Acta Non Verba

by gaelicspirit

Summary

Set mid-Season 2, after episode 6, *Through a Glass Darkly*. Out of favor with the King, Treville and d'Artagnan are assigned to transport two prisoners from Paris to Soissons. When their party is ambushed and they are taken prisoner, Rochefort grounds the Musketeers and sends the Red Guard after the prisoners under the guise of protecting the King. But the Inseparables mount their own, dangerous rescue mission, brotherhood holding more importance than a doomed outcome.

“We’d ride through fire for you, Captain, but…,” Porthos tipped his head toward the Gascon sleeping across from him, “we’d burn the world down for that one.”

Disclaimer/Warning: They're not mine. More's the pity. The title is Latin meaning 'deeds not words'. Each chapter title is in Latin as well.

Notes

Author's Note: I've taken a bit of artistic liberty with the setting of this story. While I work to remain entrenched in canon, there are times my ideas complicate that effort. Therefore, I ask you to buy in on two adjustments to our show for the sake of this story: 1) Constance and d'Artagnan's public display of affection at the bottom of the hill after all were rescued from Marmion was simple and short-lived, and 2) the King did not retreat into his Rochefort-protected solitude immediately upon returning to the palace (as it appeared between episodes 6 and 7).
Also, one of my favorite things about writing in this fandom is that each of the four main characters gives us so many layers to work with. Individually, they could each hold their own novel-length story, but when the four are combined it's like sparking a powder keg. Though the focus of this story is d'Artagnan, I've attempted to place each man in the spotlight as the plot unfolds.

Lastly, I've pulled some Musketeers I created for my previous stories into this one to keep things a bit consistent. If you read, I hope you enjoy.

Many thanks to ThruTerrysEyes for the sanity check. She knows all the skeletons in my closets. Mandi, this one is for you. Happy Birthday, my friend.
"It was like the eve of a battle; the hearts beat, the eyes laughed, and they felt that the life they were perhaps going to lose, was after all, a good thing."

- Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*

It was odd to see one of them alone.

Bauer joined the Musketeers just after Athos, developed his own friendships among the ranks, and knew the importance and significance of having men close enough they breathed for one another when necessary. But there was something different about these four, setting their friendship on a level above military fraternity. These men were brothers by choice, not by something as arbitrary as blood.

Seeing Athos stand alone in the center of the garrison, hat in hand and brooding concentration coloring his features, shifted something sideways around Bauer's heart. The stance, the expression, signaled caution, wariness. The men in the garrison had known of the tragedy at the Chatillon that transpired the day prior. Many in the King's court had been murdered by the supposed astronomer Marmion, though the details of the Musketeers' involvement were sketchy at best.

Seeing Porthos supporting Aramis from his horse straight into the infirmary upon their return that evening, the sharpshooter's hair visibly matted with blood, had been enough to draw protective concern from the men lingering at the garrison who were waiting for their men and former Captain. But having Athos return sans d'Artagnan and simply stand in the dying light of day as though braced for an attack had Bauer on alert.

He approached the man slowly, running several possible conversation starters over in his head, uncertain as always how to elicit more than a quirk of an eyebrow in response. Before the young d'Artagnan had joined their ranks, the only person who could really trigger Athos into genuine conversation had been Aramis. The honey-voiced man had made an art of the perfect turn of phrase that would draw out a response from the usually taciturn Lieutenant.

d'Artagnan employed no tactic, per se; he simply barreled forward without acknowledgement of Athos' well-guarded walls, his very presence and passion demanding the older man engage. It had been amusing to watch on many levels; d'Artagnan's seamless infiltration of the trio's inseparability had been clear to all who stood outside their ranks much sooner than it had been to Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.
However, dispossessed of d'Artagnan's earnestness and Aramis' guile, Bauer had to simply hope the latest level of chaos in their city would be a sufficient catalyst to draw information from Athos.

"Aramis seemed a bit worse for wear," Bauer commented as he stopped directly across from the other man. Athos' blue eyes were bright with an unidentifiable emotion as he looked up, his fingers gripping the brim of his hat until the tips were white. "Marmion?"

"It seems he went through a window," Athos replied, his voice low, an undercurrent of distraction woven through the words. "Second floor. Backwards."

Bauer winced. "How on Earth did he—"

"Had the good fortune to land on an awning."

*It seemed the Lord isn't quite through with our semi-pious comrade-in-arms,* Bauer thought.

"What of d'Artagnan?" Bauer continued, prodding Athos into speech via obvious worry over his brothers. "I heard nothing of casualties—"

"He's fine." Athos brought his chin up swiftly as if the very idea of anything otherwise was not to be entertained. "He accompanied the King's party to escort them safely back to the palace."

"Them?" Bauer couldn't help the smirk that lifted one corner of his mouth. "Or...*her*?"

At that, Athos simply raised an eloquent brow. d'Artagnan's love for the pretty Boniceaux woman was not exactly a well-kept secret. Still, Athos was a gentleman and as such unwilling to gossip.

"So, with everyone accounted for and more or less in one piece," Bauer spared a glance over his shoulder toward the infirmary, "why do I still get the feeling I need to prepare for a siege?"

Athos allowed a small smile to soften the line between his tense brows. "You're rather perceptive."

"I've been called worse," Bauer lifted a shoulder, following Athos to the stairs that led up to Treville's former office. Athos slouched a shoulder against a support post and Bauer settled on a lower step, his forearms resting on his knees. "Is it Treville?"

Athos sighed expressively. "He will be our Captain again. One day."

"Agreed." Bauer nodded immediately. "Is he with d'Artagnan, then?" It was curious that Treville hadn't returned with the others.

"I doubt it," Athos muttered, placing his hat back on the crown of his head, tilting his face toward the waning light of the setting sun. "He's not among his Majesty's favorites at the moment."

Bauer was silent a moment, digesting that. Without a Captain, they were at the mercy of the palace—and worse, Rochefort—for orders. Athos was the most senior among them, though aside from Treville they hadn't truly bothered with the chain of command before. The Musketeers were in need of direction, and soon.

Athos's eyes had gone distant once again; it wasn't his brothers that troubled him, Bauer now realized. It was something else, something that had transpired during their time with Marmion, as his Lieutenant had not been this tense prior to leaving the garrison. In fact, he'd seemed rather focused on drawing Treville out of his melancholy.

Perhaps it was the current unrest in Paris that was bothering the man.
"You've heard of the murders?" Bauer asked, pulling Athos' attention away from whatever darkness had momentarily swallowed his gaze.

"Murders?"

"Three in the last week," Bauer lifted his chin, eyes on the shadows that stretched to cover the courtyard. "Red Guard."

"Victims or perpetrators?" Athos asked with genuine curiosity.

"Seems to be the work of one man—a rather sadistic one at that," Bauer informed him. "Three Red Guard have been found dead, drained of blood, their tongues removed."

Athos' expression did not conceal the horror he felt at this news. "Found where?"

"At the palace entrance," Bauer informed him. "Someone is clearly sending a message."

"Why have we not been informed before now?" Athos demanded, pulling away from the post, his body squaring off into the posture of a soldier once more.

Bauer lifted a shoulder. "At first I'm sure it was to keep it quiet so that Rochefort could solve it without alarming the King…," he rubbed at the back of his neck, disquieted by the next statement, "then it was under the sentiment that Musketeers are not trusted."

"Because of Treville," Athos muttered, a muscle in his jaw flexing.

Bauer let his silence speak.

"Do they have an idea who this man is?" Athos asked, thumbs hooked in the wide leather of his weapon's belt, eyes on the shadowed entrance of the garrison, whatever had been troubling him before evaporated in the wake of this new threat.

"A Marechausee dispatched from Soissons has been investigating," Bauer informed him.

"The King allowed an enforcer of the law from a neighboring city to investigate deaths in Paris?" Athos stared at him, incredulous.

Bauer lifted his hands in a shrug, his Parisian body language ingrained since birth. "Who is to say that the King knows," he replied. "We only found out once Rochefort was occupied for too long with Marmion. The Marechausee's name is Laroche. Martin Laroche. He interviewed several of us while you were rescuing the King."

Athos' features darkened with a frown, and Bauer found he was glad to be sitting else he would have felt compelled to back up a step.

"Mathieu suggested it was a benefit to have Laroche investigating," Bauer offered.

"And why is that?"

Bauer squinted up at the other man, grudging humor edging his expression. "Diverts the accusations from the Musketeers."

At that Athos bounced his head in agreement. The discord between the Red Guard and Musketeers was legendary; three dead from the Cardinal's Red Guard might indeed shine suspicion on the King's Musketeers.
"What has this Laroche said about leads?" Athos asked. "And reasoning for the singling out of these men, or the Guard itself?"

Bauer opened his mouth to reply when the clattering of swift hooves suddenly echoed through the rapidly increasing darkness. He scrambled to his feet when he saw the rider was Grisier, his closest friend in the regiment, looking frenzied. The man's entire right side was covered with blood, but he swung down from his lathered horse without the tale-tell hitch of the injured.

"Bauer!" he called out, holding his mount by the bridle. "You must come with me!"

Bauer and Athos tied in their approach, Bauer reaching anxious hands to check his friend for wounds. Grisier slapped his hand away.

"It's not mine," Grisier snapped. "There's no time for this; you need to return to the palace with me." His eyes shifted to Athos as though just registering his presence. "You, too, Athos."

"What's happened at the palace?" Athos demanded, his voice growing edges that had Bauer shifting away lest he be cut.

"Another body has been found, but this time—"

"Is this blood from the body?" Bauer interrupted, confused as the other victims had been curiously exsanguinated.

"No! I'll explain on the way, but we must hurry!" As though seeing he wasn't getting through with a simple plea, Grisier reached out and grasped Athos by the lapel of his jacket. "d'Artagnan is in pursuit of the killer!"

"What?!" Athos bellowed. "Alone?"

Grisier nodded. "I couldn't stop him."

Without another word Athos turned on his heel and headed to the livery. Bauer shot Grisier a questioning look and received a quick jerk of the head in response. Following his Lieutenant, Bauer ran through the opened door of the livery and both men had horses saddled within minutes. Mounted once more, Grisier led them from the garrison and toward the palace at as quick a pace as they could manage through the city streets.

"I'd been ordered as a guard while the royals were at the Chatillon," Grisier called to them as they rode. "When the carriages returned, I started to leave until I saw d'Artagnan with them and told him I'd wait. He was just leaving the grounds to retrieve his horse when we heard the shouting."

Athos pulled his mount up close to Grisier. "The body was left at the palace entrance, like the others?"

"This time at the gate," Grisier shook his head. "And there is not just one man as Laroche suspected," he said, glancing at Bauer. "There were two. One was coving the palace gates with blood. Buckets of blood."

"What?!" Bauer drew his head back, shocked. "For what purpose?"

"Intimidation," Athos replied as they rounded the corner near the Louvre and approached the Royal Palace. "Fear. To send Louis into a panic."

"What of d'Artagnan?" Bauer pressed Grisier for answers.
"He called out to the man we saw hanging the body on the gate and when the man ran, he gave chase."

Bauer and Athos shook their heads in unison, Athos declaring softly, "He'll catch him, too, God help us."

"Did you see where they went?" Bauer asked.

Grisier shrugged expressively. "Toward Notre Dame, for all the good that does us."

"The other man?"

"Rochefort and two other guards were close enough to hear our shouts and caught him before he could get too far. They're hauling him to the Châtelet." He pulled his horse to a stop near the gore-covered Palace gate. "Rochefort sent me after you."

"To pursue d'Artagnan no doubt," Athos replied, his frown turning quickly to a scowl as his eyes traversed the scene before him.

Parisians were accustomed to violence and suffering, some even perpetuated it on a regular basis. But there was an unspoken assumption that such things did not impact their monarchy. The King and Queen were kept apart from the filth and degradation that surrounded them and was pervasive throughout the city. To see the stain of blood cast across the gates to the Palace had upset the balance of accepted right and wrong more so than any number of dead Red Guard on display.

"Grisier," Athos instructed. "Help them transport the body to the morgue, then locate Treville. I don't care what Rochefort says," Athos continued, eyes cutting sideways to quiet any thought of protest, "the man was our Captain and needs to be involved in the fate of these brigands."

Grisier nodded once in agreement and slid to the ground, tying his horse off at post.

"Bauer, you're with me," Athos ordered, pulling his horse around and kicking it into a trot as they headed in the direction of Notre Dame.

"He's had too much lead," Bauer called out as he caught up with Athos. "We'll never catch him."

"I care not about finding this killer," Athos replied tersely. "We have the one; we'll find the other soon enough."

Bauer lifted his chin in sudden understanding. "d'Artagnan," he replied.

"That boy does not know how to quit," Athos replied. "He'll run until his legs give out if he must."

An undercurrent of worry was clear in Athos' tone and Bauer realized that not having the full story of what had transpired for his fellow Musketeers while in the company of Marmion was a detriment in this situation. Following his Lieutenant through the rapidly thinning crowds on the streets of Paris, Bauer kept his eyes in motion, leaning forward to look down alleys, peering through lantern-lit windows, trying to catch sight of the familiar dark head and the tanned leather of d'Artagnan's uniform. Soon the streets were almost too dark to see much of anything, the sun gracing just the rooftops with the last vestiges of golden light.

"There!" Athos called out, pulling his horse to a stop.

Bauer looked out and around, seeing nothing, until he realized Athos' gaze was directed upwards, toward the rooftops. Bauer followed his line of sight, gasping as he saw what could only be
d'Artagnan's wiry frame swinging bodily from a two-handed grip. As they watched, Bauer gaping, d'Artagnan flipped his long legs over the edge of the roof to then roll to his feet and sprint forward in pursuit of another shadow much further down, running along the top of Paris.

"How in the hell…?"

"Porthos," Athos replied with a wry sort of pride coloring his tone and twisting his lips into a rare smile.

Without elaborating further, Athos kicked his horse into a trot, Bauer on his heels, getting ahead of d'Artagnan, but not quite reaching the other man. They were forced to stop by a crossroads, their horses dancing with nervous energy, responding to the anxiety that surged through the riders.

Bauer didn't tear his gaze from d'Artagnan, catching his breath as the younger man made a daring leap between two buildings, stumbling slightly, but catching himself to continue the pursuit. The Gascon was the brand of lean muscle that held a sort of raw energy Bauer could never muster; it had to be what fueled his seemingly endless drive.

"He's trapped himself up there," Bauer called breathlessly as they once more lost the lead in their pursuit. "There's no way to grab his quarry and get down safely."

"d'Artagnan won't worry about safely," Athos shouted back. "So we must."

In a sudden burst of speed, Athos wheeled his horse to the right, circling around the building d'Artagnan was currently traversing. Bauer chased after him, ready to follow the other man's lead. In moments he saw where Athos was headed and leaned low over his horse's neck to match the man's speed. They reached the river and pulled their sweaty mounts to a skidding stop, dismounting and rushing to the last building bordering the Seine, bursting through the entry doors.

Bauer took the lead, fairly certain he visited this particular establishment far more than his Lieutenant, and found the stairs that lead to the uppermost room. Tipping his hat in an insincere apology as he burst into a room currently occupied by a balding politician and a young woman half his age, Bauer climbed out through the window, main gauche in hand, and swung up to the roof, Athos on his heels.

They blue-gray of twilight teased his eyes with shadow, but soon he was able to hear the man running across the clay tiles of the roof toward them. Athos squared off next to him, sword glinting off the rising moon. They barely breathed, both listening in tandem to the pursuit that would end with their human roadblock. Before either of the men reached them, however, Bauer heard d'Artagnan cry out as though with impact and winced as the crack and slide of tiles followed soon thereafter.

Athos was moving before Bauer registered that what he'd heard was d'Artagnan tackling the man he'd been running after for closing in on half an hour now. The older man headed straight for the sound of the ruckus, rising moonlight his only guide. Bauer followed Athos, as he knew he always would, and tried to find any sign of the young Gascon along the Paris rooftops.

Cursing reached his ears, in an accent not of Paris, and Bauer surmised d'Artagnan had managed to gain the upper hand. But then Athos' voice belted out a warning and Bauer's blood ran cold.

"d'Artagnan, grab hold!"

It took Bauer a moment to focus, but once he did, he caught his breath. Athos lay sprawled on the slanted roof of the building next to the one they'd scaled, his arms over the edge, gripping d'Artagnan's wrist tightly and sliding inexorably toward the edge. Bauer sheathed his main gauche
and threw himself down across Athos' legs, holding him as best he could with his weight.

"Release him," Bauer heard Athos order.

"I do and he dies," d'Artagnan's strained voice echoed up from below.

Gripping Athos' legs, Bauer pieced together the chain of events: d'Artagnan grappling with the alleged murderer had gone over the edge, Athos had caught his protégé, and d'Artagnan was now hanging between villain and hero, being stretched apart by gravity.

"Broken leg, at the most," Athos grunted.

"You sound like Porthos," d'Artagnan managed, the tension in his voice like a living thing.

Bauer dug his heels in as Athos slipped a bit further.

"I can't hold you both," Athos snapped. "Release him; we'll take our chances."

"Athos…!" d'Artagnan gasped.

"d'Artagnan, please." Athos' tone shifted from ordering to imploring and Bauer suddenly felt the man's slide cease as the weight on the other end of his arm became significantly less.

Scrambling forward, Bauer joined Athos over the side of the building and reached down for d'Artagnan, grappling to pull the young man over the edge of the roof and to safety. Once secure, the three Musketeers lay on the clay tile gasping for air, d'Artagnan between his rescuers. Bauer could feel the younger man's muscles tremble with delayed reaction, but said nothing as they each steadied their breathing.

Sitting up, Bauer could hear the pathetic cries of the man d'Artagnan had been forced to drop.

"Come," he said to his companions. "We can still bring this man to justice, thanks to d'Artagnan's impression of the Greek's Mercury."

"Which one is that?" d'Artagnan gasped, his low voice raspy in the dark.

"The one with wings on his heels," Athos replied dryly, pushing to join Bauer upright. He looked down at d'Artagnan. "What was the plan, exactly?"

d'Artagnan didn't yet rise. "I don't know that there was one beyond: catch him."

Athos traded a look with Bauer, then gained his feet, reaching down to help d'Artagnan up. Neither of the men commented on the low groan d'Artagnan offered at the motion. Making their way back across to the flat-roofed building and through the same window Athos and Bauer had used as their roof access, all three men offering half-hearted apologies to the balding man and his companion, they reached the alley and shooed away the gathering crowd.

It seemed Athos' gamble had paid off: the man had escaped with a broken leg, which seemed to have increased his vocal abilities quite extensively. Bauer gathered their horses and he and Athos lifted the presumed murderer atop Athos' mount, ignoring his curses and cries of protest. His tanned skin further shadowed by the moonlight, d'Artagnan swayed a bit as he stood waiting for the two men to secure the man to Athos' horse.

"You ride mine," Bauer said to his young friend. "You're dead on your feet."

"I'm fine," d'Artagnan insisted.
Narrowing his eyes at the younger Musketeer in doubt, Bauer thought to push the issue, then caught Athos' warning gaze. Bauer climbed aboard his horse, taking the reins to Athos' mount and eased the horses forward, staying behind the two men who headed back to the palace on foot. As he watched, d'Artagnan—who stood a few inches taller than his mentor, but was slender enough the height difference didn't seem to matter—leaned his shoulder slightly against Athos' with every other step as though keeping himself centered.

"They told you of the murders, then?" Athos questioned.

Bauer only caught d'Artagnan's head shake because they passed by a lit street light. "I saw a man hanging a body and another tossing blood...."

"So you went after the man simply because he ran," Athos clarified, as though for himself.

"Basically," d'Artagnan replied, his tone clearly implying what of it. He rotated his shoulder—the arm Athos had caught to save him from fate similar to his quarry—his back arching stiffly.

"You're welcome, by the way," Athos commented casually.

d'Artagnan chuffed. "Yes, thank you for nearly dislocating my arm in order to save my life."

"Had Porthos not encouraged those rooftop sojourns, your life might not have needed saving."

Bauer bounced his head as he listened. Porthos did have rather interesting means of traveling about Paris; it came as no surprise that he'd roped the young Gascon into his rooftop exploits.

"I'd have probably figured out something else," d'Artagnan offered with humble amusement.

They walked in silence for several steps, no longer in a rush, mindful of d'Artagnan's stilted carriage.

"Care to elaborate on the King's accusations of what transpired with Marmion?" Athos prodded gently, his tone a cleverly disguised command. Bauer remained quiet, waiting on d'Artagnan's answer. The man tied to the horse next to him was in too much misery to pay attention to anything except the pain in his leg.

"Marmion...he justified murder with the flip of a coin," d'Artagnan spat, venom lacing each word. "It wasn't his fault people died, you see. It was fate. It was the person who chose the side of the coin. They killed those people. He was...dismantling the King before my eyes."

Athos remained silent, waiting d'Artagnan out.

"And then he turned his attention to Constance," d'Artagnan whispered wretchedly. "And I offered myself in exchange for her life."

At that, Athos flinched. Bauer saw it; d'Artagnan felt it.

"I had no choice, Athos."

"There is always a choice," Athos chided, but then turned and looked at the younger man, the moonlight turning his skin alabaster. "And you made the honorable one."

"When Marmion fired his pistol," d'Artagnan continued, "I thought that was it. I was dead. And I was...I was at peace with it. Because Constance would live."

For the longest time, no one spoke. Bauer felt a suffocating weight between the two men walking in front of him. He was about to speak to alleviate it when Athos reached out and rested a hand on
d'Artagnan's shoulder, saying without words he understood the sentiment.

"Marmion's brother saved me," d'Artagnan shook his head once. "Jumped in front of me and took the hit. I don't know that I'll ever understand that one. But...I'm glad not to be dead."

"What of the King?" Athos asked softly. "He said—"

"He was mistaken," d'Artagnan cut in, his tone bitter, his shoulders tense in the silver light illuminating the streets. "He sees only what he wants to see and even when the truth stares him in the face, he twists it to serve his own purposes."

Bauer drew back at the snarl, feeling a chill at the words. "Careful, d'Artagnan. You are skirting the edges of treason."

Athos had dropped his hand but was leaning his shoulder against the younger man's.

"Since Pepin...," d'Artagnan choked on the name. "The King simply is not the man I...not the man I wanted him to be."

"Did you encourage Marmion to kill him, as Louis suggested?" Athos asked quietly.

"No!" At that, d'Artagnan stopped so suddenly, Bauer had to pull his horse up to avoid running him over. "I was buying time, Athos. Marmion was playing us all—pitting lives against the turn of a coin. The only way I could think to save the King's life was to fool Marmion into playing his own game. You have to believe me!"

"I do," Athos replied, placing a reassuring hand on d'Artagnan's shoulder once more. "But you need to be prepared for the King's interpretation of the events to not play in your favor." He glanced up once at Bauer, then back down at d'Artagnan. "Especially with Rochefort whispering poison in the King's ear."

d'Artagnan seemed to sag a bit under Athos' hand, shaking his head once, then turned and walked forward, leaving the other two in his wake. It wasn't until they caught up with him that Bauer realized the lad was speaking.

"What was that?" Bauer asked.

d'Artagnan sighed. "The world has turned sideways," he murmured, his voice coming from the center of his chest. "I am adrift."

"Believe in your brothers, d'Artagnan," Athos said quietly, not touching the younger man, but keeping himself close just the same. "Use us as your cornerstone and build upon it."

d'Artagnan didn't reply and Bauer realized they'd reached the palace gates where several Red Guard—including Rochefort—were waiting for them. Athos stepped forward, leading his horse and the lamed suspect toward the group. Bauer listened as Athos reported the apprehension of the man and watched as Rochefort ordered several men from the Red Guard to pull the man from the mount and haul him to the Châtelet.

"You will pay for what you've done, Rochefort," the prisoner cried, his voice high and thin with pain. "You will not see another peaceful sunrise!"

Bauer frowned at the threat, but saw Rochefort shrug it off as though meaningless. The blond leader of the Red Guard ordered Athos to return to the garrison, not once bothering to thank him for apprehending a man suspected in the deaths of four of his men. His jaw muscle working vigorously
beneath his skin, Athos gave Rochefort a nod and swung up on his now-vacant horse, holding a hand out to d'Artagnan. It wasn't until the younger man was seated behind his mentor on the horse and level with Bauer that he realized d'Artagnan was—like Grisier had been—covered in blood. He surmised it was not the Gascon's, but carried over from the marring of the palace gates.

Still, it was a bit unnerving to see.

They rode in silence to the garrison. Breaching the inner walls, Bauer saw that Treville had returned and was standing at the base of the stairs that led to his former office, watching them approach.

"I must inform Treville of these proceedings," Athos said to Bauer. He noticed the man purposefully did not use the title of Captain. "Can you make sure d'Artagnan is cared for?"

d'Artagnan slid unaided from the back of Athos' horse. "I can see to myself," he said with a dark glower.

Athos held Bauer's eyes until he received a nod in reply, then held his hands out for Bauer's reins. Dismounting, Bauer waited until Athos led the horses away and moved to stand near d'Artagnan, watching as the younger man stared vacantly at the dirt floor of the garrison.

"Sounds as if you went through a time of it," Bauer offered, hoping to draw the young man's dark eyes.

"He killed three people," d'Artagnan said quietly, his low voice soft and dangerous, "on the outcome of a coin flip. He almost killed Constance and Aramis."

Bauer nodded without replying. d'Artagnan raised his eyes and pinned Bauer with his tortured gaze, causing the man to force himself to be still rather than instinctively back up a step.

"If Rochefort hadn't handled it, I would have killed the man myself," d'Artagnan all-but growled before moving toward the infirmary.

"Where are you going?" Bauer asked, hurrying to catch up.

"To check on Aramis," d'Artagnan replied.

"Athos said he was fine," Bauer informed him.

d'Artagnan shot him a scathing look. "Athos didn't see him go through that window."

Subdued, Bauer followed d'Artagnan through the doors of the infirmary, both halting just inside as Porthos' scowl hit them like a physical blow.

"'e's just got to sleep," Porthos whispered harshly, standing like a watchdog at the foot of Aramis' bed. "You'll not be waking 'im."

Bauer slid his eyes to where Aramis lay sprawled on a bunk, a pink-tinged pillow beneath his head, one leg free of the blankets that covered him to mid-torso, thigh wrapped in several layers of bandages. His face appeared unmarked, save the edge of stitches poking from his hairline, but the line between his brows was evidence of his discomfort. Porthos waved them to the adjoining room where he could keep an eye on his friend and they could talk without startling the wounded man awake.

Bauer followed d'Artagnan, not missing the way the younger man stumbled against the doorway as he passed through.
"How is he?" d'Artagnan asked, his hushed tone urgent.

"Stubborn," Porthos replied, his dark eyes raking d'Artagnan in the dim lantern light of the infirmary. "But he'll live. What in the bloody 'ell 'appened to you?"

"Long story," d'Artagnan sighed.

"He chased a suspected murderer across Paris' rooftops for just shy of an hour and ended up being nearly pulled apart between Athos and his quarry," Bauer supplied.

"Alright, apparently not that long," d'Artagnan conceded.

Porthos took d'Artagnan's chin in his grip, tilting the young man's head one way, then another, eyes raking over the split lip and bruised cheek. Bauer hadn't noticed them before in the dark of the Paris streets. The blood on d'Artagnan's mouth was dried and the bruise was slightly puffy, but not fresh. Bauer gathered these were souvenirs from the adventure with Marmion.

"This 'ave to do with those Red Guard murders that went on while we were starin' at the sun?"

"It would," Bauer answered, as d'Artagnan's chin was still held in Porthos' grip.

Porthos sighed and released the young man's face, only to lift the edge of d'Artagnan's blood-stained doublet. "Tell me that's not all yours."

"It's not all mine," d'Artagnan replied, dutifully. Bauer saw a tremor slip across the younger man's bearing, his shoulders bowing a bit. "I'm just here to check on Aramis."

Porthos narrowed his eyes, studying the Gascon. Bauer watched in part amusement, part amazement as the swarthy man formed his apparent assessment with that stare. It wasn't hard to see that d'Artagnan was still on his feet by sheer stubbornness. Porthos turned away toward a bin of discarded clothes. He re-emerged with a clean tunic, doublet, and trousers.

"Change into this, let the physician look atcha, then I'll let you see Aramis."

"Porthos, I—"

Porthos held up a hand. "Take it or leave it."

d'Artagnan pressed his lips together, then sighed in defeat. Porthos jerked his chin at Bauer, summoning him back into the adjoining room to give d'Artagnan some privacy. Situating themselves between Aramis' sleeping form and the opened door to the room where d'Artagnan was changing, Bauer leaned against a window ledge, Porthos standing across from him. There was a weariness to the man that spoke of long nights and high stress, but Bauer knew Porthos wouldn't rest until he was sure his brothers were settled and at peace—all of them.

"'e telling the truth?" Porthos asked Bauer, tipping his head back toward d'Artagnan.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bauer replied. "He's tired. That's about as much as I can see. You were with him longer."

Porthos shook his head. "After 'e went through the window," he tipped his chin toward Aramis, his expression darkening, "they hauled me 'n Rochefort down to the cellar. Chained us to a post. I made the bastard pop my shoulder t'get us loose."

Bauer winced. "You're not serious."
Porthos leveled his gaze on him. "You tellin' me if you were chained with 'im, you'd've just waited for rescue?"

"Fair point," Bauer nodded.

"I came back up to see this one," he gestured toward Aramis, "wasn't dead, thank God, and that one," he tipped his head toward d'Artagnan, "'ad been knocked around a fair bit and was in a right state."

"They apparently threatened Constance Boniceaux."

"'At'll do it," Porthos sighed, glancing askance as d'Artagnan emerged clad in clean attire, his bloody clothes gripped in a white-knuckled hand. "Oi," Porthos stepped forward, seeing something in d'Artagnan's bearing that Bauer missed. "Look at me. d'Artagnan. 'ey, look at me."

Bauer watched as the lad's dark eyes, heavy with exhaustion and not a little bit of battle-shock, lifted to meet Porthos' intent gaze.

"'ow about we sit down for a bit, yeah?" Porthos suggested.

"I wanna check on Aramis," d'Artagnan replied, his speech a bit slurred as he swayed on his feet. Bauer watched in recognition as the past two days visibly swept over the young Gascon, tipping him forward and practically into Porthos' arms. "Saw him fall."

Porthos nodded. "And ya didn't see 'im in one piece again 'till it was over, did ya?"

d'Artagnan shook his head.

"C'mon, then," Porthos slipped under d'Artagnan's arm, wrapping his other around the lad's narrow waist. "'e's sleeping."

"He's okay?" d'Artagnan asked, sounding all of twelve.

Porthos nodded. "'e'll be fine. Tough one, our Aramis."

d'Artagnan nodded and a sigh slipped out that sounded so weighted Bauer shot the younger man a worried look. Dark eyes, hooded with emotion and weariness rested on Aramis' still form, his body sagging against Porthos' sturdy frame.

"Satisfied?"

d'Artagnan nodded.

"Want to rest here 'til 'e wakes?"

d'Artagnan nodded again and Bauer watched as Porthos set him on the only other empty bed, gently pulling the bloody clothing from his grip and easing him back on the bed. The younger man's eyes closed almost immediately. As the regiment physician stepped back inside, several white cloths in his hands, Porthos nodded toward d'Artagnan. Without a word, the physician nodded back, waving a hand. Bauer knew the man would let d'Artagnan sleep and give him a quick once-over before he allowed him to leave.

Porthos paused once more next to Aramis' bed, eyes sweeping Aramis' still form, before ushering Bauer outside of the infirmary.

"Athos back yet?" Porthos asked.
"He was speaking with Treville," Bauer informed him. "All this with Rochefort and the murders...."

"Not a good situation," Porthos nodded. "You know this bloke what's looking into all this?"

"Laroche?" Bauer confirmed. "Nah, don't know him. Talked to him the once, while you were off with the King."

"Any idea about why he's focused on the Red Guard?" Porthos leaned against the support beam, his thumbs hooked into this weapons belt, a stance so similar to Athos' earlier at ease position Bauer found himself suppressing a chuckle.

"Other than they're basically a waste of space?" Bauer shrugged. "No."

Porthos sighed, his voice echoing not a little of d'Artagnan's exhaustion. "You know this is going to come back on us. Somehow."

"I can listen for them, if you want to rest."

"When Athos is done," Porthos replied, glancing toward Athos' quarters.

Thinking of what the big man had said about how he and Rochefort escaped their captivity, Bauer protested. "Porthos, you need to—"

Porthos raised a hand. "I'll rest when Athos is done."

Bauer nodded, realizing that he expected no less. Not from these men.

"I'll wait with you," he promised, wanting just for a moment, to feel what it meant to be inseparable.

-ANV-

The morning was thin; light slipped like a secret through the quiet garrison, breath clouding before dry lips in a reluctant release. Bauer rolled his neck, feeling as though he'd just closed his eyes for the night moments before the fist pounding on his door summoned him to the courtyard for an emergency meeting.

Aramis stood close to Porthos, both leaning casually against a post just outside of the infirmary, their stance belying the concerned frowns darkening their features. The marksman's face was paler than usual, lines of latent pain drawing it thin, but in truth, Bauer had seen the man look worse and fight on. Whatever wounds he still bore from his encounter with Marmion would not slow him in whatever faced them next.

Bauer sat on top of the common table at the edge of the courtyard, his boot heels hooked at the edge of the bench seat, watching each of the Musketeers gather in the courtyard at Athos' summons.

Grisier sat next to him, elbows on his knees, his posture relaxed, but gray eyes sharp and wary as he scanned the yard. It was early yet, and many were still nursing the effects of the night before. Athos and d'Artagnan were in full uniform, as were Bauer, Grisier, and Mathieu, but Bauer suspected that was more for personal comfort than being prepared for anything specific—at least in his case.

Aramis leaned over and said something to Porthos in too low a voice for anyone else to hear. Porthos nodded gravely and Bauer watched his gaze shift until it rested on d'Artagnan, standing at the back of the courtyard, arms crossed over his chest and fingers tucked beneath his biceps. Athos stood on the stairs waiting as the men gathered, metal clinking, throats clearing, boots stomping.

Treville, Bauer noticed with surprise, stood among the men, his back resting with almost forced
casualness against the staircase, strategically lower in stance than Athos. In point of fact, he couldn't recall the last time their former Captain had approached his office. It seemed the loss of title had stripped the man of more than he'd realized.

"Thank you for gathering so quickly." Athos' voice suddenly cut through the morning.

Bauer found that he wasn't alone when he glanced from Athos to Treville and back. It seemed the older man was taking the King's demotion to heart, not even choosing to lead them in practice if not rank. Athos was the next logical choice, but it clear to everyone present that the man abhorred the duty.

"As you all are no doubt aware, up until last night, there was a madman loose in Paris," Athos began.

"So they've finally caught Rochefort, have they?" called a voice from the back.

Appreciative laughter rippled through the gathered men, but it didn't reach Athos. Responding to their Lieutenant's stone-faced expression, the men quieted and waited for what came next.

"Thanks to the quick work of several here," Athos continued, cool blue eyes shifting from Bauer to rest momentarily on d'Artagnan, "two men were apprehended and will be charged with the murder of four of the Cardinal's Red Guard." Athos brought his chin up. "Setting aside personal differences, these men were soldiers, standing—like us—in defense of our King, our city. Their deaths will not be treated lightly."

The men stayed quiet, respectful of the intent behind the words if not the dead men themselves. Athos opened a folded missive, the seal having been broken prior. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke, it was deliberate, yet detached, as though he was selecting his words from inside a box of thorns.

"I have here orders from Rochefort, delivered by messenger this morning as he is unwilling to leave the King unprotected."

That created a stir and Bauer felt Grisier straighten up next to him, calling out, "Hang on, Rochefort is sending us orders?"

Bauer's neck was hot, his jaw tense, as he felt the indignant consternation of his friends and fellow soldiers seep into him, causing him to call out in protest alongside many of the others. Porthos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan remained silent, though the young Gascon had dropped his arms and moved to stand closer to the other two.

Athos brought his chin up once more, the only indication he felt as troubled by this turn of events as the rest. Treville didn't move, his eyes on nothing, his casual stance now looking defeated rather than unperturbed. Grisier stood, never one to stay still long in the face of conflict, and began pacing in a tight line just in front of Bauer.

"Three Musketeers will accompany Laroche, escorting the two perpetrators back to Soissons where they will await trial for the wrongs committed here in Paris as well as on their home soil," Athos read, pausing when the voices rose in protest loud enough to drown him out, Bauer's joining them.

"Athos!" Grisier called out, drawing the man's eyes. "They killed four people, cut out their tongues and drained their blood. These are not... sane men. Rochefort expects three of us to escort them safely?"

Athos didn't reply, but Bauer saw his eyes track from Grisier's indignant protest over to where his
three closest friends stood, the only pocket of silence in the incensed rumblings of the crowd of men around them. Something crossed Athos' features then—a sort of helpless regret, a pain that Bauer couldn't place. It was enough to silence him, and he reached out to place a quieting hand on his friend's arm. Grisier looked over and Bauer simply shook his head, once.

"Two of the men," Athos continued, looking back down at the paper in his hand, "have been selected by the King. The third will be left up to the Musketeers to choose. The group will leave at mid-day."

The yard was suddenly quiet, as if the collective of men had caught their breath, holding it hostage for Athos' next words. Athos folded his lips in, looked down at the orders in his hands, then back up at the men.

"I will leave it to you men," he said, scanning the crowd and looking resolutely away from his friends at the back, "to select who will accompany Captain Treville and d'Artagnan to Soissons."

Bauer felt himself go cold. This was no better than a suicide mission; Rochefort certainly knew that. The men selected had been done so as both punishment and to make a point: *do not speak your mind, do not cross the King, do not get sideways of Rochefort.* In the heavy silence that echoed after Athos stopped speaking, Bauer shot a look toward where Aramis and Porthos stood with d'Artagnan.

The big man had stepped to the side, an arm out across d'Artagnan's chest in an achingly instinctive move of protection, as though he could keep the lad from harm by such a simple placement. Aramis stood with one hand wrapped around his side, the other fisted against his mouth. d'Artagnan, for his part, looked as though he'd almost expected such a thing. He stood utterly still behind Porthos' arm, his eyes pinned to Athos as though willing his mentor to look at him.

Unable to stand the quiet a moment longer, Bauer stood, mouth opened to call out to Athos when Grisier suddenly surged forward, bumping into Bauer's shoulder.

"I'll go with them," Grisier volunteered.

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"I'll go with them," Grisier volunteered.

Bauer's surprise was matched by Athos' expression.

"Are you certain?" Athos asked.

"You didn't see what these men did, Athos," Grisier returned. "I hate the Guard as much as the next Musketeer," he proclaimed, glancing across the crowd of men, "but as you said yourself, they were soldiers. No one deserves to die in such a way."

Immediately, Bauer wondered why none of d'Artagnan's closest friends had volunteered before Grisier could speak up. But then, letting his eyes shift from Athos' grateful nod toward Grisier back to where the other three stood, posture unchanged from before, the realization struck him that without Treville, the Musketeer's only hope of order was Athos. And without Aramis and Porthos, Athos was a shell of a man.

It was striking to realize that these three knew each other to such an extent, it wasn't even a question.

"Laroche will be here mid-day with the prisoners," Athos said, closing the meeting. "Be prepared."

Bauer watched as the older man turned and hurried down the stairs. He expected Athos to stop and say something to Treville—who stood unmoving from his initial spot—but he breezed past heading directly for d'Artagnan.
"What is this madness, Bauer?" Grisier whispered next to him. "This is deliberate."

"I agree," Bauer nodded, turning to his friend. "You must be on your guard. Rochefort is clearly looking to eliminate the others; he sees them as rebels and threats."

"The only threat to Rochefort is the truth," Grisier growled.

You will pay for what you've done, Rochefort! You will not see another peaceful sunrise. The prisoner had singled the Captain of the Red Guard out, specifically, Bauer remembered.

"There is more to this that we are seeing, my friend," Bauer said to Grisier, resting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Stay vigilant. Your friends will not desert you."

Grisier met his gaze, nodding. "It is not my friends I worry about," he said solemnly.

"Come," Bauer turned his friend toward the livery. "Let's get you prepared."

Grisier was a simple man and soldier. It didn't take long to ensure he was well-equipped for the days' ride to Soissons. Bauer volunteered to take his blade to the armory and have it sharpened and bring him back a spare boot knife. He didn't expect to encounter anyone as the men had moved about their duties, but realized it was naïve to not consider d'Artagnan and his friends would also be at the armory.

It was Porthos' voice he heard first, the anger wrapping around each word stopping the Musketeer in his tracks just outside the room.

"'e's doin' this on purpose. Least 'e coulda done was sent some Red Guard along to act as more bodies."

Athos' reply was measured, patient, but no less tense. "He is, understandably, unwilling to risk more of his men."

"Oh, but 'e's got no problem risking us, is that it?"

"Stop, Porthos," d'Artagnan's low voice cut in. "It isn't Athos' fault; he can't change this."

"Somebody bloody well should!"

"It's Louis. He's…punishing me," d'Artagnan continued, and Bauer heard the clink of sword blades as the weapons were set against a whetstone. "I wouldn't kill a man he decided was a traitor—despite the fact that he promised the man clemency—and I encouraged a madman to flip a coin to decide his fate." d'Artagnan's bitter words jerked and bit as he sharpened his blade.

Bauer stepped forward when he heard d'Artagnan growl low and slam the blade down. Standing just inside the doorway, he saw Athos gripping the young man's bicep, preventing him from stomping away.

"We know that is not true," Athos said tersely.

"I've heard the men," d'Artagnan muttered, eyes downcast. "They believe I acted cowardly. That I was willing to sacrifice the King to save myself."

"No," Bauer stepped forward, startling the quartet in the room with his sudden presence. "The men—our men—do not believe this, d'Artagnan. If you are hearing these rumors, it is the malign of Rochefort reaching your ears."
d'Artagnan swallowed. "Perhaps part of it is true," he said quietly, looking only at Bauer. "Because right now, I'm afraid."

"You'd be a fool not to be," Aramis spoke up, his normally smooth voice edged with concern.

He stepped forward and Bauer saw a stiffness to his fluid gate and the mark of stitches at the edge of his hairline as he drew closer. Athos kept hand on d'Artagnan's arm, and Aramis stood in front of the young man, forcing d'Artagnan to look directly at him.

"You are skilled," Aramis began, something in the cadence of his words encouraging d'Artagnan to slowly release the tension in his shoulders. "You are smart. You are swift. And you are resilient. Keep your eyes open and these skills will keep you safe. Your brothers have your back, d'Artagnan."

d'Artagnan swallowed, letting his eyes shift from Aramis, to Porthos, then leaned his shoulder briefly on Athos before he said, "Would that could be true in this case."

Pulling free from Athos' grip, he pushed passed Bauer and headed with single-minded focus toward the livery.

"He's not wrong," Aramis said to no one in particular. "Rochefort is looking to cull the flock."

"He'll have Grisier and Treville with him," Bauer offered.

"Grisier'll be of some help," Porthos grumbled. "Not too sure about our Captain."

Athos stepped forward, leaning on the doorframe next to Bauer and looked out toward Treville's office. "The man has not been himself that much is certain. But he isn't so far gone as to let harm come to d'Artagnan."

"And what of harm to himself?" Aramis asked, grimacing as though the thought hurt him. "Would he stop that for the sake of keeping d'Artagnan safe?"

"Treville is discouraged, sure, but...." Bauer began to protest when he saw Treville emerge from his office, a saddle bag slung over his shoulder, his sword and main gauche clutched in his hand. The men waited, expecting Treville to head to the armory and sharpen his weapons as the other two had, but their former Captain turned and strode dejectedly toward the livery.

"I 'ave a bad feelin' about this," Porthos murmured quietly.

It was a small party gathered in the courtyard to see the men off. Laroche—a strangely coiffed, jaunty man with a garish red scarf at his throat—sat astride a large, white horse, not bothering to dismount as Athos greeted him. The two prisoners were each astride horses, hands shackled with a chain that traveled up to a neck collar. The man d'Artagnan had caught was pale and sweaty, one leg free of its stirrup, wrapped in bandages.

A length of chain attached one man to Laroche's horse and Bauer found himself tasked with attaching the other to d'Artagnan's.

"It's a day's ride to Soissons," Athos informed Laroche. "I will anticipate the return of my men in two days' time."

