THE GHOST THE AGENT & A FEMME FATALE

THE PULP SCI-FI DEFCON EUROPE #1

A Thrilling Spy Adventure by L. HAGENSEN

fusce

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The Ghost
The Agent
&
A Femme Fatale

L. HAGENSEN

FUSCE

1.

Murgendorf, Switly
June, 26th
03.00 AM

A hot wind swept through the gloomy town of Murgendorf, where it lay gray and forgotten by the empty riverbed of the Aare. Five years earlier, a moron on the Region Council had decided to move the river back to its original location further south, and the wealthy inhabitants followed suit. All that remained were the desperate souls and freebooters who roamed the streets in search of the next rush or someone to swindle. Murgendorf, which was close enough to the guarded border of Gergium, but not obviously close, had become the perfect place for shady dealings. An invisible war was raging in Europe, and in Murgendorf's alleys one could buy and sell the secrets of the Entente and the Coalition without being disturbed by the agents of either side.

In one of the darkest alleys, the old houses leaned against each other, letting their crooked roofs hide the moonlight. There was only one streetlight, broken, and deep, swirling shadows that completely swallowed the outline of a ghost standing with its back to a cracked door. The noise of the town droned under the starry sky, and musty smells drifted from the drains and into the ghost's hood, which hid both

hair and face. Anonymity was important. The ghost itself knew neither the gender nor the age of the person it was about to meet, only that they had something hot to sell.

There. A soft crackling of soles on pebbles. The ghost waited until it saw that the person was alone before taking a step out of the shadows. The person stopped. The two figures looked like mirror images. Long coats, deep hoods. A hand moved to the coat pocket, groped for something in it and broke the reflection.

"I always preferred Camembert to Morbier," the person whispered.

"I would choose Zamorano," the ghost whispered in response, and saw the hand pull a brown envelope from the pocket. The ghost put its hand in its own pocket and reached for the rectangular package wrapped in brown paper.

Deep sleeves fluttered, hands met hands, and the deal was done. The ghost stood still, idly fanning itself with the envelope until the other's footsteps faded into the alley.

"I'll be damned," it whispered as it fished out the paper and skimmed the few lines.

The ghost stared straight ahead for a minute, then nodded. That was how it would do it. Jogging, it left the alley for the room it rented across town.

2.

Marulon, Franbesan
June, 26th
02.00 PM

THE ghost hurried past the port warehouse, sniffed suspiciously at its coat sleeve without noticing any smell of crustaceans or fish, and slowed down when it spotted the person it was looking for. It quietly observed the short but stocky man with the buzz cut, who stood there smoking with his shoulder propped against one of the tar-smelling poles. His eyes were calm under pointed eyebrows, his lips were thin and he seemed unfazed by the commotion and confusion surrounding the departing ship. A sailor who opened his mouth to urge him to move seemed to sense danger and closed his mouth again. The man curved the corner of his mouth upward and brought his hand to his face to give the butt one last tug, letting it go and crushing the butt end under his shoe.

"Carrotze?"

The man froze before raising his head to meet the ghost's pale blue eyes in the deep hood.

"The ghost?" he whispered, swallowing and regaining his composure.

"I've heard you take care of unwanted people," the ghost said.

"How did you find me?"

"That's my job." The ghost sounded amused. "Are you interested, or should I turn to someone else?" Its gloved hand pulled the corner of a brown package from its pocket.

"How much?"

"Ten thousand rubles."

Carrotze's eyes widened, just as the ghost had planned in the play it was directing. It was an unusual amount of money, but the ghost had no choice.

"Who's the target?"

"A woman in Alumbreras. It's in…."

"I know where it is." Carrotze frowned. "I'm on my way to La Costa Valiente, I've a job there, but I could…."

"You have one day. Yes or no?"

Carrotze's eyebrows drew down as he thought. Alumbreras was not far from Cartone's old port and was on his route. The job in La Costa Valiente would have to wait another day, but for ten thousand rubles he should take it. The ghost discovered that it was holding its breath.

Carrotze nodded curtly and held out his hand. "I'll do it. Tell me who it is."

The ghost exhaled, ignored the hand, and pulled the package from its pocket. Carrotze opened it wide enough to see the thick stack of bills next to a folded, white paper.

"Don't read the paper here," the ghost said as Carrotze squeezed the stack of bills between his thumb and forefinger. "Burn it when you've memorized the details."

"Of course." Carrotze shoved the package into his inside pocket and patted it outside the coat.

The ghost nodded curtly, turned and disappeared into the gutter of wooden crates, ropes and stressed sailors. It expected to be paid handsomely for Carrotze's name and whereabouts in about ten hours. The information was to

be sold to Damelle, who was in charge of the Co-desk at Hellas's Intelligence. What she did with the information was her business, but the ghost suspected that the man it had just met had less than a day to live.

