Frankenstein

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Summary

An installment dedicated to the monsters gods create.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Quality of Mercy

Blois, August 1844

I stood, gazing upon the skeletal carcass of château de Bragelonne, the resting place of the last of the comtes de La Fère. Myself. I had no longer thought of myself as the comte de La Fère, yet it still made my heart twist into a knot to see those ruined white walls, the empty windows, whose broken glass gave them the scowl of a toothless hag of Carpathian fairytales. More like a witch's hut on chicken legs now than the proud home of my assumed ancestors.

What had they done with the stones, I wondered, the men who looted it? Had it been the revolutionary guard who had lifted their fearsome fist against the symbol of Bourbon tyranny, or the local plebeians who had run out of dukes and princes to blame for their empty stomachs and had finally turned against the simple home of a count who had once been a benevolent landlord to them? Forgotten, all was forgotten, and I too had moved on, as I always had.

The gardens stood overgrown and wild, the statue of Antinous was long gone, and even the bench upon which I once thought Aramis to be a veritable Botticellian Mars appeared no more, as if swept away in the maelstrom of blood and time.

I had lived out a human life here. Here, I had lain to rest my Grigori. Here, I have loved and been loved back.

Here, I had been buried.

“I was happy here,” I said aloud and Aramis’ fingers curled around my own, pulling me towards the family crypt, which had somehow stood unperturbed, almost two centuries later, as if the good citizens of Blois knew better than to trample upon the temporary resting place of the last living son of Olympus.

“You were,” he replied, stopping at the steps that led into the small chapel. The chapel itself lay in ruins, but one could still see the marks where the altar had once stood. “I was, as well. I should have stayed here with you, instead of chasing empty dreams of vanity.”

“I wanted to leave,” I reminded him.

“I should have listened to you,” he repeated, as if not hearing me.

I squeezed his hand and took a step back. “We don’t have to do this,” I said.

“It was your idea that we should come. Here we are.” Aramis turned towards me, his face open and trusting, as if he somehow expected me to know the secret passage out of the Tartarus through which we had been rambling.

“This is where it all started,” I swallowed.

“After you,” he said and my step faltered. I had never before returned to a place such as this. My burial place. My body had lain here, in this crypt, for a century and a half. Time and the gods have let it turn to bones. And Aramis had worn one of them around his neck.

We entered the crypt, our way lighted by two makeshift torches, which we easily mounted upon the cold walls. Damp. The stench of mildew filled my nostrils.
“Was it always like this?”

“It felt this way to me,” Aramis replied, his voice hollow.

The alcoves had turned to ossuaries, and I tried to recall which of them contained the remains that had once been my faithful Grimaud. In the center stood a stone sarcophagus with a heavy marbled lid. It had been kind of them to bury me as if I was a Roman, I thought, and let my hand trail over the cold marble.

“Tell me everything, Aramis,” I turned to him and watched his face transform into a mask of pain.

“What would you have me say?”

“Whatever else you have not told me yet. Start at the beginning.” I sighed and took his hands in mine. “Start in Locmaria.”

He shook his head and his body trembled. I pulled him closer then and wrapped my arms around him, but the shiver of his limbs only traversed into my own, causing us both to quake.

“At first,” he began to speak softly, “I thought I could not feel you because I was at sea. I was devastated by what I thought had befallen Porthos. I was ashamed, I… I think I wanted to die.” I stroked his back gently until he found the strength to continue. “But when I landed in Spain, I still could not sense you. I thought your gods were punishing me for what had happened in Locmaria. I thought…” He stopped and pulled away from me. “I traveled back here and I found him. I needed you! And you were…”

“Here,” I finished for him, quietly, my hand resting upon the marble slab. I pushed against the cruel stone and the sarcophagus gaped open to my gaze.

“You can’t know how it felt,” Aramis said.

“Can’t I?” I smiled at him, my hand reaching into the empty coffin and coming up with a bundle of loose papers. “My heart broke because I thought I had lost you forever.”

“I knew it was my fault,” he continued, “but I didn’t know what to do. I was alone, Athos. Not even your Grigori was here to throw a severed limb in my face to snap me out of my shock and grief. Grimaud was gone, you were gone. And I knew… I knew that if I… if I…”

He turned from me, unable to go on and I abandoned the mysterious papers back to their sepulchral resting place to come after him again and pull him back into my arms, so I could whisper against his hair.

“What did you do, flittermouse?”

“I’m so ashamed, Athos.” He shook his head and I pressed my lips to the back of his neck. “I couldn’t bear to have you look at me that way again. Like you didn't care. Like we were nothing. And I knew that your love for me would have leaked out into the waters of Lethe. And I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t!”

“Of course,” I replied, “You couldn’t have known that I would wait for you.”

“But you did! You had so much faith in me, and I failed you!” He turned and hit me square in the chest with preternatural verve.

I caught him by the fist and pulled him close again. “We’re talking, not fighting,” I reminded him and
his arm trembled in my grasp until his muscles relaxed and he sank against me. “I heard you calling out for me,” I recalled my first moments in Hades, “and I swam back across Lethe. You know how long I can hold my breath.” I smiled into his hair and felt him tremble with inappropriate laughter. “I did not need faith, Aramis. I knew that as long as you lived, you would come for me.”

“I did. I did come for you. But you were…” He looked up at me with eyes as bright as the sun even in the darkness of the crypt. “You were here! With your hair as white as snow, and your skin so cold. So cold. And you would not speak to me.” He blinked and two tears rolled down his pale cheeks, just like that morning at the top of Olympus when he had torn me from the grasp of Thanatos. “I had no tears then to cry for you, for I did not know how. I only knew I could not go on. I could not leave. Out there,” he nodded towards the surface, “there was nothing. One of my souls had died with you, and the other only craved blood.”

“I never would have left you if I had known,” I said, my voice sounding far away and then I wiped at my face because I had realized that it was I who had been crying all along. His face was wet from my own tears.

“You want to know everything?” he asked.

“Of course. That’s why we have come here.”

“Go,” he nodded towards the coffin. “Lie down, and I’ll tell you.”

“The coffin is full of papers,” I finally pointed out, swallowing my grief and finding my voice again.

“I know,” his hand caressed my back. “They were left behind here when…” His brow darkened. “It’s not important.” I smiled at him, thinking that a certain writer back in Paris would’ve paid a fair price for the contents of that coffin, and then I swiftly swung my legs over the marble and sank into my own tomb.

I lay still and looked up at his face where it hovered above my own, like the sweetest angel of death and resurrection that he was.

“What did you do, flittermouse?” I repeated my question.

“All I ever wanted was to be with you, I realized, only too late,” he spoke. “I could not bring you back to look upon me without love. But I also could not leave you here alone again. So I… stayed.”

“You stayed?”

“I stayed.” He leaned over the side of the tomb and pressed his lips to my forehead. “Give me your hand,” he whispered.

“Aramis…” A tremor ran through my limbs but I did as I was told and his hand soon clasped mine.

“I just need to feel that you’re alive right now,” he whispered against my lips as his neck craned and I cradled his head while he kissed me. And then, the strangest thing, his weight settled over me and pressed me against the hard, gaping maw of the coffin. “Hold me,” he commanded, and I wrapped my arms around him.

For a few moments, my mind was blank, for I refused to accept what he was telling me, what he was showing me. I held him in my arms and I breathed, the air moving through my body made us both rock gently, as if upon the waves, until it was squeezed out of my throat in a groan that resembled a cry of a wild beast caught in a trap.
“You didn’t!” I exclaimed. “Aramis, tell me you didn’t entomb yourself in here with my corpse!”

“You wanted me to tell you the truth,” he said, sounding tired and rather sleepy, as if he was about to drift off right there in this crypt forgotten by time and men.

“There is nothing in the world you fear more than being buried,” I whispered against his hair with growing horror at my final apprehension.

“There was one thing that I feared more than being buried,” he said and I found tears escaping from my eyes again, no matter how manfully I ordered them to retreat. “And it came to pass.”

“Sweetling.” I croaked out, kissing his eyelids and his lips as if I thought at any moment he would disappear from my embrace, “I’m sorry, my love, my darling, I’m so sorry.”

I shifted my weight until we lay on our sides, our hearts pressed against each other and beating wildly inside that coffin, as I trailed my lips over his, and my hand pressed into his lower back, keeping him close, as if by his body to staunch the flow of tears that his confession had torn from me. He spoke more, of Bazin waking him up, of the years he spent haunting the countryside, the wildling deathbringer, a coffin-riding upior, and I replied to him with a litany of “I love you’s” in every language I had ever known.

“Take me,” a hot whisper against my opened mouth.

His neck was so supple and pliant against my lips, my tongue, he tasted of metal, as if the remembrance of these nightmares past had pressed the elements of blood from his skin. The first time I had kissed him, he had tasted of ambrosia to me. Now, he tasted of the salt of my tears, and I had never been more in love.

“Are you sure?”

“What am I? A blushing virgin? Take me!” His clever fingers had already located my cock and found me hard. “You want this as much as I do, you deviant,” he laughed softly against my ear and bit my lobe.

“I always want you, Aramis.”

The palm of his hand pressed into the heat of my loins and I moaned, biting around his bottom lip, feeling it swell against my tongue. For every day spent buried in my coffin, I owed him a hundred years of bliss. My own hands fumbled against his clothes, until I too could free his cock from the confines of his breeches, and press it against my own heated flesh. He throbbed against my cock, against my hand, where the two of them lay nestled and damp, and he attacked my mouth again with his own, kissing me with fierce determination as I thrust against him and into the vise of my own grip.

“Now you know all my secrets,” he panted against my neck and I guided his head closer until I felt the twin points of his fangs.

“No more secrets,” I panted in reply, my hand squeezing and twisting harder as we rutted together.

“No more death,” he said and pressed his fangs into my veins.

Except the little one, I thought as white light filled my mind and my body was overrun with cascading bursts of pleasure.

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Paris, September 1844

We arrived back in Paris with the first autumn winds. They were still hot, but they already carried the sweet scent of ripening fruit and decay. Our luggage contained a casket where my journals and papers were locked that we’d retrieved from the tomb.

“We cannot put it off any longer,” I told my lover after we’d celebrated our return to our own apartments. “We must meet him, Athos. You said you want to decide then.”

He bit his lip, but didn’t look away. “Yes. I know, Aramis. I will ask Marie to introduce us. Or,” the old heathen smile crept on his lips and I wanted to chew it off, “would you like to ask her?”

“Don’t push it, Discord.”

“Or what?” he purred.

I showed him what.

Athos had promised Porthos to come and see him after our return from Bragelonne. Porthos had taken lodgings in a public house run by a convivial widow in the rue Rambuteau, and there was little danger that he had stirred from there to stir up trouble by having himself recognised by his son. While Athos set off to foster family ties, I paid a visit to Marion’s millinery shop. I brought my casket with me and left without it, entrusting it to her for safekeeping. Of all of us, the fairy was the one who could step behind the veil at will, flitting between this world and the other: it was in the Otherworld that I wished my secrets to be kept.

Driven by a sudden bout of nostalgia, I made a detour to the Place Saint Sulpice, and then I walked north, towards the river, across the bridge, to the Tuileries. There, I felt it: the eyes of a stalker.

I pulled the brim of my hat down and squared my shoulders. They were lurking behind me like wolves in a February forest; like wiedergänger in the war-ravaged wastelands of the Holy Roman Empire. Like mercenaries who had hunted me down in Locmaria and whose blood had propitiated the ancient gods buried under the grotto. I carried no human weapons, for in this strange new world gentlemen often walked the streets unarmed.

There were more than one, more than two. I stopped, closed my eyes, parted my lips to suck in the air that carried their scent and counted the heartbeats that throbbed for me. Around me, the aroma of chestnut trees and asters; behind me, the icy odour of impending death.

I glided from shadow to shadow, flittering in and out of sight as my form morphed with the umbrage of trees. I could not return home, for I couldn’t risk leading them to the place where Athos and I had found shelter. And so I turned left and made towards the Boulevard de La Madeleine. The noise of Paris swallowed up the echo of their footsteps, and their heartbeats were lost among the heartbeats of hundreds. For a moment, I hesitated: was I dragging them still in my tow, or had the bloodhounds lost my scent? As I turned around, there it was: the face of the man who was going to kill me. A shot sounded in broad daylight, my fangs dropped, my blood boiled and I recognised my foe: he was a man without imagination and without finesse. A man whose mission was to kill the likes of me, and who cared for nothing else.

Hunters were never picked for their ability to think.

I whirled around and dived into the shade of an alley. Behind me, the man barked a command, and its echo bounced between the houses. For the space of several heartbeats (human heartbeats, heartbeats that hadn’t stopped), they could no longer see me, and, unlike me, they were disoriented.
without sight.

I ran through the streets of Paris. I clutched my hand to my chest. I didn’t breathe, I didn’t live. I
didn’t die.

I fell against the door of the house I had never entered before, and I hammered against it until it
yielded to me. If I was to die, I wanted to choose my executioner - like I had done fifty years ago in
Meudon.

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The door burst wide open, smashing the Hermes who had opened it into the wall. A shadow fell into
the hall, dark and devouring like the maws of Hell.

\textit{Aramis}.

It was by the merest of accidents that I witnessed the scene, for I had been about to set off for my
drive in the Jardin des Champs-Élysées. I stood in the hall and watched the shadow grow bigger and
slink closer, blocking out the yellow light of the afternoon sun that poured through the door.

Outside, other shadows moved. Far away still, but closing in on us stealthily, like ants crawling up
the table leg.

“Close the door,” I told the liveried Hermes, who was wheezing in the corner. “I’m not going out.”

Aramis lifted his head and I beheld his face: the smooth mask of a wax figure from Mme Tussaud’s
cabinet. He reached out a hand and braced himself against the wall. The other hand was pressed to
his chest, fingers clawing at the black fabric of his cloak.

“Don’t bleed on the carpet,” I told him.

A wane smile twitched in the corner of his mouth. “Forgive me, Madame,” he whispered.

“It’s for your rather than my carpet’s sake.” I wrapped my fingers around his arm. “If they see fresh
bloodstains, it will be difficult to convince them that their quarry isn’t here.”

He followed me willingly as I turned to walk back upstairs. But after two steps, I felt his arm tense,
his muscles quiver, and he would have dropped to the ground, had I not whirled around and caught
him with my whole body. He struggled to keep himself upright, pressing up against me, and the slick
warmth against my chest told me that his blood soaked through my bodice.

“How bad is it?” I whispered as the Hermes hurried over to peel Aramis off me.

“The heart,” he whispered back, and the hand clutching at his chest convulsed.

“Take him upstairs,” I told the Hermes. “Put him in my bed.” I rushed up the stairs before them,
tearing at my laces and buttons as I darted into my dressing room. Blood, blood on my décolleté, my
breasts, my light summer dress. Clothilde, silent and pale, helped me out of the soiled garments,
rubbed my chest with a towel soaked in eau de cologne, and tugged a fresh dress around me.

Downstairs, a battering ram was seemingly being employed to tear down the door.

“Let them in,” I hissed at my maid. “Don’t say a word.”

She scurried out of the room. I poured myself a glass of water from the carafe, took a draught and
held it in my mouth until I felt its cool calm seep through my skin into my veins, clear my head and
calm my heart. At last, I picked up a bunch of camellias from the vase and attached them to my bodice with a brooch.

I was smiling as I swept downstairs in a sea of watered silk. My hair tumbled down my shoulders in glossy waves and my cheeks were a becoming shade of pink. “Messieurs,” I said with breathless giddiness. “As flattered I am by so much attention by so noble a troop of soldiers, I am not entertaining today. You will have to return tomorrow and,” my smile deepened and dimples appeared above the corner of my mouth, “wait your turn.”

A man stepped out of the tiny troop of tin soldiers and bowed curtly. “Madame,” he said. “Please don’t be alarmed. You have to leave immediately. An unholy abomination has just entered your house.”

I laughed and slapped him with my fan. “Oh monsieur!” I giggled. “I have heard men come up with the most outlandish stories to be admitted to my company, but yours takes the cake. An abomination, you say? What, exactly, do you mean by it?”

“It’s a fiend,” he was speaking urgently now, having come so close that I felt his eyes burn on my skin. “Do not go near it. We will protect you.”

“I’m sure you will,” I trilled, amused beyond measure. “Strong and chivalrous as you are. Not very gallant, however, to call poor old Baron von Stackelberg an abomination!” I giggled again and brushed my fan over his face. “But I’ll forgive you, Captain,” I murmured. “I will put it down to jealous passion.”

“Madame!” He took a step back. For a man trained to deal with monsters from the deepest, most depraved abyss, he appeared embarrassingly easy to beguile – at least I hoped so, for my plan depended on it.

“Madame, you will have to leave your house while we search it.” He had recovered his poise and military bearing.

“Search for what?”

“Do you wish to deny that a man had just entered here? We saw him stumble over the threshold.”

“Oh dear, yes,” I sighed, downcast. “Poor Baron von Stackelberg. Quite overcome by heat and,” a smile blossomed on my lips, “excitement.” I raised my eyes to those of the captain. “His poor heart…” I whispered conspiratorially. “It’s not as young as it once was. But I assure you, he is still… enthusiastic, quite like a young man.”

“Indeed!” There was raillery in his voice now, and for the first time, I sensed danger. “Where is he then, that Baron von Stackelberg? I assume you can present him if we demand it.”

“I can,” I said calmly. “Even though I do not fully understand why you believe you have the right to demand it. But if it makes you happy, Captain – please, by all means. Come upstairs. You are a very keen young man, I see. Leave your bloodhounds here, if you please. Not all of them look housetrained. Unless you’re scared of being attacked by a woman and an octogenarian.”

We scaled the stairs together. We crossed my boudoir. By the door to my bedchamber, I hesitated. “Baron von Stackelberg is a very dear friend of mine,” I said in a loud, clear voice. “And a very old one, but I believe that goes without saying. He is a true gentleman, such as one doesn’t meet often these days. I ask you, Captain…” I hesitated again. “Would you do me the honour of telling me your name? I would like to introduce you to Baron von Stackelberg – if he’s recovered from his fainting
spell – and explain the misunderstanding to him.”

“Biscarrat,” he said curtly. “Now, Madame, stall no longer.”

We went in. There, pale against the white cushions, lay… I blinked. I knew him to be Aramis, yet I saw the features of a stranger, distorted as though through a cracked windowpane. Shadows and lines marred his skin, and the longer I looked, the deeper the shadows grew: around his eyes, in the hollows of his cheeks, in the corners of his mouth. Oh, he was good, the devious vampyre!

But so was the hunter.

“Baron von Stackelberg,” he said in a quiet voice. “I believe you said he collapsed from heat, not injury, Madame?”

“He did.”

“Then why,” he smirked and rounded on me. I saw the phantom of Colbert rise behind him in a phantasmagoria of a long-buried past. “Why does the room reek of blood?”

My lips trembling, my lashes fluttering, I gazed up at him. My hands flew to the front of my bodice and I removed a red flower from the bunch and thrust it at him. “My maid, Monsieur Biscarrat, had not yet washed my chemise and petticoats. I shall chastise her most severely.”

The hunter was staring at the flower in his hand with the mien of a man who expected his flesh to wither and peel back from bone. Behind his back, the abomination opened his eyes.

“Keep the flower, Monsieur,” I said sweetly. “It’s red, but I’m sure you don’t mind the smell and taste of blood.”

He flew from my bedchamber on swift wings. The door closed behind him, revealing grey-clad, grey-faced Clothilde who stood with her back against the wall, a dagger in her raised hand and the flames of Artemis in her eyes. “Go,” I told her. “See if they really leave. Then come back.”

She curtsied and turned away.

“I shall not chastise you, Clothilde,” I added. “But leave the dagger here with me.”

I closed the door behind my maid and walked to the bed. The old face of the stranger had faded, and the ageless face of the vampyre had reappeared. His eyes were open and black like the abyss of his Wallachian soul.

“You led hunters to my doorstep,” I told him and yanked back the duvet that had been pulled up to his chin. The stench of blood hit me; the entire front of his clothes, the beddings, all was soaked.

“Was it not enough that you killed me once? Did it give you so much pleasure that you wish to repeat the incident?”

“You win, nymph,” he whispered with lips as white as the pillow, watching me handle the dagger. “Just… cut off my head properly. Don’t botch it up like you did Chalais. Thirty clumsy strokes.” He closed his eyes. “Nobody deserves that.”

I cut through his cravat, through the buttons of his coat and through his shirt.

“Don’t let them bury me,” he breathed. “If you ever loved me, Marie… don’t let them bury me.”

His chest was coated in sticky blood, and more was still seeping from the black hole over his heart.
How much blood did a vampyre’s body hold? I reached across for a spare pillow, pushed it down onto the wound, and placed his hand on top of the pillow. “Hold it there.”

To the writing desk in my boudoir, jabbing my pen into the inkwell, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper. When the door opened to admit Clothilde, I was folding and sealing an elegant note which I handed to my domestic. “Have it sent to the comte de Perregaux at the Hôtel de Rohan-Guémené,” I commanded, and we both rushed from the room: she through the door leading out, I through the door leading to the inner sanctum.

Aramis’ nails dug deeply into the pillow on his chest, like the talons of a bird of prey. His eyes were closed and his appearance that of a man long dead. But I had learned not to trust his appearances since the moment I had first laid eyes on him. He had been dead then, too.

The memory rose in my mind: the red-tinged waters of the Aegean Sea. The blinding Mediterranean Sun. The lifeless form of the youth in Crusader garb, a red cross on his breast, and the maimed skin and flesh of his skull. A faint spark of life had gleamed deep within him, and I had nurtured it back to a devouring fire. He had been mine for so many decades: mine to warm myself, and mine to burn myself.

I sank down on the edge of the bed and looked down at that white wax mask that concealed so much. There was much beauty in death. The dagger was on the nightstand where I had left it: how easy would it be to push it into the soft, exposed flesh at the base of his throat. To pin him to the mattress like a beautiful, rare moth. Would it kill him? I doubted it. Nothing but cutting off his head, with its finely-sculpted bones, and throwing it into flames that burned even hotter than he did would rid me of that demon.

But that was not how I operated.

I looked away from him and fixed my gaze upon the carafe of water. If I poured it over his face, into his throat, if I kept pouring until his chest was full to burst – would he drown? Or would he swallow everything, like he swallowed the blood that his god gave him in exchange for the love and devotion that he offered at the altar of Discord.

When I looked back at him, I saw the abyss stare at me.

“You’re not dead yet.”

“You know what to do.” The words floated up on a sigh as dry and icy as the breath of the tomb.

“Why, Aramis?”

Those black eyes were motionless, like onyx stones set into the visage of an automaton doll.

“Revenge,” he breathed.

“Aramis.” I reached out and wrapped my hand around his icy fingers. “Why do you think I want to kill you?”

“Everyone does.”

I had known him for many centuries. Never, not since he’d recovered from that first apathy of death and loss, had I seen him so resigned to his fate. Marion was right: something inside him had broken, and he was adrift in uncharted waters.

“Not I.” I leaned in closer and trailed my thumb over the outline of his knuckles. “I wanted to. I
fantasised about it. It turns out,” I laughed and pressed my lips to his hair. “That fantasies are much more satisfying before they become reality.”

A tremor ran through his body. He would have laughed, had he not been in agony. His lips moved woodenly, very close to my wrist as I rested my warm palm against his cold cheek. “Marie…”

“You wanted to kill me when we met,” I reminded him gently.

His breath grew warmer as it alighted on the skin of my wrist in jagged puffs. I let him feel the beat of my blood, the potent blend of human and divine essence as it pumped through my veins, as it churned in the pulse points of my body, a whirlpool of life, like the delta of a river where the ondines are born. Oh, but that must be killing him. So close, so close… The soft brush of his tongue; the smooth touch of his teeth. He tasted life even as death dug merciless claws into his heart.

“I would never bury you,” I whispered into his hair as I pulled him closer and cradled him against my chest. “Athos wouldn’t let me.”

His pulse heaved. A sudden rush of blood, the last surge of which his body was capable. “Athos!” A death rattle.

“Athos is on his way.”

Beneath my fingertips, his veins throbbed in his temple, withered, empty, and a blinding headache exploded behind his eyes. I held him to me like I had done all those centuries ago. He had outwaited the sea, once. He would outwait the pain.

He lay still and motionless, his body heavy against mine, and a greenish hue tinted his face, like mossy shadows creeping upon the features of an alabaster statue. So beautiful still, with his delicate bones and the long black lashes.

How long would it take the Hermes to fly to the Hôtel de Rohan-Guémené and deliver the message? What if Athos wasn’t at home? How long could the vampyre drift in the no-man’s land between life and death, between the light of day and the blackness of the grave? The blood that had filled his veins had long trickled out, and nothing but the curse of his demonic existence kept him tethered to the here and now.

Suddenly, the body that pressed against mine shuddered, like a corpse which rises under the influence of a galvanic shock. The black lashes fluttered, the blue lips trembled, and then, I heard it too: footsteps, coming closer and closer, the door slammed into the wall, yielding to the force of nature that swept through it. Athos hurtled in, the picture of wild-eyed frenzy as he threw himself at the bed. He sank down like a man succumbing to a swoon, as pale as his lover, and his lips moved in fervent prayer.

“Aramis,” just as the other was mouthing, “Athos.”

“What happened?” Athos had seized Aramis’ hand and pressed it to his lips, mumbling indistinct words into the vampyre’s cold skin. “What happened?”

Aramis’ eyes were open wide and the grey veil of death obscured their lustre. I saw myself called upon to give an account of the events.

“He led hunters to my house,” I informed Discord. “I got rid of them, for now.”

Athos had barely blinked at the revelation. He was lifting the pillow off Aramis’ chest, and his movements were full of such aching gentleness that it almost made me weep. “He’s hurt,” he
remarked eloquently and smoothed his open palm over the hole in Aramis’ ribcage.

“Shot through the heart,” I said, just as the sound of another pair of footsteps alarmed me. Grimley had appeared in the door, carrying an elegant leather bag and an expression of English indifference.

“Aramis,” Athos repeated like a prayer. He tugged his glove off with his teeth, cupped the vampyre’s face with his bare hand and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his temple. “I’m here, my love. You’ll be better soon. I’ll make you better.”

He pulled back, and Aramis’ eyes widened. A breath escaped his lips that both Athos and I understood to be a sigh of protest, for Athos began to speak words of comfort, assuring his demon that he wasn’t going anywhere. He unbuttoned his coat, and, still silent like a shadow, Grimley picked it off his shoulders and folded it carefully over a chair. Athos tugged off his cravat, which appeared to be choking him, and unbuttoned his cuffs. He rolled up his left sleeve, clenched his hand to a fist, once, twice, pumping blood through his veins. Aramis’ eyes alighted on the god’s wrist.

“It’s all right, my love,” Athos whispered. “It’s for you.”

Behind him, Grimley lifted his eyes to the heavens.

“Pardon me, Kyrios.”

Athos froze. “What is it, gnat?” he growled without turning around.

“If the bullet is still in the heart, it might be a good idea to remove it before the blood is replenished.”

He stepped smartly around Athos, who hovered above Aramis, and put the leather bag on the floor. “I brought all necessary instruments. They are Dr Flitterbatt’s own.”

God and demon both flashed Zeus’ own thunderbolts from their eyes, yet the Olympian guardian remained undeterred. “I believe it is the most practical solution.”

“He’s right,” Discord faltered and took his lover’s hand. “We should remove the bullet first.” He reached out and gently pushed the folds of the shirt aside that lay in tatters where I had slashed them. They were soaked in blood. “I’m sorry, angel, but it won’t take long.”

Grimley cleared his throat. “I need to access the doctor. I mean the patient.”

Athos hesitated. He was loath to let go of Aramis, even for the brief moment that would take him to walk around the bed and sit down on the other side. I took that as my cue to vacate my seat in the stalls. As I moved, Athos looked at me for the first time since he’d entered the room, as if he only now noticed my presence. “Marie…”

“Come here.” I sat up and swung myself off the bed.

He clambered over Aramis’ body very carefully and sat down on the edge of the mattress. “Thank you for taking care of him.” With his free hand, he reached for one of mine. “You don’t know how much that means…”

“I can guess.” I muttered, for I saw Athos cling to his lover with his other hand, and I saw Aramis’ black gaze glued to Discord’s face.

Meanwhile, Grimley was unrolling and unpacking a selection of scalpels and other instruments that, judging by the gleam in his eye, were the source of great pleasure to him.

“I’d better clean the wound,” I said and picked up a bottle of eau de cologne. “It’s a bloody mess,
you can’t possibly see anything with all that blood coating his chest.”

