

TO
KILL
A
KING

Also by David Gilman

Master of War series

MASTER OF WAR
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MASTER OF WAR

TO
KILL
— A —
KING



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus
This paperback edition first published in 2024 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781801108119

ISBN (E): 9781801108126

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions Ltd.

Cover design: Simon Michele

Map design: Vanessa Periam

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY



Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5-8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Suzy, my wife, with love

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CHARACTER LIST

*Sir Thomas Blackstone

*Henry Blackstone

THOMAS BLACKSTONE'S MEN

*Sir Gilbert Killbere

*Meulon: Norman captain

*John Jacob: Blackstone's squire and captain

*Renfred: German man-at-arms and captain

*Will Longdon: veteran archer and centenar

*Jack Halfpenny: archer and ventenar

*William Ashford: man-at-arms and captain

*Aicart: Gascon captain

*Rosslyn: Renfred's scout

*Dene: Renfred's scout

*Bartholomew: Renfred's scout

*Tricart: Renfred's scout

*Walter Root: archer

*Roger Fairfoot: archer

*Bullard: man-at-arms

HENRY BLACKSTONE'S MEN

*Hugh Gifford: man-at-arms and Henry's guardian

*Walter Mallin: mercenary

*Robert Helyer: mercenary

*Raymond Vachon: French mercenary

*Arnald Bezián: Gascon mercenary

*Eckehart Brun: German mercenary

*John Terrel: mercenary

BRETON MEN-AT-ARMS AND OTHERS

Bertrand du Guesclin: commander

*Jean de Soissons, la Griffe/the Claw: routier

*Pellan: routier

*Le Bourc: captain of Josselin

*Yagu: fisherman

GASCON MEN-AT-ARMS, MERCENARIES AND NOBILITY

*Galhard de Prato: commander of the

Château de Langoiran

Garciot du Châtel: mercenary commander

Bertucat d'Albret: mercenary commander

Jean de Grailly: Captal de Buch

ENGLISH ROYALTY

Edward of Woodstock: Prince of Wales and Aquitaine

John of Gaunt: Duke of Lancaster

ENGLISH OFFICIALS, ALLIES, MERCENARIES, MEN-AT-ARMS
AND OTHERS

Sir John Chandos: Constable of Aquitaine

Sir Nigel Loring: the Prince's chamberlain

Steven Cusington: Marshal of the Army

Guichard d'Angle: Marshal of the Army

John, Count d'Armagnac

James IV: exiled King of Majorca

Eustache d'Aubricourt: Hainault mercenary

Sir Hugh Calveley: mercenary commander

Sir William Felton: knight

*Fleming: man-at-arms

* Alfred Vaisey: routier

William Durant: Warden of Merton College,
Oxford

* Clara: Durant's niece

FRENCH ROYALTY

Charles V: King of France

FRENCH OFFICIALS, NOBILITY, MERCENARIES,
MEN-AT-ARMS AND OTHERS

Simon Bucy: counsellor to the French King

Arnoul d'Audrehem: Marshal of France

Gaston Phoebus: Count de Foix

* Alphonse: Count de Foix's steward

* Garnier: routier

Hélie 'Petit' Meschin: mercenary

* Bernard de Lagny: man-at-arms

* Hugo Muset: man-at-arms

* Nicholas de Mitry: man-at-arms

* Gautier de Fleur: knight

* Louis de Roche: knight