3.

Uzhvyts'ke, Belukra
June, 26th
09.00 PM

THE sky began to glow, as if an opened paint can had been slammed to the ground and spat out its golden contents. A man sat leaning against a mountain wall with binoculars in his hand. He was broad-shouldered but not tall, his head was covered with a black carpet of curly hair, and his brown eyes saw the evening shadows being pulled over the mountains like a blanket. He lowered the binoculars, put a piece of bread in his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully while nudging the young woman sleeping beside him.

"It's time, Wildcat."

The woman looked up in a daze, blinked, and was wide awake. The man grinned at her mess of black, tousled hair and went to wake the other woman.

"It's nine o'clock," he said.

Wildcat put her hair up in a ponytail, stretched, and looked out over the rolling green mountains of the Carpathians. She was slenderly built and looked too young for such an important assignment, any assignment to be honest. But add her experience and a few years to her looks, and you

got a very capable agent. An incredibly capable agent. She walked away and crouched behind a bush.

"Relieve Tiger, Wildcat," said the man who was the team leader and whose code name was Lion.

"Okay." She pulled up her pants, buttoned them, and searched in her backpack for the fully veiled green mask. Everything they wore was green, even their boots. She pulled the mask over her head, adjusted her eye sockets and patted the knife in its sheath. Any day of the week, she preferred knives to guns. Not because they were deadlier, but because they had been her best friends when she had run through the ruined city of Piro Atham as a child with scraped knees and dirty dreads on her head. She shoved a water bottle into the side pocket of her pants and broke off a large piece of Lion's bread.

"Hi," murmured Lynx, who passed her on the way to the bush she had just left. Lynx's hair wasn't disheveled at all; it lay smooth and black around her face, as if someone had painted her bob.

Lion, Lynx, Tiger and Wildcat had been a team for over two years and knew each other well in everything that mattered. They knew what set them off, what food, drink, literature, movie genre and sexual preferences they preferred. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses and could trust each other one hundred percent. What they didn't know, like each other's names and places of residence, where they came from and where they were going, was secondary.

Lynx asked Lion to heat water and make coffee while Wildcat walked past the protective boulder and raised the binoculars to her eyes. A fallow deer walked alone toward the stream, looked around, and bent its graceful neck to drink. She waited until the deer finished drinking before

making her way down the hill. When the deer caught sight of her, it froze in motion and turned sharply, its white rump glowing like a warning.

The narrow valley was naturally divided by the shallow stream, whose rocks shimmered red and yellow under the flowing water. She passed it in two wide strides and was then theoretically in the Coalition. However, those who ruled there had been clever when they sealed off their borders with walls and high fences and placed them some distance inside the border. In this way, they could patrol both sides of the Barrier without infringing on the Entente's land.

She climbed the hill, saluted Tiger and watched him crawl back the same way she had come before she lay down behind the tall grass and put the binoculars to her eyes. Below her, another valley spread out, cut in the middle by a tall fence. In a straight line from her position, the fence was pierced by a wide gate made of the same steel bars and mesh as the fence. A yellow sign was attached to the gate frame with ordinary steel wire, and the yellow area was almost completely filled with a black Z.

The fence was electrified.

Except for the steel wires and hinges, the frame was completely smooth. She pointed the binoculars at the gate and studied the swaying blades of grass on the other side, then let go of the binoculars and took a deep breath. The grass smelled of the coming night dew, the air was warm and the wind gentle. Wildcat pulled up her face mask and took a bite of the bread. She knew what she was, what they all were. Tools sent by one power to screw with another.

This mission was about an escape. After the war, but before the Coalition, a villain named Farko had appeared on the political scene. His daughter's man Tarz had been the enemy's most powerful man. After the war ended, with

Tarz dead and the regions of Europe celebrating the victory with booze, flowers and kisses, Farko had managed to gather the best scientists in Europe. Those he couldn't buy, he had taken. Now the Coalition dominated technological development, and behind the closed borders, the ancient technology that had contributed to repeated world wars was being rediscovered.

The team was certain that the escapee was one of the kidnapped scientists. The Intelligence would hardly have launched an operation of this scale for an ordinary citizen. Officially, everyone inside the fence was fine; it had been erected not to prevent people from escaping, but to prevent the Entente regions and others from infiltrating and stealing technical inventions. What it was really like to live inside the Barrier was another matter.

A noise made her look at the fence. She frowned and felt for the binoculars. The gate swung open and a middle-aged woman in the steel-gray uniform of the guards strode through, a rifle swinging casually in a strap over her shoulder.

Already?

Wildcat slid over the ridge, raised her palm and slowly turned it toward her as she curled her fingers. She repeated the signal three times, then returned to her old position and finished the bread with the binoculars pointed at the guard. When the team appeared, she had pulled the mask over her face and was waiting for orders.