Athos had slumped by his lover’s side, their fingers intertwined, and was stroking Aramis’ hair. I saw Aramis’ lips move very close to Athos’ ear, but I couldn’t distinguish the words. “I won’t let them bury you,” Athos muttered. “Never, Aramis. Never. Nobody will bury you ever again, my love.”

“Thank you, Madame,” Grimley said and pressed the tip of the scalpel to Aramis’ now-clean chest. “This is much better.”

“Hurry!” Athos snarled at him. “Don’t waste any more time.”

“Don’t worry, Kyrios.” He sliced through the flesh and forced the wound open with a pair of forceps. “It won’t take long. An autopsy is always easier to perform than an operation.”

Aramis’ white lips tightened and the black hole in his chest gaped open as the scalpel’s blade gleamed against the raw flesh.

Athos closed his eyes.

Grimley, pale and silent like the skull of Golgotha, drilled the tip of the scalpel into the vampyre’s heart, deeper and deeper, until metal clinked on metal. I picked up a pair of tweezers. “You hold it open, Grimley, I’ll get the bullet.”

The bullet was of silver. Typical. I rolled my eyes as it clattered into the wash basin. The hunters might have been the most proficient killers, but their grasp of their prey’s natures and habits was shaky at best. They clung to superstitions with the stolid stubbornness of cart oxen.

“Aramis,” Athos was whispering into his demon’s ear. He cupped Aramis’ face in the palm of his hand and angled his wrist towards Aramis’ mouth. “Drink, my love.”

Aramis’ lashes trembled like the wing of a moth struggling in a spider’s web. His lips parted under Athos’ wrist, his fangs flashed like the scalpel that had stabbed into his flesh. I had seen him feed before, during the years when Athos was trapped in Poseidon’s realm and Aramis was my ally and acolyte. I had seen him drink from Athos before; but, as the tingle of my loins told me, I had been too distracted by the sight of Aramis impaled on the cock of Discord to pay any attention to his eating habits.

This was nothing like that. The lethal fangs sank into flesh as if into butter. “Aramis.” A sigh that stirred the demon’s hair, and Athos was stroking the curve of his brow with the pad of his thumb. Even as we watched, the hollows in his temples filled with life. The thud of divine blood as it pulsed through the demon’s veins; the shadows under his eyes faded as his skin began to glow with Olympian light. The black eyes opened and locked with mine. I no longer looked down a dead abyss, but into the burning heart of black stars.

Athos moved, shifted, stretched out at the demon’s side and nestled his hips against Aramis’ thigh. He lifted his hand gently off Aramis’ mouth. Blood surged from the open vein, ran down his wrist and the length of his forearm, soaked the cuff of his shirt, and dripped on Aramis’ lips.

The demon opened his mouth. His tongue darted out in a serpentine attack. He licked the blood off his lips voraciously and then he seized Athos’ forearm, held it in place and lapped at the wound with the flat of his tongue. Torn skin mended, flesh and tendons regrew, Athos’ blood cascaded back to his heart and pulse thudded at the inside of his wrist.

They both moved together, coiling around each other as Athos presented his neck to the demon and
Aramis pulled him down. I heard a muffled moan and then the sound of the vampyre feeding, and Athos’ body melted into that of his lover. I averted my eyes and turned my back at the intimate display. I had watched them fuck not long ago, but this was worse.

In the boudoir, Grimley was putting his instruments away.

“Thank you, Grimley,” I said. “If not for you, Aramis would have- well, not died, obviously, but he would have withered in my bed for gods know how long.”

“Until Kyrios fed him.” Grimley retorted. “He never withers long with Kyrios within reach.”

“No, I imagine not.”

A loud thud in the bedroom startled us. Grimley was at the door before me, and I saw his shoulders sag.

“Don’t try to get up, Kyrios,” he said in a voice that was tinny with resignation. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“I’m fine,” Athos whispered with pale lips from where he slumped in a half-swoon on the carpet. Grimley pulled him up and placed him on the bed, next to the vampyre, whose mouth was flushed red and whose face had lost its sharp edges. The wound in his chest had closed.

“Be sensible, Athos,” I said. “Stay there. I’ll send for wine and steak. Rare, I think, to keep Baron von Stackelberg happy.”

Fangs flashed in the twilight, and I laughed. Athos shot a quizzical sidelong glance at his lover, but Aramis merely threaded his fingers through Athos’ and shook his head.

Back in the boudoir, I rang the bell for Clothilde and turned to the Olympian again. “Tell me, Grimley: are they always like this?”

His mouth remained silent, but the look in his eye was more than eloquent.

“Good heavens! Where do you have the sheets laundered?”

“Usually, Madame, I buy new ones. It’s easier that way.”

“How can you afford it? Neither of them work. Or does Aramis treat paying patients these days? I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“No, Madame. It’s all thanks to the leprechaun. He sniffs out the most promising investments like M. d’Artagnan other people’s secrets.”

“Yes, that makes sense. Where is Bartleby? How come he did not attend to his master?”

“He picked up the trail of the hunters who bothered you today, Madame. If I’m not entirely mistaken – and I very rarely am – he is even now discovering their hideout. I believe they are in for a nasty surprise, once Kyrios recuperates and Dr Flitterbatt regains what wits he has.”

“Yes,” I said, fanning myself pensively. “Yes, I believe those men’s hearts will soon be full of existential regrets.”
Paris, March 1680

To rise early and to retire late, that was the ideal combination. That way most of one’s life could be dedicated to one’s work. Work, work, work, neverending work. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the minister of the Maison du Roi, took a deep breath and fortified himself against another onslaught of the stabbing pain coming from his abdomen. What curse had one of those filthy abominations placed on him now?

His hand trembled, and at last brought the quill back down to paper. The Code Noir was going to set France aside from other colonial forces. Colbert may not have been a man of god, like his predecessor (Richelieu, not Mazarin, mind you - the former had been a great man, the latter - a simpering blister on the arse of humanity), but he would leave his mark for mankind with the groundbreaking recognition that African slaves were people too. Within reason, you understand, for you could still enslave them, but the very acknowledgement that in the heart of a black man dwelt a soul worth saving, worth the Baptismal Font - that there was already the mark of an enlightened man. Colbert smiled, lost in thought of his glory, much of which, he would’ve been sad to learn, would come only posthumously.

“But not the Jews,” he muttered, jotting down a quick addendum. “We cannot have the Jews residing in any of our colonies. Tolerance and benevolence are godly, but one has to draw the line somewhere.” He lifted his eyes up to the portrait of Richelieu just as another stabbing pain radiated up his back. “Why didn’t you strive harder to exterminate them?” the Minister asked. “The revenants, the nymphs, the bloody fairies! You were a wise man, a holy man, what stayed your hand? What was it?” The quill trembled and the Minister, at length, was forced to place it down into the inkwell.

A quiet tap on the door roused Colbert from his thoughts. “Come in,” and the door opened to allow in a young cadet, who, by the looks of him, could not have been older than eighteen. “What brings you here at such a late hour, my boy?”

“News from Pignerol prison,” the cadet bowed curtly and extended a hand with a missive.

“Fouquet?”

“Dead, Monsieur.”

“Hm…” Colbert’s hand caressed the parchment, the final news of his foe’s demise. His eyes strove to soak in each letter of the news, but his mind was elsewhere, meandering through the corridors of time.

“Anything suspicious about his passing, cadet…?”

“Biscarrat, Monsieur. And no, Monsieur.”

“Biscarrat,” Colbert paused. “Your father had been one of my first hunters.”

“That is correct, Monsieur. He was one of the men murdered by two of those monsters on Belle-Île.”
“Those monsters too had been working with Fouquet,” Colbert smiled. “But it is all over now.” The cadet bowed, about to be dismissed, when the Minister’s hand halted him. “Wait.”

“How can I serve you, Minister?”

There had been something in the back of Colbert’s mind. Something he could not quite put a finger on. His foe was dead. The monsters had been exterminated in Locmaria, and no one had seen either one of their kind since. They had searched the château de Bragelonne and found nothing there except a portrait that had been labeled as of Fouquet, which had been brought back to Paris as evidence that the comte de La Fère had been part of the conspiracy. It had been laughably simple to claim his domains in the name of the crown, since the count himself had also conveniently departed his mortal coil.

“I need your hand, my boy. Would you light my way into the gallery?”

It would be good to have one last look at his old foe, Colbert thought. One last look at those haughty features of a man who dared fly too close to the Sun, or the Sun King, as it were. He had the portrait from Bragelonne hung in his gallery, a trophy to remind him of his triumph, but he never did care to have a very good look at him. Well, now he would; he would stand the victor over the vanquished and he would say “God’s justice was done.”

They stopped before the portrait and Colbert asked the young Biscarrat to hold up the light, so he could study those features for the first and last time. The lamp went aloft, soft shadows scurrying away like field mice, and the pale features of the portrait glowed in the darkness of the gallery like a mocking ignis fatuus, calling him, luring him in.

“Ah!” Colbert clutched at his heart. “That is not him! That is not him!”

“What is it, Minister?” The cadet’s arms were around Colbert, supporting him as he drew back in horror from the portrait.

“Who is he? Who is this man?!”

The soft lips, curved in the barely perceptible smile. The sly black eyes that looked askance instead of meeting your gaze. The creamy skin and lustrous hair. He mocked, he taunted, he shone with eternal life and unquenchable beauty. You will never win!

“That is not Fouquet!” Colbert’s hand clutched at young Biscarrat’s forearm. “Take a good look, my boy! This... This is the true face of evil!”

Deep in his kidney, the stone placed there by a fairy grew. She had wanted a slow, painful death for him, but he would not be bowed. He would not surrender. He would keep recruiting and training his hunters, these men, who, like young Biscarrat, would kill and die to save the world from the monsters who would make a feast of it.

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Paris, September 1844

The Porthling buzzed like a beehive, attracting to himself almost as big an audience as the courtesan whose house he was honoring with his presence, and among his throng of worshippers - the courtesan herself. Or rather, Marie Duplessis, or rather - the once and future Rohan nymph. She laughed at one of his particularly piquant witticisms and her breasts shook with joy until she seemed to choke on air and cough.
I shot Aramis a warning look, but he merely shrugged and circled Alexandre Dumas once more, stalking his prey quietly, his lower lip pulled in between his teeth. His shadow slunk off of Marie and curled behind him as he moved.

“What do I even say to him?” I wondered aloud as my beloved appeared again at my side. “Hello, Alex, I am your uncle Athos? Your dad sends love, he is not dead, in fact he’s a Titan. Zeus’ blessings upon your fertile prick?”

“You’re the one who wanted to meet him prior to deciding his fate,” my kitten purred into my ear and pretended to be incredibly preoccupied with his own fingernails, whilst I eyed Marie. Was she faking it? The son of Porthos could not possibly be that amusing, could he? “Are you jealous?” Aramis’ breath brushed my earlobe.

“Of whom?”

He laughed, his hip bumped up against mine. “She will never belong to just one man. You know that, old man, don’t you?”

“What use have I of a courtesan when I have you?”

“Oh bah!” His fingers played with my cravat as his eyes traversed to the other corner of the room and fixed darkly on Alex. “What do you know of courtesans, you utter saint? You veritable Athanasios the Athonite.”

“You mean the literal Athanasios the Athonite.” I leaned in, Aramis laughed, I blinked, and he was across the room again. “They were the smartest women in Greece,” I spoke softly, as if to myself, knowing that flittermouse’s hearing could always pick up my words, even in a crowded salon. “Courtesans, I mean.”

“They were the only women in Greece who were allowed to be smart.” It had been Marie who answered me, placing a glass of wine into my hand. “Why so sulky, count? I’d like you to meet a good friend of mine, and father of my even better friend.” She smiled and the white camellias upon her bosom shook to the rhythm of her excited breathing. “M. Dumas here spotted you from across the room and remarked on your entirely remarkable physiognomy.”

I bowed and picked up her hand, bringing it my lips, “Madame is too kind, as always.” And then, I turned to face the fruit of Porthosian loins. “M. Dumas,” I bowed my head. “Comte de Perregaux,” I gave him the name I had been using. It occurred to me that Alexandre here might actually be exactly the man to comprehend that when in France, I prefered to pass as French, knowing them for the country of ardent xenophobes that they always have been.

“The count is a big fan of your work, chou-chou,” Marie smiled and stroked a titanic bicep. “He was only telling me so himself the other night, weren’t you, count?”

“I’m not familiar with your entire oeuvre, Monsieur,” I spoke, my eyes seeking out Aramis for help and finding him leaning against one of the bookshelves, pretending to read something by the Marquis de Sade. I wondered how the nymph even got her hands on a printed copy. “But I do find The Three Musketeers rather… um…” Aramis flipped the page with far too much gusto. “Striking.”

“What’s striking, sir,” Alex replied, “is that I have been studying you from afar for quite some time, and you bear an uncanny resemblance to one of… my characters.”

“Surely not,” I felt my face flush and I once again sought succor from Aramis, whose eyes softened and his lower lip unfurled into something recognizable as a smile.
“Something very noble in your profile, sir. And quite, dare I say, Byronic in your air!”

A Wallachian demon apparated at my side and whispered to me in Greek, “May I eat him now, agapitos?” And then he beamed charmingly at the son of Porthos and extended his hand. “Dr. Flitterbatt,” he pronounced with more composure than I would have imagined. “I am the count’s personal physician.” He grinned, flashing his brilliant teeth at all three of us, who were watching his face with bated breath, I can only imagine for our own reasons. “And you are the father of d’Artagnan?”

The so-called pearl of my cousin’s mighty tentacle laughed and rubbed his stomach in such a way that reminded me that the crusaders used to proclaim his old Da to be a baby-eater.

“I would not go so far,” the writer tittered, “perhaps a step-uncle, once removed. Ho ho ho!”

I bit my lip and remembered how Porthos had called Aramis the cousin-expert when we first met. “Ahem!” My demon cleared his throat, observing me getting lost in my vivid memories.

“But you created him, no?” Marie batted her eyelashes at the night’s likely prey.

“Ah, my dear,” Dumas patted Marie’s small hand with the condescending air of a man about to say “Actually.” “But, actually,” I shook my head at the predictability of the world, “I did not create d’Artagnan. He was a factual historical figure, you know.” He turned towards me and pronounced, “I consider myself a historian first, Messieurs, and a writer second.”

“What a coincidence!” Aramis exclaimed, eyeing me up and down with unbridled glee. “The count is an avid historian! Why, some of his retellings of history are so riveting, that I could swear, Monsieur, that he had beheld these times and deeds with his own eyes.”

“And,” Marie echoed the demonic prankster, “he is fluent in just about every language ever spoken by man.” She smiled at me coyly and added, “Or woman.”

“You have both worshipped at the altar of Discord for far too long,” I hissed at them in a language so ancient that no doubt had Alex been an innocent party all along, he would at last find a suspicion or two arising. As it was, I was becoming more and more convinced of what Aramis had said earlier: the writer was shrewd, wily, and far too dangerous to leave alive.

“Fantastic!” Alex exclaimed. “Oh do do that again, count! What was that? Was it Russian?” Or, perhaps I had given him too much credit.

“Magyar,” I lied and once again lifted an internal eyebrow at myself. Since my apotheosis, many things had become somehow a lot simpler, like telling untruths.

Liar, Aramis mouthed at me and I smiled back at him, who would certainly know.

“Getting back to d’Artagnan,” I gathered my bearings, “I know you jested in your forward about not being the true author of that work.”

“Haha!” said the demon.

“Heehee!” tittered the nymph.

I went on, undeterred. “But as an adoptive father, to use your own analogy, Monsieur Dumas, tell me - do you really consider the Gascon….” I omitted saying nuisance “… to be the true hero of your tale?”
The little, round-faced thief patted down his short mustache and fixed me with his mischievous gaze.

“Well, count,” he chortled and looked askance at Marie, “not to bring up such things in mixed company, but I had the boy force himself upon two women in the first half of the novel. How much more clear can I be of my opinion?”

“Ha!” Aramis could not contain his excitement at this and grabbed my hand.

“But, I do not need to tell you how the public is!” Alex went on, smiling slyly. “You show them a mirror and they will find their hero or villain. At times, the two are quite indistinguishable. In this case, it seems the public opinion of d’Artagnan is that he is the charming vestige of the age of chivalry.” I opened my mouth to speak but realized I was once again being led around by my nose by the chubby-fingered scion of the Sun. “The true hero of the tale, gentlemen, Mademoiselle,” he kissed Marie’s hand entirely in passing, “is of course, the comte de La Fère himself.”

“How is that?” I inquired, grinding my teeth.

“Well, he is the true author, of course!” Alex pronounced and dissolved in peals of laughter while Aramis and I exchanged bewildered looks.

“If the comte de La Fère were indeed the true author of your novel, M. Dumas,” Aramis spoke in his most dulcet of tones, “why does it sound so much like he is… How do I put this?” He glanced at me and once again I beheld the chyortik who was up to no good. “Like he is so fond of himself?”

“It’s getting late, Doctor,” I said, squeezing his elbow. “And I’m sure M. Dumas is very tired.”

“Oh no! Is it late?” The man looked at the rather ostentatious, golden watch that dangled dandily from his pocket. “But we have not even spoken of history yet! Count, please, your thoughts on the Stuart Restoration - I would give a pint of blood for them!”

Marie gasped and covered her face with her fan.

“Would you?” Aramis narrowed his eyes.

“Chyortik, back off.”

“No, but he said - I did not…” I pulled Aramis off into the corridor where once upon a time I had followed Marie’s steps to her library. He bristled and flushed in my grasp and finally slammed me into the wall, pressing our mouths together.

“We should leave.”

“I was having so much fun, Athos,” he pouted.

“I could tell.”

“You’ve met him now. Yay or nay?”

“Oh, don’t tell me it’s all so very black and white for you!”

His face still hovered close to mine, his hand pressed into my shoulder, and I grasped him by his hair which he insisted on still wearing long, despite current fashion being in favor of a much more manageable hairstyle, pulling his face back so I could study his dark and covetous eyes.

“The two of you - honestly!” Marie sprung up at our sides as if from a fountain. “Go, get out! Get this over with elsewhere, I have guests. Liszt is here, you know, and I have not even spoken to him.
yet.” She laughed and pushed us along the corridor with her long ostrich feathers. In the antechamber, her hand alighted on my wrist and squeezed. “Let him live, Athos,” her deep blue eyes, the color of the becalmed sea after a storm, “He amuses me.”

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**Olympus, 1184 BC**

“You are leaving.” The Goddess of Discord’s wings trembled in the wind, their feathers ruffled to the point that the very quills came apart where she stood. She would not weep before him; it had been bad enough she had wept before Mother.

“Yes,” the demigod nodded his head and the goddess watched his dark curls fall over his eyes, hiding them from her gaze. “Ares is to take me home, to Thira.”

“This isn’t what I wanted!” she exclaimed, no longer fully in control of her faculties. A cloud erupted over their heads with a peal of contained thunder. It was a warning. Athos needed to leave. “You were to be mine,” she whispered, reaching for him with a trembling hand, only to watch him shrink back in terror.

“Please, don’t,” he stepped back from her, too close to the edge of the cliff. For a moment, she wanted to test the extent of his new immortality. To watch him crash over the rocks. How long would it take for his body to heal itself then, she wondered. How long would it take his new Grigori to gather up his brains and put them all back together.

She took a step towards him, her wings held aloft. She was a goddess. She was still stronger than him, this man, this son of an islander and her Father’s wandering cock.

“May you only know disaster from a woman’s touch,” she whispered and her fingers curled into a fist.

Behind the demigod, a golden chariot rose up over the precipice. Her brother, her twin, he had betrayed her. He had taken her favorite toy from her, and now too - he was defending him.

“Come, Athos,” Ares’ voice cut through Eris’ rage and she shut her eyes, so as not to see her prey getting into the chariot to leave the rocky ridges of Olympus.

She rose up, carried by the Anemoi to the very feet of the Throne of Zeus, and there, the Goddess of Discord wept such tears as to soften even her sister Athena’s heart.

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**Paris, September 1844**

“It is black and white, Athos,” I told him once Marie had turned her back on us and floated back towards the salon. “When it comes to death, things are black and white. Either you kill someone or you don’t. Tertium non datur.”

“Oh?” Discord raised his eyebrows and adjusted my cravat. “And what about you, my sweet revenant? Are you not tertium?”

“I was talking about humans, as well you know.”

“He is part-Titan, as well you know.”
I grimaced and turned away from my lover, who stalled me with a hand to my arm. “Chyortik,” he whispered. “Aren’t you forgetting something? You can’t go out looking like this.”

I ground my teeth, but Discord was relentless. “It’s too dangerous. Not just for you, but also for Marie. She saved you, Aramis. You can’t put her in jeopardy now.” He leaned in and his breath stirred my hair. “Come on, darling. Let Baron von Stackelberg out to play. Come on, show me the baron’s face.”

Rage rose within my breast as I closed my eyes and focused. Behind me, Athos laughed softly. “Oh, very well done, Aramis. I’m impressed. You look not a day younger than eighty-three. Is this the face you showed d’Artagnan when he harassed you in Vannes?”

“You’re an asshole, count.”

“Mmh…” he purred. “That’s dementia speaking, baron. Here, take my arm and permit me to escort your frail self to the carriage.”

We stepped into the corridor and walked towards the doorway. The footman handed us our coats and hats, and Athos held out my walking stick with a smirk. Outside, a cab was waiting for us, and Athos handed the Baron von Stackelberg in, before leaping in lightly behind me. I leaned back into the shadows, and the cab set in motion.

“Is this charade really necessary?”

“The Baron von Stackelberg, not Dr Flitterbatt, entered Mademoiselle Duplessis’ house. The Baron von Stackelberg, not Dr Flitterbatt, had to be seen to leave it.” Athos voice was steady. “It’s bad enough that you insist on looking yourself in Marie’s salon. You can’t do it outside. They know your face, Aramis.”

“They might know yours as well.”

He shrugged. “I was never suspected. Whereas you… Colbert knew what you were. What you are. And Colbert’s legacy lives on.” He leaned in and spoke in a very low voice. “You were shot through the heart. That must never happen again.”

“I won’t die.” I reached out for his hand and curled my fingers around his. “Not as long as you’re here.”

“I’m always here. I won’t leave you.”

“I know.”

We didn’t speak for the rest of the drive. When the cab stopped in front of the Hôtel de Rohan-Guémené, I readjusted my cravat and Athos closed the top buttons of his coat. He alighted first and helped me hobble out of the cab and up the steps to the entrance.

The real Baron von Stackelberg lived on the second floor. He was old and frail and rarely left his apartments. Assuming his identity in public had been easy, for I wore his face the moment I crossed the threshold of the hotel without running the risk of meeting him in person. Unsurprisingly, Marie found it most amusing that her spur-of-the-moment lie to derail Biscarrat had blossomed into an elaborate plot and an impersonation that was at least as clever as that of the Bishop Juxon.

The gate closed behind us, I shuffled past the concierge and towards the stairs. Halfway up the staircase, the Baron von Stackelberg vanished, and I was pushing Athos against the banister, my hand in his hair and my teeth at his throat, the way he loved it. The pulse of his blood was strong, it
throbbed against my teeth through the knot of his cravat. “Here?” He gasped and snorted, aroused and amused beyond measure. “What will you do if some poor wretch sees us?” A hand, slender and fine-boned yet merciless like Persian-forged Damascus steel, dug into my hip. “Don’t eat the servant,” he mouthed against my cheekbone.

“The Porthlet is not a servant, Athos,” I murmured as we stumbled up and around the corner, down the corridor, past the door of the author, and slammed into the door to our apartment. “Let me eat him.” My fangs were razor-sharp against his skin, but I was gentle. I did not break it. I grazed it with a pointy tip and watched the white line blossom on the side of his face, and then redden as blood rose to the surface.

“No, Aramis.”

“Your final word?” Inside, across the rooms, the bedroom door opened and closed. “Thank you for bringing me home, Athos.”

“Anytime.” He took my face in both hands and kissed me on the mouth, tongue pushing past my lips and teeth. “And it was not my final word.”

“Good.” I unwrapped his cravat and pressed my fingertips against the pulse point at the side of his neck. “You were more fun as an ardent adherent of Ares, Discord.”

The heathen smirk slashed across his face, and for a moment I saw the face of his Olympian brother, Discordia’s twin, flash behind his noble features. “Oh was I?” he purred. In the blink of an eye, he had tumbled me to the ground and his hot mouth pressed into my crotch. The moisture of his breath settled on my skin even through the fabric. Athos let me feel his teeth before unbuttoning my trousers, and then his hot mouth was back with a slick slide of his tongue along my flesh. My hips thrust up, but his hands pinned me down. I opened my eyes and blinked at the ceiling, and then looked down. The sight of Athos straddling my legs, his body folded in a graceful curve above my crotch, that beautiful face a breath’s width away from my cock, and his mouth, that generous mouth open for me… I moaned, and he looked up and my cock slid into his mouth.

“You’re mine, Aramis.” He had let go of my cock again and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my stomach, above my hipbone, and then the inside of my thigh. “Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I don’t.” A groan again, for his hand had slipped between my legs and his fingertips and nails teased my skin.

“Don’t walk away from me, chyortik.” His voice was no more than a breath. “Don’t hide in the dark.”

I only groaned in response. Ever since that day when he returned from Marie’s bed and I had tried to drown him in waters that weren’t hers, his tenderness had become almost painful; his words, murmured in that honeyed voice into my skin, burned and scraped at my souls, like phenol on an open wound. I did not know where the hurt was coming from that bubbled to the surface. The coffin in which I had lain until my flesh regrew around me had never seemed so near, and for a moment the urge to go back to where it had been buried overwhelmed me. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. I wanted to burn it and to scatter the ashes to the four winds. Even as I lay awake, I felt the weight of the black earth pressing down on my chest and the legs of black beetles stab a myriad of needle pricks into my flesh. Athos’ hands shovelled the earth away and their touch soothed my raw skin.

He was fucking me with his mouth, deep and steady, sucking me in all the way into his throat, and the heartbeat of a god throbbed around my cock, until my own blood picked up the pace and my heart followed his, even before I drank from him.
We lay in each other’s arms after, his fingers threaded through my hair and his open palm on my spent cock. “I love you, Aramis,” he said calmly. “In every way known to gods.”

“I know.” I pressed my lips to the curve of his neck, where the scent of blood still lingered and where his skin was thin and tender.

“We must leave Paris soon,” he continued. “This is too dangerous for us. For you. They know your face. Perhaps they have photographs,” he spat the word in disgust, “of you.”

“I don’t believe they do. I never sat for one, and it’s not like you can secretly take one.” The technology of photograms, of daguerreotypes, of photography, it had turned out to be unstoppable. I thought of how forty years ago Marion and I had travelled to England to stop Thomas Wedgwood from capturing shadows on paper. It seemed silly now, stopping one man had accomplished nothing. Others had emerged, more dangerous than he’d ever been.

“Perhaps Marie is right,” I said suddenly. “Perhaps we should let Porthos’ son live.”

Athos raised himself on his elbow. “Really?” He was gazing down at me with eyes like stars. “What’s brought this on, Aramis?”

“There are too many,” I sighed. “We can’t kill them all. It’s like the French Revolution all over again: their name is Legion for they are many. Marion and I tried, Athos, truly we did try.” I clutched his forearm in an iron grip and he frowned and kissed me on the forehead, brushing away my sweat-soaked hair.

“I know, Aramis.”

“You don’t know what it was like,” I whispered into the soft, warm hollow in the crook of his neck. “The commoners rising up against us. Destroying the natural order of things. I,” I swallowed and nestled closer into the embrace of his body. “I was glad you were dead and didn’t have to see it. And then when Marion found me, I tried so hard to cleanse the lands from them before I could even contemplate bringing you back. I failed you.”

“Never!” He pulled me closer still. “Never, Aramis. You have not failed me.”

“You do absolve me then?” I rolled in his arms, willing my body to melt and be absorbed by his. “Your absolution, Athos – that is all that I crave.”

I felt him smile. “Not all, surely.” His blood heaved as he spoke and so did his groin where it pressed into me. “It is yours. Everything you want from me, angel. It is yours to take. I give it gladly.”

A sudden burst of light behind my closed eyelids. The solemnity of his words, like a vow given before the face of God, even as he lay half-naked and damp on the carpet – it should have been ridiculous. Yet it was not laughter that rose in the back of my throat but bitterness. I needed something to quench that acerbic taste that accompanied me wherever I went. The sweetness of his blood washed it away again and again, but it never lasted. I needed more. I needed the blood of men that was soaked in fear and wrath, for those were the two things that Athos could not give me. The diluted blood of a Titan, torn from his veins against his will. The rage-fuelled blood of men who hunted us.

“Marie should have given me Biscarrat,” I said. “He would have restored me even before you arrived. She enjoyed taunting me.”

