

Banking For Beginners

By Freddie Clegg



Finance On The Run

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All characters fictitious

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Banking for Beginners – Introduction

Most of the action takes place in and around Kolin, the capital of Kushtia. High on the fringes of the Hindu Kush, the 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. Its distinctive way of life has been recognised under the United Nations World Heritage Cultures programme (described in the tale, “Anthropology”).

Characters

Most of the folk in this tale introduce themselves as they go along but some of them were first encountered in earlier Freddie Clegg stories (Mainly in the story “Market Forces” although some also make appearances in “Anthropology”):-

- The Kalinin : President elect of the state of Kushtia.
- Lauren – daughter of Brad, the Kushtian Trade Minister and wife of Kushnati Koresh (a council elder and a very elder council elder at that).
- Victoria – wife of Koreni Kalanis, (son of the Kalinin of Kushtia).
- Freddie Clegg – a serial entrepreneur with an interest in female flesh.
- Ellie Grant – Freddie's right hand woman, lawyer for the Clegg Enterprises business
- Anatoly Kustensky – a Russian with similar aims to Freddie but in different markets
- Sergeant Dobranin – a helpful officer of the Kolin traffic police.

There are a few words of Kushtian that you might find helpful (although I'll try to keep the meanings obvious when they turn up). Some others will be used but please don't be put off, I'll try to keep things understandable:-

doenya :	a household servant
seragla :	the harem of a Kushtian household
huna :	bitch
chanoosh :	the all covering robe of an unmarried Kushtian woman
hunashif :	an aromatic herb smoked for its intoxicating effects

Chapter 1 : Flight from the UK

Henry Clegg looked nervously around at the departure lounge. Of course he really knew that the armed police, in their flack jackets, carrying their disturbing array of weaponry, were only there to provide security, but he couldn't help feeling that they were also keeping a close eye on him, personally.

In Henry's mind the question was which of the forces of law and order would be first through the door of the departure lounge ready to snatch away his ticket and boarding card before he could get to his flight. There was the bank's inspection department, their auditors, the financial services regulator, the head of consumer finance watch, and of course the police themselves. And that didn't include the irate parents of his recently pregnant P.A. Lately things just seemed to have piled up and now he was just glad to be getting out. Some bankers might be getting bailed out but it certainly didn't seem to extend to him.

"Air Kushtia is pleased to announce the departure of flight 003 to Riga, Strigino, Tashkent and Kolin. Passengers should please board now through gate 27."

Henry felt relieved by the announcement. He picked up the small bag that carried the few things that would sustain him on board and scurried towards the gate. It had been awfully good of Uncle Freddie to arrange this for him, he thought, and at such short notice. He'd certainly needed the chance of a new job somewhere far away from where he had been working. Somewhere far removed from structured funding arrangements linked to the American sub-prime market, the fall out from his deal with Lehman Brothers, from his negotiations with a certain savings bank in the North East of England or indeed the exit strategy for his finances that he had arranged with Landsbanki, Glitnir, and Kaupthing in Iceland.

With his current set of problems, the Kushtian capital of Kolin had sounded attractive at the instant that Freddie had mentioned it; if only because he'd never heard of it before and he could readily imagine that none of the people who were hoping to find him would have heard of it either. At the very least it would allow him to keep his head down for a few months. That way he could wait until the more acrimonious scalp hunting had finished and then he could work out what his options were.

The boarding gate was curiously quiet. Looking around, as far as Henry could tell, he was the only passenger. Airline staff walking back along the pier to the terminal building looked at him with what seemed to Henry like a mixture of astonishment and sympathy. Henry got his first inkling of why when the stewardess came forward to open the gate. He wasn't sure what sort of 'plane the flight was using but with her bulk he hoped it was a large one. He'd been used to the idea of wide bodied aircraft, he was surprised to see it applied to cabin crew too. She peered at him through thick lensed, heavy black framed spectacles and beckoned him forward. Henry looked around to make sure it was him she wanted but to his disappointment there was no one else.