"They will return when the job is complete," Laroche informed Athos, his voice a guttural rumble that drew a frown from all present.
Athos stepped forward, eyes not wavering, and stated, "They will return in two days' time, or I'll know the reason why."

Laroche lifted a brow, an expression of bemusement flitting across his face, then turned and started for the entrance to the garrison.

"Captain," Athos shook Treville's hand, drawing a soft, appreciative smile from Treville.

"I am not your Captain any longer, Athos," Treville replied with regret. "Take care of our men."

"I was about to say the same to you," Athos replied.

He turned to d'Artagnan, but the young Gascon moved forward and mounted his horse, denying his three friends the opportunity for goodbyes. Bauer gave Grisier a salute and a grin.

"Don't forget," Bauer said to him as he mounted his horse. "You still owe me a pint."

Grisier smirked. "That was only if you stayed with her the entire night," he returned.

"Watch out for yourself, lad," Porthos called to d'Artagnan.

As the group of six rode out from the garrison, the mid-day sun warming them and stirring up the familiar scents of the Paris streets, d'Artagnan did not look back.

"Stubborn one, 'e is," Porthos grumbled quietly. "There's a reason they call Gascons the Scots of France."

"That stubbornness may be the thing that keeps him alive," Aramis stated, his dark eyes on the empty doorway.

"Again," Athos agreed.

-BNV-

Bauer was not one to worry over friends sent out on missions. They were soldiers; facing danger daily came with the territory. He'd been in a few life-altering scrapes over his career in the Musketeers, and he'd lost many friends in the effort to protect the King and France.

So it was disconcerting to find himself lying awake, listening to the night as if it might whisper reassurances to him that his friends were alive and well.

It was only because he was inadvertently listening so intently that he recognized the sound of another restless soul—this one pacing outside in the garrison courtyard. With a sigh, Bauer rose and pulled on his boots and doublet, leaving his sword and main gauche in his room, and headed out to discover who else was up.

"Surprised to see you here," Bauer said without thinking, the moment he realized it was Aramis—sans doublet or weapons, breath clouding before his pale face—pacing the length of the targets set up at the back of the courtyard.

"Oh? And why is that?" Aramis replied amicably, not slowing in his mission to wear a groove in the earth. He had the rolling gait of a caged tiger: body tense, shoulders tight, head lowered. His entire bearing screamed out a warning.

One that Bauer chose to ignore.
"You're more apt to find companionship to combat sleeplessness," Bauer shrugged expressively. Aramis tipped his head in acknowledgement. "Perceptive."

"So I've been told," Bauer smiled softly.

"You plannin' on sleepin' anytime soon?" came a low voice from the shadows.

"No one said you had to stay up," Aramis replied, testily.

Porthos stepped forward, moonlight sliding across his features and tucking his eyes into pockets of shadow. "'ow 'bout next time you think you see me fall to my death, you let me know 'ow easy it is to get to sleep."

Aramis abruptly stopped moving, his shoulders sagging. Bauer stepped away, leaning against a post, watching the battle of wills play out.

"I am sorry, my friend," Aramis replied softly. "I wasn't thinking. Not of that, anyway." He reached up to rub gingerly at the back of his head.

"Does it hurt?" Porthos asked, his tone gentling from his earlier rebuke.

"I'll live," Aramis replied. "We've both had worse."

"Sad truth of it," Porthos agreed, hooking his thumbs into his belt. "So what's with the midnight party, eh?"

Bauer watched as Porthos' eyes stayed fixed on Aramis, though his posture was rather purposefully in an 'at ease' stance. His hyper-vigilance was familiar; they'd all been witness the big man's efforts to keep Aramis focused and present when memories and battle sent the other man sideways. As suave as Aramis appeared, he was probably more damaged than any other soldier in the regiment. Were it not for Porthos, Bauer was fairly certain Aramis would have left the Musketeers long ago; where he'd be now was anyone's guess.

"Why, this mission, of course," Aramis confessed quickly. Almost too quickly, it seemed. Both Bauer and Porthos tilted their heads in question, clearly sensing their regimental marksman had been occupied with some other worry that he wasn't inclined to speak about. "Did Athos tell you the orders included his staying here to run the garrison?"

Porthos shook his head. "Nah, but I figured."

"Why didn't either of you volunteer?" Bauer asked suddenly, the question out before he registered he was going to ask.

Both men looked at him in surprise, as though they'd forgotten his presence entirely. Bauer waited, watching curiously as they looked back at each other before answering. He'd already formulated his own theory in response, of course, but was interested in hearing it from them.

"d'Artagnan is more capable than anyone gives him credit for," Aramis began.

Porthos nodded, stepping up closer to his friend. "And Athos...'e doesn't do well, bein' alone."

"He's hardly alone," Bauer replied, sweeping his hand around the quiet garrison.

"It's not the same," the two man answered in unison.
"If you're so confident that d'Artagnan is capable of handling this task," Bauer pressed, "then what has you so worried?"

The men exchanged another glance, Porthos breaking first. "Treville."

Bauer brought his chin up. "You're worried about the Captain? The man is the finest soldier in the regiment!"

"Louis demolished him with that demotion," Aramis replied. "He is…broken." He glanced down, tugging absentmindedly at his beard. "And I should know."

"And if Treville is compromised, not only will 'e not be watching d'Artagnan's back," Porthos sighed, "but the lad will split himself in two tryin' t'keep 'em both safe."

Bauer frowned. "Aren't you forgetting one vital point?" he asked, stepping forward. "Treville and d'Artagnan didn't ride off alone. I've known Grisier my entire career as a Musketeer. He's as fine as they come."

Porthos raised an apologetic hand. "Yes, of course, mate."

"We mean no disrespect to—"

Aramis' platitude was broken by the clatter of hooves, oddly loud in the quiet of the garrison. All three men turned in surprise toward the entrance, gaping as moonlight illuminated the white of a shirt covering a slumped, bowed back. Aramis was first, getting to the horse and catching its bridle to halt it before reaching for the obviously wounded man astride the animal.

"Bauer!" he shouted the moment his hands touched the slumped man's shoulders.

Bauer went cold, knowing immediately by the urgency in Aramis' voice that it was Grisier…and it wasn't good. He beat Porthos by a nose reaching the men and helped Aramis ease Grisier from the back of the horse to rest on the ground while Porthos moved the animal out of the way. Half of Grisier's face was dark with blood, his right side so saturated neither Bauer nor Aramis could find the wound at first. The man was trembling in Bauer's arms, his mouth opening and shutting spastically, as though he was soundlessly screaming.


"Treville," Grisier managed.

Bauer felt Aramis kneel close by him, the man's sure hands peeling away Grisier's doublet to find two wounds—Bauer couldn't tell if they were from musket balls or blades, but both bled copiously—that he immediately pressed his palms against as though he might stop the flow of blood by will alone. As though by magic, Athos and Porthos appeared next to him, both breathing hard.

"What of Treville?" Aramis asked, leaning close to catch any of Grisier's gasps. "What happened to you?"

Grisier reached up a shaking hand, grasping Bauer's shirtfront. "Tr-Treville…they have him."

"Who, Grisier?" Bauer replied, feeling his voice trip over his breath within his throat.

"Red G-Guard…betrayed…," Grisier breathed, blood suddenly bubbling up through his parted lips, spilling down his chin.
Bauer tightened his hold as his friend shook, his back arching as he fought for breath that would not come, drowning on blood as it filled his throat and trickled from his mouth. Before he could say another word, Grisier went slack and the man Bauer had known, fought beside, laughed with, and sheltered was simply gone.

"No," Bauer breathed. "Grisier?"

The body he held in his arms was nothing but a shell. It had never happened this way before, this level of violence in the safety of their home. It had always been on a battle field, tension and loss surrounding him. Not where they should have been safe.

Bauer couldn't move, couldn't release his hold on his friend. He simply stared at Grisier's sightless eyes until Aramis reached up a blood-stained hand to slide them closed. He felt the weight of the marksman's grip on his shoulder, silent in his shared sorrow.

But it wasn't truly shared, was it? To Aramis, losing Grisier was simply losing a fellow soldier, not a... brother. Not like losing Porthos, Athos, or—

"Oh, God," Bauer looked up, instinctively finding Athos' eyes. "d'Artagnan."

ANV-

News of Grisier's return and subsequent demise spread like wildfire through the garrison. Within moments from carrying the fallen Musketeer to the infirmary—for lack of a better place to keep his body until they had a plan—half of the regiment had gathered, many demanding they ride after Treville and d'Artagnan, others demanding they reach out to Rochefort.

"If Grisier returned in this condition," argued Mathieu, "what of the others? If the killers are free, the King is in danger. We must inform Rochefort."

"Rochefort is the reason Grisier is dead," shouted Magliore, a hook-nosed man who rarely spoke up. "Telling him now would seal the others' fate for certain!"

"Enough!" Athos bellowed, his shirt flowing loose from where he'd simply pulled it over his head when Porthos' summons drew him from his wine-induced slumber. "Mathieu, ride to the palace. I will write you a missive to give to Rochefort."

Before anyone could argue, Athos turned to others, handing out orders to keep the men active, every inch their leader. His expression spoke of danger and determination, daring anyone to cross him. Not one man did.

"Porthos, please accompany Bauer and Grisier's body to the mortician. Aramis, meet me in Treville's office. Porthos will join us there when his task is finished." He raised his voice to address the group. "We will find our men, this I promise you."

"We should never have let them go out like this, Athos," Magliore said softly. "We let them ride to their death."

Athos glared at the man, the pain of possibility in his eyes slicing through Bauer almost as acutely as the loss of Grisier.

"I do not believe that," Athos replied, his tone a dare. "Now, do your jobs."

Bauer felt as though he were moving underwater, allowing Porthos to do most of the work in getting a wagon, carrying Grisier's body, speaking with the mortician. He simply followed, nodded, and
moved when told to. He'd been too cavalier, he realized. Too confident. Thinking he was a solider and therefore knew death. Knew loss.

It hadn't touched him quite like this before. Hadn't taken his legs from under him, rocked him from the secure perch he'd found comfortable for too long. He watched his friend, his Captain, and the youngest in their regiment ride away with a jaunty wave and not a second thought.

And now his friend's blood stained his hands.

Porthos' strong arm guided him back to the wagon after depositing Grisier with the mortician and they returned to the garrison in silence, the beginnings of dawn just starting to tease the edges of the sky. Paris woke slowly; the secrets that ran open-armed and raucous through the night slowly retreated with the coming of day. The smell of food, waste, and unwashed bodies always seemed sharper at dawn before stretch of light had time to blend them with the dirt and steel that accompanied the mid-day hours.

They rode back through the entrance of the garrison, climbing down from the wagon. Bauer wanted to fall to his bed and sleep for a week. His whole body ached with an unfamiliar weariness and his eyes burned with unshed tears, sorrow not yet allowed dominance. He began to stumble toward his quarters when he saw Porthos pull up short, his body like a snapped bow string.

Following Porthos' line of sight, he saw Athos standing alone in the center of the garrison, hat in hand, in a strange echo of the stance he'd found the man in just yesterday.

"What is it?" Porthos demanded, approaching with no regard to finesse or strategy. "What's 'appened?"

"Rochefort," Aramis snarled from nearby. Bauer hadn't even seen him, but followed the voice to find the man sprawled inelegantly on the stairs that led to Treville's office, a piece of paper crumpled in his fist. "He's grounded the Musketeers."

"He's what?" Bauer cried.

"As our men have so obviously been remiss in their duties," Athos growled, his voice low, every word bitten off at the end, "it has fallen to the goddamned Red Guard to locate the prisoners and ensure their delivery to Soissons."

"Oh, so 'e can spare 'em now, can 'e?" Porthos bellowed. "After our men are murdered? Or worse?"

Bauer looked at him strangely. "What could be worse?"

Porthos wheeled on him, all consideration for his loss having evaporated with this news. "If Treville and d'Artagnan are alive, it most likely means they are being held captive. By men who are responsible for the murder of four bloody Red Guard."

"Right," Bauer swallowed, properly chastised.

"Rochefort couldn't give a rat's ass about finding our men," Porthos continued, this time circling around to address Aramis, who simply nodded in dark agreement.

You will pay for what you've done, Rochefort!

"My guess is…," Bauer said, feeling as though he were waking from a heavy sleep, "that was his plan all along."
Athos lifted his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"The man—the one d'Artagnan caught," Bauer said, slowly approaching Athos. "He said Rochefort would pay, do you remember?"

Athos nodded.

"What if he wasn't just talking about Rochefort capturing him?" Bauer supposed.

Aramis shifted to his feet in one fluid motion and clapped a hand on Porthos' shoulder. "I knew something felt wrong about this. Why single out Red Guard—and so brutally? They were fishing."

"Tryin' to draw out Rochefort," Porthos nodded. "Or at the very least, identify 'im."

"It is a practice among the Celts to remove a liar's tongue," Athos said slowly. "We know very little about these killers; Laroche swept them away so suddenly. The soldiers could have been questioned regarding Rochefort before they were killed."

"Which…doesn't exactly bode well for our men," Aramis muttered. "Except that they are not Red Guard."

"Magliore was right: sending the Red Guard after them now will seal their fate," Porthos exclaimed.

"But with the Musketeers grounded," Bauer interjected, "how do we mount a rescue without risking being disbanded by the King?"

Bauer didn't miss the looks immediately exchanged between the three men standing before him. They were close enough their shoulders touched, and their eyes meeting in the golden light of morning seemed to speak paragraphs in the silence.

"You won't," Athos said finally, looking over at Bauer. His blue eyes held a weight that Bauer immediately felt settle on his shoulders. "We will."

The two men who flanked him drew up at his declaration, their shoulders squaring off until the three of them seemed to form an impenetrable wall.

"Just you," Bauer said, his voice falling dead between them. "You three against who knows how many?"

"Seems like pretty good odds to me," Porthos half-grinned.

"Wake Mathieu," Athos ordered, still looking at Bauer, "and work with him to maintain order from Treville's office until we return. We cannot afford raising Rochefort's suspicions that we have departed." Something of his doubt must have shown on Bauer's face because Athos put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "With the Musketeers sequestered to the garrison, the hardest part will be keeping the men from sneaking out to a tavern."

"Athos—" Bauer cut himself off, feeling the need to protest, but not having a good enough argument. His gaze widened to take in all three men. "Do you really think they're still alive?"

"Treville is seasoned," Aramis said confidently. "Despite his obvious melancholy, instinct will kick in and he'll do what must be done."

"And d'Artagnan?"

Aramis glanced at Athos. "He's…impetuous," he allowed. "And has a tendency to act without"
thought for his own safety."

"He still fights with his heart over his head," Athos agreed worriedly. "He may be promising, yes, but he's still raw."

"You've got it all backwards," Porthos shook his head. "d'Artagnan's going to be the only way Treville survives this. Or have you forgotten 'ow many times 'e's saved our asses since we met the lad?"

Athos glanced down and Aramis smiled slightly.

"I owe that boy m'life," Porthos declared. "No way I'm letting some Rochefort-hating madman take 'im from us. If 'e's still alive, I aim to keep it that way."
They traveled light, which suited Porthos just fine. All he really needed was his schinova, which Aramis had affectionately nicknamed 'Balizarde', and a fire in his belly. He had both as they crossed the outer boundaries of Paris, the sun at their backs. They'd traded their plumed hats for peasant headwear, their pauldrons for plain cloaks, and used the training horses rather than the war-ready Friesians that usually carried them on missions of this nature. There could be no chance that an errant word of their departure could reach Rochefort's ears or the entire regiment would be at risk.

"It's a day's ride to Soissons by this road," Athos finally spoke up, once they were clear of the city. "Grisier returned to us roughly ten hours from when they departed."

"Gotta keep a weather eye for the rescue party," Porthos grumbled a reminder, sarcasm accentuating his tone. "These cloaks won't fool those bastards 'f they get too close."

Athos lifted his chin in acknowledgment.

"Clearly our men were ambushed before reaching Soissons, but where?" Aramis wondered aloud.

Porthos frowned, eyes tracking the dusty road, seeing hundreds of hoof prints and wagon tracks. It was a well-traveled route; virtually impossible to track any one party. Riding a bit ahead of the other two, he looked out across the sparse tree line to their left and tracked it to where it began to grow denser a few miles up the road.

"If I were planning an ambush," he began, "I'd wait until my quarry 'ad reached those trees up there."

"Seems to be an embankment of some kind just there to the west," Athos said, by way of agreement.

Aramis kicked his horse into a canter, the others falling into line. When they reached the thickening grove of trees, they separated, each taking a branching path through the gloom. By Porthos' tracking of the sun, they'd been riding for nearly four hours when Athos suddenly called out. Porthos whistled to Aramis, who was riding far to his left, and they traversed the copse of trees until they located Athos.

He had dismounted and was staring at something on the ground. Porthos joined him and saw immediately what had caught the other man's attention: blood. Lots of it. Saturating the earth, staining the low-level foliage, smeared across the tree trunks.

"It appears there was a struggle," Aramis commented from atop his horse, the forced casualness of his statement belying the lines of concern folding around his dark eyes.

"Spread out," Athos ordered. "Search for…"

He didn't finish the sentence, but Porthos knew what they were to look for: bodies. For several stretching moments, all he heard was the crackle and crunch of fallen branches and leaves beneath their boots. He prayed he found nothing; in his mind, the best scenario would be for d'Artagnan and Treville to be with the men who'd ambushed the party so that they still had a chance at a rescue.

"Here!" Aramis' voice was high and tight, bringing the other two his direction almost instantly.

At Aramis' feet was a newly turned grave, large enough it could easily hold multiple bodies. The three exchanged silent looks, then grabbed loose branches and began digging. The grave had clearly
been a hastily-dug one; it only took a few minutes to uncover the first body.

It was the prisoner with the broken leg.

"Well, 'e didn't make it far," Porthos grumbled. "Think they was droppin' dead weight?"

Athos brought his head up sharply. "Are you saying you suspect Laroche?"

"You don't?" Aramis challenged.

Athos sat back on his heels. "To be honest, not until this moment."

"'e shows up in Paris outta the blue, Rochefort willingly works with 'im—but never meets with 'im, as far as we know," Porthos tipped his hand out in a gesture meant to convey you fill in the rest.

Athos scowled; Porthos saw the mental punishment beginning and returned to clearing the rest of the grave. There were two other men, neither of whom they'd seen before. However, one thing caught Porthos' eye: tied around the wrist of one man was what appeared to be a scarf. A very familiar-looking scarf.

"Oi," he tipped his chin toward the piece of cloth. "What's that, then?"

Athos pried the cloth out of the earth, shaking it out. "Porthos…isn't this your head scarf?"

Porthos nodded. "It's my spare. Keep it in my saddle bags."

"It appears someone else knew that," Aramis grinned slightly.

"d'Artagnan took it with him," Athos said in wonder. "Guarantee you 'e's got somethin' of yours, too."

Athos and Aramis exchanged an unreadable glance. Porthos smirked as they each unconsciously patted a pocket.

"You're missing the bigger picture," Porthos continued. "This means d'Artagnan's alive."

Athos shook his head. "All it means is that he wasn't dead when they buried these bodies."

Porthos grabbed his scarf and shook it in Athos' face. "This was left for us."

"On the body of a buried man," Aramis intoned, standing and stretching his wounded leg, a wince creasing his features.

"They probably made our men bury the bodies! 'e tied it around the wrist so we'd see it—wait, which arm was it on again?" Porthos asked suddenly.

"The left," Athos replied. "Why?"

"We go west," Porthos stood and clapped his hands together, unable to suppress his grin. "That boy is resourceful."

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" Athos stood, his blue eyes stormy.

"You forget about them pirates already?" Porthos stared at him in surprise.
Aramis and Athos exchanged another look, then, as though the move was choreographed, hooked their thumbs in their weapons belts, tilted their heads and asked, "Pirates?"

"Damn…," Porthos ran his hand down his face, tugging at his beard. "Forgot I didn't tell you 'bout that one."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this story?" Athos muttered as they began kicking the dirt back over the bodies.

"It was back just after my trial," Porthos began. "After Charon betrayed me…."

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Nine months ago

Porthos was no stranger to wine; he just didn't have the tolerance of Athos. As he traversed the darkened tents and night fires of the Court de Miracles he found himself experiencing that strange juxtaposition of a head that seemed half its normal weight and a body that was two times heavier. Ignoring the side-eye glances and slightly incoherent mutterings as he stumbled through the Court—part of the populace by virtue of his past, but not one with them any longer by virtue of his present—he was allowed passage, but offered no warmth or solace.

It was the fourth night he slipped from the safety of the garrison to explore the Court. He hadn't sought out Flea again since she kissed him and walked away; his heart couldn't bear the burden of another goodbye. He was simply…lost. The faith in his brother's eyes as they proved his innocence balanced with the doubt in everyone else's had him questioning if fighting his way out of this maze was truly what he'd been destined to do.

He barely remembered his mother; his father was anyone's guess. He knew him by name alone, and even that was probably a fabrication. He was as God—and the Court de Miracles—made him: a brawler, a lover, a soldier. No longer the mulatto orphan from the Court, he made himself into a skilled soldier, formidable foe and, he liked to think, a loyal friend.

But he'd been wrong about Charon. So very, very wrong. And it had almost gotten him and everyone he loved killed. Were it not for Aramis….

"Oi, geroff wi' ya," growled a voice thick with wine. Porthos stumbled back as an arm pushed him away; he'd not seen the man in the dark and nearly trampled over his…home, for lack of a better term. "Find yer own place. This here's mine, an' I'll kill anyone what tries to take it."

"Meant nothin' by it," Porthos apologized, lifting his hands, palms up to show they were empty of weapons.

Too many sleepless nights in a row had started to catch up to him; the wine wasn't helping either, he knew. He couldn't breathe back in his quarters at the garrison, yet he didn't belong here anymore, either. He felt haunted. By both the life he chose and the life he left. Taking a breath of air heavy with the stench of unwashed bodies, rotten meat, and the ever-present scent of blood, Porthos looked up, watching for a moment through a hole in the canopy that covered this section of the Court as silver-tinged clouds covered the bright, full moon.

On impulse, he began to climb the rickety structure that lined one wall of the Court, ignoring the brief cries and grumbles of protest as he caused it to sway with his weight. Once on the rooftop, he took another breath, this one free of the Court, of Paris, of any labels. Crouching, balanced, on the edge of the building, letting the moonlight wash over his face, Porthos felt he could be anyone, anything.
Soldier or beggar, gentleman or thief, it mattered not.

"Can't live on the rooftops, du Vallon," he chided himself.

However, he could feel the wine swim through his bloodstream, whispering that the impossible could be considered. That night would cloak his sins and no one would be the wiser. Listening to the whispers, Porthos took off across the rooftops that surrounded the Court, paying no heed to the structure beneath him or the direction he was going; he just wanted to move. The city would shelter him, he felt sure. He knew this city, he was raised by this city, he'd fought and bled for her.

Therefore, it came as quite a surprise when between one step and the next, the roof beneath his feet fell away.

Porthos didn't even have time to yelp with surprise. The plummet that would have easily crippled him was abruptly halted when two hands wrapped around his wrist and jerked him to a sudden stop. He gasped as the muscles in his arm stretched painfully and his belly slapped roughly against the beam that braced the rest of the roof.

"You want to maybe quit swinging your feet so much?"

"d'Artagnan?!!" Porthos bleated. "How in the bloody hell—"

"Story later. Up now." d'Artagnan's voice was strained from the effort of keeping a man nearly twice his bulk from falling the rest of the way through the roof.

Porthos reached up his other hand to flatten it against the roof; d'Artagnan leaned back, digging his heels into the roof's surface, and pulled. With some creative shifting, Porthos soon had a knee over the crumbling edge of the hole and the two of them heaved until they'd rolled away from the weak spot. Wordlessly, they crawled to the wall that edged the outside of the roof and put their backs to it, both gasping for breath.

"'ow did you find me?" Porthos asked, dropping his head back against the ledge.

d'Artagnan pulled his knees up, resting his forearms on the bend and grasped one wrist with his opposite hand. "You were the one who thought it would be a great idea to teach me to run across the…what did you call it? The Ceiling of Paris?"

Porthos rolled his head to the side, staring at his friend's profile in the moonlight. "That's not an answer. 'ow did you find me here?"

Swallowing audibly, d'Artagnan dropped his gaze and addressed the rooftop. "I followed you."

"What?" Porthos pushed upright from his slump. "Why?"

d'Artagnan tipped his head, worrying his bottom lip in a shrug. Porthos bumped him with his forearm, the adrenalin from his near-fall having cleared his head a bit. Moonlight had turned d'Artagnan's normally tanned skin a grayish hue, and the lad was twisting his fingers nervously. Brows pulled close, Porthos tried to think back across the last four days as to what might have transpired that would trigger such a reaction in his young friend.

"I was…concerned."

"About me?" Porthos asked, trying not to sound too incredulous.

d'Artagnan pushed to his feet and stepped away several feet, carefully avoiding the weak point in the
roof that Porthos had been clever enough to discover. As Porthos watched, the young Gascon shoved a hand through his hair, rested his palm on the hilt of his sword, then finally turned to face him with his arms crossed over his chest, fingers tucked beneath his biceps in a stance that was so intrinsically d'Artagnan Porthos had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

"Look, I owe you an apology," d'Artagnan finally blurted.

Porthos blinked. He had not seen that coming.

"When you were accused of killing that man, I…," d'Artagnan looked out over the rooftops of Paris, toward Notre Dame. "I wondered if you might have done it." He lifted a hasty hand. "I don't really know you—any of you—that well, and…well, you can be pretty scary sometimes."

Porthos stared at the younger man for nearly a full minute before barking out a laugh. d'Artagnan jumped at the sound, which made Porthos laugh even harder. Looking both relieved and confused, d'Artagnan hedged a smile.

"That's why you want to apologize?"

The younger man nodded and Porthos laughed again.

"Hell, lad, for a bit there, I wondered if I'd done it," Porthos revealed.

d'Artagnan's eyebrows shot up with surprise. "You did?"

Pushing to his feet with a grunt of effort, Porthos continued. "I couldn't remember a thing about that night. Woke up with m'head splittin' and a dead man next to me. Pretty confusing."

"I'd say," d'Artagnan nodded.

"What swayed you?"

d'Artagnan rubbed the back of his head. "Aramis at first. He, uh…took exception to my suggestion that it could have been you."

Porthos chuckled appreciatively. "'e's a good man, our Aramis."

"Then I just…started putting the pieces together," d'Artagnan shrugged, "and I knew."

"So, you've been followin' me around all this time…to apologize?"

d'Artagnan cringed. "Kind of."

Porthos waited while d'Artagnan stared at the rooftop once more.

"Spit it out 'fore you choke on it."

"I wanted to get to know you better. See where you go when you're not on duty. How you spend your time. What makes you…you." The words seemed to tumble over each other, tangling up and falling from d'Artagnan's lips in a rushed confession.

Porthos blinked again, more surprised by this than anything else the lad had said. "You wanted to…get to know…me?"

"Well…yeah," d'Artagnan shrugged. "You three…you're all I have now. I can't go back home; the farm was my father's, and he's gone. Paris is…; well it's my home now. And that means you're…you
three are my family. Such as it is."

Porthos felt like he'd been hit in the gut, the air rushing out of him. He stared at d'Artagnan while the younger man stared out across the city. In the months since d'Artagnan had found his way to their garrison, Porthos hadn't given much thought to the lad's past or future. He was simply there, part of them now. He'd become accustomed to having the younger man around.

It struck Porthos that roots had never really mattered to him. Growing up in the Court de Miracles meant learning how to blend, to hide, to be quick to run and slow to settle. His first true home had been the Musketeers and the garrison. Seeing d'Artagnan reach for some kind of indication that he could stay, that he belonged, that he had a home there, made Porthos take another look at how he'd treated the lad.

"Right, well," Porthos cleared his throat. "If you're going to follow me around like a puppy, least I can do is take you some place 'at's more interesting than a rotted old roof."

"Hardly a puppy," d'Artagnan grumbled.

"C'mon," Porthos waved a hand at him, leading him toward an easier way down from their perch.

"Where are we going?"

Without answering, Porthos led the young Gascon down to street level, winding through several alleys, and circling around two rather questionable altercations, then entered the lantern-lit Rai d'Or tavern—which was anything but its namesake.

"How are you at cards, lad?"

"Terrible," d'Artagnan answered honestly.

"You have coin on ya?"

"I do."

"Good," Porthos clapped his hands together. "You keep the wine flowing; I'll teach ya a couple tricks I have up my sleeve."

He didn't miss d'Artagnan's smirk or his mutter of, "Literally," before he parted ways and sought out a table.

The first few games went as he expected them to, and after that he was able to keep everyone at the table in their cups by his generosity. For Porthos, gambling had never been about the money but about the challenge. Could he beat them honestly, did he need to pull out that card from his sleeve to keep his opponent from taking it out of his flesh, how long would his luck hold out? It was a test of skill and he was a master.

d'Artagnan sat close, his dark eyes missing nothing. Porthos watched how much wine the lad consumed with the amount flowing around them, and was proud to see that he needn't have worried: d'Artagnan was too focused on learning Porthos' trade to fall nose first into the bottle. During a brief interlude between games, Porthos huddled close to d'Artagnan, testing what he'd learned, observed, absorbed.

"Everyone has a tell," Porthos informed him. "You find that, you own them. Works for battle just as well as cards."
"How long do you have to play them before you discover their tell?" d'Artagnan asked.

Porthos smiled; he liked how quick this boy was to absorb information. "Depends. Some are easy, clear habits. Like crossin' yerself at mass. North, South, East, West, yeah?"

d'Artagnan nodded.

"Watch this next one," Porthos advised. "I've played against 'im before; 'e's crap at cards. Leans left just so when 'e's getting thin on funds. 'is back-up card is tucked into 'is left sleeve. I bring up something about travelin' West, and 'e gets rattled."

Porthos was pleased to notice d'Artagnan's eyes on his opponent and couldn't help but grin when the lad said casually, "I'm going to turn in early, I believe. Heading West in the morning."

Porthos split his winnings from that hand with the young Gascon. After another hour of sweeping the table, Porthos found himself tired by the events of the day and was about to rise and collect his winnings when a man dropped into the seat across him.

A deep hood was pulled over the man's face to the extent that only the tip of his nose and chin was visible. A pipe was clenched between his teeth and when he struck a match to light the tobacco, the flame reflected in his eyes like a demon. He smelled of salt and cold and his fingers bore deep, old scars.

"Thought I'd try my hand," the man stated, dropping a bag of coin on the table between them.

"Was just about to leave," Porthos said, a false but amicable smile splitting his face. "Maybe next time."

"How about just one hand?" the man pressed. "As recompense for cleaning out most of my crew."

Porthos glanced around at that and saw four or five of the men he'd out-played standing around the gloom of the tavern, pints in their hands and scowls on their faces. He felt d'Artagnan tense from his perch at Porthos' shoulder and willed the lad to stay quiet as he handled this. He should have realized a stubborn lad from Gascony would never be willing to sit idle.

"Porthos," d'Artagnan whispered in his ear. "Just walk away from this one. The man is a pirate."

The hooded man tipped his chin up slightly, a toothy grin directed at d'Artagnan.

"Don't think I've much of a choice, now do I?" Porthos commented, his smile still in place.

d'Artagnan dropped into the seat at his side, arms crossed, dark eyes pinned to the man across the table. Porthos nodded and the man dealt. It was a quick first game, and Porthos could see at once the pirate was allowing him to win. The true master was revealed the moment the first card was drawn. But they completed and played another. Porthos found himself forced to pull his card from his sleeve and saw with dismay that the pirate had a similar move—he simply did it better.

"It seems I have taken the last of your coin," the pirate stated, sitting back and exposing the weapons tucked into his wide leather belt. He rested a scarred hand on the butt of his pistol. "Unless you have other secret pockets you'd like to empty."

"I'm afraid I'll have to owe you for that last hand," Porthos said tersely.

"That won't work for me," the pirate replied. "You see, my crew and I are departing this night. By the time I return to Paris, you could be dead. Musketeer."
Porthos pressed his lips flat and settled a hand on d'Artagnan's arm as the lad tensed.

"I've nothing of value to offer," Porthos replied. "You've matched me hand for hand."

The pirate pushed his hood back and Porthos forced himself not to draw back at the sight of the man's scarred face—one traversing his left eye and turning it a milky white. He felt the room begin to grow smaller around their table; men who had until now been watching from the shadow surrounding them.

"I'll take him," the pirate stated, never looking in d'Artagnan's direction, though his meaning was clear.

Porthos shot to his feet only to be immediately restrained and shoved back down by three sets of hands on his shoulders and arms. He struggled, working to pull his arms free, to reach his weapons, but the men holding him were strong and vicious. The man at his back slid an arm around his neck, bracing his hold, and effectively minimizing Porthos' air.

"You're crazy 'f you think I'm giving you my friend in payment!" Porthos spat.

"I'm only asking out of courtesy," the man said, crossing one leg over the other and resting his boot on his knee.

He tapped out his pipe on the heel of his boot, then pulled out a tobacco pouch and began to refill it, packing it loosely before lighting it and puffing smoke directly into Porthos' face. d'Artagnan hadn't moved, though his hand now rested on the hilt of his sword, his dark eyes taking everything in.

"Get outta 'ere, lad," Porthos growled, not taking his eyes from the pirate.

d'Artagnan stood, stepping back from the table. The minute he did, however, one of the men holding Porthos in place savagely twisted his right arm. White-hot pain shot through him from elbow to shoulder and reverberated up to his jaw. If the man applied any more pressure, Porthos knew he'd break the bone. He clenched his teeth and tried desperately to keep from crying out.

"Wait! Wait, stop! I'll go with you!" d'Artagnan held out an imploring hand.

Porthos felt sweat collect along his neck, a bead slipping down from beneath his head scarf. His fingers were numb and the pain in his shoulder was beating in time with his heart.

"Of course you're going with us," the pirate chuffed, as though d'Artagnan was a particularly amusing child.

A groan slipped out; Porthos couldn't help it. His shoulder was seconds from slipping its joint.

"Then let him go!" d'Artagnan demanded. "If anything you should be complimenting him, not breaking his arm."

The pirate looked up, surprised. Had Porthos been able to think beyond the pain, he'd have echoed the expression.

"How's that?"

"It's not as if he did anything differently than you," d'Artagnan all-but scoffed. "You just beat him at his own game. After he cleaned out your men."

The man slammed a hand down on the table, leaning forward. Porthos gave d'Artagnan points for
not drawing back.

"Are you saying I cheated?"

"Are you saying you didn't?" d'Artagnan challenged. He crossed his arms, lifting his chin. "Two cards from the fold of your sleeve, drawn while you were lighting your pipe that second time, one tucked into your hood when you took a sip of wine, and another still at the tip of your boot that you didn't need."

The pirate blinked.

"Damn, boss," breathed the man currently holding Porthos by the neck.

"Release him," the pirate growled. "And chain this one up. Leave your sword with your friend, boy. You won't be needing it where you're going."

Porthos was dizzy with relief as the grip on his arm was released. His vision swam slightly, but sharpened the moment he felt d'Artagnan's sword drop in his lap.

"Wait! Y'can't just—"

"Porthos, it's fine," d'Artagnan tried to reassure him, frowning at the man who jerked his arms forward to clasp heavy shackles on his wrists. "Don't worry."

"Worry?" Porthos practically growled, barreling forward. "You got any idea what Athos'll do to me?"

"No, wait! Don't—"

The last thing Porthos saw before a lightning bolt of pain sent him to his knees was d'Artagnan's wide eyes and his manacled hands waving him off. It took him several moments to register that someone had struck him. Several more to realize that not only was he bleeding, but he was lying on the dirt of the tavern floor as pirates dragged his friend away. With a groan, Porthos managed to push to his hands and knees, but his head hung low and the world tipped crazily around him.

Breathing through his nose, Porthos fought to balance himself. Blood ran from the back of his head, across his neck and down his cheek to soak through his beard and drip from his lips. The sight of it—the smell of it—turned the nauseating pain into a furious will. The pirate had rolled him and taken his friend and his pride.

At the moment, Porthos was seething over both in equal measure.

Reaching up to grab the back of a chair, he leveraged himself to his feet, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth to banish the taste of blood. Looking around at the few patrons who sat staring blearily at him, he growled low in his throat, then turned to collect d'Artagnan's sword. As he did so, he saw his one spare card stuck in a crack that bisected the table, left behind as a salute or an insult, he couldn't be sure.

Stumbling from the pub, he took a bracing breath from the cool night, his throbbing head clearing slightly, and headed toward the Seine. He couldn't go back for help; if he didn't reach d'Artagnan before the boat set sail—or worse, if the Gascon's smart mouth got him killed before Porthos could save him—he would never be able to face Athos again.

It didn't take Porthos long to find the harbor. Slipping through the shadows that lined the waterway, Porthos followed the shouts of the men who had bested him at the tavern as they loaded their boat
with supplies. Theirs was a smaller, ore-driven vessel that the pirate and his crew had no doubt used to traverse the shallower waters of the Seine, their sea-worthy vessel anchored further out in deeper waters. Several feet down from his hiding spot, Porthos saw a wagon-mounted cage with four men slumped inside. 

Even from this distance he was able to make out the dark head and distinctive profile of their Gascon.

Sliding along the building fronts, keeping to the shadows and trying not to stumble as a throb of pain in his head staggered him, Porthos made his way to the cage. He had to get there, get d'Artagnan free, and get away before the pirate or his crew discovered anything amiss. Slipping up to the edge of the cage, the bodies of the men inside masking him from the moonlight, Porthos hissed for d'Artagnan's attention.

"Oi!"

d'Artagnan brought his dark head up, a flash of white teeth exposing his grin. "Took you long enough."

"Bastards knocked me cold."

"Saw that," d'Artagnan grunted, his shoulders shifting.

"What you up to, there?"

"Picking their locks."

Porthos' eyebrows bounced skyward. "Who taught ya that one?"

d'Artagnan glanced at him. "I did know a few things before I met you three."

With a low gasp, d'Artagnan lifted his manacled hands, turning the prisoner in front of him loose. The freed man headed to the locked door, thrusting his hands through the bars and feeling for the lock in the dark.

"Wait, get yours first!" Porthos exclaimed when he saw d'Artagnan move on to the next man.

"Can't get the angle on my own," d'Artagnan told him. "Get the door, how about?"

Frowning, Porthos moved around to the door of the cage, fully aware that he was now standing exposed in the bright light of the high moon. Pulling his main gauche from its back scabbard, he pushed the freed man's hands out of the way and began working on the lock. He hadn't gotten far when the man d'Artagnan set free called out a warning.

"Behind you!"

Moving on pure instinct, Porthos turned and blocked the sword heading directly for his back with the tip of his main gauche, twisting around and avoiding a blow from the assailant's follow-through. Their grunts and growls of effort very quickly called the attention of others and Porthos found himself with his schinova in one hand, main gauche in the other, in a battle against three opponents.

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Dimly, he was aware of a din behind him from the cage, the prisoner's rattling their chains, rocking the wagon, stirring up the horses and generally distracting the pirates whose job it was to transport them onto the waiting boat. He could hear d'Artagnan's voice calling out insults and obscenities toward his captors, trying to draw their attention.
A slice to his upper arm knocked Porthos' main gauche to the ground and he shoved an elbow against the throat of one attacker while another ran for help and the third reacted to the suddenly-opened cage door, throwing his weight against it to attempt to keep it shut. Seriously flagging in his assault, Porthos kept his blade against his attacker's, trying in vain to loosen the man's grip.

Suddenly, two slim arms—still bound by heavy chains—were thrust between the bars of the cage and quick fingers grasped the collar of the man Porthos fought. The pirate stumbled backwards, slamming against the bars of the cage, and right into d'Artagnan's deadly grip. The chains acted as an anchor and while the lad held the man still, Porthos finally knocked his sword loose, clocking the struggling pirate across his temple.

d'Artagnan pulled his arms back and let the man fall to the ground; his dark eyes bounced up to meet Porthos' grin.

"Thanks," Porthos gasped. "I owe you."

"Get me out of here and we'll call it even."

Unfortunately, the man who'd run from the scene chose that moment to return with several additional men—including the pirate who had bested Porthos at cards. There was a pause in action, as if everyone present recognized the futility and inevitability of the moment, before one of the pirates charged forward with a shout, moonlight glinting from his sword.

Porthos ducked, rolled beneath the attacking blade, and picked up his dropped main gauche as he gained his feet. Surging forward, he thrust the tip of his sword into the side of the man who held the cage door closed and listened with satisfaction as the prisoners leapt to freedom, their chains rattling and wielded as weapons. He didn't have time to register who charged him, who was felled, who turned and ran. His only focus was that no prisoner end up on the end of his blade and that he and d'Artagnan escape.

He never saw the mace.

The skirmish raged in a cloistered space, the moon their only light, clanking of chains and metal their only warnings. Porthos stood facing a man he'd never remember one moment and the next found himself on the ground, head throbbing relentlessly, the taste of blood in his mouth.

It was so quiet he feared for a moment he'd gone deaf. His hands were strangely empty, his body stiff as if he'd been lying prone for longer than the moment he'd lost. Prying his eyes open he saw a set of booted feet before him, facing away, the swing of a chain like a pendulum catching the moonlight.

"Leave now, and we'll allow you to live."

He knew that voice. Low, with a back growl that was at once aged and achingly young. Dragging forward the hand not currently pinned beneath his impossibly heavy body, Porthos tried to push himself upright, succeeding only shifting his head a fraction of an inch. But it was enough that he saw the spiked metal ball with attached chain curled like a viper next to him.

"Big talk for a man what's got 'is 'ands chained," snarled a response.

"We've taken four of your men," d'Artagnan replied. "Two more are at the mercy of men you were about to sell as slaves."

Porthos shuddered with pain, realizing that d'Artagnan stood between him and their enemy. He needed to help the lad, but was afraid he'd only make the situation direr by drawing attention away from where it was now placed. He heard chains rattle and traced sluggish eyes along d'Artagnan's
legs to see that the young Gascon had raised his arms and was pointing at something.

"That still leaves three of us, lad," the scarred pirate replied coolly.

Porthos heard the click of a pistol.

"That won't matter to you," d'Artagnan replied, an eerie calm infusing his words, "because you'll be the first one to die."

Porthos held his breath, not daring to move. Time seemed to grow legs, stepping away from them in impossible strides. The damp of the night hung thick with that just-before-dawn weight as the world prepared for the assault of another day.

"Come on, boys," the pirate finally replied, something like wry amusement coloring his tone. "We've enough without this lot."

Feet shuffled, swords scraped against stone, and in moments Porthos felt the shift as there were suddenly fewer people surrounding them. He carefully rolled to his back, a helpless groan slipping through blood-crusted lips. d'Artagnan was on his knees in a second, his cool, slim hands ghosting over Porthos' face, the chain still binding his wrists dragging across Porthos' chest.

"Porthos," the Gascon breathed. "Thank God, I was…I was afraid that…"

"Chains," Porthos managed, closing his eyes as the stab of pain behind his eyes became sharper.

"You there," d'Artagnan's voice lifted above them. "Keys!"

"Lemme 'elp ya, lad."

Porthos heard the scratch and rasp of a well-used voice and smelled the wine and fish scents that soaked the clothes of someone moving closer, evidently removing the manacles from d'Artagnan's wrists. The young man's hands were soon on Porthos' face once more, moving more freely to the side and back of his head, checking as he'd seen Aramis do so many times for a break in the skull.

"You've a right nasty cut on the back of your head from that mace," d'Artagnan informed him, "but I can't feel a break in the skull."

"Stop touchin' me, then," Porthos growled, beginning to feel more embarrassment than pain, though he was extremely disinclined to move just yet. "They get you?"

"'im?" Crowed he of the keys. "at one moved so bloody fast they barely saw 'im, let alone touched 'im."

Porthos squinted an eye open, peering at d'Artagnan in the thin light of early dawn. "Wassat, then?"

" Couldn't hold a sword, my hands chain like they were," d'Artagnan shrugged, "so I figured I'd make them use theirs."

At that, Porthos opened both eyes. "Make them use theirs…?"

"'e took out two o' their men just by makin' 'em chase 'im!" The man next to d'Artagnan—who Porthos now saw was the first prisoner the Gascon had freed—cackled. "'at was smart o'ya, lad."

