup has finally dropped into position. D’Artagnan nearly passes out from a combination of exhaustion and relief, and Athos is finally able to convince
him to go to bed. Jeanne and Aramis will want him for the actual whelping in a few hours, and one of Treville’s attendants really ought to have had some sleep. D’Artagnan accedes to this argument but demands to be awoken the moment anything happens.

“It’s necessary,” he says insistently, perhaps sensing how tempted Athos is to let d’Artagnan sleep through the rest, just in case it still turns bad. “I may not know as much as Aramis or Jeanne but I’ve been training. The Captain needs all the help he can get.”

Athos promises. He knows how important Treville is to his mate, a carrier figure for the pup who’d never known a throwback parent. And it’s not like waking to find the Captain dead would be that much better than watching him die.

The party who had gone to the Louvre arrive a few hours after d’Artagnan leaves.

“I’m so sorry we couldn’t get away sooner,” Adele begins, clearly ready to regale Athos with stories of the delicate political work they’d been doing to cover over the Cardinal’s extended absence. Then she notices the atmosphere and stops short. “Isn’t it over yet?”

“Not yet,” Athos says wearily. “I think Treville may be pushing the first pup now.”

“Oh my God,” Charlotte says, suddenly frightened, and rushes past him into the whelping room. Adele and Jussac freeze next to Athos, unsure what to do.

There’s a commotion within just as Charlotte opens the door. Athos comes automatically to his feet. He may not be an Omega or Treville’s mate, but the Captain’s a carrier figure to him too, and he has to know.

“Almost there,” Aramis is saying encouragingly. “Almost – oh my God!”

“What?” Treville demands, voice nearly destroyed. “What is it?”

“A hand,” Aramis says, laughing in disbelief. “No wonder she got stuck, she’s waving at me right now – all right, push again, now!”

The mechanics of it escape Athos, but Treville must obey, because all of a sudden Aramis is holding an arm. Jeanne leans over, deft hands tugging, and a shoulder emerges too.

“Good,” Aramis praises. Athos glances upwards – Treville is panting and exhausted; Richelieu looks like he’s not sure whether to weep or collapse. “One more push and you’ll have a pup.”

“Thank God,” Treville whispers devoutly.

“Now,” Jeanne orders.

The whole process repeats again. When it ends the pup doesn’t seem appreciably closer to being whelped.

Aramis winces. “Okay, apparently one more than that.”

“What?” Treville tries to shout. The usual parade-ground bellow is barely louder than a speaking voice, but the expression on his face speaks volumes.

“She’s being stubborn!” Aramis defends. “Come on, you can do it. One more time – now –”

Athos is familiar with the signs of someone pushed past their limit, but somehow Treville must do it, because with one final cry Aramis is holding a stunned female Alpha pup. Treville slags back against
Richelieu, panting, tears of exhaustion pooling under his lashes.

“Oh my God,” Athos says involuntarily. During d’Artagnan’s labor he’d been up where Richelieu had been, behind his mate on the whelping bed, helping support d’Artagnan in a kneeling position and supplying encouragement. He hadn’t actually seen it from this side before. It’s… intimidating. Athos is suddenly devoutly grateful he hadn’t been born an Omega.

“Why isn’t she crying?” Treville demands.

Athos’ attention is jerked back to the pup. Belatedly he registers that she hasn’t yet made a sound. Fear grips his heart.

Jeanne, shockingly, doesn’t seem concerned. “Just stunned,” she says briskly. She takes the pup by the ankles, hangs her upside down dangling from one hand, and smacks her bottom once with the other.

A second, a pause, and then a screech loud enough to wake the dead fills the room.

“She wasn’t sure it was over yet,” Jeanne explains. “Coming out arm-first like that, she didn’t know when it was time to start breathing.” She rights the pup and gently tickles one small foot, watching in satisfaction as the pup jerks in automatic response.

