

Diplomatic Baggage



By

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Introduction

This is a short story about Kushtia, the fictional country found in many of my stories. High on the fringes of the Hindu Kush, a small country is moving out of the shadow of its colonial past as part of the Soviet empire. Although trying to become a modern, secular state, Kushtia is still troubled by its immediate and distant past.

Now a democratic republic, Kushtia is trying to balance the future with the past by re-building itself with a governing party and presidency dominated by the heads of the country's main tribes. Kushtia's culture is founded on the importance of the household and the primacy of the head of the household. Women always had a subservient role in the Kushtian household and during Soviet times their oppression became state sponsored with women viewed as units of family construction and the harems of Kushtia's past being replaced by woman camps. With the end of the Soviet era the camps were transformed once more into the harems of the ruling families but the brutality and secrecy of communism was carried into them with some households treating their women as little better than slaves and others treating them worse than this.

With women controlled by the heads of household, veiling is commonplace. Women are unable to hold assets or engage in contracts. In recent times the international community has suspected Kushtia's leading families of taking their ideas beyond their borders. Disappearances of young women from territories bordering on Kushtia have led to accusations of the state conniving in abduction and slavery and there have even been suggestions that Kushtia has been the destination of the victims of western white slaving.

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Chapter 1 : Trade & Kushtia

Opportunities for Trade

Gerry Daniels wasn't sure how to start his report. As far as his boss at the Foreign Office was concerned the whole thing was a complete waste of time. "Need it for those wasters in Strasbourg. Don't spend too much time on it," he had said as he told Gerry he'd be spending a couple of weeks in Kushtia. Now Gerry was sitting in the British Embassy in the Kushtian Capital of Kolin staring at a discouragingly blank lap top screen.

"Opportunities For Trade Between the UK and the People's Democratic Republic of Kushtia," he typed, "An Initial Assessment." Gerry liked that; 'an initial assessment' - that way if anything came of it he'd be seen as prescient and if it led to nothing, well, it was not intended to be definitive, was it? He went on. "Introduction & Background" he typed and stopped. He wasn't really sure how to sum up this peculiar country.

Gerry had been briefed before his trip so he knew something about the history of the place. Stuck out on the fringes of the Hindu Kush, sandwiched between Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Gerry had wondered why the country wasn't called Kushtistan. That turned out to be the least curious thing about it.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his morning tea. He still hadn't got used to the idea that the local girls working in the offices around Kolin had adopted western dress but still wore headscarves and veils. Fanima, the young woman that brought the tea was no exception. Her neat blouse and straight skirt would not have looked out of place in any London office. Her head covering and veil would have been accepted when combined with a jilbab or other form of robe. The combination of Next "work-wear" tailoring and the veil just seemed odd.

"Tea, Mr. Daniels," Fanima said bowing slightly.

As Fanima bowed, Gerry noticed the disc she was wearing on a cord around her neck. Almost all of the Kushtian girls that he had seen wore them. "What is that disc?" he asked.

Fanima fingered it, proudly. "My properta," she said. "It shows the household that I belong to, my family."

"It's very nice."

"Thank you Mr. Daniels," Fanima responded. "We are an old family, proud of our traditions."

Fanima bowed again. That was one thing Gerry did like about the place. The women were all unfailingly polite and deferential. It was something he wished that the First Assistant Under Secretary for Trade had picked up.

She appeared as Gerry took his tea and thanked Fanima. "Hey Gerry, how's it going?" Suzie Berkham almost bounced into the room, snatching a biscuit from Fanima's tray as she left. "Mmm, chocolate," she said. "I see there are benefits from moving up the ladder."

"Morning," said Gerry. Suzie was about twenty years his junior, not long out of university and in her first posting. Gerry had the impression she been sent this far away because they couldn't stick her ebullience in London.

She sat down on the couch on the far side of the room Gerry had been given as an office for his stay. She kicked off her shoes and curled her legs up under herself. She nibbled at the biscuit, taking tiny bites like a rabbit. Gerry guessed she was trying to make the most of the indulgence. She looked like one of those girls that was continually on a diet - not quite thin but not quite fat either - as if a moment's lack of attention would leave her ballooning up three or four dress sizes.

"Was there something? Or did you just come to steal my biscuits."

Suzie crammed the last bite in and brushed a crumb from the corner of her lip with a fastidious finger before ruining the dainty effect by licking it off. "The Trade Minister," she said, with a smirk, "will be happy to see you after all. I had a chat with his secretary. I managed to fix it."

