

THE
MAZARINETTE
AND THE
MUSKETEER

Heather Rose Jones

Harpy Publications

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ISBN: 1-942794-03-7

ISBN-13: 978-1-942794-03-5

If revised, this edition is 1.0

For Renay, because she asked for it

Historic Note: This story takes place in the year 1678. I have taken a great temporal liberty in moving the events of Julie d'Aubigny's life ten years earlier than they actually occurred. I hope this will be forgiven for the sake of allowing her to participate in this adventure.

CHAPTER ONE

If it weren't for the wager, Julie d'Aubigny would never have contemplated the mad scheme. And that was saying a great deal, for Julie had not merely considered, but engaged in many a mad scheme in her fifteen years.

"I can," she cried, emphasizing the claim with a feint toward Sérannes' shoulder, "and I will!" She finished with a complex pass and a triumphant touch.

He saluted her victory with an infuriating grin. "Your father may have taught you to ride and to fence and to shoot, but nothing—not even your noble lover's influence—could put you in the uniform of the Musketeers of the Guard. That you are a girl is only the greatest of the bars. You haven't the letters of recommendation nor the income. It isn't enough to

flourish a sword prettily!”

If any other man but the fencing master had smirked at her in that fashion, she would have challenged him on the instant. Sérannes did it only to goad her into mistakes.

“And how certain are you that I would fail?” Julie asked with what she knew to be a winning smile. It had won her the adoration of the Comte d’Armagnac, but she was uncertain of its efficacy on her current opponent.

Sérannes turned serious. “I had the great honor to train under the late Captain d’Artagnan, the greatest of the Musketeers. I do not take such matters lightly.” A hint of the smile returned, not a smirk this time but a challenge. “Let us say that I am certain enough that you may name the forfeit.”

Julie pretended to think carefully. “Before the end of the year, you will see me in the uniform of a Musketeer. If I succeed, you will give me an ebony walking stick with a silver head and ferrule and blue silk ribbons.”

“Quite a wager,” Sérannes said with a bow. “But now I name the forfeit if you lose.” He leaned closely and whispered a demand that should have put her to the blush.

Julie grinned back. Sérannes was handsome enough that she had been contemplating something of the sort, but she would be damned if he would win it from her as a concession. “Done!”

“And how do you plan to go about this scheme?” Sérannes asked.

“Why, the same way the great Captain d’Artagnan did: I will fight a duel with every Musketeer I encounter until they cannot help but reward my skill.”

Sérannes laughed loudly and long. “And how many Musketeers do you think you will encounter hidden away here at the Comte’s chateau in Val-d’Oise? You may as well

pay your forfeit now.”

CHAPTER TWO

Hortense Mancini lay back against the pillows, twining her finger in the curling golden love-lock that dangled in her face as Anne Lennard leaned over her, her lips pursed into a sweet bow, looking eminently kissable. Hortense tugged gently on the golden curl and drew Anne's face closer to suit action to thought.

"When may I see you again?" Anne asked, when lips had drunk their fill and she had settled into the curve of Hortense's arm.

Hortense looked into those adoring eyes—she so loved to be adored, and Anne had offered the entirety of her young heart—and said, "Why tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, if you like. His Majesty is from town for a week and I needn't wait upon his call."

Anne made a moue of distaste and sat up. "You needn't remind me that I have only scraps of your time."

"*Cara mia*," Hortense chided her, "what would you have me do? I am the king's mistress until he should discard me, as he did de K rouaille before me, and your mother before her. And if I were not, I would not be here in England to make love to you."

She traced a finger down the curve of Anne's back. The thin linen of her chemise stuck damply in the sweltering heat of a London summer. Anne turned, holding her index finger up as if to begin a scold, but Hortense grinned and tapped their fingers together.

"*En garde*," she challenged and they rolled across the bed, finger-fencing until they both slid to the floor, laughing until they could scarcely breathe.

Anne leapt to her feet and kilted up her chemise with her left hand while still extending her finger in Hortense's direction. Now they dueled in earnest, shrieking and chasing around the bed until Hortense cornered Anne in the window seat and leaned forward to claim another kiss.

"Do you yield?" she asked.

"Never!" Anne protested, while twining her arms around Hortense's waist. "I want another match. With real swords this time!"

"What? Here in the halls of Saint James's Palace?"

Anne looked back toward the window and pointed. "In the park. Out under the trees where it's shady and the grass is soft."

Hortense turned toward the dressing room to go call her maid, but Anne seized her by the hand and pulled her, laughing, toward the door.

"What, now? Like this?" Hortense asked.

Anne's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Yes!"

The servants in the palace were accustomed to scandalous goings on, so the sight of Hortense Mancini, Duchesse Mazarine and Anne Lennard, Countess of Sussex dashing along the corridors with mad whoops, wearing nothing but their chemises, and snatching up two dueling swords on their way, was not considered worthy of comment. Nor—given the place’s reputation—were those persons taking the air in Saint James’s Park apt to be shocked as the two women squared off in position between two of the stately trees that lined the Mall. Indeed, a number of wagers were made and spectators urged the ladies to yet more energetic efforts until at last the duchesse was declared victor among cheers and laughter.

#

The Earl of Sussex, when word came to him of his young wife’s exploits, was somewhat less given to laughter. Thomas Lennard was well aware that he owed both his title and his wife’s generous dowry to the convenient morals of her mother, Lady Castlemaine. That did not mean that he was required to excuse similar morals within his own household. And knowing Lady Castlemaine’s rather decided opinions on the woman—Anne’s lover—who now held Castlemaine’s previous position of *maitresse en titre* to the king, the Earl considered the matter safely dealt with by sending his wife under strong guard to her mother’s keeping in Paris, where she was installed as a guest in the convent at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

#

Hortense knew better than to carry her woes to the king. Charles might have great affection for his former mistress’s daughter, but it was unlikely that affection would extend to sanctioning her affair with his current mistress. She was wild with worry—wild enough to give no thought

for her present position. Was this love? What would she know of love? She had known marriage and jealousy and passion and pleasure. But Anne...oh, Anne! She knew she could not rest until she had seen Anne again and knew that all was well.

Out of the depths of memory came the face of dear, beloved Sidonie. Sidonie who had been her companion and her comfort and her reason for living in that dreadful first year of her marriage. Sidonie who had been sent away, leaving her bereft. Sidonie, whom she had never seen again.

Hortense knew what it was to be snatched away from the glittering world of the court and imprisoned subject to a jealous husband's whims. In two years, she herself had gone from being one of the celebrated *Mazarinettes*, the beautiful and sought-after nieces of the powerful Cardinal Mazarin, to being the terrified wife of a madman who felt neither affection nor gratitude for the title and inheritance she had brought him. If Mazarin had lived, he would never have allowed her to be so treated! In those dark days, Sidonie had been her only light. And now, for Anne, she might be that light in return.

"Marthe! Have you made arrangements for the horses? Where is my old trunk?"

The maid grumbled and pointed to the battered leather chest by the bed. "Though what you want with that thing I couldn't say, my lady. I never thought we'd be riding by dark out of London the same way we rode in!"

Hortense knelt by the small trunk and opened the lid. Yes, it was still there, carried with her through the years like treasure. She held up the dark blue cassock with its silver braid and, nestled below it, the broad-brimmed feather-trimmed hat. The white feathers were somewhat worse for wear, but they would do. Underneath were the

clothes she had worn in her furtive flight from France three years before, fearing her husband's agents at every step.

Who—knowing only the beautiful Duchesse Mazarine—would have looked beyond the man's clothing she wore? That disguise would be necessary again, when she ventured into France. Armand still had the power under law to interfere with her movements, and she didn't dare the waste of time or the attention it would take to call on influential friends there.

Hortense lifted up the cassock—that dashing uniform of her uncle's Musketeers—that was a memory of a long ago day. She and her sisters had ridden out in Uncle's company playfully dressed with the uniform of his guard over their riding skirts. The Cardinal's Musketeers had passed to the king after his death, but she still knew officers who would forgive her use of the old costume to keep herself safe on her travels.

And to her ensemble, she added a sword. Not the blunted practice blade she had carried that fateful day in the park with Anne, but a bright weapon.

“Marthe, come help me dress, then put on your own breeches and we'll be off.”

It was a long road to Paris: a road and a ship and another road. But Anne would be at the other end.

CHAPTER THREE

Aphra Behn turned the letter over in her hand without breaking the seal then looked sharply at the messenger. It had arrived at her lodgings with a single name as the inscription: Astrea. The last time she had seen that code-name she had been grateful to take up her old profession when the new one of playwright seemed to be failing. This time, the sight was unwelcome.

“What is he about? I have plays to write! Four productions in the last year. And I still haven’t been paid the last of my expenses for my services in Antwerp two years past.”

The man stood impassive and gestured to the letter.

With a sigh, Aphra broke the seal and unfolded the

message, fetching a candlestick to better make out the words.

There is an errand I must entrust only to one in whom I have perfect faith. It may be that a woman's touch will be essential in the matter. Come to N___ Street in the morning to receive instructions.

“Bah!” Aphra folded the paper up again and tucked it inside her bodice under the strap of her stays. “Why are you still waiting?”

The messenger hesitated. “But will you come? What may I report?”

“Yes, yes, of course I’ll come. For love of king and country and all that. I’d rather serve them both with my pen instead of these old bones. Tell him—” She sighed heavily. “Tell him I expect funds for proper travel this time. In advance.”

#

She hadn’t expected *him* to meet her in the morning, and yet there he was, tall and charming and raven-haired. She curtsied deeply. They were past the pretense that she might refuse the undertaking.

“Your Majesty, how may I serve you?”

King Charles struck a pose, knowing the effectiveness of the appearance he made from his elegant stockinged leg to the lace-trimmed tricorne atop his curls. “My Astrea! My dear beloved spy!”

The effusive praise continued for several minutes and Aphra began an accounting in her mind of just how badly he must need her services. She glanced over at the second figure in the room. She knew him only by the code name *Silvius*—the name he’d used several years back in correspondence with her in Antwerp. It was not entirely a happy memory but this time she was far less desperate.

His Majesty concluded his speech, nodded to Silvius, and took his leave. The specifics of the assignment had, as yet, not been touched on.

When the door had been closed once more and only the two of them remained, Silvius began, “You are familiar with the ambassador to France, Ralph Montagu?”

Aphra nodded warily. Montagu was quite above her touch, being tasked with managing high matters at King Louis’s court. Her own work had been more rough and tumble among the English exiles in the Low Countries.

“There are some...letters Montagu has carried for the king in the past. Letters His Majesty would like to see returned or destroyed, concerning certain negotiations with the French king, and most especially concerning negotiations about the Lady Mary.” He danced around the topic for quite some time without precisely indicating the content of those letters.

