

KISS OF THE DEATH ADDER



GABRIOLA, BC CANADA V0R 1X4

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KISS OF THE DEATH ADDER

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Noir Intelligence Series

The Black Hat

Spine of the Antiquarian

Kiss of the Death Adder

KISS OF THE DEATH ADDER

BOOK THREE
of the
Noir Intelligence Series

A Novel

H.B. Dumont

CHAPTER 1

“**H**err Rafael Blosch was about to reveal unknown details regarding the mysterious *Quer* when he was fatally bitten by a death adder that had crawled up through a dank, discoloured cavity in the floor of his sweltering desert cell,” Daan Segers, the director of the European Union Intelligence Unit, announced in an exasperated voice.

At that pronouncement, a church-like stillness filled the room while profanities faintly rolled off tightened lips. The frustration of those assembled was magnified because they appeared to be on the verge of uncovering critical intelligence about the enigmatic *Quer* that had been imprecisely perceived on their radar, like an apparition sensed but not seen. The kiss of the death adder had ensured that Herr Blosch would take that crucial intelligence with him to his anonymous grave.

The *Quer* was an olden society conceived when Celtic and Druid cultures dominated much of what would become Western Europe. The original seven members were *patres familias* – male owners of family estates, although not Roman citizens. Today, the *Quer* had tentacles reaching into financial institutions and political capitals of major nation states, most notably the European Union. Their rank and file were deadlier and more ruthless, with a reputation for greater savagery and tenacity than any Sicilian Mafioso.

“The law of unintended consequences,” Paul Bernard muttered. His measured gaze assessed the level of preparedness for such news. “We have people in high places including government and police departments,” he added somberly.

Daan held his focus.

After a brief silence, Paul continued. “Those were the last words Herr Blosch said to me as we were being gagged and hooded on the yacht. Perhaps with the revelation of Herr Blosch’s death, a select few of these elite senior members of the constabulary and governance who may have been loyal to Herr Blosch and the *Quer* could be urged to transfer allegiances.”

Alexandra Belliveau chimed in, “*Reculer pour mieux sauter* – we need to step back in order to take up a more strategic position from which we may re-engage.” *In every adversity, there are the seeds of its opposite*, she mused. She had risen to become the top forensic psychologist in Europe by always meeting adversity with optimism. The untimely death of Herr Blosch proved the impetus for such a review of the facts and circumstances which she projected on the monitor of her mind.

“I agree,” Daan re-joined the conversation. A chameleon-like change had transformed the retired general from briefly stoic to assuredly resolute. “With Herr Blosch’s inopportune demise, it is absolutely imperative that we do whatever is necessary to apprehend the seventh and final member of the *Quer* who has maintained his cloak of secrecy. If that means contracting out to an external freelance resource – a centurion – to lure him out of hiding, we will consider that option.”

This invitation triggered a hint of restraint among those colleagues gathered. Since its inception, members of the European Union Intelligence Unit had been carefully selected from citizens of the initial six member states and then only after a lengthy vetting process and meticulous levels of scrutiny. The sole purpose of the Intelligence Unit was to protect the European Union from internal and external threats to its political and economic stability. No external resource had ever been recruited since 1957 when the European Union had been officially formed as an adjunct to the Treaty of Rome, written by those six initial signatories.

“On a positive note,” Daan added, “we have tentatively identified the seventh member of the *Quer*. I say ‘tentative’ because we compared names of the captured members with the original family names noted on the membership list. The one surname missing is Durand. Ironically, it is derived from the old French, *durant*, which means to endure or to last. He seems to be living up to his ancient family tradition. Intelligence suggests that his first name could be Baird or some derivative, but that needs to be confirmed.”

The captured members of the *Quer* were still in safe custody in the Desert Springs Interrogation Facility. They had single-mindedly objected to their consigned wardrobes of fluorescent green coveralls and ankle bracelets. None, however, had demonstrated the potential to become as communicative as Herr Blosch. Perhaps with news of his death, they too might be persuaded to disclose yet unknown details about the *Quer* and its clandestine mandate. Then again, they might become even more resolute to keep their oath of silence, to not follow in Herr Blosch’s footsteps. No member of the *Quer* in its long history had divulged any details of its existence or mission. Probably they would simply wait until eventually freed by their captors, who would then suffer the consequences of their misguided action.

The timing of this announcement could not have been worse for Alexandra and Paul. This was supposed to be the first week of their Mediterranean honeymoon. Instead, they were re-engaged with colleagues from the European Union Intelligence Unit at a discrete location. On the bright side, if you had to interrupt an amorous vacation, then Santorini, an island in the Aegean Sea overlooking the Caldera, was an ideal venue.

“May I suggest a possible external centurion to work with us not as a formal member of the European Union Intelligence Unit, but as a contractor,” Paul suggested. Maintaining the security of the Unit and the anonymity of its members was paramount. By

contracting this work, the policy of not offering any status close to permanent membership in the European Union Intelligence Unit to ‘outsiders’ would be strictly adhered to. “You may find my suggestion unorthodox but unusual circumstances dictate extraordinary measures.”

Matthieu Richard, as head of operations for the EUI Unit, invited Paul to explain his proposition. “The floor is yours, *mon ami*.”

“As you are aware, I was approached last week when running the marathon in Palermo by a man who identified himself as the Armenian Turk. We confirmed that he had contacted me on behalf of Francine Myette. His real name is Aiolos Yusuf Dimir, code-name Rakici. We don’t know a great deal about him except that he may have been Turkish Military Intelligence. We can conclude that he is professional to the extent he knew I would be running in this marathon. I certainly did not make that information known.

“He and Francine Myette apparently first met when they were attending the University of Rostov in southern Russia. Her name at that time was Tatyana Sokolov, known as Tanya. We know much more about Francine. She is, or was, a Russian agent who had infiltrated French Intelligence. She is now supposedly more supportive of democratic philosophies, or at least less dedicated to communist doctrine. The Armenian Turk mentioned that Francine was open to engaging in conversations that could be of mutual benefit. I suggest that we accept Francine’s invitation to enter into preliminary discussions as a start.”

Alexandra joined the discussion. “It is interesting that Rakici refers to himself as the Armenian Turk rather than the Turkish Armenian. That suggests he sees himself as Armenian first and foremost, and Turkish as a result of some extraneous event or association, more than likely political. It is worth digging deeper into his character. Turkey has a reputation for working both sides of the fence, a Western NATO ally and an ally of former

Eastern satellite communist states of the USSR including Mother Russia. In contrast, Armenia entered a partnership with the Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 and a partnership with NATO two years later. That begs the question: Does Rakici perceive himself to be a NATO ally? Is he playing the field advantage? Or is he a survivor? Nothing wrong with that, subject to his true motivation and loyalties.”

