

Righting Time new in July 2007

This preview of the new book *Righting Time* is provided by
author Kat Jaske

There are 352 pages in the book.

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Praise for Kat Jaske's books
Website: www.forhonor.com

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*****Absolutely loved it! Your books are some of the most well written that I have read. Your ability to maintain complex plots and provide a true flavor of Europe is amazing. Your character development is outstanding. *For Honor* and *Gambit* — Linda Lipsitt

*****I enjoyed it so much I read it twice. *For Honor* — Joe Sinnapan

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*****They are the best fiction books I have read in a few years. They are extremely well written and put together. *For Honor* and *Gambit* — Raymond Shannon from Ireland

Excerpts from *Righting Time* by Kat Jaske

Excerpt

Jala let her jaw go slack. She twirled the chair and dashed for the time chamber. “Let’s go, gentlemen, to just before the time disturbance in 1641. We’ve got some musketeers to find before everything we know ceases to exist.”

Excerpt

“There has been a big disturbance in the time continuum that sent a man we know as *Herzog* Konrad into the twenty-first century, where he wreaked so much havoc that the entire timeline was drastically changed. We came back here to obtain your help to find the man and stop him from destroying the future of this entire world.” Keith ran out of words to say.

Excerpt

“And she hates you.”

“With a passion, and what a passion.”

“And what have you done to earn such ire from such a young woman?” Tonie appeared mildly amused by the man.

“I tried to force her to marry me. I shot one of her oldest and dearest friends down in cold blood and killed him.” He didn’t even pause for breath as he listed his catalog of worthy accomplishments.

“I betrayed my own brother. And I shot her lover in front of her eyes. A pity Frederick William wouldn’t give up on the man or he would have died. As it was it took him months to recover. I guess you could say the woman has a personal vendetta against me. Will there be anything else, *madame*?” he concluded with a practiced politeness.

Excerpt

“You are mine and I yours, *chérie*,” he said and then just held her closely to him for a long time as if he were trying to reassure them both, trying to capture the moment, knowing that more than likely they’d soon be at odds again. At odds over what was said, what was done, not done . . . what had been left unsaid. And worst of all, neither of them would know how they had slipped back into that hostility, nor even really why.

RIGHTING TIME

Book Three of BY HONOR BOUND

Kat Jaske

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The Louvre in Paris, France

Prologue

France, May 1641

“Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome.”

Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Her majesty, the queen of France—a woman with a mission—hands thrust on her hips, bored down upon the younger woman. “Touch the pins at your own peril, Laurel.”

Laurel d’Anlass, *marquise de Langeac*, and a woman of nearly two and twenty, promptly dropped her hands from her waistline and stood stock still in the wedding dress the *modiste* had left her standing in for the past two hours. Fittings. Shopping. More fittings. Laurel honestly did not know how she would survive it. A wedding was more hassle than it was worth, or so she was beginning to think. She had work to tend to, a spy network to run.

What ever had possessed her when she had agreed to marry the *duc de Rouen*? And this dress. Why it was patently ridiculous to be fitting her for a wedding dress right now. Everyone was rushing her to marry. Pressure to get her to the altar immediately, when she and Aramis had not even set a wedding date yet. “Anne,” Laurel began with a note of real pleading in her tone, “I’m tired. Enough fittings for one day. Besides, as you know, I

have other obligations that I must attend to.” All of them more desirable than this one—at least all that came to mind.

“Laurel d’Anlass,” Anne started in tones that would have caused most men and women to quake, including her own petulant husband. Then she sighed. “Help her out of the dress,” the dark-haired queen, roughly two years older than Laurel, instructed the *modiste*. “We’ll continue the fitting this Friday.” Even if she had to drag Laurel there herself.

Immediately the seamstress complied with the queen’s orders. As the gown was stripped from Laurel’s form, Anne broached the subject lesser mortals would have quaked at bringing up. “You will have to set a date, you know?” Already nearly five months had passed since the betrothal announcement without the couple having set a date for their wedding.

“I know,” Laurel admitted in an oddly deflated tone. “Aramis and I were going to talk about that very issue tomorrow. Please, Anne . . . no more. Give us time. We’re still getting used to the notion of marriage, particularly marriage to one another. Please.”

Anne shook her head. Laurel d’Anlass did beat all. Now she was more than met the eye—possibly more than Laurel herself knew. And knowing the *marquise* as she did, Anne would not be surprised were the woman to lead other women to question and oppose established patriarchal order. Give Laurel enough time and she might well be able to do anything, especially with the circle of friends she had drawn to her. “*Lâche*.” Anne accused the woman of cowardice. “You are avoiding Aramis,” she concluded, placing extra emphasis on the “are.” “*Merci*, that will be all,” Anne dismissed the *modiste* as she finished her task of freeing Laurel and helping her back into the afternoon dress. The *modiste* disappeared from the room.

A baby wailed in the background and Anne closed her eyes. Not again. But she had asked for it when she had insisted that she have more time with her son. Without further ado she retrieved her son, tucking his head against her bosom. The six and ten month old boy dropped silent as if on cue.

As the queen looked up from her baby and rested her eyes on the *marquise*, Laurel said nothing. “You are a coward, Laurel d’Anlass. Sometimes, you know, it takes more courage to risk loving than it does to follow a solitary path. Take the chance, Laurel. Not many of us ever get the chance you’ve been given.”

Laurel did not meet her friend's eyes. She could not. Rather she diverted herself by adjusting the afternoon dress she wore so that less of her breasts were revealed. The blond-haired woman opened her mouth as if to speak, and then finding she could say nothing, closed her mouth once again.

Anne came closer, within touch of Laurel. Concern radiated from her eyes. "Laurel, what's wrong? Laurel. Look at me. I can help if you will allow it. Tell me what's wrong. Come on; do not lock everything inside."

"Anne, what if." Laurel stumbled over her words and then met Anne's eyes again. The queen had never seen her friend more vulnerable. "Anne what if I don't really love him or he doesn't love me? . . . Oh Anne I just don't think I can do it. What if I can't satisfy him?"

"Satisfy him?"

"Well, you know." Laurel blushed crimson and cleared her throat. "There are so many other women who want him. And—and I get so afraid, Anne, so afraid when he touches me. I just don't know if I can—" Anne waited, silently encouraging. "If I can do what men and women do in the marriage bed." The *marquise* shivered. Apprehensive, nervous, embarrassed—all at once. She could not pinpoint what.

So that was it. Laurel felt sexually inadequate and was terrified by the idea of having sex. Particularly the idea of having sex and being found cold or wanting. "*Mon amie*. Oh, Laurel. Aramis wants you and only you." Laurel, if anything, appeared more forlorn, and the monarch was at a loss. Different approach, then. With more confidence than she felt, Anne started anew. "Now this is what you do, *chérie*. You go to Aramis' residence dressed in your sexiest dress. Then you bolt the door, sit him down, and—"

"Anne . . ." Laurel interrupted, profoundly scandalized despite the fact that Laurel had seen and heard much worse during her years spying with her father and on missions with the musketeers, such as the one when they had captured one of France's worst traitors. The one where she had first met Aramis, and he had learned to accept (more or less) her nonconventional behavior, independent way of thinking, love of swordplay, and other "inappropriate" behaviors for a young woman of her station. "I can't just go seducing him."

