

Ian Fleming - James Bond 007 - 08.4 - Risico

"In this pizniss is much risico."

The words came softly through the thick brown moustache. The hard black eyes moved slowly over Bond's face and down to Bond's hands which were carefully shredding a paper match on which was printed Albergo Colombo, d'Oro.

James Bond felt the inspection. The same surreptitious examination had been going on since he had met the man two hours before at the rendezvous in the Excelsior bar. Bond had been told to look for a man with a heavy moustache who would be sitting by himself drinking an Alexandra. Bond had been amused by this secret recognition signal. The creamy, feminine drink was so much cleverer than the folded newspaper, the flower in the buttonhole, the yellow gloves that were the hoary, slipshod call-signs between agents. It had also the great merit of being able to operate alone, without its owner. And Kristatos had started off with a little test. When Bond had come into the bar and looked round there had been perhaps twenty people in the room. None of them had a moustache. But on a corner table at the far side of the tall, discreet room, flanked by a saucer of olives and another of cashew nuts, stood the tall-stemmed glass of cream and vodka. Bond went straight over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

The waiter came. "Good evening, sir. Signor Kristatos is at the telephone."

Bond nodded. "A Negroni. With Gordon's, please."

The waiter walked back to the bar. "Negroni. Uno. Gordon's."

"I am so sorry." The big hairy hand picked up the small chair as if it had been as light as a matchbox and swept it under the heavy hips. "I had to have a word with Alfredo."

There had been no handshake. These were old acquaintances. In the same line of business, probably. Something like import and export. The younger one looked American. No. Not with those clothes. English.

Bond returned the fast serve. "How's his little boy?"

The black eyes of Signor Kristatos narrowed. Yes, they had said this man was a professional. He spread his hands. "Much the same. What can you expect?"

"Polio is a terrible thing."

The Negroni came. The two men sat back comfortably, each one satisfied that he had to do with a man in the same league. This was rare in 'The Game'. So many times, before one had even started on a tandem assignment like this, one had lost confidence in the outcome. There was so often, at least in Bond's imagination, a faint smell of burning in the air at such a rendezvous. He knew it for the sign that the fringe of his cover had already started to smoulder. In due course the smouldering fabric would burst into flames and he would be br-l,. Then the game would be up and he would have to decide whether to pull out or wait and get shot at by someone. But at this meeting there had been no fumbling.

Later that evening, at the little restaurant off the Piazza di Spagna called the Colomba d'Oro, Bond was amused to find that he was still on probation. Kristatos was still watching and weighing him, wondering if he could be trusted. This remark about the risky business was as near as Kristatos had so far got to

admitting that there existed any business between the two of them. Bond was encouraged. He had not really believed in Kristatos. But surely all these precautions could only mean that M's intuition had paid off - that Kristatos knew something big.

Bond dropped the last shred of match into the ashtray. He said mildly: "I was once taught that any business that pays more than ten per cent or is conducted after nine o'clock at night is a dangerous business. The business which brings us together pays up to one thousand per cent and is conducted almost exclusively at night. On both counts it is obviously a risky business." Bond lowered his voice. "Funds are available. Dollars, Swiss francs, Venezuelan bolivars - anything convenient."

"That makes me glad. I have already too much lire." Signor Kristatos picked up the folio menu. "But let us feed on something. One should not decide important pizness on a hollow stomach."

A week earlier M had sent for Bond. M was in a bad temper. "Got anything on, 007?"

"Only paper work, sir."

"What do you mean, only paper work?" M jerked his pipe towards his loaded in-tray. "Who hasn't got paper work?"

"I meant nothing active, sir."

"Well, say so." M picked up a bundle of dark red files tied together with tape and slid them so sharply across the desk that Bond had to catch them. "And here's some more paper work. Scotland Yard stuff mostly - their narcotics people. Wads from the Home Office and the Ministry of Health, and some nice thick reports from the International Opium Control people in Geneva. Take it away and read it. You'll need today and most of tonight. Tomorrow you fly to Rome and get after the big men. Is that clear?"

Bond said that it was. The state of M's temper was also explained. There was nothing that made him more angry than having to divert his staff from their primary duty. This duty was espionage, and when necessary sabotage and subversion. Anything else was a misuse of the Service and of Secret Funds which, God knows, were meagre enough.

"Any questions?" M's jaw stuck out like the prow of a ship. The jaw seemed to tell Bond to pick up the files and get the hell out of the office and let M move on to something important.

Bond knew that a part of all this - if only a small part - was an act. M had certain bees in his bonnet. They were famous in the Service, and M knew they were. But that did not mean that he would allow them to stop buzzing. There were queen bees, like the misuse of the Service, and the search for true as distinct from wishful intelligence, and there were worker bees. These included such idiosyncrasies as not employing men with beards, or those who were completely bilingual, instantly dismissing men who tried to bring pressure to bear on him through family relationships with members of the Cabinet, mistrusting men or women who were too 'dressy', and those who called him 'sir' off-duty; and having an exaggerated faith in Scotsmen. But M was ironically conscious of his obsessions, as, thought Bond, a Churchill or a Montgomery were about theirs. He never minded his bluff, as it partly was, being called on any of them. Moreover, he would never have dreamed of sending Bond out on an assignment without proper briefing.

Bond knew all this. He said mildly: "Two things, sir. Why are we taking this thing on, and what lead, if any, have Station I got towards the people involved in it?"

M gave Bond a hard, sour look. He swivelled his chair sideways so that he could watch the high,

scudding October clouds through the broad window. He reached out for his pipe, blew through it sharply, and then, as if this action had let off the small head of steam, replaced it gently on the desk. When he spoke, his voice was patient, reasonable. "As you can imagine, 007, I do not wish the Service to become involved in this drug business. Earlier this year I had to take you off other duties for a fortnight so that you could go to Mexico and chase off that Mexican grower. You nearly got yourself killed. I sent you as a favour to the Special Branch. When they asked for you again to tackle this Italian gang I refused. Ronnie Vallance went behind my back to the Home Office and the Ministry of Health. The Ministers pressed me. I said that you were needed here and that I had no one else to spare. Then the two Ministers went to the PM." M paused. "And that was that. I must say the PM was very persuasive. Took the line that heroin, in the quantities that have been coming in, is an instrument of psychological warfare - that it saps a country's strength. He said he wouldn't be surprised to find that this wasn't just a gang of Italians' out to make big money - that subversion and not money was at the back of it." M smiled sourly. "I expect Ronnie Vallance thought up that line of argument. Apparently his narcotics people have been having the devil of a time with the traffic - trying to stop it getting a hold on the teenagers as it has in America. Seems the dance halls and the amusement arcades are full of pedlars. Vallance's Ghost Squad have managed to penetrate back up the line to one of the middle-men, and there's no doubt it's all coming from Italy, hidden in Italian tourists' cars. Vallance has done what he can through the Italian police and Interpol, and got nowhere. They get so far back up the pipeline, arrest a few little people, and then, when they seem to be getting near the centre, there's a blank wall. The inner ring of distributors are too frightened or too well paid."

Bond interrupted. "Perhaps there's protection somewhere, sir. That Montesi business didn't look so good."