4.

Dimiriana, Hellas
June, 26th
09.30 PM

HELLAS had a troubled history. History is perhaps the wrong word. The whole world had a troubled history. It had survived five world wars, an entire continent was still uninhabitable due to the last, deadly nuclear war, and another hadn't been heard from in over a hundred years. And as if that weren't enough, they were also living in the aftermath of a worldwide racial breeding in which they'd forced almost all people into a single, mixed race, and banned all religions and languages except English, while they were at it. Hellas had a troubled recent history, you might say. When Central Europe slowly surfaced after the war eighty years earlier, Hellas was divided into three smaller regions: East, North and South Hellas. But there had been another war in Europe, a bloody, fast-moving race war that had ironically united them into a single region, and now Dimiriana, the capital of East Hellas, was the capital of all Hellas. Large, safe, and bright, she rested with Serbulgria at her back and the Aegean Sea below. A good bit below, although people said they could smell the sea when stormy winds blew from the south. Some even claimed they could hear seagulls screaming.

On the outskirts of one of the worst areas of Dimiriana stood a nondescript building of cracked sandstone. The first floor windows were boarded up, there was no elevator, and the stairs were impregnated with thousands of dirty shoe soles. There was only one door on the top floor of the building and the sign next to the doorbell read *Section 31* in felt-tip pen.

A thin, silver-haired woman with glasses perched far down her narrow nose sat at a large, messy desk in the middle of one of the floor's few rooms. Her name was Damelle, and she wasn't only the head of the Coalition Desk in the Hellas's Intelligence, which everyone who didn't want to twist their tongues called the Co-desk, but she was also in charge of the rather shady Section 31.

A brown-eyed man in a suit and with black, well-cut hair knocked on her half-open door, pushed it open and entered. He held a piece of paper in his hand.

"We just got this fax," he said.

She accepted the thin paper and read:

26/06/4 09:26 PM PAGE 1 OF 1

FAX

To:Damelle From:UNKNOWN

Fax:xp380 Fax:UNKNOWN

Company:Section 31

Date:June,26,4

Subject:Information

Ray's killer. Name, time and place, £25.000 or equivalent in rubles.



Damelle tapped her finger on the symbol and looked at the man.

"The ghost," she said, "and it's still not possible to trace the fax number?"

"To be honest, no one is trying anymore."

"Well, the ghost is reliable. Make sure the money is sent."

"Will do." The man went back to his office to take care of the somewhat complicated payment procedure. He liked these late nights with Damelle, when she sat waiting for updates on an ongoing operation and had sent everyone home but him. The phone rang and he glanced at his watch before answering.

"Section 31, this is Zabarre," he said.

"Payment from the special account has been completed."

Zabarre hung up without answering and winced when Damelle called his name. "Yes?" he replied, running to his boss.

"Was that the handler?" she asked. "Did they make it?"

Zabarre understood her concerns. Dr. Suntión was one of the best scientists in Europe, and it was of the utmost importance that Hellas got him back. However, the guards they had bought hadn't chosen one of the usual border crossings for this operation. Uzhvyts'ke wasn't an optimal place. Either they wanted completely uninhabited backwoods or a larger city, not a village where everyone knew everyone. Damelle had ordered the target to be killed if they failed to get him through the Barrier, and that own losses were acceptable. Her face had turned green as she spoke the words.

"It wasn't Root," he said. "Just a confirmation that the payment was made to the ghost."

"Then we'll wait," she said.

5.

Uzhvyts'ke, Belukra
June, 26th
10.30 PM

TIGER stood out sharply against the moonlight as he ran down the hill, crossed the stream, and ran up the next hill. He dropped into the grass beside Lion and rolled onto his belly.

"I packed everything in the jeep and drove it as close as I could," he said.

Lion nudged Lynx's boots and she lowered the binoculars and turned to face him.

"Has anything changed?" he asked.

She shook her head and put the binoculars back to her eyes.

"Okay. We know the score. The guards will arrive with the defector at midnight. If she's still down there at ten to twelve, we need to neutralize her. If she's one of the guards on our payroll, it's on them. You don't change the plan after radio silence."

They took turns watching the guard and the fence, and crawled down their side of the hill to take a last bathroom break before the attack. When it was ten to twelve, the woman was still pacing up and down the fence. Lion looked at Wildcat. "You take her," he whispered.

In the books Wildcat had read and the movies she had seen, the heroes always fought heroically against the villains and they won every time. In the real world, it was a matter of surviving and slitting a woman's throat from behind without knowing anything about her except that she might be working for your employer's enemy. Wildcat had never met Farko, but she had a troubled past, having met both his daughter Judi and her man Tarz. Anyone who worked for that pack was her enemy too.

But might was a strong word.

"Wildcat."

She nodded, unsheathed her knife and looked at Lynx.

