



THE LAST MUSKETEER

TRAITOR'S CHASE

STUART GIBBS

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HARPER

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DEDICATION

For Suz, Darragh, & Ciara

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Madrid, Spain
July 1615

THE ALCÁZAR, THE ROYAL PALACE, HOME TO THE KING OF Spain and Portugal, was perched high on a hill above the city. Like the Louvre in Paris, it had originally been built as a fortress but was currently being converted to a more pleasant place for the royal family to live—which meant that, at the moment, it wasn't really pleasant at all. Despite the blazing sun and summer heat, inside the castle it was dark and cold. Michel Dinicoeur felt it was more like a prison—and he knew prisons. He'd spent over a hundred years of his life in one.

Michel was immortal. Long ago, he'd had grand plans to gain power and wealth. But things hadn't worked out the way he'd hoped, thanks to the Three Musketeers—Athos, Porthos, and Aramis—and Greg Rich. It had taken him centuries to recover from their meddling. Now he had a new plan—one that would not only allow him to get revenge on the Musketeers and Greg—but also provide him with even more power than he'd ever dreamed of.

Michel followed three guards through a maze of stone hallways and grand staircases until they arrived at the throne room. The decor was as drab as that of the Louvre, but Michel was surprised by the room's enormous size. Stained-glass windows allowed some sunlight to spill in, though the room was still so cavernous that torches were needed to fully light it.

King Philip III sat on a large wooden throne at the far end. He was only in his thirties, with a pointed beard and a twirled mustache. He wore what was

considered extremely fashionable in 1615: bright yellow stockings, an ornately embroidered jacket, and a neck ruffle so large it looked as though his head was on a platter. Instead of a crown, a feathered hat was perched on his head. The look was supposed to inspire awe, but instead it made Michel think the man was a fool.

Unfortunately, Michel knew his own appearance was hardly impressive. He was dusty and weary from his long journey; his clothes were tattered and worn. And he was an invalid; there was only a stump where his right hand had once been, thanks to Athos's sword.

"Your Honor," he said in Spanish, as he passed between a gauntlet of armed soldiers and knelt before the throne. "Thank you for seeing me."

King Philip's eyebrows raised slightly in surprise. "You speak Spanish."

"You are surprised?" Michel replied, standing. In fact, he spoke five languages fluently—and could read and write another ten. When you were immortal, you had plenty of time for self-improvement.

"I didn't think any Frenchman was smart enough to master our language." The king's statement, though insulting, wasn't really unexpected. Every civilization in Europe thought itself better than every other.

"But the letter I sent you was in Spanish," Michel said. "As was your reply to me."

Philip shrugged. "I thought there might be a Spaniard helping you."

Michel did his best not to sigh. He had sent the letter with the aid of Milady de Winter, a handmaiden from King Louis XIII's palace. He had intercepted Philip's response en route, which was why he was here right now, prostrating himself before this pompous idiot. "Do you still possess what I inquired about?"

Philip smirked and reached beneath his silken clothes, revealing a chain of silver links around his neck. He tugged on it, lifting out a large black crystal that dangled from the end.

The Devil's Stone. Only one half of it hung on the chain, but there was something entrancing about it, as though it somehow wasn't of the earth.

Michel's heart pounded at the sight of it, though he fought to hide his excitement. The stone was the key to his plans. When both halves were combined, it had incredible powers. Long ago, it had given him the gift of immortality. More recently, he had used it to travel back through time, returning to 1615 from the twenty-first century with a plan to kill the Musketeers when they were only teenagers. However, Greg Rich had interfered. Greg was from modern times, and when he and his parents accidentally followed Michel back through time, they caused him to lose the Devil's Stone. Now Michel needed to find both pieces again. Fortunately, he knew where they were, as he'd tracked them both down once before, back when he had been known as Dominic Richelieu.

And yet, while he'd known this half of the stone was in the Alcázar, he hadn't expected the King to be *wearing* it.

Philip seemed to sense Michel's excitement and defensively closed his hand around the stone. "This must be of great value to you," he said, "to have come all this way for it."