M shrugged impatiently. "Maybe, maybe. And you'll have to watch out for that too, but my impression is that the Montesi case resulted in a pretty extensive clean-up. Anyway, when the PM gave me the order to get on with it, it occurred to me to have a talk with Washington. CIA were very helpful. You know the Narcotics Bureau have a team in Italy. Have had ever since the War. They're nothing to do with CIA - run by the American Treasury Department, of all people. The American Treasury control a so-called Secret Service that looks after drug smuggling and counterfeiting. Pretty crazy arrangement. Often wonder what the FBI must think of it. However," M slowly swivelled his chair away from the window. He linked his hands behind his head and leaned back, looking across the desk at Bond. "The point is that the CIA Rome Station works pretty closely with this little narcotics team. Has to, to prevent crossed lines and so on. And CIA - Alan Dulles himself, as a matter of fact - gave me the name of the top narcotics agent used by the Bureau. Apparently he's a double. Does a little smuggling as cover. Chap called Kristatos. Dulles said that of course he couldn't involve his people in any way and he was pretty certain the Treasury Department wouldn't welcome their Rome Bureau playing too closely with us. But he said that, if I wished, he would get word to this Kristatos that one of our, er, best men would like to make contact with a view to doing business. I said I would much appreciate that, and yesterday I got word that the rendezvous is fixed for the day after tomorrow." M gestured towards the files in front of Bond.

"You'll find all the details in there."

There was a brief silence in the room. Bond was thinking that the whole affair sounded unpleasant probably dangerous and certainly dirty. With the last quality in mind, Bond got to his feet and picked up the files. "All right, sir. It looks like money. How much will we pay for the traffic to stop?"

M let his chair tip forward. He put his hands flat down on the desk, side by side. He said roughly: "A hundred thousand pounds. In any currency. That's the PM's figure. But I don't want you to get hurt. Certainly not picking other people's coals out of the fire. So you can go up to another hundred thousand if there's bad trouble. Drugs are the biggest and tightest ring in crime." M reached for his in-basket and

took out a file of signals. Without looking up he said: "Look after yourself."

Signor Kristatos picked up the menu. He said: "I do not beat about bushes, Mr Bond. How much?"

"Fifty thousand pounds for one hundred per cent results."

Kristatos said indifferently: "Yes. Those are important funds. I shall have melon with prosciutto ham and a chocolate ice-cream. I do not eat greatly at night. These people have their own Chianti. I commend it."

The waiter came and there was a brisk rattle of Italian. Bond ordered Tagliatelli Verdi with a Genoese sauce which Kristatos said was improbably concocted of basil, garlic and fir cones.

When the waiter had gone, Kristatos sat and chewed silently on a wooden toothpick. His face gradually became dark and glum as if bad weather had come to his mind. The black, hard eyes that glanced restlessly at everything in the restaurant except Bond, glittered. Bond guessed that Kristatos was wondering whether or not to betray somebody. Bond said encouragingly: "In certain circumstances, there might be more."

Kristatos seemed to make up his mind. He said: "So?" He pushed back his chair and got up. "Forgive me. I must visit the toilette." He turned and walked swiftly towards the back of the restaurant.

Bond was suddenly hungrier and thirstier. He poured out a large glass of Chianti and swallowed half of it. He broke a roll and began eating, smothering each mouthful with deep yellow butter. He wondered why rolls and butter are delicious only in France and Italy. There was nothing else on his mind. It was just a question of waiting. He had confidence in Kristatos. He was a big, solid man who was trusted by the Americans. He was probably making some telephone call that would be decisive. Bond felt in good spirits. He watched the passers-by through the plate-glass window. A man selling one of the Party papers went by on a bicycle. Flying from the basket in front of the handlebars was a pennant. In red on white it said: PROGRESSO? - SI! - AVVENTURI? - NO! Bond smiled. That was how it was. Let it so remain for the rest of the assignment.

On the far side of the square, rather plain room, at the corner table by the caisse, the plump fair-haired girl with the dramatic mouth said to the jovial good-living man with the thick rope of spaghetti joining his face to the plate: "He has a rather cruel smile. But he is very handsome. Spies aren't usually so good-looking. Are you sure you are right, mein T,,ubchen?"

The man's teeth cut through the rope. He wiped his mouth on a napkin already streaked with tomato sauce, belched sonorously and said: "Santos is never wrong about these things. He has a nose for spies. That is why I chose him as the permanent tail for that bastard Kristatos. And who else but a spy would think of spending an evening with the pig? But we will make sure." The man took out of his pocket one of those cheap tin snappers that are sometimes given out, with paper hats and whistles, on carnival nights. It gave one sharp click. The maEtre d'h"tel on the far side of the room stopped whatever he was doing and hurried over.

"Si, padrone."

The man beckoned. The maEtre d'h"tel went over and received the whispered instructions. He nodded briefly, walked over to a door near the kitchens marked UFFICIO, and went in and closed the door behind him.

Phase by phase, in a series of minute moves, an exercise that had long been perfected was then smoothly

put into effect. The man near the caisse munched his spaghetti and critically observed each step in the operation as if it had been a fast game of chess.

The maître d'hôtel came out of the door marked UFFICIO, hurried across the restaurant and said loudly to his No. 2: "An extra table for four. Immediately." The No. 2 gave him a direct look and nodded. He followed the maître d'hôtel over to a space adjoining Bond's table, clicked his fingers for help, borrowed a chair from one table, a chair from another table and, with a bow and an apology, the spare chair from Bond's table. The fourth chair was being carried over from the direction of the door marked UFFICIO by the maître d'hôtel. He placed it square with the others, a table was lowered into the middle and glass and cutlery were deftly laid. The maître d'hôtel frowned. "But you have laid a table for four. I said three - for three people." He casually took the chair he had himself brought to the table and switched it to Bond's table. He gave a wave of the hand to dismiss his helpers and everyone dispersed about their business.

The innocent little flurry of restaurant movement had taken about a minute. An innocuous trio of Italians came into the restaurant. The maître d'hôtel greeted them personally and bowed them to the new table, and the gambit was completed.

Bond had hardly been conscious of it. Kristatos returned from whatever business he had been about, their food came and they got on with the meal.

While they ate they talked about nothing - the election chances in Italy, the latest Alfa Romeo, Italian shoes compared with English. Kristatos talked well. He seemed to know the inside story of everything. He gave information so casually that it did not sound like bluff. He spoke his own kind of English with an occasional phrase borrowed from other languages. It made a lively mixture. Bond was interested and amused. Kristatos was a tough insider - a useful man. Bond was not surprised that the American Intelligence people found him good value.

Coffee came, Kristatos lit a thin black cigar and talked through it, the cigar jumping up and down between the thin straight lips. He put both hands flat on the table in front of him. He looked at the tablecloth between them and said softly: "This pizness. I will play with you. To now I have only played with the Americans. I have not told them what I am about to tell you. There was no requirement. This machina does not operate with America. These things are closely regulated. This machina operates only with England. Yes? Capito?"

"I understand. Everyone has his own territory. It's the usual way in these things."

"Exact. Now, before I give you the informations, like good commercials we make the terms. Yes?"

"Of course."

Signor Kristatos examined the tablecloth more closely. "I wish for ten thousand dollars American, in paper of small sizes, by tomorrow lunchtime. When you have destroyed the machina I wish for a further twenty thousand." Signor Kristatos briefly raised his eyes and surveyed Bond's face. "I am not greedy. I do not take all your funds, isn't it?"

"The price is satisfactory."

"Bueno. Second term. There is no telling where you get these informations from. Even if you are beaten."

"Fair enough."

"Third term. The head of this machina is a bad man." Signor Kristatos paused and looked up. The black eyes held a red glint. The clenched dry lips pulled away from the cigar to let the words out. "He is to be destrutto - killed."

Bond sat back. He gazed quizzically at the other man who now leaned slightly forward over the table, waiting. So the wheels had now shown within the wheels! This was a private vendetta of some sort. Kristatos wanted to get himself a gunman. And he was not paying the gunman, the gunman was paying him for the privilege of disposing of an enemy. Not bad! The fixer was certainly working on a big fix this time - using the Secret Service to pay off his private scores. Bond said softly: "Why?"