"Right, well," d'Artagnan looked down and shoved the bloody mace away with the toe of his boot, "we have to be getting back to the garrison."
"at'll take ya a fair bit," the man told him. "It's clear on the other side o' the Court."

Porthos reached for d'Artagnan's hand and used the lad's muscle to carefully haul himself to a seated position, bracing the flat of his hand on the stone of the street while the world spun crazily about him.

"Can't go back like this," he muttered groggily. "Aramis'll skin me 'live."

"Can't not go back," d'Artagnan argued. "Athos'll skin me alive."

"Find Flea," Porthos exhaled, not realizing at first that he'd tipped forward in his attempt to balance himself and was now resting his forehead on d'Artagnan's clavicle, the lad's fingers gently gripping the back of his neck. "In the Court. She won't like it, but…she can help."

"I know Flea," replied d'Artagnan's apparent new best friend. "I'll find 'er."

Before either of them could say a word, the man was gone. Porthos stayed as he was, leaning forward against d'Artagnan, breathing in the scent of sweat, leather, blood, and morning. He felt d'Artagnan's hand shift from his neck to his back, fingers spreading as if reassuring himself that Porthos still breathed. He could feel the rise and fall of the lad's chest, the steady thud-thud of his heartbeat against the flat of his forehead.

It was an oddly intimate embrace, the way d'Artagnan held him upright, solid and sure. But either the lad didn't recognize it or didn't care. Porthos had been in enough battle situations, had seen enough of his friends fall, and had feared enough of them dead to understand why d'Artagnan chose not to move. He wasn't sure how the lad had managed to rally the prisoners to his cause, but it seemed that had turned the tide of this struggle while Porthos had been unconscious.

Pain like a hot blade shimmied behind his eyes and he was unable to bite back a low moan. He hated head pain over all else that damaged his body. It rendered him helpless and distracted. He'd rather they cut his sword arm off than cracked him across the head. d'Artagnan pressed his hand a bit flatter against Porthos' back, stopping just short, it seemed, of rocking him.

"So," Porthos muttered, licking dried blood from his lips, desperate for a distraction. "You wanted t'learn more 'bout me."

"I did."

"Sorry yet?"

"Not in the slightest," d'Artagnan replied.

"Almost got you killed and sold into…," Porthos winced, nausea surging up and demanding to be quelled before he was able to spit out the last word, "slavery."

"True," d'Artagnan replied, his slim body remaining a solid support. "But on the bright side, now I can beat everyone except you at cards."

Porthos huffed a weak laugh, his head baying a sharp protest at the sound. They stayed still for several more minutes until Flea arrived, cursing and barking orders. It took the three of them to get Porthos on his feet and he nearly collapsed twice before they settled him on a pallet tucked into the corner of Flea's apartment at the edge of the Court de Miracles.

They agreed that Porthos would stay here until he could return to the garrison under his own steam, d'Artagnan making his excuses and requesting temporary leave. Porthos drafted a missive for Treville, his scrawling script even more illegible than normal as he couldn't focus properly on the
paper before him. He knew he was at risk of disciplinary action, but he was willing to take that over the scathing disappointment he knew would be in Athos' eyes if he were to come clean.

Before d'Artagnan left to make their excuses at the garrison, Porthos grabbed his arm, careful of the manacle-bruised wrist.

"Thank you."

d'Artagnan looked down and away. "I should never have doubted you," he confessed softly. "No matter how briefly I knew you, I knew you were a man of honor." He looked back at Porthos, meeting his eyes squarely. "I'll never doubt again."

"Never's a long time," Porthos allowed.

"Not among friends," d'Artagnan offered a small smile, then ducked out of the room and into the brassy morning light.

Porthos closed his eyes, lying still under Flea's quiet ministrations. She said not one word to him, simply stitched him and bandaged him and offered him water with a pain draught, then was absorbed into the chaos of the Court as though she'd never been by his side. He was left alone throughout the day to sleep, to heal, and to listen to the noise of the Paris night time at the door.

Two days later, Porthos returned to the garrison, tender and weak, but with a sly smile that hid the latent pain and an indulgent nod toward d'Artagnan when the young man greeted him with relief. Their stride was different after that; Porthos still saw the young Gascon as green, raw, in need of guidance and training as the others did, but he also knew that d'Artagnan would go to the mat for them, defending them with his life, his loyalty—and ingenuity—unwavering.

Present

"You realize Treville never believed d'Artagnan's story about why you were missing," Athos informed Porthos when he'd finished speaking.

"You realize we never believed his story," Aramis interjected.

Porthos frowned. "What story?"

"That you'd returned to the Court for some unfinished business with Flea," Aramis replied, reaching up to rub gingerly at the stitches marching up the back of his neck along his hairline.

Shrugging, Porthos replied, "Weren't exactly a lie."

"If I remember correctly," Athos continued, shifting on his horse to look back at Porthos, "Treville had the boy mucking stalls for three days when he returned without you."

Porthos brought his chin up. "'e never told you about the pirates?"

"Not a word."

"Ain't that a wonder," Porthos murmured.

They rode in silence as the day weakened, twilight wrapping around them like a cloak. When they reached a clearing, Porthos felt dread sitting heavy and dark in his gut. There was no way to see which direction their men had taken on the other side of the opened field. The hoof marks were
"I fear we could lose the trail if we ride too long into the night," Athos cautioned, reading Porthos' mind. His eyes strayed to where Aramis sat slumped in his saddle, all pretense of being fit for travel after his fall having evaporated during the long day. "I'm already worried we've strayed too far west."

Porthos moved his horse closer to Aramis, reaching out to offer his friend a steadying hand. Just as he touched Aramis' shoulder, however, his friend straightened, peering into the steadily increasing darkness. Porthos couldn't see it yet, but he was willing to bet a storm was on the approach.

"I wouldn't worry," Aramis replied, kicking his horse forward, surprising both of his comrades as he crossed the clearing.

"Aramis?" Porthos called, following him. "What is it?"

They closed in on him quickly, watching as Aramis leaned over and grasped a piece of cloth only his sharp eyesight could have caught from that distance. He turned and held it out to Athos.

"I believe this is yours."

Athos took the cloth from Aramis' hand, twisting it around his grip very similarly in manner to how Porthos had seen their young Gascon friend do with the same cloth not long ago.

"It's my neck scarf," Athos replied. "d'Artagnan…borrowed it when he went after LeMaitre. I didn't realize he'd kept it after that day in the woods."

"Yes, I've been meaning to ask you—why did he choose that garment to protect his hand when killing their persecutor?" Aramis asked.

Athos looked up at them, a strange sort of sorrow in his eyes. "Because he found it for me," he replied. "The day he saved my sanity."

"Hmm," Porthos murmured, drawing the eyes of his two friends. "Makes sense, don't it? That 'e used it to help kill the man who tried to take 'is?"

"He's clearly leaving us clues," Aramis stated, a scowl finding its home on his face. "We need to keep moving, catch up."

Porthos shot a look at Athos in protest, but saw his friend was already ahead of him.

"No," Athos shook his head, swinging down from his horse. "We rest here and get an early start."

"Athos—" Aramis protested.

"It will do d'Artagnan and Treville no good if we ride ourselves into the ground."

Aramis slumped once more. "If you're doing this for me…."

Athos brought his chin up. "What I do for one of us, I do for all. You are weary and wounded, Aramis. Let's rest, gather our strength so that we can be of use to our men when we find them. Besides," he continued, looking toward the horizon, "it's going to rain."

Porthos dismounted quickly before Aramis could use him as an excuse to move on. Without a word, he let his reins trail in the brush and moved around to stand next to Aramis' horse, waiting. A slightly defeated sigh slipped from Aramis' lips as he allowed Porthos to balance him when he swung down
to the ground. His wounded leg had clearly stiffened up while riding and Porthos took over his horse while Aramis gathered firewood.

"It's clear d'Artagnan has his wits about him," Aramis remarked as they prepared their meal. "But I am worried about Treville."

"Man's not acted like 'imself since the King demoted him," Porthos commented in agreement.

"Would you?" Athos inquired. "Stripped of your identity, your responsibility? If we were taken from you, would you be able to carry on?"

"We haven't been taken from him," Aramis argued. "We still see him as our Captain."

"It doesn't matter how we see him," Athos replied quietly, his eyes reflecting the snap of the flames. "It matters how he sees himself. He needs a reason to remember who he is."

Porthos watched his friend, wondering not for the first time how Athos had reinvented himself after the supposed death of his wife.

"Athos," he spoke up. "What did you mean, d'Artagnan saved your sanity?"

Athos was quiet for so long, Porthos wasn't sure he'd reply. Then, softly, addressing the fire, he said, "That is a story I should have told you long before now."
A fist crashed against his jaw; d'Artagnan staggered with the force of the blow, spitting blood on the ground and taking an extra beat before he lifted his face to glare at Laroche. The man seemed determined to break his hand on d'Artagnan's jaw.

"You're a right bastard, you know that?" d'Artagnan growled, blood trailing from his mouth, down his chin, and painting his neck crimson. "They were your men! Why not just take them from Paris once we caught them for you?"

"If I wanted you to know my story, I'd have written it down," Laroche snarled. "Now mount up! We've a ride ahead of us."

"I need to bind my Captain's leg first," d'Artagnan argued.

This time the blow came from the left; the man's knuckles, reinforced by what appeared to be an elongated silver ring spanning all four fingers, cut open the skin beneath d'Artagnan's right eye with the force of the impact. He staggered, going to one knee and spitting out more blood as his ears rung.

"Stop!" Treville spoke up, one of the first words d'Artagnan had heard out of the man since they left the garrison.

Laroche dropped his hand and turned to look at the former Musketeer Captain, giving d'Artagnan a moment to gain his feet. Before the man could center his ire on Treville, d'Artagnan spoke up again.

"You want us to ride, I need to bind his leg."

Laroche took a deep breath, muttering something to himself on the exhale as though he were working to calm his temper. He glanced around the blood-splattered grove of trees, at the men standing awaiting orders, at the bodies sprawled across the ground. d'Artagnan felt blood from the fresh cut on his cheek trickle down his neck, tickling the fine hairs there, before soaking into the loose collar of his white shirt.

Laroche's men had taken their cloaks, pauldrons, and weapons, leaving Treville and d'Artagnan with only their sleeved doublets as protection. d'Artagnan felt oddly unbalanced without the feel of his main gauche tucked up against his back and with his rapier and wheel lock pistol in the hands of another. He could cope with losing all but the rapier; that had been given to him by his father.

He aimed to get it back.

"Bind his leg. Then bury the bodies," Laroche growled finally, facing away from d'Artagnan. "Be quick about it." He looked toward his remaining men, calling for one to bring the chains that had previously bound the two 'prisoners' the party had been supposedly returning to Soissons. "The outpost is a day's ride west of here," Laroche continued, pulling his garish red cravat loose and wiping his grime-covered face clean. "I don't want them getting away before we've made use of them."

d'Artagnan worried the cut along the inside of his lower lip with his tongue, calculating where they might be headed. Soissons was further north, not west. Had anything Laroche said been true?

The ambush had been quick, bloody, and effective, leaving Treville wounded and three others dead. d'Artagnan had earned a split lip delivered from a manacle-wrapped fist in payment for cursing Laroche and calling out his betrayal the moment he realized by the man's actions that he was no more
a Marechausee than d'Artagnan was a prince. The men who'd come at them from the forest had weeded out the weak with strategic precision; it was only because Rochefort had sent Musketeers rather than Red Guard that three died rather than one.

Dragging the back of his hand across his still-bleeding mouth, d'Artagnan moved to his horse, reaching for his saddle bag. One of the men who had ridden in and turned their world to a blood-soaked mess lurched forward and grabbed d'Artagnan's wrist, halting him. d'Artagnan glared at the man, blinking in surprise when he realized he recognized him. The man rode with the Red Guard—he'd been one of the group they'd battled with when arresting LeBarge several months ago.

"You want me to bind his leg, I need bandages," d'Artagnan spat, staring the man in the eyes and daring him to acknowledge his treachery.

"I'll be watching you," the man replied.

d'Artagnan stopped just short of rolling his eyes. "I'll try to live with that."

Grabbing his saddle bags from the back of his horse, he returned to Treville, crouching down next to his wounded right leg. Treville had been applying pressure to the wound; blood stained his fingers, having spilled there in the moments that stretched since the attack. His Captain looked pale, drawn. His hands appeared thinner somehow, the fingers gripping the wound on his leg not nearly as strong as they once seemed.

For one heartbeat, d'Artagnan wished desperately for Aramis—his calm presence, his medical knowledge, his quick smile, his quiet eyes—but then banished that thought as quickly as it came. If Aramis were here there was every possibility he would be one of the bodies d'Artagnan had to bury.

"Let go of it, sir," d'Artagnan instructed his Captain quietly. A musket ball had buried itself in the man's upper thigh when Treville had thrown himself in front of the already-wounded Grisier, giving d'Artagnan just enough time to get the other man on his horse.

"You should run," Treville replied, not releasing his leg.

d'Artagnan glanced up at the man's pale face. "I'm not leaving you."

"You should go after Grisier; the man was wounded. There's no guarantee he'll make it back to the garrison." Treville's voice was no more than a subdued mutter, as though he were drifting.

d'Artagnan gripped Treville's shoulder, drawing the older man's eyes. "I'm not leaving you," he repeated, spacing his words so that Treville felt the impact.

His throat bobbing as he swallowed, Treville removed his visibly trembling hands from his leg, allowing d'Artagnan access.

"The ball is still inside," Treville said. "I can feel it, just beneath the skin."

d'Artagnan nodded as he ripped the hole Treville's pant leg wider to better see the wound.

"I don't think it hit bone," Treville continued.

"Picked up a thing or two from Aramis, have you?" d'Artagnan teased as he gently wiped away some still-seeping blood.

"I was his Captain for five years," Treville groused, some of his usual color back in his tone. "I think I'm entitled to retain a bit of medicinal knowledge."
"Of course, Captain," d'Artagnan nodded agreeably, pleased to have some fire back in Treville's belly, if only for a moment. "Brace yourself," he advised. "This may hurt."

Wrapping one of the pieces of cloth stashed in his saddle bag around the back of Treville's leg, d'Artagnan folded the material over the open wound, then pulled the knot tight to keep pressure on the wound and stall the bleeding. Treville sucked in a lungful of air, fingers digging into the earth.

"Sorry," d'Artagnan whispered sincerely. "I'll have to mend it further when we have a bit more time."

"It's fine," Treville panted.

"Take care of the bodies," growled the Red Guard who'd grabbed d'Artagnan's wrist earlier. He kicked at the young Gascon's hip, knocking him off-balance from his crouch next to Treville.

d'Artagnan started to surge upright, ready to launch himself at the man in retaliation, but Treville grasped his forearm, stalling him just long enough he was able to coil his temper.

"Not yet," Treville murmured.

Taking a breath, d'Artagnan nodded, then gathered his saddle bag as he stood. Slinging the bag across his horse's flanks, d'Artagnan paused briefly, then grabbed out a few more pieces of cloth under the guise of having spare bandages at the ready. If Grisier had made it back to the garrison, the men would mount a rescue, he was sure of it. They would need some kind of sign that group was not heading toward Soissons any longer.

Turning from his horse he muttered to the man he'd recognized, "Help me drag them to the clearing?"

"You killed them," the former Red Guard groused. "You bury them."

d'Artagnan paused next to the man he'd chased across the rooftops, the broken leg bent awkwardly beneath him. "I didn't kill this one," he pointed out.

"Andreas," Laroche barked. d'Artagnan saw the Red Guard snap his head in the other man's direction. "Help him. We are wasting time."

"Wouldn't want to waste time, Andreas," d'Artagnan smirked, reaching down and sliding Porthos' headscarf under the arms and across the back of one of the bodies. He noted Andreas watching him, but used the scarf to pull the dead weight toward a clearing, making a show of rotating his shoulder as though it were tender once he lay the body down. "Let's go. Your boss is in a hurry."

Turning from Andreas, d'Artagnan grabbed the closest branch he could find and used it to drag grooves in the loose, sandy earth next to the body. By the time Andreas had dragged the other two bodies over, d'Artagnan had a decent start to the grave.

"You planning on doing any actual work?" d'Artagnan muttered.

"Just enjoying the sight of a Musketeer in his element," Andreas returned.

d'Artagnan glanced over toward where Treville still sat watching him. Running his tongue across his wounded lip, the taste of copper strong enough to encourage him to avoid any more direct hits, d'Artagnan nodded.

"Right, well," he bent down and continued digging. "I did after all claim the lives of two of these
men, as you pointed out. Can't fault a Musketeer for finishing the job."

Andreas muttered something too low for d'Artagnan to hear, but collected another branch and began to help with the grave. As they dragged the bodies into the low ditch, d'Artagnan swiftly tied Porthos' scarf around one man's left wrist. It was a gamble, but if Porthos were with the rescue party, he knew his friend would follow the clue. Andreas was too busy kicking dirt over the bodies to notice.

"Andreas!" Laroche shouted. "Chain them up!"

Andreas grabbed the manacles from the pile of chains that had once bound the two criminals and moved toward d'Artagnan.

"Wait!" d'Artagnan backed up a step, holding his dirt-caked, scuffed hands in front of him. "Let me aid my Captain first."

"Enough delays, Musketeer," Andreas growled.

d'Artagnan took another step back. "You have all our weapons," he argued. "You've lamed my Captain, and I am not leaving without him. You've won."

Andreas paused, heavy, black brows lowered over muddy brown eyes. "Be quick."

Exhaling with relief, d'Artagnan hurried over to Treville, concern tightening his chest when the man didn't so much as look up at him.

"Sir," he said quietly, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu as he bent to collect Treville to his feet. "We need to move." He was purposefully pitching his voice low, gentling his tone, much as he had while trying to keep the King alive with the slave traders.

Treville wavered once upright and stared at d'Artagnan with hollow eyes. "You should just let them take me," he said quietly. "I'll be more use to you as a distraction."

"Let's get you on your horse," d'Artagnan said, ignoring Treville's words, his defeated tone, his listless eyes. The man's words cut an edge of panic in d'Artagnan's heart. Treville was his Captain, his leader. He would follow this man into the fire. "C'mon, Captain."

Allowing himself to be led, Treville shook his head. "I'm a liability, not your Captain. You shouldn't call me that."

"Whatever you say, Captain," d'Artagnan replied, stifling a wince as boosting the man atop his horse strained his rather abused muscles.

As Treville settled, d'Artagnan checked the man's bandage, then looked up at him, pinning his gaze.

"We will get out of this, sir," d'Artagnan promised.

"I have no doubt you will," Treville replied, a shimmer of his old tone wrapping around his words. "But I was sent on this mission so that our King would be rid of me."

"You forget," d'Artagnan replied, his voice low, eyes serious. "I was also ordered on this mission. Grisier was the only volunteer."

Treville frowned at that, a slight spark illuminating his eyes as his thoughts struck against a flint stone of memory.
"The King has more reason to rid himself of me than he ever will of you, Captain," d'Artagnan continued. "Rochefort has bent his Majesty's ear. Pretty sure he expects both of us to follow our orders and ride ourselves off a cliff somewhere. But..." he grinned slightly, letting it hit his eyes, making his Captain see it. "I aim to misbehave. You?"

Treville's lips quirked in an almost-smile. "If I were your Captain," he replied, shifting his weight from his wounded leg and taking up his reins, "I would reprimand you for talk like that."

d'Artagnan lifted a shoulder. "Good thing for me you're not."

Andreas appeared out of nowhere, cuffing d'Artagnan on the back of the head with one of the empty manacles. "Enough chatter, Musketeer."

d'Artagnan rubbed the back of his head, stumbling to the side as Treville protested Andreas' treatment. Ignoring him, Andreas grabbed d'Artagnan's arm and fastened the manacles, leaving a length of chain the width of his hips, then trailing a longer length up to a second set of manacles, which he fastened on Treville.

"You expect us to ride chained together?" d'Artagnan protested as Andreas carried the final length of chain toward Laroche.

"I expect you to be silent," Laroche retorted. "And get on your damn horse."

"d'Artagnan," Treville warned quietly as d'Artagnan curled his hands into fists and stepped forward. "Not yet."

Mounting while coping with the chains was not an easy task, but d'Artagnan was soon astride his horse, fingers twisted in both the reins and his horse's long mane. Laroche kicked his mount into a canter, a gait d'Artagnan knew would be painful for Treville's wound. He tried to hold his mount back at a more sedate pace, but Laroche's momentum nearly pulled him from the saddle.

"I hear one word from you, Musketeer, and a leg wound will be the least of the old man's worries," Laroche shouted over his shoulder.

d'Artagnan spared a glance in Treville's direction and was gratified to see that spark of fire in his Captain's eyes once more.

Silence had never come easily for the young Gascon.

Even as a child, he'd found it physically painful to keep his questions inside, to still his sharp tongue, to know his place. His father's disappointment had been the only thing to quiet him as a youth and as he'd grown, working at his father's side, he'd learned the value of holding his tongue, though he'd never quite mastered the skill. Emotions often got the better of him, driving him to speak when common sense screamed at him to stay quiet.

The ride through the dying light of day was quiet save for the groan and creak of worn saddles, the huff and blow of horses, and the click and rattle of their chains. Laroche led the way, followed at length by Treville and d'Artagnan. The second former prisoner, who'd managed to survive the "ambush" primarily because he was not hampered by a broken leg, brought up the rear. Andreas and another man flanked them, riding out through the trees in great sweeping passes, checking for outliers, bandits, and any possible rescue.

Silence won this round, not in the least because talking raked the shredded skin of d'Artagnan's lip against his teeth. His one hope now was that Grisier had survived his desperate ride, and that Treville's mad sacrifice had bought their fellow Musketeer enough time to return. He just had to keep
marking the trail as Laroche led the rest of their party onward toward some unknown destination. Leaving the neck scarf he'd taken from Athos snagged on a low branch as they rode back into a grove of trees after crossing a broad clearing was simple. No one was watching them; they were tethered to Laroche, and Treville was visibly flagging.

d'Artagnan had made it clear he wasn't parting from his Captain; that didn't mean he wasn't willing to take Treville with him.

They rode for several hours through the forest; storm clouds gathered on the far horizon. Darkness seemed to encroach early, the sun disappearing and an early twilight shadows settling across the road. d'Artagnan could smell rain, feel a distinct charge in the air. There had been a time in his life that storms were welcome, needed. That all ended the day his father was killed. Now he felt only tension, apprehension, his entire being on guard against the possibilities lurking in the rain as strong and dangerous as those cloaked by night.

Laroche stopped at the edge of another clearing, a large stone structure, not unlike the convent where the Musketeers and their Queen had taken refuge, visible not more than a hundred yards away. A river separated the clearing from the narrow, winding road that lead up to an iron gate. To the south, d'Artagnan could just make out what seemed to be an outcropping of rocks, the clearing slipping down into the river valley.

On their side of the river were the remains of a cable bridge, the narrow anchoring tower constructed of rusted metal and rotting wood cross-beams, roughly the height of two men, was still centered in the clearing. The cables that had traversed the river had long since removed. Both the building and the tower had seen better days. Settling back in his saddle, Laroche peered at the reinforced building with narrowed eyes. Without turning back, he instructed Andreas to set up camp.

"We're not going in?" Andreas questioned.

"At night? Hardly," Laroche replied. "I haven't come this far just to be taken out by my own men."

"Bet the fellow with the broken leg thought the same thing," d'Artagnan muttered askance to Treville. His Captain was bent forward, keeping weight from his wounded leg, but he lifted his chin in acknowledgement.

"You," Laroche pointed to the other man the Musketeers had taken into custody. "Tether them."

"Where?" the man replied, dismounting to take the end of the chain from Laroche's hand.

Thunder rumbled, low and heavy, in the distance and Laroche pulled in a deep breath through his nose. "In the clearing," he replied. "Use the tower."

d'Artagnan clenched his jaw, his back tensing. He felt Treville's eyes on him, but neither of them said a word. d'Artagnan watched as one man secured the horses behind a dilapidated make-shift fence, then pulled at their bindings, forcing them to dismount. d'Artagnan reached up to help his Captain, seeing the growing stain of blood having seeped through his field dressing. Treville leaned heavily on d'Artagnan as they were hauled across the clearing toward the tower.

"Fantastic," d'Artagnan muttered. "Chain us to a giant bit of metal with a storm on the way."

"I don't give the orders," the man replied.

"Think you could at least get me something to mend his leg?" d'Artagnan bargained.
The man narrowed his eyes at d'Artagnan, his expression difficult to read in the dark. "I tortured and killed four men in Paris," he said without inflection. "I cut out their lying tongues."

d'Artagnan swallowed, helplessly shuddering at the thought; he hoped that if he couldn't see this man, then the man couldn't see him that well, either. Catching his lower lip between his teeth, he looked back toward the camp.

"Well, maybe you could get the musket ball out, then. Seeing as how you have some knowledge of human anatomy."

The man stood completely still for a moment and d'Artagnan held his breath. The sudden bark of laughter made d'Artagnan startle as the man turned back to the tower, looping the end of the chain around one of the tower's four supporting legs and securing it with a bolt. He came back to d'Artagnan and clapped him hard on the shoulder.

"I like you, lad," he said, a chuckle still apparent in his voice. "Even if you did kill half our men."

d'Artagnan shrugged faux-apologetically. "I thought they were the bad guys," he offered.

The man leaned forward, his breath sour and hot against d'Artagnan's face. "They were."

Striding away with a bounce in his step, the man called out to one of his comrades to bring the boy some water and bandages. d'Artagnan wasn't sure how he was going to get the musket ball out of Treville's leg with water and bandages, but he'd take what he could get. He crouched down next to d'Artagnan and clapped him hard on the shoulder.

"That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one of these days," Treville managed through gritted teeth.

"You sound like Athos," d'Artagnan murmured.

"You should listen to him," Treville replied.

Frowning, d'Artagnan peeled away the sodden bandage. "As if he gives me a choice to do otherwise."

Thunder rumbled again, this time closer. d'Artagnan couldn't suppress the small shudder that slipped along the top of his shoulders. He heard the horses stamp nearby, feeling their nervous energy buffet off of his own. Turning his full focus to Treville, he grunted with frustration. Limited mobility and sight were not going to help him care for his Captain.

"Can't see a damned thing," he muttered.

"d'Artagnan," Treville began, coughing once to clear his throat. "Listen—"

"Sir, no offense," d'Artagnan held up a hand, resting his forearm on his bent knee, "but if you're going to tell me to find a way to escape and leave you behind, I may knock you unconscious."

Treville huffed out a surprised laugh. "You sound like Porthos."

Before he could reply, d'Artagnan saw the flicker of firelight coming closer. He looked up and saw that Andreas had been sent over with water and bandages, as ordered, but had also brought a torch, small knife, and a pouch of wine.

"I'll be watching you," he warned d'Artagnan again.
Ignoring everything except the supplies, d'Artagnan used the water to clean the blood from Treville's wound. He frowned when Treville pressed back against the tower as wine was poured over the wound. The structure had appeared worn but solid enough at first glance. However, when Treville pulled away from him, d'Artagnan heard the metal creak and rattle as though the base was rusted through.

Taking the knife from Andreas, d'Artagnan held the blade in the flame of the torch until he almost couldn't maintain his grip on the handle.

"Come over here," d'Artagnan ordered the other man. "Hold the light as close to us as you can."

For once, Andreas did as he was asked without complaint or comment. Treville's hooded eyes followed the source of the light, getting his first close look at the former Red Guard who was traveling with them now.

"I know you," Treville panted slightly, "don't I?"

Andreas turned his head slightly, not answering, d'Artagnan positioned himself so that he was straddling Treville's leg.

"Hang on to something, Captain," d'Artagnan instructed. "I've seen Aramis do this many times, but I —"

"You'll do fine, d'Artagnan," Treville replied, a bead of sweat glistening off of the flickering torchlight ran down his face and buried itself in his beard.

d'Artagnan swallowed a breath, folded his lips together, the sting of the broken skin against teeth keeping him present. Focused.

He could feel the bullet just below the skin, buried in the meat of Treville's leg. Thinking back to Aramis' steady instructions, d'Artagnan could almost hear the man's smooth voice in his ear, telling him to cut across the wound, to press the heated blade inside, to slip the ball from the leg.

A litany of meaningless reassurance spilled from him as Treville tensed and writhed away from the pain. He sat on the man's knee to keep him from moving too far, too fast. Using the last of the wine, he cleaned the wound once more, then heated the blade again in the torch flames. Andreas had looked away; the torch was shaking in his hand.

"Nearly there, Captain," d'Artagnan promised.

"S-speaking French again, are we?" Treville gasped.

At that, d'Artagnan looked up from his duty. "Again?"

"You'd slipped into Gascon," Treville informed him. "M-made me have to think a bit."

d'Artagnan had forgotten that his Captain spoke Gascon. He'd forgotten that he knew how to speak it. He'd only done it once since his childhood, and it was when their situations were reversed.

"Apparently bullet wounds remind me of home," d'Artagnan teased. The hilt of the knife was burning his hand. "You ready?"

Treville nodded quickly and before he could change his mind, d'Artagnan laid the flat of the blade against the worst of the wound. Treville choked on a scream, biting on the sleeve of his leathers to keep as silent as possible. When d'Artagnan was sure the wound was as cauterized as he was going
to get it, he placed one of the clean bandages over it, then wrapped his Captain's leg once more.

Looking up at Andreas, he handed back the knife and empty wine pouch, stalwartly ignoring the way his hand shook. "Thank you," he said.

"Not my idea," Andreas replied, pushing to his feet, his face pale in the firelight. He looked down at Treville. "Laroche wants you healthy for what's next."

"And what," Treville gasped, heavy eyes blinking open, "is that, exactly?"

"You'll know when he wants you to," Andreas snapped, stepping across Treville's outstretched legs.

"How about I take a guess?" Treville fired back, halting Andreas momentarily. "I'm not yet sure what Laroche has against the Red Guard—or if it's just Rochefort, not that I blame him. But by the nature of the kills your friend back there claims responsibility for, I'm guessing betrayal is involved."

d'Artagnan was amazed at the clarity with which his Captain spoke, words spilling forth as though the man had stored them up all day and pain had shaken them loose. Andreas half turned toward him, the fire from the torch reflecting in his eyes.

"You don't know the half of it."

"As you were once Red Guard," Treville continued, having apparently placed where he knew the man from, "I'm sure you have your own reasons for allowing your fellow soldiers to be slaughtered in the name of Laroche's agenda."

The universe deemed it fit to punctuate Treville's sentence with another growl of thunder, this time accompanied with an increase in the wind that snapped at the flames lighting Andreas' face.

"Rochefort had my brother killed," Andreas spat, leaning forward. "And not one of those men lifted a finger to stop it. They deserved what they got."

"I hope your brother's death was swift and merciful," Treville stated calmly, "rather than choking to death on his own blood as those soldiers surely did."

d'Artagnan was too busy bouncing his gaze between his Captain and the former Red Guard to register Andreas' slight shift in position. The man reared his leg back and d'Artagnan saw the movement just before he landed the kick on Treville's wounded leg.

Twisting quickly from his crouch over Treville's knee, d'Artagnan took the force of the blow in his lower back, the impact knocking him forward and into the base of the metal tower. The air vacated his lungs and he clung to the rusted metal, seeking balance. Treville wisely said nothing. Andreas snapped something rather disparaging about their parentage, then stomped off.

"d'Artagnan," Treville called, turning to the side to reach for him. d'Artagnan felt the Captain's hands at his waist and shoulder, easing him up off the edge of the metal brace so that he could sit leaning against the support next to Treville. "I'm sorry, lad."

"'s okay," d'Artagnan managed, coughing slightly. He was pretty sure Andreas had bruised something inside of him, but if it saved Treville more pain, he'd take it. "'m okay. Really."

"You sound it," Treville muttered.

The first splatters of rain hit their faces then and d'Artagnan forced himself to breathe, fighting to calm his suddenly racing nerves. It was only rain. And perhaps some lightning—yes, there it was. He
could practically feel the currents reaching for them.

"Are you going to be able to handle this?" Treville asked, dragging his hand down his face to wipe away the collecting rain water.

"I've been in worse situations than this, Captain," d'Artagnan returned. "Recently, actually. Twice. With the King."

"I'm not talking about our captors," Treville countered.

d'Artagnan looked at him in surprise.

"I know my men, d'Artagnan," Treville said, water flinging from his lips. "For Aramis, it's snow. And solitude. For Porthos, it's anything that hints of slavery. For Athos, it's being reminded of his past. Of Thomas. And for you," Treville blinked up into the rain, the fingers of lightning dancing across the heavy clouds periodically illuminating his face, "it's rainstorms."

d'Artagnan swallowed, blinking rain from his lashes, unsure how to reply. He shivered as another flash of lightning cracked the sky.

"It's just rain," d'Artagnan said, more to convince himself than to reassure Treville. He closed his eyes, working to banish the image of his father falling, wet and heavy, mouth agape, blood pooling beneath him, as rain beat down on the back of d'Artagnan's head.

Treville tugged on his chains a bit, the metal links clanking against the rusted support of the tower. Lightning beat a strange staccato pattern of illumination against the backs of d'Artagnan's eyelids. He swore he could feel the storm growing in intensity.

"We need to move away from this tower," he said. "We need to be rid of these chains."

He rattled his manacled wrists.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Treville replied. d'Artagnan felt the weight of the older man's gaze and looked over at him. "But something tells me I'm not going to like how you propose to solve this problem."

d'Artagnan pushed to his feet, staggering a bit with the pain in his back. The water stung the cuts on his cheek and lip, but the rain was washing the dried blood from his face and neck. He peered through the storm-curtained darkness to where he'd seen the men camping, their fire barely visible beneath the tent of pine boughs used to keep it sheltered from the water.

"Laroche!" He shouted. "We need shelter."

"You need to be silent!" Laroche hollered back.

"The storm!" d'Artagnan pressed. "At least move the Captain! You said you wanted us whole, right?"

A pistol fired, the ball clanging harmlessly against the steel support of the tower and causing d'Artagnan to instinctively duck. The already nervous horses stomped and whinnied in protest.

"Mad bastard," d'Artagnan grumbled, turning back toward the Captain.

The storm surged a bit, pulling at d'Artagnan's shirt where it was plastered to his skin. In the intermittent glow of the lightning, he traced his eyes along the length of the chains that linked him to
Treville and both of them to the tower. Stepping around his Captain, d'Artagnan approached the tower, pushing at each of the four supports, seeking out the weakest.

If he'd had more strength or more men, he could push the tower over to one side and slip their looped chain free. Thunder stirred up the nervous horses more and d'Artagnan whipped his head around at the sound, his long, wet hair slapping against his cheek.

And idea formed. He may not have more men, but more strength was within his grasp.

"d'Artagnan," Treville called, drawing out the name with a note of worry. "What are you thinking?"

Not answering, d'Artagnan gathered up the chain, running the length through his fingers, then studied the loops that connected his and Treville's manacles. He could maybe pick the locks around their wrists if he had his dagger or main gauche, but save that, he had one other option.

d'Artagnan crouched down next to Treville. "Captain, I need you to trust me."

"Usually it's Aramis saying that to me." Treville tilted his head worriedly.

"And he's never let you down, right?"

"Not once."

"Well, I have learned a lot from those men, Captain. Not just how to be a soldier, but…," he looked up, blinking away the rain, then wiped the flat of his hand across his eyes, "how to see a way through the impossible."

d'Artagnan sensed Treville looking up, then felt the tug on his wrists as the man turned away from the tower, pulling the chains with him.

"Tell me you're not thinking what I think you're thinking."

Lightning flashed bright, drawing thunder in its immediate wake and d'Artagnan shook slightly in reaction.

"If Athos were here—"

"He'd tell me it was a suicidal idea," d'Artagnan interrupted.

"And he'd be right!" Treville tried to gain his feet, but his wounded leg denied him. He managed to twist to the side and grab the front of d'Artagnan's wet doublet, turning them face to face. "If they were here to help it would still be suicidal."

"But brilliant," d'Artagnan grinned, all teeth and cold rage. "I need you to trust me."

"d'Artagnan," Treville shook his head, curling his fists tighter into the leather in his grip. "Just go, lad. You can get free of these locks; I've seen you do it. Get out of here."

d'Artagnan put his cold hands over Treville's fists and, blinking through the rain, stared into the other man's pale blue eyes. "Sir, I did not leave my King and I will not leave my Captain."

Treville frowned, water dripping from the point of his beard. "If you are doing this to prove that you didn't let down your King as he claimed—"

"Louis is unable to recognize loyalty and has a twisted definition of honor," d'Artagnan spat bitterly, feeling the dark seed of betrayal and hurt dig roots in his heart. "He is my King but he's not my
leader. *You* are." He tore Treville's fists from his doublet and pushed to his feet. "So bloody *act like it.*"

Leaving Treville staring at him in shocked silence, d'Artagnan began pulling the chain toward him through the loop around the tower support until he had the full length in a pile at his feet. Doing so brought Treville's hands up above his head to the edge of the metal supports, the only play left in his chains being the length between his manacles.

d'Artagnan glanced over at the stomping, nervous horses, knowing it wasn't enough length to reach them. He was going to have to bring one to him. Somehow. Licking his wounded lips, he turned back to Treville.

"Stay low and close to the tower," he instructed. "Do not allow yourself to be pinned by the chain. Understand?"

Treville stared at him a moment. "Which direction are you planning to tip it?"

"East," d'Artagnan replied immediately. "These two supports are rusted through, see? You just have to be ready to slip us free."

Lightning dazzled their eyes and d'Artagnan felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle with anticipation as though his body was shouting back at the sky.

"And when they think you're escaping and fire at you, what then?"

d'Artagnan gathered up the chain in his arms. "They've proven to be far better with their blades than their pistols," he said, then grinned. "I could always alert them?"

Treville pushed himself back against the weakest support of the tower. "No, by all means, let's keep this suicidal."

Another bright crash danced across the wet sky, this one sending the horses into a frenzy and causing them to pull from their tethers, pushing against the make-shift corral. Seeing his opportunity, d'Artagnan flattened his wounded lips and whistled, hearing rather than seeing one of the wet mounts break from the group. Trailing the length of the chain in his wake, d'Artagnan ran toward the horse, catching the animal's wet mane in motion and using the momentum to swing himself aboard its back.

The other horses reared and panicked, drawing the attention of Laroche and his men. Ignoring everything but the storm, the tower, and Treville, d'Artagnan drew up his legs and kicked the horse forward, shouting at the Captain to *mind the chain* as he circled the tower, trailing the chain behind him. He heard the *ping* and *snap* of pistols fired at him, all missing completely in the chaos of running horses and crashing thunder.

The rain made it challenging for d'Artagnan to keep his seat, but the horse responded to his commands; the play in the chain grew shorter as it pulled taut against the metal supports of the tower. It wasn't until that moment d'Artagnan realized the flaw in his plan: he had nothing to brace the chain as he pulled.

Leaning far forward, he slipped his arms over the head and neck of the animal and hissed in its ear, tapping his heels to press it forward, using its body mass as an anchor. The weakened tower creaked and shuddered as d'Artagnan lay low on the horse's neck, his wrists chafing painfully with the rub of metal, his arms aching from the strain, the length of the chain that pressed against his leg bruising his flesh.

"Narrggh," he cried, growling at the horse, "Come on. Pull, dammit!"
He heard men shouting around the rumble of thunder and the scream of twisting metal and the snap of old wood and suddenly the pressure on his leg and arms lessened as the narrow, rusted tower toppled to the ground with an echoing clank. His horse danced with the newfound freedom and d'Artagnan sat up and turned, seeing through the rain as lightning once more illuminated the landscape. Treville was free of the tower, listing to one side as he stood, arms raised. Another flash revealed Andreas grabbing him and wrestling to the ground.

d'Artagnan turned his horse to help when a third flash revealed Laroche appearing from the darkness like a wraith, astride another horse and headed straight for him. The hilt of a pistol was gripped in his hand like a club. Pain splashed across d'Artagnan's consciousness and his world went black, darkness sweetly silencing the storm.

"Slowly."

He heard the word, but for the life him, he couldn't understand it. It was just another sound in the sudden cacophony that replaced the blissful quiet he'd been floating within. The word was repeated and d'Artagnan felt his mind break apart the letters, examining each as a foreign object, disconnected from meaning.

The word changed then, slid into a different skin, a different sound and he realized it was a command. Instructions. Caution.

Blinking his eyes open, he registered soft, muted light filling the immediate space around him. Pain flared—at first from everywhere, indiscernible—and d'Artagnan halted the motion his body had apparently been instinctively engaged in: sitting up. He was pushing away from something, someone, the flight instinct strong in his confusion. Freezing mid-rise, he held his breath.


He did, and found that air hurt. It hurt his chest and his wrists and holy shit his mouth felt shredded. The groan that slipped free rattled his head, his eyes trembling with the misery of the sound.

"Hold on, lad. Let me help you."

Hands were on his shoulder, his waist, shifting him, settling him. He kept blinking, his eyes burning, resisting the light that filtered in and seemed to sear the cracks in his skull. His stomach rolled, sending his balance awry and he pulled in a sharp breath, instinctively tamping down the threatening nausea.

Another groan escaped, tugged forward by the relentless pull of pain. He began to automatically take stock, training kicking in to override the ache, a vague memory of danger sending his heart rate into overdrive. He needed to be ready to move.

Except it appeared as though he was made of glass and moving was a very, very bad idea.

"Look at me," the voice commanded from somewhere to his left.

d'Artagnan felt a calloused hand cup his jaw, the pad of a thumb just below his aching cheekbone, and he leaned into it, his head too heavy for his neck muscles to keep it aloft.

"d'Artagnan," the voice beckoned. "Look at me, Lad."

He obeyed, eyes rolling slowly, until he saw a face swimming blurrily before him. One that he knew.
One that matched the voice.

"Captain?" he managed, his voice emerging thin and strangled from his dry throat.

"Thank God," Treville sighed, releasing d'Artagnan's face and sinking back on his heels. "You've been unconscious for hours."

The world began to take shape, the edges of d'Artagnan's perception sharpening to a razor point, cutting him with memory. Images flashed across his vision of a storm, a tower, heavy, heavy chains… He lifted his arms to find them free of chains, though his wrists were bruised and bloody, the cuffs of his shirt stuck to open wounds like make-shift bandages.

He pulled in a slow breath, finally finding the balance that had been scattered within him like shrapnel moments before. Another breath and he was able to look around without his eyes feeling as though they were going to tumble free from their sockets.

His doublet had been removed, but he'd managed to keep his shirt. From the angle he was slumped, he could see the white was stained with blood—presumably from his head. Reaching up a clumsy hand, he felt dried flakes of blood in his left brow, swollen skin around a two-inch gash across his forehead. The pain of the wound felt oddly detached; as if he knew it was his, but decided to set it aside for a while and deal with it later.

"It worked?"

"Quite effectively." Treville was looking at him like he was fairly certain any sudden movements would send him over an invisible edge of sanity.

It took d'Artagnan a moment to realize what was strange about their surroundings. When he did, he sat up straighter, catching his breath as pain spiked through his shoulders up into his head.

"Whoa."

"Slowly," Treville repeated.

"Are we…in a house?" d'Artagnan asked, looking around as his body began to settle around him.

"Seems to be an abandoned monastery, actually," Treville informed him, handing him a water pouch and steadying it as he drank.

When his thirst was sated, Treville handed him a hunk of bread and then, using the wall next to him, gained his feet to pace stiffly around the small room. d'Artagnan ate automatically, chewing carefully around the cuts in his mouth. He felt his body respond to the sustenance, steadying his roiling stomach. He only wished he could ease the ache in his head.

Clarity returned like pieces of a puzzle, bringing the full picture together in d'Artagnan's mind as he watched his Captain move around him, significantly favoring one leg. Their clothes were dry—and he fully remembered being soaked to the bone—so some time had passed. They were most likely inside a room within the structure he'd seen across the river.

And neither of them had been struck by lightning, so his plan hadn't been completely suicidal.

"After you toppled the tower, lightning struck a nearby tree and scattered the horses. Your brilliant plan," Treville gave him a side-eye glance, "caused Laroche to effectively lose his mind."

d'Artagnan nodded slowly, secretly pleased at the back-handed compliment from his Captain. "Not
"Indeed," Treville nodded. "Andreas tied us back to back and you were…." here, Treville swallowed, lifting his eyes to the crumbling corners of the ceiling above them, "you were dead weight against me. In truth, d'Artagnan, I thought they had killed you. I couldn't imagine facing Athos…." "They didn't, though," d'Artagnan argued, arms cradled in his lap.

