

THE HIT

1. Deus le voelt

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It had been one of those miserable days the troops habitually described in their letters home as typical of Londonderry. A slowly moving warm front had brought in low cloud, fine rain and supersaturated mist to soak early churchgoers through to their skin and to depress those sitting sullenly indoors nursing their misery. It was Sunday morning, and that, combined with the weather, kept the traffic light.

He was following a battered blue Renault station wagon which, with some miraculous engineering, had acquired a four-litre engine and would in a chase have left his little Ford plumber's van far behind. Yet he was content; although its four-wheel drive was of most use to him when the pursuit was across fields, the Jaguar power at the call of his right foot was potentially of huge advantage in town.

The Boss was with him for the mandatory quarterly checkride, but this was a routine operation and he felt under no pressure. (He was on top of his job, one of the best.) That day's target was on the pillion seat of a Kawasaki 500, tasked with a punishment mission, but the informant had not known where, which was why three cars were in use and, despite the cloud base being well below limits, a chopper was on standby.

He was running the target's record through his mind, wondering how much, given the opportunity, he would enjoy killing the sadistic swine, when two

small lights, green and amber, blinked twice in the Renault's rear window. It slowed; he pulled out to overtake; the target was about a hundred yards ahead and turning right to enter a street he knew. Catholic and poor, it was a fair sample of this republican-dominated area. (Where was their God here?) Small terraced houses with net curtains to hide their grimy secrets, with flaking paintwork on their rotting woodwork, and with no gardens little children might enjoy, sloped downwards towards the dirty river. The cars parked outside most of them were cheap and mud-stained, usually untaxed, always uninsured.

As the target pulled over onto the right side of the road he slotted the van neatly into the gap between two wrecks on the left and thirty yards short, and left the engine running. He heard the Boss grunt approvingly, but he had eyes only for the pillion passenger as he dismounted, stepped up to number 20, and knocked. This was unexpected, for number 20 was among the few recorded as politically inactive. The child who appeared as the door swung back was tall and thin with a hungry face, long blonde hair and a torn purple frock, perhaps fifteen, he thought, as he memorised her features. Suddenly the acidic anger he so often felt at the cost to her generation of the inhuman stupidity of this and the previous ones froze as he interpreted the sudden protest on the girl's face: then he was slamming the gear stick into second,

wrenching the steering wheel hard over to the right, accelerating fiercely with slipping clutch, and pulling his Browning from the dashboard holster. He didn't hear the shots, but he saw her kneecaps disintegrate and then in less than three seconds the gunman was back on the pillion and his driver had started racing down the footpath. The split-second advantage from his fast decision together with the Jaguar performance of his disreputable little van brought him level. The killer turned to look at him, and he put two bullets between his goggles.

"You bloody fool," said the Boss. "Get us out of here, quick."

There was no panic. He knew those streets as comprehensively as any terrorists, and there would be nothing in the area fast enough to catch them. Within a minute they were back on the main road and as he braked at the first red traffic light the Boss unstrapped and climbed out, turning to say, "Get it to the skunks for a repaint, a new name and new plates; then get lost until tomorrow in my office, eleven hundred hours."

He had never been in the office, which was usually entered only by VIPs over for the day from London, so the unfamiliarity of its layout delayed recognition of the presence of a well-dressed woman who stared at

him with hostility before turning elegantly to leave by a door in the far wall he had never suspected existed. (That might be the Boss's Number Two, the fashion model no one ever admitted to having seen and who had somehow earned the name of Enforcer.)

"You're a fuckin' stupid idiot. Fuckin' stupid idiots can sometimes be useful, but you're an undisciplined fuckin' stupid idiot and a danger to us all." The Boss stopped to draw breath. "But you're luckier than any fool like you has a right to be. Two loyalist gangs are both claiming the credit for eliminating a bastard practically everyone wanted dead, and as I don't want that vanity exposed I can't sack you."

"Do we know why he shot the girl?" he asked.

"Yes. She'd been seen dancing with a soldier at a local hop, so they made damned sure she'd never dance again."

(Oh, God!) "She didn't look old enough to go dancing."

"She wasn't. It was her sister. And now she'll be too scared ever to even think of dancing again. So he got two for one. When these bastards are most stupidly incompetent they still seem to have everything working for them."

"Well, whatever you say, whatever you're going to do, I'm glad I killed him. The only sorrow I have is that he died quickly, not like some of the poor sods he interrogated."

