Completed. Aramis centred with d'Artagnan as secondary and full cast throughout. Extreme Whump. Men are going missing across the French countryside. Aramis and d'Artagnan find themselves in dire straits; alone and unsure of their futures. But as each one learns the definition of torture, one of them also learns about himself.
Chapter 1

Dispatched to Hell

by SpaceCowboy

Prologue.

Porthos ran through the underground tunnels, pushing aside any unfortunate soul who got in his way. When the wall suddenly disappeared on his left, he came to an abrupt halt in an entryway leading into a large, windowless cell. Looking into the room, it took him a moment to realize that he had found his salvation. He paused in the mantle but a mere breath in length before charging into the room, his heart pounding and sweat beading on every surface of his body.

“Stop.”


Athos was standing in the doorway behind him, his arms steady by his sides with his palms raised in cautionary warning. He spoke slowly and quietly, his only word soft yet determined. “Look.”

Confused, Porthos turned back around with a questioning frown. Before him, there was a man on his knees; arms limp beside him, eyes dead and unblinking as they stared into nothingness. The man’s shirt was torn and shredded in several places and stained with blood. There were bruises visible under his right eye and evident through the holes in his shirt. There was also dried blood on his neck and fresh blood dripping down his right hand from under his cuff, along his fingers and onto the dirt floor.

Now that he had a chance to appreciate the man and all his gruesome details, Porthos swallowed thickly, trying to force the bile rising in his throat. Slowly, and near panic-stricken, he turned back to Athos. “But he needs our help,” he pleaded, still willing to risk moving forward.


Porthos slowly turned his head and took in the room for the first time since their hasty arrival. There were bodies everywhere, at least a dozen; shirtless, covered in bruises, caked in dried dirt and blood, motionless and obviously dead for quite some time. Amidst the decay and despair was this one man, alive, but beaten and bloody and devoid of any outward emotion. The man was a mere shell as he rested on his knees, alone and still in a room full of corpses.

Realization dawned on Porthos, and he drew in a sharp breath before slowly lowering himself to the ground. On his knees, he raised his hands in supplication and moved cautiously forward.

“Careful,” warned Athos in a steady voice. “We have no idea how he will react.”

Porthos took the words to heart, but inched forward despite them, his head dipping down trying to lock eyes with the man.

But the man would not oblige him. Every time Porthos met his gaze, he would flick his eyes away.
“It’s all right,” soothed Porthos, daring another inch forward, his knees barely lifting off the ground as he closed in. “Look at me.

The man would not.

When Porthos was finally close enough to reach out with both his arms and brace the man’s shoulders, he did so, slowly and with soothing words that he hoped would break through the man’s apparent stupor. “It’s all right,” he said again. “This is not Savoy.”

Aramis slowly raised his head to finally meet his friend’s gaze, but his eyes were vacant and cold. “I know,” he said lifelessly.

Porthos turned back to Athos, scared and confused by Aramis’ lack of emotion. When he looked back at his best friend, he tried to keep his expression neutral, but found it difficult to fight his quivering jaw and twitching eyes.

“I did this,” mumbled Aramis, his voice cold and languid. “I killed them all.”

Fear and anxiety flared within both Porthos and Athos as they watched their friend study his bloodied and torn hands, turning them over and examining both wretched sides with unabashed disinterest.

“I beat them all to death,” Aramis further explained. Then he closed his eyes, and without warning, collapsed forward.

If not for Porthos’ quick reflexes and protective arms, Aramis would have hit the ground in an unceremonious heap.

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A crowd had formed in the corridor that led to the room where the musketeers had found Aramis. Soldiers; Red Guards and Musketeers alike, silent and sorrowful, lined the walls as Porthos carried his friend passed them- Athos leading the way on legs that threatened to betray him at the slightest hint of uneven ground.

When they stepped out from the obscurity of the underground prison into the brilliant light of day, Athos had to shield his eyes from the glare after spending so much time in the darkness that had been his friend’s home for many a week. He turned back and noticed Porthos hunched over the charge in his arms, shielding an unmoving Aramis protectively from the sun glaring down upon them.

When Athos returned his attention in front of him, he noticed that once again, the path leading his friend to safety was lined with men. It wasn’t just soldiers standing guard out here though, there were also farmers from nearby homesteads, and friends and families of the victims that had not survived, lining the path; a path leading directly to a carriage waiting to take their friend home. King Louis himself had supplied it, grand and spacious, and meant only for his musketeer.

As they walked the gauntlet of sympathetic onlookers, Athos accepted their sympathies with a gracious nod, but his strength for propriety had hit its limit a long time ago and he found that he barely had the strength for pleasantries, let alone to look any of them in the eyes.

Treville and d’Artagnan were waiting for them at the carriage, each unsure and fearful for what they were about to witness. The first, his hat in hand and unsteady on his feet as he finally lay witness to what Jacques Pelissier- the sadist behind all this, had done to one of his musketeers, rested a hand on Aramis’ forehead as Porthos gently lowered his charge to the ground.
The other, the young Gascon sitting quietly at the reigns, forlorn yet determined to take his friend home, shifted nervously and then moved over to allow his mentor to share his seat when ready.

The King had also provided riders for the carriage, and even an escort of honor guards baring the French national flag, but none of the musketeers trusted anyone enough to take their injured friend home, nor did any of them wish to part with Aramis. So the King’s entourage, sent as a message to all those who would dare treat one of his personal guard as a mere commoner, were left standing at the side of the road with nothing more to do other than share in everyone’s grief.

As Porthos climbed inside, eager volunteers from the musketeer regiment held the door of the carriage open for him. When inside, Treville and Athos lifted Aramis’ limp body from the ground and carefully transferred him to the waiting arms of his best friend kneeling in the plush carriage.

Porthos moved his friend onto one of the benches, propped him up against a side wall and wrapped him in blankets. He sat himself down on the floor between the benches so he could watch his friend without disturbing him—yet be as close to him as he could, and held one of his bloodied hands within his own—his face buried in their cupped fist as he tried to remember one of the prayers Aramis had tried to instill in him.

“Has he said anything?” asked Treville, leaning into the carriage with one hand resting on the door. His voice was quiet and subdued, and he felt anxious asking the question in lieu of the situation, but as Captain of the regiment, he still had a job to do.

Porthos turned his head toward him, not letting his forehead leave his or his friend’s hands, and stared at him briefly before answering. “No,” he said, boldly. “He hasn’t said a word.”

Treville closed the door, latched it shut and stepped back. He watched as Athos took his seat next to d’Artagnan and then gave a curt salute and promised to meet them back at the garrison. He still had business to attend at the scene of the massacre, but he took some reprieve in the fact that he had already sent a rider ahead to make preparations for Aramis’ arrival.

A few moments later, the carriage, with an escort of six musketeers and an honor guard, moved forward to begin its long journey back to Paris—it’s precious cargo now safe amongst his friends.

To be continued…

Author's Note—I’ve decided to branch out a little, so this story will most likely be much darker and more violent than most of my others. But not too much more, I like to keep my stories under the Mature radar. If there is anything within a specific chapter that I feel violates the General rating, I will post a warning at the beginning of said chapter. And if it becomes too frequent, I will change the status of the whole story. Thank you. Hope you enjoy it.

Also, this story would be nothing without my beta reader LJGroundwater. Any and all praise is shared with her.
Chapter 2

This story was inspired by the glorious fight sequence seen in the eighth episode of the first season of, The Originals, titled, The River In Reverse. The song playing during that scene, ‘Bartholomew’ by The Silent Comedy, also inspired it and to which all chapter quotes are taken. But most importantly, this story was inspired by the dark side of Aramis- the one simmering just under the surface of his gentlemanly exterior.

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter One.

Aramis stopped tracing the words in his book with his index finger and pointed it at the ceiling. “Reverse peristalsis,” he said, the natural crinkles around his eyes taught as he sought out his friend sitting across the room.

Dropping his head, Porthos spread his arms across the table in front of him to stop his upper body from collapsing over his porridge. “Please stop.”

“Stop what?” asked Athos, entering the refectory.

“Reverse peristalsis,” said Aramis.

Porthos closed his eyes. “I don’t wanna do this anymore.”

Athos glanced at each of them with narrowed eyes, and then with a sigh, he pulled a chair out from the table. “Aramis, must you antagonize him this early in the morning? The sun has barely risen. Let the man eat his breakfast in peace.”

His attention focused on his book, Aramis raised his head as his brows pulled together. “Hm?”

“I’ll give you the names of every willing seductress I know if you would just stop,” said Porthos, burying his head in his hands.

Aramis flitted his eyes between his two friends. “What are you talking about?” he asked, before diving back into his book.

“If you insist on bribing Monsieur Aramis,” Athos whispered to the large musketeer, “try enticing him with something he does not currently possess, or is incapable of acquiring.”

Porthos ran his hands down his face, stopping when he was able to peer at Athos over the tips of his fingers. “You’re not helping.”

“Vomiting,” said the marksman. “Reverse peristalsis means vomiting. Oh, here’s another interesting one. How about, bilateral periorbital ecchymosis?”
Athos leaned back and peered at Aramis. “What?”

“Bilateral periorbital ecchymosis,” stated Aramis.

Athos frowned. “Those words are nonsense.”

“What’s nonsense?” asked d’Artagnan, strolling into the room.

The marksman smiled at the new arrival and patted the empty seat of the chair next to him. When the Gascon sat down, Aramis scuttled his chair close. “Perhaps you would care to learn a few things,” he said.

D’Artagnan hitched his shoulders. “Hm. Sure. What are we discussing? Strategic advances? Logistical retreats?” The corner of his mouth crept upward and he lowered his voice. “How one of the Queen’s ladies in waiting is getting a little wider around the midsection?”

Aramis opened his mouth, but Porthos held out his hand, exposing his palm and spread fingers.

“Ignore him,” Porthos said to d’Artagnan, then he picked up his spoon and dug into his now cold breakfast. “He’s not teaching anythin’. He’s just making up words and trying to get me to guess their meanings.”

Athos frowned. “That’s what he’s doing?”

Porthos nodded as he let out a stuttering breath.

“Come on now,” Aramis said. “Give it a try. Bilateral periorbital ecchymosis?”

“Two black eyes,” responded d’Artagnan.

Aramis patted the Gascon on the back. “Very good.”

D’Artagnan grinned and straightened, then noticed the glare coming from his brothers at the table. “What?”

Porthos threw his head back, mouth extended beyond a typical smile as he patted his chest. “I get it. Very funny,” he said. “You two are in this together. You win. Good game. No hard feelings.” He paused and his face turned serious. “Now, can we please stop?”

Aramis was many things, but above all else he considered himself a gentleman, so he closed his book. His studies would have to wait and his fascination be mollified later.

Their captain entered the room at that moment, and the four musketeers rose to their feet in respectful salutation; Porthos’ spoon clanging to the table and Aramis’ book falling from his lap.

“At ease, gentlemen,” greeted Treville, making his way across the room. He stopped at the table and dropped two envelopes down. “Two letters. Two teams,” he announced. “Pick your pairs and see…”

Porthos snatched one of the envelopes. “I call Athos.”

Aramis clutched his heart as his mouth fell open, but before he could rebuke, Treville tossed him the other envelope.

“Instructions are inside, men,” explained the captain. “And if you don’t dawdle, you should be able to meet in Orleans for supper before heading back.”
Treville turned and headed for the door, stopping when he noticed the book on the floor. “I see you got it,” he said, nodding at Aramis.

“Yes, thank you, Captain,” replied the marksman, picking the book up and smoothing his hand over the worn leather cover. “I was just sharing some of the more interesting bits when you arrived.”

Treville looked to the table. “Bout time the two of you took up some sort of intellectual pursuit,” he said, and then turned back to Aramis. “I found it in some old chest while cleaning out my office and thought you might get more out of it than I. Enjoy.” Then he left the room.

Porthos turned to Athos with a raised eyebrow. “Was the cap’n talking bout us?”

Athos frowned while shaking his head lightly, then strode over to the book in question and turned it so he could examine the cover. “De Mortu Cordis,” he said. “It’s a medical textbook.”

“Figures,” mumbled Porthos. “No wonder I didn’t understand anythin’.”

Athos turned toward the door, flicking his wrist beside his head to indicate Porthos should follow.

“I guess it’s you and me,” d’Artagnan said, patting Aramis on the back. He guided the marksman toward the door and gestured to the book tucked under his arm as they turned into the corridor. “So, the captain really gave you that?”

“Found it outside my door just this morning,” replied Aramis, pulling the book closer to his body. “I haven’t been able to put it down since.” As they walked into the courtyard, Aramis turned to his friend with a raised eyebrow. “Do you mind if I ask how you knew what that meant?”

“Remember that dreadful gala last week the King threw for the Physician’s Guild?” replied d’Artagnan. When Aramis nodded he continued. “I was stationed near a group from the Paris University. They spend hours rambling on about the…” he paused to mimic the voice of a blowhard physician, “intricacies of the medical language. Must have picked up a few things”

Aramis smiled. “I sympathize with you,” he said. “The physicians do like to advocate their medical superiority. Pompous bunch they are.”

~The Musketeers~

The two letters were each delivered to their respective recipients without delay. It was a simple task that required musketeers only due to the fact that the King himself was sending them.

Athos and Porthos rode straight to Nevers to deliver theirs, staying only briefly to rest before setting out to meet with the others in Orleans. They arrived at the prearranged inn first, found rooms, and were well into their second tankard of ale when their brothers arrived.

“Do a little sight seeing?” asked Porthos, pouring them each a mug.

Aramis stretched his legs, clasping his hands behind his head. “Held up outside Le Mans,” he said.

“How so?”

“A poor woman and her goats,” he replied.


Aramis chuckled. “As much as I appreciate how that sounds, it does insinuate I am less than a gentleman.”
“You did take care of the woman,” said d’Artagnan. “I was out there alone herding the goats.”

“To explain it more clearly, I was mending her fence,” Aramis said, reaching forward to pat the Gascon on the shoulder with a wry smile. “Sorry my friend, but you are much more experienced than I at handling animals so I felt my presence would only be interfering.”

Although d’Artagnan preferred to be recognized as a soldier, he was not ashamed of his farming roots, so he accepted the apology with a tight-lipped nod.

“No husband around?” asked Athos.

“Away hunting,” said d’Artagnan. “Along with their two sons.”

“Had forgotten to fix the fence before they left,” added Aramis. “Were due back hours ago but hadn’t shown up yet, so we graciously offered our services.”

Porthos reached for his ale. “Always the gentlemen,” he said. Draining his mug, he got up to order another tankard, knocking the chair of the patron behind him.

“Hey! Watch it!”

Porthos mumbled an apology, but it did not stop the patron and his friends from pushing back their chairs and rising. With their lips curled and their fists clenched, they surrounded the large musketeer.

Aramis and d’Artagnan smiled at each other while Athos dropped his head into a hand.

“Here we go,” said the former Comte, rising to his feet.

D’Artagnan also started to rise, but Aramis stilled him with a firm grip on his arm. “Pick your battle first,” he said.

The Gascon, his muscles twitching, shook his head. Aramis pulled him back down into his chair with a glint in his eyes d’Artagnan could not quite decipher.

“Patience, my friend,” Aramis said. “First decide what you are in the mood for.” He swept his arm in front of them as if presenting his newest collection of pistols. “We are not in the heat of battle, so you have time to be discerning. Ask yourself, how much danger am I up for this evening?”

“Ah, I see,” said d’Artagnan.

They leaned back, nearly shoulder to shoulder and surveyed the room.

“I might be inclined to toy with the one over there,” d’Artagnan said, pointing across the room to a patron swaying on his feet as he tried to land his awkward punches. “As a bit of a warm up.”

Aramis’ chair lurched sideways as a man on the floor slid into the legs. “Or perhaps you can simply kick a man when he’s down?” he offered.

D’Artagnan shook his head, flexed his fingers. “No. I think I’m actually feeling a bit more vigorous tonight.”

“Athos! Left!” Aramis cringed when the swordsman received a harsh punch to the side of his face, then he turned back to the Gascon. “Sorry, you were saying?”

D’Artagnan chuckled. “I’m thinking something more lively,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the din of the tavern.
Aramis motioned to the floor, once again as if presenting something of high value. “Now that you know what part of you needs to be sated,” he said. “It’s time to pick your battle.”

The Gascon jumped to his feet only to find himself sprawled on his back as a brute of a man crashed into him.

“Or,” Aramis said, rising, “you can let your battles pick you.” He reached down and pulled the man off d’Artagnan and shoved him on his way.

D’Artagnan thanked the marksman as he scrambled to his feet, then they joined the fray together, fighting not so valiantly along side their brothers.

Chairs flew through the air, some hitting their marks, some not even close. Arms swung in all directions searching for something to hit or to defend their owners from airborne bottles and cutlery. There was even biting and kicking involved, but no pistols or swords were drawn, keeping the fight clean, at least by brawling standards.

The only patrons not involved in the fight were the two men leaning against a wall with their arms folded in front of them, occasionally craning their necks for a better view. Their associates had instigated the ordeal specifically so they could observe. Their plan had worked, possibly even too well, for they had not needed an entire tavern full of men, only a few. Either way, they could not hide their delight as they watched the uproar before them, occasionally pointing and whispering when someone piqued their interest.

~The Musketeers~

Over a day late, Athos and Porthos returned to the garrison alone, having neither seen nor heard from their brothers since the start of the brawl in Orleans.

Treville was prepping a search party in the courtyard when they arrived, and upon hearing the news, sent them anyway, only they were now searching for two musketeers, not four. Athos and Porthos would join them shortly, but first they wanted to report to their captain, change horses and restock their supplies.

They followed their captain up to his office, and as Treville barged in ahead of them he threw a stack of papers down on his desk. Turning to his men, he ran one hand down his face, stopping to grasp the chin of his gapping mouth. With his other hand, he motioned for Athos and Porthos to start talking.

“We learned other men have also gone missing;” said Athos. “In particular, two young sons and a father missing from a farm near Le Mans.”

Treville dropped his head and leaned against his desk with his arms crossed, clenching each bicep hard enough to form bruises. “This is bigger than you think,” he said. “Right after you left to deliver the letters, I was summoned to the palace on the King’s request.”

Porthos stepped forward. “What’s happening, cap’n?”

“Several messengers arrived begging the King do something about the disappearance of men in their areas.”

Athos glanced at Porthos, before speaking. “Regrettably, there’s more.”

“We heard two men went missing from Nevers as well,” said Porthos.
Treville took a deep breath before pushing off his desk. He paced the area between it and his two musketeers. “That brings the total to twenty-two,” he said.

“That have been reported,” Athos reminded everyone.

Porthos found the floor between his feet suddenly fascinating. “Does that count include…”

“Yes,” Treville said softly. He felt a mild pain in his chest as he looked at the large musketeer, knowing how much he worried about his friends. Unfortunately there was not much room for sentimentality as the captain, so he cleared his throat. “I’ll send word right away to the King regarding Aramis and d’Artagnan,” he said. “But I’ll have to report to him shortly in person. Hopefully by then he won’t be so distracted and start showing support.”

“You don’t think he has a vested interest in this?” asked Athos.

“He hasn’t shown much regard yet,” replied Treville. “He’s been busy with some such nonsense regarding the universities in Paris.”

Porthos pulled his frame back, eyes wide. “But he’ll take notice when he hears ‘bout his musketeers, won’t he?”

“I hope so,” replied Treville. “The Cardinal sent out his guards right away when four of his men went missing the other day, so I suspect the King will follow suit.”

Athos looked pointedly at his captain. “Red Guards?”

“You didn’t hear?” asked Treville, glancing quickly at Athos. “Of course not. You haven’t been here. Four Red Guard went missing the day you left to deliver the letters.”

Porthos threw his head back and arms in the air. “Who’d wanna steal them?”

Treville glared at the large musketeer- who now had the good sense to silence any further comments. It was not the time to be spurring animosity between the two regiments. Whether they like it or not, Treville knew they might have to work together on this one. “I’ll send men to search Alencon,” he said. “And there’s already a large contingency of Red Guard searching the ports of LeHavre.”

“Porthos and I will return to search between Nevers and Le Mans,” said Athos.

“That’s a lot of territory,” Treville pointed out.

Porthos pursed his lips with a curt nod. “And we’ll search every inch of it,” he said. Then he bid his Captain good-bye and headed for the door.

As Athos turned to follow, Treville caught him by the arm before he had a chance to leave. “How’s he holding up?” he asked, hitching his head in the direction of the retreating musketeer.

Athos’ response was a long sigh.

“How ‘bout you, then?” Treville asked, noting the dark circles under the swordsman’s eyes.

Athos turned away and started toward the stairs. On the landing he paused and looked back at Treville. “Until we find Aramis and d’Artagnan, neither of us will be fine.”

Treville nodded and watched the swordsman continue down the stairs. When the two musketeers cleared the gates of the garrison, Treville retreated back into his office, closing the door firmly behind
*De Mortu Cordis*—An historical landmark text concerning physiology, written by physician William Harvey in 1628. The full title of the book is, ‘Exercitatio Anatomica De Mortu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus’, but is more commonly referred to by it’s shorter name, ‘De Mortu Cordis’. 

To be continued…
Chapter 3

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Two.

‘Oh my god,

please help me, waist deep in the river,

can you hear my plea?’

Aramis woke as a violent shiver ran through him. He curled into the fetal position to help fortify his body against the cold, reducing his frantic shaking into minute tremors.

He opened his eyes and saw a torch flickering in the distance; it’s light barely reaching the corners of the room. Looking around where he could see, he noticed the floor was hard packed dirt, and the only window was barred and set into a door several feet in front of him.

He wasn’t in a room. He was in a prison cell.

Aramis sat up, blinking and shaking his head. He pushed to his feet using the wall behind him for support, dirt tumbling down his neck under the collar of his doublet. Shaking out his coat, he noticed how it moved too easily and quickly patted himself down. His weapons and belts were gone.

He reached the door in three long strides and peered through the small opening. The hallway was lit with torches sporadically placed on the walls creating too many shadows and dark corners to see anything clearly.

He pushed on the door and nothing happened, so he ran his fingers along its frame, his heart falling when realizing it was hinged on the other side, rendering his more intricate escape skills moot. He stepped back, crouched and threw himself against the obstruction impeding his escape. It banged, vibrated and echoed but would not budge.

Backing into the middle of the cell, Aramis braced a hand on one hip and ran the other through his hair, grabbing a fistful of locks. “Think.”

Images of a tavern, his brothers, Orleans and a woman with goats flew through his mind in random order. He shook his head hoping they would fall into place as his heart fluttered and his stomach dropped.

“How did I end up here?” he said, fisting his hair nearly hard enough to pull it from his scalp.

He paced, hoping the cadence would govern his mild panic and put order to his thoughts. Years of soldiering, and deep breathing, combined to bring Aramis back under control within moments.

“Someone will be by shortly,” he said, leaning against the back wall. “Someone always comes by shortly.”
He rubbed a hand down his face, stopping to grip the tip of his beard. Memories of past imprisonments; a broken arm from a Spanish inquisitor, dislocated joints from an angry nobleman unhappy with the King’s new taxes, countless other bruises and scars- these flashbacks were not so disjointed. He released a loud huff of breath, cognizant of the coming threats and torture.

But no one came.

As the sun came and went without him knowing, the day stretched into many days, leaving Aramis with only the degradation of his body to mark the passing of time. He thought it odd how it had become a mere timepiece, ticking away as stages of dehydration and malnutrition tore at him.

It began as a pinching in his stomach and a mouth that tasted as if it had licked the bottom of a hundred boots. It culminated in an aching tightness in his throat and jaw, and not long after, an unforgiving urge to flex his muscles took over. So when the damp dirt beneath him began to look appetizing, he punched and clawed at the walls. And he screamed in vain with a throat and mouth too dry to produce sound until finally collapsing against a wall and sinking to the ground.

With a splintering pain in his head inhibiting his will to stand again, his body shrank away beneath his clothes, causing them to drape far too loosely from his slender frame. When the fever started, turning his body into a vibrating skeleton that threatened to shatter as he shivered and trembled, even his prayers stopped bringing him comfort.

Aramis had always known, like all men did, that he would eventually die, but he’d always envisioned his death on a battlefield, surrounded by his brothers fighting valiantly beside him. But as his solitude and lack of food and water drew on, he made peace with the fact that he would now most likely die alone. Being isolated gave him too much time to think, allowing for his deepest fears to surface and grab hold of any remaining hope and wrap it’s tentacles around it and toss it away. So with his lingering faith of being rescued by his brothers eluding him, Aramis huddled deeper into his doublet on the cold, damp ground and waited to cross over to the other side.

When it was abundantly clear he lacked the fortitude to resist, a face appeared in the window of the door.

A tingling in the back of his mind, an innate sense that had saved him and his brothers on countless missions, made him open his eyes. He saw, or envisioned, he could not be sure, two eyes staring back at him. Was this his salvation or had he actually crossed the veil? Were those the eyes of a saviour or did they belong to the devil?

The figure did not speak, nor did Aramis ask it to, being far too weak to put voice to his thoughts. He also knew he could neither escape nor protect himself, so he let his eyes fall closed.

An ear-piercing screech forced his eyes open again, and he watched as a form moved into the cell. It was nothing more than a black shadow floating across the ground; it’s fluid figure swishing gracefully as it came to a stop in the middle of the cell.

“My name is Pellisier.”

The voice was distant, an echo hailing from the depths of an enormous pit. Aramis believed only the devil could speak with such a voice. A voice that rattled his soul and made him shudder when it reached his ears.

Aramis lifted his lids, fear instigating the movement rather than curiosity. The figure was a pale, featureless head atop a shadow that flowed like vivid black silk to the ground. Aramis was not certain if it was real or a product of his imagination.
Two other figures, bulky in stature, entered and flanked Pellisier. Aramis strained against the heaviness of his eyelids, battling a sleepiness that threatened to overwhelm him. He swallowed, his throat stinging as there was no moisture to service the process. Had he really crossed the veil between life and death? Was this the greeting of the devil and his minions to his ungodly domicile?

“Welcome to your new existence,” said Pellisier. “Any sign of defiance shall be met with aggression. Any act in contradiction to your instructions shall be met with aggression. Any refusal to act upon given instructions will also be met with aggression.”

Existence. Defiance. Aggression. These words stood out.

“I’ll take your silence as acceptance of these rules,” continued Pellisier. “You heed instructions well, monsieur. Continue to do so and your time here may be more pleasant. Don’t, and I will be forced to adjust your destiny toward a more painful and shorter future.”

The devil did not explain rules or offer reward. The devil splayed and gutted souls, leaving open wounds to fester and decompose. He burned and twisted everything and everyone around him, leaving the acrid smell of sulphur and char in his wake.

This man was not the devil. He was real. A mortal. And mortals could be killed.

Anger sprouted within Aramis, fostering his instincts for self-preservation. He would not let this man take him whole. Pellisier could have his decrepit body, but his obedience and surrender he could not.

So Aramis yawned, slow and deliberate, with eyes unflinching as they bore into the man before him. He knew the act would not necessarily imply defiance, but the smug smile that accompanied it would.

Pellisier turned away in a blur of blackness and retreated to the door, his two companions following quickly on his heels. On the mantle, Pellisier stopped and turned, and then slowly closed the door to the cell.

Aramis heard the scraping of metal followed by the deep thud of a lock engaging. The ground rumbled, causing Aramis to flinch.

Pellisier looked at him through the small window. “I know what you did there,” he said. “And I respect your audacity. It is, after all, one of the reasons you were chosen. But your mistake, monsieur, was assuming the aggression would be meted out on you.” Pellisier paused to smile. It was quick and flat, depicting only malevolence. “I will be sure to send your regards to your fellow musketeer.”

Two thoughts immediately struck Aramis. First, he was not alone. And second, he regretted his actions.

~The Musketeers~

In a room with a polished stone floor and walls that looked as if tapestries had hung on them a long time ago, d’Artagnan woke. He rolled onto his side and heard a clanging as something heavy landed on his hip. Twisting back, he looked down at his waist to see a thick chain draped over him.

He raised his arms, his eyes growing wide when he noticed the shackles on his wrists. His heart pounded as he scrambled to his feet, his ascent hindered by the heavy chains. His eyes followed the chains back from his wrists up to a ring imbedded in the wall. Each arm was chained separately, but to the same chain, and as he pulled on one side the other side shortened.
He stepped back, twisting his body to add momentum as he yanked and pulled on the chains. He accomplished nothing other than bruising his wrists, but he tried again anyway, his body working on instinct rather than logic.

The door swung open, startling d’Artagnan as it slammed against the wall. In the doorway stood two men, their chests heaving. He shuddered, noticing how their meaty fists were clenched at the ends of their well-defined arms. A moan escaped him, and he swallowed quickly before completely exposing his unease.

But they did not enter. A small framed man in a black robe entered instead, carrying a water skin and loaf of bread.

His presence ignited d’Artagnan’s anger. The two brutes were just guards, this man with his delicate features and air of superiority was most likely the one behind his imprisonment. So d’Artagnan pitched himself forward, his shoulders jarring when he ran out of chain. “Who are you? Why have you done this?”

The robed man remained still and impassive, just out of d’Artagnan’s reach.

Eyes narrowed, his jaw almost too tense to articulate words, d’Artagnan leaned over his feet, creating further strain to his shoulders. “Why… am… I… here?”

The two men from the doorway plodded forward, their speed increasing as they neared.

D’Artagnan crouched and swivelled his wrists to wrap the chains around his hands, but the two men grabbed him by the shoulders and wrists and pushed him back before he could take a swing.

Air exploded from his lungs as his back hit the wall, stunning him long enough for the robed man to toss the water skin and bread at his feet.

When he was released, he slumped to the floor clutching his chest. The three men left, slamming the door behind them. D’Artagnan looked after them, coughing and sputtering until his breathing regulated and it no longer felt as if Porthos was squeezing him in a bear hug. He looked down at the food and water and pushed them away, saving the debate over whether they were safe to eat till later… or until he was left with no choice.

Drawing in a deep breath and stretching out his legs, d’Artagnan surveyed the room. There was a window across from him, and although large, it was too far to reach and all he could see was sky. I’m on an upper level, he thought.

He looked to the door next, which was also too far away, but he hadn’t heard the distinct thud of a lock, so he held on to some hope in that regard. First though, he had to shed himself of the chains.

Tilting his head back, he examined the anchor in the wall above him. He grabbed the chains and yanked, causing a fine powder to sprinkle down, dusting his hair and lips. He shook his head and spit it from his lips and then looked back up. Around the anchor the wall was smooth.

“Think with your head, not your heart,” he said, remembering the tutoring of Athos. With a frown, d’Artagnan looked around the room again, sniffing the air. It lacked the bitter scent of urine and the musky sourness of stale body odour typically found in well-used prison cells.

His lips pressed into a thin line. Were the chains new? Was this someone’s residence? The walls and floor suggested as much, but whose? And where were his brothers?

“Please tell me you haven’t been captured,” said d’Artagnan, tapping his head against the wall.
“Please tell me you’re out there executing my escape.”

D’Artagnan spent the next few days repeating a similar scenario. He kicked and thrashed as the guards restrained him, smiling when he was able to draw blood, regardless of always losing the battle in the end. Then the robed man would toss food and water at his feet, a curious look on his face as he did. D’Artagnan ignored it for the most part, his frustration overwhelming any sense of curiosity. But as the days wore on and boredom struck, he fantasized wiping that impertinent expression from the man’s face.

But one day, the routine changed. As d’Artagnan lay on the floor, watching the night sky through the window as his eyelids fluttered close, the two men responsible for restraining him each morning barged in and stalked toward him. His heart racing, skin flush, and fighting his way to alertness, d’Artagnan clambered to his feet. His eyes darted between the men as they stomped across the stone floor, their heads thrust forward and lips curled back.

The flushing of d’Artagnan’s skin turned cold, and he shivered as the two temperatures within his body fought for control.

“I’m not going to enjoy this, am I?” he asked, tightening his muscles and spreading his feet as he lowered into a crouch.

To be continued…
Chapter 4

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Three.

‘Please help me, knee keep in the river
tryin’ to get clean.

He says, wash your hands, get out the stain.

But you best believe, boy, there’s hell to pay.’

The guards came at d’Artagnan from both sides. They had no weapons, but their fists were large and clenched and d’Artagnan knew he stood only a small chance of winning this fight. He backed up, swivelling his head back and forth to keep them in sight. The one to his right lunged forward and d’Artagnan swung his arm, whipping the chain attached to it in an arc and forcing him back. He whirled around to attack the other, but he’d already charged. D’Artagnan doubled over gasping for breath as a fist connected powerfully with his stomach.

The punches came faster now leaving him barely enough time to breathe between each jarring blow to his ribs and back. Refusing to go down, d’Artagnan gritted his teeth and widened his stance as the guards tried to force him to the floor.

When the pummelling stopped, he tensed in anticipation of further pain. He waited several seconds, his breath hitching, his arms reaching up to protect his head, but nothing happened.

A loud bang startled him, and he slowly opened one eye, then the other when he noticed the room was empty and the door was closed. He pulled his head back and arched his brows, then strained his neck to see over each shoulder. He was alone.

Clenching his stomach, d’Artagnan stepped back until he reached the wall and slid to the floor, his gaze fixated on the door. He pulled his legs up, rolled to the side and wrapped his arms around his midsection, hoping to squeeze the pain into submission. When it didn’t’ work, he tried releasing the build up of pressure in his gut by coughing. It only made it worse, adding a stabbing sensation to his already aching stomach.

He ran a hand through his damp, stringy hair, pushing it back off his face. This was not d’Artagnan’s first experience with imprisonment. He’d been with the musketeers for several months now and had already seen the inside of one jail. But this was his first experience since earning his pauldron and was wondering if the beatings would be worse now that he held a true military commission.

~The Musketeers~

As Aramis slept, his body tossed and turned, a thin layer of sweat covering his skin. In his dream, a figure stood in front of him, over ten feet tall and surrounded by flames. Black, inky oil trailed from his lips as snakes slithered around him instead of material. The figure threw his head back in laughter
and the snakes darted out, hissing and spitting.

Aramis recoiled against the wall and watched as the face of the demon contorted and whorled into someone familiar. It was Pellisier.

And in his clawed hand he held Porthos by the throat, shaking him like a child’s doll. Porthos’ legs swung helplessly as he clutched the hand squeezing his throat, and Aramis lurched forward, arms outstretched to save his brother, but his feet remained planted on the ground. He tried again and again, screaming and clutching at air as something stopped him from helping his friend. He searched frantically for some sort of restraint, but found nothing physical holding him back.

At the sound of a thud, Aramis turned back to see Porthos’ shredded body lying at Pellisier’s feet. Aramis trembled and crouched against the wall. He covered his head as tears stung his cheeks and his heart ached. Swallowing, he dug deep inside him in search of the bravery he knew existed. He could do this. He could fight whatever had a hold of him and save his brothers.

He made a move forward, but Pellisier now had d’Artagnan within his grip. The young Gascon was burning. The fire that flowed around the ungodly creature was now winding its way up d’Artagnan’s legs, melting away leather and flesh and making the air thick with smoke.

Aramis cried out, reached out an arm…

A screeching sound broke through his nightmare, snapping him across what felt like time and space and dumping him back in his cell. He opened his eyes as his heart pounded in his chest to see the two brutish men he had seen earlier.

“Stand.”

Aramis blinked.

“Stand!”

Bile rose in his throat. There was nothing he could do.

“Stand!”

Aramis was hauled to his feet, and unable to hold himself upright, the guards held him steady while another man entered the room.

The marksman closed his eyes as the room tilted. Then he felt something wet on his lips and his tongue darted out to retrieve the water, stinging as it slid down his parched throat. His body moved without thought as it pressed forward wanting more. And as the liquid came faster, sliding over his tongue without time to swallow, he sputtered and gagged. He was barely able to swallow the bread forced into his mouth next as he continued to choke on the water lingering near his vocal cords. But he ate, slowly and methodically, simply because he had no choice.

When the feeding was finished, Aramis was dropped to the ground and abandoned once again. He closed his eyes to stem the burning behind them. His jaw spasmed as he clenched his teeth; his cheeks aching when the muscles would not release. He drew an arm up his body and draped it over his head, wondering if his brother would be punished just once for his not getting up, or for all three times he’d been unable.

He clench his eyes tighter as his shame overtook him, and with food and water now in his stomach, his throat spasmed. Knowing he could not afford to lose the nourishment he’d only just received, he swallowed repeatedly. But his efforts were not sufficient and a moment later, he was on
his side retching acidic bile onto the ground beside him.

His throat now burned along with his eyes, both fighting against the tearing pain in his stomach for sovereignty. Too tired to fight off the pain, he let it have its way.

He flopped onto his back and let go of every mental and physical restraint he had, allowing his body the freedom to express its agony. It throbbed, twitched and convulsed, making every muscle feel as if it were in permanent contraction until it tired itself out and he fell asleep.

He woke hours later feeling worse than before as sharp, needling pain engulfed every inch of him. Too weak to protect himself from the explosions of fire repeatedly assailing him, Aramis cried out with nothing more than forced air escaping his lips.

The bones in his upper arms felt as if they were shattering as tight clamps squeezed them, pulling him upward. He opened his eyes to see a short man with the same inky black and billowing body of Pellisier standing before him. He held things Aramis could not identify, the items simply hovering in space where one would imagine hands would be. And instead of feet, there were empty buckets.

His mind was compromised and he knew it. He dropped his head and let it hang forward, but his addled mind found no comfort. Pale and tinged blue, his body stretched downward to where two white feet contrasted starkly against the dark ground.

It took Aramis several seconds to recognize it as his own and when he did, a flushing heat ignited in his stomach. He was naked.

The fire inside him spread to all his limbs and he wanted nothing more than to curl into himself and hide. He felt like everyone could see through the thin covering of his skin and muscle to the very depths of his soul.

In his entire life, Aramis had granted no one that privilege. There were some who knew him well, probably well enough to surmise what lay beneath the man he showed the world, but what he kept locked deep down inside him- something he barely understood himself- was no ones business but his own.

His head was yanked upright by someone pulling his hair, and while naked and trembling, the stranger scrubbed him with a brush from head to toe, including his hair and beard. Harsh bristles scratched every inch and crevasse of his body until he was raw.

With his skin burning and streaked with thin lines of fresh blood, the stranger dried him with a coarse towel that agitated his already sensitive skin. Aramis was then dressed in leather pants and a white shirt that were not his own, each limb thrust forcefully into the leg holes and shirtsleeves by the guards.

Aramis was then deposited back on the ground, where he curled under his doublet and fell asleep, the next time waking as the door to his cell creaked opened.

Pellisier entered, and with him, he carried a chair and a large skin of water. “Drink this,” he said, tossing the container to Aramis- who had neither the strength nor wherewithal to catch it.

Pellisier shrugged and took a seat, crossing one leg slowly and precisely over the other and placing his hands in his lap.

Their stalemate lasted several minutes until Pellisier sighed and dusted imaginary dirt from his knee. “I will graciously ignore your lack of responsiveness if you would sit up now and drink.”
Aramis closed his eyes. What he wanted was to rush forward and kill this man. To draw his death out slowly by slicing his blade down every vein he could find. But instead, he pushed it from his mind, and then slowly stretched out his arm. He wrapped boney fingers around the water skin and pulled it back toward him. He drank, not caring that most of the water dripped onto his chest.

“That is enough,” said Pellisier, and Aramis dropped the water skin, letting the remaining contents spill onto the floor.

“I can see you are a man of fortitude,” said Pellisier. “A man with strong wills and a stubbornness that knows no bounds. This is what I need, and this is what you will give me—without question and without hesitation.”

The anger within Aramis began to rise, bringing with it a sense of clarity.

“You are most likely confused,” stated Pellisier, rising from his chair. He paced before the marksman several times before he spoke again. “In time all will become clear, but for now you need not know anything more than I wish you well in the coming days. Our champion has grown tiresome and I feel I need another.”

Aramis focused his glare on Pellisier, accentuating the natural arch of his brows as they drew together.

“I saw how you conducted yourself in Orleans, during that rather rambunctious ordeal at the tavern. You showed a side of humanity I rarely see, and I think you’ll do just fine with what is to come.” Pellisier bent down and brushed the hair from the marksman’s forehead, a small smile playing on his lips. “Do you know what it is that’s inside you? Yes? No? I think you do. I saw it the moment you pulled your friend back into his seat.”

Rising and turning with a swish of black fabric, Pellisier moved to the center of the cell. “You will see it as well soon enough.”

With a smile that turned Aramis cold, Pellisier started toward the door, picking his chair up as he walked away. Before he disappeared, he stumbled forward as his feet tangled with something on the ground. He looked down to see the water skin between his feet and when he turned back, Aramis was smiling.

“I will forgive you for the failure to drink,” said Pellisier. “But for this, your friend will suffer.”

~The Musketeers~

Breathe, d’Artagnan thought. Just breathe. Everyone breathes, it can’t be that hard.

He lay on the floor as a man in long black robes sat and watched him. He’d been taking notes since the guards had left, and not once had he spoken to d’Artagnan. Which was fine with the Gascon because he was too busy concentrating on the tremendous pain in his left hand. The broken bones grated and twisted under his skin, making every inch of every finger throb in beat with his heart. The two men responsible for this had made sure they did it properly. It was one thing to stomp on a hand and break some bones, but it was another thing altogether to twist the foot that lies upon that hand.

D’Artagnan could barely look at his fingers as deformed and bloody as they were. No bones stuck out, but he knew that could change if he couldn’t find a bandage or splint.

He diverted his attention by staring at the robed man in the chair. He could only imagine how much his suffering was entertaining him, and although d’Artagnan was trying his best not to reveal anything noteworthy, it was becoming more difficult as time passed and the throbbing increased.
Just breathe through this, d’Artagnan thought, as he closed his eyes.

He thought of pleasant things, like sword practice with Athos, early mornings on his farm in Gascony, but it was the vengeful thoughts that actually distracted him from the pain. He pictured himself cocking his pistol, the barrel aimed at one of the guards, as the other lay splayed on the floor with his sword through his heart. D’Artagnan’s lips turned up in the corners when he saw himself squeeze the trigger, splattering blood and tissue on a distant wall.

“What are you writing there?” he asked.

When no answer came, d’Artagnan turned away. He could hear the scratching of the man’s quill as it moved across the page, and occasionally he heard the man sigh. D’Artagnan could not fathom what the man found so interesting, other than his pain and discomfort…

“What exactly do you want from me?” he asked, this time his voice firm as his brows pulled together. He inched his shoulders along the wall to help hoist himself upright. “Are you recording my suffering? Are you seriously enjoying this?”

D’Artagnan’s eyes were wide and focused. “You sadistic bastard.”

The man looked up from his writings and placed his quill inside his book before closing it. He picked up the ink well on the floor by his feet then stood. For a moment he stared at the Gascon, his facial muscles slack and his frame relaxed. Then he turned away and headed out the door.

~The Musketeers~

Treville stood outside the King’s personal apartments waiting his introduction. When the large, gilded doors swung open, Treville made his way directly to where Louis sat behind his desk signing papers, several members of his court standing idly by waiting eagerly for the King to throw them a crumb of recognition.

Treville huffed, but kept his countenance professional when Louis looked up at him.

“I hear more of my subjects have gone missing?”

Treville cleared his throat and shifted his weight. The light, lilting nature of the King’s voice was gone. His shoulders were also closer to his ears, and the hand that gripped the quill was red, as if it had been holding on for dear life for way too long. “That is true, your majesty,” he said, carefully pacing his words. “But may I just…”

“Have you narrowed down the search?”

Treville drew in a deep breath. Louis was being short and his easy smile had not graced his face upon seeing him, as it usually did. “We are narrowing down the possibilities,” he replied. “For every piece of land or estate where we don’t find them, we close in on where they are actually located.”

Louis smiled, but it was flat and disappeared as quickly as it appeared. “That seems like a rather tedious way of doing things.”

Treville ground his teeth. “Unfortunately so.”

“As for my men?”

A groan nearly escaped Treville’s lips as he forced down the words he wanted to say. “As like the other missing men,” he said. “There has been no word.”
Arching his quill in the air, Louis let it drop the last few inches to the desk before rising. Head down, his lips pressed thin and his hands clasped in front of him, he stepped around the desk, each footfall deliberate.

He came to a stop only steps away from the captain and raised his head. “When this scoundrel started taking my subjects, it merely irked me,” he said. “But as more petitioners arrived asking for my help, I realized someone was poaching on my lands.”

Treville took deep breaths to relax the muscles in his face, preventing them from tightening and furrowing his brow. He’d never enjoyed being dressed down by his King, but with each word the King spoke, his volume increased.

Louis closed the gap between them with a single step. “When two of my musketeers were taken, I took it as a personal affront. Those poachers have encroached upon my personal property! They might as well have taken the rings right off my hand!”

Treville held his ground as the King leaned into him with flushed cheeks and bulging neck veins. “I understand, your majesty,” said Treville.

“You do not!” Louis turned away to brace his hands on his desk. When he turned back, his face was still flush but his shoulders and chest were moving much more subtly. “Musketeers represent me and therefore must be treated with more respect than some villager ploughing the lands. They are not miscreants from the Court of Miracles; they are the King’s men. And I will not tolerate people thinking it is appropriate to treat them as commoners. Commoners are common. Musketeers are honoured soldiers. Therefore, if one is stealing a commoner, he has no business stealing a musketeer. It suggests this felon regards my musketeers as commoners, which they are not. They are a part of me, and I am most certainly not a commoner.”

Treville’s teeth nearly broke under the weight of his clenched jaw. Although there was probably a good point to be found somewhere in the King’s rant, it was lost amongst the rather bad ones.

“Do we understand?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied the captain.

Louis waved a hand toward the door. “I want the one responsible for this to be punished. I want him used as an example to those who dare attack my personage. Now go. Find my men.”

Treville bowed and turned on his heels. He made his way toward the door as fast as his legs could take him, mumbling, “they are not property.”

His anger carried him through most of the palace. It wasn’t until the rear portico that he was stopped by a familiar voice. He spun around and waited as the Queen approached, her ladies in waiting not more than six feet behind. “Your Majesty,” he said, bending at the waist.

“Hello, Captain.”

“I’ve just come from the King.”

A delicate movement of the Queen’s lips suggested a smile. “I’m surprised he had time,” she said. “He’s been so preoccupied with the dealings of this Physician’s Guild, he’s barely come up for air.”

Treville was in somewhat of a rush. “If I may beg your pardon…”
“I hear some of your men have been caught up in this…” she paused, and her eyes drifted away from his.

Treville felt her anxiety hit him like an invisible punch to the gut. He swallowed and tried to ease her discomfort by being succinct. “Yes. Two,” he said.

The Queen bit her lip. “Their names?”

Treville drew in a deep breath, speaking when the air passed quickly through his lips “D’Artagnan and Aramis.”

There was the slightest quiver in the Queen’s lips, and if Treville had not been watching her so closely he would have missed it.

“I’m sure they will be fine,” he said. “They are amongst the finest of the Musketeers.”

“And the bravest,” she said, her fingers dusting over her chest as if looking for something.

Treville bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said. “Now, if there is nothing further I must get back to the garrison.”

~The Musketeers~

The green of the countryside bordered by a blue sky, lulled Athos and Porthos into a calm, their thoughts and worries no longer as frantic as the hustle and bustle of Paris. Their concern had not waned, but as the smell of wild flowers and fresh air surrounded them, they relaxed enough to formulate plans instead of being bogged down by angry, vengeful thoughts directed at a still unknown opponent.

They’d packed light, making their journey across the central part of France quick and easy. But there was a lot of ground to cover. By nightfall, Athos and Porthos had searched two estates, one farm and only a meagre portion of forest. They’d not found a single missing person, or any clues signifying any sort of hideout either, but were relieved to discover that no new kidnappings needed to be reported.

As the sky turned dark, signifying night, the two musketeers made camp on the River Loire near Tours, where they met up with two of the Cardinal’s Red Guard.

“Alain. Edmond.” Porthos nodded at each guard as he sat across from them. A fire crackled and spat between the two rival groups as a rabbit, courtesy of the guard, roasted over the pit. Wine also flowed freely, with more than one bottle open at a time.

“We have men stationed at the port in Le Havre,” said Alain, sitting forward to rest his elbows on his knees. The light from the fire exposed deep lines and eyes that drooped in the outer corners, and Athos felt that if he could see his own reflection, it would most likely appear the same.

“That’s good,” he said.

One side of Alain’s mouth twitched up. “I wasn’t looking for your approval.”

Athos clenched his jaw and took a sip of his wine. “Find out anything useful?”

Alain cast his eyes downward.

“Did you know ‘em well?” asked Porthos.
Alain shrugged while Edmond nodded. “One was my brother in law,” replied the latter. “Taken right out of a tavern in Paris while I was playing cards!” He threw his wine into the fire, pitching burning sparks into the air as it flared.

“It was a tavern for us as well,” Porthos said, leaning back. When the fire settled, he hunched forward again, poking at the rabbit with a stick as he rested his chin in a hand propped on one knee. “Should ‘ave been paying more…”

“When?” interrupted Athos.

“Days ago,” replied Edmund.

“When do the reports say the first disappearance was?” asked Porthos.

“Weeks ago,” replied Athos.

The creases around Alain’s eyes deepened. “When were yours taken?”

Athos felt his left eye twitch, but he refused to expose his vulnerability. “Days ago as well,” he said, rising from the fire. He walked away, heading toward the river. His whole body trembled now, begging to release pent up energy. The only thing stopping him from exerting that energy in some violent form or other was a dull, clamping ache around his heart.

When he reached the bank, he stood near the water’s edge and watched as the moonlight played on the surface. Behind him, he heard the soft crunch of boots on damp grass. Athos did not look over his shoulder, nor did he reach for the hilt of his sword. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

“Who says I wanna talk?” replied Porthos, entering his periphery.

They watched the rippling water as it rolled onto the riverbank, neither looking at the other. Back at camp the two guards were eating the rabbit and finishing off the last of the wine, but neither musketeer cared.

“Where are they, Porthos?”

The question was asked so quietly Porthos nearly missed it. He turned to the swordsman, putting one hand on his shoulder and the other he placed on his own chest. “I don’t know where they’re bein’ kept,” he said. “But I know where they are.” Porthos tapped his chest. “And as long as they’re here, they can’t be too far.”

“I wish I had your sentimentality.”

Porthos slid his hand down the swordsman’s shoulder to the centre of his friend’s chest. “You do, my friend,” he said. “You just need to learn how to let it out.” He tapped Athos’ chest gently before turning to leave.

After a few beats, Athos turned after him. “I tried that once,” he said.

Porthos stopped and glanced over his shoulder.

“It did not go well. I’m better off this way.”

“Well, we like you just fine the way you are,” said Porthos. “Don’t go changing on our account.”

With the moon behind him, Athos’ small smile was lost in the shadows. He turned back to the river and listened as Porthos retreating footsteps faded in the distance.
This was his fault. Everything was his fault when in active duty of the King. He was the leader of their small, inseparable group, and all actions were not only a reflection of him, but also an extension of him. So with two missing, possibly dead, it felt as if a limb had been torn from his body- one for each brother.

He sat down and put his back against a rock, taking a hit from his canteen as he laid the situation out in his head; the history of recent events and what he intended to do now. He took another full swig, letting it ease his buzzing thoughts. Men were disappearing from a relatively distinct area of France. None were being found- dead or alive- and there were no signs of any large camps or …

Athos sat up.

He pushed himself to his feet and headed back toward camp, the length of his strides increasing as he neared. When he burst into the clearing, he took barely a breath before speaking.

“Supply chains,” he said.

“Follow the supply chain,” Porthos said, jumping to his feet.

Athos nodded. “One would need a very large group of men to organize something this big. For every prisoner there would be at least… what, two or three guards?”

“Maybe more,” Porthos said. “And that’s a lot of mouths to feed.”

Alain frowned. “Not if the prisoners are being killed or sold after they’re captured.”

Porthos turned narrowed eyes on the guard. “Don’t go there.”

Athos pulled his bedroll from his saddlebag and laid it near the fire. He stretched himself out on top of it and reached for the canteen on his belt. He took a long swig, settling it on his lap when sated, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. “Tomorrow,” he said. “We start looking at this from a different angle.”

To be continued…
Aramis would not leave without his brother.

When he woke to find a full water skin and several pieces of bread next to him, he finished them off, feeling only slightly better when he was done. The little food he’d been given granted him some strength, but not enough to take on Pellisier and his guards.

Pellisier barely spoke of his brother, offering Aramis no clues to who it was paying for his disobedience. He considered maybe it was a bluff, but wasn’t willing to the take the chance that it wasn’t.

He ran a hand through his hair, pushing his head back against the wall. With his hunger and thirst now stimulated, his cramps bordered on painful. He swept his tongue across his dry lips and imagined cool water passing over them. He gripped his stomach, trying to settle the hunger pains eating away at him by imagining himself full.

By the time the cell doors opened again, his discomfort had not eased. In fact, it was worse. Aramis ground his teeth to temper his starvation fuelled aggression as a man dressed similar to Pellisier stepped into the cell carrying more water and a handful of dried meat and cheese.

The stranger flinched and drew in a sharp breath when Aramis moved his foot. Aramis smiled and steadied his gaze as he watched him bend down in front of him; the threat looming over his brother deterring his urge to strangle the young man more than any chain, gag or torture device ever could.

The young man’s trembling nearly had him dropping his items as he moved closer. Aramis narrowed his eyes, one corner of his mouth twitching upward in enjoyment of the man’s rising panic.

The man dropped the food and water and scrambled toward the door, slamming it closed behind him. Aramis reached for the water. “And all it took was one look,” he said quietly, before taking a long drink from the skin.

By the time he finished the food and water, many hours had passed. When he felt strong enough, he tried to stand. His legs wobbled at first, but once he had his bearings he was able to stand without the support of the wall. He took small, careful steps at first, and then larger more determined strides as his strength and co-ordination returned. If the food and water continued to come, Aramis felt he
would be back to fighting strength very soon, and he pitied anyone who had the displeasure of coming after him then.

**Athos. Porthos. D’Artagnan.**

The names repeated in his head, his chest aching at the thought of it being any one of them. His only consolation was that when he felt strong enough, and the circumstances were right, he would unleash a fury all those involved in his and his brother’s capture would never forget.

He made this promise to himself, but until then, he would play the role of the dutiful prisoner and give Pellisier what he wanted in order to keep his brother safe.

The door to his cell creaked opened and he turned to face it, his hands balling into fists that he quickly released.

Pellisier entered carrying a chair and placed it near the door. Aramis watched as he slowly, almost delicately, sat himself down and crossed his legs with his hands coming to rest in his lap.

Aramis glared, awaiting instructions and not daring to move less there be repercussions. His patience was rewarded when Pellisier waved a hand and told him he could continue pacing. Although, he was not remiss in mentioning there were several large men standing outside the open door eager to prove their worth.

Aramis stood his ground. It had been neither an order nor an instruction, merely an allowance, so he felt no need to comply.

Pellisier smiled softly. “As you wish,” he said. Then after a moment of watching him closely, he continued. “You seem… angry.”

Aramis didn’t know how to react.

“That’s good actually,” continued Pellisier. “And by the way, feel free to speak your mind.” He leaned forward over his knees. “You have my permission.”

Aramis turned away, crossing his arms over his chest. “You don’t want to know what’s on my mind,” he said.

“Oh but I do,” replied Pellisier. “I want to know everything about you. You intrigue me, Aramis. And shortly, my curiosity will be rewarded.”

Aramis stiffened. How does he know my name?

“I will know what makes you happy, what makes you sad, what makes you hurt,” continued Pellisier. “And in time, I will know what makes you… tick.”

The marksman smirked. “That’s not likely to happen, but at least you can grant me the courtesy of telling me why? Why me?”

“Confidence,” said Pellisier, returning to his chair. “You have so much of it. Even now as you look at me, I see a storm brewing behind those dark eyes of yours. You wish to kill me…” Pellisier tilted his head, his lips spreading into a smile. “No. You wish to punish me! How marvellous.”

The laughter that followed sent a shiver through Aramis, and it was by sheer force of will he did not disprove Pellisier’s latter statement by ripping his throat out.
“Right there! That’s it,” said Pellisier, pointing at the marksman. “That recalcitrant jaw. That defiant tilt of your head. That unshakable focus. It must have taken years to perfect that level of control. To keep that brutality within you from bursting out.”

Aramis held fast, believing even the smallest movement would disclose how much impact the words had on him.

Pellisier searched out his eyes, locking on them with equal focus. “You have the eyes of a marksman,” he said. “Is that your role as a musketeer? I bet it is.”

Aramis neither twitched nor blinked. In fact, he barely drew breath.

“The marksman is a different breed of soldier,” continued Pellisier. “He is the embodiment of control amongst chaos. He turns the random act of killing in battle into something personal as he isolates his target and squeezes the trigger; the pleasure of a perfect shot outweighing any sense of remorse for taking a life.”

A muscle twitched in Aramis’ jaw.

Pellisier relaxed back into his chair. “Truth be told, he really is nothing more than an assassin hiding behind honour.”

Aramis said nothing.

“No one joins the military if they are not willing to kill,” Pellisier said. “But you Aramis, you have the look of someone who also enjoys it. You don’t fight for money, or honour, but for the fight itself.”

Aramis’ eyes reduced to mere slits, then he shook himself. “You know nothing of me,” he said, turning away.

He braced his hands on the wall and dropped his head. The words stung, more than Aramis thought possible. It was like Pellisier had broken the lock to his deepest secret with a crude hatchet. Aramis knew he could not let the man know this, so he turned back, his lips parted slightly to keep his jaw from clenching.

“Your silence confirms everything, my friend,” said Pellisier.


Pellisier rose from his seat. “Two men will come to retrieve you shortly. You will do exactly as they instruct or your friend will suffer.”

As Pellisier made his way to the door with chair in hand, Aramis involuntarily took a step forward. “Who? Which friend?”

Pellisier waved his hand. “Oh I have no clue. I never inquired after his name.”

At the door, Pellisier paused on the mantle and with a casual smile he pointed at the water skin laying on the ground. “Enjoy the water,” he said.

Aramis watched Pellisier for a moment, then reached down and picked up the skin and sniffed the opening. He smelled nothing but dusty leather so he tossed it back down. By the time he looked up again, Pellisier was gone.
Having not seen food for quite some time, d’Artagnan was beginning to think the real torture was starting. He lay on the floor trying to figure out what his captors wanted from him, but with his throbbing fingers and growling stomach he found it hard to concentrate.

No one had said a word to him, having only performed random acts of violence and, up until today, leaving him food. D’Artagnan had nearly no information other than a man in black robes was interested in him, possibly more interested in watching him suffer. And he knew there were two large, burly men who enjoyed breaking his fingers, but again, he’d no clue as to why they’d want them broken, unless it was for the simple enjoyment of the man in the robes.

He grunted and slammed his fist on the ground, bolting upright the instant his hand exploded in pain. He cradled his throbbing fingers against his chest, grimacing to fight back the tears.

A moment later the robed man entered, chair in hand, and took his position near the door. Following after him, the two guards from earlier entered the cell with another man dressed in a black robe.

The bitterness within d’Artagnan heightened, making him feel ill and angry at the same time.

The guards rushed d’Artagnan, tackling him to the ground with one of them landing on his legs and the other across his chest. D’Artagnan thrashed and bit, until an ear-piercing screech startled him.

He strained his neck to see over the guard on his chest and saw that the man and his chair had moved closer and the stranger was now leaning over his broken hand, gripping it and rendering it completely still.

D’Artagnan pressed his head into the floor and screamed. He wanted to curl into himself, but the weight on his torso and limbs was unforgiving. He gritted his teeth, forcing scratchy growls past them to stem the pain. When his shear force of will pushed some of it away, he raised his head again to see what was happening.

The man in the chair was scribbling notes. The other was kneeling beside his hand and pointing at his deformed fingers. D’Artagnan let his head fall back to the floor and drew in a deep breath.

An intense tearing sensation ran up his arm and he cried out even louder as the skin and muscles on his hand were sliced open and peeled back. D’Artagnan clamped his mouth shut, trying to retreat to the safety of his mind, but the pain was too intense, and he was nearing oblivion when suddenly his hand was released.

Instant relief filled d’Artagnan and he could feel the blood rushing back to his senses and reawakening them. A cold sweat covered his skin and he shivered under the weight of the guards still on top of him. His hand was nearly numb, the only sensation left was the occasional sting. He took a moment to settle himself then lifted his head.

The man beside him was wrapping a bandage carefully around his hand. D’Artagnan lay still, allowing his injured fingers to be fixed despite his anger. When it was done, the two robed men retreated to the door where they huddled close and whispered to each other. D’Artagnan leant an ear in their direction, but could hear nothing.

When they left, d’Artagnan was released. Air rushed into him as the heavy weight on his chest was released. He bent his knees up and used them as leverage to roll onto his side, his hand held gently against him. He swallowed thickly and wiped his other hand across his wet brow. Then he grabbed his shirt around the collar and shook it- creating a breeze to dry his soaked skin.
He took a deep breath and stared at the bloody bandage around his hand, damning the sadistic monsters in the black robes and praying it would regain its functionality. Then, as his exhaustion overwhelmed him, he closed his eyes and fell asleep, his mind too tired to figure out what had just happened and why.

~The Musketeers~

Their captain’s assessment of the area between Nevers and Le Mans had not been wrong. Athos and Porthos had been scouring the land between the two cities for quite some time, and had yet to find any real evidence suggesting a large group of men were being held somewhere. But they had not given up hope, nor did either of them feel it waning by their lack of progress.

As the two musketeers entered a small village, people came to the main gate to greet them with the owners of the local inns and taverns soliciting their business without any compunction what so ever. It was big news around this part of the countryside that men were disappearing, and seeing musketeers not only made them feel safe, but also assured them that something was being done.

Porthos smiled down at one of the tavern girls, obviously sent out to garner their attention by the way she filled out her dress, and then looked wearily at Athos. Any other time he would have enjoyed the view, but today, with their friends still missing, it was all but missed by the big man.