Treville turned to face him. "Yes, but you take too many chances, lad. Put yourself at too much risk."

"What is too much?" d'Artagnan challenged. "How can it be too much if it is for the life of another? My brother or my King?"

Treville pressed his lips out, resting his hands on his hips and contemplated the cracked stone floor. The bandage still wrapped tightly around his leg was clean; no new blood had gathered while d'Artagnan had been out. He smiled at that, hoping he'd get the opportunity to tell Aramis. It would please the man that his lessons had been put to good use.

"When I was with the King," d'Artagnan said, his voice carrying across the small void between them in a hushed current, not fully aware he was speaking, "there was a man. Pepin. He'd been taken from his home, his family."

"I remember," Treville replied, reminding d'Artagnan that the Captain had contributed to the impromptu widow's fund they provided Pepin's wife and daughter.

"The King helped me save this man. Helped me carry him when he couldn't walk. Helped me tend to him when the pain was too great. And Pepin honored the King with his life because of that. He fought for a man who he saw as willing to fight for him."

Treville was quiet as d'Artagnan continued, plucking the cloth away from his wounded wrists.

"I see the same in Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. I see them willing to put themselves—their lives—on the line to honor the men beside them. To honor you. To honor their King." He rubbed the side of his aching head. "I see them sacrifice home and heart and peace; I see them surface through nightmares and lay comrades to rest. I see them at risk every time they ride out on a mission, and not once is it too much."

Treville sighed. "d'Artagnan…." "These men, sir;" he looked up, meeting Treville's blue eyes. "These men are my family. They filled a…a void left within me when everything—everything—that I knew, everything that was mine was destroyed. Burned out." He looked down at the floor, rubbed his hands together, the dried blood from his wrists flaking off. "My father taught me to be a gentleman. They taught me to be a man."

Meeting Treville's eyes once more, he challenged, "How can you say it's too much? Simply because it's for you?"

Treville, dragged a hand down his face, his shoulders bowing in acceptance. "It did work, after all," he allowed.

d'Artagnan grinned.

"But the next plan better not involve you getting beat to hell."
"Agreed," d'Artagnan nodded, then winced. "So, uh…how did we get here?"

Treville resumed his pacing, lurching slightly as he work the stiffness from his wounded leg. "Laroche was ready to cross the river in the middle of the rainstorm, certain that the men in here had heard the tower coming down. He was convinced otherwise and someone rounded up the horses, which took until morning. They tied my hands and tossed you over my horse—tied your hands, too, by the way," he shook his head. "And we rode across the river, which I thought was going to kill you because your head kept going below the surface. It was all I could do to keep you from drowning."

"Glad I can't remember that."

Nodding in agreement, Treville continued, "They hauled us up into this room—we're two flights above the main landing. Only window is above either of our heads."

"Convenient." d'Artagnan managed to get to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall until the world settled. His head pounded mercilessly, making it hard for him to not fist his face into a grimace of pain. "Any idea what his plan is? Why they killed those Red Guard they way they did?"

Treville shook his head. "Door's locked?"

"And there's a guard standing outside." Treville raised his voice. "Isn't that right, Andreas?"

A low grumble could be heard through the door. "I'm fairly certain he just insulted us, Captain."

Treville just smiled at him. "You look terrible. But your color is better."

"I'm sorry I worried you," d'Artagnan replied sincerely, touching his split lip with the tip of his tongue.

"Worrying is one of the key tenets of being a Captain, d'Artagnan."

Before d'Artagnan could reply, they heard a commotion beyond the door, drawing both Treville and d'Artagnan away as it crashed open, Laroche storming through. His once carefully coiffed hair was a tangled mess, the red cravat was gone. Rather than the poised lawmaker, he now looked like a crazed wild man, leather vest adorned with multiple straps and buckles encasing his ribs, his arms bare and several markings tattooed on his skin.

"You!" He pointed at d'Artagnan. "With me. Now."

"Stop." Treville limped forward. "You're not taking him."

Laroche looked at Treville in shock, as if he were a dog that had suddenly learned to speak, and stepped in close. "You are no longer Captain of the Musketeers. You're merely a cog in the wheel. You do not say what I will do."

"I may not be his Captain," Treville replied, coolly, "but I am his leader. He goes nowhere without me."

Laroche narrowed his eyes, then rotated his head to glare at d'Artagnan. "You're not even truly Musketeers any longer. Rochefort signed your lives away when he sent you with me."
"If that is true, then it's fortunate for you," Treville replied, nonplussed. "For what you have done, were we still Musketeers, it would be our duty to kill you."

"And, incidentally," d'Artagnan chimed in, "our pleasure."

Laroche took a step back from Treville, eyeing d'Artagnan as though he were a cut of meat. With a flick of his wrist, he waved to Andreas who was waiting in the alcove.

"Bind their hands. Tightly."

d'Artagnan noted that neither Laroche nor Andreas carried pistols, only their swords. If he and Treville weren't hampered by wounds, he would have charged the moment Laroche turned his back. But his head beat a pulse all its own and Treville was still leaning most of his weight on his opposite leg. They wouldn't get much further than the doorway at this point.

Andreas tied their hands at the wrists—Treville's behind him, d'Artagnan's in front—heedless of the open wounds that littered d'Artagnan's skin. He grunted in pain when the coarse rope bit into his scuffed wrists, but said nothing. Andreas smirked, tugging d'Artagnan forward. Treville followed silently as they slowly descended the stairs to what appeared to be a large, open-aired courtyard.

Cracked, crumbling statues gracing all four corners, and fixed to the busts of the statues were the gutted remains of what appeared to have once been rabbits. The smell of the rotting animal corpses seemed to twist and blend with scent of sweat and dirt that wafted toward d'Artagnan and Treville as they entered the open space.

Several additional men were gathered along the far end of the courtyard, all with similar scowls shadowing their faces. The three men who had traveled from Paris with the Musketeers were stacking barrels against the opposite wall. It was impossible to tell what was inside, but d'Artagnan had a sweat-inducing memory of waking tied to similar barrels, Vadim informing him that he was about to be blown up.

In the center of the courtyard stood a sturdy post, a sigil carved into it. d'Artagnan had no idea what the symbol meant, but he couldn't imagine it was anything good. Last night's storm had left puddles of water in pockets of earth, the largest surrounding the post. The men stacking the barrels paused in their work to look up and smirk in their general direction, sending a cold sliver of fear down d'Artagnan's spine.

"I have a very bad feeling about this, Captain."

His eyes darted back to the broken statues at the corners of the courtyard, unable to get past the mutilated animal bodies, blood staining the once-white stone. There were large bowls at the base of each statue, filled with some sort of dark powder. Laroche and his men began to surround the courtyard, effectively blocking any available exit. Two held lit torches and approached the statues. d'Artagnan tried not to flinch when they lit the substance in the bowls—the pop and sizzle of the flame as it sparked identifying it as gunpowder.

Laroche motioned to Andreas again and d'Artagnan felt himself being pulled toward the center post.

"Wait," Laroche called. "Not him. He stays. Take the old one."

Treville lifted a brow, but allowed himself to be led to the post, his bound hands secured behind him to the thick wood.

"What the hell is going on here, Laroche?" d'Artagnan demanded, his mind working furiously. "Your men kill four Red Guard…cut out their tongues…drain them of blood…and leave the bodies
on the palace steps…as what? A warning?"

Laroche moved over to the barrels as the other two basins of gunpowder were lit, the sparkling flame dazzling d'Artagnan's eyes.

"Did you know your Rochefort spent time in a Spanish prison?" Laroche asked, almost in a conversational tone.

d'Artagnan couldn't see what he was doing to the barrels, but he did note the group of men closing ranks and drawing closer to the center of the courtyard.

"He's not my Rochefort!" d'Artagnan snapped. "But, yes. I did."

"He had a cellmate there," Laroche continued, his voice carrying an almost dream-like cadence, as though he were telling a bedtime story to a small child. "A man who had been raised by the Celts, who knew certain magic, and who, as it turned out, became quite a useful…," Laroche glanced back over at d'Artagnan, a dark smile lurking at the corners of his generous mouth, "distraction."

d'Artagnan darted a look at his Captain, shifting his stance slightly toward the bound man, but saw that the moment he did, the men surrounding them closed in a bit more, moving almost as one.

"This man traded his history—his knowledge of Celtic ways and magic—for peace. Moments of peace. He thought he would be spending a lifetime in this prison; a few hours reprieve were Heaven."

Laroche turned around and d'Artagnan saw that he held what looked like a black rope in his hands. "Whenever the Spaniards hurt Rochefort, he would turn that pain into a weapon, and sharpen the blade on his cellmate. Until the day he discovered power was so much more pleasurable."

d'Artagnan licked his lips, flexing his fingers to ward off the numbing effect of the ropes. Laroche's words were making him sweat. And as the man moved closer, he realized he recognized the black rope: it was a fuse.

"Where is this going, Laroche?" he demanded, trying to keep the tremor from his voice, surreptitiously counting the weapons within his reach, wondering how many he would be able to kill before they got to him. "If you wanted to get back at Rochefort for his treatment of you, there are more direct ways."

"Ah, so you have realized I was his cellmate," Laroche smiled softly.

"I'm quick like that."

"But what you do not yet realize," Laroche paused behind Andreas, and d'Artagnan took in the dichotomy of the former Red Guard's smug confidence with Laroche's eerily calm insanity just past his shoulder, "is that everything I've done has been an attack on your Rochefort."

"He's not—oh, forget it," d'Artagnan muttered.

"My men have been poisoning his ranks against him for weeks," Laroche revealed, staying perched behind Andreas. "In point of fact, we caused the unfortunate accident that took young Andreas' brother from him, not Rochefort."

The smirk fell from Andreas face as quickly as the color faded from his skin. He started to turn around, but three of the men surrounding them stepped forward, holding him steady. d'Artagnan saw the slick thrum of fear stain Andreas' features as Laroche wrapped the fuse around his wrists, tying them tightly in front. Andreas shouted in protest, but the criminal who'd claimed credit for the four
deaths back in Paris stepped forward.

d'Artagnan instinctively stepped back, watching in abject horror as Andreas was held fast, his face squeezed mercilessly until his jaw dropped open. With detached precision, his tongue was cut from his mouth, his screams turning from piercing to gurgling as blood clogged his throat.

"Holy shit," d'Artagnan breathed, trading a shell-shocked look with Treville.

Around them, the men were moving, trailing the fuse from the four basins of rapidly burning gunpowder to where Andreas' hands were bound, then to the barrels stacked at the far end of the courtyard. Andreas was released when the job was finished and he crumpled to the ground, his whimpers the background for the continuation of Laroche's tale.

"Your King has a weak mind," Laroche stated staring down at Andreas, his head tilted curiously as he watched the man at his feet sob and spit blood. "The misdirection of the Red Guard murders will be discovered—as will missives implicating Rochefort in subversive dealings with Spain—once news of the destruction of Cardinal Richelieu's home abbey at the hand of a former Red Guard reaches his ears."

d'Artagnan saw Treville bring his chin up at that, as though he realized a connection d'Artagnan hadn't quite reached.

Laroche glanced to the side, having caught Treville's reaction. "Didn't you realize where you were standing? Yes, the King's precious Cardinal Richelieu once called these grounds home. Factor in that it also took out two of his Musketeers—his long-time Captain and his favorite—and your fickle boy King will set his sights on Rochefort."

"You're a little behind, Laroche," d'Artagnan broke in, unable to cover the quiver of horror in his tone. "You said yourself that Treville has been removed as Captain of the Musketeers and I am about as far from his favorite as one can get."

"Now, d'Artagnan," Laroche smiled, drawing closer to him. "You saved him from Marmion. We ensured the King would be surrounded by his most trusted when we coordinated Marmion's visit and you came through with flying colors."

d'Artagnan blinked. "Wait…y-you…?"

"Were you not listening?" Laroche stepped close enough to him d'Artagnan could feel the brush of breath against his skin. "Weeks."

"Rochefort wanted the power of the Celts without any of the sacrifice. And a price must be paid." Trailing a cool, slim finger from the wound on d'Artagnan's forehead, down his bruised cheekbone, to his split lip, Laroche smiled. "A price such as the life of an innocent so that his brother will feel the sting of betrayal and become a willing spy. A price such as the tongues of lying men. A price such as a fearful monarch retreating from his people, unable to rule. A price such as a country."

"You…you want France?" d'Artagnan bleated, his entire body taut as he held still under Laroche's caress.

"I want vengeance!" Laroche screamed the word, turning away from d'Artagnan and lifting his arm in an apparent signal, exposing the fact that his belt held two swords: his and d'Artagnan's.

The men who had been surrounding them moved away when Laroche screamed, scrambling through exits and shutting the heavy, wooden doors behind them. In moments, only one man stood with Treville, Laroche, the whimpering Andreas, and d'Artagnan: the other criminal they'd caught in
Paris. d'Artagnan swallowed, eyes searching the exits, following the strange trails of the fuses, seeking access to a weapon.

"This is crazy," he couldn't help but mutter. "If you blow us up, how will anyone know what you've done here? Who we are?"

"You've left a trail, yes?" Laroche replied, not turning around, tapping the toe of his boot into Andreas' belly almost playfully. "Your friends will be following us, and you led them straight here. There will be a battle—which my men are preparing for just now—and one man will confess just before bravely dying at the hands of the Musketeers, one of whom will live to return to your King."

"What power is this?" Treville finally spoke up. "What hold do you have over these men?"

Laroche looked at him, voice flat, eyes dead. "It's called loyalty."

d'Artagnan twisted his hands in the ropes, biting back the hiss of pain as the skin tore further and blood slicked the binding.

Laroche didn't look away from Treville. "As I said, a sacrifice is needed. But you will find I am not a complete monster. The basins act like an hourglass. You have time to put your soul right with your God, to say your goodbyes to this man who has fought so hard to keep you whole. When the fuses run out, they will converge and put our Andreas here out of his muted misery."

"And you think you'll be able to just…leave us here?" d'Artagnan scoffed.

"I think you will try to save your Captain. That you won't want to leave a man behind to die, realize you can't save both, and end up saving none." Laroche smiled at Treville. "I think you will complete my plan perfectly."

"You're mad," d'Artagnan breathed, his mind on fire with multiple possibilities for escape, too many ending in death.

"I am many things," Laroche replied, facing d'Artagnan, his hands now clasped behind his back to reveal the weapons belt. "Only my demons know if madness is one of them."

Unable to stomach another word, d'Artagnan surged forward, grabbing his sword from Laroche's spare sheath. It was difficult to wield with his hands bound—he distinctly remembered attempting this once before when trying to save Porthos—and he was forced to improvise. Laroche shouted, pulling his own blade. From behind Treville, the criminal from Paris lurched forward, surprised by the sudden attack, and d'Artagnan spun, darting out of the way so that Laroche's blade struck the criminal's sword with a resounding clang.

Thinking quickly, d'Artagnan ran to the far end of the courtyard and kicked the fuse away from the hourglass basin. He heard Treville's shout just before the approaching feet and turned to block a blow from the criminal's sword. Laroche stood near Treville, the point of his blade at the Captain's throat.

"I will kill him, boy!"

"Don't listen, d'Artagnan!" Treville shouted. "You fight, dammit!"

d'Artagnan swung his blade, his grip loose, clumsy, and staggered back against the burning gunpowder basin, toppling it from its perch. The powder burst toward d'Artagnan's attacker, the sparkling flame following, and suddenly the screams of the criminal echoed off the stone walls of the courtyard; his clothes were burning. He dropped his sword, slapping at the flames. His hands seemed
to scatter the burning powder and the criminal toppled, rolling in the dirt of the courtyard, flames catching on the various fuses lining the ground.

d'Artagnan took the advantage of the man's distraction to flip is blade around, slicing through his bonds, and freeing his hands.

The scattered flames caught the rest of the fuses before the remaining hourglass basins had run out and d'Artagnan found himself once more racing the flames to escape, only this time he had to bring someone with him. He skidded to a stop just behind Treville, ignoring the blade at his Captain's throat, and put his sword against the ropes binding Treville to the post.

"Your choice, Laroche," d'Artagnan panted. "Become part of your own the sacrifice, or let me have my Captain."

The pop and sizzle of the fuses resounded around them and d'Artagnan heard the criminal charging toward them with an enraged roar—having apparently put out the flames on his person. Surging forward in a reckless attack, d'Artagnan knocked Laroche's blade away from Treville's throat, battling with the delusional leader as his criminal cohort attacked from behind.

d'Artagnan couldn't let himself think about the rapidly burning fuses or the fact that Treville was still tethered to the center post. He simply fought, remembering Athos' calm instructions to parry, thrust, block. Heeding Porthos' reminders that strength wasn't just size, it's also speed. Focusing on Aramis' guidance on how to cause the most damage with minimal motion.

He kicked out at Laroche from the front as he lifted his rapier between his shoulders to protect an attack from behind. He felt his blade sink into flesh and heard the criminal shout for Laroche.

"Go! Leave!" The man screamed as d'Artagnan pressed his advantage.

Ignoring Laroche's escape, d'Artagnan focused on the man who was willing to sacrifice himself to see the deed done. Arms aching, weakening as his head throbbed, hands threatening to lose their grip, d'Artagnan concentrated his whole self in his attack, his blade a blur of motion as he matched the criminal's desperate fight.

An opening presented itself and d'Artagnan's sword found its home at the base of the other man's throat. d'Artagnan shoved the man back against the barrels of gunpowder, knocking several free as the man choked and fell limp in a growing pool of his own blood.

Breathing hard, d'Artagnan instinctively wiped his blade clean before turning toward Treville.

"There's no time!" Treville yelled. "d'Artagnan, just go!"

d'Artagnan shot an urgent look over his shoulder and saw that Laroche had been right: the fuses converged on Andreas, igniting to set fire to the already suffering man, then speeding toward the barrels.

"Hold still, Captain!" d'Artagnan slashed through the rope holding Treville's bound hands to the pole and jerked him away.

Hands still tied behind him, Treville didn't resist when d'Artagnan turned him and they ran in a lurching gate, hampered by Treville's wounded leg, toward the opposite end of the courtyard, as far from the barrels of gunpowder as they could get.

d'Artagnan shoved Treville against the wall and ducked over him as best he could in protection. He remembered how an explosion of this magnitude felt, how the ground rolled beneath him, the heat
flashing over him like a furnace, his body simultaneously stretched and compressed for just one instant.

His memory was shockingly accurate.

This time, however, there was the added bonus of the walls at one end of the monastery collapsing in on themselves and launching debris across the courtyard.

The force of the concentrated blast flung d'Artagnan away from Treville, his body landing hard several feet away, pain lancing his side, the world shaking as dust billowed. He coughed, gasping for breath, dirt and dust coating his face, his mouth, the inside of his throat, his lungs. The effort to breathe stole his air and for an impossible moment he was caught in a suffocating tug-of-war.

Then everything settled and he lay still, a high-pitched buzzing in his ears drowning out any other sound. His eyes watered, his head ached, and the pain in his side was starting to become rather insistent. His vision blanked out for a moment, then slid back into focus.

He still couldn't hear, but at least now he could draw a shallow breath without feeling like the effort scooped his lungs from his body. Coughing weakly, he started to roll over when his body screamed at him to stop.

Or perhaps the scream came from him.

He felt the vibration of sound in his throat, in his chest. Choosing the lesser of two evils, he pushed himself carefully into a semi-seated position, bracing his weight on wounded wrists.

Blinking dust from his lashes, he looked around, marveling at the destruction. The opposite end of the monastery had completely collapsed, but the dust had snuffed out any latent fires from the surplus of gunpowder. His vision swam and seemed to blank out once more, like a curtain drawing across a stage.

When he could see once again, he realized he was slumped against something—but it wasn't the stone wall of the building, it was much softer. And there was some sort of strange vibration coming from it. Awkwardly raising his eyes, his head sliding back against the soft support, d'Artagnan realized that Treville was next to him.

The man looked dreadful: blood smeared the side of his neck, seemingly originating from a cut across his forehead, dust covered his face and his eyes were bloodshot, making the pale blue seem almost gray. He was saying something. Staring d'Artagnan right in the face, and repeating it, over and over.

"I can't hear you," d'Artagnan replied, his voice echoing inside his head with a dull hum.

Treville seemed to sigh at that, sagging a bit. He was positioned awkwardly and it was only then that d'Artagnan remembered the man still had his hands tied behind his back. He tried to push away and sit up further—he knew his sword was nearby—but the moment he did so his side flared up hot and insistent. He cried out, his voice reverberating against the curved edges filling his head.

Looking down, he realized that there was something sticking out of his lower left side—it appeared to be a flat piece of metal, a bit of one of the bands that held the barrels together. He couldn't tell how deep it had stabbed into him—it hadn't gone clean through—but he wasn't going to be able to move if he didn't remove it.

He glanced up at Treville, unable to mask the pain and fear in his eyes and saw the man try to say something again. Something about his hands, d'Artagnan was sure. He could free Treville's hands as
soon as he pulled this bastard out of his side.

Puffing out several quick breaths to brace himself, d'Artagnan grasped the end of the metal and pulled.

"Nnnrrrargh!"

The pain blinded him.

It was everything, everywhere. He couldn't breathe through it.

The curtain fell once more.

"…where is that bloody sword…"

Words were floating around him as though they'd lost their mooring. He thought about reaching for one or two and examining them, but he was much too tired.

"…you thinking, dammit, boy…don't you…will not watch you…die…"

The curtain lifted briefly, but with it came a searing pain. d'Artagnan was quite sure if he didn't move, the curtain would fall again and he could stay hidden in the dark, away from the agony.

"d'Artagnan."

The voice was oddly persistent. It pulled the curtain back with the hook of his name. His name held securely in the voice of his Captain. He blinked his eyes open, staring up at the man uncomprehendingly.

"Am I awake?" His voice sounded as shredded as his lips felt.

"You are," Treville confirmed.

d'Artagnan peered down at himself and saw that Treville was pressing the bandage that used to be on his leg flat against d'Artagnan's burning side.

"Your hands!" d'Artagnan exclaimed upon seeing the slight cuts littering the weathered appendages.

"I found your sword," Treville explained. "Managed to free myself. You can hear again, I see."

d'Artagnan blinked again, bringing his hand up to the side of his head. "It's…muffled, but…yeah."

Everything felt oddly removed, far away, blurred out. Everything but the pain in his side.

He closed his eyes, seeking balance. When he opened them again, Treville had moved once more and was now holding him up and against him. The bandage wrapped around his side, secured by a rather painfully placed knot, was no longer white but a rather startling shade of red.

Pain, it seemed to d'Artagnan, had become simply another way to gauge time, because it was noticeably darker now.

"I faded again, didn't I?" he asked against Treville's chest.

"It's been a long day," Treville allowed.

d'Artagnan lifted a trembling hand to press near the fire in his side. "Shit," he breathed.
"I thought we agreed the next plan would not result in you beat to hell," Treville softly admonished.

"We need to get out of here," d'Artagnan exclaimed as memory flooded back. "Laroche knows about me marking our trail. He'll be waiting for them to follow us."

"Not yet—"

"Captain," d'Artagnan pushed forward, halted with a ragged cry when a spike of pain shot through him, shimming up his spine and lancing his head directly behind his eyes.

It was so great he tipped sideways, practically cradled in Treville's arms. Treville braced him, held him as the pain shivered around him, holding him steady until it was manageable.

"Captain," he all-but whimpered, trying to blink his blurred vision clear. "You have to go. You have to warn them."

"I'm not leaving you," Treville proclaimed.

"Athos…." d'Artagnan had to pause and take a breath. "Athos will be there. Laroche will kill him. I can't…please, you have to warn them." He reached up a shaking hand to grip Treville's shirtfront, desperate.

Treville eased him back against the rubble, looking directly in his eyes. "We will warn them. I'm not leaving you behind, d'Artagnan."

d'Artagnan swallowed. The pain was intense; he wasn't certain he could move, let alone fight Laroche's homicidally loyal men. But Athos was out there. And Porthos and Aramis were with him.

He could sense them closing in.

Riding into a trap set by a mad man.

"I just need…I need a minute," d'Artagnan nodded.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

He thought of his friends, the men who fought and bled for him, beside him. He thought of Constance, of her bravery, her fire, her love. He thought of his home at the garrison, his home in Lupiac. He thought of his Captain. He gathered each thought close to him, folding them inside and using them to push the pain down, down, deep inside where he could breathe around it.

A shout startled him, jerking him back to awareness. He rolled his head slowly, blearily trying to find the source of the sound and saw Treville standing in the center of the rubble, bits of shattered wood at his feet, laced together by ropes that had once bound their hands. The man's frustration was evident in the way he gripped the frayed rope. It took d'Artagnan a moment, but he realized his Captain was attempting to construct a travois to carry him out of there.

d'Artagnan forced himself to roll to the good side, puffing quick breaths of air to ward off the flare of pain, using his arm and elbow to leverage upright. Once he was sitting, he paused to catch his breath, feeling the wetness at his side soaking into his breeches, cooling quickly and chilling him. He reached for one of the still-standing walls near him and used it to gain his feet; he nearly toppled back over once upright, but managed to find his center and stay balanced.

"Captain."
"d'Artagnan, what the hell—"

"Is it getting dark, or is it my eyes?"

Treville was next to him, a careful hand on his shoulder, eyes darting down to the bandage at his side.

"It's nearing night," the Captain replied.

"Good," d'Artagnan offered the man a grimace that tried valiantly to be a smile. "One less thing to worry about. Plus, we'll be harder for them to see."

"Are you sure you can do this?" Treville asked, dragging one of d'Artagnan's arms across his shoulders.

"Do you know what Porthos told me once?" d'Artagnan asked, wincing as they stumbled on a piece of rubble. Treville's wounded leg not at all sturdy. He instinctively wrapped his free hand around his middle, pressing his palm to the blood-soaked bandage.

"I can only imagine," Treville replied tightly.

"He said it's not about how hard you hit…it's about how hard you get hit, and keep moving forward."

Treville chuffed. "We got hit pretty hard, lad."

"And we're still standing," d'Artagnan managed, though he'd started trembling, his body an earthquake crushing every heroic effort in its path. "We'll get out of this, Captain."

"I have no doubt," Treville replied, carefully easing him over the last of the rubble and through the shattered door of the monastery. "That's done."

"Right," d'Artagnan replied as they stumbled slowly down the road toward the gate next to the river's edge. "Now all we have to do is cross a river, find our men, get back to the King, and report about…about Laroche."

"Without getting killed by a cadre of sadistic Celts," Treville reminded him.

"Well, when you put it that way—ah! Shit, this hurts."

Treville braced him, pausing so that he could capture his breath. He could feel blood slipping through the fingers pressed against his side, warm and wet and terrifying in its amount.

"Did you…get any weapons?" d'Artagnan asked as Treville eased the gate open.

"Your sword, Andreas' dagger," he replied. Treville slipped the dagger from his belt and slid it into d'Artagnan's.

"Too bad we couldn't've used all that gun powder," d'Artagnan half-chuckled. His vision was blurring once again.

"Right," Treville nodded, easing him down on a large boulder near the river's edge. "Rest a moment."

There was enough light in the clearing by the river that d'Artagnan was able to see his Captain's face fold into a worried frown.
"We have to stop this bleeding," Treville said almost to himself. "This is too much."

"Not here," d'Artagnan managed.

Treville lifted his head, looking over d'Artagnan's shoulder at the river. "I should go back for some of those barrel pieces," he said. "Use them to help you get across this river."

"Horses gone?" d'Artagnan panted, doubling over as pain spiked hot through his side and climbed his ribs.

It was getting harder to breathe. A clenched-teeth groan snuck out, but Treville graciously ignored it.

"Looks like," Treville replied.

Suddenly the man went rigid; a year living around battle-experienced Musketeers told d'Artagnan that he was listening to something.

"Someone's out there," Treville whispered.

The click of a pistol being readied to fire echoed around them.

"You weren't supposed to make it out of the abbey," came a voice to d'Artagnan's right, just beyond Treville.

Instinctively, d'Artagnan slid from the boulder, rolling until he was flat on the ground, his body on fire with pain as he listened to Treville wrestle whichever man Laroche had left behind for control of the pistol. The weapon fired and a man cried out in aborted surprise before the river once more became the only sound.

d'Artagnan didn't move. Couldn't move. He held his breath, waiting, body trembling helplessly.

"It's me," Treville revealed as he approached in the dark, gently rolling d'Artagnan to his back.

This time, d'Artagnan didn't bother masking the groan. Agony demanded a voice. He was shaking from the inside out and he didn't think he'd ever hurt quite this badly.

"What's that? Andreas' dagger?"

He'd been gripping it beneath him, and felt Treville's hands close over his cold, shaking fingers, slipping the dagger free.

"F-figured you didn't g-give it to me 'cause it was p-pretty," d'Artagnan gasped.

"You were going to kill that man if he got me, is that it?"

d'Artagnan exhaled slowly, the breath trembling audibly. "I w-was going to try."

A horse's whinny sounded from the other side of the river.

"Dammit," Treville cursed, hurriedly loading the pistol he stole from Laroche's man as best he could in the dark. "I'm not letting it end this way, d'Artagnan. They will not take us. We are King's Musketeers, not sacrificial lambs."

Just as Treville began to rise above the cover of the boulder for a better shot, d'Artagnan put a hand on his arm.
"Captain," he said softly, infusing the word with meaning as his voice slipping from its determined edge. "It's g-good to see you again."

As d'Artagnan allowed his eyes to close, bracing himself for whatever came of this latest battle, he listened as Treville shouted curses across the river toward the next threat, firing toward the sound of the horses.

A cry of pain reverberated across the river in response.

A very familiar-sounding cry.

"Oi! Captain!"

Porthos…. d'Artagnan's eyes flew open and he struggled in vain to sit forward.

"Don't shoot!"

"Porthos?!" Treville's voice cracked around the name almost comically.

"Yeah, it's us! Don't shoot; you already owe Athos a new hat!"

d'Artagnan grabbed Treville's arm. "You shot Athos?"

"Cross quickly," Treville called back. "Laroche's men are still close by."

"Where's d'Artagnan?"

Athos…. d'Artagnan felt relief flood through him, making his head swim and his breath catch. He wanted to call back to him, tell him he was fine, but pain had stolen his voice.

"He's here. Is Aramis with you?"

"Right here, Captain." Aramis' voice was blessedly near.

"We need you. Now."

The tension in Treville's tone should have worried d'Artagnan. The urgency in Aramis' voice the moment he touched him should have been terrifying. Athos' colorful cursing should have been a warning. But none of it so much as made a dent in the cloak of misery that swirled around him.

Darkness had been waiting in the wings of his consciousness; he'd been holding it back with every spark of light within him. But his friends were here now. His family. And his Captain was safe. He'd done his job.

"d'Artagnan," Aramis' voice was harsh, urgent. "Open your eyes for me. Don't fade on us, lad…."

The curtain fell, and d'Artagnan exhaled, his body finally relaxing as he slipped free of the pain.
One Year Ago

*They rode away reluctantly, Porthos inside the wagon, Aramis as close to him as his horse would allow. The wound had been grievous,* but nothing Aramis hadn't been able to handle and Porthos was stubborn, Athos knew. Too stubborn to be felled by this wound in this skirmish…especially when it had been to protect a miscreant like Bonaire.

d'Artagnan had looked back several times as they crested the hill, leaving Athos slouched against the opened doorway of his long-abandoned manor. It was hard to pin down that boy; he was impulsive, erratic, impassioned…but he'd shown true worth in the brief encounters they'd allowed him to be part of. And what's more, he'd saved Athos' life.

There was something to that.

Finding Remi's body, throat slashed, in the outbuilding was almost expected. Athos had felt something was wrong, had felt death lurking near, but wrote it off to the echoes of Thomas. Remi had been a hollow man, the breadth of his life having unspooled in the service of a ghost. Staring with empty eyes at the body of a man who had once been his friend, Athos knew he'd taken his life as surely as if the knife had been in his grip.

He found himself back inside the manor, a box of wine on the table, an insatiable thirst clawing at his throat. He moved slowly through the quiet halls, wandering aimlessly from room to shrouded room. He *ached.*

Each breath held a burden of memory. Of Thomas. Of Anne. Of happiness slaughtered and innocence poisoned and lives lost.

Within hours, Athos had consumed two bottles. His third was thrown in unmitigated contempt at his own portrait. The man he was supposed to have been—Comte de la Fère, heir, brother, husband, leader—had been more than just a simple disappointment.

He'd been a failure. A liar. A murderer, all in the name of honor. Duty.

Anne's portrait was torn, her beautiful face hidden by the curl of canvas. He could still *feel* her here. His Anne, the woman whose smile stopped his heart, whose lips set his skin on fire. Stumbling, Athos gripped another bottle—fourth? fifth?—by the neck, sliding to his knees and then collapsing against the sideboard, his head coming to rest against the wall.

The house smelled of age and dust. It echoed of empty promises. He shivered, the weight of his failure pressing down on him, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

What was he doing? How was he to come back from this?

He'd never intended on returning. If Porthos hadn't been wounded—if Aramis hadn't been so frightened on their friend's behalf—he could have buried this part of him forever. He could have remained simply *Athos,* a soldier and friend.
Now they knew. Now they'd seen.

And he couldn't forget.

Time passed—immeasurable in his wine-induced stupor—and Athos felt himself called back to consciousness by the smell of something burning. He could hear flames snapping, crackling, spitting ire and heat that seemed to radiate around him, through his bones. A part of him—the corner of his brain where logic barricaded itself in the wake of his forlorn, alcoholic attack of self-loathing—registered that the heat he felt couldn't be from the flames as they were three rooms away.

Pushing to his feet and staggering toward the light, heat wrapping around him, sending his senses askew, his eyes blurring. He stood before the flames that ate their way along the wall coverings, staring at them uncomprehendingly.

How in the world—

A movement to his right drew his eyes like magnets and in one moment his world stilled. His heart stopped beating, his lungs froze.

She stood just outside the entrance of the room, a torch in her hand, flames greedily licking the air above her head. She stared at him, her green eyes cool and calm, her bearing at ease, as though her body sighed into the acceptance of seeing him, standing in their home with him, at last, at last.

"You're dead," Athos croaked, his voice ripped from his hollow body by hooks of disbelief. "I watched you hang."

"You didn't watch, did you?" she challenged, turning to face him fully as fire devoured the wall before him. "You couldn't stay to see your beloved wife choking on the end of a rope."

Understanding splashed across Athos' sluggish mind. "Remi."

"I seduced him," Anne said, moving into the room, closing the gap between them and sucking the air from near him as she moved past. "As soon as you fled, he cut me down and revived me. But look," she reached up and tugged at the bit of green satin at her throat, exposing scars the ropes left behind. "I still carry a token of your love."

Athos felt off-balance, sounds slipping in and out of meaning. "You killed Remi."

"Put him out of his misery. He spent the last five years waiting for you to show up and discover his crime. He was half-dead already."

Athos staggered, trying desperately to keep his feet. He felt hot and cold at the same time, his body shuddering around him. She stood, impossibly facing him, her chin lifted, her eyes angry. She was flesh and blood and beating heart.

He wanted to touch her. To hold her. To bury his face in her hair.

To wrap his fingers around her throat and squeeze.

"I'm dreaming."

Anne scoffed. "Drunk, perhaps. But not dreaming."

Without warning, she gripped the torch with both hands and swung, catching him across the face with the heavy end. He spun, slamming into the door frame then crumpling to the floor. His face
throbbed; he could smell blood and burned flesh. Rolling over slowly, he blinked up at her, unable to summon the energy to even lift his head.

"Why are you here?"

"To erase the past," she snapped, her eyes going to the flames. "To destroy it completely." He felt her kneeling next to him, a touch of cool metal against his throat, her hand cradling the back of his head. "I'm glad you came back," she murmured, her voice soft as though the world wasn't burning around them. "It's right you should die with this house."

"The house," Athos gasped, "where you murdered my brother."

Anne raged, her fingers fisting in his hair, pulling it hard to further expose his throat. "I killed Thomas to save our love!"

"You…you killed him because he discovered the truth." Athos bit back a groan as she pressed the blade harder against his throat. "That you were a criminal who lied and tricked your way into my life."

"He was a fool and a hypocrite! He deserved to die! I thought you would understand that." Anne almost sobbed and Athos remembered.

Remembered how she felt against him when nothing separated them but skin. Remembered how she sounded when she begged for his mercy. Remembered the look of hatred and sorrow in her eyes when the rope settled around her neck.

"Anne…," he groaned as she rolled him toward her, pressing his face against her chest in a brief, tortured moment of desperate affection.

"Perhaps it's best it ends like this."

Anne gripped his hair once more, yanking his head back and away, pressing the blade against his flesh until it bowed.

"Do it," Athos demanded, arching up into the blade. "Do it!"

He wanted it over. The aching, the longing, the pain, the questions, the endless, endless attempt at normalcy, at forgetting.

"Athos! Athos, can you hear me?"

d'Artagnan….

Releasing his head, Anne moved away, one last scent of jasmine and she was gone.

"Athos! Athos!"

He was lost, alone in a sea of fire.

"Athos! ATHOS!"

He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. This was to be his end, in this house, paying for crimes of his past.

"Athos, it's me." Hands, on his shoulder, his face, wiping blood from his eye, cupping his cheek. "It's d'Artagnan."
Athos simply blinked up at him, uncomprehending. It was as though the boy was a wraith, an impossibility. There was no rescue from this fate, no salvation. It was right he should burn.

"Come on, get up," d'Artagnan ordered, coughing and gasping as the smoke filled the room almost entirely. He crouched low and pulled Athos' arm over his shoulder. "Get up!"

Athos faded a bit then, allowing d'Artagnan's smaller frame to support him out through the burning house. As they breached the common room, the flames having reached the ceiling supports and loosening beams, d'Artagnan stumbled beneath his weight, going to a knee. Athos felt him shift as though reaching for something, then shove them both upright once more with a low growl of effort.

The night air was choked with smoke but markedly cooler and Athos felt himself reeling, slipping between memory and reality. d'Artagnan gripped him, dragging him further from the flames, then eased him to his knees a safe distance from the house. Athos swayed when d'Artagnan released him, nearly falling before d'Artagnan was back, a water pouch in hand, cool water spilled over his head, wiping down his face.

"What happened?" d'Artagnan asked, voice sounding as breathless as Athos felt. "Who was that woman?"

Athos couldn't seem to find his balance. His head throbbed, his cheek burned, alcohol and shock slipped through his blood stream, making him sway and shiver. "Since we arrived…I felt her presence…. Everywhere. I thought I was imagining it."

d'Artagnan grabbed the front of his loose coat, pulling him around. "Who? Who?"

"My wife!" Athos bellowed, his voice breaking over the realization. "She died…five years ago now…by my orders." Athos felt d'Artagnan draw back, confused. He stared uncomprehendingly at the flames that consumed his home. His past. "She was a cold-blooded murderer, so I had her taken from the house and hung from the branch of a tree."

"Look at me," d'Artagnan demanded, shaking him. "Look at me. Are you saying the…the ghost of your dead wife tried to kill you?"

Athos leaned into d'Artagnan's grip, suddenly needing him to understand. "She's not dead, d'Artagnan. She survived. This was her revenge." His vision slid out of focus, he was losing track of where d'Artagnan was. Reaching out with a shaky, desperate hand, he gripped d'Artagnan's jacket, anchoring himself. "It was my duty," he cried. "My duty to uphold the law. My duty to condemn the woman I love to death. I've…clung to the belief that I had no choice."

d'Artagnan held still, his hands the only anchor keeping Athos from sliding into darkness.

"Five years…learning how to live in a world without her," Athos whispered, feeling his reality crack around him, spearing him breathless. "What do I do now?"

Strength left him in a swift exodus. He tipped forward, forehead landing on d'Artagnan's shoulder, the younger man's arms going around him in an almost instinctive hold. Athos was aware that d'Artagnan was talking, could feel the vibrations of his low voice through his chest, but was unable to muster the strength—or will—to bring clarity to the words.

He was done, his strength spent in a way it had never been on the battlefield.

Yearning to simply yield to the oblivion but somehow still aware, Athos allowed himself to be shifted, turned, realizing dimly that d'Artagnan was dragging him backwards, further from the flames. His eyes slipped closed, yet he couldn't release his conscious thought. His mind was intent on
torturing him, punishing him for his cruelty.

He was rested against something solid—a tree, perhaps—and d'Artagnan stumbled away. Athos slid to the side, letting gravity pull at the weight of his body until he felt the cool grass brush his blistered face. Time slid away from him, leaving him with only images, memories of mistakes, of choices, of regret and loss and anguish beyond any physical wounds.

He dreamed.

Thomas' earnest eyes, his fingers twisting in worry as he spilled his discovery of truth, words halting in awareness of the pain he caused. Anne's denial, her claim of Thomas' betrayal, her desperation. The smell of blood—so much blood—the feel of Thomas cold skin, life having retreated long before Athos found him, removing any chance of saving.

"Thomas," Athos breathed, feeling hands at his face, the brush of something cool at his throat.

"No, Athos, it's me," a low voice replied. "It's d'Artagnan."

"I couldn't save him," Athos whispered. "I didn't know."

"It's okay," the voice—d'Artagnan—replied. There was something in the tone, the rough-edged desperation of tears. "It's okay, Athos."

"It was my duty," he groaned. "Her death…. I had to…I didn't have a choice."

"There is always a choice. You made the honorable one."

Athos wasn't sure anymore. He could have done more. He should have done more. Been more. The utter failure of his life made him shudder, his skin on fire, his body chilled. Everything ached, his eyes burned. He felt tears slip free from his closed eyes and run unchecked down his burned cheek, chased by the soft swipe of a cool cloth.

A low murmur slipped around him and he thrashed, wanting both to escape the comfort and lean into it. Gentle hands held him still, something soothing and soft was placed against his wounded face, and the words never stopped. It was a sea of meaningless sound, washing him with reassurance and Athos finally gave in.

"Rest, Athos," the voice encouraged, when he could focus on the meaning behind the words once more. "I won't leave you."

"You should," Athos groaned. "I am poison."

"You are not." There was an edge to the tone that almost forced Athos to open his eyes. Almost. "You are not."

Dimly, as though it were happening to someone else, someone far away, Athos registered his head and shoulders being lifted, pulled up from the cold ground and held against something warm, soft, almost comforting. The fever that had assaulted his senses, turning truth sour in his heart, began to lift and Athos found himself sinking, a different darkness sweeping over him.

There were no dreams this time.

When next he opened his eyes, Athos held very still, taking stock. He no longer ached, not like before. Now it was simply the morning-after thrum of too much wine and stiff muscles from having lain still for far too long. He was outside; the air smelled fresh, clean. Not of smoke and ash as he
would expect. He was propped up against a saddle, his weapons belt and boots having been
removed.

Cautiously, as though his body were made of spun glass, he eased himself to a seated position and
looked around. It was late in the morning; the sun had nearly reached its zenith. He could see the
shell of his home in the distance, white smoke curling up and indicating the fire had burned itself out.
He was tucked into the grove of trees near the small river that fed the manor's well.

"It's good to see you awake."

Athos startled, looking around sharply. d'Artagnan stood several feet away, the body of a snared
rabbit clutched in one hand, his dagger in the other. His doublet was gone, the white shirt beneath
gray from smoke, his face soot-streaked and drawn. He looked exhausted.

"How long?" Athos croaked.

d'Artagnan dropped the rabbit on some rocks piled up not far from Athos' feet.

"I found you night before last," d'Artagnan revealed. "You've been…in and out. But you slept
through the recent night without incident."

Athos rubbed the back of his head, then dragged his hand down his face. He felt oddly rested, at
peace in a way he didn't expect to feel after seeing Anne standing—impossibly alive—in his home.

"Have you slept?" Athos asked as he watched d'Artagnan crouch down and begin to skin the rabbit.
The young Gascon's eyes were bloodshot, shadows lurking in the hollows beneath.

d'Artagnan shook his head. "But now that you're…well,

Athos didn't reply. Casting about for his boots, he pulled them on, stood, and made his way
downstream. He took care of his bodily needs, including dunking his head into the frigid water and
gasping himself fully awake. Whatever d'Artagnan had put on the burn along his cheekbone seemed
to have soothed the skin enough that it was no longer painful to blink.

