In Corpore Sano

by Donna_Immaculata

Summary

Aramis thinks he has to deal with the aftermath of Marsac’s death alone. Athos and Porthos disagree.

Notes

This is an extended scene of the last chapter of Ars Moriendi, but can be read as a stand-alone. It didn’t fit the themes or the atmosphere of Ars Moriendi, which is why I wrote it as a separate fic.

See the end of the work for more notes

The ghost from the past, the memories of death, the doubts, the anger, the overcharging of senses and overheating of brain. The sleepless nights. The last few days have taken their toll. It is over now, Marsac is gone, and this time, this time, he won’t come back.

Aramis is sitting in his boudoir now, waiting. Waiting to hear footsteps that will not come, will never again come, and he is holding his pistol in his hand. He shoves a cleaning patch down the barrel with a ramrod, pushes it all the way in to clean out barrel fouling. He runs a cloth over the hammer, the flint, the frizzen, and the pan, scrubbing off every last grain of soot. He rubs the pan vigorously with the pan brush, until it is perfectly clean and dry. He wipes the barrel with an oiled cloth, and he listens, listens, listens, to the creak of the floorboards, to the tell-tale click-clack of heeled boots, to the screech of the door hinges.
There it is, at last. The distant scrape of the front door as it is pushed open. Aramis sighs, pricks the touch-hole, puts a few grains of priming powder into the pan, closes the frizzen.

…footsteps in the hall, erratic, like the heartbeat of a dying man…

Cocks the hammer. Bends his head. Waits.

The door creaks open, and Aramis flexes his arm. Lifts his head.

Porthos fills the doorframe. His hand rests on the back of Athos’ neck in what is meant to be a tender, supportive gesture. What it looks like is a mother cat dragging a wayward kitten by the scruff of its neck.

“Just because you two insist on being utter fools,” Porthos says, “I don’t have to.”

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“Athos didn’t want to come.” Porthos says. “He took a leaf out of your book, said we should trust you to handle your own affairs.”

He and Aramis are seated at the table in the boudoir, whilst Athos is next door, going through the cupboard in the eating room in search of wine goblets.

“I see.”

“He worried about you, though. He’ll never admit it, but he did.”

Aramis looks up at him and smiles. “I know.” Athos, who held him back, who kept holding him back. He held him back with words, if it is true – what then?, what then?, and he did, Aramis did ask himself, he couldn’t stop asking himself that, yet he couldn’t stop running towards the answer, either. And it was Athos again who stopped him again, when he was shaking with rage and willing to risk everything, to tear Treville apart limb by limb, only to make that cold pain go away. Athos stopped him with a hand to his waist, but then let him go. Aramis thought then that Athos did no longer want to have anything to do with him, with the chaos into which Aramis had dragged them in his wake. But now, Porthos’ words put a different spin on things: Athos didn’t abandon him. He trusted Aramis to handle his own affairs.

“I know,” he repeats, still smiling, and Porthos smiles back, honestly and happily; a smile that makes his eyes crinkle and his cheeks dimple. He opens the mouth as if to say something, but Athos chooses that precise moment to throw open the door and stride back into the room. “Your landlady should be whipped,” he declares dramatically. “I found only two goblets and there was a dead spider in one of them. You two will have to share.”

He shrugs off his jacket, pulls off his boots, drops into a chair and pours himself wine in one fluid motion. “We are staying here tonight, I understand,” he says in answer to Aramis’ raised eyebrows. “I might as well get comfortable now.”

“So we won’t have to help you out of your clothes later,” says Porthos, grinning.

“Precisely.” Athos raises his glass and holds it into the light. The flame of the candle conjures ruby highlights in the liquid. “To what are we drinking? Aramis?”

Aramis stops with the flagon hovering above his and Porthos’ goblet. He smiles, fills and raises it. “To fallen friends,” he says softly.

He sees Athos and Porthos exchange a look. “Marsac was my friend,” he says, unable to prevent
annoyance from creeping into his voice. “There’s nothing you can do about that. He was my friend, and I killed him.”