Signor Kristatos said indifferently: "No questions catch no lies."

Bond drank down his coffee. It was the usual story of big syndicate crime. You never saw more than the tip of the iceberg. But what did that matter to him? He had been sent to do one specific job. If his success benefited others, nobody, least of all M, could care less. Bond had been told to destroy the machine. If this unnamed man was the machine, it would be merely carrying out orders to destroy the man. Bond said: "I cannot promise that. You must see that. All I can say is that if the man tries to destroy me, I will destroy him."

Signor Kristatos took a toothpick out of the holder, stripped off the paper and set about cleaning his fingernails. When he had finished one hand he looked up. He said: "I do not often gamble on incertitudes. This time I will do so because it is you who are paying me, and not me you. Is all right? So now I will give you the informations. Then you are alone - solo. Tomorrow night I fly to Karachi. I have important pizniss there. I can only give you the informations. After that you run with the ball and -" he threw the dirty toothpick down on the table - "Che sera, sera."

"All right."

Signor Kristatos edged his chair nearer to Bond. He spoke softly and quickly. He gave specimen dates and names to document his narrative. He never hesitated for a fact and he did not waste time on irrelevant detail. It was a short story and a pithy one. There were two thousand American gangsters in the country - Italian-Americans who had been convicted and expelled from the United States. These men were in a bad way. They were on the blackest of all police lists and, because of their records, their own people were wary of employing them. A hundred of the toughest among them had pooled their funds and small groups from this elite had moved to Beirut, Istanbul, Tangier and Macao - the great smuggling centres of the world. A further large section acted as couriers, and the bosses had acquired, through nominees, a small and respectable pharmaceutical business in Milan. To this centre the outlying groups smuggled opium and its derivatives. They used small craft across the Mediterranean, a group of stewards in an Italian charter airline and, as a regular weekly source of supply, the through carriage of the Orient Express in which whole sections of bogus upholstery were fitted by bribed members of the train cleaners in Istanbul. The Milan firm - Pharmacia Colomba SA - acted as a clearing-house and as a convenient centre for breaking down the raw opium into heroin. Thence the couriers, using innocent motor cars of various makes, ran a delivery service to the middlemen in England.

Bond interrupted. "Our Customs are pretty good at spotting that sort of traffic. There aren't many hiding places in a car they don't know about. Where do these men carry the stuff?"

"Always in the spare wheel. You can carry twenty thousand pounds worth of heroin in one spare wheel."

"Don't they ever get caught - either bringing the stuff in to Milan or taking it on?"

"Certainly. Many times. But these are well-trained men. And they are tough. They never talk. If they are convicted, they receive ten thousand dollars for each year spent in prison. If they have families, they are cared for. And when all goes well they make good money. It is a co-operative. Each man receives his tranche of the brutto. Only the chief gets a special tranche."

"All right. Well, who is this man?"

Signor Kristatos put his hand up to the cheroot in his mouth. He kept the hand there and spoke softly from behind it. "Is a man they call 'The Dove', Enrico Colombo. Is the padrone of this restaurant. That is why I bring you here, so that you may see him. Is the fat man who sits with a blonde woman. At the table by the cassa. She is from Vienna. Her name is Lisl Baum. A luxus whore."

Bond said reflectively: "She is, is she?" He did not need to look. He had noticed the girl, as soon as he had sat down at the table. Every man in the restaurant would have noticed her. She had the gay, bold, forthcoming looks the Viennese are supposed to have and seldom do. There was a vivacity and a charm about her that lit up her corner of the room. She had the wildest possible urchin cut in ash blonde, a pert nose, a wide laughing mouth and a black ribbon round her throat. James Bond knew that her eyes had been on him at intervals throughout the evening. Her companion had seemed just the type of rich, cheerful, good-living man she would be glad to have as her lover for a while. He would give her a good time. He would be generous.

There would be no regrets on either side. On the whole, Bond had vaguely approved of him. He liked cheerful, expansive people with a zest for life. Since he, Bond, could not have the girl, it was at least something that she was in good hands. But now? Bond glanced across the room. The couple were laughing about something. The man patted her cheek and got up and went to the door marked UFFICIO and went through and shut the door. So this was the man who ran the great pipeline into England. The man with M's price of a hundred thousand pounds on his head. The man Kristatos wanted Bond to kill. Well, he had better get on with the job. Bond stared rudely across the room at the girl. When she lifted her head and looked at him, he smiled at her. Her eyes swept past him, but there was a half smile, as if for herself, on her lips, and when she took a cigarette out of her case and lit it and blew the smoke straight up towards the ceiling there was an offering of the throat and the profile that Bond knew were for him.

It was nearing the time for the after-cinema trade. The maEtre d'h"tel was supervising the clearing of the unoccupied tables and the setting up of new ones. There was the usual bustle and slapping of napkins across chair-seats and tinkle of glass and cutlery being laid. Vaguely Bond noticed the spare chair at his table being whisked away to help build up a nearby table for six. He began asking Kristatos specific questions - the personal habits of Enrico Colombo, where he lived, the address of his firm in Milan, what other business interests he had. He did not notice the casual progress of the spare chair from its fresh table to another, and then to another, and finally through the door marked UFFICIO. There was no reason why he should.

When the chair was brought into his office, Enrico Colombo waved the maEtre d'h"tel away and locked the door behind him. Then he went to the chair and lifted off the squab cushion and put it on his desk. He unzipped one side of the cushion and withdrew a Grundig tape-recorder, stopped the machine, ran the tape back, took it off the recorder and put it on a playback and adjusted the speed and volume. Then he sat down at his desk and lit a cigarette and listened, occasionally making further adjustments and occasionally repeating passages. At the end, when Bond's tinny voice said "She is, is she?" and there was a long silence interspersed with background noises from the restaurant, Enrico Colombo switched off the machine and sat looking at it. He looked at it for a full minute. His face showed nothing but acute

concentration on his thoughts. Then he looked away from the machine and into nothing and said softly, out loud: "Son-a-beech." He got slowly to his feet and went to the door and unlocked it. He looked back once more at the Grundig, said "Son-a-beech" again with more emphasis and went out and back to his table.

Enrico Colombo spoke swiftly and urgently to the girl. She nodded and glanced across the room at Bond. He and Kristatos were getting up from the table. She said to Colombo in a low, angry voice: "You are a disgusting man. Everybody said so and warned me against you. They were right. Just because you give me dinner in your lousy restaurant you think you have the right to insult me with your filthy propositions" - the girl's voice had got louder. Now she had snatched up her handbag and had got to her feet. She stood beside the table directly in the line of Bond's approach on his way to the exit.

Enrico Colombo's face was black with rage. Now he, too, was on his feet. "You goddam Austrian beech --"

"Don't dare insult my country, you Italian toad." She reached for a half-full glass of wine and hurled it accurately in the man's face. When he came at her it was easy for her to back the few steps into Bond who was standing with Kristatos politely waiting to get by. Enrico Colombo stood panting, wiping the wine off his face with a napkin. He said furiously to the girl: "Don't ever show your face inside my restaurant again." He made the gesture of spitting on the floor between them, turned and strode off through the door marked UFFICIO.

The maEtre d'h"tel had hurried up. Everyone in the restaurant had stopped eating. Bond took the girl by the elbow. "May I help you find a taxi?"

She jerked herself free. She said, still angry: "All men are pigs." She remembered her manners. She said stiffly: "You are very kind." She moved haughtily towards the door with the men in her wake.

There was a buzz in the restaurant and a renewed clatter of knives and forks. Everyone was delighted with the scene. The maEtre d'h"tel, looking solemn, held open the door. He said to Bond: "I apologize, Monsieur. And you are very kind to be of assistance." A cruising taxi slowed. He beckoned it to the pavement and held open the door.

