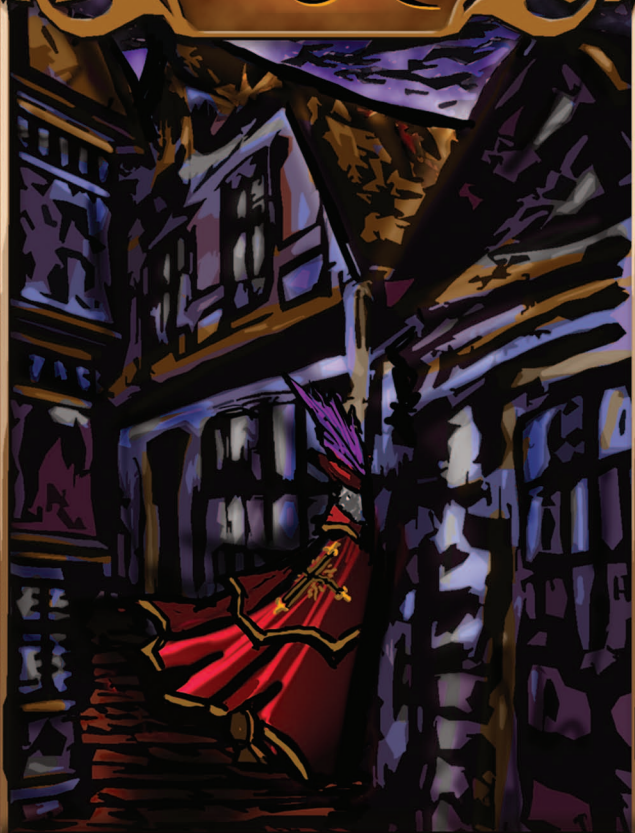




THE CARDINAL'S HEIR



❁ IAKI DEMAREST ❁

THE
CARDINAL'S HEIR

BY

JAKI DEMAREST

Dedication,

To my mother, the first person to see humor, possibilities, and a future in my words; to my father and brother, for years of olive theft and practical jokes; to Joshua Engel, the Rude Mechanicals, the Mongol Horde, the College Avenue Players and other friends, for good times; to Bill Fawcett, for the help he's given me over the years; to Scott Heinig, the first person to teach me to use a sword; and to Paul Nelson, because my writing career and my life as I know it began with his friendship.

November 2004

Published by Medallion Press, Inc.

225 Seabreeze Ave.

Palm Beach, FL 33480

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Demarest, Jaki.

The cardinal's heir / by Jaki Demarest.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-932815-10-4 (pbk.)

1. Richelieu, Armand Jean du Plessis, duc de, 1585-1642--Death and burial--Fiction. 2. France--History--17th century--Fiction. 3. Women detectives--France--Fiction. 4. Inheritance and succession--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.E454C37 2004

813'.54--dc22

2004020507

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Kris Andersen, for acting as my beta-reader, to my mother, for reading faithfully through many years of rewrites, and to Pam Ficarella, for being the most outstanding editor I've ever encountered. *Cardinal's Heir* is a better book for her sharp and careful eyes. Thanks also to Bill Forstchen, for helping and encouraging me along the way, and to the writers of *Cruel Hoax*, for a live role-playing game called *The Kings' Musketeers* that inspired the first draft of this book (very different) and literally changed my life. Paul Nelson played Tréville, I played Françoise, the fiendishly brilliant Ken Rolston played my poor doomed husband Antoine, and you're holding the (eventual) result. Bill Fawcett nursed the book through much of the process and talked me into adding elements of eroticism and the occult to the mix. Without those, it would probably have ended its life as a carefully researched (but unpublished) historical novel.

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GOLD IMPRINT
MEDALLION PRESS, INC.
FLORIDA, USA

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CHAPTER ONE

PARIS, DECEMBER 1642

O Lord, Françoise prayed silently, In Your infinite might and wisdom, please feel free to smite all the men in this chamber who are prettier than I am. You might conceivably start with that blue-eyed, blond, smug bastard over there, if You were feeling particularly generous.

You can start anytime, Lord. Smite away. And . . . GO! Anytime, Lord, really. No? Nothing? Ah, well. Hastily Conceived Proof of the Existence of a Benign and Loving God: negative for today.

Françoise shook her head in amused irritation, forcing her eyes to continue their jaded, professional scan of the crowded ballroom. Inevitably, they worked their way over dancing, drinking, bickering, flirting courtiers and right back to the Comte de Tréville, of their own mindless accord. *Stupid eyes. You should know better.*

She'd had a passing acquaintance with Tréville for the last dozen years or more, but she'd limited that acquaintance for the best of reasons. Arnaud-Jean du Peyrer, Comte de Tréville, was the Captain of the King's Musketeers. Françoise was the right hand of Tréville's deadliest enemy, Cardinal Richelieu, the brilliant (and occasionally ruthless) chief minister to Louis XIII. And that was the least of her secrets. Tréville was quite literally the last man on earth she wanted prying into them.

Staring at him in the middle of His Majesty's Winter Fête was no way to ensure her continued survival at court, either.

Tréville and the Comte de la Fère were talking together halfway across L'Hôtel de Ville's crowded Grande Salle des Fêtes, an enormous, brilliantly lit gallery with gilt-traced, blood red walls and tall, narrow, lead-paned windows. Dancers whirled past them in flashes of jewel color, and in her mind she brushed them aside like gaudy insects, her eyes intent on Tréville. La Fère said something to make him laugh, giving him an excuse to flash flawless white teeth.

Disgusting, she thought. No one has the right to teeth like that. I'll bet they're false. The hair will have to go too; I'm getting awfully tired of men having prettier hair than mine. Hers was an impossible coppery mess that generally did whatever it wanted, no matter what she or anyone else tried to do to it, and it had an unfortunate tendency to tie itself in Gordian knots when no one was looking. Tréville's was blond, falling over his broad shoulders in the sort of long, artlessly perfect waves that she'd always found just a little irritating, mostly because they were inevitably to be found on other people's heads. And his blue-gray velvet doublet and breeches exactly matched the color of his eyes, a touch of potential vanity she found herself smiling at.

Hair? Clothes? Captain? Since when have I devolved to thinking about this? Brain, brain, must have forgotten to put the brain in before I left the house tonight . . . Ah! Now I know what it is I'm finding so . . . noteworthy . . . about our dear captain. No protection amulet. The man isn't wearing a single protection amulet. Is he that confident, or just that ignorant of Magic? Pensively she chewed the red paint off her lower lip. An innocent, in the French court. Or perhaps someone so dangerously gifted that his Wards and Protections eluded even her. *Either way, she thought, not good. I might forget to*

dis trust the innocent, or watch the fellow Sorcier. Speaking of which . . . back to it. I'll admit, he's got me genuinely curious, now.

The Musketeer was solidly built, lithe and wiry rather than imposing. *Come to think of it, he's only a little taller than I am. But, then, I'm what could be politely described as Amazonian.* He laughed again, and Françoise quietly gnashed her slightly crooked teeth at the sight of all those perfect ones. *Yes, she decided ruefully, I really do hate men who are prettier than I am. Perhaps I should shoot him.*

She felt a warm, familiar presence behind her, and turned to find her cousin Madeleine bustling toward her. A plumply pretty figure in an exquisite claret silk gown, Marie-Madeleine de Vignerot, Duchesse d'Aiguillon, had an unfortunately rare combination of wealth and genuinely excellent taste. Françoise's own amethyst-beaded, plum velvet gown was the best in her wardrobe, at least her favorite, but it couldn't compete with the sheer richness of Madeleine's garnet-studded, gold embroidered confection. *Ah, well. Wealth and taste. Pick one. Come to think of it, if we got a choice, I would have picked "wealth" and I consequently probably got neither.*

"Françoise Marguerite de Palis, you wicked creature, who are you staring at?" Madeleine teased huskily, and as always, the use of her hideous full name made Françoise wince just a bit even as she smiled. The myopic Madeleine peered through her *lorgnon* at Tréville and la Fère, and shot Françoise a knowing grin. "Not bad," she murmured. "So, which one were you watching, the dashing and heroic captain, or the jaded, alcoholic, and unobtainable la Fère?"

"La Fère the wife-murderer wouldn't be my type," Françoise drawled. "Tréville might, under better circumstances, but I somewhat doubt his taste runs to Cardinalist spies."

“You never know. Besides, why bother staring at him if you weren’t planning to do anything about it?”

“Take a good look at him, Mad, and try to do it without being too obvious.”

Madeleine complied with an amused roll of her light hazel eyes, looked him up and down, and gave up the game. “All right, what’s wrong with him?”

“No protection amulets.”

“Really?”

“Really. Next, you’ll ask me why. The answer, of course, is ‘I don’t know,’ which is why I’m watching him so avidly. I’ve checked his aura, and he doesn’t have a stitch of Warding or Protection anywhere as far as I can tell. He’s either dangerously innocent, or very, very good.”

“Or suicidal,” Madeleine murmured thoughtfully. “And what a waste! Speaking of wastes, are you sure that’s the only reason you were staring at him?”

“Yes, Mad, I’m sorry, but that was it.” *Liar*, she chided herself ruefully.

“I still think you should give him a tumble,” Madeleine whispered with a grin, tapping her round, rouged cheek with her white goose feather fan. Françoise rolled dark amused eyes at her, unfazed as always by her outrageous cousin. “After all, what’s stopping you? That pig of a husband of yours? Never stopped him a day or night in all your married life.” Her voice rose and fell on the conspiratorial note of a village gossip.

Françoise bit back a quiet sigh and shifted to a more comfortable position against the wall behind her, bracing herself. Her marriage, such as it was, was one of Madeleine’s most tireless subjects of bawdy, well-meaning advice.

“Antoine’s not exactly a pig, cousin,” Françoise said mildly. “He’s just . . .”

“Cold? Insensitive? Arrogant? Conceited? A pompous, strutting windbag with delusions of sainthood?” Madeleine offered enthusiastically. Françoise permitted herself a smirk, but refused to add anything to her cousin’s canonical list. Madeleine sighed, frowned, and twisted a lock of graying chestnut hair around her finger.

“You’ll fray the ends of your hair if you keep doing that, you know,” Françoise chided her affectionately.

“I know.” Madeleine shrugged. “Stop trying to change the subject.”

“Why ever would I do that?” Françoise inquired dryly.

“Oh, enough,” Madeleine huffed in exasperation. “Now, about Tréville . . .”

“I thought the subject was my pig of a husband.”

“Antoine? Why would I want to talk about him? Now, Tréville, on the other hand, has possibilities,” Madeleine announced proudly.

“The Captain of the Musketeers, and our Uncle Richelieu’s staunchest opponent, possibilities?” Françoise teased her lightly. “Which one do you suppose would have me killed or imprisoned first?”

“What they don’t know . . .”

“Won’t hurt me?” Françoise finished for her wryly. “Yes, it would. You know that. No sense in even letting myself think about it.”

“Françoise, you’ve practically lived the life of a nun for the last fifteen years!”

“And I intend to go on doing exactly that. *Living* being the operative word,” she muttered grimly.

Madeleine frowned and made an inarticulate moue of disapproval. Her favorite frown . . . the especially bullheaded one . . . began to manifest like a storm cloud. “You know, young lady, life is short,” she observed testily.

“So the best philosophers and worst poets tell us,” Françoise agreed blandly.

“And you deserve something better than that great lout of an unappreciative boor of a . . . Oh, never mind!” She sighed, frustrated beyond measure by the carefully inexpressive canvas of her cousin’s face. “You do whatever you want to do. You always did. But life is short, and you’re wasting it on a husband who’ll never offer you as much consideration.” She gathered up her burgundy skirts with irritated dignity and stalked off, and Françoise carefully bit off any reaction. She frankly didn’t have the luxury. Not then, not ever.

Madeleine disappeared into the lush, noisy crush of velvet coats and elegant gowns, flirtation and fevered hubris, and Françoise watched her until she was completely obscured. *Life is short, eh?* she grumbled to herself. *How much shorter would mine be if I listened to well-meaning relatives? Mordieux . . .*

As if on cue, her eyes wandered back to Tréville, right back to the quiet, unobtrusive study she gave any good opponent. (At least, that was what she told herself.) Right-handed, but then she’d known that already. Had a nervous habit of running that hand thoughtfully over his close-cropped beard, but she knew that too. She’d kept Tréville under close surveillance for years; his valet was being extremely well paid to keep her up to date on his movements, habits, secrets, and love affairs, and at this point, anything she didn’t know about Tréville probably wasn’t worth knowing.

That had to be it, had to explain the odd sensation of familiarity she’d gotten off him in the handful of times she’d been in the same room with him. There were ways of forcing that familiarity, of course. There were ways of delving deeply into another psyche, prying out every secret a man possessed, but they left the seeker vulnerable to attack. Worse, if the victim

were a magically powerless Nul, as Tréville seemed to be, there wouldn't have been much of a mind left by the time she was finished. No, she'd never personally forced that level of psychic rape on Tréville or anyone else, and she never would, her position as Richelieu's master of spies be damned. But the sense of knowing remained, for no reason she could name.

After a moment, Tréville the supposed Nul felt someone's eyes on him, turned and caught her staring. *Oh, brilliant. Marvelous. Subtle. Well done. Françoise de Palis, Sorcière, master of spies, and keeper of state secrets finally succumbs to clumsiness at the advanced old age of thirty-four. Read all about it in Renaudot's Gazette de France.* She nodded politely and turned her attention casually to something else. And she felt his eyes remain on her, studying her as intently as she'd been studying him. It was an experience she found oddly disquieting.

Françoise wasn't unused to being stared at, by rakes, jades, scandalmongers, or bored courtiers in search of the next tidbit of gossip. But Tréville didn't particularly fit into those neat, comfortable, and easily discarded categories. How much had he felt her eyes on him? How long? Was he truly a Nul? And why the hell was he watching her now? There was nothing about her to excite comment; there were women better dressed, more beautiful, many of them dancing back and forth between them in an elaborate andante. There must have been something . . . someone . . . more interesting for him to look at. An enormous room full of somethings and someones, in point of fact. Finally she glanced back at him almost in exasperation, and he didn't look away. He smiled at her and etched her a flawlessly graceful bow.

Françoise's slanting dark brows knitted together, almost imperceptibly. What was the man playing at? She curtsied back at him, smiled a bit unsteadily, and turned away, forcing

herself to walk out of the room. A tactical retreat, she told herself, not disorganized flight in terror from the battlefield. By the time she reached an unlit, abandoned gallery on the far side of L'Hôtel de Ville, a second floor sitting room done in pale gold damask, she was trembling with an emotion she couldn't define for the life of her, as raw as an exposed nerve. She stared absently out a window at the Place de Grève, the site of the grotesque public executions that kept the masses entertained. It was a cold reminder of where she could well end her own days if she routinely let herself get as clumsy as she was tonight. As bad as she'd been with her husband, perhaps?

"Not a chance," she muttered to herself. "Keep telling yourself that." Almost by way of self-punishment, she turned her thoughts to her misspent youth, flogging herself with every imbecile misstep, ending with the worst one of all. The one that had nearly cost her everything.

Françoise had let herself fall in love, once, beyond reason. In the poorest possible taste, in defiance of centuries of court convention, she'd fallen in love with her own husband. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, of course, and like most court unions, it was empty of anything but convenience.

It might have been different, she supposed. In the beginning, she was a sixteen-year-old girl whose romantic ideals hadn't yet been tarnished by their first cold brush with reality. She toyed with the fringe of a pale gold curtain and misted the winter-cold window with a soft, bemused exhalation, remembering the fairy-tale marriage turned *commedia dell' arte*.

Once upon a time, the story began, a young and idiotic girl had adored the cool, cerebral, darkly beautiful soldier her uncle had selected for her. But nothing about her had ever stirred any feeling in her husband warmer than indifference. He never forgave her for being the (tall) product of a *mesal-*

liance between a daughter of the house of du Plessis de Richelieu and their baseborn family doctor. A woman he married for her dowry and political connections, and had no further use for.

After a few years of enduring his coldness and his mistresses, she'd started flirting openly and outrageously with other men to try to rouse his jealousy. She came dangerously close to jeopardizing her position at court because of it. Her uncle's influence alone had stood between her and ruin, perhaps even imprisonment in the Madelonettes as a whore, if her husband had cared enough to bother with a trial.

Antoine dueled each of her supposed lovers, but dispassionately, as if the prospect of his wife's infidelity was a matter of little interest to him. Anything, even open hatred, would have been preferable to that casual contempt. She loved him, and then for a time she convinced herself that she hated him. Finally they settled into the tired, civilized, distant relationship that characterized most court marriages.

Marry for wealth or political position, her uncle had told her, and take lovers for sport if you must, but do all quietly. A practical man, her uncle, and one to occasionally take his own advice.

But she'd long since decided to go his practicality one better. *Love no one.* An empty existence, perhaps, but it was safer than the alternative. She and Antoine lived in their great houses in silence, making love occasionally in a desultory way like the strangers they were. And it was enough, she informed herself firmly. It was survival.

The opening strains of another andante reached her ears. It was time to go back; she would surely be missed, and she hadn't yet danced with her husband. She brushed absently at her full skirts, pushed a disobedient strand of red hair out of her eyes and started back inside . . . and suddenly stopped.

Someone else was in the corridor, waiting for her. She sensed him. An unfamiliar mind; not one of her people. And she couldn't probe any more deeply than that without leaving herself wide open to counterattack.

Françoise hissed a choice oath under her breath and withdrew into the dark stone window embrasure. She quickly ran over her options. There weren't many. She wasn't on the ground floor, so there was absolutely no sense trying the window in a skirt and heels. There was only the one door.

All right, genius, she thought to herself wryly, *let's see you worm your way out of this one*. She stripped off her jeweled mask and set it aside. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she drew a wicked *poignard* from her bodice, gripping it lightly in a moist fist. If someone had come looking for a helpless bit of court fluff, they were about to be sadly disappointed. Her eyes narrowed in silent concentration.

After a moment's silence, she finally heard footsteps in the corridor. Tentative at first, then faster, more certain. The door swung open slowly with a soft creak.

"Madame?" a stranger's pleasant, hesitant voice echoed through the gallery. "I could have sworn I saw her come in here," he muttered to himself distractedly.

Her heartbeat thrummed in her ears, louder and louder, drowning out all other sounds. Her fingers tensed reflexively around the hilt of the blade. She felt him come closer, felt him pull back her curtain. In a single, swift motion she pinned him to the opposite wall of the embrasure, her dagger at his throat.

"Don't move," she hissed. She unbuckled his belt and baldric quickly with her free hand, and his saber clattered as it fell away from him. "Put your hands on your head, slowly."

He moved to comply with a soft huff that felt like quiet laughter.

“You certainly do this professionally, for a gentlewoman,” he observed ironically. “I can’t remember when I’ve had my belt unbuckled so well.”

“I’m glad one of us is enjoying this, monsieur,” she said tightly, pressing the dagger a little more deeply into his throat. “Would you please step slowly into the light of the window? I have this womanly eccentricity I just *live* to indulge; I always like to see who’s attacking me.”

“Attacking you? I assure you, madame, on my word of honor, I meant no such thing . . .”

“Of course not, monsieur,” she agreed pleasantly, keeping her dagger exactly where it was. “But as I still have no idea whose word of honor I’m meant to be accepting, please step into the light.”

He complied, slowly and cautiously, perhaps not wanting to startle her into a rash action. *Smart man*, she thought. *Nice and slow . . . mordieux. I suppose I should have guessed as much*, she admitted to herself as the moonlight finally revealed the identity of her pursuer. After a moment, she laughed softly.

“Monsieur de Tréville,” she inclined her head graciously, as if accepting an invitation to tea.

Sketching her as much of a bow as her dagger would permit, he regarded her for a moment with quizzical amusement.

“I’d be honored if you’d call me Jean.”

CHAPTER TWO

Françoise paused a moment, considering her response, and her position. Bad that it was Tréville and not someone else. The Captain of the Musketeers had come upon her with a blade in her hand, and it might be difficult now to convince him she didn't know how to use it. Cold pragmatism would have her kill him or *Oublier* his memories to maintain her cover, but she didn't want to be quite that pragmatic, not yet. *Let's see what he wants first.*

"If you wanted to see me, you might at least have scheduled an appointment along with my hundreds of other admirers," Françoise murmured teasingly, not lowering the blade between them.

"I could hardly wait for an appointment, madame. When a beautiful woman laughs at a Gascon, it becomes his sworn duty to figure out why as soon as possible." His sharp blue-gray eyes seemed to hold nothing but mirth, and warmth. Maybe a little nervousness, concealed in the slightly forced, determined brilliance of that opening sally. *Does he really expect me to believe he followed me up here for . . . a meeting? A seduction? What?*

"Monsieur, I would hardly be a woman if I sacrificed my secrets that readily, even to a Gascon." She smiled at him through lowered lashes, deciding to continue the flirtation.

If he could be distracted by that, he might conveniently forget or overlook their current awkward circumstances, and her uncommon skill with knives. The small, eternal chess pieces in her head moved. “But I hasten to assure you that I wasn’t laughing at you. I was only laughing in your general direction.”

“I feel better already,” Tréville quipped dryly, and she laughed in response. *There, that sounded more natural, more like I expected him to sound.*

“Well, since you’re feeling so much better, I suppose we can postpone the surgery,” she said lightly, slowly lowering her *poignard*, letting it wobble a little in her hand, holding it too tightly, as if she were unaccustomed to the exercise. If he’d moved a muscle, he would have instantly found the dagger back at his throat, and with more skill and certainty than she was currently displaying. But he remained absolutely still, as if she were a wild creature he was trying not to startle, and after a moment she sheathed the *poignard* back in her bodice. The Musketeer released the breath he’d unconsciously been holding.

“My servant, Gules, used to be a sailor, and he’s been teaching me to use that blade,” Françoise murmured in answer to his unspoken thought. Tréville looked at her for a moment, visibly unnerved. She flashed him a brilliant smile and continued. “We have an agreement, he and I . . . I’m keeping him out of the clutches of the harbor master in Marseilles, and he’s teaching me to defend myself.” *There, she thought, that was just right.* She’d told Tréville the truth . . . just not the *entire* truth. Maybe, just maybe, he’d let it go at that.

“Pass along my compliments,” he murmured archly, fingering his throat. “He’s teaching you disgustingly well.”

Françoise let out a low, wicked laugh. “I’ll have to tell him you said so,” she grinned. “Were you serious about wanting me to call you Jean?”

“Wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t.”

“All right, Jean. Call me Françoise. It’s not a wonderful name, but it’s the only one I’ve got, so it’ll have to do.”

“Françoise it is.” He nodded. “And I disagree that it’s not a wonderful name.” Something in the way he said it made it sound like a caress, and suddenly she found herself liking the hated name much better. *Bleeding hell*, she thought. There was a momentary silence between them as she neglected to pick up her cue and continue the banter.

This is bad, she thought; *I shouldn’t be here, not with him*. What was it Plutarch had written about the wisdom of not engaging with overwhelming and unknown forces? Something about Crassus and the Parthians? *Damn. Must remember to take my brain with me next time I leave the house, not that I tend to use it for much . . .*

“I should go,” she said softly, as much to herself as to him. “I’m married to a royal favorite, and you and I are both compromising ourselves by being here. If we were discovered, it would cost me my position at court to say the least, and depending on the King’s mood, it might cost you the same.”

“I know, and I would never want to compromise you. I don’t even know why I followed you up here, really . . . I knew you were married, and I’ve never in my life let my honor slip so far that I’ve pursued another man’s wife.”

“So, you’re pursuing me, then?” she teased a bit breathlessly. *Damn . . . I really shouldn’t have gone there*. Tréville hesitated for a second or two, as if weighing the risks of pursuing a married woman who was probably a Cardinalist spy.

“You want to know the truth?” He grinned suddenly, boyishly. “I honestly have no idea. I have no idea what I’m doing here, what I want from you . . . well, no, that’s not true, I know exactly what I’d *like* to happen . . .” He risked a glance at her, and seemed relieved that she was laughing and not

insulted. “Pursuing you, eh? Doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” he murmured, suddenly quiet and intense, locking eyes with hers but not yet touching her. Françoise drew in a breath and held it, suddenly unsure of what to do as the stakes escalated wildly. She had experience of flirtation, but almost none of actual seduction, and she was now officially out of her depth. Jean was close enough to kiss her, but he didn’t. He waited for her to make the next move, and the silence drew on dangerously.

“‘Whoso list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,’ ” she said quietly after a moment, quoting the poem of farewell Thomas Wyatt had written Anne Boleyn more than a century earlier. The words were a gentle and subtle set-down, one that would leave his pride intact, with luck.

“Then you’d better go, now,” he said, “before I do something that we might both regret. Or not regret at all.” The moment was charged with tension, and invitation. Their eyes met and held. If she were going to leave, it would have to be now.

“I . . . Come find me downstairs,” she mumbled tensely, unable for once to think of anything clever to say. Françoise snatched up her mask and fled the room while her legs would still hold her up.

Somewhere in the middle of that conversation, a lead cannonball had lodged itself nicely in her stomach, fear mixed with an unsettling something almost like elation.

What the hell was that about? What did he want, really? That couldn’t have been a genuine flirtation. How much does he know about me? My position, skills, past, contacts? Damn, would have been very nice, if I could believe it . . . “Come find me downstairs?” Why the hell did I say that? I shouldn’t even be letting myself think about this, she admitted to herself irascibly, forcing the return of practicality. *I have a*

husband downstairs, one who's bound to be irate because I haven't kept up appearances by seeking him out for a dance. I can't think about this now. Later. Maybe. If thoughts could growl, hers did.

She reentered the Grande Salle des Fêtes as inconspicuously as she could and was greeted with a blaze of color. The hall was lit with over seven hundred candles, and the light of their flames danced over brilliant jewels and delicate crystal wineglasses and illumined the garish blood red walls with their gilded trceries. The buzz of hundreds of voices nearly drowned out the musicians. Françoise caught a glimpse of herself in a full-length Venetian mirror and stopped for a moment.

At least my gown seems to have survived my Homeric battle with the Captain of the Musketeers. Probably better than I did myself, she noted with wry relief. The gown was plain compared to almost everyone else's, but she liked it. Plum velvet, drop-waisted, shot through with delicate embroidery and accented with small pearls and amethysts . . . all in all, a serviceable gown, nothing either spectacular enough or ugly enough to draw the eye or make her memorable. Those hematite hair combs looked slightly out of place, but the protection they offered from the prying attacks of other Sorciers was worth its weight in conspicuousness.

She scanned the room until she found the object of her search, a single, somber note in the midst of all the gaiety. Antoine, her husband, was dressed as usual in unrelieved black. And, as usual, he was obviously brooding about something. *Like a Danish Prince,* she couldn't resist thinking. He was still strikingly handsome in his forty-seventh year, tall and well formed, with soft silver hair and a close-trimmed beard that accented the sharp, square angle of his jaw. His eyes, the brown of dark polished tiger's-eye, might have been beautiful

in another, but in him they were cold. Even on the rare occasions that he smiled, they never did.

He smiled one of those rare, predatory smiles at Julie d'Angennes, his current *maîtresse-en-titre*, as she floated by him in a disastrous green-trimmed yellow gown better suited to a comedy at the Théâtre du Marais than a winter fête. Julie ran a white-gloved hand through her pale blonde hair, flashed a warm, genuine smile back at him, and stopped to talk to him for a moment.

Françoise considered the other woman as she watched them. Odd that she didn't feel even a mild twinge of jealousy anymore. It would have been difficult to hate Julie, in any case. The poor girl was obviously infatuated for what was probably the first time in her life, and she was being disgracefully used. Her father, the Marquis de Rambouillet, had been Antoine's patron when he'd first come to Paris to study, but had made him the butt of one of his infamous practical jokes. Like most Gascons, her husband couldn't stomach a laugh at his expense. He clearly meant to repay his former patron by ruining his daughter.

I don't usually regard Antoine's affairs as any of my business, Françoise thought irritably, *but I genuinely like this girl. Damn, how inconvenient, but I may just have to interfere this time . . .* Julie moved on, and Françoise chose that moment to corner Antoine.

"Well, my dear, it is certainly good of you to finally put in an appearance," he said tightly as she swept into view. Françoise noted the tension in his clean, chiseled jaw and sighed; a Nulle could have read his thoughts at that point. Something about his bitch of a wife keeping him waiting for an hour in the humiliation of the public gaze, she was sure.

"So sorry, my love," she said easily, raising her shields against his unconscious assault. "I wanted to try to catch you

between mistresses. Shall we dance? It's expected of us."

Damn, that sounded stiff even to her. What was it about Antoine that inevitably brought out the worst in her? He took her arm, touching her with obvious reluctance, and led her out onto the floor for a pavane.

"I have always put the expectations of others well before my own desires, madame," he muttered, picking up their quibbling exactly where they'd left off. "I broke off my betrothal to Mademoiselle de Soissons and married you, at your uncle's urging. God in his heaven knows what joy I have had of that."

"Damned shame you were born with a penis, Antoine. You would have made an enchanting fishwife."

His wife's shocking riposte hit him like a thunderclap. He quivered, and his mouth hung agape for a moment as he sputtered, searching for a suitable response.

"As a matter of fact," she continued ironically, "you would have made an enchanting fish, as your gaping maw now demonstrates to the world. Do close your mouth, love. I haven't yet dined tonight, and I'm beginning to think you'd look admirable on a plate."

Whispers and surreptitious laughter spread like fire in dry grass as her comments were passed from dancer to dancer with malicious relish. The arrogance and wooden dignity of the Comte de Palis hadn't endeared him to many people; he was a royal favorite, but quietly detested by almost everyone else who knew him. Françoise knew it for what it was and secretly pitied him; he had begun his life as a penniless Gascon noble, and he compensated for his lack of education and stature with the sword and shield of hauteur. And now his own wife had shamed him in public. She instantly felt incredibly guilty. He drew himself up proudly and walked off as she stood and watched him go. The dance moved on without them.

Her uncle limped in to rescue her, and she smiled at him fondly as they joined the pavane. Julie followed Antoine out of the hall, a charming picture of tender concern, flouncing after him in her yellow dress.

“My husband is being attacked by a chrysanthemum,” Françoise murmured dryly, gesturing at the hastily departing pair. Richelieu rasped a laugh that was like the whispering of dead leaves, and she smiled slowly. “Thanks for the rescue, Uncle.”

“Salvation is my sacred duty, my dear. And I did save you, from a greater danger than you know. The Marquis d’Azyr was leering at you, trying to decide whether or not to ask you to dance.” His small mouth twitched in wry amusement, setting his grayed goatee at a curious angle.

“Mordieux!” Françoise muttered under her breath while essaying a smile; she’d had years to grow heartily sick of d’Azyr’s unsubtle innuendoes.

“God and His death have nothing to do with it,” he assured her with mock solemnity.

Of that much, I’m certain. You’d think the marquis would have his hands full enough just trying to preserve His Majesty from boredom, she thought, knowing full well that the Link between her and her uncle was strong enough to convey the thought word for word without effort.

Too dangerous even to think about, here, he warned quietly.

That concerned her more than a little. There wasn’t a Sorcier alive who could hold a candle to Richelieu, and he’d been the de facto ruler of France for an age. Who would even think of trying to Read him? What was he suddenly afraid of?

Had the King’s new favorite gained so much power, so quickly? For almost twenty years, Richelieu’s position as Prime Minister had survived the attacks of countless little royal favorites, ending in the execution of the last one, the

Marquis de Cinq-Mars. Now, for whatever reason, Richelieu was unwilling to cast a thought of d'Azyr publicly, in case it was overheard. Strange, and it didn't accord with her latest information on the court at all. That much concerned her more than all the rest of it. She raised an eyebrow very slightly, but said nothing more. The cardinal artfully changed the subject.

"I must break off the dancing and sit for a moment. I really am getting too old for this sort of thing," he wheezed convincingly.

They broke off from the dancing and found a reasonably quiet corner in which to rest. Françoise turned to look at her uncle and was shocked by his sudden pallor. His low-lidded dark eyes were unnaturally bright, and his breathing was shallow and strained, the harsh rasp of dry parchment. It wasn't an act, after all.

"Uncle!" she hissed. "You really aren't well, are you? I thought it was just a ruse . . . I'll go get you something to drink, I'll be right back . . ."

"I'm fine, my dear, really. Just a bit off tonight, that's all," he said very faintly. She nodded, though she wasn't really convinced.

"I think I'd better see you safely home," she said firmly. "You probably shouldn't have come at all."

He shook his head wearily. "His Majesty was too importunate; I could not gracefully refuse the invitation. And I was fine before I came," the cardinal muttered darkly, almost to himself. In an ordinary man, one might call it indigestion. In a man as universally feared as Richelieu, "indigestion" would have been a naïve assumption. Poison was far more likely.

"No," she whispered, more because she didn't want it to be true than because she thought it wasn't. *We've been so careful . . .*

They looked at one another, and she couldn't quite manage

to keep the desperate fear out of her eyes. There were no more words between them, no more thoughts. None were needed.

“Sorlin!” she beckoned sharply to her best friend, a lieutenant in the Cardinal’s Guards who’d been standing a discreet distance away. “Bring His Eminence’s carriage around. Now!”

Sorlin glanced at them both, and realization lit his features with barely contained shock.

“How is this possible?” he asked.

“Move! We’ll figure it out later!” she snapped, tension making her harsher than she’d intended to be. Sorlin bolted for the gate and the guards. Richelieu’s breath had begun to come in labored gasps. “Uncle, do you feel like you could try to make it to the front gate? I’ll help you.”

“There are chambers upstairs. I could be taken to one of them,” he rasped.

“No, I don’t trust anyone here. I don’t particularly trust all of your servants, either, but I don’t think we have much choice. We have to get you to the Palais Cardinal.” He was as good as dead if they couldn’t, but she would never say as much to him. As strong a Sorcier as he was, unfortunately, she didn’t have to.

He nodded weakly, obviously in pain. Françoise felt the unexpected sting of tears in her eyes. Damn it, why did it have to be him? With all the sly, vicious, stupid men to choose from at this court, how had anyone *dared* to blot out that brilliance, that tireless dedication?

Stop it, she said to herself sharply, realizing with a shock that she sounded as if she were already delivering the eulogy. He would live and recover. He had to. The alternative was unthinkable. Richelieu doubled over in pain and let out a short, sharp cry. Françoise rubbed his back gently, murmuring to him soothingly. Healing had never been one of her Talents,

and for the life of her, she had no idea what to do for him. She had never felt so helpless.

“Damn it all, where is Sorlin?” she hissed. A crowd of colorfully dressed, curious vultures was beginning to gather around them.

“Is His Eminence unwell?” the self-important Duc de Nevers asked her in a deep voice clearly calculated to impress with its gravity.

“Yes, monsieur, he has just now been taken ill,” she replied coolly. “I will be bringing him home shortly.”

“Oh, but surely one of the chambers here in L’Hôtel de Ville would suit . . .”

“I thank you all for your tender concern, but we have the situation well in hand. Pray continue with your dancing,” she said to the assembled crowd, allowing just the finest edge of irony to creep into her voice. A few of them had the grace to bow themselves off, but most of them remained to glut themselves on the exquisite satisfaction of a tragedy that didn’t directly affect them.

Mentally Françoise cursed every last beribboned useless one of them, cursed Sorlin for taking so long, cursed herself for not having seen and prevented this. She forced her face and every line of her body to perfect, calm neutrality, inwardly indulging in violent fantasies of laying waste to the entire room. A tempting thought, but a surefire way to burn as a witch in the Place de Grève. The highest birth and best connections were no shield against a charge of Sorcery; they hadn’t protected Eleonore Galigai, the foster-sister of the dowager queen Marie de Medici, and they certainly wouldn’t save Richelieu’s baseborn niece. Especially if Richelieu died tonight.

Damn you, Sorlin, where are you? No answer, and she didn’t dare send any stronger Calling than that, not with half

the bloody court staring at her. She could feel her uncle's strength fading beneath her fingers, and she gently flooded him with her own energies. Not too much, not too quickly. Nothing that would hurt him, and nothing obvious enough to condemn her. Françoise kept her features locked in a placid, neutral mask while she worked. She indulged in a few more savage fantasies of changing the courtiers' mocking half-smiles to screams of anguish, but the simple imagining was as much as she could afford to allow herself.

Sorlin arrived in time to deliver her from temptation, and she permitted herself a slow and inaudible sigh of relief. He lifted Richelieu gently, and the guards took up a half-decorative, half-defensive position around them.

"Take him back to the Palais Cardinal," Françoise ordered them as calmly as she could. She turned and marched toward the waiting carriage, digging her nails into her palms. The little pain kept her aware, kept her from giving in to the numb, hazy stupor that was suddenly threatening to envelop her. There would be too much time for that later.

CHAPTER THREE

“Help me get his clothes off, Sorlin,” Françoise said as soon as they’d gotten her uncle comfortably settled in his chambers.

“What?!” Sorlin and Richelieu chorused disbelievingly.

“You heard me, both of you. His undergarments could have been treated with a contact poison. We have to get them off him as soon as possible. I’ll give you a nightshirt, or a chamber robe if you prefer,” she said crisply, starting to undo her uncle’s elaborate red ecclesiastical vestments.

“Guerite, please!” the cardinal pleaded, using her childhood nickname to soften her.

“Mordieux, Uncle!” she swore softly. “If I see anything I haven’t seen before, I’ll shoot it.” They looked at one another for a moment, and finally Françoise smiled sheepishly and let him have his way. “Monsieur de Sorlin, if you please? I’ll go hunt you up a nightshirt.”

Sorlin moved to comply, and Françoise ransacked the chests and armoires in the other bedrooms for a nightshirt, getting it herself rather than trusting any of the servants to do it. When she found one, she smeared it over her forearm to make sure that if it *was* poisoned, at least it wouldn’t be poisoning her uncle. Ironic, that. In a world where Magic was much more powerful, non-magical attacks were ultimately more to be feared. They were subtler, more difficult to detect.

By the time she got back, the King's doctor had arrived. Dottore Blandini, the brilliant, flamboyant Italian, the most artful poisoner in Europe, and quite possibly the one man Françoise was proudest of having on her payroll.

"How is my uncle?" she asked him quietly.

"Not good," Blandini murmured. "I won't lie to you; you'd probably lower my pay."

"Probably," she muttered, in no mood for humor of any stamp. Blandini sensed that and wisely bowed himself off into a far corner of the room. Françoise stared after him for a moment, shook herself mentally and pasted a calm expression onto her face as she walked to Richelieu's bedside.

"How do you feel, Uncle?" she asked him, hating the patently false bravado of her own voice. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is, actually," he replied dryly. His voice was shockingly weak. "Show Blandini out. There's nothing he can do . . . and we both know it." *And you and I have business to discuss . . . which shouldn't be overheard.*

A hasty denial came to her lips and died there as she looked at him. His dark eyes blazed feverishly in a shrunken and wasted frame. Richelieu had never been strong; only a powerful will to live had kept that brilliant mind alive for so many years in a feeble, twisted body. In that moment she truly realized for the first time that her uncle would die, and nothing would save him. Nothing. Françoise turned away hastily and fought for self-control, biting the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood.

After a momentary struggle with her emotions, she turned to Dottore Blandini, a cheerful smile painted on her lips beneath her dead eyes.

"Come, Dottore," she said brightly, taking the doctor by the arm and leading him out. "You and I both know perfectly

well that you'll bring him through, but let's let him rest for a while."

Blandini turned his dark and too-knowing eyes on her with something oddly like sympathy, and bowed himself gracefully out of the chamber.

That done, Françoise turned to the chamber's only remaining occupants. "Monsieur de Sorlin, if you'd do the honors, I left a nightshirt there on the bed for him."

Sorlin nodded wordlessly, and Françoise left just long enough to let her uncle preserve his old-fashioned idea of dignity by getting dressed. They readmitted her as soon as they were finished, and Sorlin quietly bowed himself off. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Françoise went in and approached the bed.

I'm here, Uncle, she thought softly. Tell me what you want me to do. His reply was faint and strained with intense effort.

In all France, there . . . there is no one I trust absolutely, save you. You alone. . . of all who serve me . . . have consistently . . . put the interests of the state . . . above your own. I have . . . certain documents . . . that I will entrust to you. In the bookcase . . . in my private library in the townhouse in the Marais . . . on the second shelf from the bottom . . . on the east wall . . . He paused for a long moment, gasping for breath.

"Uncle, why don't you rest for a while? We can settle this later," Françoise murmured soothingly.

"No," he rasped harshly. He coughed feebly, turned aside, and spat blood into a linen towel. "There is no later, for me. This must be done *now*. Listen carefully . . . and don't interrupt." *My library . . . the east wall . . . find my copy of St. Augustine . . . and pull it out, gently. The wood panel beneath it will open. You'll find letters in there . . . letters from the Duchesse de Chevreuse . . . and the King's brother . . . to the Spanish ambassador . . . they're plotting against France again. You'll*

find more, much more. Use it . . . at your discretion . . . show it to Tréville . . . as you deem it necessary.

Tréville? she thought, utterly mystified.

He's a good man . . . for all that he's been my enemy. He is devoted to the King. And he is the only man in France . . . who might be able to . . . to countermand the influence . . . of the Marquis d'Azyr . . . and of Cardinal Mazarin, whom we will be . . . unable to prevent . . . from taking control of our faction. Mazarin is the lover of the Queen. Together, they will be virtually unstoppable . . . and they could sell France out to Spain. He paused for breath again, and Françoise handed him a glass of wine. "The pain is passing," he said after a moment. "This is getting easier."

"Rest and collect your thoughts," she said gently. He shook his head impatiently and was about to continue when a sudden spasm wracked him, and he gasped and doubled over. Françoise snatched the wine out of his hand before he could spill a drop, and she gave him her other hand to squeeze, unable to do anything else. Sweat broke out visibly on his brow. She wanted to wipe it away, but one hand held Richelieu's wine, and he was clutching the other desperately. *What a ridiculous dilemma . . .* After a second's hesitation she tossed back the wine, set down the glass, and reached for the damp cloth on the bedside table.

"You stole my wine," he complained as soon as he could get his breath back.

"I saved your soul, Uncle," she said smoothly. "You would have spent a day in hell for every drop you spilled. But I'll go get you some more, anyway." She turned away to look for the decanter, and pirouetted quickly back again when she heard her uncle gasping and wheezing behind her. Just as she started to call for the doctor, she realized that the all-powerful Cardinal Richelieu was laughing at her. Wholeheartedly.

She'd never heard him laugh like that in his life, not at anything. She stared at him, stupefied, worried. *Nervous laughter, or some new stage of the poisoning?*

"Stop worrying, girl," the old man chided her. "I'm not mad. Not yet. But thank you, for sparing me a few days in hell."

"You're not going there," Françoise insisted. "You'd take over, and then what would Satan have to do with himself? A long sojourn in Paris, probably, where we could trade you, one for the other." That image set him laughing again, and this time, his niece shared in it.

"Ah, Guerite," he said faintly at last. "I wish I could leave you . . . with something significant. You're the best of them. You're worth ten . . . of any of my nephews . . . worth ten of any man I know. I wish I could . . . leave the faction . . . safely in your hands."

"Thank you for that, Uncle," she grinned at him affectionately. She dashed a hand across her eyes in a gesture she hoped wouldn't be noticeable, and Richelieu half-smiled at her mediocre attempt to be brave. "Hell, I wish you could leave it to Sorlin; I suspect he'd do brilliantly with it. But it's got to be Cardinal Mazarin, and you and I both know that. My political career won't survive you, and to tell you the truth I never expected it to."

"No . . . there are a few last things . . . I can do for you, even now," he wheezed, another flush of pain taking hold of him. *If I appoint Mazarin . . . openly as my successor, and make it clear to him . . . that I am doing so at your behest . . . you may be able to use that as a lever . . . to influence or even to control him. You'll need to bring back His Majesty . . . Mazarin . . . and Tréville, just for good measure. And drag the rest of them in as well . . . all the fawning vultures . . . who are standing out there . . . waiting for me to die . . . so the feeding frenzy can begin.*

“Uncle, are you sure you want to do this?” she whispered tensely. “It’s as good as admitting you’re going to die, when there’s still a good chance you could recover . . .”

“My girl, you’re quite possibly the only living soul . . . who would be glad if I did,” he responded dryly. “Besides, you and I both know . . . how unlikely it is . . . that a man of my age . . . and constitution . . . should live through a poisoning. Go . . . find the King and Mazarin . . . and bring them all in. I promise not to die until you return.” He managed half a smile, though a note of fear lurked in his eyes. Françoise turned from him quickly, grimly determined not to start bawling in front of him, and she went out to start gathering the witnesses.

The corridor outside was packed with unwashed bodies in winter velvets. The servants were valiantly trying to minister to all of them, and Françoise shot Gules, her own aging, scrawny, unfailingly cheeky servant a grateful glance as he passed her. He rolled his small dark eyes almost invisibly at the flock of courtiers, and she allowed the barest fraction of affection to light her features.

Does your uncle need a Healer, love? Gules flashed at her sympathetically. Even his thoughts had the Marseillais twang of his speech. Gules was an odd study in humanity; he was a master of the *Jeu Marseillais*, her teacher in the vicious arts of combat used by sailors and street fighters, and one of the most singularly efficient killers she knew. He was rough-hewn, rude, openly disrespectful of rank, astringent, and only ever called her “Comtesse” when he was being ironic. He was also the best Healer of her acquaintance, with a heart roughly the size of a mountain.

Do you think he can be Healed, Gules?

Probably not, love, came the blunt but not unkind thought. *I’ll try. I’m sorry.*

Françoise pursed her lips and nodded faintly in understanding. She hadn't really expected any other answer, but coming from her teacher, it was damning.

"You there, sirrah!" the Duc de Nevers snapped haughtily at Gules. "Wine!" The old man bowed a bit stiffly and moved off wordlessly to comply. Françoise sighed; she was truly grateful to him for not telling the pampered darlings to go to hell. Gules had been a marquis' byblow on a peasant girl, and his blood was as good as anyone's present as far as she was concerned. For that matter, she supposed, his blood was quite a bit better than her own.

It was the reason they sneered at her, this glittering flock of vultures, but never openly, never quite. Not yet, at any rate. Her mother, the cardinal's sister Isabel, had been disowned by the family on her marriage to a penniless Gascon doctor named Louis Pidoux. Isabel was nearing thirty, not exactly pretty, and had no particular desire to become a bride of God. Richelieu respected the estrangement for the family's sake, but regretted it, and when his sister died, he saw to her daughter's tutoring.

At first it was for a nameless sense of something owed. It was impersonal, and as he told her later after actually meeting her, he wasn't at all sure it would be possible to civilize her. She was ten years old, rapidly approaching a marriageable age, and she was wild, unprincipled, filthy, and illiterate. Her father had long since become an idiot from drink, and it seemed there were whole days that he forgot he had a daughter.

Françoise played with peasant children, acted for all the world as if she were one of them, and refused to cease associating with them. But Richelieu apparently found genuine wit and spirit in her astonishing impudence, and oddly enough that much seemed to give him a frail thread of hope. He hired

a tutor for her, thinking that it would probably be a wasted expense, but wanting to make the gesture nevertheless.

It was difficult at first; she was reluctant to sacrifice her freedom for the strict discipline her tutor impressed on her. But her natural curiosity, her passionate thirst for knowledge got the better of her at last. She wore out several tutors in the next few years as each of them in turn ran out of things to teach her. By the time she and her uncle met again, the dirty, rather ugly little gamin had been replaced by a woman whose education rivaled his own. The impudent wit he remembered had become a polished and dangerous weapon. The child had become his mirror image.

Françoise scanned the crowd for the Comte de Sorlin and found him with little effort; his height and the patch over his left eye would have set him apart almost anywhere, even if the Link between them hadn't been as powerful as it was. Her closest friend was beautiful tonight, if a bit underdressed for the royal fête. He wore an unadorned black leather doublet over a white linen shirt, with flowing sleeves tied back at the wrist with black satin ribbons. His black velvet hat was tilted at its usual rakish angle, its single white plume standing out in stark relief, and his tousled dark hair spilled over his shoulders and down his back. The only adornment he wore was the sapphire signet ring that never left his finger, the last symbol of a once-great family.

André stood a full head taller than almost everyone in that milling crowd, and judging by the supercilious sneer he couldn't quite suppress as he watched them, Françoise supposed he was quietly sharing her opinion of them. Then again, André sneered at almost everyone; he was a dreadful cynic who tended to expect incompetence, avarice, or both from everyone around him. And at the court of France, he was seldom disappointed. She smiled

a bit at the cynicism of her own thoughts and went over to join him.

“Old friend, I hate to be forever setting you to strange errands,” she began, “but I need to ask another favor of you. My uncle has requested that the King, Cardinal Mazarin, and Monsieur de Tréville be brought to him. Is there any way you could arrange to have them tracked down for me?”

“No need, madame,” he replied in a clipped, businesslike tone that betrayed a good deal of tension to someone who knew him as well as she did. “All three are already here. I put off showing His Majesty in until I was sure you and the cardinal had had a chance to talk.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For everything. André, I just want you to know . . . I don’t blame you for this.”

“I blame myself,” he said quietly, running a finger absently over his dark, close-trimmed beard.

“I was there as well, and I didn’t see the poisoning either. If you’re to blame, then so am I and so is everyone who was set to guard him tonight. When this is over . . .” She took a ragged breath and continued. “When this is over, you and I will sit down and work over every clue, every scrap of possible evidence we can find. I want his murderer, André. I don’t care who it is. I want him.” Her black eyes narrowed a dangerous fraction as she forced herself to resurrect a semblance of control. “I’m going back in there. Send everyone in, all the witnesses you can squeeze into that room. Richelieu’s about to make history, one last time.” She turned on her heel and strode away without another word.

Françoise opened wide the high doors to the chamber, and the courtiers filed in avidly after her. Finally the King entered, and the room rippled into obsequious bows and curtsies. Françoise managed a distracted one herself out of simple reflex. Mazarin and Tréville entered in the King’s wake, and

Tréville shot Françoise a concerned glance and planted himself near her. She found the gesture irrationally comforting, for whatever reason, though she reminded herself firmly that this was neither the time nor the place to analyze that feeling.

More to distract herself than anything else, she took a moment to study Jules Mazarin, Richelieu's inevitable political successor, in the calm before the storm. He'd abandoned his usual red cardinal's robes for a cavalier's dress: charcoal gray velvet, thick with silver embroidery and inset with diamonds. He leaned casually against one of the thick spiral oak bedposts, sweeping the room with what he must have supposed to be a masterful gaze. There was a stoop-shouldered roundness to him that made that difficult to carry off, and bulbous brown eyes and childish round cheeks that made it more difficult still. Not her type at all, but there were still women who found him attractive. The Queen, for example, who'd been his mistress for years.

Mazarin felt Françoise's cool, assessing eyes on him, shifted his stance, and returned her gaze. He licked his full lips to moisten them, and she caught a quick unguarded thought from him before he suppressed it. *The Comtesse de . . . Palis*, he obviously struggled to remember. *One of Richelieu's innumerable nieces. The baseborn one, I seem to recall. Beautiful. Strange that I hadn't noticed it before . . .*

Françoise smiled at him, a smile that never reached her dark, unreadable eyes, and turned her attention back to her uncle before Mazarin could speak to her.

"Majesty, my lords and ladies," Richelieu rasped into the deathly silence, "should I die, I would request . . . that Cardinal Mazarin be allowed to take my place on the King's Council."

The room burst into startled whispers, and Mazarin gaped at the pitifully shrunken figure in the enormous curtained bed,

apparently stunned that it was really going to happen this easily. No doubt he'd assumed that there would be several months of vicious infighting before he could lay claim to what was "rightfully his."

"It is my sincere belief . . . that Your Majesty will find Cardinal Mazarin wise in statecraft . . . and tolerant on religious issues. Does he meet with your approval, Sire?" Richelieu asked, knowing that this was the one chance that Mazarin wouldn't succeed him, and knowing as well that Louis would never have the stomach to actually reject him.

"He does, yes, he does indeed," Louis mumbled with his characteristic nervous laugh. "Since you recommend him, I mean . . . but we have no doubt that you will recover, my dear Cardinal." Again he tittered nervously. Louis wasn't a fool, exactly. He was simply a weak soul who had had the misfortune to have been born a king, and he'd grown to manhood under the strident domination of Richelieu. A large part of him would undoubtedly be relieved when the cardinal was no longer around to overshadow and intimidate him, yet at the same time, he had never had to function without that quietly capable guidance.

Françoise wondered if he had any idea just how badly his kingdom was about to start unraveling. She also started quietly planning a long vacation . . . say, twenty to thirty years . . . in Venice.

"Your Majesty . . . My Lord Cardinal . . . Monsieur de Tréville . . . and you, Guerite, please stay with me for a few minutes . . . we have much to plan . . . and little time in which to plan it. The rest of you have my leave to depart," Richelieu muttered archly, dismissing the flock with a contemptuous sneer.

Those who had been summarily given the boot strode off haughtily, insulted to a man. Françoise and Richelieu smiled

at one another intimately and with the deepest satisfaction. Another spasm left the cardinal weak and shaking, and Françoise clasped one of his hands in hers. She didn't even wince as he clutched it ever more tightly as an anchor against the pain. Finally he gathered enough breath to speak as the assault diminished.

"Frankly, Mazarin . . . you wouldn't have been my first choice . . . but my niece insisted on you," Richelieu said coldly.

"Then it is to her that I owe my profoundest thanks," Mazarin simpered somewhat greasily, grasping her hand away from her uncle's and kissing it, brushing her knuckles with his tongue in what he doubtless imagined to be a sultry gesture. Françoise smiled sweetly at him and successfully fought the mad urge to wipe her hand against the side of her skirts. Tréville, who hadn't missed Mazarin's unsubtle play, shot him a glare of acid dislike. And Richelieu, whose sharp eyes missed nothing, instantly understood the captain's look for exactly what it was.

What an intriguing development, the minister thought to himself, just loudly enough for Françoise to catch it. *Tréville appears to be developing a tendre for the sinister spymaster niece of the Evil Red Duke.* Richelieu managed not to smile, but only just.

Nice to know you appreciate the bedroom farce my life seems to be degenerating into, O Evil Red Duke, Françoise thought at him with wry affection, turning her eyes back to Mazarin. She could feel Richelieu's eyes flicker over her briefly, low-lidded, opaque, and lazily amused, and then he dragged in a deep breath and continued with effort.

"You owe her . . . a great deal more . . . than your profoundest thanks, Mazarin. Get me a pen, ink, and paper," Richelieu snapped.

Mazarin jumped to obey before anyone else could think of it.

He scuttled about the chamber, gathering everything he'd been asked for, and as he handed them to the cardinal, Françoise was struck by the image of a fat spaniel dropping a well-fetched stick before its master. Mazarin was no fool, but he fawned too low and always had, and he failed to inspire the respect in allies and enemies alike that was the real core of Richelieu's power. *A poor replacement*, Françoise thought, *but what choice?*

Richelieu scrawled out a hasty missive with hands that now trembled uncontrollably. "Your Majesty . . . you would do the ultimate kindness . . . to a dying man . . . and to France . . . by signing this. It gives my niece . . . leave to have Monsieur Mazarin replaced . . . whenever she sees fit."

"What?!" Mazarin screeched like a disappointed child. Louis signed the document automatically and absently; he was accustomed to obeying Richelieu without question.

Uncle, you are a truly evil man, Françoise thought affectionately, masking her grief from him tightly. Richelieu's stern expression never wavered, but his amusement rippled back to her through the Link they shared. Mazarin would have taken control of the faction with or without them. Thanks to her uncle's quick thinking, he now had to accept that control on terms that were extremely favorable to Françoise. The document would be virtually worthless in practical terms, but if Mazarin didn't realize that, she could conceivably use it as a formidable lever against him.

"It is the sole condition . . . of your elevation. Of course . . . if you do not aspire to my place . . ." Richelieu began archly.

"Oh, no, no!" the plump prelate stammered hastily. "I was merely surprised. I'm sure your niece and I will get on famously, and she will never see the need to take such a drastic measure." Again he kissed her hand, and his tongue snaked over her knuckles as he ravished her with a leer. The Queen's

easy surrender seemed to have accustomed him to a false sense of his own virility; he probably couldn't foresee having any problems with a mere comtesse. His eyes strayed to her breasts and lingered there for a moment.

"Keep looking at the lady like that, Mazarin, and I will call you out, man of the cloth or no," Tréville informed him cordially through gritted teeth. Mazarin paled and hastily shifted his gaze to a more neutral ground.

"Remember, Mazarin . . . you owe your elevation to her . . . and to His Majesty. Serve them both well. Now, be off with you," Richelieu spat tersely in dismissal. Mazarin showed himself out with embarrassingly florid bows, and Richelieu rolled his eyes. Tréville bit his lip and ducked his head to keep his amusement from spilling over into open laughter.

"Your Majesty . . . Monsieur de Tréville . . . Françoise has been . . . more like my daughter than my niece. Please . . . if ever you valued my services to France . . . look after her when I cannot," Richelieu whispered. Françoise gasped and turned away hastily, fighting for self-control. Behind her, she could feel Tréville's indecision as he looked for a way to comfort her that wouldn't be too socially damning.

"My Guerite has wisdom beyond her years," Richelieu continued, "and she's been the true source . . . of some of the best advice I ever gave you. As you are Louis le Juste, Your Majesty . . . I know you will continue to value that advice. And she has one other . . . great advantage . . . that we've not yet shared . . . with anyone."

As he paused for breath, Françoise turned back to him. She watched the subtle calculations flicker behind his eyes, and she kept her face as rigidly neutral as possible while she made a few of her own. Telling His Majesty and Tréville the full truth about her was a serious risk, but it was also the only

way Richelieu had of granting her some small measure of power after his death. It was like watching him bury himself alive, and it horrified her.

The moment lengthened between them, and her thoughts raced. She could still leave Paris by the end of the week with almost no one the wiser or sorrier, and retire to a comfortable private life in Venice or Padua, living out the rest of her days drinking good wine in a sunny palazzo. Or she could stay and try to stem France's inevitable internal collapse, doing what she could through an impossibly limited power base, with the eternal horrors of failure, incarceration, and assassination dogging her heels at every step.

Damn, I wish you hadn't asked me this, she thought.

I know, he replied gravely. *And that's what makes you the right choice.*

Finally she nodded almost imperceptibly. *Tell them, Uncle,* she thought, ordering her features and emotions into calm neutrality for his sake. *I'll take the risk. I'm not afraid. All right, I'm lying, I'm scared to death, but I'll do it anyway.* It was the sort of decision that forges or shatters destinies. Right or wrong, it was the only decision she was capable of making.

"Gentlemen," Richelieu said very quietly, with a gleam of affectionate pride in his eyes, "I present to you my niece . . . Françoise Marguerite de Pau . . . Comtesse de Palis . . . the master of the Cardinal's Eyes . . . the most ruthlessly efficient spy network in Europe."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tréville peeled his jaw off the ground with visible difficulty. Françoise inwardly supplied a little dialogue for him as she watched the thoughts flicker across his open and expressive face in rapid-fire succession . . . as his eyebrows lowered. “A woman, the master of the Cardinal’s Eyes?” As his gray eyes widened, he looked her up and down. “*That* woman, the master of the Cardinal’s Eyes?” As his brows knitted together again in confusion, “Would that be master, or mistress?” As his mouth opened fractionally in shock and he fingered his throat, “Say, didn’t she have a knife at my throat earlier tonight?”

Yep, I’m in trouble, the spymaster thought glumly. But on another sudden thought, Tréville actually broke into a boyish grin. Perhaps he was amused, or perhaps he’d gotten around to weighing the benefits of an alliance between them. Françoise saw that grin and breathed a mental sigh of relief. Tréville, at least, wouldn’t turn on her. Not yet. What the King would do remained to be seen, but of the two of them, he’d be much easier to get around than Tréville.

“I’m sure I needn’t point out to you . . . that she could be a powerful trump card in your hand . . . but only if absolute secrecy is maintained,” Richelieu wheezed in a voice that was barely audible. “I do not propose . . . to give her to Mazarin.

She has been the joy of my old age. Please, messieurs . . . protect her for me . . . when I am gone.” Another seizure shot through him and he gasped, crumpling in pain. Françoise cried out and grasped his hand in hers.

“We will look after madame for you,” Tréville said quietly, taking her other hand.

“Well, yes . . . yes, of course we will,” Louis piped in fretfully. He looked as if he wanted to say something consoling about the possibility of Richelieu’s recovery, but he held his tongue. There would be no recovery; that was obvious.

“Your Majesty, a royal pension would allow madame to continue in her work,” Tréville suggested as nonchalantly as he could. “Ten thousand pistoles a year should suffice. Her spies, if they are not paid well and regularly, will find other employers. Possibly Spanish or English employers. And I cannot stress enough that Your Majesty has urgent need of such an organization, as we’ve discussed before. This is an unprecedented opportunity to shore up the holes in our own security.”

