Fire and Ice

by Lokimis

Summary

It was in Aramis's gallant nature to offer help to two lost brothers, one dark and one fair, especially when the darker one had eyes of godly green and seemed to radiate with a light befitting an angel that had lost its way. [Or, Loki and Thor arrive in 17th century France and meet some dashing Musketeers. Eventual slash pairings, no spoilers].

Notes

Our first co-authored fic, our brain-child, and we will sail this ship through every universe - and we hope you will, too!

This is what happens when you write for too many fandoms and start screaming hysterical, sleep-deprived ideas over Skype.

It's set post-Musketeers S1, pre-Thor. We write in alternate chapters, and as one of us is American and the other is British, there will be some differences in spelling/form - and it's staying that way!
Some say the world will end in fire,
    Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
    But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
    Is also great
And would suffice.

- Robert Frost, 'Fire and Ice'

The atmosphere in the garrison was hot and heavy, the air as thick as treacle, rife with the sounds of Musketeers brawling and laughing in the blistering summer heat.

They were good sounds, happy sounds, but there were only so many times a man could take up a stance and launch into another spar, what clothes that hadn’t been cast aside sticking uncomfortably to sweat-slick skin.

Aramis was just about managing the cool side of composed, his shirt a limp thing about his wrists and his curls askew, but finally he could take no more.

Of course, part of the reasoning behind that was because Porthos kept insisting they wrestle rather than shoot, but by now even the thought of blasting gunpowder was enough to bring a frown to Aramis’ brow.

Besides, Porthos always cheated.

Aramis only managed about ten steps out of the Musketeers’ yard when that same man fell in beside him with nothing more than an innocent look at the bustling crowds around them, their merging with the market crowd going entirely unnoticed.

Aramis made an effort to sound frustrated but couldn't quite keep the smile from his face. "What do you want?"

"Nothin'," Porthos replied amicably, bumping their shoulders together. "Jus' wanted to stretch my legs."

Aramis hummed in response, a pleased noise that made Porthos shoot him a grin, because they both knew that the other was only ever valued company.

Especially when it came to boredom and lonely nights.

Aramis had long become used to the fact that his heart didn't mind who it fell or broke for, whether they were man or woman made no difference to him. He hadn't chosen to be this way, but he had stopped hiding it when doing so had hurt.

Porthos' life in the Court of Miracles had taught him to take comfort from wherever he could, and
if that was in the arms of a man, so be it.

It had made life very interesting for the two of them when they had realised that important fact about the other.

Interesting and deliciously exhausting.

Aramis would give his life for Porthos, but so would he for Athos and D'Artagnan, too. Just because Aramis shared his bed with Porthos had not changed their friendship in any way other than the occasional sly glance and a warm tussle on the cold ground.

Thankfully, Porthos felt the same way, and it was so utterly relieving to know that their shared moments of bliss were nothing more than two friends – very close friends, mind – finding succour in each other in moments of madness.

Porthos had been the only man that Aramis had lain with for quite some time, though; no one else had come near enough in attraction or, more importantly, trust.

Trust was important when the explicit thoughts that occasionally ruled Aramis' head were ones that the Church would have him condemned for.

Aramis liked life, it was full of pleasures, and so he kept his secrets close to his chest.

He loved quite blatantly when he chose to, but it had always been with women. He had never had cause to fall head-over-heels for a man, it had just never happened.

Aramis thanked his God for that. His friends knew how reckless he could be when it came to love. He became blind to everything else except securing affections and tumbling them thoroughly – sometimes the love even lasted to the next night.

But never with a man, one that wasn't Porthos anyway, and that was different.

"You up to anythin', later?" Porthos asked casually, but the question hinted of harsh cries and heat.

"Why, no, I don't think I am," Aramis replied with exaggerated innocence, savouring the hungry look on Porthos' face. "Do you need something?"

"As it 'appens, I do."

"Well, then, I'm sure I can help—" Aramis cut himself off when he heard a ruckus around the corner, some sort of commotion down a shady side-street. Suddenly, Aramis was stumbling, Porthos pushing him into the shadows when he thought Aramis was being a tease.

Aramis’ back met the closest building and then Porthos’ hands were running over his body, blunt fingers pressing at his leathers, searching for skin and contact and succour.

“Hush,” Aramis urged breathlessly, attention torn as he tried to listen to the nearing sounds over his own panting. If their relationship was normally akin to a lightly burning flame, Porthos’ rough grabbing of Aramis’ waist turned it into a fire, and the thick thigh shoved between his legs set it sparking.

Porthos grumbled a denial against his neck, breath hot and incredibly distracting.

Two men bundled down the opposite end of the alleyway and Porthos jumped backwards in alarm, ever wary of being seen even as he cast Aramis a yearning look. Aramis would have
returned it, had his attention not been well and truly grabbed by the loud argument the two strangers were having.

"You are such an oaf, where are we?" The first asked derisively, his black hair sleek and long, swept back from a pale face with the sharpest cheekbones that Aramis had ever seen.

"I do not know, brother, but it is Midgard," the other replied. This one was built bigger, along the same lines as Porthos, broad and tall; but where Porthos was dark, this one was light, blonde and radiant.

They were dressed in such finely wrought armour that Aramis had to stop himself from rushing forward and examining it, even as the first one swirled his green cloak angrily and stilled when he noticed that they were there.

"This is your fault," he muttered to the other, who advanced towards them, beaming.

Porthos immediately reached for his rapier and the broad stranger halted, his expression placid and soothing. "I mean no harm. My name is Thor, and this is my brother, Loki."

Loki heaved a sigh that sounded so incredibly world-weary it made Aramis hide a smile. As the displeased man joined his brother, a tense line stiffened his slim shoulders and he looked at the sky as if it had betrayed him somehow.

Evidently, he was an angel.

The haughty cast to his face only made him appear more attractive, a cold sort of beauty that Aramis wanted to warm. No simple angel, Aramis amended, but a fallen one.

Immediately, Aramis was caught up in the mental images of helping him fly.

Porthos' voice faintly broke through his fascination, "I'm Porthos, an' this is—"

"—Aramis," he interrupted huskily, and swept his hat from his head in a bow that finally managed to make Loki look at him.

Bewitching, startling, almost godly green eyes stared into his. Amusement began to flicker there, lighting the icy, emerald depths like fireflies in a shadowed forest.

Aramis had well and truly fallen.

His fingers itched to trace the thin, cruel, captivating line of Loki's lips, to drag through the silky black length of his hair, to see if his skin was quite that captivating pale shade all over the lean body so temptingly hidden under supple leather.

"Thor," Loki murmured to his side, his gaze still locked with Aramis', "there is something different here, they're wearing armour."

Thor frowned at them both. "And cloaks," he added with a glance at his own luxuriant one, red to Loki's green.

Aramis could finally break the emerald-eyed regard to look at Porthos with concern, but his friend was staring at him with a lecherous grin on his face and it said 'you sucker'.

Was he really that obvious?
Loki fought to restrain his bemused pleasure, but it was proving so very difficult.

As he had wondered how Thor had managed to completely mess up what was supposed to be an easy trip, he had taken note of the high points of colour on the two strangers' cheeks. The dark, broad man had seemed a little flustered, but the tan, gallant one had—

Well, he had *looked* at him.

There was such an intense look in this Aramis' brown eyes that it made wonderful fire burn away all of the contempt that Loki had planned to bestow on his idiot brother.

It was hard to be angry with anything when you were being looked at as if you tasted delicious, as if he were a sweetmeat at a Midsummer banquet.

Thankfully, before Loki could show the man how pleasantly surprised he was, his arrogance came to him like a lover's embrace. It helped put the disdainful tilt to his lips that he wanted, for they had business to attend to that couldn't revolve around dashing swordsmen.

Although, it seemed that his particular brand of play would not be looked down upon as it was on Asgard.

Loki found that he couldn't look away from brown eyes that seared into his and flicked to his mouth and back again – what Aramis saw evidently did not deter him, for the man took a deep, almost savouring breath that made Loki's own catch.

Aramis slowly straightened from his remarkably elegant bow and placed what appeared to be a hat with a feather in it onto his dark brown curls.

Loki wasn't sure what he was more interested in, the ridiculous hat or the smooth way its owner moved.

"You boys wouldn't be *lost*, now, would you?" the other, Porthos, asked with what definitely sounded like a low tease.

Thor blinked in astonishment at the man and Loki rather had to agree, was everyone as openly amorous in this area of Midgard?

To Loki's amusement, Thor stammered, "Er, yes, actually. Where are we?"

"Rue Plumet, you're near the Musketeers' garrison if that's any help to you," Porthos offered in what was probably a helpful manner to anyone who had understood the names given.

But he and Thor had no references to rely on, no idea where they were. The two Midgardians shared a laughing look that allowed Loki to get his bearings; brown eyes could be quite distracting when they burned so agreeably.

The ground gave way underneath Loki's foot and he looked down in mild disgust. They were standing on muddy floor or a dirt path, and they were surrounded by barrels and crates. It was quite bizarre now that he noticed it; it almost looked like a dirtier version of Asgard—

Loki leaned away from Thor and looked onto the street beyond, his mouth dropping slightly at what he saw. Wooden carts pulled by animals creaked by, voices loudly touting produce rang through the streets, and there was not a spark of electricity to be seen.

He might not know a lot about the Midgardians' planet, but he knew that they evolved extraordinarily quickly.
They did not go backwards.

"What is the date," he asked faintly, and felt Thor stiffen besides him.

Porthos rolled his eyes and a frown creased Aramis forehead – they clearly thought that they were drunk.

Thor had begun wildly looking about him, finding the same flaws in the scenery that he had. "The date, what is the date," Thor asked forcefully, a note of anxiety in his voice.

Their plight must have appealed to Aramis because, as he watched them carefully, he replied, "The first day of July, the sixteenth winter of King Louis XIII's reign."

"King?" Thor's voice was hoarse, for there had been no kings when they had last been here, no wood or cloaks or men that flirted with their eyes.

"What year is it," Loki grit out, and saw Porthos' expression turn from concern to wariness. Now he thought that they were insane.

Aramis, however, deigned to relieve them from their anguish, and if Loki hadn't been so uneasy he would have been grateful. "1626."

Thor inhaled sharply and whispered, "By Urd's waters."

"Tis not possible," Loki answered the unspoken question, but Thor's breath seemed to tear from his chest as he whirled to him, his blue eyes uncertain and confused.

"Loki, this isn't right, this isn't right."

"Shut up, Thor," he hissed to hide his own distress. "Call the Bifrost."

Thor settled at the order, as he always did whenever he was flailing and it was Loki's job to be the strong one. They both looked up at the sky but the sun's glare had Loki shielding his eyes and glancing away.

The two frowns that met Loki's wince made him remember that they weren't alone. It didn't matter now, the pair would see them disappear and they would be nothing more than a mysterious tale to tell around a Midgardian fire.

A small, slumbering part of Loki found that a little more unfortunate than a son of Odin's probably should.

He had expected to see a twist of disdain on Aramis' face, senseless as they probably looked. But Aramis had only questions, not judgements, and— was that, pity, in his warm eyes?

Midgardians were so weak.

"Heimdall," Thor cried to the skies, "open the Bifrost!"

Deafening silence answered and Loki stared at Thor with uncertainty flooding his system. Thor's heavy palm fell upon his shoulder; normally Loki would have shrugged it off, but he couldn't quite do it this time. The weight failed to reassure him; in fact, it started fear squirming in his stomach.

"Again," he urged desperately, and they looked upwards once more.
"Heimdall!" Thor's voice was pathetically quiet as he repeated, "Heimdall?"

Nothing happened. Thor had called and nothing happened. Heimdall hadn't answered and now they were— they were stuck on Midgard?

Shock slapped him like a wave, cold and cruel, yanking his feet away from the safety of sand. Loki suddenly felt disconnected from everything, as if his entire world had disappeared. In a way, it had, for Asgard was no longer within a call's reach, and only his foolish brother was there to anchor him.

Aramis took a tentative step towards them with a significant amount of concern written across his handsome features, but Porthos looked at them as if they were mad and said slowly, "Ohhhh-kay, we're gonna go."

"Porthos, we can't leave them."

"Yeah, we can, let's go."

"Porthos," Aramis scolded, and Loki's shock diminished a little as the bigger man sagged in amusing acceptance of the smaller. Satisfied, Aramis returned his attention to them, his expression soft and sympathising. "You can come with us if you have nowhere to go."

"No—!" he started quickly, needing time to plan their next move, but Thor latched onto friendliness in that infuriating way of his, as if he were a hound starved of love.

"Yes, thank you, we're very grateful."

Porthos sighed heavily, but Aramis glanced at Loki's sudden grimace and something like a smile tugged at the man's sensual lips, as if he knew that Loki wasn't grateful, and that he didn't want to follow the pair anywhere.

Loki's very way of life was being threatened, he couldn't restrain the almighty scowl that had formed on his brow, and yet despite all of that, he had the peculiar feeling of being pursued.

Pursued by a mere mortal who watched him with hunger just barely hidden under concern.

Chapter End Notes

Behold, the beginning of a journey that has basically consumed us. No, that's a lie, it's totally consumed us. We hope you enjoyed it! Please review, let us know if you like where it's going/have any questions/want to say hello. All feedback is much loved and appreciated! - C and L.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thor and Loki visit the Musketeers' garrison and Porthos pouts about it. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aramis found himself watching the dark haired man out of the corner of his eye as they walked. What had he said his name was again? Loki? He smiled at the thought, recalling the myths he had read once in a dusty tome. Loki and Thor were pagan gods. He wondered why their parents had chosen the names.

Then he decided it really didn't matter what they were called as he ran his eyes approvingly over the angle of the man's shoulders. They could've named him 'Tree Stump' and he would still be beautiful. He itched to dig his teeth into the spot where neck met shoulder and-

Porthos' elbow to his ribs stalled his train of thought and he glared. Porthos met his glare with one of his own.

"Where exactly are we takin' 'em, Aramis?" he hissed, glancing furtively at the two men. "I don't want two madmen in my rooms, no matter 'ow attractive you think they are!"

Aramis flashed him a charming smile, wondering if Loki was watching. "Why Porthos," he purred, "A man would think you were jealous!"

Porthos' glare could have killed a man. Aramis smiled wider. "We will take them back to the garrison. We both still have rooms there, officially, no? They can stay there while we try and help them!" he finished triumphantly. He liked the idea of the handsome stranger sleeping in his bed. He idly wished he could be in it too.

"Treville isn't gonna want them stayin' there, Aramis. Who the hell are we gonna tell 'im they are?"

"You worry too much, my friend," Aramis said breezily, offering Loki a charming smile as he swept past. The man raised an eyebrow in disdain, lip curling. Aramis heard the bigger one, Thor, reprimand him for being unsociable. He fought the urge to chuckle.

It didn't take them long to make it back to the yard. It was deserted, so with a defiant look at Porthos, Aramis ushered the two strangers through the garrison and into his private rooms. He wasn't sure why they had these when they didn't live at the garrison, but he wasn't about to complain of Treville's generosity when it had just come in handy.

He shut the door behind his guests and turned a smile on them. Porthos sulked against the wall, glaring at him.

Their guests were examining the room. The bigger one was looking around with a broad smile, but Loki was peering at the furnishings critically.

"I'm afraid I must apologize for the state of the rooms," he said, staring directly at Loki. "They haven't seen much use. Judging by your fine clothes, I'd imagine you are used to finer
"My clothes are probably worth more than this building," Loki said, but there was no real venom in the words. He sounded bored.

Aramis merely smiled at him. "That reminds me. You'll need to get out of those clothes." He enjoyed the blush that crept over Loki's pale features, highlighting the man's sharp cheekbones.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded. Thor looked totally unconcerned and indeed had even begun removing his fine armor. A heavy hammer hung at his waist.

"Your clothes draw too much attention, my friend. I gather you have lost your way. Until you know where you are going, it would be wise to pass unnoticed. Therefore, I advise you to strip." He smirked at Loki's outraged expression.

"I will not-" Loki began, sputtering, but Thor cut him off.

"We are among the Midgardians, brother. We must follow their ways."

"What do you expect us to wear?" Loki asked archly, lips pressing into a thin line. Aramis stared, entranced for a moment. Then he shook himself and moved across the room to the wardrobe. He flung it open and pulled out a clean shirt and a pair of breeches. Then he glanced contemplatively at Loki, admiring the way his own breeches fit his lithe legs snugly. He stuffed the spare pair back in the wardrobe, emerging with only the shirt.

"Porthos, can you fetch something for Thor?" he asked, eyeing the large man. Porthos sighed heavily and rolled his eyes but obeyed, disappearing into his own room next door.

"This should fit you," Aramis said, holding the folded shirt out to Loki, who stared at it as one might stare at a dead rat.

"I am not wearing that."

"Brother," Thor rumbled remonstratively. Loki rolled his eyes heavenward, his head falling back slightly. Aramis traced the length of his throat with hungry eyes.

"Fine. Give them to me," Loki snapped, an air of command in his tone. Aramis shivered, struggling not to flush.

"Can we not have some of those fine blue cloaks you wear?" Thor asked eagerly just as Porthos re-entered the room with a pile of clothes.

"Those are for Musketeers," he grunted, passing Thor the bundle.

"What is a Musketeer?" Thor asked curiously, piling his armor on the bed. Loki made no move to change, much to Aramis's chagrin. He hoped the man would change while they were in the room, but he seemed determined to wait. A shame.

"We're Musketeers," Porthos told him, indicating himself and Aramis. "We're elite soldiers. We serve the King."

Thor's eyes had lit up, and even Loki looked interested despite himself. "Soldiers!" Thor boomed. "That is fantastic! You must be excellent warriors!"

Porthos smiled at him, and Aramis knew he was softening towards their guests. It was hard not to like Thor, who was now questioning Porthos about the weapons he was proficient in.
Loki was another matter. Aramis liked him… well, lusted after him might be a better way to phrase it, but he could tell the man wasn't nearly as open as his brother. Thor was an open book, but Loki was a locked room. Aramis wanted to break inside and see what treasures those walls might be hiding.

Loki's eyes snapped around to meet his as if he could read his thoughts and Aramis fought to smile charmingly as the blood rushed to his cheeks. Those emerald eyes could well be his undoing.

He might be in trouble here.

Thor was blabbering on to that taller Midgardian about weapons or some such nonsense, and Loki was growing bored. The hungry brown eyes of the shorter man – Aramis– were beginning to make him self-conscious and hyper alert.

"Yes, yes, it's all very fascinating," he said, cutting through Thor's babbling. "But if we are going to change into these 'clothes'—" his lip curled on the word, "then I would appreciate some privacy."

"Of course," Aramis said, flashing another of those smiles that seemed to be comprised entirely of straight, white, sparkling teeth. He followed Porthos from the room with a grace that was almost enough to make Loki forget he was trying to hold onto his disdain for this planet he had become stranded on.

Loki could feel Thor grinning idiotically at him, so he ignored his brother completely and began changing out of his fine shirt and tunic into the simpler shirt Aramis had handed him.

He felt an odd, but not unwelcome, warmth inside at the thought that this was Aramis's shirt, but he stopped himself before he could follow that particular line of thinking. They were apparently trapped on Midgard with no way to get home. He didn't have time to dally with Midgardians, however handsome and charming they might be.

"I don't suppose you have a plan regarding how we will get home, brother?" he asked when he had finished changing. The material was coarser than he was used to, and it was unpleasantly loose on his slim frame, the neck gaping to reveal his collarbones. He pulled at it irritably.

Thor looked up from where he was struggling with his boots. "I'm sure Father will find us eventually," he shrugged.

Loki stared at him. He really shouldn't be surprised by Thor's more ridiculous ideas at this point. This whole trip had been his idea, had it not? And now they were stranded on Midgard, cut off from their home, perhaps forever, and Thor's brilliant plan was to wait?

"You think we should just wait for Father to swoop in and rescue us?" he asked, sarcasm dripping from his words. "What shall we do in the meantime? What do we tell the Midgardians? They'll want to know where we came from and why we are here."

Thor shrugged, the very picture of unconcern. "We tell them we're travellers and we got lost. We're not really heading anywhere specific, so we would be grateful if they would allow us to stay with them until we get our bearings in this strange country."

"That is a terrible plan, brother," Loki hissed, though a voice in the back of his mind said it wouldn't be such a tragedy to be stuck on Midgard for a time. Not when he was so blatantly desired.
"Do you have a better one?" Thor asked earnestly. Loki sighed heavily because no, he did not have a better plan. "Then we shall stay until you think of something or Father comes for us," Thor said, smiling broadly. He grabbed his cape from the floor and hung Mjolnir from his belt before heading to the door to beckon their hosts back in.

Loki sighed, swirling his own cloak about his shoulders. The familiar weight of the garment lent him strength, and he raised his head proudly, determined not to appear weak in front of these strangers.

He didn't miss the way Aramis's eyes roved appreciatively over his body when they re-entered, lingering on his exposed collarbones. He scowled at him so as not to betray the way his chest seemed to warm beneath the gaze.

"You two finished?" Porthos grunted, glancing askance at their bright cloaks. Loki stiffened, his chin rising to jut out proudly. He would not be judged by a mere mortal, no matter how handsome his friend.

"Yes, thank you!" Thor said happily. He looked like a puppy with a new toy as he smiled at the large man. "What shall we do now?"

Porthos frowned at him speculatively. "What d'you mean? Don't you know what you're doin' 'ere? Why are you 'ere, by the way?"

Loki spoke up before the oaf could spill some ridiculous story. "We are simple travellers. We came to meet some relatives of ours, but we seem to have become quite lost, and now we aren't sure where we are meant to go. We hoped to find somewhere to stay until our relatives find us."

He glared at Thor, daring him to try to add anything to the story. Thor took the hint and stayed silent.

"You'll stay here, of course!" Aramis cried. Loki glanced over at him, somewhat surprised by the sincerity in his tone. Warm brown eyes smiled at him, and he looked away quickly.

"Just a minute," Porthos said, a warning in his voice. "Where are you from, anyway? You sound English."

Loki heard the edge to his tone and decided being English would not be good. "We were stationed there for a time," he said smoothly, thinking fast. He noted a large map pinned to the wall and caught the name of a city near the top. "We've just come from Calais."

He worried for a moment that Aramis might notice his deceptions, as he was watching his every move hungrily, but it seems the man was more concerned with making a good impression than analyzing Loki's motivations. Loki shot him a long, calculating gaze, noting the way the man stood up straighter and shot him a charming smile. He seemed worried about being found wanting.

Or, perhaps, not being found wanted.

"What d'you mean, 'stationed there'?'" Porthos asked curiously. "You soldiers?"

Thor answered before Loki had finished mentally cursing himself for his poor word choice. "We are part of a special regiment too," he informed them proudly.

"Mercenaries," Loki added quickly, worried these men would assume they served their king or worse, an enemy ruler. Aramis and Porthos shared a long look before Porthos shrugged.

"I got nothin' against mercenaries as long as they aren't fightin' against me," he said. "I suppose
you can stay." Aramis grinned like a child with a piece of candy and Porthos shot him a long suffering look. It said, quite clearly, you owe me.

Thor smiled happily. Loki merely scowled, hoping they found some way to get home soon. He did not wish to stay on this world with its small chambers and scratchy clothes, and this man who stared at him with such lust that it made Loki feel too warm inside.

"I'm sure you'll be very comfortable here," Aramis said, voice silky. Loki fought to keep his expression neutral as the man smiled at him again. This was going to be difficult. He followed as the others filed out of the room, trying to ignore the way Aramis’s eyes roved over his body as he fell in behind Loki.

What had he done to deserve this?

Chapter End Notes

Still liking it? Let us know! Bonus points for anyone who can tell just by our styles who's who. For reference, odd chapters are written by C and evens by L (and C went along adding Porthos' speech patterns and trying not change z's to s's)!
Aramis tried his hand at sparring with a master who’s had centuries to train and something to prove, and Loki learns something distasteful. - C

Loki was definitely formed along the lines of the god he was named after, and Aramis was of the firm belief that such beauty should be admired. Aramis certainly admired the long lines that were unfortunately hidden under clothes, although Loki managed to make even simple garments look expensive. It was something about the air of superiority that sat upon his shoulders like a falcon, proud and beautiful.

Aramis had never seen such a captivating combination. Normally, the male objects of his affection were, well, Porthos. And Porthos was broad and steady, like a mountain, as well as being warm and friendly and knew exactly how to crowd Aramis to make his breath catch.

But Loki? Loki was cold and haughty and still somehow managed to evoke the same reaction, though Aramis wasn’t sure how he did it.

It occurred to Aramis that his usual methods of pursuit might need to be altered. He was used to his smiles immediately winning one in return, but this time, unless he counted the tantalizing amusement that he had first seen in Loki’s eyes, he hadn’t seen the man smile once.

No, this was going to take some thought and care, like approaching a horse that might baulk - or a predator that might decide to take a swipe. Aramis couldn’t rely on his charisma alone, not when he was trying to charm a figure of ice who clearly didn't know how to react to him.

As Aramis eyed the striking figure, he realized that his flirtatious advances hadn't even been overtly responded to apart from flashes of irritation and disdain.

Did that mean that Loki wasn't as affected by him?

With a sinking feeling, Aramis wondered whether it was because Loki didn't even play that way, for that would just be too cruel.

A haughty sniff dragged his attention to a raised sooty eyebrow over cool, emerald eyes. "Can I help you?"

"I don't know," Aramis answered smoothly. "Can you?"

Loki rolled his eyes at the veiled lewd insinuation, but there was definitely a faint flush on his pale cheeks, and Aramis delighted in it.

It meant that he now knew what to do.

Loki might be the ice to Porthos' earth, but Aramis knew how to warm even the coldest of hearts. If he had to focus on teasing a smile out of Loki instead of merely expecting one, well…

Aramis had always liked a chase.
Porthos noticed his eager smile and scowled at it, saying under his breath, "You're plottin'."

"Why," Aramis replied innocently, "I have no idea what you're talking about, mon ami."

Porthos was distinctly unimpressed. "I saw that look last week, when you met that Comtesse at the Palace."

"Ah." Aramis cast his mind back and said wistfully, "She was, indeed, ravissante. Her hair like rivers of gold, and eyes of a clear summer sky."

Aramis had pitched his voice slightly higher than necessary for Porthos' ear alone, and he definitely wasn't watching his friend as he spoke. Loki had stiffened almost imperceptibly and frowned when Thor chuckled at Aramis' passionate remarks.

His dark angel did not know what to make of him now. Excellent.

Porthos, however, seemed relieved all of a sudden, and clapped a fond hand on his shoulder. It automatically made Aramis draw in close to the man so that Porthos' arm lay snug along his back, and Porthos immediately grinned down at him as they entered the empty yard.

"We may as well make the most of the space," Aramis said aloud. It would be easier to talk in the open air than it would be in their rooms, and he wanted to learn as much as possible about the brothers. Especially whether or not Loki's slim form meant that he could bend a sword as well as he could his narrow waist.

As they stopped in the clearing, Aramis leaned into Porthos in a move so familiar to them both it was practically unconscious, and Aramis suddenly became aware of calculating, emerald eyes roving over every place that he and Porthos touched.

Interesting.

Thor, meanwhile, looked about with a jubilant chuckle. "This is where you train?"

"Yeah, we focus on swords rather than 'ammers, though," Porthos said with a wry nod at Thor's hip. "For all that looks pretty damn impressive."

Thor beamed and unhooked the hefty weapon from his belt. "This is Mjolnir, given to me by our father."

Porthos finally removed his arm but Aramis could only smile fondly because he knew what had prompted it. With a soft *shing*, Porthos drew his blade and said proudly, "Balizarde."

Aramis had dubbed it that, after the first time that Porthos had managed to land a bloodied strike on him. At the time it was because he had teased that Balizarde was the true winner, and not its wielder, but the name had stuck and hearing it always made them smile.

Thor observed their respective pride and joys with a happy nod, clearly delighted with Porthos. "They are truly excellent weapons, worthy of their names."

Loki had been silent the entire time, and now a sneer curled his lip as Porthos sheathed his blade and returned his arm to Aramis' back.

"Your swords do not look very strong," Loki remarked disdainfully.

Aramis felt Porthos stiffen and saw Thor scowl at his brother, but he jumped at the chance to ask
innocently, "Do you know much of swords, then?"

Loki’s gaze flicked to his and away again before the faint pink stain on his cheeks would be noticed by anyone other than Aramis – who had already learned the exact shade of his pale skin. "I am known to partake in the occasional bout, aren’t I, Thor?"

"Well, yes," Thor began nervously, apparently unwilling to offend his hosts. "But that is not an excuse to disparage their forging. How would you know of their strength?"

"Indeed," Aramis said with a sly note to his voice that had Porthos beginning to grin. "Perhaps you would like to test them?"

Porthos laughed. It rumbled warmly along Aramis' neck and whispered, make the little upstart pay.

Loki bristled as if he had heard, and Aramis had to blink away a sudden glare of reflected light that had Thor shifting uncomfortably for some reason.

From underneath his green cloak, Loki drew a golden scabbard, and from that he pulled the most exquisite sword that Aramis had ever seen. It shone in gleams of pale gold, matching the accoutrements that were on the discarded armour upstairs.

Loki's blade was slimmer than Aramis' own and had only the smallest of cross-guards. It was a deadly sign, for it meant that Loki didn’t need brute strength or a fail-safe. Instead, it meant that he would strike like a snake, once and with a fatal outcome.

Aramis’ fingers trailed patterns over the smooth swirls of his swept hilt, the polished steel as protective as it was decorative. Ever one for a show, Aramis drew his rapier with a lazy twirl of one wrist, and Loki’s eyes lit up keenly.

For a moment, Aramis almost thought that he saw that amazing armour on Loki's lean form, saw the black leather and air of absolute superiority, but then Aramis blinked and it was gone.

The proud arch of Loki's neck, however, was still there.

Porthos jerked his head away from them and Thor followed after a concerned glance at his brother. The pair settled against the wall and Aramis wondered whether Thor's worry was for Loki, or for him.

"Have you changed your mind?" Loki's tone was rife with idle condescension, but Aramis could still see the coiled readiness of muscles just waiting to spring at him if he so much as shifted his weight.

Aramis tested that barely constrained power, whipping his sword up like lightning, and he almost had to take a step back when Loki's swung to meet his with a speed that seemed to belie a normal man.

Aramis tried to look for flaws, for gaps in his guard, but it wasn't just the fact that Loki was so coldly captivating that it skewed Aramis' judgment. The problem was that there were no flaws. Before him stood a master, and Aramis had thought Athos the only one capable of truly beating him.

Sparks of amusement lit those dark, green depths, and a thrill of suicidal fascination ran through Aramis at the sight.

He kept Loki's gaze but slowly ran his blade along the golden one, savoring the sweet song of
swords and the sharp inhalation that Loki gave when he read the heat in his gaze.

Loki moved, a blur of green cloak and flashing eyes, and then Aramis’ instincts kicked in and he had to deflect a metal point that would have ended up somewhere near his heart.

The sparks of light had gone. Aramis looked into the eyes of a predator and realized that he might just be looking at his death.

It was startling how truly taciturn Loki could look, how entirely inaccessible, how strangely old.

Following another instinct, Aramis glanced over at the side-lines and saw two things that told him how this bout should go.

The first was Porthos, a proud grin on his face that said he expected Aramis to whip Loki into the dust. It warmed those parts of him that Loki had cooled, and Aramis held onto that flaring of heat when Porthos winked at him.

Of course, Porthos couldn't know that Loki's skill far surpassed his own, or that he really did not mind losing to a master whose cold gaze sent delicious chills up his spine.

The second of the two things was unexpected but not entirely unwelcome. It was Treville, standing in his office window and watching them with a critical eye.

There were strangers in his yard and their Captain wouldn't like that, but if Aramis was to continue in his conquering of the beautiful man, Loki and Thor would need to be welcome here.

What was it that Treville had grumbled to them recently? That they needed more Musketeers?

Porthos wanted him to win, to show Loki's derision up, but Treville wanted new blood and more bodies.

Aramis sent Porthos an apologetic look and thought, *I'm sorry, mon cher, but I think I've lost this one already.*

And Aramis found that he didn't really mind, not when he might receive far sweeter prizes in the form of Porthos' clucking and Treville seeing that Loki was an excellent swordsman.

"Now," he murmured to the fallen angel across from him, "where were we?"

Loki gave him a slash of a smile, bloodthirsty and fascinating. It occurred a little belatedly to Aramis that perhaps he shouldn't be chasing, he should be running.

But where was the fun in that?

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The Midgardian had skill.

Aramis was quick, fighting with swooping flourishes that he could easily block and little darting movements that he could just about dodge. Some of his flashy attitude was conveyed in his sword-work, his blue cloak flaring dramatically with every showy sweep of his blade, an act which left him wide open to counter-attack.

But Aramis’ true downfall lay in his honour.

Thor was the same, and it always made Loki want to roll his eyes in exasperation. If offered a stumble or a hesitation, Loki took it with the tip of his sword, but Thor? Thor would *wait* for his
opponent to regain their balance, wouldn't dream of rushing in to secure a victory.

It was disgusting.

Loki deliberately over-stretched, practically offering his throat as he pretended to trip, and Aramis immediately pulled back with a gentlemanly air.

And then narrowed those warm brown eyes.

Aramis gave him what was definitely a reproving glare for literally putting his neck on the line, and Loki almost laughed. Almost.

Instead, he remembered what had encouraged him to engage in this pointless, if amusing, display of skill, and that succeeded in injecting a bit of malice into his next few strikes.

Loki had spent a lifetime hiding his illicit persuasions, and yet no more than five steps onto Midgard and he had bumped into the most flirtatious man he had ever come across.

Yes, he admitted that the attention had been nice, if completely surprising and entirely unwanted, but for so long had it been Thor who received all of the attention, Thor who was completely oblivious to the lingering looks he always received.

Loki had long grown used to the fact that his shoulders would never be as broad as his brother's, nor his muscles as ridiculously large, but at least he had a brain and a quick tongue to match it.

So, yes, the attention had been nice.

Which is why the realization had hit like Mjolnir did when Thor forgot to hold himself back, when Loki had put the pieces together and seen. The flustered looks on the pair's faces when he and Thor had first arrived, the way one strengthened and smiled when in contact with the other.

Aramis and Porthos were an item.

He had gotten it all wrong, the heated glances weren't for him, they were for Thor, as they always were.

It was bad enough that Thor basked in female attention, now he was to do so in male, too? That just wasn't fair, and it made rage surge in Loki's veins.

Hence why he was ensuring that Aramis worked for this paltry fight, and at the end of it, Loki would humiliate him, for no one interfered in his business without paying for it. Least of all attractive Midgardians with warm eyes and quick feet, even if Loki did enjoy the way this particular Midgardian was beginning to pant.

His own enjoyment annoyed him; he didn't want to feel that little burst of heat in his stomach as Aramis focused solely on him.

One slice, that was all it took: one too-forceful sweep because he had been watching a drop of sweat track down Aramis' neck and forgot to make allowances for the slightly slower mortal. A sliver of resistance against the tip of his sword and then a streak of red opened across tanned collarbone.

Aramis pulled back with a hiss and, startlingly, the noise distressed him. A tendril of guilt made Loki automatically raise his hand and he felt that familiar rush of magic, savored the glorious tingle of power for a single, heady moment. And then Thor and Porthos both moved, but for separate reasons, and Loki remembered.
They were stuck on Midgard.

"Brother," Thor whispered forcefully.

"I know," he bit back. He didn't appreciate the reminder, of their effective prison or how close he had come to healing a foolish mortal just because he didn't like the sound of his pain.

Porthos, however, apparently liked it less, because he had gone straight to Aramis and used his hands to gently tilt Aramis' chin away and roughly jerk aside his shirt. The big man hissed in sympathy and his fingers lingered a little too long on Aramis' jaw.

Loki sneered at Porthos' back. Yes, the two were definitely an item, it was painfully obvious now.

"Apologise," Thor reprimanded, much to Loki's shocked disgust.

"What? No, why—?"

"Of course not," Aramis interrupted cheerfully as Porthos walked away from them. "We agreed on first blood."

Loki looked curiously at Aramis, for they had never said any such thing, but if it would excuse him from Thor's misguided reprimand, then so be it.

"Yes, we did."

Thor relaxed and folded his arms, a smile breaking across his face. "I have never seen someone hold out for so long against my brother. You did well."

Aramis smiled and inclined his head in gratitude, that strange hat still somehow perched on his head. "I'm afraid I'm a poor show," he said wryly, uncoupling the toggles of his leather jacket when Porthos reappeared to hand him a wet cloth. "Our friend Athos is the true swordsman."

"Best I've ever seen," Porthos added, and then, strangely, caught Loki's eye for a second that seemed to hang for eternity. "Best anyone's ever seen."

 challenge, it was a whisper over Loki's skin, coming from the shadowed, judging eyes of Porthos but with the promise of a man he had never met.

Loki had no idea why he had garnered Porthos' distaste; perhaps the man could tell that something was amiss. Or, Loki amended with a sudden urge to smirk, maybe Aramis had meant those charming smiles for him, after all.

Not that Loki wanted that, of course.

"You do yourself disfavour!" Thor boomed happily. "You were excellent!"

"I try," Aramis replied modestly, "but my skill lies with the musket."

"A musket?" Thor asked interestedly, but Loki couldn't quite echo the statement, despite his own curiosity flaring, for something else had utterly caught his attention.

Aramis nodded distractedly as he pulled aside his shirt and bared his neck, carefully dabbing at the faint traces of blood that Loki had brought to his fragile skin.

Loki became fixated on tan chest and muscled shoulders, on glinting water and a trail of dark hair that disappeared into a cotton shirt, on cursing the man for attracting him so when they were
stranded on this – quite literally – godforsaken planet.

Loki needed to remember that. He needed to remember that Thor was relying on him to find a way back home, and even if his brother wanted to make pretty with the Midgardians, *Loki* was a respected mage and had no time for mere mortals.

"And what about you, Porthos," Thor asked with his usual sickening friendliness, forcing Loki back to the issue at hand. "What is your skill?"

"I like the sword—" Porthos began matter-of-factly, but was interrupted by Aramis' snort of denial.

"Porthos favours hand-to-hand." Aramis' tone suddenly turned sympathetic as he continued forlornly, "But he never has anyone to spar with."

For some reason, Porthos threw Aramis a confused look even as he nodded in agreement. Loki, however, watched the exchange with a souring expression, because he knew that his brother was just about to jump for joy.

And then Loki saw what was happening, for Porthos grinned in delighted surprise at Thor's exuberant offer of a wrestle, and a sly, anticipatory smile came across Aramis' face.

The striking sight made Loki scowl and he realised that the little tease was going to enjoy this fight.

Loki sighed and cast another glance at the skies. The day already felt to have lasted half a millennium; would it ever end?

Chapter End Notes

Reviews are the lifeblood of fanfics, so please let us know if you're enjoying ours! - C
Chapter 4

Aramis couldn't keep the delighted smile from his face as he watched Porthos go through his usual stretches, muscles rippling beneath his shirt. Both he and Thor had stripped away their outer layers until they stood only in shirt and breeches, and Aramis would be lying if he said he wasn't enjoying the show.

Not that the display in front of him was making him forget the one standing beside him, arms crossed, scowling at the preparations.

Loki had a sour expression on his face and his entire body was coiled as tightly as a spring. Aramis could almost feel the tension radiating off of him. How he wished to dig his fingers into those supple shoulders and help him relax…

He swallowed hard, trying to drive the image of Loki's bare shoulders beneath his hands from his mind, focusing instead on the bright, eager smile lighting Porthos's handsome features.

It wasn't often Porthos had the chance to fight someone with even close to the same level of skill as he possessed, and if Thor was as good as his graceful motions and hulking build suggested, Porthos might have at last met his match.

"Are you both ready?" Aramis called, seeing that Porthos had finished his warm up. Loki shifted beside him, still scowling.

Porthos nodded. "I am ready, friend!" Thor boomed, deep voice ringing with excitement. Aramis saw Loki's mouth twist up in a derisive sneer.

"Then begin," Aramis said, smiling wickedly as the two men squared up to one another.

This was going to be good.

It was Porthos who moved first, as Aramis knew it would be. He feinted in, aiming a jab at Thor's ribs that turned into an uppercut to the jaw as Thor dodged. But Thor was fast, as fast as Porthos, and he danced back with a speed that belied his bulk.

Aramis wondered if he was drooling, or if he only felt like it.

Thor came back with a roundhouse that seemed to almost whistle through the air. Porthos blocked it, staggering back a half step under the force. He locked Thor's wrist and twisted his shoulders, allowing Thor's own momentum to carry him past. Thor recovered almost instantly and turned, his broad grin matching Porthos's own.

This was going to be very good.

Porthos darted in, lowering his shoulders as if to catch Thor's midsection in a tackle, but Thor
stood his ground and allowed himself to be rammed. He then grabbed Porthos's waist and flipped him through the air to land crashing in the dust.

Aramis’s jaw dropped.

Porthos lay there for a long moment, looking for the life of him utterly stunned, and then a grin began to form on his face that could chase clouds from the sun. He was positively beaming, and it sent rays of warmth chasing through Aramis.

He wondered how Loki could sneer in the face of such blatant happiness. Though that sneer did send shivers down his spine...

Porthos rolled lightly to his feet, cracking his neck in a way that threw his jawline into sharp relief. Honestly, it ought to be illegal. Aramis could see the subtle lengthening of his stance, the tightening of muscles that meant Porthos was about to fight in earnest. He had only seen this a few times in his life, and it was amazing to behold.

Porthos drew back and lashed out in a move almost too fast to follow, launching a high kick at Thor's chest. Thor twisted to the side, using his hip to knock Porthos's foot off course so he landed awkwardly. Porthos allowed himself to fall to the dust once more, sweeping Thor's feet out from beneath him as he fell.

The faint sound of a door opening somewhere behind him made him drag his hungry gaze away from the wrestling. He glanced over his shoulder to see Treville had stepped out of his office and was watching the match with an impassive expression. Aramis hid a smile and turned away, giving no indication he had noticed the captain.

He wanted him to see this.

In the few seconds he had been distracted, Thor and Porthos had ended up struggling together on the ground in a way that looked less like wrestling and more like something else entirely. Aramis's throat went rather dry. This was turning into a wonderful show.

Porthos momentarily gained the upper hand, striving to pin Thor to the ground. Thor writhed beneath him, demonstrating far more flexibility than was decent.

Aramis found himself wondering if flexibility was a family trait.

He watched the match avidly, admiring the delicious display of strength, the muscles glistening with sweat in the sunlight, bulging as the two men strained against one another, laughing even as they vied for dominance.

It was a stunning display, really, but even as he watched Aramis found himself craving something else entirely, lean lines and haughty sneers instead of bulk and booming laughs.

Aramis appreciated Porthos and Thor's muscular forms, but he mostly liked the assertive nature that came with the stature, their ability to make him feel utterly protected even though he didn't need it.

Loki was all lean lines and agile as a cat, and yet that assertive nature snarled at him every time he caught those godly green eyes, despite the lack of obvious strength in his slim shoulders. Instead, there was a steeliness to his spine, an aura of something that made Aramis' pulse buck and crave cruel lips at his throat. When he'd had that sword in his hand…

Loki didn't need physical power to bend him to his whim, because it only took one smirk for Aramis to decide that there was nothing he would rather do than offer himself on a platter.
And so he watched Porthos trying to pound Thor into the dust, and smiled, and felt the warmth of desire in his stomach, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Porthos was no longer what he most desired, not when a great deal of it was due to the cold sneer at his side.

Loki felt as if ice was forming in his very veins as he was subjected to this pathetic wrestling match. He had no interest in watching his brother show off his prodigious skills. He dealt with enough of that on Asgard.

It didn't help that the ridiculous mortal beside him was all but drooling over the display.

From the moment the fight had begun, Aramis had watched the pair with ravenous eyes, an elated grin plastered across his handsome face. He was like a dog panting after a bone. It was disgusting, base, vulgar.

Loki wondered why it bothered him so much.

The same interest with which he had appraised Loki before was on his face once again as he watched the pitiful display of male dominance happening in front of them.

There's an oomph as Thor crushes Porthos to the ground and Loki watches Aramis sway forward, eyes fixed on the broad shoulders of his brother. The twinge of jealousy this evokes in his breast is ruthlessly crushed.

He has no time for sentiment.

Still, as he watched Aramis enjoying the broad shoulders and bulging biceps of the pair, he was painfully aware of how much he isn't built like them. He might or might not have allowed a small sound of annoyance to slip past his curled lips, and suddenly Aramis turned the full force of that hungry gaze on him, and Loki was drowning.

He expected the man to look back to the match at once, but Aramis's stare lingered, tracing along Loki's jaw in a way that made his stomach clench. Aramis smiled then, a small, taunting thing, and Loki knew this smile was for him, not for Thor, not for Porthos. Clearly this man was dangerous and unstable, because he did not seem to know what he wanted.

Nevertheless, the unexpected attention was like stepping into a sunbeam, and when Aramis at last turned back to the match, Loki was left feeling bereft.

He tried to focus on the two men squirming shamefully in the dirt, but it didn't rid his mind of a warm smile and laughing brown eyes. Thor managed to get the mortal into some sort of hold, and Loki had to give him credit: Thor had kept himself in check better than he himself had, careful to use only a fraction of his real strength so as not to injure the fragile Midgardian now struggling to free himself.

At last Porthos tapped Thor's arm, a resigned expression on his face. Thor released him immediately and clambered to his feet, offering a hand to help the other man up. There was his precious honor at work once more.

"Mon Dieu, what a match," Aramis called, voice laced with barely veiled desire. Loki noted the way Porthos's eyes flashed up to meet the smiling man's.

"Indeed it was," Thor boomed happily. "I have not had such an enjoyable contest in some time, my friend. You are a worthy opponent!"
Porthos smiled warmly at him, apparently taking no shame in his defeat. "First time I've lost in years," he said ruefully. Loki found his humility jarring. Defeat was shameful, not something to smile about. What was wrong with these mortals?

"You did marvellously," Aramis told Porthos gallantly.

Loki felt spite boil within him. "I don't know what you expected the outcome to be," he snapped irritably. "Thor is clearly taller."

Thor shot him a disapproving look and Porthos visibly bristled.

"Yes, well, size isn't everything," Aramis replied smoothly, stepping forward to brush the dust from Porthos's shoulders, his graceful hands lingering overly long. Loki didn't miss the way the larger man leaned into the touch, allowing Aramis to soothe his bruised pride with a few compliments about the match.

Loki glanced away, lips twisting once more. After having that blinding smile directed at him, he had almost forgotten that the pair were together.

He hated that a mere mortal could make his stomach sink with a disappointment he hadn't felt in millennia.

A bright young voice heralded the arrival of more of these 'Musketeers,' and Loki turned to see two men walking across the courtyard to them, one smiling like a younger, darker Thor and the other eyeing them with a suspicion Loki could respect.

"Aramis, Porthos!" the young one called, ridiculous grin still plastered across his eager face. Honestly, it was sickening.

"Who's this?" the older one asked bluntly. Loki found the abrupt tone rather refreshing after the amount of charm and teasing he'd been putting up with. There was an edge to this one that told Loki he would do well to keep an eye on him, and Loki always appreciated that in an opponent.

"And what happened there?" he asked, an edge to his tone, taking in the long, shallow cut just visible on Aramis's collarbone. Aramis waved him off with a smile.

"Simply an invigorating match with our new friends here," he said, warm brown eyes finding Loki's. There was a teasing quality to his voice, a slight suggestiveness that made Loki's cheeks feel warm.

"Oh?" the shaggy one asked, cool eyes assessing Loki. He huffed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes or openly sneer at his unkempt appearance. He supposed he ought to at least attempt to be civil. They could be stuck here a long time.

The thought sent an unpleasant wave of anxiety through his stomach, but he swallowed it down in favor of learning who these newcomers were and whether it would be worth trying to remember their names.

"Athos, d'Artagnan, allow me to introduce you to Loki and his brother, Thor," Aramis said formally. Loki tried not to be too pleased that Aramis had said his name first. No one ever bothered giving him precedence over Thor.

"It is a great honor to meet the comrades of our very gracious hosts!" Thor thundered, beaming at d'Artagnan as he shook his hand vigorously. Loki was willing to bet his fingers were being compressed in ways bones did not take kindly to.
"How nice to meet you, too," Athos said dryly. "What are they doing here, exactly?"

"They were lost," Porthos informed him. "Aramis, the charmer, offered to let 'em stay here until they find who they're lookin' for. They're good."

"Good?" the youngest one asked, massaging his hand. "Did you fight them?" He eyed Thor's bulk with awe.

"Loki bested me with the sword, and Porthos took his first fall in years," Aramis told them, smirking, though Loki noted the way he clapped a hand to Porthos's shoulder as he stepped forward, softening the remark. It lingered a moment too long and Loki's lip curled again.

"That is good," Athos's eyebrows raised, and Loki sensed there were words conveyed with the expression if only he knew how to read it. He hated puzzles.

"Was there something you wanted?" Porthos asked curiously. "A mission?" Thor's expression brightened hopefully in a way that made Loki want to kick him. Even if there was a mission, they certainly would not be going!

Athos shook his head. "We were hoping Treville might have something for us to do," d'Artagnan said, his tone a touch petulant.


Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading; please feed us sweet, sweet reviews so that we may feast on more Lokimis love. (I hope you're enjoying these notes, I'm going to make them all silly so that you have to laugh and make them professional :3) - C

^That was a challenge from my co-author. Little does she know I shall leave them all exactly as they are. HA :P - L
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

"Loki, do you wanna do a mission? Come on, let's go and play!"

Most of the places in this fic are real places in France, with painstaking work being done to figure out distances and horse-gaits to get there. Marteaux Forest, however, is a creation used as a waypoint for Lagny-sur-Marne. (Yggdrasil sits in the Milky Way, obviously.) - C

Just so you know, we've written an extensive amount of ridiculous parodies involving Lokimis, one of which is, in fact, "Do you want to build a snowman?" - L

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aramis held his breath when he saw Athos look up at the balcony in a silent question, but then Treville inclined his head and said, "All of you."

Aramis grinned in relief at an elated Thor, who clearly wanted to join them as much as Aramis did. Athos merely shrugged, ever neutral, and gallantly gestured for Loki to walk ahead of him. It amused Aramis to see Loki hesitate, but he heard the murmur of surprised gratitude that followed.

It was also interesting to see Athos' raised brow when he noticed the gleaming rapier hung at Loki's waist. Athos would bide his time, as he always did, but Loki would find himself at the tip of a Musketeer's sword, sooner or later.

Aramis couldn't wait.

The captain's office wasn't large to begin with, but it seemed positively cramped with all seven of them in there. Treville followed his usual pattern of waiting until they had settled, for the laughter to pass, and then he watched them quietly, weighing them up with whatever task he had.

Thor's enthusiasm tempered to seriousness under Treville's cool stare, but Loki fidgeted uncomfortably until Aramis deliberately bumped him and earned a hot glare. Something about their captain must be familiar to the pair, for their reactions seemed learned. Perhaps they were reminded of their own superior, and Aramis idly wondered whether they were missed.

"Extra hands couldn't come at a better time; I've heard some disturbing reports about bandits up by Lagny-sur-Marne."

It was natural for them to let Athos ask the questions. His calm and calculated control always knew what to ask and what to say. "How is that disturbing? We've been there before."

"They hadn't banded up under one flagship before," Treville explained with a sigh as the four of them murmured in surprise. "Yes, there are at least two separate groups, possibly three. I have no idea what's caused it, but they're a formidable force, now."

"Safety in numbers," Loki remarked quietly. "Do they have a leader?"

Aramis and Treville shared a glance that wouldn't mean anything to anyone that didn't know them.
Aramis knew what it meant, it spoke of being surprised and impressed, that Loki's question was an intelligent one, for a leader would turn rabble into an army.

Treville shrugged. "Not that I know of, but on the off-chance that they do, I want you all to go." He regarded them each in turn, his eye lingering on Athos as he said, "Be wary, keep a watch, and come back in one piece."

"Of course, Captain," Athos replied with his usual half-smile.

Thor was surprisingly quiet as they left, but beamed when Porthos asked aloud, "We 'ave horses for 'em?"

Athos nodded. "I fear we'll need mounts if the group is that large, and it wouldn't do to not outfit our new comrades."

Aramis' thoughts warmed a little more than was called for as he considered the casually dressed pair at his side. He cleared his throat and remarked, "They have armour but, ah, it might be best for it to be worn outside of Paris, tu comprends?"

D'Artagnan's eyebrow rose at Thor, who ducked his head and said, "My brother and I wear armour specially forged for us. It is, perhaps, a little attention-grabbing."

"A little?" Porthos asked with a laugh. "Thor wears chainmail like s'cotton, I've never seen the like."

"Nor I," Aramis added slyly, and pretended not to notice the scowl that crossed Loki's face. "It can be fetched quickly enough."

By the time they arrived, the stables were mostly empty except for their four mounts and the assortment of fresh horses that could be swapped out for long missions. Aramis kept his eye on the brothers as he tended to his own beloved mount, and smiled when Thor immediately gravitated towards the largest stallion of the bunch.

Loki, however, took his time. He waited for his brother to loudly disappear before wandering through the throng of horseflesh, letting the animals come to him rather than the other way around. It was fascinating to watch, especially when a sweet-tempered mare butted him softly and practically walked into the offered reins.

Evidently, there was some magic at work here, although Aramis could understand the allure.

He wasn't opposed to a slap on the rump, after all.

Loki stepped gracefully into the stirrups, his posture as perfect and striking as Athos' when he could be bothered. Aramis' breath caught when they walked into the sun, for Loki looked like a prince, haughty and uncaring. Except, before Aramis could completely write him off as cold to the core, he heard quiet words of affection said towards his mount and noticed the small smile playing about his cruel lips.

Loki was truly an enigma, and Aramis couldn't wait to work it out.

Once they were bundled down with supplies and armour, their company took on the frisky air that accompanied a sunlit task and the banter between friends. D'Artagnan's happiness at finally not being the newcomer made Aramis reply teasingly, "You still have the worst seat on a horse, mon fils."

D'Artagnan scowled at him, drawing a laugh, but Thor pulled his stallion up alongside the boy's
and commented, "I'm afraid my brother and I are at a disadvantage, we do not know this area."

Aramis smiled when d'Artagnan puffed up in happy pride and offered to detail their route. Thor was being sweet, and it made Aramis share an amused look with Athos. But where one brother was fitting in well, the other rolled his eyes and sighed despairingly, as if he was quite disgusted with the camaraderie.

"You ride very well, Loki," Aramis remarked innocently, and it was Porthos' turn to roll his eyes as Loki preened.

The journey passed in a similar fashion, the little jabs and jokes that often resulted in someone scowling and someone laughing. Contentment settled in Aramis' chest and he realised that this felt right, for all Loki didn't seem to be enjoying himself, his green eyes occasionally sparked with humour before being wiped clear again.

Loki didn't fool Aramis, he knew that there was a way to warm the ice; he just had to find it.

Night had fallen by the time they neared, and it was agreed that they would camp in Marteaux Forest to approach Lagny-sur-Marne with daylight on their sides. Thor graciously offered himself and Loki to keep watch, to which the four of them readily accepted – having more members was certainly providing more perks. Loki scowled, but when Athos looked questioningly at him, he raised his brow in reluctant acceptance.

Sleep was hard in finding. Aramis couldn't stop thinking about the delicious riddle that sat mere feet away from him. He knew that he should be resting in case they were as outnumbered as they feared, tomorrow, but instead he was distracted by a hushed conversation from across the fire.

Thor's voice was questioning and Loki's was angry; the argument lasted until Loki hissed something that sounded derogatory before disappearing into the trees. Aramis stirred, not entirely wanting to pry, but mostly not wanting anyone to leave the safety of their camp.

He waited for Thor to sit down before asking, "Is everything okay?"

Thor startled and seemed to grasp for an excuse. "Loki is, ah, patrolling. I wouldn't surprise him."

Aramis paused at what would have sounded like a warning if it hadn't come from Thor's concerned blue eyes. "He... does not like travelling?"

