



The Anonymous Henchmen

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FLYMF October 2005, The Lust and Consequences Issue, Volume 2 Issue 10

Our kind is always the first to go. The first line of defense. We're expendable. Replaceable. Forgettable. Most of us don't even have nametags. A knife to the throat, a sniper's head shot, a well-thrown grenade, or the ever-popular unnecessary abundance of bullets—it doesn't really matter how it happens. We exist only to provide the higher-ups with more time to get away, to delay the opposition.

Pawns.

It's no secret, this fact. It's known going in, but we take the job anyway. Part of it is false hope—hope that maybe one day we'll be the one who wins, the one who gets recognized, the one who isn't killed. We're promised that glory from the beginning—they tell us that if we work hard enough we'll get there.

Every job has entry level positions; ours is no different. You start at the bottom and work your way up. But for us, chances for promotions don't come easily, or often. And when an opportunity presents itself, it's kill, or be killed, literally. That's the difference; other jobs don't have an unwritten "if you didn't get promoted it's because you're dead" clause. Every single one of us dreams of sitting at that head table, of having an eyeball or a fingerprint that can open any door. The depressing truth, however, is that for most of us it isn't possible.

Phillip Harmon Espan, better known as Harmon E., always whistled as he patrolled the building's top four floors. Never anything specific, just a random string of notes, but it sounded like it could be a song. From midnight to eight in the morning he whistled. Through the hallways, echoing up and down the vertical length of the building when he decided to take the stairs, and twice as loud when he didn't, so he could drown out that horrible elevator music. Harmon even whistled when he took a piss.

It's sad that his whistling was his downfall.

One night, exiting the elevator, he walked down the building's narrow fluorescent hallway, glancing into each office as one would glance into a car's sideview mirrors. He stopped halfway down to take a few laps from the water fountain and a quick bathroom break.

The sound of his steady stream slowly eating away at the urinal cake raised the volume of his whistling, just like in the elevator. He didn't hear the ceiling grate above the middle stall being removed. He didn't hear a man wearing all black groundhog his head down from the air conditioning duct and slowly lower himself on top of the toilet. He didn't hear that same man open the stall door and slink up behind him. I'm not sure if he heard his own neck snap.

There's no such thing as death with dignity. None of us ever die heroically while trying to save a runaway school bus full of children, or while diving in front of a bullet. It's always humiliating.

Ooger sat at the half-pentagonal desk and leaned back in the blue swivel chair, his feet propped up. Four identical twelve-by-nine computer screens fanned across the desk, to the right of his recently shined black army boots. Each screen was split into fours, for the sixteen different cameras eyeing the perimeter of the compound.

Ooger however, was fixated on a seventeenth screen, a much smaller one. James Bond, in Goldeneye, one of the new classics on TNT, crammed into a three by three inch portable Zenith he and the other West Tower guards chipped in for last month. He watched Pierce Brosnan bungee jump off a dam, then acrobatically disarm and shoot a Russian military guard with his own gun.

"Stupid Russians." Three shadows blurred across Camera 1a, the top left hand corner of screen 1. "How do you not see him?"

Camera 3b, static.

Ooger suddenly wasn't so involved with 007 anymore. He stood up and clicked the talk button on the walkie-talkie strapped to his left shoulder.

"Hey East Tower, I just lost the feed for 3b, how's it lookin' for you?"

No response. "Jerry, you there? Come back to me."

4a and b went out.

Ooger wasn't a rookie; with three cameras out and a tower guard not responding, he knew better than to walk outside and investigate. He got back on the walkie-talkie. "Control, hit the flood lights, put snipers on the roof, and get somebody over to check on Tower East. Gus isn't responding."

In sets of four, the flood lights blasted on, soaking the rectangular perimeter wall and the carefully manicured interior lawn with hot white light. Ooger looked out of the expansive glass windows of his tower to see gunmen take their positions on the roof of the villa.

The ground shook when the East Tower exploded with an eruption that rained smoldering pieces of brick all over the compound.

Knowing that his tower would most likely be the next to vomit up fire, brick, and glass, along with his charcoaled body, Ooger slid down the aluminum ladder that ran down the middle of the tower.