Lynx raised her hand without taking her eyes off the guard, seconds passed, and she lowered it. Wildcat rose, ran crouched down the slope, and watched the guard's back continue at a leisurely pace. This is bloody weird, she thought, turning as she approached the fence and increasing her pace. The guard must have sensed the movement at her back, because she turned around a second before Wildcat reached her. Their eyes met, and Wildcat had just enough time to see that the other didn't look scared before the grassy slope collapsed beside them. Instinctively, she threw herself away, landing on her side and skidding across the grass. Above her, a knife flew by and struck the fence with a thud.

Wildcat looked up, lifted her leg when she saw the guard draw her knife, and rammed her foot right over the other's knee, which cracked like a dry branch under the heavy sole. The guard cried out, dropping the knife, and Wildcat rolled onto her stomach, seeing more guards in steel-gray uniforms crawling out of the mountain. She blinked incomprehensibly, but understood at least one thing.

It was an ambush.

In less than two seconds, the new situation was analyzed.

Three men and two women next to the first guard, who was down for the moment. Four with knives, no guns. Their task was obviously to take her out as quietly as possible. If she screamed, the guards who were with the target would be warned and retreat, but the order was to kill the defector if the mission failed. So keep quiet.

Could she hold the knife to the injured guard's throat to get the others to back off? No, the guard wasn't important enough. All she could do was defend herself and wait for rescue.

Wildcat stood up, kicked the guard's knife away, and squeezed her own smooth knife handle. It was her mother's knife, the only thing she had inherited from her. Or rather, taken.

The knife she had used to slit Tarz's throat three years ago.

*

Adrenaline washed away the shock, and Lynx found herself hurrying down the mountain with Lion and Tiger.

"More guards," Lion said when they spotted what Wildcat was looking at.

"They're attacking her," Tiger said. "With knives."

"You help Wildcat," Lion told her. "Tiger, you go to the left. Only use knives, we don't want to alert the guards with the defector."

Lynx drew her knife and tried to sort out the scene in front of her. One guard was on the ground, it was the one Wildcat had dropped. Two other guards were trying to force her against the fence, and a third was waiting right behind them with a knife in her hand. She didn't have time to see more before Wildcat suddenly lunged at the two guards in a low, swift arc. She made a deep, vertical cut through

one thigh, folded her body and rammed her boots into the other's crotch. They fell simultaneously, but the guard behind them made a leap over the fallen and hissed as she attacked. Wildcat threw out her arm to protect her throat, stopped the knife blade with her upper arm, and jammed her own knife into the woman's side.

She's high off her ass, Lynx thought as she grabbed the crazy woman's hair and yanked her to the ground. The woman immediately pointed the knife at Lynx instead, who slammed her knee under the guard's chin before thrusting her knife under her ribs. The woman went limp and Lynx let go of her hair and wiped the knife on the woman's shirtfront.

"Is it over?" she asked, looking down at the mess of bloody, moaning bodies. Tiger and Lion had killed the other two, and the one Wildcat had stabbed in the thigh would soon be dead, too. She dropped to her knees beside Wildcat. "How are you?"

Wildcat looked up, one of her hands tightly gripping the wound on her upper arm. "Better the arm than the throat." She raised her arm, ripped off the torn shirt sleeve, and blood flowed thick and red toward her armpit.

"Lynx," Lion called, and she tore her gaze from Wildcat to see one of the guards running toward the gate. He stuck something black into an almost invisible hole, turned, and pushed the gate open. She ran after him, but stopped when he slammed the gate in her face. It was electrified, just like the fence.

"Shit," she said, watching him stumble up the nearest hill with his hand on his crotch. "The others probably have keys, too. They must be rubber-coated to withstand the electricity."

"It's the one with the family jewels," Tiger said. He was standing with one knee on the ground and a bloody knife in

his hand. "Where the hell did they come from?"

Lynx turned and looked at the mountain. Five shallow pits had been dug and had probably been covered with the thick sods that lay below.

"From there," she said, pointing. "That's why the sixth guard must have acted as bait, she had to cover the others up with the sods when they had crawled into the holes."

Lion looked at his watch. "We have three minutes. Collect all the keys and put the bodies in the pits. I don't want to scare our guards away when they come with the defector."

"Let me see." Lynx walked back to Wildcat and gently grabbed her arm. "One cut, maybe five stitches. I'll fix it when we get out of here." She pulled a flat medic kit from the side pocket of her pants, took out a compress and a roll of tape, and bandaged her arm.

"Thanks, Lynx."

"Sweetie, you know how to thank me."

"Um, if I didn't already have a girlfriend and if it wasn't against the rules."

Lynx was pretty sure Wildcat didn't give a damn about rules and that she knew Tiger and her had fun from time to time, even though he had a girlfriend. What happened on the field stayed on the field, as they used to say. Whoever Wildcat's girlfriend was, she had a firm grip on her.