As he handed the woman his boarding card, his eyes were drawn to the thick dark moustache that adorned her top lip. She misinterpreted his startled curiosity for some form of flirtatious interest and handed him his boarding card back with a disturbing smile. As Henry got back to his seat he noticed her adjusting her dark brown uniform jacket in some sort of vain attempt to pretend that it had anything to do with the figure of the woman underneath it. When she straightened her jacket, her body appeared to move off in another direction entirely. As far as Henry could tell the uniform had been created by dyeing a khaki Soviet army jacket with cold tea and replacing the badges with the insignia of Air Kushtia. You could still see darker patches where the military badges that had been there before had stopped the fabric from fading.

When the flight attendant pulled back the curtain that closed off the boarding ramp he was only too pleased to slide past her and on towards the plane.

As he walked down the ramp he peered out of the window into the gathering gloom of the evening. The aircraft that was waiting for him was no sleek jet but one of the largest propeller driven aircraft that Henry had ever seen. With its thin fuselage, steeply swept back wings and

four large engines each carrying two sets of propellers, the thing looked more like a bomber from the cold war than any sort of airliner that Henry had travelled on. He would have to ask his uncle about it, Henry thought. Freddie knew a lot about aircraft. He emerged from the ramp close to tail of the aircraft. Its fin and rudder stretched up high above him. Henry could see the insignia of Air Kushtia on the fin; it appeared to have been painted over a Soviet red star. Maybe his theories about cold war bombers weren't so far off the mark.

The bulky, moustachioed, flight attendant was waiting at the head of the stairway as he climbed up to the rear passenger door. Henry was a bit puzzled as to how she might have got there, given that she hadn't passed him on the ramp. He managed to squeeze by her. As he did so he realised that it was not, after all, the same woman as had checked his ticket at the gate. He was depressed by the idea that, in Kushtia, maybe all women looked like this.

He stepped into the cabin and looked around, wondering at how an interior designer could find a use for so many shades of brown. He found his seat and stowed his flight bag in the overhead locker.

The engines coughed into life. He was evidently going to be alone for the first leg of the flight at least. He heard the flight attendant slam the rear door of the aircraft and then, obviously not happy that it had shut properly, slam it again. He was beginning to wonder if Freddie had done him such a favour after all.

The aircraft seemed to lope across the tarmac towards the runway before lurching upward with a whine of engines and staggering into the air. Henry thought the best thing to do would be to get some sleep.

"Henry George Arthur Clegg," the judge was saying. "You have been responsible for defrauding your employer and the customers of your bank. You have caused distress and hardship. You have been found guilty of fraud and it is the sentence of this court that you will be taken from here to a place of confinement and then to a place of execution where you shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead in twenty minutes."

"In twenty minutes," thought Clegg, "what sort of sentence was that? Where's the time for appeals? That can't be right."

"In twenty minutes. Sir, we will be landing in Riga in twenty minutes. Please you must fasten your belt seat."

Henry looked up with relief, waking up with a jump to find the flight attendant tugging at his arm. He nodded to show understanding, fiddled with the controls of his seat to slide it upright and strapped himself in, ready for what he feared would be a bumpy landing.

At Riga the flight was joined by more passengers, a small group of men in dark suits, dark shirts, dark ties and dark glasses that sat together and spoke not a word for the entire 4 hours of the next leg of the flight to Strigino. They left the flight there and Henry had the opportunity to stretch his legs while the plane refuelled.

The flight took off again heading to Tashkent. An hour out from Strigino, one of the engines coughed and failed, its propellers shuddering to a halt. Clegg waved the stewardess over to show her but she seemed neither surprised nor even very interested. At least that was reassuring, thought Clegg. Certainly it didn't seem to interfere with the aircraft continuing its flight.