“Well, *diantre* Laurel!” Anne lost her not inconsiderable patience. “You won’t talk with him about sexual matters; you won’t try to get him to your bed so that he can teach you and put your fears to rest. You won’t take another man. What will you do then? All right. Look. I’m sorry and I know some of the suggestions are objectionable and completely inappropriate. Just think on it, Laurel. But don’t spend too much time thinking. You do have to act.”

Laurel nodded slowly and leaned down and pressed a swift kiss to Anne’s cheek. “I promise.” She tried to assure the other woman as well as her own self. The *marquise de Langeac* offered her queen a farewell and escaped toward the door.

Before she could step through, the queen’s voice captured her attention. “Just remember,” she said, “no matter what happens, I will always be here for you. Always. And I am not the only one, either.”

* * * * *

A mysterious hum undercut the chirping of the spring crickets, only for an instant, and then was gone, to be replaced with an even briefer flash of gold and blue light. As the haze disappeared, a figure took several steps and glanced around. Several locks of sandyblond hair were whipped into his face by the wind.

The bearded man paid it no mind. Nothing here mattered anymore—except . . . well, except the goal of his mission. He fingered the minuscule, pen-shaped unit by his side. Executioner was still there. A second later he remembered to place the handheld linkup inside his pouch. He took a deep breath and smelled the air. Yes! He was on French soil and, more importantly, he was back! Back in 1641.

One more time he fingered the executioner; then, all other thoughts pushed aside, he started purposefully toward Paris. He had a long overdue appointment to keep. His vengeance had been deferred much too long.

* * * * *

After bidding Porthos good night, Aramis mounted the last of the stairs to his room. For several moments he stood poised on the

threshold of the room assigned to him while he stayed in Paris. One more time his thoughts drifted back to his large, boisterous comrade. Porthos was unhappy; Aramis was sure of it. The man had been trying too hard to be jovial and carry on like nothing had happened. Aramis, *duc de Rouen*, knew better than to be fooled. The mighty Porthos had been felled by that thing called love, and an impossible love at that, if Aramis was guessing aright.

“God bless you.” Aramis sent the blessing on the retreating form of his fellow musketeer. May God watch over him too—Porthos needed it right now.

Once again the *duc* turned his attention to his door and opened it. In a few lithe strides he was inside and closing the door behind him. With a deft flick of his wrist he locked the door and then leaned back against it, head staring up at the shadowed recesses of the ceiling and the odd way the moon and the stars illuminated the texture.

Suddenly every muscle in his body tensed. He was not alone. Instinctively he reached to his left and drew his sword, whirling around to meet his opponent.

Just as he whirled he hesitated, and his sword fell from its ready position. “Laurel.” Foolish woman. She should know better than to sneak into his room like this. He might have killed her. Belatedly he sheathed his sword and focused his attention on the woman in front of him.

“*Non*, please, don’t say it. I should not have surprised you like this,” the *marquise* admitted, her voice soft and earnest. She took a quick breath to fortify herself and then looked her fiancé straight in the eye without so much as flinching. “I, I just wanted to see you.”

“Oh, I see,” he replied, though he was more baffled than he had been moments earlier. Laurel was being too polite, or at least more polite than she usually was to him. He took a step closer to her and took a quick gasp of breath. It was almost inaudible, but it sounded louder to Aramis as he gazed upon the blond-haired woman.

Never before had he seen Laurel wearing a dress like that, scandalously low cut and one that most married women wouldn’t dare sport, let alone a respectable single woman. He found that he could not raise his eyes from the expanse of exposed shoulder and bosom. He took himself to task. “What did you want to see me about?” He thought his voice sounded at least somewhat normal.

Laurel smiled. The smile was more confident than she actually felt. "I see you noticed the dress." As if she couldn't think of anything more inane to say!

"Well *diantre*, Laurel! What did you expect? Of course I noticed the dress!" He plunged a hand through his raven-black hair, and in that action Laurel could tell Aramis was truly discomfited. "I hardly think I need tell you that it is wholly inappropriate for a lady of your station."

"Shut up," Laurel snapped, exasperated and overwrought. "You're the only one who's seen me in it, so don't worry your overdeveloped sense of propriety." Though, truth be told, she found the dress far too revealing for her sense of modesty too. Oddly enough, Laurel was coming to think that she was more modest than most women, and she was definitely beginning to seriously rethink the wisdom of this course of action. Yet, the scandalous things she had seen and heard from supposedly chaste unmarried women alone . . . She did not complete the thought as Aramis' voice interrupted her musings.

"Laurel, I." She saw him swallow. "I think you had better go."

"Why?" was her simple response, and she heard him start to explain something about propriety. Laurel sighed, scared and disappointed, maybe even resigned, at the same time. "So you have no interest in kissing me then?" Now, where had those words come from? And was it possible to take them back without really appearing the fool?

Aramis froze. "I did not say that." The collar of his tunic felt too tight.

Fingertips brushed his cheek, and he felt a warm breath. For a moment he thought he felt those fingertips tremble. "Then kiss me, Aramis." *Please don't make me beg*, she added silently, wondering from where this alternate her had suddenly emerged.

Reluctantly, and with all the discipline he could muster, he pushed her hand down and started to tell her she should go, but she didn't let him finish. "I'm sorry. If you don't want . . . I shouldn't . . . I don't know what I was thinking. I'd better go," she finally stuttered to a finish.

"*Chérie*. That's precisely it. I do want," he whispered in her ear, and her eyes suddenly locked on his. He could sense her nervousness; however, she did not run. Her eyes, they dared him. Beckoning. He didn't put it off any longer; he twined his hand in

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her long hair, pulling it from its pins, and covered her mouth with his. She shivered and sighed, falling against him. Close, but not close enough. His free hand traced the contour of her body up to the bodice of her dress and then paused there.

“So, you are no better than a whore. Well, you’ll never have her again, Aramis,” another voice intruded, and Aramis and Laurel did not even have time to break apart as a shot of blazing light streamed from the window. The *marquise* screamed in tortured agony as the beam impacted with her spinal cord, eating away and fusing neurons, warping molecular structure. The impulse traveled further up her spine, and she writhed in agony.

Aramis dropped to his knees, struggling to support the woman’s convulsing body. Desperately, his hands shaking, he searched for some sign of the wound the assailant had inflicted. Nothing. Laurel’s cries and throes were going weaker. Still nothing.

Once again he tried, his hands searching everywhere. Then suddenly she was still. He shook her, but she did not move. Aramis’ hands frantically tried for a pulse. There was none. No breathing either. “*Non.*” He shook his head in denial and looked up to see the figure perched in his window, unmoved emotionally or physically by the scene he had just instigated. A slow, malicious smile spread across the other man’s face. “My debt is now paid in full,” he said in a voice that Aramis recognized.

The musketeer jumped to his feet and dashed for the window, drawing his sword. “Konrad. You devil’s spawn. You’re going to wish you were dead when I’m finished with you.”