"It is," Michel admitted. There was no point in being coy. If everything went according to plan, Michel would have this half of the stone again soon enough. "Though its worth is sentimental, not financial. Long ago, my family used to own it," he lied.

Philip gave a snort of laughter. "It must have been *very* long ago. This has been in my family for as long as anyone can remember."

Then you come from a long line of fools, Michel thought. *To have owned this for generations and never understood what it was*. But he replied deferentially, "That is correct, My Lord."

"And you have journeyed all the way from Paris hoping to get it back?"

"Correct again."

Philip laughed once more, but longer this time, as though Michel had told a joke. "Then I'm afraid you have wasted your time. I do not intend to sell this to you."

Michel bristled. "But in your letter to me, you said you might."

“That was when you were a man of power, a member of King Louis XIII’s court.” Philip held the stone up and smiled at it dreamily, as though entranced by it. “But things have changed. From what I understand, you were ousted from your post in the palace. You are now a fugitive, a traitor, and a pauper. Your only worth is the bounty placed on your head by the king of France. A bounty I am tempted to collect.” Philip snapped his fingers and his soldiers swung their swords toward Michel. “So tell me, what could you possibly give me that could pay for this?” He dangled the stone tauntingly before Michel.

Michel didn’t even glance at the swords aimed at his neck. Instead, he kept his eyes locked on King Philip’s.

“I can give you France,” he said.

PART ONE



THE ASSASSINS



Paris

GREG RICH CREPT SLOWLY THROUGH THE LOUVRE, clutching his sword tightly, fearing an attack at any second. Flickering torches lighted the rough-hewn stone walls as he made his way along the dirt floor. A rat scurried past him, no doubt to its burrow between the gaps in the stone, while clusters of bats hung from the high, shadowed ceiling. Although clad in his Musketeer's uniform—bright blue with the emblem of the king, a white fleur-de-lis, embroidered on it—the chill air made Greg shiver.

He was in the oldest section of the palace, a remnant from when the Louvre was a fortress on the western edge of Paris. It was hard to believe this was actually part of the home of the king of France.

The bells of Notre Dame chimed in the distance. It was seven o'clock at night, and although back in the twenty-first century, it wouldn't have been late, here in the seventeenth, most people were already turning in for the night. The sound of the bells made Greg uneasy; two months before, he'd nearly been killed by Michel Dinicoeur in that bell tower.

As Greg edged through the dim corridors, he struggled to remain calm, practicing what Athos had taught him: breathe slowly, be alert to everything around you, keep your sword unsheathed so you're always prepared for ...

Trouble. Bat squeaks and the flutter of wings alerted Greg that someone was approaching from behind. He spun, his sword at the ready, just as his

attacker lunged from the dark passage. A blade glinted in the torchlight, clanging against Greg's own.

Greg took a swordsman's stance, right foot forward, and parried. Athos's lessons filtered through his mind. *Stay in the moment. Focus. No matter how hard he tries not to, your attacker will always signal what he's going to do next. Predict, prepare—and counter.*

Greg watched his opponent's hands and feet, guessed where the strikes would come next, and responded. They ducked and dodged, steel hitting steel. Still, Greg was on the defensive, forced to back down the passage as his attacker surged forward. But then, Greg saw his opening. He deflected a slash at his head, twirled to the right, and attacked.

His instincts were dead on. He had a direct shot at the heart....

"Drop it," a voice hissed in his ear. Suddenly, there was another sword at his throat, cold metal biting against his skin.

Greg let his sword clatter to the ground.

"What'd you do that for?" the voice behind him asked, far less sinister this time.

"Uh ..." Greg said. "Because you told me to."

"Why would you do what the bad guy tells you to?" The sword lowered from Greg's neck, allowing him to face the second attacker: Porthos. "After all, he's the bad guy. He's not looking out for your best interests."

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" Greg asked. "Out-duel two men while there's a sword pressed to my neck?"

"Yes." Athos—the first attacker—emerged from the shadows. "If that had been Michel Dinicoeur or Dominic Richelieu behind you, your head would no longer be attached to your body. How do you expect to catch the madmen if you give up so easily?"