Louis nodded hastily. Ten thousand pistoles a year was a staggering sum, but Françoise knew it was exactly what he paid Tréville for the maintenance of the Musketeers. The Cardinal’s Eyes would be no less useful. But this . . . estate sale of Richelieu’s powers and secrets was obscene. Unbearable.

“Yes, of course . . . a pension . . . we will arrange for it, of course, madame. Come to the Louvre at noon on Thursday, and you, Monsieur de Tréville, and I will discuss it,” the King stammered like a nervous rabbit.

Noon on Thursday. Only three days away, and my uncle won’t be here to see it. There was a moment’s awkward silence between them as Françoise finally lost the battle for poise and dignity.

“Thank you, Your Majesty, monsieur,” she said as clearly as she could, hot, frustrating tears starting to burn tracks down her cheeks in spite of her best efforts. “I would be deeply grateful for a moment alone with my uncle.” She’d almost said “a last moment.” Tréville nodded, clasped her hand in wordless sympathy and left, ushering Louis before him. The doors closed behind them with a hollow, awful finality.

“Whatever it costs me, I’ll avenge you, I swear it!” she sobbed, giving free rein at last to her emotions, and hating herself for it.

“*Ma Fille*,” he sighed, taking her hand and kissing it fervently, “I have been . . . so fortunate in you . . . God be thanked . . . I will not die alone, or surrounded by . . . fools and scavengers . . . which is infinitely worse. Take this,” he said faintly, slipping something small into her hand, “and remember me with it. You will inherit much else from me . . . but that is how I want you . . . to remember me.”

She slipped it onto a shaking finger without looking at it. She thought she’d go mad if she looked at it now. For a long, intense moment she fought for control of herself, and when she finally turned back to him, it was with an odd, unconvincing kind of forced cheer. *Damn it all, I used to be a better actress than this.*

“Your cousin,” he continued feebly, “the Duchesse d’Aiguillon . . . will actually have to inherit . . . the lion’s share . . . if we are to continue the pretense . . . that she is my favorite . . . while you are someone I have . . . only a passing acquaintance with. It isn’t to spite you . . . I wanted to preserve the . . . anonymity . . . you’ll need to survive.”

“I know, Uncle. It doesn’t matter to me, you should know that. And you know I love Madeleine dearly and wouldn’t begrudge her my place in heaven if she asked for it.” They fell silent for a moment; Françoise didn’t quite trust herself to

speak. The cardinal's ragged breathing knifed into the quietness of the room. His niece looked for something to say that wouldn't sound too final.

"Well, Uncle, do you feel like being read to?" she said at last on a note of badly feigned gaiety. "The Bible, perhaps? It is your vocation, after all," she teased him lightly. *A Huguenot habit, Bible-reading, but God help me, I have no idea what else to do to comfort him . . .*

"How about the Canterbury Tales?" he countered. "The Bible is too depressing, and I don't think . . . either one of us really . . . believes in God, anyway." She was a bit shocked at that deathbed admission. But he was right, she didn't believe in God, at least not the fire and brimstone God of Abraham, and she wasn't about to make hypocritical mouthings at him if he didn't either. At this rate, if there was Christian salvation, he and she were both beyond it, and she supposed there was little sense destroying his last hours on this earth by looking for it.

"Chaucer it is," she said easily. "Do you have a copy, or will I need to send someone we trust off to look for one?"

"It's over there . . . somewhere along that wall," the cardinal rasped. Françoise scanned the dusty bookshelves hastily and dragged out the old volume. She pulled a comfortable chair up next to the bed, curled her legs up under her, and began to read. She'd gotten about halfway through the prologue when her cousin Madeleine burst into the room, sobbing noisily, and shattering the fragile peace Françoise had created. Père Leon followed quietly in the wake of the duchesse, a dusty Bible in his chalk-white hands. *Damn. I don't want to be selfish, not now, but . . . damn.* Françoise reluctantly set her book aside and stood, offering her cousin her chair.

"I'll leave you alone," Françoise said quietly. "I'll be in the library when he needs me." She left without another word and closed the doors firmly behind her, to the obvious

disappointment of the avidly curious hordes outside.

The library was the one room in the house that would give her ample room to pace and let her avoid the other courtiers as well. Their false expressions of sympathy would have grated in her ears. Most of them would be glad to see her uncle die, and they'd feed like maggots on the corroding carcass of the state unless someone found the means to block them. Those who had been part of the last assassination conspiracy had been willing to cede a great deal of territory to Spain to secure foreign aid in ridding the world of Richelieu. Françoise had no doubt that she'd be spending the rest of her life in a futile attempt to preserve the gains of her uncle's virtual rule. For almost two hours she paced restlessly back and forth, a prey to her thoughts, her feet starting to ache in too-tight dancing shoes she didn't care enough to slip out of. Madeleine finally burst in on her, still sobbing loudly.

"Has he asked for me?" Françoise whispered, trying to keep the anxiety out of her voice and not succeeding.

"Y-yes, h-he's asking for you," Madeleine responded, her breath coming in small gasps. "H-he s-sent me away . . . He said he didn't w-want me to s-see him die," she choked. Françoise pulled her cousin into her arms and held her fiercely.

"He did you a kindness," she said quietly. "You wouldn't have been able to stand it. Come on, I'll take you upstairs to your room. You should try to sleep."

Madeleine nodded weakly, complacently. Keeping one arm around Madeleine's waist, Françoise grabbed a silver candelabrum from an end table and led her out. Once they reached the enormous, ornate crimson boudoir, Françoise quickly undid the laces on her cousin's ball gown and put her to bed. She raced back downstairs to spend every last minute she could with her uncle. She had a lifetime of caring to pour into what might be a matter of hours, or less.

“What . . . what kept you?” the cardinal asked her in a cracked and feeble voice as soon as she poked her head in the door.

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief. “I had to put Marie-Madeleine to bed,” Françoise replied softly.

“After two hours . . . of her crying all over me . . . and Père Leon . . . putting me to sleep with the . . . Extreme Unction . . . and His Majesty . . . trying to feed me raw egg yolks . . . I was more than ready . . . to get on to the Miller’s Tale,” he confessed.

His niece’s bold laughter rang through the chamber, and the old man sighed, a quiet sound of relief. Françoise glanced down at him and suddenly realized that this, strangely enough, was exactly how he wanted to die. No throngs of visitors grieving or quietly gloating, no requiems, no goodbyes. Just the last laughter he could snatch from the world, a last light moment before he began his solitary journey to the Summer Lands. He deserved that much, and more. He deserved her laughter, her cheer, her greatest theatrical performance if those were what it took to do this right. He would slip away with Chaucer in his ears, and perhaps a dry, secretive smile on his thin lips. *It’s not enough, damn it. It’s not nearly enough. But it’s all I have to give him.*

Without another word Françoise reached for the book, opened it to the requested passage, and sat in the uncomfortable oak-backed chair with her long legs tucked up under her. She commenced her reading in a cheerful, unwavering voice, which was probably the most difficult thing she’d ever done in her life. They laughed in all the right places, and his feeble laughter was like the whispering of the sea. She was careful to savor each moment, storing the memories like ripe grain against the coming winter. His breathing gradually grew more ragged, and then much fainter. She clasped his hand in one of hers and read on until the last labored breath left his body and

his hands lost their warmth. The Link between them stretched taut, unbearably taut, and finally faded as she unwillingly let go.

Afterward she sat for a long time, waiting for something to happen. Waiting to scream, to cry, to feel something beyond emptiness and overwhelming silence. She'd promised herself that she'd release her tightly caged emotions once her uncle was no longer alive to be troubled by them. But now that he was dead, she felt dead as well, strangely absent from all this. It was as if she were watching it happen to other people. Someone else had just watched her uncle, or perhaps her father, die; someone else was sitting quietly beside his body waiting for release. Someone else, not her.

Finally she stood, calmly laying the book aside. There was a gilded mirror opposite the bed, and she stared numbly into its depths. She was pale and hollow-eyed from weeping, and her hair was a wild, tangled mass that fell awkwardly over her shoulders. The plum velvet gown was a tawdry, wrinkled ruin that she would never wear again.

That wild, defeated creature has no place here or anywhere, she thought with a moue of self-mockery. A trembling hand straightened her hair into some semblance of compliance and smoothed her gown. Not that she gave a damn what the vermin in the hall outside thought of her, but her uncle wouldn't have wanted her to be seen like that. Almost as an afterthought, she plucked his final gift from her finger and closed it tightly in her fist.

The first pale haze of dawn suffused the room, and Françoise found herself wondering how many of their unwanted guests had actually stayed to witness the finale. She knew she would have to face them eventually. May as well get it over with. She closed her uncle's eyes, drew the sheet up over his corpse, and went to the door, went out to face the carrion alone.

Alone. Her mind fixed on that word, turned it as a squirrel turns a nut, toyed with it until it became absurd. *Alone.* She supposed that was how it would always be, from this moment; Richelieu had left her all he could of the power they used to share. There would be no sharing it anymore; the burdens and the joys of that service were hers alone, now. *Alone.* She couldn't quite bring herself to believe it; it wasn't real to her yet. It wasn't any more real to her than the dark, cold watermark in her mind where Richelieu had been only moments ago.

Françoise pushed the tall doors open before her, and a breathless silence filled the corridor at her entrance. The red-rimmed eyes of a few exhausted courtiers flickered over her, devouring her with insidious curiosity.

"It's over," she announced quietly to the thirty or so who had remained. She could hear them murmuring amongst themselves, and she shut out all the hushed voices. Whatever they were finding to say to one another was none of her concern. She swept past them all, looking for a familiar face and finding no one she wanted. Their condolences washed over and through her, leaving no mark. To most of them, at least, she managed to be polite.

She was the best of them, her uncle had said. Worth ten of any man he'd ever known. Françoise clutched Richelieu's small remembrance tightly. It was a talisman, like his words. There was strength in the solidity of the thing in her fist, and she drew on it; strength not to embarrass herself before the courtiers, strength not to be too disappointed that none of her friends were there. She wandered into the library, sank down onto a wide, claret velvet sofa, and unfolded her hand to have a look at her uncle's talisman.

CHAPTER FIVE

The cardinal had given her an exquisite ruby ring, set in intricately chased gold. She studied it slowly and intently, memorizing its every detail. It was somewhat larger than she was used to, obviously a man's ring, and in spite of her height she had small, rather delicate hands. She had to wear it on her right forefinger. It was beautiful, but why had her uncle wanted to be remembered through this, particularly? Certain that she had to be missing some subtle catch, some symbolism, she stared at the ring for a long time. And finally she saw it, an infinitesimally tiny hinge. This was a poison ring.

She pulled the ruby up with trembling fingers to reveal a hidden compartment. It was empty, but the jewel itself was reversible, and the hidden side had been engraved with the seal of Richelieu. It was his ducal signet.

Marie-Madeleine's son, Armand Jean de Pont-Courlay, would inherit the title, but Richelieu had given Françoise the signet as a talisman between them, a symbol that she was his heir, his child in all the ways that mattered. She sighed bitterly, closed her eyes, and rested her head in her cold hands, remembering. Hers would be the hand that avenged him. She had sworn it.

The faces of all his detractors, all his enemies, rose to assail her one by one. The Queen, Anne of Austria, and the

King, who had both chafed for years under Richelieu's dominion. Tréville, the cardinal's archrival at court. The Duchesse de Chevreuse, the Queen's loyal partisan, who was constantly engaging in treacherous intrigues for her sake. Mazarin, who had gained control of Richelieu's faction on his death. The Spanish Conde-Duque d'Olivares, perhaps the most powerful of any of his rivals. The King's brother, Gaston d'Orleans, whose hatred of the cardinal was so intense it was almost holy, and who'd played a part in every assassination attempt on him to date. It could have been any of them, or any combination of them, or any of their soldiers, servants, or lackeys. A foreign spy, a jilted mistress, a lone fanatic. Logic alone wouldn't help her. If she could talk to Sorlin and find out how it had been done, "how" just might lead her to "whom." In fact, it was her only option.

"Françoise?" a now-familiar voice murmured softly, startling her. She opened her eyes to find Jean de Tréville standing in front of her. He took both her hands in his, very gently. "I would have come sooner, but you disappeared so quickly, and for a while I couldn't find you. I'm truly sorry about your uncle . . . is there anything I can do for you?"

"You can swear to me that you had nothing to do with his murder," she said coldly, fixing him with an icy, unwavering stare. The words were harsh, and she knew it, but just then she needed to be harsh. She needed to hurt someone. Jean's features hardened for a moment in anger, then softened to bewilderment.

"Of course I swear! What do you take me for? Yes, your uncle was my enemy, and neither of us ever pretended otherwise, but I'm not a man who stoops to poisoning his enemies. Françoise, your uncle was a great man who served France ably, and whatever our differences, I respected him far too much to vouchsafe him the death he died. I swear to you, I

had nothing whatsoever to do with this, and I'll prove it to you by finding his murderer and avenging his death."

He kissed her hands and looked down at her earnestly. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with rage, pain, exhaustion, need. Words began to flood out of her incoherently, and she gripped his hands tightly.

"Oh God, Jean, I want to believe you. I looked tonight at all the faces around me, everyone secretly glad he was dying, and any one of them could have had a hand in it . . . I won't rest, Jean, I swear I won't rest until his murderer's blood runs warm over my hands, I don't care if it kills me to do it . . ."

Jean sank down beside her and pulled her to him, and for a moment she let herself stay there, seeking comfort where it was offered and feeling like a wounded animal. Not quite in tears. What she felt was a pain too deep for that release.

"I understand, better than you can possibly imagine," he said quietly, bitterly. "I really do understand. We'll find his murderer together, you and I. You're not alone." A pleasant fiction, that, and for just a moment, she was tempted to give in to it.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked him at last, suspicion and bewilderment twining in her voice. She lifted her head off his shoulder to look at him, but didn't quite shrug his arms away.

There was a pause between them as she watched potential responses chase each other across his face, only to be discarded. This one too earnest, that one too flippant. After a moment, a light "ahem" from the doorway shattered the tableau. Françoise stiffened in Jean's arms, and they hastily let go as they turned toward the intruder.

"Sorry to interrupt." André de Sorlin's cool, dry voice echoed from the doorway, and the faintly ironic tone he adopted made it clear that he wasn't sorry at all. "The lady and I have

business to discuss, and I'm afraid it can't wait." He fixed Jean with a hard stare, which was returned.

"It can wait as long as I want it to wait, Sorlin," Françoise said icily, moving to regain control of the situation. "I'm not one of your henchmen." The words were cold, wretched, and she regretted them instantly. Unfortunately, they'd needed to be said. André had been her friend since they were children, but she couldn't allow any man to gain the whip hand over her now that Richelieu was dead. She meant to retain control of the Cardinal's Eyes. She was lost if she couldn't.

"No, madame, it's all right," Jean said evenly, rising to depart. "I'm sure monsieur would only have interrupted us with affairs of the greatest importance." He couldn't keep the cynicism out of his voice entirely, and it hardly mattered. The cardinal's death had changed nothing between Tréville and Sorlin; they'd detested each other for years, and probably always would. "I'm sorry for your loss, and I'll call on you soon." Jean kissed her hand and left, closing the door behind him.

"Would you answer an old friend one simple question?" André sang to Françoise on an irritating note of ineffable sweetness.

"I'd say that rather depends on the question," she replied.

"What the hell do you think you're doing with the Captain of the Musketeers?" he hissed, furious, but not wanting to be overheard.

"Wrong question," she said coolly, admiring her fingernails with studied indifference. She felt herself on the edge of complete disintegration, and she had no idea what would happen when the last shreds of control finally frayed. André, above anyone, she wanted to preserve from that. But her current act, so careless, so contemptuous, so utterly unlike her, clearly stung him and made him equally careless.

"I never credited you with any taste in men. The idiot you married and proceeded to fall in love with is ample proof that you don't have any. But *Tréville*? Guerite, for all we know, he or his men could have murdered your uncle! How long has this been going on?"

"Since last night. And I think this topic of conversation has just about exhausted itself," she said in a voice that was still deceptively calm.

André breathed a quiet sigh of relief, and Françoise knew him well enough to supply the thought behind the sigh: if she'd only decided on this madness last night, it was probably still possible to change her mind, to keep her from going through with it. After all, she'd spent almost the entire night with her uncle; that tête-à-tête he'd interrupted had to be as far as the affair had gone. He'd be right, of course.

"Actually, I don't think this topic of conversation has exhausted itself at all," he said, warming to his argument. "Have you stopped to think that this could cost you control of the Cardinal's Eyes if they discovered you? And it's going to be pretty damned difficult to keep the affair hidden from your own spies. Have you thought . . ."

"That's enough!" she exploded, surging to her feet. André took an involuntary step backward, shocked by her sudden ferocity. "My private life is no one's affair but my own. Do you really think you're going to tell me anything I haven't thought of already? I still think it might be worth it!" She reined in her temper sharply and lowered her voice to a venomous hiss. "I've spent the last eighteen years of my life in a travesty of a marriage, and unlike you, I haven't had the luxury of tumbling into a few dozen beds to help me forget about it. Why is that fine for you, for my husband, for any man, and not for me? And what is there left to my life that I should care about risking it?" They fell silent for a moment as André

searched for exactly the right words to bring her to her senses.

“You disappoint me, Guerite,” he said stonily. “I’d thought you were smarter than this. I came in here expecting to find a Richelieu.”

The barbed arrow hit its mark admirably, too well in fact. Under better circumstances, Françoise might have risen to the bait. He’d probably expected that, and hoped to get her angry enough to fight with him. Instead, though, she gasped and turned from him quickly, gripping the window embrasure for support.

“You wanted a Richelieu?” she responded in a voice that was humiliatingly thick with tears. She took a deep breath and tried again. “Try the corpse down the hall. Now get out.”

She could feel André’s shock behind her, palpable in the air. Never in his wildest dreams had he anticipated pushing her so far; she knew that. This flawed, feeling creature was nothing like the woman he was used to serving, the friend he’d grown up with. She’d usually been the quiet anchor of their faction, their driving will, and she’d never let him see her get this emotional over anything, not even when they were children.

Clearly not knowing what else to do, André watched helplessly for a long moment as she dug her nails into her palms, struggling with herself. Her shoulders shook with the wracking sobs she refused to give voice to. In truth, there was no crueler thing in this world he could have said to her, and no worse time he could have chosen to say it.

“Get out, damn you!” Françoise railed at him, still not daring to turn around. She refused to cry in front of him. Better to let go at last when he was gone.

His footsteps, muffled by the red carpet, headed toward the door, then stopped. A wave of memories assaulted her, and belatedly she realized they were coming unguardedly from

him, through their shared Link. The two of them playing hide-and-seek in the forests and fields of Dax, where they'd grown up. The time they'd built a leaf-fort together and attacked it with wooden swords. No, he'd apparently decided he wasn't about to leave just yet. Some instinct must have warned him that if he walked out now, their friendship would suffer for it, and they'd been through far too much together for that. The damnable part was that he was absolutely right.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, walking back into the room. "I was stupid. Truce?" There was a long, excruciating silence while she struggled to collect herself.

"Truce," she sighed wearily, dashing a rumpled velvet sleeve across her eyes and turning to him at last. "If you were stupid, I was worse. I'm sorry too." They looked at one another for a moment, each afraid to say the wrong thing. On an impulse, she spat into her palm, and they pressed thumbs exactly as they would have done to end a fight when they were growing up together. Their sudden spurt of laughter at the absurdity of the gesture washed away the last lingering tension between them.

"I didn't mean to bite your head off," Françoise said softly. "I have my own doubts about Tréville, obviously, but somehow I don't seem to want to listen to them. Or to you, when you voice them." He smirked and lowered his head, and his long dark hair fell over his eye patch. She brushed it back for him absently, wandered over to the corner table, pulled up a chair, and motioned for him to sit. "You were right, André, we have business to discuss that won't wait."

He joined her at the table, looked at her for a few seconds and frowned. "Are you sure you're up to this right now?" he asked her.

"I'm up to it," she said slowly and deliberately, as if she could make it so by a simple act of will. "Did you find any

trace of contact poison or Magical attack?" she said brusquely to head off any further argument.

"None. It had to have been a simple, unspelled poison taken either at dinner or at the ball. He had one glass of wine at the ball, and the Duchesse d'Aiguillon brought him that, so I didn't think anything of it."

"Coming straight from her, I wouldn't think anything of it either, but we can't guarantee the loyalty of the chain of servants it must have passed through on its way to her. You have no idea how many times I must have begged him not to take food or drink on public occasions like that."

"I know, and I did the same thing. But he always told me he'd rather die in agony than live in a cage. And I'm not sure I blame him," André said frankly.

Françoise bit her lip, got up, and started to pace restlessly back and forth. "What about before the ball?"

"Dinner, the usual servants, the usual guests. The Duchesse d'Aiguillon, the Comte de Wardes, your husband . . ." He paused, as she froze unconsciously. "Something wrong?"

"My husband was there? Was he sitting near the cardinal?"

"No, he was sitting closer to the other end. My God, Guerite, relax. Now that I really stop to think about it, it couldn't have happened at dinner anyway, not with the symptoms he was showing. He was overcome so quickly and so completely that it really had to be something he took at the ball, and the only thing I saw him take all evening was that glass of wine."

She nodded, but she didn't quite relax. She continued to pace, pulling her kid gloves off, putting them back on, and pulling them off again, over and over until André looked like he wanted to scream, badly.

"Will you stop pacing, *please*?" he . . . whined at her, she decided. "And give me those damned gloves."

“But then I’d have nothing to play with,” she said silkily. He groaned and put his head in his hands.

“Woman, if you don’t sit down and relax, I’ll throw you over the couch and give you something much more interesting to play with,” he quipped. She smiled a little in spite of herself and sat down again. “That’s better,” he grumbled, unable to suppress a fleeting grin. “Now then, why are you so worried about the fact that your husband was there?”

“Well . . . you know our marriage has been . . . difficult,” Françoise said slowly, and André nodded with complete understanding. He knew that better than anyone alive. A bad thought, that, and she let the rest of her words drain quickly out of her to avoid thinking it. “We’re childless, and the only thing that’s prevented him from annulling our marriage has been my uncle’s disapproval. As long as the cardinal lived, Antoine was stuck with me. Then again, if he’d wanted to be rid of me that badly, there’s no reason he couldn’t simply have had me killed instead. Murdering my uncle is too subtle, too circuitous a route for my husband.” She sighed, realizing she’d been babbling, thinking aloud. “André, my uncle had so many enemies that I don’t even know where to begin. We’ll have to ascertain how it was done before we’ll have any clue as to who did it.” She got up and resumed her pacing, pulling off her gloves again. André grimaced, but wisely didn’t say anything.

“Honestly, I think it was a nightshade poisoning. It had all the right symptoms,” he said, and she nodded slowly and pursed her lips in thought. She suddenly felt shockingly tired.

“Between us, we probably know most of the poisoners in Paris. Do me a favor and work on finding out who’s bought nightshade recently, and I’ll do the same with my contacts. The actual poisoning was probably done through a servant at his master’s orders, though we can’t even be sure of that.

Most servants are amenable to bribes from third parties.”

“This is going to be almost impossible to solve,” André growled. “There are too many suspects, too many random factors, and no hard evidence as yet.”

“I know. But I don’t plan to leave this unsolved. Whatever it takes, I *will* find my uncle’s murderers.” *And I have ways of making their deaths considerably less pleasant than his.* The world darkened before her eyes, and she grabbed the back of her chair to keep herself from falling. André sprang up to catch her, and she smiled faintly. “I think exhaustion is finally starting to catch up with me,” she slurred. “Time to put me to bed. I think you should try to sleep too. Get Gules to show you into one of the guest rooms.”

“I will,” he said. “I want to be here when you wake.”

Françoise glanced up at him, silently grateful for that loyalty, for their friendship. As always, though, she had no idea how to put that into words, and the sardonic André wouldn’t have welcomed the emotional display.

He led her out of the library and into the nearest bedroom he could find, and she sank down into the bed and was instantly asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

The woman ran down a dark corridor and crouched near a filth-encrusted stone wall to catch her breath. Hundreds of rats ran past her and over her, devouring her with curious red eyes and returning to the chase. She had no idea who she was, where she was, or whether she was the hunter or the prey; she knew only that she had to keep running.

A harsh, bitter wind tore savagely through the tunnels, carrying an echo of mocking laughter, carrying voices she tried in vain to shut out.

His Majesty was too importunate; I could not gracefully refuse the invitation. And I was fine before I came. A dry, dusty voice, like the brush of a sandalwood fan, familiar, yet unremembered.

Another voice, a voice from her childhood, angry, the grating of stone against stone. *I came in here expecting to find a Richelieu.* Even the scream that tore itself from her throat couldn't shut out the echo of those words. *I came in here expecting to find a Richelieu.*

She ran on and on, blindly, shutting out the agony of an old knife wound that was cramping fiercely. Laughter laced all the voices, mocking, tormenting, and urging her on, and as she turned the next corner, she stumbled on its source. Tréville stood over the mangled corpse of her uncle, and his eyes

glittered feverishly. Blood dripped from his mouth. He sneered at her and continued to feed. She launched herself at him with a roar of keen loss and animal rage.

“Madame!” a clipped feminine voice called to her from a distance, piercing the dementia of the dream. She screamed again, and rough hands seized on her.

“Guerite! Come on, wake up!” Someone shook her, hard, pinning her arms so that she wouldn’t be able to lash out. She gasped and came suddenly awake, trembling violently and looking about her wildly.

“Jesu, I thought you would have outgrown this habit by now,” the man quipped, slowly letting go of her arms. She looked at him, and it took her a moment to recognize André. It took her longer to recognize herself. Finally she laughed shakily and took in the scene at a glance, still a little breathless. André had obviously thrown himself together hastily; his shirt was unlaced, he was barelegged, and his long dark hair was a wild jumble. Françoise’s English maid, Kitty, was as impeccably groomed as always, but she looked a little frightened. Gules slouched behind them both, his usually open and expressive face inscrutable for once.

“Did I manage to rouse the whole house?” Françoise asked them sheepishly.

“No, just us, mercifully.” André grinned wanly. “I was in the bedroom next door, and Gules and Kitty apparently stayed up to watch over you.” He turned to the servants. “Will you both excuse us for a few minutes?”

Kitty raised a questioning eyebrow at her mistress, who nodded after a fractional hesitation. It could compromise a lady to be left alone with a man, but it occurred to Françoise that she was now officially past caring. Her husband was almost sure to annul their marriage anyway now that the cardinal was dead, and she’d finally be free of the laughable

confinements of a lady's life. Kitty made a low curtsy and was about to leave when Françoise called to her.

"Kitty, I'm suddenly so hungry I could start devouring the bed curtains. Would you bring me something to eat, and draw a bath for me? And I'll need a change of clothes," Françoise said ruefully, just realizing that she wasn't wearing anything but a thin silk shift.

Kitty nodded, and she and Gules left without another word.

Françoise raised an eyebrow quizzically at André, waiting for him to spill whatever he had to tell her. After a few seconds it became clear that no explanation was forthcoming, and she lowered her eyebrow to half-mast and shrugged.

"Do you want to tell me what was making you scream like that?" André asked her at last.

She thought about it for a moment. Her automatic, instinctive response would have been "no." But she and André had never had any secrets between them; he'd always been the one being in this world with whom she could talk about absolutely anything. Because he was the one asking, she decided to change her answer.

"It's stupid, now that I'm awake." She shrugged faintly. "I was running through a series of corridors, and at the end of one of them, I . . . this is going to sound crazy."

"Skip the commentary and just tell me."

"All right, you asked . . . I ran into Tréville. There was blood streaming out of his mouth, and I looked down, and it turned out he'd been feeding on my uncle's corpse." She'd tried to say it lightly, as if it was a thing of no moment, but she couldn't quite manage complete nonchalance.

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit," André said lightly. "I mean, we *are* talking about Tréville, here." He sounded amused, but looked faintly horrified, and she was suddenly sorry she'd told him.

Françoise smiled a little at his teasing, but she didn't laugh as she normally would have. In a fluid, restless motion she threw back the coverlet, swung off the bed, and wandered to the window, indifferent to her undress. She peeled back one of the moss green curtains and glanced out at the rain.

"It's dark already!" she pointed out needlessly. "How long have I been asleep? What time is it?"

"About two in the morning."

"Morbleu! What are we all doing up at this hour?"

"Oh, I don't know. Someone decided to have a nightmare."

"What an idiot!" She sniffed with an attempt at a grin that didn't quite make it all the way there, and managed to be more of a grimace. "Well, since we won't be able to question anyone for at least the next few hours, we could always stay up and play a few rounds of lansquenet," she suggested casually. Only someone who knew her as well as André did would have detected her faint nervous tremor as she'd said it. She didn't want to risk going back to sleep.

Probably ignoring his own exhaustion, André nodded in silent agreement. With an almost inaudible sigh of relief Françoise wrapped a blanket around herself, and they wandered into the library, leaving the door open so that Kitty would be able to find them with the food she was bringing.

They built a fire in the fireplace themselves and played through the night. André's luck was as abysmal as always, which put Françoise in a slightly better mood. She supposed ruefully that it was just as well they hadn't played for money, since it was her family's fault that he didn't have any in the first place.

Their mothers had been childhood friends, just as they had been, and the two women had kept in touch through letters after her mother Isabel's unfortunate marriage. A terrible lapse in judgment, and an absolute ignorance of just how poor

Isabel and her husband were, allowed the Pidoux family to inherit André's wardship when he was orphaned. They took as little care of their ward as they did of their daughter, and he quickly became as wild and uncouth as Françoise was herself.

Pidoux plundered the boy's inheritance so thoroughly that the Comte de Sorlin, sole survivor of a once-great family, came of age without a livre to his name. Françoise had bullied him into joining her in her lessons, but education alone wouldn't save him from disgrace.

The newly married Françoise was already working for her uncle in the capacity of a spy, though she hadn't yet risen to the leadership of the Cardinal's Eyes. To keep her best friend from genteelly starving, she brought him to Richelieu's attention, and she'd never been sure afterward whether she'd done him a favor or an extreme disservice.

André quickly became the cardinal's elite assassin. His first kill, the convenient eleventh-hour collapse of the Comte de Soissons, had ended a rebellion against the crown and firmly established him in his grim role. Françoise had no idea how her friend felt about the life she'd led him into, and she didn't have the courage to ask. He killed with style and never missed his target, and he never let on what it cost him, if anything. Her uncle had paid him well, but not well enough that he could afford to leave the Cardinal's Eyes and live in idleness at court; and many would have considered that the literally God-given right of his noble birth. André had good reason to hate her if he chose, and yet here he was, her friend and shieldmate to the last. She might not completely understand it, but she was endlessly grateful for it.

"Guerite? You awake?" he asked her, breaking into her thoughts. "It's been your move for a while, and since the century is drawing to its close, I thought you might want to get on with it."

“It’s not quite 1643 yet,” she smiled, drawing another card. “We’ve got time.”

“François?” Marie-Madeleine’s voice called to her from the doorway. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Playing lansquenet. Come join us.”

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked groggily.

“I don’t know. Were you awake at all yesterday?”

“On and off, but there was no one around that I actually wanted to talk to, so I kept going back to sleep.”

Françoise smiled a bit; it was exactly like her lazy, easygoing cousin to sleep through an entire day out of boredom. It was the first moment since their uncle’s death that felt marginally normal, which made what she was about to have to do next all the more wrenching.

“I’m hungry,” Madeleine said on a sudden thought. “Is that food?” she asked, gesturing at the tray of bread, fruit, and wine that Kitty had brought them earlier. Françoise almost sailed out of her chair with laughter. It was high, forced, artificial. Not her best performance, but it had the desired effect of annoying Madeleine.

“No, it looks like food, and smells like food, but it’s not really food, trust me on this one,” she gasped, wiping away tears of hilarity. André stared at her, frowning in visible concern. *Probably for my sanity, not that I blame him*, she thought. Her cousin shot her an acid glare and marched over to the tray.

“Well, I don’t know that, do I? I can’t see that far,” she snarled.

“You’re that blind?”

“I’m that blind,” Madeleine confirmed sharply, waving her *lorgnon* at her.

“Then you wouldn’t have seen, for example, anything of the chain of servants who would have brought you the poisoned glass of wine you gave our uncle?” Françoise said

archly, no longer playing. Madeleine gasped and recoiled as if she'd been struck, and Françoise forced her features not to crumble into guilt or softness. She had to know exactly what Madeleine was capable of, because the poison could only have come from her glass.

André's worried frown dissipated as he figured out exactly what Françoise was playing at. He didn't look disgusted with her, at least. He looked relieved.

"Are you accusing me of poisoning him?" Madeleine snapped angrily, drawing herself up to what there was of her full height.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, yet," Françoise said coolly. "Who gave you the cup?"

"My servant, Pointreau," she replied faintly and cleared her throat.

"Where did he get the wine?"

"We used our private stock, as always. It shouldn't have gone through any other servants."

The younger woman nodded and pursed her lips. She'd never liked it, but they'd been doing that for years, and technically speaking it should have been relatively safe.

"Did Pointreau spend last night here?" Françoise asked a bit more gently.

"He should have, yes. I didn't dismiss him." Madeleine was trying to sound calm, but she was trembling uncontrollably. Françoise and André shared a long, considering look.

"André, where the hell has my head been for the last twenty-four hours?"

"What about mine?" he growled. "I don't want to hear it. I should have thought to question Pointreau last night, while you were asleep."

Françoise vaulted from her chair and went to the door. Damn it, she'd lost an entire day to shock, grief, and inaction . . .

“Gules!” she called out into the hallway, feeling utterly sick with herself. She waited for a few seconds and called for him again, more impatiently. She tugged the blankets more tightly around her for warmth. It took him less than a minute to arrive, but it felt longer.

“Gules, the Duchesse d’Aiguillon’s servant, Pointreau . . . what happened to him after I put her to bed?” she snapped.

“He returned to his chamber in the servants’ quarters, love. Do we need to question him?”

She nodded sharply. By now, Kitty had shown up as well with a loose-fitting chamber robe for her mistress. Françoise flashed a smile at her, dropped the blankets she’d been holding, and threw the robe on over her shift. Kitty blushed at that absolute lack of modesty, Gules shot her a mock leer and a wink, and Françoise grabbed a candelabrum off the nearest table and swept out of the room. Everyone else followed in her wake.

Pointreau’s chamber door was locked. Françoise knocked on it, then pounded on it when there was no response. She listened for a few seconds and called his name. Finally she and Gules exchanged a look, and she reached out with the barest flick of her mind and unlocked the door. She swung it open and stopped dead at the carnage that greeted them. There was a silence of several seconds while the three of them stared at the mangled body in the blood-soaked sheets. Pointreau had been garroted, very professionally, before he’d even been able to cry out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Françoise closed her eyes for a moment and very carefully mastered the sudden, explosive rage that scalded her like acid. They'd gotten there too late for answers or anything else. Madeleine poked her head in cautiously, screamed, and fainted dead away; Kitty tried to tend to her and looked desperately ill. André started a quick sweep of the room to make sure the murderer had left, and Françoise examined the open window that had probably been the escape route. Interesting that it had been left open. It led out onto the roof, and there looked to be a perceptible trail through the light blanketing of snow on the impeccably ordered gardens, three stories below.

"Can you track him?" she asked Gules. The old man nodded and launched himself out the window without a word or a sound. "I'll be along soon," she called to him and turned back into the room. "Bank on it," she added to herself grimly. Gules and André, her dear friends, were two of the only people in France who were capable of doing this as neatly as it had been done. And they'd both had ample opportunity.

It hurt like fire, but she could no longer afford to trust either of them completely, not until she managed to clear them. Torn between the possibility that Gules would cover the murderer's trail and the possibility that André would destroy some bit of crucial evidence if left alone in the room, she

decided to stay where she was and conduct as thorough an investigation as she could.

She moved over to the bed to study the mutilated corpse of Pointreau. She studied André just as carefully; if he felt half as sickened as she did, he hid it well. Françoise had seen hardened soldiers faint at less gruesome sights, but her best friend seemed absolutely unmoved by this. She felt bile rise in her throat as she turned her attention to what was left of Pointreau's, and she had to struggle for just a moment to settle the accustomed mask of neutrality and indifference over her features.

The murder weapon was a lovely piece of work. It was a long, thin ribbon of braided steel that could be slipped over the head of its victim to slit his throat deeply. Pointreau had been sliced open so far that his voice box had been totally destroyed and the garrote had embedded itself in his spine. If he'd been able to cry out before the garroting, he might have been saved; he'd lived in a fairly heavily populated section of the house. The assassin had been good, and incredibly strong to boot. Probably ruled out the possibility of the assailant being female; a female assassin would have likely relied more on finesse and less on brute strength. The aging Gules could probably be ruled out for the same reason. But André . . . André was strong enough to have done this, just this way. Françoise fingered her throat for a moment and grimly went back to work.

She let her eyes relax into soft focus and scanned the room Ethereally, looking for lingering resonances of the murder. The spirits of the murdered were sometimes known to replay the moments of their deaths over and over, in an endless loop, until they were finally released by a sufficiently strong Sorcier. And, failing that, the room itself might have memories of its own, on the Ethereal Plane. But there was no resonance, no

trace of the departed spirit, no lingering memory of the event. The room had been Magically wiped before the assassin departed. Another thing either André or Gules would have been capable of, where few others would.

If Pointreau had been bribed into poisoning Richelieu's wine, and he almost certainly had been, it was possible that the money was still in the room somewhere. Pointreau's clothes were lying in a heap on the floor, and Françoise rooted through them but found nothing of any particular interest. She pulled back the sheets and searched them, thoroughly, and again there were no traces of anything amiss. Then it occurred to her: If she were a servant who'd just accepted an enormous bribe to poison a glass of wine, she would have hidden the money where all servants seemed to hide their money. She pulled up the straw mattress carefully so as not to disturb the body any more than she had to. About a hundred pistoles gleamed up at her.

"Well, well," she murmured, and André crossed the room to get a look at what she'd found. He whistled appreciatively. "Unless this was planted at the time of his murder, I think we've found our poisoner, André," she said tightly. "Servants don't come by this much money in an entire lifetime." She heard a groan from the hallway and guessed that Madeleine was probably just coming around. Leaving off her search for a moment, she went to confront her cousin with the new evidence.

Madeleine's scream had gathered a small army of servants, and Françoise questioned them first to try to get an idea of approximately when the murder had happened. Pointreau had apparently stayed around the house all day, waiting for his mistress's orders. He'd played a few rounds of cards in the kitchens, lost a fair bit of money, and seemed cavalierly unconcerned about his losses. Finally, around midnight, he'd

gone back to his small, plain chamber in the servants' wing and never emerged. If anyone had entered the room through the inner door, no one had seen it, but as good as the assassin obviously was, that was hardly surprising.

Françoise dismissed the servants after that, realizing that that was about the most she'd be able to get out of any of them. And she didn't want a lot of witnesses around for the conversation she was about to have with her cousin. She shooed Kitty and André away as well. It was the closest thing to privacy they'd get in that house. Madeleine sat propped up against a white plaster wall, hugging her knees, and rocking back and forth. Her light hazel eyes held the wild, hunted look of a small animal. Françoise sank down next to her wearily.

"All right, cousin, it's time to tell me what you know," she said as gently as she could. "Tell me now, woman to woman, with no witnesses, and I'll find some way to be as lenient as I can toward you."

"I swear, I don't know anything," Madeleine replied, dissolving into tears and burying her face in her knees. "I didn't kill them or arrange to have them killed. I really d-don't know anything, please believe me."

Françoise pursed her lips thoughtfully for a moment. Of anyone she knew in this world, Madeleine was the one with the least amount of motivation for wanting Richelieu's death. Mad had genuinely loved him, had moved into the Palais Cardinal with him after the death of her husband, and had named their son after him. For the life of her, Françoise couldn't think of a single reason to even suspect her cousin, in spite of the evidence against her.

"I do believe you," she said quietly but firmly. "I'll believe you until direct evidence of your complicity stares me in the face. But we've both seen what the killer or killers are capable of. For the time being, I want you to stay at

Richelieu's townhouse in the Marais, where we'll be able to protect you. I don't want to see you end up like Pointreau," Françoise said gently. Her cousin looked up at her, and she was obviously badly frightened.

"I have to go there today as well," she continued, clasping the other woman's hands reassuringly. "I'll have Kitty draw you a bath and bring you some breakfast, and we should be ready to go in the afternoon." Rising a bit stiffly with fatigue and the pain of old wounds, Françoise beckoned her maid over to them.

"Kitty, I'm leaving the duchesse in your capable hands for a few hours. I'm going to need a quick bath; I don't care if the water is cold. Speed is of the essence." She drew nearer and whispered softly, "You'll find an extra guard's uniform in the armoire in the green bedroom on the second floor. I'll need it, as quickly and discreetly as you can manage it. Never mind the damned bath; I don't have time. But go through the motions."

Kitty nodded sharply, curtsied to the duchesse, and managed to usher her out. Françoise stared indecisively at the parquet floor for a moment and finally turned to her oldest friend.

"André?" she called to him. He quit his restless pacing and came over to join her. "Since when have you started pacing?"

"Yet another bad habit I've picked up from you," he said lightly. She smiled wanly, not really in the mood to laugh just now.

"Do me a favor, will you? Keep a sharp eye on this room. No one goes through that door until I get back." *Time to start seeing how far I can trust you, André, because God knows I want to.*

"You mean I don't get a bath and a change of clothes too?" André whined, half teasing and half not.

"Somehow, I'm sure you'll survive," she said dryly. "On

the other hand, do you really want to watch me try to track an assassin in this get-up?"

"Actually, yes, I do. It could be fun."

Françoise shot her friend a mock glare, turned, and swept down the hall.

"I'll make it fast, I promise," she called over her shoulder. And she did, all things considered. She strode back to the servants' wing about ten minutes later, disguised as a Cardinal's Guard named Biscarrat, and she brought two other guards with her to take Sorlin's place at the door.

She bounded down the hall toward André with Biscarrat's usual ebullient self-importance, and noted with satisfaction that André was glancing over her with a quick and critical eye. If there were any glaring problems with her Shapeshifting, he'd need to point them out to her quietly as soon as they were alone.

Françoise's Biscarrat persona didn't so much "walk" as "waddle with a slight limp"; he'd taken a bad thigh-wound from a Musketeer some years ago, and of late he'd been putting on a bit of weight. This morning, as usual, he was the height of bold and tasteless fashion, sporting a brilliant red velvet hat over his tightly curled, shoulder-length gray hair. It did nothing to match the gold and purple swordbelt over black doublet and breeches, but it vaguely accented the striped crimson and yellow hose. His grizzled moustache and goatee were elegantly trimmed and curled, and the slight smallpox scars were exactly where they should have been. André gave her a small nod of approval; apparently the disguise was perfectly in place.

There were limits to her Shapeshifting abilities; Guerite could alter her mass and facial features considerably, even assume animal forms, but she couldn't do anything with color. Her black eyes stayed black, and her impossibly red hair wouldn't change, either. The gray wig sewn into her hat, the

false goatee and moustache and the artificially grayed eyebrows were all potentially serious drawbacks to the Shifting; if that blasted hat were ever knocked off in combat or anywhere else, she'd have no end of clever explaining to do.

But risk or no risk, Françoise was keeping Biscarrat. She enjoyed playing him a little too much to want to give him up. Her Biscarrat was a Gascon, a hot-blooded Southerner, adventurous, foolish, and romantic; in short, all the things she sometimes wished she had the luxury of being, herself.

He'd had a long and distinguished career in the Cardinal's Guards, dueling often in spite of the edicts against it. He'd won himself a reputation as a master swordsman, proud and reckless. And even the Musketeers had long since come to respect his courage, if not his keen fashion sense.

After a few years, as Françoise's youthful idealism became cynicism and experience, Biscarrat took on darker aspects. He was still a brilliant swordsman, but his years in Paris began to make him something of a fop, and he fancied himself a ladies' man, but no one ever saw him with a mistress. Today, Biscarrat was half a savage caricature of her husband and half based on a legendary former Musketeer named Porthos.

"Gentlemen." André saluted the guardsmen with a bow as they reached the end of the corridor.

"Monsieur de Sorlin," Biscarrat's gravelly voice answered him. Françoise made an impeccable bow, flourishing an elegant batiste kerchief as she did so. It was as polite to flourish a kerchief as to remove one's hat while bowing, and that damned hat was *not* coming off under *any* circumstances.

"Shall we?" she asked, gesturing at the chamber door.

"By all means," André replied. The guards took his place at the door without a word, and he and the newly portly Françoise made their way out the window and onto the roof.

The first bit of potential evidence Françoise noticed was a

small, frayed bit of black and silver braid that had caught in the window as the murderer went through it. It was exactly the style of braid that garnished the livery of the Palis retainers. It couldn't have come off anything Gules was wearing, because she'd never made him wear the family livery; Gules was more friend and mentor than retainer.

Damn. One of her own servants, then, or one of her husband's. Possible, she thought. It was possible. A Palis servant could have come in to Pointreau's room right through the door, and no one who'd seen him in the servants' wing would have suspected a thing. She plucked the braid free of the crack in which it had caught, and showed it to André, who frowned and ran a finger absently over his close-trimmed beard.

"Braid from the Palis livery," he whispered in confirmation. "One of your own servants, either at your husband's orders or as the result of a bribe. Or someone could have planted it, trying to link you to the murders."

"Certainly possible. Gules didn't have time, but the killer might have."

"I had plenty of time, too, while you were changing. It could have been me."

"Yes, it could have been," she said, giving André an appraising stare which he met evenly. Françoise stashed the bit of braid in a pocket and moved on.

There were two visible sets of footprints trailing through the snow in the gardens below. One belonged to Gules, the other, to Pointreau's killer. Françoise and André climbed off the roof and down the side of the building, a little too easily for Françoise's comfort. The elegant Palais Cardinal had always been too much of a security risk in her opinion, and the events of the last two days had proved it. She and André dropped down the last few feet off the second story ledge and

landed softly and quietly in the gardens below. The killer's too-visible trail led toward the back gate.

A hedge yielded them their next clue; a swatch of pale blue cloth had been snagged, and it dangled on a thorn. Pale blue, the exact color of a Musketeer's uniform. This one just *had* to have been planted; it was far too obvious. André looked at her askance and smirked at the piece of cloth.

"Someone must really think we're stupid," he murmured.

"Nice to know our wits are so respected," she agreed with a husky laugh. "Find me even one Musketeer brave or foolish enough to traipse through my uncle's gardens in full dress uniform in the middle of the night."

"Not even Tréville is that dim," André said, needling her. He'd obviously not forgotten the other night. Françoise raised a bushy gray eyebrow at him, but let it pass without comment, and they continued to follow the trail through the gardens, foot by careful foot. Anything they missed could be critical, and Gules was already up ahead tracking the assassin, if he could be trusted. If he couldn't, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

A profile began to weave itself together in Françoise's mind as they searched the grounds. The assassin was reasonably skilled, but not particularly subtle or imaginative. Extremely physically strong, probably large, probably male. Definitely a trained Sorcier, but one who for whatever reason hadn't taken advantage of the opportunity to set Magical traps in Pointreau's chamber, as Françoise would have done in his place. He was wealthy, or backed by someone who was; the bribe was high, and had been left there. If the killer had had the time and luxury of Magically cleansing the room, he could have taken out the money, the expensive garrote, anything he'd wanted. No, those things had been left there on purpose. A challenge, or a lure for any potential investigators? And what exactly was it meant to lure them into?

The killer's trail led out into the Rue St. Honoré. The snow on the street had perfectly preserved each footprint, and the killer had worn a particularly distinctive pair of large square-toed boots. Gules' smaller footprints were there as well. Françoise hoped against hope that she and André would be able to catch up with him somewhere on the trail before either party ran into the killer.

Their quarry had walked for a few blocks and climbed into a carriage that had obviously been waiting for him.

"This is much too easy," Françoise muttered. "I don't like it. It's got all the earmarks of a set-up, and not a very subtle one at that."

"I know, but walking into it's still the best way we have of getting the information we need," André argued quietly. She shook her head grimly, and they continued to follow the tracks the coach had left in the light and already melting snow.

André was right; there was probably no better way of getting close to her uncle's killers. Unfortunately, she still wasn't sure how far she could trust him. He could well be leading her into this trap. But it was the one lead she had, and it wouldn't last. The snow would only melt faster as the day wore on. She decided to keep going. At best, she'd have a few more pieces to add to the puzzle, and she'd know whether or not André could be trusted. At worst, she was armed to the back teeth, and she'd be able to take an awful lot of them with her when she went, starting with André if he betrayed her.

The coach tracks were leading them toward a bad section of Paris, a section that had fallen to footpads, cutpurses, and bored or sodden Musketeers who tended to wander the streets in packs, looking for an excuse to fight. A pair of Cardinal's Guards would make a tempting target. And Richelieu and Tréville had always quietly encouraged such brawls in spite of the royal edicts against dueling, so intense was their enmity.

The coach had stopped around the Rue Ferou, and the square-toed footprints continued into a tavern called the Pomme de Pin, a favorite haunt of Musketeers and *libellistes*. The killer appeared to still be inside, and there was no sign of Gules; his less distinctive footprints had long since been lost among a hundred others. Françoise decided about then that she really, *really* didn't like this.

"We've still got time to back out if you want to," André said quietly, seeing her hesitate.

"That would be intelligent." She smiled tightly. "Come on, let's go spring this painfully obvious trap, and see what jumps out at us."

"Are you sure?"

"No. Are you?"

"No."

"Good. Then let's go." Françoise strode boldly forward, fingering the hilt of her rapier, and André shook his head, and stupidly followed where she stupidly led, as usual.

The place was crawling with Musketeers, as she'd expected. There was a breathless silence as the Cardinal's Guards entered, and Françoise took advantage of the calm before the storm to scan the room.

The Pomme du Pin was no different than a dozen other taverns in this city: a small, rickety stage lined the left wall, and long, deeply scored tables and tipsy benches were scattered over the rest of the dimly lit chamber. Only a single narrow window on the front wall admitted any sunlight, and the tavern reeked of burning tallow, cheap wine, and human sweat. Françoise's eyes took a moment to accustom themselves to the gloom, and by the time they'd adjusted well enough to look for a muddied pair of square-toed boots, the calm was over and the storm was about to begin.

"Well, well, if it isn't Sorlin and Biscarrat," a familiar

voice sneered from the back of the room. The Chevalier de Batz-Castelmore rose from his chair and swaggered up to them. He was young, only newly promoted from the King's Guards into the Musketeers, and it didn't surprise Françoise that he would be the one to call them out. He still had a lot to prove. He hooked a thumb into his belt in an attitude of complete confidence, but the hand he ran through his pale blond hair betrayed his nervousness. Françoise and André expected him to continue his banter, and when he couldn't think of anything clever to say, they let the awkward silence drag on for a minute to embarrass him.

"Yes, it's Sorlin and Biscarrat," Françoise drawled insolently in Biscarrat's gravelly voice. "So, do you have a point, other than the one that absurd hat is decorating?"

The boy flushed to the roots of his pale hair. "My point is that you shouldn't be here," he sputtered, looking around him for support.

"They should be hiding under the cardinal's skirts. Oh, but they can't. He's dead," another Musketeer simpered. The room erupted into coarse laughter. Françoise's breath caught in her throat, and she felt André's hand on her arm. He gave her a reassuring pinch and stepped in front of her.

"You're both uncommonly brave when you have half a dozen friends to back you up," Sorlin said coolly. "How brave will you be if you meet us in an hour, perhaps behind the convent of Carnes-Deschaux?"

"That sounds like an invitation to duel," de Tremblay, the second Musketeer, said cheerfully. "And if it is, it's sufficient grounds for your immediate arrest."

The Musketeers rose noisily from their benches and moved in to surround Françoise and André. With a swift glance to be sure they were both planning the same thing, the two of them stepped up onto the stage to have the wall at their

backs and a minimal advantage of height. They were cut off from the door, and flight was no longer an option, not that it would have been a particularly good one to begin with. If André meant to turn on her, now would certainly be an excellent time.

“Duel?” he quipped. “Who said anything about a duel? I thought we’d go on a picnic. Flowers, good wine, soft music, dancing . . . Who knows where it could lead?” He raised an eyebrow at them and looked them up and down with a slow, lascivious glance, and finally he pantomimed a kiss at them. Under better circumstances, Françoise would have been hard-pressed not to laugh.

“After all, you *are* Musketeers.” The assassin shrugged insolently, nailing the point home. “I thought you enjoyed that sort of thing.”

There was only the briefest of stunned pauses before Batz-Castelmore snapped, drew his sword, and charged them. André’s needling had had its desired effect, and he and Françoise could no longer be arrested for inciting a duel. The Musketeers waded in enthusiastically after Batz-Castelmore, starting the fight that had been inevitable from the first. Françoise and André hastily unsheathed their swords, and steel met steel with a dull, hollow ring.

“Get out, Sorlin!” Françoise bellowed, using her *main gauche* to block de Tremblay’s thrust and slicing his throat open with the next swing of her rapier.

“What, are you kidding? You go!” he grunted, blocking Batz-Castelmore’s badly aimed thrust, leaning back against the wall, and kicking him away.

“I’m not leaving you!”

“Well, I’m not leaving you! What are we worried about, anyway? There’s only six of ‘em!” They glanced at each other, shrugged and kept fighting. Both of them would probably die

here, because neither one was prepared to abandon the other. It didn't look as if he meant to betray her, at least openly, but that would be no consolation if she managed to get him killed.

André whipped off his cloak and used it as a shield, disarming Batz-Castelmore with it. He cold-cocked the boy with the pommel of his sword and thrust him out of the way of the fighting. The assassin avoided killing when he could.

Françoise, on the other hand, felt no particular need for restraint. Richelieu was dead, and they had dared to mock him, and she finally had a tangible attack she could honorably vent her rage on. She sliced into one after another, senses reeling in the fierce joy of it. Two were dead already, and she wanted more. She was taking wounds herself, and she didn't care. She didn't even feel them.

Parrying a swift thrust, she kicked her opponent's knee so hard that it snapped backward. The Musketeer cried out and collapsed in a boneless heap. Someone slipped behind her and tried to pin her, and she flipped her *main gauche* and punched it into him savagely. He fell and tried to take her with him. Slipping free of him, she launched herself into her next victim, slashing her rapier across a smug face. She tried to glance back at André, to see how he was faring, but couldn't get even a second's reprieve from the tangle of swords.

A sudden, loud gunshot from the tavern door startled them and instantly quieted the room. Françoise crouched, blocked a final, weak thrust, and turned toward the door. D'Artagnan, a lieutenant in the Musketeers and an old friend of André's, was leveling a matchlock musket at her. The cadet who'd fired the warning shot was struggling to reload.

"Lower your swords," d'Artagnan barked. Françoise and André locked eyes in silent communication, and complied after a moment's thought had produced no alternative for either of them.

Françoise came down off the shocky combat high, slowly, and the red haze before her eyes dissipated. She staggered as a wave of pain hit her; the wounds she'd been ignoring caught up to her in a sudden rush. She caught André looking at her with concern, and she shook her head to let him know that she was all right. With a laconic shrug that attempted to give the lie to her pain, she broke her blades over her knee to avoid having to surrender them to her enemies. She tossed the broken bits away indifferently, whistling a Cardinalist air. The gesture was her hallmark in moments of defeat.

She was grabbed roughly, and her arms were twisted behind her. *I won't give these bastards the satisfaction of hearing me cry out*, she swore to herself. *I will not*. It got harder to keep to that as they opened several of her wounds further in dragging her outside. The pain was bad, but they hadn't killed her yet. And they hadn't even scratched André, by the looks of it.

"Let's take them to the Bastille!" one of them grinned enthusiastically. Actually, he didn't seem to be one of them; his nondescript brown tunic looked nothing like anything a Musketeer would wear.

"Don't be an idiot, Grismonde," d'Artagnan snapped. "We'll have to take them to Monsieur de Tréville for sentencing. How many have they killed?"

"Biscarrat killed three and wounded one more. Badly," Grismonde reported grimly.

"And Sorlin?"

"He knocked one unconscious, but no kills."

"His sentencing will be lighter, then. Who started it?"

"They did," Grismonde lied hastily, licking his narrow lips and drawing Françoise's attention to his square-toed boots with a downward glance. So, he was the one . . . Grismonde . . . obviously a pseudonym. She managed not to react, but she

promised herself a long, unpleasant chat with him as soon as she could get her hands on him.

“No, I started it,” Batz-Castelmore admitted sheepishly after a moment, holding a batiste kerchief to his head. “And Monsieur de Sorlin could have killed me, but he didn’t.”

Grismonde glared at the boy corrosively.

“Let Sorlin go, then. But bring Biscarrat,” d’Artagnan snapped, starting down the street toward L’Hôtel de Tréville.

“I’m not leaving him,” André said quietly. He and Françoise locked eyes for a long moment, and she finally looked away when she realized that there was nothing she would be able to say to change his mind.

“How touching,” Grismonde sneered. “Take him along then, and let’s move!” He bound Françoise’s arms fast behind her and shoved her forward. She had to land on her knees to avoid losing the bedraggled red hat that was now her lifeline; it was all that kept her disguise from being compromised. A white shock of pain coursed through her, and she gasped and bit her lip to keep from crying out. She looked back slowly and studied her captor with something akin to fascination, memorizing his every feature with the exquisite care of a woman who planned to kill.

Not exactly fat, as she’d first imagined, but solidly built and heavysset. Tall. That coarse, shoulder-length brown hair might have been a wig, but she couldn’t be certain. A long, narrow nose and small light eyes gave his triangular face a faintly rodent cast, and those eyes bored into hers with a hatred she instinctively returned.

As soon as I manage to free myself, she thought, I will come for you. Grismonde.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I've died and gone to hell, and now I'm standing at the door to the devil's private office, Françoise thought. It was half-cynical, half-truth, laced with lightheadedness and blood loss. Françoise and André had been brought to L'Hôtel de Tréville, the Musketeers' headquarters, where their fates for the foreseeable future would be decided by the Musketeers' erstwhile captain, her old enemy and would-be lover. She wanted to pace, or preferably lie down somewhere and bleed for a while, but she made herself settle for tapping one foot impatiently on the parquet floor. Their captors still held them fast.

Just at the moment, they were waiting to be admitted into the . . . sanctum sanctorum, Françoise decided to call it. The elegant second-floor office in which Jean de Tréville tended to live a good bit of his life. The closed oak door was tall and imposing, with elegant geometric carvings. She forced herself to study them to try to keep her fading wits sharp, and just as her pain-fogged mind started to make absurd and fanciful monsters out of the patterns, Tréville's voice exploded from behind the closed door.

"They did WHAT?!" he shouted. Françoise bit back a grimace. She had no idea whether he was referring to his Musketeers or his prisoners, but either way, it wasn't good. "Get them in here, *right now.*" A little less loud, but no less

angry. Wonderful. Splendid. Their first fight as a prospective couple would have a dozen witnesses, and would likely end in a trip to the Bastille for her and André. How romantic.

The massive doors of Tréville's private study parted with a distinctly ominous creak, and the prisoners were admitted. Françoise cast a quick glance over at André, who managed to look annoyingly self-possessed in spite of his bonds. She didn't doubt she suffered by comparison. Knowing she would never manage a tenth of André's elegant insouciance, she struggled to at least look as dignified and pain-free as possible. She probably failed at that, judging by Tréville's hastily stifled "you're bleeding on my expensive carpet" expression.

He rose from his chair and walked around the desk slowly, resting lightly against it as he stopped in front of them.

"Leave us," he snapped at his troops, who were pressing in at the door to watch the proceedings. The taut, strained tone of his voice was one they were clearly unaccustomed to hearing from him. "D'Artagnan and Batz-Castelmore, you stay here. The rest of you will drill in the courtyard. If I catch any of you listening at the door, you will answer to me."

Françoise had the fleeting irrational thought that Tréville couldn't have chosen a more mismatched pair of guards than Batz-Castelmore and d'Artagnan. Batz-Castelmore was tall and lanky with the pale blond hair, ice-blue eyes, and eternal semi-slouch of a provincial, and the short, muscular, dark-haired d'Artagnan always seemed like a cat about to pounce: vital, restless, and dangerously alert. The voice of Grismonde, who held her from behind, drew her instantly back to the present.

"Monsieur, I would like to be allowed to stay," he said nervously. His hands tightened unconsciously on Françoise's arms. One of his fingers slipped into what felt like the worst of her wounds, a deep gash on her left shoulder. Her eyes

watered, and she clenched her jaw to keep from crying out. "I have important testimony which I . . ."