Gerry was mildly surprised. There hadn't been any enthusiasm when he had called earlier in the week. Maybe Suzie had unrecognised diplomatic skills. It was irritating. "Good," Gerry said.

"It's this afternoon. I'll take you over. The Minister was anxious to meet the local contact as well as yourself."

Ah, yes, thought Gerry, now I understand. He remembered the briefing notes with the profiles of the various members of the Kushtian Council of Ministers. "Randy old bugger," someone had scrawled in the margin alongside the entry for Kashim Kushnar, the Trade Minister, and Suzie was an attractive girl that he would no doubt welcome the opportunity to meet.

Meeting The Minister

Gerry made his own way across the city to meet Suzie at the Trade Ministry. He took a bus. It had seemed like a good opportunity to get to see a bit more of the people and culture. After about a mile he was less sure that it had been a good idea. He doubted if his internal organs would survive the trip. It was hard to know which was more responsible for the jolting and jarring he was being subjected to; the inadequacies of the bus's suspension or the liberal sprinkling of potholes that seemed a feature of every road.

One of the things Gerry found hardest to come to grips with in Kushtia was the status of women and the attitude of men towards them. It wasn't so much that they were thought inferior; it was more that they were regarded as having very separate lives. Men seemed to view them as though they were a different species, almost. Virtually every aspect of Kushtian life seemed designed to keep men and women separate. Even here on the bus, women had their own designated area at the back, men at the front. He had been taken to dinner with a Kushtian family and there he had spent most of the evening with the men, the women hard at work cooking and serving the food.

He'd made a joke about the women slaving away while they were enjoying themselves. His host had cut in quickly, saying that sort of thing didn't happen anymore before changing the subject quickly.

On the other hand all of the women that he had met seemed happy and cheerful; accepting their separateness, enjoying their different role in society. It was all a bit strange.

The Trade Ministry building was a depressing remnant of Kushtia's past as part of the Russian Empire. It looked as though it had been cast out of concrete in a single pouring. The windows and doors seemed to have been an afterthought by an architect anxious to ensure that the unremitting blankness of the walls was disturbed as little as possible by openings of any kind. And, while newer buildings made a style statement by carrying their plumbing on the outside, the way that the collection of pipes, ducts and cabling that spread across this building made it look more like it had been colonised by some industrial form of climbing plant.

Gerry watched as Suzie pulled up outside the Ministry in her car. She had pulled a scarf across the lower half of her face as a makeshift veil. Although women generally veiled in public it was more a matter of custom than anything else. While westerners weren't really expected to veil, it was always a good idea, Suzie thought, to at least give a nod to local traditions. She pulled the car up onto the pavement and got out. Gerry nodded in acknowledgement, enjoying the view of her legs afforded by her contortions and her short skirt. She was obviously making an effort for the benefit of the Trade Minister.

The woman that greeted them at the building's reception desk looked like a remnant from the Russian occupation as well. Heavily overweight, with a large mole in the middle of her chin and wearing in a dull olive drab dress, she managed to acknowledge their presence without the hint of a smile. With the usual essential delay to make sure that visitors knew that they were the least important thing in her life, Gerry and Suzie were eventually shown into the Minister's office.

"Mr Daniels," the Trade Minister beamed as they were shown into his office, "and the delightful as anticipated Miss Berkham. Come in! Come in!"

Gerry had to admire the man's skill. He managed to shake Gerry's hand without for a moment taking his eyes off Suzie.

After what seemed like minutes in which the Minister made small talk with Gerry while taking careful note of every detail of Suzie, Gerry was beginning to feel he would never get a moment's attention. From the way that he cast his eyes it was hard to tell if Kashim Kushnar was more taken with the way that Suzie's skirt fitted across her upper thighs, the drape of the soft silk of her shirt across her breasts or the tantalising way in which her slender neck slid beneath the collar.

In spite of the fact that Suzie was receiving Kashim's appraising glances, all his remarks were addressed to Gerry. Suzie was evidently finding it difficult to keep her irritation at being ignored in check. Finding it impossible to attract Kashim's attention other than by how she looked, she tried to cut in on Gerry's remarks. Kushnar ignored her, replying simply to whatever it was that Gerry had said. Gerry made no attempt to steer things around to Suzie's discussions, to her progressive annoyance. Suddenly the Minister turned towards Gerry and said, "Well, enough of the pleasantries. You and I need to talk, I believe." he turned back towards Suzie. "So if you will excuse us, my dear."