Lion walked past Lynx to the first guard, who lay cursing and holding her injured knee.

"Who sent you?" he asked.

"On orders," she said.

"From where?"

"The squad leader. He's the one over there." She nodded to the man with the severed femoral artery, whom Tiger was dragging toward the pit in the mountain.

"What were the orders?"

"To kill you and to capture the traitors who came with the defector. That's why we weren't allowed to shoot, not to warn ... They want the defector alive to make an example and interrogate the traitors."

"Who?"

"Who do you think? Our bosses. Who's coming through the Barrier?"

"I don't know," Lion said, cutting her throat. "Help me, Lynx."

She grabbed the woman's arms and together they carried her to the hillside where Tiger had squeezed the other four in and covered their bodies with the sods. The fifth hole was empty and reeked of shit and urine.

"We've been watching the place since we arrived," Tiger said. "They must have been here for over twelve hours." He kicked a water bottle that had fallen out of one of the holes and helped them push the guard in and cover her with the sod.

"Did you hear that?" said Lion, and the others fell silent and looked at the fence.

A faint whistle was heard again and Lion answered with another tone.

"Here they come," he said.

6.

Kreuzmisch, Gergium
June, 27th
09.00 AM

THE view was impressive. A spruce forest climbed the steep mountains, their Alpine peaks gray and snowless, towering over the land like huge, upturned ice cream cones. In the valley, wooden houses huddled on either side of a winding road, and between the mountains and the town lay a magnificent villa, built of gleaming red solid wood and filled with balconies, eaves, and windows that glistened in the morning sun.

Although Mungart was the official capital of Gergium, the villa in Kreuzmisch was the most powerful building in the Coalition right now. It was Juniford Farko's villa, and where he was, power was.

Which, at the moment, was centered on the large table in the villa's only room on the top floor. Farko sat at one short side of the table and looked out at his subordinates, who consisted of three men and three women. They were his inner circle, and the fact that they were three people of each gender had nothing to do with equality or gender equity, as those concepts hadn't existed for many centuries. People's gender was no longer important, only their abilities, and the

six people in Farko's inner circle were all extremely capable.

"I have received some very unpleasant news." Farko's cold eyes scrutinized the group. "Go ahead, Kander," he said.

Kendro Kander was the youngest of them, only twenty-three, and he was sitting on an impressive network. He looked anxiously at Farko and tucked his long blond hair behind his ear. "I talked to Thundel yesterday. He commands the guards of eastern Cesco Asterien. It seems he didn't understand the seriousness of my warning."

"Warning?" said Francine Metallica, the oldest member of the circle. Her hair and eyes were appropriately of the same color as polished metal, her mind just as unyielding. "Was I asleep at one of the meetings?"

Anara Pomier suppressed a giggle, but Kim Dowes, sitting on the other side of Metallica, seemed to be wondering the same thing.

"I received the information less than a day ago." Kander seemed to immediately regret the excuse. "One of my people in Belukra called," he said. "Some strangers had shown up in Uzhvyts'ke. They went into hiding, but because I suspected an escape, I ordered Thundel to deal with it." Kander looked at Farko for confirmation, but got none.

"I take it that you were right. Who escaped?" said Metallica.

"I just found out," said Farko. "It's come to my attention that Dr. Suntión didn't show up for work this morning. His woman claims he was called to the lab last night and she hasn't heard from him since. Obviously a false call."

"Dr. Suntión?" said Dowes, letting her brown eyes meet Farko's. Dowes was his age, sixty-two, but looked twenty years younger. "That's bad."

"He's got a woman and child since he came here," Kander said. "We have them in custody."

"Arrange a spectacular accident," Jase Finder said, hiding his cruelty behind a thin layer of indifference. "Everyone needs to know what happens to the family when you leave. Those on the other side of the Barrier, too."

"I'll do it," Pomier said. Her brown eyes began to glow and a scent of sexual arousal emanated from her glands. Metallica wrinkled her nose and pulled her chair closer to Dowes's.

"Not yet," Farko said, looking at Pomier's stressed fingers. "First, Kander will investigate whether Dr. Suntión escaped voluntarily or was abducted."

A bright voice clearing its throat at the short end of the table made the inner circle look at Farko's long, thin, hawk-like figure. Or, more accurately, at the two children who sat deadly serious and thoughtful on either side of him, radiating their very own power. They were five years old, and with their light brown hair, striking blue eyes, and beautiful features, they could compete with and win over any view. Their names were Arius and Jeanne, and their genes were perfectly modified.

"Did any of our guards survive?" the girl asked.

"Yes, one of them managed to escape," said Kander. "The only thing he could say was that the opponents were two men and two women with a Hellas accent, so we assume they belong to the Hellas's Intelligence. They were wearing masks, so he couldn't identify them. One of them had a big scar on the forearm."