The girl got in. Bond firmly followed and closed the door. He said to Kristatos through the window: "I'll telephone you in the morning. All right?" Without waiting for the man's reply he sat back in the seat. The girl had drawn herself away into the farthest corner. Bond said: "Where shall I tell him?"

"Hotel Ambassadori."

They drove a short way in silence. Bond said: "Would you like to go somewhere first for a drink?"

"No thank you." She hesitated. "You are very kind but tonight I am tired."

"Perhaps another night."

"Perhaps, but I go to Venice tomorrow."

"I shall also be there. Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

The girl smiled. She said: "I thought Englishmen were supposed to be shy. You are English, aren't you? What is your name? What do you do?"

"Yes, I'm English - My name's Bond - James Bond. I write books - adventure stories. I'm writing one now about drug smuggling. It's set in Rome and Venice. The trouble is that I don't know enough about the trade. I am going round picking up stories about it. Do you know any?"

"So that is why you were having dinner with that Kristatos. I know of him. He has a bad reputation. No. I don't know any stories. I only know what everybody knows."

Bond said enthusiastically: "But that's exactly what I want. When I said 'stories' I didn't mean fiction. I meant the sort of high-level gossip that's probably pretty near the truth. That sort of thing's worth diamonds to a writer."

She laughed. "You mean that... diamonds?"

Bond said: "Well, I don't earn all that as a writer, but I've already sold an option on this story for a film, and if I can make it authentic enough I dare say they'll actually buy the film." He reached out and put his hand over hers in her lap. She did not take her hand away. "Yes, diamonds. A diamond clip from Van Cleef. Is it a deal?"

Now she took her hand away. They were arriving at the Ambasciadori. She picked up her bag from the seat beside her. She turned on the seat so that she faced him. The commissionaire opened the door and the light from the street turned her eyes into stars. She examined his face with a certain seriousness. She said: "All men are pigs, but some are lesser pigs than others. All right. I will meet you. But not for dinner. What I may tell you is not for public places. I bathe every afternoon at the Lido. But not at the fashionable plage. I bathe at the Bagni Alberoni, where the English poet Byron used to ride his horse. It is at the tip of the peninsula. The Vaporetto will take you there. You will find me there the day after tomorrow - at three in the afternoon. I shall be getting my last sunburn before the winter. Among the sand-dunes. You will see a pale yellow umbrella. Underneath it will be me." She smiled. "Knock on the umbrella and ask for Fraulein Lisl Baum."

She got out of the taxi. Bond followed. She held out her hand. "Thank you for coming to my rescue. Goodnight."

Bond said: "Three o'clock then. I shall be there. Goodnight."

She turned and walked up the curved steps of the hotel. Bond looked after her thoughtfully, and then turned and got back into the taxi and told the man to take him to the Nazionale. He sat back and watched the neon signs ribbon past the window. Things, including the taxi, were going almost too fast for comfort. The only one over which he had any control was the taxi. He leant forward and told the man to drive more slowly.

The best train from Rome to Venice is the Laguna express that leaves every day at midday. Bond, after a morning that was chiefly occupied with difficult talks with his London Headquarters on Station I's scrambler caught it by the skin of his teeth. The Laguna is a smart, streamlined affair that looks and sounds more luxurious than it is. The seats are made for small Italians and the restaurant car staff suffer from the disease that afflicts their brethren in the great trains all over the world - a genuine loathing for the modern traveller and particularly for the foreigner. Bond had a gangway seat over the axle in the rear aluminium coach. If the seven heavens had been flowing by outside the window he would not have cared. He kept his eyes inside the train, read a jerking book, spilled Chianti over the tablecloth and shifted his long, aching legs and cursed the Ferrovie Italiane dello Stato.

But at last there was Mestre and the dead straight finger of rail across the eighteenth century aquatint into Venice. Then came the unfailing shock of the beauty that never betrays and the soft swaying progress down the Grand Canal into a blood-red sunset, and the extreme pleasure - so it seemed - of the Gritti Palace that Bond should have ordered the best double room on the first floor.

That evening, scattering thousand-lira notes like leaves in Vallombrosa, James Bond sought, at Harry's Bar, at Florian's, and finally upstairs in the admirable Quadri, to establish to anyone who might be interested that he was what he had wished to appear to the girl - a prosperous writer who lived high and well. Then, in the temporary state of euphoria that a first night in Venice engenders, however high and serious the purpose of the visitor, James Bond walked back to the Gritti and had eight hours dreamless sleep.

May and October are the best months in Venice. The sun is soft and the nights are cool. The glittering scene is kinder to the eyes and there is a freshness in the air that helps one to hammer out those long miles of stone and terrazza and marble that are intolerable to the feet in summer. And there are fewer people. Although Venice is the one town in the world that can swallow up a hundred thousand tourists as easily as it can a thousand - hiding them down its side-streets, using them for crowd scenes on the piazzas, stuffing them into the vaporetti - it is still better to share Venice with the minimum number of packaged tours and Lederhosen.

Bond spent the next morning strolling the back-streets in the hope that he would be able to uncover a tail. He visited a couple of churches - not to admire their interiors but to discover if anyone came in after him through the main entrance before he left by the side door. No one was following him. Bond went to Florian's and had an Americano and listened to a couple of French culture-snobbs discussing the imbalance of the containing facade of St Mark's Square. On an impulse, he bought a postcard and sent it off to his secretary who had once been with the Georgian Group to Italy and had never allowed Bond to forget it. He wrote: "Venice is wonderful. Have so far inspected the railway station and the Stock Exchange. Very aesthetically satisfying. To the Municipal Waterworks this afternoon and then an old Brigitte Bardot at the Scala Cinema. Do you know a wonderful tune called 'O Sole Mio'? It's v. romantic like everything here. JB."

Pleased with his inspiration, Bond had an early luncheon and went back to his hotel. He locked the door of his room and took off his coat and ran over the Walther PPK. He put up the safe and practised one or two quick draws and put the gun back in the holster. It was time to go. He went along to the landing-stage and boarded the twelve-forty vaporetto to Alberoni, out of sight across the mirrored lagoons. Then he settled down in a seat in the bows and wondered what was going to happen to him.

From the jetty at Alberoni, on the Venice side of the Lido peninsula, there is a half mile dusty walk across the neck of land to the Bagni Alberoni facing the Adriatic. It is a curiously deserted world, this tip of the famous peninsula. A mile down the thin neck of land the luxury real estate development has petered out in a scattering of cracked stucco villas and bankrupt housing projects, and here there is nothing but the tiny fishing village of Alberoni, a sanatorium for students, a derelict experimental station belonging to the Italian Navy and some massive weed-choked gun emplacements from the last war. In the no man's land in the centre of this thin tongue of land is the Golf du Lido, whose brownish undulating fairways meander around the ruins of ancient fortifications. Not many people come to Venice to play golf, and the project is kept alive for its snob appeal by the grand hotels of the Lido. The golf course is surrounded by a high wire fence hung at intervals, as if it protected something of great value or secrecy, with threatening Vietatos and Prohibitos. Around this wired enclave, the scrub and sandhills have not even been cleared of mines, and amongst the rusting barbed wire are signs saying MINAS. PERICOLO DI MORTE beneath a roughly stencilled skull and crossbones. The whole area is strange and melancholy and in extraordinary contrast to the gay carnival world of Venice less than an hour away across the lagoons.