Suzie looked furious at being sidelined so suddenly but Gerry cut in before she had the chance to say anything. "Go on, Suzie," he said taking his cue from the Minister, "run along. I'll fill you in if there's anything you need to worry your head about afterwards."

"But, but,..." Suzie spluttered. Seeing the Minister's impassive face, she realised that protests were unlikely to do any good and gave in. "Sure," she said, with heavy irony, "I expect there's some filing or something I can do back at the Embassy." She picked up her bag and walked to the door. The Minister's gaze never left her backside all the way. Gerry felt smug for a moment or two and then decided he wasn't looking forward to what Suzie was likely to say to him once he got back to the office.

Trading Standards

Once Suzie had left the room, the Minister appeared to relax.

"An attractive woman," he said, "at least in the physical sense. But I think your country is breeding too many women who are ... ah, what is the word???"

"Assertively professional?" Gerry was being careful not to reveal his true feelings. "Pain in the butt," was what he was thinking.

The Minister appeared to consider his suggestion for a moment. "No," he said, "that is true but they are not the words I was seeking. Ah! I have it. Ball-breakers."

Gerry almost choked. "You couldn't expect me to agree, Minister," he said.

"No. That would be most undiplomatic language. But, I suspect that is how you feel. Still that is your problem I

suppose."

"Not really," Gerry responded. "She works in the Embassy but we don't have to work together. She agreed to set up this meeting. I rather gathered she had contact with you already."

The Minister shook his head. "No, but that is as I would expect. I take it then she has not been assigned to you?"

"Assigned?"

"Yes, for your comfort and amusement while you are here in Kushtia. To help you wile away your evenings."

"Good heavens! We don't do things like that! Assigned? Good grief. You can't hand women out like some sort of gift plan."

"No?" said the Minister, thoughtfully. "Ah, I suppose not. Well, then you won't mind if I...." he nodded his head towards the door that Suzie had just left through.

"You don't need to ask my permission, old man. But, as far as I am concerned, you can be my guest. I wish you luck."

"Luck?" the Minister looked puzzled. "Oh. Yes. Luck. Now will you take coffee? Or do you British still prefer tea?"

Chapter 2 : A Missing Diplomat

Suzie's Apartment

The following morning Gerry arrived at the Embassy to find considerable toing and froing. "Some sort of Whitehall flap?" he asked of one of the secretaries as she scurried by.

"No idea," she said. "All I know is the Ambassador is in a right state. Oh, and he was looking for you."

"I can't have upset the Trade Minister this much," Gerry thought. "And I don't think I've given Suzie any real cause for complaint." He went in search of the Ambassador and found him in Suzie's office.

"Ah!" Sir Patrick exclaimed on seeing him. "Good. Come on. We're going to Miss Berkham's apartment." Gerry followed him out of the Embassy and down to the Bentley convertible that he had parked outside.

Suzie's apartment was in one of the older timber framed houses overlooking what in the wet season would be Kolin's river. An old woman sat at the foot of the stairs that led to the upper floors peering at Gerry and Sir Patrick in disapproval as the two made their way up to where Suzie had her rooms.

The apartment was wrecked. She wasn't there.

Sir Patrick and Gerry peered at the muddle. Furniture was upturned, drawers had been ransacked, papers were strewn everywhere.

"It looks like there's been some sort of fight," Gerry said.

"A perceptive remark, Mr Daniels. I can only assume that you gained your degree at the University of the Bleeding Obvious." Sir Patrick scowled over his gold half rimmed spectacles as he contemplated the scene.

On one side of the room an upturned chair lay on the floor. Strips of tape wrapped around the front legs and the back support showed where someone - Suzie, Gerry imagined - had been kept tied up. Clean cut marks on the tape suggest that someone had used a knife to set her free rather than that she had managed to escape.

The other odd thing that Gerry noticed was that there was no sign of any of Suzie's personal effects. Clothes, jewelry, everything that might have been thought hers was missing. All that had been left in the flat was furnishings and her work papers and computer.

"Good heavens," said Gerry, "do you think she's been abducted by terrorists? I didn't think that there was anything like that here. There wasn't anything about it in the briefing papers. Shouldn't we call the police?"

"Tell me," said the Ambassador, slowly and carefully, "exactly what did you say to the Minister?"

Taking Things Literally

Gerry explained the conversation that he had had with the Minister. "He seemed to think I had some sort of rights over her. I suppose he thought she was my girlfriend or something. Asked if she'd been 'assigned' to me."

