

For France

a *The Musketeers* fanfic

by Rodo

MANY CONSIDERED THE secret to Cardinal Richelieu's success to be his ruthlessness. Others, an unquenchable thirst for power. Richelieu himself, of course, knew better. Ruthlessness and a thirst for power, and indeed power itself, were useless to those who did not know how to use them, or what to use them for, and to those who did not pay close attention to the people around them. Just look at the king, he sometimes found himself thinking. He had all the power a man could dream of and a ruthless streak to rival his own, if he decided to drop the façade of a benevolent monarch he so loved to cloak himself in. And yet, he would have lost his throne long ago, had it not been for Richelieu, to his mother, his brother or his brothers by marriage. Louis did not know people, did not understand how they worked, what drove them. He did not know the slight tells on their faces as they plotted treason. Nor did he know what to use his power for, short of his own amusement. Richelieu knew all of it, and he knew that *that* was the secret to his success.

It was a talent that sometimes turned out to be a curse, as he found out one fine day as he watched the Queen of France take a walk in the garden in the company of her ladies. Richelieu himself watched her parade her very pregnant self for all the court to see while he sat on a bench, in the shade, fighting to catch his breath. This increasing shortness of breath was beginning to worry him. His lungs had never quite recovered from Salvini's poison. Had the damage run deeper than he initially assumed?

A movement to the left drew his eye, and that of the queen. Four of the King's Musketeers were crossing the queen's path; all four thorns in Richelieu's side wherever they went. The queen thought differently, of course. It was easy to tell from the way her eyes lit up. They were her favourites and she greeted them by name as they paused to pay their respects. Only natural, considering they had saved her life and crown more than once. It was

all quite touching, if one was given to such sentiments. And entirely innocent to all but the most observant of watchers, and even then, Richelieu would have missed it had it not been for that twist of fate that made him resent one of the musketeers more than the others.

There was an irony to it, of course. Had Aramis not taken Adèle from him, Richelieu would not have noticed Aramis' infatuation with the queen, the way his eyes lingered half a breath too long, the way emotion clouded his eyes despite his impassive face, the way his eyes were drawn to her belly more than those of his comrades. The queen was a better actress, but not by much. Richelieu could see the affection on her face as well, could see how she subtly shifted her stance towards her lover—for that was no doubt what he was.

Richelieu wanted to sneer, but he didn't move a muscle. It wasn't the first time he suspected something, but there was no proof. He could find some, without a doubt, or fabricate some, if need be. For a moment, he allowed himself to indulge in the fantasies of revenge. Oh how he wished to cast down the queen who had humiliated him, outplayed him even. Who had never liked him and who he had never liked in turn. And the musketeer. He would hang, of course, or worse. Richelieu imagined the desperate look on his face as he went to join Adèle to reap the fruits of his carelessness and lust.

Then the moment passed, as did the musketeers, leaving Richelieu with a conundrum to consider. And as always when he did so he asked himself: what was best for France? But before he could continue following that line of thought, another came to his mind. What could he deduce from those few meaningful glances he had witnessed, from what he knew? The queen was rarely alone, or at least far enough from his spies to engage in an affair. There were only a handful of occasions when she might have had the chance to lie with Aramis. The most prominent one still in Richelieu's mind was also the most likely, which left him with one conclusion: the child—the child all of France had prayed for for years—was more likely than not a bastard.

It was treason, Richelieu thought. A bastard could not be allowed to sit on the throne of France, the one thing he served more than even God. His parents should pay for their deception. Were the boy's (for everybody had decided the miracle child had to be a boy) parentage ever questioned, a civil war would tear apart everything he had worked for so hard. It simply could not be. And yet...

And yet so would a king without an heir. They had all blamed the queen for it, Richelieu first among the doubters. It was easy. She was Spanish, a Habsburg, incapable of making the king love her as more than a sister or friend. But the musketeer had succeeded where the king had failed through years and years of carefully timed conjugal visits and he didn't even have to try. Would a different queen be more successful? Was a war at the

Spanish borders over a deposed queen worth the risk just to find out? Was the public embarrassment of a king who had been made a fool of by his wife and guard?

Richelieu sighed and stood up to go back to his office. He would admire the queen's efforts to conceive an heir by all means possible were it not for the fact that he thought it unlikely she had been that calculating. It pained him to admit it, but the lovers would have to wait for their just deserts for this crime until the Lord called them to Him. Richelieu would keep his silence. For France.

There were always other ways to get justice. Just as soon as he could catch his breath.

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