“First one we see?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Athos. “My patience is wearing thin, and since we’ve already been through this village, I would just like to eat, feed the horses and be on our way.”

Porthos nodded. “Sounds good to me.” He turned his horse away from the gathering crowd toward the first sign offering food.

When they entered the tavern it was busy and loud. Porthos found a table near the back and a short while later they were digging into their food and throwing back wine like it was last of its kind in France. With plenty of homes, estates and farms still to search, they were eager to get on with it before night became an obstacle.

Athos was about to settle up with one of the barmaids when someone bumped into him at the counter. He glared at the patron, then moved down to make room. A moment later the same patron bumped him again, so this time when Athos turned, he had every intention of speaking of his tired and impatient mind.

“Ho there,” the patron called out, grabbing Athos by the shoulder.

Athos opened his mouth to reply but closed it when he saw the man. He was elegantly dressed, too much so for an establishment such as this, but he seemed quite happy and content to be where he was- surrounded by farmers and laypersons as it were- so Athos let it go.

“Are you here for the festivities?” asked the man, squeezing Athos shoulder.

“No,” Athos replied, then he removed the man’s hand from his body and turned his attention back in search of the barmaid.

“But we’re all here for the festivities,” the man continued, slurring his last words as he drank and spoke at the same time.

“Not all of us,” stated Athos, barely glancing at the man.
“You should,” the man said. “I hear it is quite the entertaining spectacle. And the drinks are free!”

Athos turned to him, his indignant glare unmistakable even from under the brim of his hat. “You know that part in a conversation where someone usually draws their sword? Well, we’re coming up on that very quickly.”

The man’s eyes grew wide with fear, then he disappeared into the crowd.

Athos watched to make sure he had no intentions of coming back before turning back to the counter. A few minutes later everything was settled with the barmaid and was heading back to the table where Porthos was waiting.

He picked up his friend’s hat and tossed it to him. “It’s time to go,” he said, and then started toward the door.

Porthos was on his heels within seconds, having no compunction to stay any more than the swordsman, but when they approached the door they found it blocked by many people- each more lavishly dressed than the other.

Athos threw his arms in the air when he spotted the man from the counter corralling everyone outside. He made his way toward the backdoor instead, pausing to ask for directions from the innkeeper on his way. Again, Porthos followed after him, and it wasn’t until they were in the back alley that he said something.

“What the ‘ell was going on in there?” asked Porthos.

“Apparently there are festivities being held tonight.”

“For what?”

“I haven’t a clue, nor do I wish to,” replied Athos. “Now let’s get our horses and be on our way.”

Porthos could tell his brother was on edge, more so than when they had entered the establishment, so he didn’t press further and instead followed the swordsman toward the stable. When they were tacked and ready to leave, they walked their horses out front and found their path blocked once again by the lavish partygoers.

Athos immediately let out a gruff breath of air, but Porthos stopped him from turning away in search of another path with a hand on his shoulder. “Wait,” he said, eyeing the patrons outside the tavern. “Why are they all climbing into that wagon?”

Athos had only glanced at the scene, and had not noticed what the crowd was doing. As he saw now, they were eagerly, if not drunkenly, climbing into the back of several covered wagons. It had been odd enough to see people of significant wealth in the tavern, but to see them now climbing unceremoniously into the back of what most people considered a poor-man’s carriage, was even more strange. But they seemed content with their situation, and no one was herding them in against their will, so Athos decided to leave well enough alone. They had other business to attend, and night was closing in faster now that it had begun.

“Festivities await!” called one of the patrons, holding his arm to be seen above the crowd- a mug of ale from the tavern still gripped in his hand.

“I hear the prospects will be good!” shouted another as he climbed onto one of the wagons.

“To each his own,” Athos said, having heard enough to know he didn’t much care what they were
doing. He lead his horse in the opposite direction to which the wagons were facing, intent on putting distance between them.

Porthos watched the crowd a little longer, and then turned and followed his brother. From the village gate they headed east, hoping to cover as much ground as they could before being forced to stop for the night.

~The Musketeers~

Aramis had to move, and it was getting harder to keep this urge in check as time passed. By the time the two men arrived to collect him, he was beyond anxious. His body felt- no, needed- to do something. Anything. It took all his strength to stop himself from charging the guards, and by the looks on their faces, they seemed to know this.

Aramis restrained himself for the sake of his brother, allowing himself to be blindfolded and his hands tied behind his back. Before they started moving, a canteen was brought to his lips and he was ordered to drink. He was so thirsty he could not help but drink greedily from the flask. And the more he drank, the more he wanted.

When the canteen was empty, Aramis was pushed forward. He couldn’t see anything, but he could still map out his surroundings. He counted each step and when each turn occurred. He sniffed the air and listened for dripping water, tapping, whispered conversations. He even listened for the changing sounds of each footstep indicating a change in terrain.

Every detail he filed away as he was led through what he believed to be tunnels based on the dampness around him, and what felt like uneven and sometimes sloshy ground underfoot. The air was also thick with the smell of mould and dirt, which inclined Aramis to believe he was in either a cave or basement.

They came to a stop and Aramis was leaned against a wall, his blindfold and restraints still secure. He dropped his head and drew in a few breaths to steady himself, knowing that whatever was going to happen was going to happen now.

"Is he ready?"

Aramis looked up when he heard the question. He did not recognize the voice.

"No," he heard someone reply. "Still needs time."

Above him, Aramis heard a lock disengaging followed by the whoosh of a door. He felt a rush of air and smelled manure, making him dizzy.

From above, a cacophony of noise assaulted him and he staggered, his knees buckling under him as his hands covered his ears. A rush of adrenaline coursed through him in time to stop him from falling to the ground.

His skin tingled and he wanted to move again. His bindings were irritating him more than previously and his heart was racing. He found it harder to stand still as each second passed, so when a hand gripped his arm he flinched, every nerve in his body reacting with a cold shiver.

"He’s ready now," someone yelled, the sound of the voice so loud Aramis cringed.

He felt more alive than he’d ever felt in his entire life. Every sense was in-tune and his muscles twitched in excitement. His body was coiled for action, and if working his jaw was the only outlet he could find than he was going to take it. He clenched his teeth together repeatedly, creating a
constant beat.

He was told to step up, which he did without hesitation. He stepped up again and again, his shoulders brushing against something as he climbed a narrow staircase. Someone in front of him was pulling him by his wrists while another pushed him from behind as he was led toward the din of noise.

As Aramis climbed higher the sounds grew louder, but they could not drown out his hyperactive senses. He felt a cool breeze tickle his skin causing a slight shiver. A lightheadedness threatened to overwhelm him. He felt exposed, no longer protected by walls or the presence of nearby bodies.

The noise around him increased, turning boisterous, and he recognized it as cheering. It surrounded him, filling his ears with thunderous intensity and invigorating the fervency within him.

His breathing quickened in compensation for his rising heartbeat, and with each breath he felt himself leaning forward as if the air in front of him was not enough to fill his lungs. He was turned around and the cheering grew louder. A moment later a voice cut through the sounds. Aramis would recognize Pellisier’s voice anywhere.

“Begin.”

Begin what?

The restraints on his wrists were released, so was his blindfold. Blinking against the harsh and unexpected light, Aramis spun around, the sounds of cheering urging his body into a frenzied state. As his vision settled, he saw people all around him, shouting and cheering, their arms waving to and fro with glasses and mugs tight in their hands.

His head spun as the onslaught of stimulation assaulted every one of his senses, and he found himself staggering, which caused the sound of the crowd to increase tenfold.

Aramis had no idea what he was supposed to do.

“I said, begin!”

Aramis tuned toward the voice, startled by the sudden presence of a sturdy, shirtless man before him. His stance seemed familiar; his body bent forward, arms held at chest level with fists clenched and a crooked smile on his face.

In took a moment for Aramis to recognize the posture, and a moment more to realize what, begin, meant.

To be continued…
D’Artagnan heard two people talking in the hallway. He looked to the door and noticed it was slightly open.

He slowly turned his wrists and grabbed the loose chains in his hands, then raised his arms to keep them from dragging on the floor as he took a step forward. The chains made no sound, so he took another step. Still safe, he took another and then carefully lowered his arms and leaned forward.

“Arnault… he doing?”

“He’s proving more… just a deterrent … actually… to study… further.”

D’Artagnan frowned. Arnault? Study? He closed his eyes and concentrated on their voices.

“I am glad to see… found something… interest,” he heard someone say. The voice was masculine but light, with a slight tone on condescension. “But I do need… more rebellious than I anticipated. If not for him, he would have most likely killed me by…”

“Really? That dangerous?”

The second voice was much higher and faster paced.

D’Artagnan heard a chuckle. “Afraid so. I can see it in his eyes. There’s viciousness… I wish to awaken. I would love to see him at his truest form.”

“So you see him as your new champion?”

The voices were clearer, louder and d’Artagnan considered they had moved closer to the door. He thought of stepping back, but he held still, deciding he’d have time to retreat when the door opened. He let out a slow breath and continued to listen.

“I see him as more,” replied the first voice. “But enough about that, what has you so intrigued by our young lad here?”

“He’s very resilient,” said the higher pitched voice. “I’ve taken some notes. See here.”

D’Artagnan recognized the sound of someone flipping through the pages of a book and thought of
the one the robed man always carried with him.

“Arnault, his purpose was only to be a control device.”

Arnault. D’Artagnan mouthed the name and wondered if it belonged to the one in the black robe. If those were the pages of a book he’d heard, perhaps it was the one being written about him? And the one writing it was called, Arnault?

It felt like a small victory. The relief of learning something after so many days made him smile.

“I know,” said Arnault. “But he deserves further observation. I brought Philippe in the other day for study and practice. He did quite well, perhaps you can take him with you on your next trip?”

Philippe. Another name. D’Artagnan took note of it, then considered the rest of the statement. Study and practice. Was Philippe the one who’d both destroyed and bandaged his hand?

D’Artagnan concentrated on putting the names with the faces, for when he escaped he’d know exactly who to look for. He wanted to laugh at their foolishness for talking so close to his door; did they not think he would listen? Did they think he couldn’t hear? Or did they even care if he heard them.

“I shall take that under advisement, but you digress, sir.”

“Pardon my excitement,” said Arnault. “This, d’Artagnan, if I remember correctly, warrants further examination.”

D’Artagnan did not remember saying his name. He thought back over the past few days, then further back to the night at the tavern in Orleans. There were too many faces to remember if he’d seen Arnault there. He considered maybe he’d been following him even before then. Or did he know him from Paris? Hell, did he know him from Gascony?

D’Artagnan shook himself. He had to listen now and figure things out later.

“This is a very new field of study, Arnault. Are you sure you wish to add to your studies?”

“Yes,” said Arnault.

“Very well. Proceed. Just don’t let it interfere with our true purpose here.”

“I won’t.”

“One more request,” said Arnault.

D’Artagnan heard a creak, his heart stopped. The door was moving. He grabbed the chains as delicately as possible and stepped back until he reached the wall where he slid slowly to the floor.

The door stopped moving, but the voices continued, muffled now that d’Artagnan was across the room.

“May I… losing contestant… last nights event? I assure you… body will remain… tact.” He heard Arnault say.

“Assure that… does. Also… everything… back in order?

“Yes. Pierre took care…”
“Very good… Arnault.”

“Till later, Monsieur Pellisier.”

The door swung open. D’Artagnan closed his eyes and feigned sleep.

~The Musketeers~

The sound of the crowd was gone. All Aramis could hear was the thump… thump… thump of his leaden heart as it kept pace with each slow, deep breath he took. He felt heavy and warm as his body swayed back and forth. He knew he should hurt, but he didn’t care that he didn’t. The blackness around him was too comforting to let go, he wanted to stay here where it was calm and peaceful.

He was floating between two worlds, no foot in either. It was safe here. No pain. No concerns. No decisions. And no nightmares.

His world crumbled when his back touched something solid. He was lying down, but he didn’t know where. The ground beneath him was soft, so he burrowed himself into it and tried to return to his safe haven.

But he could not find his way back. Muted voices invaded his private sanctuary, drawing him away from comfort and toward wakefulness. Aramis opened his eyes and looked around. Colours and shapes blurred together like the portrait of a landscape still being painted.

He closed them again, sweeping his tongue across his bottom lip. It stung and he tasted blood.

Red splashed across his mind’s eye. His body twitched as memories flooded back to him, each more vivid than the last. Swinging arms, clenched fists, the crunching sound his boot made when he broke ribs. As each one came, more were awoken.

He had just done things, seen things, no man should ever lay witness to, but it was not guilt or remorse he felt, it was satisfaction.

The sound of the crowd, indistinguishable from crashing waves, had exhilarated him, made him feel like every artery in his head was going to explode, making him both dizzy and excited at once. His skin had felt alive, like fire ants crawling across every surface of his body, motivating him to keep moving, keep fighting.

When his opponent had curled back his lips to reveal a mouthful of broken and missing teeth, and his eyes revealed a murderous intent, Aramis had swung his arm back and thrust it forward with enough power to knock him back staggering.

It had felt good. Skin and bone hitting skin and bone. Human against human, testing their strength and mettle and living on nothing but instinct.

Aramis didn’t want it to end. His pent up energy was being released, cascading from each arm he thrust forward and exploding as it made contact with his foe. He needed this release to continue until there was nothing left in him.

He toyed with the man, letting him land a few punches to build his ego and confidence, until Aramis felt it was time to claim his victory. There was only so much energy he had left, and he wanted to let it out before he collapsed from exhaustion.

He dropped and swung a leg out, catching his staggering opponent just under the knees and landing him on his back. Aramis rushed forward and kicked him in the ribs, smiling at the sound as bones
cracked.

These details were so clear, he remembered them like they had just happened. He’d been so focused that everything else: the crowd, Pellisier, his brother’s safety, had all been pushed aside as his adrenaline became too much to control and his inner being had taken over.

Aramis had kicked the insensate man again and again, his energy not as depleted as he’d thought, and not caring that his foe was no longer capable of protecting himself.

Aramis dropped to his knees beside him, prepared to unleash another downward blow, but someone grabbed his raised arm and hauled him backward, landing him on his back.

Aramis thrashed and kicked, swinging his arms and letting loose cursive in every language he knew. But he could not wrench free from the men on top of him. His heart pounded, rushing blood to all his senses and making them come alive with even more clarity. His instincts told him he was about to be hit, so he turned his head, causing his new opponent to punch the ground instead.

But there were too many punches and Aramis’ instincts could not keep up, allowing for one to hit its mark.

His energy drained out from every pore onto the ground around him, his limbs went heavy as if mired in mud and his head felt as if wrapped in a warm blanket.

He was done, his muscles and adrenaline depleted, so he welcomed the coming darkness with a smile as it consumed him, drawing him toward sleep.

As Aramis now lay on his back, the muted voices drew him closer to the real world and away from the memories. He tried to ignore the hushed tones, but they were growing in volume and clarity.

“… that was spectacular.”

Aramis followed the voice toward alertness, his vision still blurry when he opened his eyes.

“…more than I ever imagined.”

Aramis’ mind still lagged. He knew he was awake, the pain coursing through his body made it evidently clear, but he still floated amongst the fog, his mouth disconnected from his mind as words tumbled out. “Alive…”

“How do you feel?”

Aramis swallowed, blinked, tried to focus on the man looking down at him. He was so tired and still unable to connect his mind with his mouth. “Alive,” he said. “So alive… Thirsty.”

He felt something nudge him. “Stay with me, Aramis. This is important.”

Aramis smacked pasty lips together, closed his eyes. “Release.” He smiled as his head rolled toward the voice. “I feel good…” His brow furrowed. “I’ve never felt…”

“I can help you feel it again,” replied the voice. “You can have the world, Aramis. With a little help, a little motivation, you can have that release whenever you want. They loved you.”


A hand settled on his forehead, a voice whispered in his ear. “Now rest,” said the voice. “You have sustained some injuries and I cannot have my new champion suffering.”
Champion. Aramis had heard that word before. The fog parted, opening a floodgate of emotions too fast to identify as they washed over him. He opened his eyes. Pellisier was an inch from his face, his hot breath caressing his cheek as he spoke through smiling lips.

“There you are.”

Aramis recoiled and screamed when his neck spasmed and his side pinched in pain. “What have I done?”

“Nothing you haven’t dreamt of doing,” said Pellisier, rising. “I just helped you make your fantasies a reality.”

Aramis shook his head despite the stabbing sensation in his neck. “No… No.”

“Yes,” Pellisier said. “You were the prime specimen of uncontrolled rage. The feral look in your eyes, the way you continued to beat him when he was no longer conscious… it was nothing short of spectacular.”

“No… not me.”

“Oh… but it was you, Aramis,” continued Pellisier. “All that blood and anger, the crowd adored you. And we managed to fill our purses beyond expectation. The people will pay even more to see you fight again.” Pellisier paused to sigh. “I just hope your body can sustain this.”

“What? Dead? Did I… kill him?”

Pellisier smiled. “You left him in perfect condition for our purposes,” he said. “Your opponents loss was not in vain. His body is dedicated to science now, so let your conscience rest.” Then he turned and walked out of the room.

Aramis stared after him until he disappeared around the corner. He wanted to give chase in search of answers, but his body was too sore.

There were several men in long robes hovering near him, some looking at him with wonder, others shaking their heads. Their presence enraged Aramis, but he knew he could not act on his impulses, injured or not.

He looked passed them to where Pellisier had left. The door was only a few paces away and heavyset, with a barred window…

Aramis frowned. He was back in his cell, lying on a cot rather than the cold, hard ground, and the men around him held books and bandages. He sat up, but a few of the men rushed forward and eased him back down.

Aramis let his body be nestled back onto the cot, his spike in energy now spent by trying to sit. His eyes lids grew heavy and he felt the draw of sleep pulling him deeper into the bed. His world of safety was beckoning and he longed to be there again, so he let himself succumb to its urgent plea.

“We’re here to help,” was the last thing he heard before his world went black.

~The Musketeers~

The next time d’Artagnan woke, it was to the sound of a door crashing open. D’Artagnan sat up against the wall. In the doorway were the two guards, and hanging between them from the crooks of his arms was a man, bloodied and broken. He appeared unconscious, perhaps even lifeless by the
Gascon’s estimations. But when he was dropped just inside the door, d’Artagnan could see the man was indeed still breathing.

His chest was rising and falling in awkward movements, certain parts of his ribs not in rhythm with the others, and the sounds that came from him were wet and wheezy. This man appeared beaten just shy of death. D’Artagnan climbed to his feet, using the wall for support and stepped toward him wanting to help, but his restraints kept from actually reaching him.

D’Artagnan’s gaze moved to the two guards. “What am I supposed to do with this?” he asked, indicating the motionless mass on the floor.

As he expected, no answer was given. When Arnault entered, d’Artagnan glared. He now had a name to put with the face, but he did not want to show his hand yet.


The two guards left the room, leaving the Gascon alone with Arnault and the bloodied body struggling to breathe. With a stoicism even Athos could not match, Arnault pulled a bundle of bandages from one of his pockets and threw them on the floor before settling in his chair.

D’Artagnan sighed as a small load was unburdened from his mind. He bent down to pick them up, scrambling to remember some of the battlefield medicine Aramis had taught him, but he found himself just shy of being able to reach the bandages. When he looked at Arnault, there was a smile on his face that had never been there before and it made d’Artagnan’s stomach churn.

He sat down and threw his legs out in front of him, extending his reach, but Arnault rose from his chair and pulled the bandages away.

D’Artagnan scowled. “You bastard. You think this is amusing, don’t you?” He shook his head and ran a hand down his face.

He didn’t want to watch this man suffer, especially when there was possibly a way to save him. He also wondered where the man had come from? Was he not the only one here? Did they just beat this man to see how he would react?

D’Artagnan pushed himself back against the wall, his eyes darting between the dying man and the one in the chair. So many questions, so many mysteries he still had to figure out. He bent his knees upward and draped his forearms across them. Fidgeting with the bandages on his hand, he stared at the man dying before him, realizing it had been a useless endeavour to grab the bandages. Even if he could reach them, he could never have reached the man.

With a long sigh, d’Artagnan switched his gaze back to the chair. This man wanted him to suffer or see him react in some way. D’Artagnan would not allow that. In the end, Arnault may end up with his cold dead body, but until then d’Artagnan would give him nothing.

His head fell back against the wall, his eyes cast downward. “I’m a soldier, you know,” he said quietly. “I’ve seen men die. Killed them myself actually.”

Arnault’s head listed to the side.

“I hope the smell of his rotting flesh doesn’t bother you too much,” said d’Artagnan, then he closed his eyes and thought about his brothers in an effort to drown out the sounds of the dying man’s last breaths.
To be continued…
Chapter 7

Author’s Note: Unfortunately, I have lost my beta reader. Life gets busy. So everything after this point is solely my own and I accept all responsibility for misspelled words, misused grammar and badly formed ideas… to which I hope there are none. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Six.

Athos and Porthos sat on their horses on the crest of a large, grassy hill looking over an expansive property. The house governing the land was sizeable and square with a large stable to its left and unkempt gardens to its right. It was situated far back from the main road and nestled up against another large hill, but one that was dense with forest instead of grass.

“Is someone down there?” asked Porthos, pointing at the gardens.

Athos squinted before pulling out his spyglass. “There is,” he said.

“Should we introduce ourselves?”

“It would be rude of us not to,” replied Athos. “After all, we’ve visited all their neighbours.”

Porthos spurred his horse down the hill and a moment later Athos was beside him. At full canter, they entered the drive, their speed causing the road’s gravel to kick up behind them. As they drew nearer to the house, Athos became acutely aware of its state of moderate disrepair. Many windows on the third and fourth floors were boarded up, the grass in front of the house needed trimming and some of the windows on the first floor of the east wing were broken.

They slowed just short of the main door, then stopped and dismounted. Their entrance hardly went unnoticed, and before they had a chance to start walking, the figure from the garden was running toward them.

“Greetings. Hello,” said the short man as he scurried toward them, his arms outstretched and wearing a friendly smile on his cherub-like face. “Hello. Yes! How are you?”

When the squat man stopped in front of them, Athos and Porthos shared a surprised look with each other. Although folks outside of Paris were known to be friendly, this man with his soil stained hands and grass covered smock, was outright jubilant. Which they both thought was odd for an area recently strife with abductions.

Porthos tore his gaze away from Athos and looked down at the man. “We’re looking for some people,” he said.

“Oh yes, we have people,” he replied in a hurried voice. “Well, no, but yes, we have many. Who are these people you are looking for?”

Porthos instinctively took a small step back and shared a raised eyebrow with his brother.
“You are a strange little man,” stated Athos.

“Yes. I have been called such before.”

The two musketeers shared another curious look before the larger one spoke again. “You the owner of this house?” he asked, looking over his shoulder to the estate spread out behind him.

“Oh, no. Heavens no,” replied the man. “I’m the gardener. The owner hasn’t arrived yet. Still on his way. I’m just sprucing the place up for him.”

“What is the name behind the estate?” asked Athos.

“Name?”

Athos rolled his eyes. “Yes, name. The owner of this estate?”

The gardener remained quiet, his brows knitting together as he stared back.

“The name of the owner of this estate!” boomed Porthos.

The gardener smiled and walked toward the front door of the house, waving at the musketeers to follow him. “Names. I have no business with names. If I know you, than I know you. What is in a name really?”

“Stop,” ordered Athos, who had by no means, began following the man.

The gardener turned back, his eyes wide and lips slightly parted. “You do not wish to meet the owner?”

“You just said he wasn’t here,” said Athos, his voice tight and clipped.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” asked Porthos.

“Yes the owner is not here,” replied the gardener. “But he will be here shortly. I am sprucing the place up for his arrival. You can wait inside if you wish?”

Athos dropped his shoulders and ran a hand down his face. “How long?”

The gardener walked toward the estate again, speaking over his shoulder. “Oh I have no idea. What is time, really? A minute. A day. A year. It all just passes us by…”

Porthos leaned over Athos’ shoulder. “Are we really going to wait?” he asked.

Athos glared, and then turned on his heel and made his way toward his horse. “What is waiting, really?” he said over his shoulder, striding away from the large musketeer.

“I take that as a no,” said Porthos, following his friend.

When they were mounted again, Athos took a moment to look over the exterior of the estate once more before coming to a decision. “I see no evidence of anyone having been here in quite some time,” he said. “And without the owner present, it would be rude to see ourselves in. But I see no harm in checking the grounds before we depart. If only to satisfy my curiosity.”

“And what would your curiosity be telling you?” asked Porthos.
“I’m not sure,” said Athos. “But I’m curious to find out.”

When it was obvious the two strangers were not going to follow him, the short man in the grass stained clothes hurried himself into the house and shut the door behind him with an echoing thud. Standing in the expansive foyer, he brushed himself off before walking deeper into the house.

“How have they gone?”

He stopped and turned to see a man standing in the entrance to the parlour on his right. He was rotund like himself, and the long black robe he wore did him no favours in hiding his girth. In his hands, he held two large, heavy books with an inkwell balanced on top.

The gardener fought to keep his distain from showing as he bowed slightly. “Yes, Philippe. I believe I have successfully run them off,” he said, rising back to his full height.

“Are you sure, Pierre?”

“Of course.”

“Then why is it I see two musketeers nosing around the stables?” asked another man.

Pierre turned to his left where another man in a long black robe was standing in the entrance to the den. These men, with their robes and books were no better than he, but the way they spoke to him sent his nerves on edge. They held their heads high, looking down their noses at him. And their voices always seemed softer when they were around him, their words chosen carefully and spoken with distain. They sounded quite different when they spoke with each other over tea in the refectory.

“They will find nothing,” Pierre said. “Now if you will excuse me, I have a garden to run. None of you would eat if it weren’t for me, so I suggest you bother me no further and allow me to return to my work.”

The two men were left standing in the foyer as Pierre strode deeper into the house.

“He is presumptuous for a commoner,” said Philippe.

“But he does his job well,” replied the other.

Philippe nodded. “He does produce quite a lot of sustenance.”

“No that job,” said the other, turning away.

Philippe conceded rather quickly that indeed, Pierre was very good at making things disappear.

~The Musketeers~

The stables seemed innocuous, albeit in an extremely rough and shod state. Lining one of the interior walls were the individual stalls that once housed horses, but on the other side, the stable dividers were knocked down- either deliberately or from lack of care Athos could not tell.

They walked around kicking away empty bottles and peeking behind crates. “This place looks about as welcoming as the estate,” said Porthos, pulling back a large canvass to reveal more empty crates.

Athos stood in the middle of the derelict stable, his hands on his hips as he looked around. “People have been here,” he said. “Look at all the footprints.”
Porthos spun slowly, his eyes taking in the myriad of imprints in the dirt. “Hm, didn’t notice those. Maybe travellers have been using it as a cheap shelter? There’s lots of blankets and benches strewn about. Easy refuge from the cold in the winter.”

Athos chewed his lip. “Perhaps,” he said. “We’ve done it a time or two.” He and his brothers had taken refuge in many stables, derelict and otherwise, during their travels, and therefore could not judge or condone anyone for having stayed here against the owner’s wishes. But then, who was the owner and how long had he left this property to fall to ruins? Perhaps the owner had just acquired the estate and was on his way to make use of it for the first time? Perhaps someone like him had once owned it; a Comte who’d walked away from everything that reminded him of his former life?

Athos was not betting on the latter and didn’t much care if it was the first, all he really wanted to know was where his brothers were. “I don’t see anything here,” he said, his heart falling as the words slipped from his lips. He’d hoped to find something, anything that related to the missing men and his brothers, but there was nothing here but the remnants of an abandoned stable.

He took one last look around, and then headed toward the large stable doors. Porthos followed and when they were mounted back on their horses, they took off toward the drive leading to the main road.

The sun was at its apex when they entered a forest. They were taking a known short cut, seeking shade from the oppressive sun when a shriek in the near distance brought them to a halt.

“What was that?” asked Porthos, circling his steed as he tried to narrow in on the direction of the noise.

Athos did likewise. “Sounds like a child.”

The shriek intensified, leading the two musketeers deeper into the forest when the direction was confirmed. They slowed when they saw a woman fall against a tree, hunched forward as she slid to the ground. Athos and Porthos tread lightly as they approached, dismounting several feet behind her and walking the rest of the way to not frighten her.

“We are the King’s Musketeers,” said Athos. “Do you require assistance?”

“Please help,” said the woman, followed by pleading sobs.

Athos and Porthos picked up their pace and came to a stop in front of her. They crouched, each releasing a sigh when they saw what she cradled in her arms.

“We must get to the village,” said the woman, looking to each of them with water filled eyes. “The physician will only be there a short while. I must get Henrique there before he leaves.”

Porthos reached for the child’s forehead, pulling his hand back when he felt the heat of his skin. “Fever.”

There was a small village several lieu away. Athos glanced down the path over his shoulder. It wasn’t far and it wasn’t out of their way. “Take the woman,” he said to Porthos. “I’ll carry the child.”

Mounted once again, and with their charges secure, Athos and Porthos headed toward the village. They saw the gates first, a flimsy wooden structure with only one door left hanging on its hinges. As they approached, they realized it was more of a hamlet than a village, and in desperate need of repairs.
No structure stood more than a story tall; most of which were made of rotting wood and listing to the side. And the carts where farmers sold their wares were half empty with fruits and vegetables drying in the sun, enticing more flies than customers.

Athos steered his horse close to Porthos and leaned over. “These people cannot afford a physician.”

“I was thinkin’ the same thing,” said Porthos. He looked around at the occupants of the hamlet. Many were congregating in a large group near the centre, but a few were idling in the doorways of their homes and shops. No one seemed to be paying them any attention, which he found odd considering their usual greetings.

“Thank god,” said the mother of the child Athos held. “He’s still here.”

Porthos felt the woman drop from behind him and watched as she fetched her child from Athos. She ran toward the gathering and pushed her way in, disappearing from the musketeer’s sight.

A man broke from the crowd, his pant hems tattered, his greying shirt torn and roughly sewn. One arm was held in a sling and there was a slight limp in his gait. His face was covered in bruises well on their way to healing based on their yellowish tinge. “Thank you for bringing ‘em here,” he said. “May not ‘ave made it without your help.”

“It was our pleasure,” said Athos, his eyes unsure where to rest. The tattered man deserved his attention, but the gathering piqued his interest. “You have a physician here?”

The man glanced over his shoulder, and then looked back with a smile. “Yes. Don’t come as often as we’d like, but when they ask not for payment, who are we t’argue.”

Porthos frowned. “A physician practicing for free?”

“Yes, come,” said the man, waving them down from their horses. “Come and meet the one here today.”

Athos and Porthos shared a glance before dismounting. They secured their horses to the most stable structure they could find and approached the gathering. It parted as they passed through, people stepping back when noticing the pauldrons on their shoulders- some with respect, some with discerning frowns.

A tall, slender man in a clean white shirt and elaborate doublet turned his attention from the person in front of him at their approach. “Are you here to arrest me?”

“Why would we do that?” asked Athos.

“We don’t see many Musketeers around these parts,” he said. “One must wonder, why the visit?”

“Just helping where we can,” said Porthos, hitching his thumbs on his belt. “Found a woman on her way here. Looking for you, I presume.”

The man searched out the new arrival and her small child. “Ah yes, Henrique.” He stepped closer to the pair, his arms outstretched. He took a few moments to assess the child then smiled at the mother as he pulled a small vial from his pocket. “Make sure he takes this tonic three times a day,” he said. “The fever should be gone in no time.”

After the woman thanked him, she hurried out of the crowd to find a seat in the shade where she cradled her child against her chest. The physician turned his attention back to Athos and Porthos, one arm extended, motioning for them to follow him. “Shall we,” he said, leading them into what
appeared to be a tavern, the faded picture of a wine bottle above its door the only indication.

Athos and Porthos stepped into the cool shade of the building, removing their hats and swiping sweat from their brows as they found seats at a table. The man followed after them, but not before turning back to the crowd outside. “Thomas, be sure to wear that sling,” he said. “And Elaine, hopefully that child won’t make his way into this world until we meet again.”

Seating himself across from the musketeers, he ordered three plates of food and a bottle of wine from the barmaid. “It’s not much, and usually I just poke around at it,” he said, leaning over the table. “But these people need the commerce, and other than medical services, they are rather irreverent to charity.”

When the food was placed before him, Porthos decided he too would simply play with it, but the wine he drank heartily. “Have you been helpin’ these people out a long time?”

“No, just these past months. I’m new to the area, but I come from rather humble roots, and I feel that all honourable men should never forget where they come from.”

Porthos raised his cup. “I’ll drink to that.” Then he downed its contents in a single swallow.

“Men of your position rarely come from humble roots,” said Athos. “It requires substantial wealth and title to be accepted into Montpellier* or Toulouse*.”

“Come now, there must be more interesting topics than my training. You are musketeers! I’m sure your stories are abundant. So tell me, what has two of the King’s guard out this far from the palace?”

Athos held his gaze on the doctor for several seconds before replying, “we are searching for our friends.”

“And a lot of men,” added Porthos. “You ‘aven’t heard of anyone missing from ‘round these parts, have you? Or possibly seen anyone buying up a lot of supplies?”

“I’ve heard murmurings, but that is not my area of expertise. Perhaps you should ask around the village, they might have something that’ll lead you in the right direction.”

Athos rose, finishing off the last of the wine in his cup before reaching full height. He put the cup on the table and his hat back on his head. “We shall,” he said. “Have a pleasant day. And please, continue with your work. France could use more men like you.”

Porthos extended his hand across the table as he too rose from his chair. He dropped a coin on the table for their food and extended his hand to the physician “Was a pleasure meeting you,” he said. “And if you’re ever near Paris, come find me. I know a few people who could use your help.”

The physician stood, his smile broad and relaxed. “I shall, good sir,” he said. “What is your name?”

“Porthos,” he said. “And yours?”


To be continued…
Montpellier and Toulouse are the world’s oldest medical schools, opening their doors as early as the 12th century. The prestigious schools of medicine expressly banned apothecaries, and any other such ‘manual trades’, from receiving a higher education within their walls. Only men of noble breeding were deemed enlightened enough to study to be physicians. Surgeons and barber-surgeons were only granted moderate studies and were never allowed to further their education based on their lowly status within society.
“I want to talk.”

“So talk.”

Pellisier lowered himself into a chair and adjusted his robe so he could cross his legs beneath its flowing fabric. “Sit up and we shall proceed like gentleman.”

Aramis braced his previously dislocated shoulder with a bandaged hand, gritted his teeth and engaged his stomach muscles. A foot above the cot, his strength abandoned him and he fell back against the wall. Two gentle hands braced his arms and slowly raised him to full height, and then gently swung his legs to the floor.

“Thank you,” Aramis said, without thought.

Pellisier sat himself back on his chair. “You are most welcome. You see? We don’t have to be enemies.”

Aramis glared, causing Pellisier to squirm. “Well, when you see all that I can do for you, you may reconsider,” he said. “But first, let us get to know each other. Where are you from, Aramis of the King’s Musketeers?”

“France.”

“I sense Spanish in your blood.”

“On my mother’s side,” replied Aramis, his bandaged hand still massaging the ache in his shoulder.

“Are they proud of what they’ve created? You’re parents, that is.”

Aramis swallowed and looked away. “None of your concern.”

Pellisier shrugged. “I will grant you that. They are not really of importance, only you.”

“Why?” asked Aramis. “Why am I so intriguing to you? Why am I to be treated as a caged animal?”

“Because you are an animal,” replied Pellisier. “All this pomp and circumstance, those leathers and sash, feathered hat and the King’s emblem on your shoulder… these are just clothes you wear to cover your true nature. Just like you wear that gentleman’s exterior to hide your true beast beneath.”

“Do you realize the hypocrisy of your words?” said Aramis, studying Pellisier’s slightly raised nose and delicate cant of his head. “If I am to be called a fake, than you, sir, shall also where the title. I’ve been in the company of the King’s Court for far too long to be fooled by charlatans such as you.”

Aramis cast his gaze downward, eyeing Pellisier from the tips of his barely scuffed boots peeking out from under his long robe, up to the smooth hands clasped in his lap. “There is nothing natural about
the way you carry yourself. You choose your words carefully. You move deliberately. You are nothing more than a pretender. Your grace does not come from breeding, but more from want of breeding.”

Pellisier smiled, but Aramis noticed the twitch in his lips and knew he’d hit a sore spot. But he dared not push further for the sake of his brother.

Pellisier leaned forward over his knees as his head tilted an inch more to the side. “Tell me, what is it you would do if I were to grant you your freedom right here and now?”

Aramis heaved in a gulp of air, releasing it slowly as he spoke. “I would tear you apart for what you have done.”

“No forgive and forget?”

Aramis pressed his lips thin, his eyes piercing in intensity as he stared at his captor.

“You prove my point.”

“I am no different than any other man! Treat any human as you have I, and they would perform accordingly.”

“No, my friend,” said Pellisier. “Many would have given in a long time ago. Many have, and many more shall continue to do so after you are gone.”

“Gone? You mean to release me? Or kill me?”

Pellisier chuckled. “There are many interpretations of the word,” he said. “The future can only reveal which applies to you.”

Aramis was both exhausted and frustrated, and felt his heart ease in both pace and intensity as he dropped his chin to his chest. “Speak plainly,” he said. “I’m tired of the riddles.”

“Then ask me anything you want.”

So many questions filled his head he didn’t know where to start. Aramis wanted to know how his brother fared, and whom it was being held along with him, but why this was happening could not be ignored. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Pellisier. You know that. Now ask me something intelligent.”

Aramis flushed with heat and his eyes turned dark. “I didn’t ask your name,” he said, “I asked who you are.”

Pellisier bobbed his head side to side, smiling. “Touché,” he said, and then leaned back and scowled, as if challenging Aramis to continue.

“If you want to proceed as gentleman, than I expect an honourable answer,” said Aramis.

“All right,” replied Pellisier. “I will give you an answer. I’m someone who holds your future in his hands. I am both your captor and your salvation, depending on how you chose to proceed. It’s in your hands, Aramis. Be free or live a life of restriction.”

“There is no freedom here! You grant me no more than solitude, pain and despair!”

Pellisier coughed lightly. “That is not exactly how you saw it the other night,” he said. “I believe you
were actually on the verge of thanking me for granting you the freedom to unleash your inner animal.” He paused and looked pensive for a moment. “Alive. So alive… Is what you said, if I remember correctly?”

Aramis turned away, angered by his own words thrown back at him. He could not lie to himself. That feeling, the experience of discharging his rage and energy with abandon, had been near euphoric.

“I see this troubles you,” Pellisier said. “Most men fear what is inside them.”

Aramis’ breath caught in his throat. The statement left him dumbfounded for a moment, until finally he conceded. He did fear what was inside him.

Coldness swept outward from his core, igniting every nerve in his body, and a knot formed in his stomach. He hesitated before moving his eyes to look at Pellisier. “Are we done now?”

“We’ve only just begun, my dear Aramis,” replied Pellisier. “Now ask me a real question before my patience runs out. We both know what it is you feel the need to ask.”

Aramis just had his self-assurance knocked out of him. Or, he considered, perhaps not, and that scared him more. Had this man just identified what plagued him his whole life? Something Aramis could never decipher, but knew existed? Had he been hiding his true self this whole time behind the honour of soldiering?

He could not recover from the staggering insight, so he asked his next question in a quiet voice, his tone lacking in its usual vibrancy. “How is my friend? Does he still breathe?”

“Yes.”

“May I see him?”

“In due time.”

Aramis raised his head, his body stiffening with anticipation. “Does he know I’m here?”

“He does not,” replied Pellisier. “Now it’s my turn. To what extent would you go to save your friends?”

Aramis slumped back against the wall and looked away. “Ends of the earth,” he said, his voice heavy with sadness.

“And they would do the same for you?”

Aramis’ eyes shot up followed slowly by his head as it rose to meet their height. He took several breaths before answering. “Yes.”

Pellisier smiled. “You hesitated.”

The marksman turned away. “I did not.”

Pellisier rose, his smile broadening. He stepped to the bed and looked down on his prisoner. “Tell me what happened?”

“And if I don’t?” asked Aramis, his voice flat.

“Your brother will surely pay the price,” replied Pellisier, his eyes growing bigger. “Now tell me,
please, what happened?”

Many scenarios, ones that were true and others figments of his imagination, flitted through his mind. They were so jumbled he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to keep them straight, and before he knew it, the truth was coming out his mouth. “Marsac.”

Pellisier crouched and placed a hand on Aramis’ knee. “Is he another friend? A fellow musketeer? Perhaps an uncle or… a son?”

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Aramis, unable to stop the words from slipping between his lips. He could not look at the man with whom he spoke. He detested him. Loathed him. Envisioned himself doing violent, nasty things to him, but he was so raw, so tired, so complacent of his emotions. “He is dead.”

“Did your friends kill him?”

“I did.”

Pellisier drew in a sharp breath, the hand on the marksman’s knee moving quickly to cover his gaping mouth.

Aramis righted himself on the cot and cleared his throat. “It was to save another,” he said, his voice now firm.

“And your friends, they let this happen?”

Aramis drew in a deep breath, shook himself, and spit out everything Pellisier wanted to know. “I asked for their trust and they did not give it,” he said. “They left me to fight for myself. That is all. This exchange is over.”

“I am sorry,” said Pellisier, his head slightly askew as his brows pulled together. “And you fight for them still? Pity.”

Aramis swung the arm bracing his shoulder in a wide arc, hitting the side of Pellisier’s head and knocking him to the side. “Always!” he said. “Man can forgive! It’s what separates us from animals!”

Pellisier chuckled as he rubbed the side of his face. He then pushed himself off the floor and walked to the door.

Aramis stood, his pain forgotten as the cold grip of fear gave him strength. “Don’t hurt him! Please. I will do anything you say. Answer any question. Just… please… please.”

Pellisier stuck his head outside the cell. Aramis could not hear what was said, and as each second passed his skin cooled, his balance wavered. “Please.”

~The Musketeers~

“… And so you see, that’s why it’s always better to herd goats with a dog. But back to what I was saying, the wine from the southern regions of France are much more refined. They use…”

D’Artagnan didn’t even pause when he noticed Arnault sigh. He’d managed to irritate the robed man, and was enjoying it too much. “My friend would argue otherwise. He’s more of a wine connoisseur than I am, so perhaps he’s correct. But my other friend… He insists good wine is simply what you like. I like this way of thinking, but of course it does lend one to believe…”
The door banged open and the brute squad entered, causing Arnault to jump to his feet. D’Artagnan’s voice trailed off as he watched with building anxiety as the three men discussed something in hushed whispers. When Arnault gathered his chair and removed it from the room, d’Artagnan’s unease heightened.

There was only one reason these two men ever entered his cell, to bring food or to inflict damage. D’Artagnan saw neither bread nor water in their hands, so he braced for impact.

It came swift and controlled, each thrusting of a fist coming with equal force and pacing as he failed in evading them. He ducked and swung left, letting his chains hit the floor to try and trip one of the guards, but they were stealthy on their feet, despite their hulking masses.

One of them grabbed the chains and pulled d’Artagnan to the floor where he landed sprawled on his stomach. He rolled onto his back, curled his knees up and thrust his legs out, knocking back the one not holding his chains. His small victory was rewarded with a kick to his ribs.

The air rushed out of d’Artagnan, turning his face red as blood from his mid-section fled to his head. He was gulping in air when the next blow landed on the side of his head, smacking it against the stone floor.

A bright white dot appeared in his vision, swelling and pulsing as thin tendrils spread from its core until all he could see was a sheet of white.

~The Musketeers~

“What’s done is done,” said Pellisier, turning back into the cell. “You knew the rules and you knew the consequences. You have only yourself to blame for the punishment your brother receives.”

Aramis shook as two sides waged war within him; kill this man… spare your brother further injuries. He inched forward, and then retreated. His mouth opened, then closed. His clenched his fists, then released them.

“This is what I came for,” said Pellisier, his hands clasped behind his back as he strolled toward Aramis. “This anger and fury. And this is what you will give me tonight. We are short on bodies and our purses have run low once again. You will bring this rage and venom, and you will give me what I want. Now rest. Your opponent this evening is spry. Young. And he’s fighting to save his family from starvation.”

Aramis breathed, deep and fast, his chest rising and falling too quickly for his body to oxygenate itself. But he held firm, despite the dizziness creeping across his head.

Pellisier leaned forward. “And you will not stop until he is dead this time. Do I make myself clear?”

Aramis narrowed his eyes, felt them twitch, and clenched his teeth. “Abundantly so.”

~To be continued...~
Chapter 9

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Eight.

Swing sweet charity.

Take what’s left of me.

A new beginning or is this the end?

Aramis massaged his shoulder with his bandaged hand, grimacing as the tightness would not release. He’d fought with worse, so it wasn’t his battered body that had him pacing when the guards arrived, it was his brother’s uncertain condition which had him unsettled.

The guards tied his wrists and blindfolded him, then ushered him out of the cell. This time, there was no urgency behind the men leading him as he walked the same path as before. He knew what was waiting, what he was supposed to do, and as he drew closer to the staircase leading to the arena, he subconsciously slowed.

Someone pushed him from behind, sending him head first into something solid. He felt his cheek split open and warm blood trickle down the side of his face.

“Up.”

Aramis sighed and wiped his cheek on his shoulder, then did as instructed. As he continued to climb, the sound of a crowd did not greet him. Instead, it was near silent when he reached flat ground.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“Be quiet.”

“Who said you could talk?”

Aramis’ head was knocked sideways and a dull ache spread across his forehead.

They continued to walk, confusing Aramis, so he focused his senses. He heard and felt things he hadn’t experienced in a very long time, making it hard for him to concentrate. The deep, resounding creak of unoiled hinges as a large door scraped across dry ground, the pungent smell of manure mixed with the familiar scent of wood and hay.

His surroundings changed again and he sensed open space around him. He walked on soft ground as a warm breeze ruffled his hair and the sharp, fresh scent of grass filled his nose. Like a tree leaning toward the sun, Aramis tipped his head back and felt a warmth flush his cheeks.

It was only when he was forced to climb a small set of stairs that his mind returned to the situation at hand.
The air around him turned stagnant, and the sounds of heeled boots clambering across a solid floor echoed from all directions. He discerned many people staring and gawking, and wondered who they were and why they weren’t helping him. A few ‘tsks’ were whispered, even a few muttered platitudes, which grated on every nerve Aramis possessed. He didn’t want their pity, he wanted their common decency. How could they stand there and do nothing as he was led to slaughter?

His anger carried him down several long hallways and up another staircase. At the top he was forced right, and several minutes, and several turns later, he was pulled to a stop.

“We wait here.”

Aramis looked toward the voice.

“Not talkin’ to you.”

He heard someone approaching a moment later, their footsteps quick and clipped. Aramis turned toward the escalating sound. He assumed they were waiting for Pellisier, and was not surprised when the man greeted him a moment later.

“Monsieur Aramis,” he heard, as warm hands grabbed his shoulders.

Aramis flinched, causing the hands that held him to let go.

“Your shoulder,” said Pellisier. “My apologies. But I’m sure all will be forgiven momentarily.”

Aramis hesitated before asking, “what’s going on? Where have you taken me?”

The air shifted around him, like people waving their arms or making gestures. He heard a door open and was thrust toward the sound, stumbling forward until strong arms caught him and held him steady.

Aramis gritted his teeth and doubled over, refusing to cry out as his shoulder spasmed.

“Are you sure he’s out?”

“Yes.”

The words were too vague for Aramis to discern anything, and his mind scrambled to conceive some sort of explanation for what was happening.

“You understand this will only happen this one time?” Pellisier paused for several seconds before Aramis felt someone nudge him. “I’m talking to you, Aramis.”

The marksman lifted his head, turned toward the voice. “How can I understand if I don’t know what is happening?”

The blindfold was removed and he was spun around.

Aramis ran toward d’Artagnan, skidding to a halt when he noticed a guard standing over his brother with a loaded pistol pointed at his head.

“One wrong move and your friend dies,” said Pellisier. “And one wrong word, shout or warning and he dies as well.”

Aramis whirled around, his eyes large and pleading. “He’s alive?”
Pellisier nodded.

Aramis turned back to d’Artagnan to see his still form on the floor. Under his head, Aramis noticed a small pool of blood and felt bile burning its way up his throat. He had to touch him, feel his pulse under his fingertips and tell him everything was going to be okay.

Running a hand down his face, Aramis looked over his shoulder at Pellisier. “Please. Let me go to him?”

“No.”

“I need proof he’s still alive.”

Pellisier nodded at the guard with the pistol, and when Aramis turned to his friend the guard nudged him with the toe of his boot. D’Artagnan moaned but did not open his eyes. A deep sigh of relief escaped Aramis, despite the meagre show of life.

“I keep my promises,” said Pellisier. “I told you you would see your friend, now it’s time for you to fulfill your promise to me.”

Aramis closed his eyes, the joy of seeing his friend quickly replaced by anger and guilt. He did not want to end a man’s life, d’Artagnan’s most of all.

A thought occurred to him and he flicked his eyes up. He crawled out from under his guilt and squared his shoulders as several expressions crossed his face.

“You have been told to win,” said Pellisier. “Therefore, losing has consequences.”

Aramis growled. This man saw right through him, knew what was inside him, and it bothered Aramis more than physical torture ever could.

He drew in a deep breath. If he was going to do this, he’d have to be prepared. Unlike last time, he did not feel excited. His senses were more dulled than alert. His skin did not tingle, his muscles were not aching for exertion. He felt more dead than alive.

But he didn’t have time to dwell, the guards were securing his blindfold and leading him out of the room. He was walked through the same hallways as before, and taken down the same staircase and back outside.

After seeing the room where d’Artagnan was held, Aramis knew they were on an estate. It took only seconds for him to recognise the walls and floor, so the rest of the pieces fell into place. He smelled trees and grass because he’d been outside. He’d smelled manure and hay because he’d been in a stable. But he was not being kept in the main house, his cell was underground based on the stairs he’d climbed and the dampness and dirt that usually surrounded him.

He filed this information away for later, for none of it was going to help him in the hours to come.

~

Aramis was sitting on the stairs under the stable, leaning against a wall. The hatch above him was closed, he’d heard the lock. There was someone with him, he could hear him breathing. His wrists were not bound, but his blindfold still covered his eyes.

Above him, he heard the clinking of glasses, cheerful shouts and music- a string quartet by the sound of the song’s lilting melody. Aramis enjoyed music, but on this occasion it sounded more like the
musicians were playing a death march rather than something one could dance to. The notes were long and sorrowful, rising and falling and filling his head with haunting memories of his brothers and his recent nightmares.

It lulled him into a trance seeded in misery and guilt. A part of him longed for the feeling he had when last he fought, the adrenaline and excitement that made him do those awful things to his opponent. He felt no such things now, and knew that when he killed this man tonight, it would be with both clarity and intent. And he would feel it as it happened. It would not pass by in a blur.

Seeing d’Artagnan on the floor with his head in a pool of blood did not pass by in a blur either. The vision was permanently etched in his mind. He also saw the bandaged left hand and shackles around his wrists, which gave him pause, but his clothes appeared in tact and no other obvious deformities were noticable, so Aramis felt some relief. But only a little.

Seeing any of his brothers in that condition would have brought him heartache, but seeing the youngest and newest being tortured for his behaviour was like pouring salt directly into a wound.

Porthos and Athos were soldiers with many years experience, they understood the depths and layers of emotions and strategic compromises that occured while imprisoned or tortured. In the end, Aramis hoped d’Artagnan would not just forgive him, but understand why he did what he did. Without this understanding, Aramis felt there could be no real forgiveness.

“I want this clean.”

Aramis sat upright when he heard Pellisier’s voice above him.

“I need the body to remain somewhat in tact.”

“Of course,” replied Aramis. “Why would you want it any other way?”

“Is that sarcasm?”

Aramis rolled his head back to face Pellisier above him on the stairs. “It’s all I have left,” he said toward the voice. “Do you want that as well?”

“You can keep it,” said Pellisier. “Now stand. It’s time to begin. Your audience awaits.”

The blindfold was removed and Aramis was led up the stairs. He stood in a large open space in the middle of a stable, surrounded by drunk and lavishly dressed men and women who cheered on his arrival.

Aramis refused to bait them further by looking up as he was paraded around the stable arena accompanied by two guards. Behind him, and perched on a raised dias, Pellisier welcomed his guests with a toast. As Aramis made a turn by the stable doors, he saw his opponent; young, slim and wiry. Aramis shook his head, unsure whether to be angry at the young man’s foolishness or saddened by the fact that he was about to die.

Aramis held no doubts that he would win. And as the bets were placed around him, he wondered if Pellisier would actually make any money. No man or woman in their right mind would bet on his opponent. He could barely stand his ground as he stood on pin thin legs, wobbling back and forth in either fear or excitement- Aramis could not tell.

“Boy, what’s your name?” called Aramis, as he passed by.

“Why you wanna know?”
Aramis was shoved ahead before he could answer, but was able to take a quick backward glance. His opponent sneered, but the mannerism did not fool Aramis, and his heart fell at the thought of extinguishing this man’s short life—especially when it appeared like he thought he had a chance.

Aramis realized then that he was not angry, he was sad. He preferred to spare his opponent this humiliating death, but d’Artagnan’s life meant more. He promised himself he would do this quickly, spare the man a painful death and let him keep some dignity. There was nothing worse than having spectators watch you suffer. Even worse, to have them watch as your pride and strength was stripped away as another man took it from you.

Aramis was brought to a halt in the middle of the stable, and while one of the guards stayed with him, the other went to fetch his opponent. As they stood facing each other, Aramis again asked him his name.

“Charles,” said the young man, his scowl and harsh voice betraying the fear Aramis saw in his eyes. “Why you wanna know?”

Aramis smiled without mirth. “I’d like to know the name of the man I’m about to kill,” he said, sotto voce. “I have no right to forget what I’m about to do.”

“Then it’s not my name you wish to know,” said Charles, lunging forward.

Aramis landed on his back with his arms wrapped around Charles’ midsection. A bony fist smashed into the marksman’s left eyebrow. The skin split open, dripping blood into his eye, stinging and blurring his vision.

Another punch connected with his left cheek, snapping his head to the side. Aramis had been hit much harder before and felt bad for Charles, for he was about to be put in his place.

It took half a second for Aramis to gain the upper hand. He reached up with his right arm, twisted and grabbed the man on the left side of his neck, and with barely much strength, pushed him to the ground. After reciprocating with two swift punches, mimicking the ones he’d just received, Aramis pushed off the ground and rose to full height.

Charles remained on the ground, cradling the side of his face. Aramis winced and dropped his head into his hands. Charles did not deserve this. He was young, had a family and had no business trying to pit his strength against someone as well trained as a soldier, let alone a musketeer. Aramis didn’t know how to proceed. He knew he had to kill Charles, he just didn’t know how to do it.

He backed up, his body unwilling to continue what his mind had been set to do. Charles was getting up now, staggering as he finally managed to get his feet under him.

Charles charged again, a harsh war cry escaping his lips this time as he ran at Aramis.

The marksman stepped to the side just before contact and his opponent landed on the ground. He rolled over and was on his feet quickly with fists ready.

“Heads up, Charles. Finish him.”

Around them voices fell into unison, chanting the same two words. Aramis looked around, his chest heaving as the momentum of their cheer grew louder. If only just one of them would step into this ring, Aramis was sure they wouldn’t last as long as even Charles.

When he turned his attention back to his opponent, he noticed him bouncing on his toes, presumably invigorated by the eager words. He was also crouched low and holding something in his hand.
Aramis saw the glint of steel.

Pellisier had levelled the playing field by adding a weapon to the match. Aramis didn’t know if he’d had from the start, but it didn’t much matter. He shook his head. Giving Charles a blade only gave him false hope.

Aramis spotted Pellisier to his right, perched on his dias, draped in his black robe and watching with cold eyes, and sighed. They both understood the addition of a weapon was for the sake of the audience, and in the end, Charles would fall.

*So, this is what he meant by keeping the body in tact.* Aramis knew exactly where to place the blade in order to make a quick kill, and Pellisier knew that. There would be no slashing or hacking required.

It took Aramis a single breath to assess the situation. *Four inch blade. Right hand hold. Underhand grip. He’ll slash from the left.*

Aramis moved to deflect the exact movements he’d predicted from his opponent, swiping the blade from Charles’ hand as he spun him around. Then he placed his foot in the middle of Charles’ chest and pushed him back, but not hard enough to knock him to the ground.

Aramis now held the knife and the crowd was nearing ecstasy.

Aramis could see the tension rippling through his opponent’s body, from the tremor in his hands to the stiff muscles of his neck.

Aramis had to make a choice; kill him quickly now or let this drag out. He’d never liked making decisions concerning his own life, they never seemed to work out, always leaving him unsatisfied in the end.

He felt like he was always searching, not for something better, but for something else.

He’d tried the church but had felt the battle field beckon. And now that he was a soldier, he felt the church calling. He was good at dispatching men to hell, but felt an overwhelming need to help mankind. So as he mastered the musket, so had he studied medicine.

But to kill or be killed was an easy choice. It was one or the other, and in this case, save a friend’s life at the sake of another.

But would it stop here? When would it end? How would it end? How many innocent lives was he willing to extinguish to save d’Artagnan’s?

In front of him, Charles was shaking. Aramis looked passed him to the door.

*Two seconds to the crowd. Slash the fat man on the left. Stab the one with the hat. Turn. Roll. Spin. Guard by the door- duck. The other guard- stab.* Ten seconds to his freedom.

The sounds of the crowd rushed back, startling him. He looked down at the knife in his hand and saw d’Artagnan’s name written across the steel hilt.

He shook himself. *No. It’s not there.* He looked up at the man quivering before him. But it’s what will happen if he chose to escape.

Aramis advanced.
He was in front of Charles with his hand wrapped around his neck, cradling the back of his head within a breaths time. He pressed his body against him and leaned into his ear.

Aramis felt the tension slipping from his opponent’s body, like he knew the end was near. “Please forgive me, Charles,” he whispered. “For I do this to save someone I care for more than you.”

Aramis thrust the knife into the man’s gut, holding it there as the warm blood spilled over his hand. He dropped his head onto Charles’ shoulder and held him tight against his body. “May god have mercy on your soul,” he said. “For mine is no longer worth saving.”

He stepped back, leaving the knife imbedded between the spleen and diaphragm. Charles collapsed, dead before his head hit the ground.

The crowd erupted and Aramis hated them all.

*To be Continued…*
Chapter 10

Author’s Note: Sorry for the long delay, but I have temporarily lost my beta reader, and the story is possibly not quite as good as it can be without my wonderful LJGroundwater. But I have decided to forge ahead.

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Nine.

“Ah, Captain Treville! So nice of you to finally join us.”

Treville looked up as he approached Louis. The King’s voice held a level of condescension, but he did not sound angered. “My apologies, Your Majesties,” he said, as he pulled up next to the French monarchies strolling through their gardens. “This situation with the missing men has kept myself and my men extremely busy.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has,” said Anne, earning a patronizing smile from her husband.

Her lips were thin as if trying to suppress an emotion too powerful for present company to witness. Treville knew she felt something deeper for the musketeers than perhaps Louis did, they had saved her life numerous times, particularly Aramis, and since he was one of the men missing, her countenance was understandable.

“And you will tell me all the newest details as we take a turn around the garden,” said Louis, striding forward with his entourage of courtiers and Red Guard falling in around them.

Treville matched pace as the three strolled through the hedges and flowers. “My men are investigating supply chains,” he said. “If they can’t find the location where the men are being kept, perhaps they can find and follow what is sustaining their enterprise.”

“Good thinking,” said Louis. “Have any more been reported missing? I’ve had the Cardinal halt all personal audiences. It just became so tedious hearing the same thing over and over again.”

Treville kept his expression neutral with great difficulty. “I can see how it would,” he said. “But they are your people, Your Majesty, and it is you that will bring them comfort in times like this.”

“Ah, Treville, it seems you have learned the art of empty compliments.”

Treville smiled. “My apologies,” he said, remembering how the king had once told him that he cherished his honesty.

“No, no,” said Louis. “Please continue. I quite like it coming from you once in awhile. It brings me joy, especially with all that is going on right now.”

“The King has been preoccupied with both dealings concerning the missing men as well as the Physician’s Guild,” said the queen, leaning around her husband to look at Treville.
Treville bowed his head in respect to the queen and gave her a small smile. “Are they giving you trouble?”

“Indeed,” replied Louis with a deep sigh. He led the small group through the maze of shrubbery; occasionally looking up at the sky so the sun could bask down on his youthful features.

Treville saw worry lines etched on his forehead. “Is there anything my men can assist with?” he asked, knowing his offer was empty with most of his musketeers already engaged.

“It’s more politics, I’m afraid,” said Louis. “And I am familiar with your disdain for such things, so I do not wish to bother you further.”

“Very well.”

“But if you insist,” said Louis, inching closer to the captain. “There seems to be quite the uproar building amongst them. I’ve heard blood has been shed, and they can’t seem to bring an end to their infighting.”

Treville raised a brow. The dealings of the universities and various guilds were not something he was familiar with, but if arms and warfare were involved, he felt perhaps he should become more acquainted with the situation. “Any threats made toward you, Sire?”

Louis shook his head. “No, but both sides are awaiting my decisions on several legal matters that could change the course of our medical tributaries.”

“I’m sure once you have come to a wise and fair decision things will settle down once again,” said the queen.

Louis patted the back of her hand that he held in his own. “Yes, my love.” He turned to Treville and lowered his voice, apparently more for effect rather than secrecy. “Your Queen seems to have quite the opinion on this matter.”

“I do, Your Majesty,” Anne said, with a gentle smile. “I believe in the equality of all men. Regardless of their place, if they are capable of learning, then they should be granted the same rights to education as any other man.”

“As do I, Anne,” replied Louis.

Treville smiled at the queen’s capacity to speak her mind, but was surprised that Louis agreed with her. “Forgive me,” he said, unsure if he’d heard correctly. “You agree that all men should have the same privileges to education?”

Louis looked at him with a mouthful of teeth. “This surprises you, Captain?”

Treville hesitated. “It does, Your Majesty. I’ve always known you to be a fair and just King, but…”

Louis laid a hand on his forearm. “I’ll stop you right there, Captain Treville,” he said, his smile still present but slightly less infectious. “Before you say something that I may regret.”