CHAPTER 2

“My intuitive response,” Matthieu responded, “is that it’s unorthodox. But, as you said, Paul, unanticipated circumstances could open the door to unconventional responses.”

Alexandra looked at Matthieu, scanning him for the reason for his response, one way or another. Was his initial reaction to the nominee or the nominator? His focus remained on Paul in an attempt to understand his motivation in suggesting Francine.

Matthieu had only worked with Paul on one major case with the European Union Intelligence Unit. There he had come to respect and trust Paul’s judgement. A decade earlier, they had walked similar turf while serving with the United Nations Protection Force in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Colonel Paul Bernard, as he knew him on that mission, had a PhD in biochemistry. Recently, he had been inducted as a *Commandeur de la Légion d’Honneur* at the Élysée Palace in Paris for notable courage and steadfastness when gathering evidence at scenes of war crimes and presenting it at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

An interlude followed before Matthieu continued. This reaction was consistent with his *modus operandi*, which was to ponder before proposing a response. More often than not, he sought additional knowledge in order to shed light on all factors contributing to potential decisions.

“You met Francine Myette briefly while working on the Thon case but not Rakici.” Matthieu let his observation settle.

Paul clarified his proposal. “My sense is that Rakici, the Armenian Turk, may be positioning himself on the periphery for some future benefit. So, we would need to factor him into the

Francine equation. He may be neither comrade nor adversary at this time, but simply a convenient link to an opportune solution.”

Matthieu looked toward Daan who furrowed his forehead and nodded tentatively in agreement as he opened his mouth and then closed it without saying anything. Words unuttered had more power at that moment. Matthieu sensed there was something disconcerting about his superior’s manner. Working closely with Daan for over a decade, he had come to realize that retired generals tend to deliberate strategically, without necessarily debating the details in a public forum.

Matthieu sought additional input. Dr. Alexandra Belliveau was a valuable source who had spent her career as a forensic psychologist working with the Police nationale and the Prefecture de Police in Paris. Paul alone referred to her as AV. There was a story behind that but Matthieu was not one of the privileged few who knew the reason, at least not yet.

“Alexandra, your thoughts?”

“Paul and I have talked about the possibility of Francine’s involvement. She was trained KGB before transferring to FSB. She is utterly appalled and disgusted with her former employer because they murdered Capitaine Dominique Roland of the Police nationale. Francine and Dominique had been in an intimate relationship. I did not trust Francine when we first met but the context has changed since then. Today, my intuition tells me that her motivation to join forces with us may be genuine. I would support this recommendation with a codicil of caution. My preference would be to spend some time with Francine to gauge the level of her sincerity before we propose any business relationship.”

Alexandra concluded her psychological assessment prophetically but with professional efficiency. “In the words of our KGB contemporaries, *doveryat i proveryat* – trust and verify. Francine would do the same. She would expect the same. If we proceed too

quickly, she would become suspicious. If we dragged our feet, she would become guarded. It is a matter of professional balance, but balance from her KGB/FSB perspective, not ours.”

“A guarded proviso,” Paul added. “When you sub-contract to another gladiator, you run the risk of giving up control over some aspects of the mission, which may result in you becoming subservient to that gladiator in ways only the gladiator knows.”

Matthieu glanced over at his superior who had been resting his chin against his steepled fingers in contemplation. Occasionally, Daan would merely ponder, sifting through the facts as they were related, not presenting any indication of his intentions. On other occasions, he would blink once slowly followed with a tic of a nod, denoting he was on the cusp of a decision, a forthcoming directive.

“In espionage parlance,” Daan declared, “you either want to *only* be seen or *never* be seen by your target. We could employ Francine to only be seen by the truant final member of the *Quer*, Baird Durand, if we can be assured of her loyalty. His capture is our number one priority.”

Daan waited for confirmation before continuing with his deliberation. They had reached a point when additional considerations were welcome. He scanned the composure and read the gaze of his team members. All nodded, agreeing with the priority level of this case.

“Second, we know that the old KGB is still after the code that Alexandra’s mother, Maria Belliveau, developed when she was employed by French Counterintelligence. An interesting twist. We suspect that it is old KGB and not current FSB because of the vintage of the bug that was planted in Alexandra’s apartment. The Russians are currently tracking Alexandra, and Paul by association, in hopes of finding the code. Using an appropriate disguise, we could employ Francine to manoeuvre invisibly, never seen by these old-guard KGB agents. It will be a delicate balance but I’m confident we could neutralize this obstinate and malignant Soviet

menace, while minimizing the gladiator subservient factor which Paul correctly identified.”

Again, Daan paused briefly to take a sounding before delivering his directive. Once a general, always a general.

“Contact the Armenian Turk via the hotel concierge he mentioned, Paul, and meet with Francine. Alexandra, you will work with Paul.”

“Let me know when you have established contact, Paul,” Matthieu promptly followed up. “We will have the Delta Team provide surveillance and security. The techies will wire you and ideally install cameras so we can analyze Francine’s responses and demeanour. If Francine becomes aware of our surveillance, she will not be surprised. As Alexandra suggested, Francine would do the same and expect the same.”

“Having you collaborate on this case is the least I can do for interrupting your honeymoon!” Daan whispered to Alexandra and Paul in his customary light-hearted manner and with a sheepish chuckle. He was well aware of how cherished holiday time was, but emergencies usurp personal schedules.

“This will cost you another all-expenses-paid weekend in Liechtenstein,” Alexandra replied with equal levity as she and Paul left Daan and Matthieu to debrief. As with all missions, they would debate the pros and cons of each scenario, particularly the contingencies and exit strategies. She had not met Rakici, the Armenian Turk, so would need to depend on Paul’s assessment, however brief. They had both met Francine when working on a previous case but their engagement had been limited to across-the-table appraisals. Introductions had been brief and formal. Communications had been restricted to the formal exchange of business cards devoid of handshakes which would have provided the opportunity for reinforcement of tacit intuition, a strength that Alexandra had perfected as a forensic psychologist.

“Walk with me,” Daan invited Matthieu. “I think better on my feet amid the hustle and bustle of morning traffic. We can grab a coffee at the kiosk on the way out.”

Once on the sidewalk, Matthieu murmured to Daan. “When Paul suggested that we consider Francine as the centurion, you seemed a bit distant about his nomination.” He let his observation hang as an open-ended question.

The impenetrable din of street-level commerce muffled his enquiry and would do the same for the ensuing response. Matthieu savoured the aroma as he sipped his cappuccino while awaiting Daan’s reply. He too had been tutored in the richness of patience.

“I have full confidence in Paul’s suggestion,” Daan affirmed. “I thought that it was audacious but brilliant, typical Paul. That’s why I hired him, in addition to his astute intellectual perspectives. My apologies if I gave you the wrong impression. I was debating whether we could also employ Francine to deactivate the Russian threat to the code. That would be a bonus. And now there is the wild card that has popped up on our radar: Rakici, the Armenian Turk, and his relationship with Francine.”