“No, Aramis.” He laced his fingers through mine. “I know you do not yet trust her fully. But she showed much prudence when she acted the way she did. What would have happened had you eaten
Biscarrat? His men would have charged in, and what would have happened to you then?"

"Restored to my powers?" I snorted. "I would have enjoyed a veritable feast. And we wouldn’t have had to hunt them down later – and even so Biscarrat got away. It vexes me greatly, Athos."

"We will get Biscarrat. And think of it this way: it was I who gave you new life. I had failed to do so when you lay injured with a shot through your heart once before. In Crève-cœur,” he put a stress on both syllables, “your heart had broken without me. In Paris, I mended it with my blood."

"You great sap," I couldn’t help smiling. "You think it’s romantic."

"My blood flows through your veins, Aramis. Through nobody else’s, just yours. Certainly not through Marie’s."

"That would have been pretty much impossible. Unless I had performed a blood transfusion on her."

"What I am saying, Dr Flitterbatt, is that what you are for me…" He swallowed and whispered in my hair. "In Greek, there are four words for love. I believe I have discovered new ones since I’ve known you."

***

Thira, 1184 BC

The island of Thira rose majestically from the waves of the Aegean. With its colorful buildings, the bright frescoes, the barefooted and magnificently-tanned children who ran up and down the cultivated hills, the noise and din of the ports and the seabirds over the caldera. This island - the beloved of Poseidon - where his Father had seen his mother, so strangely pale among the other inhabitants as to resemble a pearl herself. With her flaxseed hair and her aquamarine eyes, and her long fingers that could wield the sacrificial knife as adroitly as she poured libations at the altar of her Gods.

Soon, he would see her again. He would tell her that he is alive and well, and that he would remain that way. Forever. But would his mother’s touch also be denied him?

"Thinking about our sister?" Ares’ voice caressed Athos’ ear as the chariot came to a halt.

"No," the demigod responded.

"Good. Put love behind you. You serve only War now."

"I remember," Athos replied in a hollow voice.

"No, not like that," Ares was close to him again, so close that Athos could almost taste the phantom sweetness of ambrosia on his lips. The God of War’s hands brushed along the back of his shoulders, making his ears ring with the sounds of a hundred battle horns. “I don’t want you to go like that.”

Athos had made no reply but he leaned back against the marble planes of the God’s body, letting Ares wrap him up into his gilded cloak and his golden-hued arms which were cut with a veritable delta of veins, a mysterious and divine landscape that meant something, but Athos was not sure what.

"You are immortal now,” the God of War whispered letting his beard tickle the soft skin of the demigod’s neck. “Think of all the glorious things we can accomplish together, you and I.”

"Yes,” the demigod said.
Since they had quit Olympus, he appeared to have lost what reservoir of words he had. Things that were colorful before and nuanced, now appeared as gradations of black and white. Things that were forbidden to him; and things that were still allowed. Ares’ lips upon the nape of his neck: allowed. Eris’ lips: forbidden.

“Do you ever think about the act of mating, brother?” the God of War purred into his ear. “Humans seem to be at a distinct disadvantage, their genitalia are so simple and unrefined. Defenseless, really. Perhaps that is why we Gods, who can take on aspects of other living creatures, so often mate with them as beasts.” Athos was not sure where all this talk led to, perhaps to distraction, perhaps his brother the God of War really had no one else on Olympus to discuss such things with. Indeed, what did Gods talk about when left among themselves? “Felines, for example, have a barbed penis. Did you know that?”

“No,” Athos responded.

“I would not like to have been born a female cat,” Ares went on musing. “Although, I imagine such a raking could potentially be quite pleasurable, under the right circumstances.” His lips were back on the skin of Athos’ nape.

“You are not a cat,” Athos replied.

Ares laughed, a soft laughter that caressed Athos’ skin.

“No, brother. I am not a cat.” His hands tightened over the demigod’s hips, holding him close, holding him tight. “Did you know that when canines mate, the base of their cock swells into a giant knot to keep their mates in place, and their bitches clamp down tightly against it, so they can stay that way, locked together, for quite a long time?”

“No, I have never taken the time to learn the mating habits of dogs,” Athos replied, aroused despite the bizarre turn of their conversation.

“Don’t you think that sounds much more pleasurable than mating for felines?”

“Ares…” The God of War’s hand clamped over his mouth.

“Show me you are serious about our pact, Athos. That it wasn’t just something you said to get me to save your life.”

The God’s hand slipped from his lips and slid along his throat.

“You doubt my word?”

“I doubt all words. I only value deeds, for only by his deeds is a man truly measured.” Ares’ hand traveled lower, until, to Athos’ growing shame, he discovered the proof of his arousal and laughed softly into the curve of his neck again. “Don’t worry, Athos, as a God, I prefer the canine aspects to feline ones.” A moan escaped the demigod’s lips, his disobedient to rule body surrendering before the command even came. “No one is here. No one will see.” And Ares, deftly bending him over the rails of his chariot with one swift motion. “Let’s see if you will clamp down around my knot as hard as a female bitch.”

A soft curse escaped Athos’ lips and his cock stood somehow harder still, rigid, leaking and begging.

“Don’t be ashamed, brother,” Ares’ words came dripping into his ear like mead, “to surrender to me is not truly to surrender.”
He was a man and a warrior. He had slaughtered countless men and had sacked Troy. He had loved and he had lost there. And now all was lost, but he had an eternity before him, and it stretched out into an interminable collier of days that wound itself around his neck with invisible force, dragging him down in a way that he could not yet fully conceive, and yet it terrified him.

“Show me,” Ares’ voice brought him back into the physical realm, the realm where pleasure and pain molded into one glorious flame. “Show me they haven’t broken your spirit. Show me.”

A cry of pure desire tore from the demigod’s throat as the God of War filled him. And then kept on filling him, his cock swelling into a Gordian knot inside him, and Athos clenched around it with determined desperation.

“H-how?” The word fell from his dry lips.

“I’m a God,” Ares panted, hands clutching and caressing at the same time. “And you…” He grabbed Athos by the hair roughly, pulling his head back until his neck craned to its limit, long and supple. “You are mine,” and his teeth clamped down around the exposed ligaments, hard enough to bruise, hard enough to mark.

Athos felt sparks behind his eyelids as pleasure surged through his body and mind. The dogs of War. And he laughed because to live forever with the God of War as one’s patron could be hilarious. To battle, Achaeans!

“Yes!” he cried out, clenched around the knot, filled to the brim with lust and awash in a sea of gratitude. He was going to live forever. He too could fuck the world, the entire world, and knot in it, and keep it on his cock for as long as it would please him. “Yes!”

He had lost track of how long it pleased Ares to stay inside him, but when he came down from his own high, he lay on the sand and the chariot was gone. Only a big, black, shaggy dog sniffed around him and nuzzled into this neck.

“Remember, you are mine now, and I will take care of you,” the dog said.

“What in Hades,” Athos scrambled up to his feet. He cast a look about and saw no one else who could have been speaking. “Ares? Is that really you?” The dog barked and waved his tail and then scampered off along the azure shoreline until Athos’ gaze could find him no more.

He sat down upon the black sand, careless of how hot it felt against the back of his thighs, and buried his face in his hands. Home. How many nights had he spent in Troy thinking of the way it sparkled, this island, this jewel upon the sea. Secrets whispered in the dark to those who chose to love him at a time of war. Everything was gone, just as he was doomed to watch everything and everyone he loved die.

“Kyrios.”

Athos stirred. A man had been standing next to him; a man he had never seen before in his life.

“Do I know you?”

“I am Gregorios, your Grigori.”

“What happened to Yorgas?”

“I used to be Yorgas, but now I am this. Yorgas drowned.”
“Drowned?” Athos rose from the sand and the newly arrived man swiftly brushed the grains off his chiton and examined him with an expert eye.

“Yes, Kyrios. There was a terrible storm at sea. Not to mention Scylla and Charybdis and the Sirens and the…”

“Be quiet, fool! Where is my mother?”

The servant bowed silently and motioned for the demigod to follow him. Athos cast one last look along the shoreline, half-expecting and half-dreading to see a pair of gigantic, black wings. But the air was still and the Gods were mute.

Chapter End Notes

And because perhaps not everyone remembers the painting in question, here it is again:

Note that it says: "portrait supposé du surintendant Fouquet". I think we all know what happened there.
Notes from the Underground

Paris, October 1844

The Baron von Stackelberg was rather convivial for an octogenarian, it would be said later. He frequently visited Marie Duplessis’ salon, although often accompanied by the comte de Perregaux, as tongues wagged. It must have been quite the arrangement, they would gossip, the courtesan, the dashing young count, and the frail old man who could barely stand on his own two feet.

But where else if not at Marie’s place could we continue our interrogations of Alexandre Dumas? I realized, somewhat too late, that if anyone had been conducting an interrogation, it was rather the clever Porthling himself.

“Shall we go wake up Porthos?” I offered the Baron von Stackelberg my arm with a smirk. Aramis glanced at his pocket watch. It was just past five in the morning. We had spent the entire night at Marie’s, drinking and arguing about the historical accuracy of certain accounts of the events of the seventeenth century.

“You do know the duke of Buckingham was much more interested in men than in Anne of Austria, right?” Aramis leaned over the card table and cheated blatantly. Alexandre, however, had been too preoccupied with our conversation to notice.

“You don’t say!”

“I do say,” Aramis grinned and collected the author’s money from him. “Stenie, I believe, they called him at King James’ court. Isn’t that right, count?”

“I would not know, I wasn’t there,” I reminded Aramis. Indeed, I had not been. He was the one involved, quite intimately, in the Buckingham intrigue, and if anyone was going to speak to the duke’s proclivities, it certainly wasn’t my place to do so.

Back in the carriage, I shoved my hand into Aramis’ pocket and pulled out the pilfered currency. “Shame on you, chyortik. The man steals other people’s work for a living - how will he eat?”

My lips were crimson red from his teeth by the time we arrived at rue Rambuteau.

“Be careful, baron,” I handed Aramis my hand to aid in his alighting from the carriage.

“This is ridiculous,” he muttered under his breath. “You are ridiculous. In all my years, I’ve never been so abused.”

“That’s excellent, my love,” I whispered, “very curmudgeonly. No one will suspect a thing.”

“Asshole.”

I missed Mousqueton. Now, I suppose a homunculus isn’t built to last forever, but whoever Porthos’ new lackey was just did not carry the same gravitas. Still, as the story went, he had attached himself to Porthos quite readily during one of his relapses into piracy, which, oddly enough, made him loyal and trustworthy in my eyes. True to his habit of naming his own servants, Porthos had christened his new dogsbody as Takoyaki, which, I am sorry to report, means “grilled octopus” in Japanese.

“Monsieur is currently indisposed,” the silly named man attempted to protest, but Aramis merely gave him a look before he meekly stood aside and liberated the path to the bedroom.
Inside the vaulted bedchamber, Porthos slept in the middle of a bed gigantic enough to accommodate five. I startled when I realized that, indeed, the bed already contained three.

“Porthos, aren’t you going to introduce us to your new friends?” I asked, causing the two naked women to squeal and burrow under the covers.

“Good morning, comrades!” the Titan stretched and yawned, while Aramis and I exchanged a look and then a shrug and both selected an armchair to sprawl in whilst we waited for the scene to resolve itself. Meanwhile, I betook myself of the opportunity to get a better look at Porthos’ new entourage. “This is Sylvie, and this is Sabine,” Porthos pointed from one nude to another.

“I’m Sabine and she’s Sylvie!” one of the identical twins protested.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Porthos kissed the hand of the protesting twin, while her sister frowned and threw suspicious looks in our direction. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Porthos turned towards the other woman.

Aramis averted his eyes. For a Slavic abomination of the most unholy kind, he certainly still exhibited some bizarrely parochial sensibilities. I smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

“Do you like them, Athos?” he whispered while Sabine and Sylvie were hastily retreating into their dresses. “Perhaps you’d like to shag them, hmm?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I replied under my breath, “they are nowhere as creamy-skinned and delicious as my chyortik.”

“You’re vile,” Aramis proclaimed.

“You’re both vile,” Porthos yawned, and was suddenly standing upright before us in his dressing gown, with his hands upon his hips. “What kind of animals just burst into the bedroom, without warning, without knocking?” He turned towards the two flabbergasted twins. “I’ll call on you, honeys, word of honor!” I waved; Aramis snarled.

“I see you’re busy making more future nuisances?” I addressed my cousin as soon as the ladies of the night were out of earshot. “Whatever happened to your resolution to abstain from women of childbearing age?”

“Oh trust me, Athos, they’re not going to be with child from what we did last night, ha ha ha!”

“Eww!” Aramis recoiled.

“He’s right, Porthos,” I nodded and patted my beloved’s hand, “Eww.”

“Eww, yourselves!” Porthos huffed. “Now, what have you done to my son?” I opened my mouth to speak when Porthos held up his hand, “Wait!” and hollered for his manservant, “Breakfast!” Then, turning back to us, and assuming a seat in his unmade and rather rancid bed, pronounced: “Proceed.”

“Nothing yet,” Aramis replied. “Your cousin is as indecisive as King Solomon. If he could, he would only kill half of Alexandre.”

“It’s all fine for you to jest, Aramis,” Porthos wagged his finger in my beloved’s face, “but I’m not even allowed to see my boy! You two get to spend time with him, getting to know him, while I have to skulk in shadows trying to get a glimpse. Need I remind you - I do not like shadows!”

“Must be terrible,” I mused, “having to drown your sorrows in all that human poon, after having
your pick of the Caribbean mermaids.”

“Oh ha ha, says the man who ran a monastery as his personal brothel.”

“Down, you two,” Aramis admonished us, rather half-heartedly. I shot him a scornful look, being fully aware that the only man who liked to throw my past in my face more than Porthos was Aramis himself.

“Technically, a conglomerate of monasteries,” I shrugged.

“No one needs to hear the sordid details of the Athonite State,” Aramis stated and gave me a look. My loins stirred and I crossed my legs out of propriety.

“Stop flirting, you two monsters!” Porthos resorted to theatrics. “Just tell me about my boy! What does he say? How does he look? Is he writing a sequel to *The Three of Us*?”

“Sweet mother of god!” Aramis rolled his eyes. “You cannot go around calling it that!”

“I’m not going around, I’m sitting still, in my own bed. Calm down, flittermouse!”

“Hey! Only he gets to call me that!”

I laughed, letting my face fall onto my arm, and just then we were rescued from further distractions by the timely arrival of the “breakfast”, which would have been sufficient to feed a small army of Titans, or at least Porthos and his immediate Parisian family.

When we had eaten somewhat and Porthos had eaten most of the rest, we could at last resume our discussion of the inconvenient fruit of my cousin’s Titanic loins.

“He asks us hundreds of questions, under the pretext of ‘research’, and plays the fool every time we try to learn anything useful for ourselves,” I sighed, massaging my temples. “He eats like you, gambles like I did back in our musketeer days, and evades like Aramis!”

“And he takes notes,” my flittermouse inserted, moving his armchair closer to mine. “On napkins.”

“What kind of notes?” Porthos asked, continuing to chew the remnants of his repast.

“Sometimes, I’m fairly sure he’s making sketches of Athos’ face,” Aramis elbowed me.

“He’s not,” I waved him off.

“He has a huge crush on you, count.”

Porthos choked and went into a coughing fit until Aramis delivered a powerful punch to his abdomen.

“Well done there, Doctor,” I grinned and refilled my wine glass. “You rescued the pastry from certain boredom inside Porthos’ lung.”

“Fuck off, Discord.”

Porthos’ gasps slowed down gradually until his breathing evened out. And after a powerful inhale, at last, he asked, “Athos, you’re not going to fuck my son, are you?”

“Good gods, no!” I clapped my hand over my heart.
“Don’t be stupid, Porthos,” Aramis mewled in the meantime. “Alex is far too old for Athos, you know that. Perhaps your grandson, Alex Junior?”

“Thanks for helping,” I mouthed at my paramour.

“No, but truly, Porthos,” Aramis went on, undeterred, “you should see the way he fawns over your cousin, the way he hangs on his every word. The glares of hatred he sends my way.”

“Why should he hate you?” Porthos asked with widening eyes. “Does he know what you are to each other? Immortal Marrieds?”

“It’s impossible to know how much he actually believed of what he read,” I replied with growing frustration. “He’s very good at obfuscating. Are you sure it was Madame Dumas and not Aramis who gave birth to him in my absence?”

“Ha, bloody, ha!” Aramis glared at me.

“It’s not important what he knows,” Porthos finally shook his head, with a grave look. “What’s important is what he writes! Is he going to expose us?”

Aramis and I exchanged a glance and I opened my hands, feeling somewhat helpless.

“In all honesty,” my diablik conceded, “I don’t think he will. Even assuming he believes that you really are a god… well, demigod, to be exact, and that I am a… whatever you called me in your memoirs…”

“My little chyortik?”

“I hate you.”

“Can we get back on track?” Porthos attempted.

“Even if he knows about us, doesn’t mean he knows about Porthos. And either way, we probably could use a new pet,” Aramis muttered. “Although I’d prefer you got another dog. Devil the Next. No more parrots, I beg you!”

“You had a dog?” Porthos perked up. “I love dogs!”

“He’s very good with them,” Aramis shrugged and I blushed, thinking thoughts that I did not want to ever think again. “You know animal husbandry runs in his family.”

“Shut up,” I hissed, wishing the floor to open up and usher my way into Tartarus.

“So, should we kill him then?” Aramis turned on me.

“No!” I finally declared. “Final word. For now.” Porthos’ face lit up and he jumped from the bed to encase me into a heartfelt yet bone-crushing squeeze. After I was sat back down and Porthos wiped a furtive tear from his eye, I continued my thoughts. “I think Marie was right - he is entertaining. And the truth of it is, I like him. But…”

“But?”

“I reserve the right to change my mind, if at any point it looks like it’s become too risky.”

“So, like d’Artagnan, then?” Aramis sighed, rolling his eyes.
“No, chyortik, not like d’Artagnan. You ate d’Artagnan.”

“You ate d’Artagnan?” Porthos began choking again, while my demon shot me a look of spousal disapproval.

“You have a big mouth, count. I shall have to find some other use for it, for certainly it is not well-suited for so much talking.”

I shrugged and gave him my most innocent look, reaching my hand out to stroke down his arm. “We promised each other no more secrets, Dr Flitterbatt.”

“I did not realize Porthos was in the coffin with us,” Aramis whispered against my lips before biting my mouth gently.

“Remember that I love you,” I said, in my defense.

“Remember that I’m still here,” we heard Porthos say and separated reluctantly. I reached for more wine, Aramis reached for the remaining profiteroles, and Porthos reached the limit of tolerating us and shortly found oblivion in a blissful, post-prandial nap.

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Paris, October 1844

“I have been talking to a priest.”

Marion had swept into my boudoir wrapped into a cloak that blew around her like wings of the North Wind. It was the first frosty autumn day, and her lips as she pressed them to my cheek were cold.

“My poor girl, you have never lost your penchant for the ecclesiastical frock, have you?” I looked over her shoulder towards the door. She was accompanied by what I had taken at first glance for one of her familiars but what turned out to be Aramis’ lackey. The leprechaun stood at the threshold, clutching a bulky package to his chest, until Marion beckoned him closer. He stepped over and placed it on the table.

“I’ve been trying to gather more information.” Marion laid her hand on the package. “The hunters will return.”

“I know.” I shook my head and adjusted the flower adorning my bodice. “To be honest, I hadn’t expected them to leave as meekly as they did after the vampyre led them to my house.”

“I have a theory why they did.”

“Does that have anything to do with the consultations with your priest friend?”

“Partly.” She began to unwrap the package and pulled out a bundle of papers. “Look at this.” We both leaned in and her hair brushed against mine. She smiled and I kissed her cheek and pressed her hand.

“We’ll be all right,” I whispered.

“Of course we will. And it’s not you and I who are the most hunted at present. Aramis is.”

“They never hunted ondines much anyway,” I leaned back in my chair, stretched out my legs and crossed my ankles daintily. “They preferred to give us a human soul. With their cocks.”
“The human man’s answer to everything.” Marion smiled grimly. “They murdered a nymph forty years ago. Here, in Paris. They found a way to trap her in her corporeal form.”

“They didn’t.” I sighed. “She’d probably taken the body of an adolescent girl, like I did. We don’t retain our powers when that happens. Neither nymph, nor human. Neither flesh, nor water.”

“That is a huge risk that you took, Marie. And for what? Just so you could wear the flesh of a human again for a few decades?”

“Ah, but,” I brushed away my melancholy thoughts like cobwebs and beamed at her, “The human body does have its perks.”

“Clearly,” Marion said drily. “That also means that you must be careful. They have already spotted you, due to friend bloodsucker. They must not come to suspect you.”

“Friend bloodsucker has got himself into a lot of trouble.”

“To be fair, it wasn’t just him. The revenants of the East have crossed the Danube and the Oder, and people have taken notice of them. The wiedergänger of the Thirty Years’ War, remember them?”

“Aramis is nothing like them. He’s clean. He doesn’t look anything like the revenants of the East.”

“He’s new,” Marion said. “He’s different. He’s been living among humans and partaken of human food, pleasures-”

“And blood-”

“And blood for centuries. He had not rotted in the earth, nor fed on inbred peasants and their cattle. That’s why it took them so long to spot him. They might not have spotted him at all, had you not pointed him out to Colbert.”

I shrugged and picked up a plum from the fruit basket. “Discord will have to take care of him,” I said. “The count, at least, is safe. Nobody believes in Greek gods anymore - even though they still like to invoke them for entertainment.”

“But they believe in Transdanubian vampyres now.” She tapped her finger on a page and traced a row of words. “Rumour has it that vampyres can turn into fog and back at will and therefore escape through even the narrowest gaps. Biscarrat and his men probably didn’t search your house, because they knew it would be futile.”

“Turn into fog and back?” I frowned and picked up the document, frowning. “What nonsense. If they could turn into fog, why should they ever stalk their prey in human shape?”

“Fuck knows.” Marion shook her head in disdain. “Nobody ever accused those hunters of intelligence.”

“No, nobody ever did.” I read the next few lines and laughed. “Vampyres cannot enter a dwelling until somebody invites them in? Oh superb! What kind of a lame predator is that? Vampyres fear crosses, holy water and other Christian symbols? And yet they return to sleep in their graves every day? There are no crosses at or near the grave, I take it, and they never step on sacred ground, either, while they traverse the graveyard or crypt.”

“Aramis said that the first time he cornered one of those hunters after he recovered from having his head cut off that man threw holy water on him. He was very vexed. Apparently, the water messed up his coiffure and left unsightly stains on his silk vest and velvet coat.”
“Who on earth goes hunting hunters in a silk vest and velvet coat?”

“Aramis does.”

“Silly boy.” I put the sheets aside and turned my attention to an aged manuscript. “Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et demons?” I read. “The inconstancy of demons, ha!” I snorted and Marion laughed. “By Pierre de Lancre, Counsellor to the King at the Parliament of Bordeaux. Hang on, I know that name. He was around while I was being…” I rubbed my forefingers against my forehead in an attempt to force memories out of my brain through vigorous massage. “Madame de Chevreuse,” I eventually said. “I remember now. He wrote very enthusiastically and in great and rather torturous detail about the carnal congress between Satan and married women, and between witches and goats. Aramis made some rather scathing remarks about him one night in Madame de Rambouillet’s ruelle.”

“I can imagine.”

“Is this relevant?” I waved the brownish pages in the air. “Surely, superstitions have moved on since the early 1600s.”

“Perhaps the superstitions are not relevant, but you don’t know where this has been found.”

“Where?”

Marion turned around to the leprechaun, who kept a respectful distance. “Tell her, Bartleby.”

“Yes, Mistress.” He bowed. “In M. Hugo’s apartments.”

“M. Hugo’s?” I raised my eyebrows. “The same M. Hugo who wrote the drama Marion Delorme?”

“The very same.”

“The same M. Hugo who resides at my late father’s family seat, next door to the count de Perregaux and the Baron von Stackelberg.”

Marion smirked.

“Does he keep anything else in his rooms that is noteworthy?” I turned to Bartleby.

“A lock of Léopoldine’s hair,” he said. “I believe she was his favourite daughter.”

“It must be a year since she drowned,” Marion mused.

“Such a shame. She was a very pretty girl.” I sighed. Humans took it so hard when they lost relatives to the waters. Nymphs never fretted like that when one of their kind forwent eternal life for the sake of a few pleasurable years in a flesh vessel.

“Discord and Dr Flitterbatt keep an eye on M. Hugo,” Marion said and Bartleby nodded. “What’s their verdict so far?”

“Dr Flitterbatt prescribed a spot of consumption,” the leprechaun said. “But the count vetoed it.”

“Discord is losing his touch,” Marion wrinkled her nose.

“I doubt that,” I said.

“Yes, you would.”
I hid my smile behind my fan. “Where does your priest come into play, chérie?”

“Some of these papers are his. I will return them to him, embellished, I hope, with a few ideas of our own.”

“Something like… the feet of nymphs bleed when they walk on solid ground?”

“Something like that, yes. The more superstitions they have to incorporate into their modus operandi, the better for us. They will have to carry a veritable arsenal on their person in order to deal with the likes of us.”

I pulled a sheet towards me and dipped my pen into the ink. “What kind of superstitions?” I said. “Give me something preposterous, and we’ll see if it catches on. Why would a vampyre abstain from drinking a human’s blood?”

“Hm… Aramis once refused to eat a hunter because the man reeked of garlic. He stabbed him instead, and we were left with the body of what was very obviously a murder victim. Luckily those were uncertain times, dead bodies turned up on every corner.”

“Excellent!” I started to write, copying the hand of the man whose notes I was thus embellishing. “Vampyres fear garlic. It is recommended to wear a wreath of garlic cloves when tracking them down.”

Marion laughed. “It is a lovely image, but it’s just too ridiculous. Nobody will fall for that.”

“Oh, you think? Well, I’ll have you know, my dear, that I am writing this in a very masculine, authoritative hand.” I pushed the page towards her. “Nobody will doubt the words of a man who writes as if he was carving letters in stone with a rock. Certainly not those lumbering bigots.”

“They are guided by scholars, who might have a tiny little bit of brain.”

“Scholars believe in the power of manuscripts. The more obscure, the better.” I tilted my head and smiled at Marion. “Trust me. We can send them on a wild goose chase armed with holy water and garlic, and they will fancy themselves great big dashing heroes.”

***

**Akte Peninsula, 480 BC**

The demigod dismounted from the winged steed and stroked his mane while the charioteer next to him attended to his own horses, golden helmet gleaming in the Mediterranean sunlight.

“So long, cousin Pegasus,” the demigod whispered into the steed’s twitching ear, “thank you for not throwing me off like you did that Bellerophon upstart.”

Athos received a wet nuzzle before the winged son of Poseidon and the Gorgon took to the skies again. Behind him, Ares stretched out his arms and the echo of war trumpets bounced off the mountain looming over them.

“What an absolutely spectacular run we’ve had!” The God of War beamed at his younger brother and shook his long hair out from under the golden helmet, setting it aside into the abandoned chariot. “You’ve truly outdone yourself this time. I thought you had grown soft when you pulled that caper with Queen Esther and the Jews, but then - using her to manipulate Xerxes into attacking Greece…” Ares tossed back his locks and laughed.
“What was your favorite part?” Athos asked, sizing up his brother with the eye of a connoisseur. Ares was radiating the kind of joy that he had not seen since Troy.

“What was your favorite part?” the God of War sighed wistfully. “Glorious.”

“It was,” Athos turned away, hiding his eyes from his brother’s gaze. Thermopylae had been glorious and the Spartans who lay down their lives there had all died the lauded death of true heroes. Something he would never have. “What about Salamis?”

“Aye, that as well! Athos, what a marvelous time we’ve had!”

“I do have a soft spot for naval battles,” the demigod admitted.

“Must be because of your ties to Poseidon,” Ares mused, coming closer. “Speaking of Uncle…” His fingers grasped his brother’s wrist and pulled him closer. “Do you know where we are, Athos?”

“When we were airborne, the best guess I could venture is the Akte Peninsula.” He did not resist, but he did now follow the magnetic pull of his brother’s body either, merely waiting to see what the God of War would do. It had been centuries since Ares had shown any interest in him aside from the one pertaining to his divine calling - of War - but that did not mean gods and their desires weren’t as fickle as men’s. And it had been a particularly arousing war.

“This mountain,” Ares whispered, turning Athos around like a ragdoll and pressing his chest to his demigod brother’s back. “Do you know what it is?”

“Should I?”

