

Prologue

The log burning in the imposing marble fireplace disintegrated and sent a shower of dancing red-gold sparks into the air. The sound of the small explosion echoed in the library of the new palatial building known to everybody in Paris simply as *le palais du cardinal*, the home of His Eminence, Cardinal Richelieu, the revered – as much as reviled – prime minister of France.

The library was not only lit by the blazing fire; numerous candles had been placed lavishly and regardless of expense on tables and shelves and on the carved oak desk that dominated a room of truly impressive proportions. The heavy desk was laden with parchment scrolls, scribbled notes, leather-bound books on different subjects, a random book of prayers and a jewel-studded bible – as was to be expected in the inner sanctum of France’s most powerful minister and clergyman.

As usual Cardinal Richelieu was working late, seated like a scarlet spider in the centre of a web of power he had assiduously spun. Hard work, genius and a stroke of luck had catapulted him from the position of an unknown provincial bishop to become the second – some would even say the first – man of the realm.

His dark eyes looked alert, but heavy circles around his eyes showed fatigue. His gaunt face was dominated by his prominent Roman nose and his skin was of an unhealthy waxen complexion. The formerly elegant hands – once a source of pride – were transformed into bony claws by the rheumatism eating into his body.

The candlesticks on his desk were made from solid gold set with diamonds and rubies. Huge oil paintings of the King of France and various saints in their moment of martyrdom adorned those walls that were not covered by bookshelves. The suffering of the saints in the paintings looked depressingly realistic as they seemed to be moving in their pain, such was the effect of the flickering light and the shadows cast by the fire and the candlelight.

The fire was kept burning day and night on the orders of His Eminence. It was late evening and the nights in Paris tended to be quite chilly during early springtime. But the Cardinal needed warmth as his health was failing.

Richelieu sat behind his desk, still clad in the scarlet robes that he had worn when he had attended the King’s private council earlier that day. He was reading the latest confidential messages that had arrived by special courier from Lisbon and all of a sudden a satisfied smile played on his thin lips; another fatal blow had been dealt to the Spanish enemy.

His dark eyes burned with delight while he watched the reflections of the candlelight flicker upon the candlesticks and his bible. The candlelight played with the precious jewels, making the rubies and diamonds shoot fiery darts across the room. Richelieu loved gold, he worshipped power – and he adored success.

His secretary on duty entered almost noiselessly and announced that Brother Joseph from the order of the Dominicans would like to speak to him.

“Is it urgent?” the Cardinal asked, reluctant to leave the realms of triumph and return to the routine of daily business.

“I’m afraid, yes, Your Eminence, Brother Joseph would like to see you immediately but he has confided in me that he is the bearer of good news!”

Richelieu nodded his consent to admit the monk into the library and only seconds later a monk of middle age entered, knelt and kissed the ring on the bony hand that was extended to him.

“You were successful!” the Cardinal stated, rather than asked.

“Yes, Your Eminence, I have discovered the hiding place of the person we’ve been looking for, and,” he paused to draw breath, his face full of awe, “I examined with my own eyes documents that will be of the greatest importance.”

“So the game can commence,” the Cardinal said, his mind already weighing up the different options for his plan of action. He looked at Brother Joseph and added gravely, “And we shall make sure that there will be only one winner: our Holy Mother, the Church,” and then silently to himself, careful not to upset Brother Joseph’s faith in a good cause, he added, *and my own treasury, of course.*

Operating the biggest European network of spies and agents was a very costly enterprise and the Cardinal was in need of money – the one and only aspect of his life that never changed.

The hunt was on.