"Your 'testimony' is of no interest, Grismonde," Tréville spat contemptuously, cutting him off. "You're not a Musketeer."

Grismonde grimaced darkly and shoved his way past the Musketeers at the door. The rest of them bowed themselves off as well, closing the doors behind them.

"What do you know about this Grismonde?" Françoise rasped, unable to keep the pain out of her voice. No matter. She might be able to throw him off guard by interrogating him, and she really did want to know how deeply linked Tréville was with one of her uncle's killers.

"That is none of your concern," he snapped.

"Even though he might well be a murderer?" she challenged him.

"He wouldn't be alone in that, would he, Biscarrat? Do you have any idea what you've done today? One of the men you killed was eighteen years old! Scarcely more than a child!"

She felt a deep flash of guilt at that, and quickly suppressed it. His Musketeers had waylaid her and André into a trap, attacked them, and done their best to kill them.

"I wasn't aware that children were allowed to don the uniforms of Musketeers. Is it really so difficult finding adults?" she asked him coolly, forcing anger and defiance to temporarily silence the guilt. Tréville closed the narrow distance between them and backhanded her across the face. The force of the blow knocked her off balance, and again she had to land on her knees to keep her hat from falling off.

My knees are never going to forgive me for this day, she thought ironically, hastily probing her teeth with her tongue to

make sure none of them had been loosened. They were still fine, thank God. *After all, not all of us can have perfect teeth.* She spat blood onto his gorgeous Berber carpet, taking an admittedly petty satisfaction in the gesture.

“You miserable bastard!” André swore at Tréville hotly, straining against his bonds. Françoise turned hastily back to him and shook her head at him in frantic, mute appeal. *Don’t lose it, André,* she thought at him, risking a Sending through their shared Link. *Not here, not now.* D’Artagnan unsheathed his rapier and let the point hover just over André’s throat. André darkened visibly, but stopped struggling.

“Brutality to prisoners? I hardly thought that would have been your style,” Françoise said coolly, pulling herself up off the floor more stiffly than she would have liked.

“And I hardly thought brutality in battle would have been yours,” Tréville shot back. “Untie Biscarrat and get him a sword,” he snapped at d’Artagnan, who moved hastily to obey. Tréville glared down at his prisoner. “Three of my men died today at your hands, monsieur,” he said to her in a voice that was chillingly calm. “If you’d shown any remorse over it, I might have simply let you rot in the Bastille. As it is, however, I’m going to kill you.”

“How much remorse can you possibly expect him to show?!” André cried, outraged. “We were provoked! Since when have you heard of two men attacking six? Don’t let your pride in your Musketeers outweigh your common sense!”

“Enough, Sorlin,” Françoise muttered wearily. “I will not be seen to beg for my life. Let him try to take it from me as best he can. Monsieur,” she said, turning to address Tréville, “I wish you better luck than your Musketeers had.” She sketched him a mocking bow, and he looked very much as if he’d like to hit her again.

"Can't you untie him any faster?" he complained to d'Artagnan.

"I'm trying," d'Artagnan said emphatically. He didn't like hearing the Musketeers insulted any more than his captain did.

"I challenge you to fight me in his place," André blurted, unable to keep a shade of desperation out of his voice, "and we'll see how well you do against an uninjured man!"

"The hell you will!" Françoise snapped. "André, I know you mean well, but the challenge has been issued and accepted. I'm the one who killed his men, and I'm the one whose blood he wants. *Alea jacta est*, my friend. The die is cast. It remains for us to play it out as best we can."

"One more classical reference from you, and I'll skewer you myself and save him the trouble," André muttered. The answering grin she shot him challenged him to do just that, and he sighed a long-suffering sigh. "You're not up to this, and you know it," he whispered tensely, trying a different tack. "Don't be an idiot. Tréville is arguably the best swordsman in the kingdom."

"Perhaps. But, then, most other members of the animal kingdom don't have opposable thumbs, a distinct disadvantage in swordplay," she pointed out with studied sweetness.

D'Artagnan worked even more feverishly at his untying, and Tréville fumed silently, unable to think of a suitably crushing rejoinder.

"Don't pick on him until you've recovered," André said firmly. "You're so badly wounded you can barely stand. Now either you tell him who you really are, or I will."

"The hell you will," she hissed.

"Oh, I think you'd better," Tréville interjected with deadly intensity. "If he isn't truly Biscarrat, the chivalric code gives me the right to know whom I'm dueling."

"Would that be the same chivalric code you're breaking in

the first place by dueling a wounded man?" Sorlin inquired innocently. Tréville's gray eyes narrowed to slits, and his jaw tightened.

"I'm giving him no more quarter than he gave Honoré de Foix, or Isaac de Tremblay, or Francois de Simier. Now, one of you had better tell me who he is," Tréville said quietly.

André, if you dishonor me and blow my cover, I'll never forgive you, she thought at him, glaring up at him fiercely. There was no sense in threatening him with anything worse. A disloyal retainer could easily meet with an unfortunate accident, but Françoise knew perfectly well she'd never be able to order one for her oldest friend.

"If I don't tell him, he'll kill you," André said reasonably. She opened her mouth to protest, and he cut her off sharply. "Don't even *think* about arguing with me. He'll kill you."

"You don't know that!"

"You haven't seen yourself in a mirror yet, Guerite!"

"Guerite?" Tréville interrupted their quibbling sharply. On an impulse, he reached out and ripped off her battered hat. Her red hair fell limply around her shoulders and betrayed her. *Dratted, stupid hair . . . dratted, stupid André . . . damn, damn, damn, damn, DAMN!*

It took Tréville a moment to regain the gift of speech, and even when he did, the best he could do was to squeak out a bewildered "Françoise?"

Did I mention DAMN?!

Françoise remained stubbornly, mutinously silent and glowered at all of them. She wasn't sure herself whether she wanted to laugh or to scream. Even having been found out, she knew she'd have to keep up the tattered remnants of the Shifting. If any of them thought it was more than a purely cosmetic disguise, there would shortly be a bonfire in the Place de Grève with her name on it. *Damn André!*

"You might want to get rid of them," André murmured to Tréville, gesturing with his eyes at d'Artagnan and Batz-Castelmore.

"You should have thought of *that* about five minutes ago," Françoise said icily in her own voice.

André, the idiot, had the good grace to look at least a little crestfallen.

"There's no need, messieurs . . . and madame?" d'Artagnan reassured them smoothly enough, though he was white with shock. "We've both been trusted in the past with more dangerous secrets, and we've kept them." That much, at least, was true.

"I owe Monsieur de Sorlin my life," Batz-Castelmore added earnestly. "For him, I can be trusted to keep any secret. Monsieur?" he asked Tréville, apparently expecting some response. Tréville looked positively dazed. He slumped down on the desk behind him and held his aching head in his hands. Françoise was surprised to find herself feeling genuinely sorry for the man.

"D'Artagnan?" his beleaguered captain asked faintly. "Get me something to drink."

"But you don't drink!"

"I do now."

Without another word, d'Artagnan gave up on trying to untie Françoise, and scuttled off in search of wine.

"I'm still at your disposal, if you want to duel," Françoise said, bowing to Tréville.

He looked up at her with an odd mixture of admiration and horror. "But . . . but you *can't* be Biscarrat!" he almost whined. "I've dueled you before!"

"Yup," she agreed equably.

"And you've beaten me!"

"Yup."

“And you’re a woman!”

“Yup.”

“You *are* a woman, aren’t you?”

“I promise.”

“And I hit you!”

“Now *that* I still owe you for.” Françoise broke into a sudden grin in spite of herself. “Jean, I think maybe we should talk. Alone,” she growled, skewering André with a “later for you” glare. He opened his mouth to protest, and Françoise closed it for him by cutting him off. “Don’t worry, Sorlin,” she purred dangerously. “You and I will talk alone later tonight. And we’ll discuss concepts like ‘insubordination’ and ‘knowing when to keep your mouth shut.’”

Tréville winced, and the two men exchanged a surprising glance of guarded sympathy. D’Artagnan brought in a bottle of Spanish wine and a silver goblet, and Tréville grabbed the bottle and drank deeply, ignoring the goblet and any sense of social decency. He finally came up for air halfway through his prize vintage.

“Better now?” Françoise asked him wryly.

“A bit,” he admitted.

“Would you gentlemen please excuse us for a few minutes?” she asked the others, gesturing at Tréville. They bowed themselves off, and Françoise breathed a heavy sigh. “Do I get to tell you my side of today’s fiasco? Or would you rather not hear it just now?”

“Oh, I’m all ears,” he said dryly. Not a promising invitation, she supposed, but at least it was a place to begin. Françoise shifted her balance a bit to get as comfortable as she could; she was still securely bound, and she was beginning to lose sensation in her hands. And she would have killed for a chair, or even a stool. But it seemed this was going to be a formal interview, so she shrugged and accepted the discomfort.

“Sorlin and I were following a set of square-toed boot-prints into the Pomme de Pin,” she began. “The owner of said square-toed boots is your friend Grismonde, who’s been implicated in my uncle’s murder. The tracks were too crystal clear to be anything but a set-up, and we knew it, but we chose to walk into it rather than lose the lead. Well, you can pretty much imagine what happened when two Cardinal’s Guards walked into a nest of half a dozen Musketeers. They insulted my uncle’s memory and attacked us, and I’ll admit I lost my head. I fought to kill, thinking I would never get out of there alive myself. They were drunk, and I was furious. I wanted to take as many of them with me as I could. I’m sorry, truly.”

“They were young,” Jean said quietly, fiercely.

“They were old enough to try to kill us. It was battle, Jean. The kind of battle Musketeers and Cardinal’s Guards have been indulging in for two decades, and you and my uncle both encouraged it. Am I wrong? André and I were badly outnumbered, and your men weren’t shy about taking advantage of that fact. If you’d been in my place, would you have allowed yourself and your best friend to be skewered, or would you have fought, and killed whoever you had to, however wretched you knew you’d feel about it afterward?” Françoise asked him quietly.

He was silent for a moment, thinking, and finally his expression thawed a bit. “I would have fought,” he admitted.

She let out a slow, quiet breath of relief. He’d given her a kind of absolution, and he hadn’t said anything about “embroidering something, if he’d been in her place.” Thank God. Most men in his position wouldn’t have been able to resist taking the potshot at her femininity, or lack thereof. But other than a moment’s shock, he surprisingly hadn’t gone that expected and well-traveled road with it.

“I’m sorry, Jean,” she said, unable to meet his eyes. “I wish I had it to play over again. I wish I hadn’t been that ruthless.”

“I wish you hadn’t been that ruthless, and I also wish my men hadn’t insulted Richelieu and attacked you. Sorlin’s right about a few things: you were deeply provoked, and you had a right to defend yourselves.”

Françoise nodded, unable to say anything to that, and still unable to meet his eyes. After a moment, she changed the subject.

“What can you tell me about Grismonde, the man we came in with?” she asked him cautiously. Probably not the most wonderful opportunity to pry, but she didn’t know when or if she’d ever get another.

“What do you want to know?”

“How long have you known him?”

“Not long. A few months. I can’t even stand to have him around me, I don’t know why. He’s desperate to become a Musketeer, and my men seem to like him, so he’s started spending a lot of time with them.”

“I see,” Françoise murmured thoughtfully, shifting her stance again in a futile attempt to accommodate the pain of her wounds. The world around her spun a bit, and she swallowed hard and forced herself to focus on the interrogation. *This opportunity might not come again.* “Any idea who he’s working for, what sources of income he might possess?”

“None, I’m afraid. He’s been evasive about it.”

“That shouldn’t take too long for my spies to ferret out. He’s obviously been trying to plant himself amongst your Musketeers, quite possibly to throw suspicion for my uncle’s murder on you. He certainly left us enough clues to specifically implicate the Musketeers . . . I found this stuck in one of my hedges, and it wasn’t even done particularly well,” she

muttered, gesturing at her right pocket a bit awkwardly. The scrap of sky-blue cloth that looked as if it had been torn from a Musketeer's uniform was sticking out of the top. Jean barked a short, sharp laugh and bent down to retrieve it, and as he did so, their eyes locked for a brief moment in awkward, erotic awareness.

Not the time, Françoise reminded herself. *Definitely not the time. No. Bad Françoise.* A sudden image filled her head of Jean undressing her slowly, and she gave herself a swift mental kick and lowered her eyes, breaking the contact. Jean pulled the scrap of cloth from her pocket, studied the color and make for a moment, and cleared his throat.

"Not even I would have been brave or stupid enough to go traipsing through Cardinal Richelieu's hedges in full dress uniform," he muttered a bit irritably, shaking his head.

"Exactly. You're being set up. Actually, the more realistic clue we found was a bit of braid from the Palis livery. One of my own servants, or one of my husband's." There was another moment's awkwardness at that reminder of her marriage.

"You and Palis keep separate servants?" he finally asked her.

"Separate households, whenever we can manage it," she admitted, with a trace of old bitterness. "My uncle made the match a long time ago, and now that he's gone, Palis will undoubtedly seek an annulment. I promise to be the least devastated woman in Paris when that happens."

"Good," Jean said quietly, and Françoise smiled up at him. The room started to spin again, and she found a wall to lean against, which Jean visibly mistook as a need for distance between them. *Damn, again.* "How did you come across the braid?" he asked her after a brief hesitation.

"It was snagged between two stones in a window ledge at the Palais Cardinal. It seems my uncle was poisoned by

a servant of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon, my cousin. The servant was murdered sometime last night, and his murderer escaped out the window, leaving a scrap of a Musketeer's uniform behind him, leading us into a trap with Musketeers loaded to spring it. Grismonde planned all that very carefully and had plenty of time to act it all out." She pinned him with her most piercing gaze, quietly willing him to trust her.

Tréville returned her gaze for a few seconds and bolted toward the door, swinging it open. "D'Artagnan!" he bellowed out into the corridor. The lieutenant appeared in a matter of seconds. "Find Grismonde and arrest him. Get Batz-Castelmore to scour the grounds for him, and organize ten search parties of three to go out into the streets and find him. Try to keep his friends out of the search. Good luck." D'Artagnan bowed and went to carry out his orders, and Tréville closed the heavy doors with a groan. "I've really got to get those hinges oiled," he murmured, shaking his head ruefully.

"Thank you," Françoise said with relief. "I don't even know if it'll do any good; if Grismonde had a brain in his head he would have taken off immediately. But thank you for trying. By the way, am I still your prisoner?"

"No, of course not. You're free to leave whenever you like, though I'd love it if you stayed for supper."

"I'd like that. Of course, it would be easier to eat if I had hands. Diving into a plate face-first can get so unattractive," she quipped, flashing him a lopsided grin that set her false moustache and goatee awry.

"Mordieux, I got so distracted I forgot to finish untying you," Jean gasped apologetically. "Let me see if I'll have any better luck with it than d'Artagnan did."

Françoise could feel his fingers trembling a little as he worked at the knots. The intriguing possibilities of the

moment obviously didn't escape him, and they certainly didn't escape her, but Jean didn't press his advantage. *Damn*, she thought, not for the first time that day. *Of course, maybe if I didn't look like a man, and a plump, unattractive one at that . . . damned lightheadedness catching up to me again . . .*

"Who the hell tied you up, anyway?" he finally exclaimed in frustration after a few minutes' effort had produced no appreciable result.

"Grismonde," she breathed, suddenly having a hard time keeping on her feet.

"That's one more we owe him. Do you trust me?" he asked, unsheathing a knife from his boot. He flashed it in front of her to show her what he intended to do.

"You trusted me when I held a knife to you," she laughed, shrugging her shoulders. It wasn't really an answer, she realized, and wondered if he did.

"I didn't have much of a choice, did I?" Jean carefully sliced away her bonds, and she groaned involuntarily and started massaging some of the feeling back into her hands.

"My thanks, monsieur," she said evenly, carefully keeping the pain out of her voice. "Before I take you up on that offer to dine, I should really go back home and clean up a bit, get out of this disguise. And there was one last detail I promised my uncle I'd take care of; it shouldn't take me more than a couple of hours. Would you be willing to wait for me?"

"If it takes forever, though I sincerely hope it doesn't," he murmured with a roguish glint in his eye. She smiled at him a bit wanly and leaned her head back against the wall, and he frowned thoughtfully. "Not to change the subject," he murmured casually, changing the subject, "but how bad are your injuries, seriously? Do you need my doctor?"

Françoise kept her face carefully neutral; if any doctor but Gules examined her in her current Shifted form . . . *no, no,*

that's all right, Jean, nothing the threat of a bonfire in the Place de Grève wouldn't cure . . .

"Thanks, but I do my own field dressings and never let doctors near me if I can avoid them," she said, perhaps a shade too quickly. He didn't seem to notice; from the expression on his face, he was clearly wondering exactly how to deal with a woman who did her own field dressings.

"Any idea what time it is?" she asked him, not wanting to give him too much time to contemplate that. He glanced at the jewel-encrusted clock on his desk.

"Looks like about five minutes to noon."

"Barring any further arrests, what say I come back around four? Hopefully not trussed up like a Christmas goose this time."

"I thought you looked good trussed up like a Christmas goose." He shrugged with a gamin grin. "Even in that remarkable and, dare I say, disconcerting disguise." He paused for a second or two to look her over, and Françoise opted to distract him with innuendo before he could decide for himself just how good that disguise was.

"My thanks, monsieur, but you probably shouldn't be sending your men to tie me up. A good captain always saves the sensitive missions for himself," she smirked at him.

A scratch on the door interrupted any reply Jean might have made to that. *André. Always André. Damned interfering ubiquitous bloody André.*

"What?!" Jean and Françoise cried out plaintively together. Françoise plucked her ruined hat up off the floor and hastily tucked every last strand of impossible red hair back into it.

"I don't suppose we could just tell them to go away?" he teased hopefully.

"You do that, and your Musketeers will assume you're having a torrid affair with Biscarrat."

“Umm . . . on second thought, I’d rather not.”

She laughed a throaty, wicked laugh. There was a second, more impatient scratch at the door, and that one they couldn’t avoid answering.

“Come,” Tréville called a shade impatiently. André entered alone. Tréville glanced around him, surprised and obviously none too pleased to find that a Cardinalist prisoner had been left unguarded and had managed to completely untie himself in the bargain.

Françoise couldn’t blame Tréville; if any of her people had been responsible for a blunder like that, heads would have rolled.

“Like it or not, lady, it’s time to get you to a doctor,” André informed Françoise without preamble. “You may not know your own limits, but I do, and you’re just about to crash into them. And don’t bother glaring at me, because you know I’m right.”

“Has he always been this bad?” Jean asked Françoise sympathetically.

“Since we were children,” she replied ironically. “And the worst part is that I *do* know he’s right.”

“Good,” André said, a little surprised. “Then let’s go.”

“I think perhaps I’ll see you to the door myself,” Jean said easily. “After all, I wouldn’t want to deprive myself of your company a minute before I have to.”

Françoise smiled a bit wryly; he’d been too much of a diplomat to say openly that his men would most likely kill them on sight if he didn’t walk them out. She bowed smoothly, opened one of the heavy doors and ushered the two men out, unsettling Jean a bit with such a masculine display of politesse. They made small talk about the odd warmth of the December afternoon as they descended the ornately carved, red-carpeted staircase and made their

slightly uneasy way through a large, white foyer with high oak wainscoting.

The cold, angry eyes of a few dozen Musketeers followed them. One of them looked questioningly at Tréville, who shook his head slightly in the negative. The Musketeers grumbled sullenly at that subtle exchange, like wolves denied the kill.

A pair of blue-liveried footmen opened the tall oak doors for them, and they stepped out onto the wide marble staircase. Jean ordered a coach to be brought around for them, and he managed to stop himself just short of bowing to kiss Françoise's hand in farewell when it arrived. She turned the gesture into a firm handshake, and the Musketeer laughed ruefully.

"I'll see you this afternoon," she whispered, holding his hand in hers for just a few seconds longer than was conventional.

"You'll see him this afternoon if your injuries aren't too bad," André corrected sternly.

"I *will* see you this afternoon, Jean," Françoise said firmly. She smiled as she said it, but her tone left no room for argument on André's part.

"I look forward to it, monsieur," Jean smiled, going back inside with the final, clipped bow that was all he could allow himself. André glared at his retreating form until the heavy oak doors closed behind him.

" 'I look forward to it, monsieur,' " the assassin mimicked, as soon as Tréville was out of earshot. "What you see in that reptile is completely beyond me. He was probably molesting you when I scratched on the door."

"That's for me to know and you *never* to find out," she growled. "Tell me something. Do you plan to interrupt us every time things start to get interesting?"

"I certainly intend to try," he smiled tightly.

“I wish you luck. Has it occurred to you yet that we’re not children anymore, and that I didn’t need you to protect me even when we were? I’m *thirty-four*, André. At my age, a chaperone becomes ridiculous. Besides, I’ve let you have plenty of disastrous love affairs. Surely you can let me have one.” She shrugged laconically, trying to tease them both out of their respective tempers. It wasn’t working. They walked down the marble stairs and through the gardens in tense silence.

A footman opened the gilded door of Tréville’s midnight blue conveyance. Françoise glanced inside before she climbed in, the ingrained habit of a lifetime. Gules had managed to stow himself inside the conveyance, and he put a gnarled finger to his lips and winked. Françoise gave him the barest fraction of a nod and climbed into the carriage, ignoring the dull aches and sharp pains that were the inevitable reward of battle. André climbed in after her. The gravelly voice of Biscarrat instructed the coachman to take them to L’Hôtel de Palis on the Rue des Bons Enfants, and they started off down the street.

Françoise studied Gules for a moment before speaking. He certainly looked none the worse for wear, not that it was easy to tell. His unfashionably short white hair and mismatched clothes were as rumpled as usual, but there was no trace of blood or battle about them. His jewel-bright brown eyes regarded her steadily. It was difficult to look for treachery in those composed, familiar features, but she no longer had the luxury of trust.

“Gules,” Françoise muttered quietly in her own voice, “what’s been happening on your end?”

“I followed the trail, love, just like you asked,” Gules began. “I stayed in a shop across the street. You sprung the trap. I’d expected you to just surrender to them and go

wherever they decided to take you; I didn't expect you to actually try to fight all of them. Stupid, love," he said, shaking his head in exasperation.

Françoise suppressed a flash of anger and held her tongue. He was right, after all. "Yes, I was stupid," she admitted tersely, her anger turning inward on herself. "I was stupid, I've been letting grief and rage do my thinking for me, and today André could have died for it. My apologies to you both. It won't happen again."

Gules pursed his thin mouth and nodded gruffly. Françoise had no idea what André did, because she didn't have the heart to look at him just then. Gules frowned and continued his debriefing. "By the time I realized the two of you were fighting them, d'Artagnan had already stopped the fight. Best I could do was follow at a distance and try to rescue you if you needed it." Françoise nodded thoughtfully and winced as a rut in the road jolted the carriage. "So, how many of the bastards did you kill, anyway?" Gules asked her with a laconic shrug.

"Three," she admitted.

"Because they insulted your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Well done, then, love." He nodded firmly, agreeing with himself, and the subject was dropped. They rode the rest of the way to L' Hôtel de Palis in silence.

Françoise took about half an hour to bathe and dress her wounds. Gules did a light Healing on the worst of them, but true to form, he did nothing to ease the pain. Françoise was still his pupil, and pain was a valuable lesson in the avoidance of rash stupidity. When the Healing was finished, Françoise had Kitty pour her aching limbs into a simple, uncorseted charcoal gray mourning gown with jet beading, and she went downstairs to the library, where André waited for her. Waited for the inevitable dressing down they both knew she had to

give him. He might be her oldest friend, but his blunder today had compromised her Biscarrat, and God alone knew what consequences that would bring.

Françoise walked in and softly closed the door behind her. They stood for a moment in silent tableau, sizing each other up like opposing generals. After a moment she crossed the room and sat down at a walnut table with five spiral-carved legs.

“Sit,” she commanded him with a graceful gesture, as if asking him to tea. Her voice was even, betraying no hint of what she felt. She could explode with rage or laugh and shrug her shoulders, and even the lifetime they’d spent together would give him no insight as to where he really stood with her at that moment. His eyes were studying her intently, and he was clearly wondering just how much trouble he was actually in. Good. She needed him to wonder, to be just a little less sure of her, and himself.

“For my own stupidity, I’ve already apologized,” Françoise began in a light, musical voice that still betrayed no emotion. “For your part in this afternoon’s debacle, I will say only this. I’m the only one who gets to decide what’s done for ‘my own good.’ So help me God, if you *ever* pull another stunt like the one you pulled this afternoon, you and I will cross swords.”

She said it calmly, but her eyes bored into his, willing him to understand that she was deadly serious about this. He looked away uncomfortably after a moment, and she decided to let it lie there.

“All right,” she sighed. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, tell me why you dislike Tréville so intensely.”

“Where do I begin?” he smirked, visibly relieved that she was going to let the first subject drop so easily.

“Pick a spot,” she growled, still angry with him. He

realized that, and tried a different tack.

“Well enough. Let me run this one by you. He’s a gentleman, a man of honor.”

“And you’re not?”

“Not particularly, no,” André said easily. “And more to the point, I don’t believe anyone else is, either. In my experience, anyone who rambles that much about his integrity has almost *got* to be hiding something. I don’t trust him. People who seem too good to be true are generally neither.”

“A valid point,” she conceded a bit mechanically, “though I haven’t decided yet how far it applies to Tréville. And for the record, you *are* a man of honor, old friend, and I’ll kill anyone who says less of you. You’re continuing to back me when it would be safer to go with Mazarin. Now, what else is worrying you?”

“You mean aside from the fact that the man currently trying to seduce you is the Captain of the Musketeers, and we’re Cardinalists?”

“We *were* Cardinalists,” she corrected him sadly. “My uncle would have been the first to realize that it’s time to make other alliances. In fact, he himself recommended that I cultivate Tréville.”

“In other words,” Sorlin pointed out dryly, “he recommended that you should whore yourself out for political gain.”

“He recommended nothing of the sort,” she snapped defensively. “Wake up, André. We’ve been cast adrift politically. The Queen and her partisans wouldn’t have us if we begged them on bended knees; they hated the cardinal too much. I could angle us at the Marquis d’Azyr, but in order to do that, I’d have to become his mistress, and that prospect doesn’t appeal to me. And, frankly, it would make me a romantic rival of His Majesty, and I doubt I’d last long under those circumstances. Prince Gaston is a hopeless dupe, and

the King doesn't trust him; to ally ourselves with Gaston would be tantamount to political suicide. That leaves us with two options, Mazarin or Tréville. I can't afford to alienate Mazarin, but I don't want to give him the almost unlimited power that the Cardinal's Eyes would bring. He's already allied with the Queen and her faction; they're both too powerful as it is. If I were convinced that they were committed to the best interests of France, it might be a different story. But you and I both know better. Sadly enough, the only one of them we can trust even a little is Tréville."

"God help us," André muttered.

"Amen," she agreed emphatically. "But I want you to understand something. I am *not* whoring myself for political gain. I need to stay close to Tréville for a lot of reasons. I need to work through him until my own influence with the King is secure, and I want to find out if he's responsible for my uncle's murder. But I have no intention of taking the man to my bed in order to accomplish these things. If I do take him for a lover, it won't have anything to do with politics, and he's got a long way to go with me before I'll trust him that far. Are you satisfied with that?"

"I wasn't aware I was getting a vote."

"You're not," she said tersely, beginning to grow exasperated with him. "But this will be a lot easier for me if I don't have to fight you every step of the way. I've been wading through court intrigues for almost twenty years. I need you to trust my ability to do that now, and I can't have you getting in my way, even with the best of intentions. One false step or gesture, one word out of place, and the fragile structure we've built our lives on will come crumbling down around our ears. You know that; it is as it's always been. Trust me. Trust what I'm doing."

"You know I do," he said at last. "I always have. I just

don't like Tréville. I'm afraid of anyone who could cloud your judgment, and believe me, love will do that faster than anything else."

"Don't I know it," she smiled, shaking her head. "You remember what I was like with Antoine."

"Too well," André agreed. "And I see it happening again."

"No, you do not."

"You're not just going to stay close to Tréville to get answers out of him. You're going back there and spending the afternoon with him when you should probably be spending it in bed, and you're doing it because you want to. Partly for your uncle, yes, but mostly for yourself."

Françoise bit back her temper, and her first three replies to that. "André," she finally managed, "I suppose there's not much point in discussing insubordination with someone I played doctor with when we were children. But somewhere in all the years we've known each other, I want to believe I've earned your respect."

"You know you have."

"Good. Then trust me to not be sixteen years old and stupid anymore."

André grinned at that, then let the smile fade into uncharacteristic seriousness. "I do trust that, and you. But someone needs to say this. Richelieu's death has left you vulnerable, and I don't just mean politically. It's hit you hard, and over the last couple of days, you've managed to become . . . impulsive. This isn't like you, Françoise, and you can't afford it. *We* can't afford it."

"I know," she admitted. "I do know, I've said as much myself, and I mean to be more careful from here. But I'm not willing to give up the notion of Tréville, not yet. I *like* the man, André. He seems . . . real. Honest. Human. In all likelihood, nothing is ever going to happen between us, let's be

truthful, but it's a lovely illusion. A pleasant thing to occupy the back of my mind while I solve my uncle's murder, restore our lives as best I can, and move on."

André nodded a bit reluctantly after a moment's thought. "Makes sense, I suppose," he admitted at last. "Good luck." *You're about to need it*, he thought, just loudly enough for her to catch it. She nodded, in response to both.

CHAPTER NINE

Time rolled back almost twenty years in her memory as Françoise entered her uncle's private library, shut and locked the small oak door behind her. It was here that she had first received her commission into the Cardinal's Eyes. Here she and Richelieu had closeted themselves away for hours on end, determining foreign policy, deciphering intrigues, and sometimes, more rarely, playing chess or talking over a glass of wine. Every detail of the room was hauntingly familiar, from the soft, dark Persian carpet to the standing globe in the corner by the gray stone fireplace to the huge, formidable oak desk with its burgundy leather chairs. It was the desk that riveted her slightly apprehensive attention. The chair behind it was hers, now. Richelieu's Marais townhouse with all its secrets now belonged to Françoise, and it was one of those secrets that drew her to this room.

She lit a few extra candles, drew the heavy burgundy velvet drapes and started a fire in the hearth. *Admit it*, she thought to herself, *you're just stalling*. She glanced over the hundreds of books that lined the east wall, remembering her uncle's words to her. His private papers would be hidden there, somewhere. He could have been killed for one of the pieces of information she was about to uncover, and for the first time since his death, she was beginning to think a little of her own danger. Taking

a shallow breath to steady her nerves, Françoise crossed the room and started to look for the volume of Saint Augustine.

It took her a few minutes to find it; it was a small, unprepossessing bit of work bound in ivory vellum, deliberately made to be nondescript. *The subject matter wasn't badly chosen, either*, she mused. *No one reads Saint Augustine for fun. If my uncle hadn't told me about the secret panel, it probably wouldn't have been discovered for centuries.* After the barest hesitation she pulled the book out of its housing, and the carved wood panel beneath the bookshelf slid open.

Françoise sank down onto her knees with agonizing slowness, letting out an involuntary groan. *God, I'm getting old*, she thought. *Light wounds like these wouldn't have fazed me ten years ago.* She placed her candle next to the aperture for light and looked inside. Hundreds of papers were stacked in neatly tied bundles. With a last, furtive glance around her she started drawing them out and skimming them for content, placing them in piles on the floor around her.

One large bundle contained copies of the love letters the Queen had exchanged with Mazarin and the Duke of Buckingham, and Françoise paused for a few minutes to read those. Anne of Austria was a potentially dangerous enemy. And Françoise wasn't a woman to sacrifice an opportunity for studying the innermost workings of an enemy's mind.

The first, most obvious thing she noticed was the almost complete about-face in the style of the letters. The Queen had only ever written two letters to Buckingham, and those were brief, cursory notes that did little to betray her. Mostly they took the opportunity to remind the impetuous man that everything lay between them; the Channel, their religion, her husband. The open message was largely one of cool rejection, but it was belied by the occasional hint that he might continue to pursue her in spite of her noble protests. The letters to

Buckingham, written when she was about twenty-six or twenty-seven, were masterworks of caution and elegant restraint. Hers was a mind to be wary of, even if it hadn't been a match for the cardinal's.

The later letters to Mazarin could almost have been written by an entirely different woman. Page followed page of compromising, illiterate passion scrawled in a hasty script that bore little resemblance to the elegant Italian hand of the Buckingham letters. Was the Queen in love with Mazarin, or was she possessed? And was this what love did, even to an intelligent woman? "In time, my own," she wrote, "you will be master of France as surely as you are master of my heart." *This is worse than fulsome sentiment*, Françoise thought. *This is treason. If I didn't know better, I'd swear they were forgeries.*

As the head of the Cardinal's Eyes she'd known about the affair, known about the letters. She'd kept everyone but her uncle from reading them, hadn't even read them herself. One of the risks of her position was capture by an enemy, and she didn't want to be able to say all that much if put to the torture. And, God, she'd been right to keep such tight security on Anne's correspondence.

One of these letters would be sufficient to take a queen to the scaffold. The idiot woman had written dozens of them. Louis was a jealous husband; he wouldn't balk at the execution of a faithless wife, even if that execution would lead France more deeply into its never-ending war with Spain and the French Queen's Hapsburg relatives. Françoise wasn't about to let anyone see these letters, ever. She briefly considered burning them, but realized she might well need them as a lever to restrain Anne and her faction. She set them aside and continued her perusal of the other papers.

There were, of course, several dozen letters scrawled by

the poisoned pen of the Queen's dearest friend, the Duchesse de Chevreuse. The wretched creature had plotted with Spain, with England, with anyone she thought would help her to pull down the cardinal. Her clumsy intrigues had led her into exile time and again, and she was currently cooling her heels in Brussels.

The duchesse was the perfect romantic heroine: an inveterate plotter, beautiful, high-spirited, adventurous, and appallingly stupid. If it hadn't been for Richelieu's recent murder, Françoise would have left the entire batch of letters untouched. La Chevreuse was a third-rate politician who'd never posed a serious threat to anyone but herself, and Françoise felt no particular need to study her thought processes as she'd done with the Queen's. Still, an assassin was easy enough for a woman of La Chevreuse's connections to procure; it was probably best to err on the side of caution and go through the letters carefully.

She found love letters to the Marquis de Cinq-Mars, the Earl of Holland in England, the Conde-Duque d'Olivares in Spain, the Duc de Lorraine, Louis' brother d'Orleans . . . the list seemed to have been endless. The letters were charmingly laced with treacherous plots for the invasion of France by Spain, or plots for Richelieu's assassination. Information on French troop movements figured in a few of the letters, but none of them were more recent than 1637, when her patroness, the Queen, had gotten herself into a fair amount of trouble by supplying similar information to the Spanish. It was Richelieu who'd saved Anne from disgrace, and for a few days she'd actually been grateful. Then, of course, the plotting had begun afresh.

Ah, Françoise thought as she skimmed another of the duchesse's letters with rising hope, here's a love letter to the Marquis d'Azyr. If he's replied to her in kind, I'll have him by

an unfortunate appendage. The King is jealous enough of Anne, his wife, for whom he feels nothing. He might just destroy d'Azyr and La Chevreuse both if he knew they were betraying him. At the very least, it would be all she'd need to deal with the duchesse. Louis sometimes forgave his lovers, but he showed no mercy to his rivals. Françoise smiled softly to herself and read on.

Copies of d'Azyr's love letters to La Chevreuse and half the court followed in the next stack of papers. His love letters to Françoise were conspicuously and interestingly absent.

"He's been even busier than I thought," Françoise murmured to herself sardonically. She took the time to read them all, carefully. There was no hint of political intrigue in any of them, as there had been in those of the Duchesse de Chevreuse. He seemed to be exclusively devoted to pleasure and the pursuit of more lovers to add to his collection. To his credit, the poetry he wrote them was truly exquisite, but he had an unfortunate habit of addressing the exact same poem to several people at the same time. She smiled and shook her head, recognizing some of the sonnets he'd sent her over the years. When she was done leafing through them, she set them aside with a smirk and forced herself on to more serious matters.

There weren't too many plots coming out of England these days, but it was hardly surprising. Their king, Charles Stuart, had his hands full trying to quell full-scale rebellion. He'd be appropriately occupied on his own shores for at least the next year or two. Spain, as usual, was rife with anti-French intrigues. It never seemed to matter how badly off the Spaniards were; somehow they always found time to complicate things for their neighbors.

Françoise's brow creased in thought, and she gnawed at her lower lip. Nothing looked too dangerous yet, but she resolved to set more spies on the Queen and Mazarin. Her

uncle had worried that the two of them would sell France out to Spain, and he could well have been right. So much depended on the life of the King . . . Anne would be powerless as long as her husband lived. But if he should die while his heir was still a child, nothing would prevent Anne from ruling as regent in her son's name. And no one doubted that her first loyalty lay with Spain and her Hapsburg relatives. *God forgive me, but if she seems halfway to destroying France, I will take the last resort. The Queen and Mazarin are mortal, and I am no gentler than my uncle when it comes to that. And with the royal physician on my payroll, it wouldn't be difficult to arrange.*

Another pile, closer to the bottom, contained partially blank signed forms, all of which would no doubt prove extremely useful. Arrest warrants with Richelieu's signature and seal, with a space left blank for the name of the intended prisoner; writs of assassination that also bore his signature and seal . . . they would only be useful for about the next week or two, but in that time she'd have virtual diplomatic immunity. She couldn't be taken to task for any action that these blank sheets could justify, and there was remarkably little they couldn't justify. Her favorites were the empty parchments that simply bore his spidery signature. She could make anything at all of those. He'd managed to give her the gift of his unlimited power for a few days, and what she did with it was now up to her.

A plain envelope contained all the relevant letters, treaties, and documents that had been involved in the Cinq-Mars plot. The King's former favorite, the Marquis de Cinq-Mars, had been executed only a few months ago for high treason and the attempted murder of the cardinal.

The King himself had dabbled in that plot, and it was the first time he'd ever intrigued against his chief minister, the

first sign that Richelieu's hold on him was waning. Louis had loved the marquis beyond reason, had indulged his every whim, and the petulant and spoiled favorite had attempted, in an amateur way, to usurp Richelieu's power and place.

The plot was more dangerous to France and larger in scope than any that had preceded it. It had the nominal support of the King, the Queen, the King's brother, and the Conde-Duque d'Olivares, Richelieu's age-old rival and the favorite of King Philip IV of Spain. It was there, however, that the conspirators overstepped themselves. Louis was unaware of the treaty they'd concluded with Olivares that would have ceded the military gains of the last twenty years back into Spanish hands in exchange for Spanish support in the plot. Françoise had managed to intercept a copy of that treaty and get it to Richelieu, who presented it to Louis. And Louis, publicly cornered, sent his treacherous favorite to the block.

That dossier contained everything she had expected it to contain, and it was by far the most dangerous thing she'd ever touched. The signed confession of Cinq-Mars implicated everyone, and all the letters he'd exchanged with Anne, Louis, and Gaston d'Orleans were there. Françoise had the whip hand over them all, if she ever chose to use it.

The next paper she ran across in the secret panel was a list of names. It read, "Tontine - Heart of Flame. Duc de Richelieu. Duc de Nemours. Marquis d'Azyr. Marquis d'Entragues. Marquis de Vitry. Marquis de la Pailleterie. Comte de Palis. Comte de Tréville. Comte des Chasses. Comte de Sorlin. Entrusted to l'Abbé d'Herblay 11 Mars 1629."

The Comte des Chasses, the Duc de Nemours, and the Marquis d'Entragues had been crossed off the list. Des Chasses had died sometime in the late 1630s, almost certainly of natural causes. But Nemours and d'Entragues had both

been poisoned at banquets at the Louvre within the last month or two. Politically, nothing had connected them with Richelieu; Françoise hadn't believed their deaths to have been related to his or each other's in any way. But if this was truly a list of the members of a tontine, it was conceivable that all three of them had been murdered for the same cause. She looked over the list again. Jean and André were both on it, as was her husband, all suspects and potential victims. Her stomach knotted at the thought, and her mind raced on ahead in its analysis.

Tontines were most often formed when there was a bit of treasure that no one wanted to split up. The Heart of Flame was probably a jewel or priceless artifact that the last surviving member of the tontine would inherit. The fact that someone was suddenly killing off members of a tontine that had apparently existed for over a decade could only mean that the murderer had a sudden, urgent need for whatever had been entrusted to the abbé's care. Until she learned exactly what the Heart of Flame was, she would have to act on the assumption that it was some sort of treasure, and the killer was in desperate need of money. God knows, it happened often enough among members of their class.

André, for example, could use that kind of money to buy his way back into polite society, back into the life to which his birth entitled him. His years as Richelieu's assassin would be quickly forgotten if he suddenly got his hands on a fortune. And he wasn't above killing them all; she'd be a fool to believe otherwise. He'd had every opportunity, he certainly had the ability, and he had the strongest visible motive of any of them. If it came to it, would she be able to kill her oldest friend? Would he kill her if she got too close to the truth? She tried to thrust the thought from her mind. It couldn't have been André. And yet the thought, unbidden, remained.

Her husband was also on the list, and by no means could he be ruled out. They weren't having money problems, but there were other possible motives; she still didn't know what the Heart of Flame was. It might have had nothing whatever to do with treasure. And Antoine had hated Richelieu with all the jealous spite a small, ambitious man tends to feel for the success of a great one.

D'Azyr seemed to be too much of a lazy sensualist to have undertaken anything as ambitious as the murder of the King's chief minister and two highly-placed courtiers, but appearances could be deceiving. Louis had always lavishly subsidized his favorites, so a need for money hardly seemed to make sense as a motivation for d'Azyr. But the motivation could have been political . . . among other things, Richelieu would have been a stumbling block on his road to power.

The same could be said for Tréville, and he had the added spur of the months he'd just spent in exile for his opposition to the cardinal. He'd been a close friend of the Marquis de Cinq-Mars. She hadn't been able to uncover any evidence that Tréville had been personally involved, but he almost had to have known at least some of the details of the plot. He and anyone else who'd been close to the marquis were exiled, and thus far only Tréville had been permitted to return to court. *But he was allowed to return because even my uncle trusted his integrity*, she thought. *God, don't let it be Jean.* She gnawed at the paint on her lower lip and forced herself to concentrate on the other names on the list.

The Marquis de Vitry had been in the Bastille at the time of the murders, but that alone wasn't sufficient to clear him. It was possible to procure an assassin, even from within the walls of a prison.

Richelieu had sent him there in 1637 for abusing his position as Governor of Provence. Vitry had used his title to claim the

droit de seigneur of an unwilling bride, allowing him to bed her before her husband did. Worse, he beat and raped her so violently she almost died. Her husband challenged him to a duel, and the marquis killed him.

Françoise heard about the case and took a very personal interest in it. Her uncle had seemed reluctant to pursue the matter, but in the end he capitulated, and the marquis was imprisoned. Only the King's intervention had prevented Vitry's execution; killing an opponent in a duel was an offense punishable by death. At the time Françoise had found it ironic that Vitry could be tried for the duel but not for the rape, but until now, she'd never appreciated the irony of one tontine member condemning another.

Now that Richelieu was dead, the marquis would most likely be released. After all, he was a former favorite of His Majesty's. Fortunately, Françoise had the woman he raped under her protection, safely hidden in Paris. She almost hoped the bastard would try something by way of revenge; it would justify her in killing him. For the last five years she'd left standing orders at the Bastille. They were to warn her if Vitry escaped or was released. So far, she had heard nothing.

The Marquis de la Pailleterie was the only one of them about whom Françoise knew almost nothing, and that was perhaps most dangerous of all.

There was no way she would ever be able to interrogate all of them herself; the curiosity of the late cardinal's baseborn niece would raise unhealthy suspicions in anyone with half a brain. No one was likely to guess at the truth, but Françoise wasn't prepared to risk anyone's close scrutiny. Thus far she'd survived by keeping a low profile, by playing the bitter recluse, the scorned, jealous wife for whom the French court wavered between pity and contempt. Above all, above even her hunger for revenge, she couldn't allow that delicately

maintained balance to be jeopardized. She resolved to set spies on all of them; it was all she could do. God willing, it would be enough.

There was already a spy in Tréville's household; the small fortune she paid his *valet de chambre* every month guaranteed that she knew everything about him that was worth knowing and a great deal more that wasn't. Unfortunately, there was no one currently watching d'Azyr in spite of her protests; Richelieu had considered the marquis too dangerous to even spy on. Cinq-Mars had been Louis' favorite before d'Azyr, and the Cinq-Mars execution had almost cost the cardinal his place at Louis' side. She could see no way around it now; she would have to plant someone in d'Azyr's bed. Fortunately, it didn't seem that that would pose any sort of difficulty whatsoever. The others would be easier; they were less important.

Her plans laid, Françoise pulled a candle over to the compartment and took a last look inside, just to make sure she wasn't missing anything. There was one last sealed envelope she'd somehow overlooked when she was taking all the papers out. It was addressed to her. She hastily stacked the papers back into the compartment, shoved the panel closed, and raised herself painfully to her feet, clutching the sealed letter, a little afraid to open it.

On an impulse she approached the desk and sat down gingerly in the tall chair that had been her uncle's. A chill shot through her; she almost seemed to feel the old man standing at her shoulder. A black wall of loneliness hit her with surprising force and left her breathless, blinking back tears. She'd almost expected Richelieu to limp into the room, snap his papery white fingers and order her out of his chair, half-laughing at her impudence. He never would again. The room was empty, silent except for the crackling hiss of the fire.

She tore open the envelope with suddenly nerveless fingers,

and the paper crumbled at her touch. *He must have written this years ago*, she thought, carefully opening the letter. It was written in the clear, bold hand of his younger days, before increasing age and ill health had produced the spidery script she'd grown accustomed to seeing.

My dear Guerite, he began, *The fact that you are reading this now means that I have died; probably some assassination attempt or other caught me out at last. Avenge me if you must, but don't waste time grieving for me. France will need you now to have a man's strength rather than a woman's tenderness.*

"Oh, really?" Françoise muttered aloud, remembering with a mixture of sadness and amusement the passionate arguments they'd had on the subject of her sex. "You may not have liked women much, but you surely knew us better than that, Uncle," she said to the empty room. "We're neither weak nor particularly tender." The room, unsurprisingly, didn't offer any answers to that. She shook her head and turned her attention back to the parchment.

I have enclosed in this cabinet all the documents I consider relevant to the safety of France. Use them as you see fit, but be careful of them. Let no one know you have them. By no means should you publish the Queen's letters unless all else is lost, and perhaps not even then.

Send them to His Majesty through Tréville, if he still lives. Tréville is the one man everyone at court seems to trust implicitly, and I cannot imagine that he would ever lose the King's ear. I myself have never found reason to doubt his integrity. Use Tréville.

And be careful of your husband, Guerite. He may be a fool, but he has dangerous friends. Be suspicious of any attempt at reconciliation. Don't be ashamed to seek an annulment yourself if you have to. A Papal Legate named Giulio

Mazarini is currently being well paid to defend the interests of France in the Vatican. If you need an annulment, work through him.

“Mordieux,” she breathed, “you really did write this a long time ago. Mazarin hasn’t gone by that Italian name in three or four years, and it’s far longer than that since he left the Vatican. I’d be afraid to send an annulment through him now; he might think I was freeing myself up to make a play for him.” She laughed quietly and read on.

Forgive an old man’s wandering thoughts, my child; I must make sure I tell you everything, though I leave order behind me. You would do well to befriend the Queen if you can. It may not be as difficult as you think; you and I are so seldom seen together that she could easily be brought to think we despised one another. And she is only a little older than you, and a woman. She is not a fool, but you are far more clever; look to it and see if it can be done.

Lastly, a word on Louis. It is possible to slip a woman into his bed, but it must never be yourself. Avoid at all costs the temptations of becoming the royal mistress. Louis is notoriously fickle, and I doubt anyone could hold his attentions for long. And he is unkind to those he has tired of; you would have no choice but to enter a convent or leave France, and either measure would be a waste of your talents. My sole consolation in this is that I doubt Louis would have you, in spite of your beauty. He prefers soft, submissive, saintly ladies who doubtless lie numbly beneath him and resign themselves to the will of a nonexistent God. Consummate actress as you are, my dear, that is not the role for you.

Having said all this, I leave the honor and the burden of safeguarding France to you, for I truly believe that you alone are capable of it. Power is a demanding mistress; you will have to sacrifice much of your happiness to her.

“Not power, Uncle,” Françoise said to herself quietly. “I never wanted that. Honor. Honor is the one thing that could compel me to do what you’re asking of me. And I think you knew that.”

I will not wish you joy, for this path will bring you little enough of that, the letter continued in the same depressing vein. I will simply wish you luck. Never doubt that you are equal to the task I set before you. I have reposed great faith in you, and I have not done so without reason. You carry within you the seeds of greatness. Aut Cesar aut nihil. Signed this eleventh day of June in the year of grace 1634, Richelieu.

Françoise folded the letter gently to avoid damaging it and slid it into her bodice. *Aut Cesar aut nihil. Caesar or nothing.* It wasn't the path she would have chosen for herself. Restlessly she rose from her chair and walked toward the fireplace to warm herself. She stared into the flames for a long time before she left the room and the ghosts it held for her.

CHAPTER TEN

Françoise shortly found herself back in L'Hôtel de Tréville, staring at the same stolid, geometrically patterned oak door she'd last stood and stared at as a prisoner a handful of hours ago. Now she was back as a supper guest of sorts, disguised as a Capuchin monk.

My life, she thought, is endlessly strange. This is the second time today I've visited the Captain of the Musketeers in the guise of a somewhat paunchy and unattractive man. I'm beginning to feel like something out of a Shakespeare comedy. This time, of course, it was more physical disguise than Shift; something that would fool the casual onlooker, but wouldn't smack of Magic to a Nul like Jean. She shook herself out of her reverie and set about listening through the door; Jean and his valet were on the other side of it, discussing her arrival. The valet's voice rose on a high and somewhat nasal note of complaint.

"Monsieur de Tréville, there's a Capuchin monk outside who's demanding an audience with you. I can't get rid of him!" That would be Emile Vressac, Jean's somewhat twitchy and regrettably disloyal *valet de chambre*. The one who was secretly on her payroll. Françoise unconsciously ran a hand over her monk's robes to smooth them down, then caught herself doing it and made herself

stop. It wasn't as if fussing would make the disguise any prettier.

"I *tried* to tell him to go away," Vressac continued, working himself into a state, "and he threatened to thump me with his staff! Yes, monsieur, those were his exact words! Monsieur finds something amusing?" the valet asked him, apparently trying to decide whether or not he should be offended by his employer's expression.

"A passing thought, that's all. Now then, what does this monk seem to want of me?"

"He said he was an old friend of your father's, from Bearn. It seems your father wishes you to take up instruction with him."

"That hardly sounds like my father," Jean muttered. There was a pause of a few seconds, probably while Jean was deciding what to do next. "D'Artagnan!" he called out after a moment. "There's a Capuchin monk coming in here to . . . uhh . . . start giving me instruction, I think he said." Françoise bit back a smile; it hadn't sounded nearly that salacious when Vressac had said it. "He could be a friend, visiting me in disguise. He could also be an assassin. I want you here, just in case it's the latter." There were the sounds of shuffling and arrangement, presumably while d'Artagnan hid himself, and after a moment the heavy office doors opened with their usual stiff creak. Françoise limped heavily into the room. Jean was seated behind the enormous oak desk, and stood as she entered.

"Good afternoon, my son," came her wheeze from inside the monk's deep cowl. The trick to making a woman's voice sound sufficiently like a man's, she'd discovered long ago, was to go ahead and keep her voice at its natural pitch, but keep it in the back of the throat and throw just a bit of gravel into it. Most actresses who tried to play men forced their voices into unsupportable lower registers instead, with

utterly unconvincing results. By contrast, she was really rather proud of hers.

“You may dismiss your servant,” she continued. “We will have no need of him.”

Tréville nodded to Vressac after the barest pause, and Vressac drew his touchy dignity about him like an invisible cloak and was gone in a huff. “You may also dismiss Monsieur d’Artagnan,” she continued.

“Listening at the door, were you?” he murmured.

“Occupational hazard,” she admitted.

“The hazard of a spy, or an assassin?”

“Spy, I’m afraid,” she said a bit wearily, maintaining the masculine wheeze. “It’s more fashionable, not to mention the fact that it pays better. Ten thousand pistoles a year, when last we spoke with His Majesty.” Jean’s eyes lit with recognition and remembrance, and he turned to the tapestry.

“Thank you, Monsieur d’Artagnan, that will be all,” he murmured. “Please let Monsieur Vressac know that the guest I was expecting has arrived for dinner.”

D’Artagnan extricated himself from the tapestry with really quite remarkable grace, and bowed himself off.

Françoise laughed a warm, vibrant laugh as soon as they were alone, and Jean turned to regard her with a quizzically raised eyebrow.

“You’ll give poor Vressac a fit of apoplexy if you lead him to think you were expecting the Capuchin,” she pointed out wryly, allowing herself to revert back to her own voice for the moment.

“But, Françoise, I absolutely *live* to give him apoplexy. He makes the temptation irresistible.” Jean took her hand, kissed it, led her to a corner table and poured wine for them both.

“Any news on Grismonde?” she asked without preamble.

“Nothing yet, unfortunately. You were right, he took to his heels the moment I dismissed him. Predictable enough, I suppose,” he said with a shrug. She hadn’t expected any other answer, but she swore quietly in frustration nevertheless. “I’ll tell you the minute we come up with anything,” he added, and she flashed him a smile of gratitude. The Cardinal’s Eyes would stand a much better chance of finding the man than Tréville’s Musketeers would, but she was too tactful to tell him so. And she’d already ordered her people to arrest him on sight.

“You know, there’s one question that’s been driving me crazy since this morning,” he said, changing the subject.

“Unless I miss my guess, it would have something to do with the duels we’ve fought over the years,” she surmised, studying him over the rim of her wineglass.

“How did you know?”

“I know *you*, or at least I like to think I do. Our duels seemed to have bothered you. Now, this next part’s a little harder; I have to try to figure out specifically which duel you’re going to ask me about. I have to figure this out, of course, because I’m sure I’ll need at least a little time to come up with some reasonably convincing lies about it.”

Jean laughed and shook his head. “Okay, fair enough,” he said. “Lie to me about Michele. Why in the world did you challenge me over her? You can’t possibly have wanted her yourself. Uhh . . . can you?”

“I was afraid you were going to ask me about that,” Françoise sighed ruefully. “You really don’t want me to tell you the truth about Michele, and I’m too tired to make up a good lie.”

“Tell me the truth. How bad can it be?” he asked earnestly. She looked at him for a moment and laughed mirthlessly.

“I want you to remember those words, Jean. I suspect I’m

going to be throwing them back at you quite a bit as we get to know each other better. Are you entirely sure you want the truth?"

"Always."

"All right. You might throw me out on my ear for this, but you seem to want to know, so I'll tell you." She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts, took another sip of the wine and began. "Michele was one of the Cardinal's Eyes. We'd been trying to get her into your bed for over a month, but you were being honorable for some reason."

"I wanted her, but I didn't want to marry her, and I didn't want to be the one who ruined her," he admitted. "I'm not proud of that, but if I'm asking you for uncomfortable truths, I suppose I should be willing to reciprocate."

Françoise nodded without any visible register of emotion. "I thought it might be something like that. And I figured that no man really wants a woman unless he's convinced that someone else wants her too. That was why I challenged you over my 'mistress' and made sure to lose the duel."

"It worked too," he said thoughtfully. "And, no, I'm not going to throw you out on your ear for that. I'd be a fool to think you wouldn't have set spies on me all these years. You probably still have one or two in my household."

"Probably," she smiled. "And if you want to smack me for it, go right ahead." She presented a black-gloved hand for him to slap, and he kissed it instead.

"I think I've brutalized you quite enough for one day. I didn't hurt you too badly when I hit you, did I?" he asked softly, not letting go of her hand.

"Hmmm, let's see . . . should I be honest with him and admit that I'm fine, or should I milk this for the guilt?" she quipped.

"Believe me, you couldn't make me feel any worse than I

already do," he said miserably. "If I'd known you were a woman . . ."

"Jean, it doesn't matter. You weren't *supposed* to know. You aren't supposed to know *now*, and if it hadn't been for Sorlin . . ."

"If it hadn't been for Sorlin," he interrupted her firmly, "I would have killed you."

"Probably," she conceded after a moment. "But if you can be reasonable about our duels and my disguises, surely you'll allow me to be equally reasonable about this." He breathed a quiet sigh of relief and grinned, relaxing at last.

"Oh, I suppose if I must . . ."

"You must." She nodded emphatically.

"Of course, there *is* one thing that still bothers me about our duels," he murmured thoughtfully.

"And that is?"

"If you're going to tell me you only ever lost to me on purpose, I'm going to crawl under my desk and never come out again."

Françoise laughed wickedly. On a sudden, reckless impulse, she lowered the cowl on her monk's robe, revealing her own unaltered features. Just this once, she wanted to spend an afternoon in Jean's company without having to look like a plump, older man. She rose from her seat, moved to the window embrasure, and turned to contemplate him thoughtfully.

"With a single word, I could condemn one of my oldest enemies to life imprisonment under a desk," she mused mock-seriously. "The cardinal himself would have been jealous of my power."

"You don't mean to tell me . . ."

"Of course I don't mean to tell you," she laughed lightly, cutting him off. "Either way. Just think what a devastating advantage that'll give me the next time."

“There won’t *be* a next time,” he said, rising to join her. “There won’t ever be a need.”

“I hope you’re right, my friend.” She smiled a bit sadly.

“Of course I’m right. Musketeers are always right,” he quipped.

“What *was* I thinking?” Françoise drawled. “Of *course* you must be right. We silly Cardinalists sometimes forget these things.”

“Well, as long as you’ve remembered your place . . .” He shrugged with a good-natured grin.

“I may yet teach you yours.”

“Teach me, then,” he smiled, daring her with his eyes.

“Get me a sword.”

“That wasn’t what I had in mind.” He brushed her lips with his, in a touch that was as light as a whisper. As if he didn’t want to frighten her. As if she were spun glass. She wanted to fly apart with the shock of it; the last time someone had kissed her as any part of an erotic adventure, she’d been sixteen years old. Antoine hadn’t kissed her since their wedding.

There are nuns out there who’ve done more than I have, she chided herself. *Time, I suppose, to do something about that.* She deepened the kiss experimentally, lightly grazing his lower lip with her teeth. His breath hitched in response, and his mouth softened as he leaned into the kiss, pulling her toward him. It was slow, unhurried, breathtaking. Perhaps a little painful, to think of just how many years it had been since anyone had touched her that way, or held her at all. Jean’s fingertips trailed exquisite fire along her skin, traced the base of her spine in soft circles.

For the second time that day they were interrupted by a scratch on the door.

“Go away!” Jean growled, kissing her again. There was a second scratching that managed to somehow be timid and

persistent at the same time. Françoise sighed, broke off the kiss and threw her monk's cowl hastily back over her head.

"It's a plot!" Jean whispered fiercely. "Every single time! We'll be ninety years old, and people will *still* be finding new and creative ways to interrupt us!"

"If this turns out to be Sorlin," she murmured, only half-joking, "remind me to have him killed." She picked up her staff, and as she turned toward the door, she physically transformed herself back into the monk. "Enter!" she bellowed pompously in her gravelly wheeze. The door swung open to reveal Vressac, and she advanced on him menacingly. The poor man blanched but somehow managed to hold his ground.

"You presumptuous insect!" she railed. "You dare interrupt the workings of the Lord?!"

"But . . . but I only wanted to . . ."

"Silence, toad, lest I should decide to administer the Lord's punishment!" She raised her staff, and Vressac backed out of the doorway hastily.

"Messieurs, dinner is prepared!" the valet quailed.

"Dinner?!" she boomed, lowering her staff with a loud thump. She halted her advance and looked at him for a moment, resting one hand on an enormous hip. Vressac froze, looking frightened and miserable, and Françoise finally decided to take pity on him. "Well, why didn't you say so, man?" she laughed a jovial, expansive laugh. "The Lord's work can always wait for that! Come, my young friend," she beckoned to Tréville. Vressac laughed nervously, and Françoise pounded him on the back heartily. "Lead on, my master, and let us fill ourselves full with the Lord's good things!"

I'm going to hell for this, she thought as she and Jean followed the valet out into the hall. She kept up a steady, uninteresting patter about a passage from Revelations until they reached the dining room and she and Jean were seated.

“May I be excused, messieurs?” Vressac mumbled at last, pleading to Tréville with his eyes.