Ares laughed. “It’s Mount Athos. Do you know the story of Mount Athos, brother? Do you know why your mother named you after a Giant who tried to kill Poseidon?” The demigod shook his head. “Athos was one of those other unruly children of Gaia and Uranus who tried to contend against the Olympians - the Gigantes, they were called. People these days tend to be of the opinion that they were half-men half-monsters.” Ares’ laughter tickled the back of Athos’ neck and the demigod stepped out of his grasp, turning to face him.

“My mother was banished from Poseidon’s temple for betraying her vow of chastity,” he told Ares. “If she had named me after his enemy, she would have had her reasons. What did this Giant do?”

“He picked up a mountain, and threw it at Uncle, but missed.” Ares grinned and bit his lower lip, letting his eyes caress the warrior in front of him. “And then Uncle threw the mountain back at the Giant and, well, you can imagine who had the better aim.”

“The gods are not infallible,” Athos responded, not tearing his eyes away from the amber glow of Ares’ gaze.

“Athos was crushed under this mountain, and so it had been called Mount Athos ever since.”

“Touching story.”

“We, on Olympus, have been joking for quite some time now that it is actually named after you. You - who are our faithful servant, and not some half-breed of Uranus and his severed balls.”

“Why have you brought me here?” Athos had grown tired of Olympian tales. He had borne more years of them than anyone should ever have to listen to.

“Because it is yours.”
“What is?”

“Mount Athos. It is your reward for my last war.”

“I…” the demigod found himself speechless. “Ares, I am actually touched by this gesture.” He laughed. “I would not have thought you capable of actual gratitude.”

“Your mouth, puppy!”

The demigod laughed again, his face radiant with a burst of sudden glee. “Brother, what am I supposed to do with a mountain?”

“Whatever you wish,” Ares shrugged. “It’s not exactly Olympus, which… well, you know. You can’t go there. But see,” he pointed west, “you can see us all from here.”

“And you can see me.”

“We can always see you, Athos.”

“I’ll have to think of something to do worth watching,” he smiled, a sad, tired smile of a man whose road led to nowhere.

“It will be protected. You can do whatever you like. You can stay here or not, that’s up to you. But Father has granted that it be yours.”

“That’s… kind of Father.” Athos looked up the verdant cliff towards the top of the mount rising above his head. “Mount Athos,” he smiled. “An entire world in which to live alone.”

“One would think, brother, that you’re more ungrateful even than the rumors have it. You have been given immortality.”

“An immortal alone among mortals, what an enviable fate.”

“I believe that is what the humans call ‘sarcasm.’”

“You are most astute, brother.”

Ares’ hand was in Athos’ hair, pulling him down onto his knees. “If there is something you want, puppy, you’d better just ask. I’m not one of the Moirai, and therefore, cannot actually read your mind.”

“Kill me,” Athos squeezed through his teeth, his eyes kindled with the fire of defiance.

“What? No!”

“Smite me, damn it!”

The God of War’s hand unclenched and he pulled away from the man kneeling at his feet.

“I will not do that. It was hard enough making you an immortal in the first place.”

“I never asked to be made immortal,” the demigod’s voice softened and his face turned suppliant. “For seven centuries I have served you. Is that not enough? Will you deny me the one thing I ask of you for the first time in seven hundred years?” Ares brow darkened but he did not turn away. “Time means nothing to the gods on Olympus, but down here, we feel it acutely. Do you know how many bodies my Grigori has been through? How many mortals who were fools enough to be my friends I
have seen buried?"

“Their lives mean nothing. You - are irreplaceable.”

“Plenty demigods have come and gone and were found to be quite replaceable.”

“Eris would never forgive me if I killed you.”

“Since when do you even care what Eris thinks? You did not care when you…” He stopped speaking. Seven centuries later, there was really no sense in opening up old wounds.

“Besides, I cannot. As long as Mother’s curse remains in effect, no god or goddess can smite you. Except possibly Father, but even he would not wish to anger her so.” A sly grin crept onto Ares’ lips. “Besides, if you really want to die, you know what you need to do. You've done it once before. It isn't my fault your Grigori brought you back.”

The demigod sank lower onto the ground and turned his face from War.

“Don’t be like this,” Ares’ hand trembled as he reached for the man at his feet. “Come now. Don’t do this. If you keep up like this, I’m afraid my own heart might break.”

“It won’t kill you,” Athos retorted quietly, it seemed that whatever spark he still possessed had gone out of him with the last hope of death.

“I don’t know how to do this. I’m not very good at…” War’s face contorted in agony.

“...Comforting.”

Athos did not speak. He was not interested in being comforted. And then, a tentative hand was on his shoulder, a pair of hot lips pressed against the nape of his neck. A husky whisper trickled into his ear.

“I cannot kill you, brother,” and another surprisingly soft kiss, “but if you want, I can make you sleep for a while. Right here, on your mountain.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as you want.”

“A hundred years?”

“Well, if you like.”

Athos turned and pressed his mouth against the scorching cinders of Ares’ lips. His eyes burned with tears of gratitude. It was the kindest thing anyone had ever offered to do for him since his mother succumbed to her own mortality.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I’ll give you another beautiful war when I wake up.”

“I know you will, brother,” Ares responded and touched his fingers gently to the demigod’s temples. “Sweet dreams.”
La Bête Humaine

Paris, January 1845

“Athos, I declare: we have created a monster!” I stared at the page in the latest edition of Le Siècle in reluctant admiration.

“Hm?” He didn’t open his eyes, sprawled as he was in an easy chair, with his head tilted back and his long neck taut and bared to my looks and to the rays of the pale winter sun that fell askance on his face.

“Listen to this: *Notwithstanding his commission in the musketeers, d'Artagnan felt completely solitary.*” I read with great relish, and a corner of Athos’ mouth twitched. “Let’s not kill him,” I whispered, watching the way his mouth relaxed and the corner of his mouth unfurled. His lashes trembled, but his eyes remained closed. “Yet. Let’s see where he goes with this.”

“Go on.” His chest rose with a deep inhale. “What else does the Porthling have to say about M. d’Artagnan?”

“For a time,” I intoned happily, “The delightful remembrance of Madame Bonacieux left on his character a certain poetic tinge, perishable indeed; for like all other recollections in this world, these impressions were, by degrees, effaced.”

Athos frowned. “Which one was Madame Bonacieux?”

“The seamstress.”

“Ah!” His frown deepened and he opened his eyes. “He only talked to her once. He didn’t even shag her.”

“That was what made his love oh so true and pure.”

Discord closed his eyes again and shook his head. “You Christians and your peculiar moralities.”

“Pardon? I, if I may remind you, am as pagan as they come.”

“You, my diablik, were a delightful little monkling when I found you.”

“I’ll come over in a minute and show you how pagan I am.”

“Mmh…” Discord conceded cheerfully.

“. . . But first, the tale of high romance,” I said, and he laughed. His hand moved languidly from where it had rested on his thigh to his groin, and he adjusted himself in his breeches.

“Go on, then.” His voice had dropped to a silky murmur, but I remained, ah, firm.

“The pretty landlady was desolate. She would have taken D'Artagnan not only as her husband, but as her God, he was so handsome and had so fierce a moustache.”

“It certainly was very fierce,” Athos admitted.

“And bristly,” I added. “It was enormously bristly. With extra bristles at the ends.”
“What happened then?”

“With d’Artagnan’s moustache?”

“With his landlady.”

“What do you think? He uses her as a convenient fucktoy — no, Athos, I am not making this up, this is what your nephew writes — and refuses to marry her, even though she asks him to. ‘If I had any money,’ said d’Artagnan to himself, ‘I would go away; but I have none. I must stay and follow the advice of my hostess, while thwarting the conjugal designs of this inopportune apparition.’

“M. Dumas might have made it up. It’s not as if he was there.”

“No, I remember now,” I said slowly, as memories began to flock like a murder of crows that had spotted fresh carrion. “D’Artagnan was bragging about his… arrangement, that night when the four of us met for dinner.”

“Did he?” Athos smiled. “I must confess I wasn’t really paying much attention to what anybody was saying that night.”

My gaze dropped to where his fingers flexed in his crotch and I licked my lips. “Yes, anyway,” I said, shifting in my seat. “You must have been paying some attention, because the Porthling has not made that up.”

“He might have found some of your notes.”

I blanched and then blushed, biting my lip. Athos was smirking now, and I felt his mocking gaze burn me even through his closed eyelids.

“D’Artagnan comes back after a long absence and duels with a rival for the landlady’s favours,” I said in one breath. “Brace yourself, Athos: The Swiss became as purple as a peony. He wore his elegant uniform, d’Artagnan was wrapped in a sort of gray cloak; the Swiss was six feet high, d’Artagnan was hardly more than five.”

“He was very short,” Athos said pensively. “His sword all but dragged on the ground.”

“Remember when I bedevilled him into thinking that my old uniform fitted him?”

“You were a very bad chyortik that day,” Athos nodded.

“But as bad as d’Artagnan was: But when he was alone with the hostess, he said: ‘Now, pretty Madeleine, you know the difference between a Swiss and a gentleman. As for you, you have acted like a barmaid. So much the worse for you, for by such conduct you have lost my esteem and my patronage. I have driven away the Swiss to humiliate you, but I shall lodge here no longer. I will not sleep where I must scorn.’”

“Aramis!”

“I swear, Athos, this is what it says. He fucked her, refused to marry her, left her, and when he came back, he expressly and deliberately humiliated her. Are these the actions of a gentleman?”

“You deliberately humiliated Marie,” Athos said gently.

I let the journal drop. “That was different,” I said through my teeth.

“How so? She had been your mistress, and she asked for your help. Which you refused.”
“Which I had every right to do.”

“And insulted her instead.”

“Athos,” I said, icy calm rising to my brain like vapour over a frozen lake. “You don’t understand. You believe her delicate and frail. She had declared war on me – and if you remember what happened later, it was war – and she was not weak and feeble. Marie does not need your protection. She can fight, and she can kill, and she will smile charmingly all the while. You must stop seeing her as that sweet, gentle creature. She is as deadly as either of us.”

“After all those years,” Athos said in a voice laced with melancholia. He looked at me, and the expression in those dark, liquid eyes took my breath away. “After all those centuries – how can you not trust her?”

“She sent Colbert’s men after me with explicit directions to cut my head off.”

“She was hurt.”

“She was vengeful.” I stood and crossed the room to where he was spread in his chair. I took his hand in mine. “She is no Aphrodite, Athos. She is Nemesis.”

He was still smiling that sad, ancient smile, and my heart clenched at the sight. Dear, noble Athos! The best, the most honourable of men. The nymph had him wrapped around her finger, and he was too tender-hearted to see.

I sank to my knees beside his chair and pressed my forehead to his chest, where the beat of his heart was the strongest. It thuddied into my skull, into my brain, and dark thoughts dispersed like carrion birds. When I tilted my head, my lips brushed against the strip of skin where his shirt gaped open. The soft hairs there, the warm skin, the smell of him, the throb of his blood that called out to me as it had always done. I would keep him mine, and safe, I would dig my teeth and my claws into his ribcage all the way to his heart and cling to him, and never again would he drown in treacherous waters.

“Chyortik,” he whispered as his hand alighted on my hair and his warm palm cupped the vulnerable back of my skull. Sparks erupted at the nape of my neck at the sound of that mellifluous voice and travelled along my vertebrae like electricity. I parted my lips over his chest and dug my teeth into his skin. Athos groaned and his body arched off the chair. He was holding my head in place, and I seized the front of his shirt and tore the two halves apart. He let go of me with a groan, and my teeth fastened at the base of his throat, where his skin bulged with the blood that coursed through him. I lapped at it with the flat of my tongue, damp hot skin and the scent of his flesh and his blood, and my head spun with hunger.

He sensed it. He turned his head and craned his neck, pressing it against my mouth, until my teeth clenched around the distended vein and his blood pulsated in my mouth.

I did not break the skin. I sucked it in, the vessel of blood that he was giving to me so freely, and then I let go of him with a growl and my mouth travelled down, down, brushing the damp hairs on his chest, down the trail on his abdomen and between his thighs that were spread for me. Beneath the fabric of his breeches, his cock was hard like an iron rod.

I tore them off him as well. With his garments in tatters around him, with his body taut and panting, his dark eyes burning with Olympian light, with his mouth hungry for my kisses, he was devastating. His cock stood within reach of my tongue and I felt its heat on my lips. So full of blood too. So delicious, so life-giving, ichor pure, and I leaned in and licked the full length from base to tip.
“I love you,” he gasped as I sucked him in. “Aramis… please.” His head fell back, the entire body pulled back like a bowstring, like a catapult, the muscles of his thigh hard like marble under my hand, but I felt life thud through them and burst at the surface, and the tremors tingled in my fingertips.

With my other hand, I was fucking him, slow and steady, and he opened up on each thrust, fucking himself on my fingers with harsh shoves of his pelvis. I curled my fingers and dragged them over the spot that made him swear and convulse, and clamp down on me so hard it hurt. In my mouth, his cock twitched. His fingers wove through my hair and tugged. “What would you like?”

I closed my eyes and opened them again, and watched his stomach shudder with frantic breaths.

“This.” I had let go of his cock for a moment, and we both hung there, panting, staring at each other across the expanse of his torso. I trailed my hand up his stomach and chest, nails-down, and he sucked in my fingers when they reached his mouth. “Let me taste you,” I whispered.

Athos gasped out a laugh. “All right.” He bit down on my knuckles and rolled his head back. “All yours, Aramis.”

His semen flooded my mouth, and then his blood, as I dug into his thigh and fed on the lava-like eruption that surged forth. My fingers were buried inside him still, just as my fangs, and he was giving himself to me, open and trusting and so full of love for me that my own love for him seemed inadequate. There was nothing I could give him in the same way; all I could do was to kneel before my god and celebrate our Eucharist until my veins, my heart, my soul were infused with divine light and the open wound closed under the fervent kisses of my blood-soaked lips.

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Boreas drew intricate patterns on the windowpanes that grew into forests of ferns, where goblins crouched in the corners and Melusine wound her serpent tail through the grooves in the glass. Athos was asleep, for he had never discarded that old habit after his elevation to godhood. Wandering through Hypnos’ realm, he was free to talk to his brothers and sisters, and I could not follow him there. I watched the long lashes tremble as dream images unfurled behind his closed lids. Where was he now, my idol? Had his soul truly left the earthly plane and floated among the stars?

I brushed my thumb over his forehead, painting the shape of the cross into the crease between his brows. Then, I got up and got dressed. I left the bed chamber on silent feet, crossed the antechamber and opened another door: there, seated at a low table in the corner, Bartleby and Grimley were playing cards by the light of one candle.

“I’m going out.”

Bartleby stood and bowed his head respectfully. “Yes, monsieur le docteur.”

“Fetch me my case.”

The leprechaun vanished, and Grimley and I were left to look at each other across the room.

“The count is asleep.”

“Very good, monsieur.”

“When he wakes, he will require a bath.”

“Naturally.”
“Are you giving me Olympian lip, Grigori?”

“Never.”

Bartleby reappeared with my elegant leather case and malacca walking cane. He handed both to me after helping me in my coat and hat. “Is monsieur dining out tonight?”

“Monsieur has already dined,” Grimley muttered under his breath.

I did not let myself get drawn into domestic squabbles. I left my instructions with the servants and left our apartments. In the corridor, I ran into M. Hugo, who was leaving soggy footprints on the floor as he walked towards the door to his rooms. We exchanged amicable salutations, as befitted good neighbours, and I continued on my way. Bartleby had assured us only the other day that M. Hugo was not currently engaged in writing anything compromising, and that he had put all papers back the way he had found them.

I ascended the stairs and walked down the corridor on the second floor. I stopped by a door. I closed my eyes and focused, and when the door opened to my knock, my appearance was not that of a youth of twenty-two.

“Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon, monsieur le docteur,” the manservant said.

“The Baron von Stackelberg is well?”

“He has no complaints.”

“Very good.” I handed the man my hat and cane and strode to the library, where the worthy ex-ambassador was sitting by the fire with a newspaper in his hands.

“Dr Flitterbatt!” he exclaimed when he beheld me. “This is an unexpected visit.”

I smiled at him with all my teeth.

“How so?” I glided across the carpet to the chair where he was sitting and took his hand in mine. “You must know, baron, that we are all deeply concerned about the persistent cough that had kept you confined to your rooms of late. The count de Perregaux has enquired after your health.”

“I am quite well, thank you.” He let me take his pulse, which beat quite strongly for a man so old and frail. “You are too kind, doctor.”

“Not at all.” I patted his hand in the reassuring manner of a seasoned physician. “I hear you have been much missed,” I said in a conspiratorial whisper.

A shadow flitted across the old face. “Have I…?”

My smile deepened, my teeth flashed in candlelight. Ever since I had been shot through the heart and had been forbidden to show my face in the streets of Paris, Baron von Stackelberg had taken up a rather active lifestyle – despite his advanced age and the fact that his memory was failing him.

“Indeed. I understand from the count de Perregaux that your absence at Mademoiselle Duplessis’ soirees has been noticed.”

The shadow deepened. He was making a desperate attempt to remember when, exactly, his presence at Mademoiselle Duplessis’ soirees might have been noticed.
I reminded him. I spoke gently as I examined him and pronounced him to be in the best of health. “Soon, you will be able to enjoy Mademoiselle Duplessis’ charming conversation again, baron,” I assured him. “The count will be delighted to take you in his carriage.”

“The count is the most generous man,” Stackelberg muttered. “Please make sure to thank him on my behalf.”

“Mademoiselle Duplessis,” I said, enunciating the name as my gaze locked with his, “is very much looking forward to seeing you again. She knows how much pleasure you take in the music that is played in her salon, like you did in the performance of monsieur Liszt on New Year’s Day.”

“Yes,” he said without breaking eye contact with me. “That was charming.”


“Bombastic,” he repeated. “I enjoyed it very much.”

“Very good.” I patted his hand again and stood. He was still looking at me, and I leaned in on impulse and whispered in his ear. “Mademoiselle Duplessis has great titties.”

He giggled. I smiled. My work was done. I picked up my case and bade the baron goodnight.

I hummed a lively Hungarian air as I walked back to our apartments. The mask that had been forced on my face for my own protection had its amusing sides. Nevertheless, I was looking forward to the day I would be able to choose a different one, one that suited me better. There was something I had in mind, and Bartleby had already procured the necessary materials.

The masquerade beckoned.

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Paris, February, 1845

The Luxembourg Gardens were awash in a sea of naiads and dryads. Masked faces twirled along the snowy ground, decked in furs, their breath a trail of vapor misting the air. I pressed Marie against the naked bark of an ancient oak tree and lifted up her feathered mask.

“Be careful, count,” she whispered, her breath freezing in the February air, as she pushed my Harlequin mask up to my forehead, “I might be recognized and you will have a slew of rivals to contend with.”

“Like this one, perhaps,” I laughed as a face encased in a mask shaped of laced butterfly wings appeared from behind our tree. I would have recognized Marion even without the giveaway fairy attributes of her costume, simply by the way she carried herself.

“I lost Aramis,” the Dame Blanche informed me.

“So did we,” Marie laughed and pulled me closer against her heaving bosom. “I’m cold, Athos.”

“Shall we go inside?”

“I meant that you should keep me warm out here,” her words tickled my earlobe as I leaned closer. Her little hand came out of her foxfur muff and snuck in between the buttons of my coat. “We’re so close now to where it all happened back then. Do you recall, count? 25 rue de Vaugirard,” she batted her lashes at me. “Why, it’s mere steps away.”
Marion’s hand slid in between our bodies and grasped me by the balls, which, admittedly, was an effective way of getting my attention.

“Did you not hear me? I lost Aramis.”

Marie reluctantly pushed me away and I turned towards the woman in white. “He’s not a bloody fairy, Marion, he didn’t just disappear into the Veil.”

“No, indeed, he would not, so I thought you’d wish to know.”

“How hard it is to find someone wearing the Plague Doctor mask?” Marie giggled, much amused as ever by Aramis’ choice of costume.

“Sometimes Aramis just… flitters off,” I offered. “He might have been feeling peckish?” It was a likely explanation, but it didn’t sit right with me either. Aramis was a gentleman. He would not have left Marion unattended to disappear for an impromptu snack.

“He would have said something,” Marion pointed out what I had already been thinking. “He went to replenish our champagne and I have not seen him since.”

My jaw twitched and I felt something harden under the wool of my overcoat. The breastplate of my Achaean armor. The squeezing pull of Discord’s mantle. There was trouble afoot.

I grabbed Marie’s hand and placed it into Marion’s. “I will find Aramis, but you two must leave. Go now.”

“We should stay and help you,” the nymph protested.

“You’re in a human vessel, Marie. I don’t think it can turn to water quite as readily as I had the pleasure of witnessing when we first met,” I pointed out. “Marion, take her away.”

“We’re going,” the fairy replied with cool composure. “Be safe, Discord.”

Where have you gone, flittermouse? I closed my eyes and tried to feel him, but to no avail. I did not have the same senses as Aramis. He was the one with the gift for finding me no matter where I was. And yet, did I not find him in Snagov? And did I not, despite myself, find him again in Chartres? I shut my eyes again and felt the pull of Discord’s mantle; it tugged me on the pathway towards trouble. I had to hope that where there was trouble, I would also find my beloved.

My steps took me deeper into the park, away from the masked revelers and their sounds of music. I sniffed at the air and detected the faint smell of smoke. But this smell was not coming from the direction of the masquerade bonfires. I followed my senses further into the wooded area of the park, where the trees grew thicker and the air more still, until, at last, I saw them.

There were three men, standing over the body of a fourth, who appeared to have his leg caught in a bear trap.

“Now we’ve got you, Nosferatu!” one of the men said. “Let’s see you try and bedevil your way out of this one.”

A torch swooped through the air, casting light on Aramis’ pale face. He faced his assailants with fangs bared and the look of defiance. His Plague Doctor mask lay discarded and trampled on the cold ground.

“It’s him. He looks exactly like the portrait.”
“Good,” another one of the hunters said. “Biscarrat will be pleased when we bring him the vampyre’s head.”

The snow where Aramis sat was crimson with blood from where the bear trap had sank its merciless teeth into his flesh. And I had no arms with me. Fine, I would have to tear them apart with my bare hands.

He sensed me, my flittermouse, his eyes moving beyond his would-be executioners and gazing into the darkness that hid me still in its protective veil. My blood heaved out from my heart, eager to succor him, pulsing wildly, deafeningly against my temples.

An axe gleamed in the moonlight, sharpened and ready to claim its victim.

“Get the hell away from him!”

My voice had not been my own and yet I had spoken those words. The men turned towards me and froze. I came out into the clearing before them, my arms at my sides, but as I glanced down upon my hands, I saw that each one held a glowing cloud of energy - two thunderbolts, ready to strike down my enemies.

“What the devil are you?” one of the hunters asked, aiming his pistol at my breast.

“I am Death,” I replied.

Several shots rang out simultaneously piercing the air around me or bouncing off the breastplate hidden beneath my coat. But before I could release the lightning bolts from my palms, something utterly unprecedented happened.

They came out of nowhere, through trees or through air, a flash of fur, fangs and claws slashing through flesh until three bodies lay eviscerated at my feet. And then, the wolves looked up at the moon and howled in triumph.

“Athos!”

“Aramis!”

The bear trap was slippery with blood in my hands.

“Hang on, my love, I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Athos, what are they?”

I glanced behind me, where the three wolves circled the dead hunters, casting looks in our direction that were almost those of concern. My fingers strained against the slippery metal, my arms flexed, I pulled until the iron teeth began to come apart.

“There has to be an easier way to do this,” Aramis grit through the pain.

“Well, why did you…” I pulled and I pulled again, until the stubborn trap snapped in my grasp, “have to go and get stuck in a bear trap?”

“Ah!” Aramis fell back onto the blood-stained snow. His leg hung loosely at his side and his chest heaved with labored breaths.

“Hang on, angel, I’ll make you better,” I said, rolling up my sleeve so he could drink from my wrist.
“Fucking *hunters!*”

Even as I cradled him in my arms, I became acutely aware of a canine breathing too close to my ear and then a long wet lick alighted on my cheek.

“All right, enough, don’t just stand there - help him,” I muttered to the small pack and watched them as they began to lick the blood from Aramis’ leg.

“The blood of the revenant,” Aramis whispered, his hand clutching at my neck while he took in his three unexpected saviors. “What *are* they? Werewolves?” His leg moved along the snow, no longer bleeding nor broken, and the wolves howled again. One of them rolled over and presented his belly for rubbings and I could no longer pretend not to recognize familial behavior when I saw it.

“That’s enough - reveal yourselves!”

The three canines wagged their tails at me and reared up on their hind paws, their bodies elongating, fur disappearing, until it was not wolves that stood before us but two men and a woman.

“Beasts turning into naked people, Athos?” Aramis whispered hotly into my ear, as I tried to support him.

“Deimos, Phobos, Adrestia,” I nodded to each one of them in turn. “It’s been a long time.”

“You know them?” Aramis tried to stand, but was clearly still weakened from all the excitement.

“You know the werewolves?”

“They’re not werewolves, they’re gods.”

“Of what?” Aramis frowned.

“War,” I smiled and kissed him on his cold nose. “They’re children of Ares and Aphrodite. Half are gods of War and half are…”

“I don’t care,” Aramis snapped.

“...gods of Love,” I finished.

“Your revenant is quite ungrateful, Uncle,” Adrestia, the goddess of revolt, spoke first.

“Why are Greek gods of War masquerading as werewolves?” Aramis leaned on me and looked my niece and nephews over with growing distrust.

“Don’t be silly, Uncle’s revenant,” spoke Deimos, the god of terror. “There is no such thing as a werewolf. That’s just a myth humans came up with to explain…”

“What? Divine meddling?”

“Father said he would be rude,” said Phobos, the god of fear.

“Did Ares send you?” I finally asked.

“You were about to expose us, with your thunder-hands,” Adrestia sounded as exasperated as Aramis felt. “The hunters don’t know about us. It’s better that they be left to hunting demons and vampyres and imaginary werewolves than get a whiff of the kind of power that lies dormant on Olympus.”
“I… I didn’t mean to,” I stuttered. “I didn’t even know that I could.”

“Werewolves are actually obnoxious Olympian hell-puppies,” Aramis stated calmly next to me. “Werewolves. Are gods. If I could walk, I would be walking away demonstratively right now.”

“You should at least say ‘thank you’ before you do,” Phobos pointed out with his father’s habitual cool.

“Oh, don’t feel bad, Uncle’s revenant,” Adrestia chimed in. “He does not seem to love you any less because of your demonic provenance!”

“That will do, children!” I commanded, my voice again sounded detached and booming and not entirely my own.

“You need to try not to do that as well,” Deimos pointed out. “You can’t God-out like that in front of mortals. They will shit a brick and then lay siege to Olympus.”

“Hades’ balls, even Zeus the All Father was more circumspect,” Phobos backed up his brother.

“Enough with the unsolicited advice!” I snapped. “I need to get Aramis home. Can you help?”

“I can walk,” Aramis protested weakly and collapsed into my arms again.

“No need for any more heroics, my love. But I can’t very well carry you home across Paris - someone might notice that.”

“But that would be romantic,” Adrestia cooed and I could practically envision her wagging her canine tail.

“Get a hold of yourself, sis,” Deimos snickered.

“Listen you three,” I addressed the faux-weres, “it’s not that I don’t appreciate the unexpected help. I do! But you need to start being more useful. Can you get word to Olympus?”

“We can.”

“I want Pegasus.”

“You want… what?” Aramis’ eyes practically fell out of his sockets.

“It’s still dark. If he flies high enough, no one will see and he can get us to our rooftop without anyone noticing.”

“A huge, white, flying horse?” Aramis didn’t seem convinced.

“Pegasus is actually blue,” I corrected. “It’s just that the humans hadn’t developed the ability to see the color blue until fairly recently, so it was never recorded as such.”

“And you don’t think anyone will notice a huge, blue, flying horse?”

“Not at this time of night, no.”

“We’ll be seeing you, Uncle,” one of the children of Ares said, and the other two followed, disappearing before our eyes into the winter fog.

“How the hell are they even able to show up here?” Aramis huffed. “I thought you Greekling
divinities couldn’t manifest outside of your native lands.”

“I’m far too upset to come up with a plausible explanation right now,” I confessed, brushing hair off his sweaty brow and pressing a fervent kiss to his temple. “But we can probably ask them the next time we see them.” He rolled his eyes but his fingers curled in between my own. “You can’t do this, kitten. You can’t wander off and get yourself captured like this.”

“I thought I’d recognized one of them. I wasn’t expecting a bear trap.” His lower lip pouted out and I took the opportunity presented to suck it into my mouth.