Konrad shrugged his shoulders and shifted his position. “Give my condolences to the others,” he told the *duc* flippantly, and Aramis, his face set grimly and sword at ready, stalked forward.

“You will pay.” Aramis’ voice was frigid.

“Only if you can find me, Aramis,” Konrad replied and jumped from his perch on the window. By the time Aramis was able to dash from his place and jump out the window, the Prussian had vanished.

“*NON!*” the *duc* screamed in anguish and then screamed again. Finally he fell silent. Not Laurel. But there was no further denial that Laurel had been murdered. “I will catch you, Konrad. My promise to God.”

Section One

2514 A.D.

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” — Louis Carroll

“Stop!” The woman desperately flew over the chair. More like leaped over it, clearing it by a wide margin. Almost better than an Olympic hurdler, had she been of the mind to compare herself to that elite type of athlete.

In her rush to get across the room, she stumbled, pitched forward, and after a quick battle with her ringing ears regained her balance. Arriving at the terminal, she snagged the man’s hand from the console with brutal force.

In the same swift movement, she pushed him out of the way and placed herself right before the console so she could have clear access to the terminal. She didn’t even notice the man’s stifled grunt as her attention was immediately riveted on the display readout.

Fingers flew over keys with nearly inhuman speed. Finally, there was a content bleep, and the woman sagged onto the empty desk beside the computer. “Next time when I tell you to do something, I expect my instructions to be followed—immediately. I trust I make myself clear, Daryl.”

“But, Jala, I . . . nothing happened.”

Jala rolled her eyes heavenward. Incompetent fool. Then she took herself to task. He was really very young. Not to mention that if she didn’t watch it, she would soon vent her temper upon him. And truly it was an “innocent mistake,” but still, one that no one could afford to make—Jala knew. Two deep breaths. She turned

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away and calmed herself. Sometimes she forgot how very young she was. What with her mother and all. But that was neither here nor there.

A tall, black-skinned man came to the woman's side and placed a hand on her shoulder. Slowly he shook his head, and in return Jala gave Keith, her stepfather and mentor, a weak smile. "Daryl, we apparently narrowly avoided a terrible disaster. When working with the time transducers, no precaution can be overlooked. Not one. Not ever. That's why we use older, twenty-third-century computers. If the machinery were any more sensitive, any little thing we said or did could trigger a major time shift." Then, there would go all their oaths to protect the time stream, maintain its integrity, and to do nothing more than observe. Not to mention, that meant years of psychological testing and testing in general going to waste for one small mistake in time transducting. No, the Guild of History and Time Observation was not an easy place to get into in the first place, let alone work at.

"No!" The black-haired woman took a heavy step backward and then rushed to another terminal. Let her be wrong. Dead wrong. That would be better than the alternative.

Jala's lastipants felt uncomfortably tight as if they were asphyxiating her, but they were no tighter than they had ever been. She rerouted the maxicoredrive circuitry with the same inhuman deftness she had managed moments earlier and then accessed the mainframe. Defeated, the young woman dropped her head face-first into her hands.

"Jala." Keith's voice was controlled despite his obvious concern.

The twenty-nine, nearly thirty-year-old, woman scarcely lifted her head and fixed her indigo eyes on Keith. "I wasn't quick enough." The voice was devoid of inflection, but Keith knew her too well to be quite fooled; she blamed herself regardless of the fact that she was not responsible in this instance. "We have a major time disturbance manifesting in the field," she said, her voice remaining lifeless.

"Pinpoint it," the black man ordered Daryl, and the young man ran through several sequences after Jala fell back out of his way, still stunned mute.

Uselessly his hands fell to his sides. His voice almost as flat as Jala's, Daryl said, "The major disturbance is centered in 2060 A.D. and expands outward at a near exponential rate."

“Major disturbance?” Keith and Jala echoed together. Perhaps they were too shocked to say anything more coherent.

Daryl keyed through sequences again, conscious of Jala and the older man watching over his shoulder, conscious of how little time there was. “There are also fluctuations all throughout the time sequence.” If it weren’t so disastrous, it would almost be funny.

Only through the exercise of extreme discipline and effort did Jala manage to hold on to her poise and cool. Panic did no good; that point had been vividly driven home to her by harsh experience over the course of her ten years—unofficially—with the Guild of History and Time Observation. Before long, the time fluctuations would manifest and the true time—her time or her present—likely would be inextricably altered. Right now, there was still some infinitesimal window of opportunity to try for correction and containment.

“Find me the date of the first time fluctuation in the timeline and pinpoint the locale on the main screen.” Jala took refuge in decisiveness. Daryl nodded and did so swiftly. The trio turned to the screen as a map blipped into place. It was a very old map. At a guess Keith would place it at least eight hundred years old.

“Old-world France?” Jala questioned, and Daryl nodded as the woman came close to the screen.

“France in 1641, eight hundred and seventy-three years ago, to be exact,” Daryl enlightened his companions. Jala punched a button and another section of the screen leaped to life. United States of America, 2060. Those dates were linked. Linked very closely. Jala’s eyebrows drew together in deep thought. Without needing to be told, Daryl set about determining exactly how they were related.

At the same moment, Keith and Jala lifted their heads and an understanding look flashed between them. “Something or someone from 1640 or 1641 was thrust forward to the year 2060,” they said together. “Make that, a person from 1640 was thrust forward, but a secondary major time disturbance occurred in 1641, then was manifest further in 2060,” Jala said as she scanned over the data Daryl had discovered.

“But who was pulled from the seventeenth?” Daryl asked. Brilliant, now he was asking obvious questions, sitting like the proverbial bump on a log and doing nothing. At times like this, youth and inexperience had their drawbacks.

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Jala brushed a tendril of her shoulder-length hair back and relieved the young man. “Let’s find out.” Deftly her hands ran over the terminal board center, and she scanned the information more quickly than Daryl had thought humanly possible, but then again, the woman was known to be the fastest and most accurate reader in history. In fact, she redefined the term photographic memory and had redefined sheer physical motor speed of the human body, come to think of it. Some would have called it an unfair advantage. Jala took it in stride. Most days.

“Wait. Stop there. No, back,” Keith said, curious about something his daughter had overlooked. He put his finger to the name. “That’s our man, someone called *Herzog Konrad*. He’s responsible for the major compromises of the time continuum.” Sometimes he found it paid to go on instinct.

“You’re sure?” Jala inquired and Keith nodded. He had years more experience in this than the woman. She didn’t argue further. If Keith were sure, she’d trust his judgment. Not that there was time to quibble.

“Now we need to stop him from compromising the flow of time. Anyone know the man?” Keith spoke again.

“He was a one-time, ‘minor’ Prussian noble under Frederick William the Great Elector,” Daryl replied. “Other than that, the records indicate he simply made a lot of money, which he invested in building up his estates and Brandenburg-Prussia. At least, before history started changing, that was the case.” Daryl checked the banks. “There’s nothing more on him, not even a description. No one has yet gone back to observe in the early half of the seventeenth century. At least not in France or Prussia.”

“It looks like I’ll be taking that trip, gentlemen.” Jala slipped a veston on, grabbed two packets and thrust them in her pocket, and headed directly for the time chamber.