There was no need to hear it in as many words. At one time, King Charles had hoped to make a match between the Dauphin Louis and his niece and had, no doubt, made many promises to that end. If he had put to paper his opposition to the marriage Lord Danby had championed—the one to William of Orange celebrated half a year past—those words would smolder like a squib of damp powder until, when least expected, the whole matter would blow apart.

“And where am I to find Master Montagu?” Aphra asked when it was clear no further details on her quarry would be forthcoming. “Is he in Paris?”

“Presumably,” Silvius said. “There is a rumor that he has been paying court these past months to Lady Castlemaine who is at present residing there. When you arrive in Paris, your contacts there will be able to provide further information.”

But if that were so, Aphra thought, then why in heaven's name couldn't Lady Castlemaine retrieve his letters? Surely His Majesty had only to suggest the matter and his former mistress would be happy to assist.

#

Charles had, for once, been true to his word, though the swift transport had been arranged for her alone.

“And what of my maid?” Aphra had asked the paymaster. “And I asked for one or two stout men to see us safe on the road.”

The man looked up from his accounts and gazed at her blankly. “Perhaps you'd like a coach with six white horses? And a company of soldiers to ride before and behind? My instructions were to set you on the road to Paris. Nothing about no maids.”

It was Antwerp all over again. Scrimp and save and make do and in the end bare thanks. Assuming the mission succeeded. But the roads were good and the sea calm and there was a public coach from Calais to Amiens to Beauvais and on toward Paris. And so Aphra found herself a surprisingly small number of days later breaking her journey, just after crossing the Oise, at an inn in Beaumont late one fine summer afternoon.

The innkeeper, Dubois, was a morose man who scowled out over the new arrivals in the yard with the air of one who believed every new coach would bring disaster. Having long experience of such establishments, Aphra hurried inside to determine whether any private rooms were to be had. King Charles's advance payment might not extend to the comfort of a traveling companion, but it was generous enough for that luxury.

Madame Dubois was considerably more voluble than her husband, though little less pessimistic. Yes, the

English Madame could have the small room to the left of the stairs that looked out over the yard. It had been claimed previously by a cadet of the Black Musketeers who was just now leaving. She led the way up and Aphra claimed the room with her traveling cloak before returning down to the yard to oversee the unloading of the luggage.

As she waited for her own small trunk to be unearthed, Aphra watched the bright-uniformed figure of her room's previous inhabitant swing up into the saddle of his jet-black steed. He shouted a command back to the servant struggling with the reins of a baggage horse in addition to his own. There was something oddly familiar about the officer, something in the way he moved...

Her rumination was cut short by the arrival of another rider through the gate into the yard—a youth dressed in the height of fashion with gleaming black riding boots rising to disappear under the full skirts of an emerald-green *justacorps*, his head topped with a tricorne of the same bright color. He seemed young to be traveling alone and had the ill manners to crowd the Musketeer's pack horse in passing, sending the normally phlegmatic animal prancing sideways, and ending in a confusion of tangled reins and shouting.

"You clumsy wretch! You villain! Mind how you go!" the Musketeer shouted.

The boy turned...no, *was* it a boy? Aphra had spent far too much time watching romantic comedies on the stage not to miss certain signs in the fit of the coat and the line of the face. Most would not look beyond the clothing.

The girl—for, yes, it was indeed a girl—turned and shouted back, "Keep your spavined plough-horse out of my way!"

There seemed no reason for the altercation other than deliberate provocation, for the newcomer was clearly

in the wrong. Aphra was torn between amusement and anxiety as the Musketeer returned insult for insult and the other arriving guests nervously exited the yard for the greater safety of the common room.

“You insolent pup!” came the soldier’s clear high tenor. “You ignorant bumpkin! I’ll have your apology before I ride another step!”

“You’ll have no apology but the taste of my blade!” the girl cried.

The Musketeer looked around the yard at the watching faces, either eagerly or apprehensively anticipating the clash of swords. No doubt he was weighing the conflicting costs to his honor in refusing a challenge or trouncing an impudent child.

“Then I will meet you at dawn on the morrow on the grounds of the old chateau.” The Musketeer gestured toward the crumbling ruin that Aphra had seen as the coach approached the inn.

Aphra retrieved her trunk and gave a few coins to a stableboy to bring it up to her room, sparing a last glance over her shoulder at the arrangements being made for the next day’s challenge. Pray God the soldier realized who he fought before tragedy struck, no matter what the provocation.

She was washing off the dust of the road as well as she might when a loud knocking sounded on the door. Thanks be there had been a bar to fasten across it if she had to deal with such intrusions.

“Who’s there? One moment, if you will!” She put on her jacket once more and fastened it hastily before unbarring and opening the door.

Madame Dubois was shadowed by the figure of the Musketeer. Damn! This had been his room and now he would be staying another night.

“I beg your pardon,” Madame Dubois said, without any hint of apology to her voice, “but Monsieur Delaporte requires your removal.”

It was just on the tip of her tongue to argue that she had already paid good coin for the chamber when the blue uniformed figure stepped out of the darkness of the corridor and swept his hat off with an apologetic flourish.

Swept *her* hat off.

Clothing couldn't fool Aphra's eyes as easily as it fooled most, but the elegant pointed moustaches and bit of a beard had led her astray until she was close enough to see them for the fakery they were. No wonder something in the Musketeer's movements had seemed familiar! And as *she* looked up from the slight bow, her eyes widened in recognition.

Aphra suppressed a laugh and turned to the innkeeper. “I believe Monsieur Delaporte and I can discuss this in private and come to a mutual accommodation.”

With the door closed on any witnesses, Aphra made a small curtsy and said, “My lady, Duchesse Mazarine! You had me fooled at a distance. But if I may be allowed the liberty, perhaps you will allow me to adjust your beard?”

Hortense's hand flew up to her chin and she looked wildly around for a glass. “Oh dear! Is it that obvious?”

“No, no, I think you have them all quite fooled. Even that pretty little girl you will be crossing swords with in the morning.”

“That...?”

And then they both dissolved in helpless laughter until, supporting each other from collapsing, they staggered to sit on the edge of the bed to gain their breath. They found their tongues only when a knock on the door

was revealed to be Hortense's servant Marthe, struggling under the burden of Hortense's luggage. Marthe's male disguise gave her no excuse to demand the assistance of the stable boys that Aphra had enjoyed.

"Whatever shall we do about the room?" Hortense asked, once that confusion had been sorted out. "I hate to turn you out, but I can't sleep with the men in the general *dormoir*! It's simply impossible."

"Then I'll sacrifice my reputation on the altar of my comfort," Aphra replied. "For I care less for what our host may think than I care for retaining this room. Unless —" She ventured a sly smile. "—you have an objection to sharing my bed?" She patted the coverlet between them to divert the implication.

"We could tell them we are dear old friends," Hortense said with a wink. "Shall we go down?"

Aphra stood and in a no nonsense tone said, "First we must fix your beard. What in heaven's name do you have it stuck on with?"

As Hortense couldn't speak while her beard was being adjusted, Aphra waited until the task was complete to inquire, "Do you really intend to cross swords with that poor child tomorrow?"

"I must, I suppose." There was a touch of apprehension in Hortense's voice. "The honor of the Musketeers and all that! I couldn't very well put on the uniform and then be seen to refuse a challenge! And it's clear someone needs to teach her some caution. That insult was carefully planned. I'd love to know what she was about."

Marthe turned from where she'd been returning Hortense's elements of disguise to their case. "Perhaps she's grown weary of life and wishes to end it gloriously on the point of your sword."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Aphra said. “No one grows that weary of life at the age of fifteen!”

Marthe only looked meaningfully at her mistress and harumphed.

“Well I promise you I won’t hurt her,” Hortense said.

“Then you know how to use that thing?” Aphra gestured toward the sword cast carelessly on the bed.

“I most certainly do!” But then Hortense slumped a little and sighed, “Though perhaps it would have been better if I didn’t. You heard about the little affair in Saint James's Park?”

“I’ve heard of many affairs in Saint James's Park, but it’s beyond me to sort out the doings of the court too closely.”

“Why, the Countess of Sussex and I fought a duel there in our chemises! It was quite a scandal—and that’s saying a great deal.” Her voice now had a crisp brittle tone that belied the lightness of her words. “And now dear Anne has been packed off to a convent near Paris and I’ve come to rescue her.”

Aphra stored that information away with the secrets she was tracking. The Countess of Sussex’s mother was none other than Barbara Castlemaine. And it was Barbara Castlemaine that Ralph Montagu had lately been paying court to. Might there be some common purpose to be had here? But though Hortense Mancini shared His Majesty’s bed, that didn’t mean she shared his state secrets. Better she kept her counsel.

With Hortense presentably masculine once more, they trooped down to the common room to inform the innkeeper of their arrangement and bespeak dinner. Aphra endured the snickers and ribald jests of the other diners, thinking it a fair trade for the company, as Hortense laid an

arm intimately across her shoulders to support their tale, and explained what a delight it had been to be reunited with her dear old friend.

CHAPTER FOUR

Captain Peyron d'Aure looked down at the blue and silver uniform of a Musketeer of the Guard, laid out brushed, cleaned, and waiting. "Thank you, Marguerite. I know we'd hoped to have more time together." Already there was a sweet longing for this small stone cottage, with its bright fire on the hearth and chickens in the narrow yard in the back. It was so far, both in distance and concerns, from the court. It was theirs alone—a private space where they could make a life together. Some day. But Jacques was waiting outside with the horses. It was time.

The captain's wife leaned into a close embrace, hiding her tears. "It isn't fair, Peyron."

"I am always under command, and I must go."

D'Aure felt for the packet of orders nestled safe in

a coat pocket. A delicate mission. One involving both secrecy and diplomacy. Certain letters between King Louis and the English king that had been thought to be safe or destroyed.

It wouldn't have mattered if matters had gone forward as planned. If the English princess had been betrothed to the Dauphin with all the other agreements attached to that. But the woman who, at present, was the heir to England had been snapped up by the Protestant House of Orange and the English king, her uncle, must pretend to have approved from the start. And now those letters from King Louis, making certain offers, were a liability for both their nations.

And the letters, it seemed, were still in the keeping of their go-between: the English ambassador, Ralph Montagu. After all his reports and summaries and coded messages had been sent, he had kept the original missives. Carelessness? A thought to use them in future for his master's advantage or his own? It didn't matter. What mattered was that Montagu was now considered unreliable. King Louis wanted his correspondence destroyed and had tasked one of his trusted officers to see it done, quietly and without incident.

"Marguerite, I must go," the captain repeated, but made no move to break the embrace.

The woman lifted her tear-stained face. "Why can't I live in Paris? Then you would come home to me more often."

D'Aure sighed. "We've talked it over again and again. Better you should be here, in Cavigny, quiet and forgotten in case..."

"In case some day you *don't* come home," Marguerite said fiercely.