"Maybe *you* can beat two men in that situation," Greg said. "But I can't."

"Then I'd recommend not getting into that situation," Athos replied coolly. "You should *always* be prepared for an attack from behind. No matter what."

Greg sighed and picked up his sword. Athos was right, of course. Which only reinforced the fact that, even after two months of training, Greg still felt way out of his league in a swordfight.

“Hey”—Athos put a reassuring arm around Greg’s shoulders—“you’re doing great. Honestly. If it hadn’t been for Porthos, you’d have got me right in the chest.”

“Yeah. I would have.” Greg mustered a smile. “I almost did you in.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*.” Athos thumped his hand against the metal breastplate concealed beneath his tunic. “This is *me* we’re talking about. I still had a few tricks up my sleeve. But virtually anyone else, you would have beaten. You’ve come a long way in a short time.”

Greg appreciated the praise, though he was also daunted by it. Sometimes he forgot this wasn’t just for sport, like all those years of fencing lessons had been back in prep school. Now that he was a Musketeer, knowing how to handle a sword could be the difference between life and death. Especially when Michel Dinicoeur and Dominic Richelieu were out there somewhere, plotting against him.

It had been two months since Michel had sprung Dominic from the Bastille. The attack had come mere minutes after Greg and the others had been sworn in as Musketeers by King Louis XIII. Even though the Bastille was a massive protected fortress, it had proven little challenge for Michel. The guards had claimed Michel had used sorcery, rendering men unconscious with a mere touch and making the walls explode with a single incantation. Once free, both men had ridden north of the city and crossed the Seine—and when the guards had tried to follow, they’d been repelled by a fusillade of arrows, courtesy of René Valois, a staunch supporter of Michel and Dominic who had once been a leader of the King’s Guard. By the time the Musketeers arrived on the scene, Michel and Dominic were long gone.

Greg still had no idea where they were, although he assumed they’d gone off to recover the Devil’s Stone. Michel needed it to make his younger self, Dominic, immortal—for if Dominic died, then Michel would cease to exist. Greg wanted to find the stone just as badly as they did—perhaps more—for

without it, he couldn't return to his own time. But now his enemies had a two-month head start tracking it down—and once they had it, Greg suspected he'd never get it back. He and his parents would be trapped in 1615 France.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Michel and Dominic hadn't gone after the stone at all but were merely lurking about Paris, waiting for the best opportunity to kill Greg and the Musketeers—a scenario Greg found equally unsettling.

Therefore, Greg had spent the past two months doing two things: training with Athos and Porthos—or sleuthing with Aramis, the brains of the Musketeers. Aramis had gone out today to follow up on a lead, but Greg feared that this would end like all the others: nowhere.

“All right,” Athos said, brandishing his sword. “Let's try this again, shall we? Porthos and I will set up another ambush....”

“Another?” Porthos groaned. “Haven't we ambushed him enough?”

“Practice makes perfect,” Athos replied. “Besides, it's not like we have anything better to do.”

“*I do*,” Porthos shot back. “A lady friend of mine needs an escort to a ball this evening. And she has some friends who could use escorts as well, if you're interested.”

Greg glanced at Athos, thinking that a ball might be a nice change of pace from the endless training, but the young swordsman frowned. “There are deadly enemies on the loose,” he said. “We have no time for dancing.”

“I'll bet you wouldn't say that if Milady de Winter needed an escort,” Porthos replied with a smirk.

Athos flushed red at the mention of Milady, though Greg couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or anger—or both. “I have no interest in the queen's handmaiden,” he snapped.

Before Porthos could reply, footsteps echoed through the passageway. The three boys immediately raised their swords.

A palace messenger boy rounded the corner and shrieked in fright upon seeing the three blades pointed his way.

“Sorry!” Greg said, lowering his sword. “Didn’t mean to scare you!”

“It’s my fault,” the boy apologized. “I’m sorry, sir.” He knelt and bowed his head reverentially.

Greg and the others had been getting a lot of this type of respect since becoming Musketeers. Greg found it a little creepy, although the others ate it up. Even Aramis, who felt that pride was a sin.

“What brings you to interrupt our training?” Athos asked the messenger.

