

Something to Aspire to

a *The Musketeers* fanfic

by **Rodo**

IT WAS STRANGE how different a room could look if only you stood on the other side of a desk, Aramis thought as he examined his new office. He'd been in this very room countless times – it had been the Cardinal's office first, and then Treville's. The latter had been too practical to redecorate and Aramis doubted he would change much either. There was too much work to be done, and at the moment, it all felt a little overwhelming. To take it all in, he pulled back the chair and sat down, surveying his new realm. To both sides stood tall shelves full of ledgers and correspondence detailing the state of the realm while the sun shone through the windows at his back, casting a shadow on the desk. Aramis took a deep breath and tried not to despair. He was a soldier, the son of a whore, no less. He knew battlefields, not politics. For a moment, he cursed Athos for talking him into accepting the position. Then he was distracted by approaching steps.

A few moments later, the door opened to reveal Anne – the Queen Regent of France. She looked as perfect as ever, with her hair piled high upon her head and a lavish dress of gold and blue brocade. She smiled slightly when she saw him sitting there, then nodded at her guard and entered the room. The door closed behind her. They were alone, but barely. Aramis had no illusions that their every word could – and would – be heard.

“First Minister,” the queen greeted him, her lips quirked upwards slightly. Aramis couldn't help the smile that crept on his own face. He stood up and bowed.

“Your Majesty.”

“I hope you like your new office,” Anne commented, letting her eyes roam over the shelves. “You will spend a lot of time here.”

Aramis frowned slightly. “It will do; I'm not the kind of man who needs to be surrounded by luxury.”

“Neither was your predecessor.”

For a moment, it was almost as if Treville was standing in the room with them. Aramis could feel the captain's disapproving glare on the back of his neck. What would he have said had he known who would succeed him? Nothing good, probably. He knew as well as Aramis that putting him and the queen together was bound to end in disaster. Even the king had known, for all that he was usually a dense fool. Yet here they were. Aramis fought the urge to take her hand in his, even though nobody would see them.

"But you will need to invest in some luxury at least. A Minister of France doesn't dress himself in worn down soldier's garb," she continued, looking sharply at him. Aramis looked down at himself and sighed. He was wearing his best clothes; the shirt was almost brand new and there were no mended tears in his breeches. His boots might use some polish, though. He had always liked to dress well if he could afford it, but he'd ever been just a well-dressed soldier, not a nobleman.

"I thought you liked how I looked," he whispered, hoping it could not be heard by the guards.

Anne tilted her head and her gentle smile widened. "I do. But in court, the right clothes are as important as the words you speak and the people you know. I'm afraid you'll have to adjust your wardrobe somewhat to fit in."

And he'd have to learn how to speak and make friends with rich men. It should have been Athos. He was of noble birth and knew all of this already. Not that he truly wished this life on his friend, not after he'd fought so hard to be rid of it.

"I'll have to change more than that," he told her. "I'm not cut out for this. I'm just a soldier, a good soldier, but a soldier still. I might have made a decent priest, but a minister ... I'm afraid I will fail you." And our son, he thought. The new king needed a competent First Minister. Someone like Richelieu, Aramis thought. As much as he hated the man, he could admit that he would have been the right man to keep the boy's throne secure.

"You won't," Anne assured him, carefully putting a hand on his arm. "You are charming, if you want to be, and sensible. You know war and court is not so different. Only the opponents use words and spies instead of musket and cannon. And most important of all, you are loyal. You will never betray your king and you will be his most ardent champion."

Aramis laid his hand on hers, then nodded tiredly. He had already agreed and he would do his best, no matter how much he might hate it. He would attend balls, read the right books and wear the right clothes. He would study whatever

he needed to. Looking at her now, as she looked up at him, he knew that he would do anything she asked of him, no matter how outlandish. He loved her, and he loved the boy who could never be his son so much it hurt.



“Welcome to France, Excellency, we are glad to receive you.” Aramis greeted the Spanish Ambassador with a strained smile that was answered in kind. De Cardenas was a prickly fellow that would have liked to keep fighting to the bitter end instead of talking, or so the spies’ missives said. He’d only come because the queen had convinced her brother to negotiate, and Aramis had no doubt that he would try his best to sabotage their efforts. He knew his kind of man. The kind that saw the men at the front as little more than pieces on a chess board. The kind that saw him as nothing more than an up-jumped soldier who was not worthy of his position.

“And I am glad to be here,” the Ambassador lied. “France is always so ... hospitable.”

“I’m glad you like your accommodations,” Aramis replied, ignoring the barb. “The Queen Regent awaits us in the council chamber. If you would follow me.”

De Cardenas nodded and Aramis led him and his party down the corridors of the Louvre that were finally starting to feel like home. He’d spent years guarding the king and walking through them, yet somehow he’d always felt like a piece of furniture in those days. After becoming First Minister, he’d felt like an intruder, but that was starting to fade at last, and it was not an insecurity he could afford to show in front of their guests. The Spanish were the enemy. There was a chance they would remain the enemy despite Anne’s efforts.

