



THE LAST MUSKETEER

DOUBLE CROSS

STUART GIBBS

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HARPER

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Dedication

*For Mike Matthews, Ken Parker & Mark Middleman, my original three
Musketeers*

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PROLOGUE

Castillon-du-Gard, France
Four hundred miles south of Paris
August 1615

EVEN THOUGH MICHEL DINICOEUR WAS IMMORTAL, HE could still feel pain. And right now, he was in agony. In the four hundred years he'd lived, he'd experienced a great deal of misery—and yet this was the worst so far.

The ordeal he'd been through would have killed a regular man. He'd been shot by flaming arrows, had fallen off a ten-story bridge, and had been swept through a raging river. His flesh was scorched and his bones were fractured. He'd swallowed enough water to drown a fish. During the past few days, he often had wished he could die and end his suffering.

Only one thing kept him going. The desire for revenge.

He would avenge what Greg Rich and the Musketeers had done to him.

The door of the barn where he lay creaked open. Michel recoiled from the sunlight that spilled into the room.

"There's nothing to fear," his own voice told him. "It's only me."

Dominic Richelieu, his younger self, approached. Dominic had rescued Michel from the Gard River and found him this hayloft to hide in while he recovered. As he came to Michel's side, he tried to hide his disgust.

Michel understood why—his face was a hideous mask of scarred flesh—and yet Dominic's reaction made him seethe with anger. "Please tell me you've

found something edible this time,” he snarled.

“Carrots and beets.” Dominic took them from the folds of his clothes.

“Fool!” Michel snapped. “You know I can’t eat those things!” Somehow, even his stomach had been affected by the ordeal the Musketeers had put him through. He’d inhaled too much smoke—or maybe too much water—and hadn’t been able to keep anything down for days.

“I thought you could try again,” Dominic said.

“I need soup,” Michel told him. “How hard is it to find some soup? It’s practically all anyone in this cursed time eats!”

“It’s not that simple!” Dominic shot back angrily. “We are fugitives, thanks to you! You lost our army, our money, the Devil’s Stone . . .”

“None of that was my fault!” Michel roared. “It was the Musketeers!”

“They are only boys, and yet you let the four of them defeat you and our entire army.”

“And where were you during all that?”

“Doing exactly what you’d asked of me,” Dominic said. “Keeping my distance and letting you handle things. You told me to trust you, that you could take care of everything. You said that under your leadership Paris and all of France would fall. Obviously, I was a fool to believe in you. Everything you have done has led only to failure.”

Michel glared at his younger self. “All is not lost. I am healing. By tomorrow, I will be strong enough to travel again. We can make it to Paris.”

“In your condition?” Dominic asked. “That will take weeks.”

“If I were a mere mortal, perhaps. But I am not.” Michel held up his hand as evidence. Although the skin had been badly blistered and burned just days before, it was beginning to return to its normal state. The healing had been much slower than Michel had hoped, but it *was* healing—whereas a normal human would have been scarred for life. “It will not be long before I look just like you again. And while I do not have all my strength back yet, with your help—and a few good horses—we can reach Paris in only a few days.”

Dominic frowned in doubt. “And then what? We are wanted men there.”

Michel waved his hand dismissively. “The king’s guard does not concern me. Once we recover both halves of the Devil’s Stone, we will be invincible. The stone, once united, can do the most incredible things.”

“And what of the Musketeers?” Dominic asked. “Surely *they* must concern you. They have thwarted your plans twice now.”

“They are of no consequence,” Michel replied. “I have figured out how to defeat them once and for all.”

“You keep saying that—and they keep defeating *us*,” Dominic shot back.

Michel suddenly began to laugh. It was a ghastly sound, coming from his burned throat. “But this time will be different. It’s a drastic measure, but it won’t merely get rid of the Musketeers. . . . It will ensure they never existed at all.”

PART ONE



THE FORTRESS



ONE

Les Baux de Provence
420 miles south of Paris
August 1615

IN LESS THAN A DAY, GREG RICH WOULD DIE.

So would his fellow Musketeers: Athos, Aramis, and Porthos. And Catherine as well. The four stood with him now in the pillory, mocked by passersby.