"Ah," said the Ambassador with an air of weariness that was growing with increased understanding. "And how did the Minister respond to Miss Berkham?"

"I think he was quite taken with her. He had no interest in what she had to say but he didn't take his eyes off her all the time she was with us. Even asked if I'd mind if he approached her - in a roundabout sort of way."

"And you said?"

"I think it was something like 'be my guest'. And I wished him luck."

"Ah," said the Ambassador again as though understanding was dawning. "Now tell me, Gerry, how much do you know of Kushtian culture and traditions?"

"Well, there was what they told me in the briefing papers...."

"I'm sure they did a wonderful job but I suspect they haven't included some aspects of Kushtian culture that are, well, rather outside the traditions of most western nations."

"Such as?"

"Let's just say they have a rather proprietary attitude towards women."

"They resent any intrusion by foreigners? Don't like visitors talking to them?"

"No, they treat them like property."

"Property?"

"Yes. Buy them, sell them, keep them for whatever purpose they chose."

"But how can that be? I see women wandering around. I've met some Kushtian women. They seem to have the same attitudes as western women. "

"The women aren't the problem. Besides I am guessing that all the women that you have met so far are part of a household? Members of a family, perhaps?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"You've seen the disc that they wear around their necks."

"Oh, the - what's it called - properta. Yes. Fanima explained it to me. I thought it was like a sort of family badge."

Sir Patrick nodded. "Yes," he said. "But it's more than that. Women that are part of a household, whether as members of the family or the staff are treated as the property of that household. They are free to come and go as they chose, within the limits of the household. Mostly, as long as a woman is compliant, the household will care and provide for them. They are well cared for. It is a very paternalistic society. Many household heads are quite liberal but make no mistake, they guard their rights jealously. And that includes the rights to dictate how the women in their household should behave and to correct them if it is felt they are not conforming to the rules of the household. And that includes selling them to another household if so wished."

"But you can't sell people. That's slavery."

"It does look an awful lot like that, doesn't it? But actually the women consent to their treatment. Every so often someone will try to stir up trouble, agitating for political freedoms and so forth but, so far, the conservative voices of the women have outnumbered the more radical views. And for a lot of households it actually isn't much worse than an arranged marriage. It's just that here the girl's parents don't give the husband a dowry, it's the other way around."

"Extraordinary. But if this goes on between households, how does that explain what's happened to Suzie?"

"Well, let's just say a woman that isn't attached to a household is seen as pretty much up for grabs. Literally." Sir Patrick saw Gerry's shocked reaction. "I mean they're careful about tourists and so on but otherwise, well, I'm afraid that some of the old traditions die hard. I think after your conversation with the Minister he decided that if she wasn't part of the Embassy household then she was available and I'm very much afraid that when you wished him luck he thought he had your permission."

"Oh good grief. So this is my fault in some way? What do we do now?" Even though Gerry hadn't liked Suzie very much, the idea that she'd been abducted as a result of something he'd said was appalling.

"I think we had better pay a call on the Minister," the Ambassador said calmly.

"Do you really think we'll find her?"

"Oh yes," Sir Patrick nodded with confidence. "The problem won't be finding her. The problem will be getting him to give her back."

Chapter 3 : Part of the Household

The Bentley

Back in the Bentley, Sir Patrick and Gerry headed back into town.

"I'm not sure that I understand the problem," Gerry began. "Surely we just need to explain things to the Minister, and then off we go."

"Diplomatically it's more difficult than that, I'm afraid. Let's look at it from his point of view. He's the Trade Minister, you're a Trade Envoy. A transaction occurred. You can't just turn up and say you didn't mean it. Where would that leave your credibility? No that wouldn't do at all. Even if it was likely that Kushnar would accept it." Sir Patrick was long experienced in making the outrageous seem reasonable.

"But I didn't 'trade' Suzie. I couldn't, could I?"

"No, but that's not how Kushnar would see it. You turn up with an attractive woman in tow. Of course he assumes that she is 'yours'. That's the way that their culture works, even informally."

Gerry sat back in his seat feeling glum. What made things worse was that he'd found Suzie insufferable. When it came to women, he preferred the quietly compliant Fanima to the brash and noisy Ms. Berkham. And she had known it. Even if they got her back, she probably wouldn't ever forgive him. Which might or might not be a problem, of course.

A Social Call

Kashim Kushnar was all smiles as he greeted Sir Patrick and Gerry.

"Ambassador, how agreeable. When was it we met last? The Embassy garden party, I'm sure. Your household is well I trust." Kashim Kushnar was effusive and welcoming.

