

## **The First Kill**

*Editor's Note: This takes place six months before Agent G: Infiltrator*

**By. C.T. Phipps**

"Murder is a trade," I said, steering the 2010 Mercedes Benz S-Klasse with one hand as we moved down the streets of Paris.

"What?" Nameless said, sitting beside me, looking out the window. She was young for a potential Letter, early twenties at best, with bowl-cut black hair and Eurasian ancestry. Her almond eyes were bright blue, but her cheekbones were sharp like knives. If she passed her test then she was going to be the replacement for B, who had fallen during a mission against the Carnivale a few months ago. I didn't know where they'd recruited her or what her backstory was. I didn't care either. I was purely here to evaluate her and whether the process of removing her memories had taken.

Nameless wore a gray tracksuit and a vacant expression which I would have taken for drugs if not for the fact her implants were the same as mine and prevented any decent high from lasting more than a few minutes. No, I expected her problem ran much deeper. She had a conscience. That wasn't going to serve her any better than mine had. It made me wonder if I was going to be tested every bit as much as her.

"Pretentious assholes like A or M talk about it as an art form," I said, sighing. "They try to make it like it's some sort of poetic expression of art. It's not. Murder is a cultivated skill. Like singing, everyone can do it but only a few people can do it well. That's Persephone said to me

before I got my Letter. The Society tested me before they put in the field too. I may be an original Letter but that doesn't mean I didn't have to go through a bunch of hurdles."

My first kill had been a wry little NSA contractor who had thought he could blow the whistle on a massive computer monitoring network. This was before Snowden but the parallels were eerie with the slight exception that he wanted cash in exchange for the information. The poor bastard had been dead in his Hong Kong hotel room before he'd known what hit him. I'd made it look like a drug overdose and recovered his files. Somedays I wondered if his actions could have made a difference, but it wasn't my job to question orders. The Society hadn't made me a cyborg to make moral decisions. No, I was a gun that they pointed at people. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Poor baby. What if you don't want to kill people?" Nameless said, mocking me. "What if you find this whole business to be complete bullshit?"

I rolled my eyes. "Then welcome to the rest of the world where things aren't fair."

Nameless looked over for perhaps the first time with interest. "You don't resent what was done to us? What they've taken from us?"

I took a deep breath then spoke like I was addressing a very small child. "*Of course*, I resent it. Don't you think I wake up every day wondering who the fuck I was? That's part and parcel of what it means to be a Letter. We have no memories of who we were, how we got here, or why we're working for the Society. We do it, though, because we don't have a choice."

"We always have a choice," Nameless said.

I rolled my eyes. "Let me rephrase then: we do it, though, because we have a choice between doing it and getting two bullets to the back of the skull."

"And that's enough?" Nameless asked.

I shrugged. "The drugs, money, and prostitutes help."

Nameless frowned. "All I know is I woke up, filled to the rim with cybernetics and was put through an agonizing amount of training before they said I was ready to graduate to killing people. I'm not like you, I've never actually killed anyone."

"That you know of," I said.

"I would know," Nameless insisted.

"The International Refugee Society doesn't recruit saints," I said, making a turn down the Rue de Belleville. "Each of us had something to bring to the table before we began. If you're worried about doing this for the rest of your life, I suggest you focus on the ten year barrier. Finish out your term and you get to enjoy retirement with your memories restored plus a luxury package that even Saudi Princes would envy."

"You really think they're going to let us go?" Nameless asked.

I stared forward. "I've seen the survivors. None of us are fools. We wouldn't believe the deal if it wasn't true."

Honestly, it genuinely surprised me the Society honored its ten-year contracts. Murder-for-hire organizations, no matter how well connected or funded, didn't tend to be on the trustworthy side. Indeed, the very fact that it looked on the level was one of the most suspicious things about it. I didn't want to kill people forever, though, so I believed against my better judgement.

Nameless stared at me. "Why don't we just focus on my target, G."

"As you wish," I said. "Just remember, this isn't *La Femme Nikita*. You screw this up and there's no happy endings."

"La Femme na what?" Nameless asked. "The Lady Nikita?"

"Philistine," I muttered.

I opened a small compartment on the dashboard and typed in the code for our mission files. Holographic feeds of our intended target projected onto the interior windshield even as the exterior otherwise looked like that of any other vehicle.