WITH A DISCRETE BOW, THE concierge acknowledged Paul’s note addressed to Rakici requesting a meeting with Francine. The text was terse but to the point just like Rakici’s initial introduction to Paul when running the Palermo marathon.

“I will ensure that your communiqué is passed along, *monsieur*.” The concierge appeared unfazed by the seemingly vagueness of Paul’s request as if such actions were routine beyond Hollywood movie scripts of heroes and heroines, protagonists and antagonists leaving clandestine communiqués to arrange a romantic rendezvous.

Paul reflected on his mission in Sarajevo when he was employed

by the United Nations Protection Force. He had worked alongside a Russian major who was also employed with the UNPROFOR. They were comrades in arms on this Balkans mission because their respective politicians had deemed it so. Yet barely five years before, they were pointing guns at each other across the Berlin Wall because their politicians had decided they were enemies.

This New World Order had caused a change in ethos on both sides, albeit a tenuous one. Enemies and Allies of both World Wars barely twenty years apart had hoisted military standards and alliances at the stroke of the political pen. In previous centuries, a royal marriage of convenience or a divorce could bring about violent wars lasting decades or fragile peace treaties spanning a few years. In the final analysis, it all boiled down to interpersonal relations. The Cold War had allowed for peace among former enemy agents from the East such as Francine and Rakici and from the West such as Alexandra and Paul. The foggy ground in between defined the nebulous landscape. Likewise, one could argue that France's loyalty to the ethos of the Western NATO Alliance under President Charles de Gaul's leadership was also hazy.

Today, there was room for additional shifting of alliances based on perceived common agendas. Paul concluded he had worked with a former enemy, a Russian major, in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Accordingly, he could now work with a former Russian enemy agent and her Armenian Turkish associate. In the immediate situation, they would be neither avowed enemies nor fervent friends, but simply associates working under the cloak of finding a possible solution to a thorny problem that, if unresolved, could result in continuing unfavourable results for all. It was in their mutual interest to work toward a common solution. When they first met at the Palermo marathon, Rakici had explained Francine's motivation to meet within that collaborative context. Paul was open.

CHAPTER 3

“The paradox of misfortune,” Alexandra muttered. “Some die while others benefit from death. Both you and I have been recognized and advanced in our chosen careers on the heels of misfortune, the murders, or untimely deaths of others.” *The obliqueness of death*, she mused.

“It’s a function of living outside our normal lives, whatever normal is or was,” said Paul in acknowledgement of the fact. As an only child growing up in Montigny-lès-Metz, “normal” meant a protected middle-class household with both parents at home for dinner. He was neither spoiled by being given anything that money could buy, nor did he want for anything either. Death was not a foreign concept. His father, being a police officer, spoke openly of his experience in dealing with all aspects of law enforcement including the seedier side of society. Both his parents encouraged a balanced discussion to ensure he would not remain too naïve. Nor would he be traumatized by constant news of social violence. As a result of the family environment, he gained a keen interest in science and a desire to learn about biochemistry as it applied to human health.

Death was seen as a normal part of life. Mortality resulting from violence, or what Alexandra referred to as the obliqueness of death, had its own norm. It might appear senseless to those who exhibited lower levels of emotional intelligence, yet logical to the scientific mind of the rational Mr. Spock from the television program *Star Trek*. Thus, Paul understood Alexandra’s perspective. It wasn’t that he was devoid of emotion. He knew about love and hate, happiness and sorrow. He’d had experience dealing with severe stress resulting from overwhelming emotional and physical trauma.

The paradox of misfortune was a reality for which everyone needed to take responsibility. His late wife, Suzette, made the choice to drive while impaired. His eldest son, Yvon, had drowned because of choices he had made while using and trafficking illegal drugs. They had both failed to consider the consequences of their reckless actions. In contrast, his younger son, Jean, had followed in Paul's footsteps and had become successful as a result.

Alexandra reflected on the disquiet that had assured her survival on occasions when heightened situational awareness was needed. She re-evaluated the knowns and, more importantly, the unknowns of their current mission, ever conscious of the intervening variables in this ominous environment. She sensed nothing that would cause her imminent concern but her *shrew*, her intuition, continued to remind her that invisible eyes were watching, and concealed ears were listening, in addition to instinctual senses scanning. On the eve of his being poisoned by an old KGB foe, their previous CIA associate, Tom Hunt, had encouraged both Alexandra and Paul to remember the imperative of situational awareness. Her intuition had never been wrong. It was only the misinterpretation of her intuition that left her in the lurch when she dismissed the subtle signals.

Her upbringing was different from Paul's in some respects although similar in other ways. She never knew her father as a child. She was raised by her aunt and uncle because her mother was constantly travelling as a French Counterintelligence agent. From a young age, she had learned to accept responsibility and appreciate the consequences of her decisions. A deep desire to understand how and why individuals made decisions had drawn her to the world of forensic psychology. She became an expert at understanding others, but less expert in analyzing the motivation for some of her own decisions.

When she had asked her mother what it was like to grow up in the shadow of the Second World War, she was advised sternly

that she needed to remain close-lipped. Only later did she learn her mother and grandmother had been members of the French Resistance, the *Maquis*. “You simply did not talk about what went on back then,” they had warned her on several occasions. The dutiful Alexandra never did talk about it until after her mother’s funeral. Even then, she contemplated the paradox of misfortune as it related to death in the context of her mother’s career, in addition to her own life.

In truth, Alexandra was a lioness, a natural protector of her pride. She had demonstrated proficiency as a predator who could track a common criminal, a serial killer, a demented sociopath, or a deviant terrorist. She was a woman of many disguises and equally of many personalities to be adopted as circumstances dictated. She took full responsibility for the consequences of those decisions, some of which had contributed to the end of her first marriage to André.

Paul had become aware of some of her masks but certainly not all. Other clandestine innuendos he might perceive but she would follow her mother’s advice not to talk about such matters for safety’s sake. There were unknown eyes scanning and prying ears ready to pilfer secrets.

“You’re rubbing your amulet. Talk to me.” Paul’s voice was hardly more than a warm whisper. He had seen her on other occasions hovering in these cognitive spaces shrouded in the mist of enquiry. One characteristic of her personality he had learned to consider when engaging in conversation with her was patience. Her default mode was to ponder before expressing her thoughts.

“In the fullness of time,” she said philosophically, “if you serve the system like Herr Blosch did, you are rewarded. He did well because he understood the depth and dimensions of fealty. He had faithfully served the corporate elite of the *Quer*. Together, all members and associates of this nefarious organization, including Herr

Blosch, had benefitted financially from their malicious exploits over millennia. In the past few decades, they had profited from the carnage of the Third Reich and its successor.” Alexandra carefully gathered her thoughts. “Herr Blosch paid the ultimate price. What is next?”