"We always knew the risks. We always know my

position might some day bring me wounds that can't be brushed away or treated in private. Some day, some strange physician or an undertaker may have need to strip my body bare and discover what we've kept secret all these years." D'Aure left that image hanging between them. "And on that day I wouldn't want your grief turned to public spectacle and mockery. A few more years, just a few. And then my pension can keep us both in quiet retirement here."

"I know," Marguerite sniffed. "I know, but it's so hard to see you leave each time. Now go, quickly, before I make a fool of myself again."

Marguerite crossed to the bed to fetch the braided cassock and lift it over her husband's head, settling the folds in place. The baldric and sword were next, across the shoulder. She stroked the somewhat bedraggled feathers on the hat before setting it in place. One last kiss for luck and love.

"Now go."

#

It wasn't quite such a long road to Paris. One long day's travel to cross the Oise at Beaumont, then an easy ride the next day to reach Paris and wind through the maze of streets to the Musketeers' barracks. Then there would be further instructions on Montagu's location and movements. Once Montagu had been found, all that was left was to puzzle out how best the ambassador's luggage might be searched without making the matter an affair of state.

The long and lingering farewell had delayed Captain d'Aure's start long enough that hunger would have called a stop even if distance hadn't. The inn at Beaumont served adequate fare, though nothing that could compare to Marguerite's.

But it seemed there was one more gate to pass before that meal. As the road curved around the side of the old ruined chateau just south of the river, it was blocked by a foppish young man on a high-spirited bay horse who seemed to have nothing better to do with his day than to stand athwart the rutted path in a manner that would have posed quite a hazard to wagons and coaches if any had still been traveling at this hour.

D'Aure could, of course, have turned aside. There was room at the edge of the road to pass, even without stepping off onto the grassy verge. But such puppyish arrogance was hardly to be rewarded.

When the distance had closed enough that there was no possible excuse for the boy's recalcitrance, Captain d'Aure called out, "If you mean to do wool-gathering, I suggest you join your flock in the field yonder," pointing to the scattering of sheep at one edge of the chateau's lawn.

"Do you take me for s shepherd? For a rustic?" the boy retorted with haughty pride.

"I take you for a lack-wit who knows no better than to rest his horse in the middle of the highway." The captain cultivated a world-weary tone that suggested there were better things to do than pick a quarrel on this fine evening, though it was clear this young fop had decided to amuse himself by seeking fights.

"I will rest my horse where I choose and stand where I please!" he said. "And not take orders from one whose feather droops like a limp reed."

Now there he had gone too far.

"Do you find fault with my feather?" the captain asked slowly, recalling the vision of Marguerite's fingers smoothing it into place.

"It is a fine feather. A worthy feather, I am sure, in the way of birds. But I find fault with its curl."

So. It was to be a duel, then. It was, perhaps, not the worst affliction that came with being a King's Musketeer. But the stories and legends had greatly inflated the value of picking fights with a member of the company as a means of establishing a reputation. Hot temper and touchy pride were not at all the same thing as courage and daring. Yet one must meet the challenge, for the honor of the Guard.

"Bold words," the captain returned, "from one who has barely fledged himself! But perhaps you could do with a lesson that will curl your own feathers."

The captain's sword was drawn a few inches to make the threat clear. Such an obvious sign was scarcely necessary.

"I take that challenge!" the boy said. "And I will meet you here on the morrow," gesturing toward the grassy lawn, "so that you may be fresh for our meeting. I would not want to take advantage of an old man when he's tired."

Captain d'Aure smiled grimly and nodded. Did it never occur to these young pups just how it was that one succeeded in growing old in the king's service?

As the conversation had progressed, the horses had circled each other in such a way that neither need seem to give way in order to continue on their journey. Well, it would be scarcely any delay in the morning to handle the matter and still make Paris well before mid-afternoon.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hortense and Aphra had no sooner finished a platter of roasted ham and a ragout of duck and commenced upon a bit of good cheese, when a voice at the door called out, "Is everyone in this misbegotten town gone mad? Some fop of a boy accosted me in the town square! Said he didn't care for the curl of my feather and demanded to cross swords with me in the morning. Innkeep! A bottle of your finest!"

Hortense exchanged a curious glance with Aphra. Perhaps the guess about the child's self-destructive wish was not far off.

But then they heard Madame Dubois's voice suggesting, "Here is your wine, and perhaps you'd like to share it with your comrade, Monsieur Delaporte in the

corner there?”

Hortense’s heart jumped at the loud mention of her *nom de guerre* and she fought down a feeling of panic as the man came over, set his bottle down on the table between them, and stared intently at her in suspicion.

The Musketeer had a seamed, careworn, sun-burnt face that carried the weight of battles witnessed, though mostly won. The dashing moustaches that seemed a uniform of the company were nowhere in evidence, but as if to make up for it a profusion of long hair lay lankly about his shoulders with the dirt and sweat of the road. It was a face that Hortense remembered well from among the Musketeers of her uncle’s company. She relaxed, knowing they both had their secrets to keep. Not that she would dream of being so cruel as to betray...his. Yes, even in her own thoughts it must always remain “his.”

“Good evening Lieutenant d’Aure, or...I see by the insignia, it is Captain now.”

In a voice too quiet to be heard beyond their table in the noise of the inn, but full of menace, he said, “Now I would have thought that I knew the faces of every man of the Musketeers. And I find it strange that one as fresh-faced as you should be wearing a cut of uniform that has not been issued for a number of years. So how is it that you come to know my name and face?”

Hortense lowered her voice to match his. “I was given this uniform by Mazarin himself, two years before he died,” she said. “And you yourself were present at the ceremony. I recall you well. How is dear Marguerite?”

D’Aure’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, then flew open wide in startled recognition. In the same low, intent voice as before he said, “Madame la duchesse, how may I serve you?”

“So you do remember,” Hortense said with a nod.

“We were quite dashing, were we not, my sisters and I? But you mustn’t call me that here. If it came to the ears of my pig of a husband that I’m in France...”

“And so you travel in disguise, as before,” the Musketeer said. “But to what end? Are you fleeing your royal lover?”

“No,” Hortense said with a shrug. “There would never be any reason to flee Charles. He has no antipathy. He merely grows bored and moves on. No, it is for love that I’ve come. To rescue a fair maiden from the clutches of a dragon. But tell me, so you too have been challenged by that impertinent child?”

“Dear God yes,” the captain said, shaking his head slowly. “One encounters them every few months. They’ve heard the daring tales of yesteryear and think it takes no more to join the Musketeers than to impress us with their flourishes and footwork. And you as well? You needn’t fear I’ll murder the boy before you have a chance to meet him. You always did have a very pretty way with a blade yourself.”

Hortense smiled. “It’s rather the other way around. I have the first meeting. But I promise to leave the child as unscathed as may be for your lessoning.”

“Have you forgotten,” Aphra interposed, “that this ‘child’ you speak of is a girl?”

Captain d’Aure looked startled, then rolled his eyes to the heavens, exclaiming, “Sweet Mother of God, the both of you? My dear Monsieur Delaporte, I could wish there weren’t quite so many people running about who provide a reason to question what lies beneath their clothing!”

Hortense glanced quickly at Aphra, but if the playwright had heard any deeper meaning beneath their banter, she chose to remain in ignorance.

#

They called for more of the ham and more wine and finished both bottles between them, though failing to uphold the reputation of the Musketeers for late and drunken carousal. When the second bottle was empty, Hortense turned to Aphra and suggested, “The day has been long. Shall we seek our bed?”

She was amused to see the other woman blushing. And, recalling the rumors that had been whispered about Mistress Behn, it occurred to her that the story of being old and dear friends need not be entirely a fiction after all.

No, indeed. As the next few hours passed, they found themselves well on the way to becoming old and dear friends of the closest sort.

CHAPTER SIX

Julie d'Aubigny rose fresh-faced well before dawn and dressed herself once again in her riding suit of emerald green. She had been a month on her quest to encounter a Musketeer to impress with her sword-work, riding out from d'Armagnac's chateau to haunt the roads that led to Paris. It was quite annoying to be limited to half a day's ride, and she had lost an entire week when d'Armagnac himself was in residence and expected her to dance attendance and sing to entertain him. It wasn't that the delights of being a Comte's mistress had palled, but only that she itched for new challenges. If he came to visit more often, she might well grow bored of him before he did of her.

And now she'd had a wealth of success. Two

challenges in one morning! In the thin light she preened before her glass, admiring the trim fit of her *justacorps*, the line of her shapely legs encased in black leather, and the way her chestnut hair tumbled in careful confusion from under her befeathered tricorn. Yes, she was a very fine figure indeed! She slung the sword-belt over her shoulder and went down to the yard where a groom had her horse waiting.

“Would you like me to accompany you, Madame?” he asked in a bored tone that anticipated her answer.

As always, she refused. She didn’t need the Comte’s servants trailing after her and spoiling her fun by carrying tales back to him. D’Armagnac could be so stuffy at times.

She’d set her heart on staging the duels on the grassy lawn within the ruined walls of the old chateau when first she’d seen it. She imagined herself striking a pose, leaping from rock to rock on the tumbled walls as blades clashed and sparked. Yes, it suited her vision perfectly.

The others were there before her, which was no wonder as they needed only to walk the hundred feet or so from the inn. And there they were: the two Musketeers in their bright blue cassocks, each attended by a dour servant. Julie frowned in annoyance at the sight of the lady who stood with them. The handful of spectators from among the denizens of the inn could be ignored. But by the way the lady hung on the arm of the younger Musketeer, she must be a sweetheart, and no doubt would shriek and swoon at the threat of bloodshed. It was such an inconvenience at times to be of the sex associated with such creatures. Julie could not imagine any circumstance that would lead her to shriek or swoon. Not even deep wounds.

At that thought, for the first time, a worm of

doubt crept in. The older Musketeer was scowling in her direction with the air of one who wished to have done with the matter. But it was good to have two duels to fight. Then neither of her opponents would have the opportunity to deny the meeting if...no, when she prevailed against them.

The lady approached her first. Not a *fine* lady. She was dressed like a bourgeoisie in sober russet and gray. Julie thought that such an elegant Musketeer should have higher standards for his mistress.

The woman spoke in what were meant to be soothing tones. “Child, child, what are you about? There’s no need for this. They—” She gestured back toward the waiting Musketeers. “They cannot withdraw. They have the honor of the corps to uphold. But you—you could make an end to this without the need for blood to be spilled. A girl like you has nothing to prove.”

“So you set a woman’s honor at naught?” Julie demanded. How dare she think to scold!

The woman’s expression turned sharp. “I think a woman’s honor doesn’t rest in provoking a false quarrel in order to strut about with a sword. Now I ask you once more. Will you render your apology to these men and we can part as friends?”