"Yes, indeed. My wife and daughters are very well, thank you." Sir Patrick was cheery in response.

"So lucky! Such fine looking women."

"Thank you, Minister. Yes, I am most lucky in that respect." The Ambassador accepted the compliment with grace.

"You'll take tea?"

"Indeed."

Kashim Kushnar reached down beside his cushion and picked up a small brass bell. Its tinkling ring was answered by a dark skinned Kushtian girl clad in a golden harem costume, veiled and wearing an elaborate head dress which fell behind her to be fastened to cuffs around her ankles. Between her breasts hung a large golden disk engraved with two large letter K's, the girl's properta. The girl was small, barely five feet tall. She ran quickly to Kashim's side and fell to her knees. Kashim grunted a few guttural words of Kushtian. The girl bowed her head, leapt to her feet and disappeared.

Moments later three girls, all dressed as the first, reappeared. Each carried a small tray with an ornately engraved

brass pot and a small porcelain bowl. All three were blessed with the flawless skin and taut bellies that made any woman over the age of twenty one jealous. Each was endowed with a bosom and cleavage that was likely to distract any of the men present from any deep conversation. They knelt, one beside each of the three men. "Tea, gentlemen," Kushner announced. "Now, how can I help you?"

Diplomatic Language

Sir Patrick picked up his bowl of tea and took a sip. "I wanted to be confident," Sir Patrick began, "that you were happy Minister."

Gerry sat quietly. The last thing that was needed, he knew, was for him to say anything else right now. Instead he sat back and watched the two men sizing each other up as if for a game of poker.

"Happy, Sir Patrick?" Kashim Kushner's face was impassive.

"Happy, Minister. I know how important your comforts are to you and I just wanted to be sure that your, ah, latest comfort was up to expectations."

"Ah, I see. Of course. Mr. Daniels' most generous gift." The pokerfaced stare gave way to a smile of appreciation.

Gerry was feeling increasingly uncomfortable but he kept quiet.

"Exactly."

"Well, I would say that things are satisfactory so far. Although, I fear that the arrangements did not meet with the young lady's approval."

Sir Patrick gave an understanding nod. Gerry recalled the chaos in Suzie's apartment and the struggle that she had evidently put up. "So I believe," Sir Patrick said. "I was a little concerned that Mr. Daniel's gift might have its problems. He was, of course, anxious to gain your favour but I was not sure that this was the best way."

"Oh, really? I was rather pleased. There really wasn't too much of a problem in getting her to come along. Would you like to see the arrangements that I have made for the young lady?"

"By all means, by all means," Sir Patrick responded amiably.

"In which case I shall show you. Do follow me."

Kashim Kushner led the way to a flight of stairs. The three of them climbed their way towards the top of the building winding up in a spiral. As they climbed Gerry realised they were ascending the large tower that stood at one corner of Kushner's residence. Eventually they reached the top. A heavy wooden door, locked, barred and bolted, blocked their way. Kushner unlocked it and drew back the bolts with a theatrical gesture.

Inside the small room Suzie lay helplessly bound and gagged, wearing only her bra and panties, on a small, low wooden bed. The cases and boxes of her clothes and possessions from the flat lay piled around. She looked up at the men as they entered, at first wide eyed in terror at seeing Kashim and then with hope and expectation at the sight of Sir Patrick and Gerry.

Kashim sat on the bed alongside Suzie. He reached out with a hand to stroke her hair with an expression of abstracted pleasure. Suzie attempted to recoil, bringing forth a smile of satisfaction as her wriggles only served to amuse Kashim further. "Not the most comfortable arrangements for the young lady so far but in time we will not

need all this..." He gestured to the strips of tape that were wrapped around Suzie's arms and legs, restraining her "... and something more elegant than this will be required." He traced his fingers across the strip of tape that covered Suzie's lips. "It's really a shame that I haven't had a chance to give her any attention since her arrival. But you know how things are... I am sure that, given time, she will make an excellent addition to the household."

Chapter 4 : The New Intern

A Possible Alternative

"So you see, Ambassador," Kashim went on fondling the helpless and struggling Suzie, "Mr Daniel's present makes a very acceptable addition to my harem. I've felt for some time that a new blonde would be a worthwhile acquisition."