* Père Éraste: priest

SPANISH ROYALTY

Pedro I: King of Castile and León

Henry of Trastámara: Don Pedro's half-brother and
claimant to his throne

Charles II: King of Navarre

SPANISH OFFICIALS, NOBILITY AND OTHERS

* High Steward to King Pedro I

* Sancha Ferrandes of Castile

* Don Fernando Ferrandes of Castile

Martín Henríquez de Lacarra: Navarrese knight

Count de Osona: Aragonese ally of King Pedro

*Abbess of the Convent of Santo Domingo de Estella,
Navarre

*Abraam Abroz: leader of the Jewish community in
Estella

*Indicates fictional characters

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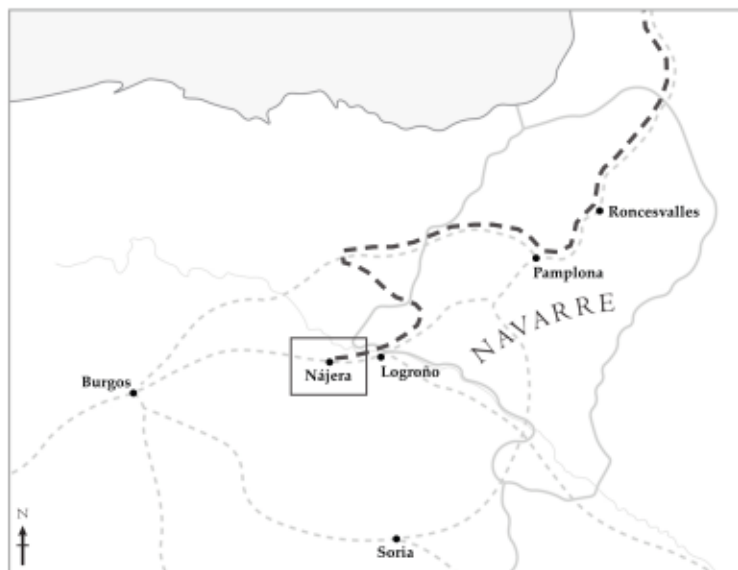
BLACKSTONE AND HENRY'S ROUTES THROUGH FRANCE



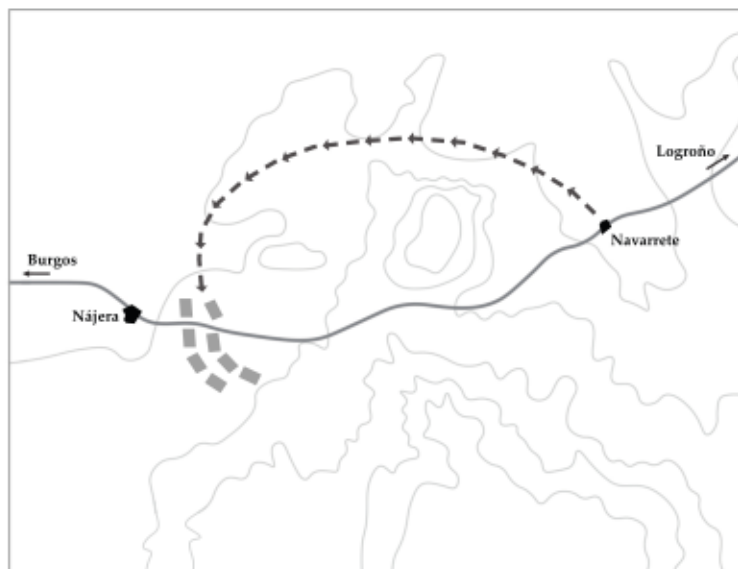
BLACKSTONE'S ROUTE - - - - -

HENRY'S ROUTE

THE PRINCE OF WALES'S ROUTE TO THE BATTLE OF NÁJERA



THE BATTLE OF NÁJERA



THE PRINCE OF WALES'S ROUTE - - - - -

HENRY OF TRASTÁMARA'S ARMY ■■■■■

MAIN ROAD ———

Ignis aurum probat, miseria fortes viros.

As fire tests gold, so adversity tests brave men.

Seneca

PROLOGUE

Cathédrale Saint-André
Bordeaux
1367

For seventeen years the High Steward to King Don Pedro I of Castile and León was a silent witness to the depraved violence of the Spanish King. And he had lived in fear since Thomas Blackstone had returned from Galicia where he had slain the King's favourite, Velasquita Alcón de Lugo. There was no doubt in the steward's mind that the woman was a creature of the devil. At Pedro's behest, she had murdered his young Queen, using her skill with poisons to make it seem like suicide. She had sided with the murderous Ronec le Bête, the beast who had slaughtered Blackstone's Gascon captain, Beyard, and a boy witness who had identified Velasquita as the young Queen's killer.

And Blackstone had killed the poisoner and the beast who served her.

How had the scar-faced English knight done so? It should not have been possible. No one had ever survived her poison. No one. And yet... and yet Blackstone had. Had God favoured Blackstone? Or had the devil found a stronger ally than even the woman? The High Steward recalled the terror instilled in him by the poisoner when she asked him to choose between

God and the devil: which of them did he fear the most? And after he confessed to her that he feared the devil more, he had agreed to administer her poison to Blackstone. Had he refused, Lucifer would have torn his soul from his body. And so he had been a party to murder and further encumbered his soul's burden by poisoning Blackstone's wine before he set off in search of the woman killer. Who was the most aggrieved by the High Steward's action? God or the devil? If only he could banish his doubt about which entity waited to wreak vengeance on him. Every day in the small hours the Castilian King's trusted servant slipped away from the royal chambers at the Archbishop's palace adjoining the northern perimeter of the Cathédrale Saint-André and made his way to the cathedral itself, where he would kneel in penance.