“Our mandate is to gather intelligence,” Paul reminded her. “Enforcement falls primarily to other agencies. Welcome to the New World Order where there are different rules for different circumstances. Your mother and her colleagues helped define the parameters of this ever-changing arena of the Cold War and how to manoeuvre within it. You and I, Francine and Rakici, and a host of other unknown players have inherited this toxic playground. Once in, there is no turning back. George Smiley, John le Carré’s fictional career spy with the British Secret Intelligence Service, realized that truth after he attempted to retire. When called to account for past deeds, he realized that full retirement was beyond his reach. We entered with eyes wide open!”

“Let’s look at the players and their methodology,” Alexandra proposed. “The *Quer* learned to adapt and improvise, to strategically manoeuvre into known and emerging enclaves when it was to their advantage and, of necessity, to survive. They continue to adapt as circumstances dictate.”

Paul agreed. “True. They had perfected the art and science of the chameleon and its distant venomous cousin the Komodo dragon, each adopting successful strategies, one more passive than the other but both successful, given their hostile environment.”

“Another factor,” Alexandra proposed solemnly, “was the driving ethos of the *Quer* and the Thousand-Year Reich which continues to amass extraordinary wealth, thereby ensuring an almost limitless capability to buy loyalty, tenuous as it may be. This equated to absolute influence and control. Everyone had a price in order

to evade the ultimate consequence – untimely and often sudden death.”

Paul added, “By chance and inheritance, we have acquired considerable prosperity. Regardless of whether you define it as clean or tainted, we are now in the crosshairs of someone’s sniper rifle. There are always consequences!”

“Fair enough. What’s our exit strategy?” Alexandra asked, not as a rhetorical question but a fundamental approach. “Like the *Quer*, are we able to retreat into unknown bastioned enclaves if circumstances warrant? There is a high probability that we will need such secluded sanctuaries sooner rather than later. Let’s not forget Collette and Jean. As my daughter, Collette has inherited my world as I became part of my mother’s world, without choice. And as your son, Jean cannot escape his father’s exploits.” With that pronouncement, Alexandra retreated into a dark solitude that Paul had witnessed on a few occasions. It was best to leave her to resolve it. His obligation was to stand sentinel.

While in these trances, she recited her mother’s premonitions with the cautionary caveats, perhaps for reassurance that all would be resolved or as guidance that Alexandra would find the key: “Your roots are those of Charlemagne and your destiny is Merovingian. The truths of those times are masked in the mists of the Moselle. In them, you will discover your strengths and unearth the truths.”

Paul pursed his lips and squinted into the distance, staring at nothing yet sensing a spiritual energy. “You are absolutely correct. There is a big difference between growing up within and inheriting an environment that had previously been foreign to you. What is your *shrew* suggesting?”

“There are a growing number of eyes upon us, some from the past, while others are current. Each has their own motivations and consequences. The immediate threat is twofold. The first is with

Baird Durand, the truant and final member of the *Quer*. We now know his name. What we don't know is the full extent of his potential for violence. We have to conclude he will live up to the venomous reputation of the *Quer*."

"No argument from me." Paul bowed in agreement. The paradox of both fortune and calamity, as Alexandra had prophesied, mandated constant surveillance or what he referred to as SA – situational awareness. It had kept him out of harm's way several times when serving with the United Nations Protection Force in Sarajevo and on the subsequent missions gathering evidence at scenes of war crimes.

"The second threat," Alexandra proposed, "has many heads like the mythical serpent, Hydra, whose lair was purported to be in the depths of Lake Lerna. The most prominent threat is the KGB. We know more about the old guard today but still not enough, because emphasis has shifted to its successor, the FSB. Some of these former adversaries are emerging as opportunist allies. We only have to look at Francine and Rakici, the Armenian Turk, gladiators with battle scars and honours in their own rights. We can only speculate about the extent to which they have been tested in the emerging post-Cold War arena. We do know they are survivors."

Paul nodded deliberately. "Not only just survivors but benefactors, due in part to their finely-tuned competencies in the tradecraft. I mentioned that Herr Blosch wasn't worried initially when we were taken hostage on the yacht because he was confident that senior members of the constabulary and governance, who were on the *Quer* payroll, would come to our rescue."

"And?" Alexandra's voice rose inquiringly. She sensed that what Paul was contemplating was one of these decision points that could have either a beneficial or disastrous outcome. What exit strategies would they need to develop?

"And as a vanguard, I think someone needs to make discrete

enquiries to find out if any of those members of the constabulary and governance, whose loyalty had been purchased by the *Quer*, could be convinced to transfer allegiance to the European Union Intelligence Unit. Their motivation would be to survive in their respective worlds that have mutated like a virulent virus. When you prostitute yourself for the almighty dollar, you abrogate your integrity, that ability to steadfastly adhere to moral standards. They have been bought once. They can be bought again. Their intelligence might offset the loss from Herr Blosch's unfortunate death."

"Are you suggesting that Francine would be the best resource to take on this task with or without Rakici?" Alexandra asked. "Best outcome – it would demonstrate the intent of their willingness to work with us as contractors. Worst case scenario – they warn the former financial benefactors of the *Quer* that the European Union Intelligence Unit is closing in on them. In addition, they inform the Kremlin. If the latter, they would fly their true colours not as disgruntled agents of Moscow but as still-active FSB agents."

"Best we find out sooner rather than later," Paul proposed. "If their intent is to defect, I surmise that Francine has greater finesse and diplomacy. In contrast, Rakici would attempt to manipulate his target. If unsuccessful, he might re-engage with guns blazing, so to speak. Either one would be perceived as being at arm's length of the EUI Unit if it backfired. Let's present this strategy to Daan."

Alexandra lingered, unsure of the optimal strategy. "We're missing something, but I don't know what. There's an unknown unknown. Invisible eyes are watching and less-than-plugged ears are listening."

CHAPTER 4

The concierge approached Paul. “A message for you, *monsieur*.”
Alexandra watched intently as he read.

“Rakici has suggested we meet in Thira later this evening. He’ll have a mutual acquaintance with him,” Paul noted in a tone that was both buoyant yet wary.

Matthieu’s cell boogied across the table with the vibrations of the incoming message. “Meeting with our target after dinner in Thira. Exact location TBA. Need to be wired,” Paul’s text read.

Paul had complete confidence in Alexandra’s proven ability to take the initiative with no prior notice and under the most stressful conditions. In the previous Thon case, she had manipulated Thon into revealing a fatal flaw in his sociopathic personality and *modus operandi*. That encounter ultimately ended Thon’s murderous rampage at the hands of one of his supposed loyal Fourth Reich soldiers who, at the last minute, moved his pistol away from Alexandra to point it at Thon and end his life with one carefully aimed bullet to his head.