The International Refugee Society had access to technology thirty years in advance of even the most cutting edge companies. Our sponsors had decided, perhaps with some wisdom, that it was better to use our tech advantage to guarantee global "peace" as well as a healthy profit than give the masses a better iPhone. I still had a clear view of the streets in front of me but the car was set on automatic now and would drive itself while we reviewed our mission parameters.

"The target is Emile Durand, age 57, a dealer in black market Black Technology," I said, pointing to the image on our windshield.

Emile was a white-haired man currently leaving Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Belleville church with a much younger blonde woman in a short dress and a white mink stole. He was dressed well in an expensive leather coat, gloves, and a gray scarf.

Nameless sat up, suddenly paying attention. "Who is the girl?"

I pretended disinterest in her reaction. "Ana Dalan, age 24, an immigrant of Romanian descent. She's Durand's slave."

Nameless looked over at me, shocked. "His slave, huh? You act so causal about it."

"Why shouldn't I?" I said, leaning back in my seat. "I've seen much worse and men like Emile almost always own their companions. They've just moved beyond addiction to drugs and threats of intimidation to more sophisticated methods like sub-dermal tracking devices and mnemonic conditioning."

"Is she brainwashed?" Nameless asked.

I pretended to check the file. I already knew its complete contents as well as which parts which had been altered or redacted. "The dossier says no. She was just taken from a group of girls who were kidnapped by the Red Tide and eventually found their way into his possession."

"So we kill him and she goes free?" Nameless asked.

"As free as a woman intimidated into nightly degradation in a country she doesn't speak the language of can be."

Nameless snorted. "You're a real charmer, you know that."

"I try," I said. "But if she's smart she'll steal whatever she can from their hotel room and get far away. It's got to be better than what she's currently undergoing."

"From one slaver to another."

"Cute," I said, not at all happy with the comparison. "Listen, we're almost there. Are you prepared to kill him or not?"

Nameless looked to the glove compartment, which contained the Desert Eagle XIX that she'd looked at several times during our conversation in the car. I knew she'd considered taking it out and using it on me but it wasn't in her nature to kill someone in order to free herself. In a very real way, that was the problem.

"I don't know," Nameless said, admitting her problem to herself. "Do you ever really know if you're ready to kill?"

"Yes," I said, empty of my usual snark.

She looked over at me again. "When?"

"When you've pulled the trigger," I said. "Not a second before."

We arrived in front of Le Café Aux Folies where our target was sitting at a table with his female companion despite the chill. It wasn't crowded today and arrangements had been made to make sure our actions wouldn't be interfered with.

A less public avenue might have been better for the assassination, but the Society had its reasons for wanting it done here. Reasons Nameless couldn't guess in her focus on the girl. A clear-thinking Letter would see the trap but, of course, she wasn't a Letter yet.

Pulling the car to a stop in an open parking spot down the block, I looked to Nameless. "This is going to be an extraordinarily easy op. All you have to do is take the gun, conceal it until you're up close, and then shoot him in the back of the head, right above the scarf. There's a motorcycle next to the restaurant that has the keys hidden under the seat."

"What's the catch?" Nameless said, looking down the street at Emile and Ana.

"Catch?" I asked.

"There's always a catch with the Society," Nameless said.

She had me there. I wasn't even going to try and deny it. You didn't need to have served with them for years to know there was always an angle being played.

"The catch is this is a mission to test your willingness to kill on command," I said, shrugging. "They could not make it easier for you unless they tied up Emile and put a black bag over his head. Shoot him, take the motorcycle, and drive to the rendezvous point then it'll all go smoothly."

That part was true. The Society didn't expect it to go smoothly, though. Which was the trap Nameless was going to fall into. Bastards. Why did I agree to this? Ah, yes, I had a shitty choice. Same as she had.

"And if I just run away on the bike?" Nameless asked.

"That would be ill-advised," I said.

"You'd track me down?" Nameless asked.

"Eventually," I said.

"Have you done this before?" Nameless asked.

"Yes," I said, remembering the first time I'd asked to conduct an evaluation.

"What happened?" Nameless asked.

I blinked, slowly. "Nothing you need to know about."