The laugh that followed was childlike and exuberant, and neither Treville nor the Queen could stop themselves from chuckling.

“But I have seen first hand what these surgeons and barbers are capable of,” continued Louis. “If the church is going to forbid physicians to lay hands on patients, than these barbers, with their abilities to perform surgeries should be given certain allowances when it comes to education.”
Louis paused and leaned even closer to Treville. “You never know if one day you might be in need of one of these men, and I for one would like him to know everything he can about my royal body before cutting into it.” He stood back up and smiled at his wife. “And it would be a shame to see their talents go to waste because of some silly rule that states only those of noble breeding may attend our Universities. It’s not as if they are asking to be King.” His laugh was again, loud and joyous.

Treville watched the ground pass by underfoot as they continued through the gardens, both mildly shocked and also pleased at Louis’ attitude. But there was another reason for his visit, and he had to get back to the garrison, so he changed the subject rather subtly in order to assure the King’s attention.

“From the last report I received,” he said. “Two of my musketeers met a physician helping people in the outlying villages. Free of charge. Apparently he impressed my men greatly.”

“That’s wonderful,” said the Queen.

“It is,” said Louis. “Just as long as they remember where their true loyalties lie and pay their taxes.”

Treville sighed. “How far are these surgeons and barbers willing to go?”

“Oh, only time, and spilled blood, will tell,” said the King. “But let us talk of more pressing matters. How is your investigation going?”

“Not as well as I’d expect,” replied Treville. “I’ve received communiqués from my men in the field. They have yet to find any location that is housing a large contingency of men, and no reports from the harbours have proven worthy. We haven’t even found any evidence of any sort of large supply trails.”

“Perhaps they are self sufficient?” said Louis.

Treville quirked an eyebrow. A lot of farmland occupied the area where the men were missing, as well as many estates.

The King had possibly just proved himself useful, and Treville now urgently wanted to get back to the garrison.

~The Musketeers~

Aramis didn’t know how to feel after he’d been deposited back in his cell after the fight. He was charged with so many emotions, each battling for dominance over his exhaustion. He chose anger since it was the most predominant, and let it coil around his tired muscles to give him strength.

He sat up abruptly on his cot and leaned over his knees, staring with intensity at the locked door of his cell as his shoulders rose and fell with each deep deliberate breath he took.

Aramis said no prayers for he felt unworthy of his god’s attention. He knew he wasn’t to blame for his actions, but still, the stain of blood and death marred his hands and soul.

Killing people was easy, a simple process of doing something to another. It was actually a specialty of Aramis’, but those he killed usually deserved it. Charles, other than choosing to step into the fight, had not, and this weighed heavily on Aramis’ conscious.

He tried to reason that Charles deserved what he got. Charles knew the consequences as much as Aramis did… or did he?
Did Charles know whom he’d be up against? Did he even choose to be there? Had he been kidnapped like Aramis and d’Artagnan, or had Pellisier lied to him about his fighting to save his family?

Aramis grunted and pushed off the cot. He ran to the cell door and banged his fists against the wooden structure. The vibrations from the force travelled up his arms and he stumbled back when his left shoulder shuddered in pain.

“Why?!?”

He ran at the door again, slamming it repeatedly with his fists, revelling in the pain shooting across both his shoulders and bare knuckles.

“Why?!… Pellisier!”


“Pellisier!”


“Face me you coward!”

Aramis kicked the door then stumbled back to the cot where he landed hard.

Defeat overcame him and he slumped forward. “It’s never going to end,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m going to have to keep killing innocent men until I am no longer useful.”

Useful? Or entertaining? He laughed. I am nothing but the people’s entertainment.

Aramis laughed harder, unable to control it as it burst forth from deep within his gut. He fell back against the wall then onto to his side with his head landing on the pillow.

He remembered Charles’ young face, his large eyes, crooked nose, smooth skin and an attitude not befitting his experience. Aramis recalled the moment when the young man’s demeanour had changed from standing so defiant and confident with the blade in his hand, to stiff and shaking in his arms right before he’d thrust the blade.

What was the going rate these days to watch a human suffer? Aramis thought. I wonder who won the biggest pot?

Aramis laughed out loud as he lay on the cot. He put his hands over his face, stifling the sounds that shamefully escaped him. “Oh god, what has become of me?” He let out a soft chuckle and shook his head, staring at the ceiling as if it were heaven itself.

“My intentions are pure and I can only pray you see that within me. I do not wish to harm these men, but what am I to do when d’Artagnan’s life hangs in the balance? What is the right thing? How many is too many? When will I know too many have suffered for the sake of one man’s life?”

The ceiling didn’t answer.

“Right,” Aramis said, rolling onto his side. “I don’t deserve your guidance. Your silence is very telling.”

His hands, bloodied and split open, rested before his eyes. New blood mixed with old. His and Charles’.
“To stop now would be to forsake all I’ve done,” he reasoned aloud, in a soft voice. “Charles will have died in vain if I don’t continue to keep d’Artagnan safe.”

He closed his eyes. “My soul for his. My god, I’ve been dispatched to hell.”

His bloodied hands began to blur in front of his eyes until all he saw was darkness.

*This is truly who I am, there is no point fighting it anymore.*

~*The Musketeers*~

D’Artagnan heard a sickening, sucking sound when he lifted his head off the floor. His world tilted when he opened his eyes, a brilliant flash of white light exploded in his brain.

“Oh god,” he said, reaching behind to feel a sticky substance matted in his hair. He knew what it was and didn’t have to look.

Sitting up, his surroundings spun around him again, his stomach clenching until he wrapped a hand around his midsection, holding tight until everything settled.

But with the nausea abated a pounding in his head began. Fragments of yesterdays events flashed into his mind and he remembered the struggle, and more importantly, losing the struggle.

Reaching behind him, he braced his hand on the edge of a cot and hoisted himself up…

*Cot?*

D’Artagnan stood up, spun around and stared down at the bed, his throbbing head and woozy stomach momentarily forgotten. He bent down and ran a hand over the mattress, trailed his fingers along the soft material and gave it a push. He smiled as he slowly sat down, sinking into the first piece of softness he’d experienced since waking up in this room.

He bounced up and down to test the cot, then remembered his head and grimaced. It pounded again, but not nearly as bad as before, because now… now he had a cot.

He was still chained, but they didn’t interfere, so d’Artagnan lay down, savouring the feeling of warm material not cold stone, softness not stiffness, and closed his eyes. Who his benefactor was, why the cot was there, he didn’t care. Even if they came and took it away, he would enjoy the blissfulness of it as long as he could.

A warm breeze blew through the open window across the room, he turned his face into it, revelling in how it tickled his skin. It would be easy to forget where he was, what was happening, but when he opened his eyes the stark reality of his situation made him groan.

Something moved along the floor by the door.

D’Artagnan squinted, the object was so thin and masked by the sunlight shining in through the window, he could not make out what it was.

It moved again, floating upward as the breeze continued to swirl around the room, then landed on the floor again.

A quill. Arnault had dropped his quill prior to his last beating.

D’Artagnan sat up and moved off the cot toward the centre of the room, his chains, and his throbbing head stopping him just feet from his new bed. The chains clinked on the ground when he rubbed his
head, and he didn’t want to alert anyone he was up, so he carefully put his hands at his sides and
knelt down. The pain pounding in his head continued, and his squinting was not helping, but the
quill was intriguing.

It was filed for writing, it’s tip harder than most and substantial enough to pick a lock. Or at least,
d’Artagnan hoped it was strong enough to pick a lock.

He smiled. This was turning out to be a good day, relatively speaking he thought as he looked down
at the iron shackles around his wrists, and for the fact that the quill was out of reach.

~The Musketeers~

In the front parlour of the estate, Pellisier dismissed the group from their studies, but motioned for
Arnault to remain behind. They took seats in tall, leather bound chairs by the impressive stone hearth,
sipping brandy from extravagant goblets as they spoke.

“The young man has been rewarded for Aramis’ behaviour,” said Arnault.

“Hopefully he will continue to be so,” replied Pellisier, placing his goblet on the side table with an
amused look. “Our enterprise here has proven quite lucrative. The people love our Musketeer. His
brutality brings them back wanting more.”

Arnault chuckled softly. “Even the women,” he said.

A soft and pensive quality adorned Pellisier’s facial features. “I think they are more drawn to his
looks,” he said. “But whatever brings in our means to sustain this place, it doesn’t matter.”

“About that,” said Arnault, sitting forward. He rested his goblet on the arm of the chair and stared
into it before continuing. “How much longer do you think our school will go unnoticed? There have
already been two Musketeers nosing around. I fear we may have to re-locate ourselves yet again, and
we are in no shape right now to do so as we are quite comfortable and established.”

“I trust Pierre deterred them enough not to come back,” replied Pellisier. “And we have plenty of
able bodies still to be serviced, so I am in no rush to pack up yet. My students need more practice
with cadavers before they will be comfortable enough to perform surgeries, so I don’t feel right
graduating any of them yet. It would be a disservice to the people of France to release unto them
untrained physicians.”

Arnault inched further forward in his chair. “I agree, sir,” he said. “But if we wait too long before
leaving, and we are found out, I’m afraid we might lose some of our students in the melee.”

Pellisier raised a hand. “Settle, Arnault,” he said. “We have done this in the past and were quite
successful. Do you not trust me?”

Arnault fidgeted. “Of course I do,” he said. “But there are so many bodies this time. It’s a much
grander enterprise.”

“If we are to change the world, Arnault,” said Pellisier. “We must take some risks. Until the King
decides in our favour, and grants education to everyman, we must remain steadfast in our operation
to provide that education to the masses. France has become a much more violent place, and it’s need
of physicians and surgeons will only increase. The Universities of Paris and Toulouse and what not,
cannot succeed in filling the need fast enough.”

Arnault smiled, took a sip of his brandy. “So we are doing France a favour?”
'Indeed we are,’ replied Pellisier, adjusting the robe over his knees before resting his head against the back of his chair. ‘Mark my word, Arnault. King Louis will thank us for this one day. But in the meantime, everything continues as planned. Prepare some of the lesser men for the fights tonight, I want Aramis to rest. I’d like to try that potion on him once again, but I want him in top form before I do.’ He took another sip of his brandy and closed his eyes. ‘Better results that way.’

_To be continued…_
Days passed, possibly weeks, Aramis could not be certain without any windows in his cell to reveal the outside world. He had remained in his one room prison, healing and regaining his strength as young men in robes brought him food and occasionally a bucket of water and rags in which to clean himself. The only time he was let outside was for exercise.

Chained at both wrists and ankles, he was walked around the empty stable by a large contingency of guards. It wasn’t much, but Aramis appreciated the opportunity to not only stretch his legs, but also survey the grounds in search of an escape. After a few times where he was caught gazing intently into the distance, the guards began blindfolding him.

It was no matter, Aramis knew he would never escape. There was no way he could get to d’Artagnan, and he wouldn’t leave without him. But knowing that, he still hadn’t been able to stop his innate need to keep searching while he’d had the chance.

On the day Pellisier finally arrived to speak with him, Aramis was more than willing to engage in conversation, something that had lacked during his time with the attendants and guards.

Pellisier had brought his chair into the room along with a small table. Robed attendants brought in two cups and a wooden decanter of wine, but Aramis refused to imbibe, stating he only drank with friends.

“I see you are looking well,” said Pellisier.

“As well as my friend?” asked Aramis, sitting on the edge of his cot languidly playing with the cuffs of his shirt.

“D’Artagnan, that is his name?” asked Pellisier. Aramis didn’t answer. “Well, it is,” he said, matter-of-factly. “And I’m sure you will be pleased to hear he has been rewarded for your obedience, and has received a bed so he longer has to sleep on the cold floor.”

Aramis bristled. “I don’t need him to be pampered,” he spat back. “I need him to be free and safe!”

“He will always be safe as long as you co-operate.”

Aramis stood and paced the width of his cell. “Right,” he said, letting out a long sigh. “As long as I obey.” He stopped in front of the table and rested his eyes on Pellisier, his shoulders staunch as he watched the man all too comfortable in his chair. “Obey what? I haven’t exactly been doing anything? What are we waiting for? Am I not here to fight?”
Pellisier laughed then drank slowly from his cup, licking his lips afterward as if savouring every drop. “Eager, aren’t we?”

“Not eager,” said Aramis. “The sooner we get on with this, the sooner it will be over.”

“Then I have come at the right time,” said Pellisier. He pushed the empty cup across the table. “Drink with me.”

“I have no need for your wine,” replied Aramis, turning away.

“It is an order,” said Pellisier, but his voice was not ardent. It was almost questioning. “But it doesn’t have to be.”

Aramis turned back. “What are you talking about?”

Pellisier pulled out a vial from an inside pocket of his robe and shook it gently in the air. “Remember how you felt that first fight? I can bring that back to you. Make it so you don’t have to think, let your inhibitions run wild without the consequences of remorse.”

Aramis eyed the vial. A small voice inside him urged him to drink it and be damned with all of this, but he looked away before the thought could fully establish itself. “There is always remorse,” he said. “You cannot hide from your demons, no matter how much appalling substances you put in your body.”

Pellisier poured the liquid into the empty cup, watching Aramis as he did. “Not if you keep consuming it,” he said. “We are still learning the effects of this rare cocoa substance, but so far our tests have been promising.”

“Cocoa?” asked Aramis, taking on a pensive mien. “I’ve heard of this. Botanists brought it back from the Amazon?”

“You are a man of many wonders, Aramis,” said Pellisier, his expression depicting his surprise. “A man of the world.”

Aramis answered without thought. “And of books,” he said.

“Do you know of medicine?”

“Yes,” said Aramis. “But what does this have to do with anything? I’m here for my prowess in the ring, obviously not my mind since you seem so hell bent on destroying it with that concoction of yours.”

Pellisier turned thoughtful for a moment, his eyes looking to the far corners of the room as he switched his legs to now cross the right over the left. “Hm,” he said.

Aramis dismissed his captor’s speculative pause, figuring eventually he would choose might over mind, and not spare him duly because he was educated. “Am I to fight this evening or not?” he asked, drawing Pellisier’s attention back on him.

Pellisier sat up straighter in his chair. “Right,” he said, then cleared his throat. He pointed at the wine on the small table, offering it to Aramis. “A toast to this evenings’ event, and the coin that shall sustain my enterprise.”

With a cautious glance and steady hand, Aramis reached for the bottle. But he did not pour the wine into the cup. He raised the wooden decanter to his lips and drank. When he placed it back on the
table, he smiled and tilted his head. “As you wish,” he said.

After a deep sigh, Pellisier leaned forward and grabbed the wine. He poured a generous amount in Aramis’ cup then sat back.

“No,” said Aramis.

Pellisier rested his hands in his lap, his expression brooking no argument.

“No!” said Aramis. “I wish to remain in full control of my faculties. I deserve penance for what I’m doing.”

Pellisier narrowed his eyes.

The small voice urging Aramis to drink from the cup and allow his body to function without censor niggled its way back into his thoughts. It had been near rhapsodic to fight so unencumbered from morals and righteousness, to let loose what he had kept locked deep down inside for so many years. With each passing moment of contemplation he leaned closer to the table, his right hand twitching.

No! He squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head, clenching his biceps as hard as he could as he crossed them over his chest. This should not be easy!

“Aramis.”

He looked up and into Pellisier’s eyes and knew there was no longer a choice in the matter. It was now an order.

Based on that alone, Aramis reached forward and grabbed the cup. He poured it down his throat as fast as he could then threw the cup across his cell. “Are you satisfied?!”

“Another.”

Aramis stared at him, eyes fierce and forehead furrowed, creating a wedge between his brows. How could he make him do this? How in good conscience could Pellisier force him into a state of frenzied violence?

Aramis drew in a deep breath to consolidate his strength, employing d’Artagnan’s mercurial state as his bedrock, then strode across the cell with authority and retrieved his cup.

Pellisier took it from his reluctant grasp and poured into it more of the concoction from the vial. Then he filled the rest of the cup with wine and passed it back to him.

Aramis drank it in one gulp then placed it on the table. Before he could retract his hand, Pellisier was pouring more.

~The Musketeers~

D’Artagnan thought the cot was a marvellous thing, until he learned it would be accompanied by sleepless nights. After hours of watching the quill fluttering about the room, moving closer to him at times and further away moments later, he had taken to the cot out of tiredness and boredom.

That was days ago, and since that short nap he hadn’t slept.

“Stop! Just spot! Please! I beg you!” D’Artagnan rolled toward the wall, smothering his ears with the soft parts of his arms, anything to drown out the banging and clanging reverberating in the near empty room where he was sequestered.
The guards smashed pots, rang bells and screeched what sounded like rusty bows across the strings of an out-of-tune cello, taking turns when their arms grew tired or they could no longer stand to listen to the ungodly racket they were making.

D’Artagnan had no escape, and his yelling only served to mildly temper his frustration but never the noise. It had been three days since he’d heard peace, and hours since he’d last been able to doze, albeit fitfully.

Whenever he was capable of pushing the clamour out of his mind and drift off, one of the guards would shove him awake, then continue on with whichever instrument of oratory torture he was assigned.

“Take the cot back!” he screamed, rolling onto his back, his hands barely muffling the noise as he squeezed them against his now fragile ears. “I don’t care! Just stop!”

He’d already offered up his clothes, his rations and even volunteered for another beating, but every sacrifice was ignored, along with his pleas.

His head pounded, but not in rhythm with anything, for the devilish orchestra was playing without rhyme or reason. His inner ears vibrated to the point of pain, and his heart was hammering in his chest at an ungodly pace. Even his wrists were raw and aching from tugging and pulling on the chains in an effort to break from the wall and strangle the noise makers.

He could no longer stand, his legs were too weak from lack of sleep. No more tears could be shed, for he’d shed them all out of sheer fury and exasperation. Food and water had come, but was left untouched. D’Artagnan could not stomach anything as his frustration mounted to a nauseating level, causing his body to weaken faster and magnify his aversion to anything one could possibly put in their mouth and swallow.

“Why?! Why?!” he screamed. His throat and mouth had become so dry, he could barely form words, but he continued to beg and plea, barter and bribe until there was nothing left of his voice but a hoarse whisper.

_Dear god, make it stop! What have I done?.. Please help... Why can’t I remember my prayers!_

“Aramis…” the name died on his lips. _Wherever you are, pray for me. You know how. Please, pray my torture ends._

He rolled back to face the wall, his whole body convulsing every time someone smashed a pot with an iron rod. The effect was so loud d’Artagnan felt the whole cot shake. _Tell Porthos to beat the hell out of that man while you’re at it!_


_And tell Athos to get on with my rescue! I don’t know how much more I can take…_

The noise stopped.

D’Artagnan whimpered, bracing himself for an even louder onslaught of commotion, but there was nothing but silence, barring the incessant thrum resounding in his ears.

“My ears,” he whispered, as he tugged viciously on his lobes, trying to dislodge whatever blocked them. “I can’t hear.”

He rolled into a seated position with his feet on the floor, his heart still hammering, his breaths
ragged. A deep thumping echoed in his head, pulsating with each beat of his heart.

“Hello,” he said, over and over again, unable to hear his own voice.

He looked up and saw the last of the guards leaving the room, taking their instruments of destruction along with them.

D’Artagnan took deep breaths, calming his overactive body so he could concentrate. “Hello,” he said again.

He felt the air rush through his throat and past his lips, but heard no words.

Then he remembered he had no voice left and cleared his throat. He tried again, but still nothing. Spotting a water skin on the floor, he reached for it and guzzled its contents until his throat no longer stung.

He tested his voice again, grimacing as his once parched throat worked painfully to produce sound. “Hello?”

He’d heard it. Quiet and strained as it was, he’d heard it.

D’Artagnan slumped back against the wall and rubbed his ears. Everything echoed, and everything hurt, but at least he could hear again. And the noise had stopped.

For now.

In a few minutes, he knew his stomach would beg for nourishment, having been without it for too long, so he reached for the loaf of bread at the foot of his cot and placed it on his stomach for later. Right now, he wanted to rest, enjoy the relative silence of the room and wait out the noises still pounding in his brain.

He lifted a single eyelid, checking to see if the room was still empty and saw the quill on the floor by the window.

“You’re still there,” he said, both pleased at his discovery, and that he could hear his voice more clearly. He drank again from the water skin and cleared his throat, a dry needling pain at the back of his mouth made him wince. “I’ll have you yet,” he whispered, staring at the still out of reach quill.

“But first, let me rest,” he said, sliding down the wall. He was asleep before he hit the cot.

~The Musketeers~

Aramis was a heaving mass of coiled violence when he entered the stable. He’d already knocked out one of the guards, leaving him with a bloodied nose and broken collarbone and writhing on the stairs leading up from the tunnels.

Aramis felt no compassion for what he’d done. He felt euphoric, alive, and more alert than he’d ever felt his entire life.

But he wanted something, something that was being kept from him across the stable floor. As each moment passed, his desire to destroy and unleash his pent up energy increased tenfold, making his heart flutter and his limbs shake with anticipation.

Aramis had an almost irrational urge to tear apart the man who stood before him, larger than life, over six feet tall and with biceps the size of Aramis’ thighs. There were scars on his face, he could
see them clearly from several feet away, crisscrossing his nose and bisecting his upper lip.

None of it worried Aramis, not even when the man pounded his chest and stamped his feet. He was nothing. A toy. Aramis didn’t care what his name was, or why he was there, only to kill him by whatever means possible.

The man who stood before Aramis was nothing more than meat in clothes, and Aramis was starving.

He licked his dry lips, squinted his eyes and leaned forward, pulling against the hands holding him back from his prey. He’d kill those men too if need be, anything to just be released and set free before his heart exploded in his chest.

Aramis didn’t hear Pellisier announce the fight, he only knew when he was let go. His skin tingled where hands had once been held him. A flush of heat swept through him as he crouched, fingers curling into fists. His pupils dilated, granting him clarity of sight that nearly hurt his eyes.

Everything after that moment of release was a blur of blood, pain, sweat and exultation. Aramis only remembered visions of swirling, vivid colours and feelings of greatness as he was brutally ushered back to his cell.

Thin streaks of fresh blood dripped down his arms as he was dragged through the tunnel, pooling on the back of his hands before falling to the ground. He watched the liquid flow off his fingertips, mesmerized by its slow descent as it dropped away, yet energized by the fact that he still lived while his vitality seeped from his body.

In his own mind, Aramis was invincible. He could feel what blood he had left pumping through every artery in his body, hear the whooshing of air in his lungs as they expanded and contracted. He could taste liquid iron, bitter and metallic, as it coated his throat in a thick, viscous film when he swallowed.

The clang of his cell door opening resounded in the underground chamber, echoing in his ears like thunder during a spring storm. He was pushed onto the bed roughly, but he was on his feet instantly, running at the guards who’d tossed him aside like trash.

His left fist flew forward, making contact with the face of one of the guards. Aramis stood back, crouched and waited for retaliation.

He wanted them to try and stop him. “Come on! Take me!” he yelled, begging them to unleash their fury so he could fight back.

The guards would play no part in his physical overture, so when they locked him inside his cell with no one to play with, Aramis charged at the door.

Then he charged the wall beside his bed. Then the floor. He screamed like a caged animal, profanities coming out of his mouth in every language he could speak. He tore at the dirt of the floor and walls until he could no longer feel his appendages.

Aramis found no rest from his agitated state until the cell door flew open again and several guards entered, pounding their meaty fists into the palms of their hands while rushing forward. It took several blows to his head before he would stay down, and several more after that until he finally found respite in sleep.

~The Musketeers~

“You’re threshold for pain astounds me, Aramis.”
The voice was distant, but somehow it penetrated the thick fog surrounding Aramis. A heavy, unrelenting pressure pushed down on his limbs, rendering him physically incapable of movement but not of hearing.

“Time to wake up.”

The voice broke through again, piercing his muddled thoughts with its familiar tone and condescension. Aramis knew that voice, hated that voice, but was involuntarily drawn to it despite his abhorrence of the man whom it belonged to.

“I see you twitching,” said Pellisier. “Work your way through it and you’ll be here with me shortly.”

Aramis could picture the smile on Pellisier’s face and wanted to cut it off for what he had done to him. The man had no reason to smile or feel proud, or talk to him in such a childlike manner.

Unable to control more than his throat, Aramis swallowed and groaned as he felt himself being pulled toward the palpable world. He had no control of his return to consciousness, and no ability to fight it, and all he wanted was to remain suspended in the thick fog and lose himself to its smothering effects.

“You are to be held accountable for your actions last night, Aramis,” said Pellisier. “I had to make reparations because of you, and I promise, your punishment will be severe.”

What have I done? He couldn’t think straight, he couldn’t remember anything past the wine. He just knew he was angry, and possibly… ashamed.

Coldness swept through him, turning every nerve ending to ice, but yet his skin burned as if he were standing too close to a fire. The contradicting sensations wreaked havoc with his body, and his head shot backward abruptly, the momentum pulling his chest upward until only his hips, head and shoulders remained touching the bed.

With what little energy he had depleted by that one involuntary action, Aramis collapsed onto his right side. His hands rested before his eyes, trembling and blood soaked. Their vibrations against the coarse material of the mattress scorched his skin with every minute movement.

“You are to be held accountable for your actions last night, Aramis,” said Pellisier. “I had to make reparations because of you, and I promise, your punishment will be severe.”

Aramis heard the scrapping of a chair across dirt. It was typically a muted sound, but to his sensitive ears it was like nails on concrete.

“I have arrangements to make regarding you dear friend, d’Artagnan, but I will be back.”

Aramis reached out a trembling arm, using what controllable strength he had to hold it up. No, he thought, still unable to form words. Leave him alone! If someone is to be blamed, it’s me!

His arm fell down, dangling off the side of the bed with his torn and shredded knuckles scraping on the dirt floor.

“You disappointed me last night,” said Pellisier. “I expected better from you. More control and a little less… un-caged brutality! You were to fight, give a show, and give me bodies I can work with! Not leave messes of men that not even my students can put back together!”

The sudden stillness in the room was jarring. Aramis knew nothing of what Pellisier spoke of, his only clues being how his body felt. But after hearing those words, his soul also ached.
“The deaths of those men were in vain,” continued Pellisier, his voice softer but not any less full of conviction. “You killed without purpose and wasted lives. Reflect on that, Aramis, as you lay there in pain!”

To be continued…
Chapter 12

Author’s Note: As of this chapter I must warn my readers that the level of torture is stepping up a notch. Not much, but I don’t know people’s tolerances, and I said I would give a warning.

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Eleven

The French countryside spread out before Athos, varying shades of green dotted sporadically with the random colours of summer flowers swaying gently with the breeze. Porthos sat beside him atop his horse also gazing across the lush field. There was nothing of interest within their immediate purview except for where the grass ended and the forest began.

“Through there,” Porthos said, pointing in the distance. “That’s the trail that leads to the village where we met that physician, isn’t it?”

Athos nodded, keeping his eyes trained on the spot where his friend pointed. “Yes,” he replied. “But I think we should start with the estates and farms to the north. Treville seems to think we may have missed something and wants everyone to take a closer look at where they’ve been.”

Porthos snorted. “I thought searching for supply chains was a good idea,” he said.

There was an aura of disappointment about his friend in which Athos could sympathize. It had been too long since they’d seen their brothers, making them vulnerable and too quick to get on with their search when clues did not immediately present themselves. They would have to be more careful this time around, look for leads in less obvious places, listen for miss said words.

He sighed while adjusting his seat in his saddle. “So did I,” he said. “But nothing fruitful has come of it. Perhaps the captain is correct in suggesting this enterprise is self-sufficient.”

“Oh they’re just gone.”

Athos bristled at the thought then looked sharply at his friend, but when he noticed Porthos exuding despondency, his words softened on his lips. “We must not think that way. D’Artagnan and Aramis are survivors. We must not forget that.”

Porthos replied with a stout nod, seemingly distancing himself from his gloomy thoughts.

Their delay atop the hillside had been longer than Athos anticipated. Wanting to get on with the search, he cleared his throat, guiding the conversation back to the long journey ahead. “It’s much easier to hide a congregation of men in the tunnels and outbuildings of an estate or farm than it is to keep them hidden in a small town or village.”

“I suppose,” said Porthos, turning his horse away from the peak where they were perched. “But I wouldn’t mind meeting that doctor again someday. You know, when this is all over.”

Pulling his horse up beside his friend and leading them away from the forest, Athos tilted his hat off his face and looked at him. “The sooner we find d’Artagnan and Aramis, the sooner you can have your wish.”
Porthos raised a hand, and also his ire at the statement. “I wasn’t meanin’…”

Athos stopped him. “I know,” he said. The look they shared conveyed each other’s worry. They were both on edge and could not blame each other if harsh words or sentiments were spoken. “Let’s get on with this before it gets too dark,” said Athos. “There are several farms to the north. We should start with the large one with the many dogs. It’s the most secluded.”

“What about that estate?” asked Porthos, nudging his horse into a trot. “The one with the strange gardener?”

Athos sighed and shook his head. “There are many that require a closer look, and I’m no more inclined to inspect one over another, but since we have to check them all, I see no point in addressing that man sooner rather than later.”

“I hear that,” replied Porthos.

The farm in question indeed had many dogs, most of which yapped and snarled at their mounts’ hooves as they approached the barn. Athos dismounted as soon as there was room at his horse’s feet to do so, followed by Porthos shortly afterward.

No one was around, but Athos was confident the sound of the dogs incessant barking would alert the owners to their presence. As they approached the house on the lookout for anything unusual, an elderly woman came down the front steps shouting for the dogs to be quiet. She came up short when she noticed the two men on her property, a hand coming to her chest as if to stop her heart from beating out of her chest.

Porthos smiled and bared a palm, raising it slowly then wrapping it around his stomach as he bowed forward. “Didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said. “Our apologies.”

The woman eyed them for a moment, her gaze discerning but not unfriendly. “Musketeers, I see,” she said, with stout nod. She bustled her skirts in her arms and started back up the stairs. “Well come on now,” she called over her shoulder. “It’s hot out here and I’ve got fresh lemon water on the table. The Monsieur won’t be back for hours yet, so let’s not let it go to waste.”

Athos turned to Porthos. “Friendly.”

Porthos looked back at him. “Odd.”

They walked into the house, removing their hats as they crossed the threshold and tucked them under their arms. It was a small abode, decently furnished with several comfortable looking sofas and chairs placed around the room. The woman peered at them from behind the wall dividing the common space from the kitchen and beckoned them in, **tsking** when they didn’t move fast enough.

“Sit,” she said, pointing at the table in the middle of the room. “You must be thirsty.” She poured out glasses of lemon water, set the pitcher on the counter next to a burning hearth, and then sat herself down.

“You don’t seem surprised to see us,” said Athos, reaching for the cool glass in front of him. The liquid slid down his throat almost as easy as wine.

The woman laughed and leaned back in her chair. “Surprised? Yes,” she said. “But we’re good, law abiding French folk in this house and anyone who wears the King’s pauldron is always welcome.”

Porthos took a sip of his water and smiled. “Thank you, Mademoiselle.”
“Clarisse,” she replied. “And who might you two strapping young men be?”

Athos pulled back at the surprising use of diction, then smiled. “I am Athos,” he said. “And this is Porthos.”

“Well, Athos and Porthos, state your business,” Clarisse said, resting her elbows on the table. “Surely you haven’t come all this way just for my refreshments.”

Porthos flashed a toothy grin and shared a wink. “Perhaps we did,” he said, and then took a long gulp of his lemon water, nearly finishing the entire glass before settling it back on the table.

“As grateful as we are for your hospitality,” said Athos. “We are, unfortunately, here on business.”

Clarisse swatted his arm. “Well spit it out, don’t be shy. The dogs need feedin’.”

Athos couldn’t help but smile at the woman’s cheerful demeanour for it was almost infectious. But there were matters at hand he could not dismiss from his mind, which allowed him to keep his countenance somewhat serious. “We are in search of some men,” he said. “Some very important men.”

“No men ‘round here except my husband,” she replied. “And I don’t think he’s quite fit to be a musketeer.” She winked at them then gulped back more of her water.

“It’s not recruitment that brings us out here,” said Athos. “These men are missing and we are searching for them. Would you mind if we took a look around your property, see if there is anything… missing?”

“I have no problem with that,” said Clarisse. “But I can tell ya no one’s been poking around here. The dogs would have a fit if strangers came onto our property.”

Athos clearly recalled their welcoming and could not argue with her, but still, they were there, so he saw no harm in at least taking a quick look around.

Porthos rose from the table, his glass in hand. “May I?” he asked, stepping toward the counter and pointing at the pitcher.

Clarisse held out her glass and looked at Athos. The swordsman nodded and smiled. “Please,” he said.

Porthos carried their glasses to the counter, but when he was nearly finished filling the first, he turned back to the table brandishing a parchment in his hand. “What’s this?” he asked, brow furrowed as he held out the paper.

Athos saw Porthos swipe the parchment from the counter, but hadn’t thought anything of it until he recognized the stationary was a formal announcement of some kind. He pushed his chair back to rise, but Clarisse was on her feet first, grabbing the parchment from Porthos’ hand before he could stop her.

“That’s rubbish,” she said, tearing it into tiny pieces. “Like I said, we’re good, clean French folk here, and good Catholics’ too.” She tossed the ripped papers into the fire and spit into the flames.

By the time either Athos or Porthos could reach the hearth everything was burnt. The swordsman ran a hand down his face and sighed. “What was that?” he asked, his authoritative voice causing Clarisse to jump.
Porthos threw the contents of the pitcher onto the fire and began sifting through the embers. “Why’d you do that?”

“Never mind looking for it,” said Athos. “What’s done is done.”

Clarisse stood with her arms crossed defiantly over her chest as she tapped her foot on the floor. “I don’t see why that filth was of any importance,” she said. “Asking hard working men to part with their money in exchange for wine and entertainment. Ungodly if you ask me.”

Athos remembered the stout, drunken man from the tavern he and Porthos had visited over a week ago and a theory began to take shape in his mind. “Where did you get it?!” he asked, his want of information negating his propriety.

“My husband brought it home from one of those taverns in town,” she said. She looked across the room at nothing in particular then dropped her head. “I don’t condone my husband frequenting those types of places. There’s plenty enough good food and wine right here at home, and like I said, we’re good people, we pay our taxes when we can and help out our neighbours when times are hard.”

Athos sensed the embarrassment in Clarisse and held back his anger, albeit with some difficulty. His dissidence must have been obvious because Porthos spoke up in his place.

“What town?” asked the large musketeer, with softness Athos could not possibly achieve at the moment.

“The one several lieu west of here,” she said. “Near that Baron’s home with all the statues in its front garden.”

Athos didn’t recognize the description of the Baron’s estate, but he had a feeling which town she was referring to and looked at Porthos with a raised eyebrow.

“The one with the carriage and all the men,” said Porthos, his fingers snapping with each word as if the memory was coming to fruition as he spoke.

“And the man pedalling festivities,” said Athos. A flush came over him, he rubbed a hand down his beard, taking on a reflective mien. “A large group of men congregating in one place.”

Porthos pounded a fist into a palm. “It was right in front of us!” He marched toward the door, barely pausing to call back over his shoulder. “Let’s go. What are we waiting for?”

Athos thanked the woman with a brief nod, aware she had no idea how vital her help was, and then followed Porthos outside. There wasn’t much daylight left, but he was confident that if they rode hard, they would at least make the village before nightfall.

~The Musketeers~

D’Artagnan drew in another deep breath hoping it would energize him, but it only made him yearn more for sleep.

He’d awoken in the same position he’d fallen asleep with his ears still ringing and his stomach gurgling. The bread was beside him on the cot. He picked it up and nibbled on the end of the dry loaf, finding it difficult to swallow.

Wanting the water, he reached around him, searching for the skin but could not find it anywhere. With a grimace, and an intense hatred of movement, d’Artagnan rolled off his cot onto the floor, landing with his knees on the hard stone, adding a new level of pain to his already battered body. He
bent over the bed and braced his head. It still pounded and the room still spun when he opened his eyes, and moving around was not helping, but he needed water.

After a moment, he sat back on his heels and looked around the cot for the water skin. He saw it under the bed and sighed deeply at the thought of crawling underneath to fetch it, but his throat was protesting too much for him not to.

Once under the bed, he pulled the skin toward him then took a moment to breathe as he laid his cheek on the cool stone. His eyes found purchase on one of the legs of the cot, then trailed upward to the slats supporting the mattress.

He pulled on one of the slats, testing its strength, and then yanked it hard enough to pull it from its structure. Smiling, he crawled out from under the bed, holding the thick wooden plank before him.

D’Artagnan turned and searched for the quill, hoping to use his new tool as a way of bringing his coveted prize closer. And failing that, he could hide the slat and use it as a weapon when next the guards returned. Or better yet, against Arnault.

The thought of smashing the slat across the arrogant mans’ face brought a smile to d’Artagnan’s lips. He would enjoy the moment when it came, and for the first time since his capture, he couldn’t wait to see Arnault again.

His chance came sooner than he’d expected. The door to his room swung open and Arnault entered with several guards. As fast as he could move, d’Artagnan hid the slat behind his back, but to no avail.

The guards ran at him, pushing him backward onto the cot before he had a chance to swing. His head hit the wall hard and fireworks exploded behind his eyes, coinciding with nausea seizing his stomach. Stunned and panting for breath, his limbs were useless in fighting back and the slat was wrenchet effortlessly from his hands.

D’Artagnan was hauled to his feet and held upright by two guards while another thrust the slat into his midsection like a battering ram. He doubled over, landing on his knees at his attackers feet, sucking in air and swaying dangerously. He fell to his side, clutching his stomach as tentacles of pain spread out from his abdomen to the far reaches of his limbs.

After that he was left alone, trembling and gasping for breath on the floor. He opened his eyes, fearful of the next attack and saw the quill just out of reach. In all the commotion, it had moved significantly closer and d’Artagnan prayed no one else saw it.

Mustering all his strength and willpower with a profound grunt, he rolled onto his back and scooted away from the cot and toward the quill, barely reaching it as his chains pulled taught. One of the guards caught him and pulled him by his leg back to where he’d started.

D’Artagnan scooted away again, using his legs to push himself across the rough floor until the quill was beneath him. This time when the guard dragged him back, he pressed himself downward, hoping to drag the quill along with him. When the guard released his leg, d’Artagnan rolled onto his stomach and searched with his fingers underneath him for the quill.

He found it and tucked it into his belt just before the guards hauled him back to his feet.

D’Artagnan noticed the cot was gone, replaced by a simple wooden chair. When he saw Arnault place a full bucket of water next to it, he paled.

His legs gave way beneath him, but strong hands caught him before he hit the floor and forced him
into the chair.

“No. No. I’m sorry,” he pleaded, pushing frantically to his feet.

He was shoved back down and secured in place by a rope tied tightly around his chest. The rope constricted his lungs, nearly squeezing the breath out of him.

Struck by intense panic, he begged and pleaded. “No, please no. I’ll do anything, please.”

*I’m going to die. I’m going to die. Oh my god, I’m going to die.*

The blood in his veins felt like ice water as it rushed from his head, but before he could plead further a gag was shoved in his mouth and a sack was thrown over his head, rendering him blind and mute. His heart pounded, he thought it would explode. D’Artagnan knew what was coming and trembled, his mind working furiously to find a safe place in which to hide within its deepest recesses.

When his head was yanked backward, nearly snapping it from his neck, an uncontrollable whimper escaped his lips. When the first drops of water landed on his face, his body went numb.

*Dear god, who are in heaven…*

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~The Musketeers~

Aramis had to open his eyes, take the final step toward consciousness in order to break from his sleep induced stupor and get his barring’s. With more energy than he thought possible, Aramis fought against his heavy lids until finally his eyes were open.

Unsure where he was, he sat up in a panic, but when pain ripped through his skull and nausea surged in his stomach he fell back. He landed on the cot, rolled onto his side and curled into himself as every joint and muscle he possessed screamed in agony.

In that one quick moment, Aramis was able to deduce where he was, and that Pellisier was there with him in his cell.

Most of the adrenaline had dissipated, and a crushing weight of despondency had landed squarely on his shoulders. The remnants of the poison in his body acted like a sieve, filtering his memories so only fragments fell through the holes to where he could process them. But the feelings, emotions and painful wounds of battle registered profoundly.

Pellisier was standing at the side of his cot, ordering him to stand. No matter the consequences, Aramis could not oblige him.

“Would you like me to fly as well?” replied Aramis. The moment the last word escaped his mouth he vomited. Water and wine spewed from his lips as his stomach heaved its contents the wrong way up his throat, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

Aramis hung over the side of his cot staring into the mess he’d left on the ground, praying his queasy stomach would settle. An uncomfortable feeling enveloped his body, one of dread and weariness mixed together with a heaping dose of nausea.

He was so sick, even the risk to d’Artagnan’s life wasn’t enough to persuade him to move. Fire ants crawled across skin so sensitive a woman’s touch would burn. Ice-cold water travelled through his veins setting alight every nerve ending. Bile sloshed in his stomach, causing him to clench his jaw in anticipation of its impending revolt.
“Aramis?”

The prospect of moving any part of his body, whether to speak or otherwise, caused the contents of his stomach to swirl and churn. With his eyes closed, he could still sense the room spinning around him and his mouth filled with saliva in preparation of the bile making its way up his throat.

“Aramis?”

A hand brushed away the damp, matted hair from his face. He flinched, emitting a strangled sob as the touch of Pellisier’s fingertips chilled his heated skin.

The rebellion in his stomach suddenly escalated and he retched again. Aramis convulsed on the side of the cot, the muscles of his abdomen and chest viciously contracting, resulting in only bile and saliva dripping from his mouth.

Too tired and sore to move, and incapable of controlling his body and fretful mind, Aramis prayed his misery would end. Never before had he felt so desperate and defeated.

Pellisier continued to speak and call to him, his voice growing more concerned with each moment, drifting in and out of his head in erratic bursts. It called out like a single voice at a crowded party, with Aramis only catching pieces of words as it intermittently rose above the din of white noise. But he had neither the care nor want to listen to anything the man had to say. Aramis’ only concern was how he would survive to his next breath, for it felt like his body was about to shatter into a million little pieces.

“Get Philippe! Now! And whatever students you can find!”

Unable to roll onto his back, Aramis remained draped over the cot, trembling and barely holding on to consciousness. Voices continued to fill the ethereal space around him, disconnected and sporadic.

“Poor, Aramis. What have I done?”

There was warmth to the words Aramis could not ignore, dispelling his grief for a brief moment. But it all returned with a vengeance when he was rolled onto his back, hands poking and prodding his tender body and causing a strained groan to leak from his lips.

“Rest, Aramis. We will take care of you.”

“Does he have a fever?”

“Have his arms been properly sewn?”

“Can he speak?”

Aramis’ body became a vessel made of pain and misery that which people tossed around like a doll. He tried to articulate his agony, but his words died on his lips and came out sounding like strangled cries.

“Open his mouth!”

Aramis instinctively clamped it shut but strong hands forced it open. A thick, bitter liquid was poured down his throat, his body bucking and thrashing in protest.

When his mouth was slammed shut, he bit his tongue, choking on the blood as it trickled down his throat. Forced to swallow, Aramis threw his head back, extending his throat to allow the syrupy
substance in his mouth to slide down his oesophagus.

He gagged and coughed until his mouth was empty, and within moments his muscles began to relax and his nausea slightly diminish.

Aramis could once again think relatively clearly now that the panic had abated, but he was exhausted, and highly unmotivated to move due to the pain prickling every one of his nerve endings. He clenched his eyelids tighter and suddenly felt himself falling down a deep, cavernous pit, growing hotter and hotter with each foot he fell.

“How much did you give him?”

“Do not question me!”

The voices sounded angry and loud, jolting Aramis from his agonizing ordeal, dragging him through what felt like the nine circles of hell and depositing him in the nightmare of full awareness.

He blinked his eyes open and found himself staring up into the face of Pellisier. Men in dark robes were crouched beside him, he could feel the stick of their needles in his arm as they presumably sewed him back together. Aramis wasn’t sure how he’d received those wounds, but was grateful for their aid none-the-less.

His chest was bare and slick with sweat, his body shivering in defense of a raging fever. Several blankets were thrown over him, leaving only his right arm exposed so the men could finish their needlework.

As everything came back to him in a flurry of memories, Aramis drew in a deep breath through his nose and exhaled slowly through pursed lips. His stomach still churned, and every muscle and joint still ached, but his awareness was restored, and it brought with it the anger and shame he remembered feeling earlier.

His eyes narrowed and twitched as he stared up at Pellisier, the strength behind his gaze betraying the weakness he actually felt.

“I am so sorry, Aramis,” said Pellisier. “Words cannot express…”

“No they can’t,” said Aramis, his voice hoarse and broken.

“If it is any consequence, my students will take exceptional care of you.”

Aramis rallied all his strength to roll onto his side where he curled into the fetal position, fortifying himself against the cold he felt invading his bones. He didn’t care about any apology. Now that he had regained his faculties, there was only one thing he cared about.

“My friend?” he asked, his teeth chattering hard enough for his words to slur.

Pellisier bowed his head, a flash of shame crossing his features. “It was too late,” he said. “By the time I realized my mistake, your friend’s punishment had already begun.”

Aramis clenched his eyes shut, reached a trembling hand behind his head and grabbed a fistful of hair. He pulled until he felt pain, hoping to distract the ache in his heart. “You didn’t…” His words trailed off, replaced by quiet sobs.

“He lives,” said Pellisier. “But only by the grace of me.”
Pellisier shooed away the robed men still fussing with Aramis’ arm and pulled his chair up to the side of cot. He leaned over and rubbed a hand up and down Aramis’ other arm, smiling gently as he spoke. “My estimations on the efficacy of this cocoa plant were slightly… off. By the time I realized I was to blame for your animalistic outburst, it was too late for your friend.”

Aramis shrugged the hand off his arm. He didn’t want any part of that man touching him. “Off?” he questioned, having to pause and take steady breaths before he could continue. “It is still in me. I can feel it. Did you know that? It has been hours…”

“Many hours,” said Pellisier, hanging his head. “This has occurred only a few times under my supervision, and fortunately I have learned that the foremost antidote for poisoning of this nature is quite simple.”

“What you… poured down my throat?”

Pellisier shook his head. “No, that was purely for the benefit of stopping the more, aggressive, side-effects from killing you. What you now need to stop the symptoms and fever is more of the cocoa plant.”

Aramis’ stomach lurched, a chill ran through him.

“A much smaller dose of course,” continued Pellisier. “It will help your body acclimate to the substance so the effects are not so… overwhelming.”

The thought of ingesting anything, let alone that vile poison, made Aramis’ teeth clench and stomach roil more violently. “I won’t,” he said.

“So you would rather suffer?”

Aramis turned his head into the pillow and buried his face into the soft folds. Bile worked its way up his throat once again, and he wasn’t sure if he could contain it for much longer. “Yes,” he said, his voice muffled, and not without a level of uncertainty.

“I would take my offer,” said Pellisier, his voice returning to its usual state of pompousness. “Because once you are well, you will continue to fight, and we will most definitely continue with the tests. So you might as well prepare yourself now.”

Aramis turned his head so only one eye was visible then crept an arm out from under the blanket, extending it with his palm up to receive the vial. Pellisier had given him the reason he needed to take the substance, for he wasn’t sure if he would survive the next few days without it feeling as awful as he did.

Pellisier stood up, and another robed man took his place on the chair. “Philippe is one of my honour students. He will see to your recovery. And if there is anything you need, please, these students are here to learn and help. Simply ask and they will see that it is done.”

“Set my friend free,” said Aramis.

Pellisier smiled. “Except that.”

To be continued…

Author’s Note: It was mentioned to me that I should explain a few things to my readers, so… The events described within these chapters are based on reality, and I don’t mean the reality that most television shows would have you believe. Please bear that in mind as (if) you continue to read, but
also keep in mind that certain aspects have been slightly embellished for the readers’ enjoyment.

Author’s Other Note: When I say, based on reality, I don’t mean any actual persons were harmed for the sake of research… except a few Red Guards, but they totally deserved it.
Chapter 13

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Twelve

The tavern was less crowded when the two musketeers entered for the second time. There were no men or woman in lavish attire, nor people hustling out the door, only farmers and merchant class citizens participating in normal activities.

Recognizing a barmaid at the long serving counter, Athos strode toward her with Porthos at his side. “Excuse me,” he said, raising an arm to attract the young woman’s attention.

She put two mugs on the counter followed by a pitcher of ale. Athos waved off the offer, wanting only information. “Several nights ago this establishment was considerably more busy,” he said.

“A wagon outside took most of your patrons away,” added Porthos, leaning on the counter. “Mind explainin’?”

The barmaid poured two mugs of ale despite Athos’ insistence not to, then pushed them across the counter. When she looked at them with raised eyebrows, a hand resting on her hip, Athos let out a sigh then dropped a few coins on the counter.

The barmaid tucked them into her pocket with a satisfied grin. “Happened only a few times,” she said. “Then those nice men never came back. Don’t know why. They brought in good paying customers, so I wouldn’t mind if they came back.”

“How do you reach them?” asked Athos.

“Can’t,” replied the barmaid. “They just come when they come. Haven’t seen them around lately, though.”

Porthos hung his head, shaking it lightly. “Wonderful.”

Athos shared his frustration. They stood on the cusp of discovery with only this woman holding them back, and she was not relinquishing answers with the ease Athos had hoped, so he cleared his throat, allowing his stoic nature to override his annoyance.

“Expecting them back anytime soon?” he asked.

The barmaid shook her head. “Can’t say.”

“What did they want?” asked Porthos.

“People with money I suppose.”

Athos dropped his head forward, letting out a long sigh.

“Do you have one of their parchments?” asked Porthos.

The barmaid searched behind the counter then produced a thick tattered paper with writing. She put the parchment on the counter, then leaned over with her chin resting in her propped up hands. “A girl like me wouldn’t mind an evening of festivities,” she said, batting her eyelids as she slid her elbows closer together on the counter to emphasize her bounty. “On the arm of a musketeer too. My friends
would be jealous.”

Athos smiled out of politeness, took the parchment then stepped out of earshot of the barmaid. Porthos leaned over his shoulder, his breath heavy on his neck as he read aloud.

“Gambling and drinks. Same as the other one,” said Porthos, standing back. “But no location. I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I,” said Athos.

Porthos furrowed his brow. “What do we do now?”

Athos looked into the near distance, trying to remember the specifics of that night; squat man dressed in elegance while climbing blindfolded into the back of a wagon on his way to some sort of festivity.

Athos moved to the counter where the barmaid stood waiting for them. “Do you remember a rather rotund, boisterous fellow from a few weeks ago?” he asked.

“Baron Fournier,” replied the woman. “Crass individual, but what you gonna do? He can pinch me all he wants, as long as he pays up in the end.”

If this was the same man, his actions did not surprise Athos. “Can you direct us to his estate?”

The barmaid winced, shook her head. “The one with those god-awful eye sores several lieu south of here,” she said. “That man does love his Greek statues.”

Athos turned to Porthos wherein they shared a nod then turned to leave.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

Athos looked back over his shoulder. “Not anymore. It’s now property of the King,” he said, folding the parchment to tuck inside his doublet.

Outside, they wasted no time. They gathered their horses, made for the main gate then headed south. They would make camp as soon as darkness prevented them from riding, but till then, Athos wanted to cover as much ground as they could.

“Do you know this Baron?” asked Porthos.

“I don’t think so,” replied Athos, spurring his horse into a trot. “I was not privy to every nobleman as a Comte. And honestly, I wasn’t that interested in knowing the one’s I already knew.”

“Well,” said Porthos with a smile. “I guess it’s time we acquaint ourselves.”

~

At dawn the next morning, Athos and Porthos arrived at the Baron’s estate. The statues people spoke of loomed over a lush lawn, gleaming white and ostentatiously depicting Greek gods. Athos had no taste for such ornamentations, but believed to each his own.

As they slowed their horses, Athos noticed servants scrambling into the estate. Within moments, activity surrounding the stable increased with people running from the house, stopping on occasion to look their way before running off.

“Think they know we’re here?” said Porthos.
“It would seem that way,” replied Athos.

A carriage pulled up next to a side entrance of the estate, too close by normal standards. “Stay out here on the path,” said Athos. “I’ll make a more formal...” He paused when he heard the front door slam shut, surprising him and further piquing his attention.

He pulled his horse to a stop, watching as more servants came around the side of the estate, then looked back to where Porthos was holding ground on the path leading to the road.

“Something is about to happen,” said Athos. “Be ready.” His instincts were not quite as honed as those of his missing brother, but Athos trusted them, so when they told him to ready himself for hostility, he didn’t ignore them.

“There!” called Porthos, pointing toward the side of the estate.

Athos whipped his head around and saw the boisterous man from the tavern scrambling into a lavish carriage. “Go!” he ordered, signalling Porthos into action.

The Baron’s attempt at a hasty escape encouraged Athos to believe the answers to finding his brothers, as well as the other missing men, rested with that man, so he remained blocking the carriages’ only paved path of escape while Porthos charged across the lawn calling for the carriage to remain still in the name of the King.

A hand appeared in the carriage window, frantically shooing the coachman to move.

Athos held his ground as the vessel charged forward, Porthos keeping stride along side it while ordering it to stop.

Athos held his breath when the carriage showed no signs of halting, holding his ground through pure strength of will and perhaps a little fear, but he would not relent, no matter the consequence. If this man held answers, Athos would get them one way or another.

Porthos appeared on the verge of jumping onto the carriage to bring it to a stop in his own way when the coachman finally pulled on the reins, causing a sudden and chaotic stop just feet from Athos and his horse.

Athos pulled up along side the carriage, motioned for the coachman to relinquish the reins to Porthos, then leaned over to knock on the door. “Baron Fournier, we are the King’s Musketeers, so with King Louis’ authority, please get out of the carriage.”

“No!”

Athos rolled his eyes then rested them on Porthos who was busy cutting the carriage’s reins. “Do not make me ask twice,” he called politely, as his friend stifled a laugh.

Finished with the reins, Porthos stood next to the door stretching his arms and ready to rip it open on command.

“I have armed guards,” shouted the Baron. “They will cut you down where you stand!”

“And I have a Porthos,” replied Athos. “And trust me, you don’t want him coming in there after you.”

The curtain moved to reveal the red, sweaty face of the Baron. He eyed the large musketeer then quickly closed the curtain. A moment later the door opened, but the Baron did not exit. Athos
assumed the man felt somehow protected in his carriage for he remained sitting on the bench as he spoke to them through the open door.

“What do you want?” he asked, shuffling along the seat when Porthos’ intimidating frame filled the entrance of his carriage.

Fortunately for Fournier, his status as a Baron granted certain privileges, so Athos curtailed his anger, even though he wasn’t to haul the man outside simply for trying to elude them. “Amongst other things,” he said. “I need you to answer a few questions.”

“What sorts of questions?”

The Baron’s voice dripped with distain, his puckered expression distrustful. He didn’t seem to know where to keep his hands other than constantly moving, indicating to Athos a level of hesitation.

“Do you recognize me, sir?” he asked, tipping his hat off his face.

Fournier leaned forward, squinted then waved a dismissive hand in front of his face. “No, good gentleman, I do not. Now may we proceed? I am… on official business. Very, official. Very important… meetings I must attend.”

With gritted teeth, Athos held back the tirade he yearned to unleash, resigning himself to keeping his countenance professional. “I highly doubt that,” he said. “Besides, we’re under the King’s orders to find men that have mysteriously disappeared across this part of France. Do you know anything of this matter?”

“No,” replied Fournier, shifting in his seat to look out the window on the other side of the carriage.

Porthos grunted then leaned on the open door, causing the carriage to tilt under his added weight.

Fournier looked aghast. “Well, maybe,” he said. “But I have nothing to do with any of those missing men. I was merely an attendee.”

Athos pulled out the parchment from inside his doublet, holding it for the Baron to read. “At this?”

The Baron only took a quick glance before answering. “Perhaps.”

Porthos raised his foot to enter the carriage. Athos moved back to grant his brother room, gratified in seeing Fournier squirm.

“Yes! Yes, to that,” replied Fournier, ineffectually shooing the musketeer from his personal space. “But I cannot help you further. I have no clue as to where the fights took place. We were always blindfolded for the duration of the trip. Both ways, may I add. And the tavern where we met always changed locations. Only by pure happenstance did one know if they would be lucky enough to find an invitation.”

Porthos bristled, then scrambled to fit his large frame inside the carriage. “Fights?!” he growled. “You were betting on men?!”

Athos leaned over his horse to physically restrain his brother from climbing into the carriage. He had little doubt Fournier held answers regarding the missing men, more so their brothers, therefore killing the Baron would prove counterproductive.

With Porthos settled outside the carriage door once again, Athos continued. “What about these
“fights?” he asked. “And how is one notified about these events? How do you know which tavern to go to?”

“I don’t,” replied Fournier, then under his breath he mumbled, “as much as I’d like to know.”

The hairs on the back of Athos’ neck stood on end. He gripped his reins till his fingers cramped. “Tell me everything! Or I’ll have you unceremoniously paraded through the villages between here and Paris for treason!”

“I told you everything!”

“But yet, that’s not enough,” stated Porthos. “Tell us more about these fights?”

Fournier slumped back in his seat, rested his hands across his rotund stomach that looked about to burst from years of over indulgence. “Men against men,” he said with a sigh. “They fight till one is no longer capable of continuing, sometimes to the death.”

Athos paled as a chill shook his body. He bit his lip before continuing, the look from Porthos not bolstering his resolve. “Did you recognize any of these men?”

“Seen some about,” replied Fournier, in a cavalier tone. Then he sat up, leaned toward the door and rubbed his bearded chin in a thoughtful manner. “Now that I think of it, a new contestant did arrive recently,” he said. “Great strength… even greater anger. Lost a good fortune betting on that one, didn’t expect such savagery from such a lithe man.”

“Could be either of them,” said Porthos, looking over his shoulder to Athos.

Athos nodded, but he needed more information before he could let himself feel anything, that being grief, anticipation or excitement. The Baron suggested this newcomer won, which sparked a hope Athos could not ignore, but which one did Fournier see? Both brothers exuded in hand-to-hand combat.

“Do you know his name?” he asked.

“No names,” replied the Baron. “We made our bets based on what we saw as guards paraded them around the stable… And when I say stable, I mean only by assumption.”

“Which stable?” asked Athos.

“What did he look like?” prodded Porthos.

“If I answer these questions, will you let me go about my business? Forget my involvement in this?”

Athos wanted to say no, but finding his brothers negated any justice he felt this Baron deserved so he nodded, albeit with reluctance.

Fournier turned pensive, pulled on his beard. “About your build,” he said, nodding at Athos. “Magnificent head of hair. Spoke Spanish I believe, based on the cursive coming from his mouth…”

Aramis.

“… Very fluid. With a grace not befitting a typical fighter. Well trained I presume…”

“Like a Musketeer?” growled Porthos.
“Well, yes, very likely… Oh. Oh!” Fournier clamped his mouth shut and bolted upright in his seat. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead as his face paled.

Athos tilted his head. “You now understand how important this is to us,” he said. “I beg of you, please, continue. Was there another man of equal stature?”

The Baron shook his head, appearing too afraid to speak.

“At least that’s one,” said Porthos, his voice sounding despondent regardless of the flippant remark.

A gnawing feeling evolved in the pit of Athos’ stomach. Seeing only one of their brothers could mean anything. Not about to give up on d’Artagnan’s viability, he pushed for further answers. “The stable?” he asked. “If you can’t tell us how you arrived there, can you tell us anything about how it looked from the inside?”

“Not a thing,” replied Fournier. “The place was crowded with spectators. A small orchestra took up a lot of the room… Actually, I barely paid mind to the happenings around me. I was preoccupied with drinks and entertainment. And I was blindfolded as we entered, and once again as I left.”

“Don’t want anyone exposing their enterprise,” said Porthos.

Athos nodded in agreement.

“How far did you travel?” asked Porthos.

Fournier waved a hand. “I haven’t a clue,” he said. “It was dark when we left the tavern and remained dark after we returned, so I can only assume, not that far.”

The hope Athos held back flourished at the Baron’s words. They didn’t know the location of the stable, but at least they knew to narrow their search to the vicinity of the nearby village. With this in mind, their time would no longer be wasted, especially if they sent word back to Treville. They could have more men in the area searching in four days… not that Athos had any intentions of waiting that long.

He pulled back from the carriage, nodding for Porthos to relinquish his stance at the door. The large musketeer followed his order with reluctance, for Athos heard a low growl escape his lips when the door slammed shut.

Fournier stuck his head out the window. “Does this mean I am free to go?”

Athos nodded, invoking great strength to hold back the growl he felt building in his own chest. “You’re free to leave, sir,” he said. “But if we ever see you mixed up with anything remotely untoward, we will bring you to justice in the most embarrassing, and painful way you can imagine. Do I make myself clear?”

The curtain closed on the carriage, leaving Athos hoping that would be the last he saw of the vile man. He watched Porthos swing himself onto his mount more aggressively than normal, and Athos wondered whether anger or eagerness fuelled his demeanour.

The swordsman commiserated with his brother, but they didn’t have time to spare in order to rally troops for an arrest when their brothers needed them.

He turned his horse away from the carriage, ready to leave, when the Baron called out once again. Athos turned with a sigh to see Fournier hanging out his window while pointing up at the coachman.
“Your man there cut my reins? Who’s going to fix that? How am I supposed to return to my home?”

Athos sighed. “I don’t know who’s going to fix them, nor do I care.”

“Try walking,” said Porthos, patting his stomach in a dramatic fashion.

Athos smiled then tipped his hat at the Baron. “Good day, sir,” he said, then followed after Porthos toward the main gate, their brother’s impending rescue weighing heavy on his mind.

*To be continued…*
Chapter 13

Alone on his cot, the damp, oppressive walls of his cell a constant reminder of his bleak reality, Aramis contemplated Pellisier’s first words to him; welcome to your new existence. Stripped of his freedom from the moment of his capture, Aramis realized his life no longer belonged to him. Once full of vitality, Aramis now lived solely to save d’Artagnan.