“The king requests a presence with D’Artagnan,” the boy replied.

After all his time in France, Greg was finally getting used to being called D’Artagnan. His real name was only known to Aramis, one of many secrets he was forced to keep.

“Guess you’d better make haste, then.” Athos tried to sound light of heart, although Greg could hear the jealousy beneath it.

“All right.” Greg sheathed his sword and followed the messenger down the passage. He could feel the others staring after him, wondering what King Louis could possibly want with him this time.

The messenger led him from the old fortress into the true palace. The dirt floors became wood, and the stone walls gave way to painted plaster. They passed through the section that housed the King’s Guard, where Dominic Richelieu himself had once had an office.

Greg found himself wishing that he could tell his friends the truth about himself and where he’d really come from, but he knew he couldn’t. How could he possibly explain that he wasn’t from the distant town of Artagnan at all—but was instead from four hundred years in the future? Or that Michel Dinicoeur and Dominic Richelieu were actually the same person? Or that Michel was an immortal madman who’d traveled back through time to kill the Musketeers as revenge for something they hadn’t even done yet? These were superstitious times, Aramis had warned. Greg’s friends wouldn’t understand. They’d think him a sorcerer or a madman or both.

Greg followed the messenger up a wide wooden staircase, and the Louvre suddenly became alive with activity. Greg had always assumed that the palace was only the king’s home, but in fact hundreds of servants lived there

as well—including the Musketeers themselves. The route took Greg right past their quarters. It was a small room and they all had to share it, but compared to the living conditions of most people in 1615 Paris, the accommodations were amazing. The boys all had beds to sleep on, rather than mere thatches of straw. And there was even indoor plumbing—as long as they didn’t mind going down the hall and using a communal—and coed—bathroom that didn’t have a lock on the door.

Greg’s parents’ room was right next door to his. King Louis had graciously allowed them to move into the castle as well after their rescue from La Mort. The door currently hung open, revealing that Greg’s parents weren’t in. Greg was wondering where they’d gone when Aramis burst out of the Musketeers’ quarters.

“D’Artagnan!” he crowed. “Just who I wanted to see! You’ll never believe what I learned today!”

“Actually, can it wait?” Greg asked. “The king asked to see me.”

“I’ll walk with you. It’s too exciting.” Aramis dropped in beside Greg and held up a tiny scrap of black fabric. It was two inches long, an inch wide, and torn on three sides—as though it had been ripped from a piece of clothing. “Remember this?”

“Of course,” Greg said. “I found it.”

The shred of fabric was the only clue the boys had to Dominic and Michel’s whereabouts. A few months earlier, Michel had forced Milady de Winter to deliver a letter to a messenger at an inn. Under questioning later, Milady claimed that she had no idea what was in the letter or where the messenger was from—only that he was a foreigner. Aramis had believed her—but then, Aramis was smitten with Milady. Athos hadn’t believed her at all—but then, Athos was also smitten with Milady, and he knew she liked Aramis more than she liked him.

The day after Dominic had escaped from prison, Greg had asked Milady to take him to the inn. She had led all the Musketeers there on horseback. The inn only had a single room for guests, and there Greg had found the scrap of cloth snagged on a jagged splinter of wood that jutted from the wall. The

innkeeper's wife said it *looked* like it was from the clothes the mysterious man had worn.

"It's silk," Aramis said proudly, as he and Greg followed King Louis's messenger through the palace.

"So?" Greg asked.

Aramis frowned. "Is silk not a big deal in the future?"

Greg thought about the clothes his family had owned. His mother had several silk dresses and his father probably had some silk ties as well. "I don't think it's cheap, but I don't think it's rare, either."

"Well, it's rare here. And expensive. Silk comes all the way from the Far East, and only a few shipments reach Europe every year. What arrives tends to stay in the port cities—usually Venice or Barcelona. Only the tiniest amounts of silk ever make it to Paris."

Greg stopped walking and examined the scrap of silk more closely. "So whoever Milady met at the inn that night was no common messenger?"

"Exactly. Anyone wearing such fancy clothes would most likely be the emissary representing the king of a foreign nation."