“They’re very set on killing you, my love. It isn’t safe for us to remain here.” I pressed another kiss to his forehead and another beneath his earlobe. “I can’t bear to see you get hurt again.” Above our heads, the sound of giant, beating wings, and I lifted Aramis up into my arms. “Our ride’s here, angel.”

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Gévaudan, February 1765

When the hunters arrived in Clermont-Ferrand, the snow swallowed the sound of their footsteps and those of the pack of bloodhounds they had brought along. A flurry of snowflakes danced around men and hounds as they entered the gaping maws of the forest, and the veil of silence sank behind them, separating the hunters in the woods from the world forever. They were armed to the teeth and they smelled of rage and of blood. It pumped through the muscles in their legs as they walked; through the muscles of their shoulders as they carried their arquebuses; through their hearts and their stomachs that were full of an unquenchable thirst for blood and of righteousness. Around them, trees loomed like sleeping giants, and in the hollow trunks, the Ancient Ones woke and blinked their gleaming eyes. They chewed on toadstools and sharpened their teeth on rotten wood-flesh that crumbled to dust. The smell of blood roused them. The promise of a hunt.

The dogs were eager to go: they picked up the scent of wolves and they rushed into the thicket, through the undergrowth, their noses ploughing through snow, their paw-prints merging with those of their quarry, dozens and dozens of tracks criss-crossing the snow, indiscernible to the human eye, like countless, infinitesimal blood vessels that criss-cross the flesh of the human body beneath its mantle of skin.

The howl did not dampen the men’s spirits, they’d heard it all before. The lupine song rose to the half-moon that caught in the branches of the trees as if in brambles, and the air reverberated with its echo. The King had sent them thither, the King’s money coffers had opened to them, and they loved the smell of blood-soaked fur and the sight of fangs slashing the air in futile agony more than anything else in the world.

Branches creaked above them, and the waking dryads picked up the wailing song of the night. In the hollow trunks, the Ancient Ones giggled.

They were old and frail, tethered to the shadows within which they dwelled, but they knew what they liked. Like mushrooms sprouting under the sprinkles of later-summer rain, they swelled and plumped up under the drops of blood that fertilised the sylvan soil. A feast awaited them tonight.

The dogs barked. One yelped, another wailed, a short, sharp noise, cut off as if with a steel blade, and then – nothing. The men stood and listened, and around them, the forest listened too. In the silence, the heartbeat of the forest closed in around them like the clenching fist of a giant. For the first time, they felt sweat cool on their foreheads. For the first time, their steps faltered. Before them, the howling stopped.
Behind them, the snow creaked. Shadows pooled together and their edges sharpened.

It was not the big bad wolf who stalked the hunters in the shade. The Beast had stirred, and it slithered through the undergrowth with piercing talons and slavering jaws, on silent cat-feet and the wings of death. In its entourage travelled the god Pan, pouring primal terror into the hearts of men.

One of the hunters shrieked – the inhuman sound of a man who would never be himself again. Terror rushed into them like a torrent, a tidal wave that tore down the walls of manhood and heroism and flooded their heart with icy cold.

In the air, something stirred.

In the shadows, something rose.

Terror reached for the men’s hearts with corporeal claws. Panic fear pushed them down to their knees, as warmth trickled out through the punctures left in their hearts by talons like daggers of ice. It trickled out like blood, and fell hissing to the snow, where shadows grew, like paw prints of wolves.

Before them, a figure glided out of the darkness, black cloak and white face, and black eyes that burned like coals. A hunting knife flashed in his hands, dripping with the blood of dogs. The pale lips parted, and teeth flashed in the light of the moon, dripping with the blood of the dead.

Black shapes lay in the snow, curled up like worms, arms and legs twisted like broken twigs. The snow on which they lay drank the remnants of their blood greedily. Fresh snow began to fall, filling out the footprints that looked like those of a human that had circled the prey and disappeared back in the depth of the woods.

Hunched figures emerged from the undergrowth. On silent wolf-feet, with bared wolf-teeth and gleaming wolf-eyes, they crept closer and closer, and their shapes quivered in the treacherous light of the moon. Three figures circled the bodies in the snow. Three muzzles pointed at the sliver of the moon through the canopy of trees, and a song, more beautiful, more horrifying than that of earthly wolves, reverberated through the province of Gévaudan.

The next morning, people came in search of the bodies. They brought weapons with them and they brought crosses. They whispered prayers and shouted curses, and they loaded the bodies on a cart to give them a Christian burial, befitting of those of had hunted the Beast. A woman kneeled down in the spot where the dead had lain and touched the bloodied snow with the tips of her gloved hand. She did not lift her head to look at the men who picked up the bodies, and she did not lift up her veil to show them her face: she had not yet been dead twenty-five years. Even that far from Paris, somebody might have recognised her face with its pale skin and glowing lynx-eyes. She bent her head in fervent prayer, and her eyes scanned the dead men’s necks, which had been savaged by wolf-fangs. When the crowd moved to go, she lingered. She strayed from the path and followed the wolf tracks. And there, under a mighty fir tree, she spotted them: the footprints that looked like those of a human.


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Paris, February, 1845

The horse-hooves alighted on the snowy rooftop of the Hôtel de Rohan-Guémené with a muffled clip-clop. Clinging with one hand to a mighty wing, Athos slid down Pegasus’ back and pulled me into his arms. My leg had almost stopped hurting, but that might only have been because my
extremities had frozen solid during the flight through winter clouds. I didn’t feel my feet touch the ground and staggered, falling into Athos’ embrace, who laughed softly into my hair.

“My legs are numb,” I squeezed out through chattering teeth.

“Don’t worry, angel, I’ll warm you,” he whispered back, patting his cousin’s neck with his free hand. “Thank you, Pegasus!”

The horse spread his wings and took off into the vortex of whirling snowflakes. He vanished from view within the blink of an eye, and I looked at Athos. “Your family-”

“Are weird. I know. I’m sorry.” He kissed me on the forehead with icy lips. “But…” he hesitated, “you have to admit they have their uses.”

“I have god slobber all over my leg,” I ground out, clutching his shoulders with more force than strictly necessary.

“Not for the first time,” Discord purred.

“All this has given you a massive boner, hasn’t it?” For I could feel energy pulse through him, crackle at his finger tips and reverberate in his vibrant voice that still carried the echo of Olympian thunder. His blood thudded through him like a glacial river.

Soft laughter again, and both his arms around me. “Come on, let’s get you home.” He appeared to try to pick me up and carry me, but my legs had thawed and I balanced on the roof towards the chimney. We forced the roof hatch open and he descended first, and then his arms were around me again as I lowered myself down and slid along his body into the circle of his embrace.

For a breathless moment, we stood face to face, our hearts beating against each other and his eyes glittering in darkness. I pushed him into backwards into the dark, against the wall, and pushed his mouth open with my lips and tongue. Athos groaned hotly, grinding me into him with both hands on my arse.

“Let’s go home.” I pulled back, bracing myself with one hand next to his neck against the wall.

“Yes.” He was staring into my souls with ebony-black eyes and licked his glistening lips. “Let’s.”

Our apartment was warm and brightly lit. Bartleby opened the door, and his ageless face didn’t betray any surprise at the sight of us bloodied, drenched and dishevelled. The bottom half of my costume was shredded, and bloodstains clung to my own and Athos’ clothes and skin.

“Good morning, messieurs,” the leprechaun said, helping us shed the outer layers of our costumes. “If you would like to go through to the parlour, everything is ready.”

Athos and I exchanged a look. “What?” he mouthed at me, but the smell had long reached my nostrils and I followed it greedily.

In the parlour, illuminated by dozens of candles and warmed by a blazing fire, the table was laid for breakfast. Grimley was pouring hot hypocras from a steaming flagon into cups that he handed to Athos and myself. Across the table, nibbling daintily on a croissant from the Boulangerie viennoise, sat the nymph and fluttered her lashes at us.

“At last!” she exclaimed gaily, with a smile that set her eyes alight. “We have waited so long and were quite in despair. Weren’t we, chérie?”
Curled up in an easy chair, the Dame Blanche smiled a feline smile. A dirty-grey cat lay in her lap, purring audibly and swatting half-heartedly at the butterfly wings of Marion’s mask that she dangled before its whiskers.

Athos let himself drop into a chair with a grunt. “Where does this come from?” He pointed at the cat.

“He lives here,” Marion said calmly. “In the building.”

“I guess we’re lucky she didn’t bring any rats or bats along. They live in the building too.” I seated myself gingerly in a chair next to Athos, for even though my leg had healed, I could still feel it twinge where the bone had broken and mended – hopefully straight. I rubbed it with both hands, and Athos leaned in and pressed his warm palm to my skin, which prickled under the touch. “You know how those white dames pick up familiars.”

Athos refilled my cup with hypocras. “Drink, Aramis.” And then he began to unbutton his cuff, while I watched the pulse point at his wrist.

“Later,” I mouthed at him, locking my gaze with his, and nodded in the direction of the two women, who were watching us with undisguised amusement.

Athos raised his eyebrows. “As you wish.” He ceased rolling up his sleeve and reached across the table for the pot of coffee, brushing my hand en route.

“You two look like you’ve been in the wars,” Marion remarked casually, while Marie shook her head in commiseration.

“Your hair, Aramis,” the nymph said. “It’s positively barbarian.”

Athos and I looked at each other, and a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. He sighed wearily and turned to the ladies. “I’m very glad I sent you away,” he said in that calm, vibrating voice of his. “You were right, Marion: Aramis did not disappear willy-nilly.” He looked at me and his gaze melted. His hand reached out for mine of its own volition. “It was those damn hunters again. They had set a bear trap-”

“Wolf trap,” Marion said under her breath.

Athos looked up sharply. “What made you say that?”

“What? Oh, nothing.” She waved a hand airily. “Please, continue, count.”

He obeyed. He told them the story, politically omitting – after I had pinched his hand – the bit where the spawn of Ares had licked my leg and slobbered all over me. He stressed how imperative it was from now on to avoid anything that might draw attention to either of us.

“You should leave Paris,” Marie said after Athos had finished the tale of our nightly exploits and daring-dos with a flourish. “It is too dangerous for you. Mainly for you,” she turned to me and pointed her fan at me. “They know your face.”

“I can hide my face.”

“We can’t leave Paris yet,” Athos said.

“Why not?” Marion tilted her head, her glittering eyes narrowed.

“We can’t leave you alone with this mess!” His voice was full of righteous indignation. “Not as long
as Biscarrat is alive.”

“I’m sure he won’t be alive much longer,” Marie cooed, smiling above the rim of her cup.

“He most certainly won’t,” Athos said. “We will make sure of it.”

“Oh, monsieur le comte!” the nymph exclaimed in tones of the utmost exaltation. “How dashing you are!”

“This is no laughing matter, Marie,” he chided her gently. “Those men have been to your house. You are not safe.”

“Oh, I believe I am safe,” she batted her lashes at him shamelessly. “As long as those – who were they again? – can be persuaded to protect us.”

“War’s whelps.”

We all jumped. Grimley, quite the well-bred manservant, had blended into the background and chose that moment to join in the conversation.

“Ah! Your nephews, Discord. I’m sure they will protect Marion and me, too, if we ask nicely. Marion is very good with dumb beasts.”

Marion raised an eyebrow with a smirk, scratching the cat behind the ears.

“You can’t have wolves running around Paris,” Athos said, frowning, for, like myself, he realised that the conversation was rapidly slipping into the realms of the absurd.

“They’re not always wolves,” Grimley supplied helpfully, pouring Marie another cup of coffee. “Sometimes they’re nude humans.”

“I believe what the count is saying,” I cut in, before they got entirely derailed. “Is that he will not, under any circumstances, shirk his duty as a friend and a cavalier and leave you to deal with the fallout of our blood feud alone. Am I right, count?” I turned to him, and his eyes kindled.

“Perfectly right, doctor.”

“There. That’s settled then. We will remain in Paris, we will keep a low profile, and I will not show my face in the streets. Will that do?”

“Not quite,” Athos said. “It’s not enough that you don’t show your face in the streets, mon cher. You must not show it anywhere but in the privacy of our own apartments.”

“That’s very territorial of you, count,” Marion said. “To deprive us of the pleasure of admiring those beautiful features.”

I made her an ironic bow.

“Yes, why don’t you have a portrait of Aramis painted and hung in your rooms so that you can feast your eyes on his beauty even when he’s out and about?” Marie suggested.

“I believe Kyrios had.”

“Had what, Grimley?” Marie asked sweetly.

“A portrait of Dr Flitterbatt – His Excellency the Bishop of Vannes, as was then – painted.”
“Oh,” Athos furrowed his brow and I bit my lip. “That’s right. I didn’t have it painted, but it hung in Bragelonne… What happened to it?” He and I both asked at the same time and looked at each other and then at Grimley.

“I’m sure I’ve no idea,” the diabolical domestic pronounced primly. “I was sadly departed by the time the estate was liquidated.”

We looked around at each other and comprehension dawned on all our faces.

“So that’s how they know what he looks like,” Marie was the first to speak, fanning herself pensively. “That’s that mystery explained.” She turned towards Marion and, with a graceful tilt of her neck and slant of her shoulder, pointed her fan at the fairy, and then at Athos. “You two should be careful. Your faces don’t change, either. For gods’ sake, do not make the mistake to sit for a portrait or a daguerreotype.”

Athos smirked and carried his cup to his mouth. “I have not lived for three thousand years hiding in plain sight to get myself caught now. Don’t worry about me,” he said lightly. “Rather, make sure that your household is as respectable as possible under the circumstances so that Biscarrat and his men have no reason to harass you again.”

“That means Dr Flitterbatt will sadly have to keep away,” Marie said, smiling at Athos.

“Dr Flitterbatt will,” I agreed, smiling likewise. “But I believe, Mademoiselle Duplessis, that the dear old Baron von Stackelberg is welcome? You have invited him yourself, if you remember, or he would never presume to impose on you.”

Marie laughed. “What do you think, Discord? Will you bring the baron with you next time you’ll pay me a visit?”

“If you insist, Mademoiselle.”

“Oh, absolutely!” She clapped her hands. “I’m sure it will be most amusing.”

“Your pursuit of amusements will be the death of you one day, Marie,” Athos said sternly, but his eyes were smiling.

“Possibly.” The nymph shrugged. “I don’t go through the trouble of becoming flesh and blood to lead a gloomy existence, count.”

“Promise me you will be careful,” he entreated once again. “Promise me that if danger is afoot, you will get yourself to safety, like you did tonight at the ball.”

Marie gasped and turned it into a cough, while in her lair the Dame Blanche snorted.

I looked at the fairy, and Athos followed my gaze. The dark lynx-eyes glowed like those of the cat in her lap.

“What?” I said in a low voice.

“Nothing,” Marion said, while Marie immersed herself into buttering another croissant very thoroughly.

“What did you do?”

“We did not flash thunderbolts in the middle of the Luxembourg and summon a giant winged horse,”
Marion said.

“And werewolves,” Marie added, licking butter off her fingers with pretty laps of her pink tongue.

“They’re not werewolves,” Athos said.

“I’m sure the plebs would appreciate the difference when they saw wolves turn into nude humans.”

“Grimley,” Athos said through clenched teeth. “Are you still here?”

“In case you need your croissants buttered, Kyrios.”

“Those hunters your nephews and nieces mauled and gutted, Athos,” Marion said. “They weren’t acting alone.”

“What did you do with the bodies, incidentally?” Marie asked. “Did the war whelps eat them?” She looked from me to Athos and back and laughed. “No, did they?”

“That’s one way to ensure there is no body,” Marion said smoothly.

“If you can’t make the death look inconspicuous.” The nymph and the fairy beamed at each other.

I sighed. “What did you do, Marion?”

“You must understand that we were two ladies, alone, unprotected, no gentleman in attendance,” Marion explained, stroking the cat. “When we encountered three gentlemen who appeared to be… looking for something. Or someone-”

“They were surprisingly susceptible, you understand,” Marie said. “But then, who wouldn’t be, if such a charming, lovely lady asks for a dance.”

“Ah, the glorious freedom of a masked ball!” Marion sighed, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. “Where all rules are off, and a lady can ask a gentleman to dance without risking losing her reputation.”

“You know how it is,” Marie propped her chin up on her hand and smiled at Athos and me. “The excitement… the heat… the dance with a Dame Blanche… Any man might feel faint.”

“It is so easy to stumble and fall into the fountain, especially if one has been drinking excessively.”

“Oh, Hera’s cunt.”

“You danced three men to death and drowned them?” I was torn between irritation and admiration. Marie smiled sweetly at me. “Why so crude, flittermouse? It was a most unfortunate accident. Well, three. Three unfortunate accidents. You would know something about those, wouldn’t you?”

“When?” I asked, more bewildered than enraged. “How did you manage to accomplish that feat and be here before us?”

“Oh,” Athos said softly. I rounded on him.

“Oh, what?”

“The whole gods thing, Aramis.” He reached for my hand and pressed it. “You know how it is. The moment they get involved-”
“‘They’?” I said.

“Well. Us. We. When I… god-out and my family manifest, we step out of the human stream of time. Time must have passed differently while we talked to the-”

“War whelps,” I supplied.

“Yes.” He smiled. “At least it was only a few hours we skipped, not one year and a half.”

I glanced at the window. Outside, a gloomy winter morning was breaking. And, possibly prodded by the valet from Hell, whose sense for dramas had always been exemplary, the mantle clock began to chime eight o’clock.

The door opened and Bartleby stepped in smartly. “Your carriage, Mesdemoiselles.” He bowed.

Huddled in their fur coats, the nymph and the fairy took their leave. Marion waited by the door, while Marie reached out for Athos’ hand, and then, hesitantly, for mine. “I mean it,” she said. “Bring him with you, count - your friend the baron. I always enjoy his company very much.” She looked up at me and something flashed within those clear blue eyes that brought back the memory of that fateful day in Turkey, when I was drowning and she wouldn’t let me. The sensation of déjà-vu was so powerful that my head spun.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“It is my pleasure,” she said equally quietly. Then, a smile lit up her face again, and she stretched on her toes to kiss Athos on the cheek, and then me. Her lips were soft as ever, and I pressed the small hand they lay in mine.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “Dear Baron von Stackelberg has a gammy leg.”

“And a few front teeth missing,” Marion added.

I flashed my fangs at them, as they dashed through the door, giggling and holding hands. In the next moment, Athos’ mouth was on mine, Athos’ body pressed me up against the wall, and Athos’ tongue probed the points of my fangs with well-practised ease.

“Chyortik didn’t have proper breakfast yet,” he murmured.

Behind his back, Grimley rolled his eyes.
This chapter, in particular, is dedicated to Zoi, in honor of the day of her birth. We're not sure how old she is, because Da made her so long ago, she's lost track. <3

Paris, February 1845

The bath was ready for us in the bed chamber. The bathtub was set up on the hearth, and more water was bubbling in a large copper pot that hung over the fire. Athos dismissed Grimley with a wave of his hand, and then he sank down to his knees before me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“Athos!” I put my hands on his head, threading my fingers through the soft locks.

“Are you in pain?” His voice was muffled, as his face pressed into my stomach, and his breath was hot through the layers of clothes.

“No.” I traced the contour of his cheekbone with my thumbnail. “A bit.”
“Aramis,” he half-groaned, half-sighed, and slid one hand down my leg to where my healed bone throbbed with residual pain.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’m fine. I’ll live.”

“You were in so much pain.” The heat of his mouth, of his words, scorched me. “I would have torn them apart with my bare hands.”

“I know, Athos.”

“You don’t know. There’s no-one I would not kill if they ever laid a finger on you. No-one. Woman or man. Man or god.”

His words sent a thrill through my blood. So much love. The holy flame of devotion burned within him, flames licking higher and higher, searing in my stomach, my chest, devouring my heart with the heat of Helios’ own glare. I wanted to sink down before him, but his hands gripped me, held me upright, held me in place, and I stood before my god who was kneeling before me like a sinner.

He began to undress me, peeling my torn and bloodied breeches off my legs and wincing as he felt the hairs on my shins stick to the dried fabric. When I stood before him in nothing but my shirt, he lifted up the hem and pressed an open-mouthed kiss above my knee, to the inside of my thigh, my groin, the dip below my hipbone, and to the spot below my navel whence goosebumps erupted and trickled all the way up my torso to my lips. My mouth tingled, my groin grew heavy and warm, and pins and needles burst in my fingertips and my feet.

“Athos!” I tugged at his hair. He lifted his face to mine and my breath caught. Those large, liquid eyes, filled with the light of the starry skies, and that mouth, lips wet and parted, breathing life into my flesh.

“Come here.” I stretched out my arms and pulled him up into my embrace, and he closed his arms around me and let me shiver against him. “You’re so…” I whispered and stopped, my eyes closed, my face nestled in the crook of his neck.

“So what, Aramis?” He rocked me gently, holding me close.

“So… strong,” I choked out, and frowned in irritation at my own idiotic choice of word.

Athos laughed and turned his head to brush his lips against my hair. “Strong?” he said. “You know I am that, Aramis.” His arms tightened around me, my feet left the ground, and in the next moment, I stood knee-deep in hot water. The sudden shock made me tremble, and Athos pulled away from me, kissed me briefly on the mouth, and then he tugged at my shirt. “Take this off and sit down.”

He joined me a few minutes later, his body of marble softening and moulding itself against mine as he pulled me against him. My spine curved into his chest, my vertebrae dug into his breastbone, and my hair clung to his wet skin. One slender hand cupped my hipbone, fingers tapping against the top of my thigh, nails grazing my skin, up to my ribs and then down, teasing the hairs on my groin and dipping between my legs. His broad palm cradled my balls, and I let myself sink into the protective cocoon of his embrace. “What I meant was,” I murmured into the inside of his wrist, for he held his other arm to my lips. I pierced the skin gently with the tips of my fangs and watched the crimson rivulet trickle through the grooves between the blue veins, and then I lapped it off with the flat of my tongue. “That there is so much strength in you, Athos. In you. Not in your body. I can’t do what you do.”

“And what is that, my love?” His lips brushed against my ear.
“Let you in,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

My body had grown languid and pliant by the time Athos had scrubbed the last stains of blood and dirt off me. We lay on the bed, skin on skin, and he rolled me gently until I rested on my side, and nestled his body against mine from behind. His arm snaked underneath my neck and his pulse, where it was trapped by the weight of my head, beat like a war drum. When I turned my head, the soft skin on the inside of his arm came within reach of my mouth, and I traced the outlines of his veins with the tip of my tongue.

His other hand was touching me, firm and gentle at the same time, skipping over my nipples until I gasped, dragging down my flank, over the swell of my loin, all the way down to where the trap had held me in its iron grip. Hot, damp kisses on the side of my neck, along my shoulder, his mouth disappearing under my hair to taste and nibble the skin at the base of my skull. He dragged the flat of his palm up my thigh and cupped my arse, massaging me with strong fingers. “I believe you have let me in before, chyortik,” he purred into my ear and kissed along the ridge of my jaw.

I snorted and nipped at the inside of his forearm. “Not like that. You are so generous, with your love. Whereas I—” I thought of the layer of ice that was wedged over the abyss of my heart. I never let him look inside, for not even Athos’ divine light could disperse the darkness of the nihil within. His heart had broken twice, and twice had it been reborn, fresh and new and capable of loving me with the fervour and purity of an innocent. My heart, like my flesh and bones, had only ever mended; layers and layers of scars encased it, wrapped in the epidermis of my love for him. I could not open my heart to him as he opened his to me, for who knew what manner of Pandora’s box lurked within?

“Whereas you?” He bit my earlobe gently. “You have been the most generous, most giving, most—” His voice got lost in a deep murmur and his lashes brushed against my cheek. “You have given me everything, Aramis.”

It was impossible to make him understand what I meant. I swallowed and tried again. “I don’t let go, Athos. Not like you. Not since—”

The last time I had lost control of myself, I had ended up living in deep dark woods, feeding on the sick and the weak. I had lost my power, my strength, and my looks; I had become an upior that haunted the shadows. The thing that had crawled out of the coffin. If my control slipped, if I ever let myself fall victim to my instincts again, Athos would turn away from me in disgust, and not even his divine light could illumme my path back to him.

He lifted his hand to my mouth and let me suck his fingers. Then, his hand slipped deeper between our bodies and a slick digit began to massage me, opening me up for him, until I pulled in my knee, thrusting my arse into the heat of his body and panting. He took his time, kissing me while his fingers fucked me open, oil dribbling down my thighs and into the sheets. The warmth of his body withdrew and I groped for him, but then he was back, crouching behind me with his mouth between my thighs. The slippery slide of his tongue between my arse cheeks, and I panted, lightheaded, as that beautiful, generous mouth performed that filthiest of acts, until I was wet and open for him. He slithered back up, his knee between my thighs, pushing them apart, and the hot length of his cock slid through the cleft of my arse. He rubbed himself against me, his fingers wrapped around my hip, and we rocked against each other, our bodies glowing with arousal and steaming with sweat.

Then, his hand on his own cock, making it slick and hard for me, and he shoved the thick head into my yielding body. I groaned and pushed back, and when I reached around to hold myself open for him, he laced his fingers through mine. I felt each shove, each twitch, as his prick sank deeper and deeper, until he was burrowed balls-deep in my arse and his hipbones dug into my flesh. I grabbed his thigh and held him still, my eyes closed, all my senses focused on the sensation of his blood
thudding around me and inside me.

At last, I began to move. I pulled away and pushed back into him, but he held me still in his turn. “Shh, Aramis... Stop.” He leaned over me and kissed me on the lips, fucking my mouth with his tongue. “Hold still, angel. Hold still and... let go.”

A spark of Olympian fire. It crackled in his fingertips; it simmered in his veins. The blood trapped in his arm heaved, and I groaned and buried my face in the crook of his elbow.

Inside me, his cock swelled.

“Oh, fuck,” I ground out through gritted teeth, jabbing my nails into his thigh, clenching his hand in mine. I was breathing very hard through my nose, while flashes of light burst behind my closed eyelids.

“Let go, Aramis,” Athos spoke into my ear. “Let go, my love.” He moved his arm, and the scent of his blood unmanned me. I rammed my fangs into his veins, and liquid light flooded my mouth and my skull.

Deep inside me, I appeared to have grown a second heart. His cock was swelling still, filled to the brim with Olympian energy, and pulsing with blood in time with the beat of his heart. It was not a man who was fucking me. It was a god. A deity so powerful that his body did not obey the laws of earthly biology. It was impossible that his prick should fill me out like that, and yet it did, and a stream of energy flowed from it straight to my heart that throbbed in the same rhythm.

Breathless, lightheaded, I drifted in a state of semi-consciousness, anchored to Athos through the bloodstream that we shared. We were locked together, and time stopped. Even though neither he nor I moved, he was fucking me more deeply than ever before. One hand flat on my stomach, and he pushed it down, scissoring his fingers around my cock, palm pressed to my abdomen, holding me to him. His other hand flexing, pumping more blood into my mouth, and I saw the glimmer of gold, as if his wrist was ensconced in his Achaean gauntlet. I shivered, and he pulled a soft blanket over us both: I recognised the mantle of Discord. I knew then with frightful clarity that, like Ganymedes, like Hyacinthus, I had lain with a Greek god and that my soul belonged to him.

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Chaeronea, Boeotia, 338 BC

From the top of Mount Acteon, the slaughter was most visible. The two armies collided with each other in a loud, sweaty, endless crush of bodies. On the Athenian right, the Macedonian cavalry seemed to have met its match. From Macedonian phalanxes, sarissas gnashed angrily against Athenian shields. On the Athenian left, the Sacred Band of Thebes gleamed in an unbreakable line along the shores of the Kephisos River. At the head of the Companions, the white plume of the helmet of the golden-haired Macedonian prince.

Athos waited to see if King Philip would take his advice: a ruse retreat, to make the Athenians break their line, before swallowing them up in a surprise attack.

The signal had been given. The Macedonian cavalry beat a calculated retreat. The paean rose up, carried in the strong voice of the one they called Alexandros.

Alexandros.

He had been the first to break through the unbreakable line of the Theban Band. They fell beneath the blows of his sword, pair by pair, and his Companions swarmed around him, blinded by fury and
eager to satiate the thirst of battle with blood of the undefeated.

Hear me, Ares, I invoke you. Give him victory today and he will shower you with laurels of glory.

He had come from Pella, like a golden god, like peals of the Father’s thunder. There were some who had even the temerity to claim Zeus himself had sired Alexander onto Olympias, there were some who even believed those rumors, for to stand in the presence of Alexander was to bask in the light of greatness. Athos wouldn’t have put it past his Father, since Olympias was very beautiful, not to mention, known for sleeping with snakes (he was not certain whether that particular animal had been utilized by Zeus before for purposes of seduction).