Blackstone had returned to Bordeaux months ago and reported to the Prince of Wales all that he knew of the murders and what he had done in the name of justice. Pedro had condemned the Master of War, insisting Blackstone be punished for the wilful slaying of a member of Pedro's court. There was no proof of Velasquita being a witch, he had insisted: Blackstone had killed her to satisfy his thirst for revenge. Worse still, Blackstone had threatened Pedro. Insulted and treated with contempt a God-chosen king. A king the Prince of Wales had sent Blackstone to rescue.

And Blackstone had not denied it.

To appease the Spanish King, Blackstone was banished from the court and imprisoned. Common men do not threaten royalty and escape punishment. That had put him beyond the city, confined in a castle, separated from his men and guarded day and night.

The High Steward replayed in his mind's eye the confrontation between Prince, King and Master of War. He exhaled the tension held in his chest, his breath cold on

the air. His knees ached from the pain of spending so much time on them. The cathedral's flickering candles cast him into a half-world of darkness and light. Shadows lifted the priest's monotonous incantations into a mere whisper high in the vaulted roof arching above his bowed head. His tightly clasped hands turned his knuckles white as his mind berated him. Was he afraid of Blackstone or the Lord Jesus? Surely it was the latter: he feared the Almighty's condemnation, not any physical threat from the Englishman. He was safe. He was protected. Blackstone would never dare harm him. The Prince of Wales had commanded it. Blackstone's name had not been uttered in months. He was as a ghost in the Prince's court. The English King had decreed that the Prince must return Pedro to his rightful place in Castile. An army was being prepared. The French must not be allowed to usurp a vital ally on Aquitaine's southern flank across the Pyrenees. And Pedro, despite his cruelty and violence, was that ally. There had been no mention of Thomas Blackstone when his master had discussed plans with the Prince of Wales. Doubt about waging war without the renowned knight was not even touched on. For all the High Steward knew, Thomas Blackstone would never be favoured in the English Prince's court again.

As his tormented mind raced through the purgatory of doubt, a small miracle enveloped him: a God-given moment of warmth seeped into his aching bones. The cathedral's deathly cold chill had stiffened his ageing muscles, but now he felt the comfort of spiritual forgiveness embrace him. A tear trickled down his cheek in gratitude. The Lord had accepted his penance.

He gathered his cloak around him. It would not be long before they recrossed the Pyrenees and returned home. All would soon be well.

The High Steward scurried along the cloisters leading to the cobbled passage that would return him to the servants' entrance to the palace. His survival instinct these past months made him avoid the main public thoroughfares, seeking different ways to reach the cathedral's side door. A single lantern burned in the distance. He hugged the darkness, focusing on the lamp's glow. A beacon guiding him back to a warm bed for the scant few hours before dawn when his master would be roused for morning prayers.

Then he faltered and turned to face the darkness behind him. He had heard someone moving in the distance. He waited, breath held tightly. Shadows moved beyond the cloisters. His tension eased. It was only a handful of worshippers leaving the cathedral's main entrance, silent except for shoe leather scuffing cobbles. He did not berate himself for his caution – better to be wary. A servant holding the lantern was waiting for him. The High Steward struck out across the courtyard as the hooded man raised the oil lamp above his shoulder, showing the King's steward the way.

'All is well?' the High Steward called.

'Aye, my lord. The night watch has passed by. There is no one else abroad at this hour. Only the righteous.'

The High Steward nodded and gestured the man to lead the way. He followed in his wake. They turned a corner. A sliver of light entered the passageway from a high window: a narrow slit in the rough-hewn walls. A servant lighting a lamp, no doubt after having slept in a stairwell or wherever a humble resting place could be found. The High Steward's gaze returned to the lamp carrier, who had stopped half a dozen paces ahead of him.

'Get on,' he ordered the man.

