

Licence to Shop

(Change the names to suit yourself...)

Gunning the Aston Martin up to ninety, Bland rounded the early morning milk float and sped along the main A3 out of Guildford. He stole a glance at the tracking device set into the high-performance vehicle's console. The bug he'd planted in Jose Fillipino's lapel at the baccarat table the previous evening was still working nicely. The SPOOKTRE number two was, as expected, now in the heart of Brazil, no doubt a mere hands-breadth away from the missing thermonuclear device Bland had been charged with retrieving.

Mentally, he checked his itinerary for the day. A quick stopover at headquarters to check on 0008's progress in Bogota would be followed by breakfast at Blades, the exclusive gentlemen's club. Then Heathrow, and Rio de Janeiro – no doubt with the welcome distractions of an excellent first-class passenger luncheon and the attentions of two or three Air Brazilia stewardesses, the most attractive and, as he'd frequently found, accommodating in the world. After checking into the eight-star Hotel Juninho, he had an assignation with Trubshaw, the head of the local MI26 station. Then to the Casino Pele, where he would remake Fillipino's acquaintance over an expensive dinner. Beyond that...

He stifled a yawn. Beyond that, he would no doubt find a beautiful Colombian spy to go to bed with for a few hours. She would turn out to be one of Trubshaw's assistants, and would then be kidnapped by Fillipino and taken to a remote Caribbean island. He himself would have to follow and, in a final-reel showdown, would kill the villain, recover the thermonuclear device, and in all likelihood end up making love to the Colombian girl on a life-raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean until tracked and recovered by a British Navy submarine.

He felt his heart plummet, and was rather shocked by the fact. The trouble was, it was all so commonplace, so – ordinary! He performed a swift mental review of his last ten assignments. Yes, in every case they'd worked out in exactly the same way as he'd just rehearsed. The nationalities may have been different, the places visited in other parts of the world, but to all intents and purposes the same circumstances played themselves out in his life on a daily basis. He hated to admit it, even to himself. He was in a rut.

As he sped into the heart of London and towards the offices of Multiversal Import, undercover headquarters of the British Secret Service, he wondered how life could possibly be more frustrating.

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T, head of the triple-O section, glanced up as Bland entered his office, and the secret agent could instantly tell there was something troubling his chief. T gave a curt nod at the chair opposite, and Bland sat, tuning his antennae to see if he could detect what was up. T regarded him thoughtfully. "Ah, Roger," he said suddenly, as if only just seeing him. "How's your progress on the Fillipino situation?"

That confirmed it. T, authoritarian and formal on every occasion, only ever addressed Bland as "Roger" when a matter of deep personal concern was afoot. Briefly, he outlined his current progress. T sat back when he'd finished, and examined him minutely. Eventually, he seemed to reach a decision.

"I need you to delay for a couple of hours, if that's okay with you," he said. "Do you think your schedule will allow for that?"

Bland raised an internal eyebrow. To delay such an important assignment was serious enough. But for his chief to actually ask his permission...! Matters must have taken a grave turn indeed.

He performed a hurried calculation. The breakfast he'd planned would be out, and the drive to Heathrow a little more rushed than expected. However, if he had a police outrider escorting him... He nodded in agreement. "Yes, that would be fine."

T expelled his breath in a sigh, and Bland realised with shock that his chief had been holding it, waiting for an answer.

"Thing is, Roger," T continued, laying his cards completely on the table, "I appear to have run out of tobacco, haven't had a smoke since three this morning. And coffee supplies in Z branch are at a minimum as well." He drew himself together, once more the head of the British Secret Service rather than a man requesting a favour from a friend. "0007 – I need you to go to Tesco's for me!"

Bland stared, aghast. Need you to go to... And then, suddenly, his heart leapt. That was it! Out of the ordinary! The challenge he needed. He felt so grateful, he damned well nearly kissed his chief.

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Z, the head of the Service's technological branch, was waiting for Bland with his usual avuncular sternness. "Now pay attention, 0007," he gave his familiar greeting. "There's very little you need for this operation. First, and most important" – he handed Bland a small rectangle of plastic – "is this."