Gerry noticed the slightest raising of an eyebrow by Sir Patrick. He clasped his hands across his belly and nodded understandingly. "I remember you saying so Minister, I remember you saying so and it was for exactly that reason that I was worried." A look of concern crossed Kashim's face as Sir Patrick continued. "You know that we cannot, of course, publicly sanction the ways in which Kushtian culture manifests itself in its treatment of women," Sir Partrick's circumlocutory manner came easily after years of diplomatic service, "but I had hoped that our token of appreciation would meet your requirements in that respect."

Kashim looked puzzled for a moment.

Sir Patrick went on. "I fear that what Mr Daniels did not know was that Ms. Berkham's hair colouring is not entirely genuine. I felt I should bring it to your attention. In the interests of openness between us."

"Hmmm," said Kashim. He slid a finger across the top of her pants, pushing them down to give him a view of the struggling Suzie's pubic hair. He grabbed hold of a strand of Suzie's hair between his fingers and peered at it as a look of disappointment crossed his face. Suzie stopped her struggles, anxious not to pull against Kashim's grip. A muffled squeal came from behind her tape gag. "How duplicitous of her. It would, of course have been noticed but thank you for bringing it to my attention."

"Such is the way of women," Sir Patrick conceded. Kashim nodded as if in disappointed agreement. Suzie growled her objections but Sir Patrick was not to be diverted. "However, if you wanted me to, I think I could put things right."

Kashim looked uncertain. He drew a finger across Suzie's breasts, contemplating them carefully. He moved his hand again, stroking her thigh as she tried to turn herself away from him. He studied Sir Patrick's face for a moment and then said, "I would not wish you to think I was in any way dissatisfied with Mr Daniel's gift. However, I am always interested to hear anything that you have to propose, Ambassador. Let us go for a walk in the garden." He turned towards Gerry. "Mr Daniels, would you mind locking up after us?"

Without another word Kashim and Sir Patrick left. Gerry got up to go as well. For a moment Suzie thought that he was about to free her but her pleading look gave way to a scowl as she realised that he wasn't. Ignoring Suzie's agitated wriggling and complaining, Gerry left her, locking the door behind him.

In the Bentley, heading back to the Embassy a short while later with Sir Patrick, there were two questions running through Gerry's mind. What had Sir Patrick agreed with Kashim Kushnar? And how had he known Suzie wasn't a natural blonde?

Embassy Excitement

The following day, Gerry turned up at the Embassy in a state of considerable confusion. The more he thought about the events of the previous evening, the more puzzled he was. Kashim appeared to be involved in abduction and slavery and yet Sir Patrick had seemed happy to accept it. He even seemed to have been countenancing some sort of deal to arrange Suzie's freedom.

As he walked into his office, remembering with guilty amusement the sight of Suzie taped up on the bed at the Minister's, he heard Suzie's voice shouting, "Yes, I'm bloody back and I want this month's trade figures ready to send through to the FO by the end of the morning, so sort them OUT!"

He'd been nearly knocked down by one of the secretaries scuttling off to the registry. He thought he'd stay out of Suzie's way. Even if she hadn't realised it was his fault she had been snatched she might not forgive him for leaving her locked in the room once Sir Patrick and Kashim had gone.

Another woman's voice cut across the hubbub of the embassy. "Do you imagine for one moment that I am ever, ever, going to agree with this, Patrick Wight!" There was a loud crash of a slamming door. Gerry just managed to back out of the way as Sir Patrick's wife stalked down the corridor and out of the Embassy.

A few minutes later Fanima appeared and told Gerry that the Ambassador wanted to see him. By the time he got to Sir Patrick's office, two of the Embassy staff were busy clearing up the smashed crockery and Sir Patrick was sitting behind his desk with a mildly aggrieved expression. Opposite him sat a slim, blonde, girl of about eighteen, Gerry guessed. "Have you met my younger daughter?" Sir Patrick asked Gerry.

Gerry nodded to the girl. "Morning... ?" he said.

"Tracey," she smiled warmly stretching out a pair of legs that seemed disturbing long to Gerry. "With an 'e'."

Gerry looked at Sir Patrick quizzically. "Don't blame me," said Sir Patrick, "it was her mother's idea." Gerry decided not to comment. "Now," he said. "I've got a small job for you. You'll remember the Minister for Trade."

Gerry was scarcely likely to forget, even in the unlikely event of Suzie overlooking his involvement in her recent experiences. He nodded.

"Good. Well, young Tracey here is going on a work experience placement at the Trade Ministry." Gerry's choking cough was cut off by the Ambassador. "So I thought you might take her over there, introduce her to the Minister, see her settled in. Good man. You ought to go. Need to be there in about half an hour. Take the Bentley." He turned to Tracey. "Assuming your mother hasn't slashed the tyres," he said.