They were all being held prisoner in the town of Les Baux, a medieval village perched high on a rocky mesa. The village had only one entrance: a steep, narrow road that came up to a heavily fortified gate. Everywhere else, Les Baux was protected by cliffs of limestone that rose hundreds of feet from the swampy lowlands—a fetid, mosquito-ridden maze of marshy bogs. The surrounding mountains were some of the strangest Greg had ever seen, filled with gnarled rock formations.

Although Les Baux was in France, the local lord's allegiance was to the Prince of Condé, not to King Louis XIII. And so the Musketeers, as representatives of King Louis, were to be hung in a public spectacle. Then they would be decapitated. Their heads would be placed on pikes, while their bodies were thrown over the cliffs into the marshland below.

Greg and his friends had been in Les Baux for three days, brought there by Condé's men after Milady de Winter had engineered their capture. They had

walked the thirty miles in a single day, forced to slog through the heat without food or rest and with barely any water. The journey had nearly killed Athos. His leg, wounded by an arrow in a surprise attack in Arles, was now swollen and badly infected.

Since arriving, they had spent their nights in cramped, frigid dungeon cells and their days in the pillory. In the town square, they were forced to stand for hours in the blazing sun, hunched over with a wooden frame locked around their wrists and neck, for all the people of Les Baux to see. Jeering townsfolk occasionally threw rotten vegetables at them.

It would have been miserable under any circumstances, but two things made it even worse for Greg.

First, he felt responsible for Catherine being here. He'd had a chance to save her, back at the Pont du Gard when he'd realized his fellow Musketeers were running into a trap. But in the heat of the moment, he hadn't thought to tell her to stay back or run away. Now she would die with them.

Second, he'd lost the trust of Athos and Porthos. He hadn't told them the truth about Michel Dinicoeur—that the man was immortal—until it was too late. Now they knew Greg must have lied to them about himself as well. Both obviously felt deceived, although Athos seemed far more upset. Between his wounded leg and his wounded pride—he'd been stunned when Milady, the woman he loved, had betrayed him—he was seething with anger, and he'd turned that on Greg.

"Athos, Porthos, this is ridiculous," Greg said as they stood in the pillory on the second day. "I've said I'm sorry a hundred times over. I should have been honest with you."

"Then why weren't you?" Porthos demanded.

"Because I was afraid this would be your reaction," Greg admitted. "And the longer I kept secrets from you, the harder it was to tell you. But now I'll tell you anything you want to know. We have to get past this."

"What does it matter?" Athos asked sullenly. "In a day, we'll all be dead."

"Not necessarily," Greg said. "When all of us have worked as a team, we've done the impossible. We rescued my parents from a prison everyone said

was impenetrable. The five of us turned back an entire army. If we put our minds together now, I'm sure we can figure out a way to escape."

Athos frowned in response, but Greg caught a flicker of something in his expression.

"You know it's true, don't you?" Greg asked. "I know that look of yours. You've been trying to work out an escape yourself."

"Of course I have," Athos admitted. "Who wouldn't? I don't want to die."

"Then don't," Aramis said. "You want to know the *real* reason he didn't tell you the truth about himself? I told him not to."

Athos and Porthos shifted their attention to Aramis. "Why?" both demanded.

"Because I didn't think you'd understand," Aramis said. "So if you're going to be angry at anyone, it should be me."

Athos frowned. Greg knew the swordsman was already angry at Aramis; both had vied for the affections of Milady de Winter, before she had betrayed them.

But Porthos gave in. "Who are you, really, D'Artagnan?"

"For one thing, my name isn't D'Artagnan. It's Greg. And I'm not from the Artagnan region of France. I'm from four hundred years in the future."

Porthos and Athos stared at Greg as though he might be insane. Then they looked to Aramis.

"It's true," the cleric told them.

"How is that possible?" Porthos asked.

"Michel Dinicoeur made it happen," Greg told him. "You see, Michel isn't Dominic Richelieu's twin brother. He *is* Dominic Richelieu. At some point in my past—which is actually *your* future—around 1630 or so, Dominic got hold of a magic amulet called the Devil's Stone. The stone is actually two pieces, and when you put them together, they have incredible power. Dominic used that power to make himself immortal and then tried to gain as much wealth as possible. He hoped to live forever as a rich and powerful man, but he was thwarted by the three of you."