Julie looked across the small lawn once more at the bright blue, silver-braided uniforms and imagined herself in that garb. This was what Sérannes had said she could never aspire to. It would never be hers simply for the asking. She would need to claim their admiration with her skill. “I stand by my challenge.”

The lady gave her a pitying look and returned to the others, shaking her head.

Julie’s first opponent came forward: a shortish man, barely taller than herself, with a soft rounded face. He

raised his blade in a salute that spoke of ordered drills, with little flair or flourish. Perhaps he thought this a mere exercise. She would show him differently.

Their blades tapped and rang together, testing each other. He moved cautiously, conservatively, but he expertly countered her attempts to bring his blade off the line. They circled slowly on the grass. This wasn't the exciting battle she'd hoped for. Julie wavered between thinking she'd sounded out the extent of his skills and worrying that he was merely biding his time, considering her no true opponent.

To test the former, she threw out a few clever movements that Sérannes had taught her: showy tricks, but easily recovered from. He backed a step, scrambling to beat off her blade. Julie pressed her advantage. They fought in earnest now, blades clashing in quick succession, their bodies crossing back and forth across the field. If he had underestimated her at first, now he knew what he faced.

And then, inexplicably, the Musketeer stepped back and gave a salute of defeat, saying, "I acknowledge your skills are greater than mine. Clearly an apology is owed for my supreme clumsiness in allowing my servant to place his horse within an inn yard in the precise spot through which you desired to ride."

Julie was certain she was being mocked, but it was in all points of precision an apology and she could not well refuse it. Having accepted the surrender, she stood, breathing heavily, in the center of the small lawn as the two Musketeers conferred in whispers and the taller man came out to face her.

This man had the true bearing of a soldier. His salute was crisp with no wasted effort, and when she acknowledged it, he attacked energetically, giving her no chance to explore his skills. Julie cursed herself for having

had the bad luck to engage the less experienced man first. This one had learned all her tricks before she'd had any change to see his.

Now she was the one forced to retreat, dodging across the lawn and leaping atop the ruined walls to meet his blade. In her imagination, such moves had been full of *éclat* and *panache*. There was nothing left of showy flourishes now; she scrambled up and down the broken stones to dodge the Musketeer's relentless advance.

Having at last taken his measure, Julie found her balance once more and threw her heart into the fight. She couldn't win by dogged skill alone, nor by theatrical tricks. Yet her guard was sound and soon she advanced almost as often as she retreated, looking for an opening. There, at last, too long a lunge, a space of opportunity. She moved to close...and found the Musketeer's blade touching her gently just above the heart. She froze and lowered her sword loosely to her side.

"Well fought, Captain," she said. She realized that such praise might sound insulting coming from her mouth. "I grant you are far superior to me, and that I was very much in the wrong to have taken offense at the curl of your feathers."

He held his threat still against her breast, his eyes boring into her in place of his blade. And then, in one smooth movement, he drew back and sheathed it. "You have a certain skill," he said gruffly. "And more boldness than most. It's a pity those qualities are wasted on a girl."

"And why should they be wasted?" she protested. "I could be as good a Musketeer as any!"

He shook his head, but there was an air of sympathy now. "You could, if we lived in a different world than the one that was given to us. Go home. Find another dream."

Julie watched as the Musketeers and their attendants returned in the direction of the inn and the crowd of spectators drifted away.

No, she would *not* return home. If she had been beaten in the second fight, she had prevailed in the first. She would prove herself, they'd see.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anne Lennard, Countess of Sussex, stared at the small painted portrait that hung from a golden chain at her throat. She sighed and did her best to manage a small, pretty tear at the corner of one eye.

Tears had been easier to accomplish that first week after Thomas had dragged her away from London, scolding and sermonizing. And for what? Nothing more than a silly bit of fun in the park.

It had similarly been easy to manage tears when she had arrived at her mother's *hôtel* in Paris. Barbara, Duchess Castlemaine, was terrifying enough when she was in a good mood. And she had been very, very displeased to hear the story behind Anne's sudden journey to join her in Paris.

"After all I have worked and arranged for you? To

see you well married? And you would throw it all away to carry on with that...that Italian whore!"

Barbara Castlemaine had a most convenient memory when it came to the activities that might earn Duchesse Mazarine the title of whore. For if to be the official mistress of the king of England was to be a whore, she herself had earned the title many long years ago, well before Anne's birth.

But Barbara Castlemaine was not one to allow a point of philosophy to interfere with a towering rage. And her quarrel with Hortense Mancini was less Hortense's present position with King Charles and more that Hortense had succeeded Barbara herself in that position. A philosophical man might object that Hortense had technically supplanted the hated Louise de Kerouaille, and therefore might be considered to have earned Barbara's gratitude. But Barbara Castlemaine, as has been said, was not one to allow philosophy to impede her anger.

"I have worked and schemed and pleaded for you, and you throw it all away! I wouldn't blame Sussex if he had entirely washed his hands of you. Why else would he send you here to me? But you may be sure I will do my best to see the two of you reconciled."

And with that she had set to work.

#

During the week that Anne stayed with her mother in Paris, she had spent her days sitting at the window, gazing tearfully at the miniature portrait of Hortense. She soon found that these theatrics had no effect on her mother, who wasted no time in making other arrangements for her lodging.

It seemed it was not convenient to have a beautiful young woman—however much that beauty might at

present be marred by reddened and puffy eyes—always underfoot when one was engaging in a new flirtation. Ralph Montagu, the ambassador to the court of France, was charming and gallant. He was also somewhat easily distracted. And given that he spent nearly every day at Castlemaine's *hôtel*, and had very generously turned his hand to distracting and amusing the mournful Countess of Sussex, it was clear to the Duchess Castlemaine that other arrangements would need to be made as quickly as possible.

And so Anne found herself deposited in the guest rooms at the convent of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, while her mother set about preparing for a trip to London where she meant to smooth Sussex's ruffled feathers.

Anne found the sisters to be a far less congenial audience for her sorrow. The studied contemplation of objects of devotion was an expected practice in the convent. And if the object of Anne's devotion had raven locks, a long aristocratic nose, and a pale rose-touched bosom, rather than involving the agonies of the crucifixion, that contemplation still produced suitable pangs of sorrow, and so the nuns left her alone.

Other than the misery of Hortense's absence, the convent was not so bad a place—far preferable to living with her mother. The gardens were pleasant to walk in. And when the charm of the simple convent fare began to pall, there were dinner invitations from Ambassador Montagu who, it seemed, had taken lodgings nearby, and was more than happy to return to the task of amusing her.

"I have promised Lady Castlemaine to watch over you," he said over a delicate fricassee of oysters.

If Anne disbelieved that he had made any such arrangement with her mother, she accepted his attentions as her due. "I'm pleased to have such a friend as you," she

replied, turning a wan and appealing face to him in gratitude.

He smiled and raised her hand to his lips—only a friendly gesture, surely! A man who had been paying court to the great Barbara Castlemaine would not shift his affections so quickly or so lightly.

When his carriage returned her to the convent at the end of the evening, Anne brushed aside the scolding of the nuns, saying, “He’s a dear friend of my mother. What could be the harm?” It wasn’t as if she, herself, were cloistered, after all.

The day came when she laughed at one of Montagu’s jokes. A week passed when she only remembered to gaze on Hortense’s portrait at waking and before sleep. And then a day came when she forgot to look at it at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When the duels were concluded, Hortense returned to the inn to gather her belongings and take the road once more, as the others scattered to their own errands.

The young swordswoman left, sulking, either to return home or perhaps to seek out other Musketeers who might be more amenable to being impressed by her skills. Aphra had left shortly after, when the public coach came through. Captain d'Aure had set off for Paris directly from the ruined chateau.

Her own road lay differently from theirs, heading west and south, along the course of the Oise, to the convent at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine along the lower reaches of the Seine.

Hortense was no more than an hour out on that road before she became aware that she had a companion other than loyal Marthe, guiding the pack horse at her side. Not that the roads were deserted—that was why it had taken so long to notice—but most other riders quickly overtook their easy pace. Not this one.

Hortense told Marthe to make a pretense of checking for a stone in her horse's shoe and kept an eye on the distant rider, who also halted with no such excuse.

"Wait here," she instructed and spurred her horse back in the direction they had come.

Mademoiselle d'Aubigny looked somewhat sheepish when she had closed the distance.

"Now what are you doing here?" Hortense demanded. "Don't you have a mother and father waiting for you at home?"

"No," Julie replied with a toss of her head. "Only the Comte d'Armagnac, and he won't be there to miss me for weeks yet."

Hortense jumped to an entirely accurate conclusion regarding Julie's relationship to the absent *comte*. "Well you can't follow me," she scolded. "I have business to be about."

"Let me join you," Julie said eagerly. "I can help."

"No, you can't. It's a delicate personal matter, and you'd be a cat among the pigeons for certain."

"I'll challenge you again! I'll make you take me along."

Hortense was far too well-bred to roll her eyes so she only stared.

"I beat you once. I can do it again," Julie insisted.

Now Hortense did cast her eyes to heaven. "Such dramatics! Have you ever considered a life on the stage?"

Julie would not be dissuaded. "I just might. I have a

very pretty singing voice. But first I've set my heart on joining the Musketeers, and so I will prove myself to you with whatever service you require."

Hortense gave the matter a moment's thought. Depending on just how well hemmed-about dear Anne was at the convent, it might be useful to have a stranger as a go-between. More useful to have one dressed as a young woman than as a young man. Perhaps something could be arranged there.

"Very well," she said. "Attend me."

It was clear that Julie had been prepared to engage in further arguments for she gaped for a moment before gathering up the reins to follow.

#

They settled it that Julie was to be a younger brother, and so it was that Henri and Jules Delaporte took lodgings at an inn in Conflans, a scant few blocks from the grounds of the convent. This had first required a very awkward confession, when Hortense suggested a few changes to the girl's deportment to better play the part of a boy.

"And what would you know about such things?" Julie said with a toss of her head. "I can pass well enough!"

They had paused to let the horses rest and drink at a small stream a short distance off the road. Hortense looked back to see that none of the other travelers had taken note of them. She unbuttoned the top of her waistcoat a short ways and—before Julie could question what she was about—took the girl's hand and thrust it under her shirt.

Julie gaped at her, nearly speechless for once.

"Now will you believe I might know something of how to masquerade as a man?"

"I...I didn't..."

Hortense allowed a few moments to pass before she said, "If you don't mean to do something more interesting with that hand, you might remove it now."

Julie recovered her composure quickly as Hortense re-buttoned her clothing and let Marthe arrange her neckcloth once more.

"But you...the Captain...how did you...who?"

"I would advise you to keep your eyes more open and your mouth more shut," Hortense said. "As to who I am, that is nothing you need to know for now. Captain d'Aure was quite aware of my disguise which is clearly more than I can say for you. Now let me fix your coat and hair in a way that doesn't announce to the world that you're a wild and shameless girl."