“Jala.” Keith’s voice was up fractionally. A warning even Jala didn’t ignore, despite her desperate determination. “You can’t go back to 1640 and find the man before he was yanked. You could change history further. Nor can a woman just go to seventeenth-century France. The customs and prejudices are too deep-seeded.”

“Give me a viable alternative.” She glanced at the chrono. Desperation was a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. For the moment, she fought it. “You have some seven minutes before everything as we know it changes.”

Silence. Tense. Enveloping.

Finally, Daryl suggested, “We have the exact date he disappeared from his native time and the date of the major disturbance in 1641. Find someone from the same period and set them against him. Possibly bring them to 2060 with us to retrieve this Konrad.” Keith and Jala looked at him as if he were beyond crazy. “Famous musketeers. Athos, Aramis, D’Artagnan, and Porthos. I know you are somewhat familiar with them. Aramis’ wife is your great-grandmother many times removed, if I remember correctly.”

Daryl knew he wasn’t imagining the great pride Jala took in Laurel d’Anlass being an unusually independent woman for her time and leader of Louis XIII’s—immediately followed by Louis XIV’s—secret spy network. Another blip of information flipped across the screen. Jala caught it and understood why 1641 had been so warped. Laurel d’Anlass had died before she made all her contributions. That was not the way it was supposed to happen! Now it was personal.

Jala let her jaw go slack. She twirled the chair and dashed for the time chamber. “Let’s go, gentlemen, to just before the time disturbance in 1641. We’ve got some musketeers to find before everything we know ceases to exist.” Jala spoke more calmly than she thought possible when confronted with the prospect of Laurel’s premature death in 1641—more likely untimely murder by someone who knew what effect she would have in the future years—an effect that would reach her present in roughly two minutes. Not to mention, the sheer scope of the havoc the alterations to the timeline would wreak. No more time to debate alternatives.

The three dashed—only sparing a moment to grab one final parcel—into the chamber, and Jala twirled several knobs and pressed a sequence of buttons. The trio vanished. They might never have existed—just as the control room no longer existed and never would unless they set time right. Time may have been and was resilient, but even the main timeline could not stand up to such massive tinkering as this Konrad had launched.

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France, 1641 A. D.

What in the . . . Porthos reined back on his horse, slowing her with a deft touch. The large man scanned the expanse, watching for the unusual burst of light to repeat itself. Nothing. Except for the oddest feeling he'd ever experienced, or quite near the oddest, and his horse seemed to mirror the same sentiment. Something very strange indeed was going on.

Slowly, step-by-step, the musketeer urged his mount forward to investigate the disturbance. Several voices mingling together caught his attention. Voices speaking a language he couldn't begin to decipher. The man stopped. No charging in. Find out what he could first and then decide what to do from there. Aramis would be proud. Caution was, after all, part of that man's credo.

Jala did not pause in her unbuttoning of the dress. Sometimes she really hated the time chamber's default program, regardless of how necessary it was for the computer to automatically change one's garb to the garb of the period to which one was going. "I told you before, if you don't want to see what I'm doing, don't look," she informed her two companions. Occasionally her stubbornness got the better of her, a fact that rather annoyed her.

"Jay, women of the time wear corsets, or at least many of them do. And for all intents and purposes you must be a woman of the times, just as Daryl and I must do our best to be men of the times. You can't just take it off." It was Keith who spoke, trying to appeal to her logic. Knowing Jay, though . . .

This time his appeal did not work. Not that he had really expected it to. Already the woman was undoing the stays of the corset and lifting the obnoxious, evil thing from her body, to quote her words. Given, it was a much less restraining corset than those of the time, but . . . how could women have ever let themselves be imprisoned in these things? The rationale was beyond her, and she had no desire to try to comprehend the warped rationale. Into the underbrush she kicked the vile contraption. Later she'd fall back to her well-disciplined behavior.

"That's because you don't have to wear the vile thing," she countered. "I will not wear it. This dress is uncomfortable enough with all its infernal layers. I hardly need a corset to make it more unbearable. Stuff it, Keith. I will wear the dress, but without the

torture device. My waist is adequately small—very small by most standards. Now could one of you be so kind as to help me button this dress?” She was a good contortionist, but her body was tired after its trip, and her rampaging emotions were only carefully held in check.

The younger man stepped forward and buttoned up the dress quickly. Jala really didn’t care a whole lot for modesty sometimes. Daryl shuddered to think what men of the current time would have thought of a woman half undressing for them, taking off a corset and then asking one of them to help her fix her dress.

Task complete, Jala reached down and retrieved the veston. At least the chamber never modified the veston, or they’d all be in real trouble right now. The woman took a small, scarcely visible microtranverl and inserted the minuscule object underneath the flap of her ear.

Immediately she offered a similar object to each of her companions. “Please, don’t argue. None of us had time to learn the language of seventeenth-century France. We’re justified in using these until we can pick up the language ourselves.” Not that she intended on staying that long in the 1640s, April 1641, to be more precise. Plus, without them, communication, forget discreet, would be next to impossible. Jala did not add the comment, for the fact was more than evident to both men.

Quickly the men followed her action and inserted the device inside their own ears. Jala was right. “Oh, and Daryl, pull that hat down more so it shadows your face. These people aren’t too fond of Asians, and you’ll need to do part of the talking, so let’s keep your race quiet for a while.”

Daryl found it wise to comply. Besides, he had never before been sent on a true time trip. He certainly didn’t want to make any more stupid mistakes because of ignorance, considering it was he who had caused the major disturbance to the timeline in the first place. A tragic mistake he was having a hard enough time coping with. Not to mention, Jala actually liked being in charge.

Keith signaled his companions from this point on to be very careful what they said or did, as the words would momentarily be put into language the people of 1641 would readily understand, at least after the device heard some of the language of the time. The man glanced at Daryl. He wondered if the youngster had any clue how to use the ancient rapier strapped at his side. True, Daryl had

been a weapon's specialist, but whether he had ever actually used such an arm Keith didn't know.

Keith extended his hand, and the woman placed the veston in it. Quickly he tucked the veston in the pack the time chamber had provided them. He looked them all up and down. At least they looked somewhat like they belonged here, though a black man, a young fighter, and a tall—by standards of the time—short-haired woman were not what one saw everyday in seventeenth-century France. At that point the threesome stopped and stood. They had, to put it mildly, no clue as to how they could proceed. Finding and convincing certain musketeers to travel forward in time was not exactly something done on a regular basis, nor something you could just ask a passerby.

Some leaves rustled, and Jala swirled to face the direction of the sound. A spring breeze lifted a tendril of her hair. The woman didn't notice; she was more intent on the rider who was emerging from behind the shelter of the trees. He said something very quickly. Gibberish. Jala's look remained blank and he spoke again. To her great relief the microtranverl kicked in swiftly. Already after those few brief words it knew and had assimilated the language.

“Are you lost?” the large bearded man asked.

Jala cast her eyes toward the ground. Hopefully Daryl would realize this was his domain—actually his role. He did. “The next best thing my, good sir,” Daryl replied, almost surprised to hear himself speaking flawless old French. “Could you perhaps be so kind as to tell us where we are and where we might be able to purchase some horses?”