"See you, dad," Tracey waved at her father, uncurling herself from the seat. She rummaged in her handbag for a moment, pulled out a brightly coloured scarf and draped it around her head so that it veiled the lower half of her face. "There, I'm decent for going outdoors now, aren't I?"

Gerry looked at her short skirt and the skimpy top that fitted tightly across her chest and barely reached her belt. The scarf she was wearing as a veil was barely opaque. Decent was hardly the word but he thought Kashim would appreciate it. Did Tracey have the first idea of what she was being let into? Had her father really traded his own daughter for Suzie Berkham?

Top Down Tourer

By the time Gerry got down to the car park, Tracey was already sitting in the back seat of the Bentley. She had

persuaded the driver to put the roof down.

Gerry joined her, trying hard to keep his eyes off the expanse of thigh that Tracey was revealing as she stretched out her legs across the pale leather seat. The car started up. "The Trade Ministry, Mr. Daniels?" the driver asked as he pulled out of the Embassy.

"Please," said Gerry.

Gerry was regretting the roof being down. The Bentley was kicking up plenty of dust as they headed towards town. Tracey on the other hand was enjoying every minute, happy at the attention she was getting every time the car had to stop for traffic police or the occasional bullock cart crossing the main road into Kolin.

"Isn't it nice of daddy to get me on this scheme?" Tracey piped up.

Gerry turned towards her, aware that he hadn't looked at anything apart from her legs since he'd got into the car. He suddenly realised the girl was wearing what looked like heavy brass manacles. "What on earth are those?"

"Don't you know anything about Kushtian culture?" Tracey sneered, pushing her shackled wrists towards him before pulling them back and peering flirtatiously over her veil and the chains towards him. "These are manuses."

Gerry, better informed but no wiser, looked blank.

"They're, like, symbolic." She dropped her wrists to her lap. "From the days when Kushtian women wore real chains. These are really good ones. Heavy brass, not like some of the cheap stuff you see. I think they're cool."

"Cool?"

"Yeah. I mean like no one I know back home would have anything like this."

"I'm sure," Gerry replied with confidence

"And they'll get me in good with the Minister. He'll like me turning up with some traditional Kushtian stuff, won't he?"

After seeing how Kashim had treated Suzie, Gerry was absolutely certain that he would approve of a girl turning up already manacled but he limited his comments to a simple "I guess so" and sat back for the rest of the ride.

Kashim Kushnar, as Gerry had expected, was delighted when his new intern arrived. Gerry felt uncomfortable leaving her there. Whatever Sir Patrick's intentions had been, Gerry couldn't help but feel that Kashim viewed Tracey as some sort of exchange for Suzie. When he shared these concerns with the Ambassador, Sir Patrick's reaction had been quite sanguine. "Best not to worry what Kushnar thinks," Sir Patrick said. "I'm sure it will turn out all right."

Chapter 5: Tea Dance

Lokoum & Luxury

It was two weeks later that Gerry was invited to the Trade Ministry in order to finalise the discussions on his proposed report. Gerry had spent considerable effort compiling his thoughts on the future of trade between Kushtia and the European Union and he was looking forward to getting back to London.

Kashim Kushner, the Trade Minister, received Gerry in the small lounge area attached to Kushner's office at the Ministry. Kushner was sprawled comfortably on a pile of well stuffed cushions. Beside him knelt a girl, veiled with an almost transparent black cloth that was hung at its hem with gold wire and jewels and wearing a golden costume that left her belly bare. She was holding a tray of lokoum. Kashim gestured to the tray. "Please," he said. "Take some and join me. It is most excellent. Turkish, of course. And when they are part of the EU cheaper for us perhaps?"

Gerry selected a piece, letting the sticky sweet dissolve in his mouth. "Perhaps," he said, sitting down on the cushions. He had learned from the Ambassador never to agree, never to disagree, in these discussions. Another girl appeared to serve them tea. This one wore - what was it Tracey had called them? - 'manuses', although these looked more practical than decorative to Gerry. As she turned to leave Gerry saw that the backs of her thighs and calves were criss-crossed with bright red wheals presumably from a beating for some infringement of Kushner's regime.

Kashim smiled as he lifted his tea and gestured to Gerry to join him. "This lounge is my sanctuary. It is too easy to spend all your time working. The important thing is to balance your work with your pleasure. I try to encourage my staff to do the same."