Would he have loved him more or less if they had truly been brothers?

From the top of Mount Aktion, the glow of Alexander’s sword appeared a blinding streak of light. It did not yield, it did not cease. Was this what he had looked like to Eris, Athos wondered, this young warrior, who feared neither pain nor death? He had offered the Theban Band surrender, and they had laughed at him. They died as they had lived. Together, joined as one, fighting side by side, to the death. Glorious death. The kind of death that was forever denied to Athos.

The battle ended and the victors gave thanks to the gods with loud songs and wine aplenty. He watched them in the darkness: two shadows, hand in hand, separating from the lights and revelry of the komos. A dark head and a light head, pressed against each other, a furtive kiss of reassurance. We are alive, you and I. What words did they whisper in the air that was still pregnant with blood from battle?

He sat upon the soil of Chaeronea and he mourned the fallen dead. Erastes on the right; the side of honor. Eromenos on the left; the shield side. Side by side, together forever in the fields of Elysium. It had been necessary. They had to die so that Alexandros could live. So that Alexandros could rule.

He rose as the two young men approached, their voices dropping, their hands separating as if he was Aristotle, their teacher, about to catch them doing something unmanful.

“Why are you not at the komos, Alexander?” Athos spoke, the first words he had ever said to the future King of all Greece.

“I had come here to win, not to gloat over my victory,” the boy with the halo of golden hair replied. Athos’ heart clenched; how he reminded him of Achilles! For just a moment, he closed his eyes and allowed his memory to linger on his long-lost friend’s face. And what of Patroclus? The shade of Patroclus was silent, Homer had written.

“And you, Hephaistion?” the demigod asked. “Will you not be missed at the komos?”

“I go with Alexander,” came the expected reply.

“Yes, that you do.”

“And who are you?” the golden one said, wiping at his eyes, lest someone see and accuse him of having a heart for the fallen.

“My name is Athos,” he replied. “I was sent here by the Gods of Olympus.”

Hephaistion shivered and his hand clasped protectively at Alexander’s shoulder, but the future Conqueror of Worlds did not flinch, did not stutter.

“To what purpose?”
“To make you immortal, Alexander.”

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**Paris, March 1845**

“I see you’ve found yourself a new friend, my dear count?” As soon as we stepped through the door, the light was blocked out and my vision was filled with the height and girth of Alex, who, having inherited the Porthosian appetite, sadly had not inherited the Porthosian metabolism. I suppose that’s what comes of diluting the Sun particles.

“This is my neighbor, the baron von Stackelberg,” I turned towards Aramis who was giving Alex his best, semi-toothless grin. “Baron, I’d like to introduce M. Dumas.”

“I have been naked with Marie Duplessis,” the baron pronounced, moving his lips over his gums as if in an effort to keep the rest of his teeth from falling out. For a moment, I was terrified that I had accidentally brought the real octogenarian Balt with me, instead of my lover.

“Baron, let’s find you a seat before you fall down,” I stammered, giving Alex a terrified look. The latter only laughed and offered to bring old Stackelberg his first (of many) drinks of the night. “What the hell are you doing?” I hissed at Aramis, dropping him into the nearest armchair.

“Having what little fun I am allowed,” he hissed back at me and then declared in the wabbling voice of an old man. “Marie Duplessis has great titties!”

“Hera’s cunt!”

“Champagne for the baron!” Alex appeared at my side, just in time to mount a rescue, and having given the glass to the old man, dragged me off into some corner to ask me how I was enjoying *Twenty Years After*.

“I… I was. It is…” I was not doing so well. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marion sitting on the baron’s lap, laughing loudly at the obscenities he must have been pronouncing about Marie’s various body parts. “Why did you make Raoul a real boy?” I veered on my interlocutor.

“Beg pardon?”

“I mean… why did you give Athos a son?”

“What did you mean by ‘a real boy’?”

“Did you not feel his character was paternal enough as it was?” I tried to cover my tracks and put all my efforts into sounding less offended.

On the other end of the salon, Franz Liszt was about to grace everyone with an impromptu performance. I caught the younger Dumas casting looks of hatred and general disgust at the Hungarian musician.

“I am in the business of making money, my dear count,” Alex had been saying as I surveyed the scene. “I need a dashing, young hero for the multitudes of sequels I intend to write. I couldn’t very well have given Athos a parrot.”

“A what?” My head turned so quickly, I may have snapped a vertebra.

“A pigeon?”
“You said parrot.”

“No, why would I have said such a strange thing!”

“As opposed to a pigeon?”

I looked over at Aramis again and my eyes begged Help. It was Marion who had come to my aid, wrapping her fingers around my elbow and begging Alex’s pardon in borrowing me.

“He knows about the parrot,” I hissed in her ear.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she whispered back.

“Tell Aramis, next time, I’m leaving him at home.”

From across the room, I observed the younger and older Dumas engaged in what looked like a heated conflagration. Marion gave me one of her meaningful fairy smiles and squeezed her fingers around my bicep.

“Perhaps we should have killed them both,” I whispered.

“Keep it together, Discord,” she purred next to my ear, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Why do you keep coming to my mistress’ house?” the younger Dumas had been asking.

“My dear boy,” the Porthling replied, patting his stomach, “I am an adult, I go where I am invited, and where I please!”

“Do you know how embarrassing it is to have your father showing up at the house of the woman you’re… the woman you love?”

“Oh, there there, Junior! I daresay, this particular woman doesn’t care where you put your love as ardently as you might think!”

“Where the devil is Marie?” I whispered. “They’re going to make a deplorable scene.”

“She won’t notice,” Marion replied, turning me towards the pianist. “She’s too busy mooning over Liszt, her latest pet project.”

“He’s more striking than Dumas the younger,” I offered, having given the musician an expert once over.

“Wait till you hear him play,” Marion sighed. “It is rumored he is possessed by the Devil himself.”

“Ah, well, Marie does have a certain penchant for the devilish.”

The opening chords of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” filled the room, for a few blissful minutes silencing everyone, and bringing a becoming blush to Marie’s cheeks.

“That’s cheating,” I elbowed Marion lightly. “It’s not even his music he’s wooing her with.” The Dame Blanche laughed and hid her face behind my shoulder.

“Do the Erlkönig!” the fairy shouted out while the applause abated and Liszt’s long hair obscured his face as he bowed. I glared at her brazenness, admiring her openly.

“Oh, yes, darling! Do!” Marie clapped her hands like a little girl, coquettish and utterly enthralled.
“But I would need someone to sing the lieder,” the devil’s own musician protested.

“You know,” I stepped forward, casting Aramis a daring look, “the baron von Stackelberg is a very big fan of Goethe, and I’m told has the voice of an angel. I bet he knows all the words to the Erlkönig.”

Aramis flew up from his armchair, forgetting his cane, so great was his rage, which everyone in the audience mistook for a great burst of enthusiasm.

“Wonderful!” Liszt declared and his fingers flew along the keys with such verve that for a moment I stood transfixed, the scene of the father and son riding like the wind while pursued by the Elf King so vivid in my mind.

All eyes turned upon the baron, who opened his mouth, and I daresay, was about to start singing, when a great commotion in the vestibule spread to the music salon, and several men burst into the room, wearing great wreaths of garlic cloves and brandishing wooden stakes. I reached for my hidden pistol when one of the hunters threw holy water into Liszt’s face with an outrageous outcry of “Vade retro, Satanas!”

I held my breath as I held Marion pressed against me. Marie’s face blanched and her eyes widened. Aramis dropped back into the arm chair, clutching his walking stick with extra wrinkled hands.

As for the affronted musician himself, he flew off the stool, hands flailing in the air like a madman, and shouted “What is the meaning of this!!!”

“Behold! He’s burned with holy water! Vampyre!” the idiotic hunters yelled and brandished their wooden stakes aloft. “Madame, we hate to interrupt your party, but we must kill the Hungarian abomination!”

“How rude!” Marie gasped and clutched at her camellias.

“Gentlemen, please,” I stepped forward. “Put down your sticks. This is a civilized household, not some barn where you can come as you please whilst brandishing brooms and pitchforks.”

“And who are you?” the apparent leader of this particular batch of morons turned towards me.

“I am the comte de Perregaux, Monsieur. And I was invited here, which, I daresay cannot be said of you and your companions.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alex taking copious notes again.

“This man is a monster,” the hunter pointed at Liszt.

“This man is Mademoiselle Duplessis’ guest,” I corrected and loosened the buttons of my jacket. Alex once again wrote something down. “And Mademoiselle Duplessis is my dear friend. And sir, if you do not leave her house immediately, I shall have to chastise you most severely. And believe me, sir, I get into quite the temper when my friends’ honor is at stake.” Alex appeared to be in some kind of an ecstatic frenzy, scribbling like a madman on the back of his napkin.

At this precise moment, Marie, who had been holding her breath throughout my little speech, had the misfortune to laugh, which she immediately covered up with a fake cough.

“She has been bedevilled by the vampire!” the hunters declared in one voice. “She is consumptive and must be saved! Kill the Hungarian abomination!”
My hand twitched towards my pistol again when the baron von Stackelberg declared in a very loud voice “What’s going on? What is all this noise? I cannot hear the piano!”

The hunters turned about and beheld the baron’s toothless smile.

“Young people these days!” Aramis, in the guise of old Stackelberg, went on. “No respect! No consideration! I came here to look at the pretty courtesan! Is it time for cocoa yet?”

“Great,” I shook my head, “Now you’ve upset baron von Stackelberg.”

“He is quite too old for so much excitement,” Marie whispered while continuing to disguise her laughter as weak coughing. “I assure you, gentlemen, I simply choked a little. I am not consumptive. And Monsieur Liszt is not an abomination, albeit he truly is Hungarian.”

“Frenchmen! Such xenophobia!” Stackelberg croaked and menaced the hunters with his walking stick. And then he called them a very dirty Russian word, the naughty chyortik.

“The baron von Stackelberg is a very important Russian diplomat,” Marie smiled at the hunters, who inexplicably were still there and still wearing wreaths of garlic. “We do not wish to cause an international incident,” she added demurely.

That last part was technically true. The aging Balt had indeed spent his entire career in an ambassadorial capacity for the Russian Tsar.

“Or, perhaps,” I ventured, “You’d like to accuse the baron of also being an abomination, seeing as he comes from back East?”

There was a communal gasp, such was the high opinion of all assembled of the venerable baron. Alex, inexplicably, gasped loudest of all, and continued to scribble on yet another napkin, of which he appeared to have an inexhaustible supply.

“Suit yourself, Madame,” the leader of the imbeciles bowed to Marie. “We will leave you to your… party. But rest assured, we shall return to attend to your health.”

“How very gallant of you,” Marie smiled.

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It was with great muttering and brandishing of sticks that the troop of misguided deliverers departed my apartments. Watching them from behind my fan, I avoided catching Marion’s eye, for I feared that I should dissolve into a river on the spot were I to laugh.Luckily, I got distracted by the sight of the comte de Perregaux crouching down to pick up a clove of garlic. He eyed it with furrowed brow, and, quite casually, indicated that the baron von Stackelberg was to stay in his easy chair with one hand on the aged one’s shoulder. I admired Aramis’ terrifying coolness and his powers of persuasion: at no point had he slipped up, at no point had the mask dropped to reveal the eyes and teeth of the predator.

Quite unlike the other Transdanubian in our midst. Monsieur Liszt filled the room with Austro-Hungarian expletives and tore at his hair, littering the carpet with handkerchiefs handed to him by flushed ladies who were most solicitous to dab at his face and clothes. One woman had fainted away and had her corset loosened by attentive hands, while two younger and nimbler ones stooped to pick up the discarded handkerchiefs and hide them surreptitiously in their bosoms, after kissing them with what amounted to religious fervour.

Lisztomania, as Heinrich Heine had it, ran rampant in my salon. The poet’s words bubbled up in my
memory: When formerly I heard of the fainting spells which broke out in Germany and specially in Berlin, when Liszt showed himself there, I shrugged my shoulders pityingly and thought: quiet sabbatarien Germany does not wish to lose the opportunity of getting the little necessary exercise permitted it... Heine had said, before witnessing first-hand how convulsively his mere appearance affected them! It was almost enough to suspect Liszt of a demonic provenance – and considering his Magyar origins, it would not have been surprising if a spawn of Hell had had a hand or a horn in his creation – had not Aramis vouchsafed Liszt’s human nature. “He has angry blood,” the vampyre had pronounced after their first meeting, eyeing the pianist across the room.

That anger must be quelled. I swept over to the enraged maestro, fought my way through the throng and reached for his hand. “Permit me, monsieur,” I said softly with a smile and a pressure of my fingers that I knew he couldn’t resist. His flashing eyes met mine, his pale lips covered his teeth, and he followed me when I pulled him across the room and into the quiet antechamber. There, I rose on my tiptoes and kissed his thin cheek. “Forgive me, Ferencz.”

He did forgive me. When we returned to the salon a quarter of an hour later, it was to see the comte de Perregaux in the role of a Roman orator: he stood in the centre of a breathless crowd, and his low, harmonious voice reverberated through the room. He was explaining to my guests all about the hijinks that a group of high-spirited students had performed in my salon to surprise, shock and entertain. “You must admit, mesdames and messieurs,” he said, “That it was a thrilling show, worthy of having been penned by M. Dumas himself!” He bowed his head in the direction of the author, who was sitting at a small table in the corner, scribbling furiously, with ink blotches staining his shirtfront and his nose. At the sound of his name and the applause, the celebrated dramatist looked up abstractedly, raised a jovial hand and went back to his notes.

In the easy chair, the baron von Stackelberg was asleep. My step faltered when I beheld him, and I clung to Liszt’s arm as he led me across the room. Aramis had outdone himself. While his lover made my salon his stage, directing his audience’s gaze and thoughts where he wanted them to be in the manner of a consummate ring master, Aramis had sunk into deep shadows, his eyes closed, his fingers relaxed, an old man who had had too much excitement. For a moment, I feared that the demon might be drunk, for he had enthusiastically partaken of the champagne and the wine. I had never seen Aramis drunk on alcohol. He drank wine in moderate amounts – unlike the baron von Stackelberg, who, as it turned out, was quite the Baltic tippler.

I sank down on a chaise-longue next to Marion, who pressed my hand. “Discord is on fine form tonight,” she whispered in my ear. “What we witnessed was a carnivalistic rendering of a pagan fertility ritual.” I coughed and hid my face behind my fan. “Young men wield wooden phalluses against the most virile man in the group – that would be your Hungarian friend, incidentally – and wear garlic crowns that denote fertility.” Her words aggravated my cough, and I interrupted her.

“And they swallowed that?”

She shrugged. “The hunters swallowed the garlic we fed them.”

“Bless,” I muttered, and succumbed to another coughing fit at the thought of those fearsome heirs of Colbert’s legacy arranging garlic in the form of malodorous flower crowns.

“They must be destroyed,” Marion muttered, ostensibly adjusting the camellias at the front of my bodice.

“They will be.” I glanced at Athos and then at Aramis. “There must be a nest. Tracking it down would make a nice task for the creature of the night.”

“The creature of the night must not show his face in the streets.”
“I’m sure he’ll think of something. He can always wear a wide-brimmed hat.”

“And a cloak?”

“Naturally.”

Liszt’s fingers were hammering out a magnificent crescendo on the piano keys, but all of a sudden, the hammering stopped and softer tones floated through the air like the first aromas of spring, only to morph into an urgent gallop, the frantic heartbeat of pursued prey. Marion fell silent, and across the room, the baron jolted awake. “The elf king is coming!”

For one breathless moment, I was convinced that the mask would slip and the demon reveal himself. I readied myself to faint and create a diversion, but once again, I had underestimated Aramis’ self-control. Even though he propelled himself out of his chair with immoderate agility, the baron’s guise was firmly in place, and he leaned on his walking cane to push himself upright.

The frantic heartbeat of Schubert’s lied got a hold of the entire assembly. Our blood pulsed in the same rhythm, driven by the beat dictated by Liszt’s huge hands, and amidst the crowd, the vampyre stood and opened his mouth.

Fangs did not flash. Instead – a melodious voice, underpinned with the melancholia of the Slavic soul, and Aramis sang. The hunt came alive before all our eyes: the Wild Hunt of old, the Elf King and Berchta, the bright one, chased the human child through night and wind, and primal fear gripped the hearts of the humans.

Such a beautiful voice. It wove through the air and into the listeners’ ears, who stood transfixed. “Dem Vater grauset’s, er reitet geschwind, / Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,” the demon sang in the ageless voice of an angel, neither the youthful voice of Aramis, nor the creaky voice of the baron. “Erreicht den Hof mit Müh’ und Not; / In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.”

A shudder trickled down my spine like a drop of cold water. Beside me, Marion was palpitating with pleasure. I looked up and my heart shuddered: firm and unyielding, Athos stood across from Aramis, and stars shone in his eyes.

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Babylon, 323 BC

“Don’t bring me back this time,” the demigod’s hand trembled as it clenched at his servant’s shoulder. Deep brown eyes overflowing with agony as the pain tore through his body. “Grigori, promise me… promise me…”

Down the hallway, the wailing of women and the murmurs of men.

Alexander is dead.

“Kyrios,” the Grigori held his charge in his arms, until he lowered him against the throng of Persian pillows and throws, “Kyrios, I cannot promise you that. He will make me. I serve at the pleasure of Olympus.”

“You gnat! You rascal! Ah!” Athos’ hand clutched at his chest as his body heaved off the pillows. “You fucking traitor!”

A furtive tear streaked down the guardian’s face. “Fight through it, Master.”
“Too late, it is too late. **Alexander!**”

“I promised your brother Ares to bring you back,” the guardian whispered, wiping at his charge’s brow. “I will have no rest on Olympus if I disobey.”

“He wasn’t supposed to **die**. He wasn’t supposed to… **Gods!**”

“**Kyrios, be strong.**”

“The gods lied…” His voice grew weaker as his eyes grew dimmer. “They told me Alexander would be immortal.”

“There are many ways to attain immortality, **Kyrios.**”

The demigod laughed, feeling the last string of his heart break. At least this time, unlike the last time, he thought, he would die with a smile on his lips.
Paris, April 1845

“Tell me chérie – do you remember when the Duke de Beaufort escaped from Vincennes?” Spread out on her stomach on the divan in my boudoir, Marion looked up from the copy of Le Siècle.

“The Duke de Beaufort?” I frowned.

“He was the lover of your belle-mère when you were the Duchesse de Chevreuse.”

“I remember. It must have been around 1650, I believe.”

“I don’t mean the year. I mean the season.”

“Oh!” I gave it another thought. “It was summer, I remember it distinctly, because I visited the comte de La Fère in Bragelonne and the garden stood in full bloom.” I smiled at the memories that trickled in like clear cool water that found its way through solid rock. “Why?”

“Because, beloved nymph,” Marion turned to another copy of the magazine and leafed through it, “the comte de La Fère and the abbé d’Herblay left for England not three days after the great escape.”

“So?”

“Yet it is January when they finally arrive in Charles Stuart’s camp. What,” she raised her eyebrows at me, “have they been doing all this time?”

“Who knows.” I shrugged, fanning myself languidly. “They might have invoked Athos’ family by mistake and got trapped at sea for months. What does Alex have to say about it?”

“Nothing. He doesn’t provide any explanation at all, probably in the hope that nobody will notice.”

“He’s not wrong.” I yawned and nudged her playfully with my bare foot. “Humans are so blind.”

“Surely nobody can be so stupid as to miss a time skip of seven months?”

“Oh my darling fae!” I exclaimed. “Have you learned nothing? They trust the authorial voice implicitly, bless them. If the author tells them it is January when it was June, they believe it. Why, they are convinced that d’Artagnan is a noble hero, just because Alex tells them it is so.”

Marion was shaking her beautiful head in exasperation. “No wonder our Titanic friend can run around Paris under his real name, flaunting his solar provenience and knocking up human women. He has taken to calling himself Porthos du Phaeton, for pity’s sake!”

“See?” I slid over to where she was lying and curled my arm around her waist. “Blind.”

“Hmm…” Marion purred and rubbed her cheek against mine. “Alex is not blind to the things that truly matter. Have you read what he wrote about them?”

“Discord and the vampyre?” I laughed delightedly. “I feared that old baron von Stackelberg would regrow his teeth when Alex was reading the latest chapter the other night. Discord got well and truly
“Fucked that night.”

“Lucky him,” Marion said drily.

“Missing friend bloodsucker’s tongue, chérie?” I whispered in her ear.

“It is a good one.”

“Next time you choose to sit on the baron’s lap, you can try to coax it out to play. I wonder if he could maintain his bewitchment when he is caught unawares.”

“For a water sprite, you are all too keen on playing with fire, sweet ondine. The hunters are on your trail already. Dr Vangelis is proving surprisingly tenacious, Hera’s curse upon him!”

“He believes me to be the innocent victim of an unholy abomination,” I affected a delightful gentle cough that pressed my bosom into her side.

“What is annoying and dangerous. And we can’t do anything without attracting even more attention.” She ground her teeth in frustration.

“Poor sweetie,” I whispered in her hair. “Getting away with murder is no longer easy in these modern civilised times.”

“It is most vexing.” Marion sighed and kissed the palm of my hand. “But listen to this, this will cheer you up: Porthos, who could never see anything that was not self-evident, talked to him as usual. He replied in monosyllables and Athos and Aramis looked significantly at one another. Next morning D'Artagnan was the first to rise. He had been down to the stables, already taken a look at the horses and given the necessary orders for the day, whilst Athos and Aramis were still in bed.”

I laughed. “Alex did notice some things, then!”

“I wager it didn’t take him much reading between the lines. Hang on, there’s more: Athos and Aramis kept themselves to their role. At midnight they withdrew to their chamber.”

“Where was that?”

“In England.”

“Ah!” I exclaimed, laughing. “I believe this answers your question what they were doing for seven months.”

“They can’t have spent the full seven months in their chamber, surely.”

“You don’t know them at all, do you?”

“Somebody does: Athos put his arm around Aramis's neck and kissed him.” Marion had turned to yet another page. “The most recent chapters are full of such goings-on. It’s about time those two leave Paris for a while, before M. Dumas embarrasses himself.”

“I might have to go away for my health. I could ask the comte de Perregaux to accompany me on my travels.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to oblige, the dear old friend that he is.”

“Very dear!” I sighed happily.
“Very old,” Marion deadpanned.

Grey-eyed and demure, my faithful Clothilde slunk in like the soul of a wilted flower. She curtsied and announced: “Dr Vangelis is asking for the honour of an audience with you, Mademoiselle.”

A shudder ran through Marion’s shoulders. “You go, chérie,” she said. “I’ll stay here. I’m not in the mood for the good doctor’s learnèd sermons.”

“You never are.”

“Of course not. He is unbearable. I should like to dance with him, though,” she added thoughtfully, as she watched me pulling on my slippers.

“You and Aramis would love to take him out for dancing and dinner.”

“And one day we shall.” Her pearly teeth flashed between red lips, and I kissed her on the mouth before descending into the crypt of enlightenment.

“…that wonderful Madame Marie! She has a man’s brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and a woman’s heart. The good God fashioned her for a purpose, believe me, when He made that so good combination,” the kindly, strong-faced old man quethed, patting my hand with much reverence. “Friend Édouard, up to now fortune has made that woman of help to us.” He turned to the comte de Perregaux, who had joined us halfway through the lecture and was now casting solicitous looks at the old baron von Stackelberg, who had succumbed to a fit of narcoleptic slumber the moment he had entered my salon and beheld Dr Vangelis, M. D., D. Ph., D. Lit., etc., etc.

Ever since the farce of exorcising Liszt, the worthy academic had taken to haunting my house. My symptoms that had been reported to him by Bloodhound Biscarrat were most worrying. The only explanation Dr Vangelis could think of for my pale complexion, my translucent skin and my persistent cough, which tended to become more aggravated whenever I submitted to one of his orations, was that I had fallen victim to a bloodsucking creature, an un-dead monstrosity from beyond the grave that feasted on the blood of the living, especially on those of the female sex, whose blood he found particularly delectable.

“And after all, Madame – you who indicate the flow of your blood for all Paris to see, if you forgive me that indelicate remark,” he glanced from beneath his bushy brows at my bosom, where a pink camellia trembled in time with the gasps of suppressed laughter that escaped my lungs, “are a particularly attractive victim to the vampyre. You have been very brave through your ordeal, but you suffered enough, my dear. From now on, you must not have to do with this so terrible affair. It is not good that you run a risk so great. We men are determined – nay, are we not pledged, Friend Édouard?” turning to Athos, whose nostrils flared, “to destroy this monster. But it is no part for a woman. Even if you be not harmed, Madame Marie, your heart may fail you in so much and so many horrors. And hereafter you may suffer – both in waking, from your nerves, and in sleep, from your dreams. Madame Marie, you, a pearl among women!” Vangelis exclaimed in an outburst of emotion. “You must not be put at risk!”

“If it is my blood you worry about,” I said, avoiding Athos’ eye and most ardently avoiding glancing at the easy chair where the baron von Stackelberg lay in a death-like coma, “I can put your mind at rest: the wonders of modern medicine have made a blood transfusion a viable option for saving my life.”

“Ah!” Dr Vangelis exclaimed, his grey hair bristling. “Yes, Madame Marie, the transfusion of the blood may bring you temporary relief. And I know you are acquainted with Dr Flitterbatt, who is an eminent expert in this field.”
“He is also the comte de Perregaux’ personal physician,” I interjected smoothly.

“Was,” the comte de Perregaux said. “Sadly, Dr Flitterbatt has left my services.”

“But count!” I fanned myself with a scandalised air. “What about your delicate health? You require constant medical attention, I distinctly remember Dr Flitterbatt telling me that your heart wasn’t strong.”

Something flashed deep in the eyes of Discord. “Thank you for your solicitude, Madame.” He bowed. “My valet has already engaged another medical man to take care of my wellbeing. Dr Szimara is a most capable physician.”

“But will Dr Szimara be able to save Madame Marie from a death most gruesome, a fate most horrible when the vampyre keeps haunting her at night?” The good doctor exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, doctor,” I said, smiling at him from behind my fan. “I am rarely unattended at night.”

Discord coughed.

“Friend Édouard!” the eminent academic ejaculated and seized Athos’ hand. “You are not developing a cough, are you? For that is an early symptom of vampyric attacks: the victim’s chest feels tight, oppressed. You, who you are so pale always, dear comte – did you suffer from any bad dreams lately? Did you feel as if a mare straddled you at night? Did you wake exhausted and soaked in perspiration? People in the olden days knew what all those things meant, and they learned how to protect themselves against them, but alas! the modern man in the midst of our scientific, sceptical, matter-of-fact nineteenth century no longer trusts the wisdom of his forefathers. They have made atheism fashionable, and as they stopped believing in Him, they have also stopped believing in his adversaries.”

“What exactly happens when a mare straddles you at night?” I asked, wide-eyed, parting my lips and tilting my head, and valiantly ignoring the expression on the mare-ridden Achaean’s face, whose very lips had grown white with fury.

“Oh, my dear!” Dr Vangelis turned back to me and folded his forehead in an elaborate pattern of wrinkles. “Sadly, we don’t have a way of knowing what is true and what is fabrication. All we have to go upon are traditions and superstitions, of which there are hundreds upon hundreds. For, let me tell you, the vampyre is known everywhere that men have been: in old Greece, in old Rome, he flourished in Prussia all over, in France, in India, even in the Chersonese; and in China, so far from us in all ways, there even is he, and the peoples fear him at this day. He has followed the wake of the berserker Icelander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar. So far, then, we have all we may act upon. And let me tell you that very much of the beliefs are justified by what we have seen in our own so unhappy experience. The vampyre lives on, and cannot die by mere passing of the time; he can flourish when that he can fatten on the blood of the living. Even more, we have seen amongst us that he can even grow younger; that his vital faculties grow strenuous, and seem as though they refresh themselves when his special pabulum is plenty. But he cannot flourish without this diet.”

For the span of a heartbeat, Athos and I caught each other’s eye. It was a mistake, for a coughing fit seized me, and Discord averted his gaze and stared at baron von Stackelberg, whose vegetative state began to worry me. Who knew what was going on behind those closed eyes, in that skull of his that, in addition to razor-sharp teeth of death, also contained a brain that was as devious as it was perfidious. I knew then that Dr Vangelis was a lost man.

Lost, yet learnèd, as Marion would say, and he was galloping away on the wings of his own voice,
expounding on the nature of the revenant with the vigour and vivacity of a true connoisseur of Phantasia. He told us all about the vampyric powers of transmogrification, some of which (mist) I already knew about from ecclesiastical pamphlets, while others (wolves, bats, possibly rats, even though it was hard to imagine Aramis turning into anything so filthy) were new to me. I was deeply impressed with the inventive genius, which surpassed even what Marion and I had come up with.