Porthos leaned over his saddle horn, folding his hands in front of him. “You're about four leagues outside of Paris. And that'll be the closest place you can find horses of any quality,” the musketeer replied, still very wary of the strangers, and much less talkative than was usual for him. There was something odd about them other than the fact a negro was with them, and one simply did not see very many negroes in Europe.

“Thank you much, my good sir,” Daryl replied. An awkward silence enveloped the foursome. Apparently the big man had had enough of them, and he prepared to go.

Jala hurried several steps forward, thankful she did not trip over her skirts and end up kissing the ground—or trying very clumsily to worship God. “Please wait, *monseigneur*,” the woman

said, her tone as submissive as she could make it. His dark eyes met hers. “We have very much lost our direction and would be grateful for your able assistance.” The man fingered the sash he had tied around his head and said nothing. “It’s a lovely sash,” Jala told him demurely.

His face broke out in a grin that reminded Jala of a certain Cheshire cat she had once read about. “It was a gift from the Queen of America.”

Confusion lit her eyes. “I was unaware there’s a queen in the new world. I had thought it was nothing other than colonies.”

Porthos waved his hand dismissively. “A common misconception, *madame*. But anyway, what is it you would ask of me?”

Keith glanced at his stepdaughter. He could almost see and hear the cogs rapidly turning in her mind. At the same time, he didn’t really want to know what story the woman would concoct, though his telepathic talent would undoubtedly be able to tell him so this time. Sometimes she reminded him of his own younger days. “My companions and myself lost our horses to footpads some two days past. Thus I fear we are sadly late for an appointment, and she must be very worried about us by now.”

“She?” Porthos raised an eyebrow.

“*Oui. Mademoiselle la marquise de Langeac*, Laurel d’Anlass, is expecting us. We’d be ever so much in your debt if you could guide us to her or direct us to someone who can.”

“What may I ask is your business with *Mademoiselle* Laurel?”

“I would much rather not discuss the matter out in public, *monseigneur*,” Jala remarked. “Suffice it to say, it is a matter very dear to her heart and could well concern her personal safety.” The large man looked unconvinced. Jala cast desperately for something, anything, and latched onto a name. “I do not suppose that you are familiar with *Herzog* Konrad of Brandenburg-Prussia. ’Tis concerning him,” the woman concluded.

“Actually,” a rakish glint lit his eyes; the name minus the title brought back memories. “I believe I am quite familiar with the man. Entrust me with your message, and I can take it to *mademoiselle la marquise* myself.”

“That I cannot and will not do, *monseigneur. Mademoiselle* Laurel would not take it well if I delivered the message to any

other than her. And well you know that fact if you are even remotely familiar with the lady.”

How right the dark-haired woman was. That would never be Laurel’s style, especially if the matter were an urgent one. Slowly Porthos nodded his head. “I am well acquainted with the *marquise*. I personally can take you to her. But if I may be so bold as to inquire after your names?”

“You may call me Jalene and this is Daryl and Keith,” she gestured to each of her companions, barely hiding her surprise at the way the microtranverl altered her companions’ names. She should have expected it, though, especially considering her experience with time travel. “And we have the great pleasure of meeting . . .”

He swept the hat from his head and gave it an exaggerated flourish. “Why, I am none other than the great Porthos, known far and wide. Ah, I can see my reputation precedes me,” he commented. Porthos placed the hat back on his head, not bothering to tuck the sash under it. He looked at each of the three. Now, it was time to see what the great Porthos could do about this little situation. *Saperlipopette*, he loved his job. Beat boredom any day of the week.

“Hump, hmm,” Porthos cleared his throat loudly, and Aramis released Laurel, stepping away from her reluctantly. The sooner those two got married, the better. Aramis was having a very difficult time keeping his hands off the woman. The question was, how much longer could Aramis resist the temptation to seduce and bed the woman? He just might make it to the wedding day, depending on Laurel of course, Laurel who was blushing furiously, or had been. The blush was fading quickly.

Aramis cast a look at Porthos that Porthos correctly interpreted as one saying that he always interrupted at the most inopportune times. Just when Aramis was starting to make some headway with his betrothed. And that was not so easy a task. “So sorry to disturb you two.”

“*Non*, that is quite all right,” Laurel responded, her composure at top form. She did not at all look like a woman caught committing a rather grave impropriety, regardless of the fact that he was her betrothed. Aramis narrowed his eyes.

Infernal woman, pretending like nothing had been going on. He had been a fool to think things would go smoothly between

them once they had admitted they were in love. It was simply not in their natures to easily allow such a level of intimacy. Not to mention the fact Laurel was not in the least pleased about the fact she was in love with him. Then there was the pride, independence, and stubbornness that each of them possessed in astoundingly large quantities. “What can I do for you?” Laurel prompted after a brief pause.

“There is a woman here who would like to see you. She says you’re expecting her. Calls herself Jalene. Said something about our ‘friend,’ Konrad.”

Every sense leaped to life at the name. She should have killed the dastard. After what he had done to Erik and Aramis, he deserved it. Laurel knew no Jalene; however, she did not reveal that fact to either musketeer. She was very curious to see what the woman had to say, and she well knew that if she admitted she was unfamiliar with this Jalene, neither of the musketeers would allow her to find out what she wanted to know. Well, time to put her acting skills to work again. “*Mademoiselle* Jalene and her escorts. You found them. *Dieu soit loué*. I was beginning to fear for their lives. Where are they? Have you brought them here?”

“They’re out in the parlor. I . . .”

She had no patience to spare for his long-winded explanations today. “Come now, Porthos, *ça suffit*. Enough please. Quickly take me to them. Much time has been wasted already.” Porthos led Laurel from the room, and Aramis trailed closely behind them, trying to push aside the notion that Laurel might well be throwing herself recklessly into some predicament. That a certain amount of recklessness was part of her job description became more apparent to him with each passing day. With such obligations how ever was he going to handle her being his wife? Could he? Could even love suffice?

Jala swiftly rose to her feet as Porthos, Laurel, and Aramis entered. Be ready for anything, she instructed herself as she sized up the blond-haired woman. Now, why had nothing she’d ever read said what a beautiful and uncommonly commanding woman Laurel d’Anlass had been? Actually the history books probably would have mentioned next to nothing of her if she hadn’t “temporarily” taken control of Louis XIII’s secret spy service and married one of the most famous musketeers in history, and a rich *duc* to boot. Well, they might have mentioned her as the first

single *marquise*, first single, titled woman in her own right, Jala conceded.

Laurel came forward, a welcoming smile beaming from her face. “Jalene. So Porthos wasn’t trying to pull a fast one on me. You really did make it. Let me look at you,” Laurel said as she sized up the black-haired woman before her. Unusual. The woman was the same height as she was. She had not yet met a woman who matched her height or exceeded it. Well, until now, she corrected. “I had worried for your safety when you did not arrive as scheduled.”

At that moment Laurel took note of both Aramis’ and Porthos’ steady gazes upon her. Drat! She’d done it again, and they were silently taking her to task for it. Forgetting the social conventions she really had been making an effort to master. “Jalene, as you probably know, this is Porthos, heir to the *comte de Vendôme*. And I don’t believe you’ve met my betrothed. Allow me to introduce Aramis, *duc de Rouen*.”