"No," Thor replied slowly, something like sadness crossing his face. "My brother isn't used to travelling with anyone but me, and even I frustrate him from time to time."

Aramis didn't like the forlorn tone to Thor's low rumble, the sign of rejected affection. "Perhaps it's time he learned how to share," Aramis replied with quiet amusement.

Thor looked up in astonishment but then he grinned. "Good luck, do not say I didn't warn you."

As Aramis laughed low in his throat and went to walk past the broad man, Thor's hand rose almost self-consciously. "Thank you, Aramis."

Aramis smiled at the genuine warmth to Thor's voice. "I know you'll both be an asset to our little family."

Thor beamed suddenly but then ducked his head to add, "Not just that, for trying to befriend my brother."

Befriend, that was entirely too tame for what Aramis planned to do to the cold, beautiful man.
But a blessing was a blessing.

Aramis gave Thor his most charming smile. "You're very welcome."

It was a good thing that his friends weren't awake, for they would immediately know that he was - as Porthos so delightfully put it - plotting. Thor, however, was blessed with ignorance, and returned his attention to the flickering fire with a pleased nod.

Aramis traversed the trees with the learned skills of a man who was wary of creaking floorboards and over-protective fathers. He was fairly certain that he wasn't sneaking up on the elusive Loki, and if he was, it was because Loki might spook and run, like a deer.

Aramis had always been a good hunter.

A flash of light had him blinking back spots, but it was gone as soon as it had arrived. Aramis cautiously followed the direction he thought it had come from, concerned that Loki had been spotted or, God forbid, hurt.

What Aramis saw instead, stopped him in his tracks. Sat in a circular clearing of trees, bathed in the moonlight and an air of serenity, was his angel.

Loki didn't look dark anymore; he looked redeemed, on high, bright like diamonds and just as chillingly sharp. His profile was picked out in stark shadows and limned in light; his eyes were closed as his chest moved in controlled, deep breaths.

Aramis felt frozen to the spot, stunned by the sheer beauty of the moment, and completely incapable of disturbing the silence. He realised with a piercing clarity that had his heart stuttering, that where Loki had been lifted, he had fallen further than ever before.

He wasn't sure whether he would recover from this.

Loki felt the moon sink below the horizon and disappointment bloomed in his chest.

Hours he had spent in quiet meditation, using the well of magic that resided within him to search for something familiar. He knew that Yggdrasil, the world tree that housed the realms, was there, somewhere, but he couldn't find it. That absence of contact was vaguely terrifying, for he had been able to feel it from the moment his mother had first shown him how.

Now, bereft, he felt even more alone than he had before.

It hadn't helped that Thor had protested his meditation the night before. As soon as Loki had known the Musketeers had fallen asleep, he had tried to leave, but Thor had faltered in confusion, asking, "Why, brother?"

"I will not wait for father to find us," he had replied simply.

"Do you dislike them so much?"

Loki had followed Thor's gesture that encompassed the four sleeping forms and sneered, "They are Midgardians, we are not. What can they possibly have to offer us?"

Thor had shaken his head sadly, as if there was something that Loki didn't understand, and so he had stridden off to find a quiet spot and attempt to reach home.
It hadn't worked.

It was worse than when they had been children and had sneaked out of the palace. Thor would get them lost or into danger, and would try to fight his way out until he grew despondent. Then it would be up to Loki to use his skills, tapping into his magic to keep them safe and find the way back.

Thor hadn't grown despondent yet, which was strange, but surely it was just proof that Thor had faith in him to get them out, and he would. He just needed to find Yggdrasil.

To do that, he knew that he needed to travel further and continue his meditations. He would like to leave and find it on his own, but he couldn't risk Thor running off with these idiots, and so Loki would use their vaguely interesting missions for his own uses.

He didn't know why he had joined in on the discussion in their superior's office, especially after the man had seemed disturbingly similar to the Allfather. It was the judging gaze and expectant silence, and the way Thor immediately straightened and seemed to withdraw from him.

But then Aramis had stumbled into Loki's side and it had given him enough of a distraction to break out of the regressive memory, made him see the concern that their captain had for his men—genuine concern that set Treville apart from Odin.

Midgard was full of sentimentality and hope, and most of the time it sickened Loki. Sometimes, however, it made him see how truly cold, how *dreamless* Asgard could be.

Loki heard movement and opened his eyes to see the surly one stir first. Athos dragged a hand over his eyes and then frowned tiredly at him to say, "Why didn't you wake me for the watch?"

Loki shrugged and fed another branch to the fire, the dawn light just barely breaking over their camp. "I was not tired."

Athos sat up and his frown deepened. Loki bristled under that piercing gaze, but then he realised that Athos showed the same concern that Treville had shown, not anger at all. "You will be later today. We are a team, Loki, we share duties."

Loki blinked in amazement; no one ever spoke to him that way, certainly not for his own benefit. Even Thor just got angry with him and yelled, or worse, sighed sadly. It was never soft encouragement that a small part of him felt obliged to follow.

Fortunately, Loki didn't have to think up a reply because Porthos growled, "Not more mornin' people, please. Aramis an' d'Artagnan are enough."

As if to corroborate with that almost pleading remark, d'Artagnan sprang out of bed with all the brightness of youth, and began to noisily fold his bed roll. Porthos groaned loudly, a sentiment that both Thor and Aramis echoed. The latter surprised him, had Porthos not said that Aramis was chipper in the morning?

Loki scowled at himself when he realised he was wondering what had kept the pair up, and scowled further when the thought made him feel sick to his stomach.

He stayed stubbornly silent as the four Musketeers roused themselves and began following a routine unknown to him and Thor. It was quite soothing to watch; each of them had their own tasks and carried them out in silence but with the occasional joke as they rose to full wakefulness.

He and Thor were never like this, and they had travelled together for nigh on a millennium.
Athos collected all of their water-skins and, after a brief glance at Thor who was kicking dirt over the fire-pit, approached him and asked, "Would you mind filling these at the river, Loki?"

Thor stilled to watch over his shoulder, and Aramis sent him a sidelong look as he tended the horses. Loki huffed a sigh and thrust out his hand, "Fine."

He was gifted with a tiny twitch of Athos' lip and a charismatic smile from Aramis.

Loki wasn't pleased; it definitely wasn't warmth in his stomach as he strode in the direction of rushing water. He was doing this because Athos had asked instead of ordered. Besides, they all needed water, didn't they?

With his hands dripping wet and his magic checking for taint in the fresh liquid, he almost didn't notice the faint snapping noise to his left.

He definitely noticed the one on his right.

_Bandits._

There was a sound like a small explosion from both sides, and then Loki was forced to the floor with a heavy weight on his chest. He snapped his head up to see Aramis' handsome face only a hand-span away and frowning in concentration past the contraption in his hands.

Another explosion that Loki felt shudder through the machine in Aramis' arms to his torso, and then a grunt from the trees told him that the mark had been met. On the other, Thor burst through the trees to smash Mjolnir on a man's face, before looking up guiltily to check that none of the Musketeers had seen his show of supernatural strength.

As Thor nodded at him and ran off back to the camp, Loki sighed and let his head tip back to the ground, trying not to snort when Aramis asked silkily, "Come here often?"

"Get off of me," he snarled, but Aramis merely smiled at the flush that Loki knew had bloomed on his own cheeks.

"Of course, _mon ange_," Aramis replied smoothly and took his sweet time standing up.

Loki took great pleasure in ignoring the offered hand and strange words, and instead dusted himself off, turning in a flash when a dark figure approached their side. He swept his sword in and out, the bandit falling easily and leaving them alone once again.

Loki had expected Aramis to appear surprised at his speed, possibly disgusted by his brutality. Loki had not expected admiration and a flash of heat that immediately sliced its way to his gut in a similar way to his sword.

"Be off with you," Loki muttered, annoyed at how much he wanted to smile.

Aramis swept his hat from his head and bowed before smirking at him and disappearing into the trees.

_Arrogant mortal._

Loki continued cutting a swathe through the never-ending stream of bandits, occasionally coming across one of the Musketeers who treated him as if he were one of their own, calling out commands and compliments alike.

It irked him, so he went off on his own again. He didn't understand the strange group, how
accepting they were despite their being strangers.

Loki surprised a brigand who hadn't heard his soft footfalls and jerked when a line of fire opened along his own cheek. Whirling to find the source, he froze when he saw a man aiming a weapon at him that looked a smaller and simpler version of Aramis'. It smoked, and Loki knew that it had to be the cause of the burn; his lip twitched into a sneer.

They dared touch him?

There was too much distance for Loki to do anything except throw his hand out and force his magic from his fingers, delighting in the euphoria that accompanied it. The ball of light began its destructive path but Loki had to twist his fingers in panic when Aramis appeared to kill the man without a second thought.

The light guttered as Loki took an inhaled breath, strange relief flooding him when he saw that he hadn't accidentally hurt Aramis, who merely wiped his blade clean and gifted Loki with a gleaming smile, ignoring his scowl. This marked the second time that the attractive man had appeared out of nowhere to defend him, and Loki was becoming tired of it.

Especially tired of how it made his chest tighten bizarrely.

Aramis' hand went to his hat to do that ridiculously perfect bow, but as soon as his fingers touched the material, he jerked and hissed, a sharp noise distressingly similar to when Loki had bloodied his chest.

Concern gripped him, but Loki didn't know what to do to help the charming mortal. His own fingers lifted, magic sparkling at the tips, but he couldn't use it here. Loki's one skill that he loved, that he was born with, the one that Thor relied on; he couldn't use it, not on Midgard.

He shouldn't use it.

A roar that sounded like a bear ripped through the trees, and Porthos arrived just in time to catch a collapsing Aramis as Loki looked numbly on.

He shouldn't.

Chapter End Notes

So many times have I complained about reading angst and it making me desperate for more chapters, and here I am writing a ridiculous amount of it. Sorrynotsorry, beloved readers, but please review and scream and shout at us! - C

^Any angst she writes is probably my fault. Whoops. I'm a bad influence. - L
Chapter Notes

Loki goes all magic 8 ball on Aramis, Scruff shoots the mystery man, Porthos turns into a minotaur and does his best to headbutt Loki, and Aramis begins global warming with his blanket heat. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was all he could do not to fling the magic at the falling man right then and there, consequences be damned. He quashed the instinctive reaction ruthlessly, yanking the tendrils of magic back to him before they materialized.

He saw Thor watching him and wanted to snarl. No, he would not betray their secret.

Not even for the man with the warm, smiling eyes.

That thought jerked him back to the present and he hurried forward to join the group rapidly forming around the downed Musketeer, trying to force his expression to one of neutrality.

The relief that gripped him when he saw that Aramis was awake, alert, and trying to insist Porthos let him up was shocking in its intensity. How had this man wormed his way past his defenses so quickly? He was disgusted by his own weakness.

Sentiment, a voice chided in the back of his mind.

"Really, it's just a scratch," Aramis protested as Porthos frantically examined his upper back, hands coming away stained red.

"How bad?" Athos asked tersely, ignoring the injured man's remark.

Porthos breathed out a long sigh. "He's got a cut running right between his shoulder blades," he said, sounding relieved. "Needs stitchin', but it won't be fatal as long as we do it soon. How did this 'appen?"

"He was protecting my brother," Thor rumbled before Aramis could answer. Loki stared, recalling the way the man had knocked him to the ground. Had that wound truly been for his benefit?

Porthos face darkened, thunder brewing in his eyes. He half rose, glaring at Loki. "I thought you were a soldier! 'E shouldn't 'ave needed to protect you!"

"Leave him be, Porthos, he didn't ask me to do it," Aramis said archly. His voice was too quiet, somehow. Weak.

"This is your fault," Porthos went on, ignoring Aramis's protests. "If you 'adn't-

"Enough," Athos snapped. Porthos fell silent, crouching down beside Aramis once more. "We need to get somewhere safe. There are still bandits in the woods. It won't be long before they regroup and attack again." The others began to move immediately, fetching horses and hastily shoving belongings in packs.
Porthos helped Aramis to his feet. Loki noted the pale features, the tight line of a mouth more used to smiling than grimacing. The normally graceful movements too stiff, pained. Something didn't add up.

He eyed the back of Aramis's jacket as Porthos helped him to the horses. He could see the line where a blade had caught across his upper back, right between his muscular shoulders. An unpleasant wound, no doubt, but one that would elicit that deeply disturbing hissing sound?

Loki doubted very much that Aramis was the type to make a fuss over such a relatively minor injury. His gaze dropped to the ground where the bandit lay dead, the one that had shot at him. His gun lay by his side. His sword was unbloodied. Loki was worrying for nothing.

He snarled his disgust with himself and turned to join the others pushing through the trees to find a clearing to use as a temporary base. He had been so concerned for a moment, and over a mere mortal, just because he was attractive.

And because he looked at Loki with fire in his eyes.

No. That was insignificant. This whole planet was nothing to him. What would his father say? Shame burned through him.

They made it to the clearing, but Loki could tell from the way Athos watched the woods warily that they were far from safe.

"You should go after them before they regroup," Aramis told him quietly. Loki glanced sharply at him, feeling ice form in his stomach. He knew the look in his eyes.

"You need stitches," Porthos growled. Loki knew from the pained expression that flitted briefly across Aramis's handsome features that it was already far too late. His friends could not save him.

But Loki could.

"I am a skilled physician." The words were out before he thought about what he was saying. Everyone turned to look at him. "I could stay and sew his wounds while you hunt down the remaining bandits."

Thor was watching him, evidently confused, but he smiled encouragingly at Athos. "Yes, my brother is quite skilled," he said, voice tinged with ridiculous pride. Loki prayed he assumed that his knowledge came from a book. Thor might not approve of magical means, but it was the only way now to save Aramis's life.

Athos was staring at him steadily, that calculating look in his eye once more. "Very well," he said at last, drawing his sword and turning away. Loki fought the urge to gape at him, stunned at the unhesitating trust.

"Very well?" Porthos repeated incredulously, rising from his position beside Aramis. "He's the reason Aramis is injured! What if 'e makes it worse?"

At their feet, Aramis gave a weak chuckle. "His stitching can't be worse than yours, mon ami."

There was a desperation in his eyes, barely held in check. Loki understood then that he did not wish Porthos to watch him die.

How very noble.
Athos shot Porthos a commanding glare, calling for d'Artagnan and Thor to join them. Porthos shot Loki one last angry look, muttering viciously, "If you sew 'im crooked, I won't 'ave to kill you myself, 'e'll do it for me."

The second they were gone the strength seemed to drain from Aramis and he slumped back weakly. Loki dropped to his knees beside him, sheath banging against his thighs, and ripped Aramis's jacket off. There it was - a spreading red stain across his lower back surrounding a small hole in his flesh.

"There's no point," Aramis's voice was whisper, nearly carried away by the breeze. "Bullet lodged in my intestines. Nothing to be done."

He was fading fast. Loki called the magic, felt it thrumming in his fingertips as they hovered over the ugly wound. Was he really about to show his powers to a mortal?

Aramis's eyes fluttered shut, and still Loki hesitated. It was beneath him to waste such power on so insignificant a being, and yet a hole opened in his stomach at the thought of doing nothing, of letting those smiling eyes close forever.

The magic was flooding from his fingers before he realized it. Light played along Aramis's skin, brilliant and clear. The broken flesh knitted itself back together, the bullet dissolving into nothingness within him. The skin was pristine, no evidence of the wound remaining on it. Loki smiled to himself, absurdly glad the foolish mortal wasn't going to die.

Aramis drew a long, shuddering breath, and Loki spared a moment to be grateful he was unconscious for this dazzling display.

Only for a moment, however, for now that the fatal wound was dealt with, there was the matter of the other one, and Loki couldn't heal that one with magic too. Porthos would want to see the stitches. He looked down at the needle and thread someone had left beside Aramis.

How hard could it be?

Porthos charged through the bracken after Athos, fighting the urge to run back to camp and make sure Loki didn't mess up. His heart still hadn't recovered from that terrifying moment when Aramis had collapsed against him. He was sure in that moment that his dearest friend had been terribly injured.

And for what? A man who couldn't care less about him.

It made Porthos's blood boil in his veins. A savage part of him roared in triumph as they suddenly burst upon a group of the bandits. He needed to kill something, and these men who had hurt Aramis would do.

His sword sang in the air as he danced through the enemy, noting even as he fought that there was a greater range of organization here. Men were fighting as a united front, rather than attacking individually as they had in the ambush. Two of them almost pinned him against the tree before Thor's hammer ended their miserable lives.

He smiled fiercely at the enormous man, the adrenaline of battle filling him with a fierce joy. Thor returned the expression before diving back into the fray.

Porthos cut down another three men in quick succession and whirled to take on the next, only to find the remaining bandits had grouped together on the far side of the clearing. He moved to
charge them but Athos appeared at his side, a hand held up in warning.

The group of men parted suddenly, allowing a tall, muscular man to pass through their midst. "Ah, Musketeers," he said, a mocking smile playing about his lips. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"And who might you be?" Athos asked, voice sharp enough to cut through steel.

The man's lips twisted in a sneer. "I don't see why I should bother with introductions. You won't be here long enough." More bandits poured out from the trees behind him.

Where were they all coming from?

"You'd be surprised," Athos said bluntly. "Musketeers don't die easily."

The leader, for it had to be he, laughed aloud. "Why, perhaps you should ask your friend that," he said, smiling cruelly. "The one with my bullet in his back."

Porthos's hand fumbled blindly for his gun, the world turning to red haze before his eyes. The man was lying, he had to be, and Porthos would silence him for good.

He wasn't quick enough. The man fell back, a look of utter surprise on his sneering face. Porthos turned to see Athos lowering his gun, face white with rage. Then the world exploded, and he was too busy bashing in the skulls of the unending supply of bandits to think for several minutes.

At long last, the last man fell, his chest crushed by a heavy blow from Thor's hammer. D'Artagnan picked his way towards them across the clearing as Porthos looked to Athos for reassurance.

"He was lying. Aramis would've told us." Even as he spoke, his eyes rose to meet Porthos's, filled with fear.

Would Aramis have told them?

Without another word, they turned and ran back the way they had come. Porthos heard d'Artagnan and Thor fall in behind them, but he did not slow. All he could see was Aramis's blood staining his hands, Aramis lying too still on the ground, Aramis dead...

He burst into the clearing far ahead of the others, shoving Loki aside without a second thought and groping at Aramis's neck with a hand that trembled.

It was there... it had to be...

Ah. A heartbeat.

He scrambled to turn Aramis over, searching his back for the wound the leader had spoken of, but there was nothing but a neat line of stitches between his shoulder blades.

He thought his own heart might stop from the sheer relief. He heard the others stumbling into the clearing. Without taking his eyes off Aramis, he called out, "S'fine, 'e's alive."

"Why wouldn't he be?" Loki asked icily, and Porthos glanced back to see him picking himself up off the ground where he'd been knocked by Porthos's headlong charge.

"Bandit... said he shot him," d'Artagnan panted.

"That's no excuse to be stampeding like a wild creature," Loki sniffed disdainfully, brushing the dust from his breeches. Porthos watched him a bit sheepishly. He didn't like this man, but he had to admit he might owe him an apology.
"Sorry 'bout that," he said gruffly, noting the way Loki's eyes flashed with surprise. "An', uh, thanks. For helpin' 'im." He gestured in Aramis's direction. Loki narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously and didn't reply.

Suddenly self-conscious, he rose to go in search of his pack, wondering why he had even bothered to try and make nice with the icy bastard.

Then he saw Thor's grateful smile, the one that made his face light up like the sun. Well, that was a good reason.

He should be dead.

That was the first thing he was aware of as he clawed his way back to consciousness, fighting past a series of images that made no sense. He remembered pain, and feeling ice creeping through his veins. He remembered the desperate urge to get Porthos away, to keep the inevitable from him.

And then nothing.

But no, that wasn't quite true. He remembered something else, something impossible: Loki, crouching over him, glowing with light. And then the pain was gone.

An angel indeed.

He opened his eyes, blinking in the darkness. He was lying on the ground on top of what felt like every sleeping roll they had carried with them with two cloaks wrapped around him.

Porthos must have been worried.

It was sweet, in its way, except he was actually melting under all the layers, especially with a fire going not ten feet away. Moving carefully, he shrugged out of the cloaks, wondering just what had happened. Had he dreamed the light and the pain?

He glanced around the camp. Athos and d'Artagnan were nowhere to be seen, nor was Thor. Porthos had been crouching by the fire but rose when he heard him moving.

"How d'you feel?"

"Fine," he shrugged, wincing as the motion traced a line of fire between his shoulder blades. Right. He'd taken a blade protecting Loki. "Where is everyone?"

"Athos took Thor an' d'Artagnan out to check if we missed any bandits. Loki's off patrollin' the perimeter or somethin'." Porthos waved a hand dismissively. "An' 'ow are you, really?"


"You're a fuckin' idiot," he growled, concern edging his voice with anger. "What were you thinkin'?"

"I was thinking what a terrible host I would be if I let my guest be run through by a bandit on his first journey with me?" he offered weakly. Porthos didn't even crack a smile.

"What's wrong, mon ami? The wound was not so terrible." He could sense something darker lurking under the edge of Porthos's concern.

Porthos sighed distractedly, one of his hands dropping to clench against Aramis's own. "The
leader of the bandits said 'e'd shot you," he admitted. "I thought… I thought I'd come back an' find you dead, I couldn't bear it."

Aramis stiffened suddenly, remembering. He fought the urge to twist and try to see his back. He could tell from the lack of pain that there was no bullet lodged in his stomach. But how? He could remember it entering; remember thinking I am going to die.

If that was real, was the light? And if it wasn't, was he going mad?

"Well, I am not dead," he said, managing to keep his voice light. "I would not have hidden such a wound from you, cheri." His stomach twisted at the lie, for he had done just that.

"So, how badly did you mangle my stitches?" he asked, hoping to lighten the mood. He pushed the light from his mind for the moment.

Porthos chuckled. "They're fine. I didn't do 'em. You don't remember that?"

Aramis frowned, casting back through his blurred memories. "Wait… did Loki…?"

"You're lucky 'e knew 'ow to sew," Porthos muttered under his breath. Aramis glanced up at him sharply.

"Surely you must think more kindly of him now, Porthos?" he asked in exasperation. "He just stitched up my bleeding wounds and you still don't trust him?"

Porthos opened his mouth to reply but at that moment they heard someone approaching. From the way Porthos's brows drew together angrily, Aramis knew it must be Loki.

Thinking fast, he said, "Would you mind giving me a moment with him? I wish to thank him for saving my life." He had to know if the light was real, had to know how it was he was still alive when he had felt the lead ball resting amidst his organs.

Porthos heaved a long-suffering sigh but clambered to his feet. "I'll go find some firewood," he said loudly enough for Loki to hear him. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He strode off just as a lithe black shadow broke through the trees. Even by the firelight, Aramis could tell from the supple limbs and graceful movements that it was Loki. He sat up, smiling, as Loki cautiously approached.

"It seems I have you to thank for my life," he said cheerfully as soon as Loki's face was illuminated by the fire, the angles of his cheekbones thrown into stark relief in a way that made Aramis's skin prickle invitingly.

He doesn't miss the momentary flicker in those emerald eyes, that brief flash of suspicion. Loki knew more than Porthos, that was clear, and Aramis needed to know what that was. He decided to push his luck. "You did such a wonderful job on both my wounds."

And there. The spark of defiance in the green depths, assessing the threat he posed. So it was true. He had been on the verge of death.

And he had been saved by an angel.

For a long minute, they stared each other down. Aramis broke the silence first. "I merely wished to thank you, mon ange," he said, offering the warmest smile he could to allay Loki's defensiveness. I won't speak of it if you won't."
"If you had been more careful, you wouldn't have needed my help," Loki snapped, sealing the unspoken agreement.

"Ah, but then I might have needed to sew you up." Although that seemed unlikely, all things considered. Angels would not suffer from mortal weapons. And yet the streak of blood along Loki's cheek said otherwise, the one Loki kept touching with some sort of surprise.

Aramis fought down the urge to run his fingers along the cut, to trace the planes of that divine face with his fingertips.

For a moment, Aramis saw Loki pause and check his anger. He swore his angel was about to thank him for his sacrifice, but the next moment his lip twisted and he rose, stalking towards the far side of the fire just as Porthos emerged from the trees.

"You finished?" he asked Aramis gruffly, dropping a pile of sticks beside the fire. He had barely been gone five minutes, clearly still too concerned to leave Aramis alone. Aramis shook his head fondly at him.

"I suppose I am now," he said wryly. Porthos dropped to sit beside him. For a moment, Aramis debated telling him about the light, but he decided against it.

It was his own private miracle. He had an angel watching over him.

Chapter End Notes

And they said that a crossover between Avengers and Musketeers couldn't be done. WELL WE SHOWED THEM. We showed them.

I don't know who I'm talking about, I'm just enjoying leaving these silly notes for you to find. - C

^Ahahaha leaving this for you lovely readers to chuckle over. Tell me, is our banter as fun as the boys'? Well, probably not, but a girl can dream. - L

Of course we're as funny as the boys, we wrote them ;D - C
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Loki tells himself all manner of lies and half-truths so that he doesn't admit anything that might risk sounding sentimental, and Aramis watches Loki change from terrifyingly aloof bad-ass, to terrifyingly aloof little brother. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki was in a foul temper.

Athos had forced him into sleeping last night, when all he had wanted to do was meditate and try to take his mind off of, well, everything. He could easily keep watch over the group whilst he searched for Asgard, and he had never been burdened with a need for rest.

Instead, Athos had settled on the ground next to him with the air of someone wanting to talk, and so Loki had rolled over and begged for sleep to come.

Forced, he had been forced into sleeping.

If that wasn't the worst of it, his magic had been beckoning him. Numerous times had he caught himself with his hand outstretched and on the brink of easing a task; little things like putting out the fire, cooling their drinking water, or easing an ache on Thor's stallion's leg where his brother rode too hard.

Loki had never had to hold himself back from using his birthright before and to do so was proving difficult. It tingled in his fingertips and whispered invitingly ever since he had expended so much of it on Aramis.

Aramis who had been wincing ever since they had set off that morning, plainly suffering from the wounds Loki hadn't allowed himself to heal. It made his palms itch to see the man's distress, but Loki assured himself it would be the same whoever had been injured.

It didn't make any difference that it was the winces of the warm eyed man that threw himself in harm's way for him.

No difference at all.

Porthos broke from Thor's side to check on Aramis, making it the sixteenth time he had done so. The dark man had been rotating between Thor and Aramis as if on clockwork, and Loki was half-tempted to trip the man's horse just to halt the infuriatingly repetitive proceedings.

Their return to Paris meant that Loki wouldn't be able to meditate tonight, not unless he found a moment of silence – evidently that would be impossible with these obnoxious fools that were so like Thor's friends that it was startling.

Athos reminded him of Hogun, quiet and unassuming but possessing a streak of unbending steel that Loki had to respect. Porthos was Volstagg, loud and booming, and capable of a backhand that would break a man's neck. Aramis' graceful movements were very like Fandral's, but Aramis was definitely the more charming.
Wait, did that make Loki, d'Artagnan, the quiet shadow that, with the foolishness of youth, looked up to his brothers?

Now Loki was restless and angry.

He fervently hoped that the Musketeers' Captain would have something new for them tomorrow, so that he would have a guise to travel again. It would be diverting to have another task, of course, but that wasn't the point.

Every day that they spent here was testament to his failure to get them home, and Loki refused to even entertain the idea of waiting for a rescue.

A movement at his left showed Athos approaching, and Loki didn't bother hiding his sigh. Would the man assault him on the road where he couldn't in camp? Loki eyed the horizon and wondered how fast he would have to canter to escape the persistent group.

"Thank you for helping, yesterday," Athos said quietly as he reined in next to Loki's mare - who flipped an idle ear Athos' way. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

Loki somehow managed to restrain his surprise and instead muttered, "Thor often led us into scrapes, I am used to them."

A half-smile tugged at Athos' strangely twisted lip and it made him handsome, the darkness in his eyes receding to be replaced with amusement. "Actually, I meant your skills with Aramis, but you and your brother were indeed useful. However, I pray Thor does not encourage Porthos to pick up a similar weapon."

Loki raised an eyebrow that belied his intention to not care, even as he realised that the four Musketeers would have done just as well on their own. They were a formidable group, he had to admit. "You do not approve of Mjolnir?" Everyone praised the rune-forged hammer, even those who didn't know of the worthiness enchantment upon it – and perhaps he should remind Thor to keep it from mortal hands.

Loki shouldn't be the only one who had to hold himself back.

"Far from it, in fact – Mjolnir, was it? – is a force to be reckoned with, but I find that there is nothing quite like the song of a sword."

Loki glanced at the polished sword on Athos' other hip, the diamond in the hilt glinting in a way that indicated wealth far beyond a mere soldier. "Has it a name?"

Athos' face lit into a greater smile and Loki almost felt one curve his own mouth at the man's obvious adoration. Athos' fingers clasped under the gleaming guard as he said fondly, "Hauteclere."

Loki nodded his head and returned his attention to the road, refusing to give in to the urge to continue the entertaining discussion, to challenge the man who Aramis and Porthos deemed the best swordsman that had ever existed.

It wouldn't do to dethrone their leader, after all.

Perhaps there would be time for it later, when he wasn't so determined to not enjoy himself.

Loki's magic curled up his arm as the sun beat mercilessly upon them and, absent-mindedly, his hand lifted to cool the air. He couldn't hold back the noise of distress that escaped him as he had to once again quash the glorious power, letting the overpowering heat reign.
Aramis flinched at the sound and twisted in his saddle to look back at him, hissing when his stitches tore from the effort.

Loki immediately surged forward and, before he had even realised, placed a sliver of magic against Aramis' back, retying the stitches with an icy burst that bloomed through his palm and made them both sigh.

Aramis inhaled sharply, his eyelids fluttering as his tense shoulders finally relaxed for the first time that day, before casting Loki a look that spoke of remembrance.

Loki snatched his hand back as if Aramis had burned him, self-loathing rising until he sneered at the gentle words of gratitude from the wondering man.

Loki had forgotten himself again, his concern getting the better of him once more. Midgard was making him soft, and the sooner he was off of this ridiculous planet, the better.

Aramis watched Loki spur his horse onwards, lengthening the gap between them until Aramis would have to yell to get his attention. It upset him a little and he replayed what had just happened in his head. The excruciating pain along his shoulder blades had eased with startling swiftness, and the soothing chill in his veins felt very familiar.

Familiar to when he had courted death and an angel had kept him breathing.

That same breath caught as Loki broke into a canter and Aramis was torn between feeling worried for him, and admiring his perfect seat in the saddle.

A jingle of tack to his right was Porthos once again returning to his side, muttering, "Idiot."

"He helped me, remember," Aramis replied with some amusement.

"I wasn't talkin' about 'im." Porthos bestowed him with a scowl and grumbled.

Aramis laughed, bright and clear and blissfully free from pain. It seemed to lighten the mood because, for the rest of the trip back, they called taunts and smiled at each other over the horses. Thor proved to be a veritable trove of delights, and they all cracked up into chuckles whenever Porthos told a dirty joke that made Thor flush adorably.

Where Loki seemed to be dark and mysterious, Thor was light and innocent. It was a fantastic dichotomy that served to entertain Aramis even as it stirred his curiosity.

They only caught up with the dark mystery just outside of Paris. Loki had a closed expression on his face but was suspiciously free from the sweat and heat-exhaustion that the rest of them were suffering from.

What tricks did his angel have?

It was a relief to stable their horses – and watch Loki murmur a fond farewell to his – and take shelter from the heat in Treville's office. Their captain had looked up in surprise when they barrelled in, Thor desperately trying to figure out exactly where one would put such an object shaped suspiciously like—
"Back so soon?" Treville interrupted in a timely fashion, trying not to smile at Porthos' lecherous grin.

"It seemed our extra hands came in useful," Athos said with forced-innocence, smirking when pink streaked across Thor's cheeks. "The groups had, indeed, banded under a leader."

Treville's smile dropped and he rummaged on his desk for some papers. "I had meant to send a runner but you had already left – the leader's name is Antoine Soulier."

"Was," Porthos corrected with a murderous look in his eye that finally answered a question Aramis had been too afraid to ask.

His brush with death had been avenged.

Relief flooded him, knocking down the final barrier that the absence of pain had exposed. His shoulder blades had itched from more than the wound across them, for he had been convinced that his almost-killer would appear to finish the job.

Men as determined as Soulier did not let their targets escape easily.

"Was?" Treville looked up from his hands. "You're sure?"

Aramis noticed the way Porthos tensed and how Athos' hand brushed against his pistol, and reminded himself to buy his beloved friends a few rounds of drinks tonight.

Treville followed the movement too and nodded with a relieved sigh. "Good, he was a nasty piece of work. It turned out that he fell out of favour with the King and, ah, he was declined a commission in the regiment."

Athos raised an eyebrow. "When was this?"

To all of their surprised amusement, Treville ducked his head and muttered, "A few months ago."

Loki's sigh was world-weary. "You humiliated him, so he had an axe to grind."

Treville nodded a little shame-facedly. "Had I known he would run off to Lagny-sur-Marne and start a coup, I would have gone about it differently."

"No matter," Aramis said easily, despite the faint stirrings of discomfort where his fatal injury had been. "He's dealt with."

"Yes, and no worse for wear, I see," Treville said as he subtly looked them over for injuries. His eyes caught on the cut across Loki's cheek and the sight made him mutter, "Don't let Marie see that."

Thor and Loki frowned as the rest of them chuckled, prompting Treville to smile and explain, "My wife. She holds me responsible for every wound my men receive."

Thor laughed before replying, "Our mother is the same. We would receive further punishment on top of our injuries for receiving them."

Something that might have been a smile ghosted across Loki's lips and Aramis wondered what such a woman would be like, to mother two completely different boys, to make even Loki smile fondly.

Perhaps angelicism ran in the family, and yet Thor did not seem as blessed by it.
Aramis looked askance at the large, light, blonde man, and amended, *well, perhaps a little blessed.*

"Go," Treville dismissed them with a distracted wave. "Have the night off and return tomorrow, I'll find you something. You did well today."

With proud grins on all of their faces, they clattered down the stairs, Loki a quiet presence at Aramis' side. His fingers itched to sew the slightly bloody line across that sharp cheekbone, and he raised his hand to offer.

"You're back already?" A shocked, feminine voice sang from the kitchens. "Come; let me take a look at you!"

They turned as one and d'Artagnan whined under his breath, "I just ate, I can't eat anymore."

Thor frowned down at the boy but took a startled step back when a woman bustled past him to lift gentle fingers to d'Artagnan's jaw. She was a little plump, and flour dusted her comfortable – yet elegant – dress. The frown on her brow did nothing to detract from her beauty, but added to the silver of her hair it made her a little stern as she chided, "You're skin and bones, d'Artagnan! Why aren't these boys feeding you?"

"We do feed him, Madame," Athos drawled fondly. "He is just destined to be slim."

"Yeah, at least there's less of 'im to shoot," Porthos called out tauntingly as he sat down and propped his legs up on the closest table. Their captain's wife merely raised an eyebrow, and Porthos immediately ducked his head and placed his feet back on the floor with a sheepish grin.

The brothers were watching these proceedings with something akin to confusion on their lofty brows, so Aramis stepped in to help them along. "Madame Marie Treville? This is Thor and Loki of...?" He trailed off with a surprised tone to his question, realising that he still didn't know where they were from.

"Of Asgard," Thor supplied helpfully, and Loki seemed to exhale in exasperation.

"Asgard? That's in the mountains, is it not? I'm sure I have heard of it before." Marie asked, but didn't notice, as Aramis did, the way Thor looked to his brother for guidance.

"Yes, we're quite far from home," Loki replied politely.

The four Musketeers rolled their eyes, for they knew what would happen next.

"Mon Dieu! And my husband sent you out on errands? You poor darlings! Here, sit; let me find you some sustenance. You look half-starved!"

Thor perked up at the mention of food, but Loki didn't seem to know how to react to the openly affectionate woman. Loki blinked at Marie until she hooked her arm with his and ushered him over to the table, where she exclaimed, "Just as thin as d'Artagnan! I will fetch you a larger portion."

Emerald eyes locked with Aramis' and they screamed *'help', before cutting to d'Artagnan and glaring when the boy snickered.
Marie caught the look and gently tapped d'Artagnan on the cheek. "You too, mon fils, sit down."

D'Artagnan groaned good-naturedly, but dutifully began to eat when Thor remarked kindly, "Eat up. You'll need your strength if we're to be off tomorrow."

Aramis shared an amused glance with Athos at that presumptuous 'we', but Athos covered his by nodding sombrely. "Yes, we will be busy by all accounts."

Porthos pouted at this announcement. "We're goin' to the tavern, though, right? I won't go back out on an empty stomach." Marie placed a bowl of food in front of him and he muttered, "I meant a drink."

Marie cuffed him on the back of the head and disappeared now that her fussing was accomplished. As they laughed, Aramis found himself – as he often had since yesterday – watching Loki, who seemed entirely too innocent all of a sudden.

D'Artagnan reeled to dodge a roll that Porthos had thrown, when the boy settled back down, he frowned at his full bowl before looking at Loki's empty one. "Hey, what—?"

"What?" Loki interrupted coldly, shutting d'Artagnan down instantly.

"Nothing," d'Artagnan replied meekly, which prompted Thor to look between them.

"Loki did not eat his food," Thor remarked matter-of-factly, to which Loki first checked for Marie and then glared at his brother with the force of a thousand suns.

"What do you see before you, Thor? An empty plate."

"That is not yours, it is d'Artagnan's."

"What are you suggesting? That I, somehow, swapped them? When – and indeed, how – would I do that?"

Porthos grunted around his spoon, "S'a good point, we're all sat right 'ere."

"My brother is excellent at sleight-of-hand," Thor commented simply before reaching over to take the troubling bowl and eating from it himself.

The rest of them stared wonderingly at Loki, who simply pretended that none of them existed.

Aramis couldn't take it any longer, he cracked up. When Loki bestowed him with a withering look, he laughed even harder, until it hurt to take a breath.

Athos laid a steadying hand on his shoulder when Aramis choked trying to dodge a roll that appeared out of nowhere. Aramis could hazard a guess as to its source when Thor frowned at his brother but Loki maintained his scowl at the table, whilst d'Artagnan watched the pair with wary amusement.

To see his haughty angel engage in nothing less than bickering with his brother, was absolutely delightful.

It made him wonder quite how unrestrained Loki could become.

"You know," Aramis said slyly, "I think those drinks wouldn't go amiss."

Porthos met his eye with a ribald grin as Athos spread his hands in faux-reluctance and said, "To
the tavern it is, then."

Did angels have a high alcohol tolerance?

Aramis rather hoped not.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it, just as Aramis enjoys seeing Loki loosen up a little - and by a little, I mean that he holds himself so tight that Aramis could basically use him as a shield, or a bed... Please review! :D - C

And we're all waiting for THAT day to come :) - L
To no one's surprise, it was Porthos who suggested a drinking contest. It had taken a single round for the Musketeers to see that their guests could hold their wine as well as Athos, and Aramis had a suspicion that Porthos hoped to get Thor staggering drunk and see where that led.

Not that he was about to complain, for he saw the interest that flashed in Loki's emerald eyes at the suggestion.

"An excellent idea!" Thor cried, slapping a heavy hand on Porthos's shoulder. Aramis smirked at the appraising look in his friend's eyes. Porthos was not exactly subtle.

Loki shifted beside his brother and Aramis found his eyes drawn to the line of his jaw. Then again, neither was he. Damn d'Artagnan for taking the spot on his other side.

"I don't think I'm up for this," d'Artagnan said with a laugh, extricating himself from the crowded table. "Athos can drink two of me on a good night. I've no chance at all." Porthos checked and Athos raised his tankard with a wry smile.

"Besides, Constance is waiting for me," d'Artagnan added with a sly grin, and Aramis raised his tankard in salute as the boy darted off. If all went well, perhaps d'Artagnan would not be the only one passing the night in enjoyable company.

Aramis slipped into d'Artagnan's empty chair without missing a beat, casually letting his leg brush against Loki's without glancing towards him. Loki drew away and Aramis had to stifle a sigh. He truly hoped the man would be more amenable drunk.

"Bartender! We'll need wine… a great deal more wine!" Porthos called. In a few minutes they were ready. Aramis leaned in to fill his tankard again, careful to let his arm slide along Loki's as he did so.

"May the best man win!" Porthos said, smiling broadly as he raised his tankard in a toast. Athos smirked, but Aramis noticed Loki and Thor looked uncomfortable for a split second before echoing the gesture.

Interesting.

Perhaps angels did not count as 'men.'

It was some time before any effects became visible, but when they did, it was something to
behold. Athos, naturally, seemed no different than he did any other night in the tavern. Porthos grew boisterous, as did Thor, while Loki showed no effects whatsoever.

Aramis himself, though he would never admit it aloud, became tactile when drunk. He almost regretted not sitting next to Porthos, whom he could have draped himself over with hardly a raised eyebrow, because every move Loki made sent desire racing through his limbs. He wanted to reach out and wrap an arm around that slim waist, lean against Loki's lean frame, run a hand down his spine to see if he stiffened, but he resisted.

Ought to get a medal from the king for my immense strength of will, he thought hazily. They'd gone through several bottles already and showed no signs of slowing. No one was bothering to keep count. Good sense might kick in if they tried.

"You ought'a admit defeat right now!" Porthos said loudly, a broad grin stretching across his handsome face as he nudged Thor in the ribs. "Our Athos 'as never been out-drank!"

"Nor have I!" Thor said happily, refilling his tankard. "It shall be a glorious battle!"

And so it went on. Another bottle down and Aramis lost the battle with self-control.

There goes my medal, he thought mournfully as he found his hand resting possessively on Loki's shoulder. It was cool beneath his palm. To his surprise, Loki did not shrug him off. He seemed intent on something else. He seemed to be watching Thor, who was certainly on the path to being well and truly hammered.

Aramis paused for a moment, watching with fascination as Loki's lips curled into a tiny smile and he nodded to himself, looking pleased. He raised his tankard to his perfect lips and Aramis fought the urge to bat it aside and trace them with his fingers, curious about whatever it was that was making his angel smile.

The tankard touched Loki's lips and the air glimmered for a fraction of a second. Aramis blinked. Loki set the tankard down once more, and the level had decreased. But he had never swallowed.

Aramis was momentarily distracted by the thought of Loki swallowing, perfect lips wrapped around… no, no, he was not going there this early in the evening.

He glanced at Loki, who was still watching Thor surreptitiously. That confirmed it in his mind: Loki was cheating. His angel was using his powers to make his wine disappear.

Aramis was torn between shock and amusement. He hadn't thought an angel would put his talents to such base use. Loki truly was a fallen angel. He thought of the darkness smoldering in those emerald eyes, the disdain that curled his lips. It was certainly possible.

Loki must have sensed him watching him, for a moment later brilliant eyes turned his way and Loki jerked his shoulder out from under his hand. Smirking, Aramis glanced pointedly at the cup and winked in what was probably a ridiculously exaggerated manner, but it seemed to do the job. For just a moment, amusement lit in Loki's eyes and his face softened into something less disdainful and more… mischievous. It made Aramis's blood race.

Athos's sudden laughter brought drew Loki's attention away again. Surprised, Aramis looked over to where Athos sat, an astonishingly wide smile lighting his features. He looked… happy.

Porthos was beginning to sway in his seat, leaning heavily on Thor, whose attempts to refill his tankard left more wine on the table than in his cup. Athos laughed again at the attempt, and Aramis stared at him, shocked. For the first time in living memory, he had passed through the brooding phase and entered the happy drunken state.
"Ar'mis, you've got t' have some more wine," Athos slurred, reaching across the table to press a fresh bottle into Aramis's hands. He realized that he'd had far less than any of his companions.

Loki raised his tankard again and Aramis saw Thor glance up, a slight frown appearing between his eyes. Aramis reached forward and all but threw his tankard across the table from the force of his feigned spill as he reached for the bottle in Athos's hand, but it distracted Thor while Loki magicked away more of the wine.

"He can't 'old 'is liquor!" Porthos rumbled happily, and the others laughed, but Aramis could feel Loki's eyes on him.

Fingers brushed the back of his shoulder and Aramis had to fight not to stiffen in shock. Loki was touching him. A moment later the pressure withdrew, but Aramis read the silent acknowledgment in the gesture. His head suddenly felt far clearer.

How odd.

Athos suddenly grabbed up a full bottle of wine and made a valiant attempt to down it in one go. Porthos and Thor let out loud cheers as Athos leaned back in his chair, head flung back. He was about a quarter of the way through the bottle when he leaned too far backwards and fell, rolling over the chair to fall flat on his back. Porthos and Thor roared with laughter, and even Loki smirked.

Athos attempted to get to his feet but fell back a moment later as his feet got tangled with the chair legs, eyes falling shut. Aramis was on the verge of rising to make sure he hadn't injured himself in the fall when a loud snore emanated from the floor.

"One down!" Porthos crowed, collecting the fallen bottle and passing it to Thor. Aramis subtly nudged the bottle Athos had pressed upon him towards Porthos, hiding a grin when his friend swept it up.

It wouldn't be long now.

His prediction was correct. Porthos held his liquor well, but after a certain point it all hit him at once and he went down like a brick wall. It seemed Thor was much the same, for within ten minutes the pair of them were face down on the table, snoring like wild beasts, while Aramis grinned in delight and even Loki allowed a smile of triumph.

By unspoken agreement Aramis conceded that Loki was the winner. He was no fool, and he wasn't going to continue a fight he had no chance of winning.

Though Porthos would say that his pursuit of Loki was precisely that.

Loki turned that small, pleased smile on Aramis, and he realized he didn't give a damn if this was an impossible task. He would win his dark angel over or fail in the attempt.

He was perhaps feeling a bit too proud of himself at the moment, but it was hard not to with Aramis gazing at him with what could only be termed 'drunken adoration' and the rest of his companions out cold. Thor could outdrink Loki, but Loki could outsmart him. It wasn't an unusual end to a drinking game.

But no one had ever caught him in the act before.

Aramis’s approval and assistance had been entirely unexpected, and if Loki was being honest, not
unwelcome. He had preened a bit under the focused attention, unused to the feeling of being admired.

He was also a tad drunk from the wine he had been forced to consume until Thor was too inebriated to notice his magic, which was turning his normally ordered thoughts to chaos and making it very difficult to ignore the enormous brown eyes watching him so devotedly.

"To your victory, mon ange," Aramis murmured huskily, raising a glass. Loki frowned at the unfamiliar word but resisted the temptation to ask its meaning, refusing to appear ignorant before the mortal with the burning glances.

He tried very hard not to watch the way Aramis's lips fitted against the rough wood of the tankard as he sipped the wine.

Scowling, he forced himself to look away, allowing bitterness to sweep away the wine his magic had failed to purge from his bloodstream. Aramis was nothing more than an irritating mortal. Loki sneered, remembering his own pleasure when Aramis had accepted his magic. What had he expected? The man was drunk.

But, no, what had Aramis called it, his 'light'? He had not been incapacitated by wine then, and still he had looked on Loki with awe.

Loki allowed himself a small smile. Silly Midgardians. Still, his heart lightened enough to allow him to turn back and meet Aramis's smiling eyes.

"Perhaps we ought to do something about them?" he asked, trying to distract Aramis from his apparent goal of staring at Loki for the rest of the night.

Aramis glanced around in surprise as if he had forgotten the others were there. "Athos..." he muttered distractedly, trying to rise.

"He's fine," Loki cut him off at once, embarrassed at his own desire to spare the man worry. Athos was, in fact, fine, the hard-headed idiot. Loki, to his shame, had checked the man for injuries the moment he had fallen. Not that he would ever admit it.

Aramis, for all his slowed perception, seemed to see right through his mask of indifference and a small, pleased grin crept across his features. Nevertheless, he rose and walked unsteadily until he was kneeling by Athos, reaching down and shaking the man's shoulder.

To Loki's surprise, Athos woke after a moment. The man had drunk enough wine to render even Volstagg unconscious, and yet he glared at Aramis with an expression that was alert and irritated.

Aramis must have noted Loki's surprise, for he explained with a smile, "Athos can usually go far longer than that. If he hadn't fallen, even you might not have been able to best him."

"Help me get Porthos," Aramis ordered as he pulled Athos to his feet. Loki supposed that left Thor to his tender mercies.

Between the two of them, Aramis and Athos managed to get their sleeping companion slung between them, though Loki had his doubts about whether Athos would be able to keep his feet. Loki himself put on a show of getting Thor up but secretly sent magic to levitate his giant brother in such a way that Loki merely appeared to be carrying him. He was strong, but no one should have to deal with Thor's deadweight.

Aramis led the way back to the garrison rooms, Athos stumbling beside him and barely managing to keep Porthos from dragging them all down to the road. Once or twice on the way back, Loki
thought he heard footsteps behind them, but when he turned, there was no one there, and he had to hurry to catch up to the three men staggering ahead of him.

When they reached the garrison, Athos peeled off almost at once, staggering down a different hallway until he came up against a door.

"Athos's rooms are down there," Aramis said, panting slightly from the effort of bearing Porthos's weight on his own. The larger man had come to but was still too uncoordinated to do much more than move his legs in a vaguely cumbersome manner.

Loki pushed away an urge to help Aramis with his burden. A vindictive part of him wanted Aramis to drop the irksome Musketeer, but another worried that Aramis would injure himself in the process. In the end, he sent just enough magic to ensure Aramis wouldn't career off the edge of the balcony, cursing himself all the while for his sentimentally.

He blamed it on the wine.

He could hear Aramis murmuring what sounded like encouragement to Porthos as they neared the rooms. A few steps closer told him it was actually a mix of compliments that Loki found oddly irritating and affectionate threats to dunk Porthos in the water trough next time he got so drunk he couldn't walk.

Another compliment to 'Porthos's prodigious strength' and Loki would do it himself.

They had just reached the proper set of doors when Porthos gained his feet for a moment, smiling broadly at Aramis as he attempted to find the proper keys.

"Ar'mis, I di'n't know you could hold your liq'r so well!"

Aramis rolled his eyes as he finally located the key, tilting his head enough to catch Loki's eye.

Loki smirked, having often been on the receiving end of that particular phrase. Honestly, it was unbelievable that Thor had never realized Loki cheated during drinking games. He was a model of oafish gullibility, but Loki found himself unable to muster the proper amount of disdain for his brother at the moment.

Must be the alcohol.

Once both doors were open, Aramis paused, looking back at him with a question in his eyes. Loki realized with a sinking feeling that he was going to have to share at room with his enormous, snoring brother. He was just plotting ways to silence Thor without damaging him when a look of mischief danced across Aramis's face.

"Why don't we put Porthos and Thor in together?" he asked, smirking devilishly. Loki fought the urge to laugh but allowed himself a smile as he nodded, imagining the awkward awakening the two men would have.

He completely forgot to consider where Aramis would be sleeping until he was standing in the middle of the room, looking back at the doorway, with Aramis lounging against the wall with a very different smile on his face.

"So…" he drawled, charm all but oozing off of him as he raised one arm above his head to brace himself against the doorframe. In the darkness of the room, Loki could only make out his striking silhouette. "It's an awfully long trip back to my lodging house, and it's quite late…"

It took Loki's brain an obscene amount of time to work out what Aramis was implying. By the
time his mind caught up, Aramis was already shutting the door, crowding into Loki's space in a way that made his clothing feel too tight.

"It's my room," he protested, but his voice failed to take an appropriately icy tone.

Aramis smiled wolfishly. "Well, actually, it's mine, but we can share. The bed is large enough." Loki glanced back at the narrow bed. They'd have to lie atop one another to both fit... ahh.

With an immense effort, he brought his thoughts back under strict control and leveled a cold glare at Aramis.

"We shall not-" he began stiffly, but Aramis's laughter cut him off.

"Of course not, mon ange," he said, still grinning. "I shall, of course, take the chair unless otherwise invited." His voice curled teasingly around the last word, but Loki did not allow his thoughts to linger.

"Very good," he said shortly. He refused to allow any emotion to cross his face, worried he might show a glimpse of the amazement he felt in the face of Aramis's sincere generosity. He settled himself on Aramis's bed, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he resisted the temptation to glance over at the handsome man making himself comfortable on the hard chair in the corner.

After a few minutes of lying there, too aware of his roommate, guilt began to war with hesitation in his chest. This was Aramis's bed, and he had made no secret of his interest or his unflinching acceptance. Disdain kept Loki aloof, but Aramis was vibrant and alive, and for once Loki wondered if, perhaps, he shouldn't fight so hard against what he wanted.

Before he could think about it any longer, he sat up and blurted out, "Aramis-

A soft snore cut through the silence before he could say anymore. He was too late.

Cursing his own weakness, Loki lay back down on the bed, refusing to acknowledge the disappointment clawing through his chest.

He stared at the ceiling long into the night.

When Porthos woke in the gentle predawn light, his first thought was that Aramis was much too far away. He grumbled incoherently and tried to tug Aramis closer before pausing. Aramis's biceps were not that large last nigh- Shit.

It was Thor.

Well, technically they were both still asleep. If his arm just happened to creep over Thor and gently pull the slumbering man closer, well, he could hardly be blamed.

And if Thor responded enthusiastically and nestled into his embrace, all that could be said was that they were cuddly drunks, that was all. No one could fault them for that.

He wondered vaguely where Aramis was and chuckled to himself as he connected the dots. That little flirt, he thought. He read me too well.

And after Porthos had berated him for fancying Loki, too.

His last thought before he fell back asleep, curled against Thor's warm back, was that Aramis
would never let him live this down.

Chapter End Notes

I always forget about that last little scene and end up grinning like an absolute looby (casually tell that I've been reading Beka Cooper). Standard thanks-for-reading-gief-reviews-naaaaw. - C

^These are probably the kinds of things I was meant to edit out but c'mon man this is funnier. Also, is that a hint of Thor/Porthos I wrote in there? ...PORTHUNDER - L

ALL ABOARD THE S.S. PORTHUNDER, TOOT TOOT, READERS, TOOT TOOT - C
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Aramis feels the repercussions of being a gallant gentleman in the aches in his muscles, and Loki picks a fight like the brat that he is. Athos schools Loki in the ways of being a Musketeer. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aramis woke up from a rather delightful dream about smirks and moonlight, and wondered why his back felt like he had fallen asleep in the saddle, as well as why his head was telling him that he had drunk far too much last night.

His eyes opened onto a familiar ceiling. This was his room. Why hadn't he-?

Aramis' hand leaped to his sore neck with a small noise of distress as he tried to look at what had kept him from lying in his bed. Loki, on his back, his eyes closed, eyelashes dark against his pale cheekbones.

Aramis remembered – he was needing to do that a lot, lately.

For a moment, he thought about how he had dreamed of Loki saying his name. That had been the start of his dream, actually, and it had ended with Loki saying it again, but with a considerably higher note to his needy voice…

Aramis coughed self-consciously and shook his head, trying not to focus on cruel lips that were relaxed in repose. Loki looked serene again, like he had when he had bathed in the moonlight in Marteaux Forest.

Light flashed in front of Aramis' eyes and he jerked to his feet, whirling when he felt something move against his shoulders. It was a blanket, the one that normally hung over the end of his bed.

His heartbeat settled as he realised that there was no danger, and he aimed a considering look at the supposedly cold angel. Had it been Loki who had wrapped him up to keep him warm, or had Aramis done it himself?

Emerald eyes flicked open and locked onto his shoulders, and Aramis smiled. There was his answer.

"Sleep well, mon ange?"

Loki gave him an unimpressed look and replied scathingly, "No, you snore."

Aramis chuckled and stretched, enjoying the way green eyes tracked fire across his stomach. "I'm sure there's a medical explanation to that, I did have to sleep in a chair."

Amazingly, something that almost looked like guilt flew across Loki's face as he sat up. He almost appeared to say something, his mouth opening hesitantly, but then they both looked at the wall when they heard movement beyond.

Aramis, with a sly smile at a hazy memory, strode to the door and flung it open. Thor scrambled
back as if Aramis had scared him, but there had already been pink staining the blond's face.