“One can never be excused from the Lord’s work, my friend,” Françoise said ominously. “We will permit you to go about your business, however, as I’m sure I’ll have plenty of time to instruct you in the months to come. We’ll arrange a little chat at some point, just you and me.”

Vressac blanched, smiled a sickly smile, and fled as quickly as his bony legs would carry him. Jean and Françoise erupted with laughter as soon as he was out of earshot.

“Oh, God, that has to be the cruelest thing I’ve ever done,” she gasped, carefully keeping her voice in the monk’s wheeze even as she dropped the bombastic persona for a moment. “You’re right, he really *does* make the temptation irresistible. Oh, Jean, don’t ever let that one out of your service. He’s a jewel!”

“Oh, I’ll keep him around forever,” Jean promised faithfully. “I never noticed it before, but he runs exactly like a chicken. I could sit and watch him for hours.”

Françoise choked back another laugh as three servants entered bearing silver trays.

“Ah,” she said pompously, falling back into her monk persona. “The Lord is generous tonight! *Mirabile in nostrilis nostris!*” She glanced across the table at Tréville, who was looking at her blankly. *Note for the future*, she thought to herself. *Avoid terrible Latin puns.* “Pull back the covers, gentlemen! Let us see the Lord’s good works.”

The servants complied, revealing a feast that almost made her believe in the God she was probably offending. Roast pheasants beckoned her with sultry promises of rosemary potatoes. Exquisite sauces and seasonings were set before her in small silver ewers, and the sharp, dry scent of an Anjou wine was a flawless counterpoint. *I’m in love, and we haven’t even gotten to dessert yet.*

The food wasn't the only exquisite thing about the room, Françoise thought as she took in her surroundings. Jean had wonderful taste, an unusual thing in a man. Everything in the room was done in a warm ivory damask, from the *portières* to the long, thin table runner to the cushions on the high oak-backed chairs. The Persian carpet before the enormous oak fireplace was rendered in shades of ivory, black, and taupe with subtle hints of gold embroidery. She wanted to ask him if he'd actually put it all together himself, but she suspected such things would be beneath the notice of her pompous Capuchin, so she stored the question for another time. The servants were on the point of bowing themselves out when the Chevalier de Batz-Castelmore burst through the doors, breathing heavily.

"Pardon my intrusion, monsieur," he said, bowing hastily to Tréville, "but His Majesty has requested your immediate presence. Your friend, the Marquis de la Pailleterie, has just been found dead of a broken neck at the foot of a staircase at the Louvre. It is thought that he could have been murdered."

Jean went chalk white and clutched at the edge of the table. "Dear God," he breathed. The wine suddenly turned to ash in Françoise's mouth. She rose, limped across the room and put a hand on Jean's shoulder, not daring to do more in front of the servants.

"Will you all excuse us for a few minutes, please?" she asked quietly in her monk's wheeze. Batz-Castelmore and the servants bowed and filed out, and she waited until they were well away from the doors before she spoke. "I'm sorry, Jean," she whispered. "I'm so sorry . . . we'll find out who did this, I swear it."

"It's my fault," he murmured, staring off into the distance.

"Of course it's not your fault," she argued gently. "What on earth would make you think . . ." She trailed off

as she suddenly realized *exactly* what on earth would make him think that. De la Pailleterie had been a member of the Tontine. Her hand tightened unconsciously on his shoulder, and he looked up at her with a question in his eyes.

“Ah,” she said softly. “I see. Jean, I think you and I had better have a long talk. I know what a bad time this is to question you, and I apologize for that, but I need you to tell me everything you know about the Heart of Flame. And I need the truth.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“How in the hell did you . . . no, never mind,” Jean growled, rising from his chair and starting to pace in agitation. “I don’t want to know. I *can’t* tell you about the Heart of Flame, Françoise. We all swore an oath never to speak of it. I’d love to get my hands on whoever broke that oath and told you, because I didn’t want you involved in this.”

“I’m already involved, Jean,” she said very quietly. “My uncle may be dead because of this. You have no right to try to keep me out of it.”

“I have no right to break my oath, either,” he said firmly. She closed her eyes and turned away from him, struggling to keep her temper.

“Jean, I don’t disagree with wanting to keep your sworn word,” she said calmly after a moment. “But since I already know about the tontine, that oath has become meaningless. Please don’t hide behind it. Tell me everything you can about the tontine.”

“I can’t do that, and you know it. I’m not released from my oath, and I won’t break it, even for you. And I still don’t want you involved. It’s too dangerous . . .”

“For a woman?” she finished for him icily. “Jean, I can handle a sword as well as you or any of your Musketeers. That’s not an acceptable excuse for withholding information

I desperately need. Your life and my revenge may depend on it.”

“I can’t break my oath, Françoise. I’m sorry. My life isn’t worth that.”

“And neither is my revenge,” she concluded, not really expecting an answer to that. He shook his head mutely; there really wasn’t anything else to be said. Françoise nodded, pursed her lips and turned to leave.

“Listen, Françoise, why don’t you come to the Louvre with me?” he called after her. “I may not be able to tell you what you want to hear, but at least I can let you play some small part in the murder investigation.” He smiled at her hopefully.

Not enough, Jean, she thought. Not nearly enough. You’re clearly still thinking of me as a damsel in distress who needs to be protected.

“I appreciate the offer, Jean, but I have a *large* part to play in my own investigation,” she said, trying not to sound too pointed about it. “I’m sorry we’ll have to skip dinner; it looked wonderful. I’ll see you at noon tomorrow at the Louvre, and I’ll brief you on what my people manage to discover between now and then.” *You patronizing bastard*, she added in her thoughts. He bowed to her, and the smoothness of the bow irritated her past all measure. *Men. Irritating, patronizing, stubborn damned men.*

“Until tomorrow, then,” he said with a mock sigh of martyrdom. “Unless, perhaps, I see you at the Louvre tonight.”

“I’ll be there. But I’ll be surprised if you see me,” she drawled. Her tone could have been flirtatious, or it could have been the height of insolence. Turning on her heel, Françoise continued her limping march down the hall, leaving him to wonder which she’d meant.

Françoise was fully in the mood to break something, or someone, whichever got in her way first. She was careful to keep her face neutral in spite of the fact that it was still hidden by a cowl, and she kept her gait unhurried, but inwardly she was seething. *Idiot man*, she fumed silently. *Fool. Noble, blind, stubborn idiot man. My Eyes can wring more information out of the Louvre in two hours than his Musketeers and honest methods could accomplish in two years. I wonder what kind of "small part" he would have allowed me to play in his investigation, anyway. Maybe, if I was really nice, he would have permitted me to sew a button on his uniform before he went off to singlehandedly solve the murders.*

Vressac was waiting at the front door to show her out. His expression was a comic blend of relief that she was going and trepidation at the thought that she might try to convert him before she went. She smiled slowly on a sudden thought. Vressac was just the man she needed to talk to right now.

"A word in your ear, my friend," she wheezed. The valet swallowed, hard, but could see no way around the direct request. Timidly he followed the monk about fifty paces outside the house.

"The Cardinal's Eyes have a special request for you, my son," she wheezed quietly, laying a friendly gloved hand on Vressac's shoulder. He glanced at it as if it were an adder and managed a sickly smile after a moment. "Go through Tréville's papers while he's distracted at the Louvre tonight. Look for anything to do with the Heart of Flame."

"But . . . but what exactly is the Heart of . . ."

"No questions, my son. I must be brief. Anything you find on the Heart of Flame is worth a hundred livres. More, if the information warrants it."

Vressac's faded blue eyes lit with avaricious imagining.

"Remember, my son, bring us only copies of the evidence,

no originals,” she continued. “He must never know we have this information. Send it through the usual channels tomorrow.” She made a sign of the cross over the enthusiastically nodding valet and departed without another word.

She limped quietly down the Rue du Vieux Colombier, analyzing that afternoon’s encounter with Jean and wondering if she’d overplayed her hand. There had been only one danger in admitting to him that she knew of the tontine’s existence, and that danger wasn’t to her life. Jean already knew about her work with the Cardinal’s Eyes and her intent to avenge her uncle’s death; if he was the murderer, he would be seeking her life already. No, at worst, she ran the risk that he would cover his tracks better, and that risk was balanced by the possibility that he would panic into error. That much, she was satisfied with.

It was hard, though, not to be disappointed by the failure of what she’d hoped to be a telling shot. She’d sacrificed the secrecy of her position, and the only bit of information she’d managed to pick up in exchange was that they’d all taken an oath never to speak of the Heart of Flame. That much would have been obvious at any rate; it had been a paltry trade-off. *Damn*, she swore silently. *I seem to be thinking that a lot, lately. Ah, well. Damn anyway.*

Françoise risked a swift glance behind her when she reached the open, crowded Place de St. Sulpice, and that glance confirmed her suspicions. Someone was following her, and he’d almost certainly been sent by Tréville. She could lose him easily enough in the press of people, but that wouldn’t answer any of her questions. The best option was probably to lure him into the Couvent des Vieux Augustins, where André was waiting for her. But before she committed to that, she wanted a better look at her pursuer.

She paused at the corner of the Rue des Cannelles and fumbled with her brown leather belt pouch, taking out a few

coins. A few ragged, half-starved children gathered around the fat friar in anticipation, and they went wild as she started to distribute the coins among them. It gave her a perfect opportunity to turn and study her pursuer through her cowl. He was short, but solidly built, and he moved with the clipped, economical precision of a martinet. A dark blue cloak obscured his features, but Françoise recognized d'Artagnan simply by the way he walked. Noting that she'd stopped, he paused at a fruit stand and pretended to admire the apples. Françoise choked back a laugh and scattered the rest of her coins all across the street, and the children dived for them.

She turned and limped down the Rue des Cannelles with a slowness that mocked the Musketeer, who found himself unable to squeeze through the crowd without giving himself away.

It was almost more effort than it was worth to Françoise to let d'Artagnan catch up with her at the crumbling fourteenth century ramparts on the Rue Dauphine. Though she didn't want to lose him, she didn't dare let him get too close; she wasn't wearing a sword, and her staff had some rather serious drawbacks against a rapier. D'Artagnan was proving a rather wretched spy, but he was a first-rate swordsman. This part of town was considerably less crowded; if he wanted to kill her, the ramparts wouldn't be a bad place to do it.

Françoise limped on without bothering to glance behind her. The Musketeer didn't move quietly enough to be able to sneak up on her for the kill. Of course, there was another possibility, and one that frightened her. There was nothing at all that said he had to be acting alone in the attempt. She could be walking into a trap. D'Artagnan and André were friends; they could be setting her up together.

Stop it, she commanded herself firmly. André and I are friends too. And yet, he has such good reason to hate me . . .

and if he's been committing the murders, he knows he'll have to eliminate me eventually. I can't let myself trust anyone right now, not even him. Again, damn. She would have to settle with d'Artagnan here, without André's help, and she'd have to pray that he was working alone. And she'd have to pray as well that her battered limbs would hold out through one more fight.

The sun was setting rapidly on the quiet street. Françoise scanned her surroundings hastily and chose a convenient spot to slip through the crumbling ramparts. She could hear d'Artagnan swear softly behind her, and she smiled and found a dark corner in which to await him. The silver crest of her staff slid off easily to reveal a razor-honed blade. Her life would now depend on her ability to take him by surprise; her chances of disarming one of the best swordsmen in France with a glaive seemed slim at best. With her better range she could kill him if he failed to deflect her opening strike, but disarming him and leaving him alive to talk was another matter. And they'd be fighting in close quarters, which would give him all the advantage.

D'Artagnan's long shadow slid across the wall, faint in the fading light. He entered cautiously and peered around him, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. Françoise took advantage of his hesitation, striking him sharply across the temple with the blunt end of her glaive. He reeled from the blow, but it wasn't sufficient to knock him out. He fumbled for his sword, unsheathed it, and lunged in an unnervingly swift motion. Batting aside his thrust with her weapon, Françoise launched a kick at his head and connected. D'Artagnan spat out a harsh oath and redoubled his attack, slashing wildly into the darkness.

Françoise slid out of the way of the lunge, gasping with the pain the movement cost her. D'Artagnan heard that and made

a riposte she barely deflected. With effort she raised her glaive again and aimed another strike at his head with the blunt end. The Musketeer staggered and dropped his sword, and Françoise swept it into the shadows. One more blow to the head finally brought him down, and she sank to her knees for a moment, breathing raggedly and fighting off a wave of nausea.

Shaking with exhaustion, she fumbled at the knot of her friar's rope belt. As soon as she could find the strength to move she tied his arms behind his back, tightly, muttering epithets to herself about the thickheadedness of Gascons. He stirred feebly, and she slid a dagger from her boot and pressed it to his throat.

"Don't move if you want to live," she spat. "Just talk. Did Tréville send you?"

"I was sent to protect you, madame," d'Artagnan replied caustically. "Monsieur de Tréville neglected to inform me that I might well need protection *from* you."

Françoise laughed mirthlessly and pulled him to his knees. It was possible that he was telling the truth, but she couldn't afford to ignore the other possibility. "For all I know, d'Artagnan, you could have been sent to kill me instead. You've been playing both sides of the fence for years, trying to stay loyal to Tréville while working for the Cardinal's Eyes. What makes you think I'm going to believe you now?" she murmured ironically.

"The cardinal and the captain both knew me for a man of honor," the Musketeer insisted.

"The cardinal is dead," Françoise said flatly. "And your captain is a prime suspect in his murder. So I do hope you'll forgive me if I take everything you say with a grain of salt. If I had a brain in my head, I'd kill you. Since I don't, I'm going to let you live. There's a condition, though, and I want your word that you'll fulfill it."

“You have it, madame, provided I can agree to it.” Not a protest, no shameless begging for his life. He meant it. He’d agree to her bargain if he could, and if he couldn’t, he was absolutely prepared to have his throat slit. *I don’t know whether to roll my eyes or applaud*, Françoise thought, *but this one’s obviously been taking “noble” lessons from Jean. Men. Idiot men. I wonder if this is catching.*

“I want you to drop out of sight for the next week,” Françoise said after a moment. “You’re to have no contact with Tréville or any of your friends. There’s an apartment on the Rue Tiquetonne I can let you use for the duration. You’ll be well treated; I’m really not as terrible as I know I must seem right now.” *If nothing else, the confusion factor will kill Jean, and he’ll never be able to ask me where his lieutenant’s gone.*

“You won’t harm Monsieur de Tréville?”

“I can’t say that. But if I do, I’ll challenge him to a duel and give him every opportunity to defend himself. Will that satisfy you?”

“I don’t seem to have much of a choice,” d’Artagnan replied ruefully. “Very well, madame, I’m your prisoner. You won’t need that knife anymore; I’ve given my word.”

“I accept your word,” Françoise said quietly after a moment’s pause. “In fact, I’ll even cut you loose, though I’m probably an idiot for doing it.” She sliced easily through his bonds, sheathed her knife and helped him gently to his feet. Grabbing her glaive, she snapped the silver crest back over the blade. D’Artagnan whistled appreciatively.

“You could have killed me with that,” he pointed out unnecessarily. She smiled mysteriously and shook her head.

“And Richelieu’s ghost would have haunted me for the rest of my days. He always thought you had potential.”

D’Artagnan brightened at the compliment, and then he

frowned as another thought struck him. "My sword, madame . . . I think you brushed it into the shadows . . . with your leave, I'd like to try to find it."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she studied him. It was a perfectly natural request, but it would also be a perfect opportunity to take her unawares, and it could conceivably give him the advantage of the shadows if he attacked her. Injured and exhausted as she was, she didn't flatter herself about her chances of survival in that scenario. D'Artagnan didn't look too much better, with the painful-looking abrasions that lined his scalp, but it was definitely best not to take any chances with him.

"Actually, I was supposed to have met the Comte de Sorlin a few minutes ago, and he'll be frantic with worry that I'm late." Françoise smiled winsomely, with an apologetic shrug of her shoulders that nearly made her wince in pain. "Is it a family sword, monsieur?"

"No, it isn't that important," he said, shaking his head. He was intelligent enough to recognize the lack of trust implicit in that, and worldly enough not to blame her for it.

"Very well, then; I'll come back at first light tomorrow, and if I can't find it, I'll replace it with a better one. Done?"

"Done, madame." The Musketeer bowed to seal the agreement between them and offered her his arm. Setting her cowl back over her head, Françoise led her prisoner out onto the quiet, darkening street.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Musketeer and the spy reached the Couvent des Vieux Augustins without killing each other, generally considered a mark of good breeding in all the best social circles. Françoise spotted André a few hundred feet away, flinging pebbles off the Pont Neuf into the Seine. The enormous stone bridge was crowded as always with vendors, pamphleteers, whores, and beggars, all proclaiming their wares and wants loudly enough to scare away the fish, but finding André in that press of humanity wasn't a problem for Françoise. The two of them could have easily found each other with their eyes closed. She pointed him out quietly to d'Artagnan, who nodded and followed her to the bridge. André saluted them with an intentionally clumsy bow, brushing the ground with his straw hat.

"Please, messieurs, spare a poor man a little change?" he whined, thrusting out a hand. Françoise caught the hand and studied it for a second or two before replying.

"That hand's a damned sight too clean and well-manicured to belong to a beggar, my son," she replied in her monk's wheeze. She let go of his hand, bowed to d'Artagnan ahead of her, and brushed past André, starting to steer their rather odd trio across the bridge. "Tell me, how much money *did* you make here tonight?"

"Why, Father, what an astonishingly ill-bred question!"

André drawled. "I made enough that I may consider leaving your service and taking this up as a full-time occupation."

"Perhaps I'll join you," Françoise murmured. "Of course, you'd have to be prepared for the fact that I'd make more money than you do, since I'm so much more attractive." André coughed rudely, and she swatted him lightly on the backside with her staff. "I thought you'd planned to wait for me at the convent."

"Disguised as what? A one-eyed nun with a beard? I don't think I would have been very convincing," he pointed out acidly.

She smirked at the mental image. "You could always lose the beard," she pointed out helpfully.

"Not likely. So, d'Artagnan, what brings you here? And what in the world happened to your nose?" André asked, raising his voice to a normal level again, and changing the subject abruptly, as he always did when Françoise suggested that he shave.

The Musketeer paused in his tracks, flushed, and visibly tried to think up a good story.

Françoise stepped in gently to help him out after the silence had stretched uncomfortably. "We were waylaid by thieves at the ramparts," she lied with the casual ease of someone accustomed to the exercise. D'Artagnan flashed her a grateful smile. She grinned back and continued. "If Monsieur de Tréville hadn't sent Monsieur d'Artagnan after me to protect me, I would never have gotten out of there alive." She pierced André with a meaningful glance, and he nodded thoughtfully after a few seconds to show her that he'd understood the hidden message in her carefully chosen words. Tréville had sent d'Artagnan after her, and *she'd* waylaid *him* at the ramparts.

But the fact that she'd taken d'Artagnan on herself in spite of her injuries, rather than luring him to the Quai des

Augustins, would tell André more than she wanted to admit. She didn't trust Tréville completely, which would make André happy. But she didn't trust André completely, either, and there was no way to soften that or prevent him from making the connection.

He darkened visibly, and his jaw tightened. Françoise pursed her lips and looked away; she'd been afraid of that reaction. She knew him well enough to know what he was thinking, though she would never have intruded on an unprojected thought. And there wasn't a thing she could say to soften the moment. He was right, after all.

"Well, d'Artagnan, it seems that's two we owe you," André said easily, forcing the mood to lightness. "I just hope I'll get to return the favor one of these days."

"I don't think you should count this afternoon in there," d'Artagnan replied. "After all, I did arrest you."

"What are a few arrests among friends? Besides, if you hadn't come along, I don't know how much longer we would have held out. So, where are we headed?" André asked, too cheerfully. Françoise hated herself for doubting him, but there was no choice. She couldn't afford to trust him or anyone else until she'd solved her uncle's murder.

"D'Artagnan's promised me that he'll stay put for a week and let his wounds heal, so we'll have to put him up at the safehouse on the Rue Tiquetonne," Françoise said briskly, not to be outdone in the excessive cheer department.

"What did you have to promise him in exchange?" André asked her with a teasing sideways glance at d'Artagnan.

"His life," Françoise said flatly. She was getting just a little tired of cracks about whoring herself for political gain.

"Oh. Good trade, d'Artagnan."

"I thought so," the Musketeer grimaced, only half in jest. They lapsed into an uneasy silence, which lasted all the way

across the Seine and most of the way to the streets around the Cimetière des Innocents.

The stench of the cemetery was easier to bear in winter than it would have been in summer. Open mass graves for criminals, suicides, and the poor pocked the grounds like open and festering wounds. Even Nuls felt eyes on them in this place; for Sorciers, it was worse.

The houses in this part of town were generally run down, but still beautiful, and had once been fashionable. The overcrowding, stench, and dilapidation had occurred over centuries, gradually driving out anyone with the money to afford better housing. Those who remained were lower bourgeoisie, or minor nobility fallen too far into poverty to avoid paying the *taille*, the commoners' tax from which the upper classes were typically given an exemption. André himself had a room here, just across the street.

Françoise glanced over at the windows of his second floor apartment, and that was when she felt it. *Eyes. Danger. Hate. Someone watching.* The impressions skittered across her mind, and she looked around, trying to spot anything out of the ordinary.

"We're being watched, gentlemen," Françoise hissed. "I can feel it. I think we're about to have company." André scanned the street around them, and looked as nervous as she suddenly felt. They'd reached the southern edge of the cemetery. It was a rare being who didn't feel a faint frisson in this place and a sense of being watched by a few hundred lifeless eyes.

André just saw the fatal movement out of the corner of his eye. A sniper who'd been hiding behind a grave marker took too careful an aim, leaving himself visible. André broke into a run the second he saw him, and the first gunshot sounded, missing all three of them.

“Run!” André shouted, sprinting for the relative safety of the more crowded Rue Aux Fers. D’Artagnan and Françoise took to their heels in his wake. The Musketeer caught up with him easily, but the increased mass of Françoise’s disguise slowed her down considerably, and her wounds slowed her more. She swore violently, crouching as another bullet whizzed past and took a chunk off the tombstone behind her. André looked back to find her considerably further behind than he’d thought, and he ran back for her, grabbed her hand, and dragged her along behind him.

“André, what are you doing? Let me go . . . and get out of here!” she panted. Her entire body screamed protest at her, and she kept running through force of will alone. She tried to squirm free of him and found her hand firmly gripped in his.

“Get rid of the monk’s disguise!” he snapped.

“What?! You know I can’t . . .”

“Just do it,” he cut her off. “Your disguise is going to be compromised anyway if we both die!” A bullet whizzed past them, emphasizing his point. She dropped her staff and pulled wads of padding out of her robes, but she didn’t consider unmasking herself to be a viable option. Not yet, anyway.

She managed to lose just enough weight for them to make it to the Rue Aux Fers with both their skins intact. D’Artagnan was nowhere to be seen, but that was hardly surprising. She’d swept his sword into the shadows of the ramparts; he was completely unarmed, and the only intelligent thing to do in his case was hide well. Fighting to slow her breathing, Françoise scanned the narrow street hastily in search of a likely place to hole up for a few minutes. She couldn’t keep running. She couldn’t.

“Well? Alley or tavern? What’s your vote?” André asked her in a rapid-fire whisper.

“Either . . . could be a trap,” she gasped, fighting for enough breath to speak. “The Chat Qui Pelote tavern . . . has

a back exit . . . we can slip through . . . if we can make it that far.”

“It’s a ways off,” he said doubtfully. “The market at Les Halles is closer . . .”

“Quick! In here!” Françoise hissed, pulling André into a cramped gray space between a tavern and a warehouse. “I thought I saw . . . someone following us.”

There was only one way their pursuers could possibly have been able to follow them this closely, Françoise realized, slipping as she raced around a corner and back behind the tavern. Someone had tagged one of them with a Witch’s Mark, thrown a spell against some item of clothing or jewelry they were reasonably certain to have on them. As long as it remained with them, they could be tracked, to the ends of the earth if that was what it took. She scanned them both hastily and felt a tug at André’s family signet. Oh, God . . . his ring, they’d tagged his damned ring, the last reminder of his family he had . . . and she was going to have to tell him to get rid of it.

André, she shot at him urgently through their link. They put a Witch’s Mark on your family signet. I’m sorry, but we have to leave it behind. There was a moment of stunned silence while the loss of that registered. Françoise found herself fighting back tears as she glanced at him.

I can’t, he started to object, but he managed to silence that thought. There wasn’t a choice. Not if they wanted to live. Françoise led them into another alley. André worked the ring off with considerable effort, risked a last look at it as they ran, and finally flung it away. They made it through the alley and out the back, ran as far and as fast as they could, and finally rested behind a building on the corner of the Rue Aux Fers and the Rue Montmartre. Françoise leaned heavily against the back wall, gasping for air.

“Can’t you breathe any quieter?” André teased her offhandedly, seeming to have forgotten completely about the

ring already. Françoise knew him far better than that, but decided not to press the issue. She shot him a mock glare and continued to pant for all she was worth, fighting off a wave of nausea. Sinking to her knees, she drank in the coldness of the brick and mortar wall at her back and the damp earth beneath her fingers.

Slowly and shakily she pulled herself together enough to finish pulling the padding out of her robes. That would do for her, but they'd need to do something to disguise André. He was a competent Sorcier in his own right, but Shifting was a rare talent and André didn't have it. On a sudden impulse she tore off the outer robe of her monk's vestment, tucked in the sleeves, and slashed an opening up the middle with the dagger she kept in her boot.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Making you a cloak. I get the feeling it's more important to hide you than me right now."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied casually, starting to gain control of her breathing at last. "Could have something to do with the fact that members of the tontine of the Heart of Flame are dropping like flies all of a sudden."

André's good eye widened almost imperceptibly. "You know about that?" He frowned thoughtfully.

"We'll talk more about it later," Françoise murmured. "For now, slip this on." She raised herself painfully to her feet, threw the makeshift cloak around him, and fastened it awkwardly with a silver hairpin.

"This has to be the strangest ensemble I've ever worn," he grimaced quietly. "Now then, what are we going to do with you?"

"We're going to turn me into a whore," she replied crisply.

"I'm going to leave that line alone. I like my life."

“Smart man.” She grinned fiercely, undoing several buttons down the front of the dark inner layer of her vestments and baring her shoulders. With her mass back down to normal, the vestments hung over her as limply as draperies.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked when she was finished. He ran a knuckle over his beard and studied her intently for a few seconds.

“I don’t believe you. You look like the Comtesse de Palis in a curtain. Let me think,” he murmured almost to himself. He started by removing the silver hairpins that held her curls in place, and her hair tumbled wildly around her shoulders. “Better,” he said, “but still not enough.” He undid two more buttons on her bodice, hitched her skirts up to bare one leg to mid-thigh and stepped back to admire his work.

“Perfect! I’m a genius. You’re a slut. Let’s go.”

“O how sharper than a serpent’s tooth,” Françoise murmured, shaking her head sadly as she followed him down the dark, cold alley. “I now know exactly what made Julius Caesar cry out, ‘Brutus, you stabbed me, you daft bastard!’ ”

“I don’t think that was quite the line.”

“I was paraphrasing.”

They reached the mouth of the alley, and Françoise pushed André gently behind her and peered out cautiously. Grismonde was leading a group of four of his friends in their direction. They were stumbling as if drunk, laughing too loudly. *This is bad*, she thought. *This one’s actually a good set-up*. Grismonde caught sight of them, and only the brown cowl that obscured André’s features saved his life. The assassin melted instantly into an inebriated shamble, slipped an arm around Françoise’s waist and pulled her to him roughly.

“Play along, it’s Grismonde,” he hissed in her ear. “If we run, they’ll blow us away.” She nodded. The alley was too long and too narrow to afford escape. He buried his face in

her throat, and she shrilled the obscene cackle of a seasoned whore, and crooned encouragements.

“Hello, what have we here?” one of Grismonde’s men asked slyly, pausing to watch. Françoise wrapped a long, bare leg around André’s waist and drew him up to kiss her so that their faces could be hidden by his cowl and her hair. “I wouldn’t mind a piece of that,” the man said admiringly, advancing on them.

“Go find your own,” André slurred, shoving him away. The stranger was about to launch himself at them when Grismonde put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“It’s just a whore, plying her trade,” Grismonde muttered. “We have business to take care of. Come on.” They broke into a drinking song and continued to amble down the street. Françoise breathed a sigh of relief and was about to break the embrace when she found herself still firmly pinned in place.

“Not yet,” André hissed. “Wait until they’re gone.” He silenced her objections with a slow kiss that played havoc with her senses. Adrenaline and long-denied needs twined like serpents in her mind, leaving her breathless and on the point of panic or stupidity. She forced herself to stillness, realizing André was undoubtedly right, realizing they needed to keep this up until Grismonde and his men had moved out of their line of sight.

“How are we supposed to find out if they’re gone, if we keep kissing each other?” she whispered into his mouth after a moment.

“Good point,” he murmured. His lips traced the curve of her throat and traveled dangerously lower, and she tried to keep her breathing even as she scanned the street behind him. Grismonde and the others seemed to have gone.

“Seems safe,” she said quietly, forcing her voice to the most normal, professional tone she could manage. She felt his

answering smile against her skin; he clearly wasn't fooled by her attempt at nonchalance. He could undoubtedly feel her heart racing, and every hitch in her breathing.

"I do love my job, some days," he quipped, releasing her at last. "The pay isn't much, but the fringe benefits are marvelous."

"I pay him a pittance, and I get wild and shameful acts of wantonness performed on me in a public street. It's good to be in charge," she teased, still a little breathless. André laughed, scanned the street outside the alley carefully, and encircled Françoise's waist with an arm as he led her out.

"Well? What's the game plan?" André whispered.

"We head for the L'Hôtel de la Chevette on the Rue Tiquetonne as casually as possible, and we hope d'Artagnan meets us somewhere along the way. I don't see what else we can do. There are a few changes of clothes there, and I sure as hell won't be let into the Louvre looking like this."

"Why are we going to the Louvre?"

"Not 'we,' André, just me. The Marquis de la Pailleterie was found dead at the foot of a staircase in the Louvre late this afternoon, and I'll need to investigate. You're leaving town tonight; I think someone needs to keep an eye on the Duchesse de Chevreuse in Brussels."

"I can't go to Brussels right now," André insisted stubbornly. "You need me here."

"I'll just have to learn to do without you for a while. It's clearly too dangerous for you to stay, and your eye patch puts a serious damper on your ability to disguise yourself. You're leaving tonight, and that's the last I want to hear of it. And while I'm helping you pack, you and I are going to have a nice, long chat about the Heart of Flame."

"I feel a blistering headache coming on," the assassin grumbled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“We’re being followed again,” André whispered in Françoise’s ear, and she laughed raucously, as if he’d just whispered a lewd suggestion. It visibly took him aback for a second or two before he fell in with it.

“I know,” she murmured almost too softly for him to hear. “But I think it might be d’Artagnan this time. I only caught a glimpse of him, but he seemed to move like d’Artagnan.”

“A lot of soldiers move like d’Artagnan.”

“True enough. Let’s stop by La Ceinture Qui Craque for a drink and see if we can’t get a better look at our latest pursuer.”

“You just want to spend all my hard-begged money on cheap wine, you lush,” he drawled. Françoise grinned up at him, relieved that their kiss had altered nothing between them.

“How *does* he figure these things out?” she pondered dryly.

“It’s simple,” he pontificated. “You’re a woman. You’re *supposed* to spend all the money I haven’t got and leave me when you’re bored with me.”

“If that were true, I would have left years ago.” She narrowly ducked a light cuff and ran from him, laughing. André took off after her. A few feet away from La Ceinture she let him catch up with her, and she squealed in pretended horror as he grabbed her and avenged himself with a kiss.

The kiss gave Françoise just enough time to glance back and make sure they hadn't lost their pursuer. They hadn't, and this time she was sure of it; it was definitely d'Artagnan. She whispered that to André, who nodded almost imperceptibly, and the two of them went inside the tavern to wait for him.

La Ceinture Qui Craque was a single room, stuffed to capacity and well beyond with rickety tables and benches, most of them deeply scored and stained here and there with wine or worse. They were all arranged around a small stage against the right wall, where a young girl of about fifteen or sixteen was singing, not terribly well, and swirling her skirts so that her bare legs showed to well above the knee.

"I say we get a table close to her," André murmured teasingly in Françoise's ear.

She elbowed him in the stomach, clamped a hand on his forearm, and led him to a table near the back exit. A plump, elderly barmaid sauntered over to their table with a jug of wine and two wooden goblets of great antiquity and truly questionable cleanliness. Françoise poured for herself and André, and they saluted each other with mock solemnity and sipped carefully.

"It's that stuff from Montreuil," André muttered, and Françoise made a sour "I want to spit this out" face at the abominable vintage. Montreuil was literally the cheapest wine on the market, and it was a short step away from vinegar. André laughed at the face she was making and drained off the contents of his cup with an indifferent shrug. Françoise, bravely trying to match his insouciance, swallowed the first mouthful with difficulty and started choking on its odd, grainy consistency. D'Artagnan poked his head in the door, and André waved him over. Françoise tried to get her breath back before the Musketeer could weave his way through to them,

but she failed miserably. Peering into the jug, d'Artagnan assessed the situation with a shrewd glance.

"Let me guess. Montreuil?" he saluted them, pulling up a chair. André laughed his usual sardonic laugh, and Françoise nodded helplessly and wiped tears from her eyes as she choked.

"Do you want some water or something?" André asked her, grinning at her predicament with an utter lack of sympathy.

"Trust me, the water is the only thing here that's worse than the wine," d'Artagnan cautioned. Of course, he didn't make any recommendations as to what she *should* drink. She shook her head, got to her feet, and threw down a few livres for the vinegar.

"Come on, we've got to get out of here." She grimaced, ushering them out the back exit. L'Hôtel de la Chevrette was just next door, and Madeleine, the Flemish proprietress, was used to letting Françoise and her people in through the back of the boarding house. The Cardinal's Eyes had been renting her second floor rooms as a safe haven for years, and their odd comings and goings had long since ceased to faze her.

Madeleine caught sight of Françoise, squealed, and embraced her enthusiastically, not batting so much as an eyelash in the direction of Françoise's odd apparel.

"We haven't seen you here in months, madame!" Madeleine gushed in her thickly accented French. She ushered everyone inside and closed the door firmly behind her, while André peered out the window to make sure they hadn't been spotted. "I baked flans this morning, and I have chamomile tea. You will stay for a while this time, no?" They lapsed into Flemish for a few minutes, and André and d'Artagnan quickly gave up trying to keep track of the conversation and settled for ogling the proprietress.

Françoise couldn't blame them; Madeleine was a petite, voluptuous woman with shoulder-length chestnut hair and

wide, shockingly blue eyes. She wore a light blue wool gown with a falling lace collar that flattered her immensely, and a white scarf over her head that didn't quite. Pretty by any standards. Françoise would love to have matched her with André, but judging by the glances she occasionally spared the two men, Madeleine was more interested in d'Artagnan in spite of his broken nose. Françoise sighed mentally. No hope of happiness there; d'Artagnan used and discarded his mistresses appallingly. Maybe later she could find a way to warn the woman off.

"I can't stay, Madeleine, but when this is all over I'll come by for a visit, I promise." Françoise smiled affectionately, slipping back into French for the others' benefit. "D'Artagnan here is the one who'll be staying for a week," she said, and the Musketeer bowed smoothly, never taking his eyes off Madeleine. The proprietress blushed prettily and looked away, running a hand absently through her hair.

"I hope you and your *husband* will take good care of him for us," Françoise continued, laying a bit more emphasis on the word "husband" than she'd intended to. D'Artagnan favored Françoise with a gaze that was pure defiance, and she raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to say something. He didn't.

Madeleine wasn't married, exactly, but Françoise had assigned one of her Eyes to protect Madeleine and to pose as her husband. And Françoise prayed that her friend would have more sense than to throw caution to the wind for a self-centered rake like d'Artagnan.

Madeleine showed the Musketeer to the second floor apartments, leaving Françoise and André to closet themselves in the single room on the top floor, four narrow and tortuous flights up. Every muscle in Françoise's body screamed in outraged protest every step of the way. More "whined" than

“screamed,” she decided; they were simply too tired to scream anymore.

A harsh December wind tore through the cracked and curtainless window and set the light of their single candle to an erratic dance. Françoise pulled two ceramic goblets and a bottle of Anjou wine out of a basket she’d brought upstairs with her, and she poured off a draft for them both with hands that trembled in the cold.

“Let’s make this fast,” André whispered, the frost of his breath curling around the candle flame. Françoise shivered and nodded miserably in agreement, too frozen and too tired to come up with a clever riposte. They toasted each other and downed the wine to warm themselves.

“Let’s start with the Heart of Flame,” she said. “Tell me everything.”

“If I tell you everything, we’ll be here all night.”

“If you argue with me, we’ll be here even longer,” she hissed through chattering teeth. “Now talk.” He sighed and paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. Françoise caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the dark glass of the small dormer window. The candlelight washed out her coloring, fading even her hair to a muted copper. Only her black eyes burned as brightly as ever, standing out with stark intensity in that unnaturally pale face. She looked so waiflike, and so cold, that she almost wanted to laugh. Almost. The feverish dark eyes stopped her, and frightened her a little. She shivered and downed another mouthful of wine.

“Come here,” André motioned, opening his cloak. “You look cold.” Françoise curled up next to him against a bare plaster wall, and he wrapped his cloak and his arms around her to warm her. She was shivering against him as he began. “We found the Heart of Flame in La Rochelle, after we’d obtained the Huguenots’ surrender and raised the siege,” he told her quietly.

“What *is* the Heart of Flame?”

“You don’t even know *that*? How did you find out about it, anyway?”

“It was just a note jotted down among my uncle’s papers, a list of the tontine members. He’d crossed out the names of the ones who’d died before he did.”

“Oh,” André replied, probably not knowing what else to say. “Well, the Heart of Flame is a ruby, flawless and about the size of a tennis ball. Naturally there was no way of splitting it up, so we formed a tontine instead.”

“The tontine’s existed for years,” she murmured almost to herself. “There’s only one reason I can think of for the sudden rash of killings. Someone’s run into desperate need of money, a great deal of it, and soon. A debtor, or someone who’s being blackmailed. What do you know about the others? Who among them is in trouble?”

“Besides me, you mean?” he asked with deceptive mildness, his laughter echoing oddly in the cold, quiet room. “None of them that I know of.”

“André, if you need it, you know I’m always good for a raise.”

“I know. You also know just how much I’d need to reestablish myself at court. I’d never accept that kind of a raise. In fact, just about the only thing that would restore my family’s honor is something like the Heart of Flame.” He said it almost distantly, casually.

An involuntary chill shot through her. *Oh, God, it was André. He did it. He killed them all. And now he’s holding me, and he can break my neck before I even have a chance to cry out. I’ve been a fool.* Knowing already that it was a useless gesture, she tensed to roll away from him.

He felt her stiffen in his arms and surprised her by swatting her gently on the back of the head. “Don’t be an idiot,” he

laughed softly. "I would never hurt you. You know that, or at least you should."

"Did you kill them?" she asked, fighting to keep her voice even and not succeeding.

"No, I didn't." He sighed impatiently. "And I can prove it to you. You remember the ambush they set up in the Cimetière des Innocents?" She nodded, and he continued. "They couldn't have known we were going to be coming that way. Tréville couldn't have been setting you up, because there was no way he would have expected you to capture d'Artagnan and bring him here. I had no idea we were coming this way until you told me we were. There's only one reason for setting up the ambush the way they did, and for putting the Witch's Mark on my signet."

"Your apartments are on the Rue Montmartre, across the street," she finished for him. "It was you they were after." It wasn't enough to completely clear him, but it was at least enough to make her relax a little. "I'm sorry," she laughed shakily, laying her head on his shoulder. "I didn't mean to doubt you. I guess I'm just going crazy right now." He didn't say anything; he just held her for a minute. No teasing, no mockery, no wasted words. The simple kindness of that brought her to the sudden edge of tears.

"Where's the jewel being kept?" she asked him, just managing to keep her voice clear.

"I don't know. None of us are supposed to know. We entrusted it to the Abbé d'Herblay on Tréville's recommendation. I'd say it might be worth paying him a visit. If nothing else, he's in considerable danger right now."

"Not a bad idea. I'll do that while you go to Brussels," she said lightly.

"The hell I'm going to Brussels," André informed her equably. "And if you try to send me there, I'll quit your service."

“Damn it, André, *I’m* not the one who needs protecting!” she exploded, yanking herself out of his embrace and pinning him to the wall. He could have broken her hold, but he must have decided to let her frustration play itself out, as she sometimes did with his. “No one’s trying to kill me! No one has any reason to! As far as anyone else knows, I’m just the Comtesse de Palis, a bitter and somewhat laughable recluse who seldom shows her face at court. On the other hand, you narrowly escaped dying tonight. They’ll keep trying until they finally succeed, and no matter how many I kill to avenge you, it won’t bring you back to me!”

Françoise felt her eyes filling with unwelcome tears again, and she turned from him quickly, rose, and slammed the heel of her hand into a support beam, hard. It tilted an inch or so in tribute, and the attic room around them groaned and shifted, giving them a nervous moment before it settled.

“Careful, Guerite, I don’t think this house can stand much of your abuse.” André laughed uneasily. “Maybe we should think of getting out of here.”

“I want your promise first that you’ll leave Paris,” Françoise insisted stubbornly.

He glared at her for a moment in frustration, and then his expression lightened on a sudden thought. “All right, you have my word. I’ll leave Paris tonight,” he said casually, as if they’d been discussing the weather.

That was too easy, André, Françoise thought to herself with an odd mixture of affection and frustration. *I know you too well to fall for that.* “And you’ll stay out until I send for you,” she added sweetly.

“Whatever.” He shrugged, trying to maintain an air of indifference and doing a reasonably good job of it. With anyone else, it might have worked.

“I want your word.”

“You’re not going to get it.”

“Do you want me to keep punching the support beam?”

“Not particularly, no.”

Françoise sighed and turned away from him, torn between anger and amusement. It was exactly where he wanted her, and she realized it. It was a dangerous game he was playing. She could be made to laugh her way out of anger, but it would only be worse if he failed. This time, he would fail.

“You’re going to Brussels, my friend, if I have to knock you out and drag you by the hair,” Françoise said quietly.

“Fat lot of good I’d do in Brussels, with all my long, fabulous hair pulled out,” he drawled. His voice was starting to slur a bit. *Good*, she thought. “I suppose I could always disguise myself as a *galérien*; they don’t have any hair either.” His gesture, which would have been expansive but controlled under normal circumstances, went wild, and he knocked the bottle of wine over. He reached for it, and reached again, and it took him two or three tries to lock onto it. He righted it, then on a sudden suspicion sniffed at it. His eyes locked onto hers with the question he didn’t have to voice.

“I drugged the wine,” she admitted, feeling more than a little guilty. “Your cup, actually, not the wine. I never expected you to go voluntarily.”

André gave her a glare somewhere between rage and admiration, and rage won out. “You . . . bitch . . .” he cursed her as unconsciousness claimed him.

“I know,” she said softly, kneeling to brush a lock of hair away from his face. “I know. And I hope someday you’ll understand why I had to do this.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Françoise racked her brain, trying to think of someone she could trust to get André out of Paris. She'd thought of giving the job to d'Artagnan at first, but his first loyalty would be to Tréville, not André, and she couldn't risk the possibility of delivering her best friend into the hands of a murderer. Nor could she trust Gules with him, though under ordinary circumstances he would have been her first choice. Madeleine could be trusted, but would she be able to keep him locked up long enough to let her solve the murders? It seemed to be the only alternative. She hadn't had time to plan this well at all, and she couldn't even think of any place outside Paris where she could take him and guarantee his safety.

Her plans at least partially laid out, Françoise raced downstairs to the second floor rooms she'd been planning to let d'Artagnan use for the week. She'd have to get rid of him if she was going to be able to keep André prisoner here. The door had been left open a few inches, and Françoise scratched on the doorframe lightly and walked in.

D'Artagnan and Madeleine were still talking, and neither of them noticed her entrance. The Musketeer had plainly made himself comfortable; his dark blue wool cloak was casually draped over a rough-hewn wooden end table, and he sat sprawled on the straw mattress. Madeleine had pulled a

stool up near the bed, not quite bold enough to actually sit next to him. The two were talking intimately enough, though, and they laughed quietly at something Françoise hadn't been able to hear. *Not that I was listening*, she assured herself hastily. The laughter died away, and the Musketeer moved to raise Madeleine's hand to his lips in the sudden silence.

"D'Artagnan?" Françoise asked softly, visibly startling them both. He dropped Madeleine's hand as if it had been an adder, and Madeleine shot Françoise a glare that would have meant hairy death in any language. Françoise shrugged a graceful apology at Madeleine and turned her attention back to d'Artagnan. "I'm afraid our plans are going to have to be changed for this week. I release you from your promise. You're no longer my prisoner." D'Artagnan's face fell, and for the briefest of moments he was startled into speechlessness. His disappointment was painfully obvious.

"But . . ." he began, and didn't continue. He and Madeleine looked at one another. "Well, perhaps madame has another room she can let to me?"

"No, she doesn't," Françoise said hastily. "It was lovely seeing you again, however briefly," she sang cheerfully, grabbing his cloak, handing it to him, and ushering him out the door. "Please give my warmest regards to your captain."

"But I don't even know who you are!" he said plaintively. "And . . ."

"Goodnight, monsieur," she cut him off pleasantly, closing the door behind him. He paused for a moment at the door, undoubtedly bewildered, and finally the fading sound of his footsteps echoed down the hall.

"What was that all about?" Madeleine demanded impatiently as soon as the last traces of d'Artagnan's footsteps died away, her charming Flemish accent evaporating as she spoke.

“Madeleine, I need you. My friend upstairs is in terrible danger, and I need you to keep him here until I send for him.”

“How am I supposed to . . .”

“It’s Vitry,” Françoise cut her off in a whip-sharp voice that silenced her. “The Marquis de Vitry is trying to have him killed. That’s why I know I can rely on you to protect him.” Madeleine paled and clutched at her skirts in a fleeting nervous gesture. Actually, Françoise had no proof whatever that it was Vitry, but it was the one sure way she had to gain Madeleine’s help. Vitry had claimed the *droit de seigneur* of Madeleine, raping her on what was to have been her wedding night, and when Madeleine’s husband had challenged him to a duel afterward, Vitry had killed him. If there was one person in Paris Françoise could be sure wouldn’t be in Vitry’s service, it was this woman.

“Have they freed Vitry from the Bastille?” The question came out as a harsh, reed-thin whisper. “Will he come for me?”

“No one but me knows who you are or where you are, Marguerite,” Françoise said gently, calling the proprietress by her true name for the first time in many years. “I swore I’d protect you, and I will. The bastard won’t come near you again.”

Marguerite shuddered. “And your friend, will Vitry come for him?” Marguerite was trembling violently, but her voice remained unnervingly calm.

“I’ll assign you extra protection and do my best to see that he doesn’t. As for my friend, you’ll have to keep him bound and gagged for a few days, possibly even drugged.” Françoise paused for a minute, a wave of guilt and uncertainty assailing her at the course she was choosing. *Oh, God, how he’ll hate me when this is over . . . but at least he’ll be alive to hate me.* It was just sufficient to make up her mind. “I’ll send over a

bundle of herbs tomorrow; steep it in water and have him force-fed if he gets too loud or too close to escaping. And don't listen to anything he says. It's his death if you let him leave."

Marguerite nodded, biting her lip. "I'll keep him here, no matter what," she said quietly, a faint tremor in her voice. "I know exactly what Vitry's capable of. Please, whatever you're doing, hurry up with it. I won't be able to keep drugging him for more than a couple of days. It's not good for him, and I just won't do it. And be careful, Guerite," she warned with a worried frown, running a hand absently through her hair. "Vitry's just as likely to want to kill you."

"I'll be careful," Françoise promised. "I always am. Where do you want to keep André?"

"The attic room should be fine," Marguerite said. "He's less likely to be heard from up there."

"He'll freeze up there!"

"I'll stuff the window with rags; he won't freeze. I can keep a fire going in the grate for him and cover him with blankets if you want. But we can't risk anyone hearing him."

Françoise bit her lip, hating herself for even thinking of doing this. *He'll be miserable, but he'll be alive. I have to keep telling myself that.* She nodded and forced herself to move on.

"Do you have rope?"

"It's in the stable."

"Get it and meet me upstairs. I'm going to steal this mattress and anything else I can think of to make him more comfortable."

Marguerite nodded and hurried off, and Françoise began a monumental struggle with a fat mattress, several blankets and two flights of narrow, rickety stairs.

Françoise's body hated her more with every step, and told

her as much. By the time she got her lumbering peace offerings up to the attic, the proprietress already had André tied to the support beam in the center of the room. Françoise collapsed on top of the mattress she'd been lugging and proceeded to pant for a minute or so.

"God, I'm getting way too old for this," she managed to say at last. "You might not want to tie him to that. If he struggles, which he's going to do as soon as he wakes up, he could bring the house down around your ears if he breaks that support beam."

"Good point," Marguerite said with a sigh of frustration. "Any ideas?"

Françoise thought for a long moment. "Yes, actually I do. I'm going to have to build you a new staircase."

"Why?" Marguerite asked her with a suspicious frown.

"Because I'm going to take out the stairs that lead up to this room. You'll still be able to get him food, water, and anything else he asks for through the back window. If you have a bucket and enough rope, we can loop the rope over the roof beam and . . ."

"Hold it! You're going to take out my *staircase* now? Françoise, aren't we getting just a bit excessive?" Marguerite folded her arms and made a wry mouth of disapproval, her blue eyes flashing. She owed Françoise her life and more, and there was no question that she'd do anything for her. But that didn't mean she had to like it.

"I'm doing what I have to, to keep him safe," Françoise said after a moment. "Someone tried to kill him tonight, and almost succeeded. I won't give them another chance at him."

"I get the feeling he won't thank you for the sentiment. He's likely to be furious."

"I know. Do you have enough rope to get the bucket up to the window?" Françoise asked in a tone that brooked no

further argument. Marguerite bit her lip and gave up on trying to talk her out of it.

“If I don’t,” she sighed, “I know who does. I’ll be back.” She started toward the door, looked back at Françoise, shook her head disapprovingly, and hurried down the stairs. After a moment’s thought, Françoise went down to the desk in their second floor apartments and got a quill, ink, and paper. She took them back up to the attic and scribbled a hasty note to André. Marguerite returned with the rope and a bucket, and Françoise got to work on them while the proprietress untied André and dragged him across the room to the mattress.

“Your friend could stand to lose a little weight,” Marguerite noted acerbically.

“He’s not heavy. Just tall,” Françoise muttered distractedly, still struggling to loop the rope over the roof beam outside the back window.

“Fine. Tell him to lose some height, then,” the proprietress growled. There was just enough genuine discontent in her tone that Françoise decided to deal with it then and there rather than letting it build. *I hadn’t ever wanted to use an Obedience Charm on a friend*, she thought, hating herself for even considering it. *Perhaps I won’t have to. I’ll try this the old-fashioned way first, but either way, André will be staying here. I won’t risk losing him.*

“Marguerite, I’m really sorry to have to ask this of you,” she said softly, turning to face her friend. “The truth is, you’re the only person in Paris I’m willing to trust him with.” She set the bucket down, came back into the room and took both of Marguerite’s coarse, square hands in hers. “Anyone else might be in Vitry’s pay, but I know you’re not. Will you do this for me?”

Her voice was a dangerous weapon, and she knew how to wield it to effect, with or without sorcery. No one had ever

been able to resist that soft cajoling, tinged with weariness, shaded with sincerity. Marguerite was no different than the rest. She crumbled before the onslaught, her own fears suddenly seeming petty in the face of an old friend's need.

"Of course I will," Marguerite said brusquely. "You don't have to ask me twice." Françoise held her gaze for a moment to seal the bond, and when she looked away, Marguerite released a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

"Thank you," Françoise said quietly, giving Marguerite's hands a quick, affectionate squeeze, releasing them, and going back to work. *And thank you for agreeing out of friendship. I would have despised myself for resorting to the alternative.* They finished quickly and in silence, finally locking the door and carefully prying up the stair boards all the way down to the third floor.

"Come on, Guerite," the proprietress yawned as the last stair board was pulled free of its housing. "Let's go downstairs to the kitchen, and I'll make you some of that chamomile tea I promised you."

"Oh, Marguerite, I'd love to, but I shouldn't." Françoise sighed, exhaustion written in the dispirited slump of her shoulders. "There was a murder at the Louvre tonight, and I should have been there to investigate hours ago."

"Don't you have anyone else there to handle that?" Marguerite asked in her usual, slightly gruff manner.

As a matter of fact, there *was* someone; Henri de Bar, the Captain of the Cardinal's Guards, would be officially conducting the investigation whether or not she was there, and he was as competent and loyal as anyone she knew. For a moment, she was sorely tempted.

"I do have someone there, and usually I'd leave everything up to him. But the truth is, I have a personal interest in this murder. Whoever killed him is likely to have murdered my uncle."

“I understand, dear,” Marguerite said more softly, patting Françoise’s hand in motherly sympathy. Françoise was almost ten years older, but those ten years counted for naught against the proprietress’s ferocious maternal instincts. “I’ll wrap a flan in cloth for you, and you can take it with you.”

Françoise’s stomach knotted up in hunger at the thought, and she realized suddenly that she hadn’t eaten since last night.

“Well, it would be a sin to miss your flans,” she admitted. “Would you be offended if we compromised? I’ll need a good disguise tonight to get into the Louvre, and it tends to take me close to an hour to apply the cosmetics alone. Could I raid your flans while I make myself presentable?”

“Ha! I win! I knew I could keep you around with the promise of food.” Marguerite grinned, and Françoise laughed. “You only love me for my flans. Go down to the second floor apartments and start working on your disguise, and I’ll bring a tray for us.”

“Thank you, Marguerite. And I don’t just love you for your flans.”

“I know, dear.”

For the next hour or so, the two women talked over old times and warmed themselves with flans, chamomile tea, and good company. Marguerite lounged idly in the faded blue velvet chair by the fire, and Françoise sat at a cramped walnut bureau and peered into a small, dark, convex glass to “apply her cosmetics.” Marguerite was utterly ignorant of Magic, so Françoise made a show of playing with powders and sulphured egg white as she slowly Shifted.

She waited patiently for the subject of d’Artagnan to come up, as she knew it would, and after a bit of hedging on the other woman’s part, it finally did.

“D’Artagnan is beautiful,” the proprietress murmured

wistfully, her slightly rounded, florid face softened by the glow of the fire in the hearth. "Is he taken?"

"I wish I could tell you he was," Françoise growled. "I'd advise you to stay away from that one."

"Why?"

"He ruined one of my maids, and this one was no light-skirt. She was just a woman in love who happened to have made an abysmal choice. D'Artagnan took her virginity purely to further his real aim, which was the seduction of her mistress, Lady de Winter. And the poor girl is still in love with him, even after all these years."

"Hmph. Still, he *is* gorgeous. At least I'm allowed to look," Marguerite muttered, arguing more for her love of the sport than out of any real conviction. They had a spirited debate on the relative merits and shortcomings of men, during which Françoise exchanged her ruined garments for the pale ivory gown of a linen draper.

The plain, sacklike thing was square-necked and unfashionably narrow in the skirt, with unembellished, elbow-length sleeves. It was also a good three inches too short for her, exposing her square-toed black peasant boots up to the ankle. Françoise studied the effect in the dark reflection of a glass-paned window and decided it was the most unbecoming thing she'd ever worn in her life. But it suited her purposes admirably. With a dark wig and about an hour's worth of work, she was the living image of the Duchesse de Chevreuse. And the duchesse had once conducted her intrigues as Marie Michon, a linen draper from Tours.

Only a few would remember, but Françoise didn't doubt that the Queen, the duchesse's dearest friend, would be among them. That was a dangerous alliance that Françoise meant to pull apart tonight if she could. She smiled to herself, and glanced at Marguerite in the mirror, and something in her eyes

made the other woman shiver as she watched her. She suspected she knew what it was; she looked exactly like the dead cardinal when she smiled like that, in spite of her elaborate disguise.

Françoise pulled a dark wool cloak about her, bade her friend an affectionate farewell, and slipped silently into the night. She drifted down the moonlit street, her cloak billowing silently behind her.

There were rumors that Richelieu's ghost was haunting the King's council chamber. Remembering her own secretive smile in the mirror, Françoise felt she had her answer to that. They wouldn't find his vengeful spirit in a council chamber, or in the long, cold halls of his palais.

It had found a better way to work its will upon the world.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“That bitch!” André hissed fiercely, as he roused himself and took stock of his surroundings. They left him somewhere between anger and laughter: Françoise had converted the bare, cold attic room into the warmest, most livable prison he could have imagined. There was a fire crackling merrily in the dusty grate, his straw mattress had been heaped over with blankets, and a brightly colored rag carpet lay next to the bed. Brown peasant bread, cheese, fruit, a bottle of Spanish wine and several of his favorite books lay on the small, rickety table beneath the window. She’d even stuffed the hole in the window with rags and put up curtains. It was so like her, he would have laughed if the situation hadn’t been so serious. Françoise could fight with all a man’s skill and valiance, outflank the most brilliant political minds in Europe, and still find time to decorate your prison cell.

He felt something that had been stuffed in his right hand as he lay senseless. Looking down, he found a crumpled sheet of parchment, scrawled over in the script Guerite typically used when she was pressed for time. He smoothed it out as best he could, pulled it into the light of a candle and read.

“André, please don’t hate me,” she began. “Up here, at least, I know no one will be able to take pot shots at you. I

know this because I've torn out the flight of stairs that leads up to the room."

"Bitch," André grumbled, starting to smile in spite of himself.

"Yes, I'm a bitch, but don't hate me," the letter continued. He laughed at that. It had long since ceased to unnerve him that she knew him so well. *"I've left you Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and a (non-drugged) bottle of Spanish wine, and I'll send up some champagne with breakfast in the morning. Oh, yes, that reminds me . . . Madeleine, the proprietress, will hoist anything you want up to you via the bucket outside your window. Women are probably out (unless you want a really skinny woman), but anything else can be arranged. Speaking of that, if I were you, I wouldn't even **think** about using that rope as a means of escape; the roof beam and the rope are both too thin and worn to support the weight of a grown man. I won't order you not to attempt escape, since I know you won't listen to me anyway. But whatever you do, do it carefully. It's an old building, and I doubt it would stand up to your abuse any better than it stood up to mine."*

"Well, I've got to shut up now and get out of here. Hit me when we see each other again, and I'll be happy to call it even. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't care about you. All my love (whether you want it or not), Guerite."

André folded the letter carefully and slipped it into the knife sheath of his boot. He'd rather be dined on by a hundred rabid weasels than admit to Françoise or anyone else that he kept such tokens, but he kept them nevertheless. Actual admissions of affection between them were rare; more often than not, they were both more comfortable cloaking it in their usual rounds of easygoing banter. But this, this was something he could hold on to. He shook his head and laughed at his own idiot sentimentality. If word of this ever got out, his

reputation as France's preeminent cynic would be considerably the worse for wear.

Pulling himself to his feet with an involuntary groan, Sorlin lurched unsteadily across the small room to the table by the window. Looking at the bread and cheese she'd left him, he suddenly realized he was starving, and he attacked them with vulturish enthusiasm.

I always do seem to keep Guerite's tokens of affection, André mused with a soft huff of quiet laughter. *Strange, for a woman I claim to have fallen out of love with a long time ago.*

Well, perhaps he had loved her, once. He wasn't sure himself whether it had been love or simply thwarted desire. He'd been too poor to offer for Richelieu's niece, baseborn as she was, and he'd spared himself the humiliation of asking for her hand. And the one time he'd tried to seduce her had been more frustrating still; it had been like kissing his sister. After a few minutes they'd both given up and laughed, with no further awkwardness between them than that.

It was before she met Antoine, he remembered. It would have to have been before that. Once betrothed, once married, he knew she'd never seriously entertained the idea of taking another lover, despite the rumors that still surrounded her. Until Tréville . . . bloody hell, it was impossible. Not Tréville. Anyone but him. The man would use her, degrade her, and cast her off, and the jaded world would score it as his final triumph over the late cardinal. No, Guerite was no fool. She'd played the game for too long, knew the risks too well.

And yet he remembered her with her husband. He remembered that blind infatuation leading her to mistake after stupid mistake, leading her to sacrifice her reputation and jeopardize her power in the sad hope of getting his attention. It was half a lifetime ago, but he feared that she hadn't changed much in that one respect. She was still a closet romantic, and this time

it could cost her everything. Tréville had the intelligence that Palis lacked, and André was convinced that a world of cold, calculating malice lay beneath that marvelously convincing façade of charm and integrity. And Richelieu wasn't around to shield her anymore.