Bland studied it carefully. Blocks of silver and gold logos on a blue background. His name and assorted code numbers embossed on the front in white, and a thin metallic strip on the back. "Ingenious," he murmured. "Obviously a powerful radio transmitter and receiver, combined with a guillotine-edged combat weapon. Congratulations, Z – you never cease to amaze."

Z gave him a withering look, which failed, however, to ruffle the agent's immaculate hair. "No, it's a Cashpoint card," the elderly boffin snapped. "You put it into a cash dispenser and draw out the money to pay for your purchases."

Bland raised an eyebrow. Money, eh? He'd heard of it, of course – it was what most normal people used on a day-to-day basis. Personally, he'd never had time for it. He preferred to deal in credit. In denominations of a thousand at a time, if possible.

Z handed him another rectangle. "Tesco Clubcard," he explained. "Hand this in to the checkout girl with your cash when you're paying. We need the points this month to keep the budget down to government levels."

He must have read Bland's fleeting thought. "Oh, do behave, 0007. Try not to have sex with the checkout girl." He turned away, and Bland just managed to catch the muttered, "At least, not while she's on duty. The conveyor belts get wet enough as it is with all the frozen food."

He led Bland over to the vast laboratory's carport. This was where the highly super-charged, specially-modified vehicles necessary for the secret agent's missions were normally developed and stored. Today, it contained only one conveyance. A rickety contraption of metal framework, rusted in places, and with a

sorry-looking plastic handle at the back. "Supermarket trolley," Z told him. He saw the blank look on Bland's face. "Oh, for heaven's sake, 0007! You put the items for purchase into it. Then, when you go to pay for them, you take them out again. It's quite simple!"

Bland frowned. "What's its armament capabilities?" he asked, suddenly aware of a longing to get back onto slightly more familiar ground.

Z smiled – there was just the slightest touch of malice in the smile. "That, I shall keep to myself for now." He saw the expression on Bland's face. "Oh, believe me, 0007, wait till you get to the supermarket, in amongst harassed mothers and little old ladies charging to get at the cut-price bargains. You'll find out what its armament capabilities are, all right."

Bland took the trolley without another word. Well, he'd accepted the mission, he'd just have to accept all that went with it, too. As he wheeled the contraption towards the docking-bay doors, it gave a singular lurch sideways. And again. And again, every fifth step.

"Oh yes," Z called after him, "we've made sure you have one with a wonky wheel." He regarded the secret agent's immaculately-cut Armani suit, dazzlingly-white laundered shirt, Windsor-knotted tie and thousand-pound Italian leather shoes. "After all," he concluded, "we wouldn't want you looking out of place."

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Bland reached the delicatessen counter with highly-frayed nerves and fingers that twitched to reach for the Beretta hidden in the depths of the shoulder-holster at his armpit. To say he couldn't believe what had happened since he'd entered the portals of this branch of the famous supermarket chain was an understatement. To a man used to the cold-blooded, calculating world of espionage and intrigue, the whole universe seemed to have suddenly gone mad. Men and women charged around as if the four-minute warning had sounded, racing up and down aisles full of incomprehensibly-named tinned produce, rushing to get what he'd heard one couple – struggling determinedly with three grown-up children and two babies, identical twins by the look of them, whilst balancing eggs, milk, flour and other definitely fragile items atop a trolley, much like his own, packed incredibly with tins of something labelled John Smith's – had referred to as "Necessities". His ankles had been crushed at least seven times by renegade trolleys, and he suddenly realised what Z had meant by its armament capabilities. Trouble was, it was not a weapon he was used to dealing with. At the moment he had no defence against it, and no way of utilising its attacking potential.

He reached for the gun-metal cigarette case in his right inside-pocket, and drew out a Rothman's Number Eleven. He'd just raised it to his lips when a light tap on his shoulder caused him to wheel round.

A large man wearing a blue uniform and obviously official peaked cap smiled pleasantly at him, with just a hint of steel in his grey eyes to give the impression that the smile didn't extend to his thought processes. "You'll be noticing, Sir," he said, in a slow and deliberate manner as if speaking to a child, "that this here store would be operating a strictly no-smoking policy."

Bland summed the man up in a swift glance. Big, but he'd fought bigger, and won. Then he shrugged. At the moment, he didn't think he could be bothered.

"Of course," he said resignedly, and put the cigarette and the case away. The man bared his teeth in what could probably have passed for another smile, and strode away.