Huffing a frustrated breath, he rolled onto his side, mindful of where stitches held together the bruised skin of his right arm. After taking another dose of Pellisier’s stimulant, his nausea had reduced to a tolerable level, his minute trembles had become controllable, but the substance still pricked his nerves, sustaining his aggressive tendencies with an alacrity he could barely believe, making him wish he had someone to hit.

While they were still present, Aramis had considered wreaking havoc on the robed men left in charge of his care, but while still recuperating from his injuries he had neither the strength nor energy to exact retribution.

And then there was d’Artagnan.

Aramis groaned, clenched his jaw. “You are making this so difficult,” he grunted to the empty room. “Why did you have to get caught?”

It was a visceral response, Aramis knew his anger was misguided, yet he couldn’t stop it from invading his thoughts. He rolled onto his back, stared at the ceiling. “If you weren’t here, this would have been over long ago.”

With a weary sigh, he closed his eyes in order to focus his anger where it truly belonged, Pellisier and his men in robes. They’d left a long time ago after stitching his wounds and binding his ribs, but although thorough with their treatments, they had proved loyal to Pellisier. Aramis had attempted to communicate with them, even guiding them in their skills in order to cause him less pain, but they remained tight-lipped while they worked on restoring his body.

Pellisier had called them ‘students’. Aramis equated them to minions of hell, but as long as they continued to focus their attention anywhere other than on d’Artagnan, he would tolerate their presence, which was another painful reminder of how everything he was doing was for his young friend.

Unable to lie still any longer, Aramis stood with a groan then paced the width of his cell, vigorously flexing his fists to help dispel his bottled-up energy.

During the long spans of solitude between fights, boredom settled in, adding restlessness to his already tumultuous state. He tried occupying this time with sleeping, healing and dreaming of his brothers, but those thoughts only served to deepen the depression always plaguing his weary mind, and right now, Aramis did not want to be in that mindset.

He stopped beside the cot, bent over to brace his hands on his knees. Tilting his head to stretch the thick muscle on the right side of his neck, he winced, wondering if he required another dose. It hadn’t been that long since the last one, but anything that kept the withdrawal symptoms, as well as
his misery at bay, proved justifiable in Aramis’ mind.

When his cell door opened, he stood, a ghost of a smile gracing his lips when he saw Pellisier standing there. His cheeks flushed red the instant he realized what he’d done. He swallowed and shook himself, blaming his shameful reaction to the stimulant still in his body.

“What do you want?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Pellisier said nothing for a long while as he stood in the hallway with one hand on the door, his body leaning into the cell as his feet remained outside.

Aramis fidgeted under his discerning stare. “Am I to fight again so soon?” he asked, hoping to dispel whatever beguiled his captor.

Pellisier stood back abruptly, then hooking a finger he beckoned Aramis into the dark hallway, a sagacious smile curiously spreading across his face. “Come with me,” he said.

Aramis looked around, uncertain to whom Pellisier was referring.

Pellisier beckoned him again, this time with more enthusiasm. “Come.”

Aramis studied his unshackled wrists then stared at Pellisier. With uncertainty, he took a step forward. As Pellisier continued to smile and nod, Aramis took another tentative step.

At the doorway, Aramis stuck his head outside, swept his eyes down both hallways, then noting no guards, he stepped out of his cell, his hesitation building with each foot he placed.

In the hall, Aramis didn’t know how to feel, what to do. His instincts told him to return to his cell, nothing good would come of this, or to run, but he couldn’t. Where would he go? What of d’Artagnan? Was he also being let out of his room?

Pellisier stood before him, quietly observing. Aramis looked again down the hallways leading off in both directions, wondering what awaited him at the end of the dark tunnels?

Pellisier turned to his right then starting walking. “There is something I wish to show you, Aramis,” he said over his shoulder.

Something in his gut told him not to follow, but he really had no choice, so he fell into step behind Pellisier who was heading in the opposite direction in which Aramis typically went.

He’d memorized every inch of the route from his cell to the stable, so he knew this hallway did not lead to the arena where he fought. His curiosity now surpassing his unease, Aramis followed a few paces behind Pellisier, his eyes continuously scanning his surroundings as he travelled further into unknown territory.

Lanterns hung on the walls a few feet apart, emitting a soft, flickering glow that left everything in the near distance obscured in shadow. It would be so easy to grab one, he thought, as his hands twitched at his sides. Smash it across the back of Pellisier’s head and run. But he kept his urge in check, not knowing if guards were waiting around the next corner ready to pounce, or even if d’Artagnan could survive anymore of his foolhardy behaviour.

The last Aramis had heard, his brother’s life hung in a precarious state.

“How is… my friend?” he asked, deeming the risk of speaking autonomously worthy if it could appease at least a little of what he was beginning to feel was a perpetual concern for his brother.
“He lives,” Pellisier answered over his shoulder. “That is everything you need know.”

Actually it’s not, thought Aramis, dragging a hand down his face. He needed to know a lot more, but d’Artagnan’s ambiguous state made him hold his tongue.

“Did my students tell you anything?” asked Pellisier.

Aramis cringed at his captor’s light, easygoing voice. Pellisier conversed with him like one would a close acquaintance.

Disgusted by the thought, Aramis shuddered, quickly composing himself before answering. “No,” he replied, masking his contempt. “They guarded your secrets well.”

Pellisier looked back at him over his shoulder. “They must remain quiet for our operation to succeed,” he said.

Aramis was about to inquire further when he noticed a wooden door on his left. Heavy set and hinged on the outside, it resembled the one blockading his own cell. A few feet further along the tunnel he saw more similar doors on his right, evoking nightmarish images of frightened prisoners and battered fighters locked behind them.

He considered asking Pellisier about what lay on the other side of those doors, but held his tongue. He didn’t want to compromise his current, albeit surreptitious freedom, by saying or doing something out of line with Pellisier’s rules.

By the time they neared the end of the tunnel where the ground began to slowly climb upward, Aramis had counted six cells. Before following Pellisier up the dirt ramp, he glanced back over his shoulder into the darkness, wondering how many more prison cells existed beyond his.

At the top of the ramp stood a large, rickety door. Pellisier pushed it open with moderate ease, exposing Aramis to a wondrous sight.

Aramis dropped his jaw and blinked until the brilliant light of day no longer burned his eyes. On trembling legs, he took the last few steps out of the tunnel, his heart skipping beats with excitement, to find himself standing amongst a lush, green forest.

Pleasantly surprised, Aramis momentarily forgot all his troubles. He inhaled, long and slow, savouring the smells of pine and moss still damp with morning dew. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back to let the sun breaking through the canopy above warm his face as a soft breeze blew across skin, carrying deeper aromas of fresh earth.

Everything tickled his senses, cultivating a blissful calm that which Aramis had not felt in quite some time. A numbing haze saturated his mind, bringing a light-headedness that nearly dropped him to his knees.

“Take a moment,” he heard Pellisier say.

Aramis spread his arms to let a cool breeze whisk away days old sweat as he breathed easier than he had in weeks. Exhilaration swept through him as he relished the outside world until he opened his eyes, his heart falling at the sight of armed guards standing a few feet away.

At the forest edge where the dark soil turned into a field of emerald grass, the armed men stood poised to charge at any moment. Aramis recognized their hardened stance, knew it well. He’d been that man before; on guard, primed to react, and he longed to have that feeling back.

“One cannot be too careful,” said Pellisier, breaking Aramis from his musings. “But if you remain
amiable, then we shall proceed without the shackles.”

Amiable? That wasn’t exactly how Aramis would put it, more like cautiously restrained.

Pellisier seemed to accept his silence as compliance, and strolled out of the forest onto the lawn of an expansive estate without making any further threats. Aramis followed, shielding his eyes from the brilliant sun as he quickly glanced back over his shoulder to take note of where they’d left the forest, land marking the cave’s entrance with two towering birch trees.

When he returned his eyes forward, the guards were watching him carefully, so he watched them back while also surreptitiously scanning the property.

To his right stood a large stable. Aramis didn’t need to imagine what lay beyond its walls so he turned his attention to the estate.

“It is rather large, but we require a lot of space for our studies,” said Pellisier, nodding to his left toward the estate. “Alas, it has seen better days. But there is no need for repairs. Our stay is only temporary.”

Busy looking upward in search of the window to d’Artagnan’s room, Aramis heard only snippets of what Pellisier had said.

It frustrated him deeply that he had no idea where to look. Aramis barely had the chance to analyze anything outside his brother’s window during the short visit he’d been granted. And knowing d’Artagnan resided on an upper lever wasn’t much help. The estate stood over four storeys, there wouldn’t be enough time to search all the rooms before being caught.

Pellisier stopped at a side door that led into the estate. “Many men live here, students and advisors alike,” he said. “We’re quite self-sufficient with bountiful gardens and livestock, but it still requires substantial wealth to keep this institute functioning. Most men aren’t willing to work for free just to save a friend from suffering,” he said with a patronizing smile. “So we have you to thank for our prosperity, Aramis. You have become our most popular champion yet. Never before have we acquired such wealth. With you continuously bringing in the crowds, our future here has become both lucrative and promising.”

The muscles in Aramis’ jaw twitched in anger as his teeth ground together, but fearing repercussions, he refrained from voicing his opinion on the sacrifice he and d’Artagnan were making so that these men could live so lavishly. Instead, he focused on something else Pellisier said.

“Institute?” he asked, to which Pellisier replied with a coy smile, causing Aramis to clench his teeth tighter. How could he be so proud and humble when there were men just beyond the trees, even upstairs in the estate, suffering and dying under his will?

“You will see soon enough,” said Pellisier, then he entered the estate, motioning for Aramis to accompany him.

Aramis crossed the threshold only steps behind, the guards close on his heels as they entered into a busy kitchen. Aramis staggered as the heat of the room overwhelmed him, his strength quickly returning when the savoury aromas of chickens’ roasting and fresh bread baking in large, stone ovens engulfed him. His mouth watered as they continued through the room, and he wondered if he’d ever get to indulge in such hearty fare ever again.

He glared at the back of Pellisier’s head as they left the kitchen area, offended by the man’s lavish indulgences when there were innocent people starving all across France, but also ashamed that he
couldn’t control his stomach from growling at the mere thought of indulging in a full meal himself.

As they continued around the corner into a long hall, he tried to distract his hunger by thinking about something else, like what kind of students resided here, and what exactly were they studying?

“I’m going to show you something, that in time, the people of France will greatly appreciate,” said Pellisier, turning another corner that led into a long, grand hall.

It was filled with young men in black robes leaning against bare walls where it appeared decorative paper once hung, most carrying heavy books while others carried handfuls of strange metal instruments. Aramis looked around perplexed, pulling on his beard as he noticed more men in black robes sitting on benches, conversing quietly while they sipped tea and glancing pretentiously at him as he passed by.

Something niggled at the back of his mind, raising his hackles, which inadvertently made his limbs weak with worry. Something beyong the obvious was very wrong here, he just couldn’t figure out what.

As they neared the front foyer, a gilded ceiling loomed above Aramis. A relic of time passed, the estate still held wonders for those not accustomed to grandeur. But even as a frequent patron of the extravagant Louvre, Aramis still appreciated the intricately carved mouldings and faded mural of the foyer ceiling.

Pellisier nudged his arm. “Are you a connoisseur of art as well, Aramis?”

With his head tilted back to admire the artwork above him, Aramis gently lolled his head to the side with a deceptive smile. “We are not friends,” he said, with a sense of ease inspired by his view. “Please don’t speak to me as such.”

A short, quiet laugh escaped Pellisier’s lips. “You may think otherwise when you see what I have to show you.”

Aramis righted his head with a frown. He doubted Pellisier’s assumption, but was willing to indulge him awhile longer if it meant spending more time outside of his earthy dungeon.

“When you told me the other day of your knowledge of medicine,” continued Pellisier. “I thought… perhaps you might understand what I am trying to accomplish here.”

“Death and despair?” asked Aramis, aware his voice carried a level of mirth under his distain. “The annihilation of a human soul? The destruction of a young man’s control over his own destiny? Or perhaps you are trying to succeed at being the most detestable human being to ever grace France?”

Pellisier thinned his lips, his face turning red as he worked his throat. Aramis had hit a nerve and he wanted to savour the moment, but before he could, the backside of a hand smacked painfully across his cheek, snapping his head to the side.

His cheek stinging red, Aramis hid the smile playing on his lips as he bent over rubbing the welt. When he stood, Pellisier had composed himself, standing with his hands crossed in front of him, his expression neutral with only the slightest hint of anger showing in the corners of his mouth.

“How do I need to have my guards sent after your friend?” asked Pellisier, returning to his typical pompous nature. “Or are you to behave?”

Aramis shook his head. “No,” he said, softly. He rubbed his forehead then ran his hands through his hair. Why? Why can’t I control myself?!
Aramis had learned to mask his dispassionate brutality a long time ago, suppressing it through other means such as women and soldiering.

I used to have such control, he admonished himself.

With bitter resentment clawing at his soul, Aramis looked at Pellisier—the man who’d stripped him of everything he’d spend years constructing. He drew in a deep breath, held it for several beats then let it escape slowly through pursed lips. “I apologize,” he said, the words killing him inside, but willing to endure the pain if it meant sparing d’Artagnan the backlash of his actions. “I will comply with your rules.”

Within moments Pellisier was grinning and reaching forward to place a hand on Aramis’ shoulder. “Since I am truly excited to share my enterprise with you, I am willing to forgive your insubordination this one time,” he said. Then he leaned forward, his mouth so close to Aramis his hot breath tickled his ear. “Although next time, the repercussions will be so severe, even your prayers will not be able to save you… or your friend. Do I make myself clear?”

Beads of sweat covered Aramis’ forehead as he nodded. He’d just been given his final warning. From now on, Aramis knew there was no room to manoeuvre, no place for belligerence, and certainly no excuse for allowing d’Artagnan to suffer further for his selfish behaviour. “I… I understand,” he said.

“Well good,” said Pellisier, as he stepped back. “Now please,” he continued, gesturing down the hall.

Aramis started forward, his legs shaking from too much adrenaline mixed with abhorrence—at himself for his reckless behaviour, and at Pellisier for putting him in this position.

A moment later, they pulled up to a large entranceway on their left, the view inside the room blocked by a time-weathered double door. Aramis heard muted voices coming from the other side, so he steadied his still hyperactive nerves by drawing in deep breaths, hoping against all odds that d’Artagnan stood healthy and well on the other side. After all, Pellisier did say he would be pleased with what he saw.

A strident voice filled with anguish broke out over the quieter voices, making Aramis step back in surprise.

With a calming smile, Pellisier put a hand on his shoulder. “Rest assured, I believe you will be pleased.”

Aramis stared into his eyes, hoping to glean a stronger reassurance than words alone, for what he’d heard did not sound promising in any way what so ever.

But Pellisier gave him nothing, so when he turned away and opened the doors, Aramis braced himself.

The sound assaulted him first; loud, indistinct voices resonating around a large overcrowded room. Aramis blinked, long and slow, letting his sensitive senses acclimate. When he could, he looked about the room with discernment, his breath catching in his throat when he realized what was happening before him.

Long tables, evenly placed row upon row filled the room, bodies laying on top half-naked or draped with blood stained sheets. Men in black robes hustled between the beds, some carrying bowls and
rags, some carrying books with inkwells balanced on top.

Aramis’ mouth hung open as his heart thumped in his chest. He could feel his throat constricting, he struggled to swallow down the sick sensation at the back of this mouth, but it only served to make matters worse as his stomach began to clench in defiance of digesting the bile.

“My god,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “This… this…” Aramis could not believe his eyes. The room looked like some form of strange purgatory where men existed on the cusp of death, their fates determined by the minions of hell moving purposely amongst them.

“What… what is this?” he stammered, stepping slowly into the room.

Pellisier joined him at his side and Aramis recoiled from his presence. How this man could sanction such degradation and human defilement was shocking. For once in his life, Aramis truly could not find words to portray his repugnance.

“This is a place of higher learning,” explained Pellisier, his voice dripping with pride as he waved his arm slowly in front of him as if displaying a grand feast.

Aramis shook, then covered his ears when sudden sobs of misery belted out above the din of voices, making him aware that not all the men on the tables were dead.

He turned to his right from where the voice came from to see a man sitting on a table in front of a large window, bracing his own shoulder with a bloodied hand while men in robes probed his injuries without any regard to his pleas for them to stop.

Aramis’ instincts to help kicked in and he moved toward the man until Pellisier stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

As Aramis turned to question him, he noticed pools of crimson blood under the tables; thick and gelatinous and spreading out slowly as more dripped from the tables above. He became mesmerized by the sheer amount, the intensity of red and overwhelming scent of copper until the distinct clang of a metal instrument landing in a tin bowl broke him from his trance.

The sound resonated with him, bringing back memories of all the times he’d stitched his brothers and used tin bowls to wash the instruments.

My god, he thought, his mouth dropping open. These men were playing doctor, treating the bodies, both dead and alive, as cadavers on a mortician’s table. It was the stuff of nightmares.

His gut reaction was to run, forget he’d ever laid witness to such an atrocity, but his knees buckled beneath him, the blood rushed from his head. He reached for the doorframe to stop his descent to the floor, but Pellisier grabbed his arm, suspending him on his feet until a chair appeared underneath him. He closed his eyes as he sank into the seat, blinding himself from the torturous scene.

“I’m responsible for this,” he whispered, the shameful words tumbling from his lips when he realized what Pellisier had meant earlier. “I am to thank for sustaining this place.”

A gurgling, sucking noise on his left forced his eyes open again. He turned away, covering his mouth when he saw a man pull bloody intestines from a person’s body with pointy instruments. The robed man presented them to the group around him like a snake charmer dangling red, slippery snakes from a branch.

An image popped into Aramis’ head, frightening him enough to momentarily forget what he’d just seen. He sat up quickly and swept his eyes around the room, his heart pounding against his rib cage
as he searched for his brother. He tried to stand to get a better look, but his legs were still too shaky to support his frame. He slumped back into the chair, despair forming a thick, heavy lump in his throat.

Unable to find his full voice, but needing an answer to his burning question, he cleared his throat then spoke in a cracked voice that did nothing to hide his fear. “D’Art… d’Artagnan…?”

Pellisier spoke softly as he shook his head. “No, Aramis. And he never will be if you continue to do as your told. We need you Aramis, which means we need your friend alive to keep you in control. If you become of no use to us, both you and he will cease to exist. It is my responsibility to teach these young men about the human body and all its fragility. It is your responsibility to keep your friend alive by doing as I instruct. You belong to me now, Aramis. And your friend’s life belongs to you. Therefore you duty is to me.”

Anger rushed through Aramis like water bursting from a broken dam- fast and furious, fortifying his weak, trembling limbs and inciting the storm within him. “My duty is to France and its people!” he said, rising fast enough to send the chair behind him flying.

He lunged to his left, grabbing the first robed man holding a sharp instrument he could find, and was digging the pointy end of the tool into the young man’s neck before anyone in the room realized what had happened.

Aware of the consequences of his action, Aramis couldn’t control himself, nor did he want to. His ruthless desires had been awoken, and fuelled by the coca still poisoning his blood, Aramis couldn’t stop himself from slowly pushing the impromptu weapon deeper into the young man’s neck, a smile creeping across his lips as he felt the tip break through the surface of the skin.

“He’ll be yet another body for us to dissect,” said Pellisier, coming to stand calmly before him. “We prefer not to waste a good body.”

Aramis seethed as he pushed the instrument deeper into the man’s soft flesh, creating a warm flow of blood that seeped back along the metal instrument to coat his fingers.

“Go right ahead,” continued Pellisier, his calm voice making Aramis’ skin crawl. “I have more students. There’s one over there… And over there…”

As Pellisier pointed out one young man after another, Aramis stabbed the tool deeper into his hostage’s neck, the blood on his hand getting thicker as his victim’s heart pounded faster.

“But if that is not enough,” said Pellisier, taking a measured step toward him. “Then I have a healthy, promising lad waiting upstairs.”

Aramis threw his hostage to the side to wield his weapon toward Pellisier. “I could kill you before you would even have the chance to give the order,” he spat.

Pellisier smiled, instantly alerting Aramis to his grave mistake.

A wad of bitter smelling cloth was shoved over his mouth, his arms were wrenched behind his back hard enough to pull him off his feet. A hazy fog infiltrated Aramis’ brain, immediately suppressing his ability to fight back or even think clearly.

“Perhaps,” said Pellisier. “But not today.”

Those were the last words Aramis heard before his legs gave way beneath him and he crumpled to the floor in a boneless heap, unconscious before his head hit the ground.
To be continued…
Chapter 15

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Fourteen

The gag stuffed in d’Artagnan’s mouth prolonged his suffering for it caused the water to trickle passed his vocal cords before settling in his lungs, inducing a coughing fit to which he had no control.

Panic consumed him, driving him into a frenzied state where he was incapable of lucid thought. Powerless to stop his slow drowning, d’Artagnan thrashed in the chair, his legs kicking outward in protest as the water slowly saturated his lungs, leaving him breathless.

His chair was righted, flopping d’Artagnan’s head forward. A stillness followed wherein d’Artagnan gagged, sputtering watery mucus from his mouth while the passageway from his chest to his mouth burned in anguish.

At once he was untied, the sack removed from over his head. Before a guard had a chance, d’Artagnan pulled the rag from his mouth, throwing it away as he fell to his knees. With his hands braced on the floor, he arched his back and coughed, trying desperately to remove the water from his lungs.

No matter how much his chest heaved it could not rid his lungs of the irritant, which made catching his breath more difficult as it also worked in contradiction in its need to take in air.

D’Artagnan’s arms were yanked out from under him as someone from behind pulled on the chains attached to his wrists. His forehead smacked the stone floor, shooting lightening down his neck. His body was then pulled backward, the room spinning as the pain swirled in his head. With dizziness now nourishing his weakness, d’Artagnan’s efforts to fight back were futile and he was deposited roughly back into the chair with little effort by the guards. Gasping for air, his heart hammering against his rib cage with a frantic ferocity, d’Artagnan worked to get his panic under control.

Drawing on the mental discipline drilled into him by Athos, the air started moving easier through d’Artagnan’s lungs as he relaxed, diminishing the burning in his chest to a dull ache. His surroundings started to come back into focus as oxygen reached his brain, his sight clearing as the blurry shapes before him found their true definitions. The adrenaline rush from his near-death experience began to slither away, which allowed him to draw in sufficient air, but its departure left utter exhaustion in its wake.

D’Artagnan’s head fell forward until his chin rested on his chest. He let it hang, quiet and inert, needing the time to marshal his strength before tearing apart the men responsible for his torment.

Movement beside his chair caught his attention. The bucket of water was being taken away, kindling a hope in d’Artagnan that his current suffering was at an end.

Breathing easier now, he began to move his limbs, slowly at first to avoid disturbing his recently settled lungs. He could not yet lift his head, but a sixth sense borne of being a soldier told d’Artagnan there was someone watching him.

He sensed rather than saw Arnault sitting in his chair, most likely with his book spread open across his robed lap. D’Artagnan sneered, coughed, then found the strength to raise his head. It lolled to the
Arnault’s lips were pouted, his eyes soft beneath a furrowed brow. His countenance was in complete contradiction to his typically neutral or disdainful expression.

It made d’Artagnan wonder if what had occurred was a mistake? Now that his mind had eased somewhat, he reflected on how that form of torture was often much longer. He’d never seen the technique used before, nor had he ever wanted to, but stories passed amongst soldiers who’d spent time in other countries spoke of its harrowing results.

D’Artagnan sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees to open his chest and ease his breathing. He studied Arnault with narrowed eyes as he looked at him through his lashes. “Is that guilt I see?” he asked, the phlegm in the back of his throat muting his voice.

Arnault scribbled in his book, but said nothing.

“When I’m free, you will be the first person I kill,” said d’Artagnan, his eyes now reduced to mere slits. “I will find you. I will slit your throat. And I will enjoy every moment of your suffering.”

Arnault cleared his throat, then dove back into his writing.

D’Artagnan stood, grabbed the chair and threw it against the wall behind him. He snatched one of the broken legs then spun back, letting loose the projectile.

The wood passed through empty air, hitting the door instead of its intended target. D’Artagnan grunted, clenched his fists, his whole body tense in exasperated defeat. Arnault must have scurried out of the room the moment he’d picked up the chair, but it didn’t concern d’Artagnan too much, for he now had ammunition to throw at him later, or any other person who tried to drown him again.

He piled the pieces of broken wood against the wall then sat down beside them with the largest one resting in his lap. Staring at the door, his chest heaving, his jaw clenched tight, he waited anxiously for someone to return.

But he’d used all his strength to throw the wood, and d’Artagnan could already feel his body listing to the right, his eyelids getting heavy and the weapon in his hands falling from his fingers into his lap.

~The Musketeers~

Pellisier had hoped Aramis would be more understanding, but his violent outbreak earlier that day had shown otherwise. Aramis was back in his cell recuperating from the sedative used to calm him down, putting a damper on Pellisier’s plans to use him the next night in his royal battle. Aramis was to take on several men at once that which Pellisier knew would draw in a crowd, filling his pockets with enough coin to keep his school flourishing. Also, bodies were needed for practicing healing techniques. With a large-scale bout, many bodies, injured or dead, could be accumulated.

Pellisier sighed, planning out in his head which contestants would fight tonight in lieu of the postponement of his champion.

As he strolled through an upper hallway of his school he looked in on the students studying in the rooms, most with their heads buried in books, others watching as one of the losing contestants was examined on a table, his injuries minor but still requiring needlework or joint manipulation.

With his chest puffed, a grin pulling his lips tight, Pellisier clasped his hands behind the small of his back as he continued down the hall toward the large window overlooking the front of the estate. The
sun was setting behind the hill in the distance, smearing reds with purples across an orange tinged horizon.

A movement on the crest of the hill caught his eye, diverting Pellisier from his calming view to focus directly on the approaching problem. Behind him a voice, hurried and with no care for decorum, called his name.

“Monsieur! Monsieur Pellisier! We have visitors!”

Pellisier spun on his heel, his calm, emotionless demeanour firmly in place. “I see that, Pierre,” he said, his tone reflecting an ease that betrayed his actual anxiety. “Please make all the appropriate arrangements.”

Panting, Pierre wiped away beads of sweat from his forehead. “Stable was not yet put in order for tomorrow’s activities,” he said. “The demonstration room downstairs is all but cleaned.”

“Very good,” replied Pellisier with a nod. “Oh. I have a feeling our guests will want a tour, so see to it our young friend up here is taken care of accordingly.”

Pierre bowed before rushing off, which was something Pellisier admired in the servant. Pierre was always gracious, prone to bowing.

“Well then,” he said to himself with amusement as he turned to look at the progress of his approaching guests. “I guess it’s time to greet these musketeers.”

To give his people ample time to straighten out the estate, Pellisier waited for the musketeers outside the front door, hoping to detain them for as long as possible with idle chat about the gardens or perhaps a tour of the currently empty stable.

The two musketeers dismounted near the bottom of the wide, stone staircase leading into the estate, tying off their mounts to the handrails.

“Ah, Porthos!” greeted Pellisier, his arms wide in gesture of familiarity, a friendly smile masking his true frustration. “I am correct?” he asked, tilting his head as the two musketeers climbed the stairs.

The large one smiled, then nodded his head toward his companion. “You remember, Athos?” he said, extending a hand to shake.

Pellisier took it, noting the calloused palm with mild irritation that he managed to refrain from showing by grinning broader. “I’m afraid I do not have time to return to Paris with you, my friends,” he said, placing a hand over his heart.

The one called Porthos furrowed his brow, so Pellisier dipped his head forward, raised an eyebrow. “When first we met, you mentioned some people back there needing my services?”

A smile formed on Porthos’ lips as he nodded. “Right,” he said. “Sorry. Here on other business I’m afraid.”

Pellisier expected as much, but feigned ignorance by quirking his eyebrow higher.

The other musketeer removed his hat, tucking it under his arm as he rested a foot on a higher step. “We are still searching for our missing men,” he said.

Pellisier noticed this one spoke with less enthusiasm, to which made him think he would be more difficult to appease. “What brings you here?” he asked.
“King’s orders,” stated Porthos.

“We are to search all residences and villages for evidence of harbouring large constituencies of men.”

“We have plenty of men here,” said Pellisier. “But I assure you, they are all accounted for. They are students, not missing men. I give my word, none are here against their wills.” It was a half-truth, but since he had no qualms killing men, he saw no difficulties in lying to musketeers.

“I would take your word,” replied Athos with a gentle, albeit suspicious smile. “But duty prevails.”

“Hopefully it isn’t too much trouble?” added Porthos, his smile genuine.

Seeing no way around a tour, Pellisier started down the stairs, gesturing to the grounds. “Then shall we start with the stables?”

Athos made a move to the front door, the hairs on Pellisier’s neck pricking with unease. “We have seen them already,” said the musketeer. “We wish to have a look inside.”

Pellisier couldn’t help his lips from thinning in irritation, but hid it well with a quick smile. “By all means,” he said, returning to the door. But before he opened it, he paused to look over his shoulder. “You have been here before?” he asked, taking every advantage to stall as he could.

“We were around here a week or so ago,” replied Porthos. “Met a funny little man tending your gardens.”

“He said no one was to be arriving for quite some time,” added Athos, a curious tilt to this head.

Pellisier swallowed, then shook his head with amusement, feigning ignorance once again. “Yes,” he said. “That would have been Pierre. I sent him on ahead of our arrival to get the place ready. He mentioned some musketeers stopped by, but he said they were not interested in seeing the estate. He must have been referring to you fine gentlemen. I arrived a short while later with my students. I have been busy with administrative duties since, which has given me little time to start the much needed repairs of the estate.”

“Students?” asked Porthos, sharing a quick glance with his friend.

“This is a place of learning,” explained Pellisier, his hand still on the door handle but not moving it an inch. “I prepare young men for the world of medicine where the universities fail to accept them.”

A strange look crossed between the two musketeers that made Pellisier consider possibly adding two more fighters to his entourage. He quickly dismissed it as images of more musketeers at his doorstep flitted though his mind. Pellisier also feared he could stall no longer, so with a deep sigh he pushed the wide, heavy door open to allow them access to his school.

~The Musketeers~

The guards returned to d’Artagnan much too soon. Despite the anger flowing through his blood fuelling his violent thoughts, not enough time had passed for him to regain enough physical strength to fight them off, even with the broken pieces of the chair to which he wielded with all the venom he was capable of dispensing.

But to his surprise, the guards unshackled his wrists, granting him only a moments reprieve before wrenching them behind his back and binding his wrists once again, causing his stiff shoulder muscles to spasm as they were pulled into a different position.
As he was pushed toward the door where Arnault stood scrubbing a hand over his head, d’Artagnan dug his feet into the floor, pushing back against the aggressive guards.

Sweat covered Arnault’s pale face, alerting d’Artagnan to his unease. “Where are we going? What’s happening?” he asked, his lungs still tender from hours of coughing up residual water.

No explanation was given so he dug his feet in harder, not allowing the guards an easy go of pushing him out of the room. As he neared Arnault, he saw a look in his eyes he’d seen many times before, usually on those he was about to either kill or arrest.

“They’re here aren’t they?” he asked, his struggle with the guards momentarily forgotten.

A smile just shy of wicked spread across d’Artagnan’s face as his heart hammered in his chest with excitement rather than fear. “They’re here and you’re scared.” He broadened his smile, leaned over. “You should be. But perhaps if you release me now, they won’t kill you. That is, if Aramis is in a charitable mood. He tends to be quite protective.”

A strange look washed over Arnault’s expression that d’Artagnan did not have time to decipher as a gag was shoved in his mouth, followed by a sack thrown over his head. Shoved from behind, d’Artagnan stumbled forward. With Arnault not heeding his advise, d’Artagnan couldn’t help but smile, knowing the lack of compassion would only serve to heighten his coming punishment when this was over.

His lungs still rattled when he breathed deep, his legs were still weak, but as the guards shuffled him along, d’Artagnan’s hope rose, thinking his salvation was near. As they turned a corner, the guard pulling him by an elbow yanked hard, which caused d’Artagnan to trip. With no way to stop his plummet, another two hands gripped his shoulders to hold him up, but before he could get his feet under him he was shoved in another direction.

There was an unease in the air d’Artagnan could feel prickling his skin. He heard panicked voices around him as he was pushed along. Then suddenly a loud baritone voice cut through the din.

D’Artagnan squirmed, bucking his body against the guard behind him as he heard the voice of Porthos in the distance.

“I’m here! I’m here!” he screamed, the gag muting his words.

Air rushed past him, the contents of his stomach suddenly swished as he was whipped around, his body coming to a sudden stop when he collided with something solid. He didn’t have a chance to shake away the pain that had exploded across his forehead before he was spun around again, then pushed forcibly against what felt like a rough wall.

He heard the sound of a closing door, inciting a nervous feeling in his limbs that stemmed from the rapid pace of his heart. He was hidden, most likely where his brother would never think to look, but it did not deter d’Artagnan from continuing to fight. Porthos was so close. Every instinct in d’Artagnan fuelled his body to kick out, thrash his body and scream, hoping to make enough noise to get his brother’s attention.

His attempts were thwarted when a body pressed against him, squishing him against the wall with enough strength to force the breath from his lungs. Obstructed by the gag, the air caught in his mouth.

The trapped breath caused a deep burning ache in his lungs, but the sounds of his groans were able to escape, causing one of the guards to place a hand over his mouth that made breathing even harder.
D’Artagnan quickly relaxed, praying the guard would release his hold and allow him to breathe again.

His prayer was answered when a moment later he felt the hand disappear. He drew in a deep breath through his nose, his body slumping down the wall as far as the guard’s body would allow as air re-filled his desperate lungs. But as his knees buckled, bending him at the waist, he felt a prick near his groin, sharp enough to make him squeeze his eyes shut. Then he heard the distinctive sound of a pistol cocking.

He stilled, then couldn’t help but wonder, why both? A blade seemed redundant when a pistol was involved.

D’Artagnan felt the prick again, then realized the point was too small for a blade. The corner of his mouth quirked up when he remembered the quill still tucked in his pants. He remained still, hoping to prevent the quill from falling further down his leg. If he behaved now - for he had no doubt the guards would kill him if he in any way gave away their position - he could use the quill to escape later.

Dying now would most likely go unnoticed by Porthos. His death would not bring an end to anything, his brother would leave without knowing what was happening here, and no justice would ever be served, so d’Artagnan kept his anger in check and remained compliant.

“This is highly irregular,” he heard someone say on the other side of the door.

Athos.

Tears welled in d’Artagnan’s eyes at the sound of his brother’s voice. It was so close, yet so out of reach, but again thoughts of his own death by the guards quelled his instincts to make any noise.

“It’s admirable what you are doing, but…”

The voice trailed off, d’Artagnan’s chest tightened. Whatever the people of this place were telling his brothers, it sounded like they were buying it since there seemed to be no anger or suspicious tone to Athos’ voice.

With a quiet whimper, d’Artagnan’s head fell forward to rest on the back of the guard pressing against him, the only thing keeping him from falling deep into a pit of despair being the quill.

Escape, he thought, his cheeks aching from the pain of holding back his building emotions. As soon as I can, I make my escape.

~The Musketeers~

Disappointment plagued Athos as he left the estate. Porthos was following behind him on his left, his steps heavy as he plodded down the stairs. Although Pellisier’s school was by all accounts illegal, they had found no evidence of their brothers or of the missing men.

“It’s a shame, you know,” said Porthos, unhitching his horse while looking up at the estate.

“What is?” asked Athos, swinging his leg over his mount, then settling in his saddle.

“What he’s doing here is a good thing,” replied Porthos. “We need more physicians around. Especially ones willing to help the people who are less fortunate.”

“His intentions may be good,” said Athos. “But unfortunately, his activities are illegal.”
Porthos tilted his hat off his face, his eyes still resting on the estate. “Wonder what Aramis would think of all this? Do ya think he’d want to help them?”

Athos turned his horse toward the long drive. “I think he would be very conflicted,” he said. “Now let’s go. We’ve more estates to check.”

As they rode up the driveway, Athos took a quick glance behind him, deciding quickly that when they reached a village he’d send someone back to Paris to report their findings. He held little doubt anyone would be sent to investigate the school since most of the regiment, including the Red Guard, were tied up with other pressing matters, although, he did recall Treville mentioning something about the King having problems with the Physician’s Guild. The thought rattled around in his brain, conjuring concern that this school might be a side effect of those troubles.

He turned back to the road ahead, spurring his horse into a gallop when they arrived at the main road. The sky above was darkening, dotted sporadically with white fluffy clouds, but in the distance a darker, more ominous sky crept closer. They would have to seek shelter at the nearby village for the night, or possibly longer based on the heaviness of the near-black clouds inching their way closer.

The weather would be a set back, but far from a deterrent. With them being so close to finding their brothers, teetering on the precipice of salvation, Athos was hard pressed not to keep looking nor letting his fear and worry overwhelm his hope and anticipation.

Soon, he thought. Soon, we’ll be whole again.

*To be continued…*
Chapter 16

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Fifteen

There was nothing left inside Aramis other than anger. Every thought led to that one emotion. It consumed him as it spiralled outward from the depth of his soul to the fists clenched at the ends of his tired, aching arms. The anger pushed away his nausea, fought off his dizziness and suppressed most of his ever-present pain, so he didn’t mind the all encompassing hold it had on him.

Alone in his cell, he woke with this hostility fostering his disposition, and it had not burnt out by the time the guards came to fetch him for his next round in the stable.

“Just give it to me,” he said, smiling as he reached out a hand toward the one carrying a water skin. Aramis held no doubt the water was laced with coca meant to rile him up. He was already poised for violence so he found the notion of drinking the poison redundant.

“Give it,” he said again when the guard hesitated to pass him the skin.

When it was placed in his grasp, he pulled out the cork with his teeth, spitting it on the ground at the guard’s feet with enough ferocity they stepped back.

He raised the water skin before his face with a near devilish smile. “Let’s unleash the monster, shall we?” he said, then guzzled the entire contents of the skin before tossing it on the floor.

Aramis then proceeded out of his cell, passing the guards with neither shackles nor blindfold, ignoring their pleas for him to wait.

“No need,” he said, without looking back. “I’m looking forward to this.”

The guards fall in step behind him as he picked up his pace, using his memory to dictate which turns to take, which halls to walk down and thus reaching the stairs leading to the stable faster than he’d ever before.

He stopped, leaned against the wall, then crossed his arms over his chest as he stared at the bewildered guards before him. The poison now in full bloom, made his skin tingle, his heart pound, and his senses sharpen. He fidgeted, flexing his fingers as he bounced on his toes.

“Let’s get on with this!” he screamed, his face flushed red, spittle flying from his tense lips.

One of the guards stepped cautiously around him to climb the stairs while the other stood beside him, his hand hovering near Aramis’ arm but not touching.

Aramis glared at the guard, causing the large man to step back.

“There better be a challenge tonight,” seethed Aramis, as he turned to put a foot on the bottom step. He waited for the signal to move, his adrenalin causing his raised leg to bounce with abandon on the step.

When the hatch opened above him he ran up the stairs, scrambling to find purchase on the dirt walls as his energy drove him upward with more force than his body could accommodate.
Topside, he bit his bottom lip to stop it from trembling as his chest surged with the movement of heavy breathing. The noise of the crowd was loud and encouraging. Aroused by his ferocious arrival, the spectators clapped non-stop, their cheers growing in enthusiasm as he stepped further into the stable.

Aramis peered around at the guests in attendance, his focus engaged solely on finding his challenger. He saw him across the open space of the stable floor, tall, lanky and with bandages already covering his left arm— a weakness Aramis sought to exploit.

Several more contenders stood next to the one in which Aramis was sizing up, some also sporting bandages, some brandishing knives, while others possessed statures that would give even Porthos reason to pause.

Aramis took the time to meet each of their gazes with a sneer, making sure his opponents saw the venom in his eyes. Then he charged forth without a single care that the odds were against him. Nor did he care who lived or died.

~The Musketeers~

When d’Artagnan returned to his room the blindfold was removed along with the binds around his wrists. He noticed a new chair sitting near the back wall with all the previous broken pieces having been extracted. When he saw the fresh bucket of water sitting next to the chair with a sack beside it, he dug his feet into the floor, his heart racing with terror once again.

“No! No! No!” he screamed, his voice breaking as his vocal cords betrayed him. His chest tightened as he was pushed closer, tears welled in his eyes, burning as they fell unfettered down his cheeks.

Forced with discourtesy into the chair, his limbs shook as weakness enveloped him, rendering him incapable of fighting back. Shame and fear flowed through him with an intensity he’d never felt before, rattling him to his very core. He had suspected the last time was a mistake, but this time he knew it wasn’t.

When the gag was shoved into his mouth, a whimper escaped. When the sack was thrown over his head, a steady flow of tears burned his cheeks. When he felt the shackles tighten around his wrists, he began to pray.

D’Artagnan questioned why this was happening to him, pleaded for it to not happen, his head, as well as his heart, filling with so much dread his prayers flew through his mind jumbled and desperate. But they fell on deaf ears, for a moment later the water began to trickle down the back of his throat, his body bucking backward in the chair in response to the water reaching his lungs.

~The Musketeers~

The coca in the water spurred Aramis toward his first opponent, taking him down quick and hard while managing to sustain a lone, albeit powerful blow to his head. Now he stood ready for his next adversary in the middle of the stable, the cheers of the crowd so familiar to him they were nothing but background noise.

Aramis focused on the new man before him who looked as eager as him to engage. The marksman cracked his neck by rolling it on his shoulders, taking deep breaths to control his hyperactive heart.

A breeze blew through the cracks of the stable’s walls, tickling his skin and enervating him to a new level of euphoria. No morals or righteous indignation weighed him down, nor did any physical restraints hold him back. Aramis was free to do as he pleased with his opponent.
His eagerness for blood and pain prompted him to dig his heels into the ground then lunge forward into a run. Aramis met his opponent midway as he too ran forward.

Aramis ducked as the man’s fisted arm swung at his head. On Aramis’ way back up to standing he deposited a swift punch to the man’s ribs that sent him staggering backward. Aramis savoured the man’s struggle, licked his dry lips in a predatory way, then grabbed the man’s head and thrust it downward as he drew his knee upward.

The sound of facial bones breaking was lost in the roar of the crowd as it escalated to near deafening heights. If this was to be his new life, he saw no point in prolonging the inevitable. He saw no foreseeable escape in his future, so too bereft to care anymore, Aramis raised his arms in jubilation, exulting himself to the spectators like a champion gladiator.

A rush of adrenaline pulsed through his veins. Aramis snapped his attention back to the fight. With his lust for danger newly invigorated, he charged again at his next opponent who was slowly rising from the ground, mindful of the others waiting their turns with their chests heaving and limbs twitching.

With lips curled back exposing gritted teeth, Aramis grabbed the battered man’s shoulders and held him steady before him so he could relish the manifestation of defeat on his face.

But when he looked into his eyes he felt a strange sort of knot twisting in his gut.

The eyes.

Aramis’ head tilted to the side as he studied his opponent’s features, blinking long and slow until comprehension alit his features. “Jonathon?”

The man nodded with a hand clutching his chest, as if the effort alone could slow his ragged, shallow breathing. “Yes,” he said. “From the Red Guard… You know me, Aramis…”

Aramis smiled as he released his tight grip on Jonathon’s arms then moved them with care to rest atop his shoulders.

Jonathon spat blood onto the ground, his eyes glossy with unshed tears. “Mercy… grant me mercy,” he pleaded.

With a smile just shy of kind, Aramis patted the shoulder under his right hand. “Of course,” he said, then jabbed the joint with a hard-pressed knuckle, instantly separating bone from ligaments.

Jonathon fell to the ground in a screaming heap.

Aramis stood over him, his chest heaving, coated in sweat. He watched his opponent writhing on the ground and clutching his injured shoulder. Aramis shook his head, disappointed by the man’s fragility.

“My mercy comes in many forms,” Aramis said, circling Jonathon like prey. “Which do you prefer, a quick death to grant you leave from this hell, or enough pain to knock you into oblivion?”

The crowd roared around them, urging Aramis to take his kill in order to satisfy their lustful needs for violence. Aramis glanced around, then without waiting for his opponent to answer, he bent his left arm behind him then dropped to one knee as he thrust his fist downward, smashing Jonathon in the temple and rendering him unconscious.

Aramis jumped up with his arms raised in a ‘v’ around his head. Then he crouched, and with his
eyes narrowed and shoulders hunched, he turned in a circle so they could all see him, so they could all remember who he was and what he was capable of achieving. And with each face he saw his need to inflict more violence intensified.

A whoosh of air, the sound of feet shuffling across loose dirt, alerted Aramis to turn around, but not quick enough to stop the knife blade darting toward his abdomen. It pierced his skin, probably deeper, but Aramis cared not as he grabbed the wrist of the man wielding the weapon, pushing it away to draw the blade out.

Blood seeped from the wound as Aramis staggered back.

His opponent sneered, tossing the blade between his hands as he crouched, ready for another attack.

Aramis glared back, focusing on his opponent’s rage in order to fuel his anger further. With no regard for propriety, Aramis ripped the shirt from his body to free himself from restraint. He let loose a deep, guttural growl as he tossed the piece of clothing away, his sweat slick hair whipping around his face as he shook his head with abandon.

He felt no pain from the wound, no remorse for what he was about to do, only a yearning need for retribution.

He ran forward, disregarding his instincts to survive in lieu of killing this man.

~The Musketeers~

D’Artagnan stood before a bright, warm light that blanketed him in a welcoming peace. He saw his father step out of the soft willowy cloud, his arms outstretched and beckoning him forward. D’Artagnan’s heart filled with joy as he stepped forward, eager for his father’s embrace only to be snatched by a disconcerting force backward across space. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on a cold floor, panting and covered in sweat.

He opened his eyes, drew in a harsh breath that instigated a coughing fit that burned every inch of the passageway between his lungs to his throat. The sack and gag were gone, but he was shackled again to the wall, and, he also realized, he was very much alive.

He raised his head, noting that apart from Arnault he was alone in the room. His adversary sat where he always did, his book open and quill writing with a frenzied earnestness across its pages.

D’Artagnan dropped his head to rest on the floor, allowing himself to cry with neither shame nor remorse. Facing one’s death was a horror no man should ever endure alone, but d’Artagnan had done it twice now, and the notion that he might face it again dominated his thoughts, making every inch of his soul clench in anguish.

“Damn you!” he screamed, his voice cracking as phlegm clogged his airway, but he continued anyway, his anger too strong to contain. “Damn you! Why? Why do you do this?!”

There was no answer apart from the sounds of a quill scribbling.

~The Musketeers~

On one knee and bent forward with a fisted hand planted on the ground, Aramis took respite to heave in much needed air as men lay either dead or writhing on the ground around him. Blood still oozed from his abdomen, but now there was blood dripping into his eyes. He cared not from where, nor did he care that he could no longer feel his right hand as it dangled from an arm resting across his bent knee.
The air around him tingled with static as the roar of the crowd filled his ears, but he was not finished. Aramis had not spent the last of his energy. It still flowed through his muscles, urging him to move. His heart thumped inside his chest as if wanting to break free. Thoughts of killing filled his mind as he gritted his teeth, clenching the jaw muscles so tight they ached.

He pushed off the ground and squared his shoulders, but his head he kept low and thrust forward as if stalking the crowd like prey as he pivoted his body around. Raising his arms above his head with a roar of exultation, Aramis allowed them to revere him, fear him and shower him with praises.

But as he came full circle he stumbled.

The world around him shifted at an odd angle. With his mind too far gone to comprehend what was happening to him, and with every ounce of energy draining from his body, Aramis dropped to his knees then forward, face unprotected as he hit the ground.

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Pellisier sat in a room appointed with lavish furniture but which lacked any sort of elegant adornments on the walls or floor. He counted the purse he’d collected that night as he sipped fine brandy from a goblet, his body relaxed but his mind not at ease.

The visit from the musketeers had him rattled. Worrisome doubts flitted through his mind, conjuring scenarios of him being taken away in shackles or standing across from his ungoverned champion poised and willing to inflict the retribution he’d once threatened.

Pellisier had hoped this evening’s bout would bolster his confidence, prove that everything was still within his control, but he couldn’t shake the portent of dread resting on his shoulders like a heavy cloak. Attendance had been higher than expected, pulling in a substantial pot, but something still niggled at the back of Pellisier’s mind as he let a handful of coins fall from his open palm to the mahogany table, clinking as they landed on an already building pile.

“Monsieur Pellisier?”

Pellisier’s lifted his head, followed a moment later by his eyes, and saw Pierre standing in the entrance to his private chamber. “What is it?” he asked, releasing an exacerbated breath.

“The guests have all left and the stable is being put back in place,” replied the stout servant.

Pellisier noticed Pierre wringing his hands, shuffling his feet. He let out another long breath as he returned his attention back to his loot. “And?”

Pierre took a small step forward, looked around the room then settled his gaze on the floor. “If I may speak freely?” he asked, levelling his gaze on Pellisier.

Pellisier looked up again, then slowly crossed his legs under the desk. “By all means,” he said, waving a hand in invitation.

“I believe we have outstayed our welcome;” said Pierre, leaning back with a grimace as the words escaped his lips. “As do many others.”

It was apprehension, perchance fear, marring the short man’s countenance. Pellisier was aware of his servants’ trepidation at speaking with him, so he smiled back, making sure it was not all-together cordial. “I like it here,” he said, casting a languid gaze around the room. “It’s large enough to substantiate our needs. It’s well hidden, and with the many outlying towns our work is accommodated.”
Pierre stepped further into the room, his hands wringing with more aggression than before, beads of sweat now covering his forehead. “I understand, sir,” he said. “But with that unannounced visit today… and the body count growing…”

Pellisier considered Pierre’s words, then looked around the room with a weary sigh, yielding to the idea that it might be time to leave. Knowing he would miss this place a deep emptiness encroached upon him, making his heart heavy. It had taken him a long time to find such a suitable estate and he wondered if he’d ever find another quite so befitting his stature and needs.

“The morgue is quite full,” continued Pierre, crossing the room with rushed steps to stand before the desk. “Many men have perished from injuries…”

Conceding that there was a very good chance he’d not seen the last of Athos and Porthos, and knowing there were too many bodies now piling up, Pellisier raised a hand to silence his nervous servant. “I agree,” he said, then rose from his chair to come out from behind his desk. He rested on the corner of the piece of furniture, his hands clasped in his lap. “It will take time to pack. See to the dead, kill the rest. Then take what wagons you can from the nearby towns, I’m sure they won’t mind donating a few after all the help we’ve generously provided for them.”

Pierre bowed as he backed away from the desk, his hands no longer wringing. “I will make all the arrangements,” he said, a smile on his face. At the threshold he paused, stood upright, then held up a hand with a questioning look on his face. “What about… Aramis?” he asked. “And the other one?”

Pellisier stood, rubbed a hand across his brow. “Leave them to me,” he said. “We have a few days. Until then, no one is to touch either of them.”

When Pierre left, Pellisier dropped his head, letting out a long breath before turning toward a large armoire across the room. As he walked toward it, a degree of sadness to which he hadn’t felt in a long time crept through him, the bitter emotion fully engulfing him by the time he reached his destination. He hesitated a moment to close his eyes and breathe deeply before raising his hands.

When his fingers curled around the handles an ache squeezed his heart. After another deep, calming breath he pulled both the doors open at once to reveal a long dusty doublet with a pauldron still strapped to one shoulder. His eyes trailed down to the floor of the armoire where several well-cherished pistols lay ensconced in the belt meant to carry them. Against the back wall stood a sword, long since used, with a feathered hat hanging from the hilt.

With a touch of remorse, Pellisier stroked the leather of the doublet, his fingers caressing the soft material as they trailed down to the cuff. “I remember the first time I saw you,” he said to the coat, a trace of melancholy in his voice. “So brave. So brash. So eager to fight, but willing to wait for the most opportune moment. Ah, the calculating soldier,” he sighed, his eyes closing as he remembered that night at the tavern.

Pellisier moved his hand from the cuff to the pauldron then leaned forward. He inhaled like one would a fragrant flower, letting the scent of old gunpowder and leather fill his nostrils. “I didn’t believe Arnault when he first spoke of you,” he said to the coat, a trace of melancholy in his voice. “So brave. So brash. So eager to fight, but willing to wait for the most opportune moment. Ah, the calculating soldier,” he sighed, his eyes closing as he remembered that night at the tavern.

Pellisier stood back, dropping his hands from the doublet to rest them on the doors of the armoire. “I couldn’t wait to meet you,” he said, his eyes glossing over the uniform. “And you didn’t disappoint.”

He picked up the hat, stared with nostalgia at the now ruffled feather, then placed it on his head.
Pellisier spun around, then as if the spirit of a seasoned soldier flowed through him, he paced about the room with his chest boastfully thrust forward, his jaw recalcitrant. When he caught his reflection in a mirror, his pomp and circumstance deflated in the time it took to blink.

Pellisier knew he’d never be able to fill Aramis’ uniform quite the way he did, so with a sigh he removed the hat then placed it on the table before turning back to the armoire.

He closed the doors, then turned away.

To be continued…
Chapter 17

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Sixteen

Treville had received a notice from his men in the field just before dawn. By that afternoon he’d made his way to the palace. He preferred to send the Red Guard to investigate the school since his men were already engaged in other matters, but first he needed to seek an audience with the King to provide an update and also ask permission to use the Cardinal’s personal guard.

Paramount to the school’s existence, the notice also mentioned that his two leading musketeers were closing in on a possible location of the missing men. This tidbit of information relaxed the strained muscles of Treville’s neck, but not completely. Nothing short of his men returning to the safety of the garrison could make that happen.

As he strode with long, fast steps down the corridor leading to the King’s offices, Her Majesty appeared before him from around a corner.

Treville pulled up short with a raised hand, then bowed. “I’m sorry, Your Highness,” he said, manoeuvring around the Queen with as much grace as possible.

“Wait.”

Treville turned back at his Queen’s bidding, and at once noticed the forward cant of her body and lips pressed into a tight line. Although eager to speak with the King, the countenance of his Queen begged for him to spare her a few moments. “Your Majesty?” he said.

With her eyes darting around the hallway, never resting on one thing long enough to focus on anything, she fidgeted with the decorative ribbons on her waistband. “Is there any news of the Musketeers?” she said, he eyes coming to rest on Treville.

“Actually, yes, Your Highness,” replied Treville, his answer causing the Queen’s cheeks to flush. “Perhaps even good news,” he continued. “I was on my way to speak with His Majesty.”

Queen Anne stepped up to him, placed a hand on his forearm. “I will accompany you,” she said. “You can fill me in on all the details as we walk. If Louis is too busy, at least I will have all the pertinent information.”

Treville smiled then let her lead him toward the King’s private chambers. “We think we have found the area where the men are being kept,” he said. “Some evidence has also shown that Aramis may still be alive.”

The Queen smiled, and then a very audible sigh escaped her lips. “What of the other one?” she asked.

His heart heavy, Treville shook his head. “No word, I’m afraid.” News of Aramis’ possible viability was good indeed, but not knowing anything about d’Artagnan was troublesome, although Treville knew deep down, that if one was alive, he would do anything to keep the other alive as well.

A few moments of silence passed before the Queen cleared her throat. “So we are assuming that Aramis is still alive?” she asked, her voice a near whisper.
Treville studied her face, watching her delicate fingers play with the necklace hanging around her neck. “We hope so,” he said. “A witness provided Aramis’ description.”

The Queen stopped and turned to him. Her posture stiffened and her voice became more ardent. “Where are they Captain?” she asked. “Who is responsible for all this? How can I help?”

Treville put on a smile meant to reassure his Queen since she seemed to be quite upset. “That is why I wish to speak with the King,” he said. “Regrettably, I will require assistance on certain matters.”

The Queen nodded then started down the hallway, her pace now clipped and determined. Treville jogged a few steps to catch up, then fell into step beside her. At the doors to Louis’ chambers the Queen did not pause and stepped with determination into the room.

King Louis was pacing with his hands clasped behind his back as he dictated to a scribe sitting at his desk. When the Queen and Treville’s arrival interrupted his chain of thought, he stopped and stared at them with curiosity rather than irritation.

“We think the men have been found,” said Anne, crossing the room to stand before her husband. King Louis dismissed his scribe with a wave of his hand, his eyes roaming back and forth between Anne and Treville.

Treville regaled the King with everything he’d learned from the last missive from the field. He told the King about the illegal school being run, then emphasized the part about how his Musketeers had narrowed in on where the missing men might be found.

“I plan on riding out there myself,” said Treville, “along with as many men as I can take. Permission to use some of the Red Guard would be greatly appreciated. We have no idea what to expect when we arrive. My musketeers will focus on the missing men, so the Guard would be instrumental in investigating the school… as well as helping my men should the need arise.”

Louis’ lips were puckered into a little bow, his eyes narrowed in deep contemplation. “You shall have them,” he said. “I will speak with the Cardinal myself.”

“Surely we can provide more help,” said the Queen.

Louis glanced at his wife, then turned back to Treville with an affirmative nod. “Send one of my carriages,” said Louis. “Along with a full honour guard. If my men have been injured, then I want them cared for in the most reverent manner possible. If they have perished, then their bodies shall return to Paris with pomp and grace.”

Treville bowed, gratified by his King’s deference toward his musketeers, despite knowing that neither Aramis nor d’Artagnan would care how they returned, only that they were coming home.

“Your offer is most appreciated,” he said.

Louis spun away then gestured to one of the pages standing by the door to come closer. “I want flags, some of my finest horses and an entourage fit for royalty,” he said, his chest full and shoulders back. “I want the people of this country to see precisely what kind of response I will take when someone attacks my personage. I want fanfare and fear travelling through these villages. Show the people I support my Musketeers and any aggression directed at them is likewise an assault on me. Go. See to it this is done.”

Treville drew in a long breath as his cheeks flushed. He understood what the King was trying to accomplish, but the calibre of organization required would delay his departure. “Your Majesty…”
“I want you at the head of the brigade,” ordered Louis, his smile wide as he placed his hands on both of Treville’s shoulders. “Make sure these people understand how deeply they have wounded me, how they have insulted my honour. Ensure the people of France lay witness to the repercussions of crossing me.”

Treville hesitated before speaking, unsure if he should thank the King and start making preparations or argue the illogical delay the arrangements would make.

Louis seemed very satisfied with his decision to which Treville found hard to deflate. The Queen also seemed pleased as she stood smiling beside Louis with a hand resting on his forearm. It was a difficult decision, but in the end, Treville’s orders came from the King so he had no choice.

“Very well,” he said with a slight bow. “I will take my leave to make the appropriate preparations. I wish to depart as early as this evening.” After the King dismissed him, he turned to head out of the room, stopping when the Queen called after him.

“Captain. The storm?”

Treville turned and smiled. “I don’t believe a little foul weather will stop my men,” he said, then left the room in a hurry to head toward the stables, his mind already set to send word ahead of his arrival.

~The Musketeers~

Aramis assumed he was carried back to his cell for he didn’t remember getting there under his own power. When he woke, a pungent odour of wet dirt and mould filled his nostrils, enlivening his senses and pulling him toward full consciousness. With the effects of the coca having worn off, indicating to Aramis how long he’d been asleep, his limbs plunged into trembles, his mouth went dry and an all too familiar agitation invaded his head.

Aramis sniffed the air as he opened his eyes, his revulsion of the smell forgotten the moment he noticed a water skin lying next to his head. He reached a numb hand toward it, grateful for the gift as his weak fingers grabbed onto the skin.

He uncorked it with his teeth, then spat the stopper beside his head so he wouldn’t lose it, and drank until his throat no longer stung from dehydration. There was no doubt in his mind what laced the water, but it was what his body wanted, what it craved, thus he drank with wantonness.

After draining all but a few drops, he re-corked the skin then slid it under his mattress.

With his arms tucked behind his head, Aramis reclined on the bed to let the coca soothe not just his aches and pains but also his soul. The substance melted away the numbness of his broken hand, the deep throb in his lower belly, then found its way upward to lull his frantic thoughts so he could drift without remorse into a pleasant slumber.

It wasn’t until the coca started to wear off again that he woke, a stabbing sensation in his lower gut causing him to roll onto his side the instant his surroundings came into focus.

He let his left hand venture down his torso, feeling his way to the wound on his lower right side, yet hesitant to touch the actual perforation. A thick crust had formed on his skin around the wound, which Aramis did not want to disturb. When he pulled his hand back it was dry, suggesting the bleeding had stopped, but the damage was still evident by the way his belly pinched. It felt like a sharp stone resided under his skin, its jagged edges unrelenting as it stabbed at his insides.

With no needle or thread to sew it closed, Aramis determined his best treatment to be more of the coca-laced water. If he couldn’t cure what ailed him, he figured he could at least numb the pain and
forget it was there.

He swung his legs off the side of the bed then pushed himself into a seated position with his feet on the floor. The ground felt soft underfoot, and a moment later Aramis felt dampness invade his boots, chilling his toes. He glanced down to see a soggy ground, then shrugged and reached for the skin he’d slid under the mattress.

Heedless to how it wetted his feet more, he tapped his toes in the small puddle beneath him. Then Aramis drank the rest of the water, which had him feeling back to normal within several minutes.

A vague, quiet voice at the back of his mind knew what was happening, knew his body could no longer function with any sort of normalcy without the drug; normal to him being somewhat of a different circumstance now.

A deep rumble sounded in the distance. Aramis stood and looked around his cell. It sounded as if something heavy was rolling across the ground above, its deep sonorous boom echoing in the small room. Aramis felt small trembles come up from the ground, sending tiny vibrations up his legs. He stumbled to one of the walls and placed a hand against it, waiting to see if another sound would come.

The boom rumbled the walls again, making his ears throb. The roar was longer this time as he held his hand to the wall, feeling how it shuddered under his palm.

Aramis looked up, wondering if a hundred horses were stampeding across the ground above. Then he looked down at his damp feet. The ground was flooded so he came to the quick conclusion that in all likelihood a powerful storm had moved in overhead.