There were a few options open to André at this point, and he analyzed them all without emotion. He could kill Tréville, which would be easy enough, but which could lose him Guerite's friendship if she ever found out.

It might also be possible to discredit the man. It wouldn't be easy; quite a few people had tried and failed to tarnish that spotless reputation. But it had to be possible. Rumors of another mistress, or several others, might be sufficient to discourage Françoise.

If not, then diverting her interest away from Tréville seemed to be the last course. It might be possible to seduce her himself. Their kiss hadn't entirely been an act; for a moment it had become real and terrified them both. Then, of course, he found himself kissing his sister again, and she'd doubtless felt the same, and they'd broken it off with a laugh. Again.

What is it that's always stopped me from making love to her? he wondered. *She's beautiful, brilliant, amusing, and utterly unlike any other woman I've ever known. So why is it that whenever I've kissed her, I've invariably gotten the same image in my head of the two of us making leaf-forts together?*

André laughed aloud and shook his head; the mystery of their relationship hadn't become any clearer with that kiss. It was one of the few things in his life that seemed to defy dispassionate analysis. And the wine had begun to go to his head a little.

He pushed it aside irritably and got to his feet, and instantly sank back down into the chair as a wave of dizziness and

nausea hit him. *Damn the woman, damn the wine . . .* André struggled to raise himself again, narrowly managed it and took a few halting steps across the room, using a crossbeam above him to steady himself. He sank down onto the mattress, and the room swam in his vision.

He would be more a liability than an asset to Françoise in that condition, and he knew it. He would escape and find some way of protecting her from Tréville, and from herself, but it would have to be tomorrow. The last thing he registered as he slid into unconsciousness was the absurdly bright coloring of the rag carpet beside the mattress.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Françoise approached the Louvre silently, watching the guards, analyzing their positions and movements out of age-old habit. She decided to enter by the east gate, where Comminges was on duty; he was young, inexperienced, and a deal less bright than any of the others. She sauntered up to the gate and plastered a slightly nervous innocent expression on her face.

“I need to see Monsieur Germain. Is he on duty tonight?” Françoise asked timidly, giving Comminges just enough of a tremulous smile to clutch at his heartstrings. Comminges blinked and stared for a moment. Françoise flushed and drew the hood of her cloak more tightly around her face, as if she were coming to meet a lover and feared recognition.

“I’ll fetch him for you.” Comminges bowed graciously and took himself off. Françoise smiled after him, wrapping her dark cloak around herself more tightly to keep out the chill. She scanned the area around the eastern gate. It was unsettlingly quiet.

The Seine glittered darkly in the moonlight, just a few hundred yards away across the palace grounds. The guards were exactly where they should have been, and nothing was out of place. The night was absolutely peaceful. Strange to think that a man had died there just that afternoon, and yet

palace life still somehow managed to retain its tranquil, unshakable mundanity. She wondered if “mundanity” was a word, decided that it wasn’t, and decided as well that she was altogether too lazy to replace it with a better one.

The guard returned with Monsieur Germain, bowed, and left them in peace, no doubt assuming they were lovers. Françoise hoped against hope that Germain was still in the Queen’s pay, and that their password hadn’t changed since she’d last used it about a year ago.

“Tours and Brussels,” she whispered, the frost of her breath curling and shimmering in the night air.

“Come in, child,” the man said jovially. “You must be chilled to the bone.” He showed her inside. “Shall I see that Her Majesty knows of your arrival?” he added more quietly.

“I’d be grateful if you would, monsieur,” she replied in the high, lilting voice of the Duchesse de Chevreuse. The old guard’s eyes widened; he apparently remembered that voice. Good. “Please tell the Queen her good sister has returned.”

“Your grace,” he bowed reverently. “I truly feared we’d never see you again.”

“No more of that, my friend,” she cautioned him quietly. “You needn’t bow to a simple linen draper from Tours.” Françoise laughed the silvery, indulgent, utterly false-sounding laugh that used to drive her insane on the rare occasions that the duchesse was actually permitted to set foot in Paris.

“Hardly that, madame,” he said, bowing again. “Where should Her Majesty look for you?”

“In the laundry, downstairs.” Someplace dark; Françoise didn’t flatter herself that either her Shifting or her acting were all *that* good. Dismissing the man with an imperious nod, she went off in search of Henri de Bar, the Captain of the Cardinal’s Guards.

The cellars of the Louvre were the most ancient part of it;

they'd existed since the time of Philip Augustus. The laundry and the kitchens had existed in these pits in the ground for longer than anyone could remember. It was a cramped, windowless, dimly lit maze, impossible to guard adequately, the perfect place to conduct an intrigue. Or a murder.

It didn't take her long to stumble across a familiar voice, but unfortunately that familiar voice was Jean's, and he was effectively blocking off the passage she'd been trying to sneak through. She swore silent damnation, planted herself in a nearby alcove, and waited for him to go away. He was in the midst of giving one of his Musketeers a solid dressing-down.

"I just can't believe you had him in your hands and you let him back out! How in the name of *God* is that possible?" he growled, following the question with an explosive *fleche* of oaths. Françoise drew in a breath and listened sharply. Were they talking about Grismonde, or André?

"This has *not* been a good day, Charles," Tréville continued, a little more calmly. "First, two men, or, rather, one man and one woman, manage to completely rout six of my Musketeers, killing three of them. To make things worse, the one who killed them was the woman!"

"But, monsieur, she was fighting Florentine!" *Definitely Batz-Castelmore's* voice, Françoise thought. And he was right; her Florentine fighting style had given her a bit of an advantage, and her smaller, faster, lighter blades and half a lifetime of Gules' training had done the rest. But his captain was unimpressed with the excuse.

"I'm ranting, son. Don't interrupt me when I'm ranting," Tréville sighed impatiently. He picked up his train of rant exactly where he'd left off. "Then, to make matters slightly worse, more than thirty of my Musketeers can't seem to capture one man, not even when they have him in their musket sights! I'd rather you brought him in alive, but bring him in the other

way if you have to. I really don't care at this point. I'd just like *something* to go right today! I may hang up my sword and become a *monk* out of sheer frustration! Now go, take your men, and don't come back without Grismonde!"

So, it was Grismonde, not André, Françoise thought with relief. And they had him, and they let him get away. Well, my men obviously didn't do any better. Hell, I had him in my sights tonight, too, and I couldn't take advantage of it.

There was a momentary hesitation, as if Batz-Castelmore were bowing, and then Françoise heard him walk off. Jean paced and fumed quietly for a few minutes, and then she heard his footsteps follow the path Batz-Castelmore had taken down the other hall. Françoise followed silently in his wake and continued her search for de Bar.

A detachment of Cardinal's Guards was gathered in the wine cellar, a large, brick-vaulted antechamber just off the laundry. Françoise heard Henri de Bar among them, questioning someone.

"Monsieur, you were seen tonight committing the murder," de Bar muttered wearily but patiently, as if to a dim-witted child. "It will be easier if you confess now."

"Easier for you, perhaps," snapped a chillingly familiar Gascon voice. "As I have told you now a hundred times, I am a nobleman, and I will not pit my word against that of a servant. If you have any better proofs to offer me, you had better present them now, because what you have is insufficient evidence to convict a favorite of the King."

Dear God, it's Antoine, my husband . . . my husband . . .

She kept saying it to herself, over and over, like a mantra, as if that would somehow make her believe the words. Instead it made them more absurd, the way words said over and over become unreal, even comic. She felt her stomach knot and tighten, but it was a sensation as curiously hollow and empty

as she felt in her disbelief. Her husband was being questioned about the murder. She should have been floored. She should have cared, at least. To her credit, she did try to scrape up some last remnant of caring. It simply wasn't there anymore, and the lack of it upset her more than anything else could have. *I'm as jaded and detached as André would be, and that's the one thing I had hoped would never happen to me.* With effort she forced her attention back to the questioning.

"We may not have the evidence yet, monsieur, but rest assured, we will. It is a matter of days. Confess now and spare yourself the humiliation of discovery," de Bar snapped with icy dignity. The captain had always been excitable; when he took that somewhat high-handed tone, he was a short step away from losing his temper completely.

"Confession is for the guilty, Captain. As I am innocent, I have nothing to confess," Antoine replied coldly. Françoise heard him walk away on that line, and no one challenged his right to leave. He was right, of course; the word of a single servant wasn't sufficient evidence to convict him of anything.

De Bar ordered one of the guards to follow Palis and prevent him from destroying any evidence. Françoise breathed a sigh of relief; she'd been about to do that herself, but she hadn't wanted to waste the opportunity to do some damage around the Louvre as the Duchesse de Chevreuse. She desperately needed to see de Bar alone, and she had no more time to be subtle. Drawing her cloak more tightly around her to conceal her face, she stepped into the room.

"Captain, I also witnessed the murder," she said in a high-pitched, trembling voice. "I'll talk to you, but not in front of all these people." The captain looked at her askance for a few seconds and raised a shaggy gray eyebrow at her. He looked so like a suspicious sheepdog that she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling.

"I'm unarmed," she murmured, throwing her cloak back over her shoulders to show him that nothing was concealed underneath it. Actually, she had throwing knives strapped to her legs and a garrote concealed in her belt, but, really, who was counting? De Bar nodded gruffly after a moment.

"Wait for me upstairs," he instructed his guards. "And I do mean upstairs."

"But, sir, this could be . . ." his lieutenant, Cahusac, began, and was quickly cut off.

"I know what it could be, young man. Now do as I say."

Cahusac bowed the clipped, precise bow of a career martinet and led the men out. De Bar followed them into the corridor, drove them upstairs like a herd of sheep, and bolted a thick oak door behind them to prevent them from sneaking back downstairs to listen. After carefully checking every possible hiding place for informers, he went back to the wine cellar. Françoise was sitting on one of the barrels, waiting for him calmly.

"All right, my dear, you have me alone. Now what did you want to tell me?" de Bar began patiently, folding his arms and shifting into a more comfortable stance. He was a solidly built man, slightly shorter than average, with a thick mane of shoulder length gray hair that had been red in the days of his youth. His grizzled moustache was fashionably curled at the ends, and shaggy gray eyebrows capped off small, piercing blue eyes that alternated between suspicion and warmth depending on his mood. And de Bar changed moods more quickly and more frequently than anyone else Françoise knew.

"Actually, old friend, I was hoping *you'd* be able to tell *me* a thing or two," Françoise muttered in her own voice.

"Guerite? I thought it might be you," he sighed. "I'm so sorry about your uncle, dear. I tried to call on you today, but none of your servants would tell me where you'd gone."

“They didn’t know, themselves,” she interjected dryly.

“Doubtless.” He frowned on a sudden thought. “My dear child, please don’t think I’ve abandoned you for Mazarin. I had to pledge my men to him once your uncle named him the head of our faction, but I’m still yours, absolutely.” He gave his thick gray moustache an absent twirl and straightened his red and black guard’s uniform, and his bright blue eyes shone earnestly. Françoise exhaled quietly with relief, even though she’d had no doubts whatsoever about his loyalty.

Henri was an old friend, one who’d risked his life and his career to help her foil the Cinq-Mars conspiracy. He’d saved Richelieu in the assassination attempt, even though a betrayal of his employer would have brought him instant status at court, and probably a substantial reward from Cinq-Mars and the King who doted on him. No, Françoise had no doubts about de Bar’s loyalty; if she trusted anyone, she trusted him.

“I knew I could depend on you,” she said softly. “And I understand your position completely. Richelieu and I saw no way of avoiding Mazarin’s nomination, and you’ll find that even I am fast friends with the man these days.”

“The Cardinal’s Eyes, do you mean to keep them?” de Bar whispered, so quietly she could barely hear him. Henri was a Nul, unfortunately, and a quiet whisper was the subtlest way he had of asking her.

“I do,” she nodded firmly.

“You’re not going to report to that idiot Mazarin, are you?”

“Not on your life,” Françoise whispered. “I’m reporting directly to the King.”

“He *knows*?!”

“Richelieu told him. For better or for worse, I’m committed now.”

De Bar shook his shaggy gray head in absolute sympathy.

“God save you,” he muttered.

“The devil protects me better; he has a way of looking after his own.” Her wry, lopsided smirk was positively wicked. De Bar crossed himself.

“Don’t joke about that, Guerite,” he pleaded. “I *hate* to think of my friends burning in hell. It’s not a thing that makes me happy.”

“Well, as you’re probably the only man in France who isn’t either an atheist or a diabolist, I’ll humor you.”

“You’re too good to me, child.”

Françoise laughed and shook her head. Now that they’d cleared the air between them about Mazarin, and she had a sense of where she stood with him, she could press on to the questions that she really needed to ask. She frowned and studied her friend intently for a few seconds.

“Henri, what about my husband?” she asked quietly. “Did he kill de la Pailleterie?”

“One of the laundry maids claimed she saw him push the marquis down the staircase. She’s not one of our people, so I don’t know how reliable she is. She could just as easily have been paid to say it. And unfortunately, your husband is absolutely right. Even if the laundress is telling God’s truth, her word alone isn’t sufficient to convict a nobleman.”

Françoise pursed her lips and nodded.

“She’s under guard, of course?” It wasn’t really a question; she trusted his competence. De Bar nodded gruffly.

“We moved her to Richelieu’s townhouse for safekeeping.”

“Well done. I’ll question her tomorrow morning.” She frowned thoughtfully for a moment, trying to decide just how far to trust him with the truth. De Bar seemed to be the only man in Paris who wasn’t a member of the tontine, and if she died, she wanted someone to have enough information to piece together the murders. He seemed to be the perfect choice. After a moment’s silence she decided to take the risk,

filling him in on the details of the tontine, the murder of her cousin's servant, the bit of Palis livery braid they found caught in the window ledge, and Grismonde's repeated attempts to have her and André killed. De Bar shook his head, stunned by the sheer audacity of the plot.

"It certainly doesn't look good for your husband, does it?" he murmured in rueful sympathy.

"No, it certainly doesn't," she agreed. "There are two possibilities, and neither of them fills me with joy. He could be innocent, and the victim of an expert set-up. He could also be guilty of multiple murders and incompetent intriguing, and I could just as easily believe that."

"Be careful of him, Guerite."

"Now you're starting to sound like my uncle." She smiled wanly.

"I'm serious, child. I never liked Palis; there's something dreadfully cold about him. No disrespect to His Eminence, but he couldn't possibly have made a worse choice for you."

"No argument there. But done is done, and Antoine is my husband until death do us part. Until I have proof of his guilt, I have to assume he's innocent."

"Just make sure you don't let your sense of honor blind you to an unpleasant truth. I think it might be time for you to court scandal and stay with a friend you can trust, like me, or Sorlin. Between your reputation and your life, I know which one I'd rather have you sacrifice." He nodded gruffly to emphasize his point and tugged at the black leather belt around his waist. As careful as he was of his own reputation, she was astonished at the offer and secretly delighted by the depth of genuine caring it showed.

"Oh, Henri, thank you," she sighed, smiling a little tremulously. "I can't take either of you up on the offer, but thank you. I have to stay with my husband." His mouth popped

open, and she continued calmly over the loud, indignant objection he was about to make. "If I stay, I can ferret out the truth of the matter, one way or the other. If I don't, we'll lose an almost unparalleled opportunity for information gathering."

De Bar was silent for a moment, and his expression softened from outrage to something more indefinable, something almost like regret. Or pity. "Is that really all it is to you, Guerite? Information gathering?" he asked thoughtfully. "You loved him, once. What changed you, child?"

Bitterness? The need to survive, perhaps? she wondered. *I don't know.* "I've already promised myself a good cry when it's all over," she admitted quietly. "Until then, I have to be cold about it."

She tried to imagine what it had ever been like to feel more than this terrifying indifference to him that numbed her and made every limb feel heavy, and she found herself unable to encompass it. Even the simple remembering was beyond her. Shaking her head, Françoise dragged herself out of the mire of her thoughts with difficulty.

"Henri, before I leave you, will you promise me something?" she asked him, offering him her hand and turning the full force of her charm on him. She held him with her eyes, and he nodded earnestly. "Assign guards to the remaining tontine members: André, the Marquis d'Azyr, my husband, and the Marquis de Vitry. Vitry should still be imprisoned; the governor of the Bastille has been under strict orders for years to let me know when they release him."

"And what of Monsieur de Tréville?" Henri asked. "Didn't you mention him as another member of the tontine?"

She nodded. "Don't bother with Tréville; he's surrounded by Musketeers, and we'll never succeed in getting anyone close to him that way. I have a couple of my people watching him, and I suppose they'll have to be enough. Any chance of

my seeing the Marquis de la Pailleterie's body before we part company?"

"Unfortunately, his family removed the body for burial. I can take you to the place he was found, though."

She pursed her lips and nodded thoughtfully, and he offered her his arm and led her out of the wine cellar. They walked for a minute or two in companionable silence while they mulled over what they'd just learned from each other.

"Did you find anything amiss with the body itself?" Françoise whispered at last as they passed the laundry. "Any evidence that his fall might not have been an accident?"

"Well, his neck, his right arm, and his left leg were broken, but that could easily have happened during the fall. Nothing especially to suggest a murder, other than the location itself. I knew de la Pailleterie fairly well. He had no mistress and carefully avoided political intrigue. There was no reason for a man like that to be found dead in a secluded alcove."

"Unless perhaps a fellow tontine member had lured him there," Françoise murmured. "Someone he had reason to trust, considering the other recent murders. You say you knew him well. Who in the tontine would he have trusted enough to meet with?"

"Tréville. They'd been good friends for many years," de Bar said softly, tugging absently at his grizzled moustache.

"Anyone who knew that could easily have forged a note or sent a servant to lure de la Pailleterie here in Tréville's name," Françoise argued, trying not to sound like an adolescent girl in love, and not succeeding.

"True enough," he agreed equably, sparing her a shrewd sideways glance. "But we can't afford to ignore the alternative."

"Tréville himself has an alibi, although admittedly he could have had one of his Musketeers do the actual killing. A

Capuchin friar named Brother François can testify that Tréville dined with him this afternoon.”

“Oh, can he?” De Bar appeared fascinated. Françoise shrugged her shoulders gracefully and veered the subject onto the writings of Saint Paul, which they’d always argued about. De Bar quickly forgot about Tréville and everything else.

After a few minutes they reached the alcove in the west wing. In spite of the fact that the body was gone and the blood had been scrubbed away hours ago, Françoise shuddered violently the minute she walked into the room. She looked over at the staircase, and it swam in her vision. Fighting for breath, she pushed her way past de Bar and back out into the corridor.

“Are you all right, dear? Do you feel like you’re going to faint?” Her friend fluttered around her like a helpless moth as she sank to her knees on the cool stone floor and rested her head against a white plaster wall. For almost a full minute Françoise gasped for air and fought not to be sick. It might have been physical exhaustion at work on her, but somehow she didn’t think so.

“Should I call for a doctor?” de Bar asked gently, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“No,” she said vehemently. “Thank you, though,” she added more softly after a moment. Her breathing slowed, and after the room stopped spinning, she raised her head. “Let’s try that one more time, shall we?” She grinned weakly.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t. Something in that room doesn’t agree with you.”

“Nonsense, I’m fine. Come on.” She raised herself up off the floor with an involuntary groan, took a deep breath to fortify herself, and went back into the room. The years had taught Françoise to trust her gut reactions, and she’d never had such a strong one in her life. The marquis’ fall was no accident.

She might never be able to prove that, but she knew it as surely as if she'd seen it happen.

She pried herself out of her skin just enough to scan the place Ethereally. There were traces of violence, but any actual images of the murder had been quite deliberately scrubbed as clean as the walls and floor had on the Physical Plane. Interesting. Another Sorcier. Possibly Grismonde, possibly not. At the very least, her Nul husband would not have been so capable; if he was involved, it seemed there was a coterie of killers.

The stairway yielded them no more clues. Françoise studied the scene from several angles, trying to figure out exactly what the laundress who claimed to have witnessed the murder would have seen, and how she would have seen it.

If there were any holes in the girl's story, she'd find them tomorrow. It was her duty to exonerate her husband, if he was innocent. And if he was guilty, she had another oath to uphold. She would know tomorrow.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You’ll love this one, Kitty,” Françoise told her maid dryly in English. None of her other servants spoke the language, so anyone who’d decided to listen in would be sadly disappointed. She sat before the oak dresser in her boudoir and started to undo her dark wig. Kitty stepped in to help her, swiftly and gently pulling out the hairpins that held it in place.

“I got your former mistress, the Duchesse de Chevreuse, tossed out of the Louvre tonight. With insults. She’s in disgrace again, banished this time by the Queen herself.” Françoise grinned impishly at Kitty’s reflection in the mirror. The maid’s mouth popped open in delighted surprise, and a startled laugh came out before she could stifle it. She couldn’t quite manage to suppress a smile of malicious satisfaction, though, as she pulled the wig free and started to brush out her mistress’s hair.

“How did you do it?” Kitty asked eagerly.

“Well, you yourself confused me with the duchesse when I came home tonight, and you served her for years.” Françoise shrugged laconically with a teasing glint in her eyes.

“You gave me the scare of my life, madame.” Kitty laughed a little nervously.

“Sorry.” Françoise smiled sheepishly. She yawned, stretched like a cat, and continued her story. “Well, the Queen

was fooled too. I met her in a dark corridor just outside the laundry. We talked in hushed whispers for a while, mostly about the death of the cardinal. The Queen didn't seem to have had a hand in the murder, or to know who had, so I skipped on ahead to the real subject of my visit. I told her I'd heard dreadful rumors about her and Cardinal Mazarin, and I reviled the man to within an inch of his life. I figured one of two things would happen. She'd listen to her best friend and rid herself of Mazarin, or she'd fly into a rage and send La Chevreuse back into exile, and either one suited me just fine. Either way, I would have crippled a powerful alliance."

Kitty nodded, unable to suppress a grin. "So Her Majesty flew into a rage and cast you out of the Louvre. With insults, no less," the Englishwoman laughed. "The Queen was the last friend the duchesse had in Paris. She'll be in exile for years!"

"I thought for a moment that she was going to have me arrested! I narrowly managed to talk her out of it. As it was, she had Monsieur de Tréville escort me to the city ramparts. I made a great show of walking off dejectedly on foot in the general direction of Tours." Françoise smiled.

Her maid dropped the silver hairbrush and held her sides with laughter. "Oh, I shouldn't laugh," Kitty managed to gasp at last. "She wasn't the best of mistresses, but at least she protected me from Milady de Winter, who was a worse one."

"Yes, she protected you, so that she could use you for her own ends. Laugh away, Kit. You've earned it."

Milady de Winter may have tried to murder Kitty, but what La Chevreuse had done was just as bad as far as Françoise was concerned. The duchesse had always used her body to accomplish her intrigues, and she coerced Kitty into following suit. D'Artagnan had already ruined the girl; she was no longer protected by her virginity, and her mistress had saved her life. La Chevreuse used those arguments to coax her maidservant

into sleeping with dozens of men: her allies, her rivals, and those potentially useful pawns too lowborn for La Chevreuse to bother with, herself.

The duchesse made one fatal error, though, about four years ago. She aimed Kitty at Biscarrat. Françoise had occasionally had to fend off the attentions of other women in her Biscarrat persona, but she'd never met one who seemed so listless and halfhearted in her pursuit. It was just enough to provoke her curiosity, and her suspicion. Through patience and coaxing and a slow building-up of trust, Françoise finally got Kitty to confide in her, and the whole, hideous story came out. As Biscarrat, she offered the woman a place in the service of a friend, the Comtesse de Palis, and Kitty gratefully accepted.

Françoise had her carefully watched, of course; she was taking an awful risk, and she knew it. But she slowly began to take her maid into her confidence as she proved trustworthy. Kitty still had no idea that she was the head of the Cardinal's Eyes, or a Sorcière, but she'd finally been made privy to Françoise's odd cross-dressing habit. The maid picked up the brush she'd dropped and continued to work on Françoise's hair, and Françoise made a small performance of stripping away the cosmetics that made her look so unnervingly like the duchesse as she slowly let the Shift fade off.

"God, I look like death warmed over and poured into a blue silk dressing gown," Françoise murmured when the Shifting ended. Every ounce of her exhaustion had decided to show itself on her face; dark circles under her eyes stood out like charcoal smudges against the alabaster of her skin. There was a faint greenish bruise along her jaw, too, where Jean had struck her. She managed a tired smile at Kitty's reflection, and Kitty smiled back affectionately and assured her that she was still beautiful. *Lies, all lies!* Françoise thought and almost

laughed out loud.

Rising to her feet, she yawned again, pulled off her dressing gown, and climbed into her enormous four-poster bed of carved rosewood with Flemish blue velvet hangings. “Kitty, can you do me a favor? Don’t let me sleep past dawn tomorrow. I have an appointment with His Majesty, and our futures are riding on it.”

Kitty nodded solemnly and curtsied.

“Good night, madame,” she said, slipping back into French. “Ring if you need me.”

“I will, thank you, Kitty. Good night.” Kitty blew out all the candles, curtsied again, and closed the doors behind her.

For all her exhaustion, Françoise drifted toward sleep slowly. She toyed with the trimming on the pale blue bed curtains, thinking of André and wondering how he was sleeping tonight, if he was sleeping at all. She doubted it; she knew him too well for that. If he hadn’t escaped already, he’d be working on it now. *Stubborn idiot should have been born a Gascon*, she thought affectionately. *I only hope he’ll settle for hitting me when he sees me. I don’t want to lose his friendship over this.*

Her thoughts brushed past him and flew to Jean. She’d lost her silent bet with herself tonight; he’d seen through her disguise. Of course, it took him awhile. What ended as a romantic stroll in a moonlit garden legitimately began as a march to the ramparts, with her in tow as a prisoner. She drifted into a fitful half-sleep as images of the encounter washed over her.

She’d wrapped her cloak more tightly around her to close out the chill of the night air, and from the depths of its hood she’d studied the man who walked beside her in the light December snow. She and Jean had walked past the Tuileries Gardens alone; a single, frail woman prisoner was judged to need only one guard to escort her to the city limits. They

made their way down the street in a silence that was only occasionally and fleetingly broken by late night revelers and other passersby.

A breeze stirred, carrying a light whirl of soft snow and the sweet parting breath of the Tuileries' last flowers. Françoise shivered, and shot a glance of mild irritation at Tréville when he didn't. He wore only his Musketeer's uniform, without so much as a cloak to warm him, but he didn't seem the slightest bit affected by the chill. *I suppose one can't let perfect teeth chatter or anything*, Françoise thought ironically.

Finally she'd decided it was time to test that famous integrity of his. She'd never have a better chance, and she had to know *now* if she couldn't trust him. The uncertainty was eating her alive.

"I could make it worth your while, Jean, if you let me stay in Paris," she'd murmured to him, warming him with a slow smile of extraordinary promise. "What would it take to buy you? Money? Power, or the promise of it?"

"You know me better than that, madame," he'd replied coolly. "I serve the crown, like my father before me and his before him, and there isn't enough money in the world to buy me away from that."

"Myself, then. You loved me, once."

"I'm no longer quite so young, madame, and my heart is safely in another's keeping."

"Really?" Françoise had asked ironically, secretly delighted. "Tell me, Jean, what's she like? Is she as beautiful, as brilliant as I? Her kisses, are they as sweet? And the rest of her?" She'd arched a delicate eyebrow, expecting him to blush at that. He'd arched an eyebrow back at her, and his eyes had glinted with the one thing she hadn't expected from him. Amusement.

"Yes, Françoise, she's *exactly* as beautiful and brilliant as

you, her kisses are heaven itself, and as for the rest of her, I get the feeling she's going to make me wait awhile to find out." He'd laughed softly as her mouth opened the merest fraction and her eyes widened slightly, the closest she'd come to an involuntary expression of astonishment in years.

"Damn," she'd muttered eloquently, not bothering to deny it. "When did you figure it out?"

"I wasn't sure until that last question, but I'd begun to suspect as I watched you watching me. There's a certain tilt to the head that's characteristic of you, never more than when you're thinking or studying someone. Always to the left, never the right. You furrow your brow in thought, too, and a woman as vain as Marie de Rohan would never do that. She used to worry about those little furrows on the brow the rest of us tend to take for proof of intelligent thought."

Françoise had laughed ruefully at that. "Do you think anyone else could have recognized me?"

"Honestly, no. I didn't recognize you until we were well away from the Louvre, and I think only someone who knew you better could have spotted you any sooner."

"I hope you're right. Where are you taking me, anyway?" She'd kept her tone light and free of suspicion, but he seemed to be leading them into the gardens, away from even the scant protection of occasional passersby on the Rue Neuve St. Honoré.

"Trust me." He winked. She arched an eyebrow at him in ironic reply. Sighing, he shook his head. "Françoise, if I intended to kill you, I could just as easily do it now. There are no witnesses."

She glanced around her, and it seemed to be true enough.

"Now will you trust me?" Jean asked a bit plaintively, offering her his arm. Françoise smiled, laughed softly, and linked her arm in his after a moment's hesitation.

"I'm sorry, Jean," she said quietly, not quite daring to look

up at him yet. "Suspicion has been an occupational hazard with me since I was seventeen years old. It's hard to set that aside, even for you."

"Especially for me. I'm still a prime suspect in your uncle's murder, and you know I'm withholding information from you about the Heart of Flame."

"Yes, I know," she muttered.

"I'd tell you everything if I could."

"I know that too."

He slipped an arm around her waist, and they wandered through the gardens of the Tuileries together in comfortable silence.

As glorious as the place could be in spring, in December it was barren, a depressing collection of small, leafless trees and hedges silvered by a waning moon. A thin film of snow blanketed the bare patches of ground where riots of flowers blossomed the rest of the year. Jean led Françoise to a place where the gardens overlooked the Seine and the tall rose hedges splintered the moon with their silhouettes. The crumbling remnants of a few faded roses still clung to the hedges, and a single one among them all was still in full bloom. It was blood red, and enormous, and its petals were gilded with frost and curling at the edges with the cold.

"The last rose of winter," Jean said softly, leaning down to unsheathe a knife from his boot. He sliced neatly through the stem and handed it to her.

"It was until you beheaded it," she drawled.

"The frost would have killed it anyway." He shrugged with a good-natured grin. Françoise smiled and kissed him affectionately. "Not to sound like I'm complaining or anything, but do you want to go someplace warmer? We're going to freeze if we stay out here much longer," he pointed out.

"Oh, thank God! I was starting to wonder if you were

human. Lead on, MacDuff!”

“You sure you trust me that much?” It was his way of asking her to spend the night, and she knew it. She could still back off; it was still cloaked in easygoing banter, to spare them both if she said no. Jean waited through a long, breathless moment while she pursed her lips in thought.

“Well, you haven’t killed me yet. This is generally considered a good sign in my profession,” she murmured. “I do trust you, Jean, but tonight I’m going to ask you to escort me home. I’m still a married woman, and I’m not quite sure what to do about that part yet.”

Jean sighed, but shrugged easily enough and offered her his arm. Françoise steeled herself to meet his eyes and silently blessed him for the laughter she found there.

“I wasn’t sure either at first,” he admitted, starting to lead her out of the gardens. “I’ve never had to cope with the question before.”

“Neither have I, in spite of the rumors,” she muttered.

“I know. I know it’s wrong to pursue you. I must have told myself a hundred times in the last two days that it would be better to let you go. But for once, I just don’t give a damn whether I’m wrong or not.” He laughed, a little bemused.

“I’m caring less and less about that, myself. Here, take part of my cloak. You look like you’re ready to die of the cold.”

“Of course I do. It’s all part of my cunning plan to share your cloak.”

She’d laughed and tossed a part of her voluminous cloak over his shoulders, and they’d huddled together . . . for warmth, they said . . . and made their way through the thickening snow.

Françoise smiled softly to herself and shook her head, half-wishing for a moment that she’d gone with him instead of

coming home. No sense wishing, though. There was still Antoine to consider, and her honor. And her uncle.

She chewed her lower lip absently as she began to toy with the problem of Grismonde. He'd eluded both the Musketeers and the Cardinal's Eyes all day, and the longer he managed to hold out, the more difficult it would be to find him. But there might just be another solution. Closing her eyes and settling back, Françoise decided to try her own hand at unearthing Grismonde. Casting a rapid Ward around the room, she slowed her breathing and prepared to leave her body. She would search for his spirit itself.

It was possible, at least theoretically, to locate another soul on the Ethereal Plane purely on the resonance of his name. The name "Grismonde" could well have been assumed, and the task certainly would have been easier if she had a full name to work with, but she supposed it was worth a try.

Slowly and delicately she pried her silvery Ethereal form away from her body, limb by limb, and once she was free she half-walked, half-floated around the room. In its Ethereal state, her bedchamber was smaller and plainer, the remnant of another house, another era. The house Françoise shared with Antoine on the Rue des Bons Enfants was relatively new; he'd had it built to suit his sense of ostentation, using the small fortune with which her uncle had dowered them. And she hated it enough that she'd never bothered to Awaken it, giving it its own presence on the Ethereal Plane. If it stood long enough, the tasteless edifice would come to have that in spite of her antipathy.

She glanced across the chamber into a small, square mirror on a plain, silvery-green wooden dresser, and let herself indulge in a moment's playfulness as she Shifted from form to form for the simple joy of it. It was considerably easier to Shift an Ethereal body, but a skilled enough Sorcier could

Shift the same way on the Physical Plane. It took a good bit longer, at least it did for her, but the energies behind the Shifting were essentially the same. Finally settling on a falcon's form, she took a last cursory glance around the room she was leaving her body in. The Wards looked secure enough.

Rather than looking for a doorway onto the Astral Plane, she remained in the Ethereal, passing straight through the outer wall of the house like a wraith and flying out over the city.

She sent the Summoning rippling through the air. *Grismonde*. She instantly felt shock and an answering ripple, like a plucked lute-string. Stunned at her own immediate success, she sent a delicate tendril of energy to trace the resonance as far as she was able, finally slamming up against incredibly strong shields as she pursued it past the Louvre, across the Seine. Another Sorcier. A powerful one. She was tempted to sharpen her attack, but after a moment's thought she decided to maintain the advantage of her anonymity. If she pulled out and returned to her body now, all *Grismonde* would know was that another Sorcier was aware of him and possibly looking for him. And she now had a better sense of where her people could find him, and she knew exactly what she was up against.

She could feel him battering at her shields ineffectually, the bolts of energy searing red with his frustration. Almost lazily, Françoise cast an energy drain along the path of those bolts, giving her an even clearer idea of where to find him. *Grismonde* stopped abruptly as he felt his energies weaken critically. He invested the energies that remained with him in refortifying his shields, and he watched and waited for her next move. Clearly, this one wasn't accustomed to dealing with other Sorciers. And now Françoise had him thinking. *It might be just as well to end it here*, she thought, and began

to study his defenses with a critical eye.

Françoise's bedroom door slowly creaked open, and she was instantly slammed back into her body by the Wards she'd set. Breathless with shock and shaking like a leaf, she felt for the knife under her pillow and clutched it convulsively. Soft, uneven footsteps padded to the bed. Antoine's footsteps. She calmed down and slowed her breathing, but she didn't relax or let go of the knife. Her husband might well have been responsible for the murder of her uncle, among others. She was trying not to prejudge that, but it was difficult with him. Too much bad blood had passed between them over the years, and while she would profess to others that she believed in his innocence, she had to admit that she didn't quite believe it herself.

Antoine staggered into bed, pulled the blankets off her, and fumbled awkwardly with the laces of her night rail. He finally tore away what he was obviously too drunk to untie, and his wife's black eyes opened and raked him with a contempt she no longer bothered to conceal.

"I have come to claim my marital rights, my dear," he slurred. His breath felt hot on her face, rancid with wine and something stronger.

"It's been some time since you've so honored me. I'm fairly quivering with anticipation," she drawled sardonically. He slapped her sharply across the mouth, more to humiliate than to hurt, and rather than bothering to reply he got to his feet and started to undress.

Françoise tightened her grip on the knife until it hurt, and she forced herself to keep her temper in check. He was a favorite of the King. If she harmed him in any way, not even Jean would be able to save her. Antoine was fully within his rights to take her whenever he wished. He lowered himself onto her, parted her thighs, and roughly thrust himself into her.

Françoise dug her nails into her palms to keep from crying

out; she would never give him the satisfaction of knowing he was hurting her. She schooled her features into an expression of abject boredom and tried to think of other things

She tried to think of Jean, tried to imagine him there instead, but she couldn't picture him ever being that rough or selfish with her. *God, I wish I'd stayed with him. Why was I so concerned for my vows, for my honor? There's nothing here to save.* She tried to think of Jean, but found herself thinking of Kitty and all the men she'd been forced to make love to. Men she hadn't wanted. *Oh, Kitty, God help me, I know exactly how you must have felt. Before the murders, before Jean, I was indifferent to this, but now at last I know how you felt.*

Antoine spent himself inside her and rolled away from her. Françoise turned her face into the pillow and wept softly and prayed she wouldn't get a child from this.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

D'Artagnan's sword lay in the light dusting of snow that blanketed even the inner wall of the old ramparts, glinting dull orange in the light of a hazy winter's dawn. Françoise picked it up gently, used a corner of her cloak to dry and polish it, and tucked it into the long, coarse linen shopping sack that was the one odd part of this morning's otherwise traditional ensemble.

For once, she wasn't in disguise. She wore a stylish mourning gown, black silk, with jet beading and trim. Kitty had managed to set her hair in an elaborate chignon, and it looked as if it might actually stay put for once. She wasn't plump, or a man, or an unkempt linen draper. She had an appointment with His Majesty at the Louvre today, and she was painfully aware of just how perfectly she was going to have to play it.

Straightening with an involuntary groan, she continued on her way to L'Hôtel de Tréville to pick up Jean and return d'Artagnan's sword. *A pity all my promises won't be as easy to fulfill*, she thought. She was curiously relieved that d'Artagnan hadn't picked the sword up himself last night; it gave her one small way of salving her conscience. And perhaps he'd known that it would.

The street was slowly coming alive around her. A group of ragged children were kicking an empty green glass wine

bottle around on the street, stirring up snow and shrieking with laughter. *God, give me just a little of their energy; I need it today.* That morning Françoise felt every hour of her thirty-four years, and then some, and her usual jokes about getting old felt uncomfortably close to the truth. As she passed the window of a tavern she peered into the thick dark glass looking for lines under her eyes, smiled to make them appear, and then laughed at herself for being vain enough to care. *Well, it's morning,* she thought by way of an excuse. *I always think absurd things in the morning, particularly when I haven't had enough sleep.*

She stopped a *distributrice* on the street and bought an orange for breakfast, only realizing how stupid that was when she had to juggle the fruit, the dagger she used to cut it open, the sword in the sack over her back, and the little black velvet purse she'd tied to her wrist. Enough juice bled on to the full sleeve of her elegant black mourning gown to leave her smelling like an orchard for the rest of the day. Which was better, she supposed wryly, than the majority of the French court would smell.

Realizing she'd need to wait an hour or two before calling on Tréville, Françoise wandered for a while in and out of the shops and stalls in Les Halles.

The air was thick with its usual odd mingling of scents: roasting meat, wines, oils, animals, perfumes, human sweat. It was quieter at this time of morning than it would be later in the day, when they would all be laughing, bartering, and bickering at the top of their lungs.

And, of course, my dear, morning is not the fashionable hour to take a stroll in Les Halles, Françoise admonished herself teasingly in the elegant, fall-away drawl of a court lady. *And I'm not even here incognito, as the nobility will be this evening. And I'm on foot, and not in a proper conveyance. Shocking.*

Françoise passed a weapons stall, indulged herself in a quiet whimper, gritted her teeth, and forced herself to keep walking. Dressed as she was, she couldn't afford to look at the weapons stalls no matter how much they interested her.

By way of consolation she stopped at the gold velvet-draped stall of a parfumeuse and bought herself a small flask made of dark blue glass filled with a rose musk scent that she dabbed behind her ears and on the pulse points of her wrists.

I haven't worn perfume in years, she thought, a bit bemused. *What in the world am I thinking? Between the musk and that damned orange, I'll announce my own arrival from several streets away.* A throaty chuckle escaped her at the thought, and a plump, balding wine seller turned to look at her as if she'd sampled too many of his wares. She laughed again, shook her head, and moved on. *Note for the future,* she informed herself crisply. *Avoid mornings. Especially cold ones like this.*

Finally she decided she'd managed to waste the proper amount of time, and she continued on her way.

L'Hôtel de Tréville was swarming with petitioners, even at this inhuman hour. *It may be more difficult to get an audience with him than I'd imagined,* Françoise thought with no small measure of chagrin. *Maybe he can slate me in for Sunday if I promise to let him use and degrade me in front of his men.*

God, I really must avoid mornings in the future. I'm sure I would never think anything this absurd at noon.

Musketeers were lined three deep at the red carpeted stairs that led up to Jean's study. Two or three different conversations about the amorous adventures of court ladies came to screeching halts as Françoise swept into the hall. Only the poor Chevalier de Batz-Castelmore, whose back was turned to her, continued his line of thought on the subject, in spite of his comrades' frantic signals.

“I’m really uncertain, my friends, of which of them to choose. Madame de Beauvais is a captivating creature, but Mademoiselle de Hautefort . . .” He paused for dramatic effect and made huge round hands in front of his chest to simulate her breasts, and it was at that moment that he noticed his friends’ signals and whipped around to find the source of them. Françoise flashed him a smile of tolerant amusement and rested her hand on her hip.

“Pray continue, monsieur; I was fascinated,” she intoned dryly.

“Well, I . . . umm . . .” he mumbled, flushing darkly. One or two of his comrades snickered, and the others did their best to pretend that they were far away.

“No, truly, I’d love to hear which one of these great ladies you plan to honor with your affections. Myself, I’d choose Hautefort; I hear Beauvais makes noises like an ailing cat in the heat of passion. Your servant, sir.” Françoise inclined her head and walked out into the courtyard, savoring the open mouths she left in her wake. Their startled laughter deepened behind her until it swept the entire hall. *Poor boy*, she thought. *He just makes the temptation irresistible, he’s so innocent. I really shouldn’t bait him.* She laughed softly to herself and scanned the courtyard for d’Artagnan.

She found him exactly where she’d somehow known she would, mercilessly drilling the recruits. He was sparring with one unfortunate boy, to demonstrate his techniques to the others. From the look on the boy’s face, the demonstration was less than enjoyable. The hapless victim was almost six feet tall, whereas d’Artagnan was just a little over five, but the boy’s size and strength were clearly no match for his instructor’s supple wrist. A particularly artistic *flechette* sent the recruit’s sword flying out of his hand, and d’Artagnan was kind enough to let him off the hook and let him rejoin the others. Françoise

found the boy's look of mindless gratitude truly touching.

The lieutenant broke off his lesson, and his students fell to sparring individually. He started toward the house, and he paused when he recognized the woman who'd managed to make his life hell on earth last night. He bowed to her, and she flashed him a smile.

"I have what I promised you, monsieur," she whispered almost without moving her lips. "Shall I give it to you now, or do you want to meet me somewhere?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "We'd better meet somewhere else," he said after a moment. "It might be difficult to explain what a gentlewoman was doing with my sword, and it could compromise you."

"True enough. Where and when?"

"It has to be somewhat public, or again it could compromise you. Monsieur de Tréville's study?"

"We could, but then we'd have to explain it to him. Same story as last night?"

"Agreed. And thank you for the story," he added more quietly. "Shall we go in?" He offered her an arm.

They entered the hallway, and again conversations all around them stopped dead. The Chevalier de Batz-Castelmore approached her nervously.

"M-madame, I really must apologize," he stammered. "Such converse in front of a lady was inexcusable." The Musketeers around them nodded approvingly.

"No, monsieur, it is I who must apologize. I shouldn't have baited you; it was cruel. But it *was* fun," she admitted impishly. There was a sprinkle of laughter around her, and Batz-Castelmore flushed again and grinned shyly. "There I go, teasing you again. Go ahead, smack me, I deserve it," she proclaimed dramatically, thrusting out her free hand. On an impulse he bowed gallantly and kissed it, and his fellow

Musketeers cheered lustily at the gesture. *He could be a very young Jean*, she thought, and warmed him with her smile. Then the thought that he was young enough to be her son by Jean nearly made her wince and look for a mirror.

“Madame graces L’Hôtel de Tréville with her presence,” the ingratiating voice of Vressac, Jean’s *valet de chambre*, wheezed behind her. She and d’Artagnan pivoted to face him, and he bowed almost to the ground. “Monsieur de Tréville noticed you as you entered, and has been anxiously awaiting a visit from his good cousin.”

The man was clearly mystified by the message he was delivering, as were the Musketeers who listened to it, but the ones on the stairs cleared a path for her and bowed as she and d’Artagnan swept past them.

Françoise permitted herself a quiet smile at Jean’s transparent attempt to avoid compromising her. This morning she had a built-in excuse for coming to see him: They had an appointment at the Louvre together. And even if they hadn’t, after last night, she wasn’t particularly concerned about being compromised. She was giving serious thought to pushing her husband into seeking an annulment by courting scandal harder than she ever had in her not-nearly-misspent-enough youth.

She would put her own position at risk in making an enemy of one of the King’s favorites, but that was nothing to her now. Even if the worst happened, even if she lost Louis’ favor entirely, she wouldn’t have to give up her Eyes. An annulment would give her back the dowry of two hundred thousand livres with which her uncle had gifted her, and she could live comfortably on that for the rest of her days and continue to work through Jean, as she’d originally planned. No amount of royal favor would be worth a repetition of last night’s encounter with Antoine.

There would be scandal however she chose to play it; there was no avoiding that. She hoped Jean would be waiting for her at the end of it, but whether he would or not, she was becoming increasingly determined to go through with it. The tall doors at the top of the stairs opened before them with a stiff creak, and she and d'Artagnan were admitted into the sanctum sanctorum, as she'd increasingly come to think of it. Jean rose from his chair to greet them and gave his "good cousin" a reserved kiss on the cheek. Vressac closed the doors behind them, and Jean went to the keyhole to make sure the valet wasn't trying to listen in.

"Captain, I came to thank you for sending Monsieur d'Artagnan after me last night," Françoise began quietly as soon as Jean came back into the room. "I was waylaid by thieves at the ramparts, and if d'Artagnan hadn't been there I might well have died."

Jean frowned with concern, probably wondering why she hadn't mentioned the adventure last night. Françoise turned to d'Artagnan and handed him her suspiciously lumpy shopping sack. "This morning I found the sword you lost in the encounter, monsieur, and I'd be honored if you permit me to return it to you."

D'Artagnan took it gingerly and examined it.

"The honor is mine, madame, to receive it from so beautiful a hand," he said, bowing formally.

"How on earth did you manage to lose your sword, d'Artagnan?" his captain asked curiously.

D'Artagnan flushed a little, but held his ground.

"A brilliant disarm sent it sailing out of my hand, and we were unable to find it in the darkness."

"Indeed? How were you able to defend the lady after you'd been disarmed?"

"I grabbed a nearby tree branch," he said without missing

a beat. Françoise laced her hands behind her back to keep herself from applauding.

“Ah! Very clever. How many of them were there?”

There was a second’s pause while d’Artagnan decided on a believable number.

“Four, monsieur,” he said after a brief pause.

Jean looked at him searchingly for a moment, and d’Artagnan started to look uncomfortable. Jean transferred his gaze to Françoise, who met it evenly and said nothing.

“Four! Good Lord! And you with only a tree branch!” Jean exclaimed in admiration, clearly deciding to be kind and let them both off the hook. “Well, I must say, you discharged your duties admirably, d’Artagnan. No captain could ask for better of his lieutenant.”

D’Artagnan flushed again as he emerged from the rosy fiction and remembered that in truth he’d been beaten and captured by a woman. “It was nothing. Really,” he muttered lamely, utterly deflated.

“Nonsense! You risked life and limb to rescue my dear cousin, and you obviously took quite a pounding in the process.”

“It wasn’t *that* much of a pounding,” d’Artagnan said defensively.

“Of course it was! Just look at you! You’re an absolute mess! If I didn’t know better, I’d think you lost that fight,” Jean said shrewdly, fixing his lieutenant with a penetrating gaze. D’Artagnan flushed his darkest hue, and his shoulders sagged visibly. “Such devotion deserves a just reward.” Jean went back to his desk, unlocked the bottom drawer and counted out coins into a blue velvet pouch. He locked the desk drawer again and handed the pouch to d’Artagnan. “Fifty pistoles for your pains, my friend, along with an order to go home and rest for two days. Clearly, you need it.”

“But, Captain, I . . .”

“Not another word,” Jean insisted, holding up his hand. “Go home, and don’t return until you’re fully recovered. If I see that broken nose in this house again, I’ll order it and you to be pitched out onto the streets.”

D’Artagnan looked miserably at his captain, and at the pouch of coins he felt he’d done nothing to deserve, and at his captain again. Finally the lieutenant made his obeisance to his captain and left through the side door. This time Jean checked both side and front door keyholes, came quickly back into the room, and took both of Françoise’s hands urgently in his.

“Françoise, what are you thinking, coming to meet me undisguised? Not that I’m not delighted to see you, but you’ll shatter your reputation past repair if you keep this up!” he hissed with a worried frown.

“I don’t care anymore, not after last night. I don’t care.” She thrust herself into his arms and kissed him passionately, almost fiercely. After a startled few seconds, Jean returned her kiss with a hunger she hadn’t felt in him before. She pressed him against the nearest wall, roughly, with a wild mixture of elation and rage and pain, and she felt herself on the sudden brink of tears again. Not like this. Not this way. Not using him as she’d been used.

She forced herself to something closer to calmness, kissed him more gently, and finally he put his hands on her shoulders, created a little distance between them, studied her intently.

“Françoise, what happened last night?” he asked her quietly. “And I’m not talking about d’Artagnan, though I’d give my right arm to hear the truth behind that. What happened last night between you and your husband?”

Françoise paused for a long moment before answering. “My, aren’t we perceptive?” she muttered grimly. “He came to me last night to claim his . . . marital rights. I suppose I

should be used to it by now.” She closed her eyes, unable to bear his looking at her just then.

“He forced himself on you,” Jean whispered, stunned.

“The law doesn’t recognize ‘force’ between a man and his wife,” Françoise answered him bitterly.

“Damn the law,” he spat. “I’ll kill him.” He kissed her quickly, grabbed his sword off the desk and started strapping it on.

“Jean, I appreciate the sentiment, but if I wanted him dead, I’d kill him myself. I’m going to seek an annulment.”

He turned to face her slowly.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d really rather kill him.” Teasing, but not.

Françoise managed a halfhearted grin, took a few steps toward him and encircled his waist with her arms. “And you’d be banished, imprisoned, or executed if you did, all depending on the whim of His Majesty. I couldn’t live with that. I’d rather just end it as cleanly as I can. Before I met you, I accepted his occasional visits as a matter of course. Last night was different, though. The thought that I could have been with you instead nearly killed me.” She drew him down to her and kissed him deeply on the mouth.

He nearly burned away the last of her self-control with searing kisses that trailed across her jaw and slowly down her throat. His hands trembled a little, endearingly, and seemed to leave a trail of light everywhere they touched her. She ran her fingers through his hair and clutched him to her fiercely, and she felt the wildness of his pulse, the sharpness of his ragged breath. He slipped a hand inside her bodice, and she gasped into his mouth as he kissed her again. *If I don’t break this off now, she thought, I’ll end up throwing him down on the carpet and damning the consequences. I have to stop this.*

“My angel, I think it’s time we departed for the Louvre,”

she managed at last, running a hand through his hair.

“But we don’t have to be there for hours yet,” he whispered, unable to hide his fierce disappointment.

“You’re catching on,” she laughed wickedly. “Do you trust me?” He couldn’t prevent a heavy sigh of relief, and Françoise laughed again.

“I trust you,” he assured her solemnly, taking her hand and kissing it. Her hands were still curiously soft for a woman who lived by the sword, but her palm bore the same calluses that marked his own. The calluses of a master swordsman. He studied her hand for a moment, tracing those calluses, taking in everything they represented. A court lady who knew the fierce excitement and the plunging fear of a desperate charge. Who’d starved with the other soldiers at the siege of Arras. Who did her own field dressings. Who could duel and die on the turn of a word, just as he could.

“We don’t have a chance in hell of a normal life, my love,” she admitted sadly, knowing what he was thinking without having to ask. “I gave up any hope of that a long time ago, and I can’t go back. Wouldn’t, even if I could. Are you sure you still want this?”

“Completely. High risk, almost certain chance of death for one or both of us . . . what are we waiting for? Is life really worth all this worrying?” he asked lightly, kissing her callused palm. She smiled and led him out the tall oak doors.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A smaller, less elaborate door opened with a soft creak, and Jean followed Françoise into the small apartment she kept on the Rue des Fossoyeurs. It was beautiful, and she had a real fondness for the place; the sitting room had a plum settee with two matching chairs, and the *portières* over the high windows were a matching plum with a wide white slash over the valence. A Chaillot wool carpet before the fireplace was woven in tones of lavender and white in an elaborate floral design, and the walls were lined with bookshelves. A large bureau in the corner was piled high with papers and dossiers. Most court ladies kept small, secret places like this for their trysts, but for all its lush beauty, hers had only ever been a private study and a place to escape the world for a while. Sometimes, she came here just to be able to breathe.

“Who else knows about this place?” he asked her, trying to sound casual. He clearly wanted to know if there were or had been others.

“No one but you,” Françoise assured him. “Not even my uncle knew about this apartment. I have safehouses all over the city for my Eyes, but this one is mine. It’s the only place I can go to be alone.” She smiled a bit wistfully. Françoise lit her white porcelain lamps from a taper she’d brought in from the hallway, drew the curtains, and joined him on the settee.

"You've really never brought anyone else here?"

"If you're asking if I've ever taken lovers here, no, I haven't," she said evenly. The rumors about her had almost buried her once; she supposed the question had been inevitable.

"Thank God," he sighed heavily, drawing her close.

"Were you jealous?"

"No, I was just resoundingly afraid someone might knock on the door and interrupt us again."

"You really are a terrible liar, Jean," she murmured and kissed him.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" he whispered in her ear. He kissed the tip of her earlobe lightly, and she shivered. His breath was warm on her skin; she was alive, her senses heightened.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life," she laughed huskily. In truth, she was terrified, but she wanted this. Whatever the price she had to pay afterward, for this one moment she would be alive in his arms. She drew him down to her in a kiss of incredible sweetness and passionate demand, intent on burning away the last of his honorable reserve. Jean lifted her easily and carried her into the bedroom. He pulled swiftly and gently at the laces of her mourning gown and removed it, his lips following where the silk fell away. She shivered at the warmth of his mouth on her, and her heart pounded violently beneath his exploring hand.

She arched up to meet him, undoing the laces of his uniform with trembling fingers and tearing it away. Jean traced a line with one finger between her breasts and over her stomach.

"God, you're beautiful," he whispered.

"So are you." She felt languid with desire, a little drunk with him. He took her breast in his mouth, and she gasped sharply clutching at the cold silk sheets. Moving with

exquisite and deliberate slowness, he explored and awakened every inch of her.

She pressed him onto his back after a time and did the same to him, and he let her, following her with glazed and curious eyes. She wasn't sure it was right; Antoine never would have let her, but she wanted to. Wanted to sculpt him with her hands, to draw breath from his mouth, to will him into solidity. To make him real. Jean was a living sculpture of hard muscle and sinew and clean white scars won in honorable combat, and she reveled in his warmth, his scent, the taste of his skin. He growled low in his throat and tangled a hand in her hair.

Insistently, almost roughly, he lifted her and pressed her down beneath him. He caressed her raw pulse until she cried out her release, and then he entered her with teasing slowness.

"We can stop now if you want to," he said nonchalantly. Françoise shot him a mock glare and arched her hips to meet him. Jean gasped as she enveloped him.

"I'm sorry. Did I give you permission to speak?" she asked innocently, raising a delicate eyebrow at him. He smiled and thrust into her slowly, and she moaned and shuddered and raked her nails across his back as lightly as she could manage. She found herself holding him as he made love to her by the dwindling light of the lamps in the other room.

Finally, with an agile twist, he lifted her so that she was on top of him. She gasped with surprise and stared down at him for a few seconds.

"I didn't realize this was . . . possible . . ." she blurted without thinking. He laughed aloud, pure, joyful laughter that was tinged with something that sounded like relief. He'd doubtless been wondering if she and André had ever been together, and probably decided by that that they hadn't. André, by reputation, never left them innocent. Françoise

frowned at the man who laughed beneath her, picked up a pillow, and hit him soundly with it.

“Ow,” Jean said calmly.

“Serves you right.” She shrugged with a glint of mirth in her dark eyes. “After all, someone’s got to keep you in your place.”

He rolled with her until he was above her again, and he thrust into her fiercely. She gasped and bit her lip, and looked up at him so expectantly that he almost laughed again.

“Someone’s got to keep me in my place? Oh, I see,” he teased lightly, thrusting into her again. A groan escaped him, and she bit her lip still harder to keep from crying out. “I may yet teach you yours,” he murmured, throwing her own words back at her from the day before. With a feint, Françoise unbalanced him, forced him onto his back and mounted him in a single, smooth motion.

“Teach me, then,” she whispered, nipping his earlobe gently and lowering herself onto him.

“Get me a sword.”

“That wasn’t what I had in mind.”

He laughed and kissed her deeply, and they loved again.

Afterward they lay in the half-light, talking quietly, and Jean traced the fold of her hip, the roundness of her thigh. He found a small silver scar, and he ran his finger along it gently.

“How did you come by that one?” he asked her.

“Porthos gave me that, years ago, when he, Aramis, and Athos first met d’Artagnan. Do you remember it at all? They’d gone back behind the convent in the Carmes Dechaux to duel him, one at a time, and then a contingent of Cardinal’s Guards happened along and tried to arrest them.”

“I *do* remember that,” Jean laughed. “And I heard you were the only one left standing, and you actually fought all four of them until your lieutenant ordered you to surrender.”

Françoise smiled wryly and shook her head.

“I was lucky enough to have an easygoing lieutenant who was a lot more sensible than I was,” she admitted. “If he hadn’t stopped me, I wouldn’t be lying here casually swapping war stories with you.”

“Then I’m eternally grateful to him,” he murmured, kissing her. “Do you still have the scar I gave you over Michele?”

“Unfortunately,” she growled, trying to frown and spoiling the effect with a light laugh. “Here, just under my breast, not two inches from my heart. Your blade bounced off a rib, thank God.” She drew his hand to the scar and shivered as he caressed her. “I’d meant to lose the duel, but not at genuine risk of life and limb.”

“I hadn’t realized the wound was that bad. Kind of a heavy price to pay for getting a spy into my bed, wasn’t it?”

“If I’d realized what I was missing,” she purred, nipping at his chin and trailing kisses across the curve of his jaw, “Michele wouldn’t have had a chance at you.”

“Well, you’re the one who told me a good captain always saves the sensitive missions for himself,” he teased. “How about living up to your word?” He pinned her gently beneath him and coaxed her into doing exactly that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The King signed a draft for ten thousand pistoles, walked across the ornate red carpet in his lavish presence chamber, and handed it to Françoise to secure her services. She curtsied deeply, strangely saddened by the commission. It was only another transfer of power, this time from the cardinal to the King, and over the last few days she'd witnessed quite a few of those. But this was the one that sliced her to the bone; it was the break of the final ties that bound her to her uncle's service. *I will do what I must to survive and preserve France, because I know you would have wanted it*, she whispered silently to his spirit. *But, God, this is difficult. I just transferred my allegiance to a man who may have ordered your assassination, for all I know, a man whose life I might one day demand as the price of my vengeance.*

And what the hell am I going to do if it plays out that way? she wondered. *Jean swore an oath to shield the King's life with his own. He won't give up that oath for me, and I wouldn't expect him to or respect him much if he did, however convenient it would make my life.* She remembered their lovemaking earlier that morning, half passionate, half playful, and prayed they would never find themselves pitted against each other.

Louis chatted on idly about hunting and falconry. Françoise made all the proper responses and showed every

sign of fascination with the topic, but her mind was elsewhere. It wasn't until he changed the subject, and her finely honed sense of self-preservation kicked in, that she actually focused on the conversation.

“So, my dear, you've said precious little about your uncle.” Louis sniffed, twirling his long, graying brown moustache and putting a hand on his hip in his favorite military pose. “How is your investigation going?” His usual nervous laugh accompanied the words, and his fingers twitched a little on his moustache. That the King should be curious about the fate of his chief minister was the most natural thing in the world, and yet something in his restless dark eyes counseled her to caution.

“Actually, I'm not the one heading up the investigation at all,” Françoise lied easily. She glanced at Jean, who managed to keep his features carefully neutral. Good. For the moment, at least, he wouldn't give her away. “As the new head of his faction, it falls to Cardinal Mazarin to investigate the murder. If I start asking too many questions, it could raise his suspicions, and my uncle left the Cardinal's Eyes at your disposal, not his,” she said calmly. She finished there, sensing it would be dangerous to ramble.