"Good morning, Thor," Aramis murmured, valiantly keeping all lewd insinuation out of his voice. Thor mumbled something incoherent back and practically ran down the hallway.

Laughing under his breath, Aramis looked back to see Porthos closing his door with satisfied victory completely lighting his features.

"Had a good night?" Aramis asked with faux-innocence.

"Nope," Porthos pretended to grumble. "Slept right through it."

Aramis shared a knowing, considerably lewd grin with him before turning to see Loki with a confused frown on his face as he joined them at the doorway. "Where's Thor?"

"Went for some fresh air," Porthos answered sombrely. "Said 'e felt too warm, somethin' about a heavy blanket or..."

Aramis clamped his teeth around his lower lip and struggled not to laugh out loud, having no trouble picturing Porthos draped over an unconscious, softly smiling Thor.

Loki, however, didn't quite seem to catch on. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, said 'e'd never slept so well, actually."

Aramis' cheek twitched and he gave Porthos an amused glare, trying to tell him to stop teasing poor Loki.

That was Aramis' job.

He certainly relished it when he pretended not to notice that Loki was trying to get past, and, instead, savoured the heated flush across pale cheeks when Loki's chest came into contact with his.

Porthos snorted and Loki shot him a glower that could have killed a lesser man.

Loki strode haughtily down the corridor and Aramis allowed himself a moment to admire the lithe figure before smiling at Porthos' raised eyebrow.

"Something to say, mon ami?" Aramis asked with arch challenge.

"Can I say anythin' ever again?"

"No," Aramis replied with a dark smile from under his lashes. "But you're welcome to thank me."

Porthos slung his arm around Aramis' shoulders and grumbled, "Yeah, yeah, we'll see."

Aramis chuckled and leaned comfortably against Porthos, allowing himself to be herded along the hallway by the larger man. "Indeed, we will."

They tumbled apart with a laugh outside, and saw Loki appraising Athos with a respectful tilt of his head. Aramis knew exactly why it was, it was because Athos had that ability to appear completely sober even though he had almost been stone-cold drunk the night before.

As predicted, Athos' hair glittered in the midday light, water droplets still trickling down his neck, the signs of a man who had dunked his head in a bucket when he realised that he had to get up.
D'Artagnan was the only one who appeared genuinely awake as he strutted in, a frustratingly bright smile on his face of a young man who had enjoyed a wonderful night. "Who won then?"

Loki's assessing gaze slipped over to him and Aramis felt his own bright smile form at the sight. "Loki did."

Aramis was rewarded with a flash of a smirk and enjoyed Loki's pleased, acknowledging nod when d'Artagnan congratulated him.

To think that this was the same arrogant angel who had once regarded him so coldly.

Thor appeared, to d'Artagnan's cry of welcome, and then it was down to business. Athos brandished a note from his jacket and said quietly, "Treville wants us to meet a courier outside of the Paris; we're to wait until they arrive."

"I love easy tasks," Porthos sighed happily.

"*Je suis désolé,* but why do I think that the Captain wouldn't send us all for something so simple?" Aramis asked dubiously, patting Porthos on the shoulder when his friend's face dropped.

"Aramis is being the realistic one? Surely not," d'Artagnan teased, and grinned proudly when Thor chuckled.

"He's right," Athos admitted with a tilt to his lip. "Treville expects an ambush."

Loki frowned. "Why not just have the courier come into the city?"

Aramis met Athos' eye and read the allowance there, the confirmation that Aramis could speak about this. "The Musketeers have opposition here. It's easier for everyone if we keep it under wraps."

Thor crossed his arms in confusion. "Can your king not rout these unlawful types out?"

Loki gave his brother a look that appeared emotionless, but it made Thor duck his head in apology. Strange.

Porthos shifted his weight from foot-to-foot. "Nah— well, the shady ones ain't necessarily the problem – they keep to 'emselves," he said the last fondly, referring to the Court of Miracles. "S'the ones in the palace that end up causin' the most trouble."

"Spies—?" Thor started, seeming almost offended on Louis' behalf, to their amusement. Cardinal Richelieu might well be the very best spy that had ever existed, as no one else had managed to work their way to the King's right hand.

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Aramis hushed them all. "Let's talk about this on the road, if we must."

They immediately set off for the stables, and Aramis wondered why Loki kept looking behind them like a perceptive cat.

He recalled that wonderful dream from earlier, and knew that Loki was certainly *sinuous* like one.

Loki endured the journey in silence, as he always did; letting the others talk and joke around him as he nestled within his own thoughts.

Occasionally, he noticed Aramis look his way and smile, as if he found his silence amusing.
Loki worked very hard on not smiling back.

They made good time even lingering at turns in the road, finding the supposed drop-off point amidst the woods around Paris. It was about mid-afternoon by the time they settled, Aramis tending the horses, Thor and Porthos starting the fire, d'Artagnan readying their food, and Athos preparing to scout their surroundings.

Loki blinked at the cohesion of the little group, and then held his hand out with an impatient tapping of his foot. "Do you want water, or not?"

Each of them looked up in surprise and then hesitantly tossed their water skins to him, except for Aramis, who strode over and placed his in his hands with a warm smile and murmured, "Thank you, Loki."

*Interfering mortal.*

Loki walked away from the pleasant heat of that brown-eyed gaze and chided his foolishness. He was still feeling guilty for making the man sleep on a chair in his own room, and he had noticed the stiffness along shoulders that Loki felt compelled to soothe.

He muttered angrily under his breath and dropped all of the bottles in an ungainly heap on the grass.

It would serve Aramis right if Loki filled his bottle with muddy water or, indeed, didn't fill it at all.

Loki kicked a rock into the river and stared at the slowly setting sun. He was blaming the Musketeers for his restlessness, but in reality it was because he was no closer to finding the way home.

It didn't help that Loki couldn't stand feeling vulnerable, and he was feeling it more than he ever had before. It wasn't his own vulnerability that bothered him, but the weakness of mortals, and how theirs had become his.

His father would spit on him if he knew about that whisper of *sentiment.*

Loki sighed, relegating himself to more heated glances from Aramis whilst he was trying to restrain the urge to either heal the infuriatingly charming man, or push him over.

Considerably grumpier, he stormed back into the camp and threw their water skins near the burning fire, hesitating for only a second when Aramis appeared at his side and Loki found himself handing that one bottle over.

Curse everything.

He needed to get off of this strangely entertaining planet. "I'll take watch tonight."

"No," Athos replied matter-of-factly, appearing from the dense trees. "You took it last time, let someone else do it."

Loki bristled, his ire finding someone to focus on. "I care not that I have, I *want* to do it."

"Loki, we share duties here—"

"I am the best swordsman," Loki interrupted with a sneer. "It makes the most sense for me to be awake."
Athos had been taking off his gloves, but he stilled at Loki's disdain, and looked up with a raised eyebrow that would rival Loki's best perfectly neutral face.

Everyone else had frozen, Aramis casting a wide-eyed glance at Porthos who shook his head in regaled disbelief. Thor almost stepped forward but then d'Artagnan must have made a noise, because his brother halted with a concerned look at the boy.

Loki watched Athos' hand fall onto Hauteclere's hilt, his fingers lightly stroking the diamond in the haft. "Do you believe that we rank each other based on skill?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Six livre on Athos," Porthos called out with a bloodthirsty grin, as if he was looking forward to what would happen next. It was a far different grin from Aramis' one the last time he had watched a spar. In fact, this time, Aramis looked almost hesitant.

And then Loki caught his gaze and that tell-tale heat flared from hungry brown eyes as Aramis murmured, "I'll take that bet."

Loki's pride reared up and he drew his sword in a sigh of steel, rolling the handle in his hand as he snarled at Athos, "For the first watch."

Athos watched him for a moment, calculating and shrewd, and then the man pulled his gloves back on and his rapier, Hauteclere, suddenly danced between them, a gleaming slash of steel.

Anticipation made Loki weave his golden sword in a figure of the Ouroboros. Athos regarded the weapon's movement and Loki smirked, saying sibilantly, "Singasverð, it has tasted the blood of many, and yours will be next."

Athos merely inclined his head to the side, and then the man leaped. At one moment, Athos had seemed almost relaxed, and at the next, Loki had instinctively slid to the side and watched Hauteclere sweep through where he had been.

It prompted him to attack and so he whirled, pleased that he had his armour on and lending him strength. He knew that he looked threatening, even more so when his outfit was complete.

It made him laugh sinisterly to imagine the Midgardians' reactions if he were to wear his helmet. Perhaps he would show them at one point.

Aramis would probably like it.

Loki slashed distractedly, aiming for Athos' arm, but the Musketeer had skill. Athos moved in close steps, like a dancer, his every movement precise and calculated.

And yet Loki couldn't predict what Athos would do, and that was startling.

Athos suddenly struck, Hauteclere appearing in Loki's vision so that he had to jerk back. It occurred to Loki that Athos was as reckless as he was controlled, and that made him so very dangerous.

Loki attacked furiously, using offence as defence. He flicked Singasverð towards Athos' jugular, only for it to be smacked aside by the flat of Athos' blade.

Loki blinked in amazement, and then a strange sensation whipped across his jaw. Athos retreated immediately and Loki brought tentative fingers up to a cut that stung when he touched it.
Athos' face had never changed from neutral.

"Lodinkinni glfuss." Loki spat insults in the Asgardian tongue, his astonishment swiftly warping into vicious fury. Thor finally broke from d'Artagnan's open-mouthed side but halted when Loki hissed at him to go away, to keep watch, "Brott, vaka!"

Loki managed to brusquely return Athos' polite nod, and then he flung himself to the fire's edge and grit his teeth until it hurt. The desire to lay waste to every single inch of their camp was almost overwhelming in its intensity.

He knew with the most self-deprecating sneer that he could manage, that he had chosen not to use his magic, because that would be cheating.

And so a mortal had beaten him.

Porthos snorted at his muttered curses and Loki snapped, "Just because you lose with grace doesn't mean we all have to."

Porthos just shook his head and chuckled, prompting Loki to ask reluctantly, "How do you do it?"

Porthos' grin was bright and a little sly, and he nodded past the fire as he replied, "Because the loser gets the consolation prize".

Aramis appeared in the fire's glow with concern on his face, and Loki bristled. He adamantly did not want pity, not from the man who had taken a bet on his skill and yet Loki had let him down.

Aramis absent-mindedly threw Porthos his winnings, and it was then that Loki realised that the concern was tempered with a still distinct amount of heat. Aramis sat down next to him, facing the fire; enough distance between them to be proper, but close enough to be near.

It occurred to Loki that Aramis had enjoyed watching him dance with a sword, and it had made absolutely no difference that Loki had lost.

Loki's pride reasserted, flared like fat thrown onto an open fire, because it wasn't Thor's rough wrestling, but the grace and dexterity of swordplay that had made Aramis look quite so hungry. Loki began to understand what Porthos had just said.

But, Loki thought with that sly little whisper of sentiment fuelling the flames in his stomach, Aramis' attention was less of a consolation prize, and more something that Loki would be willing to fight for.

Loki placed icy fingers on Aramis' shoulders and savoured his soft sigh of gratitude.

Chapter End Notes

These are two are going to be the death of us, I know it. Please keep us alive by reviewing and letting us know what you think!

Couldn't resist throwing some Old Norse in alongside the smattering of French, Loki basically calls Athos a scruffy drunk. - C
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Aramis watches the pretty birds and then shows one of them how to fire a gun. The Songbird goes greener than his cape, and Porthos is a little shit. Athos is ridiculously profound and is the defender of tables everywhere. - C

^But a supportive little shit. - L

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

By some miserable turn of luck, Aramis drew the predawn watch. Porthos woke him hurriedly before crawling under his own blankets and huddling into a ball to preserve warmth in the chilly morning air. He didn’t so much as shoot Aramis a sympathetic glance, pausing only long enough to say that their contact had dropped his documents off during Athos’s shift.

Which meant there was almost no reason to bother keeping watch. Lovely. He could freeze to death while knowing his sacrifice was utterly meaningless.

A glimpse of Loki's sleeping form soon made him revise that thought, however. Maybe this watch wasn’t entirely pointless.

Loki was curled on his side, dark hair splayed against the pack he was using as a pillow. The hard lines of his face were smoothed out in sleep and he looked younger than even d’Artagnan.

Aramis stared at him, fascinated. Somewhere in the back of his mind a little voice remarked that it was good he no longer expected an ambush, for he would have been easy prey, sitting and gawping as he was.

Only the lucky intervention of a risen songbird drew his eyes from Loki’s sleeping form in time. He glanced away at the melodious creature, and when he looked back he found Loki gazing directly back at him.

He squashed the desire to blush, grateful that Loki hadn’t caught him watching him as he slept like some predator. There were lines it wouldn’t do to cross so soon.

Loki sat up, glancing around the sleeping camp. He stretched, catlike, back arching in the crisp air in a way that made Aramis feel much warmer all of a sudden.

To his great surprise, Loki made his way over to the log Aramis had commandeered as a watch post and arranged himself into a sitting position on the stump a few feet away. Aramis forced himself not to watch the way those long legs folded gracefully together.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully, breath misting slightly in the chilly air. Loki politely returned the greeting, though for some reason his breath did not leave the distinctive trail of steam that Aramis’s had.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Aramis caught Loki watching him from the corner of his eye. He was on the verge of preening at the attention when he realized Loki was actually looking at the arquebus slung across his knees.
Ah, well. Beggars can't be choosers.

"Do you like it?" he asked casually, hefting the gun in his hand. Loki jumped ever so slightly and Aramis smirked, glad to have caught him out.

"I suppose it's acceptable," Loki said derisively, but his eyes betrayed his curiosity. "Are you any good with it?"

"To hear Porthos, tell it, I'm the best," he replied with charming smile. "Perhaps I could interest you in a demonstration? I promise not to disappoint."

He could see Loki wavering, interest warring with disdain, and threw in, "You could even have a go of it yourself, if you liked."

That got Loki's attention. "Truly?" he asked, watching Aramis with what could almost be called a childish fascination. Then his face hardened and fell slightly. "But I have never..." he trailed off hesitantly.

"Never used an arquebus before?" Aramis supplied helpfully.

"...Yes," Loki answered after another momentary pause.

"Well then, perhaps I should teach you how to handle it," he teased, getting to his feet without waiting for an answer. "Come with me."

He nudged d'Artagnan awake with a boot as he passed and whispered a plea to cover for him. Taking the boy's angry grunt as agreement, he and Loki headed into the woods. It wouldn't do to be shooting too close to camp, after all.

They did not speak as they made their way through the trees to a small clearing Aramis had found while wandering the evening before. "This will do."

Loki meandered about the clearing for a few minutes before he rejoined Aramis who had been busily choosing the best targets for a beginner to aim for.

"Are you ready to begin?" he asked, smiling in anticipation. Loki eyed him warily but nodded.

"Excellent! Now, you take this," he said, shoving the gun into Loki's hands, "And stand here, and keep your finger off the trigger!" The last was hissed as he batted Loki's hand away. "Don't put your finger there unless you're ready to fire! You could kill someone. Did you not learn this?"

"My instruction with guns has been... limited," Loki told him, and Aramis was ashamed at the slight crimson tinge his cheeks had taken. He had not meant to humiliate him.

"Perhaps your weapons had less sensitive triggers," he said smoothly, offering Loki a way out of his discomfort.

"Yes, that must have been it," Loki murmured. He did not meet Aramis's eye, but he sensed a gratitude that would never be spoken.

"Very well, let us begin!" He led Loki to the center of the clearing, keeping an eye on the gun in his hands as they went. He got the impression his angel had never touched one before. Why would he have needed too?

"You see that tree? The one with the thick, twisted branch?" Loki nodded. "I want you to aim for the knot on that branch. Aim, but do not shoot, alright?"
Loki lifted the arquebus and pointed it in the general direction of the tree. Aramis fought not to wince. The entire stance was wrong and the gun was wavering slightly in his hands. Then a delicious idea occurred to him and he stepped closer, one hand sliding up Loki's arm towards the gun.

"Your arm is too tense," he murmured, trying to sound didactic rather than desirous. He let his hand linger against Loki's forearm as he tapped his wrist with an index finger. "You want to keep your wrist and grip loose, or the aim will slip."

Loki nodded, looking intent on his instruction. He made no move to make Aramis remove his hand.

Interesting.

Aramis wondered how far he could take this. The thought made heat uncurl in his belly.

"Your stance is too narrow," he purred next. He moved his left leg until it rested immediately behind Loki's right and then nudged forward, dragging Loki's leg out and pressing his own against the whole length of it in the process, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

There was a definite pink tinge to Loki's cheeks now, but still he said nothing, staring at the tree branch with single-minded focus.

Shifting so he stood almost directly behind Loki, Aramis allowed himself an excited smirk before dropping his hands to Loki's waist. "Tighten the muscles here," he said, all but whispering in Loki's ear as his hands reached around to tap against the slender man's stomach. He could feel the hard lines beneath his fingers. It was enough to make him feel a tad weak at the knees.

He leaned forward so his chin was nearly resting on Loki's shoulder. He heard the quick intake of breath, but still Loki did not stop him. Hope was flaring in his chest, so brightly it hurt.

"Now, I want you to watch the target. The target: not the muzzle of the gun, alright? Stare straight at the center and let your mind position to gun accordingly. Are you ready?"

Aramis could feel the tension in Loki's lean frame, and in a fit of bravery allowed himself to lean forward so that his chest was brushing Loki's back.

"When you are ready, exhale and pull the trigger."

For a moment, time slowed down. All Aramis was aware of was Loki's breath beside his ear, the warm expanse of his back. Then Loki breathed out a long sigh and his finger tightened on the trigger.

The crack of the arquebus was loud in the crisp morning air, and the corresponding crack from the exploding tree branch sounded like an echo. Loki took two steps forward seemingly without thinking, staring at the shattered branch in fascination. Aramis mourned the loss of his warmth, but he could hardly fault him.

"I did it," Loki muttered, sounding shocked.

"You did," Aramis said warmly, smiling when Loki turned to look at him. "And you did it far better than I expected. Not many hit the target at all their first try, let alone so close to the center." Loki had hit a foot or two away from the knot Aramis had set as the target, but d'Artagnan and Porthos had both failed to hit anything their first times.

"Flattery," Loki muttered, but there was no edge to his words.
"No, I mean it," Aramis told him sincerely. "That was really very impressive, mon ange. You have my congratulations. Of course, all credit goes to my brilliant instruction."

"Of course," Loki echoed, smirking slightly.

"Now, would you like to see the master at work?" Aramis asked trying not to rub his hands together in glee. It was obvious Loki liked the arquebus, was impressed by it. Aramis was dying to show off.

"I suspect you will show me regardless," Loki replied dryly, but Aramis caught the flicker of interest in those emerald eyes.

It was the work of a minute to reload the gun. Loki was silent throughout, but his eyes tracked the motions. "Are you aiming for the same thing?" Loki asked, curiosity getting the better of him at last.

Aramis shook his head. "You see the bunch of acorns hanging in the top branches?" he asked, intentionally choosing an impressive looking target.

It worked: Loki's eyes widened ever so slightly.

"Keep watching them," he whispered, lining up the arquebus. There was no conscious thought to the movement, just years of training and instinct. He exhaled, dipping his head just as he pulled the trigger.

Loki's small gasp told him he'd made the shot perfectly. He didn't bother to look, flashing Loki a proud smile as he tipped his hat. To his delight, Loki was looking at him with an expression simultaneously appraising and impressed.

"We'd best be getting back now," Aramis said lightly, breaking the silence where most people would have been either gushing his praises or cursing his unnaturalness. Loki, he knew, would do neither, but the new warmth in his eyes was more than enough for Aramis.

They were silent on the return journey as well. Porthos eyed them when they got into camp, which the others were busily breaking down.

"Where've you been?" he asked suspiciously, but Aramis caught the slight protective edge to his tone, and he smiled to show all was well.

"Practicing," he said slyly, winking. Porthos scowled, rolling his eyes, but beside him, Aramis saw Loki smirk.

Perhaps he had finally gotten through to his dark angel after all.

Loki found himself in an unusually good mood that evening as they invaded the tavern for the second time. Aramis had found him a spare pistol in the armory and had attached it to his belt himself, instructing him extensively on how to care for the weapon. Loki didn't know yet how to load it, but Aramis had promised to teach him that too.

That last bit had been delivered with a cheeky wink, but Loki found he didn't especially mind. It wasn't like he was enjoying the attention, not at all, but he found it less distasteful than he had previously.

They were clustered around a pair of hastily pushed-together tables. Thor was regaling the group
with tales of his many adventures, occasionally glancing over at Loki, who would need to substitute 'bear' for 'bilgesnipe' or some such nonsense. Aramis had gone with Athos to collect more wine.

To Loki's faint displeasure, Athos returned first, stumbling towards the seat Aramis had vacated. It also happened to be the only one beside Loki. The other empty seat was across the table, next to Porthos.

Aramis followed Athos after a few seconds. Loki watched as he paused, eyes darting from the empty seat to the one Athos was fast nerving, and Loki read the momentary flash of regret in his gaze. Then he shrugged, smiling broadly as he passed about new bottles, moving quickly around the table as if to cut Athos off.

As he walked past Porthos, a thick arm reached out and snagged him around the waist, pulling him into the empty chair with affectionate ease. Loki felt a brief flash of irritation shoot through him.

That might have been the end of it right there, if it had not been for Porthos.

The large mortal was staring across the table at Loki. No, not staring… glaring might be the more appropriate word. There was a defiant challenge in the tilt of his head and the gleam of dark eyes as his gaze burned into Loki, sending an irrational wave of fury crashing through him.

He looked at Aramis, half expecting the man to do something ridiculous, like leap to his defense, but Aramis was in the process of draping an arm across Porthos's shoulder, one hand pawing at his chest.

Loki stood abruptly. "What's the matter?" Porthos asked scornfully, not even bothering to keep his voice down. Beside him, Aramis had failed to register either the words or Loki's action. "Leavin' so soon?" His tone was mocking.

Drawing himself up to his full height, Loki leveled his best disdainful sneer on the man and stalked from the tavern, ending up in an alley. Aramis did not say a word in protest.

How stupid could Loki get? He had been flattered by the attention this morning, by the interest and the touching and by the Valkyrie, he was unworthy of his own title. A mere mortal had put him in such a position that the loss of his base affections left Loki angry and hurt. This would not do.

He had forgotten, in the excitement of the morning. He had forgotten what had been evident since the first day on Midgard. Aramis and Porthos were an item.

He felt his lip curl in disdain at the thought. Aramis must not be a very loyal lover, if he often behaved the way he had this morning. It was despicable.

It didn't bother Loki that Aramis had made his choice so blatantly. Not in the slightest.

A noise behind him alerted Loki to another presence in the alley. He turned, one hand automatically going for his sword but falling to rest on the pistol instead.

It was Aramis. He swayed drunkenly as he walked, but he seemed determined to get to Loki. Any warmth Loki had felt towards him this morning had dissipated. He sneered at him as he approached.
"What do you want?" he asked scathingly. Aramis looked up at him, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Are you well?" he asked, concern warm in his voice. "You left rather early, no?"

"What business is it of yours when I leave?" Loki snarled. Aramis's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I was merely concerned, that's all," he said placating. "I do not wish to overstep my bounds."

"Overstep your bounds?" Loki asked incredulously. "What do you call that little performance this morning?"

To Loki's spiteful satisfaction, Aramis blushed deeply. But the idiot clearly did not know when to quit. Couldn't he see that Loki was above him and would never have him?

"I would call it a pleasant morning spent with a very attractive man," Aramis said. Loki fought the sense of surprise at the unexpected bluntness. But that just made things all the easier.

"You have no claim to my mornings or to any of my time at all," he said harshly. His pride had been wounded, and he would make Aramis hurt in return. He was no mere mortal, to be swayed by sentiment. He was a god, cold and implacable.

"I was not aware you felt that way," Aramis replied stiffly, and Loki felt as if he could see the walls crashing down in front of those warm brown eyes. Loki went for the kill.

"I'm sure there's plenty of whores who would gladly warm your bed for you. Do not expect the likes of me to stoop to your level," Loki spat.

It seemed that was the final straw. The emotion drained from Aramis's face, leaving a flawless mask in its place. "Very well. I am sorry to have brought you grief with my unwelcome advances. I assure you, I shall leave you be in the future. Good night."

With that, Aramis turned on his heel and left, heading back into the tavern. Back to his lover, Loki thought viciously.

A sense of triumph pounded through him as he walked back to his room. He had won, had eviscerated the opposition. But somewhere within him, a voice often kept silent cried out at the senselessness of his rejection, demanded he reconsider. He stood strong.

He does not know how long he stands in his room, savoring his victory, when he hears noises in the hall outside. It takes only a moment to realize who it is: Aramis and Porthos, returned to Porthos's rooms for the night. Thor must be going elsewhere.

His lip curled in disdain for these petty mortals and their sentiment, but his heart wasn't in it.

He could convince himself that he did not care about that charming mortal, but he could not explain why a hole had opened in his chest when he heard Aramis enter Porthos's room.

Porthos wasn't ashamed to admit he was feeling ever so slightly victorious. Aramis was in his room, slightly drunk and cuddly, and Porthos had maybe been missing his attentions a bit since Loki came around. It wasn't that he was jealous, but he didn't think Loki deserved Aramis, and why shouldn't he enjoy him in the meantime?

He ran a hand down Aramis's arm comfortably, trying to dispel the lost look that had been in his eyes since he returned to the tavern, but when his hand dropped to unfasten Aramis's jacket, he
was gently nudged away.

"Not tonight," he murmured, and the hurt lingering in his eyes cut through Porthos. He enveloped his friend in a crushing hug instead, offering a different sort of comfort. Aramis relaxed against him, heaving another sigh.

Porthos was at a loss. Aramis had always been the most tactile of them, seeking comfort in the physical. He had been so earlier that evening. Porthos had certainly welcomed the familiar feeling of Aramis' hand against his chest before he had gone chasing after Loki…

Oh.

Porthos rested his forehead against Aramis's, sighing along with him. "You love 'im, don't you?"

He was close enough to see Aramis's face fall into miserable lines, and his chest tightened with concern. "But he doesn't love me back," he whispered.

The passion of a moment before dissipated, and Porthos found his heart broken. Not for himself; he had always hoped Aramis would find someone to love in a way that went beyond what he and Porthos shared, and he knew Aramis wanted that for him as well. No, his heart was breaking for Aramis.

He knew Aramis had been pursuing Loki intently for the past few days, but he honestly had never stopped to consider that Aramis wouldn't get what he wanted. He was irresistible. The thought of Loki not wanting Aramis was just further proof of the man's strangeness. Why had Aramis chosen someone so cold to love, someone so undeserving of his warmth and affection?

"At least you know that he, ah, swings that way," he said, hoping to lighten the mood and trying, as he had been these past few days, not to think about blondes whose smiles felt like the sun dawning.

Aramis smiled sadly and muttered, "What a pair we make."

"It'll work out," Porthos rumbled reassuringly. Then, desperate to hear Aramis laugh, he rubbed his beard all along the side of Aramis's face, making the smaller man yelp and wriggle free of his embrace. A smile had lit his features at last, and Porthos returned it, pleased with himself.

"You should stay 'ere for the night," he said when Aramis stopped chuckling. "'E's cold an' wet an' you're drunk. Thor an' Athos will probably wind up crashin' at 'is place, along with d'Artagnan if they keep goin' at that rate."

He saw Aramis's uncertainty and added, "It'll just be sleepin', Aramis. I promise."

Aramis smiled ruefully at him. "Thank you, my friend, but I would prefer to spend the night in my own room."

A spike of anger flashed through Porthos as he saw once more the depth of Aramis's burgeoning devotion. Loki could live for a thousand lifetimes and never deserve him. How could he not see what he was missing?

But he did not say any of this, for he knew it was not what Aramis needed to hear. He merely nodded and opened the door for him.

But in the hallway, his good intentions deserted him and he blurted out, "Why 'im, Aramis? 'E's so cold, an' he'll just make you miserable. You deserve better, someone worthy of you. So why 'im?"
Aramis glanced at his bedroom door, an unreadable expression on his face. "My heart knows what it wants."

He turned away, one hand on the doorknob, but Porthos spoke up suddenly as he remembered the question he hadn't asked.

"What'd Loki say to you outside the tavern? That made you think 'e doesn't love you back?"

The way Aramis's hand flinched was all the answer he needed. A shamed flush crept across his cheeks as he glanced back at Porthos. "Nothing I wish to discuss, my friend," he said softly, nodding a goodnight as he pushed his way into the bedroom and closed the door.

Raw fury bubbled up within Porthos. It didn't matter what Loki had said; what mattered was that awful look it left in Aramis's eyes. This was unforgivable.

Without Aramis's soothing presence, Porthos gave in to the anger, storming out to the courtyard. A bench went flying with a crash as his foot connected solidly with it. He was about to turn his attention to the table when a voice interrupted him.

"What has the table done to earn your wrath?" Athos drawled, strolling over with only a hint of a stagger. The man could hold his liquor.

"It's Aramis," Porthos told him irritably. "He's got feelin's for Loki,” he spat the name. "An' it's leavin' him miserable. That little bastard was cruel to 'im."

"And what exactly can you do about that?" Athos asked calmly. Porthos turned, ready to snap at him for his callousness, when he realized the other man was only being reasonable. There was nothing he could do. He could not persuade Aramis to give up, and he could not confront Loki without angering Aramis. He slumped onto the remaining bench, feeling defeated.

"I just want 'im to be 'appy," he said, his voice sounding small even in his own ears.

Athos nodded sympathetically. "Aramis will do as he always will and follow his heart until the bitter end."

"The bitter part is what I'm worryin' about," he growled as he rose to his feet.

"Men are worse with their hearts than women, whether it's for love or friendship," Athos sighed. Porthos didn't respond, already turning to head back up to his room. He would be there if Aramis needed him during the night, or any night to come.

He would be there no matter what, because that cold-eyed bastard would break his warm heart. And he would rip that smirking man to pieces if he hurt Aramis again.

Chapter End Notes

When I beta-ed this chapter, I was speechless for that entire shooting scene. Talk about hot under the power-blue cape, AMIRITE? Also, I know that this is a Lokimis fic, but how can anyone write Musketeers without a bit of Portamis fluff in it? - C

^No one can write any Musketeers without a bit of Portamis, obviously. Portamis is my guiding light and must be included in all things. - L
Aramis the unstoppable heads towards Loki the immovable. Results may vary, will it be fluff or failure?

Those constellation names are, indeed, real Norse ones. As a city girl, whenever I think of what Loki and Aramis see when they look at the skies just makes me sigh in jealousy - and not only because they get to see a sea of stars... - C

Loki stared at stars that didn't make sense. The constellations were wrong, the four stags were missing and he felt like Dvalin, the sleeper. Even Thiassi's Eyes, which the Midgardians called Gemini, were absent from the speckled expanse before him. It was unnerving to look upon such incoherence, and yet he thought that he could finally feel Yggdrasil calling him.

It called with his mother's voice.

Loki jerked awake and stared at an unfortunately familiar ceiling. It seemed to taunt him with its spattered marks amongst the dirty whiteness, a mocking dissimilarity to the purity of a night sky.

He instinctively reached out with his magic, ignoring how needy it felt to search for something recognisable, but nothing returned his plea, as if he were a lonely tree in an empty field. Instead, he was forced to remember exactly where he was and how he had ended up there.

His lip curled into a grimace as he recalled how much idiotic pain he had felt at hearing Aramis and Porthos in the hallway, as if the slighter man had deliberately taunted Loki by being noisy and then disappearing into Porthos' room.

He hoped the Midgardian had choked in his sleep.

The grumpy rage boiled within him until his fists clenched into the sheets. The worst part of it was that he was angry at himself as much as he was at Aramis, for it wasn't entirely the mortal's fault that Loki had almost succumbed to those warm charms.

No, it was Loki who had come to rely on those lingering, hungry looks, and seeing them aimed at someone else, someone who was nothing like Loki, managed to incite him to wrathful violence.

What had he been thinking? That, in physical form alone, he stood any chance compared to the hulking form of Porthos? Yes, Loki was strong, he was powerful, but it was different, and he had thought Aramis had appreciated that.

Instead, the little flirt had finally listened to his sneering denials, and Loki had pushed him away forever.

Curse Aramis, curse Porthos, curse this hateful, disgusting, mortal planet that he was stranded upon, doomed to see their ridiculous happiness and know that he could never experience it—

A snore broke the silence.
Loki leaped out of bed and wondered why his senses hadn't alerted him to an intruder, and the realisation made him curse himself after cursing everything else. Aramis, still fully-clothed, was sat in his chair, and Loki didn't consider Aramis a threat.

Not in the cut-throat type of way, at least, for the man was certainly dangerous in other ways.

Loki glared in confused amazement at the evidence; guilt blooming as his curses still rang in his mind, for Aramis looked exactly the same as he had scant few hours ago. Loki hadn't realised that he had taken note, but he knew that the ties across Aramis shirt hadn't been touched.

Aramis had clearly returned sometime after Loki had fallen asleep, and to what? To sleep, alone, on an uncomfortable chair, after Loki had denied him?

Had Aramis truly chosen that, over what Porthos had so blatantly offered last night?

A strange uncertainty overcame Loki, a dubiousness that he had never felt before and the void that had opened the night before became sickened. It made him wonder silently, what am I, to deserve this?

Loki watched Aramis sleep, felt something so very similar to sentiment completely flood his system, and he murmured the question out loud.

Warm brown eyes that flashed with uncertainty opened, and Aramis smiled sleepily. "Good morning, mon—Loki."

Aramis' smile dropped as he looked away from Loki hastily, and Loki felt the sentiment tearing itself apart as it cried out at the loss of that ridiculous term, the one that seemed to ring with such unrequited affection even though he had no idea what it meant.

Was that not Loki's downfall? To deny things that he didn't understand? And yet, with the painful clarity of hindsight, he realised that a growing part of him wanted to understand this time.

Aramis smiled nervously when Loki was unable to look away, and he felt as if he was staring a once-in-a-very-long-lifetime chance in its attractive face.

What am I, to deserve this?

Loki simply blinked and distractedly watched Aramis stretch in his chair, the man's shirt rising to reveal tan skin that made Loki try to remember why, exactly, he had turned him away last night.

The reasons came easily and they were numerous; he and Thor needed to return home, to where they belonged, and Loki was a mage, an immortal, so very superior.

And yet, Loki did not feel so superior when Aramis ran a tired hand through his scruffy hair and Loki felt his chest tighten at the sight, felt his fingers twitch with the sudden need to push a stray brown curl behind Aramis' ear.

Because Loki could not deny how incredibly, foolishly, grateful he was that Aramis had returned.

Aramis didn't notice his silence – in fact, he was probably used to it by now – and looked down to eye his shirt distastefully. It was still a little bloody from their various scrapes and apparently it had finally crossed the boundaries of acceptability, because Aramis drew it over his head in a swift movement of flexing muscle.

Loki's mouth dried and he forced his gaze aside, desperately deliberating why he was so affected. He had seen Thor and his idiot friends half-naked before, and although he had sometimes allowed
himself to admire Fandral's form, the sight had never made heat betray his cheeks.

He had certainly never felt an almost overwhelming craving to trace his fingers over faint lines etched into tan skin.

Loki's neat stitches had disappeared, he realised belatedly with a quick glance to confirm. He must have healed Aramis more thoroughly than he had thought when they had been sat around the fire after his spar with Athos.

"What would you usually do with the thread?" Loki found himself asking, and Aramis answered with his head buried in his cupboard.

"Clip it out after two weeks, leaves a dashing scar," Aramis replied, grinning over his shoulder at the last. Aramis then frowned at Loki's regard and question, and placed a tentative hand below the back of his neck, his eyes widening when he felt no mark. "Well," he said with forced nonchalance after noticing Loki's frown, "I suppose I had too many already."

Loki allowed himself a brief once-over, just so that he could answer Aramis, and decided that the man was wrong. Yes, there were scars, physical proof of action and a cause well fought for, but they were not indicative of the self-deprecation in Aramis' tone.

As someone who did not scar, Loki was merely fascinated by the interesting symbols, not disgusted.

Loki stepped forward, feeling oddly disconnected from his body as his hand lifted to brush the small but dark line across Aramis' forehead. Aramis' pupils dilated immediately, and his breath caught when Loki murmured, "They suit the life you lead."

The reactions pleased him, he wasn't sure why or what they meant, but they did. Loki couldn't quite stop himself from watching his hand fall back to his side, his eyes trailing avidly down a chest dusted with dark hair and shuddered with Aramis' stuttered breathing.

"The life of a fool who throws himself in harm's way?" Aramis asked with a shaky laugh, and Loki dragged his gaze back to meet blown brown eyes that seemed ever-so-nervous.

"Yes," Loki replied with a smirk, "but a brave one." Aramis ducked his head and beamed, until Loki caught his chin with his fingers and added with a hint of a threat, "Perhaps too brave."

If Aramis had seemed nervous before, it disappeared under an onslaught of fire that made Loki's own breath catch as he released him. Aramis turned to charming in the blink of hungry eyes and said gracefully, "It is worth it to keep those I admire, safe."

Loki frowned at that self-sacrificing statement and turned away, finding it surprisingly difficult to do so. "I will not pretend to know how that feels, survival is too important to me."

"We will see," Aramis said with what sounded like a smile, and Loki didn't want to deign it with a response.

He was no hero; he did not take blades for others or rampage through the woods on revenge missions. Thor did, but his brother did not have to worry about lasting damage. It was another reason as to why they needed to leave; these Musketeers were too valiant— too senseless.

They were dangerous.

Aramis' mind was reeling, he had no idea what had just happened.
He hadn't been able to deny himself the pleasure of Loki's presence, of being able to wake up to such a gorgeous sight, which was why he had thrown caution to the wind and returned to his room instead of staying with Porthos.

It was with a thread of unease that he had seen Loki watching him when he awoke, and Aramis had been so very worried that Loki would deny him again. Those truly derisive words still rang in his head, and yet here he was, anyway.

He was such a fool.

And yet, just then, when Aramis had been confronted with silence and been tempted to run for Porthos, Loki had seemed concerned for his safety, especially when Aramis had tried to tell him that he was one who he admired. It had put such startling vulnerability on Loki's face, and Aramis had seen it, because his angel had almost ramped his heart into oblivion by crowding him and brushing a gentle finger over the scar on his forehead.

Aramis had never liked that mark more.

Aramis knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would never be able to turn away from the absolute authority in Loki's emerald eyes, certainly never from the hidden strength that lay coiled within that slender form. A viciously hot part of Aramis knew that, somehow, Loki could out-power him.

And that was mind-blowingly attractive.

Loki didn't turn back around from his almost prudish retreat until Aramis had tugged a clean shirt over his head. It made Aramis sigh sadly, unable to ignore the feeling of how he had missed something important, as if he had missed a chance to ensnare Loki once and for all, for it seemed that he had finally been succumbing to his charm offensive.

When a noise sounded from beyond, Loki seemed to glare at the wall that they shared with Porthos, and Aramis' brain took a moment to catch up with the reaction. Was it… jealousy that caused that striking scowl?

And then that scowl smoothed as it fixated on his slightly bared chest, and Aramis had to hide a delighted smile.

Maybe he hadn't quite missed the chance.

Aramis held no illusions that he was anywhere near conquering his angel, but when he had finally coaxed Loki into breathing distance and could have kissed the stunning flush along his cheekbones, he thought that he might just be a little closer.

A knock at the door had Loki tensing, so Aramis held up a placating hand, because he already knew who it would be.

Porthos' glare was something that Aramis had seen countless times, and although it warmed his heart to see it aimed at a scowling Loki, it would never compare to emerald eyes that never failed to make his pulse jump.

"You alright?" Porthos asked gruffly, his expression turning to one of concern when he finally looked at him.

"Yes, mon ami, I'm fine." Porthos gave him a look that said he wasn't buying it, so Aramis chuckled and added, "Je t'assure, I am quite bouleversé."
"You are?" Porthos replied in quiet tones, and Aramis let his happy shrug say, well, *I hope it's Loki who has undergone a drastic change.*

Porthos grunted in reluctant acceptance and jerked his head outside. "Treville wants us," he said grumpily, but his hand gently rested against Aramis' hip where Loki couldn't see.

It was a gesture of comfort and Aramis smiled his gratitude, nodding his head in fond dismissal. When Porthos left, Aramis turned to see Loki's look of complete scathing antipathy disappear almost immediately. Aramis considered it and wondered whether something should be established, something that, perhaps, Loki didn't realise.

Men could be so very stubborn.

"You know," Aramis said idly as he fetched his weapons, "I think Porthos has a *tendre* for your brother."

Aramis almost couldn't restrain the bark of laughter that wanted to sound at the absolute shock on Loki's face. Was it because he finally realised that there was no relationship between Aramis and Porthos, or because he had a sibling's level of disgust at the thought of his brother intimate with someone?

Both made Aramis shake in withheld laughter, for it probably wasn't often that Loki had to have something pointed out to him.

Finally, Aramis could bear the delightfully affronted expression for no longer. "Come, *mon ange,* let us see what Treville has for us today."

Loki aimed a calculating look at him, as if able to tell that he wanted to laugh, but there wasn't the usual level of coldness in it, instead it was almost soft exasperation. In fact, Loki might have even huffed happily when Aramis hadn't called him by his true name.

Aramis couldn't stop his smile then, because everything that Loki had done since he had woken up was telling him that, perhaps, there was a glimmer of hope, of possibility between them.

And that was worth any tedious mission that they might be sent on.

As they walked out, Loki appeared at his left side, and his fallen angel felt right, there.

Chapter End Notes

The thought of Loki and Thor acting like brothers just makes me want to roll on the floor and squee, whereas Loki and Aramis just make me want to scream in excitement. The brainstorming we do for this fic is just capslock and exclamation marks, so please join in with us and review! :D - C

^It's also moments of shocked silence any time we come across the perfect idea and temporarily forget how to breath. - L
It's a ho-down, show-down in the woods. There's a Minothor scuffle, Athos wonders why he doesn't just carry a barrel of wine on his back, and then Loki taunts the Minotaur. Athos close-talks until everyone is a puddle of shame, and Aramis becomes the Queen of Clean. - C

He is a beautiful Queen. - L

Loki had wanted nothing more than to relax quietly in camp after a long day.

But with these companions, naturally that was not to be.

He was lounging beside Thor, who had thrown himself down on the ground and was now sprawled out like some ridiculous rug, when Porthos, who had been stretching by the fire, glanced over at them appraisingly. Or rather, at Thor.

He remembered Aramis's implication that Porthos had… feelings for his brother. The thought was one he had difficulty wrapping his head around, and yet Aramis had no reason to deceive him, at least not in that. And so he had watched the pair of them, and while he could not speak for his brother, there was a certain hunger in Porthos's glances that made him wonder if Aramis was not correct.

It was not as clear as, say, Aramis's regard, but then he got the impression Porthos was somewhat more subtle. He wouldn't be sitting far too close to the object of his attention as Aramis was currently doing. If Loki so much as moved his leg his thigh would brush Aramis's.

And now Porthos was sauntering over, a broad grin stretched across his face, and Loki had to fight the desire to hiss at him. He had disliked the man when he'd viewed him merely as a rival of sorts, but a never before seen protective aspect of his nature had risen within him. He wasn't sure he wanted this man near Thor.

Thor, however, clearly lacked all sense of self-preservation, for he was already sitting up and calling a greeting to the approaching Musketeer. Out of the corner of his eye, Loki could see Aramis watching the proceedings with interest. Or perhaps he was just watching Loki.

The thought sent an unexpectedly warm feeling through his chest. Hope was a wretched thing.

"Tired?" Porthos asked Thor casually as he neared them. Porthos and Aramis exchanged a quick glance that made Aramis's mouth twitch at the corners for some reason.

"Not at all," Thor said, sounding ridiculously happy for a man who had just trekked across the countryside.

Porthos grinned hugely. "How 'bout a rematch?" His flexed his muscles ever so slightly as he spoke. Loki took it back; he was not subtle. At all.
"A fine idea!" Thor cried, bounding to his feet. Loki could hear Aramis chuckling softly beside him as the two stripped down to shirts and breeches for the second time, circling one another on a broad grassy stretch near the fire.

Loki honestly didn't know what Porthos hoped to achieve by these bouts. He supposed, judging by the man's size, there was a certain reputation at stake. Perhaps he was not used to losing when it came to hand-to-hand. But he had no hope whatsoever of beating Thor. Their strength alone made it impossible, and Thor had lifetimes of experience behind him.

Nevertheless, Porthos put on a good show, managing to land a punch to Thor's jaw that must have left his head ringing. It was all for naught, however. Within a few minutes Thor had him pinned in the dust and Athos glanced over from where he was studying a map to declare the winner.

"That was better than the last!" Thor said, smiling as he helped Porthos to his feet. Loki eyed the grin still etched on Porthos's face with distrust. No one should be so happy about losing. Perhaps he should do something about that.

"I don't know why you bothered," he said derisively, noting the way Porthos's smile seemed to freeze the instant he spoke. "It's clear to everyone that you're outmatched."

"Loki…" Thor began warning, but Porthos cut him off.

"Is that right?" he asked, anger beginning to color his tone. "I'll 'ave you know I'm the best in the regiment." Aramis smiled proudly at that, and Loki was inexplicably irritated by the simple gesture.

"Then your regiment must not have much to offer," he sneered. Ah, that had done it.

"Why don't you give it a shot then?" he asked challengingly.

"Please, what reason would I have to scuffle about in the dirt?" Loki sniffed. He had no interest in fighting Thor's double. He hated wrestling.

As he spoke, he glanced to his left just in time to see Aramis's face fall slightly. Had he- did he want to see Loki fight Porthos?

Well, it seemed there was one reason.

"I suppose someone ought to deflate that ego," he said, letting his hand fall to the hilt of his sword in what he hoped would sway Porthos towards his weapon of choice.

It didn't work. "Nah, I meant a real fight."

Loki bristled, narrowing his eyes and glaring at the large mortal before him. How dare he deride him?

"Very well," he hissed, undoing his sword belt and shoving it at Aramis. He rose haughtily, dropping his cloak to the floor. "But I won't go easy on you." Porthos chuckled, obviously confident, and Loki smirked. It would be fun to wipe that grin off his face.

As he pulled off his jacket, trying very hard to ignore the way Aramis was ogling him, Loki noticed Thor clap a hand to Porthos's shoulder. No doubt about to warn him of Loki's less than honorable tendencies. Well, that wouldn't do.

"Be wary, my friend, Loki-" Thor began, but before he could finish Loki was already launching himself at Porthos, hitting him hard in the chest with a narrow shoulder and knocking the wind out
of him as he staggered back several feet.

Loki didn't even have to look to know that Aramis was wearing an expression of blissful delight.

Porthos narrowed his eyes at Loki, recovering quickly and darting in with a roundhouse that might have taken a lesser being's head clean from its shoulders.

But Loki was no lesser being, and he ducked easily, jabbing an uppercut into the larger man's ribs as his momentum carried him past. He was so easy to read, this Musketeer. He was, in terms of style, the mortal equivalent of Thor, and Loki had taken his brother down a fair number of times. This would be so much easier.

He was faster, stronger, and smarter, and he would use that to his advantage.

He dodged a high kick and whirled to the side, hand snapping out to catch Porthos's jaw. The larger man growled in irritation and lashed out with a heavy fist. Loki was a heartbeat too slow and it caught him head on, colliding with his chest to send him crashing into the dust.

He sat for a moment, taken by surprise at the mortal's strength. He saw Porthos glance over at their audience and catch Aramis's eye, flexing his muscles impressively.

Rage boiled within him, tearing at his focus and loosening the barriers he'd erected to keep his magic at bay. Loki's eyes narrowed and he flared his magic down his arms to glint at his fingertips.

Porthos would not rise well from this.

It wasn't until Athos noted the way Thor was beginning to pace about the campsite that he paid the wrestling match any attention. It wasn't such an unusual diversion among his companions, after all. But Thor seemed almost concerned, and that in turn concerned him.

The match didn't seem anything other than friendly at first glance, but Athos had watched Porthos fight too many times to know when he wasn't holding back, and the way each fist lashed out as if he wanted nothing more than to shatter his opponent was a bad sign. And Athos had not known Loki long, but there was an edge to every movement that had him setting down the map and observing intently.

He rose to his feet just as Porthos tried an underhanded move on Loki that the man should not have been able to dodge, but somehow did. To his surprise, Loki darted back in with an equally dirty trick, catching Porthos between the shoulders with a well-placed elbow.

Thor winced in apparent sympathy but Aramis was watching with what could only be described as hunger in his eyes. Honestly, these men would be the death of them all. He'd never seen him so easily compromised.

Porthos landed a blow to Loki's cheekbone that actually made Aramis's jaw drop. The sheer lust radiating off the man was obscene. Athos was glad d'Artagnan didn't seem to notice.

"Shall I pinch you?" he murmured, moving to stand beside Aramis and chuckling at the dazed look on his face.

Aramis smiled distractedly, not looking away from the scene as he replied, "Best dream I've ever had."

"Aren't you perhaps being a bit obvious, my friend?" he asked after Aramis nearly leapt forward,
fingers twitching to wipe the blood from Porthos's newly split lip, or so he assumed.

Aramis looked away at last to cast him a scathing glance. "One must be open in matters of the heart," he said loftily. Whatever else he might have added was lost as Loki neatly tripped Porthos, bearing them both to the ground.

Athos snorted and strolled around the match to where Thor was pacing, hoping that their new friends would not prove some sort of enemies in disguise. That would surely break Aramis's too-open heart.

There he paused, sizing up the giant while the fight grew increasingly fierce in the background. He had not paid close attention to the match before this, but he had watched Thor fight in the ambush, and it had been enough to form some impressions.

He was so like Porthos, and yet so different where it mattered. Porthos knew when to hold himself back for the sake of his brothers, but Thor looked like he was too sure of his own strength. He worried about that in battle. Thor might throw himself forward with no thought of the danger others would be put in trying to follow him.

Loki, though… Loki was another matter entirely.

Athos turned his attention back to the match, which had turned into some sort of competition to see who could inflict the nastiest bruises without actively seeming like they were trying to murder their opponent.

Loki was a mystery to him. Less open than Thor, he gave Athos the impression of a man who knew how to lie, and lie well. While that didn't necessarily mean he was untrustworthy, he held himself at a distance from them all.

All the same, Athos fostered a great deal of respect for the man. He knew the signs of one who kept his heart to himself for fear of being hurt. He only hoped Loki was acting from caution rather than personal experience.

A bellow from Porthos snapped him out of his thoughts and the corners of his mouth twitched as he watched the larger man regain his feet and throw himself forward to tackle Loki.

Which was apparently exactly what Loki had been waiting for. He danced to the side, one leg hooking Porthos's out from under him so that he landed heavily in the dust. Athos shook his head: Porthos should have seen that coming.

Thor mumbled under his breath about Loki's dirty tricks, but Athos was pleased by it. One couldn't be honorable all the time. Sometimes underhanded tricks were needed. Being honorable could get you killed, because you were so busy fighting like a gentleman that you weren't looking for the dagger meant for your back.

Athos noticed d'Artagnan watching Loki with admiration in his eyes. He couldn't blame him: he himself wouldn't mind learning a few of those tricks. They'd all been thrashed by Porthos many times over.

Loki pressed his advantage, crowding in as Porthos rose and landing a heavy blow to his face that sent him stumbling back.

Athos had seen Porthos take bullets without moving an inch. Loki must be far stronger than he appeared.

"You must have fought often," he said conversationally, taking up a position at Thor's side. When
the larger man glanced questioningly at him, he gestured towards Loki. "He's not at all cowed by Porthos's size."

"No, he isn't," Thor muttered, sounding distracted. Another blow landed on Porthos and Thor visibly winced.

Perhaps Aramis was not the only compromised one.

There was a murderous rage in Porthos's eye as he blocked the next blow, lashing out to land his fist squarely against Loki's jaw. There was an audible crack and Loki stumbled backwards, hissing. Beside him, Thor stiffened in what Athos knew was apprehension.

This fight needed to end.

"I think it's time we ended this," he said, keeping his voice neutral so as to hide his concern.

"Aye," Thor replied, gratitude in his deep voice.

Athos stepped forward, crossing his arms and glaring at the combatants.

"Enough!"

To Thor's immense surprise and great relief, both fighters stopped immediately. He knew Loki had been on the verge of lashing out with his magic, past the limit of his control. He half-expected him to do so anyway, but he froze at Athos's quiet command.

For Porthos to obey was hardly a shock. No doubt he was conditioned to obey Athos's orders without question, but Loki? Loki didn't listen to anyone!

And yet there he stood, fists clenched, radiating rage, and yet definitely restraining himself and striving to obey Athos's order.

It was baffling.

"What do you think you are doing?" Athos asked, his voice deceptively soft. Thor watched, fascinated, as he turned his gaze on each in turn, including both Aramis and d'Artagnan, who looked thoroughly devastated to be on the receiving end of his leader's glare.

"Porthos." The large man's head snapped up and his back straightened as he stood at attention, cheeks darkening in shame. "I was under the impression you had a modicum of self-control. Was I mistaken?"

Porthos ducked his head, unable to meet Athos's eyes. "Let things get out of hand," he mumbled.

"What was that?" Athos inquired mildly.

"I let things get out of hand," Porthos repeated clearly, meeting Athos's eyes at last. "I apologize."

"I expect better," Athos said, and the disappointment was evident in his tone.

"Sorry." And this time there was genuine remorse in the apology. How had he managed to achieve that without shouting and punishment? It was miraculous.

Athos nodded, apparently satisfied. Thor noticed a smirk curling Loki's lip, as if his brother was enjoying watching Porthos's shame.
"And you, Loki-" Thor watched the smirk fall away in shock as the mortal turned to him, "I don't know what things are like where you came from, but is it common practice to attempt to inflict serious injuries on comrades in friendly sparring matches?"

"He wouldn't have been seriously injured," Loki muttered sullenly. Thor had to give his brother credit for courage. Had Athos been looking at him with that disappointed glare, he would not have the courage to speak back.

"That is not what I saw," Athos said bluntly, voice hardening ever so slightly but still managing to sound calm. "I saw two intelligent men brawling like schoolboys in the dust playing at soldiers."

Loki opened his mouth, but no words came out. Athos had shocked his silver-tongued brother into silence.

"In the short time you have been with us, I have come to expect more from you than such immaturity. Do not force me to revise my assessment."

Thor waited for the inevitable retort, knowing Loki would never remain silent while others criticized him, so the hush that followed Athos's words was a shock. His brother was staring at Athos, flushing from embarrassment, but there was a look in his eyes Thor had rarely seen before. It looked like gratitude.

And then Thor understood. All their lives, if he or Loki had been reprimanded for getting in fights, or causing mischief, they had been told when brought before Odin only that their behavior was not befitting a prince. No one had ever expected anything of them beyond that. Their actions were defined by their titles, not their worth as individuals.

But Athos had told Loki he had seen worth in him and was disappointed when Loki behaved in a manner that did not correspond with that. Thor couldn't remember the last time someone had said anything like that to either of them without referencing proper royal behavior.

He wondered what it must be like to be part of a brotherhood where your actions determined your worth, rather than your birth. He found himself yearning for it.

Athos was not done yet, it seemed. Before releasing his men, he pinned d'Artagnan and Aramis with an irritated glare, though it seemed to be aimed more at the latter.

"And you two! You encouraged them. Did either of you think perhaps it was time to step in, or were you content to watch them rip each other to pieces?" he asked icily. D'Artagnan looked mortified, but Thor sensed the words were directed at Aramis, who had seemed to enjoy the fighting overmuch.

Neither man said anything, though Aramis at last had the grace to look ashamed. Athos swept a last disappointed glare across the group, including Thor this time, and sighed.

"Porthos, Loki, clean yourselves up. Throw yourselves in the stream if you must. As soon as you're clean, you're both on firewood duty. For the remainder of the evening. D'Artagnan, start dinner. Aramis, check if either of them bruised anything important. You've got first watch. Thor, check the horses. Dismissed."