#

And so, after Henri and Jules Delaporte had secured rooms, and while Marthe set their room to rights and went about ordering a supper, Hortense led her companion off on a leisurely stroll past the grounds of the convent to discuss the errand that had brought her.

It was not at all unusual for a convent like that at Conflans to lodge an array of guests who had no thought for the veil. Girls being kept safely locked away until a suitable marriage could be arranged. Well-off widows who wished to lead a quiet life and not be bothered with the tedium of running a household. And, on occasion, a wayward wife, placed there much against her will, to separate her from some scandal that went beyond what a husband was willing to endure.

The freedom to come and go depended entirely on the purpose of that residence and the desires of the one who made donations for the keeping. So it was that Hortense expected that the Countess of Sussex would be shut away in an upper chamber, with locks and bars

between her and the world. She explained all this to Julie as they passed with studied casualness by the gates of the convent.

“And so this lady,” she continued, “has been abducted and held against her will...or so I believe.”

“And you have come to rescue her!” Julie interrupted eagerly.

“If that is her desire.” Hortense doubted that Anne would choose to carry such a scheme out to the end. She would have had time to think. To reflect on all the absurdities and impossibilities of their position. But one thing Hortense had determined. “At the very least, I wish to determine that the lady is well, and safe, and has no need of rescuing.”

“Is she...” Julie seemed to be finding discretion at last, but a romantic excitement tinged her voice. “Is she your lover?”

Hortense smiled and nodded. “She is my beloved.”

The thought seemed to settle comfortably into the girl’s understanding. Indeed, if she had been a habitu e of the French court, she could hardly be innocent about such things.

They studied the imposing edifice before them and Julie’s mind was quick to strike on the most ridiculous of plans. “Do you see those vines in the angle of the building? We could climb them to the roof and then make our way along until the proper window was achieved.”

“Perhaps *you* could do so,” Hortense countered. “And if you didn’t break your foolish neck, what then? I doubt Anne would open her window to a strange young man tapping in the middle of the night. You couldn’t do it by daylight. Anyone passing here would see you. And how would you know which window to choose? I was thinking instead we would dress you up in a nice gown and say that

you've brought a message from Anne's mother. Marthe will accompany you in disguise, for a waiting woman wouldn't bring such a message alone. I think you could carry off the role if you tried."

Julie scowled. "I'd rather climb the vine."

Having strolled along the walls of the convent grounds until the main buildings had fallen out of view, they turned and returned as they had come. And as they came in view of the entrance again, a carriage approached and was let through those gates. They were close enough to see through the wrought iron bars as a footman let down the steps and opened the door to hand down a lady dressed in a gown of yellow satin.

Hortense's heart caught. "Anne," she breathed.

She watched as the Countess of Sussex had her hand caught up to be kissed by the man who had followed her from the carriage. And then a cluster of scowling nuns surrounded Anne and hustled her into the building.

The stylishly dressed man stepped back into the carriage and it lurched forward, turning out the gate to pass by the two of them where they stood riveted. Hortense felt a moment's panic until she remembered her disguise, for the face that leaned out of the carriage window, gazing incuriously on the Musketeer and his young companion, was that of Ralph Montagu, the English ambassador to the court of France. The man at whose invitation, Hortense had traveled to the English court just three years past.

CHAPTER NINE

Captain d'Aure spent no more than one night in lodgings at the Pont Rouge, hard by the barracks of the Musketeers. The orders that had commanded a return to Paris were now supplemented with information on Montagu's current whereabouts and a more detailed description of the documents to be retrieved.

The utmost discretion...diplomacy...the shifts of power at the English court. There was a great deal about the variety of events that must not be allowed to happen during this mission, and very little about how it was to be accomplished. D'Aure was familiar with orders of this type. If it came to the worst, there would be denials, and astonishment that the instructions had been so badly misinterpreted.

It seemed Montagu had taken a house at Conflans, some short distance outside of Paris, for the purposes of pursuing an intrigue of the romantic sort. That could be an advantage if the ambassador were sufficiently distracted, a disadvantage if it meant he had secured the lady's affections and settled into a period of domesticity. The prospect of secretly rummaging through papers with the lovers in bed not two doors away was unappealing as well as dangerous.

D'Aure did not travel entirely incognito, but the distinctive uniform of a Musketeer was hidden away in Jacques's saddlebags, along with other necessities for an excursion of uncertain duration. A room was secured at a convenient distance from Montagu's house, the latter being a small compound that had belonged to a merchant in previous years, overlooking the river near the old watchtower. There was a small tavern with outdoor tables situated nearby where a watch could be kept on comings and goings, and d'Aure settled in to spend the next several days in determining the rhythms and habits of Montagu's life.

The ambassador enjoyed regular messengers coming from the direction of Paris. That was no surprise. Their arrivals seemed limited to one in mid-morning and another in late afternoon, with departures occurring shortly enough later that either the business was of insufficient import for the messenger to wait on a response or of such urgency that it was attended to immediately. The expressions of the messengers and the condition of the horses did not suggest the latter.

There were three men who carried themselves with a martial air who took turns lounging near the entrance to the small courtyard, but the gates to that yard were only locked for the night once Montagu's carriage had made its

second daily excursion. Once in mid afternoon, just after the second messenger had departed, once near dusk. And though the ambassador himself traveled out on both occasions, it was clear that the purpose was the retrieval and delivery of the lady that d'Aure glimpsed briefly alighting within the courtyard, only to be quickly whisked inside the house.

It was unclear how far Montagu's seduction had progressed. The lady never stayed past dark, but that might only be for appearances. On the third day, d'Aure followed the afternoon excursion on horseback, keeping to an easy ambling pace and leaving enough distance to defray suspicion.

The horse proved to have been entirely unnecessary. Montagu's carriage traveled no more than a mile before turning in at the gates of the Convent Sainte-Honorine. D'Aure was less surprised than might be expected. A married woman or a widow wishing to indulge in an affair might well pay for lodgings at such a place to retain the illusion of respectability. But what did shock d'Aure was the youth of the lady involved, glimpsed at last in the moments when she passed from the convent's doors to the waiting carriage. She might easily have been a girl still waiting for her parents to arrange her marriage, except that she dressed as a married woman, and one of rank at that. And an unmarried girl would never have been allowed excursions of this sort.

D'Aure continued on past the gates after that one close examination. It might be useful to determine the lady's identity but that failed to balance the risk of Montagu taking note of the same face appearing too often and too coincidentally crossing his path. No, this was enough information to devise a plan of action. And both to take the time to devise that plan, and to give plausibility

to having set off on horseback, the captain continued beyond the convent for a leisurely country ride.

CHAPTER TEN

Mistress Aphra Behn had never been to Paris before, but though she was a stranger to that city, she was no stranger to the experience of making her way through unfamiliar streets to make contact with an agent she had never met. Though the details might be different from Surinam to Amsterdam to Paris, she had long since outworn any trepidation at the prospect before her.

This was, in many ways, more comfortable and familiar than the labyrinth of the English court. No one would pay much attention to a drab foreign woman with an indistinct accent who took lodgings in the Rue Sainte Claire and then left a message with a certain clerk before retiring to a particular coffee house to await instructions.

“Madame Astrea.”

The contact slid onto the opposite bench and regarded her critically. Aphra nodded, then answered with the counter-sign. The preliminaries being complete, the man slid a folded paper across the table to her. It provided directions to an inn located in the village of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

“The subject of your assignment has taken a residence near the inn. You will know the place by the indicated design carved on the gateposts.” He pointed to a drawing at the bottom of the paper. “We have placed a man within the house on the kitchen staff. His name is Bertrand. He will provide you with information on the... on your subject’s movements and the arrangement of the house, but he knows nothing of the nature of the papers you seek. Are there questions?”

Aphra had many, many questions, but none that her contact would be able to answer. “Where is the rest of it?” she said.

“The rest?”

She sighed inwardly. “I was told you would be supplying additional funds and papers that would identify me as the wife of a merchant doing business here in Paris.”

“Ah yes, the papers,” he said and rummaged in a pouch until he produced them.

“And the funds?”

“I was told nothing of funds.”

He was lying. Aphra had seen the same trick many times before. He hoped to pocket what had been entrusted to him. This time, she wasn’t trapped in a foreign city with no recourse.

“I have sufficient money to return to England and nothing more. If your masters want this thing done, I’ll need enough to make the trip to Conflans and pay my lodging and board, as well as whatever bribes will no doubt

be required to gain entrance to my subject's residence. But if you were told nothing of any additional funds, then I conclude your masters have changed their minds regarding the mission and I will make my way home. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

She pushed her bench back and stood. It was not difficult to be convincing.

"Perhaps...perhaps I had forgotten. Yes, there was something about possible expenses. Ten livres as I recall?"

What did he take her for? "That would barely pay the fare to Conflans and back. Thirty livres." Aphra felt like she was haggling over a cut of beef at the market.

The man drew out a purse and began counting out coins. "I fear I have only twenty on me. But as you say you have some remaining funds for the journey, present me with an accounting of any overage on your return and it will be made up."

Aphra scooped up the coins and slipped them into the pocket under her skirts. Twenty was what she'd estimated she'd need in the first place and she knew better than to rely on any promise of later payment. "One more detail. When I have retrieved the items in question, should they be destroyed or returned to you?"

"I leave that to your discretion. It may be necessary to destroy them in order to avoid...further difficulties. But be certain of what you retrieve."

#

The additional payment allowed for the small luxury of hiring a carriage to deliver her to Conflans. Having deposited her scant luggage at the inn, there seemed no reason to delay contact with Bertrand. The guard at the gate directed her to a door opening at the side of the small courtyard where an inquiry for "my cousin Bertrand" gained entrance.

A harried-looking man in a cook's apron met her in the corridor. "Madame Astrea?" he asked, checking back over his shoulder. "There is no time for the news of home just now. The master is entertaining and until the lady is returned home to the convent I haven't a moment to spare."

To punctuate this, there was a bellow of, "Bertrand!" from the kitchen beyond.

But something he had said had struck at Aphra's memory and she plucked at his sleeve. "To the convent? Who is this lady he entertains?"

Bertrand shrugged. "Some English countess, how should I know? Sussex I think they said. I'll come to you at the inn this evening. We can speak privately." And with that he was off.

The Countess of Sussex—the very lady that Hortense Mancini, Duchesse Mazarine had said she was traveling to see. Here in the very house where she needed to gain entrance. And that most likely meant that Hortense was lodged somewhere here in Conflans as well. Might it be worth the risk of contacting her again and revealing some small part of her mission?

The men idling in the yard let her out the gate with only a cursory glance and Aphra crossed the open square back toward the inn, lost in thought. As she passed by a man in worn riding clothes, nursing his ale at one of the outside tables, he tipped back his broad-brimmed hat, nudged a chair out in her direction, and said, "Why Mistress Behn, whatever has brought you to see the sights of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine?"