“Damn it,” he said, running a hand down his face. He tapped his foot on the ground, making sloshy noises with his boot and prayed the walls would not come down around him.

He made his way back to the bed where he sat down heavily, cradling his numb right hand in his lap. With the smell of mildew and mould saturating the air, his small cell became even more suffocating.

Aramis leaned forward and scratched the back of his head with his left hand, staring down at his other useless hand as it hung between his knees. “Wonderful,” he said. Then knowing what could brighten his spirits he reached for the water skin.

He tipped it back but nothing fell from the mouthpiece. It was empty. Aramis tossed it behind him on the bed and leaned back over his knees. Now that he realized the situation, further complications became apparent, adding anxiety to his already agitated state. The air was colder than usual, and each time the thunder rolled above particles of dirt tumbled down the walls, indicating to Aramis the intensity of rain soaking the ground above.

Whether it was psychosomatic or a symptom of the cold, Aramis shivered, then looked up as clank, followed by screeching metal, sounded from the door, denoting someone’s arrival.

Teeth now chattering, Aramis saw several young men dressed in robes carrying bandages and water skins enter his cell. Aramis breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the water, not even taking a second thought of the bandages to be used to fix his broken body. He raised a hand to accept the skin, but the robed men seemed hesitant until the guards came in behind them to stand at their sides.

Chafed by their standoffish nature, Aramis rolled his eyes, beckoning with his fingers to give him the water. When they did, he leaned back and drank with greed, the water dribbling down his chin as he gulped the skin dry.
“Let them fix you,” said one of the guards, standing before him with his arms crossed over his chest. “And no funny business or your…”

Aramis waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, I know,” he said as he lay back on his cot. “I’m familiar with the rules.”

As the students poked the stab wound on his stomach, Aramis grimaced but felt no urgent need to push the hands away. He let them work in peace for the most part, offering advice on how to hold the needle when he noticed one of the students using an underhand grip.

When they moved on to his hand, Aramis was no longer able to rest in relative comfort. Manipulating bone was not an easy task, and if done without consideration for the patient it could be quite painful.

“Did Pellisier show you how to do this?” screamed Aramis, sitting upright as he yanked his hand toward his chest. Dumbfounded by their inexperience, he pushed them away and pulled the joint of his right thumb back into place. It hurt, but not as much as letting the amateurs wiggle it back and forth.

The one in charge of the hand stood back shaking his head, and Aramis dropped his mouth open when he saw a scowl emerge on the young man’s face.

“I’m meant to practise,” said the young robed man, his arms crossed over his chest as the furrows on his brow deepened.

“And I’m meant to be free,” replied Aramis, with a tone of exasperation. “I guess we should both get used to disappointment.”

The other students stood back to stand with their fellow student, each crossing their arms over their chests and staring at Aramis with indignation.

Aramis let his jaw hang open for a second before slamming it closed. He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head as if heaven above was looking down with just as much annoyance as he was feeling. “Why don’t you go find a corpse to play with,” he said, followed by a long breath forced from his lungs. “You are obviously not trained to treat the living.”

“We will be physicians one day,” said one of the young men. “You would be wise to show some respect.”

If it weren’t for the leaden weight of his body or the threat hanging over d’Artagnan, Aramis would have shown the young whelp what respect really meant, but instead he smiled and shook his weary head. “Go play doctor somewhere else,” he said, waving them toward the door with his good hand. “I have no need of you. Just leave me the bandages.”

The young men left the room in a flurry of billowing robes and murmured rebukes, leaving Aramis to tend to his own wounds. He reclined back on his cot and began bandaging his right hand, manipulating the broken bones with much more ease than any of them had.

The moment he heard the lock engage, Aramis stopped what he was doing and reached for the water skin, his blood rushing from his head the moment he realized it was empty. He tossed it on the floor with a growl then curled into himself, clutching his stomach in anticipation of the pain and spasms to come and let the rolling thunder above lull him back to sleep.

~The Musketeers~
D’Artagnan had been working furiously at his shackles since Arnault left. The dark sky from the storm in conjunction with night descending upon France, cast the room in dim and gloomy shadows making it hard for him to see as he worked the quill inside the locks. He remained calm, his hands steady as he called upon the tutoring of Athos and how he needed to keep his impetuous nature in check.

The lack of light was not a hindrance since the art of picking locks was more about touch than sight. The darkness would also help in his escape, as he would put the shadows to use as he moved through the night.

He didn’t know how long he’d been working on the locks, and he had no way to know if anyone would be back or even if the guards would be high in number when he left his room, so d’Artagnan had to move quickly and precisely in order to achieve his salvation. He couldn’t chance being caught while still in his cell, he’d have no escape with so many men to fight past in such tight quarters. He figured that once out in the halls he’d have a chance, being able to hide and evade capture until he could make a move.

The first lock clicked open. D’Artagnan let out a quick sigh of relief before starting on the other one, working faster now that he could taste freedom. But the shackle on his right wrist proved harder to unlock since he had to use his left hand to work the quill, which was still sore and stiff from previous injury.

As he worked with cramped fingers to get the lock to disengage, he glanced up to the window across the room to see the dark sky. The window was slightly open, allowing the torrential rain to pool on the floor of his room. As a rule, a storm made things difficult. It made running a challenge as your feet tried to find purchase. It obscured your vision, making it difficult to see where one was going, but d’Artagnan considered it a blessing for it would help obscure him during his escape.

“Thank you, Porthos,” he said, when the last lock clicked open. “Remind me to thank you for teaching me that.”

D’Artagnan pushed to his feet, wavered when the floor tilted beneath him then fell back against the wall. After a deep breath he was ready to go, his lungs still hurt but the cough he knew he knew was coming would have to still; any noise would give away his position. He glanced from the door to the window, his heart pounding in anticipation and perhaps a little fear. If caught, he knew the consequences would be dire, therefore he would have to move quickly. No time to contemplate his next moves, no time to consider better options, he’d have to rely on instinct and hope his experience would drive him to do the right thing.

He stepped away from the wall, then ran straight to the window. He glanced down the exterior wall then headed for the door. Slick with rain, the climb down would surely lead to his death. Perhaps if he’d been on a second floor he would have chanced it, but from that quick glance he realized he was much higher.

Like d’Artagnan had expected, the door was unlocked. Before pushing it open he drew in a deep breath, readying himself for a fight for he held no doubts that a guard stood on the other side.

He decided to use the element of surprise and in one fluid movement he threw the door open and stepped into the hallway. One guard to the right of the door turned in surprise, his expression turning slack the moment d’Artagnan placed a swift punch to the man’s nose.

“Oh, that felt good,” he said, shaking out his hand as he examined the hallway for further guards or people. Then he reached down and pulled the pistol from the man’s belt, taking a moment to check
if it was loaded before heading out.

The hallway was empty but lined with many doors. He walked with careful steps toward where he presumed a staircase would be, peeking into the open doors unsure what he would find. Like the hall they were empty, void of any people or even furniture.

As he placed one foot in front of the other down the dark hallway, he used the time to form a strategy. This place was large. Looking in every room would slow his escape.

D’Artagnan wanted to search for other prisoners in order to help them escape, but it would all be for naught if they moved slowly and they were captured in the end. He had to make a decision, and he chose to get himself out so he could bring back help. In his mind, all other options led toward disaster, that being, mass casualties.

When he came across a grand staircase he pulled up next to a balustrade and crouched low to peer down the stairs. He pulled his head back, hung it low as he closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. “Main staircases usually lead to front doors,” he said, with a small shake of his head. “Perfect.”

He drew in another deep breath, checking that his lungs were clear enough to withstand the impending mad dash, then swung around the balustrade with his pistol raised. D’Artagnan took the stairs two at a time, his eyes darting in every direction in careful watch for other guards.

When he arrived on the next floor he noticed it was better lit, lanterns hung several feet apart illuminating the figures of several robed men scurrying between rooms with their arms full of books and instruments.

D’Artagnan paused mid-way down the stairs, quirked an eyebrow in response to the fact that no one seemed to be paying him any attention, then he continued down the stairs at half pace, his pistol arcing in a semi-circle but stopping on no one.

One robed man stopped short at the bottom of the stairs, looked up at him with wide eyes and mouth agape. D’Artagnan smiled as he cocked the pistol, then raised his a finger to his pursed lips. “Shh,” he said. “I may not be able to kill everyone,” he continued with a slight cant to his head. “But you, I have in my sights.”

The robed man nodded, his wiry hair flying about as he bobbed his head up and down, then he ran off, disappearing into a room. No commotion was made, nor did anyone else emerge from the room, so d’Artagnan figured he was safe to continue.

He presumed the man was nothing more than a minion under someone else's control, concerned more for his own life than his masters’ or he would have at least screamed. D’Artagnan wanted to know what was going on here, but knew he didn’t have time to investigate. Although he was able to deduce by the lack of attention the other robed men showed him that he wouldn’t have to worry about them, only the guards of which there didn’t seem to be any around.

With all the turmoil happening around him, d’Artagnan started to feel more at ease. It appeared that whatever had them scared was not his escape, so he quickened his pace down the stairs, arriving at the next floor without interruption.

The front door appeared in his sights, down one more set of stairs and across a grand hallway filled with men in robes rushing about. He paused on the landing to duck behind another balustrade, the men on his floor casting surreptitious glances his way as they appeared concerned by other matters. D’Artagnan watched them a moment, curious as to why they were heeding him no mind, but
relieved that they weren’t.

He couldn’t dismiss the fact that the place seemed to be filled with so many men in robes, all young and without weapons. D’Artagnan reprimanded himself for not getting free earlier for there hadn’t been much of a threat awaiting him outside his door. These men weren’t soldiers and there were no guards filling the halls. He pushed his curiosity aside, saving it for later since his freedom lay so close at hand and he needed to prepare his body for his next move.

After a few deep breaths to clear his lungs, d’Artagnan stood to make his final run when a bang resounded in his ears, splintering the wood beside him with one of the larger pieces ricocheting off the side of his head.

Ignoring the wound, he let his instincts control his movements and raised the pistol and fired in the direction of where the shot came from. A guard dropped to the ground as a pool of red spread across his chest.

D’Artagnan ran over to him in search of more ammunition or perhaps a sword or dagger, but as he bent down two hands grabbed him from behind, pulling him backward onto the floor. He rolled away as a foot came slamming down at his chest and was on his feet before the attacker could regain his balance.

In his periphery he could see the men in robes had stopped to watch, but he kept his focus honed on the guard before him now brandishing a long knife. D’Artagnan wanted that weapon, as well as the other pistol he saw hanging on the guard’s waist belt.

He charged forward, everything Porthos had taught him in hand-to-hand combat rushing to his brain as he disarmed the guard with several brute force punches and a little twisting manoeuvre Aramis had taught him.

With taking down the guard so easy, and now brandishing two weapons, d’Artagnan realized how untrained these men were. That had been too easy, but again he didn’t have time for contemplation, everything would have to be sorted out later, for right now his escape was all that he wanted, fuelling his mind.

Chest heaving, the knife in his right hand and the pistol held with awkward discomfort in his left, he looked around at those watching him, saw them scuttling back as if seeking protection behind those beside them. He shook his head, disgusted by their cowardice, then charged down the final staircase toward the front door.

As he crossed the threshold he heard voices shouting behind him and felt the air break beside his head as shots flew past. Heart in throat, his breaths short and controlled, d’Artagnan ran into the rain without looking back.

It was dark, his vision was obscured as rain pelted down on him, matting his hair to his face as he ran forward, legs pumping with adrenaline and mind focused on one thing… finding cover. In front of him were nothing but sizeable hills and open space, so he changed direction and headed for the forest to his right, taking a moment to breathe after ducking behind a large stable.

He peered around the building and saw no one following, but now that he had the chance, he took stock of the estate, ingraining in his mind how it looked and what was happening. Carriages and wagons lined the side of the estate where men in robes and guards were loading them. D’Artagnan couldn’t see what they were packing, only shapes and movement, but as long as they weren’t chasing him he didn’t care.
He pulled his head back, and feeling reprieve from the torrential rain as he stood under the overhang of the stable roof, d’Artagnan pushed the hair back from his face and felt the sting of a wound just below his hairline. When he drew his hand back it was soaked in rain and blood. He wiped away most of the mess on his head, then pushed off the stable wall and ran into the forest.

D’Artagnan would take stock of his injuries later, right now he needed to get as far away from this place as he could.

He didn’t know how long he’d been running before his legs gave out beneath and he dropped to his knees, landing bent forward with his hands braced on his thighs and panting.

Lungs burning, his chest aching with every breath he heaved in, d’Artagnan fell to his side and rolled behind a tree. Even with the dense canopy of foliage above, the rain still battered his body. His skin burned from the consistent onslaught and he couldn’t open his eyes without them drowning in rain.

He rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself onto his elbows to give his face enough shelter to breathe. D’Artagnan wanted to move on, but knew his body could not take any further punishment.

There was a good chance people were following him, searching the woods for him, but they would be as hard pressed to see anything in the darkness and rain as he was. He felt his chances of not being found were acceptable enough to take a rest, as long as he didn’t wait too long before heading out again, so he pulled himself up the trunk of the tree, sat back and closed his eyes.

Thunder boomed overhead, its echo lasting more than a minute, then the sky flashed white as lightning tore across the sky. It hadn’t been long since Athos and Porthos were at the estate, so d’Artagnan figured they would still be close by. With this amount of rain, he surmised they would have found shelter in a town or village, but where one was, d’Artagnan didn’t have a clue.

Even if his body were ready to move again, he wouldn’t know which direction to go. Heavy rain clouds covered the moon so there was nothing to orient himself with, and he considered that he might have to wait out the storm before setting out in search of his brothers. At least then he could use the suns’ rise and fall to determine which direction to go.

His body shuddered at the thought, but reason had a way of making you do things you didn’t want to, so d’Artagnan resigned himself to a night in the rain, his hopes and prayers filled with a clear day ahead as his body succumbed to sleep.

*To be continued…*
Chapter 18

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Seventeen

Rain was not a common deterrent, but when it fell with enough intensity to flood a tavern floor it was enough to keep Athos and Porthos from straying too far from the village. After venturing out to search a nearby farm that morning, Athos’ horse had all but stood its ground in defiance, prompting the two musketeers to return to the tavern. Proceeding on foot would be too slow, almost redundant, so Athos and Porthos decided to spend their time questioning the villagers, hoping to glean any useful information they could.

As Porthos questioned some men eating their supper around a table, Athos stood at the window watching as the large puddles of water in the central square grew bigger. The monotonous scene before him did little to settle either his nerves or his foreboding thoughts. Were his brothers safe? Was d’Artagnan still alive? Would they find them in time? He couldn’t shake these questions, even when others equally as pertinent entered his mind.

Athos had filled his stomach with wine, but it settled in his gut like rancid water. Relieved of neither the despair gripping his heart nor the frenzied thoughts of doom whisking through his head, Athos drew in a deep breath and let it escape his lips in a breathy whisper, hoping to blow out some of his anxiety along with it.

The aromatic scent of roasted chicken caught his attention and he sniffed the air then followed the trail back to where Porthos sat alone at a table shovelling forkfuls of food into his mouth. Across from the large musketeer sat a plate piled high with glistening chicken surrounded by browned potatoes.

“I knew you wouldn’t eat if I asked, so I just ordered you something,” said Porthos, gesturing to the steaming plate of food.

Athos pulled out a chair as he took off his hat. “I would have said no,” he said, picking up his fork. “So thank you.”

With his bare hands, Porthos ripped apart his chicken as he leaned forward over the table. “No one’s saying anything,” he said. “Either they don’t know, or they’re good at hiding it.”

“I expected as much,” said Athos, “but I had hope.”

Porthos shook his head. “Naw, hope is for Aramis. I believe in action.”

Athos smiled at his friend, aware of the anger and frustration guiding his words. If Porthos didn’t believe in hope, he would never have escaped his life in the Court. But since his alternative form of releasing stress involved fists and blood, Athos let him rattle on with his angry tirade.

“Like what I’m gonna do when I get my hands on the man responsible for taking our brothers,” continued Porthos, pounding a fist into an open palm. “Fighting for survival.” He shook his head as he chewed the food still in his mouth. “It’s a good thing Aramis and d’Artagnan know what they’re doing.”

Athos agreed, but without word concerning d’Artagnan, there was little he could do to stop his optimism from slipping away. Then he remembered what Porthos said to him that night by the river;
that if he carried his brothers in his heart, they’d never be too far away. The sentiment, although not all together believed by Athos, carried enough weight to make swallowing his food a little easier.

It was then the door to the tavern slammed open. Out of instinct, Athos reached for his sword while Porthos stood to full height.

In the doorway was a man in a long black coat, its red lining visible when a gust of wind blew in from behind him.

Athos relaxed his grip on the hilt of his sword and let out a deep breath. “Red Guard,” he muttered to a still tense Porthos.

The guard trudged up to their tableside, cape dripping water onto the floor as he shook his hat over their food.

Athos rolled his eyes, but since his arrival presumably meant news from the garrison he let it go without rebuke. Then with a cautionary nod toward Porthos to let it go, he offered a seat to the guard.

“What say you?” asked Athos, pushing his food toward the guard, not happy to be sharing with the man, but knowing he must be cold and starving after riding through the storm.

Before he spoke, the guard tore a piece of flesh from the bone of the chicken then chased it down with wine from Athos’ cup. “Your Captain sent me,” he said, spitting out the words as if his tongue were coated in poison. “Told me not to stop until I saw the whites of your eyes.”

“And the message you were to deliver?” asked Athos.

“He’s coming,” said the guard, then reached for the bottle of wine and filled Athos cup, from which he drank himself. “And he’s bringing the King’s entire court with him.”

Porthos threw his head back, his mouth hanging open as he righted it a moment later. “That’ll slow him down,” he said. “Why’s he dragging them here when all we need are soldiers?”

“King’s decision,” replied the guard. “He wants all sorts of pomp and circumstance escorting his musketeers back to Paris, but of course, no mention of the Red Guard.”

Athos recognized the hurt behind the man’s tone, so he poured more wine in the cup for him to drink.

The guard thanked him with a curt nod, then finished off the wine in one gulp. “Your Captain should be here in a day or so,” he said, his tone less offensive. “He wanted to leave long before nightfall, storm or not.”

The guard sat back in his chair with his hands resting on the table’s edge and blew out a long breath. “He wants us to investigate this school you found, while you and your other musketeers gallantly rescue the missing men.”

Athos pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “The school is of little importance,” he said. “You would be more beneficial helping us.”

Porthos nodded his agreement as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. “The more we have lookin’ the better,” he said. “All we know is that they’re nearby, but we haven’t had a chance to look further. Weather’s been holding us up in here.”
The guard glared. “Don’t talk to me about weather,” he said, shaking out his cape to expel more water onto the floor.

“Apologies,” said Athos, knowing it would not be forthcoming from Porthos. “If the storm has departed by tomorrow, we should head out as soon as possible to make up today’s lost time. You are welcome to accompany us.”

The guard nodded then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’d like that,” he said. “Now, if there’s more wine, I could use a re-fill.”

~The Musketeers~

Pellisier appeared above him when he opened his eyes, causing the marksman to shut them again and groan.

“I need more,” said Aramis, as he clutched his stomach, tucking his knees deeper into his chest. “I can’t fight… Help me… please.”

Pellisier remained silent, but Aramis felt a heavy object land beside his head so he pried his eyes open then reached a shaking hand out toward the bloated water skin. He didn’t care that Pellisier was staring, nor did he care how much he needed the coca in order to survive, he only wanted to replenish his decaying body so he could function like a normal human being once again.

When he could drink no more, he corked the skin and put it back beside his head. He’d drunk so fast his throat began to tickle from the remnants of water still nestled in his windpipe.

Unable to control his lungs or breathing, Aramis coughed with abandon until he found himself hanging over the edge of the cot hacking and gagging. The pressure on his belly wound increased as he lay on his side, and as his broken right hand dangled over the floor it pulsed in beat with his heart.

“Our situation has changed,” said Pellisier, standing in the near ankle deep water of the cell. “I suggest you take your fill and say your prayers.”

Aramis felt another heavy object land on his pillow behind his head. Then another by his feet. When he rolled his head to look up at Pellisier, he saw him throw another skin behind his knees.

“I’m sorry,” said Pellisier. “I wish we could have met under different circumstances, but now I must take my leave.” He bent down and met Aramis’ gaze, then placed a hand on his shoulder with his head canted to his right. “I truly did not mean for it to end this way, but alas, some circumstances are beyond my control. Please take your fill of what I’ve provided, it will make everything easier.”

Aramis’ teeth chattered uncontrollably, making any form of spoken communication impossible. The muscles in his neck were so tight from shivering, he couldn’t move his arms without shooting pain into his head. With nothing to do but watch Pellisier leave his cell, Aramis remained on the cot, praying he’d misunderstood his captor’s words.

~The Musketeers~

It was still dark when d’Artagnan decided to move again. His body still ached, and now he was shivering after a night in the rain, but his heart and mind screamed too loudly to ignore. He pushed off the ground, using the tree trunk to assist his ascent, then took a moment to get his bearings before heading deeper into the forest.

The sky still didn’t provide any support in orienting himself, but he needed to choose a direction so he started walking. He found a path several minutes later with all previous tracks washed away by
the rain. Either way, both directions led to somewhere.

D’Artagnan stood still, closed his eyes, hoping to invoke some sort of inner compass. Sailors said they could always feel which direction to find water, so d’Artagnan hoped that somewhere deep down he would be able to feel which direction to find Paris. He concentrated on images of the city as he turned in a slow circle, but his body said nothing - no urge to move in any one particular direction nor any sudden eureka moment from his brain.

He let out a deep breath and braced his hands on his hips. He looked down both paths with disappointment. He tried again, this time clearing his mind and letting himself relax. A prickling in his brain caught his attention, telling him to move left. He felt his body leaning in that direction, so with nothing more than reliance on his base instincts, d’Artagnan turned and headed toward what he hoped would be Paris, praying he would come across a town or village.

With no food, but plenty of water, d’Artagnan travelled much farther than he’d expected before needing to rest. Despite it being the middle of summer, the storm made the air cold, and the rain didn’t help, so soaked and shivering, d’Artagnan sat under a tree off the path. The open wound on his forehead stung, more so with the rains’ endless battering, and his left hand now felt numb with fingers that moved only with pain.

He needed to breathe deeply, but his lungs could not withstand the extraneous motions of his chest. His breaths sounded wet and there was a mild burning ache across his chest and back each time he coughed. The residual water in his lungs made him feel like he was still drowning, but there was nothing he could do about any of it so he tried not to think about what ailed him.

He also knew he had to keep going, find and reach his brothers before they moved on. He stood up using the tree trunk for support as he pushed to his feet, then continued on his way. The short rest was not enough to rejuvenate his body, but with his thoughts focused on his brothers he was able to keep walking without falling over.

When they reunited, he imagined that Athos would look at him with stern yet compassionate eyes, per chance even reprimand him for being captured, then hold him in an embrace as if to say everything was forgiven. Porthos would clap him on the back, his smile broad and full of teeth, then squeeze him hard enough to nearly collapse his lungs. As for Aramis, d’Artagnan missed him the most right now. His vibrant and wise eyes would stare at him as he checked his body over for wear and tear before kissing him on the cheek and guiding him to a warm bed to tend to his wounds and sickness.

Yes, he thought. I really need my brothers right now.

D’Artagnan wiped away the water on his cheeks, a mixture of both rain and tears.

No one was on the path as he continued to travel, nor were there any visible cabins or towns in the distance. And as he walked, trudging one mud ladened foot in front of the other it became harder to fight off the despondency creeping out from his gut. The rain no longer bothered him, his body was too numb to feel it anymore, his lungs were a mess of phlegm and pain but as long as he was still breathing, he figured he would survive. His hand could have fallen off hours ago and he wouldn’t have noticed, for he no longer felt it attached to the end of his arm.

The last time he felt this cold and miserable was the day his father died.

They’d pulled into a tavern several lieu outside Paris to seek shelter for the night, the sky as dark and unrelenting as the one above him now. He remembered holding his father’s slack body in the mud, cradling it against his chest as thoughts of revenge filled his mind.
It seemed so long ago.

What drove him toward the musketeers that day was vengeance, which he found ironic since what drove him toward them today was comfort.

Looking around, he came to the conclusion that no matter how miserable he felt or dreary the weather, it could never compare to the hellish day his father died.

“"I can do this," he said, his words drowned out by the rain. “I survived that… I can survive this.”

The sounds of the storm were near deafening as he trudged onward. The rain pelted the canopy above, creating a continuously loud clapping sound, and thunder rolled in the distance. So when d’Artagnan heard a voice calling to him, he thought it was his imagination.

It wasn’t until a large dark shadow appeared on the road ahead that he realized the validity of the voice. Without thought, d’Artagnan ran forward, his weak legs slipping in the mud as he carried onward. A shape took form as he shortened the distance between them, the dark mass eventually coalescing into a hooded figure with a horse.

D’Artagnan’s lips curled into a smile as he continued to slide in the mud toward the man, coming to a stop before him and falling on his knees, panting and covered in mud.

“What the…!” The hooded man stepped back clutching his heart, his chest heaving in unison with d’Artagnan’s own panting.

Unable to speak in full sentences yet, d’Artagnan raised a hand in supplication. “Please…” he said.

The stranger pulled his horse back and stood close to the steed as he studied d’Artagnan. “What are you doing out here?” he said, voice muffled by the rain.

“Could ask… the same of you,” replied d’Artagnan, his breaths now coming at a slower pace. He pushed off the ground, keeping his palms open, then bent forward to brace them on his knees when he’d expended all his energy. “Where… am I? Is there a town… nearby?”

The man seemed to realize d’Artagnan was not a threat because he stepped up to him, offering him a hand, which the Gascon took with a gracious smile and polite nod.

“Yes,” replied the man. “Just up ahead.” He beckoned for d’Artagnan to follow him. “Stella here got spooked in the storm,” he continued. “Came out lookin’ for her. But why are you out here? Only a fool ventures out in a storm like this.”

D’Artagnan straggled along beside the horse, resting a hand on its neck for support even though he felt lighter and more at ease knowing he was now travelling toward a town. “Long story,” he said. “Can you… can you tell me if…”

“What?” asked the man. “Come on boy, spit it out.”

D’Artagnan blew out a quick breath. If this man had any understanding of what he’d gone through, maybe he wouldn’t be rushing him to speak. “Have there been any… Musketeers in your town?”

“More of a village actually,” replied the man. “Not much more than a few shops and a tavern…”

“Please,” said d’Artagnan. “I… need to know.” Although he felt better, the pace at which they walked left him breathless. But he dared not slow down in case his brothers were indeed in this town, or barring that, at least help would be accessible.
“Well yes,” replied the man.

D’Artagnan’s heart missed a beat, his face flushed in excitement. “Oh my god, I’m saved.”

The man looked at him with a raised eyebrow then shook his head.

“How many?” asked d’Artagnan. “How many did you see and are they still there?”

“Saw them last night. Two at the tavern, then another joined them later. And saw them all again this morning.”

D’Artagnan closed his eyes and smiled as every tense muscle in his body relaxed at once, making him dizzy enough to almost collapse. “You’re sure?” he asked.

The man scratched his head under his hood. “Saw them pauldrons they wear on two of them,” he said. “The other was sporting a hat and cape, so I didn’t get a good look at him.”

Recognizing the descriptions, d’Artagnan breathed out a sigh and smiled. “Aramis,” he said. “Always wearing the hat…”

“What?”

D’Artagnan shook his head. “Never mind,” he said. “I just need to get there as soon as possible.”

“Some sort of trouble?” asked the man. “You ain’t wanted or anything are you?”

D’Artagnan chuckled despite his weary countenance. “I’m not running from the Musketeers,” he said. “I’m running to them.”

The man shrugged his response, then they continued in silence, d’Artagnan’s strength and ease of mind increasing as they neared the town. When he saw the gates in the distance, nothing more than a large, hulking shadow obscured by the sheet of rain falling down around them, d’Artagnan ran.

He left the man and his horse without a thank you and charged through the gates, skidding to a halt in the centre of the town, looking like a drowned rat but not caring. He spun around looking for his brothers, their horses or any other clue to their presence.

The square was all but empty with a scattering of people standing under awnings or running from building to building, and d’Artagnan’s heart sank when he saw no evidence of his brothers.

Spotting a tavern, he ran toward it, figuring it was the best place to look.

As he slid up to the door a voice called his name.

He spun around and saw Athos across the square standing outside a stable. Tears welled in d’Artagnan’s eyes, his cheeks ached from smiling and he could feel his heart fluttering. As he ran across the square his legs trembled, a joyful light-headedness overtook him, but he fought through it all to slide into Athos’ embrace.

“D’Artagnan!” cried Athos, as he held his arms tight around his brother. “Where? How? Are you all right?” He pushed d’Artagnan back, holding him an arm’s length away but not releasing his hold. “It is so good to see you.”

“You have no idea,” replied d’Artagnan, blinking back tears.

“Oh my god.”
D’Artagnan tore his eyes away from his mentor to look at the man who’d appeared from the stable. Porthos stood in the doorway, his hand over his heart and leaning heavily on the wall.

“Come here. Come here,” said the large musketeer, beckoning with open arms.

D’Artagnan fell into Porthos, wrapping his arms around his waist in a grip so tight he thought he’d never let go, Porthos doing likewise.

They stood silent for a long moment, rocking back and forth, and d’Artagnan could feel Athos’ hand on his shoulder. From the corner of his eye he could even see tears welling on the stoic man’s face, which d’Artagnan was sure he’d blame on the rain.

He reached out an arm, inviting Athos into their embrace and together they stood in the rain enjoying each other’s comforting touch.

D’Artagnan broke away first. He stood back, braced his hands on his hips, and with a smile he thought he’d never lose, he took a moment to breathe and allow his overwrought body to relax back to normal.

He looked each brother in the eye, then swivelled his head back and forth. When he rested his gaze back on Athos, there was a tight knot in his stomach that made him feel ill. With a new sort of flutter in his heart and a shiver running through him, d’Artagnan asked, “Where’s Aramis?”

~The Musketeers~

Cold murky water surrounded Aramis as he flailed his arms. The surface above him was within reach and he could see sunlight filtering down through the depths of the water so he swam toward the brightest point.

His legs felt like dead weights as he kicked, his arms moved like loose rope around him as he grabbed at water. His lungs begged for breath, threatening to force his mouth open.

Aramis pushed harder as he fought to swim to the surface, the light growing brighter as his body moved upward. Near the surface a shape formed. Then another and another. He pushed the water down around him, his arms so weak Aramis found it difficult to propel his body upward, and the effort alone was draining his sparse energy at a rapid pace.

The shapes started to coalesce into recognizable forms; three heads on top of three sets of shoulders. But although he could not see the details of their faces his heart told him it was his brothers.

With his lungs about to burst, Aramis broke through the surface, his head thrown back as his lungs expanded to draw in much needed air, his arms thrust out at his sides as if basking in the glory of god. When he landed back on the surface, the water continued to swirl around him, trying to pull him back under, but he saw his brothers, Athos, Porthos and d’Artagnan leaning over a rickety boat with their arms stretched toward him, so he knew he couldn’t give up.

“Come on,” urged Athos, his voice echoing in Aramis’ head.

“We’ve got you,” called Porthos, as he leaned over the edge of the boat to grab him, his voice distant and muffled.

Aramis flailed his arms as his lungs expanded to draw in more air, reaching the boat moments before losing his battle with the hostile water.

D’Artagnan grabbed him first, and when Aramis looked up into his eyes, drawing comfort from the
smile on his young brother’s face, he immediately felt unburdened him from all his pain and fear.

But when Aramis’ hand touched that of his brother’s, a bolt of lightening shot through him and he recoiled back from the boat. D’Artagnan reached out further with both his arms, his smile now devilish in nature.

Aramis froze. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t breathe. D’Artagnan’s eyes were piercing and intense as a crooked and fearsome smile spread his lips wide.

Aramis flailed backward but d’Artagnan caught him and pushed him back under, holding him down with both hands planted on his head. Aramis thrashed, drawing water into his lungs as his mouth opened in panic. He tried to scream, but more water rushed into him, burning as it filled his mouth and throat.

A stabbing pain shot through his heart, a flash of white brilliance blinded him. He closed his eyes and let his limbs go slack. No longer feeling the young man’s hands on his head, Aramis drifted downward, the turbulent water pulling his body deeper into its frigid abyss.

A loud boom forced his eyes open and he found himself lying on his back, arms spread out at his sides, staring at the ceiling of his cell. His breathing came ragged and fast, his heart beat without cadence, then all at once his body went slack, only to be forced upward into a seated position when he coughed.

Aramis swung his legs over the cot and braced his hands on the edge of the bed to help ease his breathing as wet, rattling sounds escaped his lungs, working overtime to expel the congestion plaguing them.

Another boom echoed in the small chamber, reminding Aramis of the storm overhead. Staring at the floor beneath his boots he noticed the water had not risen, but it hadn’t receded either. He pulled his feet out of the puddle, shook off the excess water then fell back onto the cot with a deep sigh.

Still rattled by his nightmare, Aramis’ limbs trembled and an uncomfortable heat enveloped his body. He reached a tentative hand toward what he knew his body needed, finding the skin next to his head with relative ease. As he poured the water down his throat it burned, inciting nausea when it settled in his gut.

Instinctively, he placed a hand on his forehead where hot skin greeted his palm. Trapped in the cold, dank prison cell, he wasn’t surprised.

To help dismiss all his exhausting troubles, Aramis drank more from the skin before re-corking it and putting it back on his pillow.

He rolled his head to look at the door, large and ominous and settled into the dirt wall, and hindering any chance he had of leaving his cell. His vision blurred as he continued to stare, the slats of wood blending together to form a solid wall, the small window also melting away. When his vision was nothing more than swirling shades of black and browns, Aramis closed his eyes, feeling more alone than he ever had in his entire life.

To be continued…
Chapter 19

Author’s Note: Thank you JenF for taking on the role of beta reader so far into the story.

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Eighteen

Athos couldn’t take his eyes off d’Artagnan as they sat around a table in a corner of the Inn. D’Artagnan had eaten and drunk enough wine to sustain a village, but it was obvious to Athos he hadn’t enjoyed a single bite for he’d always played with it before putting it in his mouth.

“Last we heard, Aramis is alive,” said Athos, watching as the young musketeer sank back in his chair.

“I didn’t know,” said d’Artagnan, running a hand through his damp, tangled hair. “I had no idea Aramis was there… I thought he was with you when you came… I would have… I wouldn’t have left without…”

Porthos placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder, but Athos could see a flash of anger in his compassionate eyes, no doubt harbouring a little animosity for seeing d’Artagnan safe and well but not Aramis.

“Don’t blame yourself,” said Athos, knowing the words fell on deaf ears. He wasn’t sure if there was anything he could say to make d’Artagnan feel better, but he would keep trying, despite the uphill battle. “You were right to come for help,” he continued. “You’re safe now and we’ll see to Aramis when Treville arrives.”

“If he’s still alive by then,” said d’Artagnan, staring at the table.

Porthos shook the young man’s shoulder. “Don’t speak like that,” he said in an ardent voice. “This is Aramis. He’s like a cat, nine lives and all that.”

A distant look washed over d’Artagnan’s face as he slumped lower in his chair. A deep, stabbing pang shot through Athos’ heart at seeing his younger brother so full of remorse and guilt. He wasn’t sure if he’d have done anything different, and he wanted to express that, but his own shame clouded his mind. He and Porthos had been right there, within reach of d’Artagnan and had done nothing. Porthos must have been contemplating the same thing, for when he spoke his voice was filled with anguish.

“Pellisier,” said the large musketeer, his hand still holding d’Artagnan’s shoulder in a firm grip. “To think I actually respected the guy.” He dropped his head and stared at the floor beneath his feet.

“And you are sure you saw men in robes?” asked Athos, dipping his head to make eye contact with d’Artagnan.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’ll never forget anything I saw in that place. Or anything I felt.” He lifted his left hand from the table, flexing the fingers beneath the bandage as he stared at them.

“I can’t imagine what you went through,” said Athos. “And I wouldn’t try to understand how you’re
feeling, but any information you can give us to help save Aramis and the other men would be appreciated.”

“Take your time,” said Porthos. “When you’re ready.”

D’Artagnan looked up, his brow furrowed by tight lines. “I’m ready now,” he said. He pounded his good hand on the table, causing Athos and Porthos to jump. “I will leave this instant if it means rescuing Aramis from that place! There’s no telling what they’ve put him through! I was chained, beaten and tortured but not once was I forced to fight for survival in some death match!”

“I’m with you, brother,” said Porthos with a clipped nod of his head. “Damn the storm, I say we go now.”

Every part of Athos wanted to agree with his brothers, but the large logical side of his brain knew to wait for Treville. As low on defences as d’Artagnan had described, there was no way to know if reinforcements had been brought in after his escape. It would be wrong to go now and fail rather than wait and attack in full force.

“Even with the guard who arrived yesterday, we might be far outnumbered,” he said, leaning over the table. “I prefer our chances at success be guaranteed.”

“So we wait for the captain,” said Porthos, sitting back in his chair with enough force to inch it backward.

“How long will that be?” asked d’Artagnan.

Athos shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “But I presume soon. I’m sure he’s fighting through the storm as we speak. In the meantime, I suggest you get some rest. You’ll want to be ready when the time comes, and right now you look barely able to hold yourself up.”

D’Artagnan jumped out of his chair and threw his arms in the air. He opened his mouth but instead of words a long sigh escaped his lips. A moment later his entire body deflated as his head fell back on his shoulders. When he raised it to rest his glassy gaze on the table, acknowledgement was evident on his face. Running his hands through his hair, he stopped at the crown then nodded and stepped back from the table. “I will,” he said in a quiet voice. “Just… just wake me the moment the Captain arrives.”

“Of course,” replied Athos, rising from the table. He pulled himself up to full height then walked around the table to place both his arms on d’Artagnan’s shoulders. Athos pulled him in for an embrace, holding the young man so tight to his chest he could feel his heart hammering against his own. “Have I told you how good it is to see you?”

D’Artagnan patted his back, and then Athos felt the young man’s head rest upon his shoulder. “Don’t ever go missing again,” Athos said, his words muffled as he spoke into the wet hair surrounding his face.

“No promises,” replied d’Artagnan as he pulled back.

The smile on d’Artagnan’s face held little mirth, but Athos found comfort in it and let it ease his mind, if only somewhat. “Go,” he said, pointing toward a hallway. “Third door on the right. Porthos and I will be along in a moment.”

D’Artagnan nodded then turned away, his shoulders slumped forward as he followed Athos’ directions.
When he was gone, Athos turned to Porthos, the tears he’d been hiding all this time now falling slowly down his flushed cheeks.

“I knew that was in you,” said Porthos, pulling him into a strong hold.

Athos raised his arms behind Porthos’ back and dug his fingers into the thick leather of his doublet, burying his face deeper into the large man’s shoulder.

“Now we just need to find Aramis,” said Porthos.

~The Musketeers~

The fever consuming Aramis rattled his brain more than his body. He thanked the coca for that as he took another long drag from a water skin. The cool liquid slid easily down his throat, calming the itch at the back of his mouth and landing in his belly where it sloshed about in the empty cavern.

Aramis turned more anxious than tired after he’d taken his fill of the laced water. The pinching in his stomach was all but gone, it’s only reminder being when he bent over. His hand was like a ghost, visible but without feeling, and his mind, now clear of the nightmare was running in circles.

Trying to put order to his thoughts, Aramis stood up and paced his cell, his feet sloshing through water as he crossed the small room.

A loud, blood-curdling cry emerged from the other side of the door, startling Aramis. He ran toward it then placed an ear against the heavy wood, his hands braced on either side of his head. Another agonizing screech filled his ears, followed by shouting and banging.

Aramis stepped back then threw his body against the door. “No!” he cried, spittle flying out of his mouth. “No! Stop this!”

He continued to throw his body against the door then resorted to banging his fists when no one took heed of his commotion. There was no mistaking the sounds of death; Aramis was more familiar with them than most men should.

Aramis kicked the door hard then staggered back. With one hand braced on his hip he drew in a deep breath while he ran the other hand through his hair. Then he charged at the door again, his previous strength paltry compared to what he threw at it now.

“Stop!” he cried, when beyond his door, several more voices resounded in pain.

He heard soft thuds coming from the hall, and Aramis realized the men he’d imagined in the other cells were being beaten to death as opposed to being given a quick, painless one.

“No!” he screamed again, letting his head fall against the door.

When Pellisier had last spoken to him, he’d sounded as if the end was near. Aramis hadn’t understood what that meant till now, and the realization wrapped around his heart like a python to its prey, squeezing until he could no longer breathe.

Pellisier was cleaning up his mess; having all his evidence physically destroyed, and Aramis held no doubt they would be coming for him soon. Perhaps they had already gotten to d’Artagnan.

“Not without a fight,” he said, turning to face the room with his back pressed against the door. He spotted one of the full water skins on his cot and ran to it. He yanked out the cork and spat it on the floor, then leaned back to allow the water to pour down his throat without swallowing.
Most of it spilled down his cheeks and chin, coating his bare shoulders then trickling down his chest. When he was done he threw it across the room where it bounced off the damp wall, falling into a puddle of stagnant water on the ground.

“Come and get me,” he said, staring at the door with his head thrust forward, his chest heaving. “I dare you.”

~The Musketeers~

The storm was in full force when Treville arrived at the Inn. Athos and Porthos were there to greet him, filling him in on d’Artagnan’s arrival the moment he stepped across the threshold.

“This is good news,” he said, shaking off his hat. “Where is he? I want to see him with my own eyes.”

Porthos left to fetch the Gascon still sleeping in their room. Treville suspected the young man needed his rest, but like all good soldiers, he was sure he wouldn’t mind being awoken now that reinforcements had arrived.

“There is much to tell you,” said Athos, leading his captain to a table.

Treville ordered a jug of wine and several glasses as he sat down, shouting it across the full room to the barmaid at the counter. He had no time for propriety when the look on Athos’ face was more dire than he’d ever seen it before.

Athos opened his mouth then closed it, and then looked around the room with a raised eyebrow. “Where are the others?” he asked. “We were informed you were bringing an entire army with you.”

Treville shook his head, glad his message had gotten through. He’d feared the storm had gotten the better of the Guard, but deep down knew they were as vigilant in their duties as any musketeer was to theirs. “They made camp outside the town’s wall. And it’s really more of a blustering parade than anything else.”

Athos furrowed his brow. “You didn’t bring Musketeers with you?”

“There’s musketeers,” replied Treville, turning to smile at the barmaid as she placed the wine on the table. “And Red Guard. And flag bearers… and carriages… and wagons. We even managed to pick up a few villagers keen on finding their loved ones.”

The expression on Athos’ face was nothing short of surprise, causing Treville to smile and shake his head. “It’s quite the procession we have.”

“As long as there’re men bearing weapons, I’ll accept everything else with a grain of salt,” replied Athos.

Treville passed him a full glass of wine, then turned to look over his shoulder when he heard the deep voice of Porthos. He was bringing a very tired looking d’Artagnan into the main room of the tavern, and Treville rose to greet them both, his arms open wide when he was within reach of his newest Musketeer.

“Good to see you, son,” he said, rubbing his hands up and down d’Artagnan’s back. “I thought the worst when I only heard word of Aramis being spotted.”

D’Artagnan stood back then placed a fisted hand in front of his mouth as he coughed. It was a wet, rattling sound that escaped the Gascon, making Treville realize that although he was now safe, he
was not necessarily healthy.

“I’m so sorry,” said d’Artagnan, when his cough was under control. “I would never leave a man behind…”

Treville held up a hand. “Stop right there,” he said. “I don’t want to hear another word.” He looked around at his men, taking in each countenance of despair and shame as he moved from face to face. “From now on we look forward, not back,” he said. “Our sole purpose is to rescue Aramis and the other men.”

“And put a few holes in the ones responsible,” grumbled Porthos.

Treville smiled as he looked at the large musketeer. “Yes, of course,” he replied.

As Porthos nodded, images of the impending rescue rushed through Treville’s mind, and not one involved holding the big man back, nor any of his men from taking out their vengeance on the ones responsible. He presumed there would be no way to stop them even if he tried. Although, being a Musketeer, Treville hoped honour would prevail and his men would arrest those they caught in lieu of killing them in cold blood.

Thinking of that, Treville gestured back to the table for them to sit. “Now,” he said, as he poured wine into the glasses on the table. “What more is there to tell me?”

~The Musketeers~

When the door to Aramis’ cell banged open, he crouched, ready for the fight of his life. When two guards stepped in, Aramis sighed heavily; he’d been hoping for more. His fever and pain washed away by the coca flooding his veins, his mind urged him to kill.

“Oh, I’m gonna enjoy this,” said one of the guards, stalking forward.

Aramis swung his right arm in an arc, feeling nothing when his broken hand collided with the side of the guard’s head.

Aramis fell backward as the other guard tackled him, the air rushing out of his lungs as they landed in the cold water flooding the ground. A heavy club swung at his head, but Aramis rolled him and the other guard over so it connected with his opponent’s instead of his.

The guard still standing growled as he threw away the club in lieu of a dagger, the change of weapon only serving to heighten Aramis’ appetite to inflict pain.

They both charged forward, meeting in the middle of the cell. Blood splattered everywhere, obscuring Aramis’ sight. But with his lust for vengeance clouding his judgement, and high on bravado and shear savagery, Aramis kept swinging and kicking, feeling no pain as both fist and knife assaulted his body.

Aramis didn’t stop until he landed on the ground sprawled face-up, panting and delirious, and with two dead guards lying dead beside him.

As euphoria settled in, lulling his heightened senses to a level that no longer drove his heart at a frantic pace, he smiled up at the dirt ceiling as an all-encompassing embrace warmed his battered body.

And when he looked down the length of his torso to inspect the damage, he noticed the open door of his cell.
To be continued…
Chapter 20

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Nineteen

Wearing nothing but sodden boots over weathered leather pants, Aramis stood on the threshold of his freedom glancing down the long, dark hallways outside his cell. His shirt long forgotten during his last bout in the ring, his pale, bare chest blanched in stark contrast with the darkness surrounding him like a beacon of light in the night.

Burnt out lanterns outnumbered those that glowed, making visibility near impossible for Aramis as he leaned into the hall, listening for commotion. The sounds of air whooshing through his throat was all he could hear as he drew in long, steady breaths.

The coca-laced water dominated his mind and body, stoking his burning desire to escape. With freedom within his grasp, he stepped into the dim, cavernous hall.

Aramis didn’t know whether to run for the forest or search for survivors in the adjoining cells. No screams or whimpers disturbed the silence, implying death had come to all the other prisoners, but a voice long forgotten whispered in Aramis’ ear, suggesting he leave no man behind and confirm his suspicions.

With a water skin tucked into his waistband, Aramis left his cell, dashing to the closest room in search of survivors. Levering himself with a doorframe, Aramis swung his body into the first open door he found, skidding to a halt when greeted with a bloody mess.

Half naked bodies covered the floor with neither respect nor dignity to sanctification. Body fluids, long since liberated from their decomposing cadavers, further polluted the stale rain water amassed on the ground with a rancid, sweet stench that coated the back of Aramis’ throat.

“The morgue,” he said, stepping back out of the room. Doubled over, Aramis heaved bile onto the soggy ground, then floundered further down the hall to the next open door.

Aramis covered his nose as he stepped into the room, his legs weak despite the adrenaline coursing through him. The previous occupant lay dead on the ground, his head caved in above his right temple, eyes open as if caught in a surprise. Aramis dropped to one knee beside the man, then crossed himself before reaching out with two trembling fingers to close his eyes.

After a short prayer, Aramis rose from the ground and dragged the body into the hallway. He brought it into his cell where he laid it gently on the ground.

“You shall rest with your brothers,” he said, standing over the corpse. “I give you my room to rest your soul.”

After genuflecting once again, Aramis left his cell to bring back the other men who’d died in vain at his expense. Pellisier said it himself; he was the reason this place flourished, and deep down, Aramis blamed himself for most of these men’s deaths.

Before leaving this hellish domain, Aramis wanted to bring back as many bodies as he could so they could rest in peace amongst their brothers.

Then he would see to d’Artagnan.
For the third time, Athos sat next to Porthos atop a large hill looking down upon a large estate, but this time an army stood behind them. The soldiers would accompany them in the attack as the others stayed back, moving forward under Treville’s order when the battle appeared in their favour.

The captured prisoners would require transport back to Paris in order to stand trial, so with many wagons accompanying them, Treville allocated them to transporting the prisoners.

Athos dropped the spyglass to his side before looking upward to the overcast sky. He prayed the rain would hold, then took a deep breath and glanced at Porthos. “They’re leaving,” he said. “Packing to move out. They must know d’Artagnan escaped.”

Porthos fidgeted in his saddle. “Coulda told ya that,” he replied.

“I’m thinking frontal assault,” said Athos. “At most, there are a few armed men down there, nothing we can’t handle.”

“All I plan to do is find Aramis,” said Porthos, turning to look his brother in the eyes. “And kill everyone who gets in my way.”

Athos smiled. “Good plan. Shall we proceed?”

Porthos nodded, his mouth set in a grim line as he raised his loaded pistol. “Just give the word.”

Athos cast his gaze across the landscape, then down the line of men stretching out on either side of him where eager Musketeers and Red Guard stood ready to advance.

As Aramis pulled the last body into his cell he started shivering. A moment later, a cold sweat broke out across his chest. He looked down the length of his body, surprised by the amount of evidence illustrating his long-term torture. Ugly bruises covered pale skin that stretched tightly over frightfully defined ribs. Bandages now soiled by muddied dried blood, draped from the wounds they were meant to protect. Seeking to cover his humiliation rather than to provide warmth, Aramis pulled one of the cleaner shirts off a body then threw it on.

His shame hidden, Aramis stared at the water skins lying on his cot. With the one he’d taken earlier now empty, and overwrought with exhaustion, he felt all the aches and pains of his injuries resurfacing, begging him to take another drink.

Aramis planned to rescue d’Artagnan, but not knowing what to expect topside, let alone within the walls of the estate, he considered a little incentive wouldn’t hurt. He also couldn’t ignore the fact that with all the men dead in the underground cavern, d’Artagnan might not still be alive.

Aramis wasn’t sure if he could live that, so he grabbed a skin then ran out the door toward the stable exit.

As he raced between the buildings he possessed a vague awareness of the chaos around him. The catalyst driving his desire was d’Artagnan, so he spared no attention to anything other than the people blocking his path.

Most scrambled out of his way as he pushed through the kitchen, the men in robes seeking shelter behind tables.
“Move!” screamed Aramis, shoving aside a man too slow to react. “Move!”

The robed man landed on the ground as Aramis turned the corner into the grand hallway, his hair whipping around his face as he charged forward. At the bottom of the staircase he found the first guard.

Shuffling backward, the guard held a pistol within a shaky grip.

When Aramis stalked forward, the guard dropped the weapon and ran. Aramis dove forward, catching the loaded pistol in his left hand and firing off a shot before his body hit the ground.

A loud cry echoed in the cavernous room, heralding Aramis’ perfect aim. The marksman climbed to his feet, then scrambled up the stairs to his left with the weapon in hand and used it to smash the guard on the next floor across the back of his head.

Aramis bent down and dragged the guard by his shoulders up to the rail. With the bannister for leverage, he tilted the body backward until it toppled over the edge in a free fall to the floor below.

Aramis scrutinized the scene before him, taking in the multitude of doors lining the halls as well as the robed men cowering on the floor as they clutched books to their chests. With his breathing ragged, sweat dripping into his eyes, Aramis looked each one of them over.

“Where is he?!” he screamed, his face red as he arced the unloaded pistol in front of him. “Tell me!”

A weak voice sounded out. “Who?”

The one word instigated a fury deep within Aramis’ gut. “D’Artagnan!” he screamed, stepping toward the robed men, his elbow locked as he pressed the muzzle of his pistol into the speaker’s forehead.

“The one chained upstairs?” asked the trembling student, as he crouched into a ball on the floor.

Aramis glanced up the stairs then smiled down at the timorous student, pressing the muzzle of his pistol deeper into his sweat drenched forehead. “Tell me what floor or I kill you right now.”

“Third! Fourth! I don’t know,” cried the man at the end of Aramis’ weapon as he cowered behind his trembling hands.

Aramis withdrew the weapon then ran up the stairs, taking two at a time. When he arrived on the next floor the surroundings turned dark. He shook his head unsure of his sight. After a moment he noticed the shortfall of functioning lanterns, deducing his eyesight acceptable, perchance more than acceptable due to the cocoa heightening his senses.

A scuffling to his right alerted his instincts and he jumped around with the pistol raised, hoping to catch the person off guard.

A short, rotund man in a robe, picking books off the floor, jumped back, then dropped his items when a pistol levelled between his eyes.

“Where is he?” asked Aramis, his voice steady as he crept forward. “Tell me or I kill you.”

The short man glanced into the open room to his right then back to Aramis. “Do you mean d’Artagnan?” he asked, brow furrowed. “He is gone.”

All the blood Aramis possessed seemed to drop into his boots. The arm holding the pistol fell to his
Aramis pulled out the water skin tucked in his pants then bit off the cork. The small stopper fell from his lips as he stared into the opening of the skin until tears obscured his vision. A tearing pain worked its way from the top of his heart down to its apex as if ripping apart. He tilted his weary head back, then poured the entire contents of the skin into his mouth.

“Monsieur,” said the robed man. “He… he is not dead.”

Aramis looked up then scrambled to his feet, steadying himself against the wall when he reached full height. “What?” he asked.

“The young Musketeer… In there…” continued the man as he pointed into the room. “He left.”

Aramis tilted his head, squinted his eyes. Surely this man is mistaken. “Escaped?”

“Escaped.”

Aramis’ eyebrows shot upward, his body turned numb. “Escaped?” He staggered backward, tripping on his own feet until he got them under him again. “Without me?”

Aramis continued to back away, but when the man moved toward him, Aramis lashed out with the pistol, breaking open the robed man’s head as he whipped it across the front of his skull.

“No!” screamed Aramis, hunching over his latest victim while every muscle in his back heaved in anger. “No! He did not leave me in this place!”

He staggered back again, almost toppling down the stairs. He caught himself on the balustrade then leaned over it so he wouldn’t fall to the ground. Tears fell from his eyes, his body convulsing with each deep sob he let loose.

“All this time,” he said, words staccato and soft. “I kept you safe…”

He ran a hand over his wet eyes, then drew in a deep breath as his own words suddenly took on a new meaning. “Damnit, I kept you safe!” he screamed. “I sacrificed my soul for you! This is how you repay me!”

He trudged down the stairs as chaos ensued around him, his despondent heartache replaced with anger.

“Musketeers don’t leave men behind!” he cried, as he arrived on the main floor.

Unable to control his venomous rage, Aramis grabbed the first man dressed in robes he found then wrapped his arms around his neck. With his anger elevated from the coca and d’Artagnan’s betrayal, he pulled the man’s head in one direction while forcing his shoulders in the other, breaking the man’s neck in one swift, calculated move.

When the body hit the floor, Aramis ran for the back kitchen, pausing to catch his breath in the doorway before journeying back to the caves where more coca awaited him; retribution against d’Artagnan deeply entrenched in his mind.

~The Musketeers~

On the front lawn, Red Guard safeguarded the prisoners, ensuring a somewhat safe position for the
three Musketeers to enter the estate. His sword dripping with blood, Athos stepped into the great foyer, Porthos and d’Artagnan on his heels.

Inside, a different story unfolded before Athos’ eyes as there appeared to be more men still trying to gather equipment before departing.

Sweeping his eyes across the chaos, a prone body lying haphazard on the floor caught his attention. “Aramis,” he said, knowing none of his men had yet entered the estate.

“Where?” asked Porthos, pushing himself past the swordsman.

“There!” shouted d’Artagnan, pointing down a long hall.

Athos saw a man in a dirty white shirt leaning against a doorframe, his black unkempt hair covering his face as he hung his head.

He cried his brother’s name as he ran forward, but Aramis disappeared into a room, gone by the time Athos reached the door.

Porthos rushed past to get through the door on the other side of the room, calling their brother’s name as he chased him across a field. Athos and d’Artagnan followed after him, both swords and pistols in hand as they crashed through the kitchen.

No matter how loud Porthos’ yelled, Aramis continued across the field.

When d’Artagnan started screaming his brother’s name, the marksman stopped abruptly without slowing, then spun back.

With brow furrowed, Aramis stared at his brothers, then his jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed.

Athos watched with uncertainty as Aramis’ chest heaved in unison with each short breath he drew in through his nose, the marksman’s eyes fierce and twitching as he stared back.

“Something is wrong,” Athos said, under his breath.

He wanted to warn his brothers, but before he could, Aramis lunged toward d’Artagnan, his hands poised to strangle the young man.

“You left me here to die!” screamed the marksman, squeezing d’Artagnan’s throat.

The young Gascon, eyes wide and unfocused, tried to wrench free his brother’s hands from around his neck. In all likelihood, confusion slowed d’Artagnan’s response, kept him from using excessive force against his deranged brother, to which Athos was grateful.

When they fell to the ground with Aramis landing on top, Athos rushed forward. He pulled Aramis off his brother into Porthos’ waiting grasp then helped d’Artagnan off the ground.

Aramis continued to flail within his large brother’s arms, screaming, “I called you brother! I protected you!”

Athos tried to place a hand on Aramis’ chest, hoping his touch would calm him, but the marksman kept fighting Porthos’ grip, no doubt unaware they were trying to help. The frenzied look in Aramis’ eyes, the flushed nature of his cheeks, suggested to Athos either fever or intoxication at work. Familiar with both, foreboding thoughts threatened to overwhelm him. Then, noticing how the marksman’s bloodstained clothes hung far too loosely on his frame, Athos broke out in a cold sweat.
“I gave everything for you!” screamed Aramis.

“Aramis… Please… I’m sorry…”

Athos turned back to see d’Artagnan approaching, his hands raised in supplication.

“Stay back,” said Athos, his voice brooking no argument, but d’Artagnan kept advancing. “Stop!” he ordered again, raising a hand to stop his brother’s forward movement.

“I should kill you where you stand!” cried Aramis, wrenching an arm free from Porthos’ grasp.

“Go!” Porthos yelled at d’Artagnan. “I can’t hold him much longer. Go!”

D’Artagnan stepped back as his arms dropped to his side. When he looked at Athos, the shame in his eyes became almost too much for the swordsman to handle. He kept his voice low as he stared back at him, before urging the Gascon to heed Porthos’ advise. “Go back to the Captain,” he said. “We’ll take care of Aramis. Everything is under control now, so have them move the caravan up to the estate.”

“I… This is my fault… I had no…”

“Please,” begged Athos, sparring a quick glance to see Aramis wrangle his other arm free from Porthos’ fledgling grip. “I can’t possibly understand why, but you’re causing this. We can’t control him if you’re here. Now do as I say. Go. Please.”

D’Artagnan nodded, albeit with hesitation based on his lack of movement away from Aramis.

“Go!” screamed Porthos.

D’Artagnan walked away, his retreating back leaving Athos consumed in guilt.

“Coward!” screamed Aramis, throwing his brother off his back. But instead of running after d’Artagnan, Aramis ran toward the woods at the edge of the property.

Porthos took off after him until Athos called for him to halt. The large musketeer turned with such ferocity, Athos’ breath caught in his throat.

“He’s getting away,” growled Porthos, his fists clenched at the ends of arms that shook.

“Be careful, Porthos,” said Athos, walking to stand next to him. “Aramis is not right. His mind has lost judgement.”

“Then he needs our help more than ever!” replied Porthos, his body inching toward the forest.

“Just prepare yourself,” said Athos, with caution. “He may not come so willingly when we reach him.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Porthos, in a hurried voice as he turned to face the forest. “I’m prepared.”

The large musketeer chased after Aramis, reaching the edge of the forest before Athos could catch him. It didn’t take long for them to spot the entrance into the cave, proceeding without thought for what lay ahead as they ran into the darkness of the underground cavern.

~The Musketeers~

Eager for a report from his men, Treville fidgeted on his horse as he watched the action unfolding
below him. When someone started toward him up on the hill, he called for the caravan to prepare to advance.

But the first words to escape Treville’s lips when d’Artagnan came into view were, “Did you find Aramis?”

D’Artagnan nodded while running a hand through his hair. Then walking past him, he went straight for the King’s carriage where he punched the door. “He hates me!”

Treville took a quick look down at the estate then back to his musketeer as he dismounted. “What’s happening?”

D’Artagnan spun his body around to lean against the now damaged door. “He tried to kill me,” he said. “He blames me…”

“Who?” asked Treville, his frustration at not getting clear answers riling his building anxiety. “Who tried to kill you?”

“Aramis,” replied the Gascon.

Treville took an involuntary step back, his mouth agape, his brow furrowed. Unable to speak he shook his head.

“He’s alive, but he wants me dead,” said d’Artagnan, then he twisted around to punch the door again.

“I can’t say I understand what’s going on,” said Treville, stepping up to d’Artagnan to rest a hand on his shoulder. “But I’m sure there’s been a mistake. Maybe you misunderstood what…”

D’Artagnan threw his arms in the air, shaking off his Captain’s attempt at comfort. “There was no mistake,” he said. “I’m here and he’s there. I’m rescuing him, not the other way around. I left Aramis behind! He has every right to hate me!”

Treville noticed everyone around them watching. He wanted to speak with his musketeer, tell him it wasn’t his fault, but as captain there were more pressing matters at hand, like getting the caravan down to the estate.

Before seeing d’Artagnan make his way up the hill, he was prepared to move his people forward in accordance with seeing everything under control. But after hearing d’Artagnan’s report, he questioned his earlier assessment.

“Is it safe to proceed?” he asked the young musketeer.

D’Artagnan flicked his hand in the direction of the estate, but his gaze rested on the ground beneath his feet. “Athos instructed me to tell you it’s all clear.”