Bland turned his attention to the counter. Various items of uncooked meat graced one end, while a symphony of yellows, golds and oranges at the other signalled the cheeses he'd come to find. A pair of assistants, one decidedly male, the other unglamorously female in drab uniform and hair-enclosing white hat, lounged behind it, chatting idly. He waited patiently for one of them to acknowledge his presence.

And waited.

Eventually, after about five minutes, he cleared his throat. The couple ignored him.

"Shop," he called loudly, determined not to give way.

The male one of the two, mid-way through a diatribe concerning someone or something named Sharon, shuddered to a halt mid-sentence, and turned to face him with an expression not unlike the one he might have when encountering a slice of moulding Roquefort. "I'm sorry?" he enquired, sounding not at all so.

"By which I mean," Bland elaborated, tight-lipped, "I would be very much obliged if you would cease relating the peculiar details of your girlfriend's underwear fetish, and provide me with the service I would expect to receive should I, say, wish to purchase from you a sizeable slab of Blue Stilton."

This was probably the longest speech Bland had ever made in his life, and he waited to see its effect. The male one licked his lips thoughtfully. The female one, evidently the more dominant of the two, raised her head to a mechanical contraption set into the ceiling. Scarlet numbers showed on a black background, and Bland saw that they read "76". "Do you," the female one asked, slowly and deliberately, "happen to have a ticket, Sir?"

Bland stared. A ticket? Ticket for what?

"Only," she continued, "we can't serve nobody without a ticket. It's in the rules, see? 'Customers are requested to take a ticket for service,' the rules say."

"After all," the male one chipped in, "start serving people without a ticket, the system'd be all up the bugger in no time."

"Total anarchy," his companion agreed. "I mean, next customer comes along, they take a ticket and, 'Oh look, the machine's gone on to 77,' we'd have to say, 'you've picked up ticket number 76. Sorry, you'll have to pick up another one – ooh, number 94 is it? Sorry, got to wait for everybody else to go first, 94'll be along soon'." She stared hard at Bland. "Wouldn't be happy, that customer, would they?" she concluded.

"And besides," the male one chipped in again, "if you don't take a ticket, we don't know where you are in the queue, do we?"

Bland looked around him. In a store seemingly filled with the population of every house within a five miles radius, the delicatessen counter was currently a deserted island in a sea crowded with sharks. The concept of a queue seemed as remote as Rio de Janeiro was suddenly feeling. Bland's nerves snapped. "Are you, or are you not, going to serve me?" he purred, and any of the villains he'd faced during the course of his career would have known better at that moment than to answer in the negative.

The delicatessen counter assistants were not so astute. "Sorry," they said in unison, turning away. "Not without a ticket."

This particular branch of Tesco's had probably never heard the explosion of a Beretta being fired at almost point-blank range into a concrete wall before. Well in advance of the report ceasing to ring round

the jarred pickles section, the girl assistant was back in front of Bland. "Can I help you Sir?" she asked politely.

Bland stared dead-level into her eyes. "Blue Stilton," he murmured. "Eight ounces."

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Reaching the checkouts, Bland's nerves were entirely shot to pieces. He'd had to apologise profusely to both the delicatessen assistants and the large security guard for an unfortunate mistake concerning cheese-wire – the simplest, yet most deadly, weapon known to mankind; the assaults on his knees and ankles had continued well into the second half of his tour of the food aisles; and now, to cap it all, he discovered that queuing, whilst unheard-of in the first-class circles with which he normally had dealings, was an almost daily occupation for the ordinary people he was now briefly associating with. In fact, he hazarded, to them it represented the same pleasure as he could take from a glass of Bolinger '76 and a wafer of Beluga Caviar. He remembered the security guard's admonition and sneered. Well, damn their rules, he needed a smoke.

The first drag on the cigarette was a total pleasure, and he exhaled expansively, watching the smoke curl up beyond the loan and credit-card leaflets and up towards the ceiling, up to where the fire sprinklers lay waiting...

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By the time the fire brigade had finished mopping up the mess, the store was reopened and the staff were changed and ready to resume service, Bland was in Rio de Janeiro and in bed with a beautiful Colombian spy. From now on, he decided, he'd stick to the commonplace. Anything else was just too damned dangerous.