Aphra froze only long enough for recognition to sink in. She nodded in greeting and sat down in the offered chair as if her entire purpose in coming to France had been this meeting. "My dear Captain d'Aure, I might ask

you the very same thing.”

#

Swordplay had never been one of the skills Aphra had considered taking up, but she was quite skilled in the verbal form of the game. The tricks and flourishes with a blade that she'd seen young Julie d'Aubigny employ in her bout with d'Aure found their equivalent in wordplay over the course of the next few hours, and to somewhat better effect. They danced around their purposes and goals, each knowing the other was dancing, and they came to take a pleasure in the dance itself, apart from the matter of lives and kings and ruin that hung over the conversation. Somehow, within that duel of wits, they circled gradually to a place of trust.

It helped, Aphra thought, that it had been Charles's secret treaties with Louis that were under consideration, and not some matter where the two came into conflict. One thing she had become certain of was that Captain d'Aure's loyalty belonged entirely and unreservedly to his king. And if she could not always say the same of hers, it made no difference in the matter at hand.

Shedding all pretense and misdirection, she pitched her voice low so as not to carry and said, “Ambassador Montagu has in his possession certain letters between my king and yours that would be better...lost. I have been tasked to see that this happens.”

D'Aure nodded. It was clear that her words had only provided confirmation of what the captain had suspected. “It seems we have been given similar instructions. And you, at least, have an entry to the house.”

“We may have more than that,” Aphra noted, and explained the matter of the Countess of Sussex and the history that lay behind her presence. “But I haven't yet puzzled out how to bring that to our advantage,” she

concluded.

As if a cue had been given on the stage, the gates of Montagu's house opened and a carriage rolled out in the direction of the convent. Afternoon had spun toward evening as they talked, with nothing to count the passage of time but the regular presence of the innkeeper's daughter inquiring if more wine or ale were required.

"My contact," Aphra said urgently. "He'll be meeting me here. Best we weren't seen together."

The captain rose and gave an ironic little bow. "Then I'll take myself off. Perhaps I'll make the time to discover where my fellow Musketeer, Monsieur Delaporte is staying."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Anne, Countess of Sussex was beginning to realize that she'd made a mistake. Oh, no doubt she had made many mistakes—although she refused to consider that Hortense had been one of them, despite the consequences. But Montagu...he had definitely been a mistake.

It had seemed innocent at first. He was her mother's lover! Why, that almost made him like a father to her. She recalled uncomfortably that Hortense was her father's lover and somehow that had never seemed important at the time. No, she wouldn't think about Hortense, even though she still wore the locket with her portrait. But Montagu had steadily become more persistent. The flattery and amusing talk that had distracted her in her exile had grown more pointed. His protestations

of devotion had turned from protective to demanding. The leisurely dinners at his residence were now filled with the continual need to deflect his words, his glances, his hands.

And the worst of it was that Anne had no idea how to extricate herself. When she suggested that the nuns disapproved of her spending time alone with him, he pointed out that she herself had convinced them of the propriety of her visits. Had she changed her mind? Did she now feel that she had persuaded the nuns to allow her to engage in wickedness?

It was true. She had failed to say “no” for so long that there no longer seemed any line to be drawn. And though Montagu’s behavior had never gone past what she had allowed, he had pushed her into allowing more and more, step by step. By every step, she put herself further beyond any protection she might call on.

“I wrote to my mother a week ago,” Anne said suddenly as the plates from dinner were being removed and the next bottle of wine was poured.

That stunned him for a moment. “To Lady Castlemaine?” He recovered quickly. “What a dutiful daughter you are! And how is your lady mother? Has she replied?”

“Not yet,” Anne said. She was a very poor liar—everyone told her that—but she added, “I told her that I think I should return to England. To make up with dear Thomas. He must be missing me dreadfully.”

Montagu’s eye had a dangerous glitter. “That seems much at odds with what you said three days past. Whence comes this sudden fondness for your husband? But never mind. Perhaps you are right. And yet there are so many beautiful sights here in France yet to enjoy. Why, you have yet to see the beauties of Versailles and it’s so close at hand.”

Anne made the mistake of allowing some excitement to show. Versailles! How she would love to see the palace and the gardens!

“Then it’s decided,” Montagu said with a smile. “We shall make an expedition in two days’ time.” He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips, gazing up at her in promise.

#

Worry had teased and tormented her through the night, so when one of the nuns came up to her room in the morning to say that a message had come from her mother, Anne took several long moments to remember that she hadn’t actually written to her. But if this couldn’t be a response that would save her from having to find a way to refuse Montagu, then what did it mean? She followed Sister Isabelle down to the visitors’ room.

She didn’t recognize the messenger as one of her mother’s ladies, and though she paid little attention to the servants who had come and gone at the Castlemaine *hôtel*, she was certain she would have remembered this one. It was a young woman, perhaps her own age, who stared at her in bold curiosity. She wore a sea-green gown that looked oddly familiar—the sort that a well-born companion might have handed down from her mistress. But that didn’t excuse the rudeness of her stare!

Anne put on her most haughty air and demanded, “They said you have a message from my mother.”

“Yes, that is...no, that is...we thought it would be best to say that.”

There was no sense at all in what she was babbling.

Anne tried once more. “Have you brought a letter?”

The strange girl seemed to recover somewhat. “No, not a letter exactly.” She put a hand through the slit in her

skirt and drew a small object out of the pocket underneath. She began a theatrical flourish and then cursed and grabbed her skirts to pull them out of the way. “Damn this clothing! Why couldn’t I wear...but they wouldn’t have let me in.” She sank down on one knee and held out a colorful ribbon. “I am Julie d’Aubigny, and I bring this token from one who loves you dearly that you may know I speak truly. We have come to rescue you!”

Anne’s heart leapt in excitement before she realized how preposterous the whole thing was. But she recognized the ribbon: one of dear Hortense’s garters. She pressed it to her lips and breathed in the familiar scent of sweat and perfume. And now she recognized the gown. It, too, belonged to Hortense. “Where did you get this?”

“From the lady who has traveled across the length of France to see you once more.”

Paris was hardly the entire length of France, but Anne preferred the thrilling image to the less interesting reality. “Where is she?” Her breathing had quickened and she knew her cheeks must have flushed with excitement from the admiration she saw reflected in the other woman’s gaze.

“Standing close at hand. You have only to say the word and we will...” The girl named Julie paused. “That is, if you want to be rescued. Hortense said you might not. But she wanted to make sure.”

Briefly, Anne bristled to hear this...this Julie person speak dear Hortense’s name with such familiarity. But then she gave herself up again to the adventure. “You have come not a moment too soon! Tomorrow I am to be abducted and carried off to Versailles, no doubt to be ravished without mercy once I am alone in the clutches of...” Was it appropriate to name Montagu to this stranger? She’d been carried away by the chance to voice

her secret fears. But this wasn't a mummer's play, this was real.

“Yes, we know!” Julie said, saving her the dilemma.
“By Ralph Montagu, the English ambassador. That villain!”

“He isn't a villain,” Anne said in a small voice.
“He's just...oh, tell me, where is Hortense?” She found herself crying. She had been told that she cried very prettily but she didn't feel very pretty at the moment.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hortense paced from one end of the inn's small private dining parlor to the other. The innkeeper was no doubt suspicious regarding the sum they had paid him for the exclusive use of the room for the day, but it didn't matter. One way or another, they would all be gone by tomorrow. She turned and paced back to where Aphra and d'Aure were sitting, heads in close conference over the table.

“And what if it takes too long to find it—whatever you're looking for? What if we can't catch up to Montagu's carriage? Poor Anne!”

Aphra looked up with a weary expression. Really, did the woman have no nerves?

“Hortense, we won't have any better chance than

this. Thanks to his intrigue with the Countess, Montagu will be out of the way and most likely his guards with him. Bernard will let d'Aure and I into the house. Once we secure the documents, we'll follow you and Julie on the road to Versailles. All we need do is overtake him before the end of the journey. Captain d'Aure will give him a message that his return to Conflans is of the utmost importance. Such a message from a King's Musketeer will not be ignored. And while they are still on the road before we arrive, if you think there is any danger to the Countess of Sussex's virtue—"

There was a tone to Aphra's voice that Hortense could not entirely like.

"—then the two of you may interfere as you see best. How much of our plans have you shared with her?"

Hortense wrung her hands in anxiety. "Only that she should go with Montagu and that we will see that she comes to no harm. Julie took the message this morning. Oh, I wish we hadn't dragged her into this!"

This time it was d'Aure who reassured her. "Without the Countess's assistance, we'd have no chance to search the house safely. You can be sure we won't let that go unthanked."

Only Julie was truly in sympathy with her distress. She grasped Hortense's hands in hers and said earnestly, "I have pledged myself to the countess's safety. It is a matter of honor!"

The hours stretched out unbearably. Yesterday, after Julie had first spoken with Anne, there had been the long and furious arguments over how best to proceed. Gradually the plan had emerged. But today, once Julie had returned from the convent and dressed once more in her coat and breeches, there had been nothing to do but wait. Montagu would keep to his schedule. That way it would be

well after dark before the sisters at the convent would be concerned enough at Anne's failure to return to take action.

And then it was time. Hortense and Julie crossed over to the south bank of the Seine where d'Aure's man Jacques waited with the horses near the ferry landing. He would remain behind with Aphra and d'Aure's mounts as well as his own. And Marthe would set out with their luggage to meet them at an inn on the outskirts of Paris. By the time Montagu discovered his recall had been false, there would be no trace of any of their party.

Hortense knew she was communicating her fidgets to the horse as it stamped and tossed its head. She had once again donned the blue and silver cassock. What better way to avoid any questions on the road than in the garb of a King's Musketeer? She looked over at Julie who returned her an eager grin. And then, there it was! The shouts of the ferrymen. The thump and creaking of the disembarking carriage. The slow clop of hooves and the jingle of harness as Montagu's traveling carriage rolled up the track from the landing and found the Saint-Germain road. As it went by, Hortense could see two guards clinging to the back of the carriage in place of footmen. When the ambassador's party was halfway to the edge of the Forêt Saint-Germain, Hortense signaled Julie and they followed, pacing Montagu's leisurely speed.

#

D'Aure had said to expect them to follow in two hour's time, perhaps more, so when Hortense heard rapid hoofbeats behind them after no more than half an hour had passed, she signaled Julie to pull aside, thinking some other traveler's business was more urgent than their own. But it was d'Aure and Aphra who pulled to a halt behind them, their horses lathered and blowing, followed by

d'Aure's servant.

"You've found it already?" Hortense asked. But she noticed he'd put aside his uniform cassock. That wasn't the plan.

"No," Aphra replied. "He has it with him."

