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The Prisoner

As a young man, Aramis was a musketeer in the king's service. In those days, he and his friends, Athos and Porthos, were known as the three musketeers. Later, they were joined by a fourth, named D'Artagnan. Their motto, "All for one and one for all," had become famous. The musketeers knew they could count on each other for anything.

Now the four men were more or less retired. They had gone on to live quieter lives. Aramis was now a bishop in the Catholic church. He wanted to be pope—and he had a plan to make that happen! But first, he needed to get the king on his side.

At that time, Louis the Fourteenth was the king of France. He was a selfish man who made very bad decisions. For the smallest mistakes,

he sent people to the Bastille, a terrible prison. A man named Seldon was a good example. All Seldon had done was write two lines of poetry that made fun of the king. Now he was in prison for life! When the king's advisers begged him to set the poor man free, he always refused. Others were in the Bastille for equally minor things.

Louis the Fourteenth didn't know about one prisoner in the Bastille, however. The jailers knew this prisoner as Marchiali. He was a young man, 23 years old—the same age as the king. He'd been imprisoned in the Bastille for eight years.

One evening, Aramis came to the Bastille to have dinner with Baisemeaux, the jailer. Because Baisemeaux had formerly been a musketeer, he and Aramis were friends.

Earlier, Aramis had bribed a guard to take a message to Marchiali. The message told Marchiali to ask for a priest to hear his confession that night. It was a rule that any such request must be honored. The request came to Baisemeaux when Aramis arrived. Since Aramis was now a bishop, he could hear the confession. So Baisemeaux had no

choice but to lead Aramis to Marchiali's cell. He called for a guard to go with them.

Aramis followed Baisemeaux and the guard across the courtyard. It was a beautiful, starry night. Their footsteps echoed on the stones of the terraces. The clinking of the keys on the guard's belt could be heard in the towers. The sound reminded the prisoners that liberty was out of their reach.

After entering one of the towers, Aramis, Baisemeaux, and the guard started toward the basement. They climbed down the stairs, and Baisemeaux moved toward the prisoner's cell. Aramis reached out and stopped him. "The rules do not allow anyone but a priest to hear the prisoner's confession," he said.

Baisemeaux bowed, and Aramis told the jailer to close the door behind him. He waited a moment to make sure Baisemeaux and the guard had left. Then he put his lantern on the table and looked around.

A young man lay resting on the bed. According to custom, the prisoner was in the dark. At the hour of curfew, he was required to blow out his lamp. The prisoner kept his

clothes on a leather chair near the bed. A little table—without pens, books, paper, or ink—stood near the window. The plates of food on the table showed that he had hardly touched his last meal. Picking up his lantern, Aramis walked toward the bed. The young man sat up.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Didn’t you ask for a priest?”

“Yes, but it was obviously *you* who told me to do so. Why have you come?”

“I have something very important to tell you,” Aramis said.

“I’m listening,” the young man replied.

Aramis was struck with the easy majesty of the young man’s manner.

“Tell me—do you regret the loss of your liberty?” Aramis asked.

“What do you call liberty?” the prisoner replied.

Aramis laughed. “What do *I* call liberty? The flowers, the air, light, the stars—and the happiness of going wherever I want!”

The young man smiled sadly. “Look,” he said. “I have in that vase two roses gathered today from the prison garden. If flowers mean

liberty, then I am free, for I have them. And the air comes through the bars of my window. In spring and summer, it caresses my face. In winter, it provides rain. Sometimes I stand on this chair, with my arms around the bars of the window. I imagine that I'm flying free in the wide expanse.

“And light! I have what is *better* than light! I have the sun—a friend who comes to visit me each day. I've heard there are people who work in mines who never see the sun at all. As for the stars, they all are alike except for size and brightness. I can see one beautiful star from my bed. The only thing I lack is the freedom to go wherever I want.”

Aramis smiled. “I can help you with that, if you'll let me,” he said. “But first I must know that you trust me. I should tell you that if the king knew I was here, I wouldn't see the morning!”

While listening to Aramis, the young man studied him closely. “Now I remember you,” he said. “Long ago, you came to the house where I was living. You brought a fine lady to visit me. I was told that she was a lady of the court.