“I am honored.” Jala sketched a curtsy to the men. *Mademoiselle* Laurel had very good taste in men, if Aramis’ looks were anything to judge by. Jala quickly introduced her companions, telling Laurel that Daryl was her cousin and that Keith was a friend of theirs. The *marquise* gestured for them to be seated, and everyone followed her lead.

Laurel opened her mouth to address Jala again. At that moment, the doors to her town-house parlor came open and the butler announced Athos and D’Artagnan. The woman refrained from scowling. Oh, they did have an annoying way of showing up right when she was about to get involved with something that was of great personal interest.

Once again, Laurel played her role as hostess and made sure she acquainted everyone. Laurel offered a drink to each of her guests, and the three strangers turned down the drinks. In their own time, drinking was not a popular pastime for time travelers. The musketeers, however, did not turn down such an opportunity. Laurel was a connoisseur of wines, after all.

The social niceties out of the way, Laurel turned to Jalene again. “As I was saying earlier, it’s good to see that you are well. It has been too long.”

“Indeed,” Jala played along, wondering what the other woman’s game was and realizing Laurel was handling this surprise meeting very skillfully. “I must say you are looking more

wonderful than ever, Laurel. May I extend my felicitations on your upcoming nuptials?” Aramis and Laurel graciously accepted the blessing.

“I take it you know this woman?” Athos spoke for the first time since his arrival.

“Of course,” Laurel said, making full use of her acting abilities. “Jalene and I go back years. In fact we met in . . .”

Jala took the *marquise*’s cue. “In Dover. Our fathers had business together. Needless to say we have not been able to keep in touch as much as we would have liked to.”

While Jala and Laurel were finishing this exchange Aramis leaned over toward D’Artagnan and Athos and said very quietly, “Laurel’s up to something. I’d stake my life and honor on it.” Athos and D’Artagnan exchanged glances with one another. They had a sneaking suspicion Aramis was correct on that head. Aramis had frighteningly astute instincts sometimes. Quickly the men turned their attention back to the ongoing conversation. It wouldn’t do to make Laurel suspicious of them, yet.

“You had something of great import to share with me?” Laurel prompted the other woman.

“*Oui*, it’s about Konrad,” Jala informed the woman, then dropped silent. “Do you think it wise to impart such information to this entire assembly?”

“I do trust them all implicitly, but I see your point. If you gentlemen would excuse us, please, Jalene and I have some matters to discuss in private and much to catch up on.” With those words, Laurel promptly rose to her feet, and the two women exited the parlor.

The six men sat awkwardly in the quiet room, Keith and Daryl on one side and the musketeers on the other. Antagonistic and just short of hostile would have been a more accurate description of the situation.

“So, Laurel invited you to Paris.” Athos, the *capitaine* of the musketeers, took the initiative.

“She invited *ma cousine*, *Mademoiselle* Jalene,” Daryl corrected. He did not like this game of Jala’s. What was the woman thinking? And he seriously hoped that she was thinking.

“Then how come Laurel did not even mention so much as a word about any of you to any of us?” Athos was terse, as he so often was.

Righting Time

D'Artagnan took up Aramis' customary role. "Athos, it does not do to be rude. Try a little tact, *mon ami*."

"It's all right," Keith assured them. "It is not an unusual reaction on the part of a friend. I might well do the same thing were I in his place. Actually, I might well be more rude than any of you gentlemen have been were I in your place." Daryl seconded the older man's words after Keith paused.

"You still haven't answered the question," Athos reminded the men.

"I, we, don't know how to answer your question," Daryl said absolutely truthfully. "That is something you will have to ask *Mademoiselle* Laurel yourself." He intended to, and he would, Athos decided. "I wish I could tell you more." Daryl shrugged his shoulders. Somehow he did not think these men would believe him if he told them he was from the year 2514 and had come back in time to get their aid to defeat Konrad in 2060. At the very least, they would escort him to Bedlam were they in England—if he were lucky.

"All that I have told you is true." Jala leaned forward and met the other woman's eyes steadily. "Though I do admit it would be much easier if I were crazy. Then this whole thing would be nothing more than a bad dream or the product of a deranged mind." Then she could go back to the occupation that she loved rather than fear that she might cease to exist.

"That is the truly frightening thing," Laurel began. Paused. Visibly gathered her thoughts. "You aren't crazy, which leaves me with two options. Either you are lying through your teeth and have a fantastic imagination, or you are telling the truth, unthinkable as that may be."

"Why would I lie to you?"

"That I don't know, but that doesn't make the option any less likely," Laurel contended. Her profession, if anything, had taught her to be suspicious rather than trusting.

"I can prove to you that I am what and who I claim to be, or at the very least not of any place you have ever known." Jala's low-pitched voice was heavy with conviction that was nearly palpable. Could it be that this time she was leaping before she looked; she couldn't help but wonder.

"Then do so."

Porthos and the other five men in the room looked up as the two women returned. Conversation stopped. Not that the conversation had been flowing particularly well in the first place, but as Jala and Laurel entered the sitting room it ground into nonexistence.

With purpose Jala strode over and picked up the pack that lay at Keith's feet. "Keith, Daryl, I have told *Mademoiselle* Laurel exactly why we are here. Will one of you be willing to tell her the complete truth while I retrieve the comstat?"

Keith's eyes turned to his stepdaughter, questioning, *the truth*. The thought echoed through her mind, and she warned the older man to be careful about using his telepathic talent right now. However, in acknowledgment she nodded her head a fraction. The black man took a long, deep breath. "We are not from your time. We are from very far in your future—more than eight hundred, closer to nine hundred years to be more precise."

Already the musketeers were trading looks that plainly told them they thought Keith was lying through his teeth or fit for the madhouse. "There has been a big disturbance in the time continuum that sent a man we know as *Herzog* Konrad into the twenty-first century, where he wreaked so much havoc that the entire timeline was drastically changed. We came back here to obtain your help to find the man and stop him from destroying the future of this entire world." Keith ran out of words to say.

"Of course, and I've walked on the moon numerous times." Porthos' voice was plainly deriding, and it was only a warning look from Laurel that stopped him from forcibly ejecting the three lunatics.

"Actually, men do walk on the moon in the midtwentieth," Daryl piped up and then abruptly fell silent, not wanting to get into an argument with the large man. No telling what damage a man that strong could do to him, and the medical facilities around here left a great deal to be desired.

D'Artagnan slid his gaze to Laurel. She was far too serious and still. Was the *marquise* actually considering this delusion of madness as truth? "Do you actually believe them?" the youngest musketeer asked.

"Can I take the chance that they aren't lying to me and turn my back on them only to find out that Konrad really does do what they claim he does?" Laurel sank onto the sofa next to her friend. "Put it this way. I don't disbelieve them." She couldn't afford to,

and her gut instinct was to trust Jala. More often than not her instincts were accurate. That was one trait she and her stepsister, Sabine, had often shared. The lingering memory of loss and betrayal still gave her a pang of anguish, and she pushed it away quickly.