When d’Artagnan looked up, Treville saw tears forming in the outer corners of the young man’s eyes. Seldom did the Captain see such remorse in a soldier, causing him to suspect d’Artagnan incapable of keeping his emotions in check. If there was truth to what d’Artagnan said, Treville knew a distraction of this calibre would be detrimental in keeping his impetuous nature at bay.

With a heavy heart, Treville dismissed the young man from his duties by pointing up to where the coachman sat atop the King’s carriage.

“Take the reins,” he said. “Bring it down behind us.”
With his head hung low, d’Artagnan kicked at the grass at his feet. Treville expected a fight, but when the young man looked up, he nodded and moved to climb the carriage.

When seated with reins in hands, d’Artagnan looked down on Treville with a bitter smile. “They chased Aramis into the woods over there,” he said, pointing to the forest between the estate and stable. “That’s probably the best place to set the carriage.”

The Captain showed his concurrence with a curt nod, then moved to his horse being held by one of the honour guard. He mounted, then steered himself toward the head of the procession.

If Athos and Porthos did not return from the woods by the time they reached the stable, Treville decided to send more men in after them, but he prayed it wouldn’t come to that as he started down the hill.

~The Musketeers~

By the time Aramis reached the bottom of the incline, his legs felt like weak reeds swaying in a river. Inflamed by anger and a delirious need for more coca, he stumbled toward his cell, his feet dragging across the soggy ground as he continued onward.

His energy lacking, his mind feverishly racing in circles, Aramis missed his door and stumbled into the morgue.

With the evidence of death and decay caused by his own two hands on display around him, Aramis lost the ability to breathe. He fell to his knees, wishing he could remove himself from this nightmare, only to find himself too weak to stand.

Voices filtered through the haze of his mind, but he couldn’t understand them. Consumed with unabashed guilt, a fissure cracked his soul, seeping poisonous memories into his thoughts. Recollections of a cold winter, blood stained men and death, coiled around his heart, producing an unfathomable ache.

Then someone touched his shoulders, told him everything was going to be all right and reminded him this wasn’t Savoy.

*How could they know about Savoy? It wasn’t possible.* Aramis raised his head to seek the speaker of the voice, surprised to find himself looking into the eyes of his best friend.

He swallowed, tried to find enough words to explain what happened as he knelt ashamed amongst the corpses, but he could only manage a feeble, “I know.”

Silence followed wherein Aramis tried to draw strength from Porthos’ touch so he could find his voice. But the siphoned courage ignited his remorse, pulling words of truth from his dishonourable soul he didn’t want to say. “I did this,” he said. “I killed them all.”

Aramis raised his shredded and bloodied hands before him to show them the proof, turning them over so they could examine both wretched sides.

“I beat them all to death,” he said. And with his disgrace fully exposed, he collapsed forward into Porthos’ warm embrace.

*To be continued…*
Chapter 21

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Twenty

As the carriage escorted by six Musketeers and an honour guard moved through the French countryside, Athos sat next to d’Artagnan at the reins, watching him closely. The Gascon had suffered many torturous weeks while in-prisoned in the school, and Athos feared the young man might come undone if he tried to open a dialogue - hence the silence between them since leaving the estate.

Eyes focused on the road, the reins hanging from loosely curled fingers, d’Artagnan seemed far removed from reality. Athos considered he might not want to talk, but the questions plaguing his mind demanded answers. He raised his hand to place it on the young musketeer’s shoulder when the carriage rocked heavily to the side.

Athos grabbed the low rail beside him with one hand while grabbing d’Artagnan with the other.

“Aramis! Calm down!” boomed Porthos’ voice from below.

The carriage rocked again to the side and before Athos said anything, d’Artagnan pulled back on the reins, the procession taking heed and also stopping.

“Get down here! I need help!”

At Porthos’ frantic voice, Athos jumped off the side of the carriage then swung open the door. Aramis lay twitching on the floor with Porthos on the bench trying to hold his friend steady.

“What’s happening?” asked Athos, his eyes darting between the two men.

Porthos looked up with wide eyes, his face covered in sweat and splattered frothy saliva. “He’s havin’ a fit,” he said, pushing Aramis’ shoulders against the floor. “Help me get ‘im out of here. He’s gonna hurt himself.”

D’Artagnan arrived beside Athos and together they reached into the carriage and dragged Aramis’ body out, depositing him on the ground at the side of the road to give Porthos room to jump out behind him.

Athos knelt beside the marksman, his own hands trembling while trying to revive his brother. “Aramis,” he called, tapping the marksman’s face. When Aramis didn’t stop convulsing, Athos vigorously shook his brother’s shoulders while calling his name louder. “Aramis! Aramis!”

A hand on his shoulder calmed him and he let go of Aramis.

“Give him room,” said d’Artagnan, easing Athos back. “There’s nothing we can do... Just make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

Athos restored his senses with a deep breath as d’Artagnan continued to rest his hand on his shoulder. Athos cursed himself for letting his panic overwhelm him, but the tension and fear riddling his body over the past weeks needed an outlet.

“So we just leave him?” asked Porthos, his hands poised over their brother’s body as if waiting to
grab him when given the word. “This don’t seem right.”

“I had a cousin prone to fits,” said d’Artagnan. “Trust me, there’s nothing you can do until his body settles down.”

Porthos shook his head as he released a deep, guttural growl.

“I’m inclined to believe you,” said Athos, watching with frustration as Aramis continued to twitch beside him. “I’m more familiar with fits than I care to be,” he continued. “But I’ve seen the right touch, or the right voice break the spell that traps their minds.” The words true, Athos did not put his advice into practice. So tired and weary, he let Porthos place his hands on Aramis’ cheeks.

The full body spasms of the marksman settled into minute shudders as Porthos spoke into his ear. Athos dropped his head, relieved. “What happened in that school?” he asked d’Artagnan, keeping his face hidden by staring at the ground by his feet.

“I don’t know,” replied the Gascon, dropping to his knees beside the swordsman. “I never saw him.”

Athos looked into the young man’s eyes and saw both grief and confusion reflected back at him. “Why did Aramis attack you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you fashion a guess?” asked Porthos, wiping the spittle from his brother’s mouth with the back of his hand. “You gotta at least have a clue?”

“I don’t know!” yelled d’Artagnan, pushing off the ground. He paced behind his mentor, one hand on his forehead, the other resting on the hilt of his sword. “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know,” he said, his voice softening with each repetition.

“Who did you see?” asked Athos. “Why were there so many dead men in that cave?” He pushed off the ground and spun to face d’Artagnan. “Why were you spared when Aramis was not?”

D’Artagnan’s face paled, his mouth hung agape. “Spared?” he asked. “You think I was spared?” He turned away, throwing his arms in the air.

“Then tell me what happened to you?!” screamed Athos.

D’Artagnan turned back smiling and shaking his head. “What do you want to know Athos? That I was chained to a wall? That no one spoke a word to me the entire time I was there? That they nearly drowned me twice.” He paused and dropped his head. “Or that they beat me randomly while a man sat by and watched?”

The blood drained from Athos’ face, his insides turned hollow and words failed on his lips.

“Wait,” said Porthos. “They tried to drown you? How?”

“How?” asked d’Artagnan. “How they tried to drown me concerns you?”

Athos raised a hand, his palm facing the Gascon. “D’Artagnan,” he said, his words calm and cautioning. “If we’re to help you, both of you,” he said, glancing back at Aramis, “we need to know what happened. Perhaps they did the same to him. How did they try to drown you?”

D’Artagnan drew in a deep breath then let it out slowly. “Water torture,” he said.

“Oh my god,” said Porthos, dropping his head forward.
Athos stepped forward, placed his hands on d’ Artagnan’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” he said.

D’ Artagnan stepped back, shrugging Athos’ hands from his shoulders. “What’s done is done,” he said. “Let’s focus on Aramis. We’ve no idea what they put him through.”

Athos deeply regretted the truth to d’ Artagnan’s words, and promised himself to rekindle this conversation later. He turned back to Aramis and Porthos, then cast his gaze up and down the length of their injured brother. “Based on those clothes, I’d say a lot,” he said, running a hand down his face.

“These aren’t his,” said Porthos, peeling back the stained white shirt and exposing Aramis’ torso.

Air rushed from Athos’ lungs. He staggered back into d’ Artagnan’s arms. With barely a patch of skin left unbruised or smeared in blood, Aramis’ body resembled a corpse. Mud and blood stained bandages hung from torn-open wounds like scraps of cleaved skin from his body.

“I’m gonna kill whoever did this to ‘im,” growled Porthos. “And there ain’t no law that’s gonna hold me back.”

“My god,” whispered d’ Artagnan. “Is that all from fighting?”

His legs now steady beneath him, Athos returned to Aramis’ side and pulled the shirt from Porthos’ hand to cover his brother. “You know more than we do,” he replied.

A small shake of Aramis’ head made Athos’ heart jump in anticipation of another fit. But the marksman’s body remained still, allowing Athos to breathe easy again.

“I think he’s waking up,” said Porthos, moving his hands back to their brother’s cheeks. “Come on, Aramis,” he said. “Come and say hi to ole Porthos.”

Aramis opened his eyes, fluttered his lids then closed them again.

“It’s progress,” said Athos.

Porthos moved to pick up his brother by scooping him in his arms. “Let’s get going,” he said. “I don’t like being out here in the open.”

“He needs a doctor,” said d’ Artagnan.

Athos climbed the carriage, paused mid-way and glanced back over his shoulder. “The Captain said there is one waiting at the garrison,” he said. He made sure to connect with d’ Artagnan’s eyes before saying the rest. “Where you will be checked over as well.”

D’ Artagnan replied with a tight-lipped nod, then walked around the carriage.

“No,” said Athos. “You ride with Porthos and Aramis. If he wakes up, you two need to sort this out.”

Porthos blew out a puff of air. “You sure that’s a good idea?” he asked.

“No,” replied Athos, swinging onto the coachman’s bench. He gathered the reins, turned back around and looked at Porthos standing by the open door of the carriage. “They need to sort this out, and Aramis might be the only one who can get d’ Artagnan to talk. However volatile the situation may turn out to be, I’m sure you can handle it, Porthos.”

“You know I’m standing right here,” said d’ Artagnan.
Athos looked at him. “I know.”

Aramis lay across one of the benches, his knees bent upward and his head resting on a sidewall due to the small space. D’Artagnan and Porthos sat across from him with the latter bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

The large man’s body rocked with the bouncing of the carriage, but his focus never wavered from his friend on the bench across from him. D’Artagnan sat back, keeping his chest as upright as possible in order to stifle a nagging cough in his lungs. The smallest movement, or even a few words, could cause a worrisome coughing fit he didn’t want distracting Porthos from Aramis.

A long trip back to Paris still lay ahead and d’Artagnan wondered how much longer he could hold out before passing out from exhaustion and falling on the floor of the carriage. He needed to stay awake, not burden his brothers more than they already were, so he gently cleared his throat and prayed talking would not rattle his lungs too much. Aramis had accused him of leaving him behind, which led d’Artagnan to wondering.

“Aramis said I left him behind,” he said.

“Yeah,” replied Porthos, in a distant voice. “Don’t worry ’bout it. We know you didn’t.”

D’Artagnan shifted on the bench. “No, I mean, Aramis knew I was there.”

Porthos looked back at him over his shoulder. “Why would he know about you, but not the other way around?”

D’Artagnan shook his head. “No clue.”

A moment of silence passed where d’Artagnan closed his eyes and rested his head against the back wall of the carriage. He felt as if he could melt right into the bench, sleep forever, but with Porthos’ interest piqued, the big man wanted to keep talking.

“So they kept you chained to a wall the whole time?” asked Porthos.

D’Artagnan opened his eyes. “Except when they hid me from you,” he said.

“I’d like to hear how you escaped.”

Behind Porthos, Aramis rolled his head. “Maybe later,” said d’Artagnan, directing Porthos’ attention to their friend. “Looks like he might be waking up.”

As Porthos turned back to Aramis, d’Artagnan moved to the edge of his bench, but stayed back a few inches. No one knew what type of reaction Aramis would have, and being stuck in a small carriage could make things complicated.

“Aramis? You with us?” asked Porthos, resting a hand on their brother’s chest. The marksman’s head rolled toward the voice and a moment later his eyes opened.

Porthos dropped to his knees, exposing d’Artagnan. The Gascon swallowed and tensed, but as Aramis looked between the two of them, the muscles of his face remained relaxed, his lips slightly parted as he blinked at both of them.

“You’re safe now,” said Porthos. “We’re going back to Paris.”
“Paris,” murmured Aramis, furrowing his brow.

Still wary of a violent outburst from their brother, but needing to rekindle their closeness, d’Artagnan slowly moved forward on the bench. “Do you know where you are?”

“D’Artagnan?” asked Aramis, reaching out a blood-stained hand.

Feeling unthreatened, d’Artagnan took his brother’s hand between both of his own and smiled. “Yes,” he said.

Aramis turned their hands over, his brow furrowing deeper. “I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing a thumb over the bandage wrapped around d’Artagnan’s left hand. “I did this…”

“No. No, you had nothing to do with this,” said d’Artagnan, moving to his knees beside Porthos. “Those men did this to me.”

With more strength than d’Artagnan thought possible, Aramis pulled their hands to his chest and rested them over his heart. “You paid for my mistakes,” he said.

“No,” repeated d’Artagnan. “Just rest. We’ll talk later.”

Aramis shook his head and fell asleep with his lips open as if to say something. D’Artagnan blew out his breath in a single huff, relieved to see peace encompass their brother instead of anger.

“What’d he mean by that?” asked Porthos.

“I don’t know,” replied d’Artagnan, shaking his head. He removed his hands from Aramis’ flaccid grip, sat back on the bench and motioned for Porthos to do the same. Porthos nodded and followed his lead, but took up their brother’s hands still resting on his chest.

“Well, he doesn’t seem to want to kill you anymore,” said Porthos.

After a long sigh, d’Artagnan smiled. “That’s always good,” he said. “But who knows how he’ll feel the next time he wakes.”

~The Musketeers~

Stars twinkled in a dark sky above Paris as the King’s Honour Guard led the procession toward the city’s main gate. Athos found no comfort in the celestial bodies, feeling more in-tune with the dark, empty spaces between them. A night sky this brilliant usually brought comfort to travellers, especially when they shone so brightly above their home, but Athos could not find peace while two of his brothers suffered so terribly.

Knowing they rested safely in the carriage beneath him eased his heart, but the ache of not knowing what happened to them still consumed every other part of him. Anticipating a long physical recovery for both d’Artagnan and Aramis, he knew answers would not come quickly which would only prolong their suffering, as well as his.

Stop being selfish, he reprimanded himself, carelessly flicking the reins held tightly in his hands.

The horses jerked in response but Athos reined them in before they charged forward. Again, he reprimanded himself, and drew in a deep breath to steady his nerves. To distract his maddening emotions, he focused on the nearing gates of Paris, furrowing his brow when the procession slowed before the large break in the wall wherein several Red Guard moved to block their path.
Athos longed to charge through them, but when he saw no ill intent on the Guards’ faces, he slowed to a stop. “What’s the meaning of this?” he asked.

A Red Guard approached the carriage, his lips pressed into a thin smile, one hand over his heart. “My apologies for stopping you,” he said. “But I am under orders from the Queen to divert you to the Palace.”

“Our men need to see a physician,” said Athos. The opening of a door beneath him halted his words and he turned to see d’Artagnan leaning out of the carriage.

“What’s going on?” asked the Gascon.

“Stay inside,” ordered Athos, his regret at using a harsh tone causing him to grimace. “Please. Everything is fine,” he said.

D’Artagnan ducked back inside the carriage and Athos returned his attention to the Guard.

“There is one waiting your arrival,” said the Red Guard. “The Queen has requested I send word as to how many are injured, or…” He cleared his throat. “Dead,” he continued.

Athos felt the man’s fear deep within his own heart and replied with a nod. “Two injured,” he said. “The dead are to follow.”

The Guard swallowed, leaned to look into the window of the carriage. “Did you find any of our brothers?”

Athos shook his head. “Only two Musketeers,” he replied. “Captain Treville remained on scene, perhaps when he arrives he will have good news.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said the Guard, stepping away from the carriage, his demeanour lacking the optimism which Athos hoped to provide. “My men and I will remain here till their arrival.”

With a flick of his wrists, Athos moved the carriage forward, diverting his eyes from the Guards standing at the wall as he passed through the gates. With no answers to give them, he feared the heavy guilt for only finding Musketeers would show on his face, diminishing any hope they might still hold for their brothers.

Late into the night, a clear path to the palace greeted Athos as he steered the carriage through the winding streets. The clip clopping of the horses’ hooves on stone echoed in the still air, and didn’t stop until the ground underfoot changed to the gravel road leading through the gardens of the palace.

Nearing the front of the Palace, a Guard directed Athos to take the carriage around back. Familiar with the layout, and knowing the quickest route to the guest quarters, Athos followed the directions without question. At the side of the Palace, the Honour Guard took their leave, heading for the stables, but the six Musketeer escort dismounted and moved to the carriage.

By the time Athos put his two feet on the ground, Aramis was amongst his brothers as they carried him inside the Palace. Still standing by the door of the carriage, d’Artagnan watched after them, his keen focus never straying from their retreating backs.

Athos approached with an arm raised to wrap around the young Gascon’s shoulder. “Come,” he said, then led d’Artagnan into the Palace.

~The Musketeers~
As Captain, Treville stood tall and unshakeable as he roamed the halls of the estate. His men saw a man in complete control of his faculties, a man undeterred by the horrific situation around him. But by not letting his real emotions out, Treville held his body hostage, making his limbs continuously tremble and his heart flutter. He didn’t want to break the damn holding everything in place for fear of everything rushing out, and his men witnessing his collapse.

With the caves cleared of bodies, left in rows beside the stable for families and Red Guard to claim, Treville stepped slowly up the main stairwell of the estate with two Musketeers at his side. With so many rooms and so much evidence to gather, he saw no end to the amount of work that lay ahead, but it would keep his mind distracted.

At the top of the stairs he paused to wipe his brow. “Check all the rooms and mark the doors when cleared,” he said, before walking down to the end of the hall.

An open door to a lavishly furnished room awaited him. He presumed the room once belonged to Pellisier, the mad man in charge, based on the large, ornate desk.

Treville crossed the room slowly, his eyes trained on the single item left on the desk, a feathered hat. He picked it up, smoothed out the feather. “Aramis,” he said, with a sigh as he looked around the room.

He moved to the open wardrobe to his right when he spotted his musketeer’s uniform. Fearful of unshackling his restrained emotions, Treville hesitantly reached for the leather doublet. Once his fingers wrapped around the collar of the uniform, he moved quickly to remove everything from the wardrobe. He threw the doublet over his shoulder, tucked the pistols into his belt and carried the belts and sword with him as he left the room.

His precious cargo secure, Treville made his way back outside to his horse where he packed away Aramis’ equipment. Before turning back in to the estate, for his job remained unfinished, he braced his hands on his saddle and stared at the ground beneath his feet.

His head felt too heavy to lift, his hands trembled as they rested on the saddle and a slight weakness in his legs caused his knees to buckle. Treville drew in a deep breath, steadied himself then turned around to face the estate. A Red Guard passed by escorting a prisoner, and Treville stepped forward to stop them.

“Where’s Pellisier?” he asked, grabbing the collar of the robed man. He leaned in, face red and jaw muscles tense. “Where is he?!”

“He left,” replied the man. “He was the first to go.”

Treville released him with a shove backward and the guard holding him smiled as he harshly got him back under control. “Where did he go?!” asked Treville.

The robed man smiled in response then shrugged his shoulders.

Treville sensed this man knew more, as did many others who refused to talk. As scared of capture as they were on their arrival, their loyalty to Pellisier proved unwavering. Not one of the robed men spoke of the man in charge, nor did any guard still capable of speech disclose their leader’s plans.

“He is a good man,” said the man in robes. Treville looked at him sharply as he continued. “France will thank him one day for all he’s doing.”

“Killing innocent men?!” asked Treville, stepping back into the man’s personal space.
“For the greater glory of France, yes,” replied the man. “And your man, Aramis, was significantly responsible for most of these men’s deaths. You should feel proud to have such a fierce and dedicated warrior amongst your …”

Treville never heard the man’s last words. He unclenched his fist and shook it as he stared at the robed man, unconscious on the ground. “Get this man out of my sight,” ordered Treville to the Guard.

As the Guard dragged the man away, Treville let out a breath and called after him. “Keep him separate from the others,” he said. “And anyone else who seems to have something to say.”

“Yes, Captain,” replied the Guard. “I’ll see to it they receive extra-special attention.” The Guard bent down, grabbed the prisoner’s wrist and dragged him across the field toward the wagons.

Treville turned away, then with his hands braced on his hips, he slowly raised his head to scrutinize the outside of the estate. After a deep breath which he used to numb his senses, he started toward the main door wondering what other atrocities lay waiting.

To be continued…
Athos saw the Queen wringing her hands as she waited amongst the several Musketeers outside the room in which Aramis lay. As he approached with d’Artagnan, she stepped forward. Cognizant of her needing a report, and also comfort, Athos left the Gascon with their brothers and led the Queen down the hall.

Eyes wide, face pale, she asked, “How is he? What happened? Where are the other men?”

Athos held tight to the hilt of his sword to keep from embracing the Queen. He drew in a deep breath hoping to keep the conversation short so he could return to his brothers. “Aramis went through a lot, and we do not yet know the extent of his injuries. But he’s one of the strongest men I know, and he’ll most likely pull through with nothing more than some bad memories,” he said.

Lying to the Queen went against every grain of morality Athos possessed, but she needed to hear comforting words. “As for the rest,” he continued. “Captain Treville remained behind at the scene and is gathering what information he can.”

The Queen cleared her throat. “I see,” she said.

“And bringing back the dead,” finished Athos.

The Queen’s eyes went wider, and Athos feared he’d said too much.

“And now I see even more,” she said.

Athos wanted to reach out and touch her, but refrained. “I must get back to my men.”

The Queen dismissed him with a curt nod. Relieved, he turned and walked away at a clipped pace, eager to get back to d’Artagnan and Aramis, and found the door to the guest quarter open. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and walked to the side of the bed where Porthos stood looking down on Aramis.

“How is he?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Porthos nodded across the room to a man bent over a washbasin. “Doctor Lemay thinks he’s been poisoned.”

Athos leaned over Aramis, grabbed his chin and turned his head to the side. “He’s wrong,” he said, sitting upright.

“I beg your pardon?” said Lemay. While drying his hands on a towel, he turned from the washbasin and walked toward the bed waving for everyone to move. “Fever. Wet lungs. Fits and bouts of delirium,” he continued. “He has most definitely been exposed to a poison.”

“Amongst other things,” said Athos, pointing at Aramis’ exposed chest.

Lemay sighed as he gently peeled back the filthy bandage on Aramis’ belly. “Yes,” he said. “But
these will heal.”

“You sure ‘bout that?” asked Porthos.

Lemay looked back at them with a smile in which Athos recognized remorse. “If the poison doesn’t inhibit the process, yes,” he replied.

Athos leaned all his weight onto one leg. “Aramis was enraged when we found him,” he said. “He’d been exposed to fighting, and most likely tortured by mad-men bent on becoming physicians.”

“It’s a disgrace to my profession,” said Lemay.

“I’m sure it is,” said Athos. “But my point is that they seemed to want him alive.”

“So you’re saying it’s not poison?” asked Porthos.

“I’m saying, it’s more than just poison,” replied Athos. “They were giving him something to sustain him, keep him from falling victim to his injuries so he could continue to fight.” He drew in a deep breath. “Aramis wasn’t confused when we found him,” he continued. “He was lucid. It was his perception that was wrong.”

Lemay placed his hands on Aramis’ forehead and used his thumbs to push back their brother’s eyelids. “You think they used drugs of some sort?”

“Can opiates do that to a person?” asked Porthos. “Make ‘im all crazy like that?”

“Opiates usually have the opposite effect,” replied Lemay, sitting back. “But new substances are discovered almost everyday, and if you say this school was full of young men studying medicine, I suspect perhaps your brothers may have been part of an experiment.” Lemay drew in a deep breath and looked at them. “Human experimentation goes against everything the Catholic Church stands for, as well as France…and myself. But lately, there has been some advocacy for…changes, amongst the guild of physicians, and not all are agreeable.”

Porthos stepped back. “Oh, now I’m really gonna kill ‘im,” he said. He turned away, laced his fingers behind his head and paced in front of the large window.

“Can you find an antidote?” asked Athos.

“Not unless I know what it’s for,” replied Lemay. “Perhaps when Aramis wakes he can tell me more.”

Porthos turned to the bed. “Maybe d’Artagnan was given the same thing?” he asked.

“Where is he?” asked Athos.

“Speaking with the King,” replied Porthos.

Athos sighed. “He should be resting,” he said, to which Porthos replied with a shrug. “And he shouldn’t be alone with the King.”

As he turned to leave and go after their brother, Lemay called after him.

“Wait,” called Lemay. “You said Aramis was enraged when you last saw him awake? What if he wakes up in the same disposition?”

Athos nodded at Porthos. “You stay here,” he said. “I’ll go find d’Artagnan.”
Aramis didn’t remember waking. A seamless transference occurred from unconscious to conscious. His lips felt thick and heavy, his arms like dead weights, and most of his lower body felt numb. Voices filtered to his ears, to which he paid no attention, until he heard the name d’Artagnan spoken.

A pounding started in his head, deep and dull between his eyes. His right hand came up to massage his furrowed brow, but he barely felt the pressure of his fingertips through the searing pain. “Where is he?” he asked, unsure of his voice.

Warm, rough hands ensconced his own, laying it on the bed beside him. “Whoa, Aramis, Just relax.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” replied the deep baritone voice of his friend.

Aramis drew in a deep breath, which exacerbated the deep, sharp pain between his eyes. Shooting fire from his brain to his eyes replaced the throbbing in his head. He could barely speak. “D’Artagnan… left me…”

“No, no,” said Porthos. “He didn’t know…”

“You don’t know!” shouted Aramis. Yelling caused him to roll onto his side and cradle his head. “You weren’t there…”

A moment passed wherein Porthos did not speak, but Aramis felt his calloused hand running up and down the length of his arm. It soothed his soul, but not his headache. “Where is he?”

“He’s with Athos and the King,” replied Porthos.

What? Wait… Aramis lifted his eyelids a slit, but closed them tight when blinding white light aggravated the splintering pain between them. Running… Fighting… Carriage… Porthos and Athos… “Where… where am I?”

“You’re safe,” he heard Porthos say, and immediately he remembered strong arms carrying him through the palace.

A fog hindered his memories, but a twitching feeling deep within him helped him realize the truthfulness of his friend’s words. The soft bed beneath him and the warm blankets covering him also fortified his sense of safety, but the churning in his stomach, shuddering muscles and headache reminded him of the other dangers hounding him. “Need more,” he said, rolling into his pillow.

“What?” asked Porthos, his voice loud in Aramis’ ear like he’d leaned closer. “What do you need?”

Aramis knew what he wanted to say, but the word died on his lips. He repeated it in his mind until finally his voice broke free. “Coca,” he said. “Can’t fight…”

“What?” asked Porthos, his voice softer and sounding further away.

Aramis held back the tears burning the back of his eyelids. “Coca,” he said in a broken voice. “I need… help me, please. Porthos…”

Athos and d’Artagnan returned to Aramis’ room amidst a heated conversation between Porthos and
Lemay. The swordsman glanced at the bed to see Aramis on his side, cradling his head, then approached the two arguing men.

Porthos and Lemay stilled their argument and looked at him and his face paled before he asked, “Has something happened?”

“I believe the substance affecting Aramis is something rather serious,” answered Lemay, rubbing his forehead as he turned away.

D’Artagnan coughed, gently tapping his chest. “What is it?” he asked.

Athos pointed to a cushioned bench under a large window. “Sit. Now,” he said to d’Artagnan.

D’Artagnan rolled his eyes, then dropped onto the bench and leaned back against the sill with his arms crossed over his chest. “Satisfied?”

“Not until you’re seen by the doctor,” replied Athos. “But first, what’s happening with Aramis?”

“Coca,” stated Porthos. “And he wants more of it.”

Athos’ insides dropped into his boots. D’Artagnan rose to stand next to him, and even with Athos pointing him back to the bench, the Gascon did not listen.

“As in…” said d’Artagnan.

“Yeah,” replied Porthos.

D’Artagnan’s eyes went wide. “I’ve heard of its presence in France, but I’ve never seen…”

“The lengths some physicians are willing to go,” seethed Lemay. “This Pellisier must be reported to the Physician’s Guild at once.”

“Is he even a real doctor?” asked Porthos.

Lemay shook his head. “I suspect not, and I refuse to consider him one until I see his credentials. And even then, I am remiss to ever call him a colleague.”

The doctor moved to Aramis’ bedside and sat on a chair facing his patient. On the large, ornate bedside table sat a bowl of water with a cloth dangling over the edge to which he wrung out and draped across the back of Aramis’ neck. “I don’t even know how long it will take his body to rid itself of this poison,” he said. “Or how it will affect him.”

A thought occurred to Athos and he turned to d’Artagnan. “Were you given anything of the sorts?”

D’Artagnan shook his head, coughed, then closed his eyes. “No,” he said, rubbing his chest.

Pale, and with dark circles under his eyes, the young Gascon did not appear well. Athos led him back to the bench where he took a seat next to him. “Doctor,” he said, placing a hand on d’Artagnan’s forehead, “you have another patient.”

“I’ll be fine,” said d’Artagnan, pushing off Athos’ hand. “Just take care of Aramis.”

Athos put his hand on his young friend’s shoulder. “Your health is equally as important,” he said. “And I’m sorry it took so long for it to come to our full attention.”

D’Artagnan opened his eyes and looked at Aramis. “He needs the physician more than I do,” he
“Perhaps,” replied Athos. “But you still need to be seen. You cannot discount what happened to you, nor will I let you. When Doctor Lemay is finished with Aramis, he will see to you immediately. That is an order.”

D’Artagnan nodded, so Athos rose from the bench and approached the bed where Porthos stood watching Lemay administer cool cloths to Aramis’ neck. Athos saw the grimace on the marksman’s face and heard soft whimpers, which left a hollow pit deep in his gut. A need to embrace Aramis manifested almost as strong as his want to run for the closest bottle of wine, so he turned to Porthos.

“You should rest,” he said. “The Captain will return soon and will need help…”

“No, no,” replied Porthos, shaking his head. “I’m staying. These two ‘ve been out of my sights for too long, it’s not gonna happen again.”

Athos felt the same so he knew not to argue with the man. “Then at least sit,” he said, pointing to a set of large, plush chairs near a hearth across the room.

Porthos stared at Aramis for a few seconds before nodding and moving away. Athos followed and took the other chair, leaned his head back and waited for his friend to fall asleep. Contrary to his plan to wait his friend out, it wasn’t long before he fell asleep as well.

~The Musketeers~

A hand rested on the back of Aramis’ head, which at first felt comforting, but now annoyed him. He rolled onto his back and the hand slipped away. When he opened his eyes, he saw Pellisier looking down on him. “It hurts. I need more.”

“No,” replied Pellisier. “Never again.”

Aramis shook and squirmed on the bed. “I need it. You…you did this to me.”


Aramis held his breath as the face above him coalesced into one that smiled down with mirth and concern, not malevolence and wickedness. Slowly, the dark cavernous walls around him altered into plaster and wallpaper with windows taller than him. Heavy curtains hung from thick iron rods, their sumptuous materials pooling on a stone floor, bookending a long bench where d’Artagnan lay.

A soft mattress caressed his body, and silky cool sheets tickled his bare skin. Aramis shifted to look around the room. Porthos and Athos sat sleeping in chairs in front of a large fireplace, peaceful and quiet. When he turned back to Lemay, a flood of memories assailed him.

He sat up tense, trembling and sweat drenched. “D’Artagnan,” he said, voice barely a whisper. “He’s dead.”

“No, he’s alive,” replied Lemay. “Quite sick, but very much alive. You needn’t worry about him.”

Guided back down to the bed, Aramis frowned when he saw the sleeping form under the window. The one he’d just seen only moments ago. “It was my job to protect him,” he said.

“You succeeded,” said Lemay.
Aramis shook his head. “But... he betrayed me.”

“I can’t imagine that would ever be possible,” said Lemay. “Now rest and tell me what happened?”

“I… I fought… to keep d’Artagnan alive,” replied Aramis. “I had no choice.”

Lemay folded his hands on his lap. “Yes, they made you fight others,” he said, a frown creasing his forehead. “How many? How often?”

“At first, I thought I was to die there,” replied Aramis. “They left me. No food. No water. It felt like days… I was in hell.”

Aramis’ head lolled to the side until a hand on his chin straightened it, the human contact awakening his senses.

“But eventually someone came,” said Lemay.

Aramis blinked and pushed himself up the bed, grimacing as bolts of fire lanced the muscles of his belly and arms. Hands rested on his shoulders, easing away some of the discomfort, then fell away.

After a moment, Aramis remembered the question. “Pellisier,” he said. “He wanted me for his new champion. To fight… to give him bodies…”

“Why you?” asked Lemay.

Aramis felt the pull of sleep and longed for its embrace. He shook himself and stared at Lemay. “He saw something in me,” he said, his eyes drifting to the near distance. “He saw what is inside me.”

“And what is that?” asked Lemay.

Aramis swallowed, then allowed his heavy eyelids to fall shut. “The animal within,” he said. “Now let me rest. I wish to speak no further.”

As Aramis drifted off, he listened to Lemay’s voice, its cadence and tone almost rhythmical, distracting him from his pain and sorrow.

“I’ve tended your wounds,” said the physician. “But I dare not give you anything for the pain. I will see to your friend once you have fallen asleep… and I’m certain no demons plague your dreams. Rest peacefully, Aramis.”

~The Musketeers~

Sleep evaded d’Artagnan. Suffering from a constricted chest, heated skin and throbbing head, he knew only a miracle could save him from his insomnia. But he didn’t want to disturb anyone, especially Aramis as he spoke with the physician.

The name, Pellisier, meant little to d’Artagnan. Athos and Porthos spoke of him, so he knew bit and pieces, but the man held no ground in his memories. For him, Arnault hounded his dreams both day and night. That name, that face, d’Artagnan would never forget. Nor what he did to him.

And now hearing Aramis speak of his imprisonment, d’Artagnan understood the bigger picture of what happened and to a degree, why.

Aramis said he fought to protect him, and at some point thought him dead. This disturbed d’Artagnan, for he could not imagine the torment and pressure his friend suffered, and understood the betrayal he must have felt at learning of his escape.
D’Artagnan wanted to rise from the bench, run to Aramis and explain that he didn’t know of his presence at the school. His guilt outweighed his logic and he wanted to beg for forgiveness, but the heaviness of his body kept him in place on the bench. Lemay gave him something to help him sleep, and although it numbed his body, unfortunately its effects were not so influential on his mind.

It ran in circles, keeping sleep at bay, allowing his thoughts to run rampant with images of his own torture and ill health. A deep tickle in his chest ignited a cough that caused stabs of pain to inflame his back and head. He sat up to ease his congestion and a moment later, Lemay stood beside him, pounding his back.

“Get it all out,” said the physician. “You need to clear those lungs.”

D’Artagnan coughed once more before leaning back against the windowsill. “Thank you,” he said, closing his eyes.

“No need to thank me,” said Lemay, sitting on the bench and leaning over to rest an ear on d’Artagnan’s chest. “Now just breathe normally.”

When Lemay sat up, d’Artagnan opened his eyes. “Will I live?” he asked.

“You shall indeed,” replied Lemay. “But it will take some time before that water leaves your lungs.”

Lemay put a hand on d’Artagnan’s forehead then pulled it back with a frown. “I’m surprised you’ve held up this well,” he said.

D’Artagnan raised his eyebrows. “I guess with all that was going on, I pushed it from my mind.” His eyes drifted to the bed where Aramis lay. “How is he?”

The doctor looked at the floor. “I really don’t know how to answer that.”

“He went through a lot,” said d’Artagnan. “I heard what he said to you.”

Lemay looked at him. “You were given neither this coca nor forced to fight, so how did you injure your hand, and why did they try to drown you?”

D’Artagnan closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath and coughed. “I don’t believe they were trying to drown me,” he said. “I think he only wanted to watch me suffer.”

“He?”

“For Aramis it was Pellisier, but for me, it was a man named Arnault.”

“I see,” said Lemay. “Well, perhaps your Captain has apprehended them both by now.”

D’Artagnan opened his eyes. “Has he returned?”

Lemay shook his head.

This did not surprise d’Artagnan. He ran a hand down his face and stretched his legs out before him. His eyelids felt heavy, but he did not want to sleep and breathed easier when Lemay nudged his arm.

“You are tired,” said the physician with a soft smile. “You have a fever, and I’m sure you’re other injuries are doing nothing to aid in your recovery. I’d like you to sleep properly. In a bed. I’m sure arrangements can be made to provide you a room to yourself.”
“No,” said d’Artagnan, sitting upright. “I want to stay here.” He leaned forward to look at Aramis, and then set his eyes on his two friends sleeping in chairs across the room. “I don’t… I…”

“Want to be alone,” said Lemay, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I understand. A proper bed and rest would do you better, but if being here with them brings you comfort, than I shall accept that as sufficient treatment.”

D’Artagnan smiled. “Thank you.”

“I’m curious though,” said Lemay, sitting back. “It seems Aramis was some sort of test subject, but what was your purpose?”

“I don’t know,” replied d’Artagnan. He had an inkling, but didn’t feel like talking about it. “No one said anything to me. I didn’t know about the fighting. I never met anyone called Pellisier. I was fed and given water from the start. And I never knew anyone else was there.”

The truth sounded inadequate when spoken aloud, and only Aramis could fill in the blanks, especially his friend’s outburst on their return to Paris.

“You know,” said d’Artagnan, leaning to his right. “I think I would like to rest.” Remembering those moments outside the carriage brought back memories of his own torture, quickening his heart and clinching his stomach. It enhanced his exhaustion and he felt sleep would no longer evade him if he lay down.

“Very well,” replied Lemay, patting the Gascon’s knee before rising. “I shall be here when you awake.”

D’Artagnan nodded and then fully reclined on the bench, falling asleep as a breeze from the window above him cooled his fiery skin.

~The Musketeers~

Awaiting Treville’s arrival at the gates, several Red Guard directed him to his men at the Palace. Forgoing seeing the King this late at night, two Musketeers greeted him outside the room where his injured men resided on the other side of the door.

He pushed it open and stepped inside to find all but the doctor asleep in various places around the room. With a sigh, he rested his eyes on the one in the bed.

Treville paled at the thought of telling Aramis the news, and found he could not fully enter the room without his legs shaking beneath him. He ran a hand down his face then brought it to rest on the hilt of his sword before gaining enough strength to approach the bed.

Treville didn’t want to disturb Aramis, but he found no harm in taking a closer look, if only to ease his worry. His concern escalated when the man in question suddenly screamed out.

To be continued…
Chapter 23

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aramis’ thoughts danced about, anchorless in a churning sea, a glass of wine, a saddle beneath him, the noises of a busy Paris afternoon. His mother’s perfume lingered in the air… a polished pistol held firmly in his hand… his bloodied fist connecting with raw flesh.

His shame rose up and extinguished the overwhelming pleasure the violence spawned. He groaned, wild and with abandon, his back arching off the bed as he fist the sheets beneath him until his body seized and his voice turned into a bellowing scream.

Snakes dangled from crooked sticks… black oil dripped from snarling lips… fire and brimstone.

Aramis sucked in a breath but could not exhale. Water filled his lungs as he sank into the depths of frigid water, his scream freezing on his lips until something pounded on his chest and his breath exploded forth.

Captured by despair and shame, his body shuddering and exhausted, Aramis lacked the strength or desire to talk or look at his brothers.

With his mind trapped between the real and unreal, the path leading to good sense was unclear, so he kept his eyes closed, believing that if he could not see them, they could not see him.

Aramis stood in the crowded stable… blood dripping from his fists. He swayed in a meadow of fresh flowers, a broken fence before him. He lay on a cot surrounded by dirt walls… his pained body begging for release.

He knelt on a stone floor… watched d’Artagnan’s chest rise and fall… then saw the Gascon running away.

I saved him, but he did not save me.

Aramis couldn’t let himself think about d’Artagnan. He concentrated on the nagging twitch of his muscles, the piercing in his abdomen and the relentless pulsing in his head. It kept him grounded in the present.

He heard questions directed at him, but barely understood their meanings. Athos, Porthos, and even Treville’s voice resounded in his ears as hands poked and prodded his body.

Aramis shook his head, hoping they would leave him alone, for if they continued, he feared he’d let loose the his repository of shame.

If they knew what lay beneath the surface, how much he enjoyed feeing the beast, they would never trust him again. They would look at him with disgust and fear.

He wanted them to feel safe around him, feel his love and loyalty, not wonder if he was going to break.

His brothers would walk on broken glass, waiting and watching to see if his caged animal would break free.
Aramis knew it could happen. A persistent craving in his gut yearned to lash out and inflict pain, feel the release of constrained vigour the coca so graciously granted him. The drug broke down barriers he’d tirelessly held in place for years, opened a channel for his deepest desires to escape and leave him blissfully spent when satiated.

No, he thought. He could never feel that way again.

Aramis just wasn’t sure if he’d be able to close the floodgates now that they’d opened. The rage, the hunger, was worse. Each passing moment intensified his want to lash out, scream bloody murder and rip arms from bodies.

He scrunched his face. He needed to either push these feelings away or let them control him. Aramis knew the answer, but found little strength within him.

“Calm, my son,” said Treville. “This will pass.”

“You can do it, Aramis,” said Athos. “You just need time.”

They spoke as if this was easy, as if they understood, and as if a good sleep and warm broth could soothe his troubles. He grunted and turned away from the voices. When he opened his eyes, Porthos was looking down on him from the other side of the bed.

His friend’s eyes, full of sadness and pity, stoked Aramis’ anger. He didn’t deserve their concern, and he couldn’t understand why his brothers insisted on giving it to him. Did they not understand his vileness?

Aramis closed his eyes, shook his head.

“He needs to eat,” said Lemay. “He needs water.”

I need nothing but to be left alone, thought Aramis.

Hands grabbed him, hoisted his body upward, but when they released him, Aramis slid his body back down the bed.

“Don’t be a fool,” he heard Athos say.

Aramis turned and looked sharply at his friend, then rolled his body toward him and buried his face in the pillow. It was a soft, cool pillow, and Aramis envisioned getting lost in its luxury if not for the incessant voices.

“Perhaps we should try a different approach,” said Lemay.

“What do you suggest?” asked Treville.

“I got it,” said Porthos.

Aramis felt the bed shift behind him. A rough hand rested on his arm and shook him gently. “D’Artagnan’s here with us. He’s safe. You did good by bringing him back safe and sound.”

Aramis thought them strange words till he remembered his brief conversation with Lemay. The doctor must have told them what he said. Bastard. Those were my secrets.

D’Artagnan’s presence pacified some of his anger, but in his gut a slow burn was growing with each moment his brothers lamented over him.
Unable to focus on one emotion, his mind reeled, feeding the ferocity deep within him that which begged for freedom.

“Get up, Aramis! Fight this like a soldier,” demanded Treville.

“You wouldn’t let any of us suffer like this,” said Athos. “You know what needs to be done!”

Aramis growled, swung his left arm out and hit something. It hurt, but he didn’t care. He let it drop back to the bed.

“I guess the strict approach won’t work either,” he heard Porthos grumble.

The bed shifted again and Aramis heard boots crossing the floor, followed by muffled voices.

Relieved to be left alone, but burdened with haunting memories and an anguished body, he did not celebrate his freedom with a smile.

The soft murmurings of his brothers and Captain held his attention for a short while, but the details of their conversation about Pellisier remained clouded in whispers and he had neither the strength nor want to seek clarity.

It didn’t matter what became of Pellisier. His death could not change what happened.

If Pellisier lived, Aramis could never re-cage his animal for he’d seek out the monster till the end of days and slaughter him, thus feeding his inner-animal and giving it life. And if Pellisier perished by either the sword of another man or a hangman’s noose, Aramis would live without retribution which would fuel his beast with an eternal flame of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Aramis felt doomed to a maddening existence either way.

A scream jolted d’Artagnan to consciousness. His skin slick with a cold sweat, his heart fluttering, he opened his eyes. At the bed stood his captain and Doctor Lemay, along with his brothers, all looking down on Aramis.

Hindered by exhaustion, d’Artagnan could not join them so he listened. They issued words of advise to Aramis, but the marksman would not reply, or at least, d’Artagnan could not hear any reply.

When one of his brothers raised his voice, d’Artagnan huffed quietly. “Leave him alone.”

Spoken under his breath, d’Artagnan expected no response, so when the crowd around Aramis moved closer to him he tensed. Any attention directed toward him was attention away from Aramis.

He closed his eyes and feigned sleep, but it didn’t take long for him to realize they weren’t coming to him. He continued listening to their whispered conversation, showing no indication he was awake.

“He’s gone,” said Treville.

“What do ya mean, gone?” grumbled Porthos.

“What do you think it means?” replied Treville.

The snippy comment from their captain made d’Artagnan twitch.

“This Pellisier isn’t going to get away with this,” said Porthos. “We’ll find him.”
“I hope that you do,” said Lemay. “But what of this other fellow, Arnault?”

D’Artagnan held his breath, licked his dry lips while small tremors invaded his body.

“Arnault?” repeated Treville. “No. No one by that name is in custody.”

*Can’t anything fall in our favour?* d’Artagnan asked himself. He just wanted a little hope at the end of a long dark tunnel. *Was that too much to ask?*

“They could be using false names,” said Athos. “They know we have d’Artagnan and Aramis, and their names will be spoken.”

“We assume they know we have them,” said Treville, his tone corrective and weary. “They could have escaped before the regiment arrived. There would be no way for them to know if Aramis survived or if d’Artagnan made it back.”

“And no one’s talking?” asked Porthos.

“Some,” replied Treville. “But nothing useful. They’re more concerned with spouting their message about saving France.”

D’Artagnan gritted his teeth, wondering how anything those men did was for the betterment of France. Anger flushed his cheeks and he feared his ruse would soon end.

“How many dead?” asked Athos.

D’Artagnan opened his eyes when the pause stretched longer than a few seconds.

“Over seventy,” replied Treville.

“Maybe he’s one of them,” he snapped.

Athos’ eyes turned wide when he looked at d’Artagnan. “Would you recognize him if you saw him?”

D’Artagnan sat up, swayed, then leaned back against the window sill. “Yes.”

Using his right hand for leverage on the bench, a sharp pain reminded him of his injury and he hissed a curse. “Take me to the bodies,” he said.

Athos eased him back down. “When you’re well.”

“I’m well enough now,” said d’Artagnan, shaking off his friend’s hands as he stood. “Just take me to them.”

“You’re angry, son,” said Treville. “I understand…”

“I have every right to be angry,” replied d’Artagnan, pushing through his brothers toward the bed. “And so does Aramis. But he can’t fight right now, so I have to. For the both of us. Now stop coddling me and take me to the bodies.”

Looks exchanged between his brothers served to infuriate d’Artagnan more. If they had something to say, he wished they’d say it to him. “What?” he demanded.

Athos stared at him for several beats, his lips slack and brow slightly furrowed. “All right,” he said. “Against my better judgement, I’ll take you. Then perhaps you can find your way to be angry at
them, and not us.”

The patronizing remark grated on d’Artagnan, causing a slight tremor. “Fine, let’s go,” he said. “Perhaps with a few less people in the room, Aramis might get some peace.”

Although said under his breath, d’Artagnan meant for them to hear his remark. He grabbed his weapon belt from the back of the chair and carried it with him out the door, but his anger only carried him so far, and before long a weariness seeped back into his muscles. Athos walked a few paces behind him, quiet and steady, and d’Artagnan knew he was waiting to see him falter. But the Gascon marched ahead, fighting his exhaustion and congested lungs by concentrating on Arnault’s image.

Outside in the stables, d’Artagnan found his horse, picked up his saddle and slung it over his shoulder.

“At the risk of endangering my body,” said Athos, slinging his own saddle atop his horse, “are you sure you can ride?”

D’Artagnan glared as he threw his saddle over his horse’s back.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” replied Athos.

~The Musketeers~

After watching Aramis turn his head away from Lemay’s attempt to feed him for the tenth time, Treville turned in his chair to look at Porthos across the small table. No fire burned in the hearth beside them, causing his voice to echo. “I can’t watch this anymore.”

“He’ll give in soon enough,” replied Porthos. “Aramis is stubborn, but he knows what’s best.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“So what’s the plan, Captain?” asked Porthos, leaning to rest his elbows on his knees. “Where do we start lookin’ for this Pellisier and Arnault?”

Treville rubbed his brow. “I don’t know,” he said. “And I don’t know how much the King is willing to help anymore.”

After Athos left with d’Artagnan, Treville had seen his way to speak with Louis, but the outcome of that conversation was nearly as disappointing as not finding Pellisier back at the site of the massacre.

“I thought he stood behind us?” asked Porthos. “He sent his carriage. He’s sheltering Aramis. What happened?”

Treville let out a long breath. “I suspect the Queen had something to do with this,” he said, waving his hand toward the bed where Aramis lay. “But when the King heard my report his attitude toward what happened wavered. It seems he has a soft spot for physicians.”

“Please, do not refer to those men as physicians,” stated Lemay from across the room.

Treville dipped his head. “Forgive me,” he said. “There’s been a lot of upheaval amongst the Physician’s Guild lately,” he continued, glancing at Lemay to involve him in the conversation. “And Louis seems to think the barber surgeons have a right to further their education. I’m afraid he might not be so eager in doling out punishment as he once was.”

“No,” said Porthos, his voice deep and gravely. “If they want more education, fine, but this ain’t the
“Unfortunately, they feel they have no choice,” said Lemay. He stood and came to stand before them at the table. “I’m familiar with the in-fighting within my guild,” he said. “And I see no reason why these men should not receive further education, but not just anyone can rise to the title of physician. This school Pellisier developed is neither sanctioned nor controlled, and God knows what he is teaching these men. We’ve already seen his barbaric practices. Give him licence, and who knows what he would be capable of.”

Treville leaned his head back against the chair. “Apparently, this isn’t the first one he’s established. He’s been moving about the French countryside starting up these fighting exhibitions and schools for quite some time. I suspect he isn’t doing it because of the plight of the barber surgeons so much as he’s a despot bent on delusions of grandeur.”

Lemay nodded. “The timing of the in-fighting most likely was more of a convenience that he latched onto,” he said. “Perfect timing.”

“But will the King see it this way?” asked Porthos.

Treville raised his brows and sighed. “You know him, Porthos. And how often his childish instincts get the better of him.”

“Aw, there must be at least one man who’s willing to speak against Pellisier,” said Porthos, shaking his head. “They can’t all be that blind?”

“I’m afraid they can,” replied Treville. “They love him, Porthos. He’s given them purpose, an education, when the Crown would not.”

Lemay turned away with a huff. “There’s probably good reason why the Crown turned them away from medical schools,” he said.

“Hey,” called Porthos, sitting stiffer in his chair. “Just ‘cause a man has no money, doesn’t mean he ain’t capable of learning.”

The doctor turned back. “And just because a man was born without nobility, does not mean he is instinctually capable of learning.”

“We can argue about this all day,” said Treville, “but in the end, it’s not our decision to make.”

“You’re right,” said Porthos. “But what is our decision, is whether or not we go after Pellisier. Regardless of the King’s orders.”

“Watch your words, Porthos,” said Treville.

“Are you saying you won’t go against the King’s wishes if he orders us to stand down?”

“That is exactly what I’m saying,” replied Treville. “But I like to think my actions speak louder than my words.”

Treville saw the glint in his musketeer’s eyes and knew the man understood. He glanced at Aramis and wondered how much longer before he could be moved to the garrison. With the marksman sequestered here, he knew the others would not leave his side, and running his garrison from the Palace would prove difficult, especially if they needed to resort to secretive measures.

“In the meantime,” he said, “until the King comes to his decision, let us concentrate on getting
Aramis and d’Artagnan back to health.”

Porthos nodded as he sat back in his chair. “I wonder how d’Artagnan’s doing over at the morgue?” he asked.

“Hopefully better than Aramis,” replied Treville, his eyes resting on the man in the bed. “His silence is disturbing to say the least.”

“Yeah,” replied Porthos. “Part of me wishes he’d wake up screaming again, just so I can hear his voice.”

Treville turned to him and smiled. “Lets you know he’s still fighting,” he said.

Porthos issued a quiet grunt, but said nothing.

~The Musketeers~

With so many bodies awaiting identification and burial, the city morgue reeked of putrification. Combined with the heat and flies the room was barely tolerable. D’Artagnan took the handkerchief Athos offered and covered his nose, then started walking down the aisles where the covered bodies lay motionless under sheets of burlap.

Out in front, Athos and the morgue attendant pulled back the coverings to reveal the faces of the deceased, saving d’Artagnan from expending too much energy by bending down.

Pale, blue and bloated faces frozen in death stared up at him as he made his way between the rows, but none looked familiar. So many dead would typically unsettle a man, but d’Artagnan’s focus kept the atrocity of the situation at bay.

Athos stopped in the middle of an aisle, and with his hands braced on his hips he turned to the Gascon. “Have you had enough?”

“No,” replied d’Artagnan. He bent down and pushed back the burlap cover of the body before him to reveal the man’s shoulders. “Why are they all wearing robes?”

“These are the men in charge of that place,” said Athos. “Most of the others were claimed at the site by family members. The rest are in another room.”

D’Artagnan looked up. “You mean the one’s Aramis killed?”

“We don’t know that,” replied Athos.

D’Artagnan stood. “Yes. We do,” he said. “I want to see them as well.”

“Why?”

“Because he killed them to save me!” said d’Artagnan, pounding his chest. “Aramis shouldn’t be the only one living with those ghosts.”

D’Artagnan waited out the long pause before Athos answered, his chest heaving with each moment his brother didn’t answer.

“If you insist,” Athos replied.

“Then let’s get on with this,” said d’Artagnan, continuing his slow walk down the aisle.
It wasn’t until the end of the second row that d’Artagnan stopped. He looked down on the face of his tormentor with a smile. “That’s him,” he said. “That’s Arnault.”

As the morgue attendant scribbled the name of the dead man on his scroll, d’Artagnan bent down to get a better look. Under the covering, Arnault’s body lay quiet, just how d’Artagnan remembered him.

A large gash revealing a protruding bone stood out against the paleness of Arnault’s forehead, indicating the cause of the man’s death. D’Artagnan assumed death had come quickly, perhaps even painlessly with such a precise blow. “Rot in hell,” he said, throwing the sheet back over his face. “You deserved worse.”

A hand rested on his shoulder, startling him. “Show me the others,” he said, knocking the hand away as he stood.

“Can you identify any of the others?” asked the attendant.

“I don’t care about the others identities,” said d’Artagnan. “Now show me the innocent.”

To be continued…
Aramis heard the faint murmurings of someone next to him on the bed and opened his eyes to see Porthos sitting on the edge. He tried to close his eyes before his friend noticed him awake, but Porthos caught him and smiled down.

Soft moonlight filtered through the drapes, illuminating the large musketeers white shirt. Night shrouded the further reaches of the room in darkness wherein the sparse moonlight cast strange shadows. Aramis heard muted creaks of floor boards settling, hushed snores and the quiet breathing of his friend staring down on him. Relaxed and peaceful from the heaviness of sleep, Aramis felt listless, and wished to remain withdrawn.

“How you doing?”

Aramis found the warm, friendly nature of his friend hard to resist, however, he remained obstinate in his silence.

“Still not up to talkin’?” said Porthos, adjusting the blanket. “S’alright. I’ll just sit here with you.”

Aramis breathed deeply, closed his eyes and acceded to allowing the sound of his friend’s baritone voice to try and seduce his troubles away.

“You look better,” continued Porthos, circling his hand around his face. “Not so disturbed.”

*If only you knew*, thought Aramis.

“Feel like eating something?”

Aramis wanted to answer, felt his lips twitch, but his voice failed him.

“Maybe later, then,” Porthos said, smiling. “Everyone’s asleep. Athos persuaded d’Artagnan to get some rest in a proper bed, so they’re off somewhere in this big place.” His countenance turned whimsical. “One day I’m gonna count all the rooms in this Palace,” he chuckled softly. “Hopefully I can count that high.”

Aramis smiled.

“There we go,” said Porthos, crossing his hands in his lap. “I knew my old friend was still in there.”

Feeling unworthy of Porthos’ contentment, Aramis’ smile quickly disintegrated and he turned his head away.


The soothing voice of his friend nearly chased Aramis’ demons away, leaving him exhasuted, but he fought to keep his eyes open despite its lulling nature. Sleep provided solace from the shame of looking at his friend, but the balls of Porthos’ cheeks when he smiled, the way his nose crinkled when he laughed and his warm, tranquilizing nature made Aramis feel safe, and he suddenly
wondered why he could not trust this man with his secrets.

“Doctor Lemay said your wounds are healing nicely,” continued Porthos. “He’s sleeping in the chair over there.” When Porthos nodded toward the hearth, Aramis glanced over. “So it’s just us.”

An urge to tell his friend everything rushed to the forefront of his mind, but the tears burning the rims of his eyes held his voice hostage.

Porthos wiped them away with his thumbs then sat back and smiled. “I saw Sophie the other day,” he said, glancing toward the window before settling his eyes back on Aramis. “Remember her? The one with the tight curls… big lips… works in the Palace kitchen?”

Porthos’ tilted his head and widened his smile. “Yeah, you do. The one I fancied awhile back. Said hello to her, but no sparks. Guess it’s gone.”

Aramis thought back to when his friend first introduced him to Sophie. Porthos had declared love, but weeks later they’d both forgotten about her.

“Ah well,” said Porthos. “C’est la vie.”

Porthos gazed into the distance and Aramis patted his knee. The large musketeer sighed and hitched his thumb over his shoulder at the door. “Treville says the site’s secure, and oh, he brought back your stuff. Your hat and pistols are in the cupboard by the door.”

Pistol. Aramis hadn’t held his in so long. He closed his eyes, swallowing back the rising bile as every muscle in his body prepared for vomiting. He rolled over and regurgitated what little dwelled in his stomach, feeling Porthos’ hand resting on his back the whole time his chest heaved and burned. When he rolled back, Porthos smiled down on him, adjusted the blanket and wiped the spittle from his mouth.

“Looks like rain tomorrow, real cloudy before night fell,” said Porthos. “It’ll be good. Might break this sweltering heat. Although… the last rainfall didn’t… but maybe this time…”

At his friend’s words, quiet pattering came from the closed window, which built in both volume and measure as Aramis watched. Soon the whole room echoed of the beating rain against glass until it formed one solid sound.

Aramis closed his eyes, remembering the water filling his cell and the screams of dying men. He jolted upright. He had to save them.

“Whoa there,” said Porthos, grasping him by the shoulders. He eased him back to the bed. “You’re safe, remember. At the Palace with your good friend, Porthos.”

Aramis glanced around. He heard Porthos’ voice mixed with the screams. He saw Porthos above him and his heart raced. “Porthos… I’m coming…”

The screams reverberated in his head, chilling and anguished. Aramis struggled to rise from the bed again, his body shivering. He could smell the dampness emanating from his prison walls, feel the cold invade his bones. “Porthos… hold on…”

“Easy, Aramis,” said Porthos, pushing him back to the bed.

Aramis clenched his eyes shut to stem the hot tears threatening to fall, focused on his friend’s touch until he understood Porthos still lived. But with the past and present still mixing together in his mind, he said, “Why are they killing them?”
“Hey, you’re here at the Palace,” said Porthos. “No one’s being killed.”

No. They killed them all, thought Aramis. But his voice betrayed him and the vile words he’d been trying to hold back tumbled from his lips. “I… killed them all.”

Porthos’ smile disappeared. His brow furrowed like an anger had taken hold of him, which eased Aramis. He preferred the hate to pity.

“I can’t tell you, Porthos,” said the marksman, turning his head away.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” replied his friend. “Like I said, I’ve got enough words for the both of us.”

“Thank you, my friend,” said Aramis. He cleared his throat and turned onto his side, every joint aching at the movement. “But I fear there aren’t enough words in the world to take away my affliction.”

Porthos rubbed his upper arm then sat back on the bed. “What happened at that place, stays at that place,” he said. “Leave your ghosts there.”

“If only it were that easy,” replied Aramis.

“All in good time.”

Thunder rolled in the distance, heralding a long streak of lightning. Then the room turned darker as the storm moved across the moon, and his friend’s form turned to shadow on the bed beside him. But Aramis felt his presence and revelled at having him at his side as war raged inside him.

Two forces, battling for dominancy, clambered and clawed their way to his vocal cords. Aramis wanted to tell him everything, tell Porthos how he truly felt, but his private, shameful side held it back. His throat ached from the battle within and choked sobs and moans escaped.

Porthos sat calm and patient, his dark shadowy form still and reassuring.

The burn in Aramis’ throat became too much to bear, his internal struggle building with each passing moment. He squeezed his eyes tight and swallowed. “I enjoyed it, Porthos,” he said.

Aramis heard a long, steady sigh before his friend replied.

“That’s understandable,” said Porthos. “Doctor Lemay said something about that. Said that drug is very addictive…”

“Not that,” said Aramis.

Porthos moved but remained close, and Aramis wasn’t sure if he should, or could continue. He wished dearly to see his friend’s face, but the darkness shrouded it in shadows.

He thought of the black, billowy form which first entered his cell. Snakes, like oil, writhing and slithering up its body. Aramis had thought it hell, the form being the devil himself, but now he knew it was a dream, an hallucination. His mind’s image of Pellisier.

But why couldn’t he see Porthos’ face in front of him now? Why could he not imagine what the darkness cloaked?

Perhaps if he heard his friend’s voice again he would see his lips moving, his eyes light up, the crinkles form around his eyes.
“Talk to me, Porthos,” he said, his voice hushed. “Tell me about the weather.”

Soft chuckling made Aramis look up, wherein he stared into the black void on the bed.

“Well, it’s rainin’,” said Porthos. “But I’m sure you knew that. And there’s thunder, but it sounds pretty far off. Not sure if it’s coming or passing in the distance.”