At Tashkent there was much shouting and excitement on the tarmac beneath his window as mechanics debated what if anything could or should be done about the faulty engine. A ladder was brought. An argument ensued. There was much banging and thumping from the engine nacelle as shouts of encouragement were offered from the ground. Clegg dozed off again, not anxious to witness exactly how they managed to get the plane airborne again.

By the time he woke again the plane was well into the final leg of the flight. Keen for a drink he decided to risk the attentions of the hirsute cabin staff and reached up for the stewardess call button. It came away as he tugged at it.

Henry, embarrassed, was trying to push it back into place when he realised that a stewardess was beside his seat. "What can I do to help, Sir?" a soft voice asked.

Henry turned to see a vision of loveliness staring down at him. The flight attendant was evidently no relative of the one that had crewed on the earlier parts of the flight. This girl was, Henry judged, barely twenty. She had almond shaped, dark brown eyes and a dark complexion. Her face was modestly veiled but her belly was naked, a jewel sparkling in her navel. Her uniform looked more like something that belonged in a middle-eastern harem. Henry thought it a great improvement over the one earlier that had appeared to have been acquired from a T34 tank regiment. She reached across him to push the call button back into the panel. Her breasts were only inches from his face.

"Ah, a, ah, err yes, ah, a scotch please," Henry stuttered.

"Of course." The girl disappeared and returned moments later pushing a trolley with a tray carrying three bottles of different malts, a small ice bucket, a small jug of water and a cut glass tumbler. She knelt in the aisle beside his seat holding the tray towards him. "Which would you like sir?" she said.

Henry happy at the improvement in cabin service grinned. "The Laphroaig," he said, "please."

The girl smiled again, poured a stiff measure of the drink, offered him ice and water both of which he refused and then handed him the glass before kneeling again beside him to ask if there was anything else he needed.

It was only later, when Henry had learned much more of the compliant and obliging nature of Kushtian women, that he realised that he had missed an opportunity. As it was he settled for a bag of nuts.

Chapter 2 : Kolin International

The arrival formalities in Kolin seemed no more or less tedious than at any airport. That was one of the sad things about the development of air travel, Henry thought. After leaving Heathrow he felt there was nothing to choose between a run down, fly-blown, derelict airport with third world catering and the capital of Kushtia. Henry allowed himself a grin. Freddie would be furious if he heard him say that. One thing about his uncle - Freddie could be fiercely patriotic.

He emerged from the baggage claim, surprised that his bag seemed to have had no worse a flight than he had, and headed for customs. As Freddie had suggested, the informal entry visa of a \$10 bill left carelessly in his passport speeded his admission to the People's Democratic Republic of Kushtia.

In the arrivals hall, a short dark man was waiting carrying a cardboard sign with the words "Henly Cregg" scrawled on it. Henry thought that was close enough and presented himself to the man. He pointed to the exit and headed off towards it, barely giving Henry enough time to collect his bags and stagger after him. Henry found him outside sitting in a battered Zil limousine. He tossed his bag into the back and climbed in alongside the driver. As the car pulled away, Henry grasped at once the reason why so many Russian leaders used to be seen scowling so frequently.

It was dark. The complete lack of street lighting meant that Henry's first impressions of Kushtia would be delayed until the morning. It was probably just as well. The airport road ran into town past a series of factories, cement plants, steel works and chemical refineries. It wasn't the most attractive of routes.

When Freddie had set things up he'd asked Henry if he'd prefer the Kolin Holiday Inn or the Kolin Centrallum Hotel. Henry had opted for the latter, not wanting to check into yet another impersonal international chain hotel. As Henry climbed out of the Zil in front of the hotel he now realised why Freddie had said, "Well, if you're sure...."

The hotel front was in complete darkness apart from a feeble bulb glowing over the front door. Henry pushed his way inside, dragging his bag behind him.

The lobby of the hotel was, however, much more welcoming than its exterior. There was light, there were comfortable looking chairs, there was a bar and, most intriguing of all, there was a woman naked apart from a veil that covered the lower half of her face, dancing on a table for the amusement of the guests. Henry thought that Kushtia or at least the hotel had something going for it after all.