“You didn’t,” Athos says. “He killed himself, that night in Savoy when he stripped himself off everything that made him the man he was.”

“You never liked him,” Aramis says, looking from Athos to Porthos and back again.

“No,” Athos says levelly. “That doesn’t mean we think you shouldn’t mourn him.”

Porthos face states very clearly that that’s precisely what he thinks, but he remains silent, merely takes a deep swig from the goblet he shares with Aramis. It costs him a lot, Aramis knows, to not verbalise his dislike of Marsac. Aramis reaches out and takes the goblet from Porthos’ unresisting fingers; drains it and holds it out to Athos, who refills it without a word.

Aramis leans back until his head rests against the wall and props his leg up on a footstool. His heartbeat has evened out; only now does he notice how erratic it was before, how unsteady the flow of blood through his veins must have been. No wonder he’s been feeling dizzy and confused. He threads his fingers through his hair and winces as they snag in the knots and tangles. The numbness that has dulled his senses in the last days is lifting, and as feeling returns, so does discomfort. When he runs his hand along his cheek and jaw, the rasp of his sprawling beard is alien and irritating under his palm. He sighs and promises himself that he’s going to go to the barber tomorrow.

“Yeah, about this,” Porthos says, grinning, and points a long finger at him.

“It’s a disgrace,” Athos says. “You look like a barbarian.”

“We’re going to do something about it.” Porthos stands and raps his knuckles against the table. “Take your shirt off.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your landlady might murder us of course,” Athos says pensively.

“But we’ll take that risk. Off with the shirt. And the rest.”

Porthos strides out of the room, and Aramis turns to Athos. “Are you ganging up on me?”

“In a way,” Athos says. “Take your shirt off, sit up in your chair and hold still.” He walks over to the washbasin. “Well. At least there’s water in the ewer.” He pours some into the basin and turns back to Aramis. “I’m going to give you a shave. And you better let me do it now, before I’d had too much wine.”

Aramis looks at the razor that has suddenly appeared in Athos’ hand, back at Athos’ face, and crosses himself with an exaggerated flourish. Athos smirks. Aramis pulls his shirt over his head and throws it aside. Outside, it is raining, but the cold that came with the rain has not as yet penetrated into his rooms. The air around him is warm, almost oppressively so. He watches Athos break off bits from the soap, put them in a small bowl, pour water over them and stir vigorously until the soap starts to foam.

“Sit in your chair and tilt your head back.”

As Athos strops the razor, Aramis pushes his chair towards the washbasin and sinks into it with a resigned sigh. He can’t fight them anyway, not if they’ve both made up their minds. He hopes, very much, that by the time Athos takes a good look at his face, he will have hidden the ecstatic
Joy he is sure is written on it. The fact that Athos *cares* takes his breath away.

Athos turns his attention to him, and Aramis takes several deep breaths and forces an unconcerned smile on his face, watching Athos frown down at the razor. “You know what you’re doing?” Athos has never in his life shaved his own beard, let alone anybody else’s. “Perhaps you should let Porthos do this, I’d rather not have my throat cut.”

“No, no. This is going to be fun,” Athos says in the flat tone of a man who has never grasped the meaning of the word ‘fun’. “Porthos is busy elsewhere.”

“I assume you’re not going to tell me?”

“You’ll see.” Athos adjusts the candles by the washbasin. “Turn your face into the light.” He walks over to the table to fetch the candle from there, places it next to the others and looks at Aramis with an expression of the utmost concentration on his face.

“You do realise that getting murdered by one’s landlady is not an honourable way to go?” Aramis says, sinking deeper into the chair. “And she won’t stop at murdering me alone.”

“We should trust Porthos to handle her. He can have a surprising way with the ladies if he wants to.”

“If he manages to charm her,” Aramis says, “I will tip my hat to him.”

“I’m sure you will.”