“Aramis?” Jeanne prompts after a moment. Aramis tears his eyes away from the pup and snatches up a basin. Athos realizes what must be coming next and averts his eyes.

When he judges it safe to look back, Jeanne has briskly toweled off the pup and is in the act of handing her over to her parents. Athos looks away again, this time to preserve the privacy of such an intimate moment. He blinks a few stray tears away, thinking of d’Artagnan. Of Thérèse and Charles.

His eyes catch Charlotte’s and for a moment they gaze at each other. In her face Athos sees the pups they never had together. The pups she’ll never be able to have with Adele, after what the Inquisition did to her. But she smiles a little, glancing back at the crying infant, and Athos still knows her well enough even after all these years to tell that she’s grateful that their people can still have moments like this, even if she’ll never experience them first hand.

Adele comes up next to her. They hold hands. Jussac has his over his mouth, eyes suspiciously bright.

“God is great,” Richelieu whispers reverently, gazing down at his mate and pup.

Treville smiles up at him. Then he groans again, looking startled as he does it.

“Two more to go,” Aramis says encouragingly, giving Treville a smile that’s not entirely free from mischief.

Athos can’t help laughing a little. The atmosphere in the room makes for wild mood swings. But the sound draws Jeanne’s attention, and the midwife glances at the Alpha over her shoulder. “Are you volunteering to help out?” she asks pointedly.

“I think I’d better go fetch d’Artagnan,” Athos says hastily, making for the door. “I did promise.”

“Make sure France is still in one piece while you’re at it,” Aramis calls after him, lighthearted and joking.

And this time it is a joke. This time, Athos feels it in his bones. The peace is fragile but it will stand;
the Inquisition will not return to their shores. One day they’ll spread freedom back throughout all of Europe. Today, their pack is healthy, and safe, and growing by the minute.

Athos takes the image of the happy family away with him, and goes to tell his mate and his offspring.

Chapter End Notes

The End!

Folks, it's been incredible. Thanks to everyone who has read, left kudos, commented, asked questions, debated the answers, speculated about the plot, squealed, tumbled, chatted, emailed, and cheer-led. A few call-outs in particular:

- **Elenduen**, the original prompter, whose suggestion spawned this epic. I know this went places you could never have imagined but you stuck with it, and I'm grateful beyond words for the original spark!
- **mellyflori**, for indispensable help-I'm-stuck plot advice, geeky conversations about everything from linguistic evolution to Bastille design, and beta (Beta?) advice in part four.
- **Kat2107**, for taking a short line about a minor character and turning it into an incredible (canonical!) spinoff fic that is bringing amazing depth and richness to the empty spaces I'd left in the world. If you're not reading it, you're missing out.
- Everyone who played the fantasy casting game for Richelieu's lieutenants in the comments. For the curious, Cahusac is now played by Olivier Martinez, Bernajoux by Blaise Matuidi, and Boisrenard by Ezequiel Lavezzi.

This is the end of *ye heirs of glory*, but I hope not the end for the extended *heirs* universe. In addition to Kat's fic, I'm planning several timestamps/behind-the-scenes ficlets. And everyone is invited to come hang out on my [tumblr](https://example.com) for a DVD commentary/Q&A party! [My askbox is open](https://example.com) for anything and everything *heirs*. Starting tomorrow I'll repost some of the material I originally wrote in comments for people who asked questions about how the world worked, and I'll answer pretty much any question, from the biology of Alpha females (to everyone waiting, that's definitely first!), to what I was thinking when I wrote a particular line, why a character behaved the way they did, what became of your favorite minor character, and anything and everything else!

Readers, thanks again. I hope you'll leave me one more comment telling me what you thought of the ending. If you're here for the second time, please leave a reread comment and tell me how it stood up the second time! I hope you found your experience different with spoilers known in advance :) The fic may be over, but don't be strangers. We'll always have *heirs*.

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**Works inspired by this one**

*And now these three remain* by Kat2107

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!