A loud cough from behind him drew his attention away from the spectacle in the bar. His driver was waiting. Evidently the opportunity to leer at naked flesh wasn't sufficient recompense for his trip. Henry nodded towards the naked woman, "Not your sort of thing?"

"Ah, maybe. Without the veil, that would be something. With it - well you westerners may find it a novelty, perhaps." He shrugged. Henry found him another \$10 bill. The man flashed Henry a toothy grin and left.

By the time that Henry had registered and been given his room key the almost naked woman had, to his disappointment, gone. In spite of the absence of entertainment Henry made his way back to the bar. He ordered a beer. The barman insisted that he could only serve alcohol to foreign nationals and was then disappointed when Henry showed him his passport, the extra tips for this illegal service obviously making up part of what he considered his rightful payment entitlement. Henry sat down. There had been a message waiting for him at the check in desk. He opened the envelop to read it.

"Good greeting and most welcome to Kolin," it said in neat handwriting on headed notepaper that proclaimed itself as coming from the People's Bank of Kushtia. "It is my great pleasure that a brother son of the most excellent Freddie should be here in our country. My many distraughts that I can be not wit you tonight but will join in the morning feed time. Your most extraordinary

correspondent. Kerren Kerrish. General Manager and Chief Cashier”

He re-read it and felt he had managed to take from it all the meaning that might be held within. Henry sank another beer and then a third before retiring to bed in anticipation of his meeting the following morning.

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Kerren Kerrish arrived the following morning in time to interrupt Henry's breakfast as he sat alone in the hotel restaurant. Henry saw him arrive at the doorway. He wasn't sure that the man would actually get through it. Kerrish was man with a bushy white beard and a substantial girth. If his complexion had been lighter he might have made some store an ideal festive Santa Claus. “What delights, Mr Clegg, what delights,” he boomed as he stepped across to Henry's table.

Clegg got to his feet. “Mr Kerrish,” he said, “good morning. It's very good to see you.”

“Indeed. Indeed. And for me it is very good to see you. The bank needs your expertise. I understand from Mr Freddie Clegg that you have held a very responsible position in your British banking system. It is most good of you to bring those skills to Kushtia.”

Henry was quite happy to accept Mr Kerrish's plaudits even though he wasn't sure that his career in banking to date warranted them. It sounded as though Freddie had done a more than effective job in selling his capabilities to the Kushtians. He went on with his breakfast. Kerren Kerrish was offered coffee by Henry's waiter and gladly took a cup.

“So. We have for you a nice office. We are very advanced here, with computers and everything. You will see. Just like your old lady of needle threading street.” Henry looked puzzled until he realised that Kerren was talking about the Bank of England. He wasn't sure that he believed Kerren any more than he did his uncle. Kerren Kerrish finished his coffee. “We go to the bank now. You find we work for mornings just. From 10 o'clock to one o'clock. That is enough for work. Then after for pleasure and rest. Better that way than work all times. So we go to the bank now.”

Henry nodded. He could see that the hardest part of the job was likely to be understanding just what his boss was talking about, but then, he thought, that's hardly the first time.

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The head office of the People's Bank of Kushtia turned out to be a short stroll across the square from the hotel. Kerren Kerrish was bulky but surprisingly agile as he bobbed through the crowds, avoiding the clouds of diesel fumes belching from the buses that seemed to take little notice of pedestrians whether they were in the road or on the pavement. Henry followed him, narrowly avoiding being run down on several occasions.

A doorman waved them into the bank with an expansive gesture and a deep bow to Kerrish. Inside, the banking hall was suitably impressive with heavy wooden counters, brass rails and grills for the staff; deep leather chairs and polished tables for the customers. Kerren Kerrish swept through the hall, staff bowing as he passed them, Henry hurrying along behind him. Kerrish led the way into an enormous office with a desk the size of a billiards table. “Head of Business Banking and Credit Services” it said on the door. Henry wondered what the owner of the office was like; it looked like this was going to be his new boss.