Through personal experience and lessons taught by her mother, a seasoned French Counterintelligence agent, Alexandra had become acutely aware that in the duplicitous world of espionage and intelligence, nothing exists in the absence of context. More importantly, intelligence and context could be misaligned when there were truths, partial truths, and make-believe truths.

Today, she sensed Francine was not motivated to harm either her or Paul. On the contrary, both she and Paul had been cordial when they first met despite their initial misgivings. In addition, they had been respectful and non-judgemental toward Capitaine

Dominique Roland of the Police nationale, Francine's intimate partner. Alexandra concluded that Francine having already been the target of a Moscow assassin, wounded, and now a possible defector, the probability of her having malicious intent was very low.

If there was a wild card, it would be Rakici, the Armenian Turk. He had contacted Paul at the Palermo marathon supposedly at Francine's behest. Now, he had set up this secret meeting. But who might be compensating him? A more pressing concern was whether they were providing backup to each other or had an independent set of eyes watching.

The most likely threat would come from a Moscow agent who might be tailing Francine to identify anyone meeting with her. Alternately, any threat could be another foreign agent, possibly Chinese, or private entrepreneur contracted to assassinate Francine and anyone associated with her including Rakici, Alexandra and Paul. In anticipation of the latter possibility, Daan had dispatched the EUI Delta Team as a protection force.

On a positive note, Francine had requested the meeting on the pretext that there could be mutual benefits in warming East/West relations and working as allies rather than enemies. Accordingly, Alexandra expected Francine to provide most of the conversation this evening with Rakici supporting her. If they switched roles as a strategy, Alexandra would continue to direct her enquiries to Francine. She needed to assess Francine's intent and integrity. As planned, she would leave the dialogue with Rakici to Paul, who would follow up on their initial brief encounter at the Palermo marathon.

What might Francine be thinking in anticipation of the impending meeting? Alexandra pondered. She anticipated that the persona on the other side of the table was an integral part of that planning process. She would rely on her intuition, her *shrew*. FSB agents

had been taught to respond to interrogation by deflecting and lying convincingly when necessary. Alexandra would lean on her *shrew* to differentiate between what was closer to the truth, the partial truth and anything but the truth. She would rehearse equally for all scenarios.

At dinner, Paul and Alexandra discussed the probability of each of the unknowns. They then confirmed with Daan the presence of the EUI Unit Delta Force Protection Team.

Only at the last minute did Rakici confirm the location of the café where they would rendezvous. It was not the best-case scenario for the Delta Team, which had to scramble.

“I don’t like it,” Paul whispered to Alexandra. “They seem to have stacked the deck in their favour. We will have more agents, but one well-aimed bullet will quickly negate any numeric advantage. Thoughts?”

“Two possibilities. First, Francine and Rakici are being extra cautious in order to protect Francine. Second, they are testing our resources. Either way, they are nervous. But why? They have to anticipate that we will be anxious as a result.”

Matthieu reassured Daan. “I have dispatched the ‘ladies distraction members’ of the Delta Force to escort Alexandra and Paul from dinner to the rendezvous café due to the increased level of uncertainty surrounding the meeting. These ladies will have the additional fire power with Uzi semi-automatic weapons hidden in their satchels in the event a major assault needs to be countered quickly.”

“Good call,” Daan confirmed. “At this crucial stage in the mission, neither Alexandra nor Paul could be replaced.” *If both were killed, we would be back to square one. If either or both were killed, Yolina Lambert at the EU Commission in Brussels would be looking for a new leader to replace me,* Daan pondered. He had lost one too many agents on previous intelligence gathering missions

and never fully recovered from the resulting sleepless nights or relentless nightmares. From experience, he knew that no amount of alcohol, regardless of its quality, could quell the debilitating flashbacks.

CHAPTER 5

“Francine, it has been a while since we sat across the table from each other. I would not have recognized you had it not been for your associate,” Paul stated.

As discussed with Paul, Alexandra maintained eye contact with Francine with a polite glance to acknowledge her Armenian Turkish associate. Paul did the opposite. Neither couple appeared distracted by the existence of collegial backup.

“That it has,” replied Francine. “A lot of turbulent water has passed under the bridge for all of us since Paris. I am indebted to you both for the respect and kindness you extended to Capitaine Dominique Roland. As you are aware, Dominique and I had both a professional and personal relationship.”

“Different times. Similar affiliations. Different employers. Similar missions,” Alexandra commented. “Your colleague, Rakici, mentioned to Paul that there may be mutual benefit from a renewed association. We are intrigued by your proposition.”

Francine bowed in acknowledgement. “Yusuf and I go back many years. Suffice it to say, we have had a camouflaged working relationship but have enjoyed and benefitted from an informal supportive alliance.”

Her deportment was relaxed, in contrast to when they had met at the initial briefing regarding the Thon case, which Dominique had organized in Commandant Parent’s office at the Police nationale headquarters in Paris. Curiously, she seemed less perturbed by the formal gathering of those associated with the Thon investigation than she appeared today. Perhaps being wounded and then hidden

in a series of safe houses during her recovery continued to weigh heavily on her mind.

Francine would not have ventured too far, certainly not to locations like Santorini where foreign eyes would be trawling through albums of memories of faces and body profiles they might have once seen but in a different context. Francine, no doubt, would do the same, despite all efforts to excise herself from the identity of her past with disguises and pseudonyms.

Alexandra smiled subtly and splayed her fingers upward with a gesture of measured openness. Although Francine maintained direct eye contact, she was conscious of Alexandra's affable body language. Francine reciprocated, while at the same time visually frisking both Alexandra and Paul for the threat of weapons. Her own scant evening attire revealed she was not concealing anything. She and Yusuf had arrived first, so neither Alexandra nor Paul could be sure that there were no weapons hidden out of sight under the table or beneath their chairs. It came down to trust factors which were veneer-thin.

"It's probably no surprise to you to learn that I have parted ways with my previous employer because they were complicit in Dominique's murder and my attempted murder. Hence, my change in appearance and loyalties. Betrayal is a fact of life in our trade but unforgiveable perfidy when you become a collegial target. Yusuf was there for me when no one else was. Some of your colleagues, I might add, provided me with a safe haven and support during my extended period of convalescence. For that gesture, I am eternally grateful."

"I grew up close to Moulins-lès-Metz where you were ambushed," Paul commented, all the while seeking Francine's perspective on the incident that left Dominique and one other dead, and Francine critically injured. He was watching Francine as much as Yusuf in an effort to assess their respective physiological

responses. There was none, which was more telling than if either had reacted.

“It seems ironic that the assassin was perched behind the concrete fence and under the partial camouflaged shade of the weeping willow tree in the front yard of the residence that had once been occupied by the Nazi Commandant for the Moselle Valley District during the German occupation approximately sixty years ago,” Francine replied.