As if on cue, the door opens and Porthos stalks in, carrying a steaming kettle. He grins at Aramis, who shrugs and grins back. “Here you go.” He pours the contents of the kettle into the basin. “And a clean towel.” He chucks it at Athos, who catches it with one hand and dips it into the water. Porthos laughs, leans over Aramis with both hands propped on the armrests of his chair, and says, “Good luck!” He pats him on the shoulder, and then turns on his heel and strides away.

“Where are you going?” Aramis raises himself on his elbows, but falls back with a hiss, because Athos has slapped the towel over his face. “You could’ve warned me.”

“Stop moaning.”

The towel is threatening to slip off, and Aramis grabs it and holds it in place, pushing it firmly to his face. He’s half-lying in the chair, and it’s just this side of uncomfortable, but he’s not going to complain. Athos is moving around, he can hear him rummage with the items by the washbasin.

“Don’t you have a looking-glass?” Athos asks eventually.

“Pawned it,” Aramis says.

“You pawned the looking-glass but not the razor? Where’s the logic in that?”

“The razor was a gift.” He doesn’t specify, and Athos doesn’t ask. The razor and the brush and the strop and the vial of blade oil and the tortoiseshell casket that holds them, adorned with silver mounts. He’s not been desperate enough yet to pawn them.

Water drips off the towel in hot, steaming droplets that fall onto his shoulders. They cool as they run down his chest and stomach, and he shivers and swipes his free hand across his abdomen. There is a sudden brush of air and Athos stands beside him, nudging his hand with something soft. “Here, use this.”
Aramis glances down. Athos has handed him his discarded shirt, and the linen is unbearably soft against his skin. After several days of cold numbness, Aramis feels as if all his senses have reawakened like bats in spring, bombarding him with sudden sensations. He feels the water running down in warm rivulets, feels his waistband chafing, the backrest of his chair digging into his shoulderblades and spine, and it puts his body on edge. The towel on his face, conversely, is gloriously warm and soothing, and Aramis relaxes into it as if into the kisses of a long-time lover. He hears Athos pour himself wine, hears him drink and put the goblet back on the table. The towel is cooling down now, and his skin tautens under this new sensation.

Athos appears by his side again, Aramis feels him brush his hair back and check the towel. “I think you’re ready,” Athos says.

“Perhaps a little bit longer—”

“I’m on my third glass of wine.”

“On the other hand, why drag it out?”

“Have you said your prayers?”

“Always.”

Athos hands Aramis the bowl with the lather. “Hold this.” He walks around the chair to stand behind Aramis. His hand alights on Aramis’ throat and he forces his head back until it rests against Athos’ stomach. “Hold very, very still.”

“I’m petrified.” Looking up, he can see Athos’ face above him upside down, can see the razor hover above his head, and he closes his eyes with a sigh. “Please don’t kill me.”

He can feel Athos smirk, feels the warmth of his gaze on his own face. “I won’t,” Athos says, and then the bowl in Aramis’ hand shakes as Athos dips the brush into the lather and swirls it around. Athos other hand is curled around his jaw, and the sharp smell of soap assaults his senses when Athos drags the brush across his face, lathering him up. Aramis hisses in a sharp breath and his hips lift off the chair, because his body tenses despite himself.

“What now?”

“You took me by surprise.” Foam gets into his mouth and he splutters.

“Keep still. That also applies to your mouth. Unless you want to end up with a mouthful of soap.” Athos sighs theatrically. “How your barber puts up with you, I’ve no idea.”

Lather covers the best part of his face, and Aramis breathes very slowly and deliberately through his nose. He feels suds run down his neck and wipes his chest with the shirt that he’s still clutching in one hand, and he waits, patiently, for his beard to get thoroughly soaked. Athos moves around again, and Aramis strains his ears for the sound of wine being poured, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he hears the rustle of paper; Athos must be leafing through a book.

He’s right.

“How come you’ve got German poetry?” Athos asks.