“Take a seat,” said Kerrish, gesturing to the chair behind the desk. “You should get used to your new office.” Henry was beginning to worry that Freddie might have oversold his capabilities. “I will have your chief clerk acquaint you with the bank's procedures. He will be able to take care of most things for you. Trust your staff, Mr Henry, they are capable men. Now you will need a secretary.”

“I suppose so,” Henry was still somewhat bemused by the turn of events that had him disappearing from one bank pursued by the authorities on one day and marching into this enormous office on the next. He wished he knew a bit more about Kushtia than he did. All he had to go on was that it was along way from London, Freddie's assurance that “they're a

reasonable bunch of chaps” and the fact that Freddie had done business with them for a while

“Do you have a preference?”

Henry thought for a moment. If he had been honest he'd have expressed a wish for someone more like the stewardess on the Tashkent-Kolin leg of his flight out than the one that had welcomed him on board at London but he felt that would probably be seen as politically incorrect. “I'm sure that any of the bank's secretaries will be well able to fulfil the role, Mr Kerrish,” he said to Kerren. “I will be advised by you.”

Kerren looked puzzled for a moment but then said, “Well, I shall send you one. I hope you find her suitable.”

Chapter 3 : Suitable Staff

There was a knock on his office door and, once Henry had realised that whoever was outside was waiting to be invited in, a young woman entered. Kerren Kerrish had been as good as his word and based on his first sight of her Henry thought she would be very suitable indeed.

She was, he supposed, about twenty one or twenty two years old and wore a curious combination of western and what he assumed was traditional Kushtian dress. On her head she wore a pill box hat from which draped a scarf that hung across the lower half of her face veiling all of her features apart from a pair of sparkling, dark brown eyes fringed with long lashes. If her headwear was traditional, Kushtian and modest, the rest of her outfit was anything but. She wore a white blouse that fitted tightly across her breasts and her skirt while straight and tailored was slit so that with each step Henry was afforded an excellent view of her legs. He waved her into the office. To his delight Henry realised that the girl was wearing stockings and, from the way she strode across the room, her skirt dividing at each step, she didn't mind that he knew it.

"Mr Kerrish said I should see to anything at all that you needed," she said. Henry thought her tone distinctly flirtatious. She was carrying a set of files. As she leant forward to place the files on his desk, Henry had an excellent view of her cleavage. He felt it hadn't been accidental.

"Well, Miss .." he began.

"Anchari Astana," the woman said. "I am called Anchari. But my friends call me Anch, please."

"Well Anch," Henry went on. "I hope you will be able to help me. This is all very new to me."

"I'm sure I can help," she sat herself on the desk beside him, crossing her nylon sheathed legs. "Mr Kerrish was very keen for me to do all I can. Oh, excuse me." Henry realised that the top button of her blouse had given up the unequal battle to keep her blouse closed and had become unfastened. Anch refastened it without embarrassment and then turned her attention back to Henry. "So what should I do first of all?"

"Well, why don't you take off that veil," Henry said, "I'm sure you don't need it in here."

Anch leapt to her feet, startling Henry and shouting. "What do you take me for? Mr Kerrish said I should be nice to you but you treat me like some common huna! I am no huna!" She stormed out of the room, practically knocking over Kerren Kerrish as she pushed passed him in the doorway.

Henry was on his feet calling her to come back but she ignored him. Kerren Kerrish looked at Henry. "What ever has upset Miss Astana? She is one of our most experienced staff. She seemed very distressed."

"I don't understand," Henry said. "She seemed - well - very friendly."

Kerrish smiled. "Kushtian girls are all very friendly," he said, "you will have no difficulty finding companionship for your relaxations in the afternoons. Miss Astana would be very suitable. Yes?"