Bond was sweating slightly by the time he had walked the half mile across the peninsula to the plage, and he stood for a moment under the last of the acacia trees that had bordered the dusty road to cool off while he got his bearings. In front of him was a rickety wooden archway whose central span said BAGNI ALBERONI in faded blue paint. Beyond were the lines of equally dilapidated wooden cabins, and then a hundred yards of sand and then the quiet blue glass of the sea. There were no bathers and the place seemed to be closed, but when he walked through the archway he heard the tinny sound of a radio playing Neapolitan music. It came from a ramshackle hut that advertised Coca-Cola and various Italian soft drinks. Deck-chairs were stacked against its walls and there were two pedalos and a child's half inflated seahorse. The whole establishment looked so derelict that Bond could not imagine it doing business even at the height of the summer season. He stepped off the narrow duckboards into the soft, burned sand and moved round behind the huts to the beach. He walked down to the edge of the sea. To the left, until it disappeared in the autumn heat haze, the wide empty sand swept away in a slight curve towards the Lido proper. To the right was half a mile of beach terminating in the seawall at the tip of the peninsula. The seawall stretched like a finger out into the silent mirrored sea, and at intervals along its top were the flimsy derricks of the octopus fishermen. Behind the beach were the sandhills and a section of the wire fence surrounding the golf course. On the edge of the sandhills, perhaps five hundred yards away, there was a speck of bright yellow.

Bond set off towards it along the tide-line.

"Ahem."

The hands flew to the top scrap of bikini and pulled it up. Bond walked into her line of vision and stood looking down. The bright shadow of the umbrella covered only her face. The rest of her - a burned cream body in a black bikini on a black and white striped bath-towel - lay offered to the sun.

She looked up at him through half closed eyelashes. You are five minutes early and I told you to knock."

Bond sat down close to her in the shade of the big umbrella. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. "You happen to own the only palm tree in the whole of this desert. I had to get underneath it as soon as I could. This is the hell of a place for a rendezvous."

She laughed. "I am like Greta Garbo. I like to be alone."

"Are we alone?"

She opened her eyes wide. "Why not? You think I have brought a chaperone?"

"Since you think all men are pigs..."

"Ah, but you are a gentleman pig," she giggled. "A milord pig. And anyway, it is too hot for that kind of thing. And there is too much sand. And besides this is a business meeting, no? I tell you stories about drugs and you give me a diamond clip. From Van Cleef. Or have you changed your mind?"

"No. That's how it is. Where shall we begin?"

"You ask the questions. What is it you want to know?" She sat up and pulled her knees to her between her arms. Flirtation had gone out of her eyes and they had become attentive, and perhaps a little careful.

Bond noticed the change. He said casually, watching her: "They say your friend Colombo is a big man in

the game. Tell me about him. He would make a good character for my book - disguised, of course. But it's the detail I need. How does he operate, and so on? That's not the sort of thing a writer can invent."

She veiled her eyes. She said: "Enrico would be very angry if he knew that I had told any of his secrets. I don't know what he would do to me."

"He will never know."

She looked at him seriously. "Lieber Mr Bond, there is very little that he does not know. And he is also quite capable of acting on a guess. I would not be surprised" - Bond caught her quick glance at his watch - "if it had crossed his mind to have me followed here. He is a very suspicious man." She put her hand out and touched his sleeve. Now she looked nervous. She said urgently: "I think you had better go now. This has been a great mistake."

Bond openly looked at his watch. It was three-thirty. He moved his head so that he could look behind the umbrella and back down the beach. Far down by the bathing huts, their outlines dancing slightly in the heat haze, were three men in dark clothes. They were walking purposefully up the beach, their feet keeping step as if they were a squad.

Bond got to his feet. He looked down at the bent head. He said drily: "I see what you mean. Just tell Colombo that from now on I'm writing his life-story. And I'm a very persistent writer. So long." Bond started running up the sand towards the tip of the peninsula. From there he could double back down the other shore to the village and the safety of people.

Down the beach the three men broke into a fast jogtrot, elbows and legs pounding in time with each other as if they were long-distance runners out for a training spin. As they jogged past the girl, one of the men raised a hand. She raised hers in answer and then lay down on the sand and turned over - perhaps so that her back could now get its toasting, or perhaps because she did not want to watch the man-hunt.

Bond took off his tie as he ran and put it in his pocket. It was very hot and he was already sweating profusely. But so would the three men be. It was a question who was in better training. At the tip of the peninsula, Bond clambered up on to the seawall and looked back. The men had hardly gained, but now two of them were fanning out to cut round the edge of the golf course boundary. They did not seem to mind the danger notices with the skull and crossbones. Bond, running fast down the wide seawall, measured angles and distances. The two men were cutting across the base of the triangle. It was going to be a close call.

Bond's shirt was already soaked and his feet were beginning to hurt. He had run perhaps a mile. How much farther to safety? At intervals along the seawall the breeches of antique cannon had been sunk in the concrete. They would be mooring posts for the fishing fleets sheltering in the protection of the lagoons before taking to the Adriatic. Bond counted his steps between two of them. Fifty yards. How many black knobs to the end of the wall - to the first houses of the village? Bond counted up to thirty before the line vanished into the heat haze. Probably another mile to go. Could he do it, and fast enough to beat the two flankers? Bond's breath was already rasping in his throat. Now even his suit was soaked with sweat and the cloth of his trousers was chafing his legs. Behind him, three hundred yards back, was one pursuer. To his right, dodging among the sand-dunes and converging fast, were the other two. To his left was a twenty-foot slope of masonry to the green tide ripping out into the Adriatic.

Bond was planning to slow down to a walk and keep enough breath to try and shoot it out with the three men, when two things happened in quick succession. First he saw through the haze ahead a group of spear-fishermen. There were about half a dozen of them, some in the water and some sunning themselves

on the seawall. Then, from the sand-dunes came the deep roar of an explosion. Earth and scrub and what might have been bits of a man fountained briefly into the air, and a small shock-wave hit him. Bond slowed. The other man in the dunes had stopped. He was standing stock-still. His mouth was open and a frightened jabber came from it. Suddenly he collapsed on the ground with his arms wapped round his head. Bond knew the signs. He would not move again until someone came and carried him away from there. Bond's heart lifted. Now he had only about two hundred yards to go to the fishermen. They were already gathering into a group, looking towards him. Bond summoned a few words of Italian and rehearsed them. "Mi Ingles. Prego, dove il carabinieri." Bond glanced over his shoulder. Odd, but despite the witnessing spear-fishers, the man was still coming on. He had gained and was only about a hundred yards behind. There was a gun in his hand. Now, ahead, the fishermen had fanned out across Bond's path. They had harpoon guns held at the ready. In the centre was a big man with a tiny red bathing-slip hanging beneath his stomach. A green mask was slipped back on to the crown of his head. He stood with his blue swim-fins pointing out and his arms akimbo. He looked like Mr Toad of Toad Hall in Technicolor. Bond's amused thought died in him stillborn. Panting, he slowed to a walk. Automatically his sweaty hand felt under his coat for the gun and drew it out. The man in the centre of the arc of pointing harpoons was Enrico Colombo.

Colombo watched him approach. When he was twenty yards away, Colombo said quietly: "Put away your toy, Mr Bond of the Secret Service. These are CO2 harpoon guns. And stay where you are. Unless you wish to make a copy of Mantegna's St Sebastian." He turned to the man on his right. He spoke in English. "At what range was that Albanian last week?"

"Twenty yards, padrone. And the harpoon went right through. But he was a fat man - perhaps twice as thick as this one."

Bond stopped. One of the iron bollards was beside him. He sat down and rested the gun on his knee. It pointed at the centre of Colombo's big stomach. He said: "Five harpoons in me won't stop one bullet in you, Colombo."

Colombo smiled and nodded, and the man who had been coming softly up behind Bond hit him once hard in the base of the skull with the butt of his Luger.