"Does that include your new intern?" Gerry hadn't intended to raise the subject of the Ambassador's daughter and he suddenly realised that what he had said may have sounded impertinent.

"Ah, Tracey," Kashim said with a grin, ignoring any irony in Gerry's question. "She needs little encouragement from me in the matter of pleasure. I found she was not so useful on the Ministry payroll but I was able to find a position for her in my household. See..." He leant forward and muttered a few words in the ear of the kneeling girl. She leapt to her feet bowed briefly to Gerry, peering at him with wide, dark brown, eyes over her veil, and then to Kashim before she disappeared. Kashim took another piece of lokoum, savouring it slowly. "Watch," he said.

Almost as soon as he said it, three girls, dressed in the same golden costumes and with the same jewel-trimmed veils, appeared. Tracey, the girl in the middle, led the three of them in a spirited, acrobatic and erotic dance with moves that focused on emphasising the legs, the buttocks, and the breasts. At one point Tracey stepped across the floor, pushing her hips forward so that the great golden properta that hung from the centre of her belt on a chain slapped against her crotch.

"Tracey has a very original talent in this area. It is not traditional Kushtian dancing but, ahhh," Kashim paused as Tracey bent backwards over a low table while one of the others shuffled forward, her crotch almost skimming Tracey's nose, "but it does have a rhythmical charm of its own."

Gerry could see what he meant. Tracey's dancing was more Rn'B than World Music for certain. Although, he had to confess, he wasn't complaining, either.

"She also has introduced me to one of your western erotic TV channels."

Gerry raised his eyebrows but Kashim went on without allowing him to comment.

"MTV, it is called. So many girls! Such, alluring costumes. Such - ah," Tracey executed another move that left Gerry wondering if her bones were actually connected in all the usual places, "energetic displays. Rhiannon, Beyoncee, Shakira. All of them, remarkable. Remarkable."

The girls' gyrations came to a conclusion and the three of them fell about Kashim's feet, Tracey with her head against his thigh, the tail of her black and jewelled veil and her blonde hair trailing back across Kashim's lap.

Kashim reached down and drew his fingers gently across her forehead. "She is proving to be a valuable member of my household," he said.

"As a dance tutor?"

"Among other things," Kashim gave an exaggerated wink. "No woman can truly dance for her man unless she has danced in that most intimate of ways. I found she was untouched. Can you imagine? Eighteen years old and without that most essential of knowledge. Such a generous gesture by the Ambassador."

Gerry was surprised by Kashim's bluntness. and Sir Patrick's complicit agreement. It was after all, his own daughter that the Ambassador was talking about. He was surprised, too, that the girls seemed not to object. He found Kashim's assertion of Tracey's innocence hard to believe but the calm, cool, look that Tracey was giving him over her veil suggested to him that he should keep his scepticism to himself.

"And I trust that you were not offended by my returning your original gift?" Kashim reached down to run his fingers through Tracey's hair. As he did so, Tracey inclined her head to press against his hand, much as a cat being stroked might.

Gerry thought about how Suzie would respond to being referred to as his 'gift'. She had said nothing about her experience and had given no sign that she knew Gerry was involved but it wouldn't be a welcome suggestion, at the very least he felt. "Not in the least, Minister," Gerry responded. "I was sorry that I inadvertently misled you."

"That is quite all right. Obviously Sir Patrick had a more intimate knowledge of the young lady than yourself."

No, thought Gerry to himself, that wasn't what I was apologising for misleading you about. It was too complicated to explain, though and beside Gerry was already being distracted by the thought of just how Sir Patrick had acquired his knowledge. It seemed unlikely that there would be an entry in Suzie's personnel file to the effect that the collar and cuffs didn't match.

Eventually talk returned to trade opportunities of a kind that Gerry felt he could legitimately include in his report. From their discussions it was evident that Kashim was well disposed to the British, a fact that Gerry put down to Sir Patrick's diplomatic skills and his generosity with his daughter. The last point, Gerry felt probably didn't need to be mentioned.

"Well," said Kashim, as Gerry made ready to leave. "I trust that your journey back will be safe. We look forward to the results of your visit here. Trade is always of interest to us and," he looked across to where Tracey was stretching sinuously across the cushions. "perhaps the European Union can do something to increase the number of blonde girls available in Kushtia."

Kashim smiled as he shook Gerry's hand. As he left the Ministry Gerry still wasn't sure whether or not Kashim had been joking. It wasn't something that he felt he could include in his report though. Sometimes diplomacy worked two ways.

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