The two children turned their attention to Kander, who instinctively jerked backward.

"A scar? Interesting," the boy said. "Elaborate."

"Elaborate?" said Kander. "That's all. A large scar on the left forearm. It was on one of the women."

"Very interesting," the girl said.

"I'm dissatisfied," Farko said, and it was a word that, when it came out of his mouth, tightened the anal muscles of those present. "I want to know exactly what Dr. Suntión was working on before he was taken. Dowes, do a full damage analysis."

Dowes nodded and wrote the order in a notepad with a gold-colored cover.

"If Kander had taken his job seriously, we wouldn't be in this shit," muttered John Thorson, the head of the infamous Cosi, which stood for the Coalition's Security Institute and was something you should stay on bloody good terms with. His thin lips were as usual curved into a disgruntled parody of a smile.

"I warned Thundel. Fortunately, we have our contact in Hellas's Intelligence," Kander said. "I've instructed Spino to contact me as soon as it becomes known where they're taking Dr. Suntión."

"To do what?" sneered Thorson. "It takes years to infiltrate Hellas's Intelligence. We have tried, but we haven't succeeded yet. We should catch him before they take him across the border of Hellas, because once he's there, he'll be surrounded by agents."

"We'd better catch him before that, then," Metallica said. "Aside from the fact that Dr. Suntión is a world leader in his field, he's sitting on a tremendous amount of information about our own research. If we can't bring him home, I suggest we liquidate him."

"What's his field?" asked Pomier.

"Satellites," Dowes said, and Pomier looked as puzzled as if she had said aliens.

7.

Cartones, Portain
June, 29th
00.20 AM

THE evening heat was dark and humid, and the hoarse laughter of the seagulls had died away, leaving only the soft gurgle of waves meeting the shore. A man and a woman hid behind a dilapidated warehouse and looked out over the Mediterranean. A ship was approaching and if their information was correct, the man who had committed the murder of an agent of Hellas's Intelligence would be on the ship. The fact that they didn't know the woman in question didn't dampen their motivation.

Agents Jackal and Wolf had received their assignment in Mouroche, the capital of Portain, which had been part of the countries of Spain and Portugal before World War V, and they had immediately crossed the region toward the busy port city. The order they had received was clear. *The man who liquidated Agent Ray is named Carrotze, and he is on his way by boat to the old port of Cartones. Expected arrival between 00:00 and 00:30 on June 29. Find out who ordered the murder and why. Liquidation.*

"Look," Jackal whispered as the darkness in the bay grew thicker. "It seems to have stopped."

"They're probably rowing him in by dinghy," Wolf whispered. "We'll take him when they let him off and row back out."

The old port of Cartones had been an important hub before the recent regional war between Portain and Spanugal. Back then, goods from Balizelia and Brittania were loaded and unloaded here, and the area was flooded with sailors, shipowners, crooks, and whores. Now there were only crumbling buildings and a run-down pier with broken cranes. The bay was full of protruding wreckage and dangerous to navigate both by day and after dark. The old port was the perfect place for transports of the somewhat shadier kind.

To the south, the lights of Cartone's new port shone, and the loud commotion of a delayed departure hovered over the surface, almost swallowing the sound of approaching oar strokes. A soft splash revealed that the killer had climbed onto the pier, and with the returning dinghy at his back, he carefully made his way across the water-filled holes and wide cracks of the pier.

"Now," Jackal whispered when the man was close enough for them to smell him.

"Carrotze," Wolf said, letting the gun caress the killer's ear. He stopped immediately and hissed a curse.

"It's not me. You've got the wrong man."

"Of course we have. In here," Jackal said, opening the door of the warehouse. They had been prescient enough to oil it beforehand, so the crackling squeak was barely audible.

The darkness in the room was compact. The few windows were all broken, but covered with wide boards pressed so tightly together that no light penetrated when Wolf closed the door and lit a powerful flashlight. The killer and the agents watched each other. They were tall, athletic and

dressed in black. Both had their hair covered with tight black caps, but their faces were visible. The killer was stronger than they were, his coat was of good quality and the wrinkles on his face showed he had been in the business a long time. He had the gun in his holster, however, and not in his hand like the other two.

"Sit down," Jackal said. She pointed to the chair in the middle of the dirty floor.

"Don't you hear what I'm saying? You've got the wrong man."

Wolf raised his gun and cracked the killer's ear. "Sit down," he said, nodding toward the chair, "and it won't be any more painful than necessary." That was a lie, of course.

The killer sat down, his eyes flickering back and forth between them. The blood from the smashed ear ran down his neck and under his coat, but it didn't seem to bother him. The expression on his face was calculating, not fearful. Did he think he would survive this?

"Agent Ray," Jackal said as they tied his hands and feet and pulled the gun from its holster and a knife from its sheath on his calf.