When you come to from being hit on the head the first reaction is a fit of vomiting. Even in his wretchedness Bond was aware of two sensations - he was in a ship at sea, and someone, a man, was wiping his forehead with a cool wet towel and murmuring encouragement in bad English. "Is okay, amigo. Take him easy. Take him easy."

Bond fell back on his bunk, exhausted. It was a comfortable small cabin with a feminine smell and dainty curtains and colours. A sailor in a tattered vest and trousers - Bond thought he recognized him as one of the spear-fishermen - was bending over him. He smiled when Bond opened his eyes. "Is better, yes? Subito okay." He rubbed the back of his neck in sympathy.

"It hurts for a little. Soon it will only be a black. Beneath the hair. The girls will see nothing."

Bond smiled feebly and nodded. The pain of the nod made him screw up his eyes. When he opened them the sailor shook his head in admonition. He brought his wrist-watch close up to Bond's eyes. It said seven o'clock. He pointed with his little finger at the figure nine. "Mangiare con Padrone, Si?"

Bond said: "Si."

The man put his hand to his cheek and laid his head on one side. "Dormire."

Bond said "Si" again and the sailor went out of the cabin and closed the door without locking it.

Bond got gingerly off the bunk and went over to the wash basin and set about cleaning himself. On top of the chest of drawers was a neat pile of his personal belongings. Everything was there except his gun. Bond stowed the things away in his pockets, and sat down again on the bunk and smoked and thought. His thoughts were totally inconclusive. He was being taken for a ride, or rather a sail, but from the behaviour of the sailor it did not seem that he was regarded as an enemy. Yet a great deal of trouble had been taken to make him prisoner and one of Colombo's men had even, though inadvertently, died in the process. It did not seem to be just a question of killing him. Perhaps this soft treatment was the preliminary to trying to make a deal with him. What was the deal - and what was the alternative?

At nine o'clock the same sailor came for Bond and led him down a short passage to a small, blowzy saloon, and left him. There was a table and two chairs in the middle of the room, and beside the table a nickel-plated trolley laden with food and drinks. Bond tried the hatchway at the end of the saloon. It was bolted. He unlatched one of the portholes and looked out. There was just enough light to see that the ship was about two hundred tons and might once have been a large fishing-vessel. The engine sounded like a single diesel and they were carrying sail. Bond estimated the ship's speed at six or seven knots. On the dark horizon there was a tiny cluster of yellow lights. It seemed probable that they were sailing down the Adriatic coast.

The hatchway bolt rattled back. Bond pulled in his head. Colombo came down the steps. He was dressed in a sweat-shirt, dungarees and scuffed sandals. There was a wicked, amused gleam in his eyes. He sat down in one chair and waved to the other. "Come, my friend. Food and drink and plenty of talk. We will now stop behaving like little boys and be grown-up. Yes? What will you have - gin, whisky, champagne? And this is the finest sausage in the whole of Bologna. Olives from my own estate. Bread, butter, Provelone - that is smoked cheese - and fresh figs. Peasant food, but good. Come. All that running must have given you an appetite."

His laugh was infectious. Bond poured himself a stiff whisky and soda, and sat down. He said: "Why did you have to go to so much trouble? We could have met with out all these dramatics. As it is you have prepared a lot of grief for yourself. I warned my chief that something like this might happen - the way the girl picked me up in your restaurant was too childish for words. I said that I would walk into the trap to see what it was all about. If I am not out of it again by tomorrow midday, you'll have Interpol as well as Italian police on top of you like a load of bricks."

Colombo looked puzzled. He said: "If you were ready to walk into the trap, why did you try and escape from my men this afternoon? I had sent them to fetch you and bring you to my ship, and it would all have been much more friendly. Now I have lost a good man and you might easily have had your skull broken. I do not understand."

"I didn't like the look of those three men. I know killers when I see them. I thought you might be thinking of doing something stupid. You should have used the girl. The men were unnecessary."

Colombo shook his head. "Lisl was willing to find out more about you, but nothing else. She will now be just as angry with me as you are. Life is very difficult. I like to be friends with everyone, and now I have made two enemies in one afternoon. It is too bad." Colombo looked genuinely sorry for himself. He cut a thick slice of sausage, impatiently tore the rind off it with his teeth and began to eat. While his mouth was still full he took a glass of champagne and washed the sausage down with it. He said, shaking his head reproachfully at Bond: "It is always the same, when I am worried I have to eat. But the food that I eat when I am worried I cannot digest. And now you have worried me. You say that we could have met and

talked things over - that I need not have taken all this trouble." He spread his hands helplessly. "How was I to know that? By saying that, you put the blood of Mario on my hands. I did not tell him to take a short cut through that place." Colombo pounded the table. Now he shouted angrily at Bond. "I do not agree that this was all my fault. It was your fault. Yours only. You had agreed to kill me. How does one arrange a friendly meeting with one's murderer? Eh? Just tell me that." Colombo snatched up a long roll of bread and stuffed it into his mouth, his eyes furious.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Colombo threw the remains of the roll on the table and got to his feet, holding Bond's eyes locked in his. He walked sideways, still gazing fixedly at Bond, to a chest of drawers, felt for the knob of the top drawer, opened it, groped and lifted out what Bond recognized as a tape-recorder playback machine. Still looking accusingly at Bond, he brought the machine over to the table. He sat down and pressed a switch.

When Bond heard the voice he picked up his glass of whisky and looked into it. The tinny voice said: "Exact. Now, before I give you the informations, like good commercials we make the terms. Yes?" The voice went on: "Ten thousand dollars American... There is no telling where you get these informations from. Even if you are beaten... The head of this machina is a bad man. He is to be destrutto - killed." Bond waited for his own voice to break through the restaurant noises. There had been a long pause while he thought about the last condition. What was it he had said? His voice came out of the machine, answering him. "I cannot promise that. You must see that. All I can say is that if the man tries to destroy me, I will destroy him."

Colombo switched off the machine. Bond swallowed down his whisky. Now he could look up at Colombo. He said defensively: "That doesn't make me a murderer."

Colombo looked at him sorrowfully. "To me it does. Coming from an Englishman. I worked for the English during the War. In the Resistance. I have the King's Medal." He put his hand in his pocket and threw the silver Freedom medal with the red, white and blue striped ribbon on to the table. "You see?"

Bond obstinately held Colombo's eyes. He said: "And the rest of the stuff on that tape? You long ago stopped working for the English. Now you work against them, for money."

Colombo grunted. He tapped the machine with his forefinger. He said impassively: "I have heard it all. It is lies." He banged his fist on the table so that the glasses jumped. He bellowed furiously: "It is lies, lies. Every word of it." He jumped to his feet. His chair crashed down behind him. He slowly bent and picked it up. He reached for the whisky bottle and walked round and poured four fingers into Bond's glass. He went back to his chair and sat down and put the champagne bottle on the table in front of him. Now his face was composed, serious. He said quietly: "It is not all lies. There is a grain of truth in what that bastard told you. That is why I decided not to argue with you. You might not have believed me. You would have dragged in the police. There would have been much trouble for me and my comrades. Even if you or someone else had not found reason to kill me, there would have been scandal, ruin. Instead I decided to show you the truth - the truth you were sent to Italy to find out. Within a matter of hours, tomorrow at dawn, your mission will have been completed." Colombo clicked his fingers. "Presto - like that."

Bond said: "What part of Kristatos's story is not lies?"