My orders were to give indecisive answers. I'd bonded with Nameless, but the simple fact was this was a test, a test to see if she would take the bait laid out before her, and she was failing miserably. My previous evaluation had been much simpler: they'd killed their target without any hesitation and gone on to become the new Z. Neither of us had known what the target had done, if anything, to deserve getting taken out. Later, I'd had my Assistant hack in and found out they'd been smuggling out Black Technology to interested buyers. Neither guilty nor innocent. Just stupid.

"What would you do if you ever saw someone from your past?" Nameless asked, her hands trembling. "Someone you remembered."

I thought about the occasional flashes of imagery I had of my wife and child. Images I couldn't trust due to these sorts of tests.

"I'd stay as far away from them as humanly possible," I said, lying.

Nameless didn't answer. She took the gun and stepped out of the vehicle. She proceeded to hide it in the folds of her tracksuit's front pocket and walked down the street, ignoring the pedestrians around her. If she were smart, she'd follow the plan to the letter. Nameless wasn't smart though and the next minute consisted of her shooting Emile in the chest then firing a

couple of times at my vehicle. They were wild shots, meant to intimidate me into staying put.

Then she pointed the gun at a terrified, screaming Ana and ordered her to get on the bike.

Nameless pulled off down the Rue Denoyez with her rescuee, driving off to freedom. Nameless thought she was getting away with someone who held the key to her past.

I sighed. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Stepping out of the car, I walked past screaming and running Parisians until I came to the spot where Nameless had struck her target. I looked over at the corpse of Emile Durand. He had been under the impression the hit would take place later in the day and be faked with a bullet-proof vest and squibs provided. Unfortunately, he hadn't been aware the Society had grown tired of his predilections and had lined up a replacement for him in the Black Market.

Pulling out my modified Kphone, I tapped it to replace the local CCTV footage, command my car to depart from the location, and divert the calls bystanders were sending to the police. I walked across the street into an alley and behind a dumpster before sending my confirmation code that events had proceeded as planned.

Seconds later, a six-inch-tall hologram of the Society's director, codenamed Persephone, appeared above the screen. She was an elderly white-haired woman in her sixties wearing a business dress. She was also the one who'd predicted this outcome to the moment.

"This is sadistic, you realize this, right?" I asked, looking down at the hologram.

Persephone smirked. "I take it Nameless has taken the bait?"

"Of course she has," I said, disgusted with myself. "You planted images of that girl in her brain. She thinks Ms. Dalan knows her from before."

"We had to know if she was loyal," Persephone said. "If she could be trusted."



I closed my eyes. "We knew she wasn't and couldn't be."

Who could be loyal to the Society? It wasn't an organization that inspired much in the way of trust. Why not simply accept it rather than expect blind obedience from those you bribed and intimidated into compliance? Oh right, it was more *efficient* this way. I personally suspected it was simply a way for those in charge to get their sadistic rocks off.

"Correction, we *believed* she was disloyal," Persephone said, empathizing the word believed. "You used to be one of our most disobedient and disagreeable Letters but when put in a shooting situation, you performed with flying colors."

"Your approval fills me with shame," I said, trying not to think about what was going to come next. "So what happens now?"

"I assume the tracking devices in her are still working?" Persephone asked.

I almost didn't bother to answer. "They're installed inside her. She doesn't even know they exist or how many there are. We can find her anywhere on the planet."

"Excellent," Persephone said. "You know what to do."

It was yet another layer of control since none of us knew, exactly, where our control chips were. I'd looked for mine on numerous occasions but could never be entirely sure I'd found them all or if they'd not added more during my frequent check-ups. I didn't mind being an assassin, had come to love it even, but this was cruel even by our standards. Pointless too.

"Assume I don't. She's a very expensive piece of equipment and not one to easily cast aside. What's going to happen to her now?" I asked.

Persephone looked annoyed. "Obviously, we can't promote her to full Letter status."

"Obviously," I replied.

I was hoping they were going to order me to do a quick assassination. I wasn't a great believer in the concept that some things were worse than death but I understood Nameless was never going to bend. Not as she was. Whatever drugs and training they'd given her hadn't erased her basic core of humanity. She would always rebel against the strictures imposed upon her and would probably consider them a small price to pay to remain herself. I envied and pitied her in equal measure. Unfortunately, my orders weren't so merciful.

"We need you to grab her and deliver her to the safe house. She'll have her memories of the past few months erased and her mind set back to Factory Zero," Persephone said.

"Factory Zero?" I asked.