“Well spoken, my dear,” Louis said amiably. “We can see that you'll be worth every pistole we've lavished on you. Still, we are concerned with the unfortunate death of our dearest friend and chief minister. We expect you to present us with every bit of evidence you manage to gather.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” she said quietly, curtsying deeply, with a pleasant smile that could have been carved in stone. *Why? Why would he want to see every piece of evidence, instead of simply being satisfied with the final result?* she wondered. She decided to test that. “Does Your Majesty then wish me to proceed with my own investigation?”

she asked him with an air of slightly bored indifference.

Louis blanched and put his hands behind his back to hide the fact that they'd begun to tremble. *Check*, she thought savagely, keeping that pleasant, mindless smile on her face. *You know something. And if you have me investigate it, I might find out exactly what you know, and if you tell me to back off, you'll run the risk of raising my suspicions.* She'd painted him into a corner with a single, casual-sounding question. The King coughed to buy himself time, and Tréville couldn't hide a slight frown.

Françoise noted the clenching of his jaw and wondered if she was going to regret having trusted Jean so quickly, with so much. *Please, God, don't let him be involved with this. Anyone but him.*

"No, my dear, on reflection, we think your talents would be better utilized elsewhere. Let Mazarin handle the investigation. But if you do run across any evidence, we will still expect a full report," Louis said jovially, and his nervous laugh echoed oddly in the vast, blood red chamber.

"Of course, Your Majesty." She nodded as casually as if they'd never veered off the dull subject of falconry. *That command can be used to my advantage*, she thought. *I can either reassure him that I'm going off on the wrong trail, or I can set my nets closer and closer to him and see what I can pry out of him when he starts to panic.*

"Thank you for your time, Your Majesty," Tréville interjected smoothly, no doubt trying to get Françoise out of there as quickly as possible. "We should probably let you get on to your other appointments."

"Indeed," Louis replied airily. "I believe I'll go hunting today."

Indeed? Françoise thought archly. *Not a bad idea at all, hunting. I believe I'll try it myself.* She timed her deep curtsy

with Tréville's impeccable bow, and the two of them took their leave of the King. They walked out into the corridor and were instantly accosted by Madame de Motteville, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting.

"Madame, Her Majesty craves a word with you," the woman announced crisply, curtsying. "She's awaiting you in her salon."

Damn! Françoise swore silently. *I have no idea what the Queen could possibly want of me, but couldn't it wait until I'd managed to talk to Jean?*

"This is an unexpected honor," she replied with the same neutral pleasantness she'd just finished using on the King. She wondered ironically if she would ever be able to chisel the cool smile off her face. "Shall we?"

A graceful sweep of her arm ushered the other woman into the lead. Françoise turned to Jean and offered him her hand.

"Thank you, monsieur," she said simply. "I look forward to our next meeting."

"As do I, madame," he said, bowing over her hand, matching her pleasant nonchalance. He squeezed her hand slightly before letting go, a pressure that warmed her and told her she hadn't made an open enemy of him, not yet. She suspected his King, and he was sharp enough to guess at her suspicions, but he seemed prepared to keep up at least the pretense of an amorous association with her. He could use that, of course, but then so could she. For a brief moment their eyes met, and his showed nothing but warmth and naked sincerity. She wished to God she could trust it.

Françoise bowed herself off and followed Motteville down the hall, feeling Tréville's eyes on her back for a long moment before he turned and departed.

The lady-in-waiting ushered Françoise into the Queen's apartments and announced her arrival. Mazarin sat at Her

Majesty's right hand in a tall oak chair, and Anne's chair was draped in deep green damask in conscious imitation of a throne. An enormous Persian carpet sprawled the length of the gallery, and the walls were hung from ceiling to floor with lushly beautiful silk tapestries. The room had been cleared of its usual glittering assembly of courtiers. They were quite alone.

Motteville curtsied deeply and closed the door behind her as she left; apparently even she had been instructed not to disturb them. Françoise was seething with curiosity, but she managed to contain it. She entered the room and curtsied deeply, her features a mask.

"Your Majesty does me too great an honor," she hedged cautiously. There was a moment's awkward silence. Her next line was obviously meant to be some sort of delicate inquiry as to why she'd been summoned. It was a strange game the Queen was playing, almost a sort of test. Françoise had no idea what she was being tested for, or why, but her instincts told her that the last thing she wanted to be was obvious. So she held that awkward silence and waited for the Queen to make the next move.

They studied one another for a while. Anne of Austria was forty-one and still possessed the fading remnants of a great beauty. Her round, florid face was surrounded by elaborately curled, light brown hair, and the curve of her lower lip could be sensual or arrogant depending on her mood. Her sage green eyes were extraordinary, and her gown of elaborately embroidered ivory velvet softened their color. Those eyes bored into Françoise's with intense concentration, and after a moment the Queen nodded with a smile of satisfaction.

"You have discretion," she noted archly. "That's good. You're curious, naturally, as to why I've brought you here and why I'm receiving you in so little company, but you won't ask.

You'll wait for me to speak. Shall I tell you, then?"

"As it pleases Your Majesty," Françoise said neutrally.

"Madame, I have brought you here to thank you."

Françoise's eyebrow lifted a fraction, but it was all the expression she allowed herself.

"If it weren't for you," Anne continued, "my husband would have taken my sons from me. My spies tell me it was you who spoke to the cardinal for me and persuaded him to intercede with Louis. I have borne much, but I could not have borne that. I humbly thank you for your intercession, madame."

Françoise had planted that information through Marie de Brissac, her spy and the Queen's confidante, several months ago. It had taken awhile to bear fruit, so long that Françoise realized it couldn't be the real reason for her summons.

"Your Majesty is too gracious," Françoise smiled. "I have no children of my own, but my heart went out to you when His Majesty threatened to take yours. And I've always thought that women should look after the interests of other women."

"Well put, indeed," the Queen said quietly, warming her with a smile of dazzling intimacy. "And I hear I have more to thank you for than that; I hear it was you who convinced the cardinal to appoint my dear friend, Monsieur Mazarin, his successor."

"I only acted in the best interests of France, Your Majesty." Françoise turned her eyes to Mazarin, who'd remained silent throughout the interview but listened carefully to every word. It was time to raise the stakes a bit; it was probably the only chance she'd ever have to speak to the two of them together.

"I truly thought His Eminence to be the one man who might be able to put an end to the faction rivalry that could tear France to shreds now that my uncle is gone," she began. "He alone was faithful to Richelieu and a friend to Your

Majesty. Your factions, united, will prove extremely powerful; powerful enough to keep France from splintering. Powerful enough to keep the King's brother, Gaston d'Orleans, from forcing his own regency if anything should happen to His Majesty."

"And yet," Anne said shrewdly, "not powerful enough to stand against a piece of parchment. You could have Monsieur Mazarin recalled. You've grown bold, and so will I. I want to know your price, Madame."

"My price is the well-being of France, Your Majesty," Françoise replied without hesitation. "Rule her well, and I'll forget I have that parchment."

"And if I told you I wanted to buy that parchment from you?"

"I'd respectfully decline. As I would if your enemies tried to buy it from me. Your Majesty will find me an absolutely faithful ally, as long as you continue to guard the interests of the nation your son will one day inherit. And I have faith that you will, or I wouldn't have spoken for Monsieur Mazarin."

They lapsed into silence as the Queen pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, weighing her. Neither threats nor excessive flattery would have made the necessary impact on Anne of Austria; she was too proud to take heed of the one and too intelligent not to see through the other. Françoise had carefully used neither, choosing her words with precision.

"You have the word of Anne of Austria, madame, that I will guard this realm to the best of my ability, in the name of my son, the dauphin," the Queen said proudly, breaking the silence at last.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Françoise said quietly. "For my part, I swear to serve you faithfully while you continue to serve France." She curtsied to the ground in an ancient expression of fealty, a gesture that wasn't lost on a Hapsburg

Queen. Anne took an emerald ring off her finger and presented it to Françoise as a token of acceptance.

“Then take this ring from me, madame,” the Queen commanded, “and may it always preserve us in perfect friendship.”

“Your Majesty, I’m . . . overwhelmed by the gesture, but I haven’t yet proven worthy of it.”

“Thanks to you, I still have my children, and I now have the power to oppose d’Orleans if he ever makes a bid for the regency in the event of my husband’s death. And you did all that without any hope of gain. Believe me, madame, you’re worthy of far more than this poor ring. Please, take it.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Françoise said slowly, taking the ring and putting it on the first finger of her left hand. The Queen’s hands were somewhat larger than her own.

“As long as you’re here, madame, I’d like you to meet the children you once spoke for.” Anne rang for Motteville, and she appeared with the two princes in tow. This gesture had obviously been planned in advance. What none of them had planned, however, was the four year-old dauphin’s reaction to the comtesse.

“Guerite!” he bellowed enthusiastically, running around Motteville’s wide brown skirts, rushing up to Françoise and shrieking with laughter as she picked him up and whirled him around.

“I take it you’ve already met?” the Queen inferred dryly.

“One day, about a month ago, he escaped from his attendants and hid in the hedge maze in the Tuileries Gardens. He got lost and started crying, and I heard him and found him.”

“I wasn’t crying,” Louis insisted stubbornly, blushing to the roots of his dark, tousled hair.

“Well, I don’t see why you wouldn’t,” Françoise informed him with mock-solemnity. “I cried once when I got lost in the

hedge maze. Of course, I was twenty-seven years old . . .”

“You’re lying,” he laughed, punching at her full dark skirts.

“You’re right, I’m lying,” Françoise said glumly with a sigh of martyrdom. “You caught me. I guess I’ll just go away now.” She pretended to burst into tears, and Louis pointed at her and laughed wholeheartedly. Anne laughed herself at the absurd picture they made, and after a second or two Mazarin joined in their laughter like an actor pouncing on his cue. By reputation, the Queen was utterly devoted to her sons, and anyone they liked was instantly translated into the circle of her affections.

Louis’ younger brother Philippe toddled over shyly, and Anne introduced him to Françoise. For the next hour they talked and laughed more and more unguardedly. Mazarin settled for listening in and laughing in all the right places. Françoise found herself genuinely enjoying Anne, though she still couldn’t quite warm to Mazarin.

It was an odd sort of family scene she’d been invited into, Françoise thought. After more than twenty years of a barren marriage, the Queen had managed to bear not one but two children, and while no one would ever say as much openly, there was little doubt in anyone’s mind that Mazarin had fathered them both. He held Philippe quite naturally, as if he had all the right in the world to do so, and undoubtedly he did. After an hour or so, Philippe fell asleep in his arms.

“I think it’s time for their nap,” the Queen said at last, her eyes sparkling with warmth and amusement.

“But I’m not tired!” Louis protested.

“Oh, yes you are, and so am I, and so is Guerite. Right, Guerite?” she asked her with a meaningfully raised eyebrow. Françoise pretended to nod off and snore, and the Queen laughed lightly.

“Will you come back?” Louis asked her, tugging at her skirts to wake her up.

“Whenever you like,” she grinned.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” They spat on palms and pressed thumbs, and Madame de Motteville took the children off to bed.

“I really can’t thank you enough for helping me keep my children,” Anne said as soon as they were gone. “Are you sure I can’t do anything more to thank you? A ring seems like such a hollow gesture, considering all you’ve done for us.”

Françoise pursed her lips in thought for a moment. There was definitely something the Queen and Mazarin could do for her, but she didn’t know if she dared to ask. *Then again, if . . . no, when I do it, it’ll become public knowledge anyway. Why not take advantage of the offer?* Taking a deep breath, she barreled forward.

“Actually, Your Majesty, there is something I desperately need done, and I’ve been afraid to ask until now.”

“If it’s in my power to grant, it’s yours,” the Queen said graciously.

“You might not say that after you’ve heard me out, but I’ll take the risk of asking. I need to have my marriage annulled on the basis of non-consummation. Richelieu told me years ago that Monsieur Mazarin would be the best man to ask if I ever needed to.”

“Well, Mazarin? Could it be done?” the Queen asked him thoughtfully after a moment’s pause, in which she’d evidently weighed the risks and found them acceptable.

“I can have it accomplished within a matter of weeks. I can leave tonight if you both desire it,” he said with the reptilian smile Françoise remembered so well from the night of her uncle’s murder.

And so it was done, or undone. An eighteen-year mistake

erased with the speed of a clap of thunder. A few weeks from now, it would be as if she had never married Antoine. Surely she could bear anything for a few weeks. Françoise breathed a heavy sigh of relief and was irritated to find herself trembling with tension.

“Thank you, both of you. I will be *forever* in your debt,” she said emphatically, and the other woman smiled at her intimately.

“I know what it is, madame, to have had a husband chosen for you, and to be absolutely incompatible with that husband. If I could have, I would have annulled my own marriage years ago.” Anne turned to her lover, her beautiful eyes filled with a strange urgency. “Leave tonight, Jules, and return as quickly as you can.” She held out her hand to him, and he lingered over it, kissing it.

“I’ll take my leave of you,” Françoise smiled with a final curtsy to the Queen. “And, again, thank you both.” They nodded graciously, but a bit absently, already caught up in the prospect of separation. She left without another word, terrified, and elated.

She’d done it. Insane or not, she’d really done it. She’d be the subject of more scandal and rumor than ever, but she’d be free of Antoine. *I feel like I’ve been released from the Bastille*, she realized, and she barely managed to contain a burst of exuberant laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Françoise drew Henri de Bar into the cardinal's private library in the Marais townhouse. She shut the door behind them firmly and started to light a few lamps around the room.

"Well? How did your meeting with the King go?" he whispered anxiously, unconsciously wringing his hands in nervous anticipation.

"I'm not sure," she murmured, frowning.

"You're not sure?" He laughed incredulously. "Well, did you get the commission or not?"

"Oh, I got the commission. That's not what concerns me. Henri, what have you heard about the King's reaction to my uncle's death? I haven't gotten any reports on that, and the omission strikes me as deliberate." She fixed him with a penetrating gaze, and Henri was unable to meet her eyes for long. So, he had held something back.

"I had good reasons for keeping it from you," he began.

"I don't doubt that, my friend. And now I have good reasons for asking."

"Guerite, surely you don't think . . ."

"Don't I?" She laughed harshly, cutting him off. "He supported the Cinq-Mars conspiracy. What makes you think he wouldn't have dabbled in this one?"

"Lower your voice, child," he whispered desperately.

“You’ll be the death of us both!”

“What did he say, Henri? How did he react? Tell me everything you’ve heard, and I do mean everything,” she said with a quiet, unnerving intensity.

Henri paused for a moment, doubtless trying to think of a way out of this that would satisfy them both, and Françoise’s dark eyes bored into him, not giving him any quarter. Finally he spoke.

“He . . . gloated, Guerite. That’s the only way I can describe it. And this isn’t a second or third hand account; I heard him myself. As he and a few of his favorites were wandering through the portrait gallery in the Palais Cardinal, he laughed and said . . . let me see if I have this exactly . . . ‘Now, at last, I will be sole King of France while he rots in hell.’ You see now why I didn’t want to tell you?” he finished gently.

Françoise had steeled herself for something like that, thought she’d been prepared for it. She was wrong. “Thank you, Henri,” she said hoarsely, barely keeping her rage in check. “Will you bring the murder witness in to me now?” she asked, trying to sound calm and failing miserably. She sat down in the tall chair behind the desk she still viewed as her uncle’s, mostly to hide the fact that her legs were refusing to hold her up.

“Oh, child, promise me you’re not going to do anything foolish . . .”

“Go!” she roared, hurling a glass inkwell into the fireplace. It smashed into a thousand pieces, leaving a glistening stain that ran like blood over the gray stone. She shuddered and looked away. “I’m sorry,” she said more softly. “Please, just go. I need to be alone right now. Come back with the girl in a few minutes.”

De Bar nodded, pursed his lips in sympathy and left.

Françoise held her fiercely aching head in trembling hands as images of her uncle's slow dying washed over her. His weakening voice, crackling like a winter's fire: *His Majesty was too importunate; I could not gracefully refuse the invitation.* How hard had he tried, and why had the King been so desperate to persuade him?

She had no proof as yet that the King was directly involved, but it was clear to her that he knew something. And he was one of the few men in the realm she couldn't have put to the question. Well, there were other ways; less sure, less direct, perhaps, but there were other ways. And there was one man she could easily have put to the question, if she could get her hands on him. Grismonde. Grismonde was somehow the key to the whole thing.

After a few minutes Françoise heard a soft knock on the door.

"Come," she called gruffly. Henri brought in a girl of about sixteen or seventeen, pretty, with long dark hair and light, almost colorless gray-green eyes, as quick and wide with fear as a hunted animal's. She wore a laundry maid's dress almost exactly like the one Françoise had worn the night before, and hers was stained with sweat under the arms and between her breasts. Françoise stilled with some effort the strong and irrational impulse to brush the girl's waist-length hair; it would have been an absolute glory if it wasn't so badly snarled.

"Sit down," Françoise said gently, and the girl quickly did as she was told. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Please." She laughed nervously, licking her dry lips to moisten them. Françoise rose, went over to the sideboard and poured for both of them. The white: nothing that would remind a nervous child of blood.

"Henri, would you please wait outside for us?" Françoise

asked him calmly, and he nodded and bowed himself off. He'd still be able to hear everything that went on from the other side of the door, but the laundress might relax a little more if she were only being questioned by another woman.

"My name's Françoise," she began. "What's yours?"

"Catherine," the girl stammered. "Catherine Latour." She lifted her glass with a trembling hand and downed the wine, and Françoise brought the decanter over from the sideboard and poured again. Catherine was either an extremely clever woman with a great deal of faith in her own tolerance, or a scared little girl who was in mortal danger and knew it well. Whatever the case, Françoise intended to treat her as the latter and pry the information she needed out of her as gently as she could.

"Catherine Latour? Any relation to Monique Latour?" Françoise prodded delicately.

"She's my aunt!" the girl cried, momentarily forgetting her fear in her excitement. "Do you know her?"

"Of course I know Monique! Every woman at court knows Monique. Tell me, are you as good a fortune teller as your aunt?" Françoise asked eagerly, with the warm, motherly intimacy of a village gossip.

"Well, madame, I'm not as good as she is yet, but she's teaching me. I can read palms, and Aunt Monique says she'll teach me the tarot soon! If I live that long," Catherine muttered morosely, her fear returning in a sudden and visible rush.

"You will," Françoise said reassuringly. "You'll never be more safe in your life than you are here with us. But the sooner we can have this case settled, the sooner you'll be free to leave us and learn the tarot. Tell me as much as you can remember, with as much detail as you can provide. How did you come to be there at the time?"

"Well," the girl began hesitantly, taking another sip of the

wine, "I'd come in through the eastern gate. Monsieur de Comminges was on duty, and I came through that entrance for a chance to talk to him."

So far, so good, Françoise thought. Comminges was on duty that night, at that gate; I can corroborate that much myself.

"Are you in love with Monsieur de Comminges?" she asked quietly with an intimate smile.

"Oh, of course I am. We all are!" Catherine replied with guileless enthusiasm. Françoise laughed softly into her wine, and the girl continued with her story. "So I talked to Monsieur de Comminges for a few minutes, went inside, and crept quietly down the staircase. I was a little late, and I didn't want to attract the attention of the headmistress," she confided.

"Eminently sensible," Françoise agreed. "All right, we've established how you came to be there. About what time was it?"

"Well," the girl admitted a bit reluctantly, "I was supposed to be in at one o'clock, but it was probably fifteen to twenty minutes after that by the time I finished talking to Monsieur de Comminges."

The time has to be about right, but of course the girl could have been coached on that point. "Go on," Françoise prompted with a nod.

"I . . . I was about to come around the bend of the staircase when I heard voices, and I stopped and listened. I was afraid the headmistress might be there, but I heard two men talking instead. The first man had a kind of light, high-pitched voice, and spoke with the accent of a Picard, and he said, 'Monsieur le Comte! I don't believe we've seen each other in years! Did Tréville summon you here as well?' "

"You remember their conversation that exactly?" Françoise interrupted her skeptically.

"I remember *all* conversations that exactly, madame," the laundress said proudly. "And I can prove it. Write down what I say, if it pleases you, and when I'm finished telling you how it happened, I'll tell you the whole thing again, word for word."

"An unusual gift," Françoise murmured appreciatively. "When this is over, I may well find you a place in my service, if you think you'd like that. I tend to pay better than the laundry."

"Oh, madame!" Catherine cried. "I would be so grateful! My family is poor, and a girl like me has limited prospects . . ."

"Not anymore, my dear. A woman in my service can aspire to anything she wants. And I do mean anything. But we'll talk about that later; we've still got to scrape together enough evidence to close this case and save your life."

Catherine came crashing back down to earth, and she swallowed hard and continued with her report.

"So, the high-voiced one said, 'Monsieur le Comte! I don't believe we've seen each other in years! Did Tréville summon you here as well?' And the other man had a deep voice with a Gascon patois, and he said, 'Yes, he did. He said it had something to do with the recent tontine murders. He said he thought the Comte de Sorlin was responsible. Did he say anything similar to you?'"

That's far too cunning to be Antoine's idea, pumping the victim for information before he killed him, Françoise thought to herself distractedly. That could be the first hole in the girl's story, or it could be a clue in itself. He could be acting under someone else's guidance, and it couldn't be Louis', because he's not particularly clever either. On the other hand, Grisonde is. But what would prompt him to mastermind the affair? Money, or something much more dangerous?

"Madame?" Catherine asked hesitantly, breaking into her thoughts.

“I’m sorry.” Françoise laughed ruefully. “I think I faded out after ‘Did he say anything similar to you?’ ”

“You have a good memory yourself, madame.”

“I have the same kind of memory you do,” she admitted. “Why do you think I’m not taking any notes? Besides, a note can be found or intercepted. What stays in your head goes to your grave. That’s your first lesson,” Françoise said with a wink. Catherine smiled shyly and nodded. “So, ‘Did he say anything similar to you?’ . . .”

“ ‘No, he said nothing of the kind, monsieur,’ the light-voiced man said, and he sounded astonished. ‘I know he and Sorlin despise one another, but I hadn’t heard that Tréville actually suspected him of the murders!’ They were silent for a moment, and then the Gascon asked, ‘Why do they despise one another so much?’ And the Picard said, ‘It had something to do with the honor of a lady. Beyond that, I naturally can’t say.’ I edged closer so that I could see what was going on, because I have to admit that my curiosity was piqued. They were talking about murders, and it all sounded so interesting . . . I know it was bad of me.”

“That’s quite all right, my dear,” Françoise murmured, absorbed in concentration. “What did they look like, and how and where were they standing?”

“Well, there was a man in a black cloak whose back was turned to me most of the time, but from what I could see of him, he had a long, sharply pointed nose and a close-trimmed silver beard. I got a much better look at him afterward, but I’ll come to that. The other one, the Marquis de la Pailleterie, was wearing a light brown velvet doublet and hose with a darker brown cloak, and he was short and heavysset, with white hair and skin so flushed it was almost red.”

“Excellent,” Françoise said warmly. “What happened next?”

“The Comte de Palis . . . there’s no sense whitewashing it, madame, I know perfectly well who he is . . . the comte asked the marquis, ‘And what about you? Do you have any ideas as to who the killer might be? And have you shared them with anyone else?’ The marquis said that no, he hadn’t, and the comte moved slowly behind him. At last I could see more of his face, and I almost wish I hadn’t been able to. ‘Good,’ he said, and his smile as he said it, madame . . . it was horrible.” The girl shuddered.

“It’s all right,” Françoise said soothingly. “I know how frightened you must have been. Would you like some more wine?”

“Please,” she said shakily, holding out her cup with a trembling hand. Françoise filled it with a hand that wasn’t much steadier. “Then the comte pushed the marquis down the stairs, and the marquis screamed as he fell, and I screamed too. The comte heard me, and he paused for a moment when he looked at me. I ran up the stairs, and he chased me, and at the end of the corridor we ran into a detachment of four of the Cardinal’s Guards. Their captain was with them, and he grabbed me, assuming I might have stolen something from the comte. I told them about the murder, and they detained us both and took us to the stairs.”

Catherine paused to take a long sip of the wine, and Françoise forced herself not to join her. She hadn’t eaten anything but an orange all day, and the wine was starting to go to her head a little. The wine, and the chilling certainty that her husband was a murderer.

“The body had been discovered by then,” Catherine continued, “and a crowd of servants had gathered. Monsieur de Bar tried to place the comte under arrest, and the comte asked the crowd of servants if there had been any witnesses. Of course no one came forth, and Monsieur de Palis said that

the word of a single servant wouldn't be enough to secure his arrest. Monsieur de Bar placed a guard around the body and dismissed the servants, and they took the comte and me into a room off the wine cellar to interrogate us both. I gave them the same story over and over, and Monsieur de Palis kept denying it and wouldn't give them any story at all."

Catherine drained off the last of her wine and had grown bold enough with drink to reach over for the decanter and refill her cup herself.

I definitely want this one among my Eyes, Françoise thought, but she likes wine a little too much, and I'll have to make sure she can stay away from it before I entrust her with anything important.

"Finally Monsieur de Bar gave up and had a detachment of his guards escort me here, and as far as I know, they kept up the questioning on the comte," the girl concluded, running a hand nervously through her tangled hair. "Oh, Madame, is it going to be enough to convict him?"

"Not if he's intelligent and holds his silence," Françoise admitted, and wished she hadn't been that honest when the laundress burst into tears. "There has to be other evidence, but we'll find it, believe me," she said earnestly, clasping the girl's tear-damp hands in hers. Catherine nodded and choked back a sob. Then she composed herself. The squaring of those frail-looking shoulders and the lifting of that pointed chin impressed Françoise even more than the girl's memory and eye for detail had.

"When this whole thing blows over, and it will," Françoise assured the girl, "I'll put you to work for me. You've impressed me. In the meantime, I'm going to send you off with Monsieur de Bar; I need to be alone for a while, to think things over."

Catherine nodded, drained off the last of her wine, and

rose to depart when the sudden, loud crash of the chamber door being thrown open startled them both out of their skins. Catherine screamed and ran around the desk behind Françoise, and Françoise scrambled to her feet and started calculating ways to defend herself and her young charge.

André de Sorlin stood in the frame of the doorway, a tall shadow sharply defined by the white illumination of the hall behind him. His eyes were wild, and for once his elegant clothes were rumpled. He was breathing raggedly, as if he'd run for miles, and he was clutching a crumpled letter tightly to his chest.

"Go along with Monsieur de Bar now, Catherine," Françoise said, pleasantly surprised by the calmness of her voice. "And thank you."

Catherine curtsied a little clumsily on her way out and skirted her way nervously around André, while André placed his letter on the massive oak desk. He circled the desk and leaned against a corner of it, gasping for breath. Françoise faced him calmly, waiting for his next move. He noticed her wineglass on the desk and drained it of its contents. After a moment he regained control of his breathing.

"Well, old friend, you escaped more quickly than I would have thought," she said quietly. "Am I going to have to duel you, or will you settle for hitting me?"

"Never mind that now," he said impatiently. "I'll take a strap to you later if you're really interested."

Françoise smiled wanly, feeling more like she wanted to cry than to laugh.

"No, I'm teasing you again, and I don't mean to do that right now," he said more softly, and there was pity in his eyes. "Guerite . . . I don't know how to tell you this gently, so I'll just tell you. After I escaped this morning, I called in a few favors, flirted with a few poisoners, and found out more than

I wanted to.” He clasped her upper arms supportively. “It was your husband, Guerite. Your husband arranged the poisoning of your uncle.”

“I know,” she whispered, unable to meet his eyes. “I just don’t know why.” She was pale as death. He drew her into his arms and held her for a long moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“How did you find out?” André asked her at last.

“You first,” Françoise countered grimly.

“All right,” he agreed easily enough. He pulled the letter on the desk closer to them. “I bought this denunciation from a fortune-teller, Marie Camus. Do you know her?”

“I know *of* her. Go on.”

“A little over a week ago, she sold a bottle of distilled belladonna to the Comte de Palis. The idiot bought it from her himself, didn’t even make the purchase through a servant. Apparently he dabbles in the occult and frequents these circles.”

Françoise snorted disdainfully, realizing that nothing about her husband could shock her anymore. The Cardinal’s Eyes had been trading information with the city’s witches and fortune-tellers for years, but Françoise had always privately seen their professions as the refuge of the credulous. Even the handful of witches who might have had legitimate talent surrounded themselves with candles, stones, Hands of Glory, dried cocks’ testicles, and who knew what other unnecessary nonsense. But at least they provided a suitable lancet for the two great boils of the nobility: wealth and ennui.

“She wrote an anonymous denunciation; she doesn’t want to be dragged into it. It won’t hold up in court, but you’d be an idiot to let this get to a court. You owe me fifty livres for

this, by the way.” André unfolded the letter and showed her. The name was there, scrawled in letters that looked like thin streaks of black blood. *Antoine de Pau, Comte de Palis*. Françoise sank down into her chair, poured the wine with a trembling hand, and downed it hastily, letting its warmth flood through her.

“No more of that,” André said sternly, taking the wine away. “Scream, faint, cry if you have to, but leave the wine alone.”

She glared at him, but she made no move to retrieve her glass.

“What about you?” he asked her after an uncomfortable silence. “How did you figure out Palis was responsible?”

“The girl I was talking to when you came in witnessed the murder of de la Pailleterie. She has a memory like mine, and she was able to describe it in truly horrific detail,” Françoise drawled sardonically.

“Is that exhaustion or wine talking?”

“A little of both. But not too much of either to do what I have to do. The girl’s testimony alone wouldn’t have been enough. But her testimony coupled with this denunciation, along with a few eyewitness accounts of his dabblings in the occult, should be enough to let me skewer the son of a bitch and get away with it.” She laughed harshly. “As far as anyone but you will ever know, my husband will have been killed in a duel by one of the Cardinal’s Guards.”

“Then you do at least plan to give him an honorable death?”

An odd question for an assassin, she thought, but she didn’t dare to say it.

“Yes, I’ll give him an honorable death,” she said wearily, “which is far more than he gave my uncle, or any of his other victims. But before I kill him, he’ll be arrested and taken to the Bastille. I want to see if the threat of torture will loosen

that lying Gascon tongue," she muttered a bit distractedly as she started to rummage through the desk drawer, looking for a quill and a fresh bottle of ink.

"Why do you want to question him? He's guilty, and we have multiple corroborations on that. What more could you possibly want to know?"

"Specifically? I want to know more about Grismonde. Before he killed de la Pailleterie, Antoine supposedly asked him a few questions about who he thought was responsible for the murders, who he'd shared his suspicions with, things like that. Probing questions far too cunning for my loving husband to have thought of. Grismonde, on the other hand, seems to be the happy owner of a brain, and worse, he's an extremely powerful Sorcier. He's probably the mastermind behind the killings, and even his mistakes are telling me something.

"Thus far," she continued, dropping into lecture mode as she started to write, "he's made one visible tactical error in allowing my husband to obtain the poison. Antoine's name is in a witch's denunciation, damning evidence against Antoine, but *only* against Antoine. It's possible that it was simply an oversight on Grismonde's part, but it's also possible that it was a deliberate oversight with the full intention of implicating my husband."

"Perhaps, but why?" André frowned.

"I don't know, yet. But Grismonde could have started all this with the end goal of ruining Antoine, or even both of us. My partner in wedded bliss has made himself a few enemies over the years, and so have I. And all that aside," she added softly, "if Grismonde *did* mastermind the killing of my uncle, I want him dead. And Antoine will know where to find him."

"True enough. By the way, what are you writing?"

"I'm annulling my marriage. My uncle left me a parcel of blank forms with his signature and seal. I can backdate this

one by a month or so, and I'll see if I can get Antoine to sign it tonight. It'll spare me the inconvenience of having to forge his signature."

"All well and good, but how do you plan to forge the Pope's?"

"That's being taken care of as we speak. I hope. Anyway, whether it is or not, I mean to set this in motion tonight," Françoise said firmly, setting a seal to her signature with the ring her uncle had given her.

"I don't blame you for wanting to be rid of him, but why tonight? A step this bold, taken this quickly, isn't your style at all. You're usually so cautious . . ."

"I prefer caution, when I have that luxury," she admitted. "This time, I don't. Think about it. For years, Antoine's been content to leave well enough alone and let the tontine resolve itself naturally. Now, suddenly, he's going after the Heart of Flame with a vengeance. Why? Is he being blackmailed, or has he incurred debts I don't know about? If so, I don't want to be in a position to assume them when he dies. When I kill him," she corrected herself quietly, and her black eyes were like ice.

"Now," she said crisply, rising from her chair and fanning out the sealed document gently to dry the wax, "do me a favor and track down de Bar and as many of his guards as you can get your hands on. My husband sleeps in the Bastille or in hell tonight; I don't greatly care which. Meet me back here as soon as you can."

André frowned with concern, and Françoise noted the look and laughed it off.

"And stop worrying about me. I'll be fine once this is over," she assured him lightly.

"Well, *someone* has to worry about you, and I don't seem to have anything better to do."

“My love, I really think I shall have to find you a wife and twelve children with some alacrity. Such a wealth of concern should be spread out more evenly amongst the population,” Françoise murmured archly, and André winced and shuddered.

“You’re a cruel woman, condemning me to matrimony.”

“I am indeed. Now go on, get out of my library.” She shooed him off with a wink. He bowed and closed the door behind him, and she let the false gaiety slip from her features, sank down into the tall chair behind the desk, and hid her face in her hands. *God, I should never have agreed to wait for him here. Too many ghosts in this place, too many memories . . .*

After a moment she took the witch’s denunciation and hid it away in the secret compartment, and she put the decanter back where it belonged on the sideboard. On the desk, it was a little too tempting. She tried to force her mind back onto the murders, but she found herself strangely unable to focus on anything but the last time she and Antoine had been together. The hands that had fumbled drunkenly at the laces of her night rail had been a murderer’s hands, and she felt soiled everywhere he’d ever touched her.

Françoise shivered convulsively and began to pace restlessly around the small room. Its memories, at least, were better than the ones assailing her now. The marble chess table in the corner beckoned her, and she crossed the room and sat down in the chair that had most often been hers. She lifted a black knight and studied it, watching the light of the candles glinting off its smooth surface.

She moved a few pieces absently, and André knocked on the door and entered with a contingent of about a dozen guards. Startled not to find her at the desk, he had to glance around for a second or two before he spotted her at the chess table.

“Who’s winning?” he asked lightly, and Henri de Bar chuckled behind him.

“No one, yet. Let’s go, gentlemen.” She pulled her dark cloak off its wooden peg by the door, wrapped it around her and led them out.

Her conveyance and the guards’ horses reached her square, slate gray house on the Rue des Bons Enfants in late afternoon, as the sky was fading to muted shades of purple. Françoise’s eyes flickered with distaste over the ostentatious caryatid columns and high dormer windows.

God, I hate this house, she thought for the hundredth time in her life. I look forward to the day when this entire street ceases to exist.

She stepped out of the conveyance, and the grooms bustled over to see to all the horses. Gules came outside to meet them, moving just a little slowly and stiffly with age.

“Gules, is my husband still here?” Françoise asked him, hating the cool, casual sound of her own voice. Years of practice, years of lies. She glanced at the guards around her, guards she’d served with for half her life, guards that didn’t recognize her as Biscarrat. Men that didn’t know her half as well as they thought they did.

“Yes, madame, he’s here, in the study,” Gules said with the formality he always used in company, studying her with too-perceptive eyes. Gules, unlike the others, knew her too well. “He hasn’t let anyone in to see him all day, and he won’t accept food. His valet says he’s in despair.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she murmured, but there was no sympathy in her voice. “I’m afraid we’re not about to improve the situation. Come with me; we may need you.” *Correction: I may need you.*

She swept down the cold, imposing hall, noting as she passed it the banner with Antoine’s family crest that hung over

the enormous gray stone hearth. *That*, she thought savagely, *will be the first thing to go*. They reached the little room at the top of the stairs, and Françoise scratched on the door.

“Antoine, it’s Françoise. Let me in.”

“Leave me alone, woman,” he slurred, hurling something at the door that shattered on impact. “You and I have never had much to say to each other. Why start now?”

“I have my reasons. I also have a key to every room in this house,” she said coldly, reaching for the loop of keys in her purse, finding the right one, and unlocking the small oak door.

She burst into the room and marched up to the enormous walnut desk her husband stood behind. “Antoine de Pau, Comte de Palis, I arrest you in the name of King Louis of France for the murders of Cardinal Richelieu, the Duc de Nemours, the Marquis d’Entragues and the Marquis de la Pailleterie,” she spat contemptuously. He unsealed a glass vial and downed its contents before she could reach across the desk and stop him.

“You’re too late.” His features drew back into a demonic rictus of a grin, and he collapsed across the desk, spasming and gasping for air. Poisoned.

CHAPTER TWENTY~THREE

“Why look so horrified, my love?” Antoine sneered at her, fighting for enough breath to make up the words. “You’ve been through this before. It’s just a concentration . . . of the belladonna we used . . . to poison your uncle.” He laughed, a pale reflection of the bold, self-assured laugh she remembered loving once. Without a word, without the slightest trace of an expression, she drew the *poignard* from her bodice and started toward him.

“Françoise, don’t kill him!” André warned hastily. “He’s already taken care of that for you, and really it was damned convenient of him.”

“I wasn’t planning on *killing* him,” she laughed mirthlessly, a cold, splintered sound that sent a chill down the spine of every man that heard it. “De Bar, dismiss your men and see them out. I’ll only need you.”

“If it please you, madame, I’d like to stay,” Lieutenant Cahusac said quietly. “I also served and loved the cardinal.” There was a chorus of agreement behind him.

“All right,” Françoise said after a long moment’s thought. “Those who have the stomach for it are welcome to stay. Those who don’t had best leave quickly. But staying or leaving, I want your oaths. My husband died of a terrible illness. That’s all the world need ever know.”

The guards she'd served with for half her life didn't disappoint her. To a man they swore on their swords, and not one of them left. They carried Palis into the master bedroom. Françoise had Gules dismiss all the other servants for the evening and stand watch at the front door. As a Healer, Gules wasn't likely to approve of what she was about to do, but she still needed him close. She followed her people into Antoine's bedroom and approached the green velvet bed with a sweet smile of malice.

"And now, my darling, what am I going to do with you?" she wondered aloud, drawing her stiletto gently across his cheek and poising it over his left eye. "You're not dead yet. It took my uncle more than eight hours to die, and he was a frail, elderly man. You're still in the prime of life. I can make this death of yours linger. Shall I start with your eyes? Oh, no. I want you to be able to see everything that's being done to you. Your tongue, perhaps? Yes, I think that's a much better idea. After all, as you so aptly pointed out, we've never had much to say to one another. Force his jaw open!" she snapped at Cahusac, who moved to comply with a vicious grin.

Antoine struggled, but weakly, and he sobbed in wild terror. He pleaded with her incoherently, and all she could think of was the overwhelming difference between this first love and Jean. Françoise couldn't begin to imagine Jean breaking so quickly or so completely. She herself had withstood worse than this, more than once. And this was her husband, Richelieu's choice for her. She'd never blamed her uncle for that choice, not really, but just at the moment it was difficult to see why not. With a bitter sigh of final disillusionment she shifted to the second phase of the performance.

"It's all right, Antoine, I don't really want to hurt you," she murmured soothingly, running a gentle hand through his silver hair. The guards started to argue with her, and she held up a

hand to silence them. “*They* want to hurt you,” she laughed. “But I won’t let them, as long as you’re prepared to be reasonable.”

Françoise continued running a hand through his hair, filling his mind with images of sex. Half a lifetime’s knowledge of Antoine would serve her well, here; she knew exactly what would frighten him into willing compliance. In his case, nothing would be more terrifying than the prospect of seduction mingled with an unknown amount of pain and mutilation. The seduction would almost be enough to make him lower his guard. Almost. A world of fear to be mined in that almost.

“What . . . what do you want m-me to do?” he stammered.

“André, there’s ink and a quill on the desk over there. Would you bring them to me, please?” André moved to comply, and Françoise turned back to her husband. “The first thing you’re going to do is to sign our annulment papers,” she said, utterly without emotion.

André brought over the ink and quill, and Françoise pulled the document from her bodice. Antoine signed it with a trembling hand, and Françoise brought it over to the desk and used the sandcaster over it to dry it.

She and André shared a smile of immense satisfaction as she folded the parchment neatly and tucked it back into her bodice; he’d watched the marriage disintegrate over the course of half her life, and he knew better than anyone exactly what this moment meant to her.

“Now,” she purred, resuming her place at the bed, “I want to know where I can find Grismonde.”

“At the c-corner of the Rue St. Eloi and t-the Rue de la C-Calandre,” he sobbed without hesitation. “Above a p-public house.”

She turned to Henri de Bar, who was standing just behind her. “De Bar, take four of your men and arrest him. If you

don't find him there, have your men wait for him and report back here. He's bound to show eventually. And questioning really isn't your sort of work at all," she added more softly for his ears alone. He nodded gratefully, chose his men and left quickly. Françoise turned back to Antoine.

"And now, my love, I think it's time you told me everything, from the beginning. What prompted you to go after the Heart of Flame?"

"His Majesty . . . called in my gambling debts," he rasped, "and there was no way I . . . c-could ever have afforded to pay them. I owe him six hundred thousand livres . . . and all our estates and houses . . . aren't worth that much. The Heart of Flame is. Don't you understand, woman?" He grasped at her arm feebly, but his eyes shone with unnerving intensity. "We would have been ruined! A family name . . . of seven hundred years . . . dragged through the dust!"

"Oh, I see. Well, that makes your murders perfectly acceptable," she muttered ironically. "I take it you killed de Nemours and d'Entragues the same way you killed my uncle?" she asked as calmly as she could manage. Her husband nodded weakly, and it was all she could do to keep herself from killing him on the spot. "And the Marquis de la Pailleterie . . . another premeditated murder, but a different modus operandi. Why?"

"Grismonde . . . wanted to make the murders . . . seem natural. In the wake . . . of the cardinal's death . . . another death with the . . . exact same symptoms . . . would strike anyone as suspicious." His breath was starting to come in harsh and ragged gasps, just as Richelieu's had. Françoise forced herself not to dwell on that memory.

"How did you meet Grismonde, and how did you persuade him to help you in all this?" she asked him coolly.

"His Majesty . . . recommended him to me . . . about two

or three months ago. It was only natural . . . that I should have taken him . . . into my trust. All our servants . . . have always been . . . devoted to you. Here, at last . . . was a fellow Gascon . . . who was so loyal that he was . . . even willing to kill for me.”

“Had His Majesty ever recommended a servant to you before?” she asked him coldly with a raised eyebrow.

“No, madame . . . he’d never done me . . . that honor,” Antoine rasped stiffly.

“And it didn’t strike you as in any way unusual that he should do so now?”

“The term ‘unusual’ . . . can scarce apply . . . to kings, madame,” he informed her haughtily, gasping and clutching at the sheets as a wave of agony engulfed him. “One simply accepts such honors . . . when they are granted . . . without questioning them.”

“And on the day the word ‘gullible’ was officially defined, we all stared on in wonder,” Françoise quipped. “Someone tell de Bar he owes me a drink. Gentlemen, from now on, the back stairs to the royal presence chamber are to be watched more closely. You all have Grismonde’s description. If His Majesty sees anyone who even comes *close* to fitting that description, I want that man taken in for questioning afterward. Quietly. You will, of course, do nothing to alert His Majesty or anyone close to him of our increased surveillance.”

They nodded a bit uncomfortably; clearly none of them relished the thought that the King was potentially involved in Richelieu’s murder any more than she did herself. But none of them questioned her, and none of them left the chamber.

Françoise turned back to the pathetically helpless, wheezing figure on the bed and fixed him with her most penetrating gaze. “Antoine, what else did you and Grismonde have planned, and was anyone else involved in the planning?”

“No one else was involved . . . and Sorlin was . . . supposed to have been . . . the next to die.”

“Thanks,” André muttered dryly.

“How exactly were you planning on killing him?” Françoise asked him sharply, her eyes narrowing to slits. The knife was instantly back in her hand, and Antoine paled and began to tremble.

“I don’t know, I swear . . . there was an attempt last night . . . which failed, obviously . . . and I think Grismonde left the men he hired . . . to wait for Sorlin in his apartments. They might still be there . . . or they might not . . .”

Françoise turned to look at André, and they were silent for a moment, considering their next course of action.

“Might be worth a try.” André shrugged.

“It’s worth that, at least,” she agreed. “We’ll arrest them when we’re finished here. Unfortunately, they’re not likely to inconvenience Grismonde by disappearing. They’re hired thugs, nothing more, and he can always get others.”

“With whose money? His employer here is dying by inches.”

“One of his employers is dying by inches.” She said nothing about the other, but she knew with André she didn’t have to.

“Mordieux, Guerite, are you sure about that?” André asked quietly.

“It’s just a gut feeling I got from talking to him this afternoon, but that gut feeling keeps getting strengthened by circumstantial evidence.”

André shook his head slowly, clearly not liking this new turn of events one bit. She couldn’t blame him; if anyone outside the room so much as suspected what she was thinking, the lot of them could dance on gibbets in the Place de Grève.

Françoise turned her cool attention back to the gasping, tortured figure in the great bed. “Antoine, my love, I think

I've about exhausted my run of questions. Is there anything else I should know?" she asked him with deceptive lightness.

"I've told you everything," he wheezed, crying out weakly as another wave of pain engulfed him.

She studied him for a long moment, remembering. *The sunlight slanted through the tall, stained-glass window above the altar, gilding the beautiful, angular features of the man she was marrying. The same pale, drawn, pathetic creature who writhed and gasped in the bed beneath her now, suffering the same end he'd visited on her uncle and three other men. Her cousin Marie-Madeleine had helped her choose the candle-light gold silks of her gown, and they'd laughed as the older woman had teasingly told her of what to expect on her wedding night. She remembered those beautifully manicured murderer's hands as they fumbled and tore drunkenly at the laces of her night rail. Her husband, until death parted them . . .*

She wanted to scream, and never stop. She wanted to burn the flesh away in every place he'd ever touched her.

"In that case, my love, we truly have nothing left to say to one another," Françoise said in a voice that astonished her with its clarity and coolness. She studied him for a moment, then considered the *poignard* in her hand, running a finger over it to test its sharpness. Antoine's eyes widened in horror.

"But I cooperated! I told you everything! You promised!" he wailed, and Françoise's expression could have been chiseled in stone.

"I lied," she said coldly, and ran the *poignard* up to the hilt in his innards. And twisted, as his blood began to soak the sheets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Françoise wandered from room to room, uncertain of what to do with herself, rubbing her arms to ward off the chill. The house she'd been mistress of for eighteen years felt alien to her, coldly formal and uninviting, and strangely empty. It could have been the absence of the servants, she supposed; she dimly remembered having dismissed them for the evening.

She couldn't hear any screams from the other room; Antoine could have fainted, or succumbed to the poison earlier than she'd expected, or perhaps her uncle's guards had decided to be merciful after all. If so, just as well. She'd left Antoine to their tender mercies after she'd taken the first cut from him; a stomach wound was painful, but not immediately fatal, as she had good cause to know. Left to his own devices, Antoine would simply die of the poison. In the hands of a roomful of torturers, his end could be both protracted and painful. There was no need to do what she'd done, but she couldn't undo it, either. Couldn't do or undo anything, in a world that offered increasingly little recompense for the tiresome act of breathing.

Like a wraith she wandered through the cold white corridor until she reached her own bedroom, with its familiar pale blue hangings and silk flock wallpaper. *God, was it really just last night that I sat at that same dressing table and gossiped with*

my maid? Was it just last night that my husband came to me for the last time?

She sank down into the soft slipper chair before the dressing table and gazed at her reflection in the glass. Her cosmetics hid a world of ravaged age, of bruises, of dark circles under dark, lifeless eyes. Looking in the mirror, she felt old. Unwanted. Alone. She tried to fill that void with thoughts of Jean and memories of their lovemaking that morning, but it felt like a midsummer's idyll, waxy, beautiful, and unreal.

I'll go to him tonight, she thought. This night of all nights she couldn't bear the thought of being alone. It struck her as vulgar, going from her husband's deathbed to her lover's bed, but suddenly she couldn't quite think of why. The opiate of exhaustion slipped soft fingers over her mind, crushing out the world. Thoughts began to seep away from her like water, and she stopped trying to hold on to them after a moment. She traced the lines of her silver hairbrush with an unpainted fingernail, finally thinking of nothing at all. And the pleading and the low, feeble cries came from the other room at last, her revenge. Her perfect revenge.

Françoise rose from her chair and began to pace restlessly. Her eyes kept wandering to the bed they'd shared occasionally. And to avoid the memories it held she fled the room, ran down the icy corridor in search of something else, anything to shut out the sounds of his dying. She ran down the stairs and tore out the family crest over the hearth in the Grande Galerie, throwing it into the untended flames with wild laughter and watching as it burned.

His family name of seven hundred years, meeting a well-deserved end, she thought savagely. *Unless, God forbid, I should be with child after last night . . .*

Mesmerized by the horror of the possibility, she continued her wandering and let it take her into the library, where she

sank down into the tall seat behind the large oak bureau.

“Mordieux, Uncle,” she found herself saying to the empty room, talking wildly to no one and nothing. “I wish I knew who to hate for what I had to do tonight. You, for selling me to him when I was sixteen? Him, for everything? Myself, for what I’ve become? I want to rage. I want to cry. I want to care. I can’t. I still have his blood on my hands and under my fingernails, and I can’t feel anything at all. That’s the worst thing about killing, about death, the way the blood gets lodged under your fingernails and you can find traces of it there days later, like a stain, even after you’ve washed your hands. Shakespeare was on to something.”

She laid her forehead against the desk, looking awkward, not caring.

“You know the worst part, Uncle? I miss you. And chess. And Chaucer. I miss the way we laughed at things no one else understood. I must have found a hundred things today I wanted to tell you about, and you’re not here.” On a sudden impulse she scanned the room Ethereally, hoping against hope she’d find a ghost of him, but there was nothing. The crackling hiss of the fire in the hearth. The harsh rasp of her own uneven breathing.

With effort, she pulled herself back to the present, using the sound of each breath to anchor her to the reality of the house, the room, the cold, hard desk under her forehead and her fingers. She pulled herself up, rummaged hastily through the drawers, pulled out a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a quill that needed sharpening.

There was work to be done, work she’d ignored for too long. Necessity would anchor her to the world if nothing else did.

She started by writing an anonymous letter to the Marquis d’Azyr, warning him of the tontine murders and offering to

provide guards for him through de Bar. With her husband's death, the danger to the tontine members should theoretically be past, but better to be overcautious now than to regret later.

Another letter went out to the Abbé d'Herblay, warning him of his own potential danger. As she sealed the letter with the signet ring of a dead man, another feeble cry sounded through the house. Antoine's torture was obviously beginning anew. *It's just*, she tried to tell herself; *he's a confessed murderer, and I swore vengeance on him. And now I have that vengeance.* Her husband's choking, rasping sobs echoed through the empty house, followed by pleas she couldn't quite make out the words of. Almost a mercy, that.

Françoise shoved her letters aside and resumed her restless pacing. A fly buzzed lazily around the room, an odd echo of her husband's incoherent pleading, and she sat down at the clavecin in the corner and played the most challenging piece she knew to shut out the other sounds. A final, dreadful scream tore through the house, and then there was nothing. The tinkling of the clavecin, the buzzing of the solitary fly, the dull, hollow hammering of her heart. Her husband was dead.

Her fingers danced absently over the keys, playing now almost of their own accord, and after a minute one of them hit a wildly jarring note. Her laughter splintered across the empty gallery. The fly buzzed around her and landed on the clavecin, and she smashed it, slamming the keys and smearing them with a thin streak of blood. She stared at it for a long moment, filled with an irrational horror that grew in the deathly silence. Finally she wiped the blood away with a batiste kerchief.

André scratched softly on the door and entered. The room echoed with the sharp staccato of his footsteps as he walked over to Françoise and took both her hands in his.

"It's done, and I've sent the guards on without me to arrest

Grismonde's men," he said quietly. "Your husband's death was every bit as painful as you could possibly have wished. We went at him with *poignards*, same way you did; they didn't leave much mark on the outside, but they scrambled his internal organs."

Françoise suppressed a violent shudder, lowered her head, and didn't say anything.

"You said you'd be fine as soon as it was over," he teased, a little frightened by the lack of a response. "Well, now it's over."

"Is it?" she asked ironically. She drew her hands out of his, turned from him, and resumed her playing. In frustration André finally grabbed her hands and turned her around to face him. She didn't struggle, and her eyes were tired, almost lifeless.

"It *is* over," he assured her, pulling her to her feet and walking her around the room. Françoise felt like a living doll on his arm, expressionless and disinterested. He could have made love to her just then, or beaten her senseless, and she wouldn't have been fazed by either.

"Palis deserved as painful an end as we could give him, and now he's gone," André murmured. "Grismonde, whatever part he played in the killings, has no reason to continue them. Believe me, it's over."

"I wish I *could* believe that," she said slowly, forcing every word out. She felt curiously detached from it all, and her thoughts were moving through fog. It was difficult, but she had to make him understand that it wasn't over, and the last thing any of them could afford to do was relax. "The King and Grismonde must have had their own reasons for beginning all of this. First, the King calls in my husband's gambling debts . . . and then he recommends to him a servant . . . who, conveniently, is willing to kill for him. But why would they have

chosen Antoine? And did they know about the tontine? If so, how? Which of its members betrayed that trust? I suppose Antoine could have betrayed it to His Majesty; after all, he'd been a royal favorite for years . . . God, I can't make sense of this right now . . . will you leave me for a while? I need to be alone," she finished in a small, bewildered voice. André kissed the top of her head affectionately and slipped an arm around her waist.

"Under the circumstances, I'd say that's the last thing you need," he replied. "You need to be distracted tonight. I won't let you think of any of this."

"But I need to . . ."

"Nonsense," he said, his voice a caress. "Tonight, you don't need to do anything but listen to an old friend."

Françoise shrugged listlessly, moved away from him, and sank into the wide red velvet settee before the fireplace. There was a tentative, quiet scratch on the door, and André sighed irritably.

"Come," he growled. Henri de Bar poked his graying head in.

"That didn't sound like much of a welcome, so I'll be brief," Henri murmured, entering the room but standing near the doorway. "There's no sign of Grismonde as yet. I've left four men stationed there, and as you say, he's bound to show eventually. Any further orders?"

"Yes," Françoise called from the settee, forcing herself to usefulness. "Henri, I've left letters there on the bureau that need to be delivered as soon as possible. Discreetly; they're anonymous."

Henri went over to the bureau to collect them, studied the seal, and almost dropped them in his shock.

"That was His Eminence's seal," he whispered in stunned disbelief, almost as if she'd committed blasphemy by using it.

"I know that. I need to get their attention."

"Well, that'll get attention if nothing else will," he admitted. "What else do you need me to do?"

"We'll need to figure out what to do with my husband's body," Françoise whispered, feeling sick. André went over to the desk and started to write a letter of his own. "I'm not sure whether to leave the body here in state for a few days, or claim that he wanted to be buried in secret so that his creditors wouldn't be able to defile his corpse. How bad does he look, André?"

"His external injuries are minimal; nothing we couldn't claim was a doctor's bloodletting," the assassin said evenly. He was always that cool about death. "We'll have to burn and replace the sheets, though; they're a bloody mess."

"It's worth the risk, then; we'll wrap him in a winding sheet and do all the rest, honorably, and he'll lie in for four days before we send the body back to Pau to be buried with his ancestors," Françoise said. She sounded calm and felt dead inside.

André finished off his letter with a rapid and elegant flourish, used the sandcaster over it, and went to seal it with wax, realizing a little late that his family's signet ring was gone. He cursed softly, blew on the letter to dry the unstamped wax, and handed the letter off to de Bar.

"Captain, it's crucial that this gets to Monsieur de Tréville within the hour," André whispered to him urgently. Françoise heard every word, but couldn't rouse herself sufficiently to say anything. "I'd run it there myself, but I don't dare leave Guerite alone," he continued in the same barely audible whisper.

"I'll take it to him," de Bar nodded gruffly. "And maybe later I'll get you drunk enough to tell me what's going on between those two," he added in a lighter vein, raising a shaggy gray eyebrow at the younger man.

“Unlikely,” André said, “but if you’re buying the drinks, you’re welcome to try.”

“Good luck,” Henri said quietly, offering him his hand. André clasped it warmly.

“And to you. Oh, and when he’s finished reading the letter, please make sure he burns it. I don’t want Françoise compromised.”

De Bar bowed and headed off.

“Come on, Guerite, the night is young, and Paris awaits,” he sang cheerfully, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet. She spared him an expressionless glance and drifted back into the maze of her thoughts. She didn’t really care at the moment whether Paris awaited or not, but if André thought the mindless distraction would comfort her somehow, what harm in going? It didn’t matter to her one way or the other where they went, or what they did when they got there.

He led her upstairs to her bedchamber; there was no one left in the house to be shocked by the impropriety. Hastily he raided her armoires and wardrobe chests, doubtless trying to get her into something other than mourning. Finally he settled on a dark tourmaline green gown with thick black lace and embroidery, one she hadn’t worn in years.

“What do you think of this one?” he asked her.

“André, do you really think all the ills of the world will vanish for a woman when she’s confronted with a silk dress?” Françoise asked him with a sad smile. “I killed a man tonight. My husband, incidentally. Why are you making me do this?”

“Because it’s the only thing I can think of to do for you,” he admitted after a moment. “And I refuse to leave you alone. I’m getting you out of this house.”

His uncertainty and stubborn caring went to her heart in spite of everything. There was a momentary silence between them as Françoise struggled for something to say. It wouldn’t

come, of course; she was glib, and clever, but as terrible as any man with the words that were really important. André still cared about her; he was still her friend. It was the one element in her life that hadn't been changed beyond recall by the events of the past few days.

"Thank you," she said at last, knowing it was inadequate and hating herself for it. She'd wanted to tell him that she loved him, but she couldn't quite. "I'm sure the green silk will be fine. Where are we going?" she asked, almost managing to sound as if it mattered to her.

"Such details would only confuse the female mind," André teased. "You'll just have to trust me."

Françoise coughed rudely at that, a thin shade of herself at last, and André looked positively relieved to hear himself insulted. He helped her into the gown, keeping his innuendoes to a minimum for a change, and she tied her impossible red hair back tightly and slipped a black wig on over it. Françoise was the only woman at court with hair that color, and it wouldn't do to be recognized tonight when she should be playing the grieving widow. André dug a pair of black jeweled masks out of a chest while she applied her lip rouge and the perfume she'd bought . . . was it really that morning? She felt as if she'd lived four years in as many days.

Note for the future, she thought dully. Live slower. And try to come up with something better to say to André than "thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tréville arrived at the great, cold house on the Rue des Bons Enfants to find it almost completely dark, and unnervingly silent. No grooms came to take the horse, so he stabled it himself after a few minutes' waiting. He opened the front door gingerly without bothering to knock; it didn't seem there were any servants left to answer. It occurred to him that this could have been a trap of some sort, and he kept his hand on his sword hilt as he entered.

André de Sorlin was pacing restlessly in the dimly lit foyer, and as little love as they had for one another, Sorlin's obvious relief put Tréville a little more at ease.

"Thank *God* you made it," André said emphatically. "I can't thank you enough for coming."

"Thank you for getting me that note," Jean replied, offering him his hand for the first time in many years. André clasped it firmly and without the slightest trace of rancor. For the moment, it seemed, they were joined in a common cause.

"I left Françoise to wait for us in the library, because I wanted a word with you before you saw her," André said quietly. "Please, for God's sake, don't bring up any of the details of the case with her tonight. Don't even let her talk about it; if she starts, change the subject." That was the one feeble precaution he could take to protect Françoise from her

own rambling tongue and wandering attentions; if she discussed her suspicion of the King with Tréville, she was doomed. "I've never seen her like this; I don't know what to do with her. I thought you might . . . hell, I don't know what I thought."

The man looked as if he hadn't slept in centuries. One thing was obvious: for all his usual callousness about women, he cared deeply about Françoise. Jean bit back a jealous response and forced himself to be civil.

"You did the right thing by letting me know," he said, and his slight frown could have been taken for seriousness. "How is she acting?"

"She's like a walking corpse!" André hissed with frustration. "She's hardly said a word, she only moves when I move her, and she's absolutely disinterested in everything. We could throw her on the floor and have her ten different ways each, and I doubt she'd notice or care."

"The hell we could," Jean growled.

"Just a figure of speech." André shrugged in an elegant, offhanded manner that only set the other man's teeth further on edge. "I'm not her lover, Tréville."