Aramis blows out sharply through his mouth to get rid of some of the foam. “Came by it by accident,” he mumbles, trying not to move his lips too much. “I think I’m ready.”

“Aren’t you.” Athos steps over to him and Aramis braces himself. He lays the shirt on his stomach,
lets go of it and clutches the sides of the chair instead.

“All right,” he says. “Go on.”

Athos hand is back on his face. He stretches Aramis’ skin over his cheekbone, and the edge of the blade is like an icicle against his face. His skin dips under its pressure, but it doesn’t break. Aramis could swear he hears Athos breathe out a sigh of relief. “I’ll do your neck last,” Athos says, “when I’d had a little practice.”

“I’d rather you didn’t leave my face with any scars, either,” Aramis says.

“Don’t worry. The ladies will find it dashing.”

The razor scrapes over his skin in long, slow strokes. Aramis can tell that Athos is being too careful. But Athos is a fine swordsman, he knows how to handle a sharp blade, and his movements get more and more confident with every stroke. Every now and then, he presses the towel to Aramis’ face to wipe off the remnants of the soap and the hairs he shaved off. “Turn your head a bit to the right,” he says, “into the light.” And Aramis obeys wordlessly.

“Shame you’ve pawned your looking-glass,” Athos says at last. “This looks rather good.”

Aramis lets go of the chair that he’s been clutching in a deathlike grip and touches his face with tentative fingertips. He can feel the accurate line of his beard, the hairs softened by hot water and lather, and the smooth skin above. “It feels right,” he admits.

“Good,” Athos says. “Now, your neck.”

“Oh fuck,” Aramis says. “Give me a glass of wine first.”

He takes a sip, and then another one, and then he drains the goblet and hands it back to Athos.

“Very well,” he says. “I’m all yours.” He sinks down in his chair and tips his head as far back as possible.


Aramis feels the warm weight disappear from his stomach, and Athos shoves his shirt under his neck. “You’ll be more comfortable like this.” He guides Aramis’ head back onto the backrest and Aramis feels Athos’ stomach pressing up against the top of his head, as if Athos attempted to hold him in place with his body. Then, the pressure of the blade against the side of his neck, and Aramis can feel his pulse throb against it. He opens his eyes in shock and encounters Athos’ cool, steady gaze. “It’s all right,” Athos says calmly. “I’ve got this.” He scrapes the blade up Aramis’ neck all the way to his jaw and wipes it on the towel.

Aramis closes his eyes again. “I know,” he says.

The blade is dancing. It dances over his jugular vein up to his ear, along his throat, over the jut of his Adam’s apple and underneath his chin. He can tell that Athos has now mastered the art of shaving. And he can tell that Athos is enjoying himself, enjoying this; enjoying this menial task that is the province of servants and barbers, simply because it permits him to show off his own dexterity with a blade.

The door is thrown open with a bang and a clutter, and Aramis clenches his teeth so hard it hurts. The blade on his neck didn’t so much as twitch.

“Careful,” Athos says. “If I were a lesser man, we would now be dealing with a throat with a
huge gash through it.”

“Yeah, but you aren’t a lesser man,” Porthos says. When Aramis opens his eyes, he sees him carry a large copper kettle and a bucket of water into the room. “How is he?” he asks with a grin and a nod at Aramis.

“Twitchy,” Athos says. The blade is still pressing into Aramis’ throat, and he swallows convulsively, lifts one hand and pushes Athos’ arm away by the wrist.

Porthos laughs. “Back in a minute,” he says and disappears through the door again.

Athos turns his attention back to Aramis. “Let me see.” He walks around the chair, turns Aramis’ face into the light, slides his fingers down his throat and up the side of his neck. “Tell me what you think.”

Aramis runs his own hand over his neck and hums appreciatively. “If you ever decide to leave soldiering behind,” he says, “there’s a good living to be made as a barber surgeon.”

“I think we are agreed that you are the surgeon,” Athos says. He holds the towel above the basin and pours the contents of the ewer over it. “Here, take this.”