Aramis saw the whites of his friend’s eyes, followed by the emergence of his bushy eyebrows. “Please, continue,” he said.

“Paris will be a mucky mess by tomorrow,” said Porthos. “Don’t envy those who have to go out in it. The markets will probably be pretty bare, but I’m sure they’ll pick up…”

As Porthos continued to talk of the residents of Paris, Aramis felt the ache in his throat taper off, the tension in his muscles ease, and the persistent well of tears building behind his eyes dry out.

Porthos’ face started to fill in, his countenance without sympathy, and without judgement, only relaxed friendship.

Knots suddenly twisted Aramis’ stomach, his lips twitched, and he knew the truth was about to come out. He raised his eyes slowly and looked at his friend. “I enjoyed the fighting,” he said.

The room was silent for several seconds before Aramis spoke again. “The thrill… the energy… I loved it. And I fear I won’t be able to contain it again.”

Aramis knew his last words would trigger further questions. He anticipated the shock and confusion in his friend, but Porthos remained calm and silent.

“I’ve hidden myself for so long I’d forgotten who I am… what I am capable of,” continued Aramis. “It felt good being reacquainted. I don’t know if I can say good-bye. I don’t know if I want to.”

“We all have that feeling, Aramis,” replied Porthos. “Why do you think we make such good soldiers?”

Aramis rolled onto his back, let his hands drape across his stomach. “You don’t understand how strong it lives inside me.”

“We’ve always known,” replied Porthos.

“How?”

Again, Aramis felt the bed move as his friend shifted.

“Your steady hands in battle,” replied Porthos, his voice quiet. “That look you get in your eyes when you sense danger. How it’s like a dance when you move with your sword, and how your smile grows with every enemy you slay.” Porthos chuckled. “It’s hard to miss.”

“And you never feared what I may become?”

“Not a second,” replied Porthos. “You’ve always brought yourself back.”

“I suspect you all had something to do with that.”

“And we’ll continue to do so,” said Porthos. “It’s our job as brothers. Just like we bring Athos back when he gets lost in his head and d’Artagnan when he fights with his heart…”
Aramis smiled. “And you… When you think you can achieve the impossible.”

“Ah, you got me there.”

The bed vibrated as Porthos’ baritone laugh echoed in the large room, briefly quelling Aramis’ fears. But they resurfaced with his next breath, bringing with them a tiredness he could not fight.

With drooping eyelids and trembling lips, Aramis said, “Please promise me you’ll bring me back. No matter how far I stray.”

As he drifted toward sleep, he heard Porthos reply, “Always, my friend. May our paths never diverge.”

*To be continued…*
Many issues required discussion over breakfast as Doctor Lemay examined his patients, including the King’s wishes to visit his Musketeers later that day. Captain Treville thought it wise he remain at the Palace to supervise, or possibly deter Louis’ visit till a later date to which Athos agreed. Although physically on the mend, with limbs and wounds healing well, both d’Artagnan and Aramis still remained steadfast in their peculiar dispositions.

The discussions also led to Athos and Porthos returning to the hamlet where they first encountered Pellisier while d’Artagnan sat with Aramis. Athos hoped the time alone would resolve any lingering issues and perhaps they would find solace in each other’s company.

They left shortly after morning meal, and by midday as Athos and Porthos passed through the familiar rickety gate of the hamlet, the blazing sun assaulted them with afternoon heat.

Sweat dripping down his back, Athos led his horse toward the central square where only weeks ago Pellisier tended to the sick. He removed his hat, wiped the sweat from his brow then returned it to his head. “Not quite as I remember it,” he said.

“Let’s start with the tavern,” replied Porthos, pulling ahead. “At least it gets us outta the sun.”

They tied the horses to the post of the tavern and stepped inside, the shade of the building granting only small reprieve from the heat. At the main counter stood a woman cleaning glasses so Athos approached. “Good day,” he said. “We’re looking for someone we met here awhile back. Can you assist us?”

The woman glanced at both of them then walked away, leaving Athos and Porthos alone in the tavern.

“Guess they don’t like Musketeers here,” said Porthos.

“They didn’t have a problem the last time.”

Athos patted Porthos on the shoulder, indicating for him to follow, then went after the woman who’d disappeared into the back room.

“You have no business here,” spat the woman. “Now get out.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” said Porthos, removing his hat. He smiled and bowed forward. “Didn’t mean to upset you, but…”

Athos rolled his eyes. “But… we need answers and we’re not leaving until we get them.”

~The Musketeers~

Aramis sat on the edge of the bed, his feet touching floor for the first time in days. An ache in his lower belly caused only minor concern, his right hand, still broken yet healing rested in his lap.

He dropped his gaze from the window, closed his eyes and reached out with his left hand to the one
beside him on the bed. He squeezed and released it, but did not let go. “I’m sorry, d’Artagnan,” he said.

“For what?” asked the Gascon.

Aramis looked at him. “For trying to kill you.”

“Already forgotten,” replied d’Artagnan.

Aramis leaned forward, buried his face in his left hand. “Don’t feed me lies,” he said, sighing. “I haven’t the patience for coddling or being patronized.”

“I know what you mean,” replied d’Artagnan.

Aramis sat up. “I’m sure you do,” he said. “But what now? What are we to do with ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” said d’Artagnan. “Get through this somehow, I suppose.”

“I agree,” replied Aramis. He glanced surreptitiously at d’Artagnan, bit his lower lip. “What do you want to know? Ask me anything?”

When the words passed his lips, Aramis remembered Pellisier asking him the same question. Fireflies skittered about in his stomach, his throat clenched.

“What?” asked d’Artagnan, resting his hand on Aramis’ shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Aramis hung his head. “Pellisier said the same thing to me.” He turned slowly to d’Artagnan. “And I asked about you.”

“You knew I was there the whole time?”

Aramis shook his head. “Not at first. I was alone, without food, water and… hope.” The devil and his minions from hell entering his cell flashed into his mind and he flinched. “Then someone came,” he said after a moment. “Pellisier. He spoke of another Musketeer, but did not divulge your name. I didn’t know who, only that they… you… were punished for my disobedience.”

D’Artagnan looked down at his bandaged hand, flexed his fingers.

“When did that happened?” asked Aramis.

The young Gascon sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “Several days after I woke up. Maybe a week. These… guards I guess, came in and broke it for no reason. They just entered my room, said nothing and then one smashed it with their foot. I never knew why. It served no purpose. They didn’t ask me anything…”

“I’m sorry,” said Aramis. “It was my fault. I couldn’t… I couldn’t control my anger.”

“And you shouldn’t have had to,” replied d’Artagnan.

Aramis took the young man’s injured hand into his own, stroked his thumb over the sensitive injury. “But you were hurt because of me.”

D’Artagnan pulled his hand back, hid it behind his back. Strange shadows crossed his face as he contorted it, and Aramis feared it reflected anger.

“Words can’t express…”
“Bygones,” said the Gascon. “We survived. That’s all that matters.”

The words did little to settle Aramis’ guilt. “There’s so much we don’t know,” he said, sitting up. “Understanding what happened might help us get through this, so please, at the risk of repeating Pellisier, ask me anything.”

D’Artagnan’s lips thinned, he stared at his lap. “Did you, uh… did you ever meet, Arnault?”

~The Musketeers~

The interrogation of the barmaid led Athos and Porthos to the man who had previously greeted them in the village square when last they visited. The haggard clothed man grumbled as he attempted to shoe his horse with one arm.

“What do you want?” he asked, turning his back on the musketeers as they entered the stable.

“A moment of your time,” said Athos, crossing his arms over his chest. “We’re the King’s Musketeers…”

“I know who you are,” spat the man, the broken shoe he removed clanging as it landed in a bucket.

Porthos passed him one from off a table, which the man snatched from his hand.

“You’re welcome,” said Porthos.

“You have nothing to thank you for,” said the man. “Now get on with y’er business and be on your way.”

“Tell me about the physician who visits your village,” said Athos. “Pellisier.”

“He don’t come ’round here anymore thanks to you kind sirs,” replied the man. He stood back, rubbed his shoulder then spit on the ground.

“How did you come to know him?” asked Athos.

When the man didn’t respond, Porthos approached and squeezed the man’s good shoulder. “I believe my friend just asked you a question. You don’t want to be rude, do you?”

The man flinched under the strain. “What difference does it make anyway?” he said. “It’s over. You’ve ruined everything. Made everything I did mean nothin’.”

Athos rolled his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“This, Pellisier, you seek,” said the man. “He sought me out for his next… champion. If I fought in his matches, he promised to help my people with medicine and such.”

Porthos looked the man up and down. “Why you?” he asked.

The man’s gaze fell to the ground at his feet. “I make deliveries to the Comte de Ferette,” he replied. “It seems someone there spotted me and a few days later Pellisier came ‘ere and offered some of us men jobs in return for their… services.”

The man looked around, his eyes drawn and body slumped. “As you can see, we needed it.”

Porthos frowned, his head tilted to the side, but Athos stopped him before he spoke. “Thank you,” he said, pulling his friend toward the door. “We’ll bother you no further.”
“See that you don’t,” called the man, as they left the stable.

As they walked toward their horses, Porthos kept looking over his shoulder. “Why does that name seem familiar?” he asked. “You know the Comte de Ferette?”

“No,” replied Athos. “But we both know where to find him.”

Porthos stopped, hitched his thumbs on his belt. “We do?”

“D’Artagnan and Aramis delivered a letter to him in Le Mans,” he replied.

～The Musketeers～

“No,” replied Aramis. “I never heard the name, Arnault. Who was he?”

D’Artagnan stood and walked to the window where he crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t know for sure if that’s his name. I heard it spoken through a door.”

“That’s right,” said Aramis. “I vaguely remember someone saying no one spoke to you.”

“Not once,” replied d’Artagnan. “Everyday, Arnault came into my room and sat on his little chair scribbling notes, but he never spoke.” He glanced over his shoulder half smiling. “In hindsight, I guess it wasn’t that bad.”

D’Artagnan’s gaze returned to the window. “But at the time… It was…”

“Frustrating,” said Aramis. “The not knowing why anything was happening. The reasons for our capture hidden in mystery.”

“Yeah,” replied d’Artagnan. He turned from the window, sighing.

“And this, Arnault, he inflicted your punishments?”

D’Artagnan shook his head. “No, he had his goons do it,” he said. “Two men, very large. Might even give Porthos trouble. They’re the ones who broke my hand. Beat me… water torture.”

The words gnawed at him, invigorating the ache of his belly wound, which he absently massaged. He gritted his teeth.

“He’ll pay for what he’s done to you,” said Aramis.

“It’s already taken care of,” replied d’Artagnan. He explained to Aramis his trip to the morgue and of his tormentor’s death from a large gash on his forehead.

“Then my penitence has begun,” said Aramis, causing d’Artagnan’s brow to furrow. “I vaguely recall lashing out at a man near your room who fits that description. He informed me of your escape and I took my anger out on him.”

Aramis gripped his side and rose from the bed. Legs shaking beneath him, he approached his friend. “I thought you’d left me behind. I was so confused… lost… full of rage. I felt as if you’d betrayed me.”

He reached up and wrapped his hand around the back of d’Artagnan’s head and drew him near. “I know that is not true now,” he said, wrapping his other arm around his friend. “Can you ever forgive me?”
D’Artagnan cleared his throat before Aramis felt his friend’s arms wrap around him. That brief hesitation made him tense.

“Of course,” replied d’Artagnan. “You weren’t of sound mind. I cannot blame you for your actions.”

Right mind, no, thought Aramis. But unfortunately, of my own will.

~The Musketeers~

Athos and Porthos left the village heading for Le Mans confident they would not be returning to Paris for at least another day. Athos wasn’t sure what bothered him more, the possibility of his two recuperating friends not getting along, or the idea of the King visiting them with their minds still addled. Treville’s presence at their sides settled him somewhat, but not enough to steady his hands as he held too tightly to his reins.

They arrived outside the lands of the Comte de Ferette as the moon waned in the distance. Athos knew Ferette might be innocent, perhaps been blind to the affairs taking place on his estate, and knew to delicately address the forthcoming conversation.

“Do you think the letters from the King had anything to do with this?” asked Porthos.

Athos looked up. “What?”

“The King’s letters..?” repeated Porthos.

“No,” replied Athos. “I think it’s a coincidence. We were not taken, and we delivered the same letter to another Comte.”

Porthos bobbed his head up and down, frowning. “Makes sense I guess.”

Athos returned his attention to the thoughts buzzing about in his head.

“Do you think this, Comte de Ferette, had something to do with all this?”

He loved his friend, but sometimes Porthos’ need to talk came at the most inopportune times.

“Perhaps,” he said. “We’ll know of his culpability when we get there.”

“The element of surprise is on our side,” continued Porthos. “Catch him before he can come with some sort of story.”

“I planned to arrive after nightfall,” said Athos, relinquishing himself to the conversation. “After evening meal, perhaps with drink in hand and full belly. He’ll be more pliable.”

The lanterns of the estate gate appeared and the two Musketeers passed through, arriving at the front door after a long ride down the driveway. By the time they dismounted, servants arrived to assist and announce their presence. As they waited in the dim foyer, Athos looked himself over, patted his chest to dispel the accumulated dust then turned to watch Porthos doing the same.

Hurried footsteps echoed from down the long hallway. Athos suspected the Comte and stood taller out of propriety. But when the man came around the corner, bowing profusely in greeting, Athos’ shoulders slumped and his head fell forward.

Porthos pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The stout man turned, poised ready to run back down the hallway, but Porthos’ large hand caught him by the back of the neck and spun him around.
“What is… running away, really?” asked Athos, the corner of his lips curling upward.

~*The Musketeers*~

By the time Treville arrived in his room, Aramis had told d’Artagnan all he could stomach to divulge. The young Gascon did not seem satisfied, but Aramis decided that some secrets should remain locked away. He felt no need to relinquish further troubles on the young man, deciding instead to keep his longing for more coca buried behind a calm exterior.

They stood in opposite corners of the room, each in quiet reflection, and turned simultaneously when their captain entered.

“I cannot dissuade Louis from visiting,” Treville said, walking to the bed where he turned and sat with his head in hand. “He insists on coming now.” He raised his head, but not his slumped body. “Are you two ready?”

Aramis uncrossed his arms and came to stand before his captain. “This is not our first meeting with the King,” he said.

Treville straightened and smiled up at him. “It’s good to see you up and about, Aramis,” he said, then glanced at d’Artagnan by the window. “You too.”

D’Artagnan nodded, walked to the side of the bed to join them.

Treville stood and offered his seat to Aramis. “But I think it might be wise if you get back in bed.”

Aramis ran his hand through his hair. “I may have stayed on my feet a little longer than I should,” he said, “but I can hardly address, Your Highness, while lounging in bed.”

“Normally I would agree,” replied Treville, “but…” He scanned the marksman with raised eyebrows.

Aramis looked down. Bare chested and wearing only his braes, his body a canvass of swirling purples and blues broken only by bloodied bandages, he flushed and covered himself with his hands. “I’m hardly fit to be seen by anyone,” he said, quietly.

Treville pulled back the covers on the bed. “Get in,” he said. “The Queen may be accompanying him.”

Anne. “The Queen?” Aramis’ flush deepened, and the accompanying dizziness nearly collapsed him before he crawled under the covers. “Why is she coming?”

D’Artagnan stepped back, ran his hands over his body in an attempt to smooth his shirt. “I’m hardly presentable,” he said.

Treville smiled at both of them. “I wouldn’t worry yourselves too much,” he said. “They shouldn’t expect to see either of you in full health. But I’ll see if I can find you men some new shirts.”

D’Artagnan nodded and returned to the window as Aramis pulled the sheets over his chest. His nervous stomach caused his hands to tremble and he hid them at his sides. All his jewellery was gone, somewhere safe he hoped. Would the Queen’s eyes search out her gift to him? Would she lay her gaze upon his battered chest looking for the cross she gave him?

Aramis shuddered. She couldn’t see him this way, not with all his shame exposed. What would she think of him? What would the King think of him? Would he see he no longer appeared fit to wear
“Are you alright?” asked d’Artagnan.

Aramis closed his eyes, releasing his breath long and slow. “Yes, my friend,” he said.

“You look flustered.”

Aramis looked up at him, smiling weakly. “I guess I stood for too long,” he replied. “I shall be fine.”

D’Artagnan didn’t look convinced, but said nothing as he stepped back. Moments later, Treville arrived carrying two white shirts and tossed one to d’Artagnan, then helped Aramis sit up.

Aramis threw his legs over the side of the bed, but didn’t have enough time to throw the shirt over himself before the King and Queen entered.

A fanfare of servants escorted the Royal couple as they crossed the floor and Treville rushed to help Aramis cover himself before they were close enough to see anything.

On shaky legs, Aramis pushed up from the bed to stand, but a delicately raised hand from the Queen returned him to sitting on the edge.

“No,” she said. “On this occasion, I’m sure the King will understand.”

King Louis looked at her, frowned, then straightened and turned to Aramis displaying his youthful grin full of teeth. “Yes, please,” he said, his voice jubilant. “On this occasion I will grant you leave of propriety.”

The weakness Aramis felt before their arrival intensified under the Royal’s watchful eyes. He wanted to hide under the covers, bury himself under layers of protection. Of course they could see what he’d done, what he’d become. How could they not see his vileness seeping through his pores, all his previous actions written across his face?

How could she not see the true nature of the beast before her?

“Thank you, Your Majesties,” he said, bowing his head.

“My men appreciate your kindness,” said Treville, standing next to the bed with d’Artagnan.

“You have been through so much,” said the Queen, her pitiful expression tearing a hole in Aramis’ heart.

“Yes,” said the King. “And I wish to hear the full report. Spare no details.”

King Louis looked about the room, his eyebrows raised in expectation. When his foot began tapping on the stone floor, a servant hurried to gather a chair and place it behind him. As he sat, his countenance resembled a small boy about to be told a great tale by his father. “Please,” he said. “Tell me of your adventure.”

Aramis clenched his jaw to stop from lashing out. Angry words stilled on his lips, he sat on his hands to stop them from forming fists. “Adventure isn’t exactly the words I would use, Your Highness,” he said.

The King’s smile disappeared, he cleared his throat and Aramis feared he’d taken advantage of the situation by speaking his mind.
“Forgive me,” said the King, patting his wife’s hand that rested on his shoulder. “You have been through quite the ordeal. Please, tell me the details so I can get to the bottom of this and put it all behind us.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” said d’Artagnan, whose face turned pale the moment the words escaped his lips.

Aramis looked at him wide-eyed and frozen by his friend’s audacity.

D’Artagnan fidgeted. “Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “I didn’t mean to speak out of turn.”

“It’s quite all right,” said the Queen, smiling in his direction. “Louis is correct, you both have been through quite the ordeal and he understands your words of anger are directed at the situation, not at him. Isn’t that right, Highness?”

The King smiled. “Quite right, my love,” he said.

Aramis sensed hesitation in the King’s voice and enjoyed watching him squirm. The King held no real power in this room. Aramis smiled, felt his strength returning and he sat up straighter. The Queen controlled Louis’ emotions, and he and d’Artagnan controlled his attention. They held information he wanted, that he craved, as evident by his forward leaning stature and wide eyes.

Aramis glanced at d’Artagnan standing off to the side with Treville and amended his previous thought. *No*, he thought. *I have the power.*

As his eyes travelled back to the King they narrowed, his jaw clenched and the corner of his lips curled up. “What is it you wish to know?” he asked, his building strength feeding his voice.

King Louis leaned further forward. “The Musketeers, d’Artagnan and Athos, told me of the politics involved in this situation,” he said. “Of the school and of this man, Pellisier’s involvement, but I wish to know more before laying judgement. I don’t wish to condemn a man whose only purpose was the betterment of France.”

Aramis stood red faced with fists clenched, and both Treville and the Queen rushed to his side, steadying him before he fell over. Heat radiated from his face, his arms twitched.

Aramis breathed out, swallowed his anger and let Treville and the Queen ease him back to the side of the bed. “Your Majesty,” he said calmly, “forgive me. I’m not quite myself.”

“Forgiveness granted,” replied Louis, his voice hesitant as leaned back. “Now tell me what happened?”

The words rung in Aramis’ head exactly how Pellisier had spoken them. He closed his eyes, steadied his breathing till he could further control his anger. “Pellisier is no friend to France,” he said.

“Why say you this?” asked Louis.

Aramis levelled his gaze on the King’s eager face. “Because I saw what he is doing to your people, Majesty.”

Louis slumped back in his chair, pursed his lips, and Aramis realized the true control which he possessed. He looked at everyone in the room, noticed how they each held their breaths, their bodies tense with anticipation for what he’d say or do next. Aramis smiled. He had complete control of them all. His next words would decide their actions, decide their emotions.
But most importantly, Aramis realized he could control his own emotions. He could let the outside world see him strong and confident while hiding the turmoil and shame deep inside himself. Pain seemed like nothing to him now, something he could push aside. The outside world would see him for the man he wanted them to see, honourable and obedient.

Inside, the beast would live, gaining strength while watching and waiting in eagerness until it could be set free.

*To be continued…*
Chapter Twenty-Five

“How am I to make a decision?” yelled Louis, pacing in front of Treville. “If what your two Musketeers say is true, this man must be punished!”

In the private quarters of the King, Treville stood with his hands clasped in front of him. “They would not lie, Sire.”

Louis turned to him. “You know this for a fact?”

“Emphatically, yes,” replied Treville.

Louis moved to his desk where he slumped into the chair. “What am I to do, Treville?” he asked, releasing his breath. “He tortured and killed many of my loyal subjects, including Musketeers and Red Guard alike, and yet his motivations were for the betterment of France.” Louis leaned forward and dropped his head unprotected onto his desk. “You’re my trusted friend, Treville. Advise me,” he said into the wood.

Treville cleared his throat. “Your Highness,” he said. “I agree. His motivations may be… admirable… but at what cost? If Pellisier is left to go about his business, there will be no one left in France to protect.”

Louis raised his head with drooping eyes, mouth slack.

Treville stepped forward and braced his hands on the desk. “Your highness, his list of transgressions stretches for miles. Kidnapping… murder… assault… human experimentation…”

“Do you have any idea how much power the Physician’s Guild holds?” asked Louis. “How many are involved? What their in-fighting will cause…”

“Have you spoken to them about this?”

Louis sat back. “No,” he said, voice filled with child-like obstinance.

Treville stood to full height. “Then I suggest you do,” he said. “In the meantime, I ask that you grant me permission to bring in Pellisier before another massacre happens.”

Louis’ breath sounded harsh as he forced it out between puckered lips. “All right, Treville,” he said. “Do as you see fit, but bring him in alive. I wish to question him myself.”

Treville bowed. “Yes, Sire,” he said, backing toward the door. “I will have my Musketeers on it right away.”

~The Musketeers~

Porthos released the gardener cowering in his grasp. “Pierre, I presume?” he asked.

Athos allowed Pierre to squirm for several moments before addressing him. “You do realize how much trouble you’re in, don’t you?” he asked. “And no, there is no escape, so don’t even try running
away again.”

“I… I… have no idea what you’re talking about, good sirs,” replied Pierre.

Porthos swatted the gardener on the side of the face.

Athos grabbed his friend’s arm. “Control yourself,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Pierre, rubbing the red welt on his cheek.

Athos glared. “At lease until we are no longer under the watchful eye of the Comte,” he continued, directing his words at Pierre. “Do we need to fetch him, or will you co-operate?”

Porthos pounded his fist into his palm.

Pierre gulped audibly. “No, no,” he said. “I assure you, Comte de Ferette has no involvement. We use his estate for the recruitment only. He knows Pellisier as the physician who sees to his people. That is all. Please, do not bring the Comte into this.”

Porthos looked at Athos over his shoulder. “Do we believe him?”

“I’m not sure,” replied Athos, his eyes running up and down the length of the gardener. “What business do you have here? Are you employed by the Comte?”

“Yes, yes,” replied Pierre, glancing over his shoulder while nudging the musketeers toward the door. “On occasion he is in need of an excellent event planner to which my skills come highly recommended. Now if you please, can we discuss this outside?”

Athos rolled his eyes and stepped aside, prompting Pierre to slouch. “I think I will have words with the Comte first,” he said. He turned to Porthos. “Take him outside and see what you can get out of him.”

Pierre gulped as he stared wide-eyed up at Porthos. “Him?”

Porthos smiled. “Yeah, me.”

~The Musketeers~

With the Royals and Treville gone, Aramis ran his hands down his body where caked dirt clung to his skin, ruffled bandages poked through his shirt and he saw sweat stained brasies hanging from bruised hips. He looked up, put on his mask of contentment then stood. He staggered, but caught himself with an outstretched hand on the bedside table.

D’Artagnan rushed over, grabbed his other arm. “Have you even eaten since we’ve been back?”

“Perhaps not,” replied Aramis, sitting back on the bed. After a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, pushed to his feet and smiled. “But I think we’ve outstayed our welcome and I wish to return to the garrison,” he said. The horror of the Queen seeing him in this state turned his cheeks hot, made his head spin.

“I agree,” replied d’Artagnan, his hand still resting on Aramis’ arm. “But you should eat first.”

The marksman looked at the bandaged hand of his friend, then trailed his eyes up his arm to his pale face where dark circles resided under his eyes. “How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine, now let’s get you dressed and presentable,” replied d’Artagnan.
“And yourself,” said Aramis, nodding at his friend.

D’Artagnan looked down his body and scrunched his face. “Yes, I could also use some freshening up,” he said.

Aramis stood straighter, hiding his grimace behind a smile when his muscles seized. “We’ve spent enough time pampered and coddled in this place,” he said. “It’s time we return to the real world.”

D’Artagnan let go of Aramis and stepped back. With hands on hips, he stared at the floor for several beats before gazing back at Aramis. “Not that I don’t agree…” he said.

“Do not second guess my medical opinion,” interrupted Aramis, firming his resolve with a deep breath. “Even Doctor Lemay has said our wounds are healing nicely, so I see no reason why we should not return to duty.”

“Aramis,” sighed d’Artagnan. “Be reasonable. It’s not just the physical that concerns me…”

Aramis threw his hand up. “Stop,” he said. His hand trembled so he thrust it behind his back. With the conversation threatening to expose his plan, Aramis turned away and strode toward the cupboard where Porthos told him his uniform resided.

“Aramis…”

Aramis pulled open the doors and yanked his trousers from the shelf. D’Artagnan’s hand rested on his shoulder, pulling and squeezing. Aramis shrugged it off and proceeded to dress himself.

“Listen to me…”

Aramis reached back into the cupboard and retrieved his sash. He tied it around his waist as d’Artagnan’s hands interfered.

“Leave me be,” said Aramis.

D’Artagnan closed the cupboard. “Stop and listen to me!”

The Gascon’s hands returned to his, clutching and snatching… skin on skin… contact… restraint…

Aramis grabbed d’Artagnan by the throat, spun him around and pressed him against the cupboard. “I said, leave me be!”

Eyes fixed on his prey, chest heaving and lips pressed thin, he shoved d’Artagnan aside and threw open the cupboard. When he closed the door, d’Artagnan no longer stood on the other side.

Aramis stared at the floor once occupied by his friend only moments ago. His breathing still quick, his jaw tense, he dropped his head and braced his hands on his hips where they trembled against his waist.

Coca…

He spun and punched the door of the cupboard with his broken hand. “No!”

~The Musketeers~

The mild burning in the back of Aramis’ throat made him think of food. The shaky legs beneath him as they carried him through the Palace, begged for rest.
“There he is!” he heard d’Artagnan call behind him, followed by Treville ordering his halt.

Running would look suspicious and instigate a chase he knew he could not win, so Aramis stopped and turned to them. “You found me,” he said with a slight bow.

“What’s the meaning of this?” asked Treville, red faced and breathing heavily. “Where do you think you’re going, and is what d’Artagnan tells me true? Did you assault him?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say assault…” said d’Artagnan.

“Aramis? Explain yourself.”

With hand to chest, Aramis swallowed his anger and bowed directly at d’Artagnan. “Forgive me,” he said.

The coiled fury inside Aramis contended with a hollowness echoing in his gut. Both lies and truths ran through Aramis’ head like water down stream, bottlenecking at his mouth. He clenched his teeth, fighting back the urge to hit something or say regretful things before replying, “Lack of food is my adversary.”

Treville shook his head. “That’s no excuse.”

Aramis steeled himself. “You’re right, Captain,” he said. He turned to d’Artagnan. “I apologize.”

D’Artagnan glanced at the floor, ran his hand down his face then looked up. “Forgiven,” he said.

Treville shook his head. “I don’t know what to do with you two,” he said. His brow furrowed, his lips thinned as he gazed up and down Aramis. “I know this isn’t your typical behaviour,” he said. “I don’t know… I don’t know how to help either of you. Perhaps you’re right. Maybe you just need to get something into your belly. Perhaps a change of scenery might do you two some good.”

Their Captain turned to d’Artagnan. “There are horses in the stable. Can you get him back to the garrison?”

“I’m fully capable…”

Treville glared at Aramis. “I’m not talking to you.”

D’Artagnan cleared his throat. “We’ll be fine, Captain.”

Treville’s stature softened. “You’re sure? You’re not exactly in top form yourself.”

D’Artagnan straightened. “I’m good,” he said. “I’ll make sure he gets back safely and get some food in him.”

“Make sure that you do,” replied Treville. “Now go before I change my mind. I’ll be returning to the garrison shortly, but first I have business to attend.”

Aramis gritted his teeth as he smiled his thank-you. When d’Artagnan put his hand on his shoulder, nudging him down the hall, Aramis trembled from fighting back the urge to throw it off and run.

_How dare you treat me as a child? Who do you think I am? You think I need an escort? A governess?_

D’Artagnan was looking at him so Aramis stifled his angry thoughts.
“You sure you’re alright?” asked the Gascon.

Aramis forced a smile and picked up the pace. “Let’s just get to the stables,” he said.

~The Musketeers~

Athos sauntered down the front stairs of the estate as Porthos tugged on the ropes around Pierre’s wrists which secured him to his horse.

“Anything?” asked the swordsman.

Porthos smiled. “Couldn’t get ‘im to shut up.”

Athos checked for bruises on Pierre, and seeing none, realized the extent of Porthos’ formidable stature.

With Pierre secure, Porthos mounted his horse. “The Comte have anything to say?”

Athos smirked. “Only that we remove this man from his property,” he said, staring at the bound man behind Porthos’ horse. “And he didn’t much care how.”

“And you think this Comte is on the level?”

Athos raised his foot into the stirrup and looked at his friend. “Him, I believe,” he replied, then swung himself up into his saddle.

Porthos spurred his horse forward, and Pierre lurched forward. Their prisoner grumbled under his breath as he stumbled behind the horse.

Athos sighed. “This should be fun.”

~The Musketeers~

With the streets of Paris littered with bustling citizens, Aramis found it easy to lose d’Artagnan in the crowd. He opted for the secluded tavern around the corner to drown his anger and feed his empty stomach, and released his horse to find its own way back to the stables before he stepped inside the dimly lit establishment. Wine would not quench his urge, but alcohol would at least dim the flame burning in his gut.

The hassle of pushing through the crowd made his skin crawl, so he took the table nearest the door and waved to a barmaid.

“What can I get ‘cha?” asked the approaching woman.

“Food and wine,” replied Aramis. “And not necessarily in that order.”

The barmaid swung her hip to the side. “You seem troubled?”

“And it’s none of your business,” replied Aramis. “Now please, before I pass out.”

Aramis dropped his head into his hands, scrubbed his face then sat back in his chair. The woman returned moments later and he accepted his food with nothing more than a half-hearted smile.

The familiar twitching of his muscles returned, his skin burned and his restrained fury gnawed at his gut.
Aramis shook himself, dispelling the image of d’Artagnan’s battered body lying in a heap on the floor. It was a possibility he could not ignore, for each passing moment his desire to lash out was getting harder to suppress. Coca could control him, but he was at a loss at how to obtain more.

Aramis slammed his fist on the table, grabbed the glass of wine and poured it down his throat in one solid gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and put the glass back on the table where it vibrated on the wooden table.

He picked up the spoon to stem his trembling and dug into the sloppy, brown mess on his plate, shovelling in several bites of food before stopping to breathe.

A commotion across the tavern caught his attention and he looked up. Two brutish men stood over another, one brandishing a crude knife while the other flexed his fingers.

Aramis smiled. “Just what I need,” he said, pushing his chair back.

He pulled his pistol from his belt as he shoved through the building crowd of on-lookers. Loaded and charged by the time he arrived, he pressed the muzzle into the back of the knife-wielding man’s head. “Please,” he said. “Give me an excuse to squeeze the trigger.”

The only sound in the tavern came from the knife as it clanged on the floor.

“Now turn around,” said Aramis.

The man turned with his hands hovering near his ears.

“That was too easy,” sighed Aramis, dropping his pistol. “I expected more fight from someone built such as yourself.”

“Put that weapon away and I’ll give you a fight,” replied the man.

“A man after my own heart,” said Aramis, holstering his pistol.

“Hey! No fighting in my establishment!” yelled the tavern owner, pushing his way through the crowd. “Take it outside!”

Aramis sighed then swung an arm, his fist landing in the middle of the owner’s face, stilling his argument. Aramis shook out his broken hand and smiled at his previous challenger. “Now that that’s taken care of,” he said. “Shall we begin?”

The battle ended quickly with Aramis standing over the two men, wiping his hands as they climbed their way up from the floor, bloodied and bruised. Aramis turned to return to his table, his body relaxed and his hands steady, when the door banged open and three Red Guards entered.

The patrons of the tavern hustled back, giving the Guards a wide berth, while Aramis sat at his table, turning his back on the Cardinal’s men.

Aware of the tavern owner pointing him out, Aramis filled his glass with wine, sat back in his chair and sipped slowly.

“On your feet,” said one of the Guards, his meaty hand squeezing the marksman’s shoulder.

Aramis shrugged it off. “I believe those are the men you’re looking for,” he said, dipping his head toward the bruised troublemakers, still groaning and rubbing their wounds.

“I said… on your feet, Musketeer.”
With calculated moves, Aramis put his glass down and slowly rose to his feet. Face to face with the three Guards, adrenaline coursed through his veins once again. “Perhaps I’m not finished yet,” he said.

One of the Guards furrowed his brow. “What’re you talking about?”

Aramis smiled, swung his arms out to his sides offering his body. “Do we have a problem?” he asked. “I certainly hope we have a problem.”

The Guard in front narrowed his gaze. “You’re Aramis,” he said.

“My name precedes me,” replied the marksman.

“I heard you were the only survivor,” said the Guard.

Aramis’ smile disappeared. His muscles tensed.

“There were Red Guards held prisoner there, ya know,” continued the Guard. His scowl deepened as he took one step forward, bringing him toe to toe with the Musketeer. “How’d you survive?”

Aramis sighed. “Skill I suppose,” he replied, brushing imaginary dirt from the Guard’s shoulders. “And unless you want a demonstration, I suggest you back up.”

The other Guards closed the gap around them. “Like fighting, do ya?” one asked, his fingers working the knot of his cape. “How ‘bout with these odds?”

Aramis stood taller and stared into the eyes of the Guard before him. “You should check your details before you let your men spout such threats,” he said.

“Shut him up!” said the third Guard.

Aramis’ lunged forward and tackled the Guard before him, rolled him onto his back and slid out the knife he knew the Guards kept hidden in their belts. He tossed the blade into the shoulder of one of the standing Guards then scrambled to his feet.

The space around them grew bigger as the patrons scuttled back, leaving Aramis, chest heaving, eyes cold and menacing, glowering at the remaining Guard.

The marksman circled his opponent like a wolf to its prey. His surroundings blurred, the roar of a crowd filled his ears and the corner of his mouth twitched up.

The Guard gulped, reached out, grabbed the closest patron and held him to his body. “Wouldn’t want to hurt an innocent bystander, would ya?” he said, his smile only serving to entice Aramis’ eagerness to fight. “I hear the Musketeers are honorable men?”

“I’m going to beat you death,” replied the marksman, slow and steady. Then he nodded to the Guard on the floor. “With him.”

The Guard gulped but stood firm. The he pulled out his knife and held it to the patron’s throat. “I suggest you stand down before I do something rash. You wouldn’t want to tarnish your reputation now would you?”

Aramis glanced over his shoulder, saw the door. When he looked back at the Guard with the patron squirming in his arms, he sighed. “Honour evades me at this moment,” he said. “And I regretfully don’t care what you do to him.”
Aramis turned and exited the tavern.

The streets of Paris were alive with people, so with Aramis’ depleted adrenaline weighing his body down, he stumbled past them on shaky legs that threatened to collapse beneath him. The blood fueling his limbs rushed back to his stomach. His belly spasmed, churning what little contents it possessed. His limbs shook, the bones of his broken hand vibrating against each other, pinching nerves and poking tendons.

He ducked into an alleyway, slumped against the nearest wall and slid downward to his hands and knees. Every ounce of food and wine in his stomach made its way up his throat until his belly turned into a hollow pit.

“Pellisier,” he whispered.

His arms twitched, his body dropped an inch closer to the wet, mucky ground. “I need you…” When his elbows yielded under the strain of his heavy body he collapsed.

To be continued…
D’Artagnan caught the tip of Aramis’ feathered hat as it bobbed and weaved through the crowd, cursing under his breath when it disappeared behind a merchant stall.

“Damn it, Aramis,” he hissed, climbing down from his horse. He moved faster on foot, backtracking through the crowd as he followed after his friend.

He stopped in the middle of the street, lifted onto his toes for a better advantage as angry pedestrians shuffled past. “I’d take this personally if I didn’t know any better,” he muttered softly, lowering himself back to the ground.

Shrieks echoed in the streets, and several bodies collided with his, shoving him sideways. Bellowed curses rose above the screams as merchants and shoppers scattered. D’Artagnan rose back onto his toes. His eyes bulged, his jaw slackened, and he spun away just in time to avoid a trampling from Aramis’ horse as it ran past.

Pulling his own horse behind him, d’Artagnan followed after the animal, catching it a few blocks away. He spotted a child playing in the streets, called him over and dropped a few coins into his hand. “Take these horses back to the Palace stable,” he said, hurriedly. “Tell them, a Musketeer sent you.”

As he stood in the middle of the street once again, d’Artagnan needed a moment to catch his breath and temper his frenzied thoughts.

Despite Aramis laying hands on him earlier that morning, d’Artagnan had given him the benefit of the doubt. Given as a gesture of trust, d’Artagnan now regretted forgiving his friend so quickly for his violent outburst, for perhaps it wasn’t a kind hand Aramis needed, but rather a stern one.

His instincts told him to safeguard Aramis, and the thought of finding him embroiled in destructive behaviour, pushed d’Artagnan to fight off his own failing body and find him quickly. He ran back to where last he saw Aramis, frustrated that his congested lungs and weakened legs slowed his progress.

When he arrived at the spot where Aramis had disappeared, d’Artagnan bent over, braced his hands on his knees and considered his next move. The marksman’s earlier excuse for his behaviour was lack of food, so d’Artagnan sought out the closest tavern.

He found one a half block away and made his way toward what he hoped would be a calm, and satiated Aramis, but when he stepped inside, two Red Guards hovering near the door turned to him. His stomach clenched as one of the Guards stepped forward, exposing a third Guard sitting on a chair, holding the shaft of a knife embedded in his shoulder.

D’Artagnan’s eyes went wide and he feared he was too late.

The forward Guard peeled his lips back, exposing teeth as his shoulders rose. “Musketeer.”

D’Artagnan gulped as he stumbled backward out the door. “Oh, Aramis, what have you done?” he sighed, scrambling to lose himself in the crowded streets.
Spurred on by his determination to find Aramis, d’Artagnan ignored his heaving lungs and sluggish muscles as he pushed, once again, through the crowd, mumbling apologies for his garish behaviour. He spotted an alleyway to his right, stumbled toward it and ducked around the corner. He stopped short, his breath catching in his throat when he saw Aramis sprawled on the ground.

D’Artagnan lurched forward, landing on his knees beside his friend. He grabbed Aramis’ shoulders and sat him up. “Hey, are you all right? Talk to me. Aramis? Aramis?”

Bleary eyed, his friend’s head lolled to the side.

D’Artagnan pushed aside his need to catch his own breath, and hoisted Aramis to his feet. He dragged his friend further into the alley and away from searching Guards to where the lane exited on another street.

His feet stumbling over the cobblestones, his brother’s weight heavy on d’Artagnan’s shoulder, the Gascon dragged Aramis through the streets back to the garrison where he deposited him in the marksman’s bed.

D’Artagnan dropped into a chair and stretched his legs out before him, letting his tired muscles relax and his breathing return to normal. He watched Aramis laying on his stomach with an arm draped over the side of the bed, his vacant gaze fixated on the floor.

D’Artagnan leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head. He thought about how many times Aramis insisted he was fine, and at times, even appeared well, and shook his head. “You’re not fine, Aramis,” he said.

Aramis blinked, but his stare never roamed from the floorboards.

“I should be angry at you for what you just did. You know I have to tell the Captain?”

Still reticent, Aramis closed his eyes and d’Artagnan sat back with a deep sigh, his eyes darting around the room, looking anywhere but at his friend.

D’Artagnan shifted in his seat, one leg bouncing incessantly. He ran a hand down his face and repositioned himself. A twitch of Aramis’ dangling hand drew his unwitting gaze to the marksman’s bruised knuckles.

The scars and bruises on his friend’s hand reminded him of his own damaged hand. He leaned forward, remembering how the guards had stomped on his own fingers, and wondered how Aramis received his injuries. Did the broken skin of Aramis’ index finger happen while killing a man? Were the bruises on his thumb from someone trying to break it? Was the swelling from an opponent, or did Aramis inflict the injury himself?

D’Artagnan shook himself, dispelling the trance. Aramis had done unspeakable things to save him, and it weighed on d’Artagnan like a burnt log slung over his shoulders. Saying thank-you seemed inadequate, and would only fall on deaf, guilt-ridden ears.

“What am I going to do?” he sighed.

Again, d’Artagnan thought about what happened to them at the school. These thoughts had plagued him many times since their return to the Palace; each time, making him dizzy as so many memories and emotions contended for attention. And with Aramis running away from him that morning, d’Artagnan surmised his friend didn’t trust him enough to share his pain, which deepened his unease.

“I’m frustrated… I’m angry… I should wring your neck…”
D’Artagnan froze, his heart seemed to stop, and he feared his harsh words might instigate Aramis’ recently capricious temperament. He felt like they were two men riding a raft down a turbulent river, and one wrong move, one wrong word, would disrupt their precarious state and send them both flailing into the water.

But Aramis remained calm, which allowed d’Artagnan’s heart to start beating again. He shook his head, surprised by his own reaction.

He sat back to make himself comfortable, knowing it was going to be a long while before Treville returned to the garrison. Several Musketeers had witnessed their hurried arrival, and along with well wishes, they’d helped d’Artagnan put Aramis to bed then sent food and wine up to Aramis’ room.

D’Artagnan looked at the untouched plate of cheese and bread on the table. He didn’t want it anymore than Aramis did, and he pushed it out of his line of sight. Aramis had spoken of how he’d been refused food and water for days, he’d spoken of how weak and desperate he’d become, and of the nightmares he’d experienced. Guilt swept through d’Artagnan, for he’d been fed since the moment he’d woken in his cell.

His cell… empty and alone, chains clanging and bones broken.

The world seemed to shift around d’Artagnan, colours swirled together until he was surrounded in blackness. As if pulled across space and time, he was laying on the cold stone floor of his cell, throat clenching around trapped water, his bandaged hand stinging and clumsy. His stomach clenched, his heart pounded…

D’Artagnan shuddered, dispelling the vivid memories and closed his eyes. But the darkness brought with it the endless silence he’d endured during his imprisonment, of his long days of solitude.

It suffocated him as it pressed in around him like earth thrown on his grave.

D’Artagnan longed to hear noise. Any noise.

A bang jolted him and his eyes flew open, his heart raced as he scanned the room.

Everything was still. Aramis lay quiet on the bed, nothing had fallen to the floor.

D’Artagnan breathed in slow and deep. “It’s in my head,” he said. “Only in my head.”

_Bang. Crash. Thud._

The music of the devilish orchestra reverberated in his mind and he yearned for the silence once again. Would he flinch every time a door slammed or a pistol fired? Later, when he slept, would he wake panting and sweat drenched every time the band entered his dreams?

His time to heal, to forget, could stretch for days, possibly months or even years. He knew the massacre at Savoy still haunted Aramis, and that occurred five years ago.

D’Artagnan swallowed, tilted his head back until the muscles of his neck reached their limits. “What am I going to tell Treville?”

“Tell him the truth.”

D’Artagnan righted his head to find Aramis’ staring at him, his lips parted and still.

“Aramis…” he sighed, sitting forward.
“Tell him the truth, d’Artagnan,” repeated the marksman. “I deserve what is to come.” Then he closed his eyes.

The words turned d’Artagnan’s heart to stone, sitting heavy in his chest to which he scrunched his face to stem the ache. How could he betray his friend?

Honour clashed with censure, truth with lies. D’Artagnan wrapped his head in his hands and dropped it between his knees. His cheeks ached from clenching his teeth too tightly, his head throbbed from fighting back tears.

He felt like a fickle stallion running through a crowded forest, but he had to make a decision, do the right thing. So when Treville arrived later that evening to find him still sitting in Aramis’ room, d’Artagnan spoke in great detail of how Aramis ate a full meal, drank plenty of water and retired to his bed without mishap.

To be continued…
With Pierre stumbling behind Porthos’ horse, the return to Paris for the two Musketeers progressed slowly.

“You say Pellisier is moving toward Le Havre?” asked Athos, glaring back at their prisoner.

Pierre dragged his forehead across his shoulder. “Water first.”

Seeing Pierre red-faced and panting reminded Athos of his own clinging shirt and sweat dampening the insides of his legs, so he relented to the request. He directed Porthos to a stream off the trail where they dismounted and unpacked enough provisions for a short rest.

Porthos pushed Pierre to the ground, passed him a water skin, then stood above him with his arms crossed. “You were saying something about Le Havre?”

“Actually, I wasn’t,” replied Pierre.

Porthos grumbled. “But you’re going to.”

“He will kill me,” said Pierre, with a nod. “He has people everywhere.”

Porthos squatted in front of him. “I’ll kill you,” he said. “And I’m right here.”

Pierre scuttled backward a few feet. “That is an excellent point,” he replied. “But you see, I have been without his presence for quite some time now, and I fail to see why you would think I know where he is?” Pierre levelled his gaze on Porthos’ face as he drank from the water skin. When he was finished, a smile stretched his lips. “What difference does it make? You got your men back, be content with that.”

Pierre pitched backward, rubbing his cheek as Athos’ stood above him shaking out his fist. “Where is Pellisier?” demanded the marksman, towering over their prisoner. “Tell me now, or your next words will be your last!”

“A town outside Le Havre!” cried Pierre, cowering behind trembling hands. “I scouted an abandoned estate to use for his next school!”
Athos pulled himself back as Porthos snatched the water skin from Pierre’s grasp and hauled the little man to his feet.

“Tie him back up,” ordered Athos, striding toward his horse. “And I don’t care if we have to drag his lifeless body across the countryside this time. We don’t stop till we find Pellisier.”

Porthos nodded once, his lips closed and mouth firm. “Then it’s off to Le Havre?”

Athos looked back at him. “At the next village, I’ll send word back to Treville.”

~The Musketeers~

Treville received a note from one of his recruits then dismissed the young man from his office with a curt nod. The captain took a seat behind his desk, swallowed a long drag of brandy, then slid a finger under the seal to open the letter.

He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and then gazed over the words scrawled across the parchment. He slammed back another drink before rising, the good news he’d read leading him toward Aramis’ room with the letter held tightly in one hand while the other hand scrubbed his face.

At the door to the marksman’s room, he hesitated after hearing d’Artagnan’s voice coming from the other side.

“… you’ll get past this.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“You have to give it time, Aramis. It’s only been three days. These things take days, months, even years. You can do it.”

Treville crept forward, and despite his better judgement, leaned into the door.

“I have too much to atone for.”

Treville pulled his head back. He bit his lip, put a hand on the door then knocked quietly before entering. He strode across the room with the missive held in an outstretched hand. “I have news from Athos,” he said with a smile, passing the note to Aramis.

The marksman sat up, slow and calculated, his eyes never trailing from the letter, though once the letter was in his hands, he tore it open and read quietly.

“This is good news,” said Aramis, looking up with large eyes.

For the first time since his rescue, Aramis appeared excited, which gave Treville hope that his recovery was in progress.

D’Artagnan turned in his chair and looked up at him. “What’s going on?”

“Athos and Porthos think they’ve found Pellisier,” replied Treville. “They’re on their way to Le Havre with a man named, Pierre, who works for him. Do either of you recognize that name?”

Aramis and d’Artagnan looked at each other then shrugged their shoulders.

“Well, perhaps you’ll recognize him when you see him,” said Treville. “They’re bringing him back as well. Maybe we’ll be over and done with this sooner than I thought.”
“They still have to catch him,” said d’Artagnan.

Aramis inched closer to the edge of the bed. “How soon do you expect their return?” he asked.

Treville sighed. “You know as much as I do.”

“Will he be kept in the Chatelet?” asked Aramis.

“If he’s still alive,” mused d’Artagnan.

Treville put a hand on the Gascon’s shoulder. “We are under orders from the King to bring him in alive,” he replied.

“Will they be bringing back… evidence?” asked Aramis.

Treville shook his head. “Like I said, you know what I know.”

“Of course they will,” Aramis said in a confident voice. “Forgive me. They know how to do their job.”

Treville caught the corner of Aramis’ mouth twitch into a smile, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. “What is it, Aramis?”

The marksman cleared his throat, dispersing the smile. “I’m just glad justice will prevail,” he said.

Treville frowned. Aramis conducted himself as a gentleman, but on occasion his sense of justice contradicted with propriety, and Treville wondered what was going through the man’s head. He needed to trust his men to take care of each other, and as his thoughts ran rampant, his eyes drifted toward d’Artagnan. Was he in any shape to see Aramis through this? Was Aramis’ mysterious behaviour a reflection of the Gascon’s as well?

He dropped his hand from d’Artagnan’s shoulder and headed for the door. “I’ll leave you two to rest,” he said, stepping into the corridor. When the door closed, he laid a hand on the wall, dropped his head with a heavy sigh. “Just don’t do anything stupid.”

~The Musketeers~

“Come with me,” said Aramis, squeezing d’Artagnan’s shoulders. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

“You need help, Aramis,” replied the Gascon.

His eyes wide, lips spread in a smile, Aramis stepped back. “I know,” he said. “And I know just where to get it. It’ll be our secret.”

“I lied once to protect you,” said d’Artagnan, dropping onto the edge of Aramis’ vacant bed. “Don’t mistake my kindness for weakness.”

Aramis sat beside him, put a hand on his knee. “I don’t,” he said. “But I need this. I need to find that release again before I become a danger to everyone I care about.”

D’Artagnan sighed. “What kind of release?”

He had him. Aramis knew it, and he smiled as he stood. “Nothing Porthos hasn’t done when he’s had too much to drink,” he said. He swiped a finger across his heart and laid it to rest in the middle of his chest. “I promise to pick my battles carefully.”
D’Artagnan raised an eyebrow. “Like you taught me in Orleans?”

Aramis clapped his hands. “That’s the spirit,” he said. He reached forward, pulled d’Artagnan to his feet, which required more strength than he anticipated. “You need this as much as I do,” he continued, guiding his friend out the door. He gave an extra push when d’Artagnan put a hand on the doorframe.

“Perhaps you’re right,” said d’Artagnan. “But I don’t think this is the way.”

His friend spoke disheartening words, but his body was pliable as Aramis continued to urge him out into the courtyard. Aramis hungered for the relief violence provided him, and with d’Artagnan willing to lie for him, his heart felt lighter than it had in weeks. And with Pellisier coming to Paris, he only had to stave off his urges for a short while before he could get what he really wanted.

With his liberation close at hand, and the path to what his body yearned for clear, it didn’t take long for Aramis to escort his friend through the city streets to the type of bar which typically housed vagrants.

Located off a small street frequented by ladies of night, Aramis led d’Artagnan through the maze of alleyways where men slept on the ground, seeking shelter after a long night of drinking, to a door leading to the basement of a watch factory.

“Are you serious?” asked d’Artagnan, covering his nose with a handkerchief as they stepped inside.

Aramis clapped him on the shoulder and nudged him toward the back counter. “I’m not sure I want to know what kind of urine that is,” he said. “But we’ll be too busy to be bothered by it soon enough.”

When the barkeep approached them, Aramis ordered a bottle of wine. It arrived without glasses, convincing Aramis he’d chosen the right place. He uncorked it with his teeth, spat the stopper on the floor and drank straight from the bottle.

D’Artagnan snatched the bottle with a smirk, then threw back a long swig. “How’d you find this place?”

Aramis took another drink, leaned over the Gascon’s shoulder. “Trailed some thieves here a year ago.”

“No need,” replied Aramis, then he tossed the empty wine bottle in the air and caught it by the neck. He threw d’Artagnan a coy smile and walked away.

~The Musketeers~

Porthos’ growl escalated into a roar within seconds.

“Easy, Porthos,” said Athos, using his body to hold his friend back.

“That’s him!” yelled Porthos, pointing over Athos’ shoulder as he leaned heavily into him. “That’s Pellisier! I know it!”

Athos shoved Porthos back against the wall where he held him prisoner with his own weight. “And he has nowhere to run,” he said. “Now stand down!”
Porthos bristled, then relaxed. Athos released his friend and turned back to Pellisier. He approached the desk at which Pellisier sat behind with his legs crossed, fingers steeped and his head canted to the side with a smile pulling on his lips. Athos remained calm and stoic, but his hand rested on the hilt of his sword, itching for Pellisier to make the wrong move.

Pierre had led them straight to Pellisier, where they’d found him early in the development of a new school with only a few guards on hand and several servants. Most of them had scattered on their arrival, and the others not so lucky to escape, were herded together and locked in a room to be dealt with later.

“I’m Athos of the King’s Musketeers,” said Athos. “You are under arrest. We’re taking you to Paris to appear before the King.”

“Am I to be brought in alive?” asked Pellisier.

“Unfortunately, yes,” replied Athos.

Pellisier rose and moved out from behind his desk. “Very well, then,” he said. “May I gather a few things before we depart?”

Athos stepped to the side to block a charging Porthos. “As much as I share your sentiment, Porthos, the King wants him alive.”

The smirk Pellisier wore made Athos contemplate the King’s order. “Only if it pertains to your innocence,” he said to him. “Of which I believe there will be none.”

As Pellisier gathered ledgers and filled large leather bags with vials and bottles, Athos felt himself being pulled toward the door.

“Can’t I rough him up just a little bit?” asked Porthos. “Treville’s missive said nothing about roughhousing.”

Athos sighed as Pellisier moved about the room, calm and collected. “If he steps out of line,” he said to Porthos, “you have my complete authority to do as you wish. But only if I don’t get to him first. In the meantime, we should gather what evidence we can. Make sure Pellisier doesn’t destroy or neglect to bring anything.”

As Porthos followed after Pellisier, nudging him and hovering over his shoulder, Athos blocked the doorway and scanned the room. “Don’t forget to check to wardrobe,” he said, “and for any hidden drawers in the desk.”

He said these things to incite reactions out of Pellisier, for he had full confidence in Porthos’ abilities to collect evidence. “All ledgers and monies should come with us as well.”

When Porthos indicated everything was found, and he’d slung a full saddlebag over his shoulder, Athos stepped back into the middle of the room. “Your time is up,” he said to Pellisier.

As Athos escorted their prisoner out the door, Porthos fell into step behind them. “What about the others?” asked the large Musketeer.

“We haven’t the resources to arrest them all,” replied Athos. “And I have full faith Pellisier will divulge their names when the time is… appropriate. We’ll send men back to guard them from the nearest village until we can send for them.”

“Ah, you insinuate torture is in my future,” said Pellisier. “You underestimate my importance to this
Athos rolled his eyes and shoved Pellisier from behind. “Shut up.”

While escorting Pellisier through the estate, Athos considered how early it was in the development of the school. Unlike the last estate, the halls were not littered with robed men carrying books. He glanced at the bare, plaster walls as they entered the main foyer, looked up and saw the chandelier draped with cloth. The floor beneath his feet reflected a shine dimmed by a thin layer of dust. “I guess we'll have to add trespassing to your list of transgressions,” he said.

“I assure you,” replied Pellisier. “This estate has been abandoned. It came highly recommended by a very loyal, and astute, colleague of mine.”

Porthos laughed. “Don’t know how astute he is,” he said.

Pellisier stopped and looked at him with a frown.

“If you are referring to Pierre,” said Athos. “You may wish to re-think your description of him.”

When they stepped outside, Pierre was sitting hogtied on the ground behind Porthos’ horse. “Do you have horses?” Athos asked, looking toward the stable.

“We have one,” replied Pellisier, shaking his head at the man on the ground.

“Then you two can share,” stated Porthos, patting Pellisier on the shoulder hard enough to knock him forward. “I ain’t wasting any time walking you two back to Paris.”

“Yes,” said Pellisier, narrowing his gaze on Pierre. “It will give us plenty of time to… talk.”

~The Musketeers~

The patrons of the tavern, with their smoke stained doublets and oil smeared shirts, bustled around d’Artagnan, knocking him left and right, stepping on his toes, spitting and belching, and making no apologies for their behaviour. Whatever remorse d’Artagnan harboured over picking a random fight, dissipated with a sigh. If anyone was to get hurt, he surmised they probably deserved it.

D’Artagnan sighed, and watched Aramis push through the crowd. He followed after him, a lump forming in his throat. At some point, Aramis’ plan seemed like a good idea, a vigorous fight might have helped him to release some of his own anger as well, but now that a brawl seemed imminent, d’Artagnan was having second thoughts. Aramis was a passionate man, and d’Artagnan understood his need to discharge his rage; d’Artagnan felt the same craving. And although Aramis needed this more than him, he couldn’t let his friend fall deeper into the hole he was digging for himself.

D’Artagnan quickened his pace and caught up with Aramis. He grabbed his arm, which held the bottle and spun him around. “Aramis,” he said. “Come on. Let’s just have some drinks…”

Aramis yanked his arm away and turned his back on him.

D’Artagnan swallowed, took a deep breath then grabbed Aramis again and dragged him, squirming and cursing, through the tavern out into the alley. He shoved him against a wall and blocked his escape by standing in front of him with his arms crossed, and a challenging tilt of his head. “Will you listen to me?” he asked, voice softer than his appearance.

Aramis lurched forward. “I’m done being told what to do!”
D’Artagnan pushed him back against the wall. For a brief moment, d’Artagnan considered his friend’s words. For weeks, they’d been held prisoner, so he understood where the anger came from, but after months of Athos’ tutelage, he knew this was not the way to deal with unfettered fury. “Please, let me help you?”

“I don’t need help,” seethed Aramis, stepping around d’Artagnan.

D’Artagnan trapped him with his outstretched arm, and hoped he wouldn’t have to use any more force to keep his friend at bay. “It’s obvious that you do…”

Aramis stared him in the eyes, his pupils large and jaw muscles twitching. “Get… out… of … my way.”

“No.”

“And how do you plan to stop me?” asked Aramis, his lips spreading into a crooked smile. “Anyway I can,” replied d’Artagnan. “I’m not letting you go down this road.”

A sharp pain from Aramis’ knee plunging into his groin caused d’Artagnan to double over. “Aramis,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Please? I’m your friend.”

Aramis was a few steps away before he turned around. “Then be happy for me,” he said. “I have found my true self.”

When d’Artagnan saw Aramis’ back, anger ignited in his belly. He flew forward and tackled his friend from behind, landing them sprawled on the dirty cobblestones of the alley. D’Artagnan held Aramis by the lapels of his doublet and raised him a few inches off the ground as he leaned down to him. “This is not who you are!”

Aramis squirmed beneath him, struggling to free his arms which d’Artagnan had pinned beneath his knees. “Get off! What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m saving you,” replied d’Artagnan.

“I don’t need saving!”

“Yes! You do!” yelled d’Artagnan, shaking his friend. “Tell me, what’s going on? Let me help you!”

Aramis bucked his body upward, throwing d’Artagnan to the side, then rolled onto his hands and knees. Elbows bent, shoulders raised and with narrowed eyes, Aramis appeared ready to pounce.

“Look at yourself?” said d’Artagnan, bending forward and bracing his hands on his knees. “Where’s the Aramis that preaches love and forgiveness?”

Aramis’ back heaved slow and steady. “This is who I am. Now move, before I’m forced to hurt you.”

D’Artagnan swallowed thickly. He drew in a deep breath. “Where’s the Aramis who’s true to his friends, true to his god?”

“Don’t you dare bring god into this!” seethed Aramis, lunging forward.

D’Artagnan planted a foot behind him and used his whole body to stop his friend’s forward momentum. They wrestled each other for a few moments until d’Artagnan got the upper hand and
pushed Aramis back against the wall.

D’Artagnan stared into Aramis’ dilated pupils, searching for recognition of the man he knew. But all he saw were two endless black holes that seemed to draw d’Artagnan in. His friend’s body heaved against his, sweat covered Aramis’ brow and his teeth were clenched so tight, d’Artagnan could see his jaw muscles flexing.

D’Artagnan knew he’d hit a sore spot, his friend’s breaking point, and pushed on. “What would your god think of you now?”

“He left me!” yelled Aramis. “He abandoned me in that cell to rot! He wasn’t…” Aramis’ body slumped downward, his head hung forward. “He wasn’t there for me when I needed him…”

D’Artagnan felt the weight of the world land on his shoulders and he relaxed his grip, then he supported his friend as they slid to the ground together.

“I’ve been fooling everyone,” said Aramis, rubbing his forehead. “Fooling myself.”

D’Artagnan sat back on his heels, put a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“For years I played the gentleman,” continued Aramis, looking at the ground. “Persuaded myself I wanted to help others.” Aramis remained staring at the ground.