"I never thought you were," the Musketeer replied, implying with a slightly raised eyebrow that Sorlin wouldn't begin to merit such an honor.

"Not that I . . . oh, enough of this!" the assassin growled. "I refuse to argue with you. Françoise needs both of us tonight, and she needs us to be thoroughly charming. So let's just pretend for this one night that we like each other."

Jean couldn't help but snicker at the truculent expression on the other man's face, and to his surprise, André joined him in the laugh. Once he really thought over André's words, though, Jean stopped laughing.

"When you say she needs both of us tonight, surely you

don't . . . I mean, I thought you might consider leaving me alone with her . . ." Jean flushed a bit at the suggestion and at his inability to make it more delicate.

"Not a chance." André grinned wolfishly. "I may need you to help me keep her sane, but I don't altogether trust you yet. If you manage to ruin her, everyone who hated the cardinal would consider it your final triumph over a dead man. No, all things considered, I'd be an idiot to leave you alone with her. You both get my charming companionship, all night long." His eyes sparkled with malicious enjoyment of the other man's predicament.

"That prospect transports me into untold bliss," Jean replied dryly.

"I thought it might. Shall we?" André made a clipped bow and gestured toward the library with one arm, a motion so elegant it was insolence itself.

Jean made an equally impeccable reverence. "After you." Jean smiled, showing a fierce number of perfect white teeth.

They walked toward the library in icy silence, pointedly ignoring one another. André scratched on the door and entered, signaling with his hand for Jean to wait in the hall.

"Guerite, I've brought you a present of sorts," the assassin announced sardonically. He ushered Jean in, and Françoise rose a bit unsteadily to greet them. Jean rushed over to her and swept her into his arms. Just as he drew breath to offer his condolences, André managed to interrupt him with one of the pointed witticisms that had always irritated Jean beyond measure.

"Yes, a fair and rosy gift," André drawled lazily, leaning against the door, "but I should warn you that the blood of the ancient Greeks runs in my veins. How did Cato put it? *'Timeo danaos et dona ferentes?'*"

Françoise rolled her eyes, and Jean, who'd studiously

ignored the Latin lessons of his childhood, managed to look confused and annoyed at the same time.

“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” she translated softly for her lover’s benefit. He purpled and was about to offer an equally nasty reply when Françoise cut him off teasingly and defused the situation. “André, it’s nice to know some things never change,” she said in a honeyed voice. “Your Latin scholarship is as appalling as ever. It was Virgil, not Cato.”

Jean smirked over his shoulder at him, and André arched an eyebrow in sardonic reply, but wisely didn’t say anything.

“Thanks for coming, Jean,” Françoise said softly. “It’s good to see you.” She sank wearily back down on the settee, and Jean and André exchanged meaningful glances. André signaled urgently with his hands to get her back up, and Jean brightened forcibly, pulled her up lightly and danced her around the room.

“Of course it’s good to see me,” he said, too cheerfully. “It’s always good to see me. Even Sorlin was awaiting my arrival with baited breath. Isn’t that right, Sorlin?”

“I was fairly trembling with anticipation,” André quipped.

“I thought you might be,” Jean murmured, though his heart wasn’t in the insults.

Françoise managed a tired smile, and she went through all the motions of the *allemande* with her usual grace, but she moved like a wraith. They fell silent for a moment as the two men struggled for something else to say, anything to keep her attention.

Gules scratched on the door and entered before they could think of anything.

“I’ve brought a hired conveyance,” the old man said in his Marseillais twang. “No distinguishing markings, just as you requested.”

“Thank you, Gules,” André said, breathing a heavy sigh of

relief. “Please stay at the front door tonight, and explain the situation to the servants when they return in the morning. Their dismissal tonight was at the comte’s orders; he knew he was dying and wanted to maintain his dignity. Any questions?”

“What are we doing with the body?”

“We’ll need to have it wrapped in a winding sheet; it will lie in for four days before it’s sent back to Pau for burial. I need to ask you to take care of those details and run the household until we manage to sell it. I don’t think I want Françoise to have to come back here, ever.”

“No arguments from me, Shorty,” Gules nodded up at the much taller André.

“Thanks, Gules,” André nodded, with an attempt at a grin. “Oh, yes, and one more detail I almost forgot . . . Kitty will need to be a part of this. As a widow, Françoise should be spending the next forty days in absolute seclusion. Obviously, she can’t afford to do that right now. We’ll need Kitty to maintain the deception, though . . . meals brought to her boudoir, and anything else she can think of. I’m going to get Françoise out of here as quickly as I can. Thank you for everything.”

Gules nodded and bowed himself off with a final, concerned glance at both of his charges.

“Well, you two, are you ready to go?” André asked, smiling with forced cheer. Jean took Françoise’s arm and led her out, and André handed Jean a black velvet mask in passing. “You’ll need it where we’re going, and I forgot to tell you to bring one.”

“Thank you. Where *are* we going, anyway?” Jean asked, pausing to tie on the mask. Unlike Françoise, he was genuinely curious about that.

“Trust me,” André smirked, pulling a dark cloak around Françoise and making sure her features were completely

obscured by the hood. Jean bit back a caustic reply and followed them out.

Trust you, my maiden aunt, Jean thought savagely, and Françoise caught the unshielded projection. We're in love with the same woman, whether you realize it or not, and I trust you less than anyone alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The actor Montfleury strode slowly onto center stage, more a royal procession than a walk, drinking in the cheers of his adoring audience. His mouth opened, he flung his red velvet cloak behind him with the wide sweep of a gesturing arm, and the first lines of Desmarests' *L'Europe* poured forth in his resonant bass. Françoise, of course, didn't note them, but she was hardly alone in that. The nobility came to the oldest theater in Paris, L'Hôtel de Bourgogne, to be seen in their elegant incognito, but they hardly ever paid attention to the plays.

Jean and André watched as little of it; they were busy keeping less-than-subtle eyes on Françoise. And she watched them watching her and tried to assume a little of the false cheer with which they were bombarding her.

Dozens of other eyes were on her as well: the eyes of raffish libertines and their jealous mistresses, all wondering who the tall, raven-haired woman with the coolly absent air could be. André had deliberately chosen a mask that concealed most of her face, but her slanting black eyes and red lips still promised, still drew attention.

But if Françoise's utter indifference to that attention wasn't enough to put them off, the combative light in the eyes of her blond companion certainly was. His mask didn't conceal him nearly as well; he was clearly Tréville of the King's

Musketeers. And none of Françoise's casual admirers were drunk enough yet to want to take on a man of Jean's reputation. Having had to do so herself a handful of times, Françoise supposed she couldn't blame them.

Jean hailed a *distributrice* into their box and got them a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread to share. They attacked the offerings with a semblance of cheer and went back to pretending to watch the play. Françoise silently blessed André for thinking to take them to the theater; here she didn't have to talk. Better still, she didn't have to listen to their inane bickering. Oh, they disguised it as charming banter, but it definitely qualified as bickering.

In their way, they were clever enough about it. They were managing to draw her out in spite of herself; she felt an irrational need to keep them from killing each other, so she kept coming up with engaging *bons mots* just as they were about to tear each other's throats out. Everyone would laugh, or pretend to, and the talk would lighten for a few minutes more. *Perhaps I should just let them kill each other*, the cynical thought flitted across Françoise's mind. *They'd both be a damned sight quieter.*

There was a scratching at the entrance to their box, and a courtier dripping with ribbons and lace stumbled through the red velvet curtain without waiting to be asked in. Françoise peered through the glare of fashionable excess and recognized Claude de Chauvigny, one of the parasites that had chosen to attach himself to the King's brother, Gaston d'Orleans.

Just my luck, she thought to herself irritably. *Of all the drunkards I could have drawn, it had to be Chauvigny. If he had any idea who I was, of course, he wouldn't be here.*

Chauvigny was a satirist, and not a particularly talented one. He went from salon to salon, feeding for free off the tables of the rich and singing "scabrous" songs about Cardinal

Richelieu. Françoise was content to let that go while her uncle was alive; after all, he wasn't bothered by them. But Chauvigny had apparently written and performed a song the night after Richelieu's death, mocking the circumstances of his poisoning. That was beyond the pale, and deserved to be answered with better mockery. Whatever chance had brought him here, Françoise saw his entrance as a God-given opportunity to humiliate one of Richelieu's detractors in public. She turned to him and smiled softly, and Chauvigny foolishly took it for encouragement. He reached down into her lap, lifted one of her black-gloved hands and raised it to his lips.

"Forgive my forwardness," he slurred loudly, hazy with drink, "but I must make your acquaintance or perish of longing!"

Françoise felt dozens of eyes suddenly shift to her. The actors continued to emote, but all other attention was now on the little box, the beribboned Chauvigny and the mysterious woman in dark green silk. Françoise exchanged a look with each of her companions, a look André knew her well enough to understand. She meant to cut this one's ego into more ribbons than he currently wore on his suit.

Jean frowned and fingered the hilt of his sword, and André caught the gesture and cut it short with a brief shake of his head. The Musketeer nodded in curt acquiescence after a moment, sat back, and fumed silently.

"*Che?*" Françoise asked in a squeaky voice after a long and embarrassing silence. There was a ripple of amusement from the audience they'd inherited from the theater.

"Does Madame . . . not speak French?" the courtier asked, breaking into a sweat as embarrassment and sudden, cold sobriety began to creep in on him.

"*Fala Portugues?*" she asked him, spreading her hands helplessly. The man reddened, and Jean coughed into an elegant batiste kerchief to hide his amusement. André, less concerned

with the social amenities, smirked openly. Chauvigny shrugged vaguely and began to search for a way to extricate himself.

“I weel try . . . to speek your France,” Françoise squeaked in an abominable accent, rising to stand before him and drawing more attention to them by doing so. “Eet ees trulee a horror to meet you. I am horrified by your awkward presence een my box.” She nodded graciously, and their audience laughed rudely at poor Chauvigny’s predicament. Even the actors stopped to listen at that. The courtier purpled and waited for their laughter to subside.

“Does Madame mean she is *honored* by my *august* presence in her box, perhaps?” he offered with a bow.

“Actually, I liked the way I said it much better,” she said dryly and without the faintest trace of her accent. Everyone roared with laughter as she revealed the ruse, and Chauvigny stumbled out of the box, enraged and humiliated. The audience, usually admirers of Chauvigny but ever fickle, cheered enthusiastically, and Françoise dropped them a laconic, mocking curtsy before turning her attention back to the stage. Everyone else slowly did the same, and the play was allowed to continue.

“You’ve made a bad enemy tonight, if he ever finds out who you are,” Jean murmured in her ear. “That was Claude de Chauvigny, the satirist. A friend of d’Orleans’.”

“I’m not worried.” She nudged him affectionately. “After tonight, it won’t be fashionable to receive him anymore. D’Orleans will drop him rather than stain his own reputation by sharing in that embarrassment. Chauvigny was a detractor of my uncle’s, and for a while at least he won’t have any salons in which to air his moth-eaten wit.”

“Remind me never to make you angry,” Jean said, taking her hand and kissing it.

“I’d kiss the other one to make it even,” André teased, “but that’s the one Chauvigny laid his lips to. I think a ceremonial burning of that glove might be in order.”

“For once, we’re in agreement.” Jean nodded sharply. André toasted him with the wine, and peace actually reigned for the rest of the play. Silence had never sounded so sweet.

After the play let out, they headed over to Les Halles, a tortuous, occasionally dangerous little covered maze of streets, booths, and shops. The streets were named after the wares sold in them: de la Lingerie, du Lard, de la Poterie. The market sprang to life in the evenings, when the light of thousands of candles cast a hazy illumination over the jeweled masks and silks of the nobility, wares of every possible price and description, and the pickpockets and parasites that inevitably followed in the wake of money. The usual scents assailed them, along with a new one Françoise couldn’t place. Faintly bitter, yet there was a warmth to it; she couldn’t decide quite how she felt about it. André caught the scent as well, and he seemed to know exactly how he felt about it.

“Coffee!” he whispered reverently, and his features lit with an enthusiasm she hadn’t seen in him since they were children. “Come on!” he beamed, clasping her gloved hand and dragging her along behind him. She grabbed Jean’s and pulled him in close to her.

“I hate to sound ignorant, but what’s coffee?” Françoise hissed in Jean’s ear. Jean shrugged and cast the sort of worried frown at André that one usually reserves for the demented. Their fearless leader ignored their confusion and navigated a path through the crowds, following the beloved scent to an elegantly appointed booth draped with brightly colored fabrics.

They sat at a corner table in the back, laughing when they realized that all of them wanted their backs to a wall. They compromised as best they could, the two men placing

Françoise between them in unspoken agreement. She was beginning to feel like a choice bone caught between two stray curs, but she managed not to say so.

“All right, André, I give up. What’s coffee?” Françoise asked him with a raised eyebrow.

“A drink from the Levant. I got addicted to it when I was traveling in Constantinople. Dark, bitter, marvelous, and impossible to get your hands on in Paris, or so I would have thought. Some enterprising saint of a trader must have brought some in.” A beautiful dark-skinned girl brought a brass tray to their table with an elegant enameled pitcher and three porcelain cups, and André handed her ten pistoles and smiled his most charming “you will meet me later in the bed-chamber” smile. She flushed with delight, gabbled at him enthusiastically in a language he could only pretend to understand, and finally she left, bowing profusely.

“Ten pistoles?” Françoise asked dryly. “This ‘coffee’ of yours is horribly expensive, André. Or was it the pretty *distributrice* that inspired this sudden fit of excess?”

“I’m half in love with her already,” he murmured, following her with his good eye as she flitted gracefully from table to table.

“Hmmm . . . this could be serious. Is she the third or fourth this week?” she asked, frowning with mock-concern.

“You underestimate my nearly infinite capacity for five-minute infatuations. She happens to be the fourth since we left L’Hôtel de Bourgogne.”

Françoise laughed and shook her head; she’d long since given up on reforming André. He was what he was, and she privately doubted he’d ever settle for just one woman. It was half the reason she’d never gone for him herself. Jean ground his jaw and looked away, and Françoise had a fairly good idea of what he must be thinking. His sister had been one of

André's five-minute infatuations some years ago, and like all the other infatuations, it had ended miserably for the girl.

"Jean?" she asked gently, placing her hand over his. He snapped out of his thoughts and looked at her blankly for a second or two.

"I get one of you talking, and I lose the other one," André muttered. "I can't win. Well, try some of the coffee; it's as likely to bring you both around as anything else I can think of." He poured out the coffee, sipped at his own and launched into a brief oration before he'd let them drink. "Now, I should warn you, you're both going to hate this at first. Try it with a lot of milk and sugar."

"You didn't add any to yours," Françoise pointed out.

"I'm used to it." Without another word he handed them their cups, and they poked unenthusiastically at the murky stuff with small silver spoons. Jean dutifully added milk and sugar to his, and Françoise predictably added nothing to hers, and they toasted each other and sipped cautiously. André laughed aloud at the faces they made.

"This is just a guess, but do they feed this to the condemned in whatever land this comes from?" Jean asked with a shudder.

"You mean it doesn't get better with milk and sugar?" Françoise murmured plaintively with a raised eyebrow.

"Sadly, no." The Musketeer shook his head rather emphatically.

"I hoped perhaps some wondrous alchemical change would take place."

"I warned you, it's an acquired taste," André pointed out. "But once you acquire it, you'll find yourself craving it. Go on, add milk and sugar and try again. It's a bit like making love: the second time isn't nearly as bad as the first, and it gets better as you go along."

Françoise smirked and did as she was told, and Jean reluctantly followed suit, absently clenching his jaw. After a few minutes in which they tried to find different ways to enjoy the coffee, Jean got to his feet with a smile of pained politeness.

“Monsieur, could I have a private word with you, please?” He bowed and gestured in the direction of the street outside. André glanced at Françoise, who nodded and poured herself another cup of coffee. He bit back a sigh of impatience and followed the Musketeer outside. They stayed within sight of Françoise, who made a small performance of pretending not to watch them.

“Smile, Sorlin, she’s watching us.” Tréville grinned inanely.

She can hear you, too, idiots, Françoise thought, adding a truly unhealthy amount of sugar to her coffee.

“What do you want?” Sorlin bared his teeth in a wolfish approximation of joy.

“I want to see you dead and damned, as long as you’re asking me so nicely.”

“Surely the coffee wasn’t that bad.”

“What exactly are your intentions toward Françoise? And laugh; she doesn’t look like she believes us.” They laughed loudly, pounding each other on the back a little harder than was in keeping with such blessed amity. Françoise hid a smirk in the depths of her porcelain cup and started paying an ostentatious amount of attention to her peacock feather fan.

“It’s marvelous to see you plying the subtlety you must have learned from years of maneuvering at court,” André said smoothly with a smile that visibly set Jean’s perfect teeth on edge. “I witness with admiration the master politician who keeps the trust of His Majesty.”

The Musketeer beamed as if the spirit of Christmas had taken up permanent residence on his face. “Just answer the

question straight, if you can manage such a trial," he growled through his perfect teeth, of which there suddenly seemed to be many.

"I intend to protect Françoise from herself, and you," André continued, smiling winningly. "If that includes seducing her away from you, so be it. You've maneuvered yourself into the perfect position to ruin her, and I'm damned if I'm going to sit back and watch it happen."

"I have absolutely no intention of ruining her." Jean grinned fiercely. "My infatuations last for at least *six* minutes. I realize lasting more than five can be difficult when you're excited, but for the sake of the ladies, you really should try."

André smiled broadly, and his fist clenched, and Françoise bustled over to them and looped André's arm firmly in hers before that fist could connect with Jean's face.

"I think it's time we were on our way," she announced cheerfully. "Shall we?" She offered her other arm to Jean, who kissed her hand as he took it and shot a look of pure challenge at André.

The two men hurled a final, sugary smile at each other, and their eyes glittered with malice.

"I'm going to need to run past the Rue de Lingerie," Françoise murmured thoughtfully, making inane conversation for the sake of peace. "Biscarrat could use some new lace."

She proceeded to drag them all over the market, actively seeking out the most unpleasantly feminine booths she could find and spending several minutes at each of them. Should she choose the startled fawn lace, or the pale blue ribbons? The peach velvet slippers, or those adorable little white ones with the red heels?

Her plan couldn't possibly have worked better. Suddenly Jean and André were two men trapped in the terror of a woman's boring shopping trip, and their mutual dislike softened at odd

moments into something like sympathy. When she thought she'd probably tortured them enough, she took them back to the cardinal's townhouse in the Marais and basked in the glow of their ill-concealed relief.

She led them into the salon, a large, light, elegant room hung with silk tapestries and furnished in cream-colored leathers. They sat near the hearth and talked over wine and pastries, and the exhaustion of the past few days finally began to catch up with André. He tried to force himself to stay awake, but the warmth of the fire and the wine did its work. After a few minutes Françoise and Jean rose quietly from their chairs, leaving the assassin snoring softly.

Françoise picked up a candle to guide them through the darkened hallways. Except for two footmen who guarded the entrance, the servants were all long asleep. The house was theirs, for the moment. She lured him into the bedroom she'd always slept in when she visited, set the candle on a bureau, and kissed him deeply.

"Stay with me tonight," she whispered. "Even if you never do again, stay this once." *I need you.* She would never admit it, but it was true. *God, when did this man become so much to me?* Jean drew her close, and she shivered lightly and kissed him again.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight unless you tell me to," he said quietly, trailing searing kisses down the arch of her throat. There were no more words between them. None were needed. He undressed her slowly, admiring the play of the solitary candle's light on her skin. The green silk fell away like discarded dreams. Pulling off his dark blue velvet suit, Françoise drew him down onto the bed, drew the bed curtain to shut out the distant, moonlit view of the Place de Grève.

She shivered again and twined her arms around him, drawing in a sharp breath as he ran a gentle hand over her

breast, her stomach, her hip. She felt as if she were plunging into a bottomless abyss, exhilarating, terrifying. Chess pieces moved in her head as they always had, and she no longer felt as if her own hand guided them. She was giving an old enemy her trust, giving him the power to destroy her.

Thus far he hadn't, and she found herself clinging to that frail thread. She laughed at herself for that. And before she surrendered to the pleasure of the moment, she had the fleeting, bitter thought that of all the evils in Pandora's box, the worst of them was hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Françoise lay quietly beside her lover in the stillness of the day's first light, just watching him breathe, memorizing every line of him. The slight, serious frown that usually furrowed that despicably noble brow was there even in sleep. Her fingers itched to brush a fallen lock of hair away from his face, but she didn't want to wake him.

The air was cold and heavy with the scents drifting in from the street. *I must have forgotten to shut the window last night*, she thought, too lazy just now to do anything about it. The Pâtisserie de Ragueneau was just around the corner, and the smell of baking bread knotted her stomach with sudden hunger. At the moment, she was also too lazy to do anything about that, but she had the absurd, fleeting thought that it would be lovely if a dish of *tartelettes* were simply to appear. Not surprisingly, it didn't oblige her.

Françoise drew back the ivory damask bed curtain slowly with an idle sweep of her foot, and a flood of cold air almost made her close it again. But that would have required actual effort, so she burrowed deeper under the blankets, curled around Jean for warmth, and watched the day come to life. Long, thin fingers of pale winter sunlight stretched across the bed with aching slowness, almost like a third lover. She was alive that morning, not with the animal intensity that

seizes life, but with the languid, almost liquid awareness that savors it.

“*Mort aux rats! Mort aux rats!*” a seller of rat poison called from the street, startling Jean awake. His rapier was in his hand before he came to and remembered where he was. Françoise snapped out and grabbed his wrist before he could hurt either of them.

“Oh, Lord, you and I are going to kill each other,” Françoise groaned, half laughing. “I tend to wake up the same way sometimes.”

“Really?” he asked, startled. In silent answer she drew a razor-sharp throwing knife from underneath the pillow. “Yes, I guess you do,” he murmured sleepily, shaking his head and yawning. In truth, she couldn’t have thrown it accurately if her life depended on it, but it was better for fighting in these close quarters than a rapier would have been.

“*Mort aux rats!*” came another deafening cry from the street vendor.

“I guess someone might object if we actually killed him. Pity,” Jean said thoughtfully, running a hand over the stubble on his chin and yawning. Françoise replaced the knife, and Jean set his rapier back down beside the bed. “Tell me, what are your feelings on the subject of morning breath?” he teased her lightly, tracing the course of her spine with his fingers.

“I can live with it if you can.” She grinned with an easy-going shrug. They drew the bed curtain against the cold and made love again, ignoring all the risks. *I should have had him safely out of here hours ago*, her mind nattered at her. *Oh, who cares?* her heart answered. *He’s here, and I plan to enjoy him.* Her heart, by far the louder and stupider organ, won out for the moment.

When it finally came time to sneak Jean out, she scribbled a hasty note, pushed out the false panel in the back of the elab-

orately carved armoire, and led him through a narrow, secret stairway that connected the room to the carriage house on the first floor.

“Give this note to my groom,” Françoise whispered, pressing a sealed slip of paper into his hand. “He’ll saddle a horse for you. Thank you for staying last night.”

“Thank you for letting me stay.” They stole one last lingering kiss, and finally he walked out the small door and into the light.

Françoise wandered back upstairs to the bedroom, closed the window, and drew the heavy dark blue velvet curtains against the sun and the street. Throwing off her chamber robe, she wandered restlessly around the room for a moment, reacquainting herself with it. It was small, almost too small to hold the wide-canopied bed, armoire, and elaborately carved bureau that were its only furnishings. It was the room she’d always stayed in when she visited, and she couldn’t quite bring herself to move into the chambers that had been her uncle’s. She doubted she’d ever be able to do that.

The garb of each of her personae and a full set of cosmetics and wigs were all still here; she’d kept similar arrangements in every safehouse in which she might conceivably spend the night. That was good, because she’d need a convincing disguise to slip past her own people today.

Lying back lazily in the now-cold bed, Françoise began the somewhat time-consuming process of Shifting into Biscarrat, and began as well the extensive planning the next few weeks would require.

For the first forty days of her mourning period, the Comtesse de Palis would be expected to keep herself in total seclusion. Not even the rays of the sun were supposed to intrude on a widow’s grief. After the first forty days, she could be visited by friends and family members again, but

there could be no public appearances for at least a year. No visits to court, no dances, no parties. The comtesse would have to disappear for a while, but there was no reason to put poor Monsieur Biscarrat in similar straits. Besides, she didn't have the time to waste.

She hadn't played a man for that long a period since the siege of Arras two years ago, and in truth she wasn't looking forward to it at all. *With my luck, she winced inwardly, I'll either lose the ability to Shift or forget what I looked like to begin with, and I'll be stuck in Biscarrat's flabby body for the rest of my days.*

One more brilliant observation I could only make in the morning, she chided herself. I should be laying my plans for a few months of forced inactivity, not contemplating the sad absence of my doubtful physical charms. Her mind sluggishly shifted to its assigned task, flashing one last rebellious memory of Jean at her as she glanced around her at the enormous, ivory-curtained bed.

It would be wise to sell her estates quickly and get what she could for them, so that by the time His Majesty discovered the annulment that invalidated the marriage, he wouldn't be able to give the houses her dowry paid for to Palis' nearest male relative. She would only make the annulment public knowledge if Louis pressed her to assume her husband's debts, and she'd be a fool to think he wouldn't.

It might not be a bad idea to start transferring most of the money to Venice today, she thought. My mourning period should give me enough time to act on all this. I hope. She rose, glanced over her Shift in the small Venetian glass mirror over the bureau, went back to the armoire and dug out Biscarrat's uniform.

It was still well short of ten in the morning when she'd finished dressing, and she wondered if André was awake yet.

Probably not; he'd slept as little as she had over the past few days, and it had to catch up with him sooner or later. Yesterday Françoise had been ready to keel over with exhaustion, but this morning she was strangely awake. *Maybe I'm finally getting used to this odd schedule*, she surmised. *No, that's another stupid morning thought. No one gets used to the hours we've been keeping lately. Vampires and parents, maybe, but nobody else.*

Grabbing an extra blanket from the armoire, Françoise wrapped it around her like an enormous shawl and went downstairs to the kitchens. She made two cups of hippocras, placed them on a silver tray, and made her precarious way back upstairs to the second floor salon. God willing, André would still be asleep there, and hopefully he wouldn't hate her because she wasn't. The thought of lying to her oldest friend about her lover honestly never occurred to her. Françoise could no more lie to André than she could to herself. Balancing the tray on one hand, she scratched on the door softly and entered.

André had moved from the armchair in which he'd first fallen asleep to the slightly less purgatorial settee on the other side of the room. The fire in the hearth had doubtless died of its own accord hours ago. Françoise set her tray down on a walnut end table, divested herself of the coverlet, and laid it over him gently. The assassin felt something touch him and came instantly awake, seizing her wrist and twisting it behind her savagely before he realized it was only Françoise . . . or, rather, Biscarrat . . . attacking him with a blanket.

"Will you let me live if I offer you a cup of hippocras?" she teased, making no move to free herself. He let her go, groaning involuntarily as he peeled himself off the settee and sat up.

"I'm not sure I *should* let you live, even for hippocras.

Where is it, by the way?" he grumbled. Françoise handed him a cup and took the other one for herself. "You gave me a sleeping draught last night, didn't you?"

"No, of course I didn't," she gasped, shocked that he should even think it. "André, I did that to you *once*, when I was trying to save your life. I didn't plan to make it a habit. You finally succumbed to exhaustion after days of fighting it; I didn't need to give you anything for that. What in the world would make you think I'd drugged you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He shrugged. "My falling asleep made it possible for Tréville to spend the night, which he clearly did."

"With what admirable swiftness we leap to conclusions."

"I never leap; it lacks dignity. I sauntered casually, and voilà! I was immediately clubbed over the head and dragged away by a villainous conclusion." André smirked a bit in spite of himself, and Françoise was glad to see it.

"Serves you right for sauntering. Try sashaying next time. You might even consider gallivanting."

"If I did that, my scintillating autobiography, *Why André Loves Women*, would have to be entirely rewritten."

Françoise laughed, took a deep breath and plunged into it. "In this case, your casual but undoubtedly manly saunter has led you to the right dark alley; Jean did spend the night. And your staying awake wouldn't have changed that. When do you plan to accept the fact that I'm no longer eight years old?" she asked as gently as she could. "I appreciate your friendship, and I want to keep it, but I can't allow you or anyone else to start making my decisions for me. You'd never let me do the same to you, and you know it."

"Guerite, you don't understand," André cut her off with a moue of frustration. "You don't know the man like I do. He'll use you for all you're worth and ruin you when he's bored with you."

“And haven’t you done that to a few women in your time?” she asked with the ironic lift of an eyebrow. “Could it be that you fear in him what you barely acknowledge in yourself? André, Jean had a chance to kill me two nights ago. He had me alone, virtually unarmed, and there were no witnesses. I’m still alive. Yesterday, before our appointment with His Majesty, I took him to an apartment I keep on the Rue des Fossoyeurs. He could easily have mentioned the place to the King or anyone else in the Louvre. He didn’t.”

“He’s probably just waiting for a spectacular time and place to make the announcement,” the assassin growled in response. “God, Guerite, can’t you see it? When he ruins you, the court of France will applaud his final triumph over your uncle. I always thought you were the most brilliant woman I’d ever known, and for once I mean that sincerely. How can you not see this?”

“Mordieux,” Françoise groaned, her head sinking into her hands for a moment. “My love, ignoring the insult to me implicit in all this, think logically about what you’re saying. I was, at best, a poor relative of the cardinal. In public, he seldom acknowledged me; most people have probably forgotten the blood ties between us. And my reputation, such as it is, suffered years ago for my flirtations. If he ‘exposes’ me, he’ll only be one more man who managed to parade through my bedroom for a while in the eyes of your precious court. A rather flimsy triumph, when you really stop to think about it. If that was what he wanted, he’d have done better to pursue my cousin Marie-Madeleine, who was visibly my uncle’s favorite, certainly better born, and ostensibly more virtuous. A hell of a lot richer too.”

André thought for a long moment, trying to find the hole in her argument. Françoise watched the thoughts chase each other across his exhausted mind, and watched him come to the

same realizations she had, herself. If Jean was after anything other than her, it was the power the Cardinal's Eyes would bring him, and that was no more than she'd already planned to give him. There wasn't any particular reason to pursue her beyond that, unless of course his interest was actually genuine.

"Well, I suppose there's no point anymore in seducing you myself to try to keep him out of your bed," he muttered at last. "You know, I actually considered that. And this is an awfully odd conversation to be having with another man, Monsieur Biscarrat." They laughed a little awkwardly, and he swirled the hippocras in his glass and finished off the draught.

"I'm flattered, I think," she responded dryly. "I wonder what would have happened, if you had." They thought for a moment, looked at each other, and said it at the same time.

"We would have killed each other." Their laughter at that was genuine.

"We would have had a glorious time for about a week, and *then* we would have killed each other," André said lightly.

"That, or we would have gone off on a mad killing spree together," Françoise agreed.

"Mowing down members of the court like barnyard fowl . . . I don't know, Guerite. It might almost be worth it. I mean, an awful lot of them look like barnyard fowl."

"And smell worse."

"We might be doing the world a favor."

"But then we'd have to kill each other."

"Of course," he agreed. Now, it was a parlor game between them, and it always would be. The dangerous moment had passed them by, leaving their friendship undiminished. They grinned the sort of gamin grins they might have shared in childhood, and he kissed the top of her head affectionately.

“All right, I promise, I won’t try to stop you from doing what you’re going to do anyway,” he muttered at last.

“Damned sporting of you,” Françoise said, grinning up at him.

“I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“So do I, old friend,” she sighed, a sound that could have been bitterness or could have been hope. “So do I.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

PARIS, MAY 1643

Françoise sat at the dresser in her boudoir in the Marais townhouse, applying her lip rouge with a delicate silver brush while Kitty fastened diamond brilliants in her hair. The former Comtesse de Palis would come out of mourning tonight in a way that would set Paris on its ear. She dabbed a bit of rose musk on her wrists and throat, carefully mulling over the events of the last several months. Before she left the townhouse and threw off her seclusion like an unwanted skin, she needed to be sure she was making the right decision.

Spring had come and almost gone again without a sign of Grismonde, on either the Physical Plane or the Ethereal. He hadn't returned to his rented rooms on the Rue de la Calandre, and they'd yielded no clues as to his identity or his intentions. And he hadn't been seen trying to reach His Majesty. Françoise thought it probable that there was another person involved in the conspiracy, one who was hiding him and consulting the King in his stead. With the dozens of petitioners the King saw every day, it would be impossible to guess which of them might be the unknown conspirator. There was also the possibility that Grismonde could be another Shapeshifter; she knew better than most just how powerful a tool that could be.

But if her mourning period hadn't produced Grismonde, it had at least brought them another gift on a silver platter.

Françoise had ordered spies to be set on the tontine members, and the ones that were assigned to the Marquis de Vitry weren't able to find him in the Bastille. Enough bribes finally unearthed the fact that the marquis had been released in secret sometime in September, on His Majesty's orders.

The timing, and the secrecy, fit the picture too well to be a coincidence. Vitry had to be their killer, the true mastermind behind the tontine murders. Either he was posing as Grismonde, or Grismonde was his servant, and a direct link to him.

It was the one explanation that made all the facts fit. Vitry must have found a way to contact Louis after the execution of Cinq-Mars, promising him something, possibly vengeance on the cardinal, in exchange for his freedom. Whatever Vitry's offer was, Louis had obviously accepted it. Ironic, but not too surprising; a former favorite avenged the death of an executed one. Vitry had been Louis' constant companion when they were much younger, but François de Barradat had supplanted him after a few months, and he'd long since been shunted into political obscurity.

Vitry had had his revenge on the cardinal early in the game, but clearly that wasn't all he was aiming at. There was only one logical reason for the inclusion of her husband in the plot. Vitry must want revenge on her as well, and he was going to great lengths to achieve it. She couldn't tell exactly what use he'd planned to put Antoine to, but she could see several possibilities.

If they'd managed to kill off all the other tontine members, Vitry could easily have gathered all the evidence to which he had such unique access, exposed Antoine, and had him executed for the multiple murders of some of the most important men in France. Thus the fatal error of allowing Antoine to obtain the poison personally. Clearly, Vitry planned to betray his

dupe eventually. The King would have been as powerless to save Antoine as he had been to save Cinq-Mars, and in truth he probably wouldn't have objected to using him as a scapegoat. Not if it would save his own skin.

With Antoine's execution, Vitry would inherit the jewel and reestablish his failed fortunes. And as the status of women rose and fell with that of their husbands, Françoise would have been in disgrace, ruined utterly if the King could be persuaded to press her for Antoine's gambling debts. That, indeed, could have been a part of Vitry's price. Or perhaps they'd meant to frame her for the murders, claiming she'd supported her husband in everything.

That worry had prevented her from making her husband's crimes public knowledge. Antoine had been quietly buried with his ancestors after a brief laying-in, and His Majesty had placed the court in mourning for his death and Richelieu's. Louis had publicly accepted the fiction of Antoine's tragic final illness, undoubtedly on the advice of the cautious Grismonde. It wouldn't do to have anyone looking too closely into the circumstances regarding the death of the Comte de Palis; it might raise unfortunate questions about royal involvement in the cardinal's.

There are still too many unknowns for my comfort, Françoise thought with a short sigh of irritation. *All of this is supposition upon supposition, as fragile as a house of cards and as easy to tumble with the sweep of a hand. Nonetheless, I have to keep trying. I have to know what to do about tonight.*

The King had already transferred Antoine's gambling debts to her, and it was clear that they intended to ruin her financially, now that the original plan to ruin her through her husband had failed. Her sex and social position would preserve her from debtor's prison, but not from a long incarceration in the Madelonettes, which was frankly almost as bad.

When her uncle was alive to guard her back, she could have parried that threat, but his death had left her extraordinarily susceptible to such attacks. And worst of all, they knew about her Eyes.

It was an odd sort of double jeopardy. Louis sat on an uncertain throne. His brother and their infinitely more dangerous cousin, the Prince de Conde, were both eager to assume his place, and his health was definitely failing. The King was dying; it was just a matter of time. Louis and Vitry had the upper hand at the moment, but she was in a position to change that, swiftly and decisively. She was an adder close enough to strike, and they had to move as softly around her as she did around them. It had dissolved into a waiting game, a war of nerves. For almost five months, no one had made a significant move.

Unless, of course, one considers poisoning significant.

First, there had been the attempts to poison her. Three of them in the last five months, all turned aside by the loyalty of her servants, the sheer excellence of her spy network, and the fact that she wasn't secluding herself in Antoine's house, quietly waiting to be poisoned.

Then, of course, there was her inevitable countermove. Dottore Blandini, Louis' personal physician, had been in her pay for years. Françoise had turned him on his royal employer several months ago. It would be the King's life or hers in the end, and she had a feeling they both knew it. He'd connived at the murder of Richelieu, and couldn't risk the fact that Antoine's widow might put the pieces together.

It was more a waiting game than Louis guessed; he was being slowly poisoned with white arsenic and seemed to be succumbing to tuberculosis. But it could be months before the end, and that gave him plenty of time to destroy her if he chose.

It would be easier just to kill him outright, or to use a spelled poison, but either route would be considerably more dangerous. And Françoise had decided when she began this that she'd rather be ruined than risk public torture and execution. All the disgrace in the world wouldn't diminish her control of her spies, but death would be damnably inconvenient.

Still, if Louis succeeded in getting his hands on her money, she would be left with no way to pay her own people, and her network would dissolve. That, above all, had to be guarded against. At best, it would leave her utterly dependent on Tréville, and André's cracks about whoring for political gain would take on a dreadful edge of truth. At worst, it would put an end to the Cardinal's Eyes.

There was no help for it. Tonight, she would have to move herself out of check in a bold, sweeping, scandalous gesture that would alert her enemies of her suspicions, but would shield her from the financial ruin they obviously had planned for her.

Her mind made up at last, she fastened on the diamond earrings. Françoise would go to the King's May fête in her most spectacular cloth of gold gown and make her annulment public knowledge. Her responsibility to assume Palis' debts would vanish in a puff of smoke, as would the private stain on her honor, and her enemies would be back at square one in their attempts to bring her down.

Jean scratched on the door and entered quietly. Kitty covered a delighted smile with her hand, curtsied, and tactfully withdrew from the room. In spite of her own poor experiences, the Englishwoman remained a hopeless romantic, and she'd been let in on the secret of their affair long ago.

The Musketeer paused in the doorway for a moment, admiring Françoise, and she smiled at his reflection in the mirror. She'd worn an off-the-shoulder gown with wide, two-tiered

sleeves that ended in a froth of gold-embroidered lace just below the elbows. The cloth of gold would have been a disaster on any woman without the presence to carry it off, but Françoise had Amazonian height and flaming red hair to help her in that battle.

She took a moment to study him, as well. He was beautiful, a tall, elegant column of dark blue silk with silver embroidery and a falling lace collar.

"I like yours better," she admitted with a wry smirk. "But understated won't do for me tonight. I mean to be noticed." Her eyes hardened in thought. Jean closed the distance between them, placed his hands on her bare shoulders, kissed the top of her head, and looked at their reflections in the mirror.

"You'd be noticed in a gunpowder sack," he teased her. "But I've never seen you quite so beautiful."

"Nor I you," she said softly, smiling at his reflection. "Well? Are you about ready to plunge into the lion's den?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he muttered. "Françoise, are you sure about this?" In answer she rose and drew a worn, obviously much-thumbed slip of paper from her bureau.

"Read this, my love, and tell me I have a choice," she replied evenly, handing him the letter she'd received two weeks ago.

" 'My Dear Madame de Palis,' " Jean read softly to himself. " 'We deeply regret the tragic death of your beloved husband. As you well know, we loved him also. When you feel well enough to return to court, we must discuss the subject of Monsieur le Comte's gambling debts, which sadly will now revert to you as his widow. We share your grief, madame, and look forward to continuing our association. Yours respectfully,' et cetera. Just how bad *were* these gambling debts of your husband's?"

“The figure is so astronomically high you should be sitting down to hear it,” Françoise drawled ironically. The room, unfortunately, lacked another chair, so Jean shrugged and sat on her bureau. “Brace yourself, man. Are you braced?”

“I am braced,” he grinned down at her, clutching the edges of the bureau for support.

“Six-hundred thousand livres,” she said slowly, her tongue sliding over every syllable. Jean’s jaw dropped a fraction of an inch, and his eyes widened.

“You’re kidding me.”

“I only wish I were. You see now why I have to court scandal and come out tonight? It isn’t a simple woman’s whim, I promise.”

“I know you too well to think it was.” He shook his head ruefully. “We’ll go with your best judgment. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“A lot of people have been telling me that lately,” she admitted. Rising to her feet, Françoise grabbed a black velvet cloak with gold embroidery and threw it around her with a flourish. “Once more into the breach, dear friend.” She smiled, offering Jean her arm. He accepted it and raised a quizzical eyebrow at her as he led her out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Conversations stopped dead when the Comtesse de Palis, who should still be in widow's weeds, sauntered casually into the Grande Salle des Fêtes of L'Hôtel de Ville on the arm of the Comte de Tréville. In cloth of gold, no less. Françoise held her head at an angle of unassailable hauteur and ignored the pointed stares.

"Are we having fun yet?" Jean whispered teasingly in her ear.

"Oh, I'm loving this," she laughed softly. "The warmth, the cozy, inquisitional atmosphere . . . the Bastille has nothing on the subtler tortures of polite society."

"My dear comtesse!" The King's brother, Gaston d'Orleans, Monsieur, turned to greet her with his usual effusive warmth, seemingly oblivious to the dropping temperature of the room. "Have you returned to court to steal back my heart?"

"Insolent man," she purred, slapping him lightly with her peacock feather fan. "How dare you give it away while I was gone." She offered the King's brother a delicate gloved hand, and he lingered over kissing it. Her eyes met Jean's briefly in a glance of mutual amusement.

"Ah! You wound me to the quick, madame, in showing me my own inconstancy!" d'Orleans cried, laying a hand over

his heart as broadly as a street actor. “And yet my worship of you is as constant as the sun.”

“And, like the sun, you shine equally on all women,” she quipped, looking at him sideways through her lashes. “And I must also fear the clouds that come between us.”

“No cloud need ever come between us, my fair *Astrée*, for I shall set you as a jewel in the heavens.”

“And thus, cruel *Apollo*, you would slay me with inconstancy, for I would still be but one among thousands,” she drawled. The prince pursed his lips and frowned for a moment, thinking, but the perfect rejoinder eluded him.

“You win,” he teased quietly in a voice far more like his own, and *Françoise* laughed and swept him a deep curtsy. “I can’t think of a good answer to that one.”

“It’s a wise man who lets a woman win, *Monsieur*. It is the truest way to our hearts.”

“Sparring with you, my dear *comtesse*, is every bit as exhausting as a tennis match. But infinitely more rewarding. Do you realize we haven’t danced in ages?” *D’Orleans* turned to *Jean*. “Would you object, *Captain*, if I borrowed the lady for just a few minutes? I promise to return her in perfect condition.”

“You make the lady sound like a book, *Monsieur*,” *Jean* sniffed with a raised eyebrow, probably not entirely sure how he felt about the prospect of *Françoise* dancing with someone else.

“That’s because I’m just as full of flowery and useless phrases,” *Françoise* assured him with a laconic glint in her eyes. “Pray go on without me, *Monsieur*, and I’ll find you in a dance when you least expect it.” She warmed him with a slow, suggestive smile, and *d’Orleans* bowed over her hand and departed with a rakish grin.

The Prince had all the panache of his father, *Henri IV*, unlike poor *Louis*, who was painfully reserved. But he lacked his father’s courage and resolve, and thus his rebellions

against the crown and his countless attempts on the life of Richelieu had all met with failure. Françoise followed his departure with her eyes and turned back to Jean.

"I'm sorry to have to ask this of you, Jean," she said very quietly so as not to be overheard. "A dance is the safest way I have of getting him alone, and I need to know if he played any part in my uncle's murder."

"I thought your husband had confessed to that," Jean said uneasily, his eyes searching hers. Françoise guarded her reaction out of old habit, and ignored the real question he wasn't voicing. She'd never told him she suspected the King of complicity in the murder of Richelieu, and she never would. She had no desire to test Jean's love to destruction.

"Yes, Antoine confessed," she said, "and I'm inclined to think he was too much of a coward to have protected his co-conspirators. It's just that d'Orleans was involved in every other attempt on my uncle's life that ever took place, literally, and I need to make sure he wasn't involved in this one as well." Sincere, but casual, nothing to suggest that she intended to take her investigation further than that.

"Well, I suppose I can't object to a dance." He shrugged, clearly worried that he was making the mistake of his life. Françoise squeezed his hand in silent thanks and disappeared into the crowd. She felt his eyes on her as she sauntered casually up to d'Orleans, tapping him lightly on the shoulder with her fan. D'Orleans' exaggerated bow irritated Jean; Françoise could feel the force of that irritation from across the room. Nothing to be done, for now.

Françoise curtsied gracefully, taking the hand the Prince held out to her and allowing him to lead her into the dance, a slow, erotic sarabande. When the music started, she pirouetted smoothly and clasped hands with him, warming him with a smile of extraordinary promise. The looks that flashed

between them were bold and sensuous; Françoise was playing a high-handed game tonight, and every gesture had an edge to it.

Half the fun of flirting with d'Orleans was the patent insincerity of it; d'Orleans preferred men, and much younger ones at that. But oddly enough, despite the nagging inconvenience of his repeated attempts to assassinate her uncle and take power in France, Françoise genuinely enjoyed the Prince's company. She loved matching wits with him, but it was more than that. He was a genuinely lively and amusing companion, if feckless and insincere.

"I was so sorry to hear of your uncle's tragic passing," he purred in mock-sympathy. As far as he knew, she'd despised the man for marrying her off to the Comte de Palis. Françoise reacted perfectly.

"I'll wager you were about as sorry as I was," she responded dryly, and the Prince threw back his head with a laugh, tossing his dark curls behind him. "Tell me, what part did you play in it this time?" They spun apart and stepped back together, and he shrugged elegantly.

"You'll be very disappointed in me, madame," he admitted. "I had no idea another plot was even in the works until the cardinal already lay on his deathbed."

"Nor had I, oddly enough. I wonder who did it."

"If I knew, madame, I would give him a diamond in thanks." They continued their idle banter for the rest of the dance, and Françoise thought quickly as she listened and responded automatically. D'Orleans clearly hadn't been involved in this one. He'd always told her everything about the other plots, so there was no reason for him to hold out on her now. Ironically, he'd always been one of her best sources of information on court intrigues, and she'd never paid him a thing.

"May I ask a rather impertinent question, madame?"

d'Orleans murmured with a speculative glance. "And, for once, I'm not propositioning you."

Françoise lifted her eyebrows in an expression of perfect innocence, though she knew perfectly well what he was going to ask, and he knew she knew it.

"You may ask, Monsieur, and depending on the day of the week and the alignment of the stars, I might even answer you." She smiled enigmatically, watching him through seductively lowered eyelashes as he promenaded around her.

"Fair enough," he laughed. "What made you decide to leave off your mourning period early? Not that I'm not delighted to see you, but you *have* managed to shock the rabble a bit."

"A bit," Françoise admitted, allowing the faintest trace of amusement to light her eyes. "What none of you realize yet is that I needn't be in mourning for a man I never married. Our marriage was annulled in secret about a month before his death."

D'Orleans' eyes widened in shock, and an admiring, almost boyish smile lit his features.

"Madame, you amaze me. Now your appearance makes all the sense in the world to me. I knew about your husband . . . uh, the Comte de Palis' gambling debts, of course, and I was wondering when my dear brother would start trying to foist them off onto you."

"It seems my faithless Apollo was more constant in his affections than I gave him credit for," Françoise drawled, guiding him off that dangerous subject and beginning another extravagant volley of insincere but charming flirtation. She'd accomplished what she needed to accomplish; the Prince was an inveterate gossip, and the story of her annulment would spread faster through him than it would if she printed an article in the *Gazette de France*. And as unpopular as Palis had been, the scandal would shortly become a social triumph.

The dance ended, and Françoise curtsied to d'Orleans, made her excuses and extricated herself from his protests of undying admiration as gracefully and swiftly as she could. No sense in testing Jean's jealousy any further than she had to.

Before she could find him in the crowd, though, Madame de Motteville approached her and made a swift, almost agitated curtsy.

"The Queen demands your immediate attendance, madame, in the Salon d'Arrivée Nord," the lady-in-waiting sniffed haughtily, obviously distressed beyond words by the widowed comtesse's inappropriate presence here. Françoise sighed mentally. Nothing irritated her so much as the unsolicited criticism of the mundane, spoken or not.

"My thanks, Motteville," Françoise drawled insolently, nodding to her graciously as she would to a servant of inferior rank. The other woman bristled at the insult, and Françoise's musical laughter followed her as she stormed away. *Doubtless I've displeased the Queen as well, which concerns me far more,* Françoise admitted to herself. *Time to see what I can do about that.*

She arrived in the salon to find Anne sitting in state on a raised dais draped with cloth of gold. Her gown was a deep blood red shot through with gold embroidery; beautiful, but it didn't quite suit her florid Spanish coloring. Françoise curtsied deeply, and Anne dismissed her attendants and summoned her onto the dais with the impatient sweep of a gloved hand.

"Dear God, lady, what are you thinking, showing up here like this?" the Queen hissed. "It's all anyone is talking about tonight; it's an absolute scandal!"

"I need it to be, Your Majesty," Françoise admitted quietly. "Scandals pass. My late husband's gambling debts won't, and His Majesty has already stated that I'll have to assume them as his widow. I don't have six hundred thousand livres to give

him, nor will I ever, and faced with a choice between a few rude whispers and the Madelonettes, I know which one I'm taking."

"But, my dear, to make it public! Surely you could have gone to him privately and presented the necessary documentation."

"Forgive me for disagreeing, Your Majesty, but had I done that, the King might have found a way to invalidate the annulment behind my back. If he learns about it as second-hand news after it's already swept the rounds of the court, he'll have to try to revoke it openly, which I'm wagering he won't be bold enough to do."

Anne thought for a moment before replying. Françoise watched the silent battle behind her eyes and knew she'd won it before the other woman even drew breath to speak.

"No, I suppose he wouldn't, at that," she murmured thoughtfully at last. "All right, madame, I agree, it was a risk that had to be taken. I'll support you. But you'd do well to consolidate your position as soon as possible with a marriage to someone respectable. A single woman in your position faces terrible risks to her reputation," the Queen murmured, favoring Françoise with a glance of subtle calculation.

Françoise forced her features to pleasant neutrality. She had no intention of marrying again; she'd already put one husband forcibly in his well-deserved grave. The thought of a second marriage terrified her, even with Jean. But clearly the Queen already had someone in mind for her.

Anne took Françoise's lack of a response for uncertainty and pressed her case.

"You were seen tonight walking in on the arm of Monsieur de Tréville," she said thoughtfully. "That caused almost as much astonishment as the fact that you walked in at all. If you think you could live with him, Tréville would be as sensible a choice as you could make. Think it over, madame, and let me

know what you decide.” She dismissed Françoise with a gracious nod, and Françoise couldn’t quite hide her pensive frown as she curtsied and began her solitary walk back to the Grande Salle des Fêtes.

Jean would be a sensible choice, by any measure. The Queen trusted him, and would worry less about Françoise’s ability to recall Mazarin if she were safely married to him. That was undoubtedly what was prompting this little show of concern. The Queen wasn’t wrong, either, about the fragility of her social position as an unmarried woman. Françoise wasn’t stupid, and the mind that was used to staying three jumps ahead of the nearest opponent had already worked over these thoughts. But it wasn’t reason enough to marry, not really.

Marriage was the death of love. Looking around her, there was no evidence of any marriage that was genuinely happy. Convenient, yes. Politic, yes. In the best of cases, frigidly polite. But not happy. The last thing she wanted to do with all the precarious happiness she had with Jean was to confine it to an institution that seemed to add much to the misery of the world.

Her thoughts carried her all the way back to the Grande Salle des Fêtes. The ranks of guests were thinning; the ball was almost over already, and she’d actually survived it. She hoped against hope that Jean wasn’t off somewhere sulking and ready to stick a sword in her vitals; she really should have found a way to rejoin him an hour ago.

Well, I suppose I’ll just have to find an entertaining way to make it up to him, won’t I? she thought, smiling to herself. For the moment she forced the search for ideas out of her head and concentrated on the search for Jean.

Henri de Bar spotted her before she could find her lover; it just seemed to be the course the evening was meant to take.

“Madame de Palis!” he cried delightedly, sweeping her a

florid bow and acting for all the world as if they hadn't seen each other just yesterday. Françoise permitted herself a quiet smile of affection and gave him her hand to kiss. Technically speaking he was Mazarin's captain now, not hers, and they kept their association as discreet as any *affaire du coeur*.

"It's Mademoiselle Pidoux now, monsieur," Françoise corrected him. "Much as it pains me to have to live with a name like that. As I once told another captain, it's the only one I've got, so it'll have to do."

"Well, mademoiselle," Henri began with a teasing glint in his bright blue eyes, "I seem to have intercepted a note that was meant for you. A page was trying to find you, and I promised him I'd deliver it to you."

Françoise put her kid gloves back on and tore open the unmarked envelope. It was a note from Jean, obviously written in haste, for it bore only a vague resemblance to his handwriting. Or perhaps it hadn't been written by him at all. "Françoise - Meet me upstairs in the Galerie Rouge. Jean," was all it said.

Half a lifetime in the cardinal's service made her suspicious even of that, and she wished for a fleeting moment that things were simpler. *If I could just be another woman in love, and rush upstairs to him without fear of traps or consequences . . . but there's no sense wishing for what I can never have. I am what I am.* With a slight frown, she held the note over a candle flame and let it burn.

"Do I at least get to know who sent it?" Henri cajoled her, teasing, but as always genuinely curious. Her reaction surprised him.

"Henri, do me a favor. Bring a gun and follow me upstairs. I'll be in the Galerie Rouge. Wait outside. If you hear me say, 'Let's go for a walk in the gardens,' everything is fine, and it's safe to go. But if you hear me ask, 'Why the

Galerie Rouge?’ I need you to burst in and start shooting. If you don’t hear me say either, please wait, listen if you can, and make your own best judgment. Have you got all that?’ she asked him in a tense, rapid-fire whisper. He nodded, frowning with confusion. She led him off without another word, and he managed to borrow a loaded pistol from his lieutenant, Cahusac, on the way.

The Galerie Rouge was at the end of a long, empty stretch of hallway. Françoise studied it for a moment from behind the corner of the hall that led up to it, lips pursed and eyes narrowed in thought.

“What exactly is going on?” Henri whispered at last.

“Probably nothing,” she hissed back. “I’m just being overcautious.”

“There’s no such thing, to a lady in your position.”

“My thoughts exactly, old friend. I’m going in. Wait until I’ve gotten inside before you follow me; no sense having someone spot you too soon.” As casually as she could, she sauntered down the dimly lit hallway and scratched on the door. It opened into near-darkness, and she paused before entering.

“Jean?” she called, her suspicions increasing in the gloom.

“Not quite, my dear comtesse,” rasped a voice too deep to be Jean’s. A wheellock dueling pistol was shoved up under her jaw. “Please, do come in. Jean may not be here, but Monsieur le Marquis de Vitry would love to have a chat with you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Damn, Françoise swore silently. I really, really hate it when I'm right.

The tall door closed behind her with a hollow, sickening sound, and her heart sank. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she counted Vitry and four . . . *thugs? Henchmen? What does one call one's own killers?* she wondered idly, a curious sense of detachment coming over her. And they all had pistols. Henri alone wouldn't be enough, and if he tried to rescue her, he'd quickly be overwhelmed. *I was right, but I underestimated the situation. Badly. Damn, damn, and have I mentioned damn?*

Françoise and Vitry locked eyes for a long, tense moment, the culmination of years of hatred. His unblinking gaze bored into her. It had only been five years since his imprisonment, surely not long enough to have aged him so much. The rounded, wrinkled planes of his face looked like melted tallow, not quite real. Not quite real, but close enough to fool anyone but a fellow Sorcier. *Another Shapeshifter,* she thought, her mind racing. *But I know that face, those flat blue eyes. He can't change their color, any more than I can my own. Grismonde. Vitry is Grismonde. The last piece of the puzzle. Have I mentioned yet that I really hate it when I'm right?*

“Madame de Palis,” Vitry crooned softly. “I’ve waited for this for a very, very long time.”

“I’ll wager you have,” she said dryly, her dark eyes assessing him with a cool, mathematical precision. “The Bastille changed you a great deal, Vitry. Or perhaps it was simply a long absence from the sheep of Provence that aged you so dramatically.”

He darkened, took a step toward her and struck her, hard. She laughed sardonically, purely to provoke him, and he turned from her with a violent oath. He drew a knife from his boot, but rather than using it on her, he sliced his own palm open, slowly. An attempt at self-mastery through pain, she guessed.

Françoise’s thoughts raced. The fact that he hadn’t killed her, even after that comment, must mean that either he still needed her for something, or he’d planned a spectacularly grisly end for her. Either way, they would have to try to bring her somewhere else. Praying Henri had managed to get close enough to the door to listen, she began to test that theory, the only real hope she had.

“Now that you have me, Vitry, what exactly do you plan to do with me?” she asked him, affecting boredom. The marquis smiled slowly.

“Oh, it’s really exquisite. I’ve outdone myself this time, I think you’ll admit. You see, I really wanted to get my hands on the Heart of Flame, but there are still too many tontine members alive and in the way. Now, however, I can go straight to the Abbé d’Herblay and demand the jewel. I have something to trade for it. You, to be precise.”

Ah, she thought. It makes an odd amount of sense, if you’re insane. Time to make sure Henri knows where to track me down.

“Vitry, that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,”

she sneered. "I'll wager you don't even know where to *find* the Abbé d'Herblay, much less the jewel!"

"The abbé is in Noisy-le-Sec, at the Jesuit convent," Vitry spat. Françoise prayed Henri had been in a position to hear that. "As for the jewel," he continued, "you're quite correct, I don't know where it is. But d'Herblay does, and he'll gladly hand it over to assure a lady's safety."

"Except, of course, that you mean to kill us both afterward."

"Of course. Shall we?" he asked, offering his arm in a rather hideous parody of politesse. "Remember, the pistols will be hidden, but they'll still be there. Scream, or try to escape, and there are five of us to gun you down. Let's go."

Françoise swore mentally, keeping her features carefully neutral. She hadn't managed to keep them there long enough for Henri to have gotten help. *Please, God, don't let him try to rescue me himself!* They opened the door and walked out into the darkened hallway, and Françoise exhaled slowly with relief. Thank God, Henri had decided to be intelligent. They managed to get halfway down the hall when she was forced to sharply revise that estimate.

"Unhand that lady!" his voice came from the doorway of the Galerie d'Or behind them.

"Henri, no!" Françoise screamed, and two of Vitry's men turned and opened fire. A bullet took him full in the stomach, and he clutched at the wound with a sharp cry and sank to his knees. Françoise screamed again, shoved Vitry face-first into the wall and started to run back toward Henri. One of Vitry's men tried to grab her, and she threw him down and crushed his throat with her heel without a trace of remorse.

She reached Henri just as he collapsed, retching in agony. Hastily snatching up his pistol, she raised it and fired at the nearest man, who staggered backward and collapsed in a

bloody heap. Someone else grabbed her from behind. Henri tried to get to his feet, and failed. She cast a spell to slow Henri's bleeding, already knowing there was nothing she could do to Heal the wound. Tears were streaming down her cheeks unnoticed, and Henri looked at her with an odd sort of pity before he lost consciousness.

She kicked out at the next man who came at her and went to throw the one who held her from behind. Too late to shield against it, she felt a spell come from Vitry, and she found herself unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to think. The world swiftly went black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jean hoped against hope that Françoise wasn't pacing anxiously in an anteroom somewhere, gleefully contemplating his demise. He'd only meant to slip away for a few minutes at most, but his mission had taken a bit longer than he'd anticipated. The jealous thought surfaced that d'Orleans had no doubt more than occupied her attention, but he brushed it away, realizing it was unworthy of them both.

L'Hôtel de Ville was considerably less crowded than it had been when he'd left it; it seemed as if the ball was already coming to an end. Court festivities hadn't come to a complete halt with the King's steadily worsening illness, but they had a tendency these days to end early by tacit agreement. Jean swept the Grande Galerie with his eyes, but couldn't find Françoise. She could have left without him, but somehow he didn't think it likely. He wandered through the gallery, waded through the diehards and midnight revelers that tended to take over the King's fêtes after most of the guests had gone home. Françoise was nowhere to be seen, nor was André. Nor was Henri de Bar.