He hit the ground and was just about to run towards the villa when he heard it. Two shots, glass breaking. A grenade floated over the perimeter wall and through the former window of the West Tower. It pinballed off the desk, then clanked onto the metal floor. He stood motionless, staring up the ladder well. The grenade rolled, teetering on the edge. It dropped. Finally, he took off. At full sprint by the time he hit the lawn, Ooger could hear the grenade bouncing off the ladder's steps. The explosion gave him flight, his body forced into a sky diver's position. Ooger rolled onto his back to see the tower crumbling towards him like a falling Jenga puzzle.

What's really horrible is that he actually had plenty of time to get up and run, but he just sat there.

We're not evil people. These recruiters, they're sweet talkers. The guys they can't entice with fame and fortune they manipulate with promises of an important, fulfilling career. They make it sound like we're heroic revolutionaries fighting forces of evil, a kind of modern-day Robin Hood. We never believe we're the bad guys.

If they told us the truth from the beginning, different decisions might have been made, but everything is glorified to make us think our side is right. By the time you realize it's all about power and money, that there's a reason governments try so hard to shut your boss down, men have built families and homes; they have friends and dental plans.

Besides, what legitimate company is going to hire someone with a resume that reads:

Special Skills:

Guarding

Patrolling

Can you imagine the interview?

"So, I see you worked in a hollowed-out volcano, what was that like?"

"Uh, it was hot, definitely hot—kind of cavernous. But I worked with a lot of really interesting people."

"What skills can you bring from your previous employment?"

"Well, I can consistently throw a grenade 50 yards, with decent accuracy. Torture, I'm pretty good with torture, you know, tying people up, electrocuting them. And I know how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel."

"Three words that best describe you?"

"Let's see...hardworking, obedient, and sacrificial."

Freddy O's mouth was the only part of his body exposed; everything else was completely covered in white Gortex. His ski boots, pants, and jacket, all white. He wore a white helmet, a white face mask and white goggles with a non-reflective lens. If not for the jet black semi-automatic rifle strapped to his shoulder, he would have been invisible against the snow-covered mountain.

Reverse avalanches of wind ripped up the face of the mountain, nearly knocking him over as he patrolled the balcony of the missile silo designed to look like an observatory. Freddy was a smoke—he never stopped. His left hand would flick the butt of one cigarette as his right hand put another one in his mouth.

He never smoked before starting this job, but it was one of the only ways to keep warm while walking back and forth on a frozen porch at the peak of a mountain for eight hours. It wasn't what Freddy expected the job would be. He thought there would be more skiing involved; that was why he had been recruited.

Like most henchmen, Freddy O was a bad apple with a good skill. He was one of the best amateur downhill racers in the world, but he got busted for steroids just before the Moscow Winter Olympic trials.

Henchmen recruiters love those kinds of stories. It's so easy for them to exploit someone like that, pick up the shattered pieces and promise a fresh start. It's kind of like how prostitutes get recruited. Recruiters find us, lost, helpless, broke, and willing to listen to anything anyone has to say. Never mind that our employers are evil warlords trying to take over the world; we just want a paycheck. Anyway, prostitutes probably get paid better.

The alarm whistle echoed down the mountain and back up again by the time Freddy saw its cause flying down the mountain, with two of the other skiing guards close behind, firing. Freddy quickly grabbed his skis and jumped off the. Already behind, Freddy bulletted down the mountain, floating on top of the powder with refined, sweeping turns. He caught up to the others just as the open slope abruptly became a dense pine forest.

The man they chased also wore all white, and he was an excellent skier, dodging standing trees and jumping over fallen ones while still finding time to shoot back at Freddy and the other two guards.

Freddy tailed the three, following in the path of the unknown spy, straining to catch up. Blood splattered all over his goggles as he passed one of the other guards, who had just been hit with two bullets to the chest.

He and the other guard dodged trees, sporadically firing at the elusive unknown, missing horribly. The spy took a hard left turn, and Freddy followed, but the other guard didn't see the cliff until it was too late. Freddy heard him screaming all the way down.

It was just the two of them now. There was a clearing up ahead, the access road. The trees decongested, the road grew closer, and the spy disappeared. Freddy lost him. He saw a snow ramp formed on the edge of the road, a result of plowing. Freddy O tugged, trying to gain enough speed to launch over the road, sure he would catch up to his fleeing enemy. The lip of the ramp launched him, and a smile crept across Freddy's frozen lips with the knowledge that he would make it.