Colombo's eyes looked into Bond's calculating. Finally he said: "My friend, I am a smuggler. That part is true. I am probably the most successful smuggler in the Mediterranean. Half the American cigarettes in

Italy are brought in by me from Tangier. Gold? I am the sole supplier of the black valuta market. Diamonds? I have my own purveyor in Beirut with direct lines to Sierra Leone and South Africa. In the old days, when these things were scarce, I also handled aureo-mycin and penicillin and such medicines. Bribery at the American base hospitals. And there have been many other things - even beautiful girls from Syria and Persia for the houses of Naples. I have also smuggled out escaped convicts. But," Colombo's fist crashed on the table, "drugs, heroin, opium, hemp - no! Never! I will have nothing to do with these things. These things are evil. There is no sin in the others." Colombo held up his right hand. "My friend, this I swear to you on the head of my mother."

Bond was beginning to see daylight. He was prepared to believe Colombo. He even felt a curious liking for this greedy, boisterous pirate who had so nearly been put on the spot by Kristatos. Bond said: "But why did Kristatos put the finger on you? What's he got to gain?"

Colombo slowly shook a finger to and fro in front of his nose. He said: "My friend, Kristatos is Kristatos. He is playing the biggest double game it is possible to conceive. To keep it up - to keep the protection of American Intelligence and their Narcotics people - he must now and then throw them a victim - some small man on the fringe of the big game. But with this English problem it is different. That is a huge traffic. To protect it, a big victim was required. I was chosen - by Kristatos, or by his employers. And it is true that if you had been vigorous in your investigations and had spent enough hard currency on buying information, you might have discovered the story of my operations. But each trail towards me would have led you further away from the truth. In the end, for I do not underestimate your Service, I would have gone to prison. But the big fox you are after would only be laughing at the sound of the hunt dying away in the distance."

"Why did Kristatos want you killed?"

Colombo looked cunning. "My friend, I know too much. In the fraternity of smugglers, we occasionally stumble on a corner of the next man's business. Not long ago, in this ship, I had a running fight with a small gunboat from Albania. A lucky shot set fire to their fuel. There was only one survivor. He was persuaded to talk. I learnt much, but like a fool I took a chance with the minefields and set him ashore on the coast north of Tirana. It was a mistake. Ever since then I have had this bastard Kristatos after me. Fortunately," Colombo grinned wolfishly, "I have one piece of information he does not know of. And we have a rendezvous with this piece of information at first light tomorrow - at a small fishing-port just north of Ancona, Santa Maria. And there," Colombo gave a harsh, cruel laugh, "we shall see what we shall see."

Bond said mildly. "What's your price for all this? You say my mission will have been completed tomorrow morning. How much?"

Colombo shook his head. He said indifferently: "Nothing. It just happens that our interests coincide. But I shall need your promise that what I have told you this evening is between you and me and, if necessary, your Chief in London. It must never come back to Italy. Is that agreed?"

"Yes. I agree to that."

Colombo got to his feet. He went to the chest of drawers and took out Bond's gun. He handed it to Bond. "In that case, my friend, you had better have this, because you are going to need it. And you had better get some sleep. There will be rum and coffee for everyone at five in the morning." He held out his hand. Bond took it. Suddenly the two men were friends. Bond felt the fact. He said awkwardly "All right, Colombo," and went out of the saloon and along to his cabin.

The Colombina had a crew of twelve. They were youngish, tough-looking men. They talked softly among themselves as the mugs of hot coffee and rum were dished out by Colombo in the saloon. A storm lantern was the only light - the ship had been darkened - and Bond smiled to himself at the Treasure Island atmosphere of excitement and conspiracy. Colombo went from man to man on a weapon inspection. They all had Lugers, carried under the jersey inside the trouser-band, and flick-knives in the pocket. Colombo had a word of approval or criticism for each weapon. It struck Bond that Colombo had made a good life for himself - a life of adventure and thrill and risk. It was a criminal life - a running fight with the currency laws, the State tobacco monopoly, the Customs, the police - but there was a whiff of adolescent rascality in the air which somehow changed the colour of the crime from black to white - or at least to grey.

Colombo looked at his watch. He dismissed the men to their posts. He dowsed the lantern and, in the oyster light of dawn, Bond followed him up to the bridge. He found the ship was close to a black, rocky shore which they were following at reduced speed. Colombo pointed ahead. "Round that headland is the harbour. Our approach will not have been observed. In the harbour, against the jetty, I expect to find a ship of about this size unloading innocent rolls of newsprint down a ramp into a warehouse. Round the headland, we will put on full speed and come alongside this ship and board her. There will be resistance. Heads will be broken. I hope it is not shooting. We shall not shoot unless they do. But it will be an Albanian ship manned by a crew of Albanian toughs. If there is shooting, you must shoot well with the rest of us. These people are enemies of your country as well as mine. If you get killed, you get killed. Okay?"

"That's all right."

As Bond said the words, there came a ting on the engine-room telegraph and the deck began to tremble under his feet. Making ten knots, the small ship rounded the headland into the harbour.

It was as Colombo had said. Alongside a stone jetty lay the ship, its sails flapping idly. From her stern a ramp of wood planks sloped down towards the dark mouth of a ramshackle corrugated iron warehouse, inside which burned feeble electric lights. The ship carried a deck cargo of what appeared to be rolls of newsprint, and these were being hoisted one by one on to the ramp whence they rolled down under their own momentum through the mouth of the warehouse.

There were about twenty men in sight. Only surprise would straighten out these odds. Now Colombo's craft was fifty yards away from the other ship, and one or two of the men had stopped working and were looking in their direction. One man ran off into the warehouse. Simultaneously Colombo issued a sharp order. The engines stopped and went into reverse. A big searchlight on the bridge came on and lit the whole scene brightly as the ship drifted up alongside the Albanian trawler. At the first hard contact, grappling-irons were tossed over the Albanian's rail fore and aft, and Colombo's men swarmed over the side with Colombo in the lead.

Bond had made his own plans. As soon as his feet landed on the enemy deck, he ran straight across the ship, climbed the far rail and jumped. It was about twelve feet to the jetty and he landed like a cat, on his hands and toes, and stayed for a moment, crouching, planning his next move. Shooting had already started on deck. An early shot killed the searchlight and now there was only the grey, luminous light of dawn. A body, one of the enemy, crunched to the stone in front of him and lay spread-eagled, motionless. At the same time, from the mouth of the warehouse, a light machine gun started up, firing short bursts with a highly professional touch. Bond ran towards it in the dark shadow of the ship. The machine-gunner saw him and gave him a burst. The bullets zipped round Bond, clanged against the iron hull of the ship and whined off into the night. Bond got to the cover of the sloping ramp of boards and dived forward on his stomach. The bullets crashed into the wood above his head. Bond crept forward

into the narrowing space. When he had got as close as he could, he would have a choice of breaking cover either to right or left of the boards. There came a series of heavy thuds and a swift rumble above his head. One of Colombo's men must have cut the ropes and sent the whole pile of newsprint rolls down the ramp. Now was Bond's chance. He leapt out from under cover - to the left. If the machine-gunner was waiting for him, he would expect Bond to come out firing on the right. The machine-gunner was there, crouching up against the wall of the warehouse. Bond fired twice in the split second before the bright muzzle of the enemy weapon had swung through its small arc. The dead man's finger clenched on the trigger and, as he slumped, his gun made a brief Catherine-wheel of flashes before it shook itself free from his hand and clattered to the ground.

Bond was running forward towards the warehouse door when he slipped and fell headlong. He lay for a moment, stunned, his face in a pool of black treacle. He cursed and got to his hands and knees and made a dash for cover behind a jumble of the big newsprint rolls that had crashed into the wall of the warehouse. One of them, sliced by a burst from the machine gun, was leaking black treacle. Bond wiped as much of the stuff off his hands and face as he could. It had the musty sweet smell that Bond had once smelled in Mexico. It was raw opium.