Strange, he thought. *I don't like this. This feels wrong.* Her Eyes were usually omnipresent, and their absence struck Jean as ominous. He started to move faster, started to search the smaller, more private salons surrounding the Grande

Galerie. He stumbled across card games and not a few trysts, but still there was no sign of Françoise or anyone he recognized as hers.

The sudden sharp crack of a pistol shot rang through the air, and the music and the dull murmur of multiple conversations all ground to a sudden, terrified halt. The sounds of a struggle could be clearly heard upstairs, along with a woman's screams. The King's fête dissolved into instant chaos as people shrieked and ran toward the exits, trampling one another in their panic. The guards had to fight to get past them and get up the stairs.

Oh, God, don't let that be Françoise, Jean prayed silently, forcing a path through silk and velvet and sound and panic and bounding up the steps two at a time with his usual recklessness. It didn't occur to him until he'd reached the top of the stairs that he didn't have his pistols on him, and at the moment he didn't particularly care.

Small groups of guards began to form ranks, making their more cautious way upstairs behind him. Jean unsheathed his sword and ran on ahead, not bothering to wait for them. He'd almost reached the corner where the two hallways connected when a hand shot out of a shadowed doorway, grabbed him, and drew him inside. Unable to suppress a gasp of pure shock, Tréville made a wild slash with his rapier and felt a surprisingly strong hand grab his sword arm and force it down.

"It's Sorlin," the other man hissed quickly, and Jean could just make out the eye patch and the sardonic twist of the mouth that would forever mark Sorlin in his mind. Jean released a shaky breath, and the assassin slowly relaxed his grip and let him go. "Sorry to interrupt your headlong flight into danger, but Françoise would never forgive me if I let you get yourself killed. Where are your pistols?"

"I don't have them," Jean whispered impatiently, anxious to get moving again.

"Brilliant. Stay behind me, then." André made his fluid, absolutely silent entrance into the hall, and Jean cast him a heavy glare before he fell in line behind him.

I hate it when the bastard makes sense, the Musketeer thought, some of his humor returning in spite of him. André made it to the bend in the corridor and peered around the corner, letting out a low whistle at the grisly sight of the first corpse on the floor. Jean came up behind him and drew in a sharp breath when he saw it, and the two men exchanged a quick, worried glance before they crept down the corridor to examine the body.

He'd been short, but solidly built, and he was wearing a grimy brown velvet doublet that he'd no doubt assumed would blend in at the ball. Possibly something he'd picked up used in the market in Les Halles, where gentlemen in distress sold their garments for ready cash, and the poor of Paris picked up their raffish and mismatched sartorial splendor.

"A hired man," André murmured.

"There's another one over here," Jean replied. "Dead," he added needlessly; the gaping hole in the man's chest announced that for him.

"Assuming his heart was on the left side of his chest, it would seem so," André shot back with heavy irony.

Jean gave him a low-lidded glare that was pure exasperation. "Let's just check the rest of the hall, shall we?" he said pointedly, tension and worry robbing him of patience. Before he'd gotten another ten feet down the hall, Jean spotted a dark, gleaming, spreading stain on the floor and glanced back to its source.

"Captain de Bar," the Musketeer gasped, and André whirled around and caught sight of him.

“Oh, God,” the assassin murmured faintly, sickened for the first time in his life by the sight of so much blood. “Not de Bar . . .”

“Sorlin . . .” de Bar moaned feebly, struggling to raise his head. Jean and André ran to him, and Jean pressed a hand over the wound to try to slow the bleeding. André fussed with the sash around de Bar’s waist, trying to make a bandage out of it.

“Run, get a doctor, and I’ll stay with him,” Jean snapped. André nodded and was about to comply when de Bar caught his wrist with what strength he had left and stopped him.

“No time . . . for that . . .” Henri wheezed.

“Don’t try to talk right now,” Jean said gently, and the other man cut him off.

“François . . . they’ve taken François . . .”

“Who’s taken François where?” André asked sharply.

“The Marquis de . . . Vitry . . . taking her to the . . . Jesuit convent . . . at Noisy-le-Sec . . . said something about trading her . . . to an abbé, I forget his name . . . for the Heart of Flame. Go, you’ve got to go, now! They’ll kill her . . .”

De Bar fainted again, and Jean and André locked eyes for a few seconds.

“They’ll take her to d’Herblay,” the Musketeer said quietly, dead white. “I can get us there, but de Bar’s as good as dead if we leave him like this.”

Cahusac and a small contingent of Cardinal’s Guards rounded the corner cautiously, sparing them an ugly choice, and André sighed with relief and beckoned them over with a frantic wave of his arm.

“Cahusac, the captain’s been shot,” the assassin snapped. “Get Gules. If anyone will be able to treat this wound without killing de Bar, he will. Don’t let any other doctor near him if you have a choice.”

Cahusac nodded calmly and glanced over his captain's wound. "It looks bad, but I've seen men survive worse," he said.

Jean nodded and looked like he was about to say something noble and comforting, but André grabbed him by the sleeve and started dragging him down the hall.

"We don't have time," André muttered tersely. "Come on." Jean nodded, and they started running down the hall. Behind them they heard Cahusac ordering water, wine, and fresh linens as calmly as he might have ordered a light supper, and sending his adjutant off in search of Gules.

The Musketeer and the assassin flew down the back stairs into the carriage house and started saddling the nearest pair of horses.

"Shouldn't we take a few more men?" Jean asked, frightening off a curious groom with a warning glare. The boy swallowed hard and retreated to the shadows to watch. He wasn't about to try to stop the Captain of the Musketeers by himself, not even if he *was* stealing the prize stallions of Gaston d'Orleans.

"More men would only lead to a shoot-out," André argued, "and Françoise would be the first to die in that scenario. This time, you've got to stop thinking like a soldier and start thinking like an assassin."

Jean bit back his first three replies to that and fastened the last buckle on the saddle's girth. He climbed up onto his borrowed black stallion's back in a single fluid motion, and the horse was apparently so stunned by the impropriety that it forgot to shy. It stood, flared its nostrils, flicked its tail, and tried to glance back at its new rider.

"Come on," the Musketeer muttered tensely, and the assassin bravely tried to equal that performance. It almost worked. After a minute or two he managed to cajole the

nervous animal out of the carriage house with the promise of apples, and they took off down the road for Noisy-le-Sec at a breakneck pace.

They rode for a few miles over windmill-dotted hills in tense, brooding silence, riding hell-for-leather at first, and finally slowing down to a canter to rest the horses for whatever fighting lay ahead of them. Françoise could be dead already, or dying by inches. Anything they said to each other was likely to start them quarreling, and they knew it. They'd managed to come to an uneasy truce over the last few months, but that truce was frequently broken with sharp words.

"How the hell did this happen, anyway?" André finally snapped irritably.

Truce over, I see, Jean thought to himself, grinding his jaw.

"Didn't you take her to the ball?"

"Yes, I did," Jean growled defensively. He blamed himself for the entire mess, but he wasn't about to let Sorlin do the same.

"Well, where were you when she was captured?"

"As a matter of fact, I was picking up her betrothal ring. I was going to propose tonight, now that she's officially out of mourning." His jaw tightened, and his eyes were bleak. They fell silent for a moment, a heavy, uncomfortable silence broken only by the sound of horses' hoofs flying over a moonlit dirt road.

"Damn, I had no idea . . ." André mumbled awkwardly at last. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're absolutely right," Jean said tightly, his voice rough with self-recrimination. "I never should have left her alone."

"Yes, you should have," the other man sighed after a moment. "Françoise is a capable creature. We can't start treating her like a china cup, no matter how much we'd like to."

“For one thing, she’d probably beat us both to a bloody pulp.” Jean smiled in spite of himself.

“Doubtless,” André agreed dryly, and they smirked in one of those odd flashes of male sympathy that tended to surface even in their most violent quarrels.

Of course, Jean thought, those moments invariably have something to do with Françoise. Is it because we’re two men in love with the same woman? I used to be so sure . . . and if I dared to ask, what would he say to me? It would be better to know if he plans to be a problem before I propose to Françoise, but how do I go about asking him subtly?

“Are you in love with her?” he blurted before he could call back the words. He flushed hotly. *Oh, very well done*, he sneered, mentally kicking himself. *If I were any more subtle, I’d hit him over the head with a bag of rocks preparatory to dragging Françoise back to my cave by the hair.*

André laughed lightly, not at all the harsh, mocking laugh Jean had almost grown accustomed to.

“My friend, you have no idea how many years it took me to figure out the answer to that. No, I’m not in love with her. She’s my best friend and the keeper of all my secrets, but I get the feeling love takes something beyond that, something I haven’t found yet, and may not be capable of. A handful of times in our lives we’ve kissed, Françoise and I, and I’ve invariably been assaulted with the same image of the two of us building a leaf-fort together when we were eight years old. And I’ve never once dared to ask afterward, but I’ll wager she was thinking the same thing.”

Jean laughed, as much with relief as with amusement, and André continued.

“When I was younger, I thought that if I had to ask myself whether or not I was in love with her, I couldn’t really be in love with her. That’s a little too facile, though. Finally, she

and I talked about it, the morning after Palis died, when I discovered you'd spent the night. We wondered what would have happened if I'd seduced her first. It didn't take us long to reach the conclusion that we would have absolutely killed each other. We're too much alike, she and I. So, to answer your unspoken question, no, I don't intend to be a problem."

Jean was silent for a moment, chagrined that he'd been seen through that easily.

"Mordieux, I hope Françoise doesn't find me as transparent as you seem to," he muttered at last, but he smiled as he said it.

"Don't worry," the assassin reassured him. "She does."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“The Heart of Flame,” the Marquis de Vitry whispered reverently, admiring the jewel by the light of the Abbé d’Herblay’s heavy silver candelabrum. The enormous, blood red ruby flashed fire as he turned it, considering it from different angles. The dazzling refractions chased each other around the abbé’s small but beautifully appointed boudoir. There was, Françoise noted, a portrait of Richelieu over the fireplace. An odd choice for a man who hadn’t been a Cardinalist, but she was irrationally glad to see Richelieu just then. It helped.

Françoise and d’Herblay had been securely bound to short-backed red velvet armchairs. D’Herblay looked utterly, unassailably calm, even bored, but she could tell from the occasional subtle movement that he was doing the exact same thing she was, taking advantage of their captors’ distraction to work on loosening the knots that bound their hands behind them. So far she’d managed to sacrifice four fingernails with little appreciable success, and she’d have bared her teeth in frustration if she dared show any emotion at all.

The convent walls, as in all places consecrated by the Catholic Church, were tightly warded against the use of Magic, and Françoise was unable to Shift or use any other spell to help her with her bonds. They were rapidly running out of time, and she knew it, and the look she’d exchanged

with d'Herblay told her that he didn't have any more of a working plan than she did at the moment. She turned her attention back to him, trying to guess at the thoughts behind those gorgeous dark eyes as they surveyed the room with seeming indolence.

There was a placid air about d'Herblay that had led opponents to underestimate him long before this, as if no one that beautiful could possibly know one end of a sword from the other. He was the stuff of legend, and had once been known as Aramis, one of the Four Inseparables. Tall and blade-slender with long dark hair and flawless ivory skin, the abbé had sacrificed for God a brilliant career as a Musketeer and a place at court as the lover of the Duchesse de Chevreuse.

Why? Françoise couldn't help but wonder. *What lure is there in this monastic life to have made him give up everything for it?* She felt another fingernail snap as she fumbled at her bindings, and inwardly she cursed in irritation.

"For five long years," Vitry breathed, holding the jewel against his cheek, "I rotted in the Bastille while I thought about the Heart of Flame. I dreamed about it. Lusted after it as I lusted after my revenge."

So shag yourself with the thing already, get it over with, and spare us having to listen to it, Françoise thought irreverently. Richelieu had been right, all those years ago when they'd first met; you might put the girl in silks and give her fine houses, but in the end, she was a peasant gamin with a rough tongue and a love of low company, and that would never change about her. She felt the first, faint loosening of her bonds, and kept her features carefully neutral as she worked.

"And, oh, I lusted after my revenge," Vitry continued, turning his attention to Françoise. He twined a lock of her hair between his fingers, his eyes glazing. Françoise worked more

furiously at her bonds as his hand drifted over her body, came to rest between her legs, started pulling the fabric of her skirt up slowly and with unmistakable intention. Vitry's men were staring avidly, anticipating.

"Go ahead, Vitry," she whispered, a viper's dangerous hiss. "You have to untie me if you plan on raping me. And if you untie me, I'll kill you."

"Monsieur, you gave me your word that you'd let the lady go unharmed," the Abbé d'Herblay said loudly, his calm façade crumbling at last.

"I lied." Vitry shrugged. He laughed, and his men joined him, and the former Musketeer darkened and clenched his jaw.

"You commit this act in a house of God, Marquis, and God will requite it."

"I'll tell you what, Abbé. Let's make this interesting. A wager. You believe in God, and I think God is dead, or at least never troubles to visit Noisy-le-Sec this time of year. So you call on God for help, and I'll stop ravishing the damsel in distress just as soon as God shows up to stop me."

"Perhaps you'd do me the honor of meeting me in the gardens outside with a sword in your hand, monsieur, and I can send you to visit Him," d'Herblay ground out.

Oh, God in Heaven, Françoise thought wildly as the laughter of the other men redoubled. *When he was a Musketeer, d'Herblay was fantastic with a blade. But he's been an abbé for . . . oh, I don't know . . . probably about ten years now. Has he even touched a sword in all that time?*

"I have a better idea," she found herself proclaiming in a clear voice that sliced across their laughter. "Give me a sword, and I'll duel Monsieur le Marquis myself."

The laughter subsided for a moment into stunned silence and resumed again.

"No, madame!" the abbé cried. "I cannot permit that!"

“That decision isn’t yours to make, monsieur,” Françoise said quietly, locking eyes with him. For a moment, they seemed to be the only two people in the room, and the mocking laughter of their captors faded to an insignificant buzz. “The marquis murdered my uncle. Dueling him gives me the only chance of revenge I have left.” Her eyes bored into his, quietly willing him to accept the outrageous. Willing the Musketeer to overrule the abbé.

“I understand, madame, but I would prefer to duel the marquis myself.”

“I’m sure you would, d’Herblay,” Vitry grinned. “I have absolutely no doubt that you’d love to stick a sword in my vitals. But this promises to be so much more amusing.” He turned to Françoise and began to loosen her bonds. “Madame, I accept your unorthodox challenge. But I should warn you . . . I was, in my youth, Captain of the King’s Guards, and many accounted me the best swordsman in France.”

“Perhaps they should have gotten out more,” she said coolly, absolutely unimpressed by his credentials. “Monsieur d’Herblay, could I impose on you for a change of clothes?”

“Of course, madame.” He worked through the last of the bonds on his hands and moved swiftly to free his legs, not even glancing up at his captors to watch their reactions. One of Vitry’s men got restless at that and aimed a pistol at d’Herblay’s temple.

“Go ahead and let him, Perigord,” Vitry muttered absently, still bent on untying Françoise. “The abbé isn’t the one I want to kill tonight. Release him, but watch him carefully and don’t lower that pistol for a second.”

“You only get one shot, Perigord,” d’Herblay said softly, recklessly. “Make it count.”

“I intend to,” Perigord drawled.

Vitry undid the last of the bonds tying Françoise to the

chair, and Françoise assessed the situation coolly. Now wasn't a bad time to make that bid for freedom. Vitry only had two men with him in this room, and two more posted outside the convent to guard against any rescue attempts. She wouldn't have Magic to call on, but neither would Vitry; they were both equally Nulled within the convent's walls. If she could manage to communicate her intentions to d'Herblay without alerting Vitry or his men . . . if she could somehow distract the dangerously alert Perigord, or cause him to misfire that pistol . . . the calculations ran in her head, and she hoped d'Herblay was thinking along the same lines.

D'Herblay crossed the small chamber and dug into one of his chests, found a pair of black breeches and a linen shirt and handed them over to Françoise. Françoise caught his eyes and held them, glancing around the room in an attempt to communicate her intentions. D'Herblay, unfortunately, had no idea she could fight, and was probably holding himself back on her account, not wanting to risk injury to a lady. *As all too often, damn, damn, and again, damn.*

"Gentlemen, perhaps we should leave the lady her privacy?" d'Herblay said to the room at large. "And, if I could have a moment with her, I'd like your leave to give her some basic instruction in swordplay before she has to face Monsieur de Vitry."

"Why not?" The shorter and heavier of Vitry's companions shrugged almost amiably.

"I'll tell you why not," Perigord muttered, his slate gray eyes flickering over toward the window. "That window leads out onto the roof and would give them an easy escape route. Nice try, d'Herblay. If the lady wants to change, let her change in front of us."

Vitry and his other man howled with laughter, and d'Herblay darkened and glared at all of them. Françoise

shrugged and started to undress; whatever the humiliations involved, there was no way she would ever be able to fight Vitry and his men in full court regalia. They'd just done her a series of favors, without realizing it.

D'Herblay politely turned his back on her, but the others watched avidly. *Let them look their fill*, she thought cynically. *It's not as if any of them are going to live beyond tonight.* She watched them all carefully, waiting for her chance, waiting for them to get lost in the striptease. She was careful to hide in the fall of her overskirt the throwing knives she'd strapped inside her garter, and she placed the bundle in a seemingly careless heap on the floor.

"Monsieur L'Abbé, if I could ask another favor of you . . ." she began, seized with a sudden idea and trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Anything, madame," he said graciously.

"I have to assume that this is the gown I'll be buried in. Would you please brush it off for me during the duel? And be especially careful with the overskirt."

"Of course." D'Herblay probably thought it an odd request, but she didn't doubt he would honor it and find her knives there. If she'd been particularly good at throwing them, she would have ended it all that way, but unfortunately she had no talent for knife throwing. "Could miss a sedentary elephant at two paces" was the way André had always put it, and unfortunately he was absolutely right. So she continued to undress, and continued to await her best chance to strike.

"So beautiful, I really do want the pleasure of raping you before I kill you," Vitry murmured. The back of d'Herblay's neck flushed purple, and Françoise schooled her own reaction to boredom. "But I do love the idea of dueling you," he continued. "Perhaps I'll simply cut your beauty away, a piece at a time, and then, before the coup de grace, I'll throw you

down on the ground, and the last thing you'll see, the last thing you'll feel, will be five years' worth of vengeance. Penthesilea died the same way, in the *Iliad*, did you know? Achilles threw her down and raped her on the plains of Troy after he'd delivered the killing blow, a fit ending to their battle."

Françoise affected a yawn as she dressed herself in d'Herblay's clothes.

"I'm sorry, monsieur, were you speaking?" she said, all innocence and politeness. "I'm afraid I was thinking of more interesting amorous encounters, and lost track of what you were saying. Perhaps you'd care to take it up again, from the part where I was beautiful? That much never bores me. Oh, and Penthesilea was never mentioned in the *Iliad*, by the way; that particular legend comes from Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Fall of Troy*. If you're going to threaten me with rape, at least get your literary references untangled."

D'Herblay laughed openly, and Vitry darkened, but neglected to continue the discourse.

When Françoise was finished dressing, d'Herblay took his old rapier from another chest and handed it to her. He'd kept it in perfect condition, and it seemed a good balance for her wrist. She glanced around at their captors, and Perigord was unfortunately watching their every move carefully. She and d'Herblay would have to make their own chances, separately. She'd left him her throwing knives, tucked in her overskirt, and she hoped he'd make good use of them.

"Good luck, madame," d'Herblay whispered, clearly convinced he was really saying good-bye.

"I'll try to do honor to this blade, monsieur," she said. "Thank you, for everything you've managed to do for me."

"I haven't managed to see you safely out of this," he said regretfully.

“I didn’t want you to.” She smiled cryptically, bowing herself off as a man would have done and leading Vitry and Perigord out. The third man stayed to guard the former Musketeer.

Françoise, Vitry, and Perigord went quietly down the stairs and chose a secluded patch of ground behind a high wall in the gardens, just off the central courtyard. In a duel, even a mockery of a duel with a woman, there had to be caution. The King’s edicts were still in force. Perigord took the risk of lighting torches and sticking them between the cracks in the stone walls; there was only a faint sliver of moon tonight, not nearly enough to let them see each other.

Vitry began to warm up for the duel, and Françoise aped what he was doing and feigned nervousness. No sense letting on too soon that she actually knew one end of a sword from the other. Let them think it was all a joke. It would only be that much sweeter when she shoved Aramis’ old rapier into Vitry’s heart.

The glint of her uncle’s ruby ring caught her eye as she tested the balance of her blade. A rush of images assailed and almost overwhelmed her, of the night of his death, of his cold hands pressing the ring into hers, of the vows she’d made on that ring. Of Marguerite, raped, widowed, living in terror of Vitry’s return. Of just how close he’d come to killing André. Françoise let pure hatred flame in her, white hot and cleansing, steeling her for this final act of retribution.

It will be tonight, Uncle, she thought, searing herself for the last time with the full pain of his loss, gathering strength from it. *I will avenge you or join you tonight, as I promised.*

Richelieu’s ruby glistened blood red in the light of the fires and the moon. The long hunt was almost over.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Jean and André edged closer to the convent, crawling behind a thick hedge. From their chosen vantage, they could barely make out a duel about to begin, and it was clear from the flaming red hair that Françoise was one of the combatants. Jean silently thanked his maker that the assassin had decided on the gardens as their best hope of silent entry; it let him see for himself that Françoise was still alive, at least for the moment. He drank in the sight of her, knowing he should take his eyes off her and concentrate on his own position, but failing for the moment.

André paused and held up a hand, and Jean stopped as well. They peered through a rosebush, trying to get a better idea of exactly what they faced.

For the life of them, they could only see one armed guard in the courtyard, a single witness to the duel. That could have been deceptive, but then again, Vitry had no particular reason to fear a rescue attempt. And there could have been more guards inside with the Abbé d'Herblay.

"This is almost too easy," André murmured. "I'm going for the guard."

"Be careful," Jean whispered.

"I'm always careful. And this is one of those rare moments in which my work becomes a genuine pleasure."

They shared a grim smile at that, and the assassin slipped away silently to take care of his man.

Françoise and Vitry stood *en garde* and began, and Jean watched with his heart in his throat. She was good, but the marquis had been unrivaled in his day. Then again, he reminded himself, his day was twenty years ago, and there'd been hard years served in the Bastille since then. Hard years he'd doubtless spent hating Françoise, doubtless dreamed of killing her . . . Jean forced that line of thought to an abrupt halt and paid closer attention to the duel.

For the moment, neither of them was making any significant move; they were testing each other, toying with each other. Françoise held her sword with a light, sure grip, but acted for all the world as if she had no idea what to do with it. And yet none of Vitry's thrusts could seem to connect; they were being parried as if by a miracle.

The marquis' irritation was clearly beginning to build. With a roar of frustration he made a deep lunge *en quarte*, and Françoise slipped her blade swiftly around his and scratched his cheek, and then scratched his other cheek while he paused in shock. She could easily have ended it there, and Jean swore under his breath. *Don't play with him, Françoise*, he silently willed her to hear the unspoken thought. *Even your uncle would have told you that. Just end it as quickly as you can.*

Vitry stepped quickly back *en garde*, touching his cheeks where she'd slashed them and glancing for a moment at the blood on his hand.

"Stupid, baseborn bitch!" he spat, hurling himself into an explosive *fleche* that set Françoise momentarily off balance. She recovered and pierced him through the shoulder with a skilled riposte. Vitry grimaced and raised his sword, placing himself *en garde* again. Jean edged closer to the duel, moving less and less cautiously in his haste to get

himself into a position where he could do Françoise some good.

She and Vitry seemed to be through toying with each other at last, and now they were engaged in deadly earnest. And it looked as if Françoise might actually be having trouble with him. She should have simply put him away when she had the chance, and Jean prayed he'd get the chance to bellow at her for that later.

André had made his way into the courtyard, and he slipped in behind the guard and slit his throat with the consummate ease of a professional. Jean fingered his own throat in unconscious empathy. The guard dropped his pistol and made a rasping gurgle that almost succeeded in becoming a scream, momentarily startling the combatants. They spared a swift glance in the guard's direction, and Vitry managed to slash Françoise's upper arm before she could draw herself back *en garde*.

Jean swore softly to himself. Françoise was cut. At any second, Vitry's blade could find a better spot than her arm. She could die before his eyes, in the space between one breath and the next. He edged closer, closer, moving recklessly fast, not caring.

The sharp snap of a nearby twig brought him back to himself, and he glanced around hastily and clutched his rapier.

"Don't move, monsieur," came the cool voice that froze him in place. Another guard they hadn't counted on. A dark-haired man in stained burgundy velvet cocked a wheellock pistol at him. His smug grin whitened the wide scar across his left cheek. "Drop that rapier and come along quietly; we can keep you with the Abbé d'Herblay and dispose of you both at the same time. And as you're obviously a gentleman," he sneered, "you should be relieved to die in such good company."

Jean bit back a harsh oath, his thoughts racing as he lowered his sword. He wasn't about to leave the gardens; Françoise might need him. The other man was standing about five feet away, far enough that it would be difficult to take him by surprise, but not so far that there was a chance his shot would miss. The Musketeer risked a swift glance at the duel. Vitry seemed to be tiring, and Françoise wasn't giving any quarter; it would be over soon, one way or the other. Jean's rapier was touching the ground, now, but it hadn't yet left his hand.

There would have to be a distraction . . . the old "look behind you" trick never worked anymore, but Jean found himself suddenly trying a variant of it. Glancing at a bush about three feet to his captor's right, he let his eyes widen in seeming surprise, as if he saw someone there. With a very slight nod, he turned back to Vitry's man with a look of cool consideration. The poor fool dropped his guard and lowered his pistol for a fraction of a second while he glanced at the bush behind him, and Jean lunged swiftly and buried his rapier in the idiot's throat. As he did so he caught the silver-white flash of another blade out of the corner of his eye, and he saw the pistol, and a chunk of the hand that had held it, fall on the gravel path with a sickening smack. He looked up quickly when his opponent fell, and his eyes met the calm dark ones of a small, wiry man who looked far too ancient to have delivered such a stroke. Gules raised his sword, grinned fiercely, and managed a sketchy parody of a salute.

"Gules," Jean saluted him a little more breathily than he'd intended, returning the bow and pulling his rapier free of the dying man's throat. "How did you manage to find us?"

"Captain de Bar told me where this . . . Vitry took her, and I followed, Cap, soon as I Healed him," Gules shrugged laconically.

“Did de Bar survive?”

“He’ll be fine. He was lucky enough to survive his own stupidity; let’s go see if we can save Françoise from hers. Where is she?”

“Dueling Vitry in the courtyard over there, and André just killed the single guard that was watching them.”

“Then there’s only Vitry left to worry about?”

“That, and we’ll have to rescue the Abbé d’Herblay. I think they’re holding him inside the convent,” Jean murmured thoughtfully, starting to lead the way into the central courtyard.

“Time enough for that after the comtesse kills Vitry.” Gules shrugged calmly.

“You seem remarkably certain she’ll survive the duel.”

“Of course, Cap.”

Jean relaxed at that a little, but not much. They continued on in silence and joined André at an arch that joined two tall hedges and made a door into the rectangular courtyard. André and Gules nodded to one another as casually as if they were simply meeting one another on the street; the assassin didn’t seem at all surprised to find that the old man had tracked them down. All three quickly turned their attention to the duel.

Françoise had another slashing wound across her thigh, and Vitry had picked up a few more as well, but neither had yet managed to connect with a killing stroke. Sweat was pouring off them both, and Françoise was finally starting to show the effects of exhaustion, giving Vitry an even chance again.

“Jesu, I hate this,” Jean muttered to himself.

“Don’t interfere, no matter how much you want to,” André cautioned him quietly. “It’s a duel of honor, and you’ll ruin everything she’s fought for if you jump in and try to play the hero.”

“I know that,” the Musketeer snarled, and for once he was snarling at the situation and not at André. “I still hate this.”

“Mordieux, she’s still alive,” a voice breathed behind them. They whirled and raised their swords, and the Abbé d’Herblay jumped back hastily and lowered his pistol.

“Aramis!” Jean hissed, relieved. “It’s good to see you; I just wish it was in better circumstances. How did you escape?” he asked, listening with half an ear as he watched Françoise. She was even better than he’d remembered.

“The comtesse had a set of throwing knives hidden in her overskirt, and she asked me to brush off her gown so that she could be buried in it.” The abbé laughed softly. “A truly remarkable woman. I only hope we won’t have to obey the second part of her request.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment, and Jean watched her fighting style out of old habit, even as he dug his nails into his palms with screaming tension. She parried with cool precision, waging a defensive battle and pouncing on each mistake, slowly and patiently wearing her opponent down. It wasn’t a bad fighting style for a woman, who must lack the physical strength of most of her opponents, but was generally faster, and a better tactician.

“Morbleu, a woman who can use a sword,” d’Herblay murmured, shaking his head. “Whatever will God create next?”

“Shut up, d’Herblay,” Jean and André muttered together, tensely.

The duel was slowly dissolving into a fight, savage and ugly, with low animal cunning beginning to replace skill as weariness forced the combatants to increasing desperation. Vitry sacrificed the offensive to draw a dagger from his boot, and Françoise lunged and pierced his right breast, too intent now to settle for artistic strokes. Vitry howled and doubled over, somehow managing to keep his head and his weapons up in spite of the pain.

Françoise took advantage of the moment to run back to the high stone wall and pull out one of the torches. The wound she'd just given Vitry would kill him in a matter of minutes unless he received an immediate Healing, and he had to know that wasn't coming. All Françoise had to do was survive until he had the good taste to fall over. Pulling a torch out of its crevice, she walked back to the center of the courtyard and placed herself *en garde*.

"You want to cheat, Vitry?" she purred dangerously. "All right, we'll cheat. Let's end this."

They were both shaking with exhaustion and the pain of their wounds. Their eyes locked for a long moment, an intimate communication of a hatred beyond anything either had ever felt. Vitry was dead already, and he knew it. Raising his sword and dagger, he threw himself into one last desperate *fleche*, throwing every last ounce of energy and hatred left in his soul into that last attack, thrusting both weapons at her and leaving himself wide open. Mutual annihilation, if he succeeded. She blocked the sword, but the knife connected, slicing just under her ribs. With a grimace, Françoise shoved the torch into his face. The marquis let out an agonized howl and toppled over, clutching his head, and Françoise's final, brutal sword thrust pierced him to the heart. He writhed in agony for several seconds before he stilled, and the fierce, furious hatred in his eyes flickered out with his parting breath. It was done.

Françoise studied the corpse for a moment, her expression unreadable. She swayed dangerously on her feet, and her smoldering torch fell with an echoing clatter on the flagstone as she dropped it. Her friends ran to her, and she sank to her knees, shaking with exhaustion.

Jean pressed her gently down on the ground and smoothed the sweat-damp hair from her brow.

“Jean, you came.” She smiled, her eyes glazed.

“I’d follow you into hell itself if I had to,” he teased softly. “You know that.”

“You fought well, love,” Gules said gruffly, starting to bind her wounds.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, you shouldn’t have let yourself be captured in the first place.”

“I know. Did I see André earlier?” she asked, probably to change the subject, lifting her head off Jean’s lap to look for him.

“I’m the funny-looking one in the patch who’s binding your thigh,” André sang out cheerfully, and Françoise laughed, stopping abruptly when she realized it hurt.

“Just how bad *is* the stomach wound?” she asked, trying to glance down at it. Jean pushed her head gently but insistently back down onto his lap.

“You’ll be happier if you don’t see it, I think,” he said as lightly as he could. It was a deep gash, and she was drenched in her own blood, and he’d seen soldiers go into shock just from looking at wounds like that. Françoise’s hand snuck up to probe at the cut.

“Stop that,” Gules said firmly, smacking her hand away.

“Don’t be ridiculous, it can’t *possibly* be *that* bad,” she snapped irritably. “Stung a bit at first, but fortunately that passed when the searing pain kicked in. But I survived it, and now I’m fine.”

She sprang to her feet before they could stop her, and her legs visibly shook under her and nearly refused to hold her up. Her pride kept her standing, and she swept them a bow with a cheerful smile that looked like it hurt. André rolled his eyes with irritation, lifted her easily, and started carrying her back inside the convent. Jean trotted alongside him, ready to catch Françoise if André stumbled.

“Mademoiselle Pidoux, if you had any idea how many times that pet phrase of yours has filled me with dread over the years, you wouldn’t use it anymore. D’Herblay, where can I put her?” the assassin called over his shoulder.

“There’s a bedroom for travelers on the first floor. Take her there, and I’ll meet you after I’ve finished disposing of the bodies,” the abbé said as calmly as if he did that every night.

“I can walk,” Françoise insisted stubbornly, struggling weakly to right herself and giving up the struggle when she realized she wasn’t going to win it. “Really, I’m fine,” she murmured with the last of her strength, and fainted in André’s arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Françoise opened her eyes slowly, and it took a minute for them to focus. Lifting her head weakly off the pillow, she looked around her. She didn't recognize this place, but she didn't panic; Jean was with her. He'd fallen asleep in a patched brown leather armchair next to her bed, his head slumped over a folio of Corneille.

Warm, hazy sunlight streamed in through a lace-curtained window, gilding a small bedchamber with high oak wainscoting and peeling plaster walls. A drop of sweat rolled down between her breasts, and she suddenly became aware of the damp linen shift someone had slipped her into. The first fully conscious thought she had was a passionate wish for a bath.

Without thinking she flung back the frayed red blanket and tried to spring out of bed with her usual energy, and she gasped at the sharp stabbing pain in her gut and lay down again gingerly. Jean bolted awake at the sound, dropping the folio and clutching at his rapier.

"I always said you and I were going to kill each other," she murmured, her voice edged with the pain she couldn't keep out of it. "This time you've definitely got the upper hand; I don't know where I am, so I'm fairly sure I couldn't have stashed any knives under the pillow."

"You're in the convent's guest room," he said softly,

sitting down on the bed beside her and smoothing back her hair.

“A convent,” Françoise drawled laconically, taking the place in with her eyes. “My uncle always said I’d end up in a convent if I wasn’t careful.” Jean laughed, leaned down and kissed her lightly. “Why, Jean, what *unconventional* behavior,” she drawled. Jean groaned and winced at the truly terrible pun. “Sorry.” She shrugged. “Couldn’t resist.”

“Try, woman, for God’s sake, try,” he grinned, throttling her very gently.

Note for the future, she thought, laughing weakly when she felt his hands on her neck. *Only tell bad puns in languages Jean doesn’t understand.*

Jean stopped throttling her and brushed a lock of hair back from her face, and they fell silent for a moment. He toyed with a diamond ring on the smallest finger of his left hand, and Françoise caught the movement and spotted the ring. *Oh, God, don’t let him be thinking of proposing. No, I say we shall have no more marriages*, she thought a little wildly. *Not again. Never again. I love him, but no more marriages.*

“How long was I unconscious?” she asked him hastily, forestalling any frightening proposal-type thoughts he might be having. He looked chagrined, and she felt a genuine twinge of guilt.

“Only a few hours, I’d guess. I’m not sure what time it is, myself. I should let André know you’re awake, but first I have to ask you something.”

“You’re calling him André, now?” Françoise laughed nervously, cutting him off again, stopping when she realized the laughter hurt a little. “Not ‘Sorlin,’ or ‘that miserable bastard,’ or . . .”

“Yes, I’m calling him André, now,” Jean said hastily, as André opened the door and bounded in.

“It lives!” the aforementioned miserable bastard noted cheerfully, flopping into the brown leather armchair next to the bed.

“Of course it lives. Did you really think you were getting rid of me that easily? Optimist.” She smirked.

“God, it’s good to see you like this,” he said, leaning forward and taking her hand in his. “You had us all scared to death last night.”

Françoise fought a sheepish grin at that. Then, as she felt André’s hand, felt something smooth and cold on one of the fingers, something strange occurred to her. *A ring. That’s a ring he’s wearing. But he hasn’t worn a ring since he lost his family signet . . .*

“André? What’s that on your finger?” She frowned suspiciously, craning her head around to get a better look.

“What? This old thing? It’s a finger corset,” he quipped, clearly enjoying himself. “They’re the latest fashion at court.”

She bolted upright to get a better look at the ring, gasping with the sudden wrenching pain in her gut. André and Jean pushed her gently back down onto the pillows, but not before she saw his family signet back on his finger.

“You found your signet!” she cried, her face splitting into a wide grin.

“Yup,” he confirmed with a shrug and a lopsided answering smile.

“Thank God! I was afraid you’d gone and married one of the nuns while I was unconscious.” André laughed aloud at that, and Françoise took his hand and pulled it close enough that she could see the ring. “How did you ever find it?”

“Vitry must have found it the night he tried to track us, and kept it for future use. He was wearing it when he died. I suppose I should be grateful to him,” he murmured. Françoise shivered a bit, and André pulled the blankets up over her.

"You looted the bodies before you buried them?!" Jean asked incredulously.

"Of course." The assassin shrugged casually.

"Yes, but . . . you *looted* the *bodies* before you buried them!"

"It's easier than looting them after you bury them."

"Yes, but . . . you looted the bodies!"

"Is he always this original?"

"Usually." Françoise smiled. "Bet you ten pistoles he says it again."

"You looted the bodies," Jean murmured obediently. He shook his head as if to clear it.

"We'll need to do a ritual cleansing on that ring, you know," Françoise murmured thoughtfully, studying it.

"I know," André nodded. "Later, when you're up to it. Now, unless I miss my guess, you'll want a bath, food, and a change of clothes, in something like that order."

"Actually, I was just thinking that," Françoise admitted, startled out of her skin. "How did you know?"

"You *always* want a bath, food, and a change of clothes after you're finished facing certain death. Learn this about yourself, woman. I'll go see what I can do to round them up for you." He kissed her hand affectionately and bounded out the door again, and Françoise laughed softly.

"Seriously, Françoise, there's something I've been meaning to ask you . . ." Jean began and was cut off by a polite scratch on the door. He growled in frustration. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" he asked her graciously, kissing her hand and pulling himself up off the bed. Walking calmly to the nearest wall, he pounded his head against it a few times, hard enough to loosen the plaster.

"Better now?" Françoise asked him lightly as soon as he was finished.

“Much better. Ow,” the Musketeer replied placidly. There was another scratch on the door, polite but slightly more insistent.

“Come,” Françoise called, and Gules entered the room. “Good morning, Gules,” she sang cheerfully, struggling to raise herself to a sitting position. Gules hastily crossed the room and pushed his patient firmly but gently back down onto the pillows.

“How do you feel this morning, love? Or should I say this afternoon?” he asked, laying a cool hand on her forehead to check for fever.

“I’m fine, really, thank you,” she replied crisply, knowing that if she didn’t manage to convince him of that, she could well end up spending the next month or two stuck in that lumpy bed. The old man unwrapped the bandage around her right arm and nodded to himself, apparently satisfied with how it was healing. André swept in and slouched comfortably against the doorframe, the living picture of aristocratic indolence.

“Guerite, did I *really* hear you say ‘I’m fine’ again, or was it just my imagination?” the assassin asked.

“I can say it one more time, just so you’ll be certain,” Françoise offered innocently, warming him with a beatific smile.

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” he retorted.

“Weren’t you supposed to be doing something useful, like bringing in a bath?” she inquired dryly, raising a delicate eyebrow.

“All in good time, O Impatient One. D’Herblay said he knew a woman in the village who makes scented soaps, and he’s seeing what he can do to get you one.”

“Hmmm, sounds wonderful,” Françoise purred, wincing in pain as Gules probed at the gash beneath her ribs.

“Your wounds seem to be healing well enough, love,” the old man admitted grudgingly. “I’ll change your bandages after you’ve had your bath, and then you’ll eat, and then you’ll sleep. And then we’ll work on moving you to the inn, where the walls aren’t Warded and I can Heal you properly. And you’ll take at least a week to convalesce there, my girl.”

“I have to get home, Gules,” she growled. “I don’t have time to convalesce in Noisy-le-Sec; I’ve got work to do in Paris.”

“You’ll go home when you can get past *me*, love, and not before. I have no intention of letting you set foot outside Noisy-le-Sec until I know you won’t drop dead for leaving it.” He nodded, agreeing with himself, and folded his arms over his chest for extra emphasis. Françoise’s eyes flashed in angry challenge, but this was one fight she already knew she wasn’t going to win. When Gules was serious about something, he had a habit of thrusting his chin out, and at that moment it was jutting out almost far enough to be mistaken for a peninsula.

Françoise opened her mouth to argue, purely for the sake of stubbornness, and she closed it again when the Abbé d’Herblay scratched on the door and entered. She forced her features into a smile of pained politeness, trying (and failing) to avoid looking like a scalded cat.

“I thank you for your hospitality, monsieur.” Françoise nodded to him, raising herself on her pillows and offering him her hand. “Would you gentlemen excuse us, please?” she asked innocently, availing herself of this God-given opportunity to give her new captors and self-proclaimed doctors the boot. Gules, André, and Jean bowed themselves out, and the abbé kissed her hand and sat in the brown leather chair beside the bed.

“I’m grateful for the opportunity to extend my hospitality, madame, if sorry for the circumstances. I’m also grateful to find you looking so well,” he said smoothly.

“My thanks, monsieur. Did you manage to recover the Heart of Flame?”

“Not yet, madame, and it’s the oddest thing . . . I can’t imagine what could have happened to it. Monsieur de Sorlin helped me to dispose of the bodies after he brought you in, and while I would never accuse a gentleman of looting corpses . . .”

“Of course you wouldn’t, monsieur, being a gentleman yourself,” Françoise cut him off smoothly with a placid smile. *André, you’re an absolute terror, and it’s one of your principal charms*, she saluted him in her thoughts. “I’m sure the bauble was just lost in the gardens during the duel. I myself will vouch for the integrity of the Comte de Sorlin.”

“In that case, madame, it is beyond all question,” d’Herblay said gallantly. He considered her for a second or two before he continued. “You must also allow me to congratulate you on your duel. You were astonishing. I haven’t seen such a flawless defensive style since I duelled a cadet in the Cardinal’s Guards named Biscarrat, some years ago,” he said quietly, favoring her with a calculating gaze.

Half a lifetime at court prevented Françoise from sputtering in shock, but the blood drained from her carefully expressionless face. She fastened on the armor of a pleasant, neutral smile and studied him for a moment, trying to decide just how much trouble d’Herblay intended to be. He knew, and he couldn’t seem to resist telling her he knew.

God save me from the inconvenience of intelligent men, she thought with mild irritation. *Fortunately, there aren’t that many of them. But what to do about this one?*

“You pay me far too great a compliment, monsieur,” Françoise said lightly after a moment, never taking her eyes off his. “All the world reveres the famous Biscarrat. Handsome, reckless, daring, brilliant, the secret dream of every woman in Paris, and quite possibly the best swordsman

in France . . . no, indeed, I would never support such a comparison. Nonetheless I thank you, monsieur, for holding my poor skills to the light of such a flame." Aramis' features lit with subtle amusement, taking her hyperbole exactly as it was intended.

"But, madame, who could help comparing you to the light of the sun itself?" He smiled, twisting the dangerous talk into an idle court flirtation.

"Anyone who saw me in this bed, I fear, in my current unlovely condition."

"Beside your beauty the sun herself pales in her sphere."

"More like 'pales in her fear,' monsieur. Had I only looked like this last night, I could have frightened our captors away." They laughed away the last of the tension between them. "My dear Abbé, your poet's wit deserves a softer whetstone than mine. Again, I thank you for the million kindnesses you've shown me." She smiled, and d'Herblay bowed over her hand, taking it for the dismissal it was.

"Madame, the pleasure is entirely mine. My sword and I will always be at the disposal of the lady I faced death with."

"And I and mine will be at yours."

Their eyes met and held, cementing the alliance, and the abbé left with a final, graceful bow, utterly bemused.

When d'Herblay left, Jean scratched on the door and entered. Françoise smiled at him and raised herself gingerly on her pillows, and he sat down on the bed beside her.

"How do you feel?" he asked her softly, running a gentle finger over her bruised jaw.

"I'm fine, really. Someday I'm going to say that, and someone will actually believe me," she teased him lightly. "It's a dream of mine."

"Would it suffice if I pretended to believe you?"

"It might."

“Listen, Françoise . . . I should probably think of a poetic way to ask you this, but I’m not a poet. I’m a soldier, and I’ll have to hope that simple honesty will serve. You’re free of Antoine, now, and there’s no more reason for us to hide in corners and settle for midnight trysts. I want more of you than that, and I want to be free to love you in honor. I’d meant to ask you last night, after the ball, and when you were captured, I thought I might never get the chance.” He took a slightly shaky breath, pulling the diamond off his finger and offering it to her. “Marry me, Françoise. I want you for my wife.”

Françoise completely forgot to breathe for a moment, torn between honest longing and total, gibbering, mindless panic. She almost rushed into his arms; she almost said yes. But the memory of Antoine still burned in her, of his hands on her, of his endless unsubtle cruelties, of his control. She would not subject herself to that again. No man would own her again.

Cowardice and Love enacted a little morality play in her head, with herself the hapless audience, strung along on the tide of her own patent absurdity. *No man will own you again, or force himself on you again*, Cowardice informed her firmly.

But Jean isn’t Antoine, Love argued. *What he asks is the inevitable, reasonable conclusion of love. It’s just. It’s honorable.*

It’s terrifying, Cowardice answered definitively, and carried the day.

“Jean, I love you desperately, you know that. But I can’t marry you. Anything else you ask of me I’ll gladly give you, but not that. Why can’t we just continue as we are?”

“Because it’s dishonorable, and there’s no reason for it,” he snapped, stung to the quick by her refusal. “Are you tiring of me? Do you want to be rid of me?”

“No! Oh, Jean, no, I swear. I love you, and I think I’d die

if you left me.” She looked away and dug her nails into her palm to try to keep herself from dissolving. “I just can’t marry again. Not after Antoine.” There was a moment’s awkward, devastated silence between them.

Jean’s first visible reaction was anger; he was undoubtedly thinking that he was *nothing* like her first husband, and he was right about that, she knew.

Forcing himself to calmness, Jean took both Françoise’s hands in his. “Marriage doesn’t have to be as terrible as it was with Palis,” he said quietly. “I would never treat you like that.”

“But you’d be in a position to, and that’s what I can’t accept. Antoine *owned* me, Jean. I was a possession to him, like a horse, or a pair of gloves. As most wives are to their husbands. Right now we’re equals, and if I marry you, we won’t be.”

“And you really think I’d abuse my ‘marital rights’? Christ, you don’t know me at all, do you?” he spat, anger and wounded pride finally getting the better of him. “And what makes you think I don’t have that kind of power over you now? I’ve been a favorite of the King for years. A few well-chosen words in his ear, and I could drag you to the altar by the hair, with his blessing,” he said harshly. Françoise pulled away from him, and he caught her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him. “I’ve always had the upper hand, and I’ve never once abused it. But, God, it’s tempting in this case!”

Françoise jerked free of him and tried to climb out of bed. The effort almost made her sick, and she lay back on the pillows and glared at him, panting for breath. Jean was right, and she knew it . . . if he chose to fight her on that ground, she would lose. The only thing she could do was flee the country, and her uncle’s charge to safeguard France made that impossible.

“Go to your precious King, then, for it’s the only way you’ll have me!” she said sullenly at last, turning her face into the pillow. Jean raised himself off the bed, took her hand and kissed it.

“I wish I could do this more gently, Françoise. But I’ll do it however I have to. I love you too much to do anything else.”

A single, mournful bell began to sound outside. Jean looked at Françoise for a long moment, no doubt hoping she’d say something. She remained stubbornly silent, and he finally bowed himself off and left the room. And Françoise unleashed the tears that threatened to suffocate her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

André paced back and forth in the empty foyer, waiting for the door to Françoise's sickroom to open. He'd seen Jean go in, and he knew the man had been planning to propose last night. He also knew Françoise well enough to know she'd refuse him, at least initially. *Eighteen years of marriage to a drooling imbecile haven't done much for the lady's faith in the institution*, the assassin mused wryly. As calmly as ever, he paced, waiting for all hell to break loose.

The small oak door opened and closed again with a slam, and Jean stormed out.

"Dare one ask what happened?" André asked cautiously, fully expecting the other man to bite his head off.

"She refused me!" the Musketeer exploded as predicted. "I made her an honorable offer of marriage, and she refused me! She thinks it's fine for us to keep living as we have been, a stolen evening here, a clever disguise there . . . she thinks I'll turn into another Palis the minute she marries me!" He swore violently and drove his fist into a wall, knocking out a few layers of yellowed plaster.

André was fleetingly reminded of the night Françoise had punched an attic support beam in frustration, and almost taken the house down around them. They'd make a formidable pair, but they'd likely devastate the local architecture.

“Maybe if you just give her some time,” André offered calmly.

“She doesn’t need time, she needs to be forced into this! I’m going to court to present my case, and we’ll see if she can refuse the King’s command as easily as she’s refused my pleas. Which were all COMPLETELY REASONABLE!” Jean bellowed with a fierce, unhappy glower at the sickroom door.

“Oh, obviously,” André said dryly, and fortunately the other man was too distracted at the moment to catch the biting cynicism. “But I’m afraid the King won’t be able to help you, Jean,” he said more gently. “Did you hear the bell ringing outside a few minutes ago?”

The Musketeer turned to look at him, and his face fell in immediate comprehension.

“Oh, God, no,” he whispered, suddenly deathly pale. “It wasn’t Louis. . .”

“A messenger came while you were with Françoise. His Majesty died of his illness last night,” André said gently. “And I doubt the Queen would help you force Françoise into a marriage.”

“She wouldn’t,” Jean admitted bluntly, sinking down onto a plain wooden bench and holding his head in his hands. “Oh, God, I have no hope. And I’ve been a fool; I let my temper get the better of me, and I threatened to drag her to the altar by the hair. Maybe I really am no better than Palis.”

André thought for a moment, studying him. Finally he laughed lightly and with a hint of self-mockery, and Jean looked up at him, frowning.

“If anyone had told me six months ago that I’d be trying to talk my best friend into a marriage with the Captain of the Musketeers, I would have laughed.”

“The feeling was mutual.” Jean smiled wanly in spite of himself.

“You really do love her, don’t you?”

“After everything we’ve been through, you honestly have to ask?”

“All right, I’m going in there. I just hope there’s nothing breakable within her reach,” André muttered, shaking his head. “Because what I have to say to her, she isn’t going to like.”

“However it turns out,” the Musketeer said quietly, “thank you for trying.”

André nodded gruffly, took a deep breath to steel himself for the confrontation, scratched on the door, and walked into the arena.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Françoise hadn't said "Come in," but that had never stopped André a single day in all their lives, she thought, torn between affection and exasperation, as she so often was when it came to André and almost everything he did. She hastily wiped her tears away and raised herself to face him with dignity.

They studied each other for a moment in silence, sizing each other up like opposing generals, and marshaling their arguments like little regiments.

"Over the course of a long friendship," André began to pontificate in the way that had always either charmed Françoise or driven her mad, depending on her mood when he did it, "you and I have called each other a few less-than-flattering things. But I've never called you childish, until today."

"Childish?!" Her eyes flashed anger, and she began to look around her for something more effective to throw than a pillow. *You want childish, I'll show you childish!*

"Childish," he said firmly, folding his arms over his chest. "You can't really think you'll be able to keep the affair a secret forever. Eventually one of you will slip, or someone else will bribe the information out of one of your servants, and you'll be ruined. Why take the risk? And what if there should be a

child? You're only thirty-four; it's still possible. Have you thought about what it will mean to your child to be born with the stigma of illegitimacy? Worse, he'll be the bastard of a baseborn woman who'll be cast out of court at least, and possibly thrown into the Madelonettes!"

"I'm not baseborn," she insisted stubbornly. "My mother was a du Plessis!"

"And your father's a doctor. Let's be realistic, Guerite. You haven't thought this through."

"Yes, I have," she argued gamely. "I've contemplated all these permutations and a fair few you haven't hit yet, and I still don't think they're sufficient reason for marriage. You can't 'practical' me into this one, André. You're the one who mocked the notion that I should whore myself for political gain, and that's all such a marriage would be."

"Françoise, don't be an idiot." André shook his head in exasperation. "This is altogether different. You need this marriage to solidify your place at court. How can you possibly hope to hold the Cardinal's Eyes without the protection of a title? The wife of the Comte de Tréville will be welcomed anywhere at court. The daughter of Louis Pidoux probably won't. If you plan to keep that promise to your uncle, and safeguard the interests of France, you'll need to remarry. If not him, someone else. And I don't think you really want anyone else."

"I don't," she admitted. "But I'm not marrying again for position, titles, power, or security. I'll give myself these things, as best I can."

"How about marrying for love?" he asked her, and she was silent, unable to answer that. "Do you love him enough to trust him? I don't know about you, but I do trust him, in spite of the fact that he was an idiot today."

"When did you two stop hating each other?"

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. I can tell you *why* we stopped hating each other, though. I think each of us realized how much the other cares about you. Now, either you marry that man, or I will,” he said lightly, and she laughed at last.

“The thought of the two of you together has a certain charm,” she said.

“The hell it does.” He grinned. “But it’s got you listening, and you’re not looking for something to throw at me anymore.”

Françoise shot him a low-lidded glare that dissolved into laughter in spite of her efforts to contain it. *My worst weakness*, she thought. *I can be made to laugh my way out of anger, and the bastard’s done it to me again.* Another brief silence fell between them, and this time it was a thoughtful one.

“Do you love him?” he asked her after a moment.

“Yes, but that’s no fit basis for a marriage. I loved Antoine, too, quite desperately as I recall.”

“And if Antoine had loved you back, it might have worked. As it was, he was a complete idiot, so he didn’t, and it didn’t. On the other hand, Jean genuinely loves you, and better still, he loves you for exactly who and what you are. There’s no need to keep the Cardinal’s Eyes, your sorcery, or your nefarious activities as Biscarrat a secret from him. Besides, I can think of a better reason than all of these for getting married.”

“What’s that?”

“If you don’t marry him and become the Comtesse de Tréville, which is an eminently acceptable name, you’ll be stuck answering to ‘Françoise Marguerite Pidoux’ for the rest of your days.”

“A fate worse than death,” Françoise admitted lightly,

somewhere between laughter and tears, and unsure of what to feel.

Jean scratched on the door and entered, and he paused hesitantly in the doorway for a moment. After a few seconds he sat down next to her on the bed and took her hands in his.

“Well, Mademoiselle? Are we getting married, or am I hurling myself under a dray cart in a fit of abject despair?” he asked, his heart in his eyes.

“Dray carts move awfully slowly,” André pointed out ironically. “Wouldn’t you be better off choosing something else, like a . . .”

“Shut up, André,” they cut him off lightly.

“I think it’s time I exeunteu with a flourish.” He grinned. They smiled back at him, and he bowed himself off and closed the sickroom door behind him.

“I’ll only let him suggest a better way if you say no,” Jean said quietly, brushing her hair back from her face. He kissed her at last, and her doubts and fears began to recede in spite of all her efforts to call them back. “I love you. And I want to spend my life with you. But I won’t try to force you.”

Her choice burned clear above the haze of suspicion and hesitation, if she had the courage to make it. *But I’m a miserable coward, I’ll admit it, she thought. Give me a sword and I’m fine, but this takes a different kind of bravery altogether. And I’m not sure I have that kind.*

Looking into his eyes, she found herself remembering the King’s December fête, remembering how she’d felt just watching him from across the room. A dozen other memories assailed her, of the months they’d been together, of his intelligence, his humor, his essential humanity. She loved him. This was right, and she knew it, and her fears began to

seem foolish. She wondered if he was as terrified.

“Yes,” Françoise breathed shakily at last. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” She felt as if the floor had fallen out from under her. But it was the right decision. *So stop trembling already, you idiot!* she snapped at herself impatiently.

“Thank God.” Jean sighed, drawing her into his arms. “I didn’t even have to drag you back to my cave by the hair.”

“Perhaps we should try that sometime.” She laughed and kissed him.

EPILOGUE

Jean and Françoise sat on a dark green velvet settee in Henri de Bar's salon, sipping tea and telling him at last the story of their courtship. The old man hadn't recovered from his wound in time to attend the midsummer wedding; he was ignorant of Magic, and Healing him unnaturally quickly would have been out of the question. But he was finally well enough to start receiving visitors again, and they'd made sure they were among his first.

Françoise wore a loose, flowing dressing gown of painted India cotton that did little to conceal her expanding waistline. She and Jean had been married less than two months, but the child she carried was a fair bit older than that and already starting to show.

"You're both happy, and that's all that matters," he assured them with a romantic sigh when he'd heard the story. "Though you would have given His Eminence an attack of apoplexy."

"I suppose he might not have been too thrilled," Jean admitted, grinning sheepishly at his wife.

"When he discovered you'd gotten Guerite there in the . . . um . . . family way, there would have been a good deal of restrained and elegant fulminating on his part, and a truly

terrible revenge, I have no doubt,” de Bar chuckled warmly, adding more sugar to his tea.

Françoise assessed her husband with wicked, laughing black eyes for a moment before she spoke. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. *Poor man*, she thought.

“But, Henri, I got the worst revenge imaginable,” she purred, slipping an arm around Jean’s waist. “I married him.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In writing the book, the greatest historical liberties I took were with the death of Cardinal Richelieu. His death may well have been the result of several months of systematic poisoning, but he was bedridden for most of that time, and couldn't have made it out to a masked ball. I went for the more dramatic approach as a tip of the hat to Alexandre Dumas, who would likely have done the same. In some of the little details, though, I was faithful. Louis XIII really did enact a touching deathbed scene in which he fed Richelieu raw egg yolks, and was overheard celebrating the cardinal's inevitable demise shortly afterward, with just the words I quoted. The fact that Louis died himself within a matter of months, also a potential victim of poisoning, led me to dream up an elaborate tale of murder and revenge, centered around the baseborn daughter of Cardinal Richelieu's sister, Isabel.

Isabel and her husband, Louis Pidoux, are real historical figures to the best of my knowledge, though they don't tend to be found in contemporary biographies. I discovered them by chance during one of my many lengthy visits to the fantastic New York Public Library, and I've long since forgotten where to accredit the finding. There was no mention of Isabel and Louis' children, if any, but it seems to me that if they did exist, they would have been first-draft recruits for Cardinal Richelieu's superb spy network.

Tréville, Henri de Bar, and the Marquis de Vitry are actual historical figures as well, and I've taken the sorts of liberties with them that Dumas was prone to. A lot of my color characters were lifted from the pages of Dumas himself in affectionate tribute, and I owe the greatest creative debt of all to him.

The coffee scene, my favorite, was a remote historical possibility. Coffee first started making its way into Paris in the early 1640s, but tended to be the exclusive province of the wealthy and slightly eccentric, or those with connections to trading vessels that did business as far as Constantinople and the Levant. It didn't become a mainstay of the general populace until an enterprising Turkish trader named Pascal had the idea of opening a coffee booth in the Saint Germain Fair in 1672. It was an overnight sensation, and has remained a staple of Parisian life ever since. Pam Ficarella and I downed many cups of over-sweetened coffee ourselves while we tweaked that scene.

If you're a fan of Dumas or the period, or enjoy what you read here, drop me a line at jakidemarest@yahoo.com, because I'd love to hear from you.

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It takes all the strength of Mordred's tortured soul to convince Lir to aid him on his quest to save humanity. For the blood of all Norse flows through Lir's steely veins, including that of Odin's battle maidens, the Valkyries.

Together at last, the two sail across dangerous seas, discovering a new continent where Mordred seeks what he needs to defeat his nemesis, Vlad. The task is daunting. Plagued by the most wicked of temptations, Mordred finally gives in to weakness and finds himself a victim of the Spanish Inquisition. Once again, he is forced to reconcile the evil that men do with that of his creator. Once again, he must question his own existence, and the once clear vision of his quest blurs and wavers.

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Charles W. Sasser

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The DRT comes under attack not only from savage denizens of the Dark Planet, but also from the mysterious Presence, which turns team member against team member and all against Kadar San. The Presence promises untold wealth and power to any member of the team unscrupulous enough to unleash the contents of a Pandora's box-like remnant of Indowy technology. The box's possessor poses a greater threat than the entire Blob nation, for he is capable of releasing untold horrors upon the galaxy.

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Unbeknownst to Veil, Corvus, an apparently invincible fighter, is searching for a clue to his past. Cutting a bloody swath across the Empire, now humbled by the Khaev invasion, he seeks only to know who he is.

On the other side of the continent, Kei and her partner reluctantly join a mission to hunt down a rogue sorcerer. The mission is led by an eccentric noble with a penchant for getting everyone around her killed. Kei's misgivings only increase when she's introduced to their erstwhile ally, the shadow spirit Jyo-raku. But she is duty bound to obey her commander.

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