Greg fell silent as some townspeople passed, not wanting them to hear his tale. “Down with King Louis!” the people hissed at them. “Death to all who support him!”

“The three of us?” Porthos asked once they were gone. “How?”

“I don’t know all the details,” Greg said. “But you know how Dinicoeur is missing his right hand? Athos did that to him.”

“Well done!” Porthos said to Athos, and Greg thought he saw Athos crack a small smile.

“You all took the Devil’s Stone from Dominic and locked him in the Bastille,” Greg continued. “The Devil’s Stone was broken back in two, and the pieces were separated so they could never be put together again. Meanwhile, Dominic sat in the Bastille for over a hundred years, plotting revenge against you three. Eventually, the Bastille was overthrown during a revolution and Dominic escaped. He changed his name to Michel Dinicoeur and eventually tracked down both pieces of the stone. I don’t know where he found the first half, but the second was owned by my family . . . his descendants.”

Catherine gasped, her eyes widening. Greg had shared much of his story with her before—but not this part. “You and Richelieu are related?”

Greg nodded. “From what I can tell, I’m his great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson. Or something like that. My family was supposed to protect their half of the amulet. Unfortunately, that message got lost over the centuries. Dinicoeur tricked my parents into thinking he was a museum curator at the Louvre in our time, and we brought the amulet to him—”

“Wait,” Porthos said. “How could someone be a museum curator at the royal palace?”

“Well,” Greg said, “in the future, the Louvre isn’t the royal palace. It’s a museum; one of the most famous museums in the world.”

“If the Louvre is a museum, then where does the king of France live?” Porthos asked.

Greg grimaced, wishing he hadn’t opened this can of worms. “There is no king of France anymore,” he said.

“You mean France was overthrown?” Porthos gasped.

“No,” Greg said. “France still exists. It’s just ruled by the people.”

“How could that possibly work?” Porthos asked.

“It does. You’ll just have to trust me on this,” Greg said. “The point is, Dinicoeur wanted to get even with all of you for what you’d done to him. His plan was to use the Devil’s Stone to travel back in time and kill the three of you *before* you became the Three Musketeers. Then you wouldn’t be around to defeat him—and his younger self, Richelieu, would be rich and powerful for eternity.”

“But if Dinicoeur did that, wouldn’t that negate his own existence?” Catherine asked. “If Richelieu is rich and powerful, then there’s no reason for him to ever become Dinicoeur and travel back through time.”

“I think that’s perfectly fine with Dinicoeur,” Greg said. “His life has been pretty miserable, thanks to all of you. In a sense, he’s trying to reset history and start over. All he cares about is making sure Richelieu becomes immortal.”

Porthos frowned. “Time travel can be awfully confusing to understand.”

“Try *doing* it,” Greg said. “It’s not easy.”

Porthos nodded empathically. “So how *did* you do it?”

“Once my family was at the Louvre, Dinicoeur snatched our half of the Devil’s Stone,” Greg said. “When he put both pieces together, the stone opened up a hole in time by making a portrait of the old Louvre come to life. Dinicoeur went through it and my family followed him.”

“So that’s how your family suddenly ended up in the palace that night?” Porthos asked. “The night Richelieu had your parents arrested and thrown in prison.”

“Exactly,” Greg said. “We didn’t know we were jumping through time. We were just trying to get our family heirloom back. Unfortunately, the Devil’s Stone got left in the future—and all of us need it. Dinicoeur needs it to make Richelieu immortal—and my family needs it to get back home through time again. That’s what Dinicoeur has been doing: trying to recover both halves of

the stone. He found the first somewhere in Spain—and, from what Aramis and I can tell, the second is back in Paris.”

“If that’s the case, then why didn’t Dinicoeur get that one first?” Porthos asked.

“I have no idea,” Greg admitted. “The best I can figure is that for some reason, Dinicoeur needs the first half to get the second.”

“Do you have any idea where in Paris the second half is?” Porthos asked.