The killer's eyes narrowed. Now he knew who they were and how it would end.

"We know it was you. Speak."

Silence.

"Shoot him in the kneecap," Jackal said.

"I've information."

"Speak," Jackal said again.

"Ray had sneaked into the Porsaw embassy in Mostajevo. She was fucking the bloody embassy counselor."

"We already know that. Why kill her instead of just kicking her out?"

The hit man shrugged.

"Who hired you and how much did you get paid?"

"I was hired anonymously."

"What's your assignment in Cartones?"

"Don't have one, I'm here on vacation."

"Let's start with his feet and work our way up," Wolf said. "Ray's body had cuts, burns and stab wounds, but she died of suffocation. How long did it take, Carrotze? Are you a sadist or were you paid to torture her before she died?"

"Wait," the killer said.

Wolf lowered his gun.

"I'll talk if you let me go."

Wolf shot him in the foot. The pop was more seen than heard as the finely crafted leather of the shoe burst open and soaked in dark, red blood. Carrotze gasped between his teeth.

"Five thousand rubles, okay? I got five thousand rubles for Ray. I've fifteen thousand in my pocket, you'll get it if you let me go. And I've more in an account in Tamarand. Over seventy thousand. You'll get it all."

Wolf shot him in the other foot.

"Fucking cunts," the killer yelled. "Go ahead, shoot me, I'll say no more."

Jackal looked at her wristwatch to make Carrotze fret some more.

"Take the knees," she said.

"You get the guy who hired me for a neck shot." The killer had given up.

"Who is he?"

"Kander."

Jackal and Wolf looked at each other. Kander was a big deal in the Coalition. There were even rumors that he was part of Farko's inner circle, despite his young age.

"Tell your bosses that the Coalition's people eat green

agents for breakfast and save the capable ones for dinner," Carrotze hissed.

"Why are you in Cartones?" asked Jackal again.

"My mission was to liquidate a woman. Medina Sohora, she lives in Alumbreras."

"Did Kander hire you for that assignment too? Is she involved in the Coalition's affairs?"

The assassin gave up. It didn't matter anymore, the person who had hired him couldn't get to him.

"It was the ghost. I don't know why and I didn't ask."

The ghost was a legend, a myth. It sold the secrets of the Coalition to the Entente and the secrets of the Entente to the Coalition and other, less important information to anyone willing to pay. Everyone needed the ghost, no one wanted it.

"Who's the ghost?" said Jackal. "Name? Home region?"

The killer shrugged. That was all he knew.

"Knee."

Wolf wasn't smiling as he put a bullet in the killer's kneecap. The pant leg was torn and blood splattered up to the man's screaming face. It was now ugly from fear, and sweat glistened.

"Wait, I've more."

Wolf took aim at the other knee.

"They say it's been seen in Murgendorf."

Jackal scratched her cheek with the gun.

"Wait, wait ...."

They could see him brooding, twisting his brain convolutions back and forth, looking for just the information that would give him a bullet in the neck.

"You've got a leak," he exclaimed. "Spino. That's who told Kander about Ray."

"Who the hell is Spino?" said Jackal.

"I don't know. Just the name. Spino. That's all I know. You have to believe me."

Jackal believed him. She made a hand gesture, and Wolf took a step forward, put the gun to the killer's neck and fired.

8.

Kreuzmisch, Gergium
June, 29th
08.00 AM

THERE was a knock at Farko's bedroom door and he looked up from the newspaper in surprise. "Yes?"

The door opened and his secretary looked in.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," she stammered, trying to straighten her hair, whose fine, light strands seemed to keep escaping from her hairpins. The glasses had slipped down her nose, as usual, and were so large that they almost covered her entire face.

"What's wrong, Moni?" he asked, setting the newspaper on the table by the window. "Is it Jeanne again? I have told her to behave."

"The children aren't up yet, it's Kander. He's here and wants to meet you."

Kander? Farko rose from his chair and followed her out of the room. He didn't like guests, and when meetings lasted for several days, his inner circle stayed at the hotel in downtown Kreuzmisch. Just showing up here, and before breakfast, was highly inappropriate.

Moni turned at the stairs and went to open the front door.

It amused Farko that she had left Kander waiting outside.

"You may come in."

The young man smiled and gave Moni an appreciative look as he passed her, but immediately became serious.

"Can we talk?" he said, turning to Farko.

"Let's go down to my office."

Kander followed him down the stairs, not opening his mouth until Farko had closed the office door.

"The children asked me for help yesterday." Kander looked uncertainly at the vacant chair and sat down as Farko gave him a quick nod. "They had a question for the guard who survived in Uzhvyts'ke. I have the answer here." Kander rummaged in his jacket pocket for a folded piece of paper, which he handed to Farko.