Shoving his wet hair from his face, he made his way back to the make-shift camp d'Artagnan had set
up, the smell of a cooking fire greeting him. The rabbit was on a spit, and d'Artagnan was sitting
cross-legged before it, looking incredibly young as he stared sightlessly into the flames. Athos took a
breath, then sat on the ground across the fire from his young friend.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

d'Artagnan blinked, lifting his exhausted gaze upward to meet Athos' steady eyes.

"You saved me, d'Artagnan."

Looking back at the fire and reaching out to turn the rabbit, d'Artagnan shrugged. "The others would
have done the same."

"Yet, here you sit," Athos pointed out.

He looked at their surroundings, noticing how d'Artagnan had hobbled his and one other horse on
the other side of the trees, near plentiful grass. The boy had a knack for horses, Athos had noticed
straight away. Cared for his mount more carefully than he did for himself. Next to the saddle where
he'd woken, Athos saw the contents of their saddle bags laid out according to need.
And folded carefully on top of the second saddle was a light blue neck scarf. A very familiar neck scarf.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, his tone unintentionally accusatory.

d'Artagnan blinked, uncomprehending, then followed his line of sight. Leaning over, he retrieved the scarf and Athos saw that the cloth had been newly washed and was still drying.

"I found it," d'Artagnan said. "When I was pulling you from the house…it was on the floor, near an overturned trunk. I-I don't actually know why I picked it up." He shrugged, then handed it to Athos. "I used it to keep you cool; you had a fever, but I couldn't find the source. It didn't seem to be from your wound…." His voice trailed off as Athos reached forward and took the scarf from his hand.

Athos let the soft material slide through his fingers as he pulled it to the full length. On the edge of one hem, stitched in tiny, black thread was the letter 'T'. Folding it carefully, he pressed the cloth to his face and breathed in deeply. It smelled of grass and river water.

"Athos?"

"This was…my brother's," Athos said quietly, unable to speak Thomas' name.


"She killed him," Athos said, finding it odd that he couldn't muster the expected bitterness.

"I know," d'Artagnan replied, causing Athos to wonder what else he'd said as his body fought a fever brought on by poor choices and alcohol abuse. "It's okay, Athos."

He'd heard those words, Athos now realized, several times. He'd heard d'Artagnan reassure him through the long day and night until his voice failed him. He'd heard absolution and understanding—and the fact that it had been so genuine from someone so young, Athos wasn't sure he was ready to accept quite yet.

"My…resolve," Athos began, clearing his throat as the grip of emotion tightened. "My resolve left me. Returning to this…place. This time, it…," Athos shook his head. "I was not myself."

d'Artagnan simply nodded, turning the rabbit once more. Athos pressed his hand against his sternum, gathering his breath. He'd guarded this truth like a prisoner for so long, the escape was slow. A tottering, geriatric truth scaling a barricade of caution.

"I loved her, d'Artagnan," Athos confessed softly, wrapping the scarf around his hand. "And I loved…my brother. Telling myself I had no choice was the only way I could reconcile their deaths."

d'Artagnan stayed quiet, and for that Athos was grateful. He didn't want platitudes; he couldn't handle reassurances. This was a new fate he must face: Anne was in the world, and had killed again. This burden was to be his alone.

"You need to know something," d'Artagnan finally spoke up, his low voice ragged from exhaustion and overuse. He lifted his face and his dark eyes pinned Athos with a weight he should never have had to bear. "You are an honorable man. You are my friend. And that is enough."

Athos felt his brows pull close, the bruise around his eye tugging at the tight, burned skin.

"I'm sorry to put my burden on you, d'Artagnan."
"It's not the weight of your burden I can't bear, Athos," d'Artagnan looked back down at the rabbit, pulling it from the fire, and reaching for his dagger. "It's the weight of your surrender."

Watching as d'Artagnan began to cut meat from the bones and lay it out on a sand-scrubbed rock, Athos thought back through the scattered memories of last many hours, the yearning to give in, the way he'd bared his neck to her knife. He thought of how heavy he felt—all the time—with the knowledge of his sin. He thought of how that was all different now.

And he thought of d'Artagnan hearing every guilt-stripped word spoken as fever annihilated his defenses.

"I will make you a promise," Athos said, drawing the young man's eyes to his scarf-wrapped fist. "I will not capitulate to my guilt—I will not allow her the vengeance she seeks—as long as I am a Musketeer."

Light seemed to shimmer in d'Artagnan's dark eyes. "Do Musketeers…retire?"

Athos felt the tug of a smile at the corner of his mouth. He slung the scarf around his neck, hanging on to either end. "Not that I'm aware."

"Good," d'Artagnan grinned, popping a sliver of meat into his mouth.

Athos reached for his share. "After this, you sleep," he said sternly. "You're about two seconds from toppling over as I look at you."

"I'm not going to argue with you," d'Artagnan said around a mouthful of rabbit.

"That would be a first," Athos smirked, feeling life return to his body.

They consumed the rest of the meat and d'Artagnan stretched out against a saddle, asleep before Athos had cleaned up their meal. He looked years younger in repose, Athos observed. Almost like the boy he truly should be at this age, and not the man he'd been forced to become upon the death of his father.

Athos thought of Thomas as he watched over their camp while d'Artagnan slept. Thought of his recklessness, his lust for life. He thought of how happy he'd been when Athos announced his marriage to Anne, of the anguish in his eyes as he told Athos what he'd discovered of Anne's past. He couldn't bring himself to believe Anne's accusations, but…then again, he couldn't deny the strange leap in his heart at the thought of her being alive.

Hours passed as d'Artagnan slept and Athos was forced to wake the lad up far sooner than he wanted so that they could meet up with their friends and ensure Bonaire was treated appropriately—and that Porthos was healed. As it was, he was going to have a lot of explaining to do.

"Do they know?" d'Artagnan asked as they saddled their horses and cleaned up camp. "Porthos and Aramis? Do they know any of this?"

Athos shook his head. "Treville is the only one who knew of my past."

"You kept it from them? All this time?"

"I needed to…not be Comte de la Fère," Athos tried to explain. "I needed them to see me. Not the title."

"And now?" d'Artagnan asked, swinging aboard his horse and watching Athos with careful eyes.
"There's no need to lay it out for them right away," Athos replied, frowning. With any luck, they would never need to know about Anne or her murderous ways. He looked over at d'Artagnan. "Say nothing to them about this."

d'Artagnan simply lifted a shoulder. "It's not my story to tell."

As they rode forward, Athos found himself watching the squared shoulders of his young protégé and realizing that whether he wanted to be or not, he was forever indebted to the lad not only for his care, but for his discretion. It seemed, however, that he couldn't have stumbled onto a better repository for his secret.

Present

Thunder rolled ominously through the low ceiling of dark clouds just above them.

"You realize, of course, that if 'e had told us, things probably would have played out much differently," Porthos grumbled as he stabbed at the flames of their campfire with a stick.

"Indeed," Aramis agreed, his still-healing leg stretched out before him, propped up on a saddle. "d'Artagnan might have even avoided getting shot in that whole charade to fool Milady."

"Don't forget," Athos protested. "We also trapped the Cardinal in that charade."

"True," Aramis tipped his chin forward, "but I still say we could have avoided bloodshed—"

"And attending your funeral."

"—if we'd known who Milady was much sooner."

"Porthos," Athos shook his head. "It was a false funeral."

"Felt real 'nough," Porthos grumbled.

In the distance, lighting spiked the heavy clouds, causing Porthos to look up at the sky as though nature had drawn down this storm as a personal affront to him.

"It worked out in the end," Athos said, his voice tired from having talked for longer than he was accustomed.

"I am…sorry, Athos," Aramis said after a few moments of silence. "Had we known you were ill, we would never have left you behind."

"I didn't exactly give you a choice," Athos reminded him. "And Porthos was in far worse shape."

"It's good that you don't…," Aramis shifted his position, frowning into the fire as he searched for words.

"Indulge?" Athos supplied, his quick mind drawing the conclusion his friend's concern would have reached.

Aramis nodded. "Quite as much, at any rate. The signs were all there that day; the illness practically seeped from you. I just…didn't see it."

"Do not berate yourself, Aramis," Athos replied, his expression softening as he watched Aramis' face fold into a frown of concern. "I didn't realize the fever had a hold on me either. Not until I woke up
next to the river."
"d'Artagnan knew," Porthos said, voice hushed by memory. "]'e didn't want to leave you."
"Turned back just as we lost sight of the manor," Aramis recalled. "I've always wondered what it was drew him back."
"Perhaps it was that we separated," Athos mused. "He'd just started to become comfortable with us as unit and we broke that up."
"Naw, don't think that was it," Porthos shook his head, stabbing the fire once more. "Think 'e knew you were off. Kept on 'bout 'ow you weren't yourself. Lad's got a sense 'bout you, Athos."
Aramis lifted his chin in agreement, but Athos remained silent, not wanting to put too much stock in such a possibility, even now.
"I don't believe I'd seen that neck scarf on you much prior to that day in the woods," Aramis observed, the forced casualness of his tone revealing that he'd drawn a conclusion and was looking for Athos to inadvertently confirm it.
"No," Athos shook his head. "It seemed…important…that day. A reminder of things lost."
"Because we lost the King?" Porthos asked.
Athos held Aramis' fire-lit eyes, waiting. Aramis had a knack for seeing layers of people, without really even trying. It was one of the things that drew women to him, Athos believed. He'd learned to trust it, use it…and protect himself from it.
"Because we lost d'Artagnan," Aramis concluded softly.
Athos nodded, glancing down just as the first fat drops of rain pelted the earth. The moss-covered brace of branches that they'd woven overhead when making camp kept them from the worst of the rain, but Athos knew none of them would be sleeping much that night.
"I don't like waitin' so long," Porthos grumbled, a dark cloud in and of himself. "Anything could be 'appening to them right now."
"We can't track them in the storm," Athos pointed out.
"And it won't do d'Artagnan and Treville any good if we're struck by lightning on our way to rescue them," Aramis added, shifting his leg stiffly.
"Besides," Athos handed Porthos a hunk of bread he'd retrieved from his saddle bag. "d'Artagnan's been marking the path thus far. All we'll need to do to find them next is look for something of Aramis'."
Porthos glanced over at the other man. "What do you suppose 'e's got o'yours?"
Aramis frowned, reaching up to rub gently at the stitches along his hairline. Athos knew his friend was healing, but the aches that followed being thrown through a glass window were nothing to be envied. They'd all come close to death a time or two; it didn't make the reality any easier to handle.
"I honestly can't imagine," he finally replied. "I can't think of anything I've given him…."
"We didn't exactly give him ours," Athos replied.
"True," Aramis nodded. "In that case, I haven't a clue."

The fire hissed and sputtered as rain dripped from the edges of the cover, twisting a haze of smoke around them. Athos kicked dirt over the flame, turning it into nothing more than glowing coals, then burrowed deeper into his coat, pulling his hat low over his eyes.

"Get some sleep," he ordered. "Soon as this storm breaks, we ride on."

Through the sliver of fading coal light from beneath his hat, he saw Porthos nod, then look over at Aramis, concern painted across his face.

"I'm fine, Porthos," Aramis replied without looking his direction.

"You're not," Porthos stated. "You're quiet, you're pale, and you won't talk about it."

Athos held still, waiting out Aramis' reply.

"I'm fine," he repeated. "I just don't bounce back as quickly as before. That was...a long fall."

"It was," Porthos replied.

"I'm not...not talking about it," Aramis attempted to reassure the big man. "There's just nothing much to say. The bastard got the drop on me, and if not for the grace of God—"

"And an awning."

"—I wouldn't be here with you. It's a bit...humbling."

Athos saw Porthos reach over and rest a heavy hand on Aramis' shoulder.

"I've never been so bloody grateful for a piece of canvas in my life."

Aramis returned the gesture, creating a twist of their arms with his grip. "Me too, my friend. Me too."

"That makes three of us," Athos chimed in. "Now go to sleep, both of you. We need not leave watch with the storm protecting us."

Athos had no way of knowing how prophetic those words were about to be. As lightning crashed, illuminating the night and bringing with it a fury of thunder, wind, and rain, the three Musketeers huddled deep within their jackets, hats pulled low to shield their faces from the storm. After several hours of attempted rest, Aramis shifted his stiff leg, jostling Porthos, who sat up with a disoriented growl.

"Bleedin' storm—" He broke off and Athos felt the larger man push himself upright.

"Porthos?" Aramis called.

"Quiet."

Athos held his breath in instant response to Porthos' tense command. The ferocity of the storm had begun to abate, but the rain beat loudly against their temporary cover. Athos wasn't sure what Porthos had—

Wait. There.

Nothing sounded quite like the clink of metal on metal.
Athos sat forward, alert, his main gauche already in his hand with no memory of having drawn it. Porthos was crouched, balanced on the balls of his feet, a small dagger in his hand that Athos was willing to swear he’d produced from his sleeve. Aramis held his arquebus at the ready.

A branch snapped, close. The rain fell heavy on the top of their shelter. Athos found himself breathing shallowly, focusing his attention on either side of their small shelter. Men were approaching, at least three, perhaps four. They were moving through the trees, circling either side of the shelter.

Athos nudged Porthos with his elbow and when he sensed the man look his direction in the dark, gently pressed his shoulder toward one side of the shelter. He focused on the other, leaving Aramis to take up the slack, should there be any. He counted silently, feeling the thrumming energy of the other two men radiate back at him.

They’d been through too many battles together to not have their hearts beat in sync.

As one, Athos and Porthos stood, toppling the overhang. Athos grabbed one man by the throat, shoving him against a tree, his main gauche pressed against his jugular. He heard Porthos’ familiar growl and knew the big man held another at bay with the tip of his blade.

"I wouldn’t." Aramis' smooth voice slipped under the fading rain, the barrel of his arquebus no doubt pointed at the last of their would-be attackers.

In the east, the shelf of clouds still weighted with rain gave way to the coming dawn, moving the storm away from the horizon and slowly turning the world around the Musketeers gray. It seemed that they'd been fortunate: only three men had attempted to ambush them under cover of the storm.

Athos immediately recognized the uniform of the man he pinned to the tree.

"You're Red Guard?" He asked, surprised.

He didn't back away, but allowed himself to glance over to where Aramis and Porthos held two other men at bay: Porthos standing behind one man, blade at his jugular; Aramis with his arquebus held sure and steady at the third man's forehead, not a glimmer of the weakness Athos knew his friend was feeling.

"We are," the man Athos held managed to squeeze past the grip on his throat.

"Let us go," the man standing frozen at the edge of Aramis' pistol demanded. "Unless you wish this to be your day to die."

Athos heard Porthos chuckle. "Oh, big words. You 'ear that, Athos?"

"I did. Seems they expect us to be afraid," he lifted a brow, letting sarcasm liberally pepper his next words, "of three Red Guard."

"I'm quaking in my boots," Aramis commented dryly.

The man in Athos' grip tensed. "Athos? Of the King's Musketeers?"

"At your service," Athos replied.

"You don't look much like Musketeers," snarled the one in Porthos' grip.

"You don't look much like grown men, but we play the cards we're dealt, yeah?" Porthos returned,
pressing his knife a bit harder into the man's neck.

Athos watched as the man he held at bay stared at him another moment, then slid his gaze across to where Aramis stood like an executioner and Porthos like a bandit and audibly swallowed.

"It's them," the man declared.

To Athos’ surprise, the three Red Guard seemed to simultaneously relax. No weapons were lowered, but Athos exchanged a puzzled glance with Aramis. The Red Guard started to lower their hands, but one *eh-eh* from Aramis had them raising them once more.

"We are in search of Laroche," stated one of the men.

"What of it," Aramis replied, gun arm remaining steady.

"We're lost," the man Athos held against the tree confessed.

"You are indeed, if you're heading for Soissons," Athos replied.

"Laroche isn't heading for Soissons."

Athos looked over at Aramis and Porthos, then all three lowered their weapons as one, waiting for further explanation. The rising sun seemed to push the storm west, leaving the Earth and her inhabitants soaked and weary. The Red Guard who had been against the tree rubbed at his throat.

"My name is Sault," he said. "This is Lyon and Gosse."

Athos remained silent; the other two followed his lead.

"We have been sent in search of Laroche; Rochefort wishes him to return."

"Is that right?" Porthos commented.

"How did Rochefort know Laroche wasn't returning to Soissons?" Athos demanded.

Sault sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "He was never from Soissons," he revealed. "Rochefort has been living in fear of this man since he heard of his arrival. He wanted nothing more than for the man to leave Paris."

"Why the change of mind?" Aramis asked.

"Some…papers were discovered on one of the men killed," Lyon revealed. "Of course we never saw them, but the rumor is that they implicated Rochefort."

"Implicated him in what?" Aramis pressed.

Lyon shrugged. "Whatever it was, Rochefort destroyed the papers and sent us after Laroche."

"He provided a location, but…in the storm we got turned around…." Sault shrugged.

Porthos leaned toward Aramis. "So this is the big rescue party?"

"Rescue?" Lyon questioned.

"Laroche has two of our men," Athos revealed. "There was a third, but he died bringing back a warning. We were informed that Rochefort would be sending out Red Guard to find Laroche and
retrieve our men."

"We were given no such instructions," Lyon revealed. "Just to find Laroche, bring him back, kill whoever was with him."

"Color me surprised," Porthos muttered. "Good thing we left when we did, yeah?"

"Wait, so Rochefort sent you as well?" Sault demanded, his expression darkening.

"Not quite," Athos replied. "Where is this location? And how did you come across it?"

"Rochefort wouldn't tell us how he knew," Lyon confessed. "All he would say was something about paying a price."

"We can show you where it is," Sault offered, small eyes darting as though he'd hit upon the perfect solution to a problem he hadn't realized he had. "Join forces?"

"Red Guard willingly working with Musketeers?" Porthos scoffed. He looked over at Aramis. "as the world ended and no one told us?"

"It's that or we follow you," Sault pointed out. "Either way, we can't return without Laroche." He looked at Athos. "And I suspect you won't return without your men."

Athos shifted slightly to face his men in the morning light, noting their drawn faces and the stain of exhaustion bruising Aramis' eyes. He lifted an eyebrow. Better to have them with us? Porthos scowled. Don't trust 'em. Aramis lifted his chin, resting his hands loosely on his pistol grip where it was stashed in his weapons belt. If our situations were reversed, they'd not return the favor. Athos nodded, then tipped his head. Can't leave them here.

Porthos growled, turning away. Aramis sighed and shifted his hat back a bit off his forehead. With his men's blessing, Athos turned back to face Sault.

"What the hell was all that?" Sault demanded.

"We discussed it," Athos replied. "You may lead the way—all of you, riding before us—and if there is one motion of betrayal, we will not hesitate to dispatch you."

"You...discussed it?" Lyon asked, blinking. He glanced at Gosse—who had yet to say a word—and shook his head.

"Gather your things," Athos instructed. "We ride out in thirty minutes."

The three Red Guard nodded, turning back the way they came to gather their horses.

"I don't like this, Athos," Porthos muttered, sheathing his weapons.

"First Rochefort cooperates with this Marechausee from Soissons—who is apparently not a Marechausee from Soissons—and allows two murderers to leave Paris," Aramis vented, "with our men. And then he sends three—three!—Red Guard out not to save our men, no." He swung his hands in a broad circle, face coloring with his anger. "No, he sends the men out to fetch back the man he allowed leave because some papers were discovered?"

"That about sums it up," Porthos agreed.

"What the hell is going on here?" Aramis practically roared.
Athos hadn't seen Aramis this worked up since Marsac had accused Treville of sending Musketeers to their deaths.

"I do not know," Athos replied purposefully calm, his voice lowered to bring Aramis back to center. "But I think it's safe to assume that Treville and d'Artagnan are in serious trouble."

"He's using them, isn't he?" Aramis concluded. "Laroche. Whatever this is, our men are part of his plan."

"I think we need to assume that is the case."

"We need to find them, Athos," Porthos stated, jaw tight, fists clenched. "Now."

"With the…," Athos frowned, then forced out the word, "assistance of the Red Guard, we may have a shot of doing so much sooner than before."

They rode through the morning, Lyon, Gosse, and Sault taking the lead. Athos kept a watchful eye out for any other signs d'Artagnan might have left on the trail. They ate on horseback, not willing to slow. As it neared evening, they reached another clearing, this one marked by some serious storm damage. It was clear a tree had been struck by lightning—dark marks scoring the bisected trunk. Wind had apparently ripped an old cable tower from its mooring.

"There," Sault said, just before they breached the tree line. "That abbey; that's where Rochefort said we'd find Laroche."

"What is this place?" Aramis demanded.

"Fontevrault," Lyon replied.

Aramis looked at him in shock. "Fontevrault? You're sure?"

"What is it, Aramis?" Porthos demanded.

"Richelieu's abbey," Athos replied. "Or it was, once."

"How did Laroche even know of this place?" Aramis wondered darkly.

"'eads up!" Porthos called softly down the line of horses. "There's men leavin'."

Athos looked across the clearing toward where he now saw men on horseback splashing through the river that separated the opposite shore with the road that went up to the abbey. He lost count quickly—and they weren't close enough to see if their men, or Laroche, were among them. He held out a hand to keep his men still, wanting more information before they left the safety of the tree line in pursuit.

Sault and the others were not quite as prudent. As the men from the abbey raced passed the fallen tower, the three Red Guard took off in pursuit, ignoring Athos' hiss of caution. He counted roughly ten men to Sault's three.

"That will not end well," Aramis muttered.

Waiting until the mass of men had moved well away from where they stood shielded from sight, Athos motioned the other two to move forward, across the clearing. They had no idea if d'Artagnan and Treville were still in the abbey or had been part of the mass exodus. Before they'd even reached the remains of the tower, however, two things happened very fast: the south wall of the abbey
exploded, and four more men thundered across the river toward them.

Athos recognized Laroche in that mix by his mass of hair—now hanging about his head in messy strands. The four men escaping the explosion headed in the same direction as the others, following the three hapless Red Guard. Athos felt his heart sink, and looked over at Aramis.

"I did not see our men," Aramis stated. "They could still be in the abbey."

"Sault and his men will most certainly be killed."

"We owe them nothing, Athos," Porthos argued, but he was already turning his horse in the direction the men had gone.

Athos shook his head, then wheeled his horse to the south, heading after Laroche. To his surprise, the pursuit did not last long. Not more than a mile away, they saw the men and horses huddle in what appeared to be a valley just below an outcropping of rock nestled against a steep hillside, giving way to a cave within the cliff ledge that served as a perfect overlook.

Wheeling his horse to the west, Athos ducked into the tree line that followed the river's edge, hearing Porthos and Aramis follow him, then pulled up to a stop at the crest of a small hill. From this vantage point, he could make out the motion of the people grouped around the cave, but not their faces.

"I don't see Treville or d'Artagnan," Aramis muttered, the small, hand-held telescope he used to sight shots held up to his eye. "But it looks as though Sault and his men have found new allies."

"Traitorous wretches," Porthos growled.

"Rather smart, actually," Athos lifted a shoulder. "They were severely outnumbered; it was join up, or die."

"They still may find they've seen their last sunrise," Aramis countered, focusing the scope. "They're being taken into that cave."

"What is Laroche doing?" Athos wondered out loud. Aramis' night vision was much better than his; it was getting dark enough that he could no longer make out the number of men gathered near the outcrop. "He blew up the abbey and then…doesn't leave?"

"'e's waiting for something," Porthos declared.

Aramis had risen to a near-standing position in his saddle, scope pinned to the group of men. "Athos."

"Yes?"

"Sault is at the edge of the cave; he's pointing back in the direction we came."

"Sold us out, did 'e?"

The muffled sound of a pistol being fired from a distance brought Porthos' chin up sharply.

"Well," Aramis sank back into his saddle, a hand flat on the neck of his horse to steady the animal, and tucked the scope back into his saddle bag. "If he did, it didn't buy him anything." He looked over at Athos. "Laroche just shot him in the head."

"He's waiting for something all right," Athos muttered, looking back at the abbey, then toward the outcropping of rock. "He's waiting for us."
"We need to get back to the abbey," Aramis said, turning his horse as he did so.

They had to move at an alternating walk and slow trot as they moved through the trees. Athos didn't dare move them out into the clearing for faster travel; not when Laroche likely had sharpshooters positioned between the abbey and his secondary outpost. The sound of another pistol firing caught Athos' ears as they reached the edge of the river just across from the narrow road that led up to an iron gate.

"That don't sound good," Porthos muttered, pushing his horse forward.

Athos raised up in his stirrups, trying to peer through the gathering darkness to see the riverbank on the other side. They could see a cluster of large boulders to one side, and the crumbling remains of a stone wall on the other. As the three Musketeers pulled up to the edge of the river, they startled in unison at the sound of a very familiar—very angry—shout.

"I'll be damned if I let you fucking bastards win!"

The shot caught Athos at the crown of his head, tearing his hat free and driving a shallow groove across his edge of his forehead before careening off into the trees. The blow rattled Athos, his sight dimming, his body swaying dangerously from the impact and pain. He felt Aramis grab his arm to steady him and he reached up a suddenly shaking hand to wipe the blood from his eye.

"Oi! Captain!" Porthos' shout confirmed Athos' suspicions and he looked wildly over at Aramis, trying to bring the man into focus. "Don't shoot!"

"Porthos?" Treville's voice sounded rough, battered.

"Easy, Athos—" Aramis' voice was anxious, his grip tense.

"I'm all right," Athos replied, shaking his vision clear and wiping once more at the blood that now soaked his hair. "Lost m'hat."

"Yeah, it's us!" Porthos shouted back across the river. "Don't shoot; you already owe Athos a new hat!"

"Go," Athos pushed at Aramis. "Go!"

Aramis nodded and urged his horse into the river, followed closely by Athos.

"Cross quickly," Treville called back. "Laroche's men are still close by."

"Where's d'Artagnan?" Athos demanded, having heard only Treville's voice and fearing the worst.

"He's here." Treville's voice trembled. Athos pushed his horse a bit harder to find it footing and reach the other side. "Is Aramis with you?"

"Right here, Captain."

Athos lurched up with his horse as they reached the dry land on the other side, finding Treville's voice to their right behind the large boulders.

"We need you. Now."

Aramis dismounted and barely limped as he made his way over to where Treville was crouched. Athos couldn't see d'Artagnan from where he sat his horse, but the sudden tension in Aramis' voice as he spoke to the lad shot a cold sweat of fear through him. His curses were muttered as he glanced
quickly around at the destruction he could see in the dark.

"d'Artagnan. Open your eyes for me. Don't fade on us, lad. Come on, now."

Athos slide from his horse, wobbling slightly as his head pounded in instant protest of the sudden change in elevation. He felt Porthos next to him, close, steady. He lacked the focus to protest when Porthos grabbed his elbow, keeping him from stumbling to the side as his vision swayed. Their mounts were left to find grass, reins trailing, as they joined Aramis next to Treville and d'Artagnan.

In the scattered moonlight, Athos saw Treville first. The man was covered in dirt, blood staining his collar from some sort of head wound, and the trousers on his right leg were ripped and crusty with dried blood. Their Captain didn't even look up when Athos rested a heavy hand on his shoulder for both balance and greeting; his whole focus was on d'Artagnan.

"Oh, bleedin' Christ," Porthos breathed, dropping down to his knees next to Aramis.

Aramis was leaning over d'Artagnan, trying to get the other man to respond, and blocking Athos' view of him.

"d'Artagnan. d'Artagnan." Aramis' arm jerked slightly as Athos heard him patting the younger man on the face. "Open your eyes, now. It's me. It's Aramis."

Athos saw Aramis' shoulders shift as his hands moved from the vicinity of d'Artagnan's face to somewhere around his middle. A wet, squelching sound had Aramis sucking in a breath and d'Artagnan groaning in misery. Athos swallowed, the cold sweat returning, causing his hands to tremble.

Aramis looked back over his shoulder, catching sight of Athos. "We need to move him somewhere I can work on him."

"Can we cross the river?" Athos asked.

Aramis shook his head once. "It's bad, Athos," he said tightly, shifting to ease the weight on his wounded leg.

It was then Athos truly saw d'Artagnan.

He told himself that the darkness made it worse. Darkness turned blood to black. Darkness turned skin pale and made shadows plentiful. But in truth, he knew that darkness merely masked the truth, and if d'Artagnan looked his bad in the shadow of the boulders, Athos didn't know if he could bear seeing him in the light.

"We can head back into the abbey," Treville suggested. "All that remains in there are two dead men and a bunch of rubble."

"It will have to do," Aramis stated, pushing to his feet.

Almost in mirrored contrast of motion, Athos dropped to his knees, blood once more stinging his eye from the bullet graze. He tipped slightly to the side, his thigh pressing against d'Artagnan's side, causing the lad to groan once more. Athos could feel the tremble of muscle beneath the blood-stained clothes and wanted to throw up.

"Athos!" Aramis barked, then reached down for him, grabbing him by the lapels and hauling him willingly to his feet. "Take Treville in with you, first," he ordered. "Bring the horses; we're going to need everything if they figure out where we ended up."
"They?" Treville asked, reaching for Athos's shoulder.

"We, uh, ran into Laroche and a few of 'is friends not more than a mile from 'ere," Porthos said, dropping to a crouch, and working his arms beneath d'Artagnan's shoulders and knees.

"Watch his side," Aramis cautioned. "And his head."

"I got 'im," Porthos grunted, lifting the younger man into his arms. d'Artagnan's gasp of pain had Athos helplessly reaching out. "Damn, this lad's heavy."

He turned, ready to carry d'Artagnan back through the iron gate and up the narrow road toward the abbey. Athos pulled in a steadying breath, trying to bring himself back under control, ignore the pounding in his head. He wiped blood from his eye with the back of his hand; he could tell the graze was shallow: the bleeding was already beginning to slow.

"Laroche is waiting to attack you," Treville reported, gathering the reins of one horse as Athos grabbed the other two. "He wants one of you to survive and report his crazy scheme back to Rochefort."

"He may not need us," Athos replied. He told Treville about running into the Red Guard in the forest and Laroche killing Sault. "He could send the other two back to Rochefort."

Treville pushed open the iron gate wide enough to lead the horses through and Athos saw him pause as though gathering his strength.

"He's insane, Athos," Treville said softly as they trudged up the road toward the destruction that had once been an abbey. "We need to be ready for anything."

"I'm good and ready to kill the man for what 'e's done to you two, alone," Porthos chimed in from behind them.

"I support this decision," Treville replied.

They reached the heavy wooden door and Athos saw at once they weren't going to get the horses through. Pressing the heel of his hand to the bridge of his nose in a weak attempt to push back the ever-increasing headache, he turned to face his men. As he did, the clouds parted, allowing a gibbous moon to illuminate their predicament.

He swallowed hard at the sight of d'Artagnan hanging limp in Porthos' arms, his shirt and the waistband of his breeches black with blood. His vision wavered and he was forced to reach out a hand toward the wooden door and catch his balance. Words slipped from him for a moment, hiding behind an overwhelming, choking sensation of helpless fear. He mentally scrambled, searching for the right thing to do, to say, his eyes darting from each face and finally resting on d'Artagnan's closed eyes.

"Treville, Athos," Aramis spoke up, evidently seeing how thoroughly wrecked Athos was in that moment. "Strip the horses of their saddle bags and take them into the abbey. Treville, is there a place we can lay him and stay sheltered?"

Athos noted that Aramis had dropped the title of Captain when addressing Treville. It seemed to catch the older man as well.

"I-I…yes, I think so," Treville nodded.

"Good," Aramis turned to Porthos. "Follow them in. We need light—lots of it. I'll be right behind
"ang on," Porthos protested, shifting d'Artagnan in his grip. "Where're you going?"

Aramis was moving toward the horses, grabbing the water skins from each saddle. "We need water. Lots of it."

Athos watched Aramis limp resolutely down to the river, and blinked his vision clear once more. Aramis had been walking wounded for days; there was no way Athos was about to let a little bullet graze slow him down now. He stripped the saddle from Aramis' horse, grabbing the saddle bag and anything else he could carry, then followed Treville through the thick wooden door and across the rubble of stone.

"Gah, what's that smell?" Porthos growled as he stepped across the threshold.

"Two dead bodies," Treville motioned to the side of the opened courtyard with the most damage, "or four sacrificial rabbits. Take your pick."

"Like what they've done with the place," Porthos replied, his scowl completely masking his eyes.

"Where can we lay him down?" Athos asked, staring around him with calculating eyes. They needed to get under cover and they needed to have a barricade.

"Here," Treville moved across the courtyard and into what appeared to be an anteroom to the main sanctuary. "I found it when I was trying to get my hands free—before I found d'Artagnan's sword. Seems to have taken the least amount of damage."

Treville spread out one of the bedrolls he'd grabbed from the saddle at the back of the anteroom and Porthos eased d'Artagnan to the stone floor. It troubled Athos more than he wanted to admit that the young Gascon did not groan in protest to this movement.

"We need light," Athos declared.

"Laroche used gunpowder to blow up the abbey," Treville told them. "There were torches…I'm sure we can find some."

"You stay with 'im," Porthos declared as Athos pressed his hand to his head once more, catching his shoulders as he apparently began to sway. "We'll find 'em."

Athos sank slowly to his knees next to where d'Artagnan lay, the make-shift pallet barely long enough for his whole body. It was still too dark to see the Gascon's features well; Athos reached out a trembling hand instead and placed it on the side of d'Artagnan's neck. He could feel a strong, racing pulse beating beneath heated skin. Resting his free hand on d'Artagnan's sternum, he felt rapid, rushed breaths of a body trying desperately to combat pain.

"What happened to you?" he asked softly.

"Too much." Treville's sudden voice startled him and Athos half-turned to see his former Captain awash in firelight from a torch held aloft. "He saved my life, Athos."

Before Athos could reply, they were joined by more light as Porthos and Aramis rounded the corner bringing torches and water. Porthos handed his torch to Treville and disappeared a moment before returning with an arnload of shattered pieces of barrels. Everyone converged on Athos and d'Artagnan, bringing the light close, the three Musketeers getting their first good look at their fourth.
"Good Lord," Athos breathed.

If he hadn't felt d'Artagnan's racing pulse for himself, he would doubt the lad was still alive. Dirt and bruises littered his face, blood was dried from his eyebrow to his neckline, twin trails ran from his ears to stain his neck. His shirt was more gray than white, the cuffs stuck to his skin of his wrists with dried blood. He was pale and drawn, his lips quaking with shivering breaths.

And he was lying utterly still. Athos couldn't remember the last time he'd seen d'Artagnan so still, even in sleep.

In contrast, Aramis was suddenly focused motion. He handed out orders to each, his tone brooking no argument. Athos was aware enough to realize that Aramis was keeping both he and Treville close, and off their feet. Porthos had positioned the torches around the room and started a fire in one of the wide altar bowls. As Athos helped Aramis locate the supplies he needed from the saddle bags, Treville emptied a water skin into a cooking pot and fashioned a spit to hold it above the fire.

Porthos disappeared for another moment, then returned in several trips with their saddles and weapons, reporting that the horses were tethered at the back of the abbey, away from the river.

"Should be safe there," he declared.

Aramis nodded, then began to remove d'Artagnan's filthy shirt. As he opened the laces down the lad's chest, he paused, pulling his hands away as though he'd burned himself.

"What is it?" Athos demanded.

Aramis reached for something resting on d'Artagnan's sternum: a small but ornate wooden cross, hanging from a leather strap around the lad's neck.

"Guess we know what 'e took of yours, then, yeah?" Porthos said quietly.

"I gave this to him," Aramis whispered. "After Marsac, there was a mission…. He wasn't even a Musketeer then. I…I completely forgot."

"Doesn't look like he did," Athos observed.

Gently lifting the cross from around d'Artagnan's neck and setting it aside, Aramis rolled the lad toward him, working the shirt from his arms. Athos frowned at the bruise along d'Artagnan's lower back.

"What is that?"

Treville slumped back against the wall near d'Artagnan's head. "He took a blow meant for me."

"is wrists are a mess," Porthos observed.

"We were…manacled," Treville revealed. "And bound with rope. Of course, he also pulled down the tower."

"He what?" Athos nearly shouted.

"I'm not worried about his wrists," Aramis broke in. "They may be painful, but they'll heal. I'm worried about this."

Athos saw him untie the sodden bandage covering d'Artagnan's lower left side. The cloth made a wet, sucking sound as he pulled it from the wound. The moment it was free, Athos drew back. The
skin around the two-inch gash was red, swollen, and still leaking blood.

Aramis began to palpate the wound, eliciting a ragged sound of misery from d'Artagnan that none of them wanted to hear again. The Gascon shifted his head, his forehead now dotted with sweat as he pulled his brows low in a frown. Aramis continued his examination and Athos winced as more blood spilled from the gash and Athos could see dirt embedded into the swollen edges of the wound.

"What caused this?" Aramis demanded, looking directly at Treville.

"It happened during the explosion," Treville said, his expression a frown of pain, but Athos wasn't sure it was entirely physical. "A bit of metal—I believe from the barrels that held the gunpowder. He pulled it out before I could stop him."

"Was the metal rusted? Dirty?"

"Yes, both."

Aramis sat back on his heels, his healing leg momentarily forgotten it seemed. Athos watched as he curled his fingers into a tight fist and pressed it against his lips.

"What is it, Aramis?"

"The wound is deep; I cannot tell if there is bleeding inside."

"What do you need for—"

"You don't understand." Aramis looked at him and Athos couldn't remember seeing such a look of devastation in the other man's dark eyes. "It's already showing signs of infection. I don't have all of the herbs I need. And he's lost so much blood; his pulse is racing, his heart is fighting to compensate the lack of fluid."

He shook his head helplessly, dropping his gaze back down to d'Artagnan's sweaty face.

"What are you sayin'?" Porthos asked, the only man in their group still standing. "Aramis? What are you sayin' to us right now?"

"I'm saying…." Aramis swallowed, his face visibly paling as his dark eyes brushed across each of them, leaving behind a stain of agony. "I'm saying there is a very real possibility we will lose him."

Athos stared at his friend, the words traversing the space between them and crashing against him like sparks from their modified fire.

"No." Athos shook his head.

"Athos—"

"No, Aramis." Athos pushed to his knees, grabbing Aramis by his jacket and shaking him. No one moved to stop him, not even Aramis himself. "This is d'Artagnan."

His mind echoed a memory of their roles reversed, nearly a year ago when Porthos had been wounded and Athos hadn't wanted to expose his past to them. When d'Artagnan had saved his life, saved his sanity. When he'd made a promise he did not intend to break.

"We cannot give up on him."

"Athos…." Aramis' voice was tight, emotion choking him. "I may not be able to do enough—"
"You do what you can. You do everything you can." He forced himself to uncurl his fists and release Aramis' jacket.

"Of course I will," Aramis stared around at the three men. "I just need you to realize—"

"I am not ready to lose one of my men," Athos informed him, the words steadying him.

He was not ready. Therefore it would not happen.

"You do what you need. We will be by your side."

"And if I can't save him?" Aramis' voice cracked, a plea for absolution before there was ever a sin.

"He's strong," Athos replied instead of answering.

"He's stubborn," Treville chimed in.

"'e don't know 'ow to quit," Porthos added.

Emotion swam in Aramis' eyes as he looked back at them, resting his gaze at last on Athos. It was not fair to put this on Aramis' shoulders, Athos knew. Especially Aramis, who took the loss of each man in their regiment onto himself as a personal failure.

But Athos could not lose d'Artagnan, not now. It would happen one day, he knew. It was inevitable.

But it was not this day.

"This will require all of us," Aramis told them, removing his weapons belt and shrugging out of his coat.

"We are ready, Aramis," Treville said quietly. "At your command."

Aramis licked his lips, then took a deep breath. "Porthos, take that pouch of white powder and mix it in some of the warming water. Treville, you sit at his head. If he wakes, get him to drink that. If you cannot, keep him as quiet as you can. This is going to be incredibly painful, and his cries could bring Laroche's men down on us."

"Where do you want me?" Athos asked.

"You stay by his side," Aramis ordered. "We're in for a long night."

Chapter End Notes

**a/n:** Fontevrault, or The Royal Abbey of Our Lady of Fontevraud, is actually the name of an abbey where Cardinal Richelieu occasionally resided, but it is not located where I've indicated and to the best of my knowledge was never abandoned and/or blown up. Fiction, boys and girls, is a fun place to rearrange facts.
"I need more light."

Someone instantly responded, but Aramis didn't immediately register who. *Probably Porthos,* he reasoned. Porthos had always been inordinately attuned to what Aramis needed before he was even aware himself. He allowed part of his mind to spend time musing on the mundane, the inconsequential, as a way to cope with the effort it took to keep his hands steady. The body shivering beneath him was making his task difficult enough as it was.

"Water," he snapped. "Hot, very hot."

He reached over blindly and grabbed a cloth from the pile of materials laid out next to him. Dipping the cloth into the steaming mug of water, he began to wipe the blood and dirt from the wound. The pressure of his hands caused d'Artagnan to flinch, the abused muscles of his abdomen tightening in an effort to pull away from the pain.

Aramis continued to clean the wound, frowning as he heard d'Artagnan gasp.

"Captain!"

"I'm here," Treville replied to the young Gascon's call.

Darting his eyes quickly up, Aramis saw that Treville was at his post with the cup as he'd been ordered.

"S-Something's…something's wrong," d'Artagnan panted, his dark eyes shifting quickly around him. "Where…?"

"I need you to drink this, d'Artagnan," Treville said, cupping the back of the young man's head and raising the cup to his wounded lips.

"Wh-What-?" d'Artagnan twisted his face to the side, avoiding the cup.

"It will help you," Athos chimed in, grasping the young man's forearm, avoiding the wounded wrist. d'Artagnan started, eyes searching the dancing shadows until they rested on his friend and mentor. "Athos," he breathed.

"I'm here," Athos replied, echoing his former Captain.

"You're hurt!" d'Artagnan exclaimed.

Aramis shot his gaze from one wound to another, quickly calculating how much damage Athos had sustained from the bullet graze. The bleeding already stopped, no loss of consciousness, some pain, certainly, but nothing imminently dangerous. He could examine it later without fearing his friend would pass out.

"I'll live," Athos replied. "Treville has terrible aim."

d'Artagnan shifted, trying to sit up and see around him, clearly disoriented. The movement caused Aramis to inadvertently press the cloth into a particularly raw part of the wound and d'Artagnan jerked with the pain of contact.
"Ahh!"

"Easy, lad," Porthos soothed from his higher vantage point. "You're giving our Aramis a time of it."

"Porthos?" d'Artagnan grit out, his jaw so tight Aramis could hear his teeth grinding. "You're here. You f-ound us."

"We did," Aramis replied, jerking his chin at Porthos and indicating he needed more light. "And now we need to patch you up so we can get back to the garrison."

"Cornerstone," d'Artagnan whispered, licking his dry lips, eyelids fluttering as he fought to stay conscious.

Aramis frowned, glancing in confusion toward Athos, who, he realized, was nodding his understanding.

"That's right," Athos reassured him. "Trust in your brothers is never misplaced."

"He…. Mmmmphh," d'Artagnan, arched his neck a bit as he tried to hold back his pained shudder. "He knew I left a t-trail."

"Who knew?" Athos asked.

"Laroche," Treville replied. "He was counting on your arrival to complete his plan."

"M-mad bastard," d'Artagnan managed. Aramis saw the lad's trembling hands clutching at the edge of the blanket Porthos had laid him on, fingers scraping at the dirt-covered stone where they huddled. "T-tryed to b-blow us up."

"Came pretty close, too," Treville muttered.

Aramis felt his anxiety ratcheting up each time d'Artagnan's muscles quivered and he lifted the now-soiled cloth, taking a deep breath.

"d'Artagnan," he said, forcing his voice to remain calm, measured, so as not to panic d'Artagnan further. "You need to drink the tonic. I must repair the damage inside your wound. Do you understand?"

d'Artagnan didn't reply, and Aramis leaned forward until he was looking directly into the young Musketeer's pain-blurred eyes. He blocked the others out, focusing only on the man before him. If he was to stop d'Artagnan from bleeding out, if he had any chance of saving their young friend's life, he had to act now. He saw now that there was no way to patch him up and hope to get to a physician. He wouldn't survive the journey.