D'Aure finished the explanation. "Bertrand, our man inside, he saw Montagu pack his document chest. The small locked one where the most important papers are kept. We didn't bother to search his offices but followed on immediately."

"And so...?"

"And so we take it." D'Aure pulled out a large silken handkerchief and tied it as a mask.

Julie pounced on the obvious conclusion. "And so we are to be highwaymen!"

They all found something with which to disguise their faces. Hortense knew that even her clothing and false beard might not survive Montagu's close scrutiny. There must be no risk that any of them would be recognized. Her own uniform was quickly stowed away.

The road through the Forêt Saint-Germain was ideal for a party embarking on their first experiment in highway robbery. Dense shadows curtained the road and the trees muffled sound. They had seen few other travelers and made hurried prayers that the situation would continue. The carriage had passed far out of sight by the time preparations were complete, but there was still a chance to overtake it before the far edge of the forest was reached. If they missed that chance, there would be another lonely stretch between Saint-Germain and Versailles.

Montagu's coachman must have had no thought for robbery, for he neither sped nor slowed at the sound of galloping horses. It wasn't until Julie and d'Aure had passed

on either side to seize the bridles of the lead pair that a shout went up from the guards at the back. As the carriage was brought to a stop, there was a ring of steel as they drew their swords at the ready.

D'Aure's man Jacques leapt down to hold the lead pair steady as Julie and d'Aure turned to match blades with the guards. They were a beautiful sight to watch as they worked in close tandem, beating the guards back against the side of the carriage to hinder their footwork and foul their blades. It took little time for d'Aure's opponent to be disarmed and Aphra moved in quickly to bind him hand and foot.

Julie's man had broken free of the trap and they circled a merry dance across the rutted coach road while d'Aure watched from a short distance, declining to interfere. Hortense moved closer to the carriage door to prevent Montagu from emerging to complicate matters and tackled the task of encouraging the coachman to descend from his seat with the promise that he, too, would suffer nothing worse than being bound.

Having completed that, Hortense turned her attention to the remaining fight in time to see Julie clip the man's arm.

With blood blooming across his sleeve, the guard threw down his sword and looked wildly over to d'Aure crying, "I yield! Mercy!"

So they needn't have deaths on their conscience, Hortense thought. That was a relief.

Montagu's furious countenance leaned out from the carriage's window and he demanded, "You worthless curs! What do you ruffians intend? I am known at the court! You will rue this day's work!"

Hortense made her voice as gruff as possible. "Be easy and you have nothing to fear, my good man. Think of

us as customs inspectors, if you will.”

Aphra had moved to unstrapping the luggage from the back of the carriage and throwing it down to the road to be opened and searched. Montagu’s outrage could no longer be contained by the carriage. Hortense backed away, her blade still held ready, as the door slammed open and he emerged with a wide-eyed Anne trailing behind. Hortense gave her a bold wink—the sort that might be read as mere impudence—and Anne relaxed visibly.

D’Aure had joined Aphra in opening and rummaging through the several chests and valises that now lay strewn across the road. From the corner of her eye, Hortense could see them shaking their heads at each other in dismay.

“My friends were expecting something more valuable,” Hortense said, keeping the same gruff voice as before and brandishing her sword. “If you’ve kept anything hidden away, they will be greatly disappointed.”

The ambassador seemed oddly calm. “I fear they must remain disappointed. We are traveling only a short distance. Why, even the lady has brought no jewels with her.”

Anne seemed to be trying to return some message with her eyes, and at last burst out, “Montagu, do you suppose they mean that small chest? The one hidden in the seat compartment? Oh, quickly, give it to them. They’ll surely kill you if they don’t find what they want!”

Montagu’s glare was murderous. He turned on her in a rage crying, “You stupid worthless jade!” and raised his hand to strike her, halting only when he felt the point of Julie’s sword at his throat.

“Monsieur,” Julie said icily. “I would prefer that you treat the lady with respect.” She held out her other hand to Anne who moved quickly to stand behind her. “Now

perhaps you would care to move away from the carriage?”

Aphra climbed up between the seats and found the latch that opened the hidden compartment.

“You’ll find no gold in there,” Montagu said coldly. “Nothing but papers. And those papers will cost you your heads.”

“Will they?” d’Aure said with an easy drawl.

“Perhaps we should see just what sort of papers come at such an expense.”

Aphra had done something to the lock and d’Aure joined her in the carriage, sorting rapidly through the contents of the small chest. Another flourish of Julie’s blade drew Montagu’s attention as they removed a small selection of the contents and secreted them away before closing the lock once more.

D’Aure swung down out of the carriage and threw the chest at Montagu’s feet. “It seems you told the truth. Only worthless letters. I’d hate for our efforts to go unpaid, so I must request your purse.”

The end of a robbery, it seemed, was much more awkward than the beginning. Having emptied the carriage of Montagu’s possessions, there seemed no reason not to employ it for their own purposes. Montagu was bound and added to the growing set of angry, struggling men.

And Anne—what to do with Anne? They had promised her rescue, but what excuse could highway robbers have to carry off a lady of quality? Julie came to the rescue by making a deep bow before her with every winning manner she could summon and declaiming, “Villain though I am, I will not have it said I left a lady to perish of cold and wild beasts in the woods. If you would deign to entrust your safety to my hands, I pledge my honor to see you to safety.”

And with a cold look backward at Montagu, Anne

replied, "I'd sooner the mercy of robbers and thieves than to continue another moment in that man's company!"

And so Anne was handed up into the carriage with Hortense and Aphra taking places beside her. Jacques climbed into the driver's seat, and with the extra horses led behind, the cavalcade set off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Julie d'Aubigny watched mournfully as the bold company prepared to go their separate ways. The borrowed carriage had taken them to the outskirts of Paris and the inn they had chosen for their meeting place. The first business of the night was complete when Captain d'Aure and Mistress Behn ceremoniously burned a bundle of letters in the small fireplace that warmed the rooms they had taken.

"I don't care to risk carrying them myself," Aphra had said, "and I don't know that I would trust my contact in Paris to complete the job."

Captain d'Aure had nodded in agreement. "My instructions were to see them destroyed. Better to finish the task now."

Julie had bade a tearful goodbye to the Countess of Sussex—no, Anne, in her heart it would always be her Anne—and to the Duchesse Mazarine, who had laid aside her false moustaches and beard to escort her friend to Lady Castlemaine’s *hôtel*, whence they both would return to England. If only...but no, she would be content with the thanks that Anne had bestowed in the form of a kiss. Julie touched her lips and smiled at the memory.

At the last, Captain d’Aure had saluted the duchesse and said formally, “I must request that you surrender the Musketeer’s uniform you carry. Though you have worn it with honor, it lies outside my duty to allow you to keep it.”

Hortense had nodded sadly and complied. She had fingered the silver braid, as if in farewell. “It was another age, another time. We were all so much braver and nobler then.”

D’Aure raised her fingers to kiss and said, “There is still valor and nobility in the world. May God go with you.”

And then the two noblewomen were gone, with Marthe fussing in their wake, glad to have returned to skirts. And Aphra had been seen off in the public coach on the road to Calais. And it was only her and Captain d’Aure remaining as Jacques went to ready the horses.

“I suppose I must return to d’Armagnac,” she sighed. “He will seem so dull.”

D’Aure looked at her curiously. “Why did you wish to be a Musketeer?”

Julie pursed her lips in thought. “I suppose because Sérannes said it was impossible. He’s my fencing master,” she added by way of explanation. “Whenever someone tells me that I can’t do something—that I can’t be something—it’s like a fever in me. I need to prove them wrong.”

“You are a remarkable young woman,” d’Aure said. “And I suspect that you will prove many people wrong before your life is done.”

“And there was the wager,” Julie added, in a paroxysm of honesty. “I had a bet with Sérannes that if he saw me in the uniform of a Musketeer before the end of the year, he would give me an ebony walking stick with silver mountings.” She didn’t mention what the counter-forfeit would be. It hadn’t seemed to matter when Sérannes had demanded it, but now she felt embarrassed.

Captain d’Aure regarded her thoughtfully, then looked to the uniform the duchesse had surrendered. “I think, perhaps, we could do something about that wager.”

#

Julie d’Aubigny rode in through the gates of the Comte d’Armagnac’s chateau thinking how much had changed in so little time. She hadn’t been away even as much as two weeks! The groom who came running to take her horse gaped at her in surprise and she suppressed a foolish grin.

“Anton, go fetch Monsieur Sérannes. Quickly.” She gestured in dismissal and glanced over at the rider at her side. They mirrored each other in the bold blue and silver of the Kings Musketeers.

The sword-master came stumbling out, bleary eyed. It appeared that he had been making interesting use of his unexpected holiday from teaching. “What...who?” He squinted at the two riders and blinked several times. “Julie?”

“What do you see?” Julie demanded of him. She swung down off her horse and confronted him eye to eye. “Have I won my wager?”

Sérannes looked from her to the impassive figure of Captain d’Aure and back again. “You...but...you...a

Musketeer?”

Captain d’Aure leaned forward in the saddle and touched hand to sword-hilt. “You see her in the uniform of a King’s Musketeer, do you not? I understand there is a forfeit to be paid.”

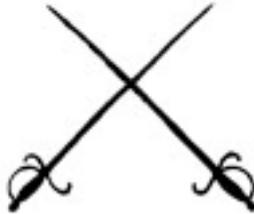
Sérannes gulped. “Yes...yes, Captain!”

D’Aure nodded. “Very well. But Mademoiselle d’Aubigny, I understand that you have duties that prevent you from remaining in service.”

Julie reluctantly unbuttoned the top few buttons of the cassock and removed her hat to pull the garment off over her head. She folded it carefully and offered it up to d’Aure’s waiting hands. “I do, indeed, have duties here. But with all my heart, I wish that I were able to serve the king at your side.”

“Follow your heart,” d’Aure said, saluting in farewell. “Always follow your heart.”

Julie watched until the captain had disappeared out the gates of the chateau, then turned to where Sérannes still stood. “An ebony walking stick, as I recall. With a silver head and ferrule and blue silk ribbons.”



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...for a brief time, intrigued and flattered by the interest and starved for the human touch that she was denied in the ordinary way, Barbara had let things go further than had been wise. Her cheeks still burned at remembering that glorious imprudence.

This is the story of that glorious imprudence.

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Barbara proudly served as the old Baron's duelist but she had expected his death to make her a free woman. Bitterness turns to determination when she finds herself the only force that stands between Margerit and the new Baron's greed.

At first Margerit protests the need for Barbara's services, but soon she cannot imagine sending Barbara away. And Barbara's duty has become something far more

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Antuniet Chazillen lost everything the night her brother was executed. In exile, she swore that treason would not be the final chapter of the Chazillen legacy in Alpennia's history. A long-hidden book of alchemical secrets provides the first hope of success, but her return to the capital is haunted by an enemy who wants those secrets for himself.