"Well I hadn't thought of that but yes." Henry was surprised by Kerrish's casual suggestion that his secretary would be happy to provide sexual favours. "But I have obviously upset her."

"I am surprised, good friend. Of course the appetites of the Cleggs are legendary but even so I cannot imagine what you could have said that would have scandalised Miss Astana so."

"But I made no improper suggestion, I simply suggested that she take off her veil and"

"Ah!" Kerrish threw up his hands. "Ah! I understanding. Such a thing is not nice here in Kushtia. For a girl to show her face before her marriage. No! Only the poorest of women in Kushtia would dream of going without a veil. You will find that Kushtian girls are most accommodating in every other respect but they would find such a thing deeply insulting."

"She said I was treating her like a common – what was the word – huna?"

"Oh yes. A girl dog."

"Bitch?"

"Yes, bitch. It is an insult to call a woman so in English? Even though you love your dogs?"

"Yes. Look can I apologise to her?"

"No. No. That is not the way." Kerren's face had a look of astonished disbelief. "No man can apologise to a Kushtian girl. That would bring great loss of face. Please let me explain to her your misunderstanding. She may forgive you. I will do what I can. This is what friends are for. Leave this to your friend. See." Kerren excused himself and left the office.

A few minutes later the girl reappeared, knocking politely at the door to the office. Henry beckoned her in. Before he could say anything she spoke. "Mr Kerrish has explained that you do not know our ways and traditions. I should have explained how things are here. Please forgive me." She lowered her eyes to the floor.

Henry was grateful for the opportunity to repair things. "That is quite all right," he said. "I have much to learn. I am sure you will be able to help me."

"So, you would like me to stay?"

"Yes, yes indeed."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you," Anch said. "I was afraid that you did not like me and that your words were intended to make me go."

"Not in the least. Now perhaps you could explain these files. I suppose that I should try to understand them."

"First some coffee though? You would like?"

"I would like very much. Thank you, Anch. What is 'thank you' in Kushtian?"

"Thaknarish."

"Thaknarish," Henry imitated.

"Very good," Anch clapped her hands delightedly. "I will get coffee."

She returned moments later with a large brass jug and two tiny porcelain cups and poured them each some of the thick, black liquid. Henry took a sip. The coffee was warm rather than hot and extremely sweet and strong. "Thaknarish," said Henry, raising his cup to Anch.

She lifted hers in response, "You say 'cheers' in English?"

"That's right. You speak very good English."

"Thank you," said Anch. "We learn at school. It is a difficult language. Much harder than Kushtian. So many words."

Henry was enjoying the discussion. Anch was an attractive girl. Even if her face was veiled, the rest of her physical attributes more than made up for that. His eyes were drawn to the swell of her breasts and then, as he looked up, he saw that she had noticed his stare and her eyes told him that she was smiling behind her veil. "Ah, err, yes," Henry stuttered.

"Do not be embarrassed Mr Clegg," Anch said. "All Kushtian men admire the woman. They all like the breasts. Do you think mine are nice? Sometimes I think they are too small. Perhaps one

day I will go to America or London and get new, big breasts.”

“They are lovely, Anch. I don’t think they need to be any bigger.”

“I’m not sure,” she started to unbutton her blouse, obviously anxious for some further reassurance.

Henry was more concerned not to get thrown out of his job on his first morning and was anxious to encourage her to put them away without offending her again. “Err, your medallion,” he said pointing to the disk that hung from a cord around her neck. “That’s very attractive. Is that gold?”

His question distracted Anch from inspecting her breasts although she did nothing to fasten her blouse. She lifted up the bright disk and nodded. “Yes,” she said. “It is my properta. All Kushtian women wear them. I am lucky to have this in gold.”

“Properta? Like the English word 'property'?”

“Yes that is right. It shows the household that I belong to. Luckily my household is wealthy so my properta is made of gold. With the properta anyone can tell from which household a woman is belonging to. The household is very important in Kushtia. It is the centre of our lives. To wear the properta of a wealthy household is to have high status. I am very lucky. Now please come and tell me what you think of my breasts.”