Aramis suppressed a yawn. They had been up late last night, he and the Queen, talking through their strategy with the other ministers. The Queen was adamant that they would have peace, just as her ministers were adamant that they would not have peace at any price. As for Aramis, he had agreed with the ministers, much as it hurt to see the look in Anne’s eyes when he told her so. She felt betrayed, he knew, but they couldn’t afford to appear weak. Giving in now would only lead to another war, with France in a weaker position, several years down the line. Anne – for all that she was better at ruling than her husband had ever been – knew little about war and soldiers. The men now fighting for France

would not take kindly to having bled and died with nothing to show for it.

In the council chamber, the Queen sat at the head of the table, and she managed a genuine smile when de Cardenas entered and bowed stiffly. Not a trace of last night's argument was left on her face. She looked as perfect as always when Aramis took his seat by her side. Across from them, the ambassador and his entourage did the same. For a moment, an uncomfortable silence reigned. Then the talks began.

They negotiated for hours. Anne did most of the talking, but de Cardenas was as dismissive of her as he was of Aramis. At noon, Aramis was beginning to get a headache and they were quite obviously getting nowhere. It was trying his patience.

"What you are refusing to acknowledge," he interrupted when the ambassador was yet again detailing all the ways in which Spain was in a better position than France, "is that you can afford the war to continue as it has even less than we. Catalonia has seceded and Portugal is in open revolt. You don't have the men to keep both of them under control while fighting us in Italy and the Netherlands."

"What the First Minister means to say," the Queen added with a beatific smile, "is that you have to cut your losses. And we both know that the position of the Spanish Netherlands is untenable. Why not make peace with us? It is in both our interests."

The ambassador stared first at her, then at Aramis, with naked hatred in his eyes until his aide took his elbow and whispered something in his ear.

"You will have to excuse us, we will need to discuss this among ourselves," de Cardenas announced before rising stiffly and walking out with the rest of the Spanish party. When the door closed behind them, Aramis finally felt the muscles in his neck and shoulders relax. The Minister of Finance next to him groaned with relief and stretched his legs.

"That went better than expected," the Queen remarked dryly.

Aramis snorted. "You'll have to forgive me. I'm still not used to all this talking."

"Oh no," Anne argued. "You did quite well. Sometimes, a direct approach is best. And it will do us some good if de Cardenas sees that we are not as easily manipulated as he would like. Now, I'd like to take a walk in the gardens before negotiations resume. Would you join me, First Minister?"

Aramis nodded gladly.



The hunting lodge at Versailles provided a welcome change of pace to the busy Louvre in Paris. Most of the court had stayed behind, now that the armistice had been signed and the last remaining supporters of Gaston's rebellion had been rooted out. And so the Queen had gladly retired to the countryside with her son, accompanied only by some guards and loyal servants, the royal tutors and the King's governess. And Aramis, of course, although it had been the King himself who had invited him.

"You promised to help me with my riding," the King reminded him before they left, pouting slightly, and Aramis had been unable to say no to that. So to Versailles he went.

For a six-year-old, the King was a good rider. Of course, he was sitting on the very docile pony his father had found for him, and it was carefully led around the yard by a stablehand that knew the animal and its habits. The King didn't notice how little he was actually doing, of course, and he didn't notice how half the guards watched him like a hawk for any sign of a fall. He was happily yanking on the reins and made his pony trot back and forth.

"Am I doing alright, Aramis?" he cried when the horse walked past where he stood.

"You are," Aramis assured him. "But you needn't be so forceful with the reins, Your Majesty."

The boy nodded and frowned in concentration as he directed the pony to continue on its round. Aramis watched him go and felt a deep pang of regret that he could never be a father to him the way King Louis had been.

"You seem unreasonably gloomy for such a fine day," a voice commented.

Aramis turned around to see d'Artagnan walk towards him with an impish smile on his face. When he reached him, they hugged gladly. They had seen too little of each other in the past few months, despite the fact that they were the only two of their group left in Paris. D'Artagnan had been busy with rebuilding the garrison and being captain and Aramis had spent most of his time in his new office. It felt far too good to see a friendly face for once.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you," Aramis said when they separated, "but I hope you don't have a pressing reason to be here."

The last thing he needed right now was another plot to overthrow the King; they'd just finished dealing with the last one. But d'Artagnan just continued smiling.

“No, I’m just here to sort out who to assign to guard the palace when the King returns, and to talk about the progress I’m making with the new recruits. I finally had the time for it. You know how it is.”

Aramis raised his eyebrows. “And who did you leave in charge? Brujon?”

D’Artagnan snorted. “No. He’s helping me with the recruits, but Constance has things well in hand, for now.”

Aramis could just imagine; the new recruits probably feared her wrath even more than they feared their Captain’s. Constance simply had a way about her. It was a testament to how unsuited he was to his new post that Aramis felt nostalgic for being harassed by another man’s wife early in the morning. He wasn’t used to being lonely, he concluded, and lonely he was. Maybe that was the penance God had ordained for his sins.