“It was simply a mask I wore to hide the true beast I knew dwelled inside me.” Aramis closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall behind him. “I had become so good at wearing the mask, I forgot who I truly am.”

“You are a good man,” said d’Artagnan. “You are more a gentleman than anyone else I know.”

Aramis smiled and opened his eyes. “Did I ever tell you why I became a Musketeer?”

D’Artagnan shook his head.

“I wanted revenge,” said Aramis. He shifted on the ground, rubbed his back against the stone wall. “You see, I was caught with a young woman I had no business being with and I was thrown from the house,” he continued. “I wanted nothing more than revenge after that, so I practiced fencing with the best swordsmen I could find. I mastered the pistol and the musket as well. When I returned to take my vengeance on the man who tossed me out, I had become so good at swordsmanship the fight lasted mere minutes.”

“How young were you?” asked d’Artagnan.

Aramis smiled. “Young enough to allow my arrogance to guide my actions, yet old enough to know that duelling was illegal, so afterward, I ran. I took on a new identity and searched out a place in life that would allow me to satisfy my violent urges.”

“The Musketeers,” said d’Artagnan.

“Yes, my friend,” replied Aramis. “There was so much adventure and excitement to be had with the Musketeers, I found an outlet for my rage at every moment. But Musketeers hold themselves to a higher standard than most regiments. They appear in court, keep company with the King and Queen of France, so you see, I had to learn to curtail my arrogance and violence. I transferred my fervour toward woman and study, of both the church and medicine. I fell back on the manners my mother had instilled in me from a young age. She wanted so much more for me in life. She wished for me to become an abbe.”
D’Artagnan smiled, remembering how feisty and arrogant he’d been when first he walked into the garrison. “It’s called growing up,” he said. “All young men have these traits, they learn to overcome them.”

Aramis chuckled and patted d’Artagnan’s shoulder. “You are still young yourself,” he said. “But unfortunately, I did not outgrow my love of violence. I merely learned to suppress it under a guise of gentlemanly behaviour.”

Aramis sighed, dropped his hand from d’Artagnan’s shoulder and stared once again at the ground. “I fear Pellisier has broken down the wall I’ve used to contain my anger, and I may never be able to build it back up again. All I want to do is destroy things. All I want is to be set free…”

“And that drug Pellisier gave you allowed you to do this,” said d’Artagnan.

“No consequences. No remorse,” replied Aramis. “I felt on top of the world once again. My old friend, arrogance, was at my side once again whispering… no… shouting at me to take all that I could. It shames me that I have such violence inside me.”

D’Artagnan sat on the ground next to his friend and leaned back against the wall. “You’re not ashamed of your violent side,” he said. “You’re ashamed that you like it. But don’t be. We all have it inside us, and you don’t need to be one or the other. You can be both. You had that balance before, you can find it again.”

“Ah,” sighed Aramis. “It’s an uphill battle now, my friend. I’m afraid there are other factors involved.”

D’Artagnan considered his next words, wondering what reaction his friend would have. “You mean the coca?”

Aramis clenched his jaw then bowed his head, and for a brief moment d’Artagnan thought he’d gone too far. But when Aramis raised his head, looked him directly in the eyes with tear filled ones of his own, d’Artagnan recognized a plea for help.

“When I read in that missive from Athos and Porthos that Pellisier was returning to Paris, all I thought about was how much closer I was to getting what I wanted,” said Aramis.

D’Artagnan pointed at the door of the tavern. “And this little escapade was to tide you over,” he said. Aramis nodded. “Please forgive me for dragging you into this, and thank you for not letting it happen.”

D’Artagnan rolled his head back and forth against the wall. “I’m partially to blame for this, I guess,” he said. “I lied to protect you. I should have told Treville what happened on the way back from the Palace. Maybe a little discipline was what you needed.”

A soft chuckle came from Aramis. “It’s better you didn’t,” he said. “Who knows what my reaction would have been. I may have just taken out a little frustration on you.”

D’Artagnan reciprocated the quiet laugh. “Oh, you think you could have taken me?”

Aramis smirked. “D’Artagnan, please,” he said. “I may very well have ripped you limb from limb. You didn’t see me in those fights. I was magnificent.”

D’Artagnan laughed outright, a little offended, but also deeply relieved to see his friend’s jesting nature return. He patted his friend’s knee, then pushed up from the ground. As he stood above
Aramis, he reached out a hand. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you back to the garrison. And I promise you, I won’t let you go through this alone.”

Aramis took the hand and was hoisted to his feet. “My protector,” he said.

D’Artagnan laid both his hands on Aramis’ shoulders. “I’m just returning the favour,” he replied.

A moment passed where the two of them stared at each other. “You’re going to tell Athos and Porthos about all of this, aren’t you?” asked Aramis.

D’Artagnan smiled. “Damn straight.”

To be continued…
A day later, Athos and Porthos returned to Paris with their prisoners. Arrangements to gather the remaining men they’d left behind at the estate were made at the first village they came across, and on their immediate return to the garrison, several Musketeers were sent to bring them back to stand trial. But the fates of those men did not weigh heavily on Athos’ mind as he sat alone in the Wren with a glass of wine in hand and staring at a half empty bottle on the small table, only those of Pellisier and Pierre.

Few patrons frequented the tavern at this late hour, yet Athos had neither the strength nor will to move. Thinking about those two despots drained him of every ounce of energy he possessed, making lifting his glass, or himself, seem a near impossible task. It wasn’t until d’Artagnan took a seat across from him that he found the strength to break his stare with the bottle.

“Need some help getting home?” asked d’Artagnan.

“I’m fine,” replied Athos.

“I’ve been watching you from across the room for the past hour,” said d’Artagnan. “You haven’t moved.”

Athos stared at him. “You’ve been spying on me?”

D’Artagnan shrugged.

Athos turned the glass slowly in his hand, playing with the ring of water it left behind on the table. “Will we get him back?”

“Aramis?” asked d’Artagnan. “He’ll find his way.”

The tables had turned, and now it was d’Artagnan dishing out words of wisdom. Athos looked into the face of the young man before him, proud of the irony, but uncertain of his conviction. Too much had happened to d’Artagnan over the past while for him to be completely sound. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“Hand is healing,” replied d’Artagnan. “Cough is all but gone. Really only bothers me when I sleep.”

Athos smiled. “I meant…”

“I know what you meant,” said d’Artagnan, but did not further his answer with details in which Athos wished to hear.

But Athos respected his privacy too much to push. “You will have your chance to explain what happened to you, just as Aramis will,” he said, reaching across the table to pat d’Artagnan’s folded hands.

D’Artagnan cleared his throat. “When… is the King speaking with Pellisier?”
“Tomorrow,” replied Athos. “Treville will be there, but we are to remain scarce.”

“Have you told Aramis about this?”

“I have,” replied Athos, spinning his glass again. “He took to his room without saying much of anything. Porthos followed after him, and neither had re-emerged before I left.”

“He will probably stay with him the night,” said d’Artagnan.

Athos nodded then raised his glass to his lips. “Based on what you said happened these past few days, it is best Aramis not spend a moment alone.” He took a long drink and placed his glass on the table.

D’Artagnan sat back and stretched out his legs. “I knew something was off with his behaviour,” he said. “What I didn’t know…” Pausing to sigh, he ran a hand down his face. “Was how much Aramis was struggling?”

“He is not so far gone that he has lost his faculties,” said Athos. “Aramis would fight heaven and hell to assure our safety, we owe him as much to do the same for him.”

“True,” said d’Artagnan. “But are we enough? I haven’t the slightest bit of experience with dealing with addictions.”

Athos raised his eyes, which flicked to the wine bottle before resting on d’Artagnan. “I have had my fair share,” he replied. “But Aramis doesn’t need hand-holding and elixirs, he needs to remember who he is. Pellisier stripped him down to the bone. Took away everything he needs to survive. And it is our job to build him back up.”

D’Artagnan rolled his head, scratched the back of his neck. “It won’t be easy,” he said. “Aramis believes this is his true self.”

“He only thinks it’s his true self,” said Athos. “Contrary to what he believes, that drug Pellisier gave him only served to weaken him. In time, Aramis will regain his inner strength and become the man he is meant to be.”

“From your lips to his ears,” said d’Artagnan. He looked around the tavern then rose to his feet. “I think it’s time for us to leave.”

Athos looked around and noticed a few men sleeping on tables and the tavern girls cleaning counters. Only half his bottle of wine was gone, so he grabbed it and joined d’Artagnan on his feet. “What?” he asked, when he noticed the Gascon eyeing him. “I paid for it,” he said, and started toward the door.

“The Musketeers~

In the late evening, the world outside Aramis’ window was dark and empty. The garrison lacked the activity of Musketeers moving about their day and the sun’s natural light brightening the courtyard. Aramis felt in tune with the lonely, darkened area even though Porthos sat behind him dealing out a deck of cards at the table.

“Are you gonna play, or just stand there?” asked Porthos.

His friend’s voice boomed in the silence of the small room Aramis kept at the garrison. He turned from the window with a placating smile and pulled out a chair at the table. “I’m actually quite tired,” he said, reaching for the bottle of brandy sitting between them.
Small, amber coloured stains mottled the elbows of Aramis’ white shirt from where spilled brandy had collected on the table. He re-filled their glasses, leaned forward, indifferent to his shirtsleeves dragging through the wet mess on the table once again, and pushed his small stack of cards to the side.

Porthos watched him from across the table, his face slightly scrunched. “Do you want to sleep?”

Aramis took a deep breath, stared at the discarded cards.

“Play something else, then?” asked Porthos.

Aramis flicked his eyes up to his friend’s face. Playing cards did not appeal to him, nor did rest, for in sleep, visions of blood and rampage awaited Aramis. It was the last thing he wanted to do. “I’m afraid I’m not good company this evening,” he sighed.

“That’s my job,” replied Porthos, reaching for his glass of brandy. He took a gulp and placed the glass back on the table.

Aramis pushed his chair back and stood. “Yes,” he said, “my governess.” He paced between the table and his door, running a hand through his hair before bringing it to rest on his hip. “To make sure I do not go running wild in the streets.”

Porthos cleared his throat. “Amongst other things.”

Aramis returned to the table where he sat back down. “I’m not going to see Pellisier,” he said.

Porthos furrowed his brow.

“Believe what you wish,” replied Aramis. “But I speak the truth. I have no intentions of seeing that man sooner than I have to.”

“What about… you know?”

Aramis closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath. “I can assure you, I want it as much as I don’t. But this conversation is doing little to acquiesce my frustrations.”

When Aramis opened his eyes to look at Porthos, he stared at his friend with intended sharpness and firm set of his jaw.

Porthos raised his glass. “Drink,” he said. “It’ll take the edge off.”

Without breaking eye contact, Aramis picked up his glass and threw back its entire contents. “It’s a little more than an edge that needs dimming,” he said, slamming the glass back on the table.

“We’ve got plenty of brandy,” replied Porthos.

“I don’t wish to replace one vice with another,” said Aramis. “Honestly, I just wish to be left alone.”

“Sorry, but that ain’t gonna happen,” replied Porthos. “You’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

“Then I shall retire for the evening,” said Aramis, pushing back his chair. Instantly regretting his decision, he took the three steps to his bed in hesitant strides then dropped onto the mattress, landing on his back.

Aramis cared not that his boots were still on his feet or that his shirt was still tucked in his pants.
Once lying down, the addictive pulse of exhaustion moved through his body, washing away any fear of coming nightmares and rendering him incapable of movement. He tried not to think of its lulling nature, or about anything, as his body grew heavy and he drifted deeper toward sleep.

Nevertheless, his sleep was not as peaceful as its transition and he woke several hours later soaked in sweat to the sounds of Porthos’ stuttering voice.

Aramis rolled his head to the side to where his friend sat beside his bed, head down and brow furrowed. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Reading from this book of yours,” replied Porthos. “Sink… sinkro… hagromatic…”

“It sounds like gibberish,” sighed Aramis.

“I consider myself a literate man, but this,” Porthos paused and leaned over the heavy, leather bound book, tracing his finger along the text, “this can’t be real words. Sink…ronous… dia… dia… matic flutter.”

“Synchronous diaphragmatic flutter,” corrected Aramis. “It means to hiccup.” He sat up, swung his legs to the floor and leaned over his knees with his head hung low and too tired to lift it.

“You were restless all night.”

Aramis looked up, vigorously rubbed his face and then pushed his hair back. He only remembered snippets of his dreams; scrambling to find purchase on oil slick cliffs, crawling through dark tunnels and drowning in blood, but like haunted souls moving through him, he still felt the emotions the visions evoked. He shivered slightly before he spoke. “Plagued by nightmares,” he said.

“Have them often?”

“Every time I close my eyes… what time is it?”

“Morning.”

“Have you been here all night?”

Porthos flipped through the pages of the book, not stopping long enough to read anything. “Captain came by before he left for the Palace, watched you while I ate, but yes, all night my friend.”

“Go rest.”

“If that’s all right with you, I’d like to catch a few winks.”

Aramis smiled. “I’m too tired to go anywhere,” he said. “Please, you’ve earned yourself some shut-eye. I’ll be fine.” He held out a steady hand to prove his point, surprising himself with its lack of trembling.

Porthos nodded, tossed the book on the mantle as he moved to the door. He stood for a few seconds holding the door handle while looking back at Aramis.

“Go,” insisted the marksman.

Porthos nodded curtly. “Alright then.”

Alone, Aramis slowly padded around the room, stopping to look out the window, collecting the cards on the table into a neat pile, and running a hand through his hair in front of the mirror, each
task failing to interest him more than the last. He lay back on the bed, crossed his legs at the ankles and his hands on his stomach and stared at the ceiling as cloying remnants of sleep played with his body. But he had no desires to rehash his nightmares so he fought to keep his eyes open.

The smell of cooking pork wafting through his open window from the garrison courtyard helped, but although enticing, it was not enough to trigger his appetite. He heard the sounds of muffled chatter from the regiment starting their day with drills and the sun bathed his room in light, keeping the darkness at bay. Each thing reminded him that life continued outside his room, and each thing tickled his fancy to get involved, but not enough to make him actually get up, for thoughts of Pellisier would creep into his mind, ruining whatever hopefulness he had.

Aramis wanted to get up, keep himself busy, but he also wanted to fall back asleep and let the day pass by quickly.

Suddenly his brain told him to get up, and for an instant his resolve was firm, his muscles twitched and his mind was clear, but yet he didn’t move. As fast as the feeling had come, it went away and his indecision ruled once again. Exhaustion? Fear? Lack of conviction? Aramis couldn’t understand what kept him rooted to his bed.

Visiting Pellisier, although jeopardous, was an option. Pure and simple, Aramis wanted to kill the man. But the thought of acting out that plan was exhausting, and he knew the consequences would be dire. He also couldn’t ignore what Pellisier had most likely brought back with him, and how much he wanted it, but d’Artagnan’s words echoed in his head, ‘you’re more a gentleman than anyone else I know,’ causing enough disappointment in himself to keep him from trying to obtain more coca.

Keeping busy would help keep his mind from such dangerous thoughts. But facing his comrades, with their expressions filled with pity and concern, would only serve as kindling to his burning desires, possibly even incite his currently dormant violent nature, thus leading him down the road he was trying to avoid.

No, he thought. I’m not ready to face the world today.

As for sleep, although his body craved it and he knew it would help the day pass, it would be restless and leave him unsettled. He would wake as tired as he felt now with fresh images of Pellisier and coca surging through him.

It seemed an endless, bitter cycle.

Maybe the only way to cure himself of these conflicting emotions was to go see Pellisier? Face the man and face down his demons? Or perhaps end the man. End his own suffering.

As the cycle began again, Aramis reached behind his head, grabbed a pillow and threw it across the room. He screamed his frustration then rolled over and buried himself in the blanket on the bed, hiding himself from the world.

To be continued…
The silence of the King’s Court was impressive, the heat unbearable. Treville pulled on his collar for the third time, dislodging the accumulated sweat on its rim and shuffled his feet to relieve his aching aches. He stood in front of a crowd that over the past hour had been nudging him closer and closer to the Dias where King Louis and the Queen would sit and preside over the hearing.

Red Guards and Musketeers were stationed around the room and in the hallway outside, providing protection for Pellisier about which Treville held some regrets. If one of his men were to fail in their duties, he wasn’t sure how upset he would be.

There were so many victims of Pellisier’s cruelty, families and friends affected by his slaughter school, and to Treville it seemed as if they’d all shown up to see his trial. He scanned the large gathering of spectators searching for Aramis amongst them, relaxing his shoulders and returning his eyes front when he didn’t see him.

Nudged again from behind as a Count from an outlying province attempted to move forward for a better view, Treville spun around. “There is nothing to see!” he said. “Now step…”

The back doors swung open heralding the King’s arrival. Treville let out a breath and turned forward, feeling a wisp of wind cross the side of his face when the King’s entourage blew past him down the aisle. Louis took his seat on his throne with Queen Anne beside him as murmurs erupted throughout the room. With a simple wave of his hand, the King silenced the room.

Treville was called forth to stand before Louis, and beckoned into a private conversation when he neared the Dias.

Treville bowed. “Your Majesties.”

“The Cardinal is away on business,” whispered the King. “I want you by my side during the proceedings.”

“As you wish, Sire,” replied Treville, before turning to face the crowd. Conflicted about whether he was there to protect the King, give advice or watch for attacks on Pellisier when he entered, Treville showed only his confident side as he stood before the court attendees.

A soft throat cleared behind him, followed by a delicate voice. “Will Aramis be in attendance today?”

Treville glanced back to the Queen. “He will not, Majesty,” he said. “I think it best the men involved remain distant during todays proceedings. We wouldn’t want any outbursts or distractions.”

“He is well, I presume?” asked Anne.

Treville hid his uncertainty behind a smile. “As well as can be expected.”

The wait for Pellisier was much shorter than that of the King, and within minutes Pellisier was standing before Treville alongside the man Athos and Porthos had brought back to Paris. Treville had not the time to get the full background on Pierre, and had to admit he was a little eager to hear
what the small man had to say.

With the crowd settled once again. Pellisier stood before the Dias in chains, wearing a smile that Treville greatly wished to wipe from his pointed little face.

“State your name and occupation for the court,” said Treville.

“I am Monsieur Pellisier, and I am both educator and loyal subject of France.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Louis, and Treville smiled. The comment clearly indicated the King was going to keep an open mind.

Pellisier, and his companion Pierre, continued, though slowly, to regale the court with answers describing their sacrifices and dedication to France in order to ensure its prominence in history. Louis wanted to know every detail of how the school was established, how much education and experience Pellisier and his teachers possessed, where his graduates were and what they were doing, but it wasn’t until Pellisier spoke of the fighting that Treville’s interest was piqued.

“You stole loyal subjects from my lands and forced them to partake in these barbaric fights?” asked the King.

“Volunteered,” replied Pellisier.

“Did my men volunteer?” cried Treville, stepping forward.

“Hold yourself,” warned the King. “You will have your turn to talk, Captain Treville.”

Treville blew out a breath and returned to his station, breathing heavily to control his anger, but holding his tongue.

“Your men were eager to participate in my trials,” said Pellisier, his eyes cold as he stared at Treville.

Treville stepped forward again. “That’s a lie!”

“I said hold yourself,” demanded Louis. “Now explain,” he said to Pellisier.

“Your man, Aramis, was exceptionally eager to participate. He craved the bloodshed he wrought upon my other volunteers. He begged for the release from all the shackles of your regimented protocols, hungered to kill and maim.” Pellisier stepped forward. “Aramis killed four men in one night out of pure rage. More, in the time he spent with me. He should consider himself lucky I didn’t have him turned over to the Crown for his insolence!”

“This is a disgrace!” yelled Treville, turning to his King. “Neither Aramis, nor any of my Musketeers, would act in such a barbaric manner!”

“I assure the court, this is most true,” said Pellisier. “Aramis confessed to me, during one of our more thoughtful exchanges, that he felt alive during those fights. The more he engaged, the more he desired it. And at rest, he thrived on our flourishing friendship. He spoke at length of his inner secrets, his deep desires, sharing with me on a most intimate level.”

Treville laughed. Craving the furor of battle, although not his most admirable quality, seemed very much like Aramis, but revealing himself to a stranger was not. Aramis considered his privacy near tantamount to breathing.

Pellisier tightly pursed lips parted a little, then quickly widened into a smirk. “Does the name Marsac
mean anything to you?"

Treville stiffened. So many secrets were attached to that name even the King did not know. He needed to end to this line of questioning. "What of d’Artagnan?" he asked. "You kept him chained to a wall. Tortured and abased him! Did he volunteer for such treatment?"

Pellisier turned to his, thus far, silent companion standing next to him. "One of my associates, Monsieur Arnault, kept guardianship of the Musketeer d’Artagnan. But I’m afraid he is no longer of this Earth, so I shall direct your questions toward another associate of mine, Monsieur Pierre."

The small, squat man stepped forward wringing his hands. "I’m afraid, the chains were for his own protection, Sire," stated Pierre, hurriedly. "After coming willingly with us from the tavern in Orleans, he became overwrought with concern over his friend who’d volunteered to be part of our experiments…"

"I can’t listen to this!" cried Treville.

"Captain!" warned the King. "Hold your tongue. Now please, Monsieur Pierre, continue."

Treville clenched his jaw, held tightly to the hilt of his sword, anything to hold himself back.

Pierre cleared his throat, glanced quickly at Pellisier before continuing. "The young man, d’Artagnan… he wanted to join Aramis. Be part of the… the festivities. But we protected him from that sort of violence, kept him safe and secure, warm and fed in a private room unto himself. Eventually he saw reason, but disappointed he was not chosen for the contests of strength, he asked to leave. So we simply let him return to his regiment, to which he was quick to do may I add, sparing not a moment to inquire of the well-being of his comrade."

"Captain," said the King. "Did your man not return to you days prior to the invasion of the school?"

"Yes, but…"

"Is he alive and well?"

Treville let out a breath. "Alive yes, but the condition we found both men…"

Pierre pressed on. "D’Artagnan insisted on leaving in the middle of the night. During a storm no less. We tried to provide a horse, provisions, but he refused. He simply left of his own volition. I can only assume he felt no concern for his friend or he would have taken him with him. That is proof enough they both volunteered to be there."

"That is a reasonable assumption," said the King.

"I assure you, Sire, my men will tell another story," said Treville. "And we have proof of the tortures and imprisonment they inflicted on my men. Athos and Porthos, two of my most honourable soldiers, brought back ledgers and diaries of what these men put my Musketeers through." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Pellisier. "And evidence of human medical experimentation."

Treville pointed at Pellisier. "This man fed Aramis drugs that fuelled him into a rage! Stripped him of his senses!"

"The Church is adamant in their opinions against human experimentation," said the Queen. "These books have proof of this happening?"

Treville turned to her. "The books go into great detail. Monsieur Pellisier kept immaculate journals,"
he said. “We also have vials of the substance used to corrupt my Musketeer. Let your Physician’s Guild look at them.”

“That will be arranged,” replied the King. “But first, I want to hear more about how all this benefits France.”

~The Musketeers~

By the time Treville was returning to the garrison later that night, he couldn’t be sure if he was more angry at the lies or disappointed in his men over their actions concerning this whole affair. He held no doubt Aramis and d’Artagnan did not volunteer to be part of Pellisier’s experiments and school, but he felt broadsided by the descriptions of violence that Aramis had inflicted. He’d not known of the extent of his fighting, or the fact that his man had killed so freely.

Treville swung his leg over his mount as he entered the courtyard, a stableboy at hand to usher his horse away, and made his way toward his awaiting Musketeers. He stood at the end of the long table, eyeing each of them as they rose, except Aramis who remained seated with his head down and fiddling with the wooden splinters of the tabletop.

“Captain?” asked Athos, his head dipped forward in question.

Treville cast him a stern nod, but his attention was on his marksman. “Aramis,” he said, slowly. “We need to talk.”

As Aramis rose from the bench, Porthos put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Captain,” said the large musketeer. “Anything you have to say to him, you can say to us.”

Treville glared at the man protecting Aramis, knowing they’d all held back information, but also understanding why. “Porthos, sit,” he said. “I will deal with you all later. Right now, Aramis and I need to have a very long conversation. I don’t wish to be blindsided again tomorrow.”

Aramis nodded at his friend, who re-took his seat, albeit with hesitation, and rose to full height. Without a word, he followed his captain up the stairs to his office where he took a seat in front of Treville’s desk.

When Treville slammed his office door shut behind him, Aramis flinched in his seat. This surprised Treville, for he’d never seen his marksman so on edge and twitchy.

Before sitting behind his desk, Treville pulled a full bottle of brandy from his cupboard and two glasses. He filled them both and slid one across the desk to Aramis. But his marksman only stared at the glass.

“Drink, son,” he said. “It might make this easier.”

Aramis reached for the glass, hesitated, then grabbed it and downed its contents before placing it gently back on the desk. He scrunched his eyes as the burn from the brandy ignited his throat.

Treville shook his head, dispelling the same burn after drinking from his glass, then took his seat at the desk. He stared at the top of Aramis’ head, for the man would not look up. He cleared his throat and still, Aramis would not look him in the eyes.

“How many men did you kill?” asked Treville, pouring out two more glasses of brandy.

Head hung low, Aramis whispered, “I couldn’t keep count.”
Treville emptied his glass and slammed it on the desk. “So you admit to killing innocent men?”

Aramis swallowed, his hands gripped the arms of the chair so tightly Treville could see the whites of his knuckles. “Yes,” he replied, looking up. “I killed men, but I swear to you I had no control over what I was doing. And my body count was a mere pittance compared to Pellisier's. If given the choice, I would never have allowed myself to do such things without persuasive provocation.”

Treville’s breath stuttered in his chest as he exhaled, his jaw twitched. “I believe you,” he said. “But why didn’t you say something before?”

“I don’t know.”

“Son, that’s not good enough.”

Aramis shifted in his seat. “Perhaps shame,” he said.

Treville’s heart hurt just watching Aramis, so when the marksman looked at him with moist eyes, Treville’s heart nearly exploded. After Savoy, the marksman had turned into himself, burdened by not only the loss of his friends but the guilt of surviving, yet he looked so much worse now as he sat before Treville. And his silence after his last answer showed Treville it was more than the simple shame of his actions that bothered Aramis.

Something else had happened to Aramis at that school other than torture and drugs. Treville was sure of this. Aramis did not break easily, and what sat before him was merely a shell of the man he knew. “I think it would be acknowledged by most that your actions while imprisoned were acceptable,” he said. “We have the ledgers to prove what Pellisier did to you, so what is it you’re ashamed of?”

The usually charming, self-assured man before him sat silent, his gaze fixated on the wall behind Treville’s head. “Speak, Aramis,” said Treville.

“I can’t, Captain.”

“You can.”

Aramis closed his eyes, tilted his head back as he drew in a breath.

“He’s ashamed of what he’s become,” said a voice from the doorway.

Treville hadn’t heard the door open, but when he turned to the voice, he saw d’Artagnan standing on the threshold of his office watching Aramis.

“Not of what I’ve become, good friend,” said Aramis. “What I’ve always been. There is a difference.” He stood and placed his hands on his hips.

As Aramis looked down on Treville, the Captain’s stomach knotted and twisted.

“Perhaps I’m too much of a menace to remain here,” said Aramis. “I wish to remove myself…”

Treville stood to meet his gaze and leaned over his desk. “Don’t you dare finish that statement,” he said. “Because, if you’re as savage and uncontrolled as you think you are, then here is exactly where you need to be. Amongst friends. That pauldron remains on your shoulder until I’m good and ready to remove it, do you hear me?”

Aramis nodded, sat down and d’Artagnan moved into the room to stand behind his brother. “He just needs more time to let his reason take over,” said the Gascon.
“As do you,” said Treville, nodding at d’Artagnan. “You will both need your wits about you tomorrow. Pellisier is not to be underestimated. He’s spinning tales from the truth that I regret the King might be believing.”

“What kind of lies?” asked Aramis.

“You two volunteered,” replied Treville, re-taking his seat as he stared at d’Artagnan. “And he’s using your escape as evidence of this. You left Aramis behind because you didn’t fear for his life.”

“That’s not true!” stated d’Artagnan.

“I know,” replied Treville, dropping his head. “I know my men, and I know where the truth was corrupted by Pellisier’s lies, but it’s the King’s opinion that counts I’m afraid. He will render judgement over this whole affair, not I.”

“We’re his Musketeers,” stated Aramis, “his most trusted soldiers. He must believe us.”

Treville sighed. “You can’t tell the King he must do anything,” he said. “Besides, Pellisier said you killed several men of your own volition. And you’ve already admitted to me there is some truth to that.”

Aramis stood, red faced and trembling. “If you call drugged out of my mind my own volition, then it is true!”

“Did you agree to be drugged?” asked Treville.

“No!” replied Aramis. His conviction visibly drained from his body as he slumped back into his chair. “Yes. Perhaps a time or two.”

Treville chewed his bottom lip, watching as once again his marksman was consumed by shame.

“There were times,” began Aramis, staring into his lap where fidgeting hands could not rest. “When all I could think about was putting more of that vile substance in my body.”

“Did you ask for it?” asked Treville.

Aramis nodded.

“Did you take it voluntarily?”

Aramis nodded again. “I could not help myself.”

“Pellisier will use that against you,” stated Treville.

“How can we prove to the King we did not volunteer for any of this?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Pellisier needs to admit what he’s done,” replied Treville. “The words must come from his mouth. He’s laid out a scenario in which he is the hero of France. According to the books, he was trying to make the perfect soldier. He was trying to get to the heart of what makes a good soldier…”

“What makes them tick…” whispered Aramis, staring into the middle distance.

“Yes,” said Treville. “And he wanted to learn how to exploit it. Unfortunately, he found a soldier with…” He let his words trail off, unsure how to describe Aramis’ violent nature in a delicate manner.
“He wanted my brutality,” said Aramis, clear and loud. “He saw me, saw us, in Orleans, and chose me. His men recognized what was inside me… an animal.”

Treville leaned over his desk. “And loyalty,” he said. When Aramis looked at him, he smiled. “They took d’Artagnan because they also recognized they would needed a victim to help coerce you. They saw not only your violent side, but your loyalty and honour.”

Aramis blew out a breath. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Because you’re stuck in your own head,” replied Treville. “So get out of it and find that roguish slyness you also renowned for. For we need him in court tomorrow, not the down trodden victim you’re playing now.”

Several looks crossed Aramis’ face before he sat up straight in his chair, indicating to Treville he’d gotten through, so he turned the conversation back to the trial.

“Pellisier described the future of this country wrought in war and sickness,” he said. “And proved that we are not ready for what is to come. His schools are preparing young men to be doctors where the Universities are failing to produce enough. He believes everyman deserves an education, especially the barbers and surgeons who will be needed.”

“He has a point,” said Aramis. “Times will be hard and we will need more educated men, particularly more men ready to help the sick and injured. I can’t fault his motives, but surely the King cannot condone Pellisier’s methods? Louis must make legitimate changes to the Physician’s Guild, not just allow crazed men to do whatever they please.”

“Members of the Guild were present, and will be in attendance tomorrow,” said Treville. “Hopefully the right ones are there.”

“What do you mean?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Their infighting concerns these decisions,” replied Treville. “The barbers and surgeons have been making a push for more education for awhile now.” Treville sat back, dragged a hand down his face. “Bloodshed, rioting… they are not above using violence to prove their point. But most of the Guild has held firm that such education is for better men than the general population, and only the King can make changes to these laws.”

“What’s the likelihood of that?” asked d’Artagnan.

“And what are the consequences if he chooses to grant more education?” asked Aramis, dropping his head. “If he allows lesser men to study further, then is he not sanctioning what Pellisier has done?”

“It’s quite the predicament,” replied Treville. “But right now, my concern is with you two, not education. And even if Louis concedes to the barbers, he can’t believe that what Pellisier did was right.”

“I guess we’ll know tomorrow,” sighed d’Artagnan.

Treville glanced at Aramis. The marksman sat slumped in his chair, staring into his lap with a creased brow. “What is it?” asked the Captain.

“I’m not the one on trial,” responded Aramis, flicking his gaze up. “But yet it feels as though I am.”

“Your actions will come to light,” said Treville. “Pellisier will paint you as a violent monster acting on your own judgements.”
Aramis shifted in his chair, looked everywhere but at his captain. “But yet I did those things,” he said.

Treville tried to catch his gaze, but couldn’t. “Aramis, look at me,” he said, but the marksman only glanced at him before returning his eyes back to his lap. “Aramis. You have to prove to the court otherwise. I don’t know a single Musketeer who would say you were acting on your own volition. It was that coca that turned you into that monster. Even Pellisier’s journals show how you were resistant at first.”

“I was,” stated Aramis in a soft voice. “But later…”

“Son,” interrupted Treville, “you have some soul searching to do. Because if you don’t believe this wasn’t your fault, how are you going to convince the court?”

D’Artagnan put a hand on the marksman’s shoulder. “Find that balance you had before,” he said.

Aramis patted his friend’s hand. “Thank you, d’Artagnan. But I’m afraid it is not that easy. This whole experience has left me weakened, drained, and wondering if I have any fight left in me.”

Aramis paused, smiled wanly and shook his head. “There is an old saying… if one cannot beat their enemy, they shall endeavour to join them. Perhaps my life would be much easier if I just gave in to my enemy.”

“Preposterous,” declared Treville. “I don’t make weak men into Musketeers. So I suggest you find yourself again, and don’t tarnish my, or this regiment’s, reputation. Do I make myself clear?”

Once again, Aramis sat a little straighter in his chair, nodded his head. “Yes, Captain,” he said.

Treville dismissed both his men from his office, and as they turned onto the balcony, he sat back with a loud exhale of air. He tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling and ran a hand down his face. The harshness in his voice had been needed, his words chosen carefully to remind Aramis of who he was, but it didn’t mean Treville enjoyed speaking to his men that way.

“The burdens of being a Captain,” he sighed.

~The Musketeers~

Bent over his knees as he sat on the edge of his bed, Aramis dropped his head into his hands. The waning light from the courtyard torches filtered through his dirty window, giving the room a dusky glow as filaments danced in the air. A soft breeze came with late evening, blowing across his heated skin and tickling his senses. His shirt was sweat drenched and smelling sour. Aramis pulled it over his head and tossed it aside, missing the table by a few feet.

“Talented,” he grumbled with amusement, as he rose to pick up the shirt and place it over the back of a chair.

His sense of self-worth, his power was gone. Not gone. Taken, he corrected, striding toward the fireplace with a new found anger.

He suddenly felt the need to hit something and looked around the room, but the effort drained him, so instead, he leaned over the fireplace, braced his hands on the mantel. By his left hand sat a wooden box with a smooth polished finish, the latch untouched for some time. He slowly raised his hand from the mantel and let it slide over the box until his fingers touched the metal hinge.

A burning ignited in his gut, forcing him to stand back. And now that he had full view of the mantel, he noticed a large, leather bound book sitting on the other side.
He grabbed it, set it on the table and flipped through the pages, wherein a small slip of paper fluttered out and landed on the floor. Aramis picked it up, reading the note as he did.

‘Thought you might want this back.

Porthos.’

Aramis smiled as he closed the book. *Du Mortu Cordis* was inscribed in gold across the dark brown leather cover. “Two black eyes,” he murmured, remembering the conversation with Porthos which seemed so long ago now.

Aramis had been so excited to delve into the mysteries concerning the human body and all the new advancements in medicine. But now as he stared at the once-wondrous book, his heart felt heavy. Would he ever get that enthusiasm back? Were his yearnings to help others lost forever? Was he now nothing more than a bloodthirsty soldier?

Aramis turned back to the box on the mantel. Without thought, he moved toward it, his right hand stretched outward. Box in hand, he lay it next to the book on the table and flipped it open.

He flushed and stepped back. The box held his most prized pistol, its intricate butt carved by a master craftsman, its long and sleek barrel lovingly oiled over the years, and an aim straight and true.

“Soldier or academia…” he mused aloud.

“Doesn’t have to be *or*,” said a voice behind him. Aramis turned to see Athos standing in the doorway. “It can be both.”

“I fear I may never find that balance again,” replied Aramis, his eyes flicking between the two avatars.

Athos walked into the room. “You will, my friend,” he said. “It’ll just take time. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

Aramis smiled. “Actually, the stories say it was.”

“You’re not Rome, Aramis.”

“No,” he replied. “I’m a man. And they break easier than cities.”

Athos stood next to him and looked down at the pistol and book. “Man heals easier though,” he said. “They just require a single power, deep within to set them straight. No politicians, no bureaucrats… just deep seeded conviction to be the man they’re meant to be. Find that power.”

Aramis let out a deep breath. “Neither of these are calling to me,” he said, nodding at the items on the table. “Neither draws my heart toward it.”

“Or perhaps they are both equally drawing you in,” said Athos. “Choose one. See how it fits.”

Aramis closed his eyes.

A sense of power invaded you when holding a pistol, one that Aramis wished to feel again. He picked it up and waited for its essence to fill him with the moxie and confidence that once burned inside him.

A spark fluttered in his stomach, one of familiarity. It felt good to hold his pistol again. But something was missing, a hole that needed filling. He ran his other hand across the book and a smile
pulled on his lips. He was filled with both power and contentment.

There was beauty in both. The clean precision of a well aimed shot was a magnificent thing, and the poetic synchronicity of how the human body worked matched its splendour.

Aramis open his eyes and studied his pistol. Such dedication and discipline was needed to make an art of killing, one in which he’d achieved long ago. To hold back for that perfect shot required a strong mind and patience. He’d done it before, turned his unfettered fury into controlled marksmanship. Perhaps he could do it again?

He glanced at the medical text. Its pages of knowledge proved the fragility of the human body. The book reminded Aramis of the consequences of his violent nature, and it was those reminders that had helped keep his actions in check in the past. He could see the connection between the two now, and how each needed the other to keep them in balance.

To keep himself in balance.

Aramis raised his head. “Perhaps there is hope for me after all,” he said, smiling at Athos.

To be continued…
Chapter 31

Dispatched to Hell

Chapter Thirty

’Saw the darkest hearts of men

And I saw myself starin’ back again.’

The room where the hearing presided was cramped once again. King Louis sat perched forward on his throne on the Dias, eyes large and bright, lips slightly parted as he listened to the final report given by a member of the Physician’s Guild.

D’Artagnan glanced to his right where Aramis stood still as stone. The marksman had barely blinked since the trial began.

“You okay?” asked d’Artagnan. “All this talk about coca isn’t… you know?”

“I haven’t killed anyone yet, have I?” replied Aramis.

D’Artagnan turned his eyes front. “I’ll leave you alone then,” he said, under his breath.

“… the efficacy of coca is like nothing we’ve seen,” said one of the Guild members. “No one is immune to its effects. And unlike the more fashionable, heroin, which frequents the seedier dens and taverns of Paris, coca has proven to be a substantial stimulant to which we have yet to find a reasonable medical purpose.”

“That’s good news,” d’Artagnan said, nudging Aramis.

“Of sorts,” replied Aramis, in a tone that quashed the young Gascon’s spirits.

“Of all things,” continued the report from the Guild, “this drug is widespread amongst the forced labourers of Spanish silver mines. It reduces appetite and increases physical stamina. It is used to create a cheap labour force, and with its highly addictive nature and feelings of euphoria, people are willing to do anything to get more.”

King Louis sat forward. “I’m failing to see why it is so bad?” he asked.

“Sire,” replied the Guild member. “Partakers of the drug forget to eat. They whittle away to skin and bone, not caring about anything other than acquiring more. But most importantly, some say the euphoria it evokes brings them one step closer to god. And that, Sire, is blasphemy.”

“Oh,” replied the King. “There is that.”

A taller member of the Guild stepped forward, arms raised to heighten his point as he spoke. “But there are benefits,” he insisted, “if taken in correct dosages. It warms the body and removes pain. For a person living out their last days of disease, it is… it is a more pleasant way to leave this Earth.”

“So it is good for the dying,” said the King. “What about the living?”
“At high doses,” said the first member, “it can turn man into animal, your Highness.”

“This is helping,” whispered d’Artagnan.

“Yes,” replied Aramis. “Something is finally going our way.”

“This man’s opinion notwithstanding, for he is only one of a few amongst the Guild,” said the first member. “The prestigious Physician’s Guild of France believes any benefits stemming from this substance should be excused, for we deem this drug the work of the devil.”

“That seems straight forward enough,” remarked d’Artagnan.

Aramis shifted, leaned close to d’Artagnan. “Or perhaps this particular member of the Guild is forcing evidence against Pellisier. If he proves to the King the drug is evil, then by association so is Pellisier. It is good, but I believe another agenda is also at work here.”

“But it still helps you,” said d’Artagnan.

“Yes,” replied Aramis. “As long as the King is in league with the Guild wanting to keep lesser society members from attending schools of medicine.”

“Is he not?”

“That has yet to be determined,” replied Aramis.

“Well,” said the King. “I’ve heard enough. I think it’s time we hear from the men involved in this whole mess. Would the Musketeer, d’Artagnan, step forward.”

D’Artagnan blew out a breath and stepped forward. “Your Majesty,” he said, with a slight bow. The King nodded then waved to Treville who moved to stand before his musketeer.

“D’Artagnan,” said Treville. “Did you volunteer to be part of Pellisier’s experiments?”

“No.”

“How did you arrive at Pellisier’s school?”

“I have no recollection of arriving there,” replied d’Artagnan. “I was in a tavern in Orleans with my fellow Musketeers, and the next thing I knew I was lying on a stone floor with shackles around both my wrists. I woke up chained to a wall in an empty room.”

“Do you know why they did this?” asked the King.

“I haven’t a clue, Sire. No one spoke a word to me the entire time I was there.”

“Not a word?” asked Louis.

D’Artagnan shook his head. “No explanation was given, Your Majesty, only food, water and a generous portion of torture.”

“What tortures were inflicted upon you?” asked Treville.

“Random beatings,” began d’Artagnan, raising his bandaged hand in example. “Silence… followed by days of unrelenting noise.” A cold shiver ran down his spine, he clenched his teeth briefly before composing himself. “Drowning…”
The King’s laughter boomed in the cavernous room. “Drowning you say? I thought you were kept in a room? Were you subjected to this coca as well, for it seems you are delusional?”

D’Artagnan cleared his throat, but his captain turned quickly and whispered something in the King’s ear.

A moment later, Louis sat back in his throne. “I see,” he said to Treville. With face drawn and slightly pale, Louis nodded at d’Artagnan. “Carry on, young man.”

Relieved of having to rehash his drowning nightmare, d’Artagnan took a long breath and continued. “At no point was freedom ever offered to me. The only truth these men spoke,” he paused to point at Pellisier and Pierre, “was that a storm occurred on the night of my escape. And the only offer they granted me, were the bullets whizzing past my head as I made a mad dash from the estate.”

“And of the other Musketeer?” asked Louis. “Why did you leave him behind?”

D’Artagnan looked over his shoulder at Aramis. “I had no idea he was with me,” he said around the knot in his throat. “I believed myself to be the only one captured.” He faced forward, unable to maintain eye contact with either his Captain or the King. “As I said, no one spoke a word to me. I would never leave a man behind.”

“It’s alright, son,” said Treville.

“Perhaps it is time we hear from the Musketeer, Aramis,” said Louis. “I’m eager to hear what he has to say about all this.”

As d’Artagnan stepped back, Aramis moved forward to take his place before the court. The Gascon patted his shoulder as they passed. “I’ll be right behind you,” he whispered.

Not more than a step behind Aramis, d’Artagnan watched the marksman’s shoulders relax and square, his head tilt back. D’Artagnan rolled his eyes to the ceiling and mouthed a short prayer. Any other day, d’Artagnan wouldn’t worry, in fact, he’d be eager to hear the roguish charm Aramis would spew before the court. But with the heavy burden of trying to retain his innocence while also proving Pellisier guilty, d’Artagnan wasn’t sure Aramis was up for it.

Without preamble, King Louis looked directly at Aramis. “Did you volunteer to be part of Pellisier’s experiments?”

“I did not, Your Majesty.”

“How did you arrive at Pellisier’s school?” asked Treville.

“Like my brother, d’Artagnan, I woke up at the school without any memory of getting there. But unlike him, I was not chained, but rather, I was locked in a small, dank, windowless cell. I went days without food, water or human contact. I thought myself on the verge of death when Pellisier finally graced me with his presence.”

“Lies,” said Pellisier, a strange, almost sad lilt to his voice. “You were still inebriated when you woke up in the morning. I nursed you back to health with my own two hands. Fed you water. Kept company with you on an intimate basis.”

“Water laced with coca,” said Aramis. “And it was days after. I was parched, famished, and ill out of my mind. No sane man would refuse water under those conditions, even if they knew what they were given, to which I did not.”
“Did you take the coca voluntarily?”

D’Artagnan braced himself, anxious, yet fearful to hear Aramis’ response.

“At first I did not,” replied the marksman, voice flat and steely. “I didn’t know it was in the water when first the drink was presented to me. But once under the thralls of its addiction, I’m ashamed to admit that I did.”

Louis sat back, turned to his Queen beside him whose drooping eyes and thinly pressed lips made d’Artagnan’s heart miss a precious beat. The two royals conversed quietly for a moment then Louis looked at Aramis, a frown marring his young features. “Did you kill innocent men during your time with Pellisier?”

“I saw the darkest hearts of men in that school,” replied Aramis. “And at times, I saw myself staring back at me. I cannot account for the innocence or guilt of the men I fought under Pellisier’s direction,” he continued, after a deep breath. “But yes, I took several lives without intimate provocation.”

Murmurs and shouts erupted in the court. D’Artagnan turned and glared at the crowd, then looked over at Athos and Porthos standing to the side, equally perturbed by the outburst.

“Let him finish!” called Treville’s voice, from the front of the room. When the crowd hushed, their captain looked at Aramis. “Did you kill these men of your own free will?”

D’Artagnan held his breath.

“From the moment I was forced to take the coca my free will was taken from me,” replied Aramis. “From the moment I learned of my comrade’s imprisonment, my free will became the object of play for Pellisier. I chose to fight to save my friend, but I did not choose to kill. The blood of those men that died, Your Highness, lies in the hands of Pellisier.”

“I ordered no such thing!” cried Pellisier, and the crowd erupted again.

As Treville and the King tried to settle the court, d’Artagnan caught sight of Aramis smirking at Pellisier. “What are you up to, Aramis?” murmured d’Artagnan.

“Quiet!” shouted Treville, his voice booming over the din of noise.

When the crowd settled, Aramis faced forward, pulled his shoulders back, held his head high, and d’Artagnan suspected his comrade was in complete control of the situation.

“Monsieur Pellisier,” said the King. “Do you wish to say something?”

Pellisier cleared his throat, smoothed down the front of his cossack and stepped forward with his nose slightly lifted. “I never asked this man to kill anyone,” he said. “My intentions were quite clear with him. The fights were simply for sport. It was an atrocity that some men died, and one that I can never forgive myself for. I held all their lives in great regard.”

Pellisier looked at ground conveying an innocence d’Artagnan did not believe, and hoped the King did not either.

“If this man did not condone my actions, why did he not stop me?” asked Aramis of the King. “Why did he not have me arrested? He was in complete control of the situation at that school, therefore had the authority to stop whatever displeased him.” Aramis turned slowly to Pellisier. “Or were you not so in control?”
“That is an excellent question,” said Louis, a single eyebrow raised as he turned to Pellisier.

Slight tremors erupted under the cossack of Pellisier, his face turned red. D’Artagnan saw the tension in the man’s face as he tried to hold himself together, and hoped the King recognized Pellisier coming undone.

“I… I was trying to give this man the benefit of the doubt,” replied Pellisier. “I wanted to give him a chance to atone for what he’d done.”

“By placing me in more fights?” Aramis asked the court. “Knowing how volatile I had become under the influence of the coca which you forced upon me?”

Pellisier stammered, nothing but muttered noise coming from his lips till he turned to Pierre standing behind him.

The squat man rushed forward, his voice trembling as he spoke. “It was I, Your Highness,” he said. “I orchestrated the whole thing under the nose of my employer.”

“I have never seen this man before,” stated Aramis, before pointing at Pellisier. “My only companionship, if one could call his social skills acceptable, was with that man there.”

Pellisier bristled, but through what appeared to d’Artagnan as sheer force of will, he remained silent.

“This Musketeer is mistaken,” stated Pierre. “I visited his cell. I forced wine and conversation on him! I held Pellisier back from contacting authorities!”

Pellisier put a hand to chest. “I am shocked, Your Majesty. Such insubordination, and from what I called a true friend.”

“It is hardly shocking,” said Aramis. “With your lack of superior education and proper breeding, it is no wonder you lacked oversight of your establishment.”

D’Artagnan flicked his eyes to Pellisier, caught him clenching his fists at his sides. “I see what you’re doing, Aramis,” he murmured, with a coy smile. “Keep pushing. Keep pushing.”

At the front of the court, Treville was engaged in a private conversation with both the King and Queen, and when Louis raised his head, he scowled at the small man next to Pellisier.

“I will not tolerate such dishonesty in my court!” seethed the King. “Take this man, Pierre, away and see to it he has no further communications with Monsieur Pellisier.”

“But… but… Your Majesty….” stammered Pierre, as he was dragged away. “I speak the truth!”

“Rubbish,” called Treville. He turned his attention directly on Pellisier, face stern and eyes steely. “We have your journals, Monsieur Pellisier. We have your handwriting. You cannot deceive this court by forcing that man to spew falsehoods.”

Aramis shook his head slowly. “I’m afraid Pellisier’s lack of gentility has left him unprepared for dealing with such an esteemed and prominent court,” he said.

“You insolent barbarian!” cried Pellisier, lunging toward Aramis.

D’Artagnan rushed forward and caught him, held him still as Aramis watched.

“Hold yourself!” called Treville. “Or we’ll be forced to have you chained!”
“It is this man who deserves the chains!” screamed Pellisier, pointing at Aramis over d’Artagnan’s shoulder. “This animal! This murderer!”

Aramis stood calm before the court, barely registering the contentious man struggling in d’Artagnan’s arms. “Of your creation,” he said.

“That is right!” declared Pellisier. He pulled back out of d’Artagnan’s arms and straightened his cossack. With head high and shoulders back, Pellisier addressed the court. “I created him. I am the mastermind behind the making of this man. Only I possess the faculties and enlightenment to tear men down and mould them to my means.”

Aramis turned to Pellisier. “You find what makes them tick, and you exploit it."

Pellisier pursed his lips, raised his nose higher in the air before he spoke. “That is right,” he said. “Through my experiments, I’ve learned to make men kill for me. They’re captivated by my charm, beg for my companionship. I shared my gifts with this man, and all he did was spit them back in my face! Fought me at every corner, yet I was still cunning enough to strip him down to his animalistic nature.”

D’Artagnan stood slack-jawed until he turned slowly to Aramis. “You did it,” he said.

“Did what, young man?” spat Pellisier.

D’Artagnan looked at him, unable to voice his dismay.

“Well speak up, boy,” demanded Pellisier. “Or does standing in my shadow reap trepidation within you?”

Movement at the front of the court had all eyes turning forward. King Louis was leaning forward in his chair, close to Treville’s ear. “Was that a confession?” he asked.

Treville smiled. “I believe it was, Sire.”

~The Musketeers~

His weakness was his pride.

Aramis used Pellisier’s trick against him by finding what made him tick and exploiting it until a confession was made. And ever since the King left to ponder his decision, there wasn’t a moment of silence in the court.

Aramis stood amongst his brothers, avoiding eye contact, ignoring their words of congratulations, and concentrated on tempering down his trembling body.

Was this the end? Was it over? Aramis glanced at d’Artagnan, saw him clear his throat and remembered all the tortures his friend endured. He looked at Porthos, standing tall on his other side, so defiant and proud. Aramis recalled holding himself as such, and wondered how long it would be before he could hold himself so once again.

Past Porthos stood Athos with years of emotional turmoil hidden behind a mask of stoicism. Here were three men who’d served the regiment well, each with their own secret battles they fought every day.

Aramis realized in that moment he was no different from his comrades, it was only their demons that differed and how they dealt with them. He nodded, as if agreeing with someone in the room, and
walked over to d’Artagnan.

“How are you doing?” asked his young friend.

Aramis smiled as he moved his eyes from one friend to the other, taking the time to look each of them in the eye. “It’s been quite the journey,” he said. “I thought I knew who I was. Then circumstances forced me to confront the side of me I thought well composed and hidden.”

“And now?” asked Athos.

Aramis shifted on his feet, cleared his throat. “And now, my friend,” he said with a sigh. “I have learned how to embrace both sides.”

Although his friends would never exploit his vulnerability, Aramis felt exposed standing before them. His exhaustion wasn’t helping, or his empty stomach, which hadn’t craved food until now. It grumbled, followed quickly by cramping and mild nausea.

“Why don’t we get out of here?” offered Porthos. “Get some real food in you.”

“Sounds good to me;” replied Aramis, falling into step behind his brothers as they pushed through the crowd toward the back doors.

They moved through the grand hallways into the rear portico where they met with Treville and Louis conversing near the staircase. Removed from the crowd, their whispered conversation carried in the large room.

“…yes, but what do you make of this?” asked Louis.

“He won’t break rank…”

Aramis, like his brothers, kept his gazed forward as they crossed the open space.

“There he is now;” said Treville, loud enough to catch their attention.

The four musketeers stopped and turned as one to face their captain and King.

“Aramis,” said Louis, face bright with a toothy smile. “Well done.” He leaned forward and whispered in the marksman’s ear. “I must admit, with all Pellisier promised this country, and with the tedious in-fighting within the Guild requiring my prompt decision, I was swaying toward his side of things.”

“But now you have seen reason, isn’t that right, Sire?” prompted Treville.

The King looked at Aramis, who held his gaze firm.

“Getting him to admit his guilt,” said Louis. “Brilliant! And such entertainment watching him squirm.” Louis straightened and smoothed down the front of his tunic. “But I find myself needing to know more information.”

“The King wishes to know if you either of you will retaliate?” stated Treville.

Aramis and d’Artagnan shared a glance. “How do you mean?” asked the young Gascon.

“Do you wish to kill this man?” asked Louis.

“With every fibre of my being,” replied Aramis.
The King looked at Treville who nodded subtly. “As do you, I presume?” asked Louis, raising his eyebrows at d’Artagnan.

“Would you expect any other reaction?” replied the Gascon.

Louis sighed. “I suppose not,” he said. “But I can trust neither of you will execute this man?” He looked each of them in the eye. “He will be severely punished for what he did, but there is more at stake here and I’m afraid I still need that vile, detestable man.”

Aramis ran his tongue across dry lips. “The Physician’s Guild?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” replied Louis.

Aramis felt his friend’s watching him, particularly Athos whose stare seemed to bore right into his soul. “As you wish,” he said, bowing his head to hide his grimace, knowing it would be a very hard promise to keep.

“I promise,” said d’Artagnan, also bowing his head forward.

“Very good,” said Louis. He then patted Treville on the shoulder and led him away, but his voice carried in the open room as he continued to speak. “They will do as they promise, won’t they?”

“You have my word,” replied Treville, glancing back over his shoulder.

Aramis turned away from his captain’s glare and started down the hall with the rest of his brothers falling into step behind him. D’Artagnan pulled up next to him, thumbs hooked on the front of his belt.

“Is it really over? Cause it certainly doesn’t feel like it,” he said, watching the ground as he walked.

Aramis patted him on the shoulder. “We might still feel tired and troubled today,” he said. “But not tomorrow.”

D’Artagnan looked up at him with a furrowed brow. “You’re suggesting time will make this easier?”

Aramis smiled. “Time, and perhaps a little help,” he replied, with a wink. “But for now, let us try and get back to normal. How are you feeling? Any problems with your hand?”

D’Artagnan flexed his healing hand, shook it out. “Much better. Gets a little stiff holding the sword, but it’s coming along. How are you? You all right?”

“I’m perfectly not all right,” replied Aramis. “But I’m okay with that.”

The two Musketeers lurched forward when Porthos clapped them both on the back, splitting them apart and stepping between them. “How ‘bout we celebrate?” he asked, with a broad grin.

Porthos pushed them forward, not waiting for a reply, and guided them out to the back lawn. Aramis stopped, looked up at the sky and took in a deep breath. As his lungs filled with fresh air, his neck and shoulders relaxed, his mind cleared. When he righted his head to watch his brothers walking ahead, a smile spread his lips.

“Home,” he said. “Right where I belong.”

Aramis ran forward, catching up to his brothers as they headed toward the stables, and fell into step beside them.
Le Finis.

Epilogue to follow.
Chapter 32

Author’s Note: This story was started on December 14 2015, and just over a year later it has come to completion. I hope you enjoyed it. And many, many thanks to JenF for beta reading this extensive story, and also to LJGroundwater for also beta reading and giving some much needed, and welcomed, advice.

Dispatched to Hell

Epilogue

Mid-way down the staircase leading from the garrison balcony, Aramis rested his forearms on the railing as he watched the front gate. He expected d’Artagnan’s arrival any moment, but until he saw his young friend walk through the tunnel, Aramis’ fingers would continue thrumming on the wooden rail. A plan, simple in its elegance and sagacious in its karma had been put in motion with the point of no return starting with d’Artagnan’s departure from the garrison that morning.

In the courtyard, both Athos and Porthos worked with the new recruits, but every so often they cast a glance up Aramis’ way. No judgement marred their features, nor did they speak their suspicions, which were evident by how often they threw looks the marksman’s way.

When Aramis’ foot began tapping, and he felt he could no longer compose his restlessness, d’Artagnan finally entered the courtyard. Aramis bound down the stairs, pausing at the bottom to adjust his hat and coat as a way of settling his nerves, before striding toward his friend in a more composed fashion.

D’Artagnan stopped at the marksman’s approach, gave a small nod.

Aramis pulled up close, aware of their other two friends watching. “It is done?”

“It will arrive before you reach the Chatelet,” replied d’Artagnan.

“Any trouble procuring…” Aramis finished his question with a raised eyebrow.

“A little,” replied d’Artagnan. “But breaking a few laws will be worth it in the end. And no, I didn’t take more than needed…. In case you were wondering.”

Although slightly irked by the insinuation, Aramis understood his friend’s concern. He smiled and patted d’Artagnan on the shoulder. “I was not asking for myself,” he said.

D’Artagnan’s chin dropped to his chest as he hung his head. “I’m sorry. It’s just…”

“It’s alright,” replied Aramis. “Just go about your day and let me finish the rest. You’ve done enough.”

Aramis dropped his hand, smiled and set off toward the garrison tunnel. As he entered the shade of the stone structure, d’Artagnan called after him.

“Good luck,” yelled his friend.
Aramis turned, and with a tip of his hat he smiled again. “I don’t need luck. I have friends.”

~The Musketeers~

Aramis watched Pellisier through the prison bars until the man finally looked over. “Good evening,” he said. “You look… well.”

Pellisier swung his bare feet to the floor, smoothed down his grey, sweat stained shirt with a turned head and crinkled nose. “Have you come to watch me suffer?” he asked, sitting straight on the side of the cot.

“No.”

“Gloat then, perhaps?”

“No.”

Pellisier pushed up from the bed and padded over to the small weathered table under the cobweb-covered window his cell provided. He picked up a half empty bottle of wine and poured some into a cup. “Wine of such excellent vintage is not usually served in such an establishment as I find myself in,” he said. “It would seem I still have friends out there.” He glanced at Aramis with raised eyebrows. “Perhaps an old student?”

Aramis smiled. “Perhaps.”

Pellisier raised the bottle toward Aramis. “Care for a drink?”

Aramis shook his head.

“That’s right,” smiled Pellisier. “You only drink with friends.” He sipped from his cup as he approached the bars, and as he neared, Aramis quietly enjoyed the stench of demoralization coming off the man who once held himself above others.

“If you are not here to gloat or enjoy my incarceration, then what brings you by?” asked Pellisier.

Aramis crossed his hands in front of himself. “I have something to say,” he said.

Pellisier took a healthy swig of his wine, threw his head back to let the warm liquid slither down his throat. When he righted his head, he fixed his eyes on Aramis with lips spread thin and one corner turned up. “Then what is it? Spit it out.”

“Nothing,” replied Aramis.

Aramis raised his brows. “Nothing? You came here to say, nothing?”

Pellisier leaned into the bars. “No,” he said. “I came here to tell you that you mean nothing to me.” He wrapped his hands around the bars and pulled himself closer. “You will spend the rest of your life knowing that you mean nothing to me.”

Pellisier stepped back, looked into his cup of wine then slowly lifted it to his lips to take another drink.

“You may occupy my thoughts for the next weeks, possibly even months,” continued Aramis. “But after that, your face, your memory will be nothing more than a fleeting image in my mind. Perhaps there will even come a day when I won’t remember you at all.”
Before continuing, Aramis set his jaw, narrowed his eyes. “I woke in a dungeon,” he said. “I went without food, water and human contact for days… I felt as if I’d been dispatched to hell. But know this, Pellisier, after all you did, after all you tried to do by degrading my soul, you didn’t win. You failed. You never succeeded at getting the better of me.”

Aramis trailed his tongue across his lips, pulled on his beard. “You once said you wanted to know the real me,” he said. “Well, now you’ll have your chance.”

Pellisier laughed, but it was forced and hesitant. He gulped down the rest of the wine and picked up the bottle, poised to pour another cup. “Yes,” said Pellisier, furrowing his brow. “I know… Wait, what are you getting at?” Pellisier ticked his head in both directions, looking over his shoulders.

It was a sign of fear, which Aramis enjoyed for a brief moment before pulling away from the bars and tucking his hands behind his back. “That is all,” he said with a slight bow. He turned to leave, then stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “Oh, wait,” he said. “One more thing, if you’ll indulge me…”

Pellisier licked his wet lips, savoured the lingering flavour of his drink, and sighed. “What is it?”

“Please,” replied Aramis, remembering in pristine clarity that fateful day Pellisier had given him his first skin of water. “Enjoy the wine.”

The marksman turned away and left the prison quarters with a confident stride, a macabre smile spreading his lips as he heard Pellisier gasp, followed immediately by the sound of a cup hitting the hardened ground.

_Le Finis._

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