The lantern bearer made no response. He stood still, gazing down. The High Steward reached him and saw what the man

was looking at. It was the crumpled body of a servant. His servant. He took a rapid pace backwards as the man in front of him turned and pulled back his hood. The High Steward stared at him. He thought he recognized the face, but could put no name to it. He gasped as his retreat brought him up against a second man. He whirled around, pressing his back against the wall. Two cloaked men barred the way. One close, the other several paces and to one side behind him. A block against any escape attempt should he manage to get past the hulking figure who stared faceless from the darkness of his hood.

'All right, Will,' said a voice from behind the lantern bearer, who handed the lamp to the voice's owner, a fourth man who stepped out of the darkness and pulled back his cowl.

King Pedro's steward lurched forward, heart pounding as he gasped for breath. The blood drained from his face as he stared at Thomas Blackstone. 'It cannot be you. You are banished.'

'I am,' said Blackstone.

'Then, how...?' The question died on his lips. His throat was dry with fear. It made no difference how Blackstone had found him.

But Blackstone answered anyway. 'We waited. My men watched for weeks. The huddled beggars in the doorway; the street seller sleeping beneath his cart. The spy from the window up there,' he said. 'We were in no hurry. Your servant is not dead. My archer struck him but he will recover from the blow.'

The steward blinked rapidly, his mind racing. Ever cautious, he had altered his journey to the cathedral every time he went to pray. Some nights one door, the next another. They had still tracked him. It made sense. They were hunters.

He fell to his knees. 'I have begged forgiveness from our blessed Lord Jesus. I have done penance. Sir Thomas, I had no choice in what I did to you. None.'

'You poisoned me to protect yourself and the King you serve.'

The steward shook his head, his hands clasped in front of him as if he were facing the very wrath of God Himself. 'I bore you no ill will. I swear it. It was the woman. She turned my bowels to water with her threats.'

'You remained silent. You kept the secrets of a murderess. You protected a foul king. You allowed a child to be slain and my loyal captain to die trying to save him. They were killed in a cathedral in Spain not unlike this one. You knew everything.' Blackstone stared down at him. 'But you remained silent. And then tried to kill me. There must be a reckoning for their sake.'

The High Steward spread his hands in supplication. 'Do not kill me, Sir Thomas. I beg you. I will pay whatever restitution you ask. My lord, I beg you with all my heart.'

His upturned face looked at the scarred features of the man gazing down at him. 'I won't kill you,' said Blackstone.

The High Steward felt tears sting his eyes. He clasped his hands again. He was saved. For a moment, he was not aware of Meulon's honed blade sliding across his neck. The bite was so sharp it felt little more than a wasp sting. And then he choked. His lungs filled with blood. By the time his head hit the cobbled street, the cloaked men had stepped away into the darkness. All except one. His dying eyes saw Blackstone crouch and gaze at him.

'Hell awaits you,' said Blackstone.

The steward blinked as Blackstone turned away. As he died, a single thought tormented him. He had been right. Blackstone was the devil's disciple.

PART ONE

THE ROAD TO WAR

CHAPTER ONE

Duchy of Aquitaine

1367

The Prince of Wales rode hard and fast. His stallion's flanks were flecked with sweat despite the crisp morning air. His entourage of a dozen men-at-arms could barely keep pace with a prince fired with anger. His inconsolable fury was penetrated only by persistent cries of alarm from the captain of his guard that he would kill his horse if he did not slow down. The thought of losing his favourite stallion drove sense into him and Edward of Woodstock, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine, pulled up his horse. Dismounting, he strode across the open meadow as a servant grabbed the reins. The courser, its lungs heaving, trembled from its effort. The men-at-arms held back. Better to let the Prince exhaust his temper. Edward turned to his captain. 'We will banish him, I swear. Not to a fortress château within three hours' ride of our palace, but there!' He gestured wildly to nowhere in particular. 'Across the damned Alps. We will send him to Italy. Again!'

The captain remained silent.

'Well? Are we not too lenient already with his imprisonment?'

The captain had served the Prince since the great victory at Poitiers a year short of a dozen years back. If he was asked

a question, he was expected to answer. 'Highness, there is no evidence it was Sir Thomas.'

'Is there not? Who else would render the man's servant unconscious and lure his master to his death below our palace walls? Are we held in such contempt?'

'The steward's purse was taken, highness. A simple robbery would explain it.'