Paul acknowledged her historical commentary with a brief nod, sensing that Francine was testing his familiarity with the background knowledge of the neighbourhood. He too was well versed in the art of repartee in an engaging tennis match of *communiqués*. The ball had changed courts.

Injecting questions into this routine ritual banter that tended to prompt dialogue among former adversaries and now possible allies, Alexandra got straight to the point.

“Where was the leak, Francine? Who knew you would be accompanying Dominique? Who knew about the third person in your car, Rudolf Heydrich? Who set you up and why? Was this an FSB assassination directive or an old KGB vendetta?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” Francine admitted willingly. “Just before our departure from Paris, I met with my Russian handler. I had mentioned that I was accompanying Dominique at her request. I did not mention Rudolf because I didn’t know anything about him, not even his name, or that he would be with us. It was at this meeting that I first got the sense my handler might have been holding back on me. But I could be wrong. He was oddly vague yet clearly aware of my intimate relationship with Dominique because he had directed me to engage with her. He had previously mentioned that the directive for this intimate liaison had come from our Moscow employer. In retrospect, I’m not sure the *communiqué* had come from the Kremlin.”

“I’m curious. Why did Dominique ask you to accompany her?” Alexandra pressed.

Francine had correctly anticipated all the questions Alexandra had asked thus far. Her rehearsed answers were easy because they had been based on facts, not on fiction. “I don’t know why,” Francine replied in a neutral yet forthright voice.

“Did you ask her? Did you find her request suspicious?”

“In response to your first question, no. She had asked me to accompany her on other occasions before... asked me for my opinion. I didn’t think her request was out of the ordinary, given our professional and personal relationship.”

Alexandra maintained her muted, enquiring pose. In the silence lay the questions anticipated but not yet asked and the answers yet to be composed but not yet provided.

“I conclude that the leak was not within my immediate FSB realm, but I can’t speak for former KGB colleagues. I don’t believe Dominique was the joker in the pack either. I can’t say the same for others in Dominique’s policing house. My sources suggested there was a confederate in the French Intelligence network who was possibly working for a third party.”

Francine’s demeanour had not changed throughout her responses. She was a professional spy and a survivor of over twenty years in the tradecraft. Alexandra would have been both surprised and suspicious had she demonstrated any indication of stress.

“Could it have been Rudolf? Could he have been bugged by a third party?” Alexandra continued. Negative responses from Francine to her questions shortened the list of possible confederates.

“I’ve replayed this tape over and over. I just don’t know.” Francine was as forthright in her response as she had been to Alexandra’s initial questions. “That is what bothers me the most. As I said, I wasn’t aware of Rudolf before we left Paris. I only

got to know a little about him from conversations en route to Moulins-lès-Metz.”

“Was this an FSB operation?” Alexandra repeated.

Francine took an unhurried breath.

“I doubt it. They had too much invested in me. Until this incident, I had no serious intention of switching sides, although I admit the thought had crossed my mind on more than one occasion. If they had suspicions or proof, I would have been assigned to a new handler. Their policy would have been to turn me into a double agent, not kill me.”

“So, what, then?” Alexandra probed. “What’s missing in this equation?”

“I just don’t know,” Francine replied earnestly. “Not being in the know is fatal in the world of espionage.” Her frustration was obvious. Her reaction was palpable. Her reply was straightforward.

The ball was back in Alexandra’s court. She carefully considered her next move.

“As you may recall, I am a forensic psychologist. With your consent, I would like to hypnotise you to ascertain if you can recall any other details that might shed light on this incident.”

Francine dwelled briefly on this request. She had undergone hypnosis as part of her training with the KGB in addition to sodium pentothal truth serum. Accordingly, Alexandra’s request did not faze her. Further, she did not know any more than she had already related.

“Only if Yusuf is present. At this juncture, he is the only person I trust. I’m sure that you can appreciate my position. My life, perhaps all our lives, are in the crosshairs right now. Although Yusuf and I have been very careful to ensure we were not followed here this evening, there is always a possibility. This is why we did not tell you earlier of the exact location and time. We hope that it did not cause you undue inconvenience or anxiety.”

Paul read Alexandra's request for endorsement as she rubbed her amulet. He slowed his breathing while nodding almost imperceptibly to signal his support of the path she had chosen to take.

"That's agreeable, Francine. Your compliance to undergo hypnosis will go a long way towards developing a trusting relationship with mutual benefit. I'm sure you can appreciate our position."

When pursuing other interviews with criminals, the suggestion of hypnosis tended to produce one of two responses. One was rejection, usually immediate, which suggested guilt or something to hide. The other was acceptance because the subject had nothing to hide or because they believed they were smarter than the hypnotist. Perhaps Francine had both nothing to hide and, through her own training as a Russian spy, was confident she could outwit Alexandra. Either way, information derived under hypnosis would add to the growing body of intelligence or, possibly, evidence.

Alexandra's primary motivation was to test the truthfulness of Francine's suggestion that working together could lead to mutual benefit after a reasonable level of confidence had been established. Only Alexandra would be able to make that assessment and only after thorough analysis of the explicit: the facts, and the intuitive exploration of the implicit, her sensation of the mind – her *shrew*.

Alexandra thought about her own training to become a forensic psychologist. On those occasions when she had been experiencing one of her sensations of the mind, a male colleague often quoted Joe Friday, the lead character in the American TV police detective series, *Dragnet* – "Give me the facts, ma'am, just the facts."

Alexandra knew that facts were essential and were derived from the science, but how you got the facts was a combination of both the science and the sensations of the mind. The latter, she knew, was wisdom older than consciousness itself.

This would not be the first time Francine had undergone hypnosis. The first time she was alone. She wasn't wholly certain

of what Alexandra wanted. Was it to test her genuineness or her willingness to comply with requests, orders? Growing up in the USSR, her psyche was constantly fraught with suspicion and, as a result, tension. There was a dearth of collegial trust during basic training to become a KGB agent. Other cadets spied on you and you on them. Only the best cadets were chosen to advance. Success came from trusting only yourself; everyone else was your enemy. There would be only you in the field, no one else.

Yusuf seemed different somehow, as Dominique had been. Francine had developed trusting relationships with both. There was not only collegial confidence but personal trust that had been tested and found to be true. And now there was the duo of Alexandra and Paul. Francine understood Alexandra's motivation to hypnotize her in an attempt to find any lingering links or deep-seated clues regarding the ambush at Moulins-lès-Metz. When they first met, Alexandra had been collegial but understandably cautious. The wariness was mutual. But Francine had not picked up on any deceitfulness regarding Alexandra's intent. Nor had she sensed any deception in Paul's demeanour.

In a way, Francine envied Alexandra and Paul for their apparent mutual love and unquestioning devotion to each other, the way they subtly touched and naturally held hands. She had read about such relationships in Western romance novels but chalked it up to propaganda to get Moscow agents to let down their guard.