Greg's heart thumped in his chest. France was surrounded by countries that were always on the verge of invading: England, Spain, the duchies of Italy, and the Holy Roman Empire, which controlled Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium. If Dominic had dealings with *any* of them, it was reason for concern. "Which one?"

"I don't know yet." Aramis took the scrap of silk back and carefully tucked it away. "I need to figure out where this silk was made. I'll bet a month's wages that, wherever it is, Dominic and Michel have fled there."

"But we don't know that for sure," Greg said.

"No," Aramis admitted. "Still, this is the best lead we have."

"How long will it take to find out where the silk is from?"

"A few days—if we're lucky."

Greg silently cursed the backward age in which he was trapped. What would have taken five seconds to discover with a simple Wikipedia search could take *forever* to find out in the past. "There's no way to do it any

faster?" he asked. "With every day that goes by, Michel and Dominic are getting closer and closer to ..."

He caught himself at the last second, not wanting to mention the Devil's Stone before the king's messenger. Aramis recognized the worry in Greg's eyes, though. "Allow us a moment?" he asked the messenger, then pulled Greg into a small alcove where they could speak in peace.

"I know that finding the stone is of utmost importance to you," Aramis whispered. "I'm doing everything I can to figure out where it is. Over the past two months, I've combed through every book, scroll, and parchment in Paris...."

"And you haven't found a single mention of it?" Greg asked. "There must be something somewhere. I mean, Michel had to learn about the stone somewhere, back when he was Dominic...."

"Well," Aramis said hesitantly, "I did find *something* a few days ago...."

"And you didn't tell me?" Greg couldn't contain himself in his excitement.

"It was merely an oblique reference," Aramis whispered, signaling Greg to keep his voice down. "It didn't even mention the Devil's Stone by name."

"What was it?"

"I found it in a scroll in the archives at Notre Dame. It was a transcript of the travels of a monk who stayed there two hundred years ago." Until Greg had met him, Aramis himself had been a cleric at Notre Dame, responsible for transcribing texts from one language to another. The cathedral had the largest library in the city. "He mentioned hearing about a magic stone with incredible powers that was last seen in the White City of Emperor Constantine."

"What's the White City of Emperor Constantine?" Greg asked.

"I don't know," Aramis admitted. "And neither does anyone else I've talked to. There were several Emperor Constantines in the Roman era, but they all lived more than a thousand years ago...."

Greg felt all the excitement drain from him.

Aramis put a comforting hand on his arm. "Don't despair," he said. "We'll find the stone. I promise you that."

Despite his reassuring tone, Greg still felt hollow inside. “We *have* to,” he said. “No offense, but I can’t stay in this time forever.”

“I know,” Aramis told him. “I’m doing everything I can....”

Before he could go on, the messenger coughed impatiently out in the hall. “Monsieur D’Artagnan. The *king* still waits for you.”

Greg nodded, then told Aramis, “The sooner you can find out about that silk, the better. I’ll take any lead I can get.” He then followed the messenger down another hall to a set of large, imposing wooden doors flanked by two members of the King’s Guard.

The messenger bowed subserviently before them. “At the king’s request, I have brought Monsieur D’Artagnan.”

The guards dramatically opened the doors and Greg passed into the throne room.

He had been inside it often—in fact, this was the very room he had landed in after jumping through time—and yet he never could get past how dull it was. It was so vast that the oil lamps barely made a dent in the darkness, though they did create a grimy slick of burnt oil on the walls and ceiling.

Louis XIII was slumped in his throne. The king was only fourteen, like Greg. He’d taken the crown at the age of nine when his father was assassinated, and he still gave the impression of a young boy merely pretending to be king. His formal royal red gown, trimmed with ermine, swallowed him up.

“D’Artagnan!” Louis said. “Thank goodness you’ve come....”

“I’m sorry it took so long, Your Majesty,” Greg began. “I was practicing my sword-fighting skills all the way at the other end of—”

“I don’t care about your tardiness. I care about my safety. I’ve just learned some terrifying news.” Louis sat upright, his eyes boring into Greg’s. “Someone in my family is plotting to kill me.”