It didn't last long. A searing hot filled his back as he sailed over the dotted-yellow road lines. Freddy O lay on the opposite side of the road, in the midst of a yard sale of a crash, straining to see through his goggles during his last moments of life. He saw the spy get up from his ducked position behind the snow bank, where he had easily picked off a flying target. A silver van slid to a stop, the spy hopped in, and the van peeled off.

Sometimes we get so close. It's painful to talk about how close some guys get. It might be better if everyone went down quickly, because it the closer a man gets to victory, the more ridiculous and horrible his death is. There are a lot of closed casket funerals.

We're a resilient bunch though. You'd think with such a high mortality rate our profession would see more quitters, but we like our jobs, and a lot of us are very optimistic. True, part of it is the recruitment and training—some call it brainwashing—but henchmen are a special breed nonetheless. We see co-workers fall all the time, probably fifteen to twenty guys every couple months, and we keep showing up every day, hoping to become the success story that everyone tells.

I'd survived eight attacks, six of them by solo spies, the other two by six-man tactical military units. I always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, which is as far away from the action as possible. It wasn't on purpose, truly coincidental, but still, the other henchmen didn't respect me; they thought I was always hiding. For a while I was under investigation as a double agent. They didn't find any evidence to support the accusations, but that didn't kill the rumors.

I was working the graveyard patrol, fourth floor, which are where the mainframe and control rooms are located, plus a couple of managerial offices. He came in through the elevator.

The bell dinged when it arrived on the floor, and the doors slid open. I radioed to the lobby guard. "Hey Bill are you messing with me again with this elevator? It's getting old."

Every time I worked this shift, Bill sent an empty elevator to my floor. He would never answer my radio transmission, just wait a couple minutes, enough time to get me cautiously approaching the elevator, gun drawn, expecting someone to jump down from the emergency door in the ceiling. Just when I was the most tense, my finger on the trigger, I'd hear hysterical laughter crackle in over my walkie-talkie.

It always worked because I knew the one time he wasn't screwing around, I'd ignore it and end up dead.

This time I swung the automatic rifle strapped to my shoulder around from my back, and took the safety off. I walked slowly towards the open elevator. To be honest, I didn't mind Bill's prank that much. If anything, it gave me something to do, and it was good training.

Pressing my back up against the wall to the left of the doors, I rotated my head around the edge of the wall and peeked into the elevator. Empty. I crept in, one step at a time, my gun pointed at the ceiling. I always made my way to the back-left hand corner of the elevator; with the trap door above the front right-hand corner, I figured it would be the safest spot in case someone did actually drop out.

I waited with my gun fixed on the door for nearly a minute and decided Bill was just having fun. I threw my gun over my shoulder and stepped back out into the hallway. I took out a Granola bar.

I almost choked when I heard it. A loud thud, coupled with a very loud snap. I froze. Ten seconds went by before I even turned around. I couldn't believe what had just happened. There was actually someone waiting to drop down from above the elevator. He had tried to lower himself down, upside down, and shoot me in the back, but he must not have had a very good grip with his feet. He fell head first, and snapped his neck on the metal elevator floor.

Of course, that's not how I told the story later.

Since that night, everything changed for me. I am no longer anonymous. I pull into a personalized parking space in the morning that's closer to the front door than the handicapped spots. I take a private elevator to the 12 th floor, accessible only by retina and fingerprint scans. I wear a nametag, give orders, and organize the shifts and the company picnic. Even more importantly, my good fortune, or his bad fortune, depending on which way you look at it, has inspired henchmen everywhere. I get emails every week from guys in evil hideouts all over the world, thanking me for inspiration and hope.

"On behalf of the henchmen crew of the submarine SS Destroyer, we'd just like to say we're all huge fans. We put your picture up in the war room as a source of inspiration. What you did not only saved your life, but it taught the rest of us that we're more than just fish in a barrel.

I'm sure that you have work to get back to, but know that you've touched us all, and made our jobs worthwhile."

Your Comrade,

Vladimir Gorbovnika

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Maybe I fabricated my success a little bit, but it was for the good of my profession. Maybe it will start a trend, with spies everywhere defeated by anonymous henchmen. After all, we're not really bad guys. We should get to win every once in a while. We deserve it.