“Laurel,” Jala handed the woman the pack and urged her to open it, “I’d like you to take a look at this. Just be careful. Some of that stuff is quite sensitive, and I wouldn’t want anyone here to get hurt.”

Laurel pulled the strange veston from the pack and held it up so she could get a better look at it. Never before had she seen anything remotely like it. The material itself was nothing like any cloth anywhere in the known world, as far as she could ascertain, and she had traveled extensively with her father on his spy missions. The *marquise* reached into one of the pockets and withdrew a handheld link, the comstat.

Though, she had no idea what it was, still, it mesmerized her. The unit was well beyond any technology of her age. Jala was telling the truth. She was convinced of it even though her friends were not. She could tell by the skeptical looks on their faces. Laurel replaced the items in the pack and handed it back to the other woman.

The *marquise* got to her feet. At that moment Athos halted her. “You mean to go with them?”

“*Oui*, Athos. Even though you do not believe, I do. And I must go.”

“Laurel, you have no idea who these people are. It could well be an elaborately contrived hoax.” Aramis gently grasped her arms as he spoke.

“Now look who doesn’t want to see the truth,” she murmured and then lifted her head, challenging. “If you are so worried about me, then come with me.” She offered them the challenge.

“To the future?” D’Artagnan queried, skeptical and curious at the same time.

“That would be my assumption,” Laurel quipped more to hide her own nervousness than anything else. Sometimes she wanted to throw their overprotectiveness back in their faces.

“I won’t let you go alone.” D’Artagnan’s voice was firm. Still found himself trying to play the knight errant for Laurel and protect her. This time was little different. “I’m coming with you.”

Laurel crossed her arms. “Anyone else?” She could use the company, friends she could trust, although she was not about to admit it to the musketeers, lest they try to prevent her from doing as she felt she must once again.

“Laurel.” Aramis looked at her with that gaze that went right through her. “You should know us better than that. You are one of us in all but name. And it is always all for one and one for all. If you go, we go too.” He turned to the three people who claimed they were from the future. “Lead on.”

“Actually,” Daryl spoke up, “we don’t need to go anywhere. We can do this from right here and whenever you’re ready.”

“Hold on a moment, Daryl.” Jala raised her hand. Time to slow things down from their breakneck speed and prepare as best as possible for what was to come. “We’re going to have to do something about our costumes. No one dresses remotely like this in the twenty-first century.” She scratched her head. “I think tunics and breeches will be the best we can do. You wouldn’t perhaps have two extra sets of those items on you, Laurel?”

“Zut,” Athos mumbled and Jala looked at him. Melancholic, brusque gentleman. “You better believe she has them,” he expanded upon the explicative. Short of death, Laurel would never give up all her male attire.

“Daryl, Keith, help these men get down to the least unusual dress that they can.”

“The swords?” Daryl asked.

Jala sighed. Scant protection was better than none. “We’d better keep those. We just might need something in 2060.” This was one time she wished for the time chamber to “magically” transform their clothes. Unfortunately, there was no chamber here. She could only summon up a portal, and all that would do is let them travel time and perhaps space. Not one thing more. “We’ll be back as soon as we’re ready,” Jala informed them, and once again the women exited the room.

True to their word, they were back quickly and in tunics and breeches. Wouldn’t you know it, Porthos remarked to himself? Both women were completely comfortable in men’s garb, and Laurel had strapped her sword to her side. He’d say not a single word, though, about how this escapade and dress could ruin their reputations. Not this time.

Laurel was unable to hide her smile at the musketeer’s reaction; she could get used to this idea of the future, especially if

the women were on equal footing with men, and apparently they were, if Jala were anything to judge by. Plus, her friends didn't look half bad reduced to such simple garb. Although, Porthos had been unable to part with his sash again. She glanced at Aramis. There should be a law against a man looking that good all the time. "I think we're ready," Laurel said with a confidence that had stood her in good stead since she had taken over as head of Louis' spy service.

A minuscule movement caught Jala's attention. Keith was shaking his head in a manner unnoticeable to anyone other than those who had Jala's specific mental talent. Not everything had been considered, and Jala bowed her eyes in response. It did come in handy that Keith was a telepath and that she could hear him despite the fact he sometimes read things from her that he wasn't supposed to know. Actually, things she'd rather he didn't know.

"Not yet." It was Jala who spoke. She reached inside her ear and plucked the device from it. The musketeers' conversation did not melt into gibberish, and she heaved a sigh of relief. The device had allowed her to start picking up old French, enough to understand them and speak it somewhat. "None of you know the language of 2060," she said in French that was actually quite good, though a little accented. She did, after all, know twenty-first-century French.

"I guess we'll just have to learn it when we get there then." Athos was completely pragmatic, resigned to doing what had to be done, despite the magnitude of the probable challenge.

Jala retrieved several microtranverls from the veston and let them slide through her fingers; her brain counted them automatically. She had been right; with her microtranverl, a total of four of the items were not currently in use. Still one less than what she needed. She extended her palm, showing the musketeers and Laurel the tiny technological objects. "These will allow you to hear, speak, and understand the language of the time and give you time to gradually pick up the language on your own," Jala told them, or at least said fairly closely in the old French.

"What of you?" Daryl touched Jala's shoulder.

Jala smiled, but did not turn to face the young Asian man. "I've been an observer in twenty-first-century America. I already know American standard. I have no need of the microtranverl there." The young man's hand fell from her shoulder.

Daryl reached to his own ear and took the device out of it, offering it to his superior and a woman seven or so years his senior. “You’ll have need of this. I’ve been learning American standard. Given a little immersion I should pick up the rest relatively quickly, but they,” he gestured, “won’t be so fortunate. They need it more than I do.”

Jala thanked him and took the tiny object. Once again the dark-haired woman extended her open palm with the devices to the French people. For a brief moment she concentrated and her stepfather nodded. Message received, he proceeded to explain to the five more specifically about what the device would do and showed them how to insert it. One by one, and reluctantly, they each took a microtranverl and inserted it in their ear as Keith had shown. Almost immediately they could perfectly understand Daryl and Jala again.

“*Doux Jésus*,” Aramis murmured and then begged the Lord’s pardon for using His name in vain. He had never before experienced anything like this. Nor was he sure that he cared for this new thing no matter how handy it seemed to be.

Jala took out the comstat and focused herself inward. Trancelike, she depressed several buttons and tweaked an internal switch with her mental power alone. One more adjustment, and she was done for the moment. A hazy gold and blue portal appeared, bubblelike almost. “I believe we’re ready to go,” she announced, prompting the musketeers out of their pose of frozen surprise.

“Wait,” D’Artagnan called his friends to attention. “We need to tell Constance and Yvette.”

“I’m afraid not.” Jala shook her head, steeling herself for a battle.

“Why not?” Athos and D’Artagnan said together, ready to challenge the three strangers despite the magical devices the three possessed.

“There is no sense in worrying them needlessly. Drat. I didn’t say that right,” she criticized herself aloud. “If we do what we must and do it right, then they will never even know you were gone.”

“And if not?” It was Porthos who spoke.