Then there was her affiliation with Dominique. Initially, she was following orders to engage in an intimate relationship in order to increase accessibility to intelligence. That was consistent with her advanced training as a Red Sparrow. There was to be no emotion. Instead, simply a means to an end in the game of espionage, spy-on-spy. But even then, as with her growing relationship with Yusuf, she was constantly vigilant, always looking over her shoulder. Was it love she felt for both Dominique and Yusuf? Or were

her emotions driven by fear? Fear of failure? Fear of being alone? Fear of being found out by her superiors or her handler? Devotion based on love, like Alexandra and Paul had, was different, without overtones of fear and distrust. She yearned for that love, which made her both vulnerable for wanting something she did not have but sought, and secure knowing she had lived without it for all those years. Hence, she didn't need it.

Had her handler noted this change and concluded she had already gone rogue? He had set her up to be assassinated as a result. The prey had now become the predator driven by the emotion of revenge. She would now have him in her crosshairs for being a co-conspirator in the ambush that resulted in Dominique's death and her attempted assassination.

Gaining mutual trust with Alexandra and Paul, even in the company of Yusuf, would be virgin ground for her to navigate. She felt confident thus far in their burgeoning relationship. Yusuf also seemed relatively comfortable. They would exchange thoughts after this rendezvous, the sole purpose of which was to test the waters. She was certain other former colleagues would have experienced similar misgivings and apprehension during the initial stages of defection.

CHAPTER 6

“Thoughts on this first interview with Francine and the subsequent hypnosis session?” Daan enquired.

“Francine was understandably cautious when we first met,” Alexandra stated. “I got the sense she was being honest with her intentions and responses to my questions. The forensic hypnosis session revealed no new facts or deviation from her earlier recollections. She seemed sincerely bothered that she did not know all the facts, why they had been ambushed, or why she had been intentionally targeted.”

“And Yusuf? What is your sense of his part? Is this Armenian Turk, codename Rakici, a wild card?”

“Francine referred to him only as Yusuf. We should do the same. No doubt, Yusuf is a prominent planet in Francine’s orbit. I do not believe he is her handler or controls her in a technical way. But there is a delicate influence and Francine draws on his strength. We need to be cautious with him. They certainly appear to be a team as much as Paul and I are. If we ask Francine to become the centurion, we are also inviting Yusuf. That is just a given.”

“You don’t seem to be completely confident,” Daan commented.

“That’s because I’m not. I just can’t put my finger on it. Perhaps it’s because I haven’t known Yusuf very long. I know more about him second hand. Unlike Paul, I hadn’t even met him before. So, I didn’t have a sense one way or the other. I’d prefer to be careful, for now.” Alexandra held Daan’s gaze all the while, maintaining an introspective reflection.

“Caution taken,” Daan conceded.

“And, Paul, your thoughts?” Daan followed up.

“Francine’s motivation is not wholly mercenary although she ardently wants to find Dominique’s killer, and to ensure that justice is served, ideally in her style. But revenge is just one of several recruiting criteria for external centurions. Ideology is another, as we have briefly discussed. I am convinced she has abandoned communism in favour of the personal lifestyle benefits of Western democracy. A third recruiting criterion is ego, which can be closely tied to revenge. Her ego is not so large that it could become a shortcoming.”

Daan nodded slowly but with judicious deliberation. Extending Francine an invitation to become an external contracted centurion was a major deviation from established recruiting policy and subsequent protocol for the European Union Intelligence Unit. There was no room for error.

“The final criterion is financial,” Paul added. “That is an unknown. Unless Francine had a second lucrative income source and an offshore bank account, we may assume that her previous employer was not overly generous with a compensation severance package replete with additional unspecified retirement benefits.”

Daan probed for a recommendation. “So, you are in favour of recruiting her?”

“Yes, but let me cover one last very important factor,” Paul replied. “The capture of Baird Durand is another crucial variable. If we can convince Francine that Baird and Dominique’s killer are somehow linked, perhaps one and the same, I’m cautiously confident that she will be loyal to our mission. Caution remains an overarching factor. If we tell Francine that Baird did kill Dominique and she finds out that he did not, we run the risk of losing our credibility with her. We need to ask ourselves – is a future relationship with her important, perhaps even critical? And as for the flipside of that coin, would she turn on us and, in doing so, turn Yusuf against us if she concludes we deceived her intentionally? Our challenge

will be to keep Baird Durand as her number one priority. Following that train of thought, if Francine finds Dominique's killer first, and it isn't Baird, I'm not certain we will be able to hold her as we pursue the hunt for Baird. Her strongest motivator at this juncture is revenge."

Daan probed for reassurance. "Is Yusuf a wild card?"

"Employing the same recruiting criteria, we need to find out more about his background before I can speculate with greater confidence," Paul replied. "We do know that Turkish Military Intelligence encourages Spartan habits. Yusuf is the opposite. He has a discriminating appetite for comfort and luxury, the latter including the finest French cuisine and wine that are infrequently served to the rank and file even in Ankara. That was supposedly a motivation for him to leave their employment if, in fact, he has left their employment. It would be reassuring if our intelligence could be verified by someone senior within Turkish Military Intelligence, or a confidant in Moscow."

"You seem hesitant, also," Daan commented.

"I am. Like Alexandra, I have a sense that there is more to Yusuf than meets the eye. He seems to be loyal to Francine. But his loyalty to her appears to be a bit contrived at times, maybe insincere, perhaps manipulative, as if he is using her to get at something else. Perhaps it's cultural and I have erred in this assessment. But I'm thinking we need to be wary until we have a better grasp of his personality, motivation and loyalties."

"Point taken and I acknowledge your concern about the unknown," Daan said. "We need to mitigate that as a risk-management strategy. If he does have an ulterior motive, how should we use him?"

"As long as we can keep Francine focused and content, he could be a strong ally. If anything happened to her there is a high probability that Yusuf would become a loose cannon on the deck, a

definite liability. Ultimately, we need to keep Francine happy and healthy, and focused on finding Baird. We accomplish that by ensuring she believes Baird is linked directly to Dominique's death. He might not have pulled the trigger but he hired the assassin who did. That has to be the *raison d'être* of our mission."

"You seem quiet, Alexandra. Something bothering you?" Daan commented, having scrutinized her reserved reaction to Paul's assessment of Yusuf.

She paused to ponder the potential implications before responding to his baited observation.

"Why had Dominique invited Francine to accompany her and Rudolf to Moulins-lès-Metz knowing that Francine was a Russian agent? What was her motive? Dominique had hidden Rudolf in a safe house, hidden him from enemy agents who desperately wanted to learn what Rudolf knew about stolen Nazi gold and other treasures. It doesn't make sense. With Dominique now dead, we may never know. Like Herr Blosch, her knowledge has gone with her to the grave."

"Good question," Daan replied. "Dominique knew Francine was an FSB agent. She was attempting to cultivate her as a double agent."