The towel is cold on his face, and Aramis welcomes it. It soothes his itchy skin, and he presses his face into it for a few moments, before swiping it carefully over his skin to wipe off the lather. He hands it back to Athos, who wipes the razor with it, dries it on his own shirt and begins to strop it. Just as he pours a few drops of oil on the blade and begins to rub them in, the door opens again and Porthos’ large frame fills it. This time, he’s carrying the washhouse copper. “Your landlady,” he says shaking his head. “She put up quite a fight, I must say.”

“What did you expect?” Aramis asks. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“The more reason for her not to start endless disputes. All I wanted was the copper and some hot water, is this too much to ask for?” Porthos picks up the kettle and pours hot water into the copper. “She had a fire still going in the kitchen, why argue?” He shakes his head and picks up the bucket. “What’re you waiting for?” he says with a glance at Aramis and looks pointedly at his breeches. “Off with them!”

Aramis looks at Porthos, who is pouring him a fucking bath, and then at Athos, who is pouring himself another glass of wine, and runs his hand through his hair in confusion.

“What about me?” Porthos points to the other goblet, and Athos fills it without a word.

“We know how much you like bathing,” Athos says, leaning with his hip against the table and sipping at his wine.

“Though we’re not sure if it’s the bath or the company,” Porthos says, grinning. “What’s her name again?”

“Lilia,” Aramis says mechanically. He shrugs and begins to unbuckle his belts. “And it’s both.”

“Yeah, well, tonight you’ll have to make do with us for company.” Porthos dips his hand into the water. “It’s not very hot, but I only managed to boil one kettle full. And you’re lucky you get even that. At one point I thought you’ll be bathing in the water straight from the well.”

Aramis sheds the last piece of clothing and walks over to the copper in a haze. The level of thought they put into making him comfortable has rendered him stunned and a little bit heart-sore. He sinks into the water with a sigh. It is only lukewarm, but it’s clean and he feels the love and
care behind it. Porthos fetches their shared goblet, pulls over the footstool and sits by Aramis. He drinks, hands the goblet to Aramis and whistles at Athos with a nod at the washbasin. Athos chucks him the soap and then the towel.

Aramis lowers himself into the water until his head is fully submerged. He feels his hair fan out around him and he turns his head slowly from side to side, relishing in the warm caresses of the water and the teasing caresses of his own hair against his skin. He comes back up when he can’t hold his breath any longer.

“What?” he asks, rubbing his ear to empty it from water.

“Nothing,” Athos says. Porthos keeps grinning at him like a dog, but there is a lot of affection to it.

“Lean forward,” Porthos says. Aramis obeys, and Porthos’ hand, warmer than the water and infinitely more comforting, settles on his shoulders. He dips the towel into the water, lathers it and rubs it over Aramis back in firm, slick strokes. “Your shoulders are like granite,” Porthos says. “Relax.”

“I’m trying,” Aramis murmurs. He watches his own fingers splayed beneath the water surface, and he feels the tension draining out of his body with every stroke across his back. Porthos’ hand hovers into view, holding out the wine goblet to him, and he drinks and savours the warmth that spreads from his throat down his chest and pools into his stomach. He picks up the discarded soap and begins to wash himself, and he feels the cleansing effect of water and care on body and soul.

“Tip your head back,” Porthos says, “and I’ll do your hair.”

Aramis does, even before Porthos has finished the sentence. He arches backward, props himself up on his hands, and closes his eyes. The water Porthos pours over his head is icy cold, and his scalp prickles, but it feels good. And then Porthos’ hands are warm and firm in his hair and Aramis lets himself fall into the touch, his senses swimming away.

He re-emerges from the state of blissful semi-consciousness when Porthos wraps his hand around the nape of his neck, pushes him up, motions him to lean forward, and pours the rest of the icy water over his head. Aramis yelps and jolts back to reality so fast and hard it blackens out his vision.

“All right,” he says, gasping for breath. “That’s it. I’m getting out.”