“He that can smile at death, as we know him; who can flourish in the midst of diseases that kill off whole peoples. Oh, if such a one was to come from God, and not the Devil, what a force for good might he not be in this old world of ours!”

Athos and I exchanged a glance. He was not wrong.

“But we are pledged to set the world free. Free from that creature whose brain is like that of a child: unformed and malleable. It is not like the brain of a man, full of purpose, nobility and masculine intelligence. No, it is the brain of a child who takes what he wants. Look at his persistence and endurance. He comes again, and again, and again. With the child-brain he has long since conceived the idea of coming to a great city. What does he do? He finds out the place of all the world most of promise for him. Then he deliberately sets himself down to prepare for the task. He finds in patience just how is his strength, and what are his powers. He studies new tongues. He learns new social life; new environment of old ways, the politic, the law, the finance, the science, the habit of a new land and a new people who have come to be since he was. His glimpse that he has had, whet his appetite only and enkeen his desire.”

The good doctor had talked himself into quite a passion, and he paused, mopping his brow, while the comte de Perregaux took a great sip from his wine glass, and then another one.

“He is clever and cunning and resourceful,” Vangelis continued, “but he is not of man-stature as to brain. He is of child-brain in much. Now this criminal of ours is predestinated to crime also; he has child-brain, and it is of the child to do what he has done. ‘Dos pou sto,’ said Archimedes. ‘Give me a fulcrum, and I shall move the world!’ To do once, is the fulcrum whereby child-brain becomes man-brain; and until he has the purpose to do more, he continues to do the same again every time, just as he have done before!”

“Children can be quite clever,” I interjected.

“Oh Madame Marie, you sweet soul!” The old man looked at me with the eyes of a tortoise beneath very hairy brows. “Of course you would say so. For you are a woman, and you do love the children. It is your destiny as a woman to love them, to cherish them and to nurture their innocent hearts and souls. But take care, sweet Madame Marie, and do not believe him innocent! He is a fiend most foul, a creature most depraved, and he has already taken advantage of your trusting, compassionate heart. Take care, Madame Marie, and guard yourself against him! Your maid shall help me deck your room with my garlic, which is all the way from Santorini, where my friend Zenobios raises herb in his glass-houses all the year, and you shall wear a wreath of garlic around your neck when you retire to sleep.”

“That would be bad for business,” I reminded him gently.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to eat the garlic?” Athos cut in. “If indeed you are certain that it repels those creatures.”

“You are a sceptic, Friend Édouard,” the Hellenic sage pronounced. “You only believe in science and forget that our origins as humans are shrouded in many mysteries.”

Athos shrugged. “I am trying to help.”
“And so you shall! You, my friend, must protect Madame Marie from the vampyre. And if you should wake one night and feel your chest oppressed, your breath harsh, your limbs languid and your neck sore, do not take that lightly!”

“I assure you, I will not.”

“Tonight, you shall wake. You shall keep guard at Madame Marie’s door, and you must take care not to trouble her waking or sleeping thoughts with sights and sounds and smells of horror which she might never forget.”

“That was edifying,” Athos said after Dr Vangelis had left us, muttering excuses of ‘long journey ahead’, which, no doubt, would involve a lot cutting off of heads and driving stakes through hearts.

“And surprisingly accurate at times,” I added.

In the easy chair, the baron stirred. Even as we were watching, the veil lifted, the sallow skin smoothed, and I couldn’t believe that I had seen an old man fast asleep where a beautiful, creamy-skinned youth reclined.

Aramis opened his eyes and smiled, showing us all his teeth.

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Athos rose, walked to my chair, lifted my hand and pressed it. “Would you like to do the honours, chyortik?” he said tenderly, inclining his head at the door through which Dr Vangelis had disappeared. It stood ajar, and I saw the pale cloud of Marion’s dress shimmer through the gap.

“No,” I said, looking at Marion and then at Athos. “Let’s not kill him.”

“What?” Athos said and let go of my hand.

“What?!” Marion said and stepped in.

“Aramis, are you well?” My lover pressed the back of his hand to my forehead, checking my temperature.

“Oh, this is good!” Marie sat up very straight, her eyes sparkling, and clapped her hands. “Aramis has a plan. This is like the old times!”

“I am quite well, thank you,” I said, for a shadow had lifted in my head and for the first time in many, many years I felt elated again. Here was something I was good at. And this time, I would succeed.

“Don’t you remember all those men we killed for less?” Marion said.

“Not very distinctly. My memories are a bit of a blur,” I told her politely. Athos was still looking down on me with eyes full of worry and compassion, and I reached out for his hand and pressed it. “I am five hundred years old,” I said. “Do you imagine I remember every man I’ve killed? I don’t have your mental powers, Athos.” I looked around the room, at the faces of my friends, and said: “All those men we have killed didn’t change anything: the hunters are still around, and they have accumulated a lot of knowledge over the centuries.”

“A lot of it is nonsense,” Marion said dismissively.

“Exactly!” I said. “And we must make sure that everyone knows that it is nonsense. That old man
today: did you listen to what he was saying? He is a pantaloon, an imbecile bespawler, who spouts words because he enjoys hearing himself talk. What does that even mean, the ‘child-brain’? Well, he has an old-man brain, and I will show him exactly what that means. ”

Marie laughed. “I knew that one would rankle, darling!”

“We tried to stop the hunters and the poets,” I continued, “because they had looked and crawled into dark corners of life that don’t concern them. We have learned that we cannot stop them all, for there will always be more.”

“That’s never stopped you before,” Marion said.

“And I’ve wasted a lot of energy tracking down men whose death was insignificant in the end.” A vague memory stirred, of the pale Englishman who had seen shadows lurk in the corners of his images and who had died staring in the heart of darkness. His death had not put a stop to photography. “That old man, if we kill him now - his legacy will not die with him. If anything, his followers will know that he was right, and they will pursue us even more ferociously.”

“What do you propose?” Marie asked, and the look in her eyes, the way her face glowed and her lips curled up in a genuine smile, the smile of a nymph and goddess to whom the death of humans means nothing, reminded me of our old Parisian days, when she and I built and destroyed human lives without besmirching ourselves with their filth.

“Let him live,” I said. “Let him live and spread the words - the mad words, the lies that he tells - and turn those words into his legacy.”

“I can do that,” Marie said.

“Of course you can, wily nymph,” I smiled at her.

“Poor old Dr Vangelis,” Marie said, fanning herself with a dejected air. “I believe he is getting old. Why, last night, he was mumbling something about fog sneaking up on him and trying to choke him. Turned out he had run into a sheets of gauze that had fluttered in the wind. And he tried to exorcise a rat that my cook had found in the kitchen.”

Athos smiled. “You’re evil, chyortik.”

“People will believe the legacy of a martyr who died before his time,” I said. “They will not believe the words of a dribbling old man who sees ghosts in every shadow, not if there are rational explanations for everything that he claims to have seen.”

“You want to drive him mad,” Marion said coolly.

“He’s driving himself mad,” I said. “I want to merely… watch.”

“He is getting very tiresome, though,” Marie sighed. “I don’t know how much longer I can bear listening to his drivel.”

“Perhaps you should leave Paris for a while,” Athos said. “On account of your health. Those hunters have been sniffing around you too much for my liking.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, and Marion smirked. “Perhaps that’s a good idea, chérie,” she said. “You go on a nice, long trip to European watering places.”

“What are you going to do?” Marie asked.
Marion raised her eyebrows. “Design hats, of course,” she said. “Entertain our Titanic friend. Patronise young writers. That young man from Nantes, Jules something, who came with Porthling the Younger the other week, I believe he’s worth watching.”

“He says he wants to study Law.”

“His father wants him to study Law.” Marion’s smile deepened. “There’s a difference.”

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Paris, May 1845

I had never before visited the famed and fabled author at his hotel, but I knew where he lived because Aramis had followed him thither upon our arrival in Paris. This arrival, which now felt like a human lifetime ago, had come through the Veil. We could not afford to make our escape by the same means. We had to depart as the humans depart: causing as much ado as possible to a choir of societal lamentations.

I needed to pay the Porthling a visit before we left. It was important that he understand that while circumstances had torn us asunder, he would not be long from our thoughts. Or, more importantly, out of our reach.

The author received me with kisses and embraces to rival those of his illustrious progenitor.

“Count! What am I hearing about you leaving us? I feel as if my Muses should certainly trail in your wake! Nay, sir, I may never write again!”

“M. Dumas, you are too kind. To listen to you, one would think that I was somehow the inspiration for your d’Artagnan oeuvre. But that would be impossible,” I pressed his hand, “because you and I did not meet until recently.”

“And yet, I feel as if I’d known you my whole life,” Alex sighed and gazed deeply into my eyes. Perhaps Aramis was not far off in accusing him of having somewhat deeper than familial feelings for me. Then again, in my family, it was all relative.

I cleared my throat and straightened my back. “I came here for a number of reasons, my friend,” I began. “One of which was to personally inform you of our impending departure. No doubt, you have heard rumors, which I am sorry to say are not entirely untrue.”

“Then you truly are going abroad with Mademoiselle Duplessis?”

I made a noncommittal gesture and went on. “I understand she was a close personal friend of your son’s. And I understand your son is currently traveling, otherwise he would no doubt have sent to me to demand satisfaction for what he must surely perceive to be a slight to his honor.”

Alex gasped, then laughed in a way that was all too entirely like Porthos. “Ah ha ha! You think my boy is going to challenge you to a duel? Oh ho ho! Oh, my dear count, you truly are a man without equal.”

I narrowed my eyes and studied him for a few moments. “Such as it may be, please inform your son that I can be at his service as soon as I’m able to return to Paris. Which I intend to do.”

“What?”

“Return to Paris.”
“When?”

“As soon as my beloved’s delicate health permits.”

“And what of your companion, Dr Flitterbatt?” Alex frowned. “Will he, too, go with you?”

“Dr Flitterbatt is a free man. He comes and goes as he pleases.” Alex gave me a scorned look of a man who knows when he’s not being given an answer. “It is my darling Marie who concerns me, you understand, don’t you? She is the one I love, she is the one who has been stricken by a sudden bout of consumption.”

“Yes, yes,” Alex muttered, not taking his eyes off my face, “sudden and very tragic.”

“God willing, it will not prove so,” I frowned. Alex, in the meantime, maneuvered us both into his study, where he proceeded to pour us brimming glasses of wine that smelled fragrant and expensive. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to savor the bouquet.

“I must confess, count, I am surprised to hear of your entanglement,” the sly dog went on, sitting at his desk and casually leafing through a stack of handwritten notes. I recognized some of the napkins from Marie’s parties. “I did not think you were the romantic type.”

“Mortality, M. Dumas, it makes fools of all of us,” I responded, sipping his excellent wine and watching him over the glistening rim of my crystal glass. “What good is a consumptive courtesan to the world? None. And yet, Marie needs me, and so I must do what I can to try and save her.”

“There is something inherently romantic about a consumptive courtesan, you must admit,” Alex mused.

“There is nothing inherently romantic in death,” I contradicted him. For a few moments, we stared at each other across the desk. He had been chewing his upper lip in contemplation, as if waiting to see which one of us will blink first.

“Surely, a man like you has nothing to fear of death,” he finally said. My nostrils twitched and that suspicion that he has always known more than he let on crept into my mind again.

I rose, feeling the moment had come for what Aramis would call “good, old-fashioned Greek histrionics.”

“I am strong against everything, except against the death of those I love,” I spoke those honest words as my hand clenched and trembled around my glass of wine. “For that only there is no remedy. He who dies, gains; he who sees others die, loses. No, this is it—to know that I should no more meet on earth him whom I now behold with joy; to know that there would not be a Marie Duplessis any more in the world, that there would not again be a… well, let’s say an Alexandre, oh! I am old, look you.”

Fuck! I had momentarily allowed my ardor to gallop off with me.

“Older… Not as young as I look. What I’m saying is, I have no longer courage, Alexandre. I pray God to spare me in my weakness; but if he struck me so plainly and in that fashion, I should curse him.”

I paused, observing as Alex tossed and turned for something to scribble with. No doubt this little speech would somehow manage to make its way into a sequel to what Porthos called The Three of Us.

“Of course, but,” Alex muttered, staring at me with eyes full of love and admiration, “a Christian gentleman ought not to curse his God, count.”

“No, a Christian gentleman ought not,” I agreed. “It is enough to have once cursed a king!”

“Verily, count! I cannot allow you to leave Paris!” Alex clutched at his chest as if the very thought of
my departure was about to cause him a grave coronary event.

“Look you, I will return,” I repeated. “Be mindful of what you write, Alexandre, because the written word has a certain immortality all its own. Posterity may judge you more or less harshly than your contemporaries, but there will be a reckoning, either way.”

In response to this very poorly veiled threat, Alex pressed my hand to his thick lips and a solitary tear streaked down his well-fed cheek.

“M. le comte is a man like no other,” he whispered in sincerest exultation.

“May your gods keep you,” I said, and departed quickly, before I could say anything more damaging.

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Rome, Spring 1846

In a city almost as eternal as myself, I was kissing Marie under the Arch of Severus Septimus.

“Are they still looking?” I breathed against her earlobe while she feigned a delighted giggle.

“They are,” her breath tickled against my lips. “But don’t let them distract you. You were saying?” Her fingers pulled on my buttons and I pressed a scattering of kisses into her long and supple neck.

“Perhaps you should cough,” I muttered. Immediately, Marie’s chest heaved, her ribs strained against her corset, and she was wracked by such spasms that I nearly mistook them for authentic. Then, overcome by her false malady, she swooned daintily into my embrace.

“Doctor Szimara!” I exclaimed, looking for my Hungarian physician whom I had dutifully implored to attend to my mistress’ needs upon our travels. In the blink of an eye, Aramis was at our side, solicitously taking Marie’s pulse. “We’re being followed,” I said under my breath.

“Hm, yes,” Aramis nodded and pried open Marie’s eyelids to check on her pupils. “I noticed them as soon as we set foot in the Forum.”

“Did you see how many?”

“Three distinct heartbeats.”

“Oh, doctor! Your senses are so keen.”

“Hush, my consumptive patient, you will overexcite yourself,” my beloved whispered to the nymph whose little hands were stroking up both our vests.

“We can’t have her overexcited,” I pointed out, taking Marie’s hand in mine. “But why are they still following us? Surely they don’t suspect her?”

“They’re looking for the bloodsucking fiend who had afflicted me with this malady,” Marie whispered as the doctor and I held her frail form up and supported her in her efforts. “Did you not hear Dr Vangelis? He explained it all to me in very comprehensible words.”

“I noticed,” I snickered, “he made sure they were no longer than two syllables each.”

“They did threaten to check on you in Paris,” Aramis mused and took Marie’s pulse again.
“Vangelis was run out of Paris under the flagellum of public calumny and Flitterbatt is,” I grinned up at Aramis in his new disguise, “nowhere to be found. And still we are not rid of this hunter pestilence.”

Marie replied with a weak cough and shivered in my embrace. She was consummate actress, indeed.

“What news there, Doctor?” I fixed Aramis with a look.

“She is still alive,” he pronounced.

“I’m so relieved!” I exclaimed loud enough for our audience. “Darling, we should get you back to the hotel. The Roman sun does not agree with your delicate constitution!”

Perhaps it is time we return to England,” Aramis suggested. “The moisture in the air there would do wonders for the lady’s lungs.” And added in a softer voice, “These fools have a tendency to remain continental.”

“Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?” the nymph trilled.

“Marie, I know how you value your independence,” I said while gesturing to Grimley to bring the carriage around for our party. “But I’m afraid the time for being coy is over. These men will not stop harassing you until they see you respectably ensconced in the care of another.”

Aramis frowned. “Meaning?”

I offered Marie my arm and conducted her to the carriage. “Are they still watching us?”

“Like hawks,” Aramis hissed.

“We need to get married,” I said, aiding our lady into the carriage.

“I don’t think society in England would look kindly upon that,” Aramis snarked and jumped into the carriage after Marie.

“I meant Marie and I.”

“So did I,” he flashed me all his teeth.

Marie giggled and hit him with her fan as I drew the curtains. “Oh silly boys,” she lowered her eyelashes and her hands brushed against both our thighs again. “As if I would ever be so foolish as to come between the two of you and your unholy matrimony.”

“Marie, I wasn’t joking. You are, for all intents and purposes, a renowned courtesan. And I am… Well, as far as everyone is concerned, I am a wealthy nobleman. As brutish as these men are, they will not dare harass you once you are the comtesse de Perregaux.”

Perhaps Aramis can do it!” Marie dissolved in peals of giggles, throwing her head back and laughing with her entire body. “Would you do it, Aramis? Perform the ceremony? It would mean so much!”

“You forget, Madame,” my flittermouse replied, not quite as amused, “I’m no longer a priest.”

“Ach yes. Quelle domage!”

“And, regardless, I certainly hope you are not planning on consummating this farce in an actual church,” Aramis threw one leg over the other rather militantly.
“Why on earth not?” I inquired, while my hand found its way to the back of his neck and rested there against his soft skin.

“Because, Athos! Some things should remain sacred,” the Wallachian abomination from beyond the grave assumed a moralizing pose. “Marriage, you damned heathen, should be between two people who truly intend on spending the rest of their lives together, for better or worse, till death do them part. Would you say that is an accurate description of you and Marie?”

“Oh Aramis,” Marie pressed her hand to her heart, “that is so beautiful! Who knew you were such a romantic!”

“That is the most maudlin thing I’ve ever heard you say, flittermouse,” I smiled and pulled him into my arms, while he hissed and bristled like a cat that refuses to be petted. “I love you and your utterly hopeless sentimentality.” I pressed a hungry trail of kisses along the back of his neck.

“I’ll show you both how sentimental I am when we get back to the hotel!”

“Tant pis,” Marie shrugged and placed her foot back into her abandoned shoe.

“Rather say tant mieux, Madame,” Aramis grinned. “I can give you my undivided medical attention upstairs.”

“I hope not entirely undivided,” I whispered and felt his body flush with a fever against me.

“Besides,” I casually mentioned to him as we entered the hotel, “you know how much we will both want you there as our witness.”

“You’re an irredeemable asshole, count,” Aramis glared among further peals of Marie’s laughter.

***

London, Spring 1846

Come to London as soon as you can and I promise you, you’re going to see something absolutely fantastic, Aramis had written to me in a message brought by a winged Anemos cousin-germain.


“Of course, Captain,” my faithful servitor responded.
“Don’t call me Captain,” I had to remind him, even though I was right chuffed to be addressed in such a way, ship or no ship.

In addition to my general dislike of England and the English, I was also loath to leave my little scrotum-nugget. I was riveted by his latest tale of our adventures, even if, in all honestly, I was having trouble recollecting whether any of what he wrote had been true or simply sprung from his fertile brain like Athena from Athos’ Da’s head. I had managed to get through the entire masterpiece all on my own (since cousin wasn’t available to read to me, galavanting as he was through Europe with his revenant and their nymph), and my pride had grown to rather Titanic portions to rival my other Titanic attributes. I was particularly fond of the part where I dragged a man through the bars of a prison cell whilst choking him single-handedly. Recalling it or not, that certainly sounded like a thing I might have enjoyed.

But, I was never one to ignore a summons from my boon companions, and so I would set out for the drizzly shores of Albion as soon as I had paid a visit to the fairy’s millinery shop.

“I’m being summoned to England,” I informed her. “The entire thing is shrouded in mystery. Have you had word from Mademoiselle Nymph?”

“The entirety of Parisian beau monde is astir with the sad news of her advanced malady,” Marion smiled and poured me an herbaceous beverage that she proclaimed had been of a Hungarian origin. I wondered if Aramis would have a liking for it, both as a medical professional and as a former Transdanubian. “It is feared she may not last long. Fortunately, the count is taking very good care of her.”

“I was hoping your news would be, um… how do I put this … less mythologized?” I sipped the drink and tried not to pull any faces. “Ugh, this is very… what do you call this again?”

“Unicum,” the fairy smiled.

I immediately pictured Japanese sea urchin testicles. I shrugged: sea urchin testicles were delicious. This “uni cum” - was not.

“If they are summoning you to England, they must need reinforcements. Perhaps they have come upon a new nest of hunters?” she proposed quite reasonably.

Having bid her my adieux and extracted a promise from her to make sure that no harm would come to my progeny in my absence, I finally set out to rejoin Athos and Aramis in London.

I was greeted by Grimley, who showed me to the rooms reserved for my sojourn and informed me that I should change into my smartest attire. The Olympian guardian did not laugh, but there was somewhat of a glint in his eye that I simply could not allow to go uninterrogated.

“Smartest attire, Grimley? Then we shall not be fighting?”

“Fighting, sir? Oh, doubtlessly. There is likely to be a horrendous row.”

“Then what am I getting all dolled up for?”

“Mostly, out of the respect for the bride, sir.”

“Bride? Whose bride?”

“Mine,” Athos stated, walking into the room and ushering the gleeful guardian out.
“Are you and Aramis finally tying the knot?” I asked, after embracing him and sitting down into the easy chair. “I thought the two of you had already done so long before we ever met.”

“What? Not a bit of it.”

“Then, I don’t follow.” I studied my cousin. He looked healthy, happy, and sane. “Whom are you leading to the altar?”

“The Rohan nymph,” he said with a bit of an affected cough. “And it’s not the altar. It’s merely the registry office.”

“Aaaaahhh all riight,” I drawled out, in such a way as to imply it was anything other than all right.

“We thought you should be here!” Athos clapped me on the shoulder rather jovially. “And not only because we need two witnesses.”

“You... and Marie… why?”

“Because,” Athos said, lowering himself onto his knees before me, “I am desperately in love with her, Porthos,” his hands clutched at my knees. “I’m completely and utterly mad for her, cannot live without her one more day, and can’t wait to marry and impregnate her with a small litter.”

“Eww, really?” I pressed myself deeper into the easy chair.

“No, not really! Of course, not really! Don’t you know me at all?”

“But you just said…”

“I was taking the piss.”

“Ah,” I scratched my head. “But you are planning on marrying her?”

“Yes.”

“And... What does Aramis have to say about this?”

“All sorts of things ill-suited for your tender, pirate ears,” Aramis’ melodious voice announced him as he glided through the door of my room.

“I am very confused,” I confessed.

“Hm, yes quite,” Athos patted me on the shoulder. “We can see that.”

In the meantime, he drew himself up to his full height and stretched a hand towards the new arrival, who gracefully allowed himself to be enfolded into my cousin’s embrace, and for a few moments I pretended to be very keenly interested in the wallpaper while they did their thing with the lips and tongues and the tender, intimate touches. I tried not to take personally the fact that Aramis had summoned me from Paris, but did not bother to even properly greet me. Mind you, it wasn't as if I needed to get that close to him and his teeth.

“Please stop whistling the god damned Marseillaise,” Athos grumbled and I had placed my hand over my mouth, not realizing what unfortunate tune had escaped my lips while I tried to give them privacy (despite the fact that they had invaded my own space).

“Sorry,” I muttered and peeked up to see if it was safe. “So... why are you marrying Marie?”
“To vex me greatly,” Aramis offered, to which cousin Discord merely smiled and shrugged. “To enrage me to the point of violence,” he added, eyeing Athos with narrowed eyes full of lustful wrath. Oh boy, I knew that look well enough.

“You did not need to invite me to travel so far to observe such a sight,” I pointed out. “I’ve certainly seen my share of Athos annoying and enraging you over the centuries, et vice versa on occasion.”

“Yes, but have you ever seen him consummate his marriage - with a woman?” Aramis laughed.

“I’m invited to that?” my eyes widened.

“Aramis! Fie!”

“What?” the revenant looked mildly scandalized. “You don’t think Marie will object, do you?”

“Chyortik, you…”

“…Are a very naughty chyortik?” Aramis grinned and pulled Athos closer by the lapels.

“I basically kind of hate you both right now,” I announced with a sigh. “Now get out, I must get dressed for this mockery of matrimony.”

They both laughed. “I’ve lost track of how many times friend Porthos has been married,” Athos whispered loud enough for me to hear every word, “but, apparently, this tests his delicate sensibilities.”

“Because Porthos has always married for love,” Aramis hissed back.

“Oh shut up, chyortik!”

“Make me.”

I shut the door in their faces.

That very afternoon, the comte the Perregaux and Marie Duplessis stood before the British Registrar and swore to be each other’s lawfully wedded spouses. I skipped the consummation party, but I am told (by Aramis, who was in attendance) it was quite spectacular and lasted well until dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Our eternal gratitude to Mr Bram Stoker, who provided a lot of excellent material for this chapter. He should be listed as co-author, really; he deserves it. Many of the wise words quoted here are lifted straight from Dracula. The listeners there were much more susceptible to mansplaining than our hero(in)es though.
The Death of the Gods

Chapter Notes

Okay, Audience, brace yourselves. Take some motion sickness drugs. It's not going to be pretty.

London, spring 1846

The bride wore a flowing gown of verdigris, *vert-de-Grèce*, and it wasn’t difficult to recognise the subtle allusion to her fiancé’s true origins in the nymph’s colour scheme. Whereas Athos was resplendent in Aegean blue – to vex me, no doubt. My loins and fangs tingled with the familiar blend of annoyance and arousal, and I let the words of the ceremony wash over me, while my mind drifted back to the night last May when we’d embarked on our European adventure that had led us down the meandering path towards a London registry.

Almost exactly one year ago, we had left Paris on the night train, travelling in style as behoved the eccentric comte and his beautiful mistress, trailing the odour of scandal in our wake. Marie Duplessis was ailing; always delicate, she suffered from consumption more than ever, and the magic of watering places across Europe was the only remedy that could help – according to the considered medical opinion that I had been bullied into giving.

In the luxury of their private carriage, the count and his courtesan were served an elegant dinner, and their humble physician was invited to partake in it. But I refused the invitation with exquisite politeness, informing them that I would take my own dinner, thank you very much.

The night had fallen and the lights of Paris flickered in the distance as I stepped on the train roof and the cold, soot-saturated air hit my skin.

The military man in the next carriage didn’t put up any fight. His blood was slick and rich, smoky with battlefield rage, and I savoured it slowly, delighting in the way my veins pulsated with the man’s lifeforce.

I did not wipe my mouth until I slid open the carriage door and appeared before the beautiful couple. Marie’s eyes lit up and she lifted her fan to hide her smile, while Athos stared at me with eyes that were black with hunger. I smiled and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“You have been a very naughty chyortik indeed,” Athos whispered in my ear a few minutes later, while Marie giggled and threaded her fingers through my hair. They had pulled me down, or perhaps the sway of the train had pushed me towards them, and we had ended up coiled around each other on the couch. Marie pulled my head down by my hair and licked my lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Whom have you eaten, Aramis?” she purred.

“He lives.”

“Athos was hoping you’d eat him tonight,” she continued, kissing and biting my lips playfully with each word. “And so was I,” she breathed.
“That I’d eat him or that I’d eat you, Madame?”

“You could always manage both,” Athos suggested.

He watched her ride me later, her legs clamped tightly around my hips and her breasts, so much admired by old baron von Stackelberg, swaying with each push of her pelvis. Athos was kissing me: on my neck, along my shoulder, and back up to my jaw and mouth, and I clenched my hands around Marie’s hips and closed my eyes, fucking hard into her as something melted inside me at the sight of so much beauty around me. Then, the soft breath at my ear, and Athos’ voice: “What do you say to a dessert, Aramis?”

His wrist on my mouth, and my lips parted, my teeth sharpened, Marie’s eyes blazed, and skin and flesh tore under the pressure of my fangs. Nectar of the gods, ichor pure, so sweet and potent that my head spun and the skin all over my body tautened with bliss. An embarrassing sound escaped my throat and I swallowed it like I swallowed Athos’ blood.

Marie leaned over me until her breasts rested on my chest, and kissed the back of Athos’ hand. “Aramis,” she sang in that nymph-voice of hers that had been irresistible to me ever since she rescued me from the waters. She brushed her thumb over my brow and then turned her head and kissed Athos with open-mouthed urgency and such unspeakable tenderness that my bones dissolved and turned to water.

A year later, and the memory of that night had imprinted itself on my souls. I had known Marie in incarnations that had been sparkling like champagne and deceptive like a calm pool in the depth of the forest. But this woman, the one who had clawed her way back on land like I had clawed mine back to the surface of the earth, she was as powerful and relentless like a stream of water that cut through rock and erupted in a life-bringing fountain. After all those years, after all that pain, I felt myself fall in love with Marie once again, and I watched her give her hand in marriage to the man I loved more than life itself.