"d'Artagnan."

"Something's wrong, Aramis," d'Artagnan confessed on a shaky whisper, the sound of his fingers scrabbling against the stone making Aramis' teeth clench. The lad needed an anchor for the pain, he knew; he'd been there many times himself. "Inside. I can…can feel it. Hurts."

"I know, my friend," Aramis replied softly. "I am going to try to fix it. But you need to drink the tonic."

d'Artagnan nodded and Aramis leaned back, glancing up at Treville. Leaning the edge of the cup against d'Artagnan's lips once more, Treville balanced him until he choked down the last of the
liquid, his face twisted in pain as his coughs pulled at his wound. Aramis swallowed tightly as d'Artagnan gasped for breath, unable to get ahead of his panic.

"A-Aramis—" d'Artagnan panted, his eyes squeezed shut. "I can't—"

d'Artagnan," Athos spoke up, finally—finally—grabbing the young man's hand and giving him something to balance against. "Listen to me. To my voice. Do you hear me?"

"Y-yes," d'Artagnan nodded, his sweaty hair clinging to his blood-smeared forehead.

"I want you to breathe with me. Now," Athos pulled in a slow breath through his nose.

"Hurts," d'Artagnan protested, but Aramis saw him fighting to do as Athos asked.

Athos leaned forward, curling their joined hands closer to his shoulder. "Good," he said. "That means you're alive. Pain is life, remember that."

Aramis frowned at that, but said nothing as d'Artagnan drew in another breath, his panicked gasps beginning to even out.

"Do you remember my promise?" Athos asked, keeping the Gascon anchored by the sound of his voice.

"P-promise?"

"I will not leave you."

Porthos leaned close, the torch illuminating d'Artagnan's bared chest and the ugly wound. Aramis picked up the bottle of brandy he kept with his medicinal supplies and pulled the cork out with his teeth. He glanced up at Treville, saw that the man was already sitting at d'Artagnan's head, his wounded leg stretched out, his hands resting on the lad's shoulders. Athos gripped d'Artagnan's right hand and Aramis felt the tug at the edge of the blanket on the other side.

"Promise?" d'Artagnan asked again, though this time Aramis heard the word completely differently.

"I swear to you," Athos said, tightening his grip so that d'Artagnan's filthy, blood-stained hand was lifted and pressed close to Athos' shoulder. "I will remain by your side."

"Ready?" Aramis asked softly.

Athos nodded, not taking his eyes from d'Artagnan. Aramis ignored the Gascon's already staggered breathing and poured the brandy over the open wound, praying with all of his considerable faith that the alcohol would burn out the infection.

d'Artagnan's scream tore from him, dragging every ounce of air from his lungs out through his wounded lips.

His back arched up, the hand clutched in Athos's grip jerked forward, pulling Athos with it, his face paled further. The scream echoed off of the three walls providing their cover and caused Treville and Porthos to flinch involuntarily.

"Hold him!" Aramis barked.

He saw Treville's hands press harder into d'Artagnan's shoulders, trying to keep him still. The younger man thrashed, insane with pain, his heels digging into the rubble and kicking stones loose. Aramis stopped pouring when the bottle was half-gone, using the rest of the hot water as a chaser to
the alcohol. d'Artagnan's rough voice was hoarse, his gasps weakened and breathy.

"Give him more water," Aramis ordered as he readied the needle to apply stitching to the tissue within the wound, stubbornly leaking precious blood.

Treville was quick to obey and d'Artagnan choked, tears leaking from the corners of his tightly-shut eyes. Aramis applied several stitches, hoping he'd closed the worst of the internal lacerations. He couldn't see with the torchlight if there were others.

"No more," d'Artagnan begged weakly. "Please, no more…"

"Why ain't 'e just passin' out?" Porthos grumbled.

"Seems our Gascon has a tougher constitution than we thought," Treville muttered, stroking d'Artagnan's sweaty hair from his brow.

"It's the pain," Aramis corrected. "He's too aware of it."

d'Artagnan groaned, tightening his hold on Athos' hand once more. Aramis frowned as the trembling seemed to increase exponentially until Athos was shaking from it as well.

"I thought you gave him a tonic!" Athos' brows were pulled low, a headache obvious in the lines around his eyes.

"We can give him more," Aramis said, readying his bandages. He reached over and tossed a small cloth bag toward Treville. "Same amount as last time; need to spread it out, make it last."

"Please," d'Artagnan whispered again, his dark eyes imploring the shadows around them. "Aramis…please."

"It will ease up soon, d'Artagnan," Aramis replied. "Just hold on."

"'m f-falling," d'Artagnan slurred, his eyes rolling closed, his head turning toward Aramis. He blinked aware, his lashes tented with sweat and tears. "'m falling, Aramis."

Aramis leaned forward, ignoring the pull of the tender muscles along his back. "I won't let you fall," he promised, feeling bile burn the back of his throat as the words tore at his heart.

It was a promise he knew he might not be able to keep, but he couldn't stop himself from offering it.

"I let you," d'Artagnan whispered, his lids falling heavy as Treville lifted his head once more, helping him drink more of the medicine. As Treville eased him back down, d'Artagnan repeated. "I let you."

Aramis carefully packed the bandages into the wound, his touch as gentle as possible to keep the quivering muscles along d'Artagnan's abdomen from flinching.

"You did nothing of the kind," Aramis protested, barely listening to d'Artagnan's fevered mutterings.

He knew he had to keep the wound open until he was sure the infection was gone, but d'Artagnan couldn't afford to lose more blood. It was a delicate balance; one that required his focus. Everything else was instinct. d'Artagnan groaned and tried to weakly shift away from his touch, but Athos anchored him, allowing Aramis to ease a bandage around the lad's narrow waist.

"Saw him push you…an' you were just…gone."
At that, Aramis froze, looking up first at d'Artagnan's closed eyes and shivering chin then over to where Porthos stood, torch in hand, horror in his eyes. Listening to d'Artagnan, Aramis saw the confrontation with Marmion through his friends' eyes, even as his own body tensed in remembrance.

"Couldn't stop 'im…couldn't do anything…." d'Artagnan continued, his voice growing raspy. "Same…," he drew a shallow, shuddering breath, "same as m'father…. You were gone. 'n I just let you fall."

Aramis swallowed hard, his mouth and throat dry with emotion. He leaned forward, his fingers at d'Artagnan's cheek, drawing the young man's face toward him.

"d'Artagnan," he said quietly. "You didn't let me fall. You stood fast with our King."

d'Artagnan blinked heavy-lidded eyes open to stare at Aramis a moment. Then, to the medic's surprise, a small smile tugged at the corner of the lad's wounded lips.

"Lot of good that did me," he rasped. "Landed me here."

With that, his eyes slipped closed and a slow exhale rattled through his parted lips.

"d'Artagnan?" Aramis called, tapping the lad's face gently. When he received no answer, he hurriedly pressed his fingertips to the Gascon's throat, sagging with relief when he felt a rapid pulse beneath the heated skin.

He looked up at Athos and nodded, watching as the older man closed his eyes in relief, then released the Gascon's lax hand and rested it on his bare chest.

"Now what?" Porthos asked, straightening up.

"Now…we wait," Aramis said, finishing his bandage. "I cannot stitch him closed with that infection; if he lasts through the night, we may have a chance." He leaned back, resting his forearm on his bent knee and pressing his wrist against his mouth. "We have to keep him cool; if his fever worsens, the infection is taking hold and…." 

"And what?" Athos asked, his voice as rough and ragged as Aramis had ever heard it.

"And I will have to get creative," Aramis replied.

"I'll go get more water from the river," Athos offered. He started to push himself to his feet, then closed his eyes quickly and wavered alarming to the side. Only Porthos' quick hand stopped him from toppling over.

"Athos, sit," Aramis instructed. He moved around d'Artagnan's legs and grasped the older man's face, turning it slightly to get a look at the bullet graze. "It's not deep, but any knock to the head like that is sure to rattle you."

"I'm fine," Athos insisted. "Just got dizzy for a moment."

"Stay with d'Artagnan," Aramis told him. When Athos looked up at him as though to protest, Aramis added, "Try to clean up his wrists, if you can."

"I'll go," Treville offered, but before he could push to his feet, Aramis glared at him.

"You stay right where you are, Captain," Aramis barked, the familiar title slipping free without conscious thought. "You're going to need your rest for the trip back." He tilted his head slightly at
the man's soft smile. "What?"

"That is the first you've called me Captain since you found us," Treville replied.

Aramis looked down, then shoved his fingers through his hair, wincing as he brushed against the stitches in his hairline.

"You...are our Captain," he said quietly. "You just have to remember that."

Treville frowned, a hand resting on his wounded leg. "d'Artagnan said something similar to me just before you arrived."

"Aramis," Porthos called. "Come with me to get water. Some air'll help you...get creative."

Aramis felt a smile tug at his mouth and he nodded, accepting his friend's hand up. Porthos always knew how to read him. He glanced back at the three men sitting or lying on the stone floor, the fire from the basin tossing shadows across their expressions. Bending to grab the empty water skins, his eyes fell on the cross d'Artagnan had been wearing. The smile slipped from his face as the memory of the night he gave that to d'Artagnan began to resurface.

His leg had stiffened up in the time he'd been treating d'Artagnan and as he and Porthos made their way through the rubble-filled, dark courtyard, Aramis tried not to wince as he worked out the muscles. The smell of death permeated the air around them as they worked their way carefully around the debris. Aramis pointedly tried not to think about the two bodies Treville said were buried beneath the crumbled stone, though they hadn't been there long enough to cause that unique smell of sickeningly sweet rot he associated with death.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, warning of the possibility of a returning storm. Porthos was quiet until they reached the wooden doors and climbed across the rubble to exit the abbey. The cloud-scattered moonlight turned the path to the iron gate silvery, the sound of the river beckoning them forward.

"Tough spot we're in," Porthos said as they slid through the gate.

"Not going to argue that point," Aramis sighed, making his way to the river.

He knelt on the bank and leaned forward, filling one of the water skins. The night felt heavy, as though the Heavens were weighted with tears. He felt the storm coming, felt dread woven through the cool wind and tripping along the swift flow of the river. It made him want to fight something—anything. It made him want to scream and hide and destroy and protect all at once.

"Been thinking one of us should 'ead back," Porthos said after several moments of silence, standing guard, his thumbs hooked in his weapons belt. "Gather reinforcements."

"By someone, you mean you, I presume?"

"I'm the only one of us not wounded in some way," Porthos pointed out. "Makes sense."

"What, to send you out there—alone—when a lunatic is not one mile away, waiting for us to make a move like that?" Aramis scoffed, shaking his head. "We are stronger together."

"We're trapping ourselves in here, Aramis," Porthos hissed, leaning down to gather one of the full water skins. "d'Artagnan won't be able to ride anytime soon; we need help."

Aramis' shoulders sagged and he rested his arm on his bent knee. He didn't want to say it out loud—
that Porthos leaving would take away his balance—but the thought of surviving in the abbey without Porthos' reassuring presence chilled him.

"Don't leave," he said, his voice directed toward the river. It was the most he could bring himself to say.

Porthos didn't reply for a moment, and when he did, his voice was low and gruff—a tell that he was shoving emotion deep. "Laroche would be a fool to attack at night anyway."

They both knew the exact opposite was true, but it was a comforting lie.

"C'mon," Porthos reached down for Aramis' shoulder and pulled him to his feet. "We've a Gascon to save."

Upon entering the abbey once more, Aramis was quick to pick up on the sounds of distress coming from the alcove where his friends were hidden. He and Porthos hurried over, noting that Treville and Athos had managed to find more torches and stationed them around the small room, lighting it considerably, but unfortunately heating it as well.

"Constance…," d'Artagnan whispered, his face flushed and sweaty, eyes pressed tightly closed, his movements restless. "Don't. Please…m-me for her…."

The distress on Athos' face was all Aramis needed to see to know the lad's fever had spiked. Athos sat where he had before, gripping d'Artagnan's hand in one of his, arm shaking with the effort of holding the younger man still.

"He's been muttering like this for several minutes," Treville reported. "We gave him more water, but —"

"He wouldn't swallow it," Athos muttered.

Aramis dropped down across from his friend, noting that Athos' expression was distant, his eyes directed toward d'Artagnan, but fixed on nothing.

"Athos," Aramis said softly. "Let Porthos clean up your head."

"I'm not leaving him," Athos replied dully.


"Constance…." d'Artagnan called again, voice wrecked, eyes rolling madly beneath closed lids, lines of pain drawing years on his skin. "Please."

Aramis swallowed tightly, relieved when Athos finally allowed Porthos to ease him away and clean the bullet graze. He reached for the bandage and was dismayed to see that his hand was trembling. To his surprise, Treville reached over and grasped his wrist in a gentle grip.

"Aramis," the quiet of Treville's voice punctuated by another rumble of thunder. "Steady. He's still with us."

Aramis closed his eyes, pulling in a slow breath, then looked over to where Athos sat against the wall, Porthos wiping at his forehead with what appeared to be the same neck scarf that had led them to finding Treville and d'Artagnan. Athos simply tipped his head in a brief nod as the cooler wind of the renewed storm cut through the dismantled abbey and tossed the flames of their torches and basin fire sideways.
Exhaling, Aramis shut down the part of his mind that saw his fellow soldiers as friends, *brothers*, and shifted into the mindset that had helped him survive a massacre at Savoy, helped him wake each day knowing the Queen—*Anne*—would never be by his side, helped him accept that his son would be raised by another man.

He closed his heart, narrowed his focus, and simply *moved*.

Pulling the wrappings from around d'Artagnan's side, Aramis grimaced at the smell of the still-opened wound, the packing having soaked up the seeping blood and pus. Looking through his bag, he validated that what he'd brought with him would possibly stave off infection, but wouldn't clean up a wound this far along. d'Artagnan needed something more if he was going to deny Laroche the death the other man had planned.

"The infection has taken hold," Aramis said as rain began to fall, hesitantly at first, but growing in intensity as he stood and looked unseeingly across the darkened courtyard. "His body is weakened by blood loss and…," he half-turned, gesturing to the obvious bruises and scrapes that constituted d'Artagnan's abused body.

Porthos stood, making his way over to stand next to Aramis. "I will ride for a physician," he declared.

"Laroche and his men are still out there," Aramis argued. "Even if you could slip by them, how would you sneak a physician back without drawing their attention?"

"I'm crafty," Porthos argued. "I can do this. 'sides, last I checked, you weren't my Captain."

"We have no Captain," Athos remarked dully, his body sagging against the wall where Porthos had left him, his eyes on Treville.

"Do you know how close the next town with a physician is?" Treville asked, using the wall behind him to gain his feet, leaving d'Artagnan's side for the first time since they'd reclaimed the abbey.

Porthos shook his head once, a frown darkening his swarthy features.

"Turquant," Aramis stated. "If this is Fontevrault, then ride north, about three miles, to Turquant."

Porthos looked back at d'Artagnan's restless, sweaty form and asked, "Will 'e make it that long?"

Before Aramis could answer, a bullet ricocheted against the upper edge of the still-standing outer wall of the courtyard. All four men flinched and reached for their swords.

"Musketeers!"

"It's Laroche," Treville said, limping forward so that he stood next to Porthos.

Athos seemed to materialize next to Aramis, the four of them making a human wall between the danger and their fallen comrade.

"You will come out and fight," Laroche called over the sound of the rain. His voice sounded shrill, edged with not a little insanity.

"d'Artagnan was right," Athos muttered. "The man is a mad bastard."

"We will allow one of you to live," Laroche continued. His voice was distant, but close enough Aramis reasoned he was on their side of the river.
The barrel of a musket edged over the outer wall, gleaming off of the flashes of lightning still captured in the clouds. It seemed Laroche was testing them for weaknesses. His movements slow enough to be almost imperceptible, Aramis loaded his arquebus.

"You are outnumbered. We know there are five of you, counting the two sacrifices," Laroche continued to shout over the growing storm.

Porthos looked askance at Treville. "Sacrifices?"

Treville pointed toward the splintered post in the center of the courtyard. "I was tied to that; we were to have blown up with the abbey. Laroche intended us to be the sacrifice that paved the way for his revenge against Rochefort."

"I'm gonna kill 'im," Porthos snarled.

"Musketeers!" Laroche called again.

"How did you free yourself?" Athos asked calmly, as if they were watching a garden party, not listening to a madman scream through a thunderstorm. The edge of battle always seemed to settle the older man.

Aramis shifted slightly until he was positioned just behind Porthos, resting his extended arm on his friend's shoulder. Porthos surreptitiously pressed his fingers against his ears.

"I didn't," Treville said, crossing his arms and scanning the remainder of the outer wall. "d'Artagnan fought and killed one man. Laroche escaped. d'Artagnan freed me."

Aramis fired. The musket barrel that had cleared the outer wall tipped and clattered into the interior of the courtyard as the would-be sharpshooter fell backwards.

Lightning flashed. The four Musketeers stood steady, weapons up.

"You will fight me, Musketeers!" Laroche shrieked. "It is the only way!"

"Athos!"

Aramis blinked at the familiar voice. "Is that Lyon?" he asked.

"I do believe so," Athos replied mildly.

"Athos, they will let you ride back to Paris," Lyon called, sounding closer than Laroche. "You just have to release the others to Laroche."

"Oh, is that all?" Aramis shrugged, looking over at Athos. "In that case, what are you waiting for?"

"It is the only way!" Lyon shouted. "The only way he will spare us!"

"course it's 'is own skin 'e's after saving," Porthos growled. "Traitor. I'll kill 'im."

"I thought you wanted to kill Laroche?" Aramis commented, shifting to see around to the other side of the unprotected courtyard. A blade tipped the crest of the wall, and Aramis saw a leg slung over the stone in an attempt to breech the edge.

"I can 'ave a list," Porthos readied his arequebus and handed it to Aramis, trading it for the spent weapon.
"Two people isn't much of a list," Athos replied, stepping smoothly sideways as Aramis sighted the next target.

Aramis fired. The man cried out in surprised pain and fell into the courtyard, crashing against the statue that graced that corner and pulling it down on top of him.

"Don't worry. There's plenty of people on the list," Porthos declared, taking the spent arequebus from Aramis and handing him another loaded one.

"You have sent two men," Athos suddenly bellowed into the storm. "And we have killed them both."

"I have more men at my disposal," Laroche shouted back.

"His men are…," Treville frowned, "scarily devoted."

"You cannot barricade yourselves in there indefinitely!" Laroche shrieked.

As though the universe were claiming the side of the Musketeers, lightning seemed to target the tree standing just outside the abbey, felling one of the larger branches. It crashed down across from the wooden doors they'd used to gain entrance to the abbey, blocking the only easy entrance. Aramis heard the horses Porthos had picketed at the back of the abbey whinny shrilly in fear.

"There go the 'orses," Porthos muttered.

"Looks as though the storm says differently," Athos called back when the chaos of the lightning strike had settled a bit.

The four men waited several beats, then Porthos glanced sideways at Aramis. Nodding to each other, they drew their swords. Aramis grabbed his hand-held scope from the pile of things at his saddle bag and they set out into the rain, crouched low as they crossed the courtyard. When they reached the far wall, Porthos gave Aramis a leg up, the slimmer man setting his hat on Porthos' bare head before he peered over the edge of the courtyard wall, his scope pressed to one eye.

"See anything?" Porthos grunted, balancing Aramis' weight.

"They're crossing back over the river," Aramis reported, flinching back as lightning flashed, temporarily dazzling his eyes. "I count…ten."

"See the dead one?"

"Can't see the one that fell on the other side," Aramis replied. "Looks like they're turning back toward the cave. Probably waiting out the storm."

"Soon as the rain ends, we're in for it," Porthos muttered.

Aramis tapped Porthos to lower him. "We should check to make sure the one that fell in here isn't a threat."

They made their way to the opposite corner of the courtyard, finding the man who'd almost gotten in. The statue had crushed his skull, blood mixing with rain and painting the grayish marble a washed out pink. Porthos wrinkled his nose in disgust at the rotting corpse of the rabbit that had fallen from the statue. He reared back to kick it away from the body when Aramis called out.

"Wait!"
Porthos halted mid kick, looking back at Aramis in surprise, the sharpshooter's wide-brim hat still covering the big man's curls.

"I have an idea," Aramis scrambled over to the rabbit, turning it over with the tip of his sword.

The belly had been sliced open, blood completely drained from the body cavity. Inside, maggots churned around the putrid flesh making Aramis want to gag. Instead, he patted his empty pockets, then reached up to Porthos' weapons belt and grabbed one of the empty gunpowder cartridges.

"What in the bloody 'ell are you doing?" Porthos exclaimed.

"Being creative," Aramis replied, tossing a grin up at Porthos, his wet hair clinging to his forehead.

Porthos didn't respond; he simply pulled Aramis sopping hat from his own head and clapped it gently down on his friend's. They hurried back to the shelter where Athos and Treville waited. Athos had returned to d'Artagnan's side and was trying to force the younger man to take in water. Aramis saw that some made it past the lad's wounded, trembling lips but most spilled down his chin and neck, further soaking his tangled black hair.

"Get the cloths—as many as you can find—and wet them with the cool water," Aramis said, dripping rain on the stone and over d'Artagnan's shivering body.

"What is that?" Athos asked of the cartridge Aramis held as he moved to do as he was asked.

"You don't want to know," Aramis replied, taking one of the small leather sacks from his pile of supplies and emptying the herbs within into the cup they'd been using to ply d'Artagnan with the pain tonic. "Athos, get behind him. Hold him up."

Moving to obey, Athos handed the cool, wet rags to Treville. Dimly, Aramis registered Porthos moving around them, readying each weapon they had near: loading the one musket and three arquebuses, setting swords and main gauche out for an easy retrieval, pulling gun powder and lead balls in from the reach of the rain.

As though they each had been handed orders, the men moved in sync, in protection, in hope of some level of salvation.

"Use the rags to keep him as cool as possible," Aramis tossed a glance toward Treville. Pulling the cloths he used to load his musket from his cartridge belt, he unrolled the material until it was at its thinnest. "This is going to...well, hurt might be too small a word. But it just may save his life."

Taking a deep breath, Aramis pulled the packing from the open wound, wincing in sympathy as d'Artagnan sucked in a breath, feeling the discomfort even while unconscious. He cleaned away the seeping blood, then, slit one of the thin cloths and laid it over the wound so that the edges were lightly covered, the swollen, infected opening in his friend's skin still exposed. Emptying the contents of the cartridge into the wound, he covered it by another of the thin cloths to ensure air still got in but that everything stayed centered on the wound.

"Maggots?" Athos choked out, his face twisted in disgust.

"Brilliant," Treville commended him. "Barbaric, but...brilliant."

"They should clean the infection," Aramis replied. "It might give us a chance to get ahead of it."

d'Artagnan flinched in Athos's arms, causing the older man to hold him more tightly. Treville handed Athos one of the rags and the other man used it to wipe the dried blood from d'Artagnan's face and
neck, soothing him with the repetitive strokes. d'Artagnan groaned, eyes flicking as he became more aware.

When his eyes shot open, Aramis reached out to protect the cloths from the young man's flailing hands, but soon realized it wasn't the pain of their attempted healing technique that had his dark eyes blowing wide with panic. He was looking passed them, out into the storm, the lightning intermittently illuminating his wounded features.

"It's the storm," Treville whispered, continuing his ministrations. "He was able to ignore it before because he had something to focus on."

"Like bringing down a cable tower with his bare hands?" Athos retorted, shifting the leather straps of his jacket so that they didn't press into d'Artagnan's bare skin.

Treville lifted a shoulder. "He had a horse, too."

Athos rolled his eyes, refocusing his attention on the young man resting against him. Aramis looked at the amount of tonic powder he had left and frowned. Nodding toward the hot water, he bade Treville pour some into the herb-filled mug.

"This won't send him under," he said softly, "but it may soothe him enough he can sleep and might stop the infection from worsening."

Treville handed the cup to Athos, who tried to prop it against d'Artagnan's lips, cursing when the younger man jerked his head to the side, sloshing some of the liquid.

"Let me," Aramis said, taking the cup from Athos, and once more leaning close to d'Artagnan until the lad's eyes focused on his face. "d'Artagnan. Can you hear me?"

"There's...there's a storm," d'Artagnan rasped, his wrecked voice sending a stab of pain through Aramis' carefully constructed walls. "Get them inside, Aramis."

"No one's out there," Aramis shook his head. "We are all safe."

Lightning flashed again and d'Artagnan flinched, the cloths on his side shifting slightly. His face twisted with pain and his eyes flickered, looking down the length of his body toward his wound.

Aramis touched his cheek.

"d'Artagnan. Look at me."

The Gascon obeyed.

"I need you to drink this."

"Aramis, the rain..."

"Is nothing," Aramis replied, remembering a time when he'd said the same before to the young Gascon. "It's just rain, d'Artagnan. Just rain."

Aramis saw Athos tighten his arms, holding the young man's back against his chest, d'Artagnan's dark head tucked beneath Athos' chin. Aramis leaned the cup against d'Artagnan's lips and encouraged him to drink the whole thing. Breathless, d'Artagnan sagged back against Athos, wincing, his hand drifting to his side.

"Hurts." He gasped slightly, arching a bit away from Athos, his eyes frantically searching the small
alcove.

"d'Artagnan," Athos spoke up, taking over as Aramis sat back, cleaning up the supplies he'd organized nearby. His hand brushed against the cross d'Artagnan had been wearing and he picked it up, turning it over in his hand as he listened to Athos. "Remember who you are," he coached as d'Artagnan closed his eyes, biting his lip to stifle a groan. "You are a Musketeer of France. You are a soldier. You are strong."

d'Artagnan nodded, but Aramis saw his fist tremble as he curled his fingers away from the pain in his side.

"Be strong now, d'Artagnan," Athos said softly. "Be strong as you were for me when I wasn't strong enough for myself."

"Athos," d'Artagnan nearly whimpered, his muscles tightening in pain. "Ahh! Shit, this hurts..." He panted, eyes closed tightly, and licked his dry lips. "Feels like...something's...tearing...."

"Easy," Athos soothed, crossing his arms so that he grasped one of d'Artagnan's wrists in each hand, holding him firmly, but gently. "Just breathe. With me. Breathe."

Aramis watched as the lad fought to obey his mentor. On impulse, he hung the cross back around d'Artagnan's neck, resting it against his and Athos' crossed hands. d'Artagnan's eyes rolled beneath his closed lids and his hammering breaths gave way to low mutterings as his muscles quivered.

"What is he saying?" Athos asked, looking up at Aramis. "Have you taught him Latin?"

"That isn't Latin," Aramis shook his head, frowning.

Treville lay one of the cooler cloths across d'Artagnan's sweaty forehead and murmured something to the young man in what appeared to be the same language d'Artagnan was whispering. Understanding dawned and Aramis' shoulders relaxed.

"Gascon," he said, glancing at Treville. "You speak it as well," he remembered.

"What are you saying to him?" Athos asked, looking over at Treville.

"Just what Aramis did," Treville revealed. "He's worried about the storm. I told him it was just rain."

After several moments, d'Artagnan visibly relaxed, but Athos didn't release him.

"When the storm ends, they'll be comin' for us," Porthos said, one foot propped on a fallen piece of wall, his arms crossed over his bent knee as he leaned forward to peer into the rain. "Can't tell—could be circling 'round back even now."

"What do you suggest, Porthos?" Athos demanded, calling the big man's attention toward him. "We ride for the physician we risk exposing one of our number and weakening those left behind. We cannot make it back to Paris with d'Artagnan."

"We can attack 'em," Porthos stated, his dark eyes heavy and serious as he studied his Lieutenant. "Cut down their number."

"Four against ten?" Aramis asked, considering.

"We've faced worse," Porthos pointed out.

For a moment everyone was silent, the constant, heavy rain the only sound in the small alcove.
Aramis checked the cloths positioned over d'Artagnan's wound, keeping the maggots in place. He couldn't deny Porthos' soldier's instinct, but he didn't want to leave d'Artagnan, not yet. Not when he was so close to actually saving the young man's life.

"Aramis," Treville spoke up, startling him. "How long do the, uh…do they have to stay on the wound?"

Aramis set his hat aside, shoving his fingers through his rain-tangled curls. "A few hours, at least. If they're to do any good."

Pressing his lips forward in thought, Treville nodded, then pushed awkwardly to his feet, shifting his weight to his unwounded leg.

"According to our King, I am no longer your Captain," he said, hands resting on his hips, eyes on the ground. "But I would like to think I am still your leader. If you are in agreement, I say we give Aramis three hours, and then reassess."

Aramis let his gaze shift from Athos and then over to Porthos, evaluating their expressions. He knew Porthos was anxious; but he also believed separating now would spell their end.

"Three hours," Aramis nodded, waiting until Porthos met his eyes.

"Three hours," Porthos agreed, collecting another arquebus and turning his gaze back out to the rain, staying on alert.

Treville looked down at Athos who simply nodded back at his former Captain, then released one of d'Artagnan's wrists to collect the cross and turn it over.

"Aramis," Athos said quietly. "Tell me about the cross."

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**Ten Months Ago**

*Aramis woke with a gasp, sheets pooling around his bare waist as he sat forward, an aborted cry choking him into silence. His chest heaving as he fought to steady his breath, he looked wildly around the unfamiliar bedchamber, trying to find something that anchored him. His heart hammered in his ears, the mist of his dreams—blood on the snow, bodies sprawled around him, the slumped retreat of a defeated man—hung like smoke in the shadowed room.*

A hand slid across the bed, brushing his wrist with soft fingers and he forced himself not to flinch away.

"It's too early, Love." A soft voice, heavy with sleep, floated through the gray light of dawn filtering through the cracks in the worn shutters. "Come here."

The bed shifted and Aramis looked over to see a pretty brunette lying next to him. She turned to her side, the sheet slipping to reveal ample breasts, and rested her arm on the curve of her hips. Her eyes were puffy from sleep, her lips pressed out in a pout, and Aramis knew immediately why he'd chosen her as his distraction last night.

Before his body could respond to her suggestive posture, he turned and climbed from her bed, standing naked in her room as he tried to remember where he'd tossed his clothes. His companion made a dissatisfied noise behind him, but Aramis ignored her until he found his breeches, then his shirt. As he made his way around the room, collecting his things and pulling them on, she huffed and sat up, moving to her window and opening the shutters, seemingly uncaring about who saw her state
of undress.

Once fully dressed, his weapons belt clutched in one hand, Aramis made his way to her side, kissing her smooth cheek.

"A soldier's work is never done," he whispered apologetically.

"I can make the dreams go away, Aramis," she replied, turning and pressing herself against him. "If you'd only trust me."

Aramis stared at her eyes: blue, painted with kohl, aged in a way that made him feel transparent. He tried in vain to remember her name.

"You are probably right," he said, pressing his lips to hers before stepping away. "But, alas, I don't trust anyone."

He set his hat on his head and left her chamber, making his way through the cold, empty tavern and out into the unfeeling Paris morning. One week prior, he'd buried a friend. A brother. One week prior, he'd almost lost his Captain to that same friend. And since that day, sleep had been as elusive as peace.

Buckling his weapons belt around his long coat, the tails brushing the tops of his boots, Aramis instinctively glanced around him, checking the still-dark corners and alleys as he made his way down the street toward the garrison. A palpable sense of dread pressed against him as he headed back toward the only home he'd known for the last five years. Despite his declaration to Treville at Marsac's gravesite, the life of a soldier was becoming difficult for him to find balance within.

Marsac hadn't been a brother to him in the same sense he now saw Porthos or Athos, but he'd been present at the moment Aramis' life was changed. He'd been part of what changed him, the knowledge that it could all be taken away, that when power was in the balance the lives of soldiers were expendable.

"Wondered if you'd make it back this time."

Porthos' quiet words came at him from the shadow of the garrison's entrance. For a stuttering moment, Aramis froze, his heartbeat matching the flight of a startled bird. He searched for the swarthy man's familiar cowl. Porthos stepped forward, a small dagger in one hand, an apple in the other.

"Thought maybe you'd found a nice wench, settle down, work at the tavern."

"Don't be ridiculous," Aramis scoffed, his heart rate slowing. "If anything, I'd own the bloody tavern."

"Course," Porthos bounced a nod, rotating on his heel to follow Aramis into the garrison courtyard. "What was I thinking?"

Several men were scattered around the yard, even this early in the morning. Aramis saw that d'Artagnan was present, his feet on the bench, seated on the long, wooden common table, in deep conversation with Serge, their cook. Athos was up at the balcony just outside of Treville's office, leaning on the rail, a cup in his hand—no prizes guessing the contents therein—staring down at them.

"I see our young Gascon is here early," Aramis commented as he made his way toward the post near the ammunitions bunker. Serge hadn't set out food quite yet; Aramis figured he'd wait to approach
the table until there was something other than company that drew him forward.

"Never left," Porthos replied, leaning an arm against the post in a slouch, his steady presence silently encouraging Aramis into the same posture. "Can't tell if 'e's tryin' to avoid the Boniceaux or if 'e's just reluctant to leave after that business with Marsac."

"Why would Marsac have anything to do with d'Artagnan?" Aramis asked testily, crossing his arms over his chest and hiding his scowl beneath the brim of his hat.

"Got nothin' to do with Marsac," Porthos elaborated, glancing askance at Aramis, "an' everythin' to do with you."

"I'm fine."

"Right," Porthos bounced his head again. "Which is why you haven't stayed at the garrison longer than two minutes since you buried 'im."

"No assignments," Aramis lifted his free shoulder in a shrug he knew Porthos would hear if not see. "No reason to stay."

"'Cept us," Porthos replied.

Aramis kept quiet.

"'ow much sleep you get last night?"

"I wasn't focused on sleep," Aramis replied coyly, an empty grin tugging up the corner of his mouth and coloring his words.

"Aramis." Porthos sighed his name, rotating his shoulder on the post until he could face his friend. "I know the nightmares are back. I know the thought of Savoy sends you into a panic."

Aramis frowned at the coil of ice that instantly spiraled from his gut to his spine and began to traverse the path to his throat, threatening to choke him. Porthos' worried eyes made him angry.

He wasn't a cause for concern. He was fit. He was a soldier.

"You know nothing of it." He bit off the words, shutting out Porthos as surely as if he'd walked away.

It wasn't fair, he knew. But at the moment he couldn't be bothered to care if Porthos was concerned about his well-being. It was all he could do to stay functioning and able to execute a passing performance of his usual self.

"Aramis!"

Treville's voice echoed through the garrison, calling Aramis' attention to the fact that he'd missed the moment food had been set out on the table. He looked up to where Treville stood at the staircase landing, noting that Athos stayed where he was on the balcony as though he'd grown roots. Porthos hadn't looked away from him, his eyes dark and dangerous, Aramis' dismissal writhing between them like a living thing.

"My office," Treville continued. "Now."

Aramis stared for a moment at Porthos, willing the other man to look away. When Porthos refused, Aramis stepped forward, bumping shoulders to push passed him. He didn't look back, knowing
Porthos would turn to follow him with his eyes.

Aramis was angry; the problem was, the person triggering the anger was dead. Porthos was simply an easy and willing—God, he was so damn willing—target.

"Captain?" Aramis called, brushing passed Athos without so much as a sideways glance.

"I need you to ride to Calais and retrieve Bishop Abelèle."

Aramis frowned, tilting his head. "Not Henri Abelèle?"

Treville dropped the paper he'd held in his hand—presumably with the orders printed on them—to the surface of his desk and peered up at Aramis with narrowed eyes. "The same."

Aramis sighed.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Treville asked, arching a brow and glancing at the door Aramis hadn't bothered to close. Athos hadn't moved from his post; it was clear he could hear every word.

"Sir, Bishop Abelèle is a...friend of Cardinal Richelieu," Aramis began.

"I am aware," Treville replied, his eyebrow nearly hitting his hairline. "Thus the reason for the King's personal request that he have a Musketeer escort back to Paris."

"We...have a history, Sir," Aramis tried to explain. "From...before I joined the Musketeers."

"Then I have chosen well for this assignment," Treville replied. "You will leave within the hour."

Aramis sighed again, shoving his hat back onto his curls and turning on his heel to leave.

"And, Aramis?" Treville called, halting him. "Take d'Artagnan."

At this, Aramis noticed that Athos straightened.

"Why?"

Treville drew up his chin, clasping his hands behind his back. "I was not aware that my orders required explanation."

"It's just...," Aramis scrambled for words to justify his surprise and hesitation. "It's a simple escort. And...d'Artagnan isn't a Musketeer."

"He's shown his value in a number of missions, has he not?"

"Yes, Sir, but—"

"And you like the boy, do you not?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Then I don't believe anything further needs to be said."

Aramis exhaled. Athos had turned around on the balcony and was now standing facing him in the opened door.

"Sir, why not Porthos or Athos?" Aramis tried one more time. There was nothing wrong with d'Artagnan, but the lad was...curious. And raw. And he would talk and ask questions and Aramis
was just not ready for that, damn it.

"Because." Treville tore the word from the air and spat it in Aramis' direction. "You are an open wound bleeding all over everyone you come into contact with, including Porthos and Athos."

Aramis staggered back a step, gaping in surprise at his Captain's raw honesty.

"I know my men, Aramis," Treville continued. "You need to get your mind right before I allow you to compromise those two further."

Aramis felt anger surge up hot and bright within him. "So d'Artagnan's a sacrifice you're willing to make, is that it?"

Treville settled back on his heels, his eyes clouding over, disguising whatever truth might be caught in his words.

"It's not as if I haven't done it before," he replied, his voice devoid of inflection but recalling Vadim in Aramis' mind all the same. "You need to find balance, Aramis," he continued, his voice softening. "And you aren't going to where your brothers are attempting to rewrite history to protect you."

Aramis pulled in a shaky breath, staring for a bit longer at Treville before turning and facing Athos once more, daring him to say something. To his surprise, Athos pivoted on one leg, stepping aside so that he could pass. Moving from Treville's office to the balcony, Aramis challenged his friend.

"You agree to this?"

Athos' blue eyes, always weighted in memory and pain, skimmed his face. "Ride safe," he said quietly, then turned back to lean against the railing.

To Aramis' surprise, d'Artagnan was quiet as they left the garrison and made their way through Paris toward the road that led to Calais. He'd almost suspect the lad had been coached were it not for the fact he'd seen the Gascon's every movement from the moment he was summoned from his conversation with Serge and readied their horses. It made Aramis feel darker somehow, that d'Artagnan was able to read his emotions so easily after only a few months around them.

There was something...genuine about the lad. Every emotion laid bare, every reaction instinctive, uncalculating. It was more than youth, Aramis reasoned as they kicked their horses into a canter on the open road. At d'Artagnan's age, Aramis was already quite skilled at the art of manipulation. He had also left his home and family in a fit of rebellion and had sought out the Musketeers in lieu of a monastery.

No, with d'Artagnan, it wasn't mere innocence of time. Aramis suspected that growing up on a farm in the idyllic Gascony proffered him no reason to hide a piece of himself, as Aramis did. As Porthos and Athos did. d'Artagnan's first impulse was to reach out. So it felt odd to have him simply ride quietly at Aramis' side.

"Bishop Abelè is not exactly a pleasant man," Aramis spoke up as they stopped to water their horses.

d'Artagnan looked up from where he tugged gently at his horse's ear while the animal drank. "You know him?"

"I knew him," Aramis offered. "A long time ago, when I was a little younger than you."

d'Artagnan lifted his chin in acknowledgement, but didn't press. Aramis felt unbalanced by this; it was unusual for the lad to stay so quiet. Curiosity was his second language.
"I thought you should know before we get to Calais," Aramis elaborated.

"I appreciate that," d'Artagnan nodded, swinging aboard his horse with enviable grace.

They rode on, the trees creating a bit of a canopy that dappled the sunlight before them. To ensure their mounts would have the energy to make the trip they walked them for a bit, riding side-by-side, boot tips nearly touching as they swayed in the saddle with the motion of the big Friesians. The air was comfortable enough that d'Artagnan shed his dark cloak, leaving him in only the tanned leathers. Aramis decided to keep the light blue of his Musketeer cloak visible, in case they were spotted.

The quiet turned out to be less soothing than Aramis first imagined. He almost wished he could goad d'Artagnan into an annoying barrage of questions. There were voices in the quiet, cries of soldiers shouting with surprise and pain. Commands of too-green Sergeants sending men to their deaths. A plea for someone to stay, to not walk away and leave him bleeding in the cold—

"Aramis!"

d'Artagnan's shout coupled with the grip on his shoulder had Aramis snapping his head upright, looking around in dazed confusion.

"You were dreaming."

"Dreaming?" Aramis blinked over at his young companion, still astride his horse. In fact, they both were, though the horses had stopped. "I fell asleep?"

"By the look of it, sleep has been in short supply for you lately." d'Artagnan had yet to release his shoulder. Aramis suspected he'd started to topple from his horse. "We can stop for the night; we passed an Inn not long ago."

Aramis straightened, pulling away from d'Artagnan's supportive hand and lifting his hat from his head to rub his hair. "No, I'm fine."

d'Artagnan sighed, but didn't argue and for that Aramis was grateful. He didn't really have the energy to point out that he had plenty of energy. They just needed to get Abelè and get back.

"Sooner we're free of that man, the better," Aramis grumbled, kicking his horse into a trot.

"I've never met a Bishop," d'Artagnan stated as he caught up. "There was a priest in Lupiac—friend of my father's, actually—who attended to the populace, but…." The shrug was apparent in his voice. "Richelieu is the only other…um, holy man…I've met."

"I wouldn't add Abelè to your list of holy men," Aramis stated. "There's a reason he and Richelieu are friends. They're both cut from the same arrogant, entitled cloth."

"Kind of gives religion a bad name," d'Artagnan commented.

At that, Aramis pulled his horse to a walk once more, turning in the saddle to face the younger man.

"There is a difference between religion and faith, d'Artagnan," he said, surprising himself with the fervor of his own words. It was as though someone else were speaking and using his mouth as their instrument. "Do not assess the Lord based on the actions of some weak men who claim to do his bidding."

d'Artagnan blinked in surprise. "I've…I've never really put much stock in either, to be honest."
Aramis tipped his head in question. "You attend church, yes?"

"I did when my father was alive." He lifted a shoulder. "I do when situations…call for it." He looked down the road, away from Aramis. "Believing in something brings more pain than anything else."

At that, he kicked his horse forward and Aramis was left to follow, his mind buzzing with this new information their seemingly innocuous recruit had just provided him. They reached Calais at dusk, riding directly to the abbey where Bishop Abelè was residing. They were told to wait in the yard while the Bishop was summoned.

Night had cloaked the surrounding land when someone finally returned to let them know that the Bishop will depart in the morning. Aramis took a slow breath and nodded; he'd expected this.

"Where can my comrade and I find food and shelter?" he asked the acolyte who'd been assigned the thankless task of messenger.

Frowning with uncertainty, the acolyte pointed to where they could stable their horses and then suggested they check in at the kitchen for food and a bunk. As it happened, there was one spare bunk near the fireplace inside the kitchen. As they ate the meal offered after their long ride, d'Artagnan suggested Aramis take the bunk.

"I'm good with the loft in the barn," he said.

"You're not sleeping in a barn," Aramis shook his head.

d'Artagnan offered him a grin that transformed his face into that of a boy. "It's fine, Aramis." He glanced at the sour-faced cook and skittering acolyte as they prepared a tray to take, presumably, to the Bishop. "I think I win on company in any case."

They separated, Aramis giving the acolyte instructions to have the Bishop ready to travel by dawn. He lay on the bunk, staring at the dying coals of the fire, trying to quiet his mind, settle his breathing. Porthos always had a way of grounding him, bringing him away from the voices, the frozen forest, reminding him where he was. But he'd turned Porthos away, subconsciously placing upon his friend blame for a death no one could have prevented.

A death Aramis himself had caused.

He could still feel the weight of Marsac in his arms as the other man's strength waned, still see the light leave his eyes as his last breath slipped from parted lips to brush against Aramis' cheek. It was an unnatural weight, one that made his arms tremble, his soul curl within him. One that had his heart screaming in denial.

"Monsieur!"

The word jerked Aramis from his fitful slumber, his breath hammering through parted lips, his chest tight—as though someone were standing on him, pressing him into the cot. He gripped the edge of the small bed and tried to catch his breath, but the more he fought for air, the more elusive it became.