Thor watched in disbelief as the Musketeers scrambled to obey the quiet commands. Porthos disappeared in the direction of the stream, returning a few moments later with two buckets of water. Aramis dug around in the packs, producing several clean rags, while d'Artagnan busied himself by the fire.
He wandered over to the horses, patting the stallion that had been assigned to him absent-mindedly. He had never seen anyone inspire such loyalty in his followers. His father was obeyed, but he'd never witnessed his soldiers look so ashamed for disappointing him. Odin would rage when he was disobeyed and doled out punishments freely, it left him with obedient men, but not loyal.

Athos was different. He was a fine leader, that much was clear, and he cared about his men personally, and they knew this and returned the regard to the point that the loss of his favor was more of a punishment than any he could order. Thor felt admiration for the mortal strum through him.

It was as if every lesson his instructors had tried to drum into his head on how to be a good leader had been wrong. They should have sent him to study with men like Athos instead.

Perhaps that was what a king should be.

Aramis was torn. He had a handful of rags to distribute between the two fighters, but who did he go to first? If he went to Loki, Porthos would be irritated, but if he went to Porthos, Loki might read it the wrong way.

Thankfully his dilemma was solved by Thor, who wandered back from the horses and commented on a large bruise spreading over Porthos's shoulder before he reached Aramis. Porthos smiled easily and shoved the second bucket of water in Loki's direction before engaging the blond giant in a laughing exchange.

Which left Aramis free to see to his angel.

Loki was sulking; there was really no better word for it. He glared at Aramis when he approached and was obviously eavesdropping on Porthos and Thor to check they weren't mocking him. It probably didn't help that Porthos kept shooting him smug looks over Thor's shoulder, especially when Thor loudly exclaimed that Loki ought to have been more careful.

Aramis would need to approach cautiously.

"I might have a new appreciation for wrestling after that display. Perhaps you could show me some moves? I did show you my arquebus, after all," he said, winking outrageously.

It worked, to an extent. Loki stopped glaring at Porthos long enough to shoot Aramis a glare of his own, and he smiled more widely.

He handed back Loki's sword belt, taking advantage of the momentary attention focused on him. "I'm considering you the victor, anyway, mon ange."

Loki shot him a suspicious look, and Aramis smiled warmly at him.

"Come now. It's obvious where that fight would have ended, if not for Athos's intercession."

He silently apologized to Porthos for the insult. He wasn't at all sure where the fight was going. Truthfully, he hadn't been thinking about anything as common as the outcome when two beautiful men were essentially fighting over him, but he figured a little lie wouldn't hurt anyone.

Loki still said nothing, but a tiny smirk curled the corner of his lips as his anger seemed to ease, and he allowed Aramis to pass him a few of the rags. Dipping them in the water, he began wiping the dust from his hands.
Dust also coated his neck and face, and Aramis sensed an opportunity too delicious to ignore.

"Allow me," he murmured, snatching the freshly wetted rag from Loki's hand. When Loki protested, he announced grandly, "I am a trained physician. I must check you for injuries. You heard our fearless leader."

It was an exaggeration, but it forced his angel to shut up, well aware that he couldn't simply announce he had no injuries to be tended. Aramis could see a few bruises beneath the dirt, but nothing like a man should have after such a bout.

Gently, he raised the cloth to Loki's face, swiping it carefully across one sharp cheekbone and relishing in the contact and the fact that Loki was actually allowing this. They sat in silence as Aramis slowly uncovered the handsome features, running the cloth down the line of Loki's jaw, across the bridge of his nose…

He kept cleaning long after the dust was gone. Loki didn't seem to notice.

A short while later he noticed Porthos rise and move towards the woods. He felt rather ashamed of himself for focusing solely on Loki when he knew his angel had no injuries to speak of. He would have to tend to Porthos's bruises and wounded pride when the other Musketeer returned from fetching firewood.

Porthos had not quite reached the line of the trees when Aramis realized something was wrong. He glanced around quickly and found the source of his disquiet. Athos had gone too still, watching the forest out of the corner of his eye.

A twig snapped ahead of Porthos, who paused, uncertain.

That was all the warning they received.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, please review, or we'll send the Minotaur after you - and we won't send Aramis to clean you up, afterwards. (The Minotaur is basically the Woman in Black, now you know of it, it's coming. QUICK WRITE A REVIEW.) - C

^Legitimately scared right now. Tempted to review my own chapter to save myself. Though if the Minotaur is Porthos, no one will review on the off chance he'll show up at their houses. - L
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thor learns that birth does not always equal worth, Aramis’ flirtation risks all of their lives, and Loki battles with a millennium of conditioning that might very well have him leaving them all behind. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thor watched with amazement as Athos barked an order and the four Musketeers immediately leaped into action. They were like a well-oiled unit; even d’Artagnan who – he had learned from the boy's jokes with the older men – was fairly new to the group, still fell into place as if he had fought alongside them for years.

They were a formidable fighting force, fitting together like gears. He and Loki had fought from each other's backs for centuries, and yet even they did not manage to work so well that they didn't need to call out to the other.

The four formed a square, each looking to a side of the clearing, and Thor gratefully slid into the gap provided by Porthos who jerked his head to the side. Loki did the same beside Athos, and they waited in tense silence for something.

There was a rustle in the foliage directly in front of him and then he felt Porthos signal Aramis with a nudge. Suddenly, Porthos gripped Thor's arm to steady it, and then the barrel of Aramis' gun rested on top of his shoulder. The sound was like an explosion and he only managed to not duck instinctively because of Porthos' firm grip and the amusement on the man's face.

"Nice shot," Porthos said quietly to a grinning Aramis, and then said to Thor, "Forgot you wouldn't be expectin' that."

He laughed and rubbed his ear, willing the ringing to subside but pleased that Porthos was pleased. "I do not know what I did, but I'm happy to help."

"You make a fantastic ledge, Thor," Aramis remarked teasingly, and Thor was surprised to see Loki's small smirk.

He wasn't sure when he had last seen it.

Loki was changing, Thor could see it happening, but he wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. His brother was never one for camaraderie, he didn't enjoy the banter of friends and soldiers; he was ever quiet.

Thor had thought that the Musketeers would grate on Loki, and sometimes he gave the impression that they did, but then there were moments where his laugh was more jesting than jeering, like now.

Of course, that might be because he had only recently attempted to dismember Porthos using his hands.

Thor shook his head in disbelief when Aramis carefully explained the reloading process of his
weapon to Loki, and Loki asked questions that had Aramis smiling in agreement.

Thor had never understood his brother, but if he was starting to relax and enjoy the company of worthy friends, perhaps being stranded on Midgard was the best thing that had ever happened to them.

Athos and d'Artagnan returned from the tree-line with a body held between them, and judging from the way Porthos clapped Aramis on the back and Loki's eyes lit with admiration, the killing shot had been a difficult one.

"A scout?" D'Artagnan asked of Athos, who nodded with a calculating glance at their surroundings.

"Yes, it would seem we have not yet been discovered, but they will come looking for him sooner or later."

Porthos did something strange then; he looked from Aramis, to Loki, to him, and finally to d'Artagnan, before shrugging at a silent question from Athos and saying, "S'fine, we'll go south."

The four of them seemed to speak without actually speaking, it was a language that made both he and Loki frown in confusion, but then Aramis - after a long, careful look at Porthos - smiled at Loki and said, "We're north, then."

Athos turned to Thor with a commanding cast to his serious expression. "We'll wait here, for they may send more to check on the scout's whereabouts."

Thor stiffened then and he knew why Athos had been authoritative, because Thor was already not happy with that arrangement.

Loki caught his eye and gave a small shrug, turning away and easily falling in with Aramis as they walked off. To his side, Porthos and d'Artagnan disappeared in the other direction, and Thor was so shocked at his brother's simple compliance that he forgot to object.

"Should we not go with them?" he asked anxiously of Athos, worried for both his brother-in-blood and his brothers-in-arms.

Athos' regard was calm and perceptive, he knew that Thor did not like Loki absent from his side, did not like that Porthos might have to fight so soon after sparring, did not like standing still when the others were out there.

Possibly getting injured.

He began to pace, his palm clutching Mjölnir and itching to attack whoever it was that lurked in the woods.

Athos crouched to search the dead man's pockets and said without looking up, "Sit down, you're wearing me out."

Thor stared in surprise, concern lacing his veins as he watched the collected man. Thor's blood was thrumming in nervous anticipation, and yet Athos, who he had thought genuinely cared for his men, seemed completely unaffected. "Are you not worried?"

"Should I be?" Athos answered mildly, rifling through some papers he had found.

"How?" Thor asked incredulously of their leader, of the man who they all looked to for guidance. "How can you just let them go, is it not torture?"
Athos did look up then, with a considering look that made Thor want to fidget, but then the man's tone seemed confiding, as if he was saying something that he would not otherwise have said. "Of course it is, but they do well in the field and I'm more patient than they are, it makes sense for me to stay here, where they know where to find me."

There was logic in there, somewhere, but Thor couldn't see it, because all he could think about was how it felt as if they were doing nothing whilst the others risked their lives.

"What if they get hurt, what if one of them dies?" Thor asked desperately, because he had come to greatly respect Athos, and it was unsettling to see him seem so callous.

Athos flinched as if he had been struck, and his fingers held his sword's hilt as if seeking comfort. "We are a team and I trust them with my life, I know that this is the best course of action, and yet if something were to happen to one of them…" Athos' eyes darkened with something like pain. "I would never forgive myself."

Thor felt some of his tension disappear, because he began to understand. It wasn't that Athos didn't care, it was that he cared too much. He knew of their strengths and their weaknesses and he planned accordingly, he had sent the impatient ones to roam and do what they did best, whilst he waited and strategised.

The waiting was what made Athos such a strong leader, for he didn't charge in recklessly, so focused on victory that he didn't look out for his companions. No, Athos thought ahead, he considered all of the possible eventualities all whilst ensuring that his men knew they could look to him for cool-headed guidance, because he only had their best interests at heart.

Athos truly cared for his men, and that made him more worthy than any other person that Thor had ever known.

"Teach me to be patient," he asked quietly, and a small smile quirked Athos' lips.

"It starts with sitting," Athos began, and Thor settled in to listen to a mortal man who should have been a king.

It took only a few minutes before he and Loki were picking their way through the thick undergrowth, and Aramis' attention was already straying. The sunlight was dappled over Loki's hair, and Aramis wondered whether it would be warm to the touch if he just reached out and—

"Would you normally have gone with Porthos?" Loki asked without turning around, interrupting Aramis' daydream - probably for the best.

"Ah," Aramis hesitated at first, but said honestly, "d'Artagnan is young yet; he fights better alongside one of us as we've trained so often."

It was only part of the truth. Porthos had silently asked his opinion and Aramis was only too happy to pair up with Loki. Perhaps he had been too keen though, for he had still not checked on Porthos' injuries and Athos had frowned slightly at his and d'Artagnan's backs when they walked off.

No, they would be okay; d'Artagnan was a fine swordsman when he didn't let his emotions get the better of him, and whilst Porthos was a fiend for riling people up, he would look out for the boy.

"That did not answer my question," Loki replied wryly, and Aramis allowed himself a sly smile.
"Yes, Porthos and I match well; he is the brawler and I, the style."

Loki gave him an arch look over his shoulder and Aramis had to restrain his grin at what might just have been slight stirrings of jealousy in those affronted green eyes.

"How unfortunate for you to be demoted to the rank of brawler, then," Loki said haughtily as he faced forward again, his cloak flaring as he did so.

Aramis laughed low in his throat, and delighted at seeing a tiny smirk on Loki's lips before he realised that Aramis could see and wiped it clear.

"I don't know," he replied idly, "brawling does look quite fun."

Another arch look.

"You have neither the strength nor the skill." Aramis snorted at that deliberately provoking statement but kept his gaze innocently on the canopy above them. "Perhaps you could teach me, then."

He felt Loki shoot him another look, but it turned to mild confusion when he thought that Aramis wasn't being flirtatious, falling straight into Aramis' trap; he did so enjoy putting Loki on the back foot.

It was a fantastic game, and Aramis thought that he was becoming rather good at it, especially when Loki murmured with a small frown, "Perhaps."

Aramis returned his attention to the object of his fascination and said gleefully, "Wonderful."

Ah, there was that arch look again.

"Are we not meant to be searching for something?" Loki asked aloofly after he had sufficiently glared at Aramis' smile.

"No," he replied easily and leaned against a tree. "Just be on the lookout."

Loki looked him up and down and it made Aramis' breath catch just a little, it stopped completely when Loki said with a sardonic curl of his lips, "Because you're so very prepared for an ambush."

Heated anticipation unfurled in Aramis' stomach and he let his hand trail absent-mindedly down his chest to his sword. "Is that a challenge, mon ange?"

Loki watched the movement raptly but then caught Aramis' amused expression and turned away. "I do not wish to engage in a one-sided duel."

"Definitely a challenge," Aramis remarked matter-of-factly, not bothering to hide his grin.

Loki rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to say something, probably a cutting denial that would make Aramis laugh, but then he turned at a noise that Aramis couldn't hear.

"It's okay," Aramis said with a shrug of his shoulders as he palmed his arquebus fondly, "I understand how it is to not feel challenged."

Loki's attention successfully regained, Aramis sighed at his beloved gun and pretended not to notice Loki's scowl. "I believe you said that I was very impressive."

"Yes, but what is impressive when compared to my, well, mastery?"
To Aramis' delight, Loki's scoff was coupled with emerald eyes that were alight with amusement, as if he knew that Aramis was only teasing him.

It would seem that his angel was learning how to play.

"Forgive me for never having picked up an arquebus before." Aramis somehow managed to restrain an eager noise at hearing Loki's voice form the name of his favourite weapon, found it even harder when Loki smirked as he continued, "I'm sure that if I had practiced as often as you have, I could match you."

"Ah, mon ange," he replied with exaggerated disappointment to his sigh. "It is not practice, it is skill, and that is inborn."

Loki raised an indifferent eyebrow that was belied by the glitter of entertainment in his eyes. "You were born with the knowledge of guns?"

"Yes, and I am excellent at handling them," he said with a sidelong glance and a smirk of his own as his caressed the barrel.

Loki straightened immediately, the precursor to his usual derision, but then he narrowed his eyes at Aramis and shook his head with what definitely sounded like a small laugh.

"Your ego is astounding."

Aramis almost groaned at how Loki had set him up for a great comeback. "That's not all I have that's astounding."

Loki's lips twitched, so on the verge of a genuine smile, and Aramis felt like he had finally convinced a giant cat to not attack him on sight.

"Aramis," Loki began, and Aramis was struck speechless at his own name from an angel's mouth, but then the humour suddenly disappeared from Loki's face as he frowned at something over his shoulder. "What is that?"

Aramis turned almost dazedly, desperate to hold onto the playful nature.

He realised too late, of course, that if Loki had never held an arquebus before, he didn't know what one looked like when it was aimed from the shadows.

There was brief pressure on Aramis' back, a growl came from behind him as he fell, a gunshot from in front, and then light that seemed to come from everywhere.

Loki splayed his fingers and sent the bullet hurtling back towards its master, noticing distractedly that even with his magic he could not manage a shot as good as Aramis' earlier.

And he had done that practically blind.

When the shadowed figure's gurgled cry sounded loud enough to satisfy Loki, he curled his fingers and let the bullet go, ignoring the thud of dead weight as the body crashed into the grass.

The figure did not deserve any further attention, for only a coward attacked from the trees and aimed at their targets' spines.

Aramis would have been crippled, and Loki had already expended enough of his power on the foolish Midgardian that seemed a magnet for trouble. If it wasn't for Aramis' incessant heated
looks, Loki could have paid more attention to the sounds of the forest.

Although, he had allowed himself to be distracted by the low note of challenge in Aramis' voice, he couldn't deny that.

Loki had been certain that he had heard the sounds of footsteps, or at least of the birds quieting for a brief few moments, but then Aramis had stroked that insanely interesting gun and Loki had only just started to grasp how the reloading worked.

It was the arquebus that had attracted his attention, and nothing more.

He hastily checked Aramis over for injuries but was reassured by the look of complete confusion on the man's face as he finally looked up. Perhaps he would not have noticed how Loki had used his magic to rid them of their craven attacker.

He just needed to ensure that Aramis didn't see the bloody hole in the dead man's chest, for then he would see that Loki's 'shot' was not as true as his or, worse, know that Loki had panicked when he had seen the gun aimed at Aramis' back.

He had panicked.

Aramis stood a little unsteadily but settled under Loki's palm and, amazingly, turned to him and asked, "Are you okay?"

Loki blinked in surprise. "Yes?"

Why had Aramis asked him if he were okay, surely he should be the one asking that?

And yet, he couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

Besides, with a soft pulse of his magic and the faintest flicker of Aramis' eyelashes, he knew that the Midgardian was fine. There was no need to check.

He didn't care, anyway.

Aramis looked down at the body that had slumped between the trees and focused on something that Loki could not see.

"Mon Dieu, that was the tail scout, they've gone past us." Aramis paled and turned to Loki with something like terrified concern darkening his brown eyes, and then he whispered, "Porthos."

Aramis ran from him, darted like a deer through the trees and leaving Loki behind without a backwards glance, unable to see the sneer of complete contempt that had curled Loki's lips. Loki took a moment to stare at the man he had pitilessly killed to save Aramis from pain, and then he snarled as he exploded the corpse into flames.

When he whisked the fire away, he wished he could also douse the sickening anger that had begun to rise in his chest, and then, as he finally followed Aramis, he resolutely told himself something important.

He didn't care, anyway.

As he approached their camp, he heard the sounds of swords and ruthlessly quashed the concern that tried to claim his heart. Instead, he focused on the voice in his head, the voice of his father, and remembered where he belonged.
On the throne, on Asgard.

As the ruthless god that ruled without sentiment.

It was that voice that kept him from leaping through the trees into the clearing, kept him lingering under the leafy canopy and merely surveying the fracas before him.

He couldn't help himself from searching for Aramis and saw him cutting a furious path towards a desperately defending Porthos.

Beyond them, too far away to help and surrounded by more attackers, were Athos and d'Artagnan fighting back-to-back as Thor funnelled newcomers towards them and batted aside anyone who dared approach him.

Loki's eyes locked on Aramis again, who had finally reached Porthos' side, the place where he had so desperately wanted to be.

The voice in his head and the anger in his chest suddenly joined to form one very compelling thought.

If he wanted, he could leave them behind.

The thought shocked him and he disgustedly examined the sense of injustice that screamed along his subconscious, but then he saw the tight smile that Porthos gave Aramis, and Loki turned away from the sight of it.

He took a step, ignoring the strange pain that lanced him, but then he heard a noise that stopped him in his tracks.

It was Aramis' cry of distress.

It sounded so much louder than his father's voice.

The rage still burned in his blood, but Loki reached for his pistol and turned back, immediately seeing where he had to fire to ensure that Aramis would live.

Aramis was standing over a collapsed Porthos, a look of agony on his face that had been lit with sly amusement for him only minutes ago.

Loki felt the gun buck in his hand and took out a man who had raised his sword to Aramis', and then he flicked his glowing fingers and tripped two others who followed with the raised roots on the forest floor.

Without taking his eyes off of Aramis, he called, "Thor!"

With a roar, Thor burst from a throng of men and achieved nothing less than three smashed skulls and proceeded to barrel to where Loki's finger pointed. Athos and d'Artagnan took advantage of Thor's attention-grabbing bellow and slipped to Aramis' side, the latter glancing fearfully at Porthos' prone form.

Loki swiftly circled through the trees and took great delight in driving his sword through the backs of men who had not thought to look behind them.

He calmed with each death, but something hot that burned like a mixture of sentiment and jealousy still fuelled his swings. Beyond the cooling corpses, Loki saw Aramis crouched over Porthos, the large man was clearly unconscious and considerably pale underneath the blood, but
there was relief tied into the anxiety on Aramis' face.

There were still more breathing bodies in Loki's way. Gold flashed, claret sprayed, and Loki sneered; these mortals were so very weak, so very small compared to him.

For he was a god, and he didn't care.

He was sure that he didn't.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I'd like three bags of angst, please? I'll take my change in screams of frustration, thanks. Please review, you wonderful readers, you! - C

^Mwuahahaha angst is beautiful. ANOTHER *smash* - L
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

If you were to look up a picture of 'jealousy', you'd see a picture of Loki's pout. The description would be as follows: 'State of extreme distaste achieved by stupid Songbirds.' I call this chapter "The Songbird and the Soldier". - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For some reason, the sight of Aramis's hands pressed close to Porthos's chest made Loki wish some of their attackers still lived, just so he could run them through again. He found the frantic look on the handsome man's normally smiling face detestable.

It mattered little that the hands were currently holding closed a bleeding wound to Porthos's chest. Perhaps it was unreasonable, but he felt a certain vindictive pleasure in the mortal's predicament. Things had been going so well. Why did this silly human have to ruin it by being injured?

His glares might serve more purpose if the idiotic mortal hadn't passed out.

It wasn't until Aramis finally spoke that Loki realized perhaps things were worse than he had first assumed.

"Athos, we need to get somewhere safe now," Aramis shouted, and the edge of command in his voice jerked Loki out of his uncharitable thoughts. Aramis was not a man to order when he could persuade, and the desperation told him something was deeply wrong.

"There's an inn," Athos said shortly, and his face was white and creased in worried lines. Thor glanced at him and his own face paled as well. "How bad-?"

"We need to get there," Aramis cut him off, ignoring the hesitant question.

"Aramis-?" Athos began again, and Aramis's head snapped up, eyes narrowed fiercely.

"We must get him there now or he will die!" he shouted, desperation distorting his handsome features.

"Brother, do something," Thor muttered urgently from beside him, but Loki bristled at the tone of command in his voice and ignored him.

"Thor, can you carry him?" Aramis asked, distracting Thor from the inevitable reprimand.

Loki's brother nodded, lifting the wounded man carefully and allowing Aramis to manhandle him until he was putting pressure on the wound. Loki had never seen this authoritative, commanding side of Aramis before.

He rather liked it.

But perhaps those were thoughts for another time, out of this forest of corpses.

Thor swung Porthos up on his horse and clambered up behind him, looking to Aramis uncertainly. "Should I ride slowly?" he ventured. "I would not want to injure him further."
"There's no time!" Aramis snapped, wheeling his own horse about so sharply it danced on its hind legs. Loki noted the way the youngest human’s face blanched at the sharp edge to Aramis’s tone. There was a terror in his eyes that Loki did not understand.

Surely the wound was not so bad?

He had no chance to check as they galloped through the forest. The inn Athos had spoken of was only a few short miles away, and Loki did not push his beast as much as the others, arriving a few minutes behind to distance himself from the madness that seemed to accompany mortal injuries.

The inn's yard was mostly deserted. The only horse that had been properly tethered was Thor's own, probably because someone had tied it before he dismounted. The others were roaming the yard freely, but had not scattered despite the open gate.

Loki spared a moment's appreciation for their fine training.

He took it upon himself to tether them properly anyway, trying not to think too uncharitably of masters who failed to see to their animals. He also found a stable boy and ordered the lad to fetch their food and water.

As an afterthought, he flipped the grubby child a coin, though from the way his eyes widened at the sight of it, large gold coins with Asgardian marking were not common tips.

The main room of the inn was empty. There was none of the hustle he had expected to lead him to the proper room, so he was forced to let his magic uncurl until he felt Aramis's presence on the floor above. It burned white hot, like a miniature sun.

He failed to suppress all thoughts of the symbolism, growling at his own sentimentality.

The room was shockingly quiet. Athos and Thor were hovering in a corner while d'Artagnan stood beside the bed, leaping to obey Aramis's terse instructions.

Aramis himself was splattered with blood, a needle held in red hands going in and out of the last few centimeters of what must have been a gaping hole in Porthos's chest. Even as Loki watched, he tied off the last of the stark black thread, cutting the end neatly with his dagger. Only then did his hands tremble. Not once did he glance at Loki.

The loss of attention stung more than it should.

"How is he?" Athos asked, voice quiet. Thor had moved to stand beside Loki near the door. Loki wasn't sure if he was seeking comfort or simply the familiar.

Aramis blew out a heavy breath, one bloody hand rising towards his hair in what was likely a nervous gesture.

Loki was absurdly grateful when d'Artagnan's hand darted out before the offending limb could reach the wild curls, and was disgusted with himself for caring.

"He may yet live, provided the wound does not fester," Aramis said. D'Artagnan and Thor both broke into relieved smiles. Athos did not, but the lines of his face softened slightly.

Loki stared at them, these men who professed to be Aramis's brothers.

How was it they could not hear he was lying?

"I suggest you sort out accommodations for the night," Aramis said, still with that undertone Loki
could not quite place. "I will stay here for now."

Athos nodded, signalling the others to leave the room. Loki himself was out the door and partway down the hallway when his sensitive hearing picked up the unexpected sound of Aramis calling Thor back in.

How odd.

Athos sent Loki into a room down the hall, and explained shortly he would be sharing with Thor before he and d'Artagnan disappeared into another. Loki stood in the center of the room, trying to sort through the disgusted emotions whirling through him.

He had seen the look on Aramis's face when they had realized the enemy had slipped past them, recalled the way he had said Porthos's name as he charged off.

Not that he cared, of course.

Not at all.

The squeak of the door tore him from his musings, and he turned to snap at Thor for distracting him, desperate to take out his frustrations on someone.

But it wasn't Thor.

It was Aramis.

Loki was so thrown by this unexpected development that for a moment he found himself lost for words. Aramis entered without invitation, closing the door behind him.

"Where is Thor?" Loki managed at last, cursing his own clumsy attempts at conversation and cursing Aramis for wrong-footing him so effectively.

"I left him with Porthos." Aramis's voice was rough, almost a croak. He stared at Loki in a way that was highly unsettling.

"Then why are you here?" Loki asked, recovering enough to add a sneer to the question.

"Porthos is dying." It was Loki staring at Aramis now, shocked by the blunt way the words had been said. Was this some kind of tasteless prank? Even Loki wouldn't bother with something like that.

"Nonsense," he said derisively. "You said he would probably be fine."

"I lied. He's dying. I can't save him." Aramis gaze burned into him, a drowning man's silent plea for rescue. Staring into his eyes was like looking into an abyss of pain and guilt.

"But you can."

Understanding swept through Loki, leaving him cold in its wake. Aramis wanted to use him to save his lover, past lover, whatever it was Porthos was to him.

"I suppose you asked Thor first?" Loki snarled, fury igniting within him.

Aramis's brow creased in confusion, but the lost look did not leave his eyes. "Why would I do that?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused. "I assumed he knew about your abilities. I did not want the others to learn of the extent of Porthos's injuries."
That mollified Loki slightly, but he still detested the thought of being used like some cheap fix in a
tough situation. He had not obeyed Thor's presumptuous order. He would not bow to this mere
mortal.

"Loki…" Aramis murmured, and his voice sounded so broken that Loki had to fight not to give
in. He could hear Odin's voice in his ear, reminding him he was a prince of Asgard, he was above
these foolish humans and their petty needs.

"Please, mon ange." Aramis was begging now, and the whispered words silenced Odin's voice
more effectively than Loki himself had ever managed.

Dully, he realized this was the first time anyone had ever asked him to help, rather than ordered.
He felt almost unclean, watching Aramis beg so disgracefully. He could not imagine ever
debasing himself so. And yet, the depth of Aramis's affection amazed him, and though he hated to
admit it, touched him.

He was going to regret this, he was sure, but he couldn't hold out in the face of such desperation.
Furiously, hating himself, he relented.

"Very well," he hissed, shoving Aramis aside as he strode down the hall. He could hear the other
man stumbling in his wake, exhaustion obviously catching up with him.

Thor spun around when Loki crashed into the room, the obvious relief on his face just one more
log on the fire of Loki's rage. It seemed even the mighty Thor cared for Porthos. The mortals'
weakness was clearly rubbing off.

Aramis was right, that much was immediately apparent. Porthos would be dead in minutes if Loki
did not act quickly.

Well, he had always liked a challenge.

Thor at least had the good sense to leave the room. Aramis hovered far too close, his breath
tickling Loki's neck as he bent over, splaying a hand on Porthos's chest and calling for his magic,
savoring the delicious way it flowed through him. The room was suddenly bathed in faint gold
light.

It took a remarkable amount of restraint to keep from pouring so much power into the mortal that
he exploded. So weak, these humans. He allowed just enough magic to heal the worst of the
wound, hoping it would keep the others from questioning the miraculous healing.

At least Aramis had the foresight to lie. Porthos's survival would seem a validation of his skills,
rather than Loki's.

It was good he had not thought of that until the healing was almost complete, or else he might
never have bothered.

At last he removed his hand, allowing himself a slight smirk at the clever nature of his handiwork.
Enough to save the miserable human, but not enough to raise suspicion. He half expected Aramis
to spout his praises then and there.

It came as something of a shock, therefore, when Aramis shoved past him, fingers fumbling at
Porthos's neck. He must have found the steady pulse, for he sagged suddenly, dropping to his
knees beside the bed. His head fell forward to rest on the lumpy mattress, muttering under his
breath too quickly for Loki to catch.

It sounded like a prayer.
Disgusted, Loki whirled around and stormed from the room. So he was used, once again, and he had allowed it. He could hear Odin's voice once more, berating him for his useless sentiment and foolish decisions.

He was furious with himself for caring, for allowing himself to be swayed by Aramis's desperation, and he was furious with Aramis for caring about Porthos so much that he would beg and force him to compromise his own principles.

It had to be love; that much was obvious. Aramis loved Porthos. Why else would a man *plead* for help, beg for a life to be saved, and of him, who had done nothing but rebuff his attentions since they had met?

Well, good for them. They could rot, for all he cared. He did not need Aramis's love to feel complete. He had survived all these millennia without his father's, after all. Odin would think him flawed for his actions today, and he would be right.

But still he could not prevent the ache that spread through his chest at the memory of how Aramis had pleaded for his help.

Perhaps he was flawed in both his father's and Aramis's eyes, for nobody would beg for *his* life to be saved.

The rise and fall of Porthos's chest was like a lifeline, keeping the torrent of emotions from overwhelming him entirely. He could barely bring himself to think beyond that one simple fact. If he did, all the guilt and shame and fear crashed upon him with enough force to knock the air from his lungs.

This was all his fault. There was no doubt in his mind that he was to blame for this. It did not matter that no one would ever say it; in his heart, this would always be his fault, his poor judgement, his failure.

He had found the cracked ribs while sewing up the terrible wound in Porthos's chest, and knew instantly that they were older than the battle, were received during the match with Loki.

The discovery had made Aramis sick with fear, for a wrong move during battle could break them cleanly and send shards of bone deep into Porthos's lungs. They had needed immediate treatment.

Porthos hadn't said a word about them.

But that shouldn't have mattered. Aramis should have checked. Didn't Porthos always try to hide his own injuries? Aramis should have known.

It was killing him to know he had come so close to failing his duty.

It was *his* job to check for injuries, *his* friendship that normally kept him plastered to Porthos's side, but he had nearly lost one of the most important people in his world because he had been too busy trying to flirt with an angel whose power astounded him.

Looking back, Aramis could see now how badly he had let his friend down. He had neglected him, ignored him for a fresh infatuation, and Porthos had suffered the consequences.

Porthos had *needed* him.

Part of his brain was trying to remind him he ought to go after Loki, fall to his knees before him
and thank him for what he had done, but it was drowned out by the fear still clamoring in his
head. He couldn't leave.

Not until he was sure.

Aramis didn't know how long he sat there, just watching Porthos breathing. He was so focused
that he did not notice when Porthos's eyes opened, blinking at him with confusion that quickly
turned to concern.

He didn't even notice the hand that lifted from the bed until it was nudging insistently at his face.
Only then did he realize Porthos had been saying his name for at least thirty seconds and receiving
no response.

No wonder he looked half-frantic with concern. Aramis supposed he probably looked worse than
Porthos right now.

Not that it mattered at all when Porthos was alive, and awake, and well enough to be concerned.
His angel had come through for him. Aramis knew he would never be able to repay Loki for this.

But Porthos was still trying to get his attention, and with difficulty Aramis focused on his face,
feeling heavy fingers brushing gently through his hair as he at last met the concerned brown eyes.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong, who died?" Porthos asked, and the strength in his voice left a lump in
Aramis's throat. So close, he had been so close to never hearing that again.

"Aramis?"

"You almost did," Aramis couldn't help but blurt out. He saw Porthos's eyes widen as
understanding chased confusion from his features.

"But I didn't," he murmured, tangling a hand in Aramis's hair and pulling him closer. "Look, see,
I'm fine."

Aramis fought the urge to laugh. So close, so close. Out loud, he only said, "You should have told
me you were hurt."

"In the middle of a battle there was 'ardly time for that," Porthos said, offering a half-smile, but
Aramis shook his head.

"Before that. You've got three cracked ribs, Porthos. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, you were busy," Porthos said, wincing slightly as he shrugged. He said it as if it were
something simple, something that did not matter very much.

Aramis felt as if a shard of ice had been driven into his heart. There it was; the proof that his own
carelessness had nearly cost Porthos his life. Suddenly he couldn't breathe.

Porthos must not have noticed the air being sucked from the room, because he was still talking.
"Besides, I don't think they were cracked after all. Must've just been bruised. I can't feel 'em now,
anyway." He pressed a hand experimentally to his chest.

Hurriedly, Aramis reached across and ran probing fingers across Porthos's ribs. He was right; the
cracked ones had healed. Loki had done far more than Aramis had realized.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," he muttered, and Porthos actually chuckled at that, oblivious to the
nature of Aramis's disbelief.
"Even you make mistakes, my friend," he said, and his smile reminded Aramis that it was okay to breathe, because the world had not ended.

He needed to thank his angel for that.

"I must go," he said, trying to ignore the brief look of hurt that flashed across Porthos's face. "Some of the others sustained minor injuries. I should check on them now that you're awake."

The hurt look subsided to concern. "You didn't check 'em over yet?" Porthos asked indignantly. "Off with you!"

Aramis left the room to Porthos's one-armed shooing gestures and made his way quickly down the hallway. Porthos might be awake, but he did not like the idea of leaving him to his own devices for too long. He had a long record of complicating even simple injuries by trying to sneak out and find wine or food when he ought to be in bed.

He knocked on the door to Loki's room, waiting patiently this time until it was opened. By Thor.

"Aramis? How is Porthos?" Thor asked. He was clearly trying to keep his voice low, but it still echoed down the hallway.

"He does well," Aramis answered, too exhausted to say much more. "Where is Loki?"

Thor frowned. "I am not entirely sure," he confessed. "He did not return. He may be outside meditating. Shall I help you find him?"

"That won't be necessary," Aramis told him, mustering a tired smile. "Thank you."

He made his way out of the inn, stopping to look in on Athos and d'Artagnan as he went just to be sure they hadn't been hiding any injuries as well. Both were sleeping soundly. Aramis noted absently that d'Artagnan had at some point risen from his own bed and stolen the blanket from Athos's.

Outside in the courtyard, the moonlight was nearly blinding. He stood still in the doorway for a moment, letting his eyes adjust, before making his way over to the stables.

Loki was not there, but a door at the far end was slightly ajar. Aramis crossed to it and pushed it open gently to find his angel sitting silently in the back pasture, moonlight glinting off his pale skin.

It was such a beautiful scene that Aramis was almost unwilling to interrupt, but his gratitude had gone unexpressed for too long already.

Loki's eyes snapped open when Aramis had crossed half the distance between them. He rose to his feet with catlike grace, emerald eyes narrowing as Aramis neared. His hands and clothes were still stained with dirt and blood, his black hair mussed. He had never looked more like a fallen angel.

"What do you want?" he snarled, crossing his arms across his chest. It seemed to Aramis almost as if he were trying to protect himself, but that was ridiculous.

Aramis had planned out every word of this on the way out, but standing in that field, a soft breeze playing through Loki's silken hair, his handsome words deserted him.

"Thank you," was all he could manage, voice strangled with emotion that hit him anew.
Loki's forehead furrowed in confusion. He opened his mouth to speak, but Aramis found his voice at last and went on. "I could not save him. Had he died, his death would have been on my hands. My dearest friend."

Here he trailed off again for a moment, struggling with words that did not want to come.

"You did what I could not. I will never, never be able to repay you for that. Anything you want of me, it is yours."

Loki was watching him with eyes that grew steadily wider as he spoke. Aramis hoped he could hear the sincerity and admiration in his voice.

He could think of nothing more to add. Aramis was rarely at a loss for words, but he did not know how to convey the depth of his emotion in such trite phrases.

He stepped closer, grateful that Loki did not back away, and reached out one hand to his jaw, a final murmured thank you slipping from his tongue.

As he turned away, he saw Loki's gaze drift upwards to the stars, a broken look in his eyes but the faintest of smiles playing on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

That last line absolutely killed me when I beta-ed this. Just capslock and screaming. Please review and scream with us. - C

The title makes it sound like a really tragic romance movie. - L
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Aramis shares his love of nature and his fascination with emerald green, and Loki tries to understand it. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ride back to Paris was infuriatingly loud and Loki had to grit his teeth not to snap at all of them. They were all excessively jubilant over Porthos' miraculous recovery and Thor had happily clapped Loki on the shoulder at least four times already.

Loki couldn't stand the casual intimacy that everyone else seemed to indulge in; it was bad enough that he had to be exposed to their ridiculous excitement, but the bruise that would surely grow on his back had tempted him into summoning a rain cloud directly over the disgustingly bright little party.

"Loki, look," Aramis murmured from his side, his stallion slowing to a walk as the others moved on, oblivious. Aramis' hand rested on his as he pointed with the other, and Loki followed the gesture to see a group of small brown animals in a nearby field.

"The deer are birthing their fawns at the moment; see that tiny ball in the grass?"

Loki watched attentively, and made a small noise of wonder when the ball unfurled and tried to stand on unsteady legs. It wobbled and fell onto its rump, eliciting a soft laugh from Aramis that Loki realised was fond rather than mocking.

The tiny fawn struggled upwards again and, this time, stood strong and began to gambol about its parents who nudged it tenderly with their noses. When he looked back at Aramis in stunned pleasure, it was to see a delighted smile that Loki couldn't help but return, his mind immediately backtracking to when Aramis had tenderly touched his jaw the night before.

Touched his jaw and said thank you.

Aramis squeezed his wrist then and released him, clucking to his horse to urge it onwards as Loki was left, staring after him.

He wasn't quite sure what had happened, but he felt absurdly pleased that none of the others had shared that surreal moment with them. With one last lingering glance at the deer, which were now prancing through the long grass with ease, Loki trotted to catch up with Aramis.

The pair spent the journey in comfortable silence, just out of distance of the rambunctious group ahead of them.

Loki found it rather pleasant.

It was surprisingly normal to stable the horses and for them all retreat to Aramis' room – the cleanest – in the garrison, d'Artagnan and Porthos arguing over the best way to win a fight and Thor alternating between who he agreed with.
Loki had been quite content sharpening his sword under Aramis' rapt scrutiny, but then the mortal had disappeared 10 minutes ago and seemed to think that he had done it very surreptitiously judging by the sly smile on his face.

He looked up from the whetstone to see that Athos had appeared, saying that he needed them for something and that someone should look for Aramis.

Loki felt a small thrill of smug satisfaction when Porthos was too preoccupied with talking to Thor to realise what was going on, and Loki was already halfway out of the door by the time Porthos asked Athos what he had just said.

There was a moment where Loki had thought that he heard Porthos chuckle knowingly, but he had no idea why that would be so, so he ignored it and focused on keeping an eye out for Aramis and his ridiculous hat amidst the townsfolk.

Only one other person managed to attract Loki's attention, a man who seemed to be watching Loki until he looked carefully at him, and then the stranger disappeared into one of the labyrinthine alleys before he could get a proper look.

It was of no matter, the streets of Paris were intolerably busy, but the crowds of bustling people seemed to part before him as if instinctively aware that he would gut anyone who touched him.

Ghastly planet.

The same could not be said for Aramis, who he caught sight of talking very closely to a woman with dark hair. Loki halted to watch them, loath to interrupt a private conversation but mostly interested to see how Aramis interacted with people other than Musketeers.

She was quite pretty, for a mortal, and Loki grudgingly wondered whether Aramis thought so, too.

It seemed that Aramis was incredibly charming to everyone that crossed his path, and that made Loki a little irritated for some reason. Aramis was offering the woman money, but she pushed his hand away and scowled at him.

For a moment, he thought that Aramis had seen him as he swept a bow to the woman, but then he merely leaned in to whisper something in her ear and the woman sighed.

Astonishingly, she then pulled back and slapped Aramis across the cheek. Loki jerked instinctively, prepared to stride over and intervene, but then as Aramis cradled his jaw, the woman burst out laughing and shook her head in what looked like fond exasperation.

Was this some strange Midgardian custom?

Apparently so, because Aramis tipped his hat gracefully and was shooed away by the giggling woman. The parting of people worked against Loki now, because Aramis immediately locked onto him and strode over with such a confident smile that Loki had to try very hard to keep his raised eyebrow cold and distinctly unamused.

"Hello, mon ange, what brings you out into the sunshine?"

"Who was that woman, and why did she accost you?" he asked brusquely, noticing the way Aramis' smile took on a crafty tilt. The woman's hand print was still emblazoned on Aramis' cheek and Loki swiftly brushed his fingers over the mark, channelling a tiny amount of magic until it disappeared.
It was a nothing gesture, completely meaningless, but Aramis beamed as if— as if— well, Loki had no idea, but it was entirely unwarranted. The mark was an offence and he hadn't liked seeing it there, that was all.

To distract Aramis, he asked again and added, "Why didn't she take your money?"

Aramis leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "That was d'Artagnan's lady love."

Loki raised his brow in surprise; the woman seemed far too fiery and commanding. "That little whelp?"

"Indeed, Constance is a seamstress and thanks to that 'little whelp', she is fee free."

"I suppose he had to be useful for something," he said dryly, pleased when Aramis chuckled.

"He is, as long as he doesn't upset her, she's quite terrifying when she's angry."

"Aren't all women?"

Aramis laughed and tilted his head in consideration. "Yes, good point. Of course, I happen to flourish under command."

Loki rolled his eyes and then caught sight of the sun's position in the sky. "Hurry up, Athos wanted us."

Aramis' eyes lidded slightly and Loki only realised that he had commanded when Aramis replied huskily, "Whatever you say, mon ange."

The lewd implication was so thick that Loki thought that he might choke on it, and the intense little look that Aramis tossed him as he strode past did nothing to help the flaring of heat in his gut.

"Stop that," Loki said with quiet forcefulness, alarmed by the strange gripping sensation in his stomach. Aramis smirked at him and Loki realised again what he had done.

Loki frowned, annoyed at himself and annoyed at Aramis for enjoying it. He took a deliberately large step and stood in Aramis' way, blocking him between the wall and the street.

He opened his mouth to chastise the arrogant mortal, but then something hot and hungry roared across Aramis' face and Loki found that he couldn't speak. Aramis' breathing changed, became deeper and throatier, and Loki realised again.

Aramis liked it.

Loki was speechless; he didn't know how to react to that revelation. He had always been naturally authoritative, it came with being a god of royal blood, but he had never known of someone enjoying being commanded. Was this the same reason that d'Artagnan liked the spitfire nature of Constance?

Aramis liked it?

On a whim, a completely detached and not interested whim, he arched his eyebrow and murmured lowly, "Aramis."

Aramis' dark brown irises were immediately eclipsed by his pupils and a strange noise came from his tan throat.

It almost sounded like a groan.
Aramis liked it.

"Aramis?" A high-pitched voice came from down the street, and Loki took his time pulling away from a moment that would forever etch itself in his memory.

Aramis’ gaze was locked on him, but then he blinked and sucked in a breath when the voice called his name again.

"Constance?" he called back, and Loki was fascinated to hear a broken note in his normally melodious voice.

The woman from before appeared and stopped short upon seeing Loki, her shrewd gaze sizing him up before turning to Aramis and saying, "Never mind, I know what colour you wanted now."

She wasn't at all cowed by his cool regard, just flashed him a smile that seemed very knowing before walking away.

Loki rather liked her.

He realised that Aramis was watching him intently again and, with a lot to think over, said nonchalantly, "Athos wanted us."

He was interested to note that Aramis took a moment to catch up with him, and when he did, it was with his hair ruffled to the point that he had obviously driven his hands through it in some sort of frustration.

Loki liked it.

Loki was starting to learn that whenever Athos said that he needed them, it could be anything from a mission, to simply gathering in the tavern to discuss their next movements over gratuitous amounts of wine.

"When’s the last time we were forced on leave?" Porthos asked with lazy amusement from his seat in the corner, flanked by a beaming Thor and d’Artagnan.

"I think it was when Athos had that concussion," Aramis teased from Loki’s side, his thigh brushing against Loki’s whenever he shifted position.

Aramis had been paying particular attention to him tonight, darting around the table to fall into the seat next to his and snickering whenever Loki said something particularly cutting.

It was all being relegated to a place in Loki's mind that he was resolutely not thinking about, along with the look on Aramis' face when he had essentially pinned him against the wall.

Loki took a steadying breath and focused on the conversation around him.

"If I remember correctly, I received that concussion because you two were busy showing d’Artagnan how to disable someone," Athos replied dryly, and when Thor frowned in confusion, added with a world-weary sigh, "I was that someone."

"Well, I couldn't do it, I had to be on hand for the medical attention," Aramis remarked with a lofty smirk. "And Porthos' skull is too thick."

Porthos nodded sombrely. "S'a blessing an' a curse."
"I was laid up in bed for three days, alternating between cursing them and being sick."

Loki snorted in amusement. "Why not practice on someone else, why risk your health?"

"Why," Porthos asked with a dark grin, "you offerin'? 'Cause I wouldn't mind knockin' you out."

Thor frowned at Loki, taking up Porthos' defence. "It was honourable of Athos to offer his services."

Porthos' expression was entirely too smug for Loki's liking, and his body turned far too close to Thor's than decent company should allow – and Loki was completely ignoring Aramis' shoulder against his.

Seizing an opportunity for mischief, he recalled Aramis saying that Porthos had some sort of – obviously unrequited – attachment to his brother, and said idly, "Yes, well, you've always been on the straight and narrow, haven't you, Thor?"

Porthos stiffened even as the hidden statement went straight over Thor's head, that Thor had never entertained the thought of a man being anything other than a comrade. Loki could clearly remember the look of utter confusion on his brother's face when he had let slip how attractive one of the male guards was.

What had only been conjecture of Porthos' affection was confirmed by the response. If looks could speak, Porthos' astonished one would have said, 'What'd you just say?' and then angrily, 'Do you know? How the 'ell d'you know that I like your brother?'

That last question was fantastically answered by Aramis' badly restrained laughter, his toned shoulders shaking enough that Porthos looked at him in surprise. Aramis bit his lip apologetically and murmured, "I'm sorry, mon ami, it just slipped out."

Porthos' glare just made Loki's smirk wider, and he decided that the large Musketeer needed some comeuppance, so Loki laid his arm possessively across the back of Aramis' chair and raised an eyebrow.

Porthos' cough of abject amazement was music to Loki's ears, but then the man narrowed his eyes at the shirt that had been exposed by his leaning into Aramis.

"That's new," Porthos remarked damningly, mocking amusement sparking in his eyes.

Loki felt heat tingle in his cheeks as he pretended not to enjoy the feel of silky smooth fabric against his skin. The green shirt had been thrust into his arms when Aramis appeared with a bundle of clothes from Constance, saying distractedly, "This doesn't fit me."

It had fit Loki perfectly.

Loki felt Athos' perceptive gaze on him, and then heard a quiet, "It suits you."

Before Loki could go through with the thought of having the ground rip open to devour them all, Athos spared himself by continuing, "Actually, I meant to say, do you have a particular attachment to your sword's sheath?"

Loki, grateful for the change of subject, let his hand drift to his hilt. "Yes, I forged it myself, why?"

Athos shrugged, leaning back into his chair with a swig of his wine. "For all its beauty, I worry that it would gain more attention than it should. Have you considered a plainer one?"
Normally, Loki would have dismissed anything seen as changing him, but he respected Athos' opinion. The mortal's skill still managed to raise his ire, but Loki couldn't deny that it showed how masterful he truly was.

Loki supposed that his sheath was a little ostentatious compared to the Musketeers' simple ones, the plain leather meaning that they proved themselves with expertise rather than flashiness.

"I... will look into it," he said finally, and deliberately didn't look at Thor's utter amazement at his easy compliance.

It occurred to Loki that he had been given things lately and had not repaid any of them. Athos would prove to be a wealth of study in swordplay, and Aramis had outfitted him with a pistol and a shirt, now. Yes, the latter could be seen as paid in regards to his healing of Porthos.

Still, he was a prince, and princes did not get into debt.

He stood abruptly, casting a glance over the table of emptying bottles and seeing Aramis drain the last of his wine.

Loki had partaken of their generosity quite a lot, actually, and alcohol, it seemed, was the perfect way to repay them. Valheim knew they drank enough of it.

He had watched the others enough to know how this transaction should work, but as he stepped towards the bar and reached into his pocket for coin, he realised that his Asgardian currency would not buy anything here except for a few strange looks.

Still, it was gold, perhaps if he just…

With a pulse of magic, he heated some of the coins until they melted into a lump and then flourished it to the innkeep. "How much can I procure for this?"

The mortal was not very good at hiding his emotions, his eyes widened almost larger than his face allowed, and then he murmured eagerly, "Open bar for you, monsieur."

"Excellent," Loki replied succinctly, covering his pleased smile at his own ingenuity. "Six bottles of wine for now, then."

He felt rather than saw Aramis approach, the man's warm weight nudging Loki's arm as he leaned on the wooden counter, pushing back his still messy hair to chide quietly, "I hope you aren't thieving on my account."

Loki hid his amusement and replied archly, "I have no need for thievery; besides, I knew that you wouldn't approve if I did so."

He had actually considered producing the bottles with his magic, or even using his sleight-of-hand tricks to delve into somebody else's pockets, but it would not have been repaying his debts as he should do.

It had nothing to do with Aramis and his gallant nature that was so similar and yet so different to Thor's.

Aramis blinked in surprise, his mouth opening and closing before forming a small, delighted smile. He took three of the bottles that had appeared courtesy of the beaming innkeep and murmured, "That makes this evermore sweeter. Thank you, Loki."

Loki did not deign that soft gratitude with a response, but he did incline his head when their table...
erupted in raucous appreciation at his return, laden down with wine.

They were surprisingly rowdy for a regiment of soldiers, but he knew first-hand that their abilities belied that.

Porthos was still eyeing him warily, so Loki, well aware that he was under Aramis' watchful gaze, graciously offered the large Musketeer a bottle and smirked at the grunted 'thank you'.

This day was turning out marvellously.

Eventually, after they had practically drank the tavern dry and Loki had had his praises sung in drunker and drunker tones, d'Artagnan collapsed into giggles and they called it a night.

As they picked the youth up, Aramis leaned into Athos and asked him something too quiet for Loki to hear, but Athos' response confused him. It was a roll of the eyes but with a smile and a quiet, "Very well."

Loki busied himself with avoiding Thor's lumbering around the table, but locked onto Aramis when he reappeared at his side.

"Mon ange, I've just realised that I need to commission the tanner for a new jacket. Go on without me, I'll ferry Athos home."

Loki glanced at him, took in his tired smile and the way Athos tipped yet another bottle back as he held a stumbling d'Artagnan up, and said simply, "Very well."

Aramis' smile grew and turned a little heated as he murmured, "Sweet dreams."

If Loki had been mildly perturbed that Aramis was not returning to his rooms, he was bizarrely relieved by that parting look. At least this meant that Loki did not have to give up his bed tonight, or wrestle with his conscience when he wouldn't anyway.

Sleep came easily with alcohol running hot in his veins, and so when he awoke to sunshine on his face and a faint thumping in his temples, it was with the distinct knowledge that Aramis was not there and Loki wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Had Aramis returned whilst he slept and been forced to retire on the chair again, leaving before Loki had awoken? Loki glared at the offending piece of furniture, but it turned into a frown when he noticed a box placed upon it that had definitely not been there the night before.

If Loki hadn't been so curious, he would have cursed himself for lowering his guard enough not to stir at midnight movements. Of course, if it had been Aramis, that partly explained his lack of alarm.

Inquisitively reading the slip of paper that rested atop, he reluctantly smirked at the words written in neat, sloping handwriting.

'Mon ange, Athos demanded it.'

It was for him then, this mysterious box. When he opened it, it was with an unfamiliar feeling cresting in his chest, it felt a little like being at the precipice of a cliff – nauseous, pleased, confused.

Eager.

Inside, nestled on soft cloth, was a black leather sheath that was picked out in faint swirling
patterns and adorned with small gold accoutrements. The decoration almost seemed like a meld between the guard that Aramis wore on his shoulder and Loki’s original sheath; the latter of which he immediately detached from his belt and threw carelessly onto the bed.

Picking the new one up almost reverently, Loki ran his fingers along it, marvelling at the detail and the sturdy but lightweight feel. It fitted his sword perfectly, the golden hilt flashing above the plain leather.

The feeling in his chest intensified until he felt almost short of breath, and Loki reached for the note once more.

The reason was a good one, just as the one for the ‘ill-fitting’ shirt was, and the ‘usefulness’ of another pistol-wielder; they all made sense, and yet Loki knew that the reasons were given purely for his benefit, thought up so that he didn’t have to deal with the strange sentimentality that came with these gifts.

For that is what they were; gifts didn’t require repaying, did not invoke debts.

Loki had never received gifts before.

He liked them.

Chapter End Notes

I'm drowning in Lokimos fluff, it's frost and honey coloured. The gold of honey. Just like Loki's light. - C

^Also, if anyone would like to see the incident of Athos and the concussion, I'd be happy to write it. Just shout out in the comments! - L

IT'S BEEN WRITTEN.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Loki preens like a peacock, Aramis ponders the sticky benefits of pastries, Athos shamelessly encourages a prank, and d'Artagnan uses his puppy dog charms on said pretty bird. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The early morning summons from Treville was almost enough to make Aramis regret his late night dash through Paris in search of the perfect sheath for Loki.

Almost.

And even the small amount of annoyance he felt gave way when the angel in question strolled down from his rooms, new sheath proudly displayed in his hip, dark leather gleaming against the richness of the green shirt. It was just a shade lighter than the green cloak he had fastened about his shoulders, and the gold ties complimented the trim on the sheath.

Loki seemed torn between pleased embarrassment and strutting pride.

Aramis beamed.

The crashing arrival of a bleary-eyed Thor swathed in a blinding red cloak forestalled any chance to ask if Loki had liked the gift, but from the way his hand kept idly tracing the etched leather, Aramis could guess the answer. He swelled with satisfaction, content to bask in the pleased expression he had brought to his angel's face.

A friendly prod to the ribs snapped him out of his reverie just as Treville arrived. Aramis shot Porthos a grateful look and reluctantly turned his attention from Loki.

Treville's briefing failed to hold his attention for long, however, and it was only when Porthos nudged him toward the archway out of the garrison that Aramis realized he hadn't listened to a word Treville had said and had no idea what they were going to do.

Perhaps he was a bit more tired than he'd realized, but he still couldn't bring himself to regret the midnight trip to his favorite tanner, or the outrageous bribe it had taken to convince the man that his order should be rushed and completed that night. The sun had been rising by the time he'd slipped the box into the bedroom and returned home to change.

He caught sight of Loki's fingers trailing down the sheath again and smiled. Definitely worth it.

He was not the only one to notice the new piece.

"Brother, you found yourself a new sheath!" Thor exclaimed, excitement written across his face. Aramis smirked as Loki neatly sidestepped Thor's outstretched hand, avoiding his grasp with the ease of long practice.

"Let me see it, Loki," Thor said petulantly. The others had paused to watch the antics. Suddenly d'Artagnan darted forward, weaving past Thor to catch a glimpse of the object of his attention.
"That's nice!" he said, surprised. Loki raised an eyebrow. "I mean, it's just nicer than I would've expected on such short notice," he babbled, backtracking quickly in the face of Loki's disdain. Thor stepped slightly in front of him, blocking him from Loki's annoyed glare.