“Everything has a price. And your self-righteous pleasure has a price. You could have shot the rear tyre as easily as you shot him, and then we could have given him some interrogation. But in a fit of stupid anger you murdered him. And I have to save your skin because that’s what politics dictate. So now you owe me one, and one day I’ll call to collect. Okay, get out. Take some leave. Get that anger out of your system. Until you do, you’re no use to me or to anyone else.”

That had been a year ago.

A week ago he had been called into the office for the second time — the debt was to be collected. The Boss, uncharacteristically tense, put a photograph on the desk. It was of an oriental, possibly a Japanese, probably quite old.

“Take a good look at your target. He’s now in London, at his son’s house. His son is a banker, but he, of course, is long retired. Every day he studies imperialism at the British Library, and for this he leaves the house at exactly nine-twenty every morning. He’s very precise in everything; he always was. A second-floor flat on the other side of the road, almost opposite his door, has been hired for you. A telescopic rifle with a suppressor and a full clip is behind the false back of the lowest shelf of a walnut

cupboard in the bedroom at the rear. With it is a passport in your new name plus an envelope containing ninety thousand Belgian francs and a first class Eurostar ticket to Brussels. In the garden at the rear of the apartments two days from now will be an old motorbike in top condition. When you reach Brussels you will call me on the first number on this paper. You will say one word only: ‘Blister’. Exactly four weeks later you will call the second number on this paper. You will say ‘Abscess’ and await instructions. Before you now depart on eight weeks’ compassionate leave you will memorise these two numbers and these two addresses. I shall burn the paper. Any questions?”

“Who is he?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“Why must he be killed?”

“Let us just say he created ‘undue hardship’ and must at last pay the price. There’s always a price. For you, it’s just a job.”

He now sat quite still. He had a clear view of the door opposite, the rifle lay across his knees, and a glass of water was on a table by his side. (He always had a dry mouth on operations like this, perhaps the price of being nerveless in all the other respects.) “There’s always a price.” Funny the way the Boss liked to say that. Funny boss, the Boss, really. No one had ever

been able to claim they knew him, unless perhaps the Enforcer did, but then the elusive Number Two was never around to claim anything. No, actually, they did know one thing about the Boss, which, of course, was why he was here today. At the only section party the Boss had ever attended they'd learned that the Boss's father had been tortured to the point of death and then been treated by a doctor until the poor man was strong enough to stand and had then been crucified, and then the Boss had told them what none of them had ever known — that in the peace treaty Britain and the USA had conspired to hide all the atrocities the Japanese had committed on their prisoners of war under the term “undue hardship”, thus being able to classify them among the sad, unavoidable consequences of warfare. And then at that party the Boss had described the testimonies given at the war crimes trials, and a couple of the snatch team had had to leave the room because they could not take it, and then the Boss had realised the effect of what they were hearing and stopped after saying that the man responsible for that torture had escaped justice and that one day the Boss would see justice served. Today was the day the Boss fulfilled that promise. Today he was not just a hit man: today he was an executioner. Odd, in a way he always felt like that, even though he had not consciously realised it before. In Londonderry on the day he incurred his

debt to the Boss he had not murdered that bastard, he had executed him. The bastard had once skinned a man alive for information, and was still cursing for not succeeding even after learning it was the wrong man, a man who knew nothing. But the target today was even worse. This target had tortured men just for his delight in hearing the screams. This target had done it every day from five o'clock until six for almost three years. Every day. And now, he, the executioner was about to extract payment. Thinking about it, he wasn't doing what was right. He ought to use a snatch squad, although of course he could probably do it alone, and bring the sadist up to the flat. What would he need? Sticky tape to tie the limbs to the bed and to seal the screams, and then his knife would be sufficient. He couldn't copy all he knew of what the bastard had done to sick, wounded, starving, emaciated British prisoners; there was not enough time, he would need a year, but he could do it for three days, perhaps, and then ensure the evil monster died in exquisite agony. What did God think of men like this one? Why did God let them live? Why did God continue to let them live and enjoy their lives after all the evil they had done? God The All Powerful could of course, God could appoint executioners. God did appoint executioners. He was one of them, and today he was doing God's work. (Deus le voelt.) And God wanted this man sent today for

God's judgement. And then, just as the Devil, indeed because he is the Devil, this man would be cast out into eternal torment.

His mouth was dry. He reached for his glass with his right hand and cocked his left wrist to see his watch, fastened around the outside of the silk glove. It was nine-nineteen. He put the glass down and stood, three feet back from the open window. The door opposite opened slowly. The Devil walked out onto the top step, stopped, looked upwards, towards God, although perhaps thinking of the weather, and was dead before the second bullet smashed into the sternum.