It’s not easy to assume an air of disdainful aloofness whilst dripping wet and shivering. Aramis tries and fails to do so as he clambers to his feet, and he ends up accepting Porthos’ hand to steady himself. Water cascades down his body and pools into a puddle by his feet, and Athos appears by his side, draping a fresh linen sheet over his shoulders. The fabric envelops him with feather-soft touches and the scent of lavender.

“I fetched clean linens from your chest,” Athos says. “Get dressed, and come and join me at the table already. I don’t want to drink alone tonight.”

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To everyone’s surprise, it is Porthos who falls asleep first. He is slumped over the table, his head rests heavily on his bent arm, the other arm dangles loosely. Aramis is too jittery still, the wine courses through his blood like the elixir of life. He fully expects Athos to keep drinking steadily, until all wine is gone, but Athos surprises him by a light touch to his arm. Aramis blinks at him drunkenly as Athos stands, steadies himself against the rest of Aramis’ chair, and nods at Porthos.
“We should get him to bed.”

Aramis mmhs his assent.

Athos leans in and kisses Aramis on the forehead. He smells of wine and leather, and the unexpected, tender gesture almost makes Aramis weep. “Come on.”

Porthos is half-drunk, half-asleep as they drag him down the hall. He’s aware, even in his state of insensibility, that it’s perfectly safe for him not to wake, and does nothing to help them. Aramis is certain that Athos bumps him into a corner on purpose at least once, and he suppresses the laughter that bubbles up in his chest.

They drop him on the bed. It is too narrow for the three of them, and Aramis drags out a bedroll and a couple of blankets and spreads them on the floor. Athos opens the door to the garden and lets in the patter of rain and the sweet smell of summer air. He sinks down beside Aramis, who has curled up by the bed, and pulls a blanket over himself. Porthos’ arm is dangling off the edge of the bed, and Aramis rolls into the touch of his hand.

Athos wine-soaked breath sweeps over his face. “I am sorry,” Athos says, so quietly that it might have only been a wisp of air.

Aramis frowns and then, remembering that Athos can’t see him: “Why?”

“For forsaking you. No, Aramis.” He forestalls any objections with two fingers pressed to Aramis’ mouth. “Let me do this. For once let me apologise. I’ll be sobered up by tomorrow, I might never tell you.” He falls silent and Aramis listens, patiently, to the sound of his breathing. “We left you alone for petty, stupid reasons. Left you to deal with that, alone,” Athos says. “Aramis. I never told you this, but.” He breathes in, deeply. “I know what it’s like to kill someone you love.”

Aramis grasps his hand and presses it, wordlessly. Athos falls silent again, his fingers resting loosely against Aramis’ palm as he relaxes bit by bit.

“Thank you,” Aramis whispers eventually.

The warm pressure that is Porthos’ hand on his shoulder shifts, as Porthos moves his hand, sliding it along Aramis’ collarbone until it rest against his chest, against his heart. “You’re welcome,” Porthos murmurs drowsily. “Now shut up, you two, and let me sleep.”

Athos’ fingers twitch in his and Aramis knows he’s smiling. He nestles deeper into the blankets, into the warmth of the two men who guard him on both sides, and he listens. A faint echo still lingers in his head, like a voice once-beloved yet long-forgotten, but it’s fading even as sleep begins to claim him, body and soul.

End Notes

So. Shaving. Gentlemen would have had servants to do it for them; in the miraculously servant-free show ’verse, they’d go to a barber. Hence the assumption that Athos has never shaved in his life, he always had someone to do it for him. Porthos might have, I guess - but then, mirrors were expensive, so he would definitely have grown up without owning a mirror. Aramis' tortoiseshell kit is based on a real 17th century shaving set.
The 17th century was filthy. The filthiest one in European history, apparently. Aramis sharing a bathing kink with one of his rich mistresses is my headcanon, as it allows me to get him reasonably clean for fic purposes from time to time.

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