"Please, Monsieur!" It was the acolyte. He was shaking Aramis' shoulder, his eyes wide with fear. "Please, you must stop! He will be here, soon!"

The damn Bishop, Aramis remembered. He tried to sit up, but the world spun crazily around him. His lips began to tingle, his fingertips going numb.

"My f-friend…," he managed before the world around him slipped gray and any sound became
secondary to the roaring in his ears.

A part of him knew he was safe, that he wasn't in that woods in Savoy, that he wasn't wounded and alone, surrounded by the bodies of his friends. But he could still see them. Could still feel the frozen ground beneath him. Still hear their last, gasping cries for help.

"...not there, Aramis. You're here, you're safe."

A warm hand clasped the back of his neck and he felt himself leveraged upright, another hand at his wrist. Nausea churned in his gut as his head was brought level, and then pressed forward until his forehead rested what felt like a shoulder. The hand moved from his wrist to his chest and he felt something tug at his neck.

"Hold this," a familiar voice instructed. Aramis felt the shape of a cross—ornate, delicate, *hers*—slipped into his numb fingers. The warm hand wrapped around his, heat from the other's skin bleeding life back into his. "Breathe. You're not there, Aramis. You're here. You're safe."

The repetition of the words seemed to bring the world back into focus and after a moment Aramis realized that d'Artagnan was kneeling before him in nothing but his breeches and shirt, boots and jacket having been left behind in his effort to reach Aramis when summoned. He was leaning forward, face pressed against the younger man's shoulder, d'Artagnan's strong arm around his back, bracing him.

Aramis drew in a trembling breath, then another. Soon he was able to sit up, his breath becoming measured, steady. d'Artagnan eased slightly away, but didn't release his hand, his dark eyes worried as he watched Aramis get his breath.

"B-Bad dream," Aramis explained.

"About Savoy," d'Artagnan nodded. "You were saying...well, enough to let me know it was about Savoy."

"Marsac...walked away. Just left," Aramis sat back, gently pulling his hand from d'Artagnan's and shoved it into his tangled hair, eyes drifting to the now-cold fire. He felt strangely weightless, hollow. "Bastard couldn't even wait until help came."

"He was afraid, Aramis," d'Artagnan offered, standing up and resting his hands on his hips. "Fear makes people do things they would never normally do."

Aramis cast a quick glance at the young Gascon. "You speak as if you know this from experience."

d'Artagnan simply shrugged. "I listen."

Aramis nodded once, accepting this. His breathing had steadied, his heart beating a normal cadence once more, but his hands stubbornly refused to steady. He curled them into fists, still holding the Queen's gold cross.

"Monsieur!" The acolyte rushed back into the kitchen. "The Bishop is ready to leave."

Aramis nodded. "Give us a moment to gather our—"

"He is ready to leave now!"

Aramis clenched his jaw. "He can just bloody well wait—"
d'Artagnan turned to face the trembling acolyte, cutting Aramis off. "Where is the Bishop's horse?"

"The…the stable, Monsieur. It is the white one."

d'Artagnan nodded. "Please inform him that we will be in the yard with his horse directly."

The acolyte left and d'Artagnan turned back around to face Aramis. "Can you be ready to ride in ten minutes?"

Aramis frowned at the concerned tone d'Artagnan offered. "I'm ready to ride now," he grumbled, pushing to his feet, refusing to stagger as the world shifted roughly around him.

"Good," d'Artagnan lifted his chin. "Grab us some food. I'll see to the horses."

Aramis quickly took care of his morning needs, gathered some bread and cheese in a cloth and took a bracing breath before heading out into the cloudy morning. The overcast sky made it appear earlier than it really was and set a pall on the individuals gathered just outside the abbey. Aramis heard Bishop Abelè before he saw the man. He'd recognize that nasally, affected tone anywhere.

"…cannot imagine the Cardinal would expect me to ride all the way to Paris. Surely he sent a carriage."

"Bishop Abelè," Aramis greeted as smoothly as possible, sweeping off his hat and offering the man a bow.

Abelè's thin face and narrow nose, offset by two of the smallest blue eyes Aramis had ever seen, seemed to paint a white-washed path to the cruel slash of his mouth—which was currently pursed in a distinct snarl of distaste. He turned, his body so bone-thin it seemed to disappear against the shadow of the abbey, and faced Aramis, a white brow arching.

"René?" Abelè questioned, sweeping Aramis with a look that expertly blended curiosity and contempt. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"By request of the King, I am to escort you back to Paris, Monsieur."

"It's Monseigneur, as you well know," Abelè informed him in a bored voice. "And why on Earth would Richelieu send…unless? Can it be true? You are a Musketeer?"

Aramis nodded, forcing himself not to react to the mocking tone. Just then, d'Artagnan appeared, leading their three horses, his dark cloak enhancing his youthful appearance. He smiled solicitously at Bishop Abelè before casting a concerned glance toward Aramis.

"Thomas? Did we hire a new stable boy?" Abelè asked over his shoulder.

"N-No, Bishop," Thomas, the acolyte, answered.

"May I present Charles d'Artagnan of Lupiac in Gascony," Aramis said, stepping forward. "He is with the Musketeers."

Abelè's eyebrow arched. "Is he, now? I wasn't aware that the Musketeers required squires."

"He's not my—"

"May I assist you with your horse, Bishop?" d'Artagnan asked, cutting off Aramis' incensed response.
Smoothly, as though the man hadn't dismissed him as a servant the moment he laid eyes on him, d'Artagnan helped the Bishop mount his horse, then swung aboard his own, tossing Aramis his reins. Aramis looked over at the people gathered outside the abbey, watching the Bishop ride away, visibly relaxing with each step the horse took toward Paris and away from them.

"Enjoy your holiday," he called to them, receiving a small wave from Thomas.

The first few hours of the ride were an exercise in patience. The weather held off, though the sky grew darker the further west they rode, wind picking up and tossing their cloaks around them. Abelê kept up a ceaseless litany of complaints—from the indignity of being forced to ride like a commoner to the fact that the road hadn't been properly maintained. They stopped for food at mid-day and Aramis stayed back, quietly watching as d'Artagnan catered to the Bishop's increasingly ridiculous demands.

"Help me to a shaded spot—there is still enough sun poking through the clouds to cause me to burn."

"Prepare my food—it is ungodly to have my food touch my hands before it's been properly blessed."

"Allow me to rest—I cannot be expected to ride further until my body has recovered from the arduousness of our journey thus far."

Aramis sat far enough from where the Bishop slept—at mid-day, no less—he couldn't be bothered by the man's snoring. d'Artagnan dropped down next to him, folding his legs and resting his elbows on his knees. Head in his hands, he addressed the ground with his plea.

"Tell me how you knew this man before."

Aramis nearly smiled. "I wondered how long it would take you to ask."

"He is insufferable." d'Artagnan looked up, exhaling slowly through clenched teeth. "I don't have much patience left in me."

"You've already shown more than I realized you possessed. You are usually more…." Aramis tilted his head, searching for a word.

"Impetuous?" d'Artagnan filled in, glancing over with a small grin. "That seems to be Athos' favorite word when training me lately."

The Bishop's snores grew louder and the two men shared a glance of annoyance. Aramis decided to take pity on the lad; he'd earned it.

"When I was a boy," Aramis began, gathering up a stick and digging small holes into the ground. "I tried my hand at stealing."

"Didn't go well, I take it?"

Aramis shook his head. "Bishop Abelê presided over my hometown at the time, and my father was a very pious man. He dragged me to confession and when Abelê heard what I had attempted to do, he told my father the only solution was to beat the sin out of me."

"What the hell did you try to steal?"

"The Magistrate's horse," Aramis grinned. "There…may have been a girl involved."

"Ah, it all becomes clear," d'Artagnan returned the grin.
"At any rate, pious though he may be, my father was not a cruel man. He agreed to have me pay penance at the church. Under the watchful eye of Bishop Abelè."

"How old were you?" d'Artagnan asked.

"Sixteen," Aramis replied. "Abelè was...well, you can guess. I wasn't fit to lick the filth from his boots but I could fix his food, clean his home, care for his animals, run his errands. He even had me sit in confession on his behalf once." Off d'Artagnan's double-take, he continued, "Lucky for me that was the day the widow L'Orene came to confession. I could live off those words for weeks."

"You're impossible," d'Artagnan chuckled.

"It wasn't long after my father declared my penance paid that I left home," Aramis replied. "I encountered Abelè once more before I joined the Musketeers. Unfortunately it was in confession at different parish. Needless to say, he did not absolve me."

"Boy! Come here, boy!"

d'Artagnan sighed, rolling his eyes. "Looks like his highness has woken."

"Let's get him going, shall we?" Aramis stood, reaching down to offer the younger man a hand up. "I want to try to make Paris before this storm hits."

They were able to cover another several miles before the first drops of rain pelted them. Abelè's complaints were loud and unyielding. d'Artagnan's cajoles to keep going only made the miserable man more stubborn. At one point, he pulled his horse to a stand-still and refused to budge. Aramis' fuse—lit hours before—burned down to the quick.

"Listen, old man," he growled, water running in a thin river from the brim of his hat. "If you do not get that horse moving this instant, I will bind your hands and fling you over my saddle, is that clear?"

"Resorting to violence and barbarism as usual, Renee?" Abelè scoffed, the rain making his pale face appear almost gray.

"Monseigneur," d'Artagnan tried once more. "If we could ride just another mile, there is an Inn where we can take shelter. I saw it on the way over."

"This stable boy at least has some sense, Renee," Abelè scoffed.

"He is not a stable boy!" Aramis shouted. "He is a Musketeer recruit and as fine a soldier as I've ever seen."

Aramis ignored d'Artagnan's blink of surprise.

"A dare sight better soldier than you, I'd say," Abelè continued, finally kicking his horse into a walk. "It wasn't him I heard gasping and whimpering in his bunk this morning, afraid of shadows."

Aramis went cold, rage burning his eyes. The only thing that kept him from reaching out and slamming his fist across the man's jaw was d'Artagnan's gently restraining arm.

"Leave it," the young Gascon said, his voice low. "He's a crazy old man, Aramis. He means nothing." Rain splashed from d'Artagnan's lips and Aramis nodded, fighting to unclench his jaw. "Maybe ride ahead and prepare the Inn for our arrival?"

Aramis took d'Artagnan's offer and splashed passed Abelè as he headed toward the Inn. As luck
would have it, the only two rooms were available. Aramis did his best to prepare the young couple for their guest, but when Abelê arrived, the look of shock on the woman's face was only rivaled by the anger on the man's.

"d'Artagnan, Monseigneur Abelê," Aramis greeted. "These are the Dubois, Marie and Etienne, and their son Jean-Marc."

"Woman, draw my bath," Abelê ordered as his cloaks dripped water on her floors. "I will bathe near the fire to warm up."

"Monseigneur," Marie Dubois started. "We would be happy to set your bath up in your room; the fireplace is in our common area."

"Nonsense," Abelê tutted. "I will be more comfortable by the fire."

Marie cast an anxious glance at her son, who was no more than eight. Aramis stepped forward to assert the bath in the room idea once more, but d'Artagnan smoothed the situation over with one suggestion.

"Jean-Marc," he said, crouching down to the boy's eye-level, his dark hair soaked and clinging to his face. "Would you mind helping me with the horses? They're nervous because of the storm."

Jean-Marc and Etienne went to help d'Artagnan with the horses, leaving Aramis to watch over the Bishop as he bathed by the fire. Soon, the man was sufficiently warmed and took his food and wine to his room, leaving Aramis to make his apologies to Marie.

"We all have duties to perform in this life, Monsieur," Marie lifted a shoulder, offering him a small smile. "Some are less rewarding than others."

Moments later, Etienne and Jean-Marc returned from the stables, a new load of wood for the fire in their arms. They shrugged out of their wet cloaks, hanging them by the fire next to Aramis' long coat and pauldron.

"Where is d'Artagnan?" Aramis asked, feeling guilty that he was now warm and dry, feasting on the food and wine the Dubois provided them.

"Still in the stable," Etienne replied. "Said something about soothing the horses during the storm."

"Look what he gave me," Jean-Marc held up a small figure to show his mother.

Aramis tilted his head. "Is that a soldier?"

Jean-Marc nodded. "d'Artagnan said it was his when he was little like me. Said it would protect me." He looked slightly sheepish. "I was scared of the lightning."

"Lightning can be scary," Aramis nodded. He studied the small figure, more surprised that d'Artagnan would have still had such a childhood object still with him than he was that he gave it to the scared boy. "I think I'll go help—"

A loud *boom* followed by the sound of splintering wood cut off Aramis' sentence. Abelê flew from his room, robes swirling, demanding to know what was happening. Everyone ignored him as Etienne opened the door, rain blowing in, and cried out.

"Lightning hit the stables!"
He ran out into the storm, Aramis fast on his heels. Fire erupted from the hole in the barn roof; the smell of ozone filled the air. He could hear the screams of the frightened horses inside and his gut clenched.

"d'Artagnan!" Aramis shouted, plunging into the smoke-filled barn next to Etienne.

"The horses!" d'Artagnan yelled, his voice ragged, coughing breaking through the words. "Get the horses out!"

Aramis joined Etienne in backing the frightened animals nearest to him from their stalls, turning them loose into the rain. It was more important to get them out of the danger; they could round them up later. A beam had fallen down the middle of the structure; d'Artagnan was on the other side, next to his horse, trying to kick a hole into the weakened wall and expose an opening.

Aramis dropped to his belly to crawl beneath the beam and joined the young Gascon in creating an escape. As soon as the hole was big enough, d'Artagnan pushed his horse through, then turned back for the others. Aramis handed him the lead for Abelè's white mount, then turned back for his own.

Smoke swiftly filled the burning structure, choked him, filling his lungs, burning his eyes.

He bent low, coughing roughly, trying to find air and get to the last horse. He felt the animal's shoulder hit his as Etienne freed it, then heard the Innkeeper shout at them to get out. Hands at his waist were both frantic and focused, turning him back toward the escape hatch he and d'Artagnan had created. Suddenly, something shifted above him. Sparks danced before his eyes and the hands at his waist disappeared.

"Aramis! Look out!"

d'Artagnan's scream was frantic, but Aramis didn't have time to figure out which way the warning was directed. A second falling beam crashed down, the edge of it catching the side of his head and shoulder, slamming him to the barn floor in a dizzying rush of heat and pain.

Sound muted.

Air seemed superfluous.

Sight unnecessary.

The world was narrowing to a small tunnel, the light at the end filled with flame and heat.

Dimly, as though it were happening to someone else, Aramis registered his body being lifted, felt himself draped across someone's shoulder. And then he was suddenly surrounded by water and smoke-free air. It smelled so sweet he wanted to cry. His body slid, his hip smacking against the muddy earth, a hand was at his cheek, smoothing his hair from his face.

"Aramis."

The voice was wrecked, low and rough and choked with fear. Aramis felt a compulsion to open his eyes, to see who held him up, out of the mud, but his head pounded an insistent rhythm and his arm burned as though it were on fire and he simply couldn't.

His lips parted as his mouth fell open in surrender, rain filling the hollows of his eyes.

"Please, don't do this!"
The voice bled tears onto his face, mixing with the rain. All too soon, however, Aramis couldn't even feel that anymore. The tunnel narrowed to nothing and Aramis slipped into the dark.

When next he woke, it was thanks to his lungs rebelling the smoke he'd tried vainly to turn into oxygen. He heaved forward, coughing roughly, a hand at his back and chest, steadying him. Blinking his burning eyes, he realized quickly that he was in a bed in only his small clothes, clean sheets and a quilt covering his legs.

"What-?" The word triggered more coughing and a cup of water was handed to him. He drank greedily, looking over with thanks at his caretaker. He was surprised to see Marie Dubois. "Where is d'Artagnan? How long have I been out?"

Marie sat back in the chair next to his bed. "Only a few hours, Monsieur," she reassured him. "Your friend carried you inside and my husband and I tended to your wounds."

Aramis looked down at his bandaged shoulder, then felt his head tentatively. He could imagine the bruise that would paint his cheek and forehead and he flinched away from the burn blistering up around his eye.

"You were very fortunate," Marie continued. "Your young friend was quite worried."

"d'Artagnan…carried me inside?" Aramis asked again, remembering the smoke, the feel of the beam bludgeoning him, the sound of panic in a voice. "Is he okay?"

Marie frowned and Aramis swung his legs over the side of the bed. It was as far as he made it, however, before the world decided to adjust its axis and he was suddenly slumped to the side, his wounded shoulder screaming in protest.

"Please don't move too hastily, Monsieur," Marie protested, helping him roll to his back.

He groaned at the movement, coughing more, the muscles along his chest pulling painfully. When he caught his breath again, he demanded, "Where is he?"

"Your friend is unharmed," Marie reassured him.

"What aren't you telling me?" Aramis managed, keeping his hands flat on the bed until it ceased its indelicate spin. Remembering how he'd woken that morning, he felt the blood drain from his face. "Did I say something in my sleep to upset you?"

Marie smiled softly at him. "You were the perfect gentleman," she assured him. "And a much better patient then you're being now."

"What is it, then?" Aramis demanded, trying to push himself upright again.

Marie huffed, and grabbed the second pillow from next to Aramis, helping him ease up so that he was resting against the headboard.

"Your friend is now out with my husband, rounding up the horses," she told him. "He was unhurt, as I said, but there is something…." She frowned again and Aramis leaned forward. "He appears… haunted."

"Haunted?"

"My father was this way when he returned from fighting the Spanish," Marie told him. "A kind of… lost look in the eye, an unsteady hand, a way of flinching without meaning to."
Aramis blinked, drawing his head back in surprise. She could have been describing Athos. Or himself. But not….

"d'Artagnan was this way?"

Marie nodded, her expression sad. "My father… he saw too much in his battles. Too much death, too much loss. When I asked him how many battles… how much death, he told me ‘one, Marie, it only takes the one.’ And this is what your friend seems to carry with him."

Aramis dragged a hand down his face, carefully testing the burn around his eye.

"I've put salve on your burns," Marie told him, showing him the jar. "We use it on the horses."

Aramis smiled. "Good thinking." Suddenly, he remembered what brought them to the Inn in the first place. He groaned, closing his eyes, a hand at his brow, staving off the ache there. "Oh, hell. Abelè."

Marie's face went cold. "Your Bishop," she clarified.

"Yes," Aramis moved once more to get out of bed. This time the world stayed where it was supposed to. "Where is he?"

"He is in his room. He will not be coming out until it is time for you to leave." Marie's voice had grown hard, shielded.

"What did he do?" Aramis asked, almost afraid of the answer.

He took his breeches from Marie and dressed quickly as she continued to hand him garments, helping him pull his shirt over his bandaged shoulder. There was a blackened tear in the shoulder where the beam had struck him, burning a hole in the cloth.

"You friend was in distress," Marie told him as she helped him dress, "and the Monseigneur… mocked him. My son moved to defend him and the Monseigneur struck him. Etienne would have turned him out for that were it not for your friend."

"What do you mean, d'Artagnan was in distress?" Aramis asked, grunting as he tugged his boot on.

"When he brought you in, Monsieur," Marie told him, handing him his weapons belt, "your friend… he was frantic. It took us showing him that your wounds were not life threatening for him to breathe normally again."

Aramis swallowed, thinking quickly.

"When he returns, may we have the common room? By the fire?"

Marie smiled. "Of course, Monsieur." She sighed, smoothing her skirts. "It has been a very busy day. It will be good to get Jean-Marc to bed and hold my husband in my arms."

Etienne was the first to return. He expressed relief at seeing Aramis up and at the table and apologized for the treatment of the Bishop. Aramis, in turn, toasted the man his thanks and offered extra coin for his troubles. Marie placed blankets on the table and set out another bottle of wine and some stew. Bundling Etienne in a blanket, she pushed her husband back toward their private quarters as Aramis waited for d'Artagnan.

When the young man finally stumbled in, soaked and shivering, Aramis stood up in greeting. The relief on d'Artagnan's face seemed to seep through the lad's whole body, sagging his shoulders and
turning his knees wobbly. He sank down onto the bench next to the table.

"It's good to see you," d'Artagnan exhaled, his long hair plastered to his head and joined his wet clothes in making an impressive puddle on the Dubois floor. "You were...in the fire, I thought...."

"I'm fine," Aramis assured him. "Few bruises, a couple burns. Nothing a little horse salve won't cure."

"H-Horse salve?" d'Artagnan laughed through his chills.

"Never mind," Aramis handed him one of Marie's blankets. "How about you get dried off before you flood the whole Inn?"

d'Artagnan nodded, pushing to his feet and stripping with some difficulty. He removed his boots and shirt, but the breeches had all-but sealed themselves to his skin. Soon, however, he was shivering in his small clothes, wrapped in the proffered blanket. Aramis took him by the shoulder and navigated him to a chair set up next to the fire.

"Here." He handed the young man some stew and a mug of wine. "I've had mine."

"Where's the Bishop?" d'Artagnan asked between bites.

"He's locked in his room," Aramis told him.

"Still?" d'Artagnan's brows bounced upwards in surprise.

"Marie said he...mocked you."

d'Artagnan shook his head. "I may have been a tad...distraught...when I brought you in." He finished his cup of wine and Aramis poured him another. "The Bishop scolded me for," he rolled his eyes, "daring to challenge God for your life."

"The man is about as far from God as you can get," Aramis replied.

"Guess you're right," d'Artagnan set the empty bowl and cup down and leaned closer to the fire, the chilled skin of his arm prickling up in gooseflesh. "There is a reason he's friends with Richelieu."

Aramis sank down on the empty chair next to d'Artagnan's. "We just need to get him back tomorrow and we're free of him."

"What about the trip back to return him to Calais?" d'Artagnan yawned, burrowing deeper into the blanket to stave off the chills.

"Someone else can have the honor," Aramis declared. "Besides, I think Treville only gave this to me to give me some perspective after...well, just after."

"And what about me?" d'Artagnan asked sleepily.

Aramis regarded the young man contemplatively. "I'm not sure," he replied honestly.

But d'Artagnan had nodded off, his dark head tipped forward until his chin met his chest. Aramis sat quietly, letting the lad rest, soaking in the warmth of the fire, his wounds thrumming just below the level of pain that would make him groan aloud. The rain continued; Aramis wondered how badly damaged the barn had been, if the young family would be able to rebuild.

He thought of the Bishop's mocking words to his young friend—that d'Artagnan had challenged...
God for his life. Aramis knew he'd not been wounded that gravely; he'd certainly had much worse. But he also knew how frightening it was to be alone with a wounded brother, knowing there was no external means of rescue. One either challenged God's plan, or appealed to it.

A rather loud clap of thunder echoed just beyond the solid Inn walls and d'Artagnan jerked awake, a cry on his lips. Aramis startled at his young friend's sudden movement and was about to laugh at their combined edginess when he saw d'Artagnan's brown eyes blown almost black with alarm, his hands gripping the edge of the chair, his breath coming in harsh gasps.

Without being told, Aramis knew this was how he appeared when the memories of Savoy took over. He recognized the panic on d'Artagnan's face as surely as if he were looking in a mirror. Shifting from his chair, he knelt in front of the younger man, closing his hand over d'Artagnan's.

"d'Artagnan." He said the name as though it was a full sentence, holding in the syllables everything he needed to say.

"The storm—" d'Artagnan's voice was a rasp across shards of shattered glass.

"It's just rain," Aramis said quietly, keeping his voice steady. "Just rain. Nothing more."

d'Artagnan pressed his lips together in an obvious bid for control, the chair quaking slightly beneath the grip of his trembling hands. Thinking back to that morning, to the way the lad managed to finally ground him, Aramis pulled the older cross he'd always worn—before the Queen had gifted him with her token—from around his neck. He pried d'Artagnan's hand from the chair and wrapped that lad's cold fingers around it.

"Feel that?" he asked.

d'Artagnan nodded, exhaling, eyes darting between the fire and his hand. Aramis moved until he was directly in the lad's line of sight.

"Focus on that. Focus on the cross." Believe in something, he silently pleaded.

For a moment, there was no sound the room save d'Artagnan's breathing and the snap of the dying fire.

"My father died during a storm," d'Artagnan finally whispered, staring at the cross held in his white-knuckled grip. "I didn't save him."

"You couldn't save him," Aramis corrected. "There's a difference."

Thunder rumbled again and d'Artagnan flinched, his breath trembling as he exhaled slowly, fighting for control.

"It's just rain," Aramis declared.

"Just rain," d'Artagnan repeated, closing his eyes. "Just rain."

The younger man's breath began to slowly even out. Aramis stayed kneeling for another moment before shifting back to his chair, still close, but no longer touching.

"I'm sorry," d'Artagnan whispered. "You must think me so ridiculous."

Aramis stared at him in surprise. "Why would you say that?"

"You…," d'Artagnan looked at him, then back at the fire. "You've had true horrors in your life."
Nightmares I can't even—and don't want to—imagine. While I…-

"Lost your father, your way of life, and everything you knew in one moment," Aramis redirected, thinking of Marie's soft words. *It only takes the one.* "What happened then happened to a different man. Use it to become who you're meant to be."

d'Artagnan was quiet a moment, and Aramis saw that he'd started to trace the outline of the cross with the pad of his thumb. Sitting back, Aramis reached over to rub his bandaged shoulder, the aches in his body starting to make themselves known.

"Treville sent me on this mission," Aramis began, "because I was allowing my loss to…overwhelm me."

d'Artagnan looked over at him.

"And it wasn't just…Savoy," Aramis continued, aware of d'Artagnan's gaze, but staring into the flames. "Or the Duke's revelation or learning the truth about Treville's role in all that transpired." He sighed, dropping his hand from his shoulder, giving himself permission to say the next words out loud. "I killed Marsac."

"You saved your Captain, Aramis," d'Artagnan immediately—predictably—protested.

Aramis clenched his teeth. He'd gotten this far, he needed to say the rest of it. But, there was a reason words such as these stayed inside where no one could see them. He had a sudden visual of himself on the wheel, strung out and on display—every scar, every sin exposed.

"I killed a man who saved my life, so that I could save the life of another," Aramis said quietly. "I chose. And I…I don't know what to do with that. Where to put it."

Thankfully, d'Artagnan said nothing.

"There was a time in my life I considered priesthood," Aramis confessed. "I thought there would be no greater thing than to do the work of the Lord, to exalt in the good of all things, but there were certain…influences that led me down a different path. And that path showed me that there is more darkness in the world than there is light. And that sometimes…God is very hard to find."

Aramis saw d'Artagnan look down at the cross in his hand.

"Becoming a soldier," Aramis continued, drawing the young man's eyes, "made me feel whole. Right. That the good I sought could be found in the defense and protection of my King and country. Of my brothers."

"And then Marsac returned." d'Artagnan bridged the gap.

"And I killed him." Aramis looked back toward the fire.

The silence between them was broken only by the sounds of flames greedily chewing through the wood, dancing before their eyes. Aramis' shoulder throbbed in reaction.

"Use it," d'Artagnan said quietly.

Aramis looked over at him, noting how the young Gascon's eyes were still the kind of black that shadows hid within.

"What?"
d'Artagnan sat forward, clutching the edge of the blanket with one hand, the cross with the other. "What happened then, happened to a different man," he said, returning Aramis' words to him. "Use it to become who you're meant to be."

"It's different, d'Artagnan," Aramis shook his head.

"I don't believe it is," d'Artagnan said, rubbing his thumb over the face of the cross. "I never knew you before Savoy. But the man I met that day in the garrison, the man who would not let me cut down his friend, regardless of what he had or hadn't done, that man? Is a man of honor, a man who saves lives. A man who believes his brothers even when what they're saying is impossible."

d'Artagnan looked down at the cross. "That is a man I would stand beside to the end of my days. That is a man I would lay down my life for."

Aramis swallowed roughly, unable to respond. d'Artagnan let the quiet linger until it pulled tight between them. Clutching his blanket, he stood, turning toward Aramis.

"We should get some sleep. We still have to get Abelè back to Paris in the morning."

Aramis nodded mutely.

d'Artagnan gathered his still-damp clothes and carried them to the room they shared. After several minutes, Aramis followed, relieved to find the lad already asleep when he stepped into the room. He lacked the energy to cope with another conversation the likes of the one they'd just had.

His sleep was blessedly dreamless.

When he woke, he was alone in the room, sunlight pouring through the cracks in the shutters, the smell of bread and meat wafting through the air. He sat up, groaning softly as his shoulder protested, the burned skin throbbing. Marie Dubois had left the jar of salve on the table next to the bed and he wasted no time in reapplying it to the burns on his shoulder and cheek.

When he reached the common area, he was greeted by the sight of d'Artagnan laughing with Jean-Marc as if the nightmarish day before had never happened. It struck Aramis then how often they were given this view of the young Gascon—the smiling, impulsive, youthful side that belied any possible depth or darkness. There was a balance there; unconscious and unassuming as it was, it gave Aramis pause before he joined the group at the table.

"Where's our Bishop?" he asked, looking around.

"He took his meal in his room, that one," Marie commented, a smirk dancing across her lips.

Aramis smiled at her, feeling the genuine light in the expression for the first time in days. "We'll be out of your hair soon, Madam."

As they readied the horses—d'Artagnan caring for all mounts once more in deference to Aramis' wounded arm—Aramis took stock of the damage the lightning had caused, and how fortunate they were to be riding away at all.

"I don't believe I ever thanked you for hauling me out of there," he said, laying a hand on d'Artagnan's shoulder and arresting his movement.

d'Artagnan ducked his head in a shy smile. "Don't think I'd have much chance at becoming a Musketeer if I'd've let you die, now would I?"

Aramis swallowed tightly, his thoughts a tangle of noise clamoring for focus. "I think I know why
Treville sent you on this mission," he said finally. "And I intend to thank him for it."

"Boy! Come here, boy!" Abelè sour shout echoed off of the charred barn walls.

d'Artagnan groaned. "You may thank Treville for sending me," he said. "I'm not so sure I will."

He began to turn toward the house, but paused. "Here." d'Artagnan pulled the cross from beneath his tanned doublet. "I forgot to return it. I had a…a trinket that I used to carry with me and hold onto when…," he shook his head, then looked up at Aramis, holding the cross out to him. "I lost it. It helped, your amulet, but I'm better now."

"Keep it," Aramis replied, closing d'Artagnan's fingers around the carved wood. He knew exactly where that trinket had gone. "Maybe it'll help you remember."

d'Artagnan smiled softly. "Thank you, Aramis."

Aramis climbed painfully aboard his horse and found he could only chuckle at Abelè's incessant grumbling this time. The ride to Paris was blessedly short, the post-storm light that spilled around them seeming to toss every miserably comment from Abelè into shadow. They deposited him at the palace, then returned to the garrison where Aramis sought out Porthos immediately.

"What the 'ell 'appened to you?" Porthos exclaimed the moment he saw him. Aramis had almost forgotten the bruised burn around his eye.

"Got caught in a barn fire," he said hastily, collecting Porthos' arm and moving him off to the side of the courtyard toward the common table.

"You what?" Porthos bleated, his brows pulling low, his expression almost comically dangerous.

"d'Artagnan pulled me out," Aramis assured him, waving his hand to dismiss the line of questioning. "Never mind that now. I owe you an apology." He enjoyed the look of surprise that smoothed the lines from around the big man's dark eyes. "You were right."

"'Course I was," Porthos declared, bringing his chin up. "What…uh…what was I right about this time?"

"About Marsac. About Savoy. All of it," Aramis declared, needing Porthos to understand. To see that he'd simply been lost, too tangled up in misery to see what he'd been doing. To realize he'd been pushing Porthos away. Pushing everyone away. "I'm sorry, Porthos."

Porthos pressed his lips together in a poor attempt at suppressing a smile. "What brought this on, eh? When you left you were 'bout as cheery as a day-old corpse."

"Our young Gascon pointed out a few things I hadn't realized before," Aramis smiled at his friend. "Think we might need to keep him around."

"If 'e's got you sayin' I'm right, I'm all for it," Porthos grinned wickedly, plucking an apple from the table and tossing it to Aramis.

There was balance in their brotherhood, Aramis knew. He simply hadn't realized it would be found with the incorporation of a young hot-head from Gascony. He smiled and took a bite of the apple Porthos handed him, comfortable in the knowledge that his faith in being a soldier—in his brothers—had paid off in temporary peace.
Treville's leg ached.

It was dull, like an old bruise that someone insisted on pressing, but continuous. Enough that while Aramis shared his story, Treville was forced to rise, compelled to move and work the muscles loose. He felt time ticking away their three hours, d'Artagnan's misery filling the small alcove with a suffocating pressure that made him catch his breath every so often, rubbing his hand over his head to bring himself back to the present.

"You give me too much credit," he said finally after several beats of silence followed the close of Aramis' story. "I didn't know anything about d'Artagnan's past when I sent him along with you. Not more than any of you knew."

"You knew somethin'," Porthos argued, his eyes on the tapering storm and rubble-strewn courtyard. "You always know somethin'."

"At any rate," Aramis sighed, checking the cloth at d'Artagnan's side, "it worked."

"Do you still have the nightmares?" Athos asked quietly, and there was something in his tone that drew Treville's eyes. He wasn't asking out of mere curiosity; he was seeking the solace of a survivor.

"Not as much anymore," Aramis said, his voice tight as he brushed the maggots from d'Artagnan's damaged skin to one of their cups. Treville made a note not to drink from that cup anytime soon.

"There was a time that the panic would take me—even without the dreams—but Porthos found a way to anchor me."

"Weren't nothin'," Porthos muttered, shifting his grip on the two weapons in his hands as the rain finally stopped. "Just needed some reminding is all."

"How is he?" Treville asked, stepping closer to where Aramis was hovering over d'Artagnan's inert form.

The fevered murmurs and calls for Constance had tapered over an hour ago; Treville had let himself hope that meant the worst had passed.

"The wound looks cleaner," Aramis said, the frown in his voice enough to dash any hopes that they would be able to ride out of here soon. "His fever is still high."

"What now?" Athos asked, moving closer.

Aramis retrieved the half-empty bottle of brandy. "I clean it again."

"Keep 'im quiet," Porthos said, readying one of the pistols. "I hear something."

Treville grabbed the third arquebus and the nearest main gauche. "Porthos and I will patrol the courtyard," he said over his shoulder to Athos and Aramis. "You two take care of our Gascon. We are riding out of this damned place together, or not at all."

Athos scowled, but Treville took that to be a good sign. An angry Athos was one he knew how to
manage. It was the despondent, too-deep-into-his-cups Athos that cared not for his role in the world that threw Treville off his game.

"You're wounded, Captain," Athos protested. "Let me—"

"Stop." Treville commanded, drawing himself up. "They need you, Athos. Plus I know you're working on a right nasty headache." He frowned, deciding against mentioning his role in that particular injury. He tested his weight on his leg. "I've been mended nicely."

Porthos waited patiently for their exchange to complete. Nodding at Aramis, Treville spared one last look at the lad who'd saved his life—and challenged him to be a Captain in deeds, if not in words—and stepped out into the wet, debris-filled courtyard. It was quiet save the soft scrabble over loose rock behind them as Aramis and Athos tried to work on d'Artagnan.

Dawn had scraped the edge of the horizon, pushing the last of the storm clouds west and south, but the usual sound of birds that greeted the sun were vacant from the morning. Every soldier's instinct had Treville on alert, the still-present ache and twinge in his leg at every step pushed to the back of his mind. Adjusting his grip on the weapons he'd selected, he exchanged a nod with Porthos and the two parted, Porthos heading toward the far wall where d'Artagnan had taken the brunt of the explosion to shield Treville.

He reached the majority of the rubble, seeing blood from either the criminal or Andreas saturate the ground near the edge of the shattered stone. Climbing carefully and as quietly as possible, Treville perched at the top of the pile and peered from behind a still-standing block to see the river crossing.

As Porthos had predicted, Laroche and his men were already crossing, several of them having breached the iron gate. He could see Laroche—still in his leather vest, tattoos visible—at the head of the line of men, staring with narrowed eyes at the entrance now blocked by the fallen tree. Treville followed the man's line of sight to the other entrances, but exhaled in relief when he realized, as Laroche seemed to, that they'd been too-well sealed to be used as a quick entrance.

The only easy way in, it seemed, was over the destroyed wall where Treville now perched.

He glanced back across the courtyard to where Porthos was similarly peering over the edge of the wall, and could tell from the big man's posture he had realized the same thing. Thinking quickly, Treville was about to signal Porthos to join him and protect their weak flank when a ragged, pain-soaked cry echoed from inside the alcove where Aramis and Athos tended d'Artagnan.

Treville winced, knowing the men were doing their best to save the young Gascon and keep him quiet. Laroche, however, smiled. He held up a hand in a similar signal to that Treville had seen his men respond to before and eight immediately dismounted, leaving the two traitorous Red Guard next to Laroche.

There wasn't time for strategy. Looking over his shoulder, Treville whistled sharply, calling Porthos' attention to him. Looking back he saw that the eight men had separated, four heading directly toward Treville, four others untying something from their saddle bags.

Breathless, Porthos joined him, peering over the rock at the approaching men.

"Ah, now it's a party," he breathed, a wild grin lighting his features.

Treville arched a brow. "I don't see how this is a party."

Porthos readied both arquebuses and held them at the ready, turning the manic grin on his former Captain. "You need to get outta your office more, Captain," he said, standing and drawing the
immediate attention of the four men climbing through the rubble.

As Treville watched, Porthos leveled his weapons, pulling the triggers simultaneously, and felled two of the men before dropping back level with his Captain.

"That's two down," he said, turning to put his back against the stone so that he could reload. "See? Party."

Treville narrowed his eyes, then swept his weapon over the edge to fire and topple a third, sending the fourth scurrying back toward Laroche and the other men.

"Remind me to gracefully decline an invitation from you," Treville teased, reloading his weapon.

"You see that lot?" Porthos asked, craning his neck to peer over the edge of the rubble without exposing his position further.

"Can't tell what they're up to," Treville nodded. "Need a closer look."

"Watch yourself," Porthos warned, nodding that he had his weapons loaded and shifted so that he could see over the edge of the wall from a covered vantage point.

Treville moved carefully over the rocks, keeping himself from stepping into the crevasses created by the explosion. Shoving the main gauche into his belt, he used his free hand to pull himself up and peer through the break in the wall nearest the heavy wooden door.

What he saw sent chills through him.

Without caution or prudence, Treville jumped from his perch to the floor of the courtyard, his wounded leg rebelling and collapsing beneath him for a moment. Having apparently seen his former Captain's fear, Porthos was by his side in an instant and hauling him to his feet.

"Captain, what—"

"Go!" Treville bellowed. "Get back, now!"

Not bothering to question further, Porthos kept a firm grip on Treville's arm and ran back toward their alcove, dragging the man with him. Treville kept up as much as he could, but his leg was throbbing, the muscles quaking miserably. They reached the break in the low wall of rubble and Treville saw that Aramis had just finished stitching d'Artagnan's side and was preparing to wrap the wound.

"Get to the corner!" Treville ordered, drawing both Aramis' and Athos' shocked eyes. "They have gunpowder at the door!"

Athos needed no further encouragement. Rising quickly, he and Aramis grabbed d'Artagnan beneath the shoulders, dragging him to the furthest corner of the alcove and together, the four men curled up, Porthos and Treville's backs providing the outermost protection. No sooner had they covered their heads than the abbey was rocked once more.

This time, however, Treville felt a marked difference in the size of the blast. Very little debris rained down on them. He tried to remember how many barrels he'd seen the men stack up by the tree, but it couldn't have been many based on the fact that they were all still very much intact.

Pushing away from his men—for they were his men—Treville raked his eyes over each, noting with equal parts worry and relief that d'Artagnan's were open and staring back at him.
"Aramis, bandage him as best you're able," he said, clearing his throat. He met d'Artagnan's eyes and saw clarity there—realization without fear. It humbled him. "Stay with him. You're the final defense." He looked over at Athos, who was already reaching for the remaining swords. "Athos, you're with me. Porthos, take the breach."

"Yes, Captain," came three voices in unison. Treville nodded and stood, turning and grabbing the main gauche from his belt.

His mind immediately began to calculate their strategy. Laroche, two Red Guard, and five remaining zealots—the best way to stay alive was a full-on attack. With limited forces. And even fewer weapons.

Porthos handed Aramis one of the arquebuses he'd held, then pulled from his weapons belt the head scarf Treville had seen d'Artagnan tie around the wrist of a dead man. Whipping it into a twisted rope, Porthos picked up several of the larger rocks from the floor of the alcove, tucking them into the sling at the end, then swung it in a loose arch around his shoulder.

"Ready when you are, Captain," he said, the maniacal grin back in place.

"Porthos, if we make it out of this," Treville said, eyeing the make-shift weapon, "remind me to get you another sword."

"Don't need nothin' save Balizarde," Porthos said, patting his large schinova with his elbow. "This 'ere's just for the sassy ones."

"They're breaking through!" Athos warned, scrambling over the rock toward the courtyard without a backward glance.

The three soldiers moved as one, Porthos heading immediately toward the wall broken by the first explosion, Athos staying at Treville's side as the made for the broken wooden door. The first men through met their end by pistol fire, but there was no time to reload. Treville dropped his arequebus and pulled his sword, matching Athos in fervor, if not skill.

They seemed to come at them from all angles, swarming the breach and overpowering Porthos, only to be pushed back as the big man roared with denial, swinging his head-scarf club like a sling-shot worthy of David in the Bible stories and slamming the stones against the head of the man who dared approach.

Treville found himself facing the man he remembered tying him to the pole earlier and lunged, locking swords at the hilt. The man growled with effort and knocked his main gauche to the side, then shoved Treville against the wall, their sword hilts the only thing keeping Treville's throat from being slashed through to his spine. He wasn't a match for the other man, weary from lack of sleep, muscles trembling from wounds. It was only a matter of time before he was overpowered and he could tell by the glint in his opponent's eyes that the man knew it.

"You were never going to leave this place alive," the man informed him. "You have nothing left."

Treville scrambled with his free hand, trying to reach where his dagger was tucked into his belt. The other man was pressed too close, all he could feel was—

"You're wrong," Treville gasped, the sword pressing closer, the pressure of their crossed blades starting to cut off his air. He twisted his hand, assured by his attacker's expression of victory that he hadn't realized his mistake. Treville tried to say something else, but the sword at his throat prevented it.
"What was that?"

Another twist of his wrist and Treville felt the other man's dagger slice deeply into his gut from its position in his weapon's belt. With a rough jerk, Treville tugged the blade sideways and immediately felt the pressure on his throat ease.

"I have your knife," Treville coughed out as the man staggered back, dropping his sword and helplessly tried to keep his intestines inside.

Stepping around the dying man, Treville grabbed his main gauche from where it had fallen and tried to find his men in the melee. The sounds of battle were thick in the air: men cursing, grunting with effort, crying out in pain. The clink of swords, the shuffle of feet, the smell of sweat and blood and gunpowder and dirt.

He couldn't find Athos; Porthos was fighting two at once. He stalked toward the big man and sliced his blade across the back of one of Porthos' attackers, earning him a nod of thanks as Porthos turned his attention to one assailant.

"Athos!" Treville shouted, turning in a circle, blood dripping from his sword, his body trembling and thrumming from a mix of exhaustion and adrenalin.

He could see two men in Red Guard uniforms rushing toward the alcove where Aramis and d'Artagnan were holed up. He'd lost count of the number of Laroche's men they'd dispatched, but he couldn't find Laroche himself. Another man rushed him, catching him off guard and sending him to the ground. Treville swiped his sword sideways, trying to knock his attacker off balance, but he was worn down and weary from his wounds and battle.

The man slapped his sword from his hand, stepping on his opposite wrist to pin it to the ground before removing his main gauche. Reaching down and grabbing Treville by his shirtfront, he yanked him roughly to his feet, turning him and pressing the point of a dagger at his jugular, the two of them facing the alcove.

"STOP!" The man behind him shouted. "I have your Captain!"

Treville saw Porthos stagger back from the man he was fighting, both of them breathing hard, both lowering their weapons. One other man was across the courtyard, standing in a mirror image of Treville, with Athos at his back, a dagger at the man's throat. The two Red Guard were in the alcove, their backs to Treville. His pulse spiked when he realized he couldn't see Laroche.

"Surrender now, or he dies!"

"I die anyway," Treville countered, dismayed to hear how rough his voice sounded.