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The alchemy of precious gems throws two women into a crucible of adversity, but it is the alchemy of the human heart that transforms them both in this breathtaking follow-up to the widely acclaimed *Daughter of Mystery*.

#

About the Author

Heather Rose Jones is writing a historic fantasy series with swordswomen and magic set in the alternate-

Regency-era country of Alpennia. She blogs about research into lesbian-like motifs in history and literature at the [Lesbian Historic Motif Project](#) and writes both historical and fantasy fiction based on that research. She has a PhD in linguistics, studying metaphor theory and the semantics of Medieval Welsh prepositions, and works as an industrial failure investigator in biotech.

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But wait, there's more...

Historic Notes

The question of “historic realism” is a hot topic in fantasy fiction these days. It’s not uncommon for certain types of characters, certain activities and events, to be decried as “unhistorical” and therefore unbelievable, even in a work of fiction. For that reason, I’d like to be very clear about which aspects of this story are based on actual history and which are pure invention. When I took up the challenge to write a story of “Musketeers, but with women,” I knew immediately who some of my characters would be. Once I started coordinating their timelines, it was clear that this would be a “next generation” setting, not only after the glory days of the great d’Artagnan, but in fact after his death in 1673 during the Franco-Dutch war. Digging somewhat deeper, I realized that the perfect setting for the adventure I wanted to tell were events occurring in the years 1677-8. Some of those events have been shifted slightly to coincide.

#

Hortense Mancini was one of the nieces of Cardinal Mazarin, the second of the two great French Cardinal-statesmen who maintained their own private companies of Musketeers. (After Mazarin's death in 1661, his company was transferred to King Louis and we lose the opportunity for including an ongoing rivalry between the two sides, alas.) Hortense and her four sisters were brought by their mother from Italy to France in order for their uncle Mazarin's influence to help gain them ambitious marriages. They, along with another set of cousins, were popularly known as "the Mazarinettes" and were something of the Kardashians of their day.

Shortly before Mazarin's death, Hortense was married off to a very rich and very disturbed man who was

granted the title Duc Mazarin and inherited significant properties at the Cardinal's death. Hortense was treated rather badly due to his...um...prudish hang-ups about sex. At first she took comfort in a love affair with another young woman, Sidonie de Courcelles, but soon was driven to the point of running away from home. In 1675, several years before my story opens, she has been solicited by the English Ambassador to France, Ralph Montagu, to travel to England with the ambition of becoming one of King Charles II's mistresses and ideally to supplant the despised Louise de K rouaille, his official mistress. De K rouaille had, in her turn, supplanted Barbara, Lady Castlemaine. Hortense took on the challenge, traveling to London disguised in male clothing. By 1676 Hortense had succeeded in becoming the king's official mistress, though she was no more faithful to Charles than he was to her.

Fictional parts: To the best of my knowledge, Hortense and her sisters never dressed up in Musketeer uniforms, either for ceremonial or entertainment purposes.

#

Anne Lennard, Countess of Sussex was the daughter of Barbara Castlemaine and was generally acknowledged to be King Charles's daughter. She is a bit of a cipher, prominent largely for her relationships to other people. For a variety of reasons, Lady Castlemaine had removed from England around 1676 and was living in Paris with several of her younger children. Anne was not among these, having been married off at the age of thirteen to the Earl of Sussex. At some time shortly before 1678, Anne began a scandalous affair with Hortense Mancini. This culminated in the two engaging in a friendly fencing match in Saint James's Park clad only in their chemises. The Earl of Sussex felt this was enough beyond the pale that he forcibly removed his wife from London

and, after some rustication (during which Anne was said to do nothing but pine in bed, kissing a miniature portrait of Hortense), Anne was sent off to Paris to the supervision of her mother, who installed Anne as a guest at the convent at Conflans, just north of town.

While in Paris, Lady Castlemaine had been amusing herself in an affair with Ralph Montagu. Remember Ralph Montagu? English Ambassador? But in 1678, while Castlemaine was distracted, Montagu began paying court to Anne, visiting her at the convent and dismissing Castlemaine's servants in a rather suspicious manner. This culminated in Anne being "abducted" from the convent, gaining Montagu the enmity of Lady Castlemaine who began bad-mouthing him to King Charles. The break between Montagu and the king had later repercussions when Montagu was involved in leaking various secret negotiations between the English and French kings that touched on the twin third-rails of religion and the English succession.

Fictional parts: I have condensed the aftermath of Anne and Hortense's duel somewhat and had the Earl of Sussex pack his wife directly off to Paris. Historically, Montagu began paying court to Anne before Lady Castlemaine took off to England, which trip was largely for the purpose of complaining about his behavior. Anne was likely more receptive to Montagu's advances than I have portrayed her and, in fact, carried on the affair at her mother's house in Paris after Montagu "abducted" her from the convent. I have moved the friction between Montagu and the king slightly earlier to provide a reason for Aphra's secret mission.

#

In 1689, the novelist and playwright **Aphra Behn** dedicated one of her works to Hortense Mancini with the

following words:

...to the Most Illustrious Princess, The Dutchess of Mazarine...how infinitely one of Your own Sex ador'd You, and that, among all the numerous Conquest, Your Grace has made over the Hearts of Men, Your Grace had not subdu'd a more intire Slave; I assure you, Madam, there is neither Compliment, nor Poetry, in this humble Declaration, but a Truth, which has cost me a great deal of Inquietude, for that Fortune has not set me in such a Station, as might justifie my Pretence to the honour and satisfaction of being ever near Your Grace, to view eternally that lovely Person, and here that surprising Wit; what can be more grateful to a Heart, than so great, and so agreeable, an Entertainment? And how few Objects are there, that can render it so entire a Pleasure, as at once to hear you speak, and to look upon your Beauty?

This, and several other pieces of evidence (such as Behn's bisexual reputation) have led historians to conclude that the two women had most likely been lovers at some point prior to that date. Behn had an interesting and colorful career, the early parts of which are clouded by deliberate obfuscation and mythologizing. But what is clearly fact is that during the mid 1660s she worked as a spy for King Charles II, possibly first in the Dutch East Indies, definitely later in the Netherlands, under the code name "Astrea". It is possible that, after some initial success with her plays, she returned to this profession in the mid 1670s, during the Franco-Dutch wars. At that time her writing output pauses for a while after her third play was a disaster, though her literary career picked up again in 1677. A regular theme of her correspondence during the espionage years, was the difficulty in having even her basic professional expenses paid, much less receiving any sort of salary for her work.

Fictional parts: There is no evidence that Aphra engaged in any secret missions for King Charles during 1678. What we know of her espionage work largely consisted of monitoring and infiltrating the English expatriate community in the Netherlands with the intent of identifying Catholic sympathizers and/or recruiting double agents.

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I have taken my greatest historical liberty with the character of **Julie d'Aubigny** (later known as Mademoiselle Maupin) in moving the events of her life one decade earlier than they actually occurred. In this description, the dates corresponding to my story will be given in brackets after her actual historic dates.

Julie was born in 1673 [1663], the daughter of a man in the service to the Comte d'Armagnac who trained the court pages. Julie was given the training of a page, learning to ride and fence as well as other courtly skills, and spent a great deal of her youth dressed as a boy. At the age of fourteen in 1687 [1677], the Comte d'Armagnac (her father's employer) took her on as a mistress, arranging for a marriage of convenience to a man who was then hastily sent off to parts unknown.

This arrangement, whatever she may have thought of it, didn't last long, for within the year Julie had begun an affair with a fencing master named Sérannes and—when he needed to hot-foot it out of town as a consequence of an unfortunate duel—ran away with him, supporting themselves by giving fencing demonstrations and by singing. Julie habitually wore male clothing at this time but didn't attempt to seriously disguise her gender. Julie rapidly grew bored with her fencing master and began a love affair with a young woman whose parents thought to interfere by placing their daughter in a convent. This was no bar to

Julie, who snuck into the convent and—amid some rather amusing hijinks—liberated the woman and ran off with her, although their relationship seems to have lasted only three months after that.

Julie's later adventures become even more outrageous. She wounds a nobleman in a duel then becomes his lover. Her flirtations with a lady at a ball result in being challenged to duels by three noblemen, all of whom she defeated. She had a stunning career with the Paris Opera. And the final great love of her life was with Madame la Marquise de Florensac, at whose death Julie was inconsolable and after which she retired to a convent.

Fictional parts: In addition to moving the entirety of Julie's life ten years earlier, I have shifted the date when she runs off with Sérannes until after the time of this story (therefore at least one year later than it actually occurred). To the best of my knowledge, Julie never aspired to anything as staid and boring as becoming a Musketeer of the Guard. As the entire episode of the pursuit of Montagu's correspondence is fictional, so is Julie's involvement in it. It is possible, however, that in my alternate timeline, Julie's participation in "rescuing" the Countess of Sussex from the convent may be thought to have inspired her later escapades along that line.

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Captain Peyron d'Aure is entirely a figment of my imagination. The choice to give d'Aure the rank of captain is quite unhistorical. That title was borne only by the highest officer of the Musketeers. In fact, technically the king was the captain of the Musketeers and their leader was only "captain-lieutenant." I confess I have used the title of captain purely for esthetic purposes.

I have been very careful to leave it entirely up to the reader to interpret whether d'Aure is a trans man or is a

woman passing as a man. Within the historic context of this story, it isn't clear that the concepts needed to make a clear distinction between the two categories would have been available. While the other characters treat d'Aure as male (either from having no reason to question it or to support d'Aure's chosen career and identity), I used a number of literary tricks to avoid having d'Aure's point of view identify with a particular pronoun. (If I did it well, you won't even have noticed.)

The phenomenon of persons born female who chose to take on male social roles and occupations was far from unusual in the early modern era. Military professions were particularly common among these individuals, due in part to the indiscriminating nature of the recruitment process, and in part to military careers often involving travel away from those who might recognize the person from an earlier life.

Their motivations were, no doubt, many and layered. Economic need was often a greater driving force than issues of gender or sexuality. But there are many documented cases where a "passing woman" married or cohabited with a woman, and in at least some of those cases there is solid evidence that the wife was aware of her husband's personal history and anatomy. It may strike some as implausible that someone could spend years—even decades—in the close and often primitive environment of a military unit without their comrades discovering such a secret. The ultimate argument against implausibility is that it actually happened. Many times.

Here are two books that touch on this phenomenon, one focusing on historic cases and the other on literary tropes:

Dekker, Rudolf M. and van de Pol, Lotte C. 1989. *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*.

Macmillan, London. ISBN 0-333-41253-2

Dugaw, Dianne. 1989. *Warrior Women and Popular
Balladry 1650-1850*. The University of Chicago Press,
Chicago. ISBN 0-226-16916-2

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