The Prince gazed across the distant landscape; his breathing settled. He looked back to where his horse was tended by the servant. He nodded. 'Perhaps,' he said. He strode back to his mount. 'But I'll wager a gold leopard it was Blackstone.'

The formidable tiered defences of the Château de Langoiran clawed up a rugged hillside, its battlements affording an unobstructed view across the valley to a bend in the River Garonne a mile or so away. The Prince and his men rode up the winding approach and galloped across the bridge into the outer yard. The fortress was manned by Gascon men-at-arms loyal to the Prince. Their captain, Galhard de Prato, was no stranger to the Prince. He had been chosen to watch over the English King's Master of War. Thomas Blackstone was to have anything he required to keep him comfortable. This was no harsh prison environment. It was a confinement more in name than reality, but one that restricted Blackstone's movement. A place where he would be watched and guarded. It was politics. A gesture to assuage the Spanish King's fury at having been insulted and threatened by Blackstone those months ago despite the Englishman saving the King's life.

The Prince followed de Prato onto the steps leading up to the walls.

'Has Sir Thomas left the château? He is kept here? He has not been allowed to ride?'

'No, my lord. He is confined within the walls, as you commanded. His horse was grazed in the outer yard and then stabled and fed. It took several men to hobble him for the farrier. If Sir Thomas had made any attempt to leave the stables, we would have known.'

'Is there any way he could have slipped out? To have reached the city?'

'I have sentries patrolling and a night watch checking every door. I have men on the road and at the Pont de Langoiran. He could not have crossed the river. No one could get there and back on foot in the hours of darkness.'

The higher up the steps they climbed the louder became the clash of steel.

'And food?'

'Brought to the gate by villagers, checked and paid for and taken to the kitchens. Served by the cook. One man takes it to Blackstone's squire.'

'No one else? No visitors?'

'None, highness, only the priest from the Église Saint-Léonce and the local fishermen from Langoiran.'

'Priest? Sir Thomas needed a priest only once and that was when he lay close to death at Crécy.'

'It was for his squire, John Jacob, lord. The sacrament.'

'You saw Sir Thomas throughout last night?'

'His squire attended him. The candles burned in his quarters. John Jacob took bathing water and food to him.'

The Prince stopped at the last turn of the steps and gazed across the valley to the river. 'How is the fish brought here?'

'In salted barrels and rundlets.'

'And the old barrels returned?'

'Yes, lord. They are brought, and then several days later the empty ones collected when the cook and kitchen servants have taken what they need.'

‘How many fishermen enter the kitchens?’

‘Three, my lord.’

‘And three return?’

‘Aye, my lord.’

The Prince looked beyond the walls. If Blackstone had been responsible for the High Steward’s murder, was that how he had escaped the fortress? It would take more than a fisherman’s barrel for Blackstone to be smuggled out of the fortress, but a man hefting such a barrel on his shoulder, a cowl hiding his face, would be allowed to leave. How, though, would he have returned unseen before daylight – if, as he suspected, the Master of War had committed murder?

He gazed hard at the glistening breadth of the River Garonne. ‘The tides could take a man in a boat to the city in a few hours. And bring him back.’ He looked at the Gascon man-at-arms, who shrugged. The Prince took the steps two at a time. There was little more to be gained from the interrogation. Reaching the walls overlooking the inner yard, he saw Blackstone and his squire John Jacob stripped to their shirts despite the biting cold, striking hard as they honed their sword-fighting skills. Blackstone wielded Wolf Sword with ferocious strength, causing the Prince to grip the wall when it looked as if Blackstone had forgotten it was his squire he fought. The Prince and his trusted Gascon watched as John Jacob retaliated and forced Blackstone onto the back foot, then kicked his legs from beneath him. For a breathless moment, it looked as though he had beaten him. The Gascon drew a sharp breath and muttered to himself. ‘By God, neither man gives quarter.’

The Prince turned to him. ‘Thomas Blackstone would have it no other way. He expects his men to best him.’

As he uttered the words Blackstone twisted away, deflected Jacob’s sword and deftly disarmed his squire, throwing him to the ground, sword at his throat. A lesson learned.

‘Though they have yet to succeed,’ said the Prince. ‘Attend to your duties. I have business with him,’ he told de Prato. The Gascon obeyed as the Prince leaned across the wall and bellowed. ‘Thomas!’

Blackstone hauled John Jacob to his feet. They looked up and then took the knee.