"When I asked Francine why Dominique had invited her to accompany them to Moulins-lès-Metz, Francine said she didn't know. She added that it wasn't uncommon for Dominique to invite her on other occasions."

"Curious," Daan commented. "I had an in-depth conversation with Commandant Parent after the Moulins-lès-Metz ambush. He indicated that Dominique believed Francine was close to becoming a double agent for the French. Perhaps this was an acid test of Francine's honesty from Dominique's perspective." Daan continued to ponder before transferring his attention to Matthieu. "Comments, bearing in mind Alexandra's last point?"

With Daan's consent, Matthieu had dispatched the female members of the Delta Force to clandestinely accompany Alexandra and Paul to the café where additional members of the Delta Team had established a perimeter security. Had that heightened level of safety been necessary or had they over-reacted? Nothing had happened, perhaps because a potential assassin had become aware of the Delta Team presence and the fire power that might have been unleashed. Had this suspected shooter decided to withdraw? As Alexandra correctly assessed – "*Reculer pour mieux sauter*" – *we need to step back in order to take up a more strategic position from which we may re-engage*. Better to be safe than sorry. The consequence of any threat at this juncture outweighed the costs, monetarily and physically.

"It will be a delicate balance to maintain, as you suggest, but I'm confident Francine could be our centurion," Matthieu commented. "In response to your question, Yusuf remains the wild card. I agree with Alexandra and Paul. We need to be cautious. If we divulge information to Francine, it is a given that Yusuf will know about it, and vice versa. We need a strategy to manage the unknowns, particularly Dominique's motivation for inviting Francine to accompany her and Rudolf to Moulins-lès-Metz. It's another unknown, which could be a stepping-stone or a landmine."

"Recommendation?" Daan invited.

Matthieu replied without hesitation. "Francine and Yusuf might relate to Alexandra and Paul because of their partner loyalty, regardless of our uncertainty about Yusuf's sincerity and motivation, and Dominique's perplexing invitation to Francine to accompany her and Rudolf to Moulins-lès-Metz. My suggestion would be to have Alexandra and Paul, as a couple, engage with Francine and Yusuf, as a couple. It would be an even match, one-on-one. In the interim, we find out as much as we can about Yusuf."

Daan eyed his colleagues. "Thank you, good conversation.

We have two priorities. First and foremost is the capture of Baird Durand as the final truant member of the *Quer*. If he dies in the process, so be it. The second goal is to identify and neutralize the threat to Maria's code. Mounting intelligence suggests that this latter threat is more than likely linked to the old KGB, Moscow-related but not necessarily Moscow-directed. We cannot assume that FSB agents are completely blind to its existence. They just have new-school priorities for the simple reason some in their ranks do not want to be perceived by their superiors as old-school. As a result, they may be privately tracking ex-KGB entrepreneurs operating primarily in Western Europe with self-interest or perhaps a mercenary purpose. Else, they would have eliminated them by now."

There was a consensus.

Daan chose his words carefully. "Alexandra and Paul, contact Francine and Yusuf, as a team. Do not mention Maria's code or even acknowledge any enquiries from Francine or Yusuf, or anyone else for that matter, regarding its existence. Instead, give Francine support to find Dominique's killer. Emphasize to Francine that there is a high probability Baird and Dominique's assassin are one and the same, or at least linked. Remain vigilant for the omnipresent unknown."

Matthieu added, "While the two of you are working with Francine and Yusuf, we will be tracking the sons of the current members of the *Quer* as possible beneficiaries. Membership has passed down from father to son since its inception. Once these sons realize their fathers are missing, a new and perhaps more menacing breed of *Quer* leaders may quickly rise from the ashes like a phoenix."

"Or like Hydra out of Lake Lerna with seven new heads already in place," Paul proposed. "The eighth head being a master financial controller like Herr Blosch. As an afterthought, the eighth could

be a foreign master spy, either of KGB or FSB vintage, or other foreign persuasion including Chinese.”

In all the cases Daan had worked on as Director of the European Union Intelligence Unit, this one held the most unknowns with the greatest potential consequences. For these interdependent reasons, his anxiety was elevated. He had complete confidence in Matthieu, Alexandra, Paul and others on the European Union Intelligence team, to respond to intervening variables operating in their environment. It was the possibility of unknown unknowns fracturing the trajectory of their mission that posed the greatest threat.

In the past decade, there had been a noticeable increase in the means and methodology of threats to the economic and political stability in the European Union. Most traditional threats had been internal, which made intelligence gathering easier. Additional resources and budgets had been granted to its charter by the European Union Commission following the increase in the breadth and complexity of the threats and a strategic sense of other hazards perceived but not yet seen on the horizon.

With growing frequency, external threats, especially cyber, had originated primarily in rogue and otherwise emerging nation states on the African continent whose own internal stability was fragile as a result of the disruptive interventions by Russia and China. Both were vying for access to material and human intelligence resources. Today, the Chinese commanded the single largest footprint, predominantly in the eastern half of the African continent. Shipping resources to and from Chinese ports was a relatively efficient process. From east coast ports like Mogadishu, the Suez Canal provided unencumbered access to nation states bordering the Mediterranean including current members of the European Union in addition to others striving to become members, like Turkey. The purpose of the supposed Chinese trade intent was suspicious.

Since the end of the Cold War, which had not ended but had

only morphed, Russia had modified its focus of influence away from some West and North African regions to the Middle East. Their renewed funding had been directed toward terrorist groups who willingly filled the gap left by retreating Russian military forces. Covertly compensating others to do your dirty work deflected ownership and accountability. This was not a new strategy for either side in the Cold War but one often employed at that time. Old wine, new wine skin.

The motivation for funding these terrorist groups correlated with the designation by Middle East Islamic States of foreign populations to become *de facto* infidels. Not surprisingly, most were previous Cold War enemies of the former Soviet Bloc. Your enemy's enemy is your friend. There were increasing numbers of fast guns for hire, so to speak, many with sophisticated lethal armaments delivered via long-range highly complex unmanned aerial platforms. The two-dimensional predominantly bullet and bomb battlefield was now a multi-dimensional virtually unseen cyber battlespace. All combatants had rules ranging from no rules to flexible rules determined by everchanging circumstances. Some combatants wore uniforms. Others employed uniforms as decoys. Some traditional allies in arms had been retained while others transitioned into temporary allies of convenience. Ultimately, security was what you made for yourself.

Employing Francine and Yusuf as centurions like contractors fell within the soft definition of allies of convenience. Their motivation was to carve out a niche in this rapidly evolving and technically sophisticated New World Order. The probability of them becoming permanent members of the European Union Intelligence Unit remained infinitely remote. That reality did not preclude them from morphing from temporary allies of convenience to a more long-lasting status not yet defined. Miscalculation at any juncture could change that tenuous prospect.