“If not, it won’t make any difference anyway. This present will have been changed, and no one here will ever know the difference.” Her voice was cool, heartless some might say. But

Keith knew better. He knew what those words cost his stepdaughter. She had lost her natural father because of the same premise. Mother too, more recently. She could understand their pain better than they realized.

“Wait Jala,” Keith interrupted. “It is likely that these men will change their appearance in 2060. Just as likely that coming back here and bringing Konrad back, we will have to travel one way or another in order to get him where he must go. Put it this way: the absence will be noted.”

“Okay. What can we do then? Recommendations?” the woman from the future asked, taking control without realizing what she was doing.

“Tell the king we have gone on a mission of national importance, Athos. Send him a message,” the *duc de Rouen* suggested. The king would trust Athos on this.

“Not enough,” Athos informed him. “I need more clout than that.”

“Then,” Laurel said, “you and I will tell Louis that we are going on a joint expedition on a matter that concerns his spies and his musketeers and that we should be back in about two weeks, barring any major and unforeseen difficulties.” This said, Laurel got out a sharpened quill and her other writing utensils and offered them to Athos. After he completed his missive and sealed it as she wrote her own and sealed it, Athos gave them to a servant to be delivered immediately. The task done, Athos reentered the room to hear Keith once again speaking.

“We’d better go,” Keith informed them, spurring them to act before someone stumbled upon them and began to wonder. The black man stepped into the bubble, followed by Daryl and each of the musketeers in turn. Then Laurel. And finally Jala. Behind the dark-haired woman, the bubble sealed—actually, Jala would have called it a portal and would have claimed the portal had collapsed.

Jala turned her attention to the comstat once again. “Brace yourselves,” she warned. “Where we’re going will be a big shock.” Jala internally crossed her fingers. Hopefully these five were adaptable and would adjust quickly to the new era. And maybe the American public would simply think they were a bunch of weirdos dressed up to go to a costume party. It really wasn’t such a far-out hope either, knowing the American society of the time and their penchant for romanticizing the past.

Jala's words of warning had been insufficient. Some would have called her a "superior adept of understatement" for being so asinine as to expect people from a "backward" time to be anything other than completely shocked by the merest notion of time travel, let alone the actual fact of experiencing it.

Keith and Daryl were tempted to be more generous. Jala had simply grossly underestimated the situation. Having such little time to prepare these new time travelers really hadn't aided matters either. Not that the notion of what they were doing sat well with either Daryl or Jala. The very fabric of time that they could be changing by bringing the people forward, regardless of the need, was staggering in its implications.

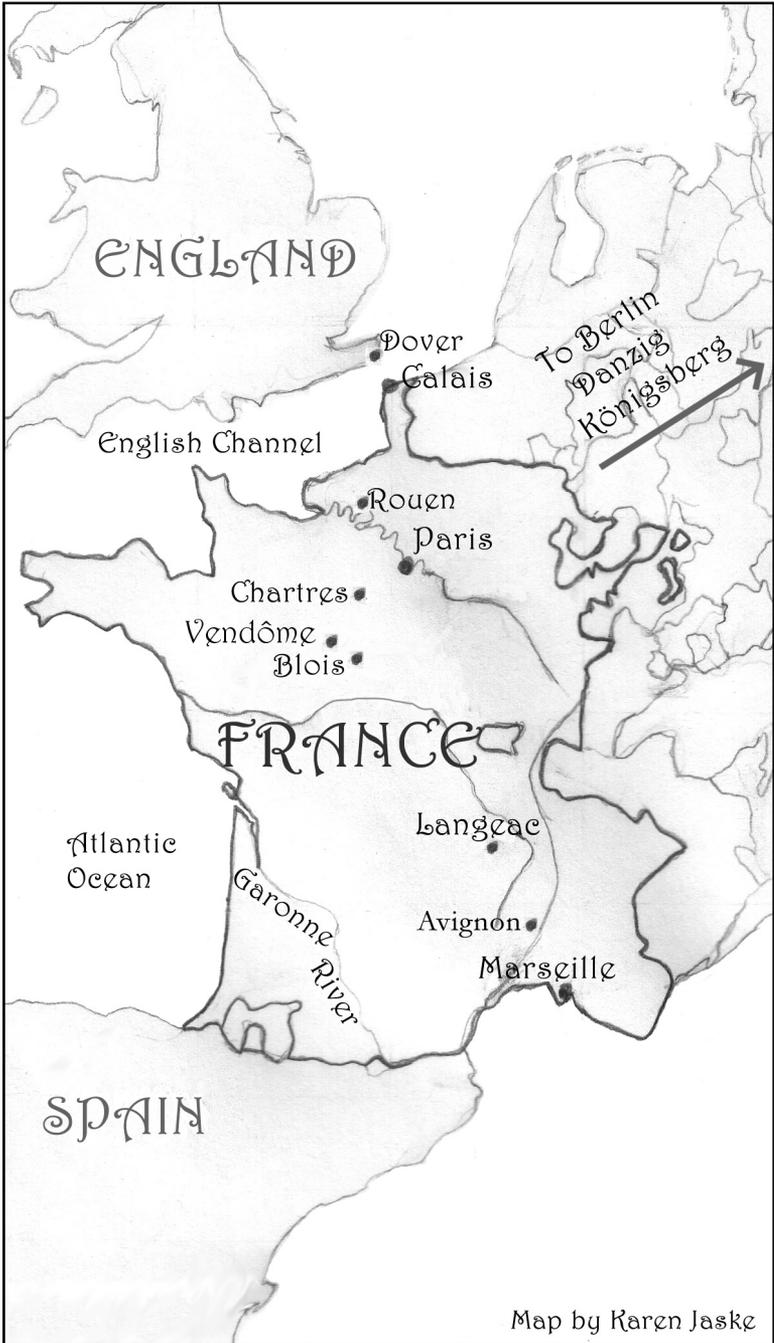
These thoughts, chaotic impressions and incoherent ideas rushed across the trained time travelers' neurons. Then, as the world shifted, they snapped back into themselves, leaving them to try to cope with the strain on five personalities unprepared for a complete shift from anything like the world they had known or ever dared to imagine.

The haze of the portal dissipated. Laurel and her friends stood rooted to the spot. Sensations—pure sensory overload, or close to it—assaulted the French people. A mind-numbing awareness seeped through them. Denial ripped at their innards. So much easier to continue that denial, to disbelieve the bevy of oratory and visual stimuli that bombarded them, forcing them to accept no alternative other than to believe in time travel. To believe in a time beyond their own.

Yet the fabric of reality—if this was reality and not a delusion of a deranged mind—defied comprehension on most every level. Deny and go mad or accept and . . .

Obviously, they were leagues and years from home with no good idea on how they would ever return from whence they came. The merest hint of choices to come left them flabbergasted. Who would return? And just what challenges would they have to surmount along the way?

End of Section One: The book contains 352 pages.



Kat Jaske

Kat Jaske is an English and French teacher in Las Vegas where her high school selected her novel, *For Honor*, as the featured book for the Reading Incentive Program.



Jaske is a national award-winning poet, and won the Upper Arlington High School top-five senior thesis award for her book.

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