"Looks good, better'n that golden torch you 'ad," Porthos conceded grudgingly, peering closely at the elaborate etching. Stepping back, he rolled his eyes and shot Aramis a rueful smile, immediately guessing where it had come from. Aramis winked.

Thor and d'Artagnan had fallen into a chorus of demands and compliments, wanting to know where it had come from, but Aramis caught Loki's gaze flashing towards Athos as he angled his body in such a way that the oldest Musketeer had a clear view of the sheath.

Aramis blinked. Was his proud angel looking for Athos's approval? But there- Athos had nodded, a small, contained motion, but Loki's face broke into a small, pleased smile, and Aramis knew that this was the equivalent of Porthos beaming with pride.

D'Artagnan had changed tactics and was rather sullenly inquiring why everyone had nicer things than he did. Apparently, this was the signal for Athos to step in.

"Gentlemen, may I remind you we are on a mission," he said dryly, neatly moving between Loki and his new admirers. "There will be plenty of time to discuss fashion later. I'm sure that's what you and Constance were doing all last night."

Porthos snorted as d'Artagnan blushed faintly but followed Athos down the street. Aramis watched Loki, who looked pleased from all the attention now that no one could see him.

Aramis strolled past him to walk next to Thor, examining Loki from the corner of his eye as he went. His angel was watching him with an intent expression on his face. As he passed, he thought he saw Loki open his mouth as if to speak, but he said nothing.

"We need to head toward the palace," Athos said as they maneuvered down the crowded thoroughfare. "We're to meet the informant before the ninth bell."

"But we haven't eaten yet!" Aramis didn't even have a chance to ask what it was exactly they were doing before d'Artagnan's voice cut him off indignantly as he dodged a cart laden with crates of produce.

"Surely you don't expect us to fight on empty stomachs?" Porthos asked, eyes gleaming wickedly.

Athos sighed in a long-suffering way, raising a hand to massage the bridge of his nose. "Aramis," he ground out good-naturedly. "Go and find us some breakfast. Quickly. We will wait before the courthouse." He tossed a purse to Aramis and headed off, the others trailing in his wake. Porthos and d'Artagnan shouted requests over their shoulders as they hurried after him.

Aramis saw Loki hesitate before following, glancing over at him again, hand hovering over the sheath, but after a moment he turned and strode after Athos, the faintest blush marking his marble cheeks.

Interesting.

Aramis picked his way easily through the crowd, stifling a yawn as he stepped neatly around squealing children that darted underfoot. He made his way to Athos's favorite bakery, just a street over. He had a feeling Athos had waited to send him for food until they were in the vicinity.
Aramis grinned at the pile of coins in the purse as he pushed his way to the counter. There were perks to being a Comte, even one in self-imposed exile.

"Aramis!" the boulangerie cried when she saw him, waving a baguette over the crowd. "What can I get for you?" she purred, batting her eyelashes at him as her gaze traced the angle of the blue cape-tie across his chest. Not so long ago, he would have flirted right back, but now things were different.

He had a fallen angel to pursue now.

"Just the usual, Madeleine," he replied, flashing a charming smile. It didn't hurt to be courteous. He noticed the shop boy sliding a fresh pastry into the display case and paused, considering.

It was richer fare than he himself preferred, decadent white pastry filled with raspberry preserves and drizzled with chocolate. It was expensive and decadent, food for an angel. He grinned.

"And Madeleine, I'll take that as well," he called, pointing at the still steaming pastry. She smiled her acknowledgement and bundled it up with the rest. There was a suggestion in her voice as she bid him farewell, but he ignored it.

Aramis had far more in his life now than a pleasant diversion with a girl from a shop.

He made his way down the busy street, calling greetings to shopkeepers and passersby. Aramis was careful of the package under his arm, worried about the safety of the precious pastry. It took only a few minutes to reach the looming courthouse.

He found his companions quickly, gathered in the shadow of the immense building, the red and green cloaks standing out in striking contrast to the blue of the Musketeers'.

It was d'Artagnan who spotted him first, hunger driving his sharp young eyesight. Porthos had to hold him back to prevent the lad from barreling over and yanking the bundle from Aramis's hands. Sometimes Aramis wondered if they'd be better served lobbing fresh pastries at their enemies before letting d'Artagnan loose.

He found a convenient bench and carefully unrolled the package, dishing out baguettes, croissants, and pain aux raisins to his hungry companions. He reserved a beignet for himself and kept the rich pastry out of sight until Thor, Porthos, and d'Artagnan had abandoned the mad rush for food and Athos and Loki were no longer at risk of being trampled if they approached.

Athos produced two bottles of wine from seemingly nowhere, offering one to Aramis before wandering over to share with the others.

Loki was just reaching for a croissant covered in powdered sugar when Aramis held a hand out to stop him. "Just a moment, mon ange," he said casually, failing to keep the grin from his face. "I thought you might like this." He produced the thick pastry with a flourish. It still radiated heat from within its wrapping.

Loki gazed at it, surprise written in his emerald eyes. He reached out almost tentatively and took the pastry, his fingers brushing Aramis's. He raised the pastry and took a small bite. Aramis had trouble not staring at the small smear of chocolate that lingered on his angel's lips.

Loki swallowed, a strange expression crossing his face. "Do you not like it?" Aramis asked, suddenly anxious.

Green eyes darted up to meet his. "It's… lovely," Loki said after a moment, and there was
unexpected warmth in his gaze. He took a deep breath, glancing away. "Thank you, Aramis."

Aramis sensed the gratitude was not merely for the pastry, but he smiled and bowed gallantly, hoping to lighten the moment so his dark angel would not feel uncomfortable. He flashed a smile and moved to join the rest of the group where they'd gathered, Loki falling into step beside him after a moment.

Aramis tried very hard not to wonder what Loki would taste like when he'd finished the pastry.

He nearly succeeded.

Loki wiped fastidiously at the chocolate lingering on his fingertips, still thrown by the preponderance of gifts he'd received in the last few hours. How had Aramis known which pastry he would most enjoy? The mortal's skills of observation were far better than he'd thought.

The man in question was currently coated in powdered sugar from his own breakfast, and Loki fought the urge to make a joke about the mess. Aramis certainly didn't need any encouragement from him.

Still, he bristled with barely contained fury when Porthos reached over and playfully swiped his hand across Aramis's well-kept beard, dislodging a cloud of sugar. Loki had no reason whatsoever to want to send a painful spark dancing across the mortal's fingers for the casual motion.

None whatsoever.

"We need to move on," Athos said abruptly, looking pointedly at d'Artagnan, who was attempting to sneak up behind Porthos with an extra sugar-covered pastry poised guiltily over his head. The lad whipped it behind his back, feigning innocence as Porthos spun around and glared suspiciously.

And oh, now Loki just couldn't resist sending a subtle wave of magic just as d'Artagnan turned away, tripping him slightly so the beignet sailed from his grasp and into the back of Porthos's head, splattering white sugar amid his curly hair.

Porthos rose, looking thunderous, as Aramis all but collapsed with laughter. Even Athos cracked a smile as d'Artagnan backed away, hands raised defensively and a look of apprehension on his face.

"I didn't mean to! I swear!" he protested, darting behind Thor for protection. Thor subtly stepped forward, blocking him from Porthos's livid glare.

"Porthos," Athos called. Loki expected a reprimand. Instead, Athos's eyes flicked to a half-eaten pastry lying on the bench, still liberally coated in sugar.

"Hold 'im," Porthos crowed delightedly, and to Loki's surprise, Thor immediately twisted, a broad grin on his face, and trapped the young Musketeer in a headlock. D'Artagnan yelped but failed to escape as Porthos ground the sugar into his hair and smeared it gleefully across his face.

Thor released the lad and he staggered back, glaring at the others with mock bitterness.

"Bastards," he muttered.

"What was that?" Athos asked, his voice neutral, but Loki's eye was caught by the handful of pastry he tossed casually up and down.

D'Artagnan must have seen it too, for he eyed Athos warily and said, "Nothing."
Aramis was still laughing as he at last gained his feet, and his amusement brought a smile to Loki's face. Never before had he experienced such easy camaraderie, and he couldn't deny that he enjoyed it.

Porthos shook his head like a dog, splattering sugar across Athos and Thor. The latter laughed exuberantly, but the former sent him an icy glare. Loki noticed d'Artagnan groping for something to clean his face with, and before he could think better of it, he tossed him his own handkerchief.

"At least someone likes me," d'Artagnan said piteously, but his small smile of thanks drew an answering one from Loki.

He was going soft.

It didn't bother him as much as it should.

"We really must go," Athos said, shooting a wry grin at the others, who had all been subtly searching for more ammunition. With good natured groans, they gave up the search, dusting sugar from their clothes and gathering up the empty packages before turning to follow their leader down the street.

Aramis passed just behind Loki as he went, and Loki caught his soft whisper. "Nice trick."

For some reason, the acknowledgement sent a thrill of warmth through his stomach, but he quickly dismissed it as sentiment and quashed the pleasant sensation.

It was odd, watching how quickly his companions could shift from playful, childish behavior back to professionals. Athos led the way through the streets with practiced ease, Porthos following closely behind him to part the crowd. The others stepped briskly in their wake, leaving spots for Thor and Loki himself. Even his father's warriors lacked such discipline.

"So, where is it exactly we are going?" Aramis asked from his left, and Loki glanced over, a scathing remark already on his lips about paying attention during briefing, but paused, considering.

Aramis looked exhausted. A slight tendril of guilt gripped his stomach and his fingers found the sheath at his side once more, stroking down the supple length. Had Aramis lost sleep to commission it for him? The thought brought that strange feeling to his chest again.

Someone had taken time out of their night for him.

He couldn't shake off the vague sense of shame at his own inadequate thank you. His father would tell him that gratitude to a mortal was pointless; that as a prince of Asgard, he would be entitled to their tribute. But it hadn't felt pointless earlier, when he had struggled to find the words to express his appreciation to Aramis.

He was drawn from his self-recriminations as Athos replied, his voice slightly louder than Loki deemed wise in the crowded streets where anyone could hear. He doubted it was arrogance, but rather a misplaced sense of trust in the streets they knew so well. A few people glanced in their direction, but he couldn't see anyone listening too closely.

"Treville has had word of an informant who may have news of Soulier for us."

A frown marred Aramis's handsome face at the mention of the man who had almost killed him. Loki fought back the bubble of rage that rose in his own throat. "I thought you killed him."
"I did," Athos replied calmly, stepping back to allow Porthos to forge through a crowd ahead of them. "But his network was not destroyed, and it seems there may still be some acting in his name. We're to meet the informant before the ninth bell in an alley behind a tavern on the Rue Buteur." He glanced up, eyeing the position of the sun. "And we're already late."

Athos increased the pace, and Loki noted that his brother stepped forward to stand beside Porthos, adding his bulk to aid in parting the crowd.

Despite their lateness, Athos did not seem inclined to hurry. "Should we not walk a little faster?" Loki asked, trying not to sound presumptuous. He really had no wish to question the mortal's leadership, a realization that shocked him.

"For this man to be informing on Soulier, he must have worked for Soulier," Athos told him amicably. "There's no harm in making him wait."

Loki nodded, pleased with the explanation and the fact that he'd actually received one. Had he questioned Odin like that, he would probably have been shouted at. And Athos was right, after all: the criminal could stand to cool his heels for a while.

Loki did not know the streets, but he sensed they were drawing near to their destination a few minutes later by the subtle shift in his companions. Banter dropped away, hands drifted to weapons, and their pace increased slightly. Even d'Artagnan appeared more alert. Thor, too, read the signs and tensed in readiness for the confrontation to come.

Loki noted the edge to Porthos's stride, the simmering anger. For once, he found he could relate to the large Musketeer. To his disgrace, he wasn't sure of his own self-control if confronted by one of the men who might have been involved in Aramis's near-fatal wounding.

Suddenly Athos stopped, frowning. "He should be here," he murmured, and there was warning layered in his tone. He might as well have shouted something is wrong.

The others immediately began to fan out, eyes searching the crowded street as they pushed towards the alley where the informant was meant to be.

"There," Loki hissed, gesturing discreetly towards a side alley, where the dark outline of a pair of legs could be seen near the ground. He crouched over the body as the others gathered quickly, instinctively forming a wall between the passers-by and the corpse with the gaping wound in its throat.

Loki immediately whipped his head around, searching the crowd passing by the entrance to the alley. Most of the slowly gathering crowd met his eyes curiously, but two ducked out of sight, avoiding his gaze. He glanced back at the body, his lip curling in disgust.

"Sloppy," he murmured, and looked up in surprise when Aramis came to his side.

"What do you see, mon ange?"

It pleased him that Aramis automatically took stock in what he had to say, and it only increased when Athos raised an eyebrow at him, an invitation to explain.

Because his opinion was valued here, whereas before, only his mother and Thor had listened to him, and the latter only because Loki was the one that managed to get them out of the trouble the oaf had gotten them into.

"This is recent," Loki said softly, glancing at Athos, who shot him a shrewd look. "And we are being watched."
"Go on," he said, and Loki felt pride rise softly within him: his father had never asked him to use his truly exceptional skills of observation for anything.

"Look at the way the blood has splattered," he said, careful to keep his voice low. "It's still wet, and the fact that there's such a large area hit with blood says the wound was inflicted hurriedly. They weren't worried about the spray. They were worried about time." He gestured around. "They dragged the body back even as they cut his throat, see? There's some blood out in the alley, but most is here."

"Why'd they rush?" Porthos asked. Loki glanced sharply at him, expecting belligerence, but saw only professional curiosity on his face. Apparently his ire was reserved for downtime, not missions.

"My guess is they knew we were coming," Loki said softly, and he heard Athos sigh heavily. "There were two men by the entrance. They were waiting for us to find the corpse."

"I should not have discussed the mission where a watcher could hear," Athos said, the self-reproach evident in his voice. "I'm sorry, Athos, I should have paid closer attention during the briefing," Aramis began, but Athos cut him off.

"It's not your fault, Aramis. I chose to tell you. I should not have been so quick to assume we were not being observed." Loki raised his eyebrows at the immediate assumption of blame and felt his respect for the mortal inch higher.

"Well," Porthos broke in, sounding practical. "Not much we can do now but search 'im for anythin' useful."

"Yes, you're right," Athos said decisively. "Aramis, Loki, watch the street. We're far too visible here. I'll take Thor and see if there's anything further down the alley that might give us a clue to our mysterious assassin's identity. Porthos and d'Artagnan can search the body."

"Your skills of observation are excellent, mon ange," Aramis said quietly as they took up positions at the entrance of the alley, silently discouraging the gathered crowd.

Loki considered making a derisive comment, but decided to accept the praise graciously. "I have always been perceptive."

He felt Aramis's eyes on him, searching, but he did not turn to meet them even as d'Artagnan and Porthos arrived at their shoulders.

"We dragged the body further into the alley," Porthos said quietly, and Loki realized he was looking to Aramis for leadership in Athos's absence.

"Good. We'll need to send some men to fetch it, but for now we'd best report to Treville. Athos will know to meet us there." The tone of command in his voice made Loki arch an eyebrow in surprise. For a man who enjoyed being ordered about, he rose to authority quite well.

They made their way back to the garrison, but Athos and Thor had yet to return. "I'll deliver the report to Treville," Aramis said heavily. "It was my inattention that led to our assassin getting his information."

"I'll come with you," Porthos grunted. Loki glanced at him sharply, but he sensed only support in the offer and had to remind himself he didn't care either way. That didn't stop him from debating
whether offering to accompany Aramis as well would be excessive.

He and d'Artagnan were alone in the yard, and Loki felt suddenly rather uncomfortable. He'd never really been exposed to anyone younger than himself, and he had no idea what he was meant to say to the boy. To forestall the awkwardness, he stalked away towards the training dummies, noting a target propped against a nearby wall with a perfect bull's-eye shot through it.

Aramis's handiwork, no doubt.

To his surprise, he heard hesitant footsteps behind him and turned to see d'Artagnan following with an expression simultaneously eager and apprehensive.

"Yes?" he asked, arching his eyebrow. He was careful not to snap at the lad even while wondering what on Midgard he wanted.

"I was- well, I was hoping…" D'Artagnan began, stumbling over his words. Loki's eyebrow rose higher. "I was hoping you might show me that move you used on Porthos when you fought," he blurted out.

Loki stared at him, nonplussed. D'Artagnan fidgeted nervously. "It's just, you're… small," he continued lamely. "And you took him down so easily. I thought, if you can do it, I could do it too…?"

The poor boy sounded like he was quaking in his boots the longer Loki gave no reply. He took pity on the lad.

"I'm a poor teacher," he warned.

"I've been told I'm a poor student," d'Artagnan shrugged. "I'd still like to learn."

No one had ever asked Loki for instruction before. On Asgard he was small, weak, and had to resort to magic to win his battles. He'd never considered that he might have picked up valuable skills in combat that others would seek to emulate. It was… gratifying.

"For starters, you need to distribute your weight differently," he began, reveling in the way d'Artagnan's eyes lit with excitement as he scrambled to copy him. Fighting back a pleased smile, Loki settled down to teach the pup how to stand.

Chapter End Notes

Loki absolutely kills me in this chapter. He's just secretly a melange of fluff and sweetness, and yet he has no idea how ridiculously it's shining through. - C

^Maybe if he coated himself in powdered sugar people would understand he's really just a sweet soul. - L

He's a sweet somethin'... - C
Aramis is fairly convinced that his world has taken a confusing turn, and Loki is convinced it's taken an amusing one. I'm calling the first scene: 'The Puppy and the Peacock'. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"It was my fault, mon capitaine," Aramis sighed, bowing his head. It was easy to take the blame with Porthos by his side, and it helped that Athos was nowhere to be seen – Athos had the most infuriating way of insisting that he was responsible even when he wasn't. "Someone must have heard me asking for your orders."

Treville merely hummed in consideration, rifling through papers on his desk. "And why were you so tired this morning?"

Aramis threw Porthos a startled look, who grinned and seemed to say, 'you know he knows everything.'

Their captain was very perceptive; he was like Athos in that way.

Athos, who flung the door open and aimed a very unimpressed look in Aramis' direction. "My apologies, Captain, I was held up looking for clues as to our informant's killer."

"Anything?"

"No, it was clear," Athos replied, and Aramis could already see him trying to shoulder his misplaced guilt. "I should have been more careful—"

"Yes, Aramis has already told me that he wasn't paying attention," Treville said idly, excusing Athos in one fell swoop. "Perhaps you could explain why?"

Athos slid Aramis a glance that said he would pay for that act of gallantry on the practice court, but then said, "Aramis was fetching commissions from the tanner last night to outfit the newcomers. We haven't had much time to replace our gear, as of late."

Aramis blinked at him. It was almost a reprieve; actually, it was almost Athos telling Treville that they needed another day of leave.

Something that might have been amusement crossed Treville's face, and then it was gone again as he said seriously, "Good, Thor and Loki should be outfitted properly, they've done good work."

Aramis felt his own smile form at that. It seemed forever ago that he had wanted Treville to realise Loki and Thor's potential, and apparently he had. He could even add to that. "Loki thinks that we're being watched."

Treville frowned. "By whom?"

"That's just it, we don't know, and our informant's dead," Athos remarked.
Porthos exemplified the restlessness that had started in Aramis' chest and shifted from foot to foot. "This don't feel right."

"I agree, we've all been on edge since Marteaux Forest," Aramis said, and resolutely didn't mention how he and Porthos had almost died.

But were saved by the hands of an angel.

Athos crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Is it possible that Soulier could have put plans in action before his death?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Treville sighed. "Soulier was rich, he had his thumbs in many pies. The whole reason he fell out of favour was because he was trying to destabilise the Musketeers."

"I would have thought the Cardinal would be pleased at that," Aramis said lightly, trying to inspire some humour in the grim atmosphere.

Porthos gave him a wry grin. "Yeah, given Soulier a pat on the back."

"He did, until Soulier tried to abolish the Red Guard, too." The three of them glanced at each other in surprise before Treville continued, "Richelieu couldn't get him out of the palace fast enough after that."

"It says something about Soulier that even the Cardinal couldn't control him," Athos murmured, and the thought made Aramis a little sick. If Soulier had almost had the King eating out of his hand, what else could he have done out of the public light?

"Perhaps we should follow the informant's path? We might be able to—"

Treville cut him off with an impatient sigh. "The trail's cold, Aramis, and Soulier's dead. Take the quiet period as a blessing and get some rest."

Aramis leaned against Porthos' side for strength and nodded tiredly. He was exhausted, but he didn't want to just sit around and wait – what if he was the next death that warmed the trail?

But then Porthos slung his arm around his shoulders and Aramis sagged into him, wrapped himself in the safe knowledge that, with these men, he had nothing to worry about.

Besides, there were two more to rely on now, and Aramis found himself very needy for one particularly chilly touch that always managed to perk him up.

As they clattered down the stairs, Thor was alone in the yard, a confused expression darkening his golden features. Porthos sped up his stride to reach him, the amount of concern in his dark eyes making Aramis laugh softly.

Athos raised an eyebrow at him and murmured, "As if you're any better."

Aramis, used to this type of sombre teasing from Athos, said airily, "I'll have you know, dear Athos, that I can be very inconspicuous."

A half-smile tilted Athos' lips. "Please tell that to the pistol, shirt, and sheath that have inexplicably come into Loki's possession."

"I was outfitting the newcomers," Aramis quoted Athos' earlier comment, and deliberately turned away from Athos' laugh to focus on Thor and Porthos.
"Did you check the pond? Maybe 'e's drownin' d'Artagnan," Porthos remarked cheerfully, withstanding Thor's sudden look of astonishment.

"You wish harm upon the boy?"

They had reached the pair now, and Athos said dryly, "It means he'll have an excuse to confront Loki."

Porthos affected a wounded expression that didn't fool either of them, but worked splendidly on Thor who looked at Athos almost reproachfully and said, "I'm sure Porthos has no such quarrel with my brother."

Aramis was forced to walk away before he burst into laughter and ruined Porthos' little game with the adorably oblivious Thor. It was amazing just how different two brothers could be, for Loki had the eyes of a hawk.

He looked about the empty yard and thought, *if I were an angel, where would I be?*

If he had learned anything about Loki, aside from how deliciously cutting he could be, it was that he sought out nature whenever he had a spare moment.

How d'Artagnan fit into that, Aramis wasn't quite sure, and for all of Thor's faith, Aramis was mildly concerned that Loki was trying to drown d'Artagnan - or at least hoping to bury him in the small garden overlooked by Treville's office.

It was green there, peaceful – and Aramis fully expected to see d'Artagnan dangling from a tree, whilst Loki snarled at the base, like a big cat chasing its prey.

He stepped into the garden proper and had to freeze, not daring to make a sound.

Ahead of him, amidst the lush greenery and bright sunlight, stood Loki and d'Artagnan. Loki had his back to him, but Aramis could see that he had his arms crossed as he watched the boy go through a series of punches.

Loki shook his head and, Aramis saw from the shadows of the trees, d'Artagnan bestowed Loki with his best puppy dog eyes. This one was accompanied with a little duck of his head as he peered through his fringe.

Even Athos submitted to that one.

But Loki was made of sterner stuff – as Aramis' ego was testament to – and simply stared until d'Artagnan moved his foot the tiniest amount and looked at Loki again, youthful determination in his questioning gaze.

Apparently that miniscule change was enough, and Aramis thought that someone had hit him on the head, because he heard a quiet, "Good. Again," from Loki, that made d'Artagnan smile shyly.

It wasn't Porthos' delighted grin or Athos' pleased nod, but from Loki? Even that monosyllabic compliment was like a shower of praise.

It was absolutely flooring, this new side to his angel.

It was also insanely attractive.

Aramis heard Porthos' footsteps in enough time to hold up a hand for quiet, and then Porthos approached to peer over his shoulder and ask worriedly, "He's not *actually* drowning him—?"
Oh."

"Oh?" Came Athos' murmur, and then the three of them simply stared at the startling scene.

"Is he—?"

"So it seems," Athos replied.

"D'Artagnan just gave him the look and Loki didn't even flinch," Aramis said quietly.

"No way."

"That is impossible."

Aramis couldn't help but smirk at Athos' firm denial, and confirmed incredulously, "I saw it happen."

"Loki's one mean son of a—"

"How did d'Artagnan respond?" Athos interrupted swiftly.

"He fixed his footing."

"What?! Just like that?" Porthos exclaimed in disbelief.

"It took me three days to keep him from balancing on his heels," Athos remarked with dry bitterness.

"Three days and I had to sew him up every time he forgot."

Porthos grinned at Aramis' equally dry tone. "Doesn't forget now though, does 'e?"

"Exactly," Athos said with a small smile that disappeared when d'Artagnan completed a complicated set of movements that he had never managed before. "It seems we've been coddling him."

They laughed under their breath, very aware that they did nothing of the sort. D'Artagnan always gave as good as he got – and he picked up on their tricks alarmingly quickly.

Thor's loud voice boomed from beyond the garden and was met with three sighs. It seemed a crime to disrupt the tranquillity before them, and Thor had done just that.

Loki looked up with a small frown and then murmured something to d'Artagnan that had the boy nodding intently, evidently committing the information to memory. As Aramis expected, Loki strode off before d'Artagnan could make whatever grateful remark he had planned.

Before d'Artagnan's lip could quiver – and Aramis wouldn't put it past him to break out some serious tactics to try and thwart Loki – Aramis whistled him over to join them back in the yard.

They were battle ready, all of them, which was why Athos' repeated order was met with looks of irritation. "Treville says that we are to wait. With Soulier dead, there's nothing more we can do."

So soon after seeing the informant's death, all of their tempers were running high. Loki was the first to respond, frowning as he murmured, "Cut off the head and another will take its place, they will band under another easily enough."

It was almost prophetic, said with his quiet forcefulness, and it succeeded in making Aramis shiver
"But Soulier was the brains, wasn't he?" D'Artagnan asked, siding with Athos. "Without him, they'll be useless."

Porthos grimaced and nodded at Loki, "I agree with 'im. We should crush 'em while we can."

Loki looked at Porthos in surprise, but gave him a terse nod back that made Aramis think that this entire day might just be some sleep-deprived dream, where Loki patiently mentored d'Artagnan and Porthos didn't try to pick fights.

Athos interceded with a restless sigh, "There's nothing we can do now, we have no leads."

For some reason, both Loki and Porthos looked at him, and Aramis could practically feel the waves of protection coming from Porthos, and some sort of intensity coming from Loki.

"I need a drink," Aramis said suddenly, and Athos hesitated before agreeing.

"A drink will do us all good, and," he continued quickly before Loki and Porthos could protest, "we can plan our next move."

That seemed to pacify them, and then Aramis found himself flanked by men that were definitely trying not to seem like human shields.

They did anyway, and Aramis found it hard not to smile warmly at them.

Aramis trusted Treville, but he trusted his friends more, and he trusted the little squirming of unease in his stomach that told him something was wrong.

It intensified when he realised that Loki had stiffened and was having a silent conversation with Athos. Unexpectedly, the two of them peeled off from the group and stalked ahead with lethal swiftness.

They mirrored each other's movements, sliding deftly through the crowds as they both focused on something that Aramis couldn't see. At a nod from Athos, he and Loki moved in for the kill.

Their target, a skinny, but wiry looking man, noticed Athos and tried to jerk in the opposite direction. He stopped in his tracks when he saw Loki's deadly expression, and backed up into Athos' commanding grip and what was probably a knife against his spine.

Loki finally looked away from his prey and met Aramis' questioning expression with a shrug. "I did say that we were being watched. Now we can question him."

The target gulped and strained against Athos' arm, going still when he saw that there were six of them now, and he had no chance of escape.

Porthos turned to Aramis with a grin that was far too cheerful for what they were about to do, and yet it was exactly what Aramis needed. The unease in his stomach lessened a little, they would get their answers now.

Porthos clapped Aramis on the shoulder but said in a low, threatening voice, "Let's find somewhere cosy for a little chat, eh?"

Aramis put on his most charming smile, winked at a surprised Loki, and brandished his arquebus. "I even brought my tools."
The target started straining again.

The four Musketeers seemed to have a side to them that Loki hadn't expected.

Loki followed with avid interest as they dragged the pitiful excuse for a watcher down an alley and through a door that Athos opened with a complicated series of twists. As they passed through, Loki noticed a tiny flower stencilled unobtrusively into the wood.

It was an empty building, devoid of furniture but for a few spindly chairs and some lone branches of candles. Daylight spattered through the shuttered windows and lent a decidedly morbid air to the room.

It took Thor an amusingly long time to comprehend that their comrades planned a torture session.

When he did, it was with a full-body flinch; and when Loki threw out a hand to stop his brother from charging forward, it was to see d'Artagnan's hand already on Thor's shoulder.

He shared a look of agreement with the boy – Thor could not get involved.

Loki was far too intrigued to see whether these honourable men would truly carry out the gruesome act. He had thought that such methods would be too harsh for them, and he was reluctantly impressed that they would stop at nothing for information.

With he, Thor, and d'Artagnan on the side of the windows, shadowed amidst the shafts of light, Athos stood on the opposite side, leaning against the wall with a bored expression on his face.

And most surprisingly of all, tying the bindings to a wooden beam in the middle of the room, were Aramis and Porthos, both seemingly on the edge of laughing at something.

This struck Loki as very strange.

"What is your name?" Athos asked idly as Aramis stood at the target's back, yanking hard on one of the knots.

The man spat, and grunted when Porthos backhanded him. Thor twitched at Loki's side, but Loki was more interested to note that Aramis raised an amused eyebrow at Porthos, whose glare almost wavered as he tried to hide his smile.

Porthos raised his hand, making the man flinch as he said quickly, "Adnet."

Aramis tilted his head as if in acknowledgement that Porthos' technique had worked, and leaned down to Adnet's ear, who tried to shuffle away from the threat that he couldn't see.

"The pleasure's all ours, Adnet," Aramis said silkily. "Now tell us who sent you before we make this distinctly… unpleasant."

Porthos scowled very intently, but there was a twitch in his cheek which told Loki that the dark man was trying not to grin, as if Aramis was amusing him.

It was amusing, watching them in this grim scenario, but they were going about it all wrong.

Porthos held Aramis' gaze for long enough that Loki was abruptly rather empathetic with Thor's
despairing confusion and was tempted to demand an explanation.

This was no normal torture session, and these weren't normal men.

They didn't enjoy dark things like this, and both he and Thor knew that – they had spent enough
time with them, lately.

Apparently Adnet had thought this at the same time as he and Thor shared a dubious look. The
man seemed to strengthen, strained against his bonds to jeer, "My boss killed one of you."

Aramis’ gaze jumped to Loki’s and then to Porthos, because both of them had stiffened in anger at
that snide comment. Porthos raised his hand again, but there was no lingering amusement this
time, and Aramis stepped in front of Adnet to say, "You're looking at him."

Adnet blinked in confusion, but somehow managed to look down his nose at Aramis in such a
way that Loki wanted to break it.

"You're Musketeers," Adnet spat derisively. "You won't kill me, you can't."

Porthos breathed easier with Aramis by his side and they shared a shrug that agreed with Adnet.
Loki bristled, furious, were they just going to let that wastrel insult them? His lip curled with
contempt. If they wouldn't bloody him, Loki would, gladly.

He had taken a step forward before he had even thought about it, and then Porthos jerked his head
at him and asked Adnet, "What about 'im?"

Adnet looked past Aramis and whatever he saw in Loki's eyes made him pale.

Loki knew somewhere in his rage that Porthos knew him a little too well for comfort, but he
obliged by falling into his arrogance. He prowled forwards, trusting d'Artagnan to keep Thor
back, and sneered at the scum who had worked for Soulier.

"You," he said lowly, and brought a tiny spark of his magic to his hidden fingertips, "aren't worth
the air you breathe."

Adnet choked, tried to gasp for breath that Loki had momentarily withheld. He only did it for a
few seconds, just enough time to inspire the fear of a god.

Adnet began to suck in mouthfuls of air. Loki barely noticed Porthos' surprised amusement on his
left, but he was acutely aware of the faint shiver that had taken a hold of Aramis at his threat.

It hadn't been a shiver of fear.

It almost made him smirk, and he realised what it was about this situation that seemed so strange.
Although Loki could so very easily kill Adnet, it was bizarrely entertaining to watch Aramis' reactions, instead.

He grasped that this was a game, not torture at all.

"Now, now, Loki, this man's done no wrong," Aramis said soothingly, but Loki saw the glint of
humour in his eye.

Apparently this was part of the plan, because Porthos tilted his head to the side in consideration
and growled, "Well, 'e did just say that 'is boss tried to kill you."

"I loved that jacket," Aramis remarked mournfully.
Porthos leaned in close to the man, whose eyes were still locked on Loki's cool regard. Even when Porthos spoke, he didn't look away from the biggest danger. "We don't like it when you try to kill us."

"Hurt one of us and you hurt us all," Aramis added with a low thread of threat to his voice that Loki almost smiled at. He had seen a new side of Aramis today, and he rather liked it.

"And you hurt our Aramis 'ere pretty bad," Porthos rumbled aggressively, genuine wrath in his tone now.

Adnet began to struggle, fear a skittering thing on his face. "It wasn't me, I didn't do it, someone else ordered me to come here, I don't—"

Loki narrowed his eyes and let his distaste of the pitiful excuse for a man flow through him. He took one menacing step forward and hissed, "Who?"

"Beland," the man cried, practically sobbing, and Porthos and Aramis immediately straightened, the threat on their faces fading so swiftly that Loki blinked.

They had been pretending the entire time. All it had been was a game of give and take, threats and compliments.

*That* was why the light humour had seemed so misplaced, they were merely toying with Adnet and making each other laugh with their faux-threats.

Loki should have known that they weren't going to torture him, honourable things that they were, but to see them gain the same amount of information without the mess of sweat or blood was…

Well, it was admirable.

"Nice work," Porthos addressed Loki with a pleased grin, shocking him slightly. "Your sneer was finally useful."

"I enjoyed it," Aramis murmured for Loki's ears alone. "I can't say our friend did though."

Loki hid his smile and cast another glance at the terrified man. Adnet had sagged against his bonds, but he still watched Loki as if he might lunge for him.

Aramis did too, but then Aramis looked like he rather wanted it to happen.

Athos pushed off from the wall before Loki could decide what to do with that information, and joined them by the windows, Thor finally relaxing when Porthos settled at his side.

"Beland shouldn't be an issue; we've come across him before."

"Small fry," Porthos commented.

Aramis nodded. "Unless he's ruling from Soulier's seat."

"That changes things," Athos acquiesced.

"We need to know where he is," d'Artagnan piped up.

They all looked at Loki, apart from Aramis, who held up a hand and said gallantly, "Allow me."

Loki rocked back on his heels, greatly amused by this turn of events. Porthos had done the roughing up, and Aramis was the balm that softened.
Was charming Aramis claiming that he could scare the information out of Adnet?

Aramis dug in his pockets for a minute, a look of mild concentration on his face. Porthos and Athos chuckled first, which prompted d'Artagnan to try and grimace to cover a smile.

Finally, Aramis smiled and revealed an apple.

"Ah," he said softly, and approached Adnet with the fruit in hand. Adnet leaned back a little, but he was still shooting Loki wary glances instead of watching the Musketeer who moved with such smooth grace.

Adnet stilled when Aramis placed the apple on his head, stepped back 5 paces, and in a movement that Loki wasn't quite sure that he had seen, wielded his arquebus and looked down the barrel.

It was a sight that Loki was fairly certain he would never forget.

"Aramis," Athos chided, "you're not drunk."

Adnet looked wildly at each of them, clearly as confused as he and Thor were. Wasn't Aramis being sober a good thing if he planned to make a shot? This one wasn't even that difficult for someone of Aramis' calibre.

Porthos grinned and said in a stage-whisper, "He only ever makes this shot when 'e's in 'is cups."

D'Artagnan nodded seriously, earning an amazed look from Thor when the boy pulled his hair back. "That's how I lost this ear, he'd only had two bottles of wine."

Loki peered closer, but couldn't see past the dust dancing in the scant light. He was almost certain that d'Artagnan had no such injury, but if he was standing two feet away and couldn't see, Adnet definitely couldn't.

"I can do it," Aramis said with airy confidence, and Loki couldn't hold back his laugh when Adnet began to babble incoherently.

Aramis' gaze flicked from Adnet's to his, and heated amusement seared him until Adnet's wriggling captured Aramis' attention again.

Bereft, Loki wondered whether he should just kill Adnet so that Aramis wouldn't be distracted.

There was a click that echoed around the room and then Aramis' arquebus wavered in a way that did him complete injustice. Adnet was too terrified to notice that Aramis' arms were steady, or that his legs were braced perfectly.

Or, Loki realised as his fingers found his pistol, that Aramis hadn't even loaded his gun.

It was impossible for Aramis to miss, his accuracy was superb, and yet he still wasn't taking any chances with accidentally blowing Adnet's head off.

When Loki looked to his side, it was to see that Thor was the only one who wasn't grinning at him. He was part of one of their jokes now, and he felt humour bubble in his throat.

Before it could sound, Aramis' deceptively cheerful voice distracted them all, "Where is Beland?"

Adnet was holding himself so stiffly that even his breathing was shallow as he tried to keep the apple steady. This apparently displeased Aramis, who tutted loudly – which made his aim falter even further.
"I said," Aramis murmured, and it was now very threatening. The amusement in Loki's chest flared and took on a different sort of enjoyment that had him inhaling sharply.

"Lagny-sur-Marne," Adnet gasped pre-emptively, trying to wriggle from the gun's quivering barrel. Loki was almost disappointed that the man had given the information up so easily, it was thoroughly entertaining watching Aramis' methods of interrogation.

But Aramis lowered his arquebus jerkily and approached Loki's side quicker than he had to, a vulnerable edge to his expression all of a sudden, as if even the name of the place he had almost died was unsettling.

Athos considered them all carefully and then sighed, "Back to Marteaux Forest, then."

Aramis flinched, and Loki found that his rage had risen again. It was a shame that Soulier was dead, for Loki wanted to kill the cretin himself.

Instead, Loki brought his sparkling fingertips to Aramis' spine and brushed ice where he knew with damning clarity the fatal wound had been.

Aramis leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering closed in relief. Loki kept his hand there longer than was strictly necessary, even as he wished he could drive it through Soulier's chest and offer Aramis his bloody heart.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by the first episode, because Porthos and Aramis interrogating [completely forgotten his name help me] is just the funniest - and yet somehow adorable - thing ever. Bang!

"You know, people tell me I'm rather good at writing author's notes." - C

^Whoops I too have forgotten his name and rather than look it up like a responsible writer I shall leave it like that for the reader's amusement. Go on. Judge us. We failed you.

Also, your ego seems somewhat inflated, my dear. Though the notes are rather brilliant. - L

I WAS DOING THE ARAMIS QUOTE. *YOU* HAVE FAILED *ME*. - C
Porthos and Loki bond over corpse mutilation, Thor and d'Artagnan bond over that not happening. Treville pays a serious compliment whilst obviously hoping that they stop scampering around his feet. - C

Thor could sense something had changed since the morning. There was no banter now, no friendly teasing, no laughter. Faces grim with determination rode beside him. A slow, simmering rage seemed to have built up in that abandoned warehouse, evident in Athos's curt orders and Porthos's cracking knuckles.

Thor still felt shame when he thought of that warehouse. He'd been too ready to believe that his new companions would sink to torture, when it should have been obvious they were all far too honorable. It had come as a great relief when he'd finally seen the ploy for what it was.

Loki, of course, had seen through it in an instant and gone along with the game. Thor shook his head, amazed once more at his brother's cleverness.

"The barn is not far now," Athos called suddenly.

Thor frowned, confusion sweeping through him.

"Why aren't we going to Marteaux Forest? We should take the fight to the enemy!" Thor called over the rumble of hooves, careful to keep his voice low. No one wanted to be overheard again.

Porthos glanced up from where he was riding between Thor and Aramis. "When Athos cut 'im down, Adnet started blabberin', beggin' us not to kill 'im. As if we would," Porthos snorted.

D'Artagnan broke in from his other side. "Told us how he had more information if only we'd spare his life." A wicked grin crossed the youthful features, making the lad seem suddenly older.

"I'm surprised he kept anything back after seeing Loki," Aramis murmured, amusement in his voice. Thor watched his brother scowl, but knew him well enough to catch the pleased edge to the expression.

"Anyway," Porthos went on, "On the way to the prison cart 'e told us about how 'is personal orders were actually comin' straight from a barn outside of Paris. Some underling of Beland's, probably."

"So? Isn't Beland himself the greater threat?"

"We cannot leave a criminal operation on the outskirts of Paris," Athos said simply, reining his stallion to a halt. "This is far enough. We'll proceed on foot from here."

The others dismounted smoothly, leading their horses into the underbrush. Thor looped his reins around the bole of a tree before giving it a farewell pat. He saw Aramis sneak an apple to his own stallion before rejoining the others.
They approached the barn in silence, wary of sentries, but they spotted no one until they reached
the dilapidated structure. The door was half-open, and they could see a few shadowy shapes
passing back and forth within.

"Doesn't seem to be very many of 'em," Porthos whispered, glancing askance at Athos.

"Perhaps we should give them the chance to surrender?" Aramis added.

Athos looked back at them, considering. "Thor, d'Artagnan, you two hang back by the doors
when we enter. Make sure no one else comes in. The rest of you are with me. I want swords
drawn and guns ready. With any luck, they'll give in without a fight."

"When are we ever lucky?" Thor heard d'Artagnan mutter as they fell into position.

Ahead of them, the others had reached the barn doors without an alarm being raised. "Porthos, if
you would?" Athos murmured.

Porthos grinned and stepped forward, flinging the doors back with crashing force as Athos strolled
idly past him. Aramis smirked and followed him through, gun already on his shoulder.

Thor and d'Artagnan took up their position by the door as Athos and the others strode into the
center of the barn, their progress marked by the stares of half a dozen shocked looking men.

"Greetings," Athos said formally, drawing his pistol. Loki and Porthos mirrored the motion.
"We'd like to speak with you leader, if you'd be so kind."

The men continued to stare blankly. Athos sighed. "We don't really have to do this the hard way,
do we?"

"There's hardly anyone here," Aramis said with a frown as he took in the deserted room.

Athos looked back, gesturing for Thor and d'Artagnan to join them. D'Artagnan stalked forward
to guard Athos's back and Thor fell into position beside Porthos.

A figure stepped out onto the landing at the far end of the barn. "I believe you're looking for me."

Athos stiffened and Thor caught the hint of a growl from Porthos.

"Beland." It was Aramis who broke the silence.

Ah, so this was the leader. He was smaller than Thor had imagined their great enemy might be.
Ahead, Athos gestured subtly behind his back, motioning for Thor and d'Artagnan to join them.

"Aramis," the man said, an oily tone to his deep voice. "I was told you were dead."

Thor glanced over in time to see Loki's shoulders tighten at the words. Porthos shifted from Thor's
side to Aramis's, and Thor obediently took up the space at Aramis's back as Loki flared his fingers
on Aramis's left.

Aramis didn't even blink at the sudden shift, and Thor had to admire his courage. "Well, I'm not."
He even flashed the man a charming smile.

Beland sneered. It was not half as intimidating or contemptuous as his brother's. "We can change
that."

Men erupted from all around them, streaming in through hidden doors that all but exploded off
their hinges under the press of bodies. A gunshot rang out, and Thor glanced up to see Beland
staggering back as a snarling Porthos tossed his pistol to the side and drew his sword.

Thor turned to swing Mjolnir at a man wielding a flimsy looking sword. It snapped under the force of his blow and the man flew through the air until he collided with the barn wall, shaking the rafters.

Glancing around for another opponent, he saw Porthos charging up the stairs to where a bleeding Beland was waiting to meet him. They met with a ringing crash and Thor spared a moment to admire the Musketeer's form as he rained fury on the man, whose sneer had disappeared, before Thor whirled back to face his next challenger.

It was obvious their attackers had no chance. Only a few among them had any real skill, and Thor could see Loki subtly picking them off with his magic when the others weren't looking. He sent another two men crashing across the room and looked around, checking that none of his mortal companions were having any trouble.

Athos was easily fencing two men at once, while behind him Aramis knocked one out with the hilt of his sword. Porthos was on the verge of breaking through Beland's harried defense. Which left only…

D'Artagnan was fighting a scrawny man near one of the hidden doors, but just behind him Thor could see a large shape making its way into the barn. Of all things, there was a hammer dangling in his massive grip, though not one as impressive as Mjolnir.

The only problem was he was heading directly for the young Musketeer.

And the pup hadn't seen him.

Thor launched himself across the room as the huge man raised the hammer, ready to bring it crashing down across the lad’s back. He slammed into d'Artagnan just before the blow landed, feeling it reverberate through his body as it crashed into the back of his left shoulder.

The man roared in what was probably triumph, but it was cut off as Thor wrenched the hammer from his grasp. The man gaped at him. Admittedly, the blow had hurt more than Thor had expected, but it was hardly as ferocious as those he'd received from Volstagg.

Thor roared right back at the man before ramming Mjolnir into his ribs. It landed with a satisfying crack.

"Are you alright?" D'Artagnan asked frantically.

"Yes, of course." The boy was still staring at him in disbelief, and only then did Thor remember that such an injury would've killed a human. He searched for a plausible explanation. "My armor protected me."

Apparently the boy believed him, for his shoulders relaxed and he grinned. "Thanks for that, then. That thing would've crushed me!"

"D'Artagnan, Thor," Athos called, beckoning them to the foot of the stairs. The boy shot him one last grin before darting over to join his leader.

When Thor reached them, he found that they had gathered around a bullet-ridden, sword slashed corpse that appeared as if it had been kicked down the stairs.

"Beland," Aramis informed him, catching his bewilderment.
"Shouldn't've threatened you, should 'e?" Porthos growled. Thor was struck anew with admiration for the man, for his great ability to care.

"You did all this?" D'Artagnan asked, sounding impressed. Across from him, Thor caught the way Loki shifted, and smiled to himself. Some of the slashes on the body were surely inflicted by his brother, probably after the man was already dead.

He watched Loki glance over at Porthos, who gave him the tiniest of nods in return. This was getting very strange. The pair had actually bantered today.

Before he had time to ponder this strange development, Athos bent down and began rifling through the blood-stained jacket. He straightened a moment later.

"What's this?" he asked softly, revealing a document that had escaped mostly unspattered. His fingers traced the wax seal at the bottom and he frowned.

"What is it?" D'Artagnan asked, leaning over his shoulder to get a closer look.

"Orders to follow us any time we leave the garrison. And this," Athos said thoughtfully, tapping the seal, "bears Soulier's own mark."

"Soulier is dead," Porthos said sharply, glancing at Aramis.

"It could have been written ages ago," d'Artagnan suggested.

"But there would have been no reason to follow us before we met in Marteaux Forest." Athos was still staring at the document.

Thor frowned at the heavy wax seal, remembering something. "It is possible that someone has merely taken his ring. It doesn't mean that he himself used it."

Loki looked up then, a smile on his face that stunned Thor with its happy memory. Often had they stolen their father's golden crow-stamped ring and used it for their own ends, signing orders for gifts and food to be brought to their rooms in the dead of night.

Of course, it had always been Loki's idea.

"That's true," Athos said, inclining his head to Thor. "Either way, we'd best show it to Treville."

He led the way from the barn. As they walked, Porthos fell into step beside Thor, his shoulder brushing the one the hammer had fallen on.

It already seemed to hurt less.

Athos led the way into Treville's office. There was a brief scuffle behind him as Porthos and Loki both tried to enter the doorway at the same time, but Aramis wisely yanked the back of Porthos's belt so that he fell a step behind.

This was the first mission in the last few weeks that Athos could stand before his captain and not feel the creeping guilt at his failure to bring all his men back unharmed. Only Thor had taken a blow of any sort, and when Aramis had checked he'd hardly had a bruise. After all their trouble lately, it was nice to have a victory.

"You've found something," Treville said. It wasn't a question.
"One of Soulier's lieutenants. Beland." Athos saw the flicker of recognition in Treville's eyes. "He was operating a base just outside of Paris."

"Was?" Treville asked, a hint of wry amusement in his tone. "I take it he's not operating anything now."

"Nope," Porthos grunted. Athos knew without turning that Aramis would be smiling at that.

"We found some documents on his corpse," he went on, ignoring the silent exchanges now taking place among his companions, a jumble of meaningful glances and lingering looks with which they all communicated. Loki had picked up on them with surprising ease. Only Thor stood without fidgeting, oblivious to the inaudible conversation.

"What kind of documents?" Treville asked, immune to the ridiculousness that was Aramis trying to tell Porthos some kind of joke using only his eyes and the shift of his head.

Athos drew the papers from within his jacket. "Documents pertaining to their current Parisian operations." He handed them to Treville. "These orders were issued recently."

Treville was gazing steadily at the wax seal on the bottom of the first page. Only the tightening of his jaw told Athos that he'd surprised his captain.

"It's his seal, isn't it?"

Treville nodded. "It's Soulier's, yes." He ran a hand across his face and sighed. "You know this means that he might be alive."

Athos met his gaze unflinchingly. "No."

Treville frowned at him. "You've seen the seal, Athos—"

"I shot him." His flexed his hand to keep it from forming into a fist at the memory of the smug look on that bastard's face when he told them he'd shot Aramis.

Wisely, Treville decided not to press the issue. "Whoever gave these orders, they are in a position of power they cannot be allowed to maintain." He frowned thoughtfully at the paper, but Athos was distracted by d'Artagnan leaning forward slightly at the other end of the line to catch his eye.

The look d'Artagnan shot him clearly said in absolute exasperation, drinks, after?

Well, the lad had never been very patient during briefings.

Silently, Athos replied, and have you leave me with them when you run off to Constance?

A blush crept up d'Artagnan's cheeks before he shot him a sheepish scowl that said, shut up, Athos.

Athos laughed under his breath even as he despaired of his sanity.

It was like being friends with a bunch of children.

Except that children didn't get up to such dangerous mischief when he wasn't looking, and nor did they flash each other ridiculous grins until Athos had to cough loudly and they all immediately looked forward, as if nothing had happened.

Treville's lip twitched. "As I was saying, you should make good time to Lagny-sur-Mame."
Athos recovered first. "You're sending us?"

"Well, you are the best," said Treville, raising his eyebrows. "God help us all," he added dryly. "Besides, you seem to have all returned intact for once, so there's nothing to keep me from sending you right back out."

"We can go as well, I hope?" Thor asked eagerly, and Athos fought a smile at the similarity to d'Artagnan. Just what they needed. Two of him.

"If this operation is as sophisticated as it sounds, they'll need the help." Athos noted with a faint sense of pride that Treville did not say backup, implying that Thor and Loki were the equals of the Musketeers.

"I'm sure they could handle it themselves if necessary, but we are always happy to help," Thor told him earnestly. Athos heard a soft snort of exasperation from Loki's general vicinity.

Treville smiled at Thor's offer. "Regardless, I'm glad you two are going with them, I thought you'd have left by now."

Athos saw Loki shift uncomfortably out of the corner of his eye even as Thor exclaimed brightly, "We thought we'd stay a little longer!"

Porthos grinned at that, but Loki seemed to stiffen slightly, clarifying quickly, "We still have some things that we need to see to before we leave."

Thor dimmed visibly at his brother's hasty dismissal. The distinct lessening of joyous enthusiasm was suddenly reflected in Porthos and Aramis's faces as well.

Good lord, if they were any more obvious they'd have signs stuck in their hats.

Athos couldn't judge them too harshly, however. He had to confess himself disappointed by Loki's words. He'd begun to hope the brothers were thinking about staying on.

Apparently Treville's thoughts had been travelling along similar lines, because he sighed in disappointment. "That's a shame. We could have used two good men in the Musketeers."

Athos stiffened even as the collective jaws of d'Artagnan, Aramis, and Porthos dropped almost to the floor. Loki and Thor didn't notice, however, but merely preened under what they failed to understand was perhaps the greatest compliment the captain would ever give them.

Treville was right, though. They would be excellent Musketeers. He just hadn't expected the stoic captain to say it so blatantly.

"Well, head down to the stores to gather what you'll need," Treville ordered, rising behind his desk. "I expect good news when you return."

Athos nodded a farewell and followed the others out of the office, pausing on the stairs to watch them stream into the courtyard.

Loki and Aramis went to ready the horses, while Thor and Porthos headed to gather the supplies. D'Artagnan hesitated a moment, clearly torn between which group to join before ultimately trailing after Thor. Perhaps it was because the large warrior had saved him in the barn.

Or perhaps it was because he wouldn't have to hear any of Aramis's blatant flirting.

Athos had seen Beland's man in the barn just before he attacked d'Artagnan. He had known he
was too slow to get there in time and for just a moment, his heart had ceased to beat, crushed by the fear of losing another brother.

Then Thor had appeared from nowhere and taken the blow, and Athos had breathed again. He owed Thor for d'Artagnan's life, and that was a debt he'd never be able to repay.

Just as he owed Loki for Aramis's. He didn't know what had happened in that forest, but he knew Soulier had truly believed he'd shot Aramis, and yet they'd returned to find Aramis uninjured but for the cut between his shoulders. It was not Athos's place to pry, but he was no fool. Something else had happened that day. He didn't know what, but it had been a long time since he'd felt gratitude that intense.

And whatever else they might be, both men were truly incredible fighters. Thor could take on a crowd of men with only his hammer and emerge victorious and laughing, while Loki was as quick and deadly as a panther. Athos was sure that if he tallied the kills made in that barn, Loki's count would exceed all others.

Besides, they were also intelligent and good company whenever Loki forgot to be so cold, and Athos had noticed he'd warmed considerably since their arrival. Maybe it wasn't too much to hope that they would yet decide to stay.

He could see Aramis smiling enchantingly over by the stables, charm turned on all the way, and felt his own mouth twitch into a wry smile. Of course, the fact that Aramis and Porthos were like enamoured school boys was also a reason to like them.

Athos found it endlessly amusing to watch Aramis slowly win Loki over. It was just as entertaining to see Thor assume that Porthos paid that much attention to everyone. He wondered how long it would take them all to stop dancing around the issue and just give in to the inevitable. Surely it would make everyone's life much easier.

Then he grimaced, realizing that it would probably just make everything much worse. Still, at least they'd be happy, even if Athos would have to start drinking twice as much as he already did just to clean the images from his mind of all the terrible things he'd no doubt walk in on.

Shuddering, he strode down the steps, calling the others to join him.

It was time to go back to Marteaux Forest.

Chapter End Notes

Athos you don't even realise how disgustingly adorable they would be, if only they just stopped being like prancing ponies. Review, review, s'il vous plaît! - C.

^They aren't ponies, they're all puppies and they're the cutest things on the planet. - L
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Porthos and Loki play 'lets-jump-into-this-boiling-hot-frying-pan-ouch-wait-no-it-hurts-this-was-YOUR-idea-you-bastard-I-hate-you', whilst the others ponder the benefits of being deaf or possibly dead. Also something about a bridge and a huge reveal. - C

OH MY GOD WE ARE ACTUALLY SO FAR THROUGH THIS NOW I DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE. HOW EXCITING. BIG CLIMAX COMING UP. - L

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a definite reluctance in returning to the place that Aramis and Porthos had skirted death. It sat like a stiffness along Aramis' spine and the glower on Porthos' face. Even Athos' lazy attitude seemed tempered with wary glances at their surroundings, clearly expecting an ambush.

It set Loki's hackles up.

Irritation was like a haze in the air, thick and infuriating, like a cloud of bugs that buzzed incessantly. It was too hot; their horses could only maintain a weary plodding as they walked steadily onwards down the wide road to Lagny-sur-Marne.

Even d'Artagnan was sullen, barely responding to Thor's jubilant questions and inane comments about the scenery. Aramis was the only other who seemed immune to the weather, his expression bright and, perhaps, slightly peaky, as if he was worried about something but was determined to hide it under gaiety.

Loki's magic prickled at his fingertips until it hurt, as if when a sleeping limb regains its blood and the tinges are almost painful. He would only have to wave his hand to bring a cloud overhead, or even a whisper of a breeze, just some sort of reprieve.