“Not exactly, but we’ve found some clues,” Greg said. “Catherine once overheard Dinicoeur tell Richelieu that the stone was hidden under the king’s nose.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Porthos asked.

“That the stone might be somewhere in the Louvre itself, I guess,” Greg replied. “But then, on Dinicoeur’s map, we found an inscription in Greek on the Île de la Cité about something called ‘the Crown of Minerva.’ Have you ever heard of that?”

Porthos shook his head, or at least tried to. It wasn’t easy with the pillory cinched around his neck. “No. Does it have something to do with the stone?”

“I think so,” Greg said.

“How could the stone be in the Louvre *and* on the Île de la Cité?” Catherine asked.

“I don’t know,” Greg admitted.

“Perhaps the stone has been broken into even more pieces,” Catherine suggested. “One is in the palace and the other is near this Crown of Minerva.”

“Maybe,” Greg said with a grimace. The thought of tracking down *one* hidden piece of the stone was daunting enough, let alone two.

“What does it matter anyhow?” Athos asked angrily. It was the first thing he’d said since Greg had begun his story. “We don’t have the first half of the stone—and neither does Dinicoeur. Milady de Winter does.” He stared daggers at Greg. “You let her get it.”

Only because you didn’t listen to me and ran right into her trap, Greg thought, though he held his tongue. “I know. I’m sorry. The good news is,

she doesn't really know anything about the stone. She only knows that it's powerful."

"But she'll figure out the rest," Athos said. "Milady's far more clever than anyone realizes. Plus, she's probably halfway to Paris with Condé by now. Even if we could escape this place, we've lost too much time."

"We still have to try," Greg said. "If Condé sacks Paris and Milady gets all the pieces of the Devil's Stone . . ." What he wanted to say was, *All of human history will be changed*, but he knew that meant something to him and not to the others. He was the only one who knew what the future of the world held and how Milady or Dinicoeur could ruin it.

"It will be very bad news for France," Aramis finished. "And as Musketeers, it is our job to protect this country."

"I know what our job is," Athos shot back. "But we're not in any position to do it. La Mort wasn't the most impenetrable prison in France. Les Baux is. We're either locked out here in the pillory or in the dungeon. We're surrounded by an entire army of guards, and there's only one way out of the city."

Greg's eyes flicked toward the city gate. It was an imposing structure, built to keep enemies from getting into the city, but it would just as well prevent anyone from getting out. A dozen guards stood watch there, and an iron portcullis hung from it, ready to drop at the slightest hint of alarm.

"The only other way out of the city is over a cliff," Athos went on. "And since none of us knows how to fly, that option is out. So let's face the facts: We're not getting out of here."

"I don't believe that," Greg said. "If we all put our heads together and work as a team . . ."

"We're not a team," Athos said angrily. "Not anymore. Barring a miracle, tomorrow at dawn, we are going to die."



TWO

AT DUSK, THE GUARDS CAME TO RETURN THE PRISONERS to their cells.

After eight hours of being hunched over in the pillory, Greg was thrilled to stand up straight and stretch his back, but the relief was short-lived. The guards clamped heavy chains around their ankles, wrists, and necks, then linked all the prisoners together front to back. They had to walk through a gauntlet of townspeople, who jeered, spat, and kicked them as they passed. “Behold the enemies of Condé!” the guards told the crowd. “This is what happens to those who will not support him!”

To the west, the sun dropped below the lip of the cliff, sinking into the swamp below. Greg wondered if it was the last sunset he’d ever see.

No, he told himself. Even if Athos and the others were resigned to their fate, he couldn’t be. There was too much at stake. The Prince of Condé couldn’t be allowed to overthrow King Louis. Neither Milady nor Dinicoeur could be allowed to obtain the entire Devil’s Stone. If any of those things happened, the history of the world—the events that had led to the future Greg was from—would be irrevocably altered. Greg had no idea how to prevent any of that from happening, but he had to try. And the first step was figuring out how to escape. There was no chance that anyone was coming to help them; no one even knew where they were. If the Musketeers were going to get out of Les Baux, they’d have to do it themselves.

Keep your eyes open, Greg thought. Don’t let anything escape your attention. Somehow, somewhere, there is a way out of here.