In the apartment God's rod of vengeance was dismantled and stowed in the deep, tailored pockets of the Barbour jacket. His executioner chose the rear stairs, moving quickly, but then was stopped by the garden door he had ensured, only thirty minutes previously, was unlocked. Mystified and tense, he had turned back, drawing his Browning, intending to leave by a window, when from out of the deep shadow at the end of the narrow corridor stepped the Enforcer.

"If the Boss sent you to help me, you're somewhat late. The job's done." God's executioner was not exactly exuberant, but he was pleased with the

accuracy of his two shots. His disrespectful attitude showed it as he reholstered the pistol with a flourish.

"I know," said the Enforcer, "and now you're under arrest." Her voice was low, cultured, musical.

"You're joking!"

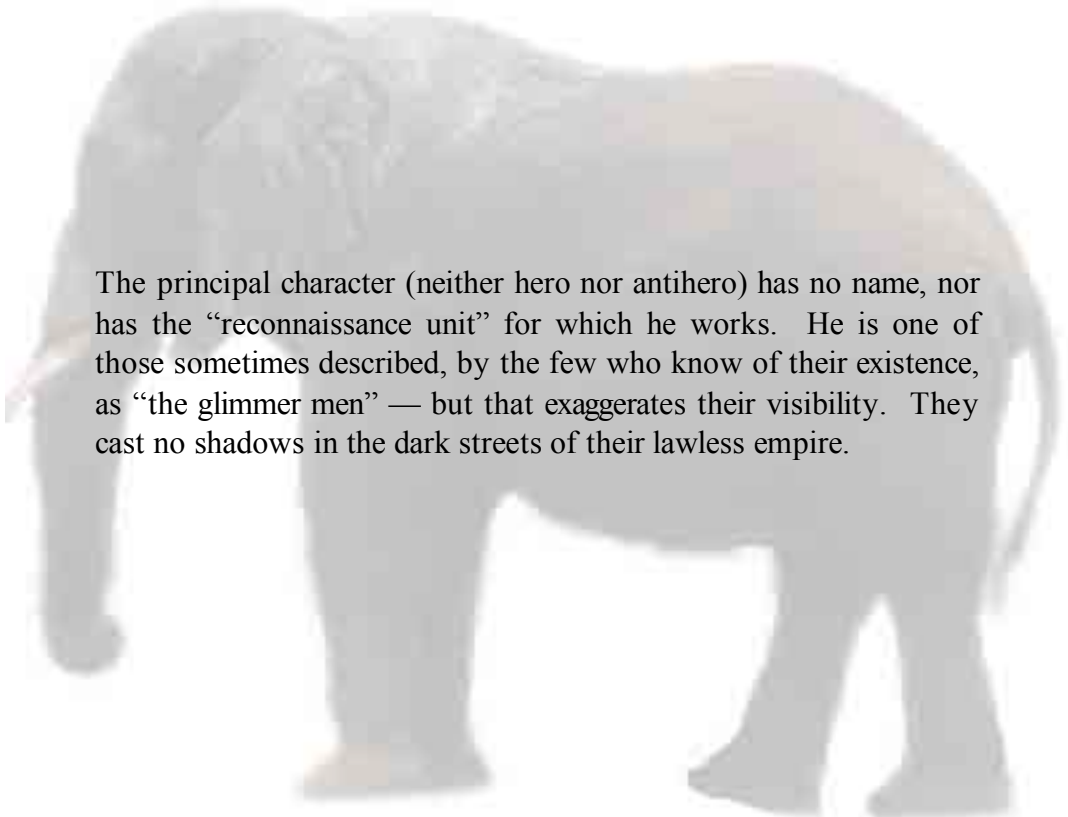
"Yes, of course I am. You'll escape arrest."

"You bitch!" He laughed. "You had me worried for a second." He relaxed. He was happy. God loved him, truly.

"But there's a price."

The suppressed Smith & Wesson .38 revolver was raised before the Browning could be reached. It tapped twice, which is standard procedure even when it seems unnecessary.

The engine of the motorcycle started on the first kick and its sweet sound faded quickly into the streets of West London, leaving the police to ponder on the problems of finding the professional killer of a man whose silk gloves bore traces of a recently fired rifle, but whose pockets were completely empty, whose anonymous clothes bore no labels, and of whose identity not a single government computer had any record of any kind at all.



The principal character (neither hero nor antihero) has no name, nor has the “reconnaissance unit” for which he works. He is one of those sometimes described, by the few who know of their existence, as “the glimmer men” — but that exaggerates their visibility. They cast no shadows in the dark streets of their lawless empire.