But no, because no one could know about his magic.

It was a learned holdover from his youth, when his father had told him that relying on his magic was weak, that warriors used their physical capabilities, not a woman's art of weaving arcane power.

Only his mother had encouraged his learning; she had taught him everything he knew until he had surpassed even her. And now, here he was, forced to suffer beyond the pale on this godforsaken planet, like some sort of mortal—

"It is very hot, isn't it, mon ange?" Aramis asked, and Loki stiffened at the hint of expectation in his tone, at the hopeful question.

For Aramis knew, he knew of his magic, and yet Loki had thought that Aramis respected his need for secrecy. There was normally something reverential in the way that Aramis regarded his power, the way a man views an omnipotent god.

And he was not to be beseeched.
"If you stopped tipping your hat at everyone we pass, you wouldn't feel the heat."

Aramis merely smiled, something like satisfaction turning it pleased. "I like to be polite."

Porthos snorted in mocking amusement on Aramis' other side, and Loki was too irritated to restrain his scowl. Was this some sort of game played at his expense? He knew that Aramis was friendly bordering on the obscene, but the man was very aware of his effect on others.

Too aware.

And he did not affect gods.

"Perhaps you should learn to be more discerning, then. Your standards are," he paused to observe Aramis bow in his saddle at a particularly ugly youth that passed, "lax."

Porthos muttered something under his breath that made Aramis lay a calming hand on his shoulder, and contempt curled Loki's lip. No matter what he did, Aramis always returned to Porthos' overly protective side. Bitterness unfurled in his stomach like the wings of a plagued creature. Did the pair of them think to toy with him and his brother?

They were beneath them, as was the rest of this disgustingly hot planet.

"Beauty is only skin-deep, Loki," Aramis murmured. "It's what's inside that makes a person, that… inner-light."

Loki flinched and flashed the man a glance, seeing a sense of knowing to his warm smile as he continued, "Wouldn't you agree, mon ange?"

Did Aramis think to coerce him; was it some sort of manipulation because he knew of his magic?

"I wouldn't know, I haven't found anyone worth looking at closely at," he said haughtily, unwilling to submit to the charms of the attractive Musketeer.

Porthos growled a curse that Loki didn't hear, but Aramis just laughed, "It's surprising what can catch your eye quite out-of-the-blue."

Loki bristled. His silk shirt was sticking to his skin and his magic was making his fingers twitch. He'd had enough, he didn't understand these strange Midgardian customs, couldn't cope with being such an outcast when Thor had settled in so well.

"Then close your eyes," he snapped. "What you cannot see cannot tempt you."

"Woah," Porthos called angrily, "simmer down."

D'Artagnan groaned, "Don't use that word, it's too hot."

"You are all useless," Loki snarled. "You cannot even deal with a bit of heat."

"Then leave!" Porthos yelled past Aramis' shocked face. "If you don't like us, fuck off."

"Fine!" Loki hissed, ignoring Athos' concerned glance, and Thor and d'Artagnan's looks of distress. If he wasn't wanted, he would disappear, it wasn't as if he cared overly for any of them. He would find the way home and drag Thor with him, kicking and screaming, if he must.

He lifted his reins in preparation to bolt, but Athos swerved in ahead of him. "Wait," he said with a thread of command that Loki stilled at. "Now is not the time for this."
"Then when is the time, Athos?" Porthos asked angrily. "When 'e's decided that we ain't worth fightin' alongside? What if 'e turns 'is back on us?"

Thor frowned and, for the first time in their long lives, spoke up for Loki's sake. "My brother would not do that."

Porthos scowled at the familial relation, and it deepened when d'Artagnan said quietly, "Loki's proved himself."

Loki inhaled sharply, almost overwhelmed with surprise, but his eyes jumped to Aramis' and saw him only staring at his horse's mane.

So, Aramis chose Porthos.

"I won't stay where I'm not wanted," Loki spat, and wheeled his mount around to head back down the road.

His hand lifted to snap the reins, but then Aramis' landed on top of his. "You are wanted, Loki."

"When 'as 'e ever helped us?" Porthos grumbled, only slightly mollified.

Aramis met Loki's gaze then, and there was some firm resolution in those warm, brown depths. "No, he tried to blurt, but a small, almost tremulous smile had graced Aramis' sensual lips as he said, "He has helped each of us." He turned to Porthos then, but his fingers tightened on Loki's. "He healed you."

Loki froze, a learned anxiety squirming in his stomach. Thor shifted uncomfortably, his gaze darting to and from Loki's as Porthos frowned and said, "No, you did, you stitched me up."

Aramis' grip turned painful as he choked out, "You were dying, mon ami, I couldn't save you." Athos' eyes narrowed as Aramis turned back to Loki, and the look on his face was so grateful that it clutched at his chest. "But Loki did."

Porthos snorted in amused confusion. "Saved me? With what, magic?" It was said sarcastically, ignorant of the truth. "Light," Aramis provided quietly, clutching onto one of his religious beads with his right hand, as he rubbed his left across Loki's stiff knuckles.

Porthos frowned and then turned to Thor, clearly seeking stability; but Thor hesitated and looked at Loki. He tried to have his best glare convey 'agree and I'll kill you', but Thor couldn't lie to anyone, least of all these honourable idiots, and so he shrugged. "Loki has been a mage since we were young."

Loki let his eyelids shutter and he sighed, wondering how on Midgard this had come to happen – and then remembered that Midgard was the reason for all of this chaos.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to see them all looking at him, as if waiting for a demonstration.

"What?" he snapped, and was bitterly pleased to see Aramis and Thor look away guiltily.

Athos was the only one who met his baleful stare, and simply tilted his head for Loki to join him at the front of their party.
It was only when Loki turned his nose up at the others so that he could join Athos, that he realised the perceptive man had tricked him into staying.

When he flashed Athos a damning glance, a tiny smile tilted the man's lips, and Loki couldn't help but laugh under his breath.

Clever mortal.

Aramis felt all of the breath whoosh out of him, and to be honest, it felt like Loki had dealt him a body blow.

He had been prepared to chase after his unreasonable angel and drag him into an impromptu kiss, whilst simultaneously mentally telling Porthos to be quiet. He had just had to pick the hottest moment of the day to pick a fight, and chosen the most hot-headed – and yet coolly cutting – one to fight with.

Thank God that Athos had thought to cut Loki off before he could run. Loki was like a horse, if they weren't careful, he would spook, and who knew where angels could run to?

But the secret of his light was out now, and he was rather worried that Loki was holding him solely responsible.

But what else could Aramis have done? Let Loki think that he wasn't appreciated, let him disappear into the woods? No, he refused to let his angel out of his sight, not when he had become so very used to his little touches and lingering looks.

Loki might not reciprocate in kind, but neither did he try to pointedly ignore him like he used to.

Sometimes Aramis even got a smile, and that little glimpse of mischief was too addictive to give up.

At least Loki had stayed in the end, even if he was now next to Athos, the two of them riding in supercilious silence up ahead. They were quite similar now that they thought of it - now that Aramis refused to acknowledge Porthos trying to get his attention.

It was an air of nobility that they shared. Not just the straight spines of authority, but an attitude that, at any moment, they might look down their noses at you and sneer.

Of course, Loki could, and he did it so well that it gave Aramis shivers of delight.

Loki could easily pass for a Comte, actually.

"Aramis, please," Porthos muttered, "I said I was sorry."

Aramis sighed, unable to deny Porthos' laughably miserable look, and bestowed a despairing smile at his friend. "I love you, Porthos, I do, but sometimes…"

"I know, I know. He just," Porthos took a breath and snarled, "he pisses me off."

"He saved your life," Aramis replied quietly.

"Yeah, well, I'll believe that when I see it."

Aramis grimaced and cast a glance at the haughty pair ahead of them. He hoped he hadn't truly upset his angel, he just wanted to ensure everyone realised how truly wonderful he was.
He just wanted Loki to realise that.

Any journey was too long when they had to not only stable their horses, but continue on foot because the innkeeper's map showed an alternate path into Marteaux Forest.

The Musketeers were far more trusting than Loki was; he took one look at the landlord and decided that he was an ingrate that didn't deserve their attention, let alone their patronage.

Although, the boy that took their horses had made Loki smile; his grubby face had lit up at the sight of six warhorses all bedecked in Musketeer leather. Loki had stayed back to warn Gerard about his mare's tendency to bite strangers, and blinked in surprise when the lad had simply touched noses with her and remarked, "Aw, she's awright, m'sieur."

Loki had given the shyly smiling boy a lump of gold and his mare an apple, before striding off to find the others.

All of that was inconsequential though, because Athos had simply had a murmured discussion – seemingly with himself – and reasoned that anything that might give them an edge would be useful.

This was why they found themselves picking their way through what was no more than a goat track, the sun still beating down upon them, and nothing but grunted questions and answers splitting the heavy air.

Somehow, he had ended up at the front of the group, his keen eye choosing the sturdiest steps and avoiding the copious rabbit holes that threatened to stumble him.

Midgard was a truly disastrous rock.

They split into single-file to traverse a bridge strung between a ravine, and the only noises were their disheartened sighs and d'Artagnan's cheeky, "Careful Thor, you'll send us all crashing to our deaths."

Aramis cuffed him on the back of the head. "Don't tempt fate, vaurien."

Loki ignored their whining and started ahead, not finding favour with the sun-dried wood and the scratchy rope under his hands. He silently cursed the mortals who didn't service every single footpath, but reasoned that the less travelled this trail, the more likely no one would be watching it.

The easier it would be to storm the enemy's camps, kill everyone, and continue his search for the way home.

He still stopped to glare at Thor when his brother finally stepped onto the bridge as the tail of their group and jokingly wiggled it. Good-natured jeers met his chuckle and Loki considered summoning a brisk breeze to truly rattle them for being so foolish.

Over the creaking of the boards, Loki heard a strange noise that caught his attention.

The bridge quivered again, Athos’ quiet threats sounded, Porthos tried to punch Thor for messing about, and as Loki beheld the ground a mere metre away, the rope creaked and tore under his hand.

On instinct, he lunged forward, desperate to take his weight off of the outrageously unsafe structure.
Why had Thor insisted on being an insufferable oaf now of all times?

With his feet wedged in the grass, he reached for the swiftly unravelling rope rail, and held. It burned like fire along his fingers and his boots slipped an inch.

He looked up and thought, it's going to fall.

So he let go.

There was a shout of utter rage, and it came from Porthos. The dark man had grabbed Aramis to his chest and bared his teeth murderously at Loki, it said: you traitor.

Thor stared dubiously at the distance below them. He would survive the fall, but the mortals would not. He looked up at the skies and his guilt-ridden face said: I'm sorry.

Athos had one palm on d'Artagnan's shoulder, the other gripping the rail, but his eyes were cool and commanding, and they said: Loki, focus.

There was no time to focus.

The rope snapped.

Loki threw out a hand and his magic thundered through his arm, spilling out in a gush that lashed onto the frayed end of the rope. There was a moment where nothing happened, nobody moved, but neither did the bridge.

It was steady.

He had it.

Almost infinitesimally slowly did he pull his hand back, curling his fingers to coax the rope back around the wooden post, tying it in the most complicated knot he knew and, after a glance around, flicked his others fingers to warp the wood around the rope for good measure.

As an added precaution, he looked down the length of the bridge with his magic and quested for other signs of weakness. He solidified threads under Thor's weight and tightened the knots at the other end.

Finally, he let everything go, and the bridge sagged under its own weight again.

They all jerked with the drop, and then everything was still once more as they all stared at Loki.

Loki grit his teeth and stared back. "I would get off of that if I were you."

Athos moved first, clapping d'Artagnan reassuringly on the shoulder to get him moving. The latter stared at him in wide-eyed amazement as he darted past, Athos stopping in Loki's blind spot to idly examine the bridge.

Loki ignored him; he couldn't relax until everyone was on solid ground.

Aramis came next, sliding out of Porthos' stunned grasp to meet Loki's gaze with tender amazement, a quiet, "Thank you, mon ange," dropping from his lips. A part of Loki wanted to grab the back of Aramis' neck and demand to know what had taken him so long to get off of that blasted bridge.

But then Porthos appeared at Aramis' elbow, giving Loki a quick, uncertain glance and what might have been muttered gratitude. Loki knew that was all he would receive from the man,
Porthos was one of those people who disliked things they couldn't understand, and mortals couldn't explain magic.

Unless, of course, they called it light, he thought as he cast an amused glance at Aramis' back.

Thor thundered through, giving Loki's shoulder the same treatment that Athos had given d'Artagnan, except Thor's was bruising and ridiculously full of pride.

And then they had walked on, and Loki was left standing next to Athos, who was studying his knot carefully. Athos tugged on the rope and made a pleased noise when it didn't even budge.

There was a strange amount of apprehension still in Loki's chest, even though the danger was past.

Athos looked up then, one of his tiny smiles on his face and his eyes clear as he said, "This is good work. Thank you, Loki."

D'Artagnan gave a strangled yelp. "Good? It was amazing!"

Thor chuckled loudly at d'Artagnan's cries of praise, and Aramis gave him a bright smile past Porthos' shaking head.

The apprehension disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

And then Loki said, let there be light, and there was light, and Athos bid it good, and everyone was happy. Except Porthos. He was a grumpy shit... Please throw reviews at us and be merry! - C

^And Loki said unto himself, 'I have been a colossal idiot', and verily they did all agree. - L
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Sometimes the most beautiful of environments can simply be the most beautiful backdrop to the sound of a heart breaking, and sometimes that heart will break further when forced somewhere bland. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After the shock of the bridge incident, not even Loki argued when Athos called them to a halt in a large clearing only a mile further into the forest. Thor alone seemed reluctant to continue, but he submitted to Athos's decision without complaint.

That was new.

Loki wandered the camp, feeling self-conscious in a way he had not felt since his father's court, where his magic was frowned upon and seen as cowardly. He'd never experienced open admiration before, and the looks the others kept throwing his way, especially d'Artagnan, made him uncomfortable.

Athos hadn't said anything about it since the bridge, and Loki was grateful for his discretion, but Porthos kept shooting him odd looks and Aramis's eyes followed him everywhere he went.

Though come to think of it, that wasn't exactly new.

But Loki refused to return his gaze, still furious at the casual way the man had revealed him to the others. Yes, they had accepted him regardless, and that was miraculous in itself, but Aramis had no right.

No right to tell anyone else what Loki had done for them; no right to think it was his place to do so. I should have let him die, Loki thought bitterly, but found himself immediately shying from the thought. Perhaps that was a bit much. But he should have let him suffer longer afterwards.

He didn't know how long he had paced before the merry crackling of a fire intruded upon his thoughts. "Loki, come and have something to eat," Athos called, the slight hint of command in his voice telling Loki it was not a suggestion.

Once he would have bristled at the presumption, but now he could recognize the concern that drove the oldest Musketeer. He stalked gracefully over to the circle of firelight, folding himself down between Thor and Athos and ignoring the hurt look Aramis shot at him from the other side of the fire.

He did notice that Aramis was not sitting beside Porthos, but that was neither here nor there.

D'Artagnan passed him a bowl, a strained expression on his face. It took Loki a moment to figure out the boy was desperately trying to contain his questions. He wondered idly who had told him to do that.

"Oh, just get on with it," he sighed, setting the bowl to the side as d'Artagnan's face lit up. Athos sent Loki a look that said, quite clearly, you're going to regret that.
"Why can you do magic?" D'Artagnan asked, excitement pouring off of him. "Where does it come from? Can anyone do it? Can you teach me?"

Porthos reached over and casually smacked a hand against the back of the boy's head. "Slow down 'fore you choke on somethin'.'"

"He's not even eating anything," Thor pointed out.

Athos snorted. "That won't stop him."

Aramis said nothing, and Loki refused to let the unusual silence bother him.

"I cannot teach you anything," he told d'Artagnan wearily, sensing which question was closest to the boy's heart. "And I cannot explain where it comes from. You would not understand."

"But that's not true, Loki!" Thor cut in, and Loki just knew his brother was about to tell the Musketeers all about Asgard and his magic and all of it and there was nothing he could do to stop him.

So he didn't try. Let their sheltered minds try to comprehend the majesty of their home, the vast gulf between them. Perhaps it would remind them all that Thor and Loki had to leave, and leave soon.

He amused himself with watching the various reactions of Thor's audience. D'Artagnan's jaw dropped lower and lower as Thor described Odin's golden palace and the glorious ranks of warriors that he led.

Porthos looked skeptical at Thor's claim to divinity, but when Thor described the great feasts and battles, his face split into a grin. He'd have fit in well with Thor and the Warriors Three.

Athos listened with interest, but his face remained blank and controlled. Once or twice, his eyes flicked to Loki's, but he did not interrupt or question anything Thor said.

Loki did not look at Aramis until Thor mentioned that Odin was their father. He heard the slight intake of breath, as if Aramis were in pain, and whipped his head around to check before he could remind himself not to care.

Aramis looked stricken. No one else seemed to have noticed, too intent on Thor's story about the time he and Loki had tried to hunt a bilgesnipe and got caught in Thor's own ridiculously overcomplicated trap. Aramis's eyes were narrowed and he was staring into the fire with desperate fervor.

It was unsettling.

"So you don't have magic, Thor?" D'Artagnan asked curiously.

"No, not I," Thor said, smiling at the boy. "My talents range more towards the physical." Porthos grinned lewdly at that, but Thor didn't notice. "Though these last few days I've begun to appreciate just how useful it would have been to learn. Perhaps I should have listened to my mother more as a child instead of sneaking out to hunt wild beasts."

Loki stared, too stunned to hide his shock. Thor had never, never, admitted to envying his magic. Thor blithely carried on, unaware that he'd just shocked Loki into silence, until d'Artagnan cut him off.

"So what I'm hearing is that with Loki's magic, we're basically unstoppable!" he exclaimed
excitedly. Thor nodded, looking pleased that they would be able to fight to their full abilities at last.

Athos leaned forward, and Loki expected him to interject some tempering comment, but all he said was, "Yes, we do have an advantage now."

Loki stared at him and realized that he was their advantage. He wasn't a hindrance here, he was a help.

He was valued.

He rose, feeling uncomfortable once more. Athos caught his eye and nodded once in understanding, and so Loki strode slowly away from the campfire, not wanting to appear sentimental.

He walked a short ways into the dark woods, trying to organize the unexpected flood of emotions now coursing through him. He did not have time for sentiment: he was a god! And yet the simple acceptance in the firelight had utterly disarmed him.

There was a crunching noise behind him, and he knew without turning it would be Aramis.

"What do you want?" he asked harshly, anger springing back up in the face of the intrusion.

Aramis hesitated, silhouetted by the fire behind him. "I came to apologize, mon dauphin," he said at last, voice so low Loki could hardly hear it.

Loki was momentarily thrown by the new phrase, but he refused to reveal his ignorance. "I do not accept your apology," he hissed. "You had no right."

"I merely looked to refute the idea that you were untrustworthy," Aramis said, his tone still pleading. "I did not want you to leave… leave us." Leave me hung in the air, and Loki hated that he could hear it.

"I trusted you with my powers, and you revealed them without my permission," Loki growled. "It was not your place!"

"Porthos had no right to distrust you!" Aramis said hotly, his own temper flaring.

"It is not your right to defend me!" Loki snarled. He sensed this argument was skirting dangerous ground, an unstable quarry of things not said. "Do not make presumptions upon me simply because I shared my magic with you. I am not yours to take."

Aramis confirmed his suspicions a moment later. "So I can share your magic but not your bed?" he cried bitterly.

Loki recoiled, fury twisting within his gut. How dare he?

"I told you once before you had no claim to me and that I would not stoop to your level," he spat, ignoring the way Aramis flinched slightly at the reminder. "Understand this: I am not yours." A rage gripped his heart, and he wanted to hurt Aramis in that moment. "Run back to Porthos."

It was unfair, and they both knew it, but Loki would not apologize. Wordlessly, Aramis turned and slipped away, rage and hurt twisting his handsome features. By the firelight, Loki could see the others were already asleep. Aramis dropped soundlessly into his bedroll and rolled to face the other direction.
Growling, Loki spun around, itching to leave, but if he was the only one awake, then he must have first watch. He refused to move closer to the fire, dropping to the forest floor with irate grace and casting his mind out desperately in all directions.

He wanted to be off this barren rock. Once he returned to Asgard, he would never think of mortals again.

Gradually his heartbeat slowed as the meditative trance set in. He cast about, searching for any hint of Yggdrasil, any whisper of a way home. He had done this so many nights now that he was beginning to lose hope, but tonight something skittered along the edge of his consciousness, brushing peace along his taut nerves.

He increased his focus, narrowing in on the elusive murmur, and its presence increased until it was a siren call, beckoning him with its promise of a way home. Blindly, he stumbled to his feet and into the clearing, grabbing Thor's arm in a vicelike grip.

"Loki?" Thor asked blearily. "What is it?"

"Come on," Loki hissed, not bothering to explain as he bodily dragged his brother through the trees in the direction of the call. He didn't know how long they spent half running through the underbrush before he felt it burst into being just ahead.

He pushed through the trees and felt it wash over him like the tide. The power of Yggdrasil made his magic flare so bright it was almost painful. In the light, Loki could make out the edges of a broad circle etched into the burned ground.

He'd found a way home.

Aramis heard Loki wake Thor, heard them crash off together into the woods, but he did not move until he was sure they were out of sight. He wasn't sure he could bear to look on the dark angel so far out of his reach it was almost laughable.

Rolling wearily to his feet, he wandered over to a stump at the edge of the forest and sat down heavily, staring off in the direction the pair had disappeared. Whatever the reason, it must be serious. For all Loki's pretense of indifference, he wouldn't have left them undefended lightly.

It hit him like the heavy blow of a hammer. All the nights he stumbled upon Loki meditating, the way his gaze darted about when asked if he was staying: Loki had been searching for a way home.

And Aramis knew with painful certainty that he had found it.

He hadn't even said goodbye.

The ache that welled up in his chest stole the air from his lungs and sent tendrils of ice creeping through his veins. What had he expected, really? That an angel would ever deign to fall for a mere mortal?

His head thudded dully, the throbbing a constant reminder of his own idiocy. Loki was a prince, a glorious being of magic and grace descended from the very heavens. Of course he hadn't wanted Aramis. Angels could do better.

And now he would leave as suddenly as he had come. Aramis's heart cracked at the thought that his last words had been words of anger and hurt. He would take them back now if he could.
But he would never have the chance, because Loki was leaving.

It didn't bother him as much that Loki's last words to him had been cruel and cold, for what else had he come to expect? It was not in his angel's nature to be gentle.

Aramis felt his lips twist into a grimace. Not his angel. Never his.

No, he thought suddenly, that isn't quite true. The thought rang through his head like the tolling of a bell, clearing away the anguish of the moment and replacing it with cool understanding.

Loki might not be his angel, but Aramis would always belong to him. He was long past the point of denying just how far he had fallen. Loki had stalked into his life and turned his world upside down, and his departure would leave a trail of devastation across the landscape of Aramis's heart, but he couldn't love him less for that.

A storm could not be blamed for its nature, and Loki had hit him like a blizzard.

The pain was already settling over him like a second skin, but he couldn't deny the gratitude that came with it. His heart might shatter to cracked pieces, but it would be worth it to have met the dark angel who could take his breath away with one look.

He half rose to his feet, the desire to follow Loki burning through him, melting the frost in his veins. He did not wish to stop him; he did not want to argue. It was not Aramis's place to hold an angel to the earth. If Loki needed to leave, Aramis would not stand in his way.

But he did want to say goodbye.

A sound from the fire stopped him, and he bowed his head under the weight of the knowledge that he could not follow. His companions needed him to guard their sleep, and loyalty demanded he place their needs above his own.

He settled back onto the stump.

His gaze roved over the camp, pausing at Porthos's slumbering form. He was limned in firelight, and once Aramis would have deemed him ethereal. But now he knew the face of divinity, it was hard to see it elsewhere.

Porthos grunted in his sleep and rolled slightly. A smile fought its way past the pain pounding in Aramis's chest and rose to his cheeks. He might lose his angel, but he would not be alone, at least.

The thought chased the smile away almost at once as he recalled that Thor had left with Loki. Would he return, or was the call of his home too strong?

Porthos would be deeply hurt by the sudden departure, and anger alit briefly in his chest before being smothered by despair. Porthos would recover. He was stronger than Aramis, and he had held his heart more carefully in reserve.

But Aramis's was lost, for he had never learned how to love anything less than wholeheartedly.

But perhaps Thor would stay? The thought was just as painful, for while Porthos would be protected, Loki would be left alone and faced with the loss of a brother he'd had by his side for millennia.

No, better Thor stay with Loki, for he was loved more than Loki ever let on. Aramis and Porthos would muddle their way back to happiness eventually.
He leaned his head back, gazing up at the stars scattered in whorls of light above his head. Loki had descended from those lights. How very fitting that he return at last.

Aramis was so lost in his thoughts that he did not realize that the forest had fallen silent around him, nor that a faint crackling noise was approaching steadily.

He did notice the arm that snaked around his neck cutting off his air and keeping him from shouting an alarm.

The lack of oxygen sent numbness creeping through his limbs until he was unable to resist the hands dragging him back through the trees. Only when he could no longer see the firelight was he released, choking and gasping to fill starving lungs.

Rough rope was knotted tightly around his wrists, cutting into the delicate skin, and a dirty rag was stuffed into his mouth and knotted behind his head before he had finished gulping the chilled air. He tried desperately to breathe through his nose.

Then he was hauled back to his feet and dragged through the trees away from the sleeping forms of his brothers. He could not count the number of men surrounding him in the darkness, but the press of bodies was stifling. Roots caught at his feet and his arms were wrenched repeatedly as he fell again and again.

At one point the swell of men slowed and lessened, and he attempted to yank his arms free, testing the limits of his captors' mercy. A broken nose told him not to try these men again, and the rest of the journey was spent struggling to catch his breath past the steady drip of blood.

They came to a stop abruptly, and Aramis could make out a dark opening ahead of him against a wall of rock. He had no time to recognize anything beyond the entrance to the cave before he was bundled inside, soft dirt giving way to unforgiving stone.

Only a few meters in the cave twisted sharply to the left into a narrow tunnel, and Aramis scraped his arms and shoulders against the rough walls as he was carelessly shoved through. Torches blazed ahead as the cave opened up once more, and he blinked in the sudden brilliance.

He was dragged over to a rocky alcove along the wall and thrown to the ground, barely managing to catch himself with his bound hands before he smashed headfirst against the rock. Straightening until he was kneeling, he looked around the cave.

It was full of men, coming and going from small openings all along the walls. One small group was headed directly for him, and there was something in the leading man's gaze that sent shivers down his spine.

"So, you did manage to catch him," he purred, rubbing his hands together in obvious delight. "Were you seen?" One of the men who'd brought him to the cave shook his head. "Then leave us."

They backed away a respectful distance, leaving Aramis alone with the man. "Do you know who I am?" he asked quietly.

Aramis shook his head, feeling the gag cutting into the corners of his mouth, and his captor made a tsking sound. One hand reached out and yanked the foul material from between his teeth. He gasped, trying to reclaim the air he'd been denied during the journey.

"My name is Antoine Soulier."

Aramis realized he was looking into the eyes of the man who had almost killed him before his
angel had saved him.

But the time of angels had passed.

His heart sank in his chest, but he managed a charming smile. "It's so wonderful to meet you at last."

Soulier's answering smile was callous and cruel, and for a moment Aramis was amazed at the difference between this man's coldness and Loki's. Loki's sneers were formidable, but he had never once seemed malevolent. Not to Aramis.

But Soulier was a different manner of man entirely. "I love what you've done with the place," Aramis added conversationally. He didn't see Soulier move, but a moment later he was sprawled on his side, head ringing from the force of the blow.

Soulier crouched down before him. "Are we playing a game? I do so love games," he said, and the torchlight glittered off his perfect teeth. "Let's play a question game. If I like your answer, I'll ask another. If I don't…" He trailed off, and the threat was obvious.

Aramis levered himself back to his knees. "Ask away," he said cheekily. This time he was prepared for the blow.

Soulier turned his back for a moment as if thinking. Suddenly he whirled back, face twisted into something resembling madness. "How are you alive?" he snarled. "I shot you myself."

Aramis smiled bitterly, blood from his split lip trickling down his chin. "I had a guardian angel."

Soulier regarded him dispassionately, earlier madness gone. "Well, they won't be saving you now."

"No, he won't," Aramis said very softly.

Soulier turned away briefly, calling an order to a group across the room. Aramis closed his eyes, leaning back on his heels. He hoped no one would come. Without Loki's magic, his brothers could never hope to overcome the odds they would face if they mounted a rescue. Better he die here alone than they die with him.

Footsteps approaching jarred him from his thoughts. He opened his eyes to see Soulier approaching, a long knife in his hand.

"I should warn you now, I won't tell you anything," Aramis said, voice calm despite the apprehension hammering at his heart even as two thugs stepped up to hold him in place.

Soulier smiled grimly. "This was never about information," he said, crouching before Aramis and setting the blade of the knife against his cheek. "Your friend shot me." With his free hand, he pulled down the neckline of his shirt, revealing a fresh, ugly scar barely an inch above his heart.

Aramis spared a moment to be proud of Athos's marksmanship, and then Soulier was dragging the blade down his cheek and the pain drowned every other thought.

"No, I'm afraid this is only about revenge."

As his skin split beneath the sharp steel, Aramis sent up a fervent prayer to the stars.

*Please don't let them come.*
They both ruin me in this chapter, in their own unique way. Loki with his terrible fixation on the crown, and Aramis with his wonderful fixation on the boys. Also, damn Soulier. - C

OH MY GOD ARE WE HERE ALREADY I FORGOT HOW ANGSTY THIS WAS C WHY DID YOU LET ME WRITE THIS??? - L
I was replaying ‘Dante’s Inferno’ the other day and this quote came up on a loading screen; it struck me quite particularly and completely changed how this scene was going to go. Gone was the Loki who might shed his immortal soul for a mere human, and long live the Loki who smites all who stand in his way! Prepare to kneel, mortals. - C

The final scene in this chapter may be my favorite thing you have ever written, my dear. - L

"Forget your hope of ever seeing Heaven:
    I come to lead you to the other shore,
    to the eternal dark, to fire and frost."
    - Dante Alighieri, ‘Inferno’

"No one is coming, you have to accept that."

Loki’s hissed words sailed through the clearing and seemed to strike Thor so much that he flinched, taking a step back. He didn't know why Thor was so surprised; Loki had always known that their father would make no effort to rescue them.

He had said so the last time Thor had gotten them both into trouble, when they had been trapped against impossible odds and Odin's wrath had rained upon their enemies before raining on Loki himself.

It had been Thor's fault, that time, but Loki had taken the blame, as he always did whether he wanted to or not – for Loki was the Trickster.

Unworthy, not to be trusted.

This ridiculous trip to Midgard had been Thor's idea, too, but Loki hadn't been about to let his foolish brother thunder around on the mortal planet and get himself lost.

Instead, they had both gotten lost, lost amidst a group of men who used sentiment like a shield, not a punishment.

Well, Loki had found exactly what he had been looking for, and it was the way home.

He was sure it was.

"Stand in the rune, Thor," he ordered distractedly, basking in Yggdrasil's thick streams of pure power. There must have been a visitation here once, many centuries ago if the scuffed marks and stored magic were any indication.

There was the connection to the Bifrost; he just had to tug on it.
"No."

Loki froze, and looked up from the swirling pattern in the grass – so very similar to the one on his leather sheath – and saw Thor standing deliberately outside the circle.

"No?"

"I will not return to Asgard, brother."

The ridiculous sentiment that had been flourishing under Aramis' misplaced ministrations suddenly turned into anger. It hurt, because that was what emotion always did, and Thor was letting his get in the way of reason.

"Do not be a fool, Thor," he snapped. "What is on offer here?"

Thor's jaw clenched and when he looked up to meet Loki's enraged gaze, it was as if he thought that Loki was wrong. It occurred to him like a punch to the gut that, for the first time in their long lives, Thor was about to stand up to him.

"I do not want to be King, Loki." Thor's words hung like suspended glass, and then they shattered. "Being here, it's shown me that I have no desire to rule, to put myself above anyone else. I just want to live," he trailed off quietly, "I just want to be happy."

Loki blinked in utter amazement. That was what they had been bred to do, to sit at the foot of the golden throne until it was their time to rule. What could possibly have distracted Thor enough to forget that reason for living?

"Whatever those simpletons have told you—"

"Do not refer to them as such," Thor shouted, stunning Loki into silence. "The Musketeers are honourable, praiseworthy men; they fight for their country and are fought for in return. The life is fun, dangerous, worthy, and I can already not give that up."

Loki watched his brother for a moment, and then he began to laugh, low and cruel, for this was what sentiment did to a person. It made them stupid; it made them forget their place in the cosmos.

"You care for them, don't you? Oh, Thor, this is too rich."

Thor flinched, the faintest of flushes appearing on his cheeks. "They are worth caring for."

Loki sneered, like the rightful ruler that he was, and he emulated every single quality that their father had tried to instil in him. Thor stiffened and shook his head almost desperately, but it was too late, Loki would not be quieted.

"I will not be commanded by mere mortals, I am a prince," Loki yelled, pointing at himself furiously, and then snarled at the light still flickering at his fingertips. Here, alone with Thor, he could fully be himself. "I had to hide half of my soul since we landed on this disgusting mortal planet. We don't belong here."

"You think we belong up there, Loki?" Thor asked suddenly, shocking him with its earnest questioning. "You had to hide your magic in Asgard, too. How often did you run away, try to practice your magic secretly because you knew using it would anger Father?"

Loki inhaled sharply and automatically shuttered his power, his fingers dimming. Even the mere mention of being discovered was enough to bring apprehension clutching at his chest.
"And now look, look at you," Thor laughed in fond surprise, and it was with proud amazement he said, "You saved a man who you can't seem to stand, and you saved another who adores you."

_Adores_?

The overwhelming anger settled and it caught at Loki's breath, made hesitation quiver along bones that had lived for so very long. But there, Yggdrasil whispered to him, ran soothing waves of power along his skin and replaced every single soft touch of a charming mortal that had no right.

"That is the exact reason we can't stay, Thor. This," he let his magic course through him again and gestured to the rune circle when it flared back in greeting, "this is our birthright." The one that their Father had seemed to love in Thor and hate in him, but that didn't matter, because Midgard was no place for gods. "We're immortal."

Thor swallowed nervously, and then he strengthened when he touched a belt that Loki could have sworn belonged to Porthos. "Yes but, brother, we don't have to be."

Loki stumbled backwards out of the rune as if Thor had smacked him with the hammer he was born to wield. It took him a few seconds of careful breathing before he asked in bewilderment, "You would give up millennia of ruling our kingdom, for scant years with mortals you just met?"

Thor's smile was devastatingly shy. "A year with them is worth a lifetime, Loki, how can you not see that?"

"How? How? Because we were meant for greater things; Thor, all we've ever known is heritage."

"And I don't want it. What is heritage compared to companionship, to _brothers_?" Thor said and then pointed at the camp that they had left far behind. "They accept you, Aramis stands by you, and you're throwing that away, for what? A cold throne and a colder heart? That is not what life is about, brother."

On an instinct that Loki hadn't realised he kept following, he reached out with his magic for a blinding white fire that had burned so agreeably from the moment he had first encountered it. He reached for the tell-tale signature of a brown-eyed man who managed to make him feel _warm_.

Only Yggdrasil spoke back, enticing him back into the rune circle, telling him that _power_ was always greater than sentiment.

Loki frowned and walked forwards, his boots glowing where they met the patterned floor.

Thor's face crumpled. "Please, Loki, don't do this. I don't want you to go."

Loki wasn't listening; he had stepped past the ring of swirling marks that reminded him so much of Aramis' shoulder-guard. He wasn't using his physical senses; he was casting out with his magic again.

In his mind's eye, he felt Athos' steel, Porthos' protection, d'Artagnan's enthusiasm.

There was no fire.

"Aramis," he murmured, and focused on the vulnerable planes on his brother's face. "Aramis has gone."

Thor grabbed his arm bruisingly, and his alarm seemed to finally jolt through to Loki. "We didn't leave a guard."
No, Loki thought numbly, *I didn't leave a guard.*

He bolted, he ran away from the path to Asgard, and he ran towards the absence of a fire that he hadn't realised he had come to rely on.

Without it, he shivered uncontrollably; he who had not felt the cold since his youth.

Loki fell into the circle of the camp's firelight and saw Athos and d'Artagnan turn vigilantly with their swords drawn. Anxiety was a skittering thing in the air.

D'Artagnan sighed in relief, "Loki, thank God you're okay. Where's Thor?"

Thor crashed through the trees behind him, but Loki paid no mind to his brother's lumbering, there was only one question on his mind. "Where is Aramis?"

That was when he realised that Athos' skin was stretched tight over his face, pinched and pale. If guilt had a tangible presence, it would be pouring off of the man in such heavy waves that it was crippling.

Loki knew what it felt like, because it was hovering on the edges of his own awareness.

"Tell me," he snapped, and Athos jerked his head in a nod at d'Artagnan.

The boy stepped forward, passing Loki a dagger with a crest engraved on the hilt that he recognised.

"Soulier's," Loki remarked dully, "He took Aramis. Why?"

He felt as disconnected from the world as he had on the first day they had arrived here. But it wasn't Asgard he felt adrift from now, it was Aramis, and it *ached* like a lost limb.

"Revenge," Athos murmured in the same toneless fashion. "He wants to finish what he started."

D'Artagnan frowned nervously even as he gravitated to Thor's side. "What makes you think he's going to kill—"

Athos released his bloodless hold on a bundle of leather straps attached to his belt. Loki reached out automatically, but he already knew what it was before Athos even brandished the front.

It was Aramis' shoulder guard, but it was sliced almost to ribbons, with one thick cut straight through the centre of the significant flower symbol of the Musketeers.

"That's where you found the dagger," Loki said quietly, his brain taking so very long to work things through, but some things came in bits and pieces.

Sentiment, acceptance, trust, *worthiness.*

They had trusted him, trusted him to keep them safe.

And he had left them alone, without a watcher, all for his own needs. His father was right; he deserved nothing more than to be the heir's brother, the unwanted son, the Trickster.

That was all he was good for. He deserved to go back to Asgard, to sit at the foot of the lonely throne and *feel* how cold it was without Aramis' fire to warm him, without brothers to rely on.

The crownless prince is all he ever was.
And yet, all Loki could think of was their last conversation, when he had told Aramis to run back to Porthos. A great, sickening weight settled in his stomach.

Aramis would think that he had left them all there to die, left him at Soulier's mercy.

There was movement outside the circle of firelight, and then Porthos appeared with despairing rage tightening his dark features. Porthos took one look at Thor, a relieved sigh shuddering through him, and then rammed his fist into Loki's jaw until he saw the stars he came from.

"What are you still doin' 'ere?" Porthos roared, and Loki merely rubbed the bruise and sneered. It was a learned response; he knew how to react to this, even if it was just a facsimile of emotion.

"I wasn't aware you required babysitting."

"Not me, you stupid fuckin' god," Porthos yelled, derision slapping Loki in the face. "Aramis needs you."

"Me?" Loki shouted, the emotion coming true this time and it was hot and angry and burned away the cold, uncaring of the ache in his jaw or the needles in his heart. "Needs me? I'm not the one he keeps returning to!"

Porthos' raised his fist again, and snarled in useless rage when Thor's hand shot out to stop Porthos from punching him a second time.

Loki gave his brother a satisfied look, but then he saw something that he had never thought to see. Thor was furious with him.

"How can you be so blind, brother?"

Loki took a step back, and that little quivering of hesitation that had almost kept him from leaving Midgard, reared its head.

Something wasn't right, Thor was angry with him, Athos was unbearably guilty, and Porthos looked terrified underneath his rage.

He was missing something.

Raw emotion screamed across Porthos' face as he said hoarsely, "You're 'is angel."

A choked noise left Loki's lips.

Every single moment that he had shared with Aramis flashed in front of his eyes, every time he had burned with curiosity at those two words that had been spoken in that ridiculously attractive tongue.

Mon ange.

Aramis' name whispered from Loki's lips, and his magic surged like a wave that had finally broken.

Aramis, the one person who had tracked fire along Loki's skin, interested him like nothing before had ever done, saw his magic as a wonderful skill and not an obligation, made him feel… Made him feel and not mocked him for feeling.

There was borrowed power under Loki's skin, he had absorbed centuries of the Bifrost's energy until it sizzled through his veins.
It would have taken him home.

Instead, he was going to use it to destroy Soulier and bring Aramis home, to where he belonged.

With his nuanced range, Loki cast far and wide, reaching out further than he ever had before, and focused like a needle point onto the faintest flickers of glorious white fire. He knew instantly where Aramis was.

"I lost the trail, I can't find him, Athos," Porthos' voice was breaking and he looked seconds away from collapsing with exhaustion, his arm quivering against Thor's as he leaned on him for strength.

But Athos wasn't watching Porthos, he was watching Loki, and there was such bitter, heart-breaking understanding in the man's anguished eyes.

Loki had gotten so good at reading these ridiculous mortals.

Go, Athos said, bring him back to us.

It was a command that no other mortal could make and live, but Loki would follow it to the end. Soulier would hurt for taking a light as bright as Aramis', and Soulier would die for taking it from a god.

With one last look at the men that Thor had chosen, Loki focused on that glorious fire and ran.

Athos had said something else, but Loki was sure that he hadn't read it correctly.

It had looked like, come home.

"What're you doing?" Porthos roared from Thor's arms, straining to free himself from a god whose face echoed the desperate question.

Athos trembled. They couldn't hate him any more than he already hated himself.

This was his fault, all of this lay upon his shoulders, for he had been the one to shoot Soulier – shoot him and not ensure that the manipulative bastard was dead.

But Loki would not make that mistake, he never would. The god that was meant to stand for tricks was so easy to read in Athos' accustomed eyes. Athos had lived embroiled in lies for so long, he had shared a bed with evil and tried to break its neck.

He had failed then, too, but Loki was neither evil nor a failure.

"Because he needs to do this," he said forcefully, and then took a deep breath to say quietly, "and he will."

Porthos was too used to his unflinching command, and immediately sagged against Thor. When the blonde man inexplicably stiffened, wariness narrowing his blue eyes, Porthos pushed his face into Thor's neck to offer reassurance.

D'Artagnan started a little at his side, but Athos merely waited, knowing that Thor would want an explanation – he owed him that much, at least. Athos had promised him patience, but he had promised him safety, too.
Thor had relaxed a little, one arm coming up to go around Porthos' shoulders, but he still stared cautiously at Athos. "You barely know my brother, and all you do know is his magic and his cutting tongue; how can you trust him?"

Athos felt himself smile and knew that it was like the slash across his heart, the cut through Aramis' shoulder guard, and the myriad of slices and rope burns that had taken away so many of their loved ones over the years.

Loki would not let something so mortal take Aramis away from him.

"I know that Aramis loves him, and I trust that Loki loves him, too."

Thor's face softened then, and he nodded to Athos as he rested his cheek against Porthos' head.

For they all knew that Loki would tear down mountains to rescue Aramis.

And he could.

The first death lit the spark.

There was a fuse in Loki's chest, and it finally lit when he approached the cliff face to find a scout napping in the trees.

The unsuspecting mortal's neck had broken like a twig, which was exactly what the other men heard as they ranged about the clearing, guarding their lair with an anxious vigilance.

But they were looking for mortals intent on rescue, and Loki was a god with a taste for revenge.

The fuse lay within him, sinister and hushed like a snake, and in its mouth would be Aramis, kept safe by his fangs. The line of gunpowder sizzled at one end, and every death made the flame flare brighter.

Not as bright as Aramis' glorious burning, but that white light was flickering, fading in a wind that Loki couldn't see. Someone was trying to put his fire out.

Soulier.

Hot, venomous rage surged through Loki's veins and it longed for Soulier's blood. Loki entered the mouth of the dark cave and knew from the echoing clicks that he was being watched, he was expected.

They expected a fight, but that would imply that they could win.

"Show yer hands!"

Loki allowed himself a smile, the most derisive of curls to his lips as he raised his arms to his head, palms forwards. His magic simmered beneath his skin, still sparkling with borrowed power, desperate to get out. He turned his hands inwards and very slowly curved his fingers.

Light exploded in sunbursts like notes on a sheet of music, and the screams were the melody.

He saw in flashes; guns backfired on their wielders, dark spots spattered the lit stone walls, and Aramis' fire strengthened and dimmed.

Someone shot blindly towards him and Loki didn't stop in his stride to throw up a palm and send
the bullet back on a fatal path to its sender.

Inside the raging void that tore at his chest were corpses, darkness, and emptiness. Somewhere ahead of him was the man who embodied the opposite of that, Aramis was fire, light, and life; he was a beacon to a god that knew only the cold.

Loki was no angel, the blackness of his heart was testament to that, but he would not let Aramis find his wings, either.

When Aramis' white fire flickered again, Loki knew that he would fly Soulier into the depths of Helheim himself, even if it meant that neither of them would ever return.

Aramis was in the next tunnel, and all that mattered was his safety.

Loki stormed in on a whirlwind of gunpowder, manipulating it like an ash cloud that bent to his whim. He flung some of it into the nearest torches, using the flash of light to conceal his entrance and find what his heart was screaming for.

The snake stilled its wary waving, and then its hood spread with a baring of fangs.

Aramis kneeled on the floor and there wasn't a single area of tan skin uncovered by blood or bruising. His head was tipped forward and his brown curls were matted and sweaty. Pressed to his temple was a pistol, and holding that pistol was a man who suddenly looked as if he stared into death.

He did.

The fuse had reached its end.

Loki exploded, pressure forcing outwards to crash into the walls and through them, arcing outwards like a bomb until it hit every figure that lay in wait; every figure, except Aramis, who knelt untouched and unaware amidst the destruction.

The man who held the gun fell backwards, his body jerking in mid-air when Loki reached out and held him steady from across the distance, his power tangible as he held the man who had threatened Aramis' white fire.

There was a squeak, a muffled cry, a desperate whine of mercy, and then Loki ripped knowledge from the man's head so viciously that blood sprayed.

Loki now knew with a deadly certainty that Soulier had run and left Aramis to die.

The nameless body and gun disintegrated into dust, mingling with the gunpowder tornado and spent fuse until Loki dropped everything to fall to his knees at Aramis' front.

"Aramis." It came out as a whisper, an excruciating tightness in his chest as he reached out with fingers turned infinitely gentle. There was nowhere he dared touch without fear of hurting him, so he calmed the raging storm inside and fed it gently against Aramis' neck.

It wasn't enough, Aramis didn't stir.

In a panic, Loki lowered the dam. Magic thundered through him and Aramis jerked upright with a wordless cry, the multitude of wounds disappeared as Loki watched.

Swollen eyes, puffy cheeks, numerous cuts and burns, faded away to reveal the tender-hearted man he knew.
Still the magic surged, finding more things to heal, and Loki shuddered at how close he had come to losing him. He couldn't heal death, even if he embodied it.

A gush of blood from Aramis' stomach finally ceased, the cause a stab from a sword that would have slowly killed him. Aramis took a breath and it sounded wet, a red bubble bursting on his lips as a punctured lung closed and pumped easily again.

Dazed brown eyes opened and a tiny smile curved those outrageously sensual lips. "Mon ange, you came."

It hit him like a sliver of ice driven deep into his black heart.

Aramis truly had thought that he would leave him.

He almost had.

"Aramis," he said quietly, but command laced his words, "your god does not bid you die, today."

There was the tiniest of laughs, a stirring of breath more than anything else. Relief replaced the fury, but Loki's dire magic simply retreated for now. It was waiting for the bloody end, for the sweet tang of revenge.

The snake was a patient hunter.

Aramis shivered, a faint trembling against Loki's hand, and he immediately pulled back to swing his cloak around Aramis' shoulders – a space that looked so very bare without his shoulder-guard.

Aramis exhaled softly and, when he looked up at Loki again, there was steely awareness in his eyes, as if he had taken the same strength that Loki usually did from the piece of green cloth that now flowed so gracefully down the Musketeer's back.

"That looks good on you," Loki said, a low note to his voice that rang with intensity as well as surprise.

Aramis flashed him a smile, and Loki hadn't realised how desperately he had wanted to see it. "Of course it does, it's yours."

Of course it did.

Aramis swayed slightly as he stood, and Loki immediately reached out a hand to cup his neck and slide more magic into him. For a moment, Loki thought that he saw golden light flicker in waves under Aramis' skin, but then it was gone and only dazed brown eyes had his attention.

"I need to find Soulier," Loki announced, even as his palm still lingered over surprisingly smooth facial hair.

"I know," Aramis murmured, and seemed loath to move, sighing when Loki ran a curious thumb over his cheek. The tan skin was warm like the fire it contained within, and it was addictive to touch.

Aramis flinched at a faint explosion and reached for weapons that weren't there.

He was defenceless, but Loki wasn't. He unhooked his sheath with his spare hand and passed it over, their fingers brushing momentarily. "Take this, find your things."

Everyone else was dead, Aramis had free reign of the caves behind them.
The belt was too tight for Aramis' toned hips, but when he had lengthened it, it looked as if it belonged there. Of course it did, just as it felt as if Loki's hand belonged on Aramis' cheek. With a soft swoosh of golden metal on patterned leather, Singasverð danced in Aramis' hand, a rhythmic glittering movement as he loosened his muscles.

It was… mesmerising.

Aramis shifted then, and Loki was acutely aware that the man was offering him comfort even as he was seeking it. A tan hand closed over his and Aramis brushed a kiss against his paler fingertips.

Outside of his rage, heat bloomed; it tried to calm the gaping void of vicious fury, but it couldn't get in.

Loki wouldn't let it; he had something to do, first.

He lowered his hand slowly, unwilling to put more concern on Aramis' handsome face, and then he turned away to search for the swine who had put the pain there.

Soulier knew nothing of pain, nothing of torture.

Loki had lived a thousand years, and he was well-versed in the shadows of blood.

The crownless prince knew the methods that the golden king could not have a hand in, and without Aramis' white fire by his side, the black frost reigned once more.

Soulier's laboured breaths echoed off of the stone walls and spiked the pulse of Loki's dark heart. He was crawling up a rope when Loki found him, edging closer to a hole that would take him out of the cave.

Loki watched him struggle for a moment, and as Soulier reached up for the penultimate hand hold, he flicked his finger and sliced the rope from its binding.

It fell, coiling on the floor like a coldblooded snake that readied to strike.

Soulier swore with vitriol and then looked up with almost comic slowness. Loki tilted his head to the side, observing the man who had brought them such grief, the man who would hurt for his crimes and now knelt on the floor at his feet.

"Who are you?" Soulier snapped, but it was belied by the faint quaver in his voice.

Loki smiled, the scent of blood was heady in his nose and his prey was run to the ground with nowhere to go. Soulier paled, an instinctual fear telling him that he should run from the abyssal-eyed being.

The faintest of lights began to glow at Loki's fingertips, and his voice seemed to ring with the echoes of the dead. "I am the angel of death, you mewling quim." Soulier scrambled up to draw a sword wet with Aramis' blood, and Loki laughed low and viciously.

His magic came like poison, slow and powerful, and it streamed from his outflung fingers in shadowy ropes. They passed through Soulier's flesh and for a taut, sinister moment, nothing happened.

Then Soulier began to scream.

Bruises, cuts, and sores flared into existence on his skin before Loki healed them and started
again. Each blow that he had seen on Aramis, every wound both fatal and superficial, he inflicted and healed and inflicted and healed until Soulier's noises were gurgled cries as blood filled and drained from his lungs.

As Soulier writhed on the floor, Loki drew the dagger that had once pierced Aramis' shoulder-guard, and would now pierce Soulier's stomach in the exact same place that he had stabbed Aramis.

It was fitting, so very fitting, and yet it wasn't enough.

The fuse had gone out, his fire elsewhere, and Loki was lost in the hot rage of hatred.

It wasn't true heat, but the emotion was real, and it hurt. He hurt for Thor who never believed he was fit to rule, he hurt for Athos who thought himself a failure, he hurt for Porthos who cared too much, and he hurt for d'Artagnan who had so much pain left to experience.

He hurt for Aramis, who he had rejected time and time again and yet still stayed by his side and offered him his warmth.

And lastly, he hurt for himself, for the boy he had been and the man he had become who had always known that he was not worthy of such warmth.

A gentle palm landed on his shoulder that managed to soothe the venomous blizzard inside of him, and Loki shuddered under that sincere offer of genuine comfort. The sentiment was so very overpowering now, but he didn't want it, he had to ensure that Soulier suffered.

There was only one man who evoked such a strong reaction in him and yet somehow never set off his alarms.

Loki kept his eye on Soulier but slightly loosened the black bindings to snarl, "I won't let him live for taking you from me."

Aramis appeared at his side, Aramis who had known how to coax him from the very beginning, touched his jaw to pull his face around. Loki dragged his eyes from the man who made him feel hurt, and he looked at the man who made him feel joy.

There were no walls for him to hide behind now, no secrets or lies or tricks. He let Aramis see into the inky depths of his soul, let him see his ragged edges, because this was who he was.

He was not worthy.

And yet, slowly, so very slowly, Aramis was filling the worthless void of his soul with white fire.

"He is not worthy of your attention, mon ange."

Loki stilled at that word, under the depth of adoration in it, at the acceptance he saw in those mortal brown eyes, and murmured, "No, he is not."

He released Soulier, left him sputtering on the floor but very much alive, thanks to Aramis' generosity, and laced the fingers of his right hand with Aramis' left as they prepared to leave the room of screams.

There was a choking noise to their side, and then they heard a rasping, "Musketeer whore——"

The snake struck one last time.
Loki whirled and, with his free hand, shot Soulier with the pistol that Aramis had given him. He did it without magic and, judging from the burst of pride on Aramis’ face, it was the best shot that he had ever made.

He looked to Aramis then, completely unashamed for ending the life of a cretin who thought himself better than gallant Aramis, who had brought Loki back from an edge he wasn't sure he would have ever returned from.

He had so nearly become the emotionless prince that he had been bred to be, and the darkness still loomed with fangs that dripped poison.

There was the softest of pressures against his lips, and yet it burned so sweetly against the darkness. Aramis' kiss spoke of gratitude, and love, and a fire that cocooned the slowly lightening depths of his soul.

The snake settled down to sleep, soothed by a mortal's touch.

When Aramis pulled him away with an encouraging smile, Loki walked from the shadows and into the light, at the left hand of a man who should have been a god.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand take a breath, the smiting has passed. So much symbolism that I'm basically Wikipedia. Liked it? Hate us? Love them? LET US KNOW, please write us a review! - C

^Ideally the smiting would never pass, but sadly we'll run out of good names for bad guys before Loki runs out of anger and wrath. - L
(Update: we've run out of good names for bad guys. Any suggestions?)
Athos felt numb. The guilt had seeped into his blood and bones like poison, paralyzing him where he stood by the edge of the forest, still dully clutching Aramis's slashed shoulder guard. How could he have been so stupid?

He knew he should be moving, making decisions, preparing for attack in case some of the enemy returned before Loki, but he could not open his mouth to speak. Authority had deserted him, and so he stood, numb and silent, watching his companions.

By the fire, Porthos's rage had burned itself out. He sat utterly still, dark eyes staring over Athos's shoulder in the direction Loki had taken. Athos couldn't be certain, but he though his lips might be moving in prayer.

D'Artagnan was pacing the edge of the clearing, frustrated desperation rolling off of him with every step. His hand jumped from his sword to his pistol every few seconds, as if unable to choose.

Thor was whirling his hammer in loose circles, the tension in his shoulders telling Athos he was minutes away from going after his brother, orders be damned. There was an air of silent expectation in the clearing, and no one wanted to be the first to break it.

"It's been too long!" Thor boomed suddenly, cracking the silence like a musket shot. "We should go after them." By the fire, Porthos flinched at the unexpected noise, but his eyes never left the trees.

Athos could feel d'Artagnan watching him, obviously hoping he would agree, but he shook his head. "No," he said firmly, finding his voice at last. To his relief, it did not break. "We will wait."