“Ah, well, surely not here in the office.”

“Of course. This is why we have cubicon.”

“Cubicon?”

Anch gestured to a curtain against one wall. She took Henry by the hand and led him towards it. Pulling back the curtain, she revealed a small recess with a couch littered with large cushions. “Here,” she said leading him to the couch and encouraging him to lie down. “Cubicon is very important for senior managers. Too much stress is very bad for you. Here you can have your stress relieved. Part of my job is to ensure that your stress is least. I feel you are tense and need to have less stress.” Henry gulped. He had to admit feeling stressed but he wasn’t prepared to tell Ann that she was the cause rather than the cure. “All Kushtian men like breasts. Are English men the same?” she said, kneeling astride him, pulling off her blouse and reaching behind her back to unfasten her bra. Her full, dark breasts spilled forward towards him.

“Ah,” said Henry appreciatively. “Yes, ah, yes, English men do like breasts, generally. And these are very nice indeed, err, very nice.”

“But they should be bigger? Yes?”

“No, not at all Anch,” Henry was thinking that if these were any bigger he would be in serious danger if one or other of them hit him. “I don’t think they need to be any bigger. No, not at all.”

“You English men are so polite. It is very nice. I shall play your piscalo.”

“Piscalo?”

“Oh, in Kushtian, it is a musical instrument. Like a – what? – flute. But it also means...” She pointed down to his crotch and in response to his “Oh!” dived for the zip of his trousers and, pushing her veil aside, quickly had her tongue around his prick. Henry decided that he was in no position to argue with Kushtian traditions and leant back to enjoy it.

Anch didn’t pause when Kerren Kerrish put his head around the cubicon curtain. “Ah! Good! You are falling into our ways. That is excellent. Miss Astana is very capable as a secretary is she not?”

“Indeed. Ah!” Henry gasped in between Anch’s enthusiastic sucking and licking. He found it difficult to hold up his part of the conversation while his other end was being kept up so

effectively by his secretary.

“Well. Shortly in my office please join me. No needing to hurry. Just when Miss Astana has finished her present tasks.”

Henry nodded and Kerrish left. Anch continued. She was apparently undisturbed by Kerren's arrival but skilfully and swiftly brought Henry to orgasm, licking him clean of his jism with enthusiasm. She reached down beside the couch and pulled out a small silken cloth with which she wiped and dried Henry's member. The gentle touch of the cloth, so carefully used, seemed to encourage Henry's prick back into life. “There,” she said. “Now you will feel much more relaxed. Ready for your meeting with Mr Kerren.” Henry had to admit that he was feeling significantly improved by his encounter with Anch. He got up from the couch, zipped his fly and headed off towards the office of Kerren Kerrish.

Chapter 4 : Loan Agreement

Kerren Kerrish's office was even larger than Henry's. It was hardly surprising, Henry thought, but it did mean you ought to be able to get a taxi from the door to the desk. As he arrived, Kerrish emerged from what Henry took to be his own cubicon, followed a moment later by a leggy dark haired woman in her late thirties, Henry guessed. She gathered her wrap around dress about her with a flourish that left Henry uncertain what, if anything, he had seen of her body and left the pair of them to their discussions.

At Kerren's suggestion,. Henry took a seat. "I have small project for you," he said. "No doubt simple after your many triumphs for Bank of England" Henry thought for a moment – he didn't remember claiming that but maybe Freddie had polished Henry's CV a little. "One of our best customers has a chance for new business making. An opportunity but – as is always – it needs funding."

"I guess that's good news for us," said Henry.

"Indeed, indeed. With no need for money where would a bank be? But, of course, not all opportunities are as splendid as they seem. Some have greater risk than others, some require more security than others, some will generate a greater return than others. I would like you to talk to our customer, assess the opportunity, advise me on the risk, determine what interest you think we should charge."