"And it couldn't wait until the meeting this afternoon?"

"Of course, it's not ... I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Farko put the paper aside without looking at it, and stared at Kander.

"Go on."

"I have men on a couple of smaller cargo ships traveling between Marulon and La Costa Valiente. One of them dropped a person off at Cartones's old port last night, and another was supposed to pick him up at five this morning. He wasn't waiting at the wharf, so they went ashore to look for him."

"And?"

"He was dead. Tortured."

"What's that to us?"

"I asked around. Two of Hellas's agents were seen in the area. They're probably behind the murder and the interrogation."

"Who was the man?"

"Carrotze. An assassin from Rombari. We hired him for Ray. The agent who infiltrated Pondulos at Porsaw's embassy in Mostajevo, you may recall?"

"That's right," Farko said.

"The problem is," Kander said, nervously fingering his shirt collar, "that only we knew about it. We of the inner circle. I told you that our contact in Hellas pointed Ray out to me at one of our meetings and you told me to fix it. I said I'd hire Carrotze to do the job, and I did it personally, Farko. No middlemen."

"You mean ...." Farko straightened up behind the desk. "Are you sitting here claiming that someone in the inner circle has been talking?"

There was a knock at the door and the new waiter waited for permission before opening the door and entering.

"Breakfast is served."

Farko nodded and beckoned him to leave the room.

"You're mistaken. The inner circle knows that everything discussed at our meetings stays here. Carrotze probably talked," he said. "And you don't know it's about Ray. It could've been anything."

"I knew Carrotze personally, but that wasn't the reason I hired him. His discretion and efficiency were one hundred percent."

"Hmm," Farko said.

"And of course it may have been about something else, but given the agents from Hellas ...."

Farko nodded curtly. "You were right to tell me. Did you get the information about Dr. Suntión's latest project?"

"I expect it at eleven," Kander said, looking as if he wanted to be offered breakfast. Farko sent him away and went up to the dining room where the children were waiting.

"Why aren't you dressed?" he asked.

"Jeanne and I are researching the necessity of dress codes," Arius said, spreading butter on a slice of bread. "We'll spend the whole day and night in our pajamas and then evaluate the experience."

"Right," said Farko, too used to the children to be surprised. "Kander just left. He suspects we have a traitor in our inner circle." He informed them of what Kander had said and then placed his note in front of them.

"There may be something to Kander's hypothesis," Arius said, looking at his sister as she unfolded the paper.

"What's that?" asked Farko.

"A suspicion," Jeanne said, showing the paper to her brother.

"About what?"

"Chanzi Maccin, the spy," Arius said, deciphering Kander's crow's feet. "We suspect she murdered Tarz and kidnapped our mother. It's common knowledge that her back is full of whip scars, but a lot of people have that. We picked up a rumor that she has a large, triangular scar on the inside of her left forearm. That's what the guard says, too." He looked up from the paper, met Farko's gaze, and began to read. "Female, slender, about 5'5. Age and facial features weren't discernible. Probably of mixed race. Large, tapered scar on inside of left forearm."

"Chanzi Maccin worked for the Resistance and was reported dead before the war began." Farko sounded as if he had had this discussion before, which he had. "And Tarz was killed the year after the war," he said.

"We were there when Tarz was murdered and our mother was captured," Jeanne said. "We know what we heard."

"Our mother said *Chanzi*," Arius said.

"You were two years old," Farko said, but a hesitation had crept into his voice. "Do you seriously believe that Tarz's killer is still alive?"

"We've been looking for women named Chanzi for three years," Jeanne said. "That's not a common name, and none of those we found resembled the woman we saw or had any information about her."

"You were never able to clarify what she looked like," he said.

"That's because she was covered with blood. No doubt both her own and Tarz's," Arius said. "But we remember her build, which was slender, and even then estimated her height at between 5'4 and 5'5. We also know she was a mixed breed and very young. Unfortunately, our experience with young people wasn't great enough at that time, so we couldn't give a safer age category than fifteen to twenty."

"If you're right," Farko said, "you've just changed the priority list of the Coalition's most wanted criminals. Chanzi Maccin's name will be at the top."

Jeanne and Arius smiled happily and clasped their small hands on the tabletop.

"We have to decide how to deal with the suspicion that one of the six in our inner circle is a traitor," said Arius.

"Six?" said Farko. "Do you suspect Kander, too?"

"Of course," said Arius. "If information leaks out of our meetings it's only a matter of time before we'd find out about it. The best way to avoid being suspected is to talk about the betrayal yourself, right?"

"Don't forget Chanzi Maccin," Jeanne said. "We have to figure out how to catch her. And how to get Dr. Suntión back. "

"We have a meeting scheduled for two o'clock this afternoon," Farko said. "If you combine your extraordinarily bright minds with mine, we should be able to come up with something before the inner circle gets here."