"For how long?" Thor demanded.

"We must trust Loki to bring him back," Athos said simply.

Thor grimaced and looked away. "I trust my brother. But I do not trust Soulier. We must go after them ourselves!"

"We will stay until they return," he repeated.

He could sense Thor's desperation before he spoke again, words that cut through Athos's numbness like daggers. "It's your fault that Soulier's not dead. Why do you not want to finish
"I would only hinder Loki," he replied quietly, trying to hide the damage those words had done. "We must be here when he returns so that he can find us."

Thor opened his mouth to say more, but he was cut off by a sharp, "Enough!" Porthos glanced over from the fire, eyes glinting in the light. "He'll bring him back. End of discussion."

Perhaps it was the ragged edge in Porthos's voice, but Thor stilled, sheepishly meeting Athos's eyes in silent apology. Athos nodded, the motion difficult with the guilt creeping through him once more. If Loki did not save Aramis…

No. He had seen it in his eyes when he left. Loki would not fail.

A noise from the forest behind him had him whirling around, hands clenching on the ruined leather. He heard Porthos leap to his feet as his eyes bored into the trees, trying to see what was coming. If an enemy attacked now, they would all be slaughtered where they stood, but no one moved for cover, drowning in the faint hope that their prayers were being answered.

And then the firelight was gleaming against golden armor stained red, an oncoming storm of blood and horror that made Athos want to cry out in relief, but he didn't, not yet, for he could not yet see Aramis beyond Loki's furious presence.

His knees went weak with relief when his eyes found Aramis at last, half a step behind Loki and covered in dried blood but smiling cheerfully at them all. Loki's green cloak was slung about his shoulders like a shield.

Athos heard Porthos moving, but to his own surprise he beat him to it, crushing Aramis in a hug that sent the slighter man staggering back half a pace before he recovered enough to return the embrace.

"Thank God," he mumbled against Aramis's shoulder, too relieved to care about the display of emotion.

"It wasn't God this time," Aramis murmured back, and Athos knew without looking that his eyes had flicked to Loki, who had stalked into the clearing, followed by a wildly grinning Thor.

Then a hand landed heavily on the back of Athos's shirt and hauled him away. Athos went willingly, stepping aside before Porthos crushed him in his haste to reach Aramis. D'Artagnan crashed into them both a moment later, his hand darting out to pull Athos back into the mad crush.

At last they broke apart, Porthos lingering a moment longer as if to reassure himself that Aramis was really present and uninjured. Then he too stepped back. Thor came up beside him and put an arm around his shoulders, and Porthos sagged against him, his face a picture of relief.

Then, as one, everyone but Aramis turned to Loki, standing near the fire and cleaning the blood from his sword.

"You did it," d'Artagnan said, his voice high with awe. Porthos shook his head, clearly beyond words. Athos knew he was not yet ready to thank Loki for all he had done, so he turned back to Aramis, intent to leave this cursed place as soon as possible.

Aramis was standing very still, a queer look on his face. He had one hand pressed against his stomach. "Loki!" Athos called, taking a step towards Aramis. "Why haven't you healed him?"

"I did," Loki said distractedly, scraping grime from his sword. Porthos had taken a step away from
Thor, concerned eyes flicking back to Aramis in confusion.

Athenois turned back to Aramis, opening his mouth to ask what was wrong, when Aramis's whole body suddenly hitched. Gripped by instinct, Athos darted forward and caught his friend before he could hit the ground.

"Aramis!" Porthos's voice was panicked as he dropped to his knees beside them, strong hands pulling Aramis from Athos's grasp to rest in his lap.

Loki followed a heartbeat later, angry mask vanishing in the face of the pressing concern. "Hang on," he murmured, placing a gentle hand against Aramis's neck. A soft white light suffused the clearing, sending waves of energy Athos could feel to his very core.

Aramis groaned, trying to jerk away from Loki's hand. Frowning, Loki increased the light until it was nearly blinding, but Aramis spasmed beneath his hand and Porthos knocked him away.

"What the 'ell are you doin'? You're makin' it worse!" he shouted, cradling Aramis protectively.

The smaller Musketeer's eyes were barely open as he tried to curl in on himself, hand still pressed to his stomach.

"I don't understand," Loki cried desperately. "Why won't he take it, why won't he accept my magic?" He reached out again, hand glowing, but Aramis jerked the moment the light touched him and Loki pulled back.

He lifted his eyes to gaze at Athos, looking lost. Athos realized that for the first time since he'd met him, Loki looked truly frightened. He was floundering, a plea for help in his eyes that he would never voice out loud.

So Athos did what he always did: began issuing commands. "Loki, stop immediately. Clearly something is not right." Loki pulled back, the light going out as he stared at Athos with desperate hope, seeking guidance.

Athos stared steadily back. He had Loki's full attention and no idea what to do with a god who couldn't heal the man he loved.

Taking a deep breath, Athos looked at Porthos. "Get that shirt off him. We can't even see what we're dealing with." Porthos nodded, carefully pulling the bloodstained fabric from Aramis's trembling form.

"D'Artagnan, fetch some water now." The lad nodded and raced away into the woods with every water skin he could carry. "Thor, fetch the medical supplies from Aramis's pack."

"Aramis!" Porthos shouted uncertainly, drawing his attention back to Aramis. He and Loki were staring wide eyed at Aramis's stomach, where golden light was flickering in waves beneath the skin. Even as Athos watched, the light flared brighter and Aramis groaned again.

"What the hell is that?" Porthos asked, turning frantic eyes on Loki, who was staring at the light in fascinated horror.

Athos put a hand on Loki's shoulder, drawing him from his reverie. "I think-" Loki swallowed nervously. "I think it's my magic."

"What is it doin' there?" Porthos demanded.

Loki didn't even react to the belligerent tone. "His wounds were too terrible to survive, so I healed them all at once. But maybe mortals can't contain so much magic. His body is rejecting it."
"Are you saying your magic is poisoning him?" Athos asked quietly, trying to ignore the voice in the back of his head insisting he give in to panic.

Loki's eyes met his, full of guilt. "Yes."

"Then get it out!" Porthos yelled, trying to keep Aramis's hands away from the glowing skin.

"I can't! It's within him! Using more magic to get it out would only make it worse. It needs to drain naturally."

"So cut it out," Porthos growled, and Athos knew from the look of horror on Loki's face that it was their only chance. He yanked his main gauche from his belt and pressed it to Loki's hand.

"Porthos, hold him down," he ordered as Loki leaned over Aramis's trembling form. Aramis's eyes were closed, but Athos guessed he was still conscious.

Loki hesitated, holding the dagger uncertainly above the swirling light. "What are you waitin' for?" Porthos ground out, trying to pin Aramis's shoulders to the dirt.

Loki looked at Athos, raw vulnerability shining in his too wide emerald eyes. "I can't hurt him again," he said softly, shame roughening his voice.

Before Athos could react, Porthos shoved bodily into Loki, knocking him aside and snatching the dagger. "He's dyin'! Get the hell outta my way!"

Athos crowded forward to pin Aramis down while Porthos placed one hand on Aramis's stomach, holding the dagger steady with the other. Carefully, he pressed the sharp point into a place just to the left of Aramis's tense abdominal muscles, cutting just deep enough and leaving a line several inches long across the glowing skin before whipping the dagger away.

Immediately Aramis arched his back, crying out in pain as golden light seemed to bleed from the wound, mixing with the red spill of blood. After a few moments, Aramis fell back limply against the ground, eyes slipping closed as the last of the golden light vanished.

"Is that it?" Porthos asked hesitantly, dropping the main gauche as if it were burning him.

"I don't know," Loki said shakily, reaching out to touch his fingertips to Aramis's skin. Athos realized that Thor was hovering behind him with d'Artagnan. He'd never noticed them return.

"We need to get him to an inn and out of these woods," Athos said firmly into the stunned silence. Porthos nodded, reaching down to cup a hand against Aramis's head, preparing to lift him into his arms.

Suddenly he recoiled with a yelp. A smear of fresh blood was on his hand. Athos looked down and saw a cut on Aramis's cheek that he was certain had not been there earlier, deep and vicious.

"Where did that come from?" Porthos asked shakily. Athos shook his head just as Aramis groaned weakly and turned his head away, hiding the injury.

"I suppose we should just-" Athos choked to a stop, for a thin line was tracing itself down Aramis's unblemished cheek. Even as he watched, blood began to trickle from the wound.

"What the hell is happening?" Porthos demanded, grabbing for the medical supplies in Thor's hands and pressing a rag against the bleeding wound.

Loki stared down at Aramis as a third cut curled its way down the side of his neck, and Athos felt
fear twist in his gut at Loki's anguished expression. Green eyes lifted to meet his own.

"His wounds are reopening," Loki whispered. "One by one. All of them."

Loki followed Porthos numbly into the small room at the inn, hating the way Aramis hung limp and bleeding in his arms. He supposed they should be grateful to have made it back so quickly, before the worst of the wounds had reopened, but he didn't. All he could feel was the knowledge that he had done this burning through his veins like wildfire, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

He should have known. He should have known, and instead he had blithely thrown magic at Aramis and hurried him through the woods like all was well.

It was worse when he remembered that he'd used his magic so viciously on Soulier. He didn't understand what had happened, but was it possible there was some link between the two, that using his magic so violently while still cocooning Aramis had led to this?

The thought made him gag.

Ahead of him, Porthos was about to lower Aramis to the bed when the smaller man suddenly gasped weakly. It was the first noise he'd made since before they'd crossed the rope bridge, and Loki knew that wasn't a good sign.

He ran forward and twitched aside the green cloak he'd wrapped around Aramis before they set out. Sure enough, red blood was spreading in a stain across Aramis's stomach.

Porthos swore, voice hard with anguish and exhaustion, and quickly lowered Aramis the rest of the way to the small bed, hands immediately moving to press against the deep wound.

"Can't you do somethin'?" he asked quietly. The anger had drained from him during the long journey, left behind with Athos and Thor and d'Artagnan, who had stayed to clear the camp and check for any enemies that may have escaped Loki's wrath. There was a plea in his eyes now, and it cut deeper than his anger had.

"Not yet," Loki managed to say past the pounding in his head, reminding him this was all his fault. "He's too weak to take more than the smallest amount of magic, and I have to save it for the worst damage."

Porthos paled further, dark skin grey in the dim light. "There's worse than this?" he whispered.

Loki knew what he was thinking. As they'd hurried back down the trail, cuts had opened all across Aramis's body, spilling blood in trickles over skin that blossomed with black bruises and shiny red burns.

And all along the brilliant white light grew steadily dimmer, and Loki could not rekindle it.

He moved to the side of the bed, knowing that to give in to the despair would be to sign Aramis's death warrant. Placing the sewing kit and bandages on the small table, he carefully helped Porthos unwind the now blood-soaked cloak from Aramis's shivering form.

"We'd best sew it up, then," Porthos said, hands already red from more of Aramis's blood than Loki cared to remember. White knuckles pressed into the wound still dribbling blood all across the sheets.

Loki nodded silently and pulled out the needle and thread, rapidly preparing it. His hand shook the
first time he tried to thread it and he had to remind himself not to snap the ridiculous thing in two. Aramis needed this foolish, useless treatment, or he would die.

But Loki's magic had already failed to save him, so now they must resort to mortal means rather than immortal ones.

He offered Porthos the threaded needle, but the large Musketeer shook his head, reaching for a roll of bandages. "I'll get started on the rest," he muttered bleakly, gesturing to the dozens of bleeding wounds that now decorated Aramis's too-pale skin.

Swallowing hard, Loki nodded and leaned closer, pressing the needle to the edge of the bloody slash. "Wait," Porthos said suddenly, rushing from the room. A moment later he returned, slamming the door in the face of the irate innkeeper. A bottle was clutched in his hand, and he hurriedly poured some over the wound.

"What did that accomplish?" Loki demanded, a spark of pride surging and fading in the face of the impossible situation.

"Cleans it," Porthos grunted, returning to his bandages.

Loki nodded and turned back to the bleeding wound, hesitating. He recalled the panic that had erupted deep inside him when Athos had pressed the dagger into his hand and told him to cut Aramis open.

Loki had never had to cut someone open and hurt them to save them, and to his eternal shame he had frozen, traumatized by the thought of inflicting more pain on the man he had only just realized he needed more than air.

Willing his hand not to tremble, Loki began, sliding the needle in and out of Aramis's flesh, grateful the man was not awake for this. The wound was not long, but it was deep, and Loki could only hope Aramis stopped rejecting his magic before it proved fatal.

He'd only just finished tying off the last stitch when Aramis shuddered beneath him, his breathing hitching frantically as he tried to get air into a lung that had just collapsed. The white light flared and dimmed.

"Swina bqlhr!" Loki swore, knocking Porthos aside to jam a hand against Aramis's heaving chest. Please let this work, he thought desperately, letting a tiny amount of magic slip through his palm and into Aramis, draining the blood from his lung.

Slowly, he wove his magic in threads through Aramis's damaged lung, strengthening the muscle and repairing as much of the damage as he could without fear of Aramis rejecting it once more.

He breathed out a hissing sigh of relief as he withdrew, confident that the punctured lung at least would not cause further trouble as long as Aramis was kept still and calm. Loki had placed only a single stitch over a gaping wound: it would hold only so long as it was not disturbed.

His hands trembled again as he sat back, this time with exhaustion. What magic he had saved from the Bifrost rune was long vanished, used up in the caves and then again at the campsite.

He'd even tapped into his own reserves to give Porthos the strength to reach the inn. Loki should have insisted Thor accompany him instead, but Porthos had refused point blank to be separated from Aramis. So he had fed the man strength enough to maintain a rapid pace through the woods, desperate to reach the inn.

After what seemed like hours, Porthos sat back too, shaking hands dropping the remaining
bandages onto the table.

"That's the best I can do," he said miserably. "Aramis is the doctor, not me."

Loki eyed the mass of white bandages wound around Aramis's torso and arms. Thankfully the cuts on his face had stopped bleeding. Ordinarily most of the wounds would have needed stitches, but they both knew that Aramis would be dead before that would be an issue if his body did not stop rejecting Loki's magic.

The rejection ached like a phantom hand gripping Loki's heart. He had never healed such grievous wounds before, it was true, but why did Aramis refuse the healing magic? He could not make sense of it, and an insidious part of his mind that spoke with his father's voice told Loki it was a rejection of him.

Porthos set aside the water he'd been trying to coax Aramis into drinking and rose unsteadily, drawing him from his thoughts. "I'd better go an' placate the innkeeper," he said reluctantly. "Gotta talk 'im into givin' us some more rooms."

Loki blinked at him blankly before realizing that Porthos was, in his own way, offering Loki privacy with Aramis, even though Loki was certain Porthos would have preferred to not leave the room at all.

"Yes, that would be wise," he found himself saying. Porthos nodded to him and disappeared into the hallway, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Loki sank back into his chair, closing his eyes and reaching out with his magic to feel for the flicker of white light that was Aramis. It was terrifyingly dim, like a candle beset by a strong breeze.

Opening his eyes, he gazed desolately at the wounded man before him. Aramis's hand was within reach of his own, but Loki did not reach out and take it.

He had no right.

There was no concept of time as he sat and stared at the rise and fall of Aramis's chest, reaching out every so often to see if he could feel the lack of resistance that would mean Aramis would at last accept his magic.

It could have been minutes or hours later when Aramis's breathing suddenly hitched. Fearing that his temporary healing had let go, Loki leaned forward and found himself confronted by glazed brown eyes. Heat was radiating off Aramis as if he were a furnace.

He flinched away when Loki reached out a hand, so he froze, slowly pulling back. Something was wrong, off. Then it hit him.

Aramis was staring at him like he did not know who he was.

"Where am I?" he croaked, eyes darting frantically around the room. "Where are the others?"

Loki had never had to soothe an injured man before, but he gave it his best shot, needing to calm Aramis down before he did himself some damage. "You're at an inn," he said smoothly, wincing internally at the distrust in Aramis's usually warm eyes. "You're safe."

"Where are my brothers?" he asked harshly, trying weakly to sit up. Loki leaned forward hurriedly to push him back down but only succeeded in making Aramis more frantic. "Where's Marsac?"
Loki sat back slowly, rising his hands to show he was not a threat. He did not know who this Marsac was, but it was clear that Aramis's mind was lost in the past, locked in some private hell.

"I'm not sure where Marsac is," he said, thinking quickly. "But I can fetch Porthos for you." Anything to keep Aramis from reopening his punctured lung.

To his surprise, Aramis recoiled in horror. "No! He wasn't there, he wasn't," he chanted weakly. "He's safe."

"He's here now," Loki said desperately. It didn't seem to do any good; Aramis was trying to push himself up again. "He's downstairs, I'll fetch him."

Every fiber of his being was screaming at him not to leave, but he forced himself to turn his back on Aramis and sprint down the hall, frantically reaching out with his magic to find Porthos.

Locating him at last, he skidded to a halt before a door in the next hallway, bursting in without bothering to knock. Porthos took one look at his face and didn't even stop to ask what had happened. He simply leapt to his feet and charged down the hall behind him.

Aramis was thrashing weakly when they thundered into the room, legs tangled in the sheets at the base of the bed.

"He was asking for someone called Marsac!" Loki called as Porthos ran over. "I said you were here and he got even worse."

Porthos swore frantically, trying to push Aramis back onto the bed without hurting him. "Aramis! Aramis, calm down, please, you're safe."

"You're not real!" Aramis moaned, trying to pull himself free from Porthos's gentle grasp.

Loki could see that this was not going to work. It wasn't enough for Porthos to simply talk to Aramis; in this state, he needed a more physical reassurance. He remembered all the casual touches he'd seen since he arrived and it hit him like Mjolnir: Aramis's nature was tactile, and he would not be calmed down unless Porthos proved to him he was really there in a way Aramis's feverish brain could grasp.

The thought of allowing it was like ice in his heart, but Loki could feel his hold on the magic slipping, the punctured lung straining to open up. "You'd better just do it."

Porthos looked up, reluctance written on his face, and Loki realized with a jolt that Porthos had suspected what needed to be done but had not suggested it. He was trying to be considerate of Loki's claim.

That knowledge strengthened his resolve. "Quickly, before he hurts himself," he snapped. Porthos needed no further commands, clambering onto the bed and wrapping Aramis in his well-muscled arms until he was pressed tightly against his chest.

Aramis thrashed for a moment longer before he suddenly relaxed against Porthos, shivering uncontrollably.

"You're real," Loki heard him whisper, pressing his face against Porthos's shoulder. Porthos shot Loki an apologetic look as he stroked his fingers through Aramis's matted hair, murmuring things Loki couldn't quite hear.

Eventually Aramis slipped into an uneasy slumber and Porthos moved to extricate himself, but
Loki shook his head. "You should stay in case it happens again."

"S'just the fever," Porthos said quietly, dropping back against the pillows. "He's gone back five years."

"Who is Marsac?" Loki asked just as quietly, desperate to fill the silence. He couldn't risk Aramis waking again and injuring himself, but the sight of Porthos holding him was almost more than he could bear.

Porthos winced at the name. "S'not my place to tell," he said at last. When Loki shot him a frustrated look, he sighed but did not relent. "Sorry, but 'is demons are 'is own. Ask 'im yourself when 'e wakes up; I'm sure he'll tell you."

Loki noticed his emphasis on the word when, and nodded his acceptance, sealing the hope in his heart. They were silent for a moment, Aramis's strained breathing the only noise in the room, before Loki spoke again.

"How did you know where to cut?" he asked quietly, remembering the way Porthos's hand had so surely traced along the edge of hard stomach muscles, choosing where to slice through the fragile skin.

Porthos's eyes darted up to meet his. "Aramis taught me. Athos took a gut shot once on a battlefield and Aramis's arm was cut too badly to sew him up. I had to get the bullet out, and I remember Aramis was praying, thanking God, because he said if the bullet had hit 'im anywhere else there'd have been no chance."

The reminder of the mortality of these men mirrored Porthos's description, hitting Loki like a shot to the stomach and leaving him ill in its wake.

They were so fragile.

Porthos fell silent once more and this time Loki did not break it to question him. He simply stared at Aramis, clutching at the continued motion of his chest like a lifeline and watching his light steadily dim in the face of a fever that refused to break.

Around midnight, he began praying to Aramis's god to save him, because Loki was no longer certain he could.

No longer certain he was Aramis's angel.

Chapter End Notes

LOOK, I have input on this chapter! When Loki swears in Old Norse, it loosely translates to "pig bollocks". Which is a curse I can empathise with, because this chapter just yanked out of my heart and stamped on it. Feel the same way? WRITE TO US! - C
We are crushed under the weight of our own angst, so much so that the next few chapters are an amalgamation of both of our efforts - as always, our punctuation gives us away. Loki worries, Aramis worries, Athos worries. - C

We actually succeeded in breaking our own hearts with all this ridiculous angst. - L

Never had a night passed so slowly. Every second seemed to creep by, and each minute brought fresh horrors as Loki's mind insisted on forcing him to consider what his life would become if Aramis were to die.

It was unbearable to even think of what he would be left with. A world with no warmth, no light. He would have nothing.

Aramis's breath hitched for the third time in as many minutes and Loki fought the urge to scream, to rage at the injustice of it all. He could feel his magic losing its hold the longer the fever raged in Aramis's blood, sending him ever closer to the waiting arms of death.

And for once in his life, Loki did not know what to do. This was not an enemy he could outsmart or fight. This battle was not his to win or lose. He could only watch helplessly as Aramis spiraled away from him.

He could see his own anguish reflected on Porthos's face. They had not spoken again as the night wore on, but it was impossible not to know what the other was thinking. It narrowed down to a single, all-consuming thought.

No.

At last he could bear it no longer, the words he had never said straining to leave his lips in a torrential flood that might never cease. He had to say it, all of it, and though it cracked his frozen heart to admit it, this might be his only chance.

"Porthos," he said quietly, feeling the dark eyes lift at last from Aramis's drawn face to focus on him. "Would you mind...?"

He trailed off weakly, not entirely sure what it was he was asking, but Porthos seemed to understand. Carefully he disentangled himself, handling Aramis as if he were made of the finest crystal, and walked silently to the door.

Just before Porthos left, Loki felt a stab of panic. What if Aramis woke up and could not be calmed again?

"Porthos?" he said again, and the big man turned around, stepping back to his side so he could speak quietly. "Don't go far."

Porthos reached down, touching a surprisingly gentle hand to his shoulder, and murmured, "I
won't." Then he was gone, and Loki was alone with Aramis.

The absurdity of the last exchange struck him then, suddenly, and he chuckled self-consciously. "If only you could see me now, Aramis," he murmured. But a moment later the gravity of the situation reasserted itself, and his smile dropped.

"I feel so useless," he whispered, the words falling more easily from his lips than he had imagined. "I thought I had saved you, and now look at what's happened. It's all a mess, and I'm right in the middle of it. Why are the messes always my fault?"

Aramis's head shifted on the pillow, blindly rolling towards warmth that had left the room. Loki smiled even as his heart cracked again.

"Yes, you're probably right," he mused sadly. "He would have been a better choice. You would have been safer with a mortal. But me? I cause nothing but trouble."

He thought about it for a moment. "Thor would have been good, as well," he muttered, bitterness stealing into his voice at last. "He's always been the golden boy. He never does anything wrong, and I can't seem to do anything right."

He shook his head, rising to his feet to pace the length of the room. "I'm not good, Aramis," he said, and now the words were like an avalanche, and he had to get them out before they crushed him beneath their weight. "I'm not like Thor! I am dark, and I could not help you."

He took a shuddering breath, coming to a stop by the side of the bed. Unconsciously, he let his hand fall until it rested atop Aramis's.

"You should never have called me an angel," he sighed, feeling the pain of the realization burn like fire through what had been left of his heart. "An angel would have saved you."

Aramis's breath hitched again and he turned his face back towards Loki, fingers twitching beneath Loki's palm.

Immediately, Loki pulled back, self-loathing flashing through him. "I have no right," he muttered darkly. To his surprise, Aramis's drawn face grew more strained when he moved away, his hand clenching and unclenching against the sheets. A low moan left his lips as his body tried to curl back towards Loki.

Hesitantly, Loki lowered his hand until it rested atop Aramis's once more. Aramis stilled at once, the ghost of a smile lightening his haggard features. His lips moved soundlessly and Loki leaned forward just in time to catch the words "mon ange" amid the nonsensical phrase.

Loki dropped into the chair, stunned beyond belief but careful to keep Aramis's hand pressed beneath his own. He sat there for some time, staring in numb shock, before he began to notice something was not right.

He had barely touched Aramis since the fever began, and he was no expert on mortal illnesses, but the hand he held in his own felt much cooler than he would have expected. Frowning, he leaned forward and pressed a hand to Aramis's forehead.

The hope hit him like a lead weight, constricting his chest until he couldn't breathe.

Aramis's fever had broken.
the past there had been pain, such terrible, awful pain, and loneliness, and praying to God that the others would not risk their lives for his.

He should have remembered that his little prayers were not heard by gods that had fallen as angels.

He was unbearably hot, sweat slicked his skin and he made a noise somewhere in between a complaint and a whimper.

There was an icy reprieve against his brow, and for a single, awfully hopeful moment, he thought that it was Loki.

But then water trickled into his hair and Aramis realised that it was just a damp cloth. He choked out a cry, because of course it wasn't, Loki had gone home.

His— the angel had returned to the stars.

Aramis strangled the noise that wanted to sound from his throat, because he didn't get to say goodbye, he didn't get to apologise one last time, he didn't get to taste cruel lips that had started curling up into a smile instead of a sneer. Coolness covered his hand and then, almost tentatively, whispers of frost flowed through his veins.

Loki?

Aramis wrenched his heavy eyelids open and whispered the name as if it were a prayer; hope a thundering thing in his chest. Tired, concerned emerald eyes widened in shock and pulled back, turning to the closed door.

"Por—" Loki began to call, and then he halted to look at him again. "Aramis?"

There was wary hope in his voice, as if he wasn't sure what was happening.

Aramis knew how that felt.

"Am I dreaming?" Aramis asked, surprised that his throat only twinged with mild pain. Physically, he felt fine, there were no lines of irritation or tight bandages around his body… And yet he was utterly convinced that he was wounded.

He bent a finger and felt it move easily, but then it blazed with agony as if his mind was trying to tell him that it was still broken. This must be what it was like to lose a limb and to feel the phantom pain as if it were still attached. The brain was unable to process the sudden difference.

It didn't seem fair to hurt in a dream, even as his heart constricted in painful hope at seeing Loki.

Of course, either he was awake and had lived through a personal Hell, or he was asleep and really shouldn't be in any pain at all.

Or he could be dead.

"I died, didn't I?"

Loki exhaled in an astonished sort of laugh, and then raised his eyebrows and murmured, "I should hope that death has far more to offer for it than these ghastly rooms."

It sounded like Loki, it looked like Loki…

He looked down to see Loki's pale fingers very nearly entwined with his tan ones.
It couldn't be Loki.

"Are you real?" he blurted out, and wasn't at all reassured by the way Loki glanced around the room with an expectant expression.

"I'm not sure," he said finally, "I'm rather wondering that myself. D'Artagnan just asked me if I would like to kick a ball – of all things – as the weather was so pleasant. I couldn't find the appeal, but felt rather compelled to try when I told him so."

Aramis blinked, he wasn't sure he had ever heard Loki have such a normal discussion before. In the interest of prolonging this bizarre and yet somehow utterly wonderful dream, he continued the everyday chatter.

"Did he give you the look?"

"The look?" Loki asked with a small frown, his fingers twitching against Aramis' as he thought.

"Puppy," Aramis said simply, finding himself remarkably ineloquent from the feeling of cool skin against his. Loki just made a noise of understanding and nodded. Aramis stared for a little longer and then said, "Did it work?"

"I'm sat here with you, am I not?"

"Yes?" he hedged uncertainly, and thought he saw a glimmer of amusement ease some of the lines of tension on Loki's face. That was when he realised that he had never seen Loki looking so stressed, so unsure.

Something terrible had happened.

As if he had suddenly allowed himself to remember, memory hit him like a brick, and he gasped in remembered pain. The argument, the missed goodbye, the torture, the rescue, the death, the light; such blinding light that had felt as if it were trying to force its way out of his flesh.

That was why he was convinced he was still injured; he had gone from death's door by Soulier's hand to life's gate by Loki's too quickly, and it hurt.

Loki tried to pull his hand away but Aramis grabbed for it, further entangling their fingers together as he tried to breathe through the memories, using that coolness as an anchor.

Loki was holding himself so very still, every muscle locked into place as he helplessly watched him shudder. "I can't help with this, Aramis."

"Why?" he grit out, fighting back a wave of darkness that promised restful sleep. He couldn't sleep, he had to know why Loki was here, if he was here.

"You reacted badly to the healing, I— I didn't do it with the care you deserved."

There was such self-loathing in that anguished statement, and Aramis had to gasp a laugh, because at least he was alive. "We all miss the occasional stitch."

Something that looked scarily like utter anguish flashed across Loki's proud brow before it disappeared, and Aramis recognised that quick change.

Loki had repaired his façade.
It was the same one that he had seen before this, before Soulier, before the leather sheath and the pistol training. It was the same one that he had seen the moment he had fallen for an angel that had just fallen from the stars.

It was almost as if they had gone back through time, except that that Loki wouldn't be sat at his bedside, offering comfort in the only way he knew how: allowing Aramis his tactile nature.

Aramis locked onto that gesture, that little flaring of hope, and with a full body shudder, fell back against the bed with a bone tired flop, the pain just a memory again.

Just a memory, for there were no scars, no marks of a life dangerously lived, bravely lived, no signs of a time where emerald eyes and cruel smirks had been his world.

No, Loki had wiped all of them away, like a wildfire cleared a cluttered forest.

Exhaustion was like a haze across Aramis' awareness and he wanted nothing more than to sleep, sleep away the ache in his chest that had nothing to do with healed wounds. There was a moment of silence except for his ragged breaths, and then Loki's thumb rubbed once against his palm.

"Who is Marsac?" Loki asked so quietly that Aramis wasn't sure he had really heard it.

He frowned wearily with his eyes closed. "An old friend, how do you know his name?"

There were a few more beats of silence. "You cried out in your sleep."

Aramis' eyes shot open, and he saw the torment on Loki's face before he wiped it away again. Marsac's name only ever meant one thing: he had been having nightmares, and there was only ever one thing that soothed him.

For a moment, it wasn't Loki's hand against his, it was his own hand against Porthos' chest, Loki looking on with that same torment he had just tried to hide.

Whatever had happened last night, Loki had kept watch as Porthos soothed Aramis' fevered nightmares by holding him close and whispering into his hair.

Sympathy gripped his chest and so he gripped Loki's fingers, trying to offer the same comfort back.

"Marsac died," he said hoarsely, needing Loki to understand that Porthos had been there when his world had left him in the blood-spattered snow, and again on the wooden floor of Treville's office. "Five years ago, I was on a mission with a regiment, they were... slaughtered, and Marsac... he left me."

Loki flinched and kept his eyes on the floor, but his arm didn't move away.

"Porthos was there to pick up the pieces," he tried to explain, but Loki flinched again.

If his muscles would obey him, he'd drag Loki over and tell him that it wasn't like that, it didn't mean anything; but Loki had seen Aramis calm under Porthos' gentle touch, and it had hurt him.

His angel was hurting, and there was nothing Aramis could do.

Aramis wanted to convey an apology, but didn't how, what to say, why he was saying it. Loki was a picture of neutrality now, his mask fitting on him like a second skin again, and Aramis despaired.
"I would not have you in such pain again, Aramis," Loki said to the floor, and it sounded like a vow.

The wings of sleep closed in and Aramis had to accept it.

His sigh wasn't quite relieved but perhaps all was not lost. That was enough for him, for now, until he regained his strength and could show his ridiculous, gorgeous, secretly gallant angel how much he adored him.

"Don't go," he managed to say, and smiled at the vulnerable surprise on Loki's face.

"I won't," Loki murmured, seeming shocked at his own answer.

The last thing Aramis saw before his eyes fluttered closed, was Loki's deep frown of contemplation as his pale fingers smoothed circles over Aramis' own tan ones.

*Your god does not bid you die, today,* Loki had said in Soulier's cave, and Aramis slept in the safety of knowing with utter certainty that he would wake up, and do so with an angel of a god by his side.

Athos leaned against the tavern's outer wall in the shadows and let the relief wash over him.

It shuddered in his chest, a learned reaction trying not to let himself be too hopeful in case it all came crashing about his ears.

But it wouldn't, because Loki had things under control now, and he wouldn't let anything happen to Aramis.

Gratitude made Athos dizzy and he needed to let it out, needed to tell the remarkable man who had killed dozens to save Aramis, and yet couldn't place a knife against his skin to save him again if it meant hurting him.

Normally, Athos would have been consoling Porthos – he was always restless after stitching Aramis up. Porthos played it off as Aramis threatening to kill him if his stitches weren't neat, but each of them knew the utter terror of having a brother's life in their hands.

Athos more than most.

But Porthos was standing in the bright sunshine, resting ever so slightly against Thor as they both chuckled at d'Artagnan when he balanced a ball on his knee. Porthos still occasionally glanced up at the window to Aramis' room, and leaned a little heavier on Thor before relaxing again.

D'Artagnan was oblivious to the way Thor's hand was making small, circular motions along Porthos' back.

Athos smiled, a small, shadow of a smile.

He had such strong, reliable brothers, and yet, without even one of them, everything would be so much harder; which was why Loki deserved all of the gratitude Athos could muster, even though he was loath to interrupt the serene silence upstairs.

Porthos turned then, as if sensing Athos' attention – when had they started doing that? – and so he disappeared back inside. Better the serene silence where he could apologise in relative isolation, than the bright delight of the others that made Athos remember how he had failed Aramis.
Failed all of them.

Loki was vigilant at the edge of Aramis' bed, smoothing back tangled curls with a gentle hand as Aramis finally slept peacefully on.

It was a tender scene, one Athos once would never have expected of Loki, and it made guilt lay heavy on his long-broken heart.

His footsteps were naturally quiet – much to d'Artagnan's annoyance – but Loki still knew he was there, looking up almost defensively as he if thought that Athos had come to reprimand him for some reason.

"I've come to apologise," Athos started, and held up a placating hand when Loki stirred in startled protest. "Please, Loki. I am.. truly sorry for what happened, I called us a team and then put undue pressure on your shoulders. I should have been more aware."

Loki watched him carefully for a moment and, after checking on Aramis once more, looked up again to say quietly, "I am the one who should be sorry, Athos. I put my own needs before the group's safety."

Athos shook his head; inwardly irritated that now of all times was when Loki showed his hidden honourable side. "It was not your burden to bear alone. It was wrong of me to expect your magic of you, it won't happen again."

There was a flicker of surprise across his face, but Loki seemed to know that Athos would not allow disagreement. Aramis was the only one who could sneak the blame onto his shoulders, and even then Aramis had to distract him whilst he did it.

Athos paused to take a breath and watched Aramis take one too, such deep relief softening his voice as he said, "I can never thank you enough for the lives you have saved whilst you have been with us."

He hadn't meant to say that last part, had been refusing to acknowledge what would happen next now that they knew Aramis pursued the heart of a god. Loki's eyes flicked to Aramis quickly, and a small little crack of empathy split across the shattered remnants of Athos' heart.

Love, it seemed, hurt even those on high. There was a decision coming soon, and it would shake the bedrock of all of their lives.

Athos just hoped that the god who already held Aramis' generous, mortal heart would make the right choice.

"Thank you, Loki," he said again, because he thought that Loki needed to hear how valued he was, not just by Aramis, but by them all.

After all, Loki had not failed them, as Athos had.

However, Loki merely tilted his head slightly to the side and murmured matter-of-factly, "You are, perhaps, one of the best mortals I have ever met."

Athos felt his shock like a great bird flapping on his chest, unsteady and billowing. He had not expected this, he had not even expected an apology – but then Loki was more like him than he realised. "I fear you either haven't met many mortals, or you are drunk."

Loki smiled then, and it was terrifying in its age even as it was bordering on friendly. "You are not a failure, Athos. You never were, and you never will be."
Apprehension flared and died at the analytical comment, for this was Loki, one of his brothers. Athos did not need to fear the probing fingers of manipulation from this man, not the one who, even now, was gently stroking Aramis' hair.

It still staggered him that Loki could read him so well, but couldn't he do the same to Loki? It made sense, just as it awakened something integral and long-forgotten inside of him. Athos remembered what it was like to feel worthy, and realised that Loki was slowly doing the same.

"You can tell the future now?" he quipped to hide his astonishment.

"No, that was always my mother's gift," Loki replied nonchalantly. "It is merely a fact."

Athos blinked a few times. "I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing. Perhaps it would be best if we forgot this entire embarrassing conversation," Loki said, a smile curving his lip.

"I agree," Athos replied calmly, grateful for the reprieve. As he turned to leave the room, feeling lighter than he had in days, he said over his shoulder, "We are sparring later."

"Are we?"

"Yes," he called down the hallway.

"I look forward to it," came the amused reply, and Athos laughed despite himself.

Loki was honourable, and Athos wasn't a failure.

Perhaps Aramis was right, sometimes the answers truly did come from the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Loki is a completely different fish when he's not being an arsehole, he can be such a delight to write. Athos, of course, is always lovely. Enjoyed this update? Let us know! And prepare yourselves, the next chapter has a scene long awaited. "Two blushing pilgrims ready stand..." - C

^Basically fortify your hearts in preparation for the fluff. Be warned- it's worse than a basketful of kittens. - L
There are many things in this world that we might never completely understand: science, cats, how Sherlock did that thing, why Britain doesn’t have applesauce, and why some people think it’s okay to make tea with a microwave.

Loki, however, is so convoluted, so very multi-faceted, that we had to write that scene by firing paragraphs at each other in different PoVs. Only the three little Loki ones are mine, the rest are my wonderful co-writer's! - C

STOP JUDGING AMERICANS FOR THEIR TEA-MAKING WAYS. It's faster. Though I suppose you get to be bitter, since it's still unbelievable to me that Britain has no applesauce. - L

When Aramis next awoke, it was with the indelible knowledge that Loki was still there. He hadn't left.

The thought was enough to bring a smile to his face before he even opened his eyes. When he finally did, it was to see Loki watching him with a bemused expression.

"What's so funny?" he asked, keeping his tone neutral, but Aramis could see the gleam of interest in his emerald eyes.

"Oh, nothing, mon ange," he replied casually, reveling in the fact that he could still say those words.

"D'Artagnan was back while you were sleeping," Loki told him. "He tried to insist I join his silly ball game since everyone else kept saying no." He shook his head, obviously baffled. "I'm surprised Thor did not join him, but do I really seem the type to enjoy such endeavors?"

Aramis chuckled. "That's just how our lad is. You'll get used to it."

Loki tensed, and Aramis realized he'd thoughtlessly implied Loki was going to stay permanently. He did not want to think about the fact that he might not, so he quickly added, "I wonder why Thor did not join the game."

Loki shrugged, his eyes sliding away from Aramis's.

Forgetting for a moment his condition, he tried to sit up, intent on recapturing Loki's gaze. Phantom pains danced across his chest, leaving him breathless with agony for several long moments. When it passed, he looked up to find Loki's beautiful face twisted into helpless concern.

"I'm alright," he murmured, shifting carefully to a more comfortable position. Loki's face slipped back into a neutral mask at once, but the concern still flickered in the tight lines around his mouth and eyes.

As did the guilt.
"Mon ange," he sighed, ready to push away the pain for long enough to convince Loki this wasn't his fault, but Loki interrupted him.

"Why did you start calling me that?" he asked quietly. The fervent question seemed to burn through Aramis, leaving him confused by the desperation he could hear within it.

His answer was unhesitating. "Because when I first saw you, I thought you had fallen from the heavens."

To his pleasure, Loki's face softened a bit at that, and he chuckled under his breath. "You weren't far off."

Encouraged, Aramis added, "I still think of you as such."

This time Loki did not laugh. His face hardened into angry lines, but Aramis sensed it was not aimed at himself.

"You shouldn't," was the low, harsh reply. "I am no angel."

Aramis smiled charmingly, hoping to lighten the tension. "You are to me."

Loki's lip curled into a sneer. "I have no right," he snarled, the words echoing those spoken in that terrible clearing with eerie precision. "No right to be seen as such. I am a failure."

"You have not failed," Aramis protested, trying to sit up further despite the pain as Loki rose and began pacing the room. He'd never sensed such distress in his angel before.

"I was going to leave you." The words were soft and deadly, full of loathing. "I was on my way home."

The confession came as no surprise to Aramis, and he found he didn't care what Loki had almost done, only that he had returned. He wanted only to soothe the self-hatred he could hear in Loki's voice, but he wasn't finished yet.

"I almost left," he spat, the word more vicious than any curse, "without saving you. I almost left you to die. How could I do that? What kind of monster am I?"

"You are not a monster," Aramis cried, hoping the fervor in his voice would break through the walls he could sense Loki erecting.

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"You don't understand. I was in the circle. I was leaving." The expression of loathing on Loki's face made Aramis's chest ache.

He managed a smile, willing Loki to understand. "But you didn't."

Loki whirled on him, expression thunderous. "Don't! Don't offer me your forgiveness. I am unworthy of it."

Without waiting for a reply, he strode to the door and vanished.

Aramis felt the loss of his presence like a physical blow. He could not allow Loki to walk out thinking such terrible things. If Loki would not stay to hear his words, then Aramis would follow him.

Getting out of the bed proved more difficult than he'd thought, and he almost passed out when phantom pain stabbed through a bone in his leg he was sure had been broken, but at last he gained
his feet. Once up, it was less trouble to stay up, and he made it across the room with slow but steady steps.

In the hallway he paused, knowing that if he encountered any of the others they would immediately send him back to his bed. Stepping softly, he crept down the hallway, listening intently for any sounds of approach.

He passed one room that he thought might be Porthos's. The light was on and deep voices were rumbling within, too quietly to make out, but he didn't pause long enough to listen.

Eventually he made it down to the inn's courtyard. He could see Athos and d'Artagnan discussing something near the stables. Aramis smiled, pleased with his luck, when they entered unexpectedly, leaving the way clear to the woods.

He didn't know how it was he was so sure Loki was in the woods, but he could sense him as if there were a tether in his chest connecting him to his angel. Perhaps it was a residue of the magic that had nearly consumed him, but whatever it was, he was grateful for it. Without its gentle guidance, he would never have found the hidden forest path.

He followed it slowly, careful not to overexert himself but refusing to stop for longer than a few moments. The sun beating through the trees sent sweat trickling down the back of his neck. Occasionally he was forced to lean against a tree to catch his breath, cursing the mental betrayal that left his body intact but his mind convinced he was still injured.

At last he came upon a sun-drenched clearing. He could make out Loki's lithe form balancing on a rock beside a broad pond.

Smiling, Aramis stepped forward into the light.

Loki basked in the warmth, needing something natural to ground him in these uncertain times. The coarseness of the rock he was sat upon caught at his breeches, the ripples of the pond lapped pleasantly against his ears, Aramis' smile made his chest tighten with unfamiliar emotion.

Aramis’ smile?

"Aramis," he said with a frown, twisting slightly with the urge to get up and go to him. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Aramis' dark curls were still a little messy but aside from the tiny winces that he was evidently trying so hard to hide, he appeared fine.

"I wasn't going to let you walk away, mon ange," Aramis replied with unbearable brightness.

Loki raised his eyes skyward, wondering when the universe had decided that he was to be surrounded by idiots who woke up smiling and forgave him for things he didn't deserve forgiveness for.

"I shan't carry you back to the inn, so you had best start walking back," Loki called, and returned his attention to the idyllic scene before him.

It was annoyingly sunny.

As was Aramis.

"But how will I compare thee to a summer's day?" Aramis laughed, and Loki refused to let the
sound bring him any sort of relief.

He was not *worthy* of that.

There was an inhaled breath from behind him and before Loki had even realized what he was doing, he was halfway across the clearing, worriedly bearing down upon a foolish mortal who insisted on making him *feel*.

Pain flickered over Aramis' handsome face and Loki automatically reached out as he neared, prepared to heal but remembering that he couldn't. Instead, Loki simply reached for him, the need to touch at once familiar and distressingly alien.

He had done this too often over the past few days.

Once again he saw his pale skin over Aramis' tan, Aramis' slightly shaking muscles under his fingers as he stumbled towards Loki's chest.

Aramis collided there, his weight negligible, but Loki felt the breath leave his lungs regardless.

Aramis let himself sag more heavily against Loki than was perhaps strictly necessary, but the feel of those cool fingers resting against his biceps was too intoxicating to surrender easily.

"You shouldn't be out here," Loki murmured, a deep frown creasing his forehead. "You're clearly not well enough."

"You'd be surprised what I'm well enough for," Aramis smirked, laughing aloud when he succeeded in shocking the irritated expression from Loki's face.

"Aramis," Loki frowned, recovering. "You need to go back."

Loki tried gently to pry Aramis from his chest, obviously intending to haul him bodily back to the inn if that's what it took, but Aramis wasn't going to give up that easily.

Not when he was so close.

Grinning up at Loki, he allowed himself to lean more heavily against his angel's solid chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle even through Loki's silk shirt.

Loki shot him a look that was half annoyance, half exasperated affection. "I know what you're doing," he muttered darkly. "It's not going to happen."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, _mon ange,"_ Aramis said, pitching his voice intentionally low. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he caught a flicker of quickly suppressed desire in those startling green eyes before Loki glanced away.

"Aramis," Loki growled, trying to step back. Aramis immediately followed, keeping them pressed tightly together. "Stop this."

"Make me," Aramis suggested, striving to keep his voice light even as desire exploded deep within him.

Loki shook his head, looking conflicted. Anger was seeping into the handsome lines of his face. "I have no right," he argued, and there was a desperate note to his voice that told Aramis the only
one he was still trying to convince was himself.

"Oh, mon ange," Aramis sighed, his breath mingling with Loki's in the sunlight. "You have the only right."

Loki groaned exasperatedly, well aware that Aramis could charm the acorns from the trees and the ripples across the pond.

There was such a struggle in his chest, two great beasts were at war and for once in his life he wasn't sure which one he wanted to win.

One was wrapped in the green cloak that he hadn't worn since putting it on Aramis' shoulders in Soulier's lair. The other was wrapped around Aramis, his hands as gentle as possible even as he wasn't sure if he was holding the ridiculous mortal up, or simply closer to his chest.

Loki looked into hopeful brown eyes and felt so worthless compared to the warmth there; warmth that had only ever dimmed when he had found cause to dim it, and had flared ever brighter afterwards.

"Do I?" Loki asked hoarsely, a strange pressure at the back of his throat.

"Yes," Aramis breathed with such conviction in his tone that it made Loki's pulse jump. "You have ever since you fell from the stars, and I fell for you, mon ange."

Loki closed his eyes and groaned again, the war was so very nearly won and he would be left a wreck in its wake.

"You have built me up to be something I'm not, Aramis."

There was an almost indiscernible shiver through Aramis' body at the sound of his name, and all it did was make Loki tighten his grip, as if he was merely concerned.

Concerned and not awash with such keen, piercing heat that he thought it would consume him utterly.

When he looked down again uncertainly, it was to be greeted with blown pupils and parted lips that whispered, "All I want you to be me, is mine."

Loki's gaze slipped from Aramis's own to linger on his lips, and that was all the invitation Aramis needed. He practically lunged, his lips meeting Loki's with a desperate need that would have sent a mortal crashing to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

But Loki was no mortal, and angels did not fall needlessly.

His lunge was met steadily, and something deep within him crowed in victory when Loki, rather than fleeing like a startled horse, returned the kiss tentatively.

The hesitance in Loki's response had Aramis gentling his first wild lunge into something softer. His thoughts were mostly swirls of light and color at the moment, but some tiny section of his brain spared a moment to wonder if Loki had ever been kissed like this before.

Selfishly, he hoped not.

He pressed his lips closer to Loki's own, letting his hands creep up to tenderly cup Loki's jaw as
he deepened the kiss, desire racing through him when he was welcomed. Loki's grip on his arms was gentle, as if the angel in him was worried he might break his fragile mortal form, but Aramis longed for contact, pressing forward until Loki's hands slipped to rest possessively at his waist.

It still wasn't enough.

He wanted... no, he needed more.

Panting slightly, he broke away, sliding his fingers down to rest against Loki's collarbone. Emerald eyes gazed back at him, wide and unexpectedly vulnerable. Aramis had to fight back the desire to reclaim those delicious lips as he smiled invitingly up into Loki's slightly stunned face.

"I'm not made of glass, mon ange. There's no call to be so gentle."

Heat exploded like blinding white fireworks, the exact colour of the light that burned like a beacon to his senses; the same beacon that had called to him from the first moment he had set eyes on the charming mortal who had bowed so gracefully before him.

There was none of that wonder now, none of the almost submissive amazement that he had seen in hungry brown eyes. No, Aramis was very sure what he wanted.

It was Loki.

And Loki was certainly not the gentle angel that Aramis thought him.

He may have been helpless to deny the blatant invitation of Aramis' smile, the way Aramis swayed forward so easily when Loki tugged at his waist, but if there was one thing that Loki refused to be, it was gentle.

Aramis' expression went from inviting to expectant as Loki moved one hand from toned hip bone to the mass of curls that he had spent so long smoothing.

It felt unbelievably satisfying to tangle his fingers in dark hair and hear the surprised moan of desire from Aramis' throat, the strong column exposed as Aramis obeyed his tug and tilted his head back.

There was one split second where he worried about Aramis' health so soon after his ordeal, but then nails scraped against Loki's chest in a bite of pleasured pain and the concern blanked out.

Aramis knew what he wanted.

Loki hissed against heated skin and then obeyed an urge that had assuaged him ever since he had accidentally drawn a line of red across tanned collarbone. Aramis' shifted slightly, trying to see what he was doing, and so with the greatest of care, he clamped his teeth around Aramis' jugular.

Aramis froze for a fraction of a moment and then arched against him, a gasp of that lilting language colouring the air as Loki smiled. On an instinct, he pressed his lips to the hurt, surprised when Aramis shuddered with delight.

He did it again.

"S'il te plait, mon ange," Aramis whispered brokenly, and Loki understood it for a plea.

Loki loosened his hold on tangled curls and dragged Aramis into a kiss, satisfaction blazing when Aramis moaned into his mouth. It gave Loki ample opportunity to taste, his tongue darting out to
lick the edge of Aramis' lip.

It was light, and fire, and spice, and ecstasy, and Loki couldn’t restrain himself from biting that which had caused him such delicious torment. It evoked another shudder that Loki felt through constricting cloth and smooth silk.

Aramis' heartbeat was a rapid flutter against his chest and his breath came quick and shallow.

Too quick and too shallow.

"Aramis," Loki murmured against lips which didn't seem to care that they were both dangerously overheating.

Opening his eyes to see Aramis's dazed ones was almost enough to have Loki throwing caution to the wind, but that little tendril of concern had reawakened and Aramis's trembling was enough to turn it into a wave.

"Breathe," he ordered, and felt his lip twitch when Aramis made a sound that edged on a whimper. He would remember that, later, when he wasn't skirting another war that would wreck them both.

Sweat had beaded on Aramis's forehead, and Loki felt the concern tamping down on desire, forcing him to be practical.

Besides, there was always later.

Loki took a careful step back, creating some distance between himself and Aramis, who frowned at the separation, refusing to release his fisted hold on Loki’s collar. A gentle wave of his hand sent cool air rushing around them, and Aramis smiled, understanding at last as a shiver of delight ran down his spine.

Loki couldn’t resist grinning at the look of relief in those warm brown eyes, grateful that some of his magic could still be used for Aramis's benefit.

"Why didn't you do that before, mon ange?" Aramis murmured, inching forward as if intent to continue their encounter, but Loki just chuckled and stepped further away, reminding himself that Aramis was really not well enough for this.

But Aramis was not a man to give up easily. Loki would have to distract him.

On impulse, he cupped his hands together before him. A moment later the flourished a perfect replica of the Musketeer insignia, made of crystal blue ice.

Aramis made a sound of shocked delight and snatched it from his hand. "That is amazing!"

Loki's smile faded slightly at the twinge of pain from an old memory. "Yes, well, not everyone thought so."

He cursed himself for saying anything when Aramis immediately reared back, looking outraged on his behalf. "Who would not think this magnificent?"

"My father thought magic a woman’s weapon," he said with a shrug, hoping the bitterness he felt at the memory did not seep into his tone. "He never liked me to use it or speak of it."

Aramis fell silent, frowning at the miniature ice sculpture. "Is that why you were so angry when I
told the others?” he asked very quietly.

Loki sucked in a breath at the memory of his harsh words. "Yes," he confessed, feeling ashamed of his actions. "I am not accustomed to others taking it well."

Aramis nodded. "Well, I think it's amazing," he said decisively, smiling down at the sculpture now beginning to melt in his palm. "You are amazing," he added more quietly.

"How can it be amazing when I caused you such pain?" Loki asked him softly, the memory of not being able to undo the damage he'd caused still fresh within him.

Aramis glared at him, but humor danced in his eyes. "Not your fault," he said clearly, accentuating each word with a jab to Loki's chest with his index finger. "Besides, you can do such wonderful things with it." He gazed again at the sculpture.

Loki shrugged, feeling faintly embarrassed in the face of the unusual praise. "I was always good with ice and cold."

"Some snow would be nice right now," Aramis sighed, swiping a hand across his forehead.

Loki's face must have betrayed his sudden epiphany, for Aramis frowned suspiciously at him. "What?"

"I…I can do snow."

Aramis's face broke into an excited smile as Loki spun towards the small pond, crouching down beside it to trail a hand in the water. He felt the magic rush through him, ignoring the subtle pull back towards the rune circle, and let it pour into the water.

Ice began to creep across the smooth surface, clear as crystal, until at last the whole pond was covered. Loki straightened, flourishing one hand in the air with unnecessary showmanship, but it was worth it to see Aramis's delight when perfect snowflakes began to drop from the sunny sky.

"That is magnificent, mon ange," Aramis cried, scrambling over to the pond's edge. His movements were still stiff, but he didn't seem to be paying his body any mind.

"Do you skate?" Loki asked, happiness sweeping through him as Aramis nodded eagerly. He held out a hand with a mock bow, and Aramis accepted it. A quick gesture formed frozen blades on the soles of their boots and then they were on the thick blue ice, and Aramis's eyes were dancing with happiness as he tried to reacquaint himself with ice skates at the height of summer.

Loki spun in graceful circles around him, laughing at Aramis's initially clumsy attempts to follow. He knew the phantom pain was keeping Aramis from moving with his usually ease, but instead of guilt, he merely felt excitement at the thought. Gliding closer, he caught Aramis's hands and spun him out gently over the ice as Aramis laughing and whooped in excitement.

A crashing sound in the trees made them pause. Loud voices were calling their names. Aramis made to take a step forward and slipped, prompting Loki to grab him, momentum spinning them dizzily around until they ended up pressed chest to chest once more. Aramis smirked.

The bastard had done that on purpose.

Their companions suddenly pushed their way into the clearing, anxiety flickering to amusement and exasperation when they were spotted.

"There you are," Athos said calmly, as if he hadn't just been frantically crashing through the trees
searching for them.

"Is everything all right?" Aramis called, steadfastly refusing to let Loki disentangle himself.

"We thought you were being attacked!" D'Artagnan said scathingly, crouching down beside the pond. "You were yelling."

Loki noticed Porthos was scowling. To his amazement, the large Musketeer hadn't even asked Aramis if he was alright, which would have been the first thing Loki expected from him. "Glad someone's havin' fun," he grumbled.

"Why are you so grumpy?" D'Artagnan asked, now prodding at the ice like a child. "You look exactly like Aramis does when he gets turned down." He glanced around at Porthos, who glanced away in irritation.

Beside him, Thor was rubbing at an odd-looking bruise on his neck. Suddenly d'Artagnan looked between them, an expression of dawning horror on his face, but before he could say anything Porthos reached out and casually pushed him onto the frozen pond.

Loki frowned. What was so alarming about a bruise?