“How are you doing?” d’Artagnan asked after a moment of silence.

Aramis looked at the King, who was patting his long-suffering pony on the neck affectionately. “I’m fine,” he replied. “Still adjusting, but I’m fine.”

One look at d’Artagnan was enough to tell that he didn’t believe a word he said.



Aramis was hunched over the desk in his quarters at Versailles, studying a number of letters that had arrived for him that day, when a knock interrupted him. He stood up and stretched before going to the door. What was it now, he wondered. But when he opened the door he did not see a messenger with an urgent note or one of the guards come to alert him to danger to the King. Instead, he saw Queen Anne, looking oddly vulnerable in her billowing nightdress. Aramis cast his eyes up and down the corridor to make sure nobody was there before admitting her to his rooms.

“Why have you come?” he asked warily.

Queen Anne cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips slightly. “I wished to be with you, is that not enough.”

Oh, how he wished it was. “Your Majesty ...”

“Anne. You can call me Anne when we’re alone. And I am a widow now, Aramis. Let them talk, if they want.”

There were no words to express how much he wanted to, especially when she was standing so close to him, with her nightgown threatening to slip off her left

shoulder and her hair falling loosely down her back. Then she smiled in that slightly restrained way that still reached her eyes and Aramis forgot all about his doubts. Before he knew what he was doing he held her face in his hands and pressed their lips together. Anne did not object. On the contrary, she responded in kind and opened her mouth to deepen their kiss.

It felt like a natural consequence that they slowly stumbled towards the bed in between kisses and caresses and Anne's soft laughter. Aramis was so entranced by her he wouldn't have noticed her divesting him of his shirt had it not been for the soft hands brushing over his bare skin. When they reached the bed, he drew her close to him one last time, pressing their bodies together before gathering the fabric of her nightgown and lifting it over her head.

Slender arms wrapped themselves around him as Anne drew him close again as she let herself fall backwards onto the bed. They landed in a somewhat inelegant tangle of limbs but Aramis couldn't bring himself to care. He was no longer twenty and insecure about his prowess in bed. And she was still so beautiful. The years and the birth of her son had barely touched her.

And Anne still responded to his every touch the same way she had seven years ago, arching into his kisses as he pressed them first to her throat, then her breasts, then deeper. She sighed the sweetest sigh when his hands grasped her thighs and Aramis felt himself stiffen in anticipation of what was to come. He eagerly moved back up to capture her lips in a kiss that left them both breathless.

"You're still wearing your breeches," Anne murmured into his ear.

Aramis huffed in amusement, and after another quick kiss, he unlaced them and lowered them to his knees before hastily shrugging out of them. For a fraction of a moment, he wondered what Anne saw when she looked at him, propped up on her elbows. Did the soft candlelight obscure the lines created by age? Did she notice the scars he'd gained over the years? But none of that mattered when he saw her lying there, the woman he loved, stripped of the queen she wore like a cloak everyday. He loved her, and she loved him, imperfect though they were.

Falling back into Anne's arms felt like coming home after long years on campaign. She embraced him as he settled between her legs. They moved together hesitantly at first, unused to the sensations after so long apart, until they found their rhythm. But once they had, Aramis lost himself in the motion and the kisses, in the feeling of Anne's thighs pressed to his side and her hands clinging to

his shoulders. And in her shining eyes that looked at him with love and happiness that made his heart skip a beat.

After that, it didn't take Anne long to reach her peak. She threw back her head and gasped and Aramis felt her body tighten around him to an almost painful degree. Not long after, he neared his climax himself. With all the sense he could muster he pulled out at the last moment and spilled his seed on her stomach. It had only taken one night the last time, after all.

That sober thought dampened the afterglow of lovemaking and reminded the gentleman in him to get up and fetch a washcloth for Anne, who took it from him gratefully to wipe herself down, but she made no move to dress herself or leave his bed, so Aramis laid back down next to her, enveloping her in his arms. They lay together for a while, still breathing a bit heavier than normal and naked as the day they were born.

"This one is new, I think," Anne said, pointing to a scar on the side of his rib cage. New wasn't exactly the word Aramis would use; it was close to a year old and still slightly red, but it was definitely one she hadn't seen before.

"So is this," he retorted, and let his fingers brush over a stretch mark on her belly.

"We have changed, haven't we?" Anne sighed after a moment, and a shadow suddenly fell over her face.

"For the better, I hope," he japed wresting a smile from her.

"I've been thinking," Anne began. "I don't want to be without you. And we'll have to be careful, for now. But in a few years, I think it will seem only natural that the Queen Regent and the First Minister grow closer, and once the King is old enough to make some decisions of his own, maybe he will grant his mother some comfort and allow her to remarry a man who has served him faithfully. Would you like that?"

Anne looked at him with a mixture of girlish uncertainty and a queen's steely resolve. Aramis tried to picture her ten, twenty years from now. Her hair would begin to gray and she'd get wrinkles. And she would still be the most beautiful woman in the world to him.

"I would like that very much," Aramis replied.

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