"Don't listen!" The man shouted, an edge of desperation to his voice. "Some of you may still live through this."

"I was a sacrifice to begin with," Treville shouted, seeing Athos start to lower his knife. "Do not lose your lives over mine."

He shot a glance toward Porthos who was standing, hands raised at the point of a sword, eyes darting to the side as he searched the recesses of the alcove for any sight of Aramis or d'Artagnan. At his feet, Treville could see his discarded head scarf.

"Porthos," he called, gasping roughly when the knife pressed sharply into his neck. He could feel it draw blood, but ignored it. This was it. This was how he defined himself: as a victim or a Captain.
"Take him."

The man holding Porthos at sword point shot a look over his shoulder at the man who held Treville captive. It was his last mistake. Porthos took advantage of the split-second of time, grabbed the head scarf from the ground, snapped it around the sword and ripped it from the man's hands. At the same moment, Treville slammed his elbow into his captor's side, twisting into his grip and knocking the knife away. In moments, he had knocked the man to the ground and was on him, dagger at the man's throat.

"I have a hundred reasons to kill you," Treville snarled. "And only one to allow you to still breathe."

"Cowardice," the man spat.

"Honor," Treville retorted and slammed the hilt of his dagger against the side of the man's head, rendering him unconscious.

He climbed to his feet and saw that Porthos had his opponent on his stomach, hands tied securely with his head scarf and Athos was walking toward the alcove, blood dripping from his dagger.

"Laroche!" Treville shouted. "Show yourself."

The two Red Guard—one Treville now recalled was Lyon—parted, revealing the scene within the alcove. Treville, Porthos, and Athos staggered to a halt. Lyon and his companion were weaponless. Aramis was sprawled on his back on the ground, blood running from a deep cut across his forehead, his eyes dark and dangerous, and Laroche was holding the point of a sword at the downed medic's throat.

And standing against the wall, chest bared and bandaged wound stained with a fresh spot of blood, a wheel lock pistol held at the back of Laroche's head, was d'Artagnan.

"Which do you think will be faster," Laroche mused, his voice eerily calm, "my blade or his pistol?"

"You're defeated, Laroche," Treville said, keeping his voice steady.

"I hardly think so," Laroche replied, a smile tipping the corner of his thin mouth. "I can quite easily dispatch your Musketeer."

"You kill Aramis, d'Artagnan kills you," Treville replied.

"The boy is barely on his feet," Laroche scoffed. "A sneeze would blow him over."

"They what stays your hand?" Aramis challenged from the ground.

"Aramis," Porthos hissed.

"Why not kill me?" Aramis pressed.

Treville saw Athos drawing closer to one of the Red Guard, an empty arquebus in his hand, turned around with the grip out like a club.

"You were to be the one that returns," Laroche revealed. "You have found favor with the Queen. Your death would bring Rochefort happiness…and that is counterproductive to my plans."

"So we are at an impasse, is that it?" Treville asked, taking a step closer. He heard movement behind him, but didn't take his eyes from Laroche. "Your plan requires sacrifice, Laroche. Who…besides all of your men will die to appease the magic?"
Laroche leaned slightly forward, the tip of his sword pressing into Aramis' neck. Aramis, to his credit, didn't so much as breathe in; he simply held fast, staring back at the man who had turned their lives into chaos.

"Not all of them." The voice wavered slightly and Treville felt his back tense in instinctive reaction when he felt a blade press against his spine. It was the man he'd spared just minutes before. "You should have killed me."

"You're right," Treville agreed, darting his eyes from Athos to Porthos, trying to think how they could use this distraction to their advantage to save the others.

"So, now," the blade lifted as the man prepared to strike. "I'll kill you."

When the sound of the pistol blast echoed through the eerily quiet courtyard, Treville startled, flinching forward and grabbing at his belly in instinctive reaction. Exchanging a confused look with Porthos, Treville turned quickly to see his assailant lying dead on the ground behind him, the sword he was going to use to kill Treville still gripped in his hand.

"No, he won't."

"Bauer!" Athos called, surprise and relief battling for control of his voice.

Treville looked up to see Bauer standing in the shattered entry to the courtyard, two other Musketeers flanking him, both with pistols raised. Treville felt his legs tremble with in reaction to this sight; he very much wanted to sink to the ground and stay there for the remainder of the day.

"No matter!" Laroche shouted, reminding Treville that the danger had not yet passed. "I can still take a sacrifice."

"You already have," Treville returned. "You just won't accept it."

Bauer, Mathieu, and a sour-faced man named DuFour crossed the threshold, walked passed Treville, and smoothly and quietly took the two Red Guards into custody. Lyon and his companion went quietly, allowing themselves to be removed from the alcove and sat under guard in the rubble behind Porthos. With access to Laroche exposed, Athos took a step forward.

"Drop your sword, Laroche," he said, his voice a command.

"I will not."

"You are defeated," Athos pressed.

At this, Laroche shot a look over his shoulder toward Athos. "I am not!"

Aramis didn't hesitate. The moment the mad man's attention wavered, he reached forward and slapped the tip of the blade to the side, away from his throat. Porthos lunged forward, wrapping strong arms around the man and slamming them both to the ground. Treville advanced, kicking Laroche's sword out of reach.

"He must pay!" Laroche screamed as Porthos wrestled him upright, twisting his arms behind him. "He must pay!"

Treville knelt next to Aramis, bracing the younger man with a strong hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good, Captain," Aramis replied, wincing and dabbing at the painful-looking cut at his forehead.
"I'll live."

d'Artagnan," Athos' low voice called their attention.

Treville turned, carefully helping Aramis to his feet as they both stared at the young Gascon. d'Artagnan's eyes were wide, his breathing rapid, his face pale, but he had yet to lower the cocked pistol. It was aimed at no one, would do no harm, but he seemed unable to relax.

"At ease," Athos soothed, reaching carefully for the young man's wounded wrist. "You did well."

The moment Athos touched d'Artagnan's arm, the pistol in his grip began to waver, but his white-knuckled grip didn't yet release.

"Give me the weapon, d'Artagnan," Athos said carefully. "You can stand down."

d'Artagnan finally slid his gaze toward his mentor; the look in his eyes was crippling. "Athos?"

Athos nodded. "You did well," he repeated.

d'Artagnan released the pistol, finally lowering his arm. He looked over at Aramis blinking as though coming back to the present, then back to Athos. With alarming suddenness, his knees seemed to vanish, sending him to the ground. Athos' quick grasp was the only thing that kept him from slamming against the stone ground. Aramis rushed over, his slim, sure hands checking the Gascon's pulse, then exhalting in relief when he found it.

"Help me with him," Aramis asked and Porthos stepped forward to aid Athos in doing so.

Treville turned to Bauer and the other two Musketeers who now held the Red Guard, Laroche, and the man Porthos had over-powered under their guard.

"How did you find us?" he demanded.

Bauer, eyes on where Aramis was crouched over the wounded d'Artagnan, replied, "Rochefort confined the Musketeers to the garrison, so, naturally, every man was out in Paris trying to get word on the progress of the rescue he had supposedly sent."

Porthos huffed from where he was crouched next to Aramis. "That lot right there," he gestured toward Lyon and his companion. "They're your bloody rescue."

"Oh, fantastic," Treville replied, his brow arched with sarcasm. "My thanks for your efforts, men."

"We were just doing what we could to survive!" One of them men spoke up.

"Shut up, Lyon," Athos and Porthos snapped in unison.

Bauer stepped closer to the alcove, lines of worry drawing his mouth into a frown as he caught sight of d'Artagnan.

"Through completely unprofessional and subversive means," he said, purposefully not looking at Treville, "we learned that Rochefort had some previous dealings with Laroche and that he knew where the man was headed—and it wasn't Soissons. So, we decided...to hell with Rochefort's orders. The risk of court martial was worth your lives."

Athos stood and regarded Bauer, his blue eyes steady, a small smile relaxing the tension on his face. "It's far better to walk with a friend in the dark than alone in the light."
"Exactly."

"We are in your debt," Treville stepped forward, registering that every man not in custody was now staring toward the alcove where Aramis was crouched over d'Artagnan.

"You would have done the same thing," Bauer paused, and glanced his way, "Captain."

"Aramis?" Porthos finally questioned. "'ow is 'e?"

"Not great," Aramis sighed, sitting back on his heels and wiping the blood from his eyebrow with the heel of his hand. "'But…better than before. His fever isn't as high and I've been able to stop the bleeding. For now."

Treville exhaled and saw Athos' shoulders sag just a bit.

"What the hell happened to him?" Mathieu asked, speaking for the first time since their arrival.

"It might be easier to tell you what didn't," Treville muttered, allowing himself to sink to the ground, his trembling leg no longer able to hold him upright.

"Can he travel?" Athos asked.

Aramis looked over at his friend and Treville saw their matching head wounds gave the weariness in their eyes a mirroring effect. "Are you asking as his friend or his Lieutenant?"

Athos looked down, the answer he was looking for caught in that cryptic response. He glanced over at Treville.

"What are your orders, Captain?"

Treville swallowed. Six sets of eyes rested on him. Taking a steadying breath, he reached for the nearest wall to help him gain his feet once more—because no one in their right mind gave orders from the ground—and grit his teeth when his leg threatened to collapse. Porthos stepped close, offering his shoulder and Treville took it gratefully. He looked down to where d'Artagnan lay, eyes closed in a bruised face, a clean bandage wrapped around his narrow waist and hiding the horrific wound beneath.

"I would not be standing—well, almost standing," he nodded once at Porthos, "with you today if it weren't for the actions of that young man from Gascon. With little to no thought to his own safety, he kept me…more than alive. He kept me present."

Treville pulled his brows close, wrestling with the decision he'd been asked to make, knowing he couldn't allow it to fall on the shoulders of anyone else present.

"That said, we must return to Paris," he declared. "We cannot wait longer; the Musketeers are at risk."

"And d'Artagnan?" Bauer asked, looking pained at the thought of losing the young Musketeer. His expression gave Treville a sense of Grisier's fate without him having to ask.

"He will ride with one of us," Aramis declared. "I have herbs enough to keep his pain somewhat manageable and treat the fever. If we can keep the wound from bleeding further…and keep the infection at bay…."

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. The men who stood near him had seen enough battle
wounds to know the other side of if. Bauer shook himself slightly and ordered Mathieu and DuFour to take the prisoners outside to the waiting horses. Porthos forced Aramis to sit for a moment so he could clean up his cut. Athos knelt next to the restless d'Artagnan, his words indiscernible, his tone comforting.

Treville sank down on the nearest boulder, the world suddenly spinning around him, but at a distance, as though a bubble of air encased him. He registered movement, voices, activity and progress, but he couldn't seem to order his body to move, respond. He had lost track of how long it had been since he'd slept. Or eaten.

There was only so long the body could move forward on will alone.

As if he'd voiced his weakness aloud, Aramis suddenly appeared before him, his face less bloody, but the cut above his eye looking like an accusation of misery. He was speaking, but it took Treville a moment to focus on his words.

"...food and water. Captain?"

"Sorry, what? I must have—"

"Bauer and Mathieu brought food and water," Aramis repeated. "Before we leave, you're eating a meal."

"Aramis, I—"

"As your only physician on hand, I am fully capable of pulling rank on you, Captain." Aramis tipped his chin and lifted a brow. "Stay here; I'll bring you some food."

Aramis started to move away, but Treville rested a hand on his arm, staying him. "Aramis."

The other man looked back. There was story caught in his eyes, one that Treville wasn't able to fully grasp in that moment, but instinctively he knew he was part of. Aramis waited, watching Treville closely.

"Will he make it? Back to Paris?"

_Tell me I haven't killed him with this order...tell me I haven't destroyed the three of you with this decision._

Aramis settled back on his heels, glancing toward the alcove. "He's strong," he said quietly. Looking back at Treville he continued, recalling the argument they had given him the previous night, "He's stubborn. And he doesn't know how to quit."

Aramis left. Food arrived. Treville ate.

The violent morning folded into a strangely quiet afternoon. When Treville stood, helping Aramis and Athos carry their saddles and supplies to the horses vacated by the dead they were leaving behind in the abbey—Rochefort could send Red Guard back to clean it up, they'd decided—he found it difficult to grasp all that had transpired in such a short time.

Laroche was silent and sullen, his eyes vacant, his body bowed. Bauer had tied him and the other prisoners tightly, securing them to their horses, and their horses together. Porthos carried the still-unconscious d'Artagnan from the abbey. The young Gascon had been dressed in his filthy shirt once more as some measure of protection against the elements, his leathers declared too problematic to put him back into. Porthos paused at the saddled horses to make sure the others were situated.
Mathieu aided Treville in mounting his horse, not saying a word when a groan slipped out as the muscles in his wounded leg were forced to stretch to accommodate the girth of horse and saddle. Athos mounted, then turned, reaching for d'Artagnan. Aramis and Porthos flanked either side of his horse, helping to adjust the young Gascon on Athos' saddle while Athos sat behind.

"Let me, Athos," Bauer offered. "You're wounded and tired. I can hold him—"

"It's fine," Athos cut the offer off with a firm, but kind decline. "He'll ride with me."

Bauer visibly swallowed his protest and waited until both Porthos and Aramis had also mounted before leading their battered party back across the river and toward the shortest route to Paris. The sky remained clear, no return of the storms that had plagued their trip.

They rode in single file, DuFour leading with two prisoners, Bauer following with two more, then Mathieu and the rest of the party. Athos and d'Artagnan rode just behind Treville and in front of Aramis with Porthos covering their flank. After riding quietly for nearly an hour, Treville heard a low, familiar voice.

"Athos?"

"I'm here," Athos replied, his tone steady in response to d'Artagnan's waver.

"Are we…," d'Artagnan paused and Treville could practically feel the young man's wheels turning. "We are going back to Paris?"

"We are."

"All of us?"

"Plus a few," Athos told him, his tone an obvious attempt to put the young man at ease. "Seems our friend Bauer is about as fond of orders as you are. He brought Mathieu and DuFour."

"Aramis, he's…?"

There was a pause. Athos voice, when next he spoke, was tight with emotion. "Aramis is well, d'Artagnan. You stopped Laroche."

"I remember holding the pistol…," d'Artagnan paused and Treville could hear a tight hiss of pain. "d'Artagnan?"

"I'm okay," the young man replied through his teeth. "Just hurts sometimes."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"I remember that Treville shot you," d'Artagnan replied, causing Treville to wince. "And…that we were back in the abbey, but…it's all tangled, really."

Athos was quiet for a bit and Treville twisted around to see that he was helping the young Gascon drink from one of the water skins. The youngest Musketeer was pale beneath his bruises, blood still caking his hairline where their cool cloths hadn't washed it away. He leaned back against Athos, not even the faintest attempt to keep himself upright, one arm wrapped around his middle as though to hold himself together.

Treville was grateful no one insisted they ride faster than a walk; it would tear the lad up. As twilight fell, he assessed they were still several hours from Paris. He whistled to DuFour, bringing his men
"We must split up," he declared. "Porthos, you ride with Bauer, Mathieu, and DuFour to take the prisoners to the Châtelet. The rest of us will make camp here and join you in the morning."

For a full minute, no one moved. Then Porthos cleared his throat.

"All due respect, Captain," he started, "but I'm not leaving them." He nodded toward Aramis, Athos, and d'Artagnan. "Even if that means we camp 'ere with this lot."

Treville didn't miss the way Aramis' shoulders seemed to release tension at that declaration. He glanced over at Bauer. "Can you get them back without a fourth?"

Bauer lifted his chin. "Absolutely." He pulled his dagger from its home on his belt and turned it so that the blade glinted off the dying light of the sun. "If they give us any trouble we can always cut them up a bit."

Lyon drew back, and Treville found himself biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

"Directly to the Châtelet," he said. "Then return to the garrison. We will join you there first thing and face the King together."

"Yes, Sir," their rescuers replied in unison.

Bauer looked over at Athos. "Take care," he said, his eyes drifting over d'Artagnan.

"We will," Athos promised, then saluted as Bauer turned and kicked their party into a canter toward Paris.

Setting up camp at dusk was simple. Getting d'Artagnan from the horse without tearing his stitches was not. Aramis was forced to sew the lad back up, but was able to report that the lingering fever was not from a resurgence of the infection. As d'Artagnan lay against one of their saddles and the others prepared a meal from the food Bauer and Mathieu left them, he grew more aware of his surroundings.

"Aramis," d'Artagnan called suddenly, drawing four sets of eyes. "Did you...were there...bugs on me?"

Aramis paused, turned, and rested his forearm on his bent knee. "Bugs?"

"I was dreaming," d'Artagnan confessed, his voice a slash of sound in the night, firelight reflecting in his dark eyes as he started into the middle distance. "I dreamed that I was being...eaten."

Treville glanced at Aramis and noted that no one hurried to bail him out of this one.

"d'Artagnan," Aramis said finally, "do you trust me?"

This caused the young man to look up, startled. "Implicitly."

"Do you trust that I would do everything in my power to save your life?"

"I do, Aramis."

Aramis nodded. "Let's...leave it at that for now, shall we?"

d'Artagnan frowned, but nodded, his gaze slipping back to the fire. They ate and Treville was
pleased to see d'Artagnan take the food Athos offered, though he consumed it much more slowly. As they rested, Aramis examined Treville's wound through the tear in his breeches.

"It's healing nicely," Aramis declared, "if you could resist pushing the torn muscles before they've recovered."

"I did that," d'Artagnan spoke up suddenly. Treville thought he'd slipped back into sleep and the suddenness of the lad's low voice startled him. "I wanted...," the Gascon paused and chuckled softly. "I remember thinking I wanted to live long enough to tell you."

Aramis smiled at him. "You did well, d'Artagnan."

"You remembered the pirates," Porthos spoke up, now that d'Artagnan was talking beyond incoherent pleas and mutterings of pain.

Treville lifted a brow and mouthed pirates toward Aramis, who closed his eyes briefly, waving him off in a don't ask gesture.

d'Artagnan smiled. "I was hoping you'd see that."

"And you kept Thomas' neck scarf," Athos said quietly.

"And my cross," Aramis chimed in.

d'Artagnan was quiet a moment and Treville looked to make sure the lad was still conscious.

"I knew when Rochefort ordered me on this mission," d'Artagnan said, his wounded lips barely moving, his eyes on the fire, "that it was because of what happened with Marmion. Because I'd allowed Louis to...be frightened for his life."

No one spoke, their silence signaling agreement.

"I knew I might not be coming back and...I couldn't leave without...a piece of each of you. Something that I could keep with me when...when the world fell apart around me."

"Like the soldier," Aramis interjected, drawing d'Artagnan's eyes.

"What?"

"The tin soldier," Aramis continued. "You kept it after you left Lupiac, after your father died, to keep you grounded when you were afraid."

d'Artagnan blinked at him in amazement. "How did you...?"

"The boy, back on the road to Calais," Aramis told him. "That barn fire, remember?"

d'Artagnan nodded and Treville saw him reach almost instinctively for the cross that still hung around his neck.

"You said you lost the trinket you used to keep, but the Innkeeper's boy told me you'd given him that tin soldier because he'd been afraid of the lightning."

d'Artagnan nodded again and a small smile pulled at the corner of his damaged mouth. "I didn't...you never said." He was quiet a moment. "Is that why you let me keep the cross?"

Aramis lifted a shoulder. "That and," he plucked his gold cross from the folds of his shirt with a grin,
"mine is prettier."

Porthos chuckled and the others smiled in response.

"You kept your head, lad," Porthos complimented him. "Remembering the pirate, leaving a trail, keeping our Captain in one piece. You made us proud."

d'Artagnan's smile lit his eyes and caused something in Treville's chest to catch painfully, capturing his breath and burning his eyes.

"Rest," Athos ordered. "We need you on your feet when we face the King."

At Athos' words, d'Artagnan's eyes began to droop and soon his face was lax in sleep, transforming him and making him appear years younger than Treville knew him to be.

"I'm the only one who should face the King," he said to his men. "I may not be your Captain in title, but as d'Artagnan reminded me…I am your leader. You are here because of me."

"Captain, no disrespect meant," Aramis held up a hand, "but…I'm here because of both of you. d'Artagnan…he helped restore my faith."

"He saved my sanity," Athos chimed in quietly, eyes on the fire.

"And my life," Porthos added. "We'd ride through fire for you, Captain, but…" he tipped his head toward the Gascon sleeping across from him, "we'd burn the world down for that one."

-ANV-

The morning had been subdued. Muscles ached, heads throbbed, wounds made themselves known. d'Artagnan's fever had made a reappearance once during the night, abating to a more manageable temperature by morning, leaving the lad weak and wrung out but able to at least rise to his feet and stand on his own. Aramis helped him clean up and between him and Athos, they helped d'Artagnan into his leathers and pauldron—both of which had been rescued from Laroche's horse—for their ride into Paris.

As they didn't have an extra horse, he rode with Athos once more, though this time he sat behind the saddle, holding onto Athos. They'd only been riding an hour when Treville saw d'Artagnan slump forward against Athos' back, the older man anchoring him close by holding onto his arms. Porthos and Aramis closed ranks, the three men riding side-by-side, a visual representation of their oft-used nickname: inseparable.

Treville followed, finding himself amazed and honored that he had once been their Captain.

When they reached Paris, he breathed a sigh of relief. The city welcomed him with open arms, the familiarity of the dirt and chaos like coming home. He saw his men react the same—with the exception of d'Artagnan.

There was no place quite like Paris.

They started to enter the garrison when Magliore ran out to them, grabbing Athos' horse by the bridle and halting their movement.

"You must ride to the palace," he said. "Rochefort has Bauer, Mathieu, and DuFour at the Châtelet. He's waiting your arrival."
Athos nodded, his jaw tense. "Let us deposit d'Artagnan at the infirmary—"

"d'Artagnan, too," Magliore interrupted, though he did spare a glance as the miserable figure d'Artagnan painted. "He wants all of you. He's threatening to disband the Musketeers if you don't arrive by tonight."

"Disband the—" Treville sputtered. "On whose authority? Rochefort cannot—"

"By order of the King," Magliore told him, pulling a folded missive from his jacket and handing it to Treville.

Scanning the letter quickly, Treville raised tragic eyes to Athos. "We...we must report immediately to the King."

Aramis reached over, pressing a hand against d'Artagnan's shoulder. "d'Artagnan," he called. "I need you to open your eyes."

As though he'd simply been waiting for the command, d'Artagnan blinked his eyes open and sat up slowly, pain tattooed in the lines of his young face.

"Are we home?"

"Not quite," Athos said, twisting slightly in the saddle, his hand still anchoring d'Artagnan to him. "We must stand before the King. Then you can rest."

d'Artagnan straightened further, then gasped as the motion pulled at his wound. He closed his eyes and wavered for a moment, then sat up fully, pulling away from Athos.

"I can do it."

Aramis nodded at him. "We will be by your side, d'Artagnan," he said. "All of us."

d'Artagnan nodded, resting his hands on the back of Athos' saddle and holding himself upright as they rode toward the palace, each lost in their own thoughts of what if.

Porthos and Aramis dismounted. Porthos reached up a hand to balance Treville as he put weight on his wounded leg and Aramis helped d'Artagnan slide from the horse, holding him on his feet until Athos dismounted.

They stood five abreast for a moment before heading into the palace and Treville was struck by the story of their appearance: soldiers, fighters, wounded, bloody, bandaged, upright, determined, survivors. The King may not realize it, may not recognize it, but the five men walking into his throne room were the very definition of brotherhood.

"Do you have this?" Athos said quietly to d'Artagnan who nodded in response, though Treville saw that it was necessary for Aramis and Athos to walk in unison, their shoulders pressing tightly against d'Artagnan to keep him from wavering.

Louis and Anne were seated on their thrones, waiting their arrival. As the five men approached, Treville saw twin expressions of horror replaced by repulsion and fear on one side, and sympathy and worry on the other. They paused the respectable distance and Treville heard d'Artagnan gasp as he bent in a bow, Athos' hand on his arm helping him rise before they stood at attention.

Constance Boniceaux stood at the Queen's left, her eyes riveted to d'Artagnan, tears swimming at the sight of his battered body. Rochefort stood at the King's right, chin lifted, and expression cool.
"Treville," Louis spoke, his lips working in that way he had where he was visibly struggling to say the *Kingly* thing rather than what his nature bade him say. "I hope you are able to account for your actions over the past week."

Had it really been a week?

"Yes, Your Majesty," Treville replied, thinking furiously. Where to begin? With the orders? The murders? Marmion?

"I've been informed that the villain Laroche is in custody," Louis continued.

"He is, Your Majesty."

"And that this whole dark business of…of *traitors* in our ranks is subdued?"

Treville slid his eyes to Rochefort, noting the challenge issued in the other man's bearing. "I hope so, Your Majesty."

"Then kindly explain why Musketeers explicitly defied orders and left the garrison! Left Paris!"

Louis was agitated, but it was forced, as though someone had told him this was unacceptable, not because he had decided so himself.

"They were—" Treville started, truly having no idea where to begin.

"May I speak, Your Majesty?"

All eyes turned in surprise to see d'Artagnan step forward, his thin frame wavering slightly for a moment before regaining his balance.

"d'Artagnan," Louis lifted his chin, tapping one hand on the arm of his throne twice in a nervous gesture. "You look half-dead."

"Yes, Your Majesty," d'Artagnan nodded, unable, it seemed, to bow and stay on his feet at the same time. "I believe, however, I may have the answer you're looking for."

Rochefort stepped forward and leaned in as though to whisper something to the King, but Louis waved him away. "Go ahead. But make it quick. It pains me to look at you."

d'Artagnan licked his wounded lips. "Not long ago, Your Majesty," he began, "you and I were... caught in unfortunate circumstances."

"Yes, well," Louis looked askance at Anne, who, Treville noted, hadn't taken her eyes off of them since they entered the chamber. "We agreed never to speak of that."

"During that...that time we do not speak of, Sire," d'Artagnan continued, his hand snaking around his side as a brace, "you helped me save a man's life."

"And then he was killed later," Louis shrugged, looking at his nails. "I hope this is going somewhere, d'Artagnan. I don't enjoy being reminded of unpleasantness."

Moving forward, on his feet by sheer stubbornness alone, d'Artagnan continued. "Before he was killed, you showed that man what it truly meant to be a King. You showed him that it wasn't about... declarations and laws and fancy ceremonies, but about people. About the people under your rule. You showed him your compassion and heart and you...you saved him, Sire."

Treville swallowed, listening to d'Artagnan paint a picture of a man who was a myth. He willed the
lad to stay on his feet long enough to complete the spell he'd started to weave, watching as Louis sank back against his throne, listening to d'Artagnan's low, pain-soaked voice tell him all the things he wasn't, but truly wanted to be.

"That man gave his life for you, Sire. Willingly."

"What of it?" Louis challenged.

"Last week," d'Artagnan continued, swaying suddenly and causing both Athos and Aramis to instinctively step forward before he caught himself and brought his head up once more. "Last week, you were forced to make impossible choices. Your actions saved the lives of your wife and son."

"That's true," Louis reached for Anne's hand and squeezed it lightly, a smile tipping the edges of his mouth. "They are alive because of me."

"Your actions once more illustrated what it meant to be a King," d'Artagnan said. "Because of you, when their brothers were in danger, these men did not hesitate to emulate you. They rode out to save their brothers from...from a fate...w-worse than death, because they knew that their K-King would do the s-same."

Treville stiffened as d'Artagnan's words stuttered. Tension radiated from Athos in waves.

"d'Artagnan are you quite all right?" Louis asked, leaning forward. "You appear...in very poor health."

"I'm fine, Your Majesty. Tired," he admitted. "But...concerned about my fellow Musketeers."

"Sire," the Queen said, leaning a bit to the side, her blue eyes beseeching her husband. "These men have saved your life—and the life of your son—multiple times. I believe they deserve clemency."

Louis brought Anne's hand up to his mouth and kissed her knuckles before releasing her hand. "Once again, you are as right as you are beautiful." He stood suddenly, tugging down the edge of his jacket. Treville caught his breath. "Release the Musketeers from the Châtelet and reinstate them as my honor guard."

"Your Majesty—" Rochefort immediately stepped forward in protest.

"I've made my decision, Rochefort. Let's put this behind us."

Treville deflated slightly as his Captaincy was not mentioned, but, he realized he had quite a bit of repair work to do there. At least the Musketeers were not disbanded—and had been returned to their usual duties. Louis turned and the Musketeers—save d'Artagnan, who merely tipped his head—bowed as he exited, Rochefort close at his heels. Anne stood, calling Constance to her and whispering something in her ear before following her husband from the room.

The moment the royals and Rochefort had left, Treville heard d'Artagnan utter a low, pained groan, his knees buckling. He slipped downward, Athos and Aramis moving as one to catch him. Constance was next to them as they lowered him to the ground, knowing better than to ask the usual what happened to him questions.

"We need to transport him to the physician," she stated, d'Artagnan's dirty, blood-stained head resting in her billowing white skirts.

"We will ready a wagon," Aramis declared.
"No," Constance shook her head. "The Queen is sending her carriage around. I can get you to the carriage, but I can't," she looked up at Athos, the tears that had been held prisoner in her eyes spilling down her cheeks, "I can't come with you."

"Constance," d'Artagnan whispered. Her tears fell on his face as she looked down. "Please…"

Treville felt his brows pull close, remembering the lad uttering those same words over and over through the long night before.

"Don't cry," he continued, blinking his eyes open to look directly into hers.

"You stupid, stubborn man," she choked out. "You're going to get yourself killed, you know that?"

"I'm still here," he said, reaching up and stroking her chin, wiping a tear from the edge of her jaw. "I'm still here." He closed his eyes, his hand falling to his chest.

Constance swallowed a sob, then looked once more at Athos. "How bad?"

Athos looked at Aramis.

"We need to get him to a physician," Aramis replied. "Please thank A—the Queen—for the use of her carriage. It means everything."

Something kind and knowing settled in Constance's eyes as she looked at Aramis. "I will," she whispered. She leaned over, pressing her lips gently against d'Artagnan's wounded mouth. "You stay with me," she whispered, then kissed his closed eyes and his mouth once more before two men stepped into the throne room, nodding that the carriage was ready.

"I'll go make sure Bauer and the others are sent back to the garrison," she stated, wiping her eyes as Porthos lifted d'Artagnan from her lap. "Please…tell him I'll…see him soon?"

Athos took her hand, kissing her knuckles with a sincere nod before following Porthos and Aramis to the carriage. Treville lingered a moment, staring at Constance as she watched the battered body of the man she loved carried away.

"He is a good soldier, Constance," he said to her, trying to find the right words that would convey d'Artagnan's bravery. "He fought with honor."

She turned to look at him, her chin lifted, her small hands fisted at her sides, her blue eyes fierce. "He has a good leader."

Something in her bearing told him she didn't mean Athos.

The ride to the infirmary was tense and silent, broken only by d'Artagnan's low gasps as the wheels rattled over the uneven Paris streets. Treville watched him closely, noting that he seemed to fade in and out, eyes open but unfocused, body shivering with pain if not fever. The garrison was opened for them and Treville felt a rush of gratitude and relief when the men—his men—stood waiting to carry d'Artagnan to where the physician waited.

Treville sat on a rough-hewn bench outside the closed door of the infirmary, Porthos and Athos leaning against the post across from him. Aramis was inside with the physician, no doubt explaining the lengths he went to keep the young man alive. The day bled into evening and darkness climbed over the garrison walls to saturate the air around them.

No one spoke. It was as though all their words had been used up. Or were waiting. Bauer, Mathieu,
and DuFour returned and joined the other three outside the infirmary. Treville noted with listless eyes that the other Musketeers milled around the courtyard, moving to and from the livery and the armory. No one trained, no one left.

Hours later, Aramis stepped outside, looking around in surprise at the number of men waiting. He looked drawn, exhausted, barely on his feet, but not shattered. His dark eyes found Athos' in the lantern light and he offered the older man a small smile.

"It was close," Aramis said, "but he's going to be fine."

The exhale of relief was pervasive.

"Can we see 'im?" Porthos asked immediately.

Aramis nodded, but didn't step aside quite yet. "He's weak. The blood loss more than the infection took its toll, but the fever did enough damage. It's going to be days yet before he can be on his feet, longer still until he can be on active duty."

"'e's not gonna like that," Porthos grinned ruefully.

"But he will live," Athos reasserted, seeming to need the words once more.

"He will live," Aramis nodded, his smile tired, but relieved. "Go on in, Athos."

Porthos seemed content to allow Athos his time and reached for Aramis to enfold him in a bear-like hug before pushing him down to the bench next to Treville.

"I could sleep for a week," Aramis confessed, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow.

"You deserve too, keeping our Gascon alive," Bauer replied. "Burying one brother is going to be hard enough."

And there it was, Treville's suspicions confirmed.

"Grisier?" he asked, his voice rough from lack of use.

"He was able to warn us of your capture before…," Bauer's voice caught and he cleared his throat, pushing away from the wall. He turned and nodded at Aramis, then broadened his gaze to encompass the other two. "Welcome back."

Bauer's departure paged the way for others and soon Treville, Aramis, and Porthos sat quietly, side-by-side on the bench outside the infirmary, all reluctant to leave. In a moment, Athos opened the door and sought Treville with his eyes.

"He's asking for you."

Pushing shakily to his feet, Treville moved toward the opened door, sensing Porthos and Aramis at his back. d'Artagnan looked pale against the sheets of the infirmary bed, but the blood had finally been cleaned from his face and hair. His wrists were bandaged, as was the cut below his eye. A sheet had been pulled up to his mid-chest, but Treville suspected the bulge at his side was another thick bandage over the problematic wound.

"Captain," d'Artagnan greeted, his voice like crushed glass.

"d'Artagnan," Treville nodded. He wanted to say something light, reassuring. You gave us quite a scare…. You'll be on your feet in no time…. But he could only stare and wait.
He had nothing left.

"I'm sorry," d'Artagnan rasped. "You should…should have been our Captain…again. After that."

Treville smiled softly. "As a wise person recently told me," he said, laying a hand on d'Artagnan's bare shoulder, "I may not be your Captain, but I am still your leader."

d'Artagnan blinked slow in an obvious struggle to stay conscious.

"And as your leader, I am telling you to rest. I need men out there who are not afraid to knock over some towers." He lowered his chin to catch d'Artagnan's eyes, letting his smile light his expression.

"Yes, Sir," d'Artagnan whispered, his eyes slipping closed.

The men filed out, leaving the physician sitting with d'Artagnan, and paused at the courtyard before separating to their quarters.

"What's this story about the tower, then?" Porthos asked.

Treville chuckled. "I wondered how long it would take you to ask."

-ANV-

Three days after their return and the subsequent reinstatement of the Musketeers, the regiment stood next to another grave, only this time it wasn't a ruse to trap a corrupt Cardinal and his assassin. And this time, Treville wasn't standing in full uniform, hat in hand, speaking words over the body. Without an official Captain of the Musketeers, it fell to the men to decide who addressed Grisier's sacrifice. Each decided that the only appropriate voice was Bauer's.

Bauer stood in Treville's place, staring down at the grave, gathering his thoughts. The men gave him leeway, all standing at attention, hats covering their hearts—save those, like d'Artagnan, who didn't have one—and waited. Treville allowed his eyes to wander the group of men who had come to mean everything to him over the last several years.

Athos' bullet graze was mending; all that remained was a bruise that was starting to fade to a greenish yellow. Aramis had more stitches to add to his collection, but he was moving easier, the bruised and torn muscles from his fall beginning to recover. Porthos was the only one of their group to slip through this one relatively unscathed. A full night's sleep and he was back in fighting form.

Treville had the physician examine his cauterized wound and was told there was nothing else he could do but rest; the wound had been repaired nicely, as Aramis declared. He had slept, but memories and restlessness plagued him, drawing him from his bed each night. He'd found himself at the infirmary, sitting next to the healing d'Artagnan, wondering what had driven the newest Musketeer to put himself in such danger, to endure such pain….

d'Artagnan's wrists and bruised face were healing, but the wound on his side would take watching. The physician had monitored the lad for infection when his fever hadn't abated that first day, but by the second his fever broke and everyone breathed a collective sigh a relief. The blood loss, however, had drained d'Artagnan's energy, causing him to sleep for long stretches of time and tire quickly. The physician commended Aramis' use of maggots to halt and clean the infection—though, when d'Artagnan learned the truth of it, Treville thought the lad was going to lose his lunch or strike Aramis.

Or both.
It would take some time, but Treville was certain d'Artagnan would be back to his hot-headed self in short order, ready to tear recklessly across Porthos' Ceiling of Paris or stand endless hours at parade rest guarding the King.

As it was, he stood, pale and quiet, next to Athos and behind Bauer, staring down at the grave where Grisier's body now lay, equal parts regret and anger lingering in his dark eyes.

"Grisier loved being a Musketeer," Bauer finally began. "You all knew that. He told us pretty much every day. Twice on Sundays." A smattering of appreciative laughter rippled through the ranks. "His brothers—all of us—were everything to him. He didn't...he wasn't a Musketeer because he loved King and country. To Grisier, that was more the recruiting line."

Bauer smiled softly, not lifting his eyes from the box where his friend's body lay. "For him, it was about the man next to him. It was about me, and...Mathieu. Athos, Porthos. It was about d'Artagnan and DuFour." He glanced up. "Even you, Magliore."

More quiet laughter and Treville found himself nodding.

"Grisier died exactly as he lived: in defense of his brothers," Bauer kept his eyes up, scanning the crowd of men as he spoke. "The mission was important, but no more than the life of the man next to him. And I feel that loss today. I feel the empty space at my side. And as I stand here, I find myself wondering how long I will feel that emptiness. I find myself wondering...who will step into his place; make me the man next to them?"

There was a stretched silence as the men contemplated his words.

"I will."

Treville's head jerked up at the voice—that unmistakable, husky voice that had pulled him from the dark, steadied him, and humbled him. d'Artagnan stepped forward, one arm wrapped around his side, bruises visible, and smiled slightly at Bauer.

"I'll be the man next to you."

"As will I," Athos echoed, stepping forward next to d'Artagnan.

"And me," said Porthos.

Aramis simply stepped forward, followed by Mathieu and others until the entire regiment had closed ranks, standing in a tight circle around Grisier's grave, shoulder to shoulder.

Bauer smiled, his eyes bright with emotion.

"Damn," he said softly. "I wish Grisier could have seen this. He'd have gotten a kick out of it."

"Maybe he can," Aramis offered, reaching over to clap a hand on Bauer's shoulder. He then bent, gathering a handful of dirt, and tossed it on the box lid, the clumps landing with a resounding thump. "Goodbye, brother," Aramis said to the grave. "We'll see you."

He turned then, placing his hat back on his head, and walked resolutely from the soldier's cemetery. Treville saw him pause briefly next to another grave, glance down, then moving on. He suspected he knew whose grave had given Aramis pause, and sighed, turning back to the latest funeral.

The other men followed Aramis' example until it was just Bauer and Treville. He stepped forward with a shovel and waited until Bauer nodded, then proceeded to fill in the grave of the man who'd
served bravely under him, as was his tradition.

"Thank you, Sir," Bauer offered when he'd finished.

"It's my duty," Treville replied, replacing his hat and nodding at Bauer.

They walked in companionable silence until they reached the armory and Bauer stepped inside, holding Grisier's sword and readying it to rejoin the ranks of the weapons. Treville continued on toward the infirmary, glancing in to see that d'Artagnan was no longer there. Without saying a word, the physician pointed to the south wing of the garrison where Treville knew d'Artagnan's quarters to be.

As though pulled by the strange gravity of grief, Treville made his way to d'Artagnan's quarters, pausing outside the door and listening as d'Artagnan argued with the three other men inside that he didn't need to rest after having been on his feet a total of three hours. Porthos, Treville noted, was no one to be trifled with when worried. He effectively silenced d'Artagnan by telling him he'd had to carry the lad—unconscious and bleeding—twice in the last week. He didn't aim to do it again for some time.

Treville knocked on the door and took his hat off when Aramis opened it. Stepping inside, he drew the sword he'd kept sheathed during the funeral.

"My sword!" d'Artagnan exclaimed from where he sat stretched out on the bed, his leathers having been removed, one hand resting on his bandaged side. "I thought it was lost with Laroche!"

"It was returned with the rest of the...materials the Red Guard recovered during their sweep of the abbey," Treville informed him, handing it to the young Musketeer.

"Thank you, Sir," d'Artagnan said quietly, eyes on the hilt of the sword. "It was my father's—the only thing of his I still have. I planned on getting it back when we escaped, but...."

"Yes, well, best laid plans and all," Treville offered them a smile.

"So Rochefort did send men back," Aramis commented, leaning back on his chair, feet up at the foot of d'Artagnan's bed. "I wondered if he'd just leave them buried in the rubble."

"There may have been some insinuation that more incriminating papers were stashed on Laroche's troops," Treville admitted.

"Is that so?" Athos smiled, leaning forward and collecting the sword from d'Artagnan's hand. Treville noted that the lad didn't argue and instead slumped a bit to the side, leaning against the pillows at the head of the bed. "Any thoughts as to what those letters contained?"

"I doubt that we'll ever know." Treville shrugged. "Laroche has been written off as a mad man and while there is no denying that fact, his insanity was sparked by circumstance. Of which Rochefort played a part, but you won't get that information to the King now."

"If anyone asked me," d'Artagnan said, rubbing at his face and gingerly avoiding the bruises around his eye and cheekbone, "I'd say Rochefort threw his cards in with the Spanish."

"A spy, eh?" Porthos mused. "Wouldn't put it passed 'im."

"At any rate, Rochefort's back on top as far as the King is concerned," Treville said with a sigh. "Louis isn't letting anyone have an audience with him—not even the Queen herself. He's sequestered himself in his private chambers as a precaution."
" Seems Laroche's scare tactics worked after all," d'Artagnan sighed. "I really thought…." He tapered, looking away, his words dying in his throat.

"Did you mean what you said?" Porthos asked. "In that throne room the other day? All that about the King's actions being...inspiring."

d'Artagnan shrugged. "I wanted it to be true," he confessed. "I wanted his deeds to be the true definition of his character, not just his words. But...in reality, the King is scared, and has been scared...maybe all of his life. When he's tested, he doesn't stand and fight. He runs. And hides."

"All the more reason to protect him," Athos said quietly.

d'Artagnan looked over at him curiously, waiting.

"We protect the King not because he is brave and honorable, a man we can trust to stand beside us and defend us," Athos said. "That's why we have each other. We protect the King because he cannot protect himself."

"Our deeds," Aramis agreed quietly. "Not just our words."

d'Artagnan's nod was echoed by the others in the room. Treville saw the weariness in the young man's frame and settled his hat once more.

"I'll take my leave," he said. "I just wanted to return your sword...and to thank you, d'Artagnan. You showed true courage. Were I still your Captain, your actions would mean a great deal to me. As your friend...it means more."

"You will always be my Captain," d'Artagnan replied, and Treville once more saw nods of agreement ripple through the room.

He smiled and stepped from the room before emotion threatened to take his voice from him. As he paused just outside the closed door he heard Athos ordering d'Artagnan to rest, threatening not to allow Constance access to the garrison the following day if he did not. Treville smiled as quiet rapidly descended over the room.

Moving slowly across the open courtyard of the garrison, Treville paused at the base of the stairs that led up to his—to the Captain's—office. He'd been avoiding it for weeks since Louis decided he wasn't fit to be Captain of His Majesty's Musketeers. It had simply been too painful. He started to head toward the livery once more, finding solace in hard labor, but paused.

Words of his man swam through his head.

"Louis is...my King, but he's not my leader. You are. So bloody act like it."

"You are our Captain. You just have to remember that."

"You will always be my Captain."

As Aramis said, deeds, not words, were the true measure of a man. Despite what poison Rochefort spilt into the King's ear, Treville knew his deeds would win out. If not with the King, then with his men.

He gripped the rail and climbed the stairs.

Chapter End Notes
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**a/n:** Athos’ quote, "It's far better to walk with a friend in the dark than alone in the light," is a paraphrased quote by Helen Keller. Most of the repurposed quotes throughout the story are movie/TV quotes that I pepper within their dialog (and cookies to you if you recognize them), but this one I wanted to call out as it is attributed to a specific individual.

Thank you for indulging me once again in our world of swashbuckling heroes. I hope you enjoyed, and if so, I look forward to sharing more stories with you in the future.

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