D'Artagnan was floundering on slippery boots, so Loki took pity on him, gesturing lazily to form another set of frozen skates. The lad looked up at him, grinning wildly, and took off across the ice with surprising skill.

"And me, brother!" Thor boomed, and Loki had no choice but to obey, realizing his private moment with Aramis was over. A quick spell had skates forming on each man's boots, though Porthos eyed them with alarm.

Thor dashed headlong onto the ice, all power and no grace, just as he had been when they were younger. "Ah, remember that time you froze all of father's fountains so we could play on them and Fandral fell in?" he asked, and Loki couldn't help but laugh at the memory, tugging Aramis back into motion as they whirled across the crystalline surface.

"I was always the better skater," he called mockingly, and Thor glared in response, launching himself after Loki as he danced away. A simple spell was all it took, and then he spun sharply to the left as Thor went barreling to the right, launching himself at an illusion that dissipated and left him sprawled on the cold surface. Loki could hear Aramis and Porthos laughing at the trick, and he grinned despite himself.

"Athos, Porthos, come on!" D'Artagnan called, sliding neatly past them. Porthos laughed and cautiously moved onto the ice in a way that told Loki he'd never skated before in his life, but Athos just shook his head.

Aramis pulled away from his side with a devious grin, sharing a look with d'Artagnan. As one, they raced towards Athos at an angle, swooping in at the last moment to yank him onto the ice and send him spinning. He recovered gracefully, circling d'Artagnan as if to say, \textit{well, there you have it.}

Porthos was still hovering near the edge of the pond, balancing unsteadily on his skates as Loki glided by, turning in a neat circle just for the pleasure of it.

"Well, ain't you a pretty picture?" Porthos taunted, but for once Loki sensed amusement rather than antagonism behind it.

Perhaps it was the kiss earlier, or the lingering relief that Aramis was alive, that made Loki spin
around and call, "Come now, Porthos, won't you join us on the ice?" He sped towards Porthos, who tried in vain to scramble back onto solid ground, but to no avail. Loki snagged his sleeve and sent him flying across the ice to whoops of laughter from the others.

Loki laughed when Porthos's arms spun wildly, trying to keep his balance on the slick surface. Just when he was sure the large Musketeer would go crashing to his rear he swept in and caught him, straightening him easily before gliding back to where Aramis was watching with a ridiculously happy expression.

Porthos shook a fist good-naturedly at his back as Thor arrived to teach him the basics, but Loki merely chuckled and ignored him. "What are you grinning about?" he asked Aramis, whose smile was broader than Loki had ever seen it.

"Oh, nothing, mon ange," he said, leaning slightly against Loki. The warmth from his body was intoxicating. "I'm just blissfully happy."

Loki felt his lips twitch in response and realized that, for the first time he could remember, he was too.

Chapter End Notes

It's happened, look at it, Loki's happy. How did we get here? Oh yeah, he made out with Aramis, that would make anyone happy. We had a ridiculous amount of fun writing this, please review and let us know if you did, too! - C
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Once again, a conjoined effort of a chapter, because we are basically a hivemind of Lokimis excitement. There's a crown, there's a fight, and there's a bruise, but neither are quite as cold as might be expected. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When at last the others shuffled off the ice, red faced and grinning, Loki laid a gentle hand on Aramis's arm, something within him not yet ready to return to that stuffy room where he'd come so close to losing everything.

Aramis seemed to understand, as Loki had known he would, hanging back without a word as the others tramped off. There was a distant yell as someone, presumably Porthos, tried to slip ice down d'Artagnan's shirt, and then they were alone.

"That truly was amazing, Loki," Aramis said softly. The sun had sunk while they frolicked on the pond and now hung just over the edge of the trees, bathing the clearing in reddish light.

The use of his name sent strange shivers running down his spine, and he found himself wanting to do more. For the first time in his life, he didn't have to hold back, and Aramis was a willing audience.

With a simple gesture, the ice melted back into smooth water. Another gentle wave and the wildflowers that had been shriveling in the summer heat burst into bloom once more, an ocean of blossoms stretching before them.

Aramis's breath caught at the sight, wide eyes drinking in the beauty of the meadow. He didn't wait for Loki to speak, stepping forward even as the spell took hold. Warm fingers slipped into his own and Loki returned the pressure unthinkingly, allowing Aramis to lead him into the center of the sun-drenched clearing.

They paused near the middle, and Loki found his heart beat speeding up at the sight of Aramis amidst the wildflowers, rays of sun making his dark curls into a wild crown around his head.

He looked beautiful.

The achingly familiar desire to kiss him stirred sluggishly in Loki's veins, and it was a long moment before the staggering realization hit him: he could.

Aramis seemed to sense his intent, turning towards him with a look both vulnerable and sensual, tongue darting out to wet his lips.

Loki lunged, surprising himself with his own fervor as he captured those invitingly pink lips with his own, one hand anchoring on Aramis's while the other fisted in untamed curls. Aramis gasped at the contact, pushing back against Loki as if trying to melt into his chest.

Loki bit down on Aramis's lip and Aramis whimpered into his mouth. He took a step forward, one leg sliding between Loki's own as his hands pressed tightly into the small of Loki's back.
Loki pulled his head back slightly, trailing his lips along Aramis's jaw until they reached his neck. The thrum of Aramis's pulse beneath the hot skin was intoxicating, and Loki pressed his lips against the spot, sucking greedily until Aramis moaned, trying to sway closer.

Unfortunately, pressed together as they were, the movement caused them both to overbalance. Loki fell backwards, tucking Aramis tightly against himself to prevent any fresh injuries, and landed on his back amid the bobbing heads of a spray of purple wildflowers.

Aramis didn't seem to object to the change in position, attempting to clamber up him to reach Loki's lips, but the incident had brought Loki back to his senses, and he chuckled, pushing Aramis gently away even as he admired his enthusiasm.

"You are in no state for such pastimes," Loki told him with mock sternness, delighted when Aramis actually pouted.

"But we're already on the ground," he said, a touch petulantly, fluttering his eyelashes outrageously when Loki laughed.

"That is not a very good reason," Loki said dryly, rolling Aramis neatly off his chest to sprawl among some pale red blossoms nearby. Aramis scowled and threw a handful of grass at him, scattering it across his shirt.

"Behaving like a child won't change my mind," Loki chuckled. "You are still recovering, and that will not be happening yet."

"But it will be happening?" Aramis asked immediately, sharp eyes fixing on Loki's own, and he fought the urge to gulp at the blatant invitation they held.

"Possibly," he said uneasily, not wishing to have this discussion at this time. Perhaps Aramis picked up on his unease, for he hmphed and rolled onto his back, a vaguely sulky look crossing his face.

Then he brightened as he noticed the explosion of color around them, laughing delightedly as he reached up to pluck some yellow flowers from beside Loki's head.

"This is beautiful, mon ange," he murmured, now reaching for a pale blue flower across Loki's chest.

"It was nothing," Loki replied, pleased with the obvious happiness on Aramis's face as he sat up, eager fingers plucking more blossoms. "I merely enhanced what was already there."

"Your mere presence would do that," Aramis said slyly, and Loki rolled his eyes at the obvious try to tempt him back into the mood.

"Tell me, do lines like that often work?" he asked sarcastically, but even he could tell the words lacked a biting edge. He sounded ridiculously sentimental.

It didn't bother him.

Aramis thought for a moment, then chuckled. "You'd be surprised."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, listening to the drone of far off insects while Aramis amassed a small trove of flowers, sorted into piles by length. Loki folded a hand behind his head and stared at the cloudless blue sky and reveling in the feeling of being at peace with nature.
"Aramis?" he asked after a while, rolling onto his side to prop his head up with one hand.

"Yes, mon ange?" Aramis hummed, stripping a long stem of its leaves.

Loki hesitated before asking the question that had been skirting in the back of his minds for days. "What does dauphin mean?"

Aramis paused, a flicker of something that looked like pain crossing his features, and Loki immediately wanted to retract his question, take back everything he had said that night: anything to take that look from Aramis's brown eyes.

But then it was gone, like a passing cloud, and Aramis smiled at him, twisting blossoms neatly around the stripped stem in motions too quick for Loki's eye to follow. "It means prince," he said simply, and Loki understood his reluctance to explain, because it brought them too close to an issue neither was ready to face. "Or, more accurately, the heir to the throne."

"Thor was always the heir," Loki murmured, a familiar bitterness sweeping through him, though it was lessened oddly, tempered by the beauty of the meadow and Aramis's charming smile as his hands wove in and out around the stem. "It was he who was to wear the crown."

"When was that decided?" Aramis asked softly.

Loki snorted. "Probably the moment they realized he'd be the perfect warrior and I nothing but his shadow." He actively attempted to summon some disdain as he spoke, but the warmth of the sun drained his resentments. "My father thought Thor better suited to the throne."

"Then your father is a fool." Aramis's words were so simple, so matter-of-fact, that Loki stared at him. No one had ever called Odin a fool but his mother, and she said it with affectionate exasperation.

Aramis must have seen his shocked look, for he shrugged unapologetically. "If he could not see your value, then he is a fool, and you do not need his crown."

Loki sat up, about to retort with words that would have inevitably shattered the fragile peace when Aramis flushed. "You can have this one instead."

Something was thrust into his chest and he looked down in amazement at the prefect circlet Aramis had created, woven of interlocking stems and set with blossoms bright as gemstones in an array of colors that would put his mother's wardrobe to shame.

Aramis had made him a crown.

It was not as useful as his sheath, nor as delicious as the pastry, and yet the simple flower circlet in his hands seemed in that moment the greatest gift he'd ever been given, for it was given with all of Aramis's generosity and love as recompense for what he had once considered his greatest failure.

It was as if the impossible man had offered his very soul.

Aramis had gone very red now, apparently on the verge of bolting from a misplaced sense of inadequacy, so Loki grabbed his hands and lightly kissed the back of his fingers, unable to say all that had passed through his mind.

Grinning, he carefully placed the circlet on his head, and Aramis's face lit with joy so brilliant it was almost painful to behold. A stray lavender flower slipped from the crown to land in his lap, and unthinkingly he reached out and tucked it neatly into Aramis's dark hair.
Aramis’s response was immediate as he flung himself forward, crashing against Loki as warm lips sought his own.

This time, Loki did not push him away.

Aramis stretched, enjoying the little aches and pains because they were real. There was a bruise on his knee where he had caught the edge of the bed, an itchiness to his eyes from waking up too early, and a sore spot on his neck.

The latter was his favourite, because Loki had put it there in the meadow of flowers. His cool lips had been soft against his throat, a perfect contrast to the harsh heat of his mouth as he sucked a mark that had made Aramis arch against slender hips.

Joy sparkled through him at the memory, intense and wonderful, and when he looked into the mirror and regarded the dark circle on his skin, it deepened into heat.

Where on earth was his angel when he needed him?

Aramis didn't like being the one to wake up last, but Loki was even sneakier than he was – and Aramis was extremely skilled in creeping out of bed at ridiculous o'clock in the morning.

That wasn't even including the fact that Loki had waited for him to pass out in exhaustion downstairs and then must have carried him to bed. It frustrated him that Loki was using all of his tricks, because he was certain that Loki had slept in the chair by his pillow.

And he knew that Loki would have done it and thought that it was deserved.

Foolish angel, when would Loki realise that all he deserved was happiness?

Rubbing his thumb over the mark again – his smile a little sly – he deliberately left it uncovered and wandered to the window, wondering where Loki could have gotten to.

He stopped dead when he looked into the yard.

In a flash, Aramis threw himself from the room, slamming his door open and bolting along the hallway. He spared half a glance for the still closed door to Porthos' room, sending the inhabitants an irritated thought because they got sleep in this morning.

Why, why today of all days, when Aramis had thought that Loki had finally started getting on—

He stopped dead again, this time on the balcony overlooking the yard.

He stopped, not just because of what he saw, but because of what he heard.

"No, it works better if you twist your wrist."

"Like this?"

"Yes."

"Would it not be better to balance on the left foot, instead?"

"You make a good point. That does feel smoother, actually."

"It seems you don't know everything, Athos."
Athos chuckled at Loki's mischievous smirk and they both altered their footing before bringing their swords up against each other's, silver against gold. They moved slowly, talking to each other and offering corrections, both of them with tiny satisfied smiles on their faces.

They were training.

Aramis felt his jaw drop and all he could do was stare in shock.

When he had seen them from his window, swords raised and brows furrowed, he had been convinced that Loki was up to his old tricks and had challenged Athos again. That would have meant that there would be scowls and sutures and good God it wasn't even midday yet…

He had never been so deliriously happy to be wrong.

At some unspoken signal, they sped up, their smooth movements turning into flashes of steel and silk as they circled each other. Loki was still more aggressive, but then Athos said something and they slowed again, following complex patterns that made Aramis gape in awe even as his heart bucked in his chest.

It wasn't just concern for their safety that had his pulse quickening.

Aramis was biased, he knew that, but Loki was truly stunning.

Neither of them were wearing their cloaks – which was surprising for Loki – and they were dressed lightly for the warm weather and a simple spar.

Loki wasn't wearing his green silk shirt today, and Aramis wondered if it was because he didn't want to dirty it. He treated it with a reverence that made something soar in Aramis' chest.

Aramis would need to visit Constance again, especially if he obeyed the almost overwhelming urge to entice Loki into the shadows and tear his clothes off.

Heat was a languorous warmth in his stomach, but it was surprisingly peaceful to watch Athos and Loki move just at the extent of their abilities, not quite pushing each other but merely learning new tactics.

Hiding friendly banter under the guise of a mutually beneficial spar.

Aramis felt a fond smile curve his lips at their stubbornness. The prince and the comte, both with dark pasts and skills with a sword that belied natural law.

Then again, Loki was very good at doing that.

They both stepped back seemingly at the same time, but they were both far too fast, far too perceptive for Aramis to be certain which had alerted the other.

Athos glanced up at him and then murmured something to Loki, who snorted with amusement and his reply sounded incredibly dry.

They were talking about him.

"We're merely sparring, Aramis," Athos remarked, a teasing half smile lighting his features.

"I told you he would come looking," Loki said to Athos, giving Aramis an amused raise of his eyebrow. "We're perfectly safe."

"Yes," Aramis drawled, enticed down the stairs by their playful moods. "That's what d'Artagnan
"Yes," Aramis drawled, enticed down the stairs by their playful moods. "That's what d'Artagnan says too, except he says it around a swollen lip and a sense of pride."

Loki sniffed haughtily, but humour danced in his eyes. "I can assure you that my pride is far larger than d'Artagnan's."

"You don't need to assure me of that, mon ange."

A knowing smirk flirted with Loki's lips, but it melted away when Aramis self-consciously rubbed his neck, accidentally giving the tiniest wince when his fingers touched the sensitive mark.

Emerald eyes locked onto the movement and suddenly blazed with heat.

The mark did too, and desire suddenly sparked like fireworks between them.

Athenos coughed, giving them both an entertained, slightly affronted, expectant look. "We were sparring."

Aramis gave his friend a guilty grin, but Loki was still focused on his neck as he murmured, "Your elbow was too far out on the second lunge, perhaps you should go and work on it."

Athos blinked for a moment and then gave a surprised, wry laugh; his look was at Aramis this time and it said, it's about time someone else knew what they were talking about.

Aramis chuckled and replied, don't pretend you aren't enjoying having a new sparring partner.

Athos tilted his head to the side in acknowledgement, d'Artagnan was growing despondent.

Loki interrupted and cut Athos a glance that clearly said, goodbye Athos.

Athos smirked and inclined his head in a farewell before disappearing up the stairs. Aramis hoped with a little mischievous selfishness – something that he had definitely picked up on from Loki – that he was going to bang incessantly on Porthos' door.

And then Aramis rather forgot about everything else, because Loki had closed the gap between them and tilted Aramis' chin up with one cool finger, his gaze intent on the tell-tale bruise.

Aramis' heart jack-hammered against his ribs and it hurt ever so sweetly.

"I could remove this," Loki said with matter-of-fact huskiness, and it wasn't quite a question, and it wasn't quite a taunt.

"If you do," Aramis replied around the hitch in his breath, "I expect you to make another."

Loki's smile was sly and seductive; sultry knowledge a lidding of his eyelids. "Ah, so you left it on show on purpose?"

"Yes," he breathed, and inhaled sharply when Loki's pleased surprise manifested in dark delight.

"Exhibitionism is.. not something I had ever before considered."

Aramis licked his lips, gasping a laugh when Loki's gaze darted to them. "Nor I."

Loki raised an eyebrow, sly amusement curling his lip. "I find that difficult to believe."

"It's not people seeing the mark, that I like," Aramis whispered, only half aware that they were still in the stable yard. "It's their not knowing who put it there."
A stillness overcame Loki, belied slightly by the emerald inferno in his eyes. He took another step towards Aramis and his finger curled a little more possessively against his jaw.

Aramis automatically took a step backwards, and it immediately felt as if he was being stalked.

"Do you mean to tell me," Loki's voice was so very low and there was a thread of the most delicious threat entwined in it, "that you have had other such marks there?"

Aramis' breath came short and quick, his chest rising and falling as he stepped backwards again and Loki came after him, their movements slow and ominous.

"Yes?"

Territorial anger tightened Loki's features and Aramis made a small prayer to God that he had never felt the need to actually return to Porthos whenever Loki had tried to spurn him.

Aramis liked his friend very much alive.

Loki's fingers moved from Aramis' chin to his neck, lightly brushing over the mark as they took another step into the shadows. Aramis jerked when his back met the stable wall and knew that he looked as cornered as prey did when Loki's reactionary smile was dangerous.

"And did you show those ones off, too?" A calm question, but it shook Aramis to his toes with its subtle intensity.

Aramis gulped and it brought the tender skin of his throat into contact with Loki's hovering thumb. "Only ever yours, mon ange, only ever you."

There was that ridiculously attractive haughtiness that only Loki could manage so well, and it made Aramis let out a tiny noise of want.

Loki's other arm shot out to brace on the other side of Aramis' head and he didn't even flinch at the noise, so enraptured was he by a commanding gaze that bid he wait.

Caged by slim muscle that could somehow so easily overpower him, Aramis was like a bird that fluttered nervously in a golden cage.

"I," Loki murmured, breath at once cool and burning hot against his lips as he leaned closer, "do not share." Loki's thumb dug into the mark on his neck and Aramis groaned, his eyes almost rolling back into his head with pure, blinding pleasure.

Pain sparked decadently over his nerve endings and then Loki's cruel smile caught Aramis' lower lip in another bite of delightful torture.

There was a heady moment where Aramis knew that he was just as in control of the situation as Loki was, for if Aramis told him so, they would stop immediately. His angel's unfathomable power would not hurt him.

The thought was almost enough to drive him to his knees.

Aramis brought his hands up to Loki's chest, curving his fingers just slightly before drawing them down pale skin over stark collarbone. When Loki's eyelids closed ever so briefly, Aramis regained enough poise to lean forward, drag his teeth across sharp jawline, and whisper, "Neither do I."

The last thing Aramis remembered coherently was a sound that sounded like a strangled moan and then being pushed back against the wall, surprisingly feverish hands untucking his shirt and
gripping onto his bare hips to pull him back up against slimmer ones.

There were a few more marks on his neck by the time they saw Athos half an hour later.

They weren't quite as noticeable as the deep purple one on Loki's pale skin, or the faint satisfied flush on his sharp cheekbones.

Chapter End Notes

Because now that Loki's started responding, we are struggling not to write smut at any given occasion. Oh, blue sky, smut; smiles, smut; sparring, smut. Perhaps you'd like to see some? Let us know, please write us a review and maybe it will encourage us to post it!... - C

We're basically looking for any excuse to justify the writing of smut. Do not disappoint us. - L

^Correction: we wrote some. Now who wants to see it? - L
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

When winter comes, the flowers fade, and when winter leaves, the flowers bloom.
Aramis is a winter-blooming flower, but without his winter, he fades away. - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The mood in the inn that evening was oddly festive. Porthos and Thor were exchanging glances that were ridiculously obvious to everyone. Well, everyone but Loki. D'Artagnan was babbling about some pastry the cook had given him that morning - yet another victim of those cursed puppy dog eyes - and even Athos was smiling at the tale. And Loki…

Loki was pressed against him from thigh to shoulder. He had not initiated the contact, but nor had he pulled away when Aramis blatantly slid against him. In fact, he'd even grinned.

Aramis thought about the moment in the stable yard, wondering idly whether Loki would be amenable to more such activities this evening.

If he didn't hustle him off to bed and steal away to sleep in that damn chair.

Tricky bastard.

As if he knew what Aramis was thinking, Loki's emerald eyes flicked up to meet his own, glimmering with amusement.

In retaliation, Aramis let his hand drift casually along the curve of his own throat, emphasizing the dark marks still blossoming there. Loki's gaze darkened from amusement to something else altogether, and Aramis smirked his victory.

Before Loki could react further, Athos cleared his throat loudly, casting an exasperated look over at them before turning the same look on Porthos, who smiled smugly but stopped whatever story he'd been telling Thor.

"As amusing as our time here has been, we must be leaving tomorrow morning," he said, ignoring d'Artagnan's groan of disappointment. Apparently the lad had been planning ways to abscond with more pastries.

"Ah, come off it, Athos, what's one more day?" Porthos's voice had the slightest edge of a whine, and Athos fixed him with a deadly glare.

"We have not sent word to Treville about what happened here. For all we know, he's on the verge of sending more men after us. We need to inform him about what happened to Soulier."

Aramis's breath caught for a moment at the name, skin crawling with remembered pain, but the faint brush of Loki's fingers against his thigh settled him. Across the table, Porthos stiffened in response to the name himself, rage playing along his dark features. Thor reached out and casually grabbed the nearest bottle of wine, nudging Porthos's shoulder in the process, and to Aramis's relief Porthos relaxed, shooting Thor a smile.
They were both idiots in love.

"So why can't one of us take the news back while the rest stay here for another day or two?" D'Artagnan asked. His pointed look at Athos made it very clear who he thought the one should be.

Athos turned his glare on him. "Because in order for the whole story to be reported, those who were there must be the ones to tell Treville what happened."

His gaze flashed over Aramis, who winced at the thought of having to report what had happened in the caves, and settled on Loki. "Unfortunately, I myself did not witness Soulier's demise. Loki, you shall have to make that report."

Loki stared at Athos for a long moment. His whole body had tensed, and his eyes had darkened to something unreadable. He looked... lost.

Then Aramis figured it out. For the first time in his life, Loki had been shocked out of his icy façade.

"But, Athos," he began, and there was a helpless quality to his voice that clutched at Aramis's heart. "I need to go home."

Aramis would have gladly relieved his time in the caves to have avoided hearing those words drop from his angel's lips. He had known they were coming, expected it since he first woke up, but his foolish heart had not wanted to believe it.

And now he felt as if a sword had been driven through it.

Athos was gaping at Loki, looking utterly shocked for the first time Aramis could remember. He recovered quickly, impassive mask falling into place, and Aramis found himself trying to imitate it, to hide the despair that must surely have flooded his features at Loki's words.

"That is a shame," Athos said, his voice heavier than usual. "I had hoped you might decide to stay with us."

"I belong on Asgard." There was strength in Loki's voice, but no certainty. It sounded as if he were trying to convince himself. For a brief moment, hope flared, but it was dashed cruelly when Loki went on, "I must return home."

Across the table, Porthos was glaring daggers at Loki. Thor was watching his brother with sadness verging on distress. D'Artagnan was the only one to speak.

"But... you can't go! You'd make such a good Musketeer!"

Loki flinched at the words, looking at the boy with surprise.

"No, I don't think I would," he said softly. "And I have a duty to my father that must come first."

"If that is your decision, we will not contest it," Athos said at last. "We must prepare for our journey, but I hope you will say goodbye in the morning before you depart." With that he rose, jerking his head at d'Artagnan to make the boy follow him upstairs.

Porthos seemed likely to sit and glare at Loki all night, but Thor tugged gently on his arm. "Come, let us go." Porthos's eyes flicked to Aramis, who swallowed heavily and nodded. At last Porthos rose to follow Thor into the courtyard.
Aramis could still feel Loki pressed against him, the line of his body stiff with tension. He knew he ought to move away, begin letting go, but he selfishly craved all the time he could get before his angel would return to the heavens.

"Aramis—" Loki began, an uncertainty in his voice that Aramis had never heard there before.

"It's alright," he managed to say, forcing a smile even as he felt his heart cracking into pieces. "I understand."

Loki shifted uncomfortably, opening an inch or two of distance between them. It might as well have been a chasm. Aramis felt as far away as if Loki were already back among the stars.

"I feel I owe you an explanation," Loki said tentatively, but there was no explanation forthcoming. Aramis realized with a sick jolt that Loki wanted to leave but didn't know how to walk away. He would linger, and draw out the pain, because he had never had to leave anything, or anyone, behind before.

The realization cut like a razor, but at the same time it numbed the pain. Loki might be leaving, but here was the proof that he had cared.

"Mon a—" he began, but cut it off, the words too difficult to force out his constricting throat. "If leaving if what you need to do, I shall not beg you to stay."

With that he rose and walked away, doing what he knew Loki could not.

He made it behind the stables before the crushing grief finally stole the air from his lungs. He sank down against the wall into the brittle straw, ignoring where it pricked his skin.

Loki was leaving.

And Aramis had sacrificed what might have been his only chance to say goodbye, just to spare his angel pain.

A laugh bubbled up from him, bitter and pained. When had he not given of his happiness for the sake of others? It was nothing new. No, what hurt was that he had allowed himself to nurture the foolish belief that an angel would stay on earth for a man like him.

It hurt, being reminded of his worth.

He sat there for a while, listening to the bustle of the inn preparing for bed as if from far away. After a time Porthos found him, as he'd known he would.

He didn't look at his friend as he slid down beside him, shoulders barely brushing. Porthos was eyeing him warily, he could feel the concern radiating off him, but he had no reassurances.

At least he had held on to his dignity. There were no tears. They would seem insufficient, somehow.

"How're you holdin' up?" Porthos asked, his voice soft. Aramis knew that if he chose not to answer, Porthos would not push him. But he found the words coming regardless.

"I'm f—"

"Don't say fine."

Aramis huffed out the faintest of laughs, for he had been about to say just that. "I will be fine.
Eventually."

"Will you, though?" He could feel Porthos's dark eyes watching him warily.

He opened his mouth to say that of course he would, but the words stuck in his throat. He couldn't say it, because if he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure, and that terrified him more than anything. Why was it that when he finally fell, it had to be for someone who had only fallen from the stars and not for him?

Porthos was still watching him, so he swallowed heavily and changed the subject.

"You should not be here, mon ami. You should be saying farewell to Thor." He imagined Porthos must be hit rather hard himself about the loss of the golden haired god.

But Porthos merely shifted, looking uncomfortable. When he spoke, his voice was sad. "He's not leavin'."

Aramis whipped his head around, hurt warring with surprise in his chest. "What?"

Porthos met his gaze with eyes that cried out in sympathy and guilt. "Thor decided to stay. He's only gone with Loki to say goodbye."

Gone. Loki was gone.

Porthos was watching him as if he expected Aramis to hate him for Thor's decision, but he didn't. A flicker of warmth cut through him for the briefest of seconds, a moment's gladness that his brother would not have to share in his pain.

Then the ice slammed down over his heart once more, and he bowed his head against the intensity.

Loki was gone.

He knew instantly that he couldn't stay here another moment, couldn't sit with Porthos. He needed to be alone. He rose hurriedly, offering Porthos a pat on the shoulder and an apologetic look to reassure him he was not angry, and strode back to the inn.

Locking himself in his room, he dropped heavily into the chair he was sure Loki had slept in these past few nights. He could see the darkening sky out the window, the stars beginning to brighten against the inky canvas.

He wondered if he would be able to tell the moment Loki left for the heavens. Would his heart feel as if it had been ripped in two, or was it already too broken that the moment of departure would not register?

Tipping his head back against the chair, he squeezed his eyes shut. A shiver ran down his body. The world already felt colder.

Loki pushed through the undergrowth viciously, as if it had done him some personal wrong. He wanted nothing more than to reach the rune circle deep in the woods, the place where the magic of Yggdrasil had been calling to him for days.

He could almost taste the magic upon his tongue as he drew steadily nearer, power whispering through his veins, promising him everything.
He just needed to take that first step.

Thor strode a step behind him, his discomfort a tangible presence between them. Loki wondered how long it would be before his brother tried to talk him out of it again. It wouldn't work this time: his mind was made up. His moment of weakness and indecision in the inn was a thing of the past.

Loki had no time left to waste on this planet. It was time to go home.

He heard Thor speed up, falling into step beside him, and braced himself for the inevitable pleading.

He was not expecting a reprimand.

"You should have said goodbye." Thor's voice was softer than its usual boom, solemn and serious.

Loki actually faltered in his step surprised by this unexpected angle. "What?"

Thor laid a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. "Brother, you should have said goodbye to Aramis. I can tell you did not."

"What business is it of yours whether I said goodbye or not?" Loki snarled, ignoring the nagging guilt the question lit within him.

Once his displeasure would have been enough to silence his brother's foolish questions, but not anymore. Thor met his gaze unflinchingly. "He deserves closure, Loki. You are leaving, probably forever."

"Of course I'm leaving forever! I don't see anything on this planet to return for."

He whirled away, heading back towards the tantalizing pull of magic, and tried to ignore Thor's quiet words. "Then you are a fool, brother."

Thor's reprimand bounced in his head, making him scowl as he walked. So what if he had not said goodbye? He knew full well that Aramis did not want him to go. What closure was there to be found then in a farewell that would only cause him pain?

It had nothing to do with the fact that Loki could not risk his resolve wavering at the sight of wounded brown eyes.

He was a god, and it was time he went home.

Though he had yet to ask, he was certain Thor would not be coming with him. Nothing had happened that would convince his brother not to stay among the mortals. Something deep within him shifted uneasily at the thought of returning home without Thor but he shook it off.

It would be better this way. He would be Odin's heir at last, and sit in his rightful place by the throne.

Thor's words from days before echoed back to him, as if the wind in the trees was whispering in his ear. *A cold throne and a colder heart? That is not what life is about, brother.*

No. Thor was wrong. He would return and be the heir, and none would scoff at his magic again. But those here had never scoffed at it.
It made no difference. Loki was a creature of magic, and he would never give that up. Not for anything. Or anyone. He just couldn't.

What would he be, without magic?

"Loki, please," Thor said suddenly, and this time, surely, would come the reasons why he should stay. "It's not too late. You can still say goodbye."

"This again?" he sneered, pulling away from the hand Thor reached beseechingly towards him. "No, Thor, I will not delay any longer."

The guilt in his chest seemed to grow as he walked, until it rivalled the pull of the magic ahead of him. There was no reason to feel so guilty simply because he hadn't said goodbye to the Musketeers. They would be disappointed for a time, maybe even sad, and then they would move on.

The thought made his step falter again. Sad. They would be sad, wouldn't they? None but his mother and brother had ever given him any reason to believe his loss would be lamented, and yet Loki knew the men he'd left behind would actually miss him.

He thought of Athos's hard earned regard, d'Artagnan's eager welcome, even Porthos's grudging acceptance.

The guilt grew stronger.

Loki growled and pushed the thought away angrily. What did it matter to him if they were sad? Sentiment was for fools, and the sooner they learned that, the better off they would be.

He could hear his father's voice in his head, cold as he voiced indifferent approval of Loki's decision. Sentiment is a weakness: it was what Odin had always taught. He didn't care that Aramis would be sad.

Oh.

The guilt burned within his stomach at the thought of the man. Aramis would be more than sad, he'd be, well, heartbroken, but it wasn't Loki's concern, he had a duty to Asgard, and it wasn't like he had asked the man to fall in love with him…

But it didn't matter. Even if he had wanted to stay, he would be left powerless and mortal, forced to watch those self-sacrificing idiots get themselves cut down one by one. What if Aramis was injured again? If he were being honest with himself, he knew he couldn't just watch the man die. He couldn't be helpless. Magic was too much a part of him.

And Aramis had understood, hadn't he? He knew Loki needed to leave. If he had heard his thoughts just now, he would've said something ridiculously gallant like knowing that you'll live is enough for me.

The thought made his chest feel tight with guilt, and he sent a flare of magic arcing out of him to brush against the trees and the creatures of the twilight, grounding himself in nature before his thoughts could lead him down a road he had no wish to traverse.

He didn't realize how fast he'd begun to walk until he spilled out of the underbrush into the clearing. A rush of magic drove away the chaos in his thoughts and left him feeling free.

This was what awaited him. His birthright, his place on a throne and the power to shape the very fabric of reality. Magic burned through him, leaving glorious warmth in its wake. It was addicting,
and he could not lose it.

He was about to step into the circle, unwilling to wait even a moment longer to embrace that marvelous power, when he heard Thor clear his throat.

"Loki, wait."

Fingers clenching and unclenching with his eagerness to be gone, he turned slowly to look at Thor. "What?"

Thor met his gaze, and Loki thought surely this would be the moment he was told he was being an idiot, that he should stay. But Thor simply smiled rather sadly and said, "I will miss you, brother."

"Why have you decided to stay?" he found himself asking, cursing himself for giving in to sentiment, but he found himself unable to leave it like that.

"I care about them," Thor said simply. "Don't you?"

"Of course I do," Loki snapped, irritability making him frank. "But I also care about Mother. And the throne."

"I care about mother too, but I don't belong on Asgard. I belong here." Thor said it with such simple certainty that Loki gaped at him, stunned for the second time in as many hours. How was it Thor could make such an enormous decision so easily?

Thor stepped forward to rest his hand against Loki's neck. "Tell our parents that I will be happy," he went on, oblivious to the fact that he'd shocked Loki with his unexpected maturity. "Tell Mother, especially. I think she'll understand. Father won't be pleased, but even he must realize I was never suited for the throne. You'll be a fine king, brother." A shadow crossed his face. "I hope that will make you happy."

"It's all I ever wanted," Loki said, surprise stripping away his defenses and forcing him to resort to honesty. He was unable to resist the urge to try, just briefly, to make Thor see sense. "It's all you ever wanted."

Thor chuckled, a bittersweet sound. "Once upon a time, that was true. But I found something better than a throne, brother." He tightened his hand briefly against Loki's neck. "Take care of yourself. I will miss you, and I will remember you."

He stepped away, a half smile playing at his lips. Suddenly Loki found the pull ever so slightly less, and realized that this was one goodbye he couldn't skip.

But how did one say goodbye, exactly?

"I thought you were choosing mortality?" he asked, grappling for a safe subject in the wake of Thor's sentimental declarations.

Thor raised an eyebrow at him in a move he must have adopted from Athos. "I already did."

Loki stared at him, aghast. Had he really? He reached out with his magic and found his brother's presence. It still glowed, crackling like lightning, but it was dimmer, less powerful.

Thor was mortal.

Loki felt a sense of horror sweep over him. He had to leave, now. He could never allow that to
happen to himself. He stepped to the center of the circle, feeling the power within him swell as he began to call on it to carry him home.

"Wait, I forgot!" Thor fumbled within his cloak for a moment. "I thought you might want this back."

Smiling brightly, he held out Loki's golden sheath. Loki took it.

Thor hesitated a moment longer, then murmured, "Goodbye, brother," before walking back into the forest.

Loki stared at the sheath in his hands. He reached down to brush his fingers against the elegant leather of the one he wore now and noticed the emerald silk he still wore. Aramis's gifts.

His hand tightened around the golden sheath. He had to exchange it. He could not take mortal creations back to Asgard. And yet he was loath to remove it. But why?

The answer was startlingly simple. Because Aramis had given it to him.

Strangely, he found himself wishing he had kept the crown of flowers Aramis had gifted him in the meadow, when he had spoken angrily against his father. If he could not see your value, then he is a fool, and you do not need his crown.

The magic called to him, whispering through his veins, but this time he ignored it, caught up in his thoughts.

It shouldn't be possible, and it was shamefully, disgustingly sentimental, but the crown he now itched to bear was made of wildflowers, not gold.

Could it really be that simple?

The thought of warm brown eyes swept the call of magic from his blood, and he found his hand raising to a touch the spot where Aramis had left his mark that morning. It was long since healed, but the heat of it remained.

Heat to a god that had known only the cold, acceptance to a prince that had known only rejection, and love to a man that had known only hatred.

Loki let the golden sheath fall from his fingers to land in the center of the circle.

He wouldn't be needing it anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhhhhh, we are nearing the end of this part of our quest, but will Loki wear a crown of gold or wildflowers? This angst hurts, please cry with us in the comments. - C

I DON'T WANT IT TO BE OVER. And yes, you should all grieve with us, we need the support. - L
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

The calls of sirens bring sailors to their watery dooms. What is worse, to fall amidst what they love, or to deny the call and spend a lifetime e'er wondering what it felt like? - C

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki was on a precipice.

How many years had he spent waiting? Waiting for recognition, waiting for maturity, waiting for the throne, waiting for life?

Far, far too many.

He had spent so long waiting in the shadows, trying to burst into the light, and he would wait no longer. Light was on the line, and it was the light of power eternal, or it was the light of love.

Both so very heady, one he had been born with and the other he had never truly known, not until now, not until a mortal had taken one look at him and decided that he had fallen from on high. Loki had not waited for this, but confronted with choice, with his fingers tracing swirling patterns on leather as his eyes traced ones on earth, he wasn't sure if he could live without either.

Could he give up a chance of honest acceptance and happiness, for the wings of power?

Could he give up those blackened, twisted, but oh-so-powerful wings for one so pure?

For was that not what Aramis was? A beam of brightness in a world that he had been so convinced was dark? A mortal who saw in such colour, such optimism, and it was infectious.

If this was life, it was an explosion of colour and heat and sentiment, and…

He had waited so very long.

At the back of his mind, Yggdrasil whispered, low and tempting, but there was another voice now, one of sweetness and smiles.

And the latter sounded so very sad.

I shall not beg you to stay, the voice had said, just after cutting off an endearment that Loki had become so used to that the loss of it felt like the lash of a whip.

Loki heard the words, but he remembered other things, he remembered Aramis' smile falling, Porthos' glare when he had said that he was leaving, Athos' shock, d'Artagnan's sadness, Thor's absolute conviction that he had found what he had been waiting for.

Not just life, but love.

Aramis had not begged him to stay, but not because he hadn't wanted to – that had been obvious in the absolute agony in his expression – but because he hadn't wanted Loki to hurt.
It hit him like a horse hoof to the ribs, directly over his frantically beating heart. Aramis thought himself **unworthy**.

Unworthy. Of Loki.

*Oh*, Aramis.

The man who had taken bullets for him, had bowed so very gracefully for him, had waited for him, had *adored* him, thought himself unworthy.

Of a failed prince who held lives in his hand and sneered at sentiment.

Loki had never felt so small, so insignificant. He was a god amongst gods, an immortal amongst mortals, and yet he was not fit to lick the dirt from Aramis' boots if he had made Aramis feel any less than the wonderful man that he was.

What had he done?

Loki was walking, and Yggdrasil was screaming, and Aramis was hurting, and he was the *cause*.

He had caused Aramis pain after the man had gone to such lengths to spare him from it.

Perhaps he truly was the monster his father had named him.

His feet pounded on the ground, his footsteps quicker, faster, until he was running. But not running away, not anymore, but running *to*.

Running to say goodbye.

Loki broke out of the trees, familiar sights assailing him, the inn where they had fearfully clattered into to get a dying Aramis to a bed, the stable yard where he had felt hot breath and teeth against his neck, the clearing where Aramis had stumbled into him and he had felt perfection against his lips.

He hesitated only once, at the threshold of the front door, his magic tearing itself into a frenzy until it thundered in his veins. Had he stopped, had he turned, he would have seen Porthos in the shadows, a shattered sigh of relief echoing around the yard.

Had he lingered longer, he would have seen Thor appear at Porthos' side, a small smile on his brother's face as golden forehead touched dark, and Loki would have heard a quiet, "I told you he would return."

But Loki had eyes only for Aramis, and perhaps that was best, for false hope was far worse.

He followed steps he had taken so many times; felt as if his path was worn into the floorboards, the wood would remember him long after he had passed on.

*Remembered.*

It was so very difficult and so very easy to turn the handle, to open the door to a room he had waged wars in; the war of death, the war of sentiment, the war of watching Aramis passing from this life into Porthos' arms.

He had waged it all from a chair.

The same chair that Aramis was now sat in.
Agonised brown eyes whipped to his and they closed for a moment, Aramis' handsome face turning to the ceiling in a desperate plea as a strangled, despairing noise left his tan throat.

"Aramis," he breathed helplessly, a whole new war raging within him.

A war of lights.

Aramis took a long breath and it was ragged and shallow and it tore at Loki's guilt, at his raw wound of sentiment. He was poised in the doorway, and when Aramis opened his eyes again, he took a step in and closed the door.

Somehow, it slammed shut.

"Loki," Aramis said, his voice hoarse, but when he swallowed, it steadied. "Is everything okay?"

No, Loki wanted to say, nothing is okay, but the words were locked inside him, writhing along with his magic in a painful storm that he could never let go.

He could not, he could not let it go, not the words, not the power, not his wings.

Not Aramis.

Aramis softened then, his limbs relaxing as such familiar concern crossed his attractive face, and he stood from that damned chair.

"What is wrong, mon ange?" An accustomed voice, a touch on his jaw, a tremulous smile, a feather brush on his lips.

War.

But war was not won by swords, or blood, or rage, or power, it was won by men who loved.

And nobody loved as Aramis did, even if he loved broken princes who had almost broken a heart so precious and freely given.

Loki looked at Aramis, he looked outside, he looked within, and he realised something.

Silence.

There was no siren’s call, no remnants of magic that tried to pull him away, only a sudden let up of pressure.

The war had been won.

Now, when Loki thought goodbye, it was to the stars.

"I've made my choice, Aramis," he said quietly, and felt his power rush in a useless fury. It needled his skin and tried to pierce his flesh, desperate to be released and rule.

Rule from a cold throne that he had once waited so long for.

Aramis’ face raced with emotion, guilt and grief, adoration and anguish. Loki would have considered it so weak once, but now he knew that feeling emotion was strength, because Aramis was the strongest man that he had ever met.

He could not withstand emotion without Aramis at his side.
He could not withstand life without him.

"The stars will shine brighter with you amongst them, Loki," Aramis choked out, and Loki felt the grief-stricken statement clench at his chest until breath was a mere memory.

One day, and one day far sooner than he had expected, that is all breath would be. But a life well lived, a life well loved? That is what would make those considerably fewer breaths worthwhile.

Loki's hands lifted to cup a jaw dusted with dark hair, his fingers tangled in curls as his thumbs brushed tan cheekbones, and all he could do was stare. Stare in absolute amazement at the man who would embrace heartbreak if it meant that Loki would be happy.

But happiness was only possible with one person, and Loki was holding him ever so tenderly in his palms.

Breath whooshed from his lungs, and he realised that he had well and truly fallen.

His immortal heart burst with love, and in its place, was Aramis' mortal one.

"Aramis," he whispered, and resolution was a gloriously pleasant ache as he leaned forward to smile against stunned lips, "I choose you, you foolish mortal."

There was a soft exhalation and then every one of Loki's muscles clenched in absolute agony. There was a blinding flash of light and then his beloved power streamed from his shoulder blades, excruciating heat ripping from his flesh. He tensed so very tightly, a frantic part of him crying out at the loss and desperate to hold onto it.

His strength was leaving him, and he was so very weak without it.

Aramis solidified under his palms, Aramis' prayers brushing over his skin as he kissed him, grounding him.

Strengthening him.

Anguish screamed in Loki's chest as his light left, leaving a hole that allowed Aramis' fire to flare into burning, caring existence in its place. Gone was the void, gone were the shields, the walls, the defences.

Loki almost stumbled, his muscles quivering, but Aramis was there to hold him steady and kiss away his vulnerable gasps. He shuddered in Aramis' grip, feeling so very fragile now, so very mortal.

"You can't say that anymore," Aramis laughed, a tear streaking down his cheek that Loki immediately brushed away, fortifying him with the urge to protect the man who held his newly mortal heart.

It stuttered, slow and breakable, but it beat for one man alone, and that man would not break it.

"No, I suppose I can't," Loki mused, and it sounded broken as his forehead rested on Aramis'.

Aramis nudged his nose against his, a soft smile curving his sensual lips as he said, "You're still mon ange."

There was a hot pressure at the back of Loki's throat, a well of anxiety, of feeling so very small. "Am I?"
"Yes," Aramis breathed, "my fallen angel."

Loki took a shuddering breath, terror creeping up his spine until Aramis' hand stroked affectionately along it. It steadied him, reminded him. "You are worth falling for, Aramis."

Aramis inhaled sharply and the affection bloomed into something else, something hotter. Aramis' smile turned deliciously sly. "All mine."

Desire surged, intense and wonderful and far more potent than it had ever been before. There was a fire burning and it consumed Loki whole, lighting nerve endings and sparking heat behind his eyes.

On an instinct already developed, he tugged Aramis' hips closer and hungrily kissed him, biting a plump lip when Aramis took a second to respond, surprise a tangible thing between them.

Aramis groaned then and fell against him, his hands hot and fast as they moved over Loki's chest. Loki's fingers twitched to send a tendril of magic to undo the ties of Aramis' shirt, and he flinched when nothing happened, when emptiness responded.

Emptiness until Aramis immediately tore at his shirt and white fire roared in its place.

Aramis was pre-empting him, doing the things that Loki would usually accomplish with his magic.

Affection made him shake, and he stillled the quivers by driving a hand up Aramis' back to tangle in his hair and tug, exposing the tan stretch of his neck. It was Aramis shivering now, and Loki smirked against his jugular, drawing the vein in with his teeth to hear the delicious gasp that followed.

It was the same area that he always returned to, as if he belonged there.

He did.

It was his right.

The fire was smouldering now, slumbering, banked, but Loki did not sleep. He sat awake by the window, sat in the war chair, watching Midgard's moon make its lonely course through the sky, and slowly came to terms with never leaving this planet's surface again.

There were new bruises on his neck and they hadn't faded.

They hadn't faded.

His calm was like the horizon, smooth and steady and straight, but sometimes it jut upwards with the peak of a mountain and then he thought that he would be sick with fear.

He was stranded; floundering like a fish out of water, like a spider with no web, like a bird with broken wings. He would choke on a breath, panic making his weak mortal heart skip beats until his whole body thrummed with anxiety.

Quite by instinct, he would reach out with a sense that wasn't there anymore, and when he flinched at the gaping void, he would reach out physically for another sort of light.

The light that had rightfully won.
Loki did not know how many times he grounded himself to a man that brought his nerves back under control, brought him relief in the feel of dark curls against his fingers or soft breaths in the still night.

Aramis slept peacefully on, but he always curled towards the touch, a small smile on his face when Loki couldn't resist murmuring his name and feeling his heartbeat stutter for quite a different reason.

Aramis had been surprisingly gentle with him, backing off with a force of will that had impressed even as it had angered him.

He wanted, but Aramis was in no mood to rush.

Ridiculous man.

Loki thought it with a smile, and the smile stayed until the moon disappeared and the first of the sun's rays peeked over the horizon.

A new day, a new life, a new heart.

Hot breath against his palm, soft lips on his fingers, brown eyes blinking sleepily up at him.

Loki found that his voice was hoarse. "Good morning."

Aramis hesitated for a moment too long and Loki felt his horizon jut upwards again, but then Aramis had clambered into his lap and their lips came together in a furious clash that Loki readily responded to.

"It wasn't a dream," Aramis panted, and Loki felt the smile against his own.

"It feels like one," he replied wonderingly, and when Aramis gave him a kiss that felt final, he growled, "or a nightmare."

"Impatient, aren't you?" Aramis teased as he sat back, and he said it as if he was pleasantly surprised.

"I have been awake all night," he explained with an arch of his eyebrow, and Aramis' eyes widened.

"Well," Aramis said finally, and Loki realised that d'Artagnan had a worthy skill in evoking pity if it meant that he could achieve what he wanted. Until Aramis continued, "We'd best feed you."

"Aramis," he snarled, but Aramis had already slid his fingers along Loki's jaw and dashed out of the room.

It felt rather like stalking prey, following him downstairs, but when he stalked into the eating room and found Aramis beaming at a similarly sickening Porthos and Thor…

Well, he had to focus on not smiling.

"Brother!" Thor called, and Loki felt his stomach clench, anxiety shooting through his veins at the possible confrontation, at the discussion. "I found that jam you like."

"Oh," Loki said simply, feeling a fool. Of course Thor wouldn't say anything, he knew him too well.

Everyone, it seemed, knew him better than he knew himself.
So, instead, he fell onto a chair and distractedly noticed Porthos giving Aramis a one-armed hug on the far side of the room.

Thor thrust a plate in front of Loki's face and he took it tentatively, following his brother's arm to see tired blue eyes and a bright but definitely weary smile.

Actually, Thor looked exhausted.

"Mortality isn't a good look on you," Loki said, but for some reason it was without his usual cutting tone, sounding almost fond.

Porthos returned with a distinctly dirty grin and said lowly, "Now, I gotta disagree with that, an' I disagree hard."

Loki blinked at that statement, and it was only when a blush crept up Thor's cheeks that the meaning trickled into Loki's brain.

An appalled squawk of noise came from his mouth and he looked away in absolute disgust. Porthos was a boor, and Thor was…

Well, his brother.

Disgusting.

He looked up to see Aramis' eyes sparkling with barely restrained mirth, but there was affectionate pity there, too. It wasn't enough to spur him into action, so Loki attempted to mimic the look d'Artagnan seemed so fond of.

Immediately, Aramis strode behind Porthos and smacked him on the back of the head. "Nonsense, they're both positively angelic."

Thor gave Aramis a shy smile of gratitude, and although Loki was marvelling at the potential destruction that a simple look could achieve, he frowned at Aramis' terminology.

Aramis winked at his affront as he came to stand by his shoulder and murmured, "Only ever you, mon ange, but look at him."

They both looked at Thor who was currently licking jam off of his fingers and trying to put some of it on Porthos' nose. Aramis' voice was still only for his ears as he said, "Thor's happy."

He was.

Yes, Thor was tired, and he looked so very mortal, but there was joy in his laughter and an absence of stiffness in his spine that had been there for as long as Loki could remember.

Loki frowned when Porthos licked one of Thor's fingers, but he couldn't deny his brother the stupid smile that followed, or even the little one that curved his own lips at the stupidly affectionate sight. Porthos' grin softened when Thor nuzzled his neck.

"They both are," Loki remarked in soft surprise.

"Yes," Aramis said happily, settling at his side and resting his cheek against Loki's shoulder.

Aramis' happiness was genuine, Loki was sure of it, but it still confused him. "Doesn't it…?" he trailed off when he realised he wasn't sure how to phrase the awkward question.
Aramis looked up at him from his shoulder and chuckled, "What? Bother me that one of my best friends is ridiculously happy with someone perfect for him? No."

Loki's horizon had settled again, and he wasn't quite sure when his fingers had curled into Aramis' hair except that he was suddenly aware that Aramis was trying incredibly hard not to instinctively bare his neck to him.

He flashed Aramis a heated smile and let him go, unsure whether that made them even or whether Aramis was going to get him back for that later.

"Are they perfect together?" Loki asked, turning back to the sickeningly bright pair, and smirking when Aramis huffed out impatiently.

Revenge, then.

It was a delight to ponder later, when he wasn't still trying to settle into his own skin. Instead, he carefully regarded Thor and Porthos, remembered how they had gotten on even from the beginning.

Matches were made on Midgard as well as heaven, it seemed.

"No, they aren't." Loki decided, and tried not to chuckle victoriously when Aramis frowned. The declaration came quite naturally, straight from the fragile organ behind his ribs, "We are."

"Ah," Aramis replied, delighted, "I won't argue with that."

"I should think not," he remarked dryly, raising an eyebrow at the palm resting very high on his thigh. Aramis attempted to look innocent, it failed miserably.

Loki found that he didn't mind in the slightest.

There was a very dejected set of footsteps coming down the stairs and Loki almost snapped his spine trying to turn around, tension bubbling along his bones again as he felt so very unprepared.

Aramis' palm squeezed and Loki settled once more.

It gave him the strength to keep his smile hidden when d'Artagnan sloped around the door and stopped dead in his tracks. There was a murmur of disapproval from behind him, and then Athos shoved the boy bodily into the room.

"You stayed!" D'Artagnan cried happily, and gave him a stupid grin as he bounded over to Thor for what was probably a rib-cracking hug.

Athos was a man after Loki's own heart, newly mortal as it was, and merely gave him a nod. Loki mirrored the tiny half smile when Athos asked, "Training tomorrow, then?"

"Of course, Athos."

A satisfied gleam was all he received, and then Athos was off to clasp Thor's forearm and murmur something about an immortal grip.

There was a ripple of laughter, and then it was all past.

Then it was just the six of them sat around a table, picking at food, talking around mouthfuls and smiling at the considerably sticky antics that occurred when d'Artagnan tried to take Loki's jam.

Athos refused to let d'Artagnan wipe it off, Porthos threw Aramis a look, who then tossed a cup of
water to 'help', and Thor helpfully offered the boy a slice of bread.

It was madness, but it was a rhythm that Loki had not been aware was already familiar.

It soothed Loki to realise that there were not as many differences as he had feared. Aramis was still flush against his side, positively aglow with contentedness, Porthos teasing Thor and d’Artagnan snickering as he feasted on treats from the cook, Athos observing them all quietly with the occasional wry comment that made Loki’s lip twitch.

Normality really was very… normal.

As was Athos’ sigh and their automatic silence, ready for the day to truly begin.

"Saddle up," Athos said, and it looked as if he said it with relief. Whether it was at their safety after another mission, or because he could say it without feeling like he had left someone behind, Loki wasn’t sure.

"Time to go home," Aramis murmured happily, and when Loki felt his horizon buckle, Aramis was there with a soft kiss on his jaw until Loki relaxed his hold on the small of Aramis’ back.

It was normal to keep his hand there as they walked out into the sunshine, normal to talk to his mare as she butted him in greeting and spat at Porthos, normal to gather their mounts and stretch one last time before starting on the road.

What wasn’t normal was Aramis’ disappearance, and Loki wasn’t aware how tense he was until he saw dark curls and relaxed.

Then he saw what Aramis was carrying, and he thought that he might retch.

"Your cloak, mon ange," Aramis said brightly, holding it out to him, and Loki’s fingers curled to get away from it.

That sweep of green had once meant so much to him, but now it felt like clinging to the past, clinging to a part of him that he would never wield again. Not power, not magic, not Gungnir. Loki would never hold those things, but he would hold Aramis.

"It is not who I am anymore", he confided quietly, and took the cloak only to swirl it around Aramis’ shoulders and hold him close. "It looked better on you, at any rate."

"I doubt that," Aramis replied with a sly smile that turned fond, "but thank you."

Aramis glanced at the sweltering sun, shrugged the fabric off and stowed it safely in his saddlebags. When Loki would have protested its safe-keeping, Aramis stepped closer, hidden by the close press of horses, and pressed a kiss to Loki’s lips that had their eyes closing on contented sighs.

"It is only a cloak, mon ange, and this is only the beginning of our journey."

Loki’s heartbeat did not stutter this time, rather it steadied, strengthened, and it pulsed for one man alone.

This was only the beginning.

_Shrank fin._
And so endeth the first part of this saga, or, what we affectionately call, *The fic that has consumed us*. We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did, and if you did, please let us know, we would love some feedback and ideas for the sequel!

FEAR NOT, we're already writing the next part, and it's going to be chock-full of fluff and smut (seriously, we've already written a fair amount of the smut). Thank you so much for reading, we love you! - C

You are a monster for writing freaking 'shark fin' instead of just 'fin' like I wanted, but you know what? I'm leaving it. So HA. And yes, everyone should watch out for the sequel, it will be amazing, and we've already got two chapters written! C, being the genius that she is, has come up with the name 'A Flowering Crown,' which is now our working title, so keep an eye out for it!

Also, a shout out to my brilliantly amazing co-author who I first met seven months ago today. Literally cannot image what life would be like had we not met. Clearly it was fate. YOU ROCK AND I LOVE YOU. - L

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