A bullet whanged into the wall of the warehouse not far from his head. Bond gave his gun-hand a last wipe on the seat of his trousers and leapt for the warehouse door. He was surprised not to be shot at from the interior as soon as he was silhouetted against the entrance. It was quiet and cool inside the place. The lights had been turned out, but it was now getting brighter outside. The pale newsprint rolls were stacked in orderly ranks with a space to make a passageway down the centre. At the far end of the passageway was a door. The whole arrangement leered at him, daring him. Bond smelled death. He edged back to the entrance and out into the open. The shooting had become spasmodic. Colombo came running swiftly towards him, his feet close to the ground as fat men run. Bond said peremptorily: "Stay at this door. Don't go in or let any of your men in. I'm going round to the back." Without waiting for an answer he sprinted round the corner of the building and down along its side.

The warehouse was about fifty feet long. Bond slowed and walked softly to the far corner. He flattened himself against the corrugated iron wall and took a swift look round. He immediately drew back. A man was standing up against the back entrance. His eyes were at some kind of spyhole. In his hand was a plunger from which wires ran under the bottom of the door. A car, a black Lancia Granturismo convertible with the hood down, stood beside him, its engine ticking over softly. It pointed inland along a deeply tracked dust road.

The man was Kristatos.

Bond knelt. He held his gun in both hands for steadiness, inched swiftly round the corner of the building and fired one shot at the man's feet. He missed. Almost as he saw the dust kick up inches off the target, there was the rumbling crack of an explosion and the tin wall hit him and sent him flying.

Bond scrambled to his feet. The warehouse had buckled crazily out of shape. Now it started to collapse noisily like a pack of tin cards. Kristatos was in the car. It was already twenty yards away, dust fountaining up from the traction on the rear wheels. Bond stood in the classic pistol-shooting pose and took careful aim. The Walther roared and kicked three times. At the last shot, at fifty yards, the figure crouched over the wheel jerked backwards. The hands flew sideways off the wheel. The head craned briefly into the air and slumped forward. The right hand remained sticking out as if the dead man was signalling a right-hand turn. Bond started to run up the road, expecting the car to stop, but the wheels were held in the ruts and, with the weight of the dead right foot still on the accelerator, the Lancia tore onwards in its screaming third gear. Bond stopped and watched it. It hurried on along the flat road across the burned-up plain and the cloud of white dust blew gaily up behind. At any moment Bond expected it

to veer off the road, but it did not, and Bond stood and saw it out of sight into the early morning mist that promised a beautiful day.

Bond put his gun on safe and tucked it away in the belt of his trousers. He turned to find Colombo approaching him. The fat man was grinning delightedly. He came up with Bond and, to Bond's horror, threw open his arms, clutched Bond to him and kissed him on both cheeks.

Bond said: "For God's sake, Colombo."

Colombo roared with laughter. "Ah, the quiet Englishman! He fears nothing save the emotions. But me," he hit himself in the chest, "me, Enrico Colombo, loves this man and he is not ashamed to say so. If you had not got the machine-gunner, not one of us would have survived. As it is, I lost two of my men and others have wounds. But only half a dozen Albanians remain on their feet and they have escaped into the village. No doubt the police will round them up. And now you have sent that bastard Kristatos motoring down to hell. What a splendid finish to him! What will happen when the little racing-hearse meets the main road? He is already signalling for the right-hand turn on to the autostrada, I hope he will remember to drive on the right." Colombo clapped Bond boisterously on the shoulder. "But come, my friend. It is time we got out of here. The cocks are open in the Albanian ship and she will soon be on the bottom. There are no telephones in this little place. We will have a good start on the police. It will take them some time to get sense out of the fishermen. I have spoken to the head man. No one here has any love for Albanians. But we must be on our way. We have a stiff sail into the wind and there is no doctor I can trust this side of Venice."

Flames were beginning to lick out of the shattered warehouse, and there was billowing smoke that smelled of sweet vegetables. Bond and Colombo walked round to windward. The Albanian ship had settled on the bottom and her decks were awash. They waded across her and climbed on board the Colombina, where Bond had to go through some more handshaking and back-slapping. They cast off at once and made for the headland guarding the harbour. There was a small group of fishermen standing by their boats that lay drawn up on the beach below a huddle of stone cottages. They made a surly impression, but when Colombo waved and shouted something in Italian most of them raised a hand in farewell, and one of them called back something that made the crew of the Colombina laugh. Colombo explained: "They say we were better than the cinema at Ancona and we must come again soon."

Bond suddenly felt the excitement drain out of him. He felt dirty and unshaven, and he could smell his own sweat. He went below and borrowed a razor and a clean shirt from one of the crew, and stripped in his cabin and cleansed himself. When he took out his gun and threw it on the bunk he caught a whiff of cordite from the barrel. It brought back the fear and violence and death of the grey dawn. He opened the porthole. Outside, the sea was dancing and gay, and the receding coastline, that had been black and mysterious, was now green and beautiful. A sudden delicious scent of frying bacon came downwind from the galley. Abruptly Bond pulled the porthole to and dressed and went along to the saloon.

Over a mound of fried eggs and bacon washed down with hot sweet coffee laced with rum, Colombo dotted the i's and crossed the t's.

"This we have done, my friend," he said through crunching toast. "That was a year's supply of raw opium on its way to Kristatos's chemical works in Naples. It is true that I have such a business in Milan and that it is a convenient depot for some of my wares. But it fabricates nothing more deadly than cascara and aspirin. For all that part of Kristatos's story, read Kristatos instead of Colombo. It is he who breaks the stuff down into heroin and it is he who employs the couriers to take it to London. That huge shipment was worth perhaps a million pounds to Kristatos and his men. But do you know something, my dear James? It cost him not one solitary cent. Why? Because it is a gift from Russia. The gift of a massive and

deadly projectile to be fired into the bowels of England. The Russians can supply unlimited quantities of the charge for the projectile. It comes from their poppy fields in the Caucasus, and Albania is a convenient entrepôt. But they have not the apparatus to fire this projectile. The man Kristatos created the necessary apparatus, and it is he, on behalf of his masters in Russia, who pulls the trigger. Today, between us, we have destroyed, in half an hour, the entire conspiracy. You can now go back and tell your people in England that the traffic will cease. You can also tell them the truth - that Italy was not the origin of this terrible underground weapon of war. That it is our old friends the Russians. No doubt it is some psychological warfare section of their Intelligence apparatus. That I cannot tell you. Perhaps, my dear James," Colombo smiled encouragingly, "they will send you to Moscow to find out. If that should happen, let us hope you will find some girl as charming as your friend Fraulein Lisl Baum to put you on the right road to the truth."

"What do you mean 'my friend'? She's yours." Colombo shook his head. "My dear James, I have many friends. You will be spending a few more days in Italy writing your report, and no doubt," he chuckled, "checking on some of the things I have told you. Perhaps you will also have an enjoyable half an hour explaining the facts of life to your colleagues in American Intelligence. In between these duties you will need companionship - someone to show you the beauties of my beloved homeland. In uncivilized countries, it is the polite custom to offer one of your wives to a man whom you love and wish to honour. I also am uncivilized. I have no wives, but I have many such friends as Lisl Baum. She will not need to receive any instructions in this matter. I have good reason to believe that she is awaiting your return this evening." Colombo fished in his trousers pocket and tossed something down with a clang on the table in front of Bond. "Here is the good reason." Colombo put his hand to his heart and looked seriously into Bond's eyes. "I give it to you from my heart. Perhaps also from hers."

Bond picked the thing up. It was a key with a heavy metal tag attached. The metal tag was inscribed Albergo Danielli. Room 68.

The End

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