***

I had always looked forward to my wedding nights. Even when the men I married were human, I always found the consummation entertaining, and often enough stimulating. Among all my husbands, the comte de Perregaux stood out in more ways than one – not least because he did not come alone.

“Whose delicate health requires the physician to be in attendance tonight, count?” I asked from where I reclined in the cushions of our marriage bed.

Aramis smirked, slithered into the space between my legs and pushed up the hem of my chemise. “Permit me,” he said. His nude body glistened in the candlelight, white like alabaster and as cool to the touch. Behind him, Athos knelt like a penitent, his head bent and his hands roaming Aramis’ legs, all the way up to his arse, and back down to drag his nail over the sole of the vampyre’s foot. He had let his hair grow again and it framed his face in wild locks, giving him an untamed, primal appearance. His body radiated heat; it steamed off him and enveloped Aramis and me, a pagan halo of Olympian energy that flickered around the three of us as we slid and twisted around and against each other.

His cock was hard like a rock and pointed at me across Aramis’ prone body. The demon’s lips were cool against my skin, and then his tongue, hot and slick, and I groaned and opened my legs even wider, pulling him in with my hands on his hair. So good. That deadly mouth with its teeth like shards of diamonds, it was full of lies. It lied when it was soft and gentle, as if bringing pleasure was the only thing it had ever known. He was drinking me like a fountain of blood; like he drank the
liquor from Athos’s veins.

Athos trailed his gaze up Aramis’ body and looked me straight in the eyes. His own were like coals burning on the altar of an ancient deity, and their heat scorched me to my core. For a moment, I feared that the frail human vessel that I wore would burst under the pressure of blood and water boiling within me, and I groaned in despair, which prompted Aramis to push his face and mouth deeper between my thighs, as if to punish me for all my transgressions.

Between Aramis’ legs, Athos moved: silkily, smoothly, curving his spine and flexing the muscles of his shoulders and back, he nipped at the back of Aramis’ knee, and the demon jumped and gasped a hot breath against my slick skin. Athos’ mouth travelled higher and higher, nipping and nibbling at the cool skin, until it was pink and covered in goosebumps, and Aramis’ hips writhed and undulated in serpentine waves. He looked up at me again, the God of Discord, and then his hands were on Aramis’ arse, and he was spreading him apart, pulling him open and pressing his hot mouth to the demon’s tender flesh. For the span of several heartbeats, all I could see was his forehead with sweat-soaked tendrils clinging to it, the elegant arch of his brows, and the bridge of his nose, and then he lifted his head from between Aramis’ spread arse cheeks and licked his glistening lips.

A wave surged over me and crashed my body into the bed, where I lay panting and lightheaded, my hands and feet numb, pulsating around the fingers Aramis was thrusting into me. The demon’s self-control was as terrifying as ever, for even as Athos dived in again and began to lick him in earnest, his rhythm never faltered, and his gasping mouth continued to pleasure me through the tide and ebb of my climax.

“Oh Poseidon,” I choked out at last, shaking in every limb, while Aramis’ hands roamed my thighs as if to soothe the tremors.

“Hm,” he muttered, raising himself off me and showing me his glittering eyes and mouth. “Are you invoking a Greek god, Madame la comtesse?”

Another tremor ran through me, a jolt of pleasure that sent sparks down my spine and into my groin. “I believe I am,” I whispered.

“Athos!” Aramis called out softly, even as his lover’s hand snaked around his chest, and Athos’ face appeared at his shoulder, kissing the white skin. “Your wife needs you.”

“Is this your medical opinion, doctor?”

“Decidedly.”

Discord obeyed. He sank into me, his thick cock pushing me open and filling me, even as lingering spasms of pleasure still throbbed around it, while Aramis had moved aside and reached for a bottle on the nightstand.

“Spread your legs,” the vampyre told his lover who moved slowly inside me, shoving me into the mattress with his hips.

Athos stilled, and then his cock twitched and a curse rolled over his lips. His head drooped and his hair spilled into my mouth.

“Go on,” Aramis murmured silkily. “Satisfy your wife, count.”

“You’re evil.”

Aramis slid behind Athos and pushed his legs apart. I couldn’t see what he was doing, but the way
Athos panted into my neck, the way his cock continued to twitch inside me, told me that whatever the vampyre did, he was hitting the right spot. I pulled in my knees and clenched my thighs around Athos’ flanks, and then, his body went rigid as Aramis began to screw himself into him. I dug my nails into his shoulder and bicep. I could feel Aramis’ cock sliding in deeper and deeper, for each centimetre pushed Athos’ swollen cock into me. So much heat. So much pressure. My pelvis was on fire, and another wave came crashing in, breaking over me and leaving me breathless. When I regained my vision, Athos was staring down at me, fucking me with the shallow thrusts of his pelvis that Aramis inflicted on him.

“Please,” I moaned hoarsely. “Please… Athos…”

A shudder ran through him, his mouth sucked in a soundless gasp, and with another harsh shove, he was spending himself inside me with thunderous force. Behind him, Aramis groaned. The slap of flesh on flesh became faster, louder, and then Aramis collapsed on my husband’s back, and my breath was knocked out of me once again.

“Congratulations on your nuptials, countess,” Aramis said eventually, and I pressed his hand that I held in mine. I lay on my side with my face nestled against Athos’ chest, and Aramis was still glued to his back. Athos’ heart thudded in his breast, we could both feel it: the surge of divine blood as it coursed through him. So powerful a beat, yet so tender his heart. He loved us both, the God of Discord, and I vowed to myself that I would never again do anything that would tear him apart.

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Paris, summer 1846 - winter 1847

Back in Paris, on the breath of Hephaestus. The faithful Clothilde had written letters to make sure my house was re-opened and the Parisian society was ready to welcome me back – more resplendent than ever in my countess’ wardrobe with diamonds glittering in my hair and around my neck. My marriage to an aristocrat had elevated me above mere mortals, just like I had elevated the peasant girl whose body I wore to eternal life, and my name would live on forever.

“Did you give any thought to the living arrangement before you embarked on wedded bliss?” Aramis had said, quite casually, as the locomotive puffed and wheezed and dragged our carriage towards Paris darting fire and spitting steam like Pyrois, Aeos, Aethon, and Phlegon.

Athos had turned away from the window, through which he had been eyeing the sooty air with disgust. “Steam engines, pah!” he muttered in his beautiful French, as pure as that of any man born in Tours. “What nonsense. Horses had been good enough for humans for millennia.”

“Yes, very nice, grand-père,” I laughed. “I thought Aramis was supposed to be the curmudgeonly one?”

“May I remind you, M. le comte, that it was the steam locomotive that made us our fortune?” Aramis said. “You only stole the life and name of a man whose estates don’t amount to much. How did you intend to keep a wife if not for the money Bartleby invested on our behalf?”

Athos shrugged, and I saw the word ‘trifles’ form on his finely-cut lips. “The Grigori always managed.”

“The Grigori was probably selling his body to Ottoman raiders to keep you fed and clothed before I came along.”

“I know, chyortik, you saved me from the deepest misery of abject poverty.” He picked up the
vampyre’s hand and kissed it.

“Were you selling your body to keep him clothed?” I nudged Aramis’ ankle with my foot.

“I was selling my verses, nymph.” He threw back his head proudly and showed us his dazzling teeth. “Something M. le comte never managed.”

“Remind me: whose memoirs have become two best sellers?”

“Rewritten by a proper author.” Aramis smirked. “And you didn’t answer my question: where do you intend to live forthwith, my dear comte?”

“Oh,” Athos darted a glance at me and then back at Aramis. “I have not thought of that.”

“No, you haven’t, have you?”

“And you took your sweet time before addressing the issue.”

“I wanted to see your face when you have to tell the cab driver the address,” Aramis said smoothly and pressed his foot between Athos’ legs.

I was not privy to the discussion that ensued between Discord and the doctor once we’d arrived back in Paris and they retired to their apartments in the Hôtel de Rohan-Guémené to recuperate from the long journey, but I understand it to have been very lively.

The discussion I led with my beloved husband was for the benefit of le bon ton, who appreciated gossip like the next cultured society and was therefore apoplectic with joy when details about the courtesan’s marriage to her aristocratic lover seeped out and flooded all of Paris.

“I am not moving into a whorehouse,” the comte de Perregaux had pronounced in supercilious tones that came far too easily to him.

“The whorehouse never bothered you when you spent your nights and your money in it, chérie,” I had reminded, smiling above the fanned-out cards in my hand.

“That was before you were my wife,” he snarled, with almost too sincere an anger.

“You knew who I was before you married me, my love.”

He narrowed his eyes, and I almost expected him to unbutton his coat to flaunt his vulnerable heart at me. “I offered you my protection.”

I fluttered my lashes at him. “I offered you my love!”

In his easy chair, the baron snorted.

Our scandalous lives afforded everyone great pleasure, for even Aramis looked much more content than one would have expected. A barely perceptible smile curled in the corners of his mouth, and he left baron von Stackelberg at home more frequently now, haunting my salon in the guise of Dr Szimara, whose melancholy Styrian charm affected the heart of many a lady. “He has the most wonderful way of taking one’s pulse!” a particularly smitten specimen sighed, while another glued her gaze to the vampyre’s elegant slim figure with an expression of such vapidity that for a moment I feared the good doctor had found a way of sucking out brains rather than blood. My husband, too, was the object of many glances and heavings of bosoms. But since he held himself aloof and never touched a woman if he could help it (the effects of Hera’s curse were not likely to wear off any time
soon), all they could do was admire him from afar.

“Discord and the vampyre have settled down quite comfortably,” Marion remarked one day, when we had retired to my boudoir where she demonstrated her new hat designs to me.

“Surely that’s a good thing?” I looked at her in the mirror. “What is it?”

“How long do they intend to stay?” she inquired. “In Paris.”

“They only came three years ago.” She was looking past me, her eyes glittering. “What?”

“I have to die.”

“What’s brought this on?”

“I attempted to calculate my age the other day. I’m old. I shouldn’t make the mistake again to live to the age of one hundred and thirty.” She laughed.

I frowned at her. “What do they have to do with it?”

“Nothing.” She sighed and sat down on the chaiselongue. “The question is – if I die, and leave, if you will all still be here when I return. It’s not safe.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.” She looked sadder than I’ve ever seen her before, and I sat down by her side and put my arm around her. “At least your body grows older,” she murmured into my neck. “You can stay in the same place, with the same people for decades, and nobody will know a thing. Whereas I—”

“Don’t die,” I said and shook my head. “Dying isn’t fun, Marion. It hurts and it scares you out of your wits. When I lie there, an old woman, my body slipping out of my control, I don’t know what’s worse: feeling my mind go likewise, or feeling it cling on, clinging to life and to consciousness. Everything hurts when you’re old.”

“Don’t get old,” Marion said.

I grimaced. “That’s no better. Dying while you’re young takes much effort. The body rebels. I tried self-slaughter, but that scares me even more.”

“Ask Aramis to do it,” she smiled. “He’d enjoy it.”

“I don’t want him to witness it. It’s private.”

“I’ll do it then.” She lifted her head and kissed me lightly on the mouth. “I saw you die last time. This time, I can help.”

“That’s very sweet of you. I wish I could help you too.”

“I have been in Paris too long. You grow old, and Aramis bedevils people – what have I got?”

“Athos gets away with not aging. Not to mention Porthos, who just doesn’t give a single damn.”

“They are men,” she snarled. “They get away with it, of course they do. Nobody cares much for what men look like, as long as they’re dashing. We get scrutinised. You want to know what’s brought this on? I’ll tell you: M. Moulin accosted me in my shop. He is thinking of pursuing a new career, and you know what his brilliant business plan is? Producing daguerreotypes of young girls,
no older than sixteen. He would ask me to sit for him, even though I am rather a bit older, but ‘you still have the body of a young girl, Mademoiselle!’ He said that with the air of making me a compliment.”

“Oh, I know!” I exclaimed. “I know the tone too well. Did he look you up and down as he spoke?”

“And leered while doing so.”

“Charming.”

“You see why I have to die? Soon, people will notice.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You?” She smiled. “A respectable married woman?”

“A scandalous married woman, rather.” I pressed her hand. “Athos hasn’t bought any rights when he married me. My fate is my own.”

“You’d leave all this to go away with me?”

“In a heartbeat. This—” I made a sweeping gesture with my hand, “is nothing. That’s just things. I can buy new things.”

“With whose money?”

“With the money of men who don’t know how to gamble.”

“Athos will object,” she insisted.

“Athos won’t object if I tell him that we have to hunt down Biscarrat. He never forgot that Biscarrat tried to kill Aramis.”

“Biscarrat left Paris…” Marion said slowly.

“And I know where he was last seen.” I laughed. “Sometimes, listening to Dr Vangelis’ monologues pays off, you know.”

“Vangelis left Paris a while ago too, the information is hardly up to date,” Marion said. “And how do you intend to shake off his solicitous minions anyway?” I averted my head and said nothing. I had been eyed with suspicion as much as with pity lately. Nothing I’d said or done had shattered the hunters’ conviction that I had fallen victim to a vampyre, and since I had shown no signs of dying—well, that could only mean that I had followed the vampyre’s call and that I, too, would have to be destroyed in due course. Hunters had begun to sniff around my house with renewed energy, undeterred even by my husband’s presence. The Olympian scion had for the first time encountered a problem that could not be solved by spilling blood on the altar of Ares, for, as Aramis had pointed out with remarkable self-control: we could no longer kill them all. One day, hiding in plain sight would no longer work, and we would all have to descend into the shadows, dissolve in the aquatic abyss or in wisps of air, like so many of our brethren had done before us. The gods and demons of yore, who had been hunted into forests and caves below mountains, who turned to earth, water or stone, leaving nothing but faint imprints in this world that humans claimed as theirs.

“Last time you went abroad to lose them, you ended up marrying the God of Discord,” Marion interrupted my gloomy thoughts.
“We will have to be stealthier this time round.”

“Hm,” Marion said. “Either that or-”

“Or what?”

“You’ll have to die.”

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Paris, February 5, 1847

“This is awkward,” I pressed Marie’s hand. “We need a doctor to confirm your death, but Aramis showed up as Stackelberg.”

A pitiful moan, soft enough to be weak, yet loud enough to be heard outside her bedroom doors, escaped Marie’s lips.

“Perhaps you should be an actress in your next career,” I suggested.

“One does quite a bit of acting as a courtesan,” she whispered and feigned a violent coughing fit.

“Die already, you consumptive nag!” Baron von Stackelberg hit his walking stick against the parquet. I buried my face in the folds of Marie’s nightgown to hide my laughter.

“Mother?” the nymph stirred from my embrace. “Mother? Is that you?”

“Marie, you are the most ridiculous woman I have ever met,” I pronounced, forcing her back against the pillows and trying to pull the white sheet over her head. “Take your last breath and lie still.”

“I see it… the light… the bright light…”

“Athos, perhaps you can knock her out? It will be more convincing,” Aramis suggested, slipping momentarily out of his bedevilment, and quickly disappearing again into the wrinkled physiognomy of the aged Balt.

“You weren’t there, Aramis, last time I truly died,” the nymph chided. “I did not get to have quite as much fun, you know. The entire event wasn’t quite so full of jolity.”

“I’m sorry you had to die back then, Marie,” I leaned over her, “but this time we are, in fact, trying to save you. So, would you please be still so I can go out there and behave as befitting a young widower?”

“Will you weep for me, my dear husband?” she gazed up at me with her angelic smile and blinked languidly, her dark lashes casting shadows against her pale cheeks. Her human vessel was indeed delicate and frail. “Will you, Athos? I wept for you, you know, when I found out that you had died.”

Perhaps we should tie her up and gag her,” Aramis suggested, rising up from the arm chair. “It may be the only way to keep her still and mute.”

Marie shot up in her bed, as if with the last of her strength to reach out for me, her hands clutching at my shoulders.

“I love you, Édouard! I shall always love you! Adieu!”

And she fell back, insensate, her dark curls spilling against the pillow. She looked lovely in her
pretended demise.

Aramis and I gently raised the sheet over her head and stared at each other across the span of her bed.

“Now what?”

“Go tell them I died,” the nymph whispered from beneath the sheet.

“Perhaps I shall gag her after all,” I muttered and gave Aramis a bewildered look. “We need a doctor.”

“We need an audience,” Aramis pulled me by the hand towards the door. “Time for histrionics, count.”

“I don’t think I can muster it up right now, in all honesty,” I confessed, casting my look back towards the bed, where the white sheet trembled from Marie’s poorly suppressed giggles.

“Leave it to me then,” Aramis grinned and, assuming the guise of the old baron, threw open the doors. “Oh! She is gone! The flower of life, the last snowflake of my winter! Never again shall I see those beautiful bosoms! Oh woe is me, Mademoiselle Marie will sing no more, no more!” He turned back towards me, where I stood open-mouthed at the door to Marie’s room. “Remain with her, count, and shed your tears in privacy. I shall fetch a medical professional. My hat! Where is my hat! I cannot be seen in public without a hat!”

Marie’s poor, faithful Clothilde fetched the baron his hat and cloak, while wiping tears from her honest eyes. My heart ached for her, even suspecting that once this charade passed she would make a good living for herself bartering stories of her mistress’ infamous exploits.

The baron doddered out the door and I remained facing the maid.

“Take a break, Clothilde,” I suggested. “There is nothing she needs from you now.”

Stout and stoic, the domestic curtsied to me before retreating to her quarters. I shut the door to Marie’s room, and sat down upon her bed. Touching her body through the white sheet, I closed my eyes and thought of what it had been like before, in the early days of our acquaintance.

“Did you really cry for me when I was dead, nymph?”

Beneath the sheet, her little hand moved and her fingers wrapped around mine. For a few minutes, I sat there in silence, doing nothing but holding her hand through the thin sheet. She barely moved at all. At times, I wondered if she wouldn’t just turn to water if I waited long enough, so still had she become, so fully committed to her “death”.

A knock on the door roused me: it was Dr. Szimara, who pronounced in a steady and voluminous voice, “My condolences, my dear count, but I am here to examine the corpse.”

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“So young!”

“So beautiful!”

“So tragic!”

The cemetery of Montmartre overflowed with grieving humanity. At the request of the departed’s
next of kin, i.e. myself, there had been no viewing of the body prior to funeral.

“I wish to remember her as she was while she yet lived,” I had said, as Dr Szimara, ever faithful to the cause of maintaining my health, took my pulse and handed me his handkerchief which I pressed against my brow to cover up the dryness of my eyes. “She would have wanted the same.”

“Dead! At the very peak of her beauty!” someone exclaimed.

“Yes, quite dead,” Aramis confirmed. “I pronounced her myself. Of course, rigor had already set in before I arrived. Requiescat in pace,” and he crossed himself much the same elegant and pious way I had observed when he was still the abbé d’Herblay. As Dr Szimara, a learnèd medical practitioner in his mid-thirties, he had taken to wearing smoke-colored lenses over his eyes, under the pretense that he had a very acutely tuned nervous system which made him over-sensitive to everything (including light).

“Rigor usually sets in just around the time you arrive,” I whispered into his ear and his arm snaked around my ribs.

“Let me support you, count,” he mewed into my ear. “I can tell you’re quite bereft.”

“My heart is utterly in pieces,” I confirmed.

“You don’t say.” He bit his lip and even through the smoke-colored lenses, I could still see him lower his eyes.

“Dr Szimara.”

“Yes, comte?”

“You’ll never believe who’s here,” I pressed his hand and turned him about face. “It’s baron von Stackelberg.” It was my turn then to support Aramis who staggered and nearly fell over. “I do hope, flittermouse, that whatever it is you did to him has staying power.”

“It must have,” Aramis replied, recovering himself in due course. “Otherwise, why would he be here, paying respects to his mistress of yore?”

Cautiously, we approached our aging Baltic neighbor to extend our greetings. He was already receiving condolences from several of the gathered mourners, who parted respectfully to let the widower and his doctor pass.

“My dear baron,” I grasped the aging hand, “it is so good of you to come.”

“Of course, of course, it is quite sad, and utterly sudden,” Stackelberg mouthed and looked at me with feeble eyes that appeared to strive for recognition.

“I must thank you again for being at her side with me when she passed,” I said, more loudly.

“At her side, yes yes,” the octogenarian intoned. “Quite at her side. I loved her very much, they say.”

“To know her was to love her,” Aramis supplied with a courtly bow.

“I saw her titties, you know. I think.”

I let go of the baron’s hand and immediately glanced over at Aramis who merely shrugged and, in turn, shook the baron’s hand with a burst of enthusiasm.
“Good show, baron, good show!”

“You’re out of control,” I hissed into my beloved’s ear.

Before the baron could further eulogize my dearly departed wife’s breasts, my attention was diverted by yet another rather touching scene.

“She was an angel! Too good for this world!” Alexandre Dumas fils was exclaiming. “And heaven has reclaimed her! Oh father, the world is an unhappy place!” He had thrown himself into Alex’s arms, while the author pressed his son to his chest with the look of dignified embarrassment.

“Do you suppose he’s quoting words of consolation to him from his own book right now?” Aramis wondered.

“The world is a sepulcher and all the men and women in it are shadows?” I suggested.

“Ha! You are young,” Aramis countered, “and your bitter recollections have time to change themselves to sweet remembrances.”

“Ha ha! Oh, touché, my dear doctor!”

“At your service, my dear count!”

“Are the two of you fiends laughing at my funeral?” a soft murmur startled us both and we turned to behold a heavily veiled woman in an elegant but demure black dress. A small hand peaked out from beneath a fur cuff, and I recognized my wedding ring.

“Ma--” Aramis pinched my arm. “Hng!!”

“What are you doing here, you foolish watery tart!” Aramis voiced for us both.

“How often do you think one has a chance like this one? Look at them, darlings! Look at all my people!”

“Yes, yes, there are hundreds of them, and they are all very, very sad. Or at least curious. Now don’t you think you should go?” I hissed.

“Is Liszt here?”

“Oh, who gives a bloody fuck!” It was now my turn to pinch Aramis, whose little vulgarian outburst was liable to cause a scene so close to the cathedral.

“Is that Jules Verne? I hear he’s the young Dumas’ bosom companion now.”

“Woman, do you want me to drag you out of here by your hair?” I threatened.

“How rude! We are not in Troy anymore; be done with all the Olympian hair seizing!” The demonic nymph laughed, her face obscured by the veil.

I felt Discord’s mantle press tightly against my chest. The nymph was playing with fire, but then again, that is what had always made her so irresistible to all her victims. I could have sworn that Aramis was about to pick Marie up and transport her off the premises when she raised up a wail of truly Grecian proportions and beat her chest as she collapsed before her own empty tomb.

“Oh, Marie! Marie! You were the best of all of us!” she cried. “The last honest courtesan!”
“This is an unbearable farce,” I declared aside to Aramis.

“Let me help you, Madame,” a voice like the pealing of bells, and another woman in black lace swooped in to pick the convulsing Marie off the cold ground. Her own veil was not as thick as the nymph’s and I beheld her lynx eyes as recognition dawned upon me. I had never seen Marion before dressed in anything other than white. “I’ll take care of her, count.”

“I trust you to,” I replied curtly and then my hand brushed the fairy’s elbow. “Be well, both of you.”

“We shall meet again soon,” she replied and whisked the budding tragedienne away with her.

I had still been following both of them out with my eyes when Aramis pressed his hand into my lower back, redirecting my attention ahead, to where the priest was reciting a final prayer for the soul of Marie Duplessis née Alphonsine Rose Plessis, as her coffin was lowered into the ground.

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Olympus, 323 BC

Searing pain split open his head and the sun blinded him. He opened his mouth and a torrential outpouring of expletives poured out towards the shimmering vault over the Throne of Zeus. And then a hand was upon his shoulder, a strong grip, fingers digging into his flesh, making his bones reverberate with the clash of a thousand swords.

“Get the fuck away from me, you Hera’s accursed cunt nugget!”

“You Thiran piece of shit!” The same hand lifted him up and threw him against the side of a cliff. “I can make you suffer a million things worse than death!”

“Suck my dick, Ares!”

“I should rip out your tongue.”

“I’ll grow a new one,” Athos spat out and then actually did spit upon the ground at his divine brother’s feet.

The God of War laughed and came closer to where his brother lay splayed in a heap of naked limbs. His shadow temporarily blocked out the harsh and unwelcoming rays of Helios, and by some force of habit, Athos almost reached out for him. But instead, he squeezed his hands into fists and pressed his body against the hot slab of rock behind him.

“You are an ingrate, Athos, that is your problem,” War spoke. “It was I who saved your life when Mother wanted to obliterate you or throw you into Tartarus. It was I who showed your Grigori the loophole for bringing you back to life, so that you could redeem your inglorious death. It is I who guides your steps, century after century, towards men of greatness and power. If not for me, you never would have met your Alexander in the first place. And how do you repay me? You fall in love with him? Is that why I sent you to Chaeronea? Is that why you had the Macedonian cross the Hellespont? For Love?” Ares’ last words were snarled towards the celestial vault, as if he had been challenging Aphrodite herself to come and contradict him. “Answer me, Athos! Are you Love’s bitch?” His hand had pulled on the demigod’s hair, craning his neck backwards. The God of War’s eyes fixed on the curve of that neck. “Whose bitch are you, puppy?”

“Yours.”

“Good dog.”
“Forgive me, Ares.”

The God of War laughed and pulled Athos up onto his feet.

“I might yet forgive you, Athos, for I admit, I seem to have a sort of a weakness for you. Even though you’re a very…,” he shoved against his brother with his hips, fixing him to the rock again, “bad… dog.”

“I can be good,” Athos panted, growing hard despite himself. His mouth tasted of blood and his head still hurt, but there was something reassuring about being trapped by Ares’ body in the scorching heat of the Olympian sun.

“Aye, I know you can,” Ares growled next to his ear. “But I think you need a reminder. I’ll remind you what it means to be a good dog.”

“Not here,” Athos whispered. “Please.”

A black feather sailed down from the heavens, carried on the breath of the Anemoi, and landed at their feet.

“Not here,” Ares agreed and wrapped his arms around his brother, before carrying them both away in a radiant cloud of red smoke.

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Mount Athos, 323 BC

“You reminded me of the story of Prometheus,” Ares said as the shackles clicked into place around Athos’ wrists. “When you mentioned that your tongue would regenerate.”

“Are you planning on plucking out my liver, brother?”

Chained to his own mountain, Athos felt grateful that Ares had him facing the cliff wall. This way, at least, he wouldn’t have to watch his brother’s face while he did whatever he was about to do.

“Do you think I love you so little?” Ares laughed and his breath tickled the nape of Athos’ neck. His hand was back, fingers tangled in Athos’ hair, pulling until his neck felt tight as a lyre string, and equally exposed. “You do not serve Love.” His teeth grazed against Athos’ shoulder and then latched onto to the curve of his neck. “You serve me.”

“Yes, Ares.”

“Mmm,” the God of War’s hands traveled over the length of his brother’s body. “Tell me, Athos,” he continued talking as his fingers trailed over the curve of the demigod’s back, the swell of his ass, the ravine of his cleft, “what will you do the next time you feel pulled by the inconvenient knots of love?”

“I don’t… I don’t know…,” a soft moan escaped him as Ares’ fingers breached him, pressing inside and stretching him open. “What should I do? Kill him?”

“Kill him?” Ares laughed. “Perhaps I won’t have to school you quite as hard as I planned.” He curled his fingers and Athos shuddered in his chains. “Hmm no, I do still have to make sure you learn your lesson, and that you won’t soon forget it.”

He let go of the demigod’s hair and took a hold of his hips, thrusting his cock into the stretched out,
waiting flesh. *There*. It had been far too long. These former mortals, apparently every few centuries you had to remind them who their true master was.

“I was going to whip you,” Ares whispered, rocking deeply into the tightly coiled body against him. His hand had already clasped his charioteer’s whip, with its flaming tip that curled like a snake around Athos’ ankle. “I still might.” The demigod’s moans got louder and Ares pushed deeper inside him, filling him to the brim until his entire length was sheathed inside. “I’m going to keep you here for a while, you know.” The knot grew, thick and firm inside the man he held impaled on his cock. “Maybe not quite as long as Prometheus,” Athos whimpered as Ares dug his fingers under his armpits and held him imprisoned on his swollen cock, “but what do you care? You have all the time in the world, don’t you?”

A surge of pleasure hit Athos like Poseidon’s own bull from the sea and he let go in his restraints, supported by the hard, hot planes of Ares’ body. He supposed this is what got him into trouble in the first place - not being able to resist the touch of War. There must have been a time at some point in Troy, he thought, that he could have said ‘No.’ But that was so long ago. And *this*, whatever this was, it still felt too good to resist. It still felt too much like love.

End Notes

Talk to us, honey babies!

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