"A figure of speech," Persephone said, not missing a beat. "As you say, the Society has a substantial investment in her cyberware. Twenty million Euros equivalent in fact and it's cheaper to start over than extract it from her corpse for reinsertion elsewhere."

"Always about the bottom line, eh?" I asked.

"What else is there?" Persephone said.

She had a point. "And if she resists?"

"Do what you have to do, G, but I expect results."

"Of course," I said, having to make a hard decision.

It required a few hours for me to track down Nameless at the Hotel Saint Remigus, a cheap dump on the edge of Paris, mostly used by working class locals for the sale of drugs and causal prostitution. The owner was an unpleasant man who suspected something terrible had happened in Nameless' room but was too scared to call the police.

Up the stairs, I found a cheaply furnished room with ugly red carpet and pulled drapes. Ana Dalan was lying face down on the bed, dead with severe damage to her neck. I'd seen and caused enough death over the years to know it was from a single cyber-enhanced slap across the face. Regular humans were easily breakable when confronted with the causal rage of a Letter. The only light in the room came from a single lamp surrounded by several empty cheap liquor bottles. The smell of narcotics was in the air, a sure sign of a cyborg trying to overcome its enhancements and blot away the pain.

Sitting on the floor, her arms around her legs, makeup ruined by tears was Nameless. The gun she'd used on Emile was lying on the carpet next to her leg. She grabbed it and pointed it up at my face. Then she climbed to her feet, her movements sluggish despite her extravagant hardware.

"Hello," I said, wishing I had something to call her other than Nameless.

"You did this!" Nameless shouted, her voice cracking.

"No," I said, looking down at her. "You did."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened here. After unwittingly kidnapping the woman she thought she was rescuing, Nameless had tried to get her to reveal details about their shared past. A past which didn't exist.

Ana Dalan had tried to play off the events but, probably scared out of her mind, unwittingly said something that set off the already agitated Nameless. Letter candidates were designed to have killing instincts and that didn't always translate well to dealing with civilians. What had happened was so predictable, I wouldn't have been surprised if Persephone hadn't seen this coming as well. Either way, we were all party to Ana's murder now.

It was a brute force but effective way of making Nameless come to terms with being a murderer of innocents. It had worked on several other Letters less manageable than me. This was the first time I'd ever been a part of a First Kill mission, though.

Nameless lowered the gun to her side. "She didn't know who I was."

"No, she didn't," I said.

Nameless raised her gun again, her hand shaking. "You knew about this, didn't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"It was a test, wasn't it?" Nameless asked, her voice breaking.

I slowly closed my eyes and opened them. "Yes."

"I failed," Nameless said, realizing just how badly she'd bungled things.

"Yes," I replied.

Nameless looked down at the gun. "Are you going to kill me?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Are you going to let me go?" Nameless asked, knowing the answer.

"No."

Nameless took three breaths in rapid succession. "I won't let them erase my memory again. I won't let them make me a killer."

"You already are," I said, pointing out the obvious.

Nameless growled and aimed the gun at me but I grabbed it from her hands in one easy motion and then presented it back to her. The act was so swift it caught her off guard and caused her to take a step back.

"Your body is Society property. Your mind is your own but only within certain choices." I empathized with her defiance but she had to face facts. "There's only two ways this ends."

"Submit or you kill me?" I could see Nameless finally realizing how hopeless her situation was.

"I said I wasn't going to kill you," I said. "That doesn't mean there's not alternatives."

Nameless stared at me, not comprehending. "I don't understand."

"Your choice." I put the safety on the gun and tossed it on the ground. I turned around and walked out the door. I expected her to make her decision in the next few minutes. Either she would come out or find the only peace available to a Letter. It only took one before the gunshot rang out.

"Stupid," I muttered, wondering whether her choice was brave or cowardly. She, at least, was free now and would never harm anyone else again. The same could not be said for me. I had two human traffickers and a cocaine smuggler to eliminate with the next week. They weren't even my main targets but people I needed to kill in order to set up a bigger hit.

An hour later, I had my evaluation for this mission. Persephone was disappointed but we harvested Nameless' cybernetics and implanted them in a more promising candidate a few days later. One who performed flawlessly on her test. At least, that was the story they told me. I'd passed the test they'd put me through and didn't need to handle another evaluation this year. I'd proven my loyalty.

God help me.