"Fine. I can do that." Henry wasn't at all sure that he was qualified. Back in London whenever anyone wanted a loan they just fired up the computer and filled in the forms and the system said yes or no. Nevertheless, Henry thought, how hard could it be? It was probably some farmer looking for a loan to build a barn or something.

"You need to talk to Kushnati Koresh, he is one of our Council Elders. He is not too able to speak English but his wife is American. He has asked for her to deal with this. It is unusual but I suppose we must move with the times in some things."

Henry didn't see what was so odd about Koresh's wife discussing a bank loan but he let Kerren continue.

"Miss Astana will provide you with the files. She will arrange a car for you. Mr Koresh and his wife will be able to see you tomorrow morning. I am sure you will be able to assess their application. Of course as a Council Member Mr Koresh has a preferred status with the Bank, he will be very happy to meet with you."

Henry wasn't entirely happy. He felt he might be getting out of his depth in political waters. It sounded like his boss didn't want to hear that this loan wasn't a good idea and that, if it did go bad, he'd be the one carrying the can for the bank. Oh well, no change there.

Back in his office, Anch was already waiting for him with the Koresh file. "I have asked for your car to collect you from the hotel in the morning," she said. "It is one o'clock now so you will go back there, I think. For me it is time to go back to my household too."

Henry was disappointed, he'd been looking forward to spending some more time with Anch but there would be plenty of other opportunities he thought. "That's all right, Anch," he said. "I'll see you when I get back from talking to Mr Koresh and his wife."

"His wife? On bank matters? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Mr Kerrish said that she was to be involved in the discussions. Why? Is that odd?"

"Very, Mr Henry, very," Anch responded. "In Kushtia a woman is not able to have a bank account. Such things can only be had by a man."

"But how do you manage? What do you do with your wages? Surely they don't pay you in cash."

"No, of course. But I don't receive wages. The earnings from my work here go to my household. They provide my food and lodging and my clothes and for my care. That is what the properta means, I contribute to my household and they take care of me."

"I see," said Henry, not really seeing at all. It sounded very odd.

"Now, I must go, if that is all right, Sir. I have to be back at my household for two o'clock. There are domestic duties to take care of."

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Well, you must tell me more of your household, Anch. I would be interested to learn more about your life."

Anch nodded her head and walked across to her desk gathering up a few things for her handbag. She took a magazine from her desk and was about to put it into her bag when she said, "Here is another good Kushtian word for you." She held out the magazine and pointed to the title. "Yassi!" it said.

"Yassi?" Henry responded, taking the magazine.

"Yes, good," said Anch. "It means 'Hello' or 'Greetings'."

Henry nodded and looked again at the magazine's cover. "Victoria Beckham is as much a celebrity here then?" he said pointing to the cover.

"Oh no. That is not Mr Beckham's wife. She does look very like her though, I agree. Also called Victoria. That is the chief wife of the son of our Kalinin, our president. She is an English girl."

"The chief wife? I suppose his others are called Gerri, Emma and Melanie."

"So you know them? It was very odd, first for a son to marry five wives at once and then for them all to be foreign. He was a big fan of the Spice Girls they say. His wives are all very like them."

Henry certainly thought the whole thing very odd. "Well, I guess the cult of celebrity extends everywhere these days," he said. "Well she certainly looks like Posh Spice, or at least the way she looked when last I saw a picture of her. What do people in Kushtia think?"

"She is very scandalous!"

"I see. Because her face is not covered?"

"No, silly. She is a wife, once you are a wife your husband may be happy to display you, if he allows. No, there are rumours about her and other men and that her husband encourages her behaviour. But she has nice breasts, doesn't she? Should I have my breasts made like those, do you think?"

"Anch, I think your breasts are just fine."

"Only fine?" In spite of her veil Henry could sense the sulky pout. "But I must go." She pulled a heavy shawl around her shoulders and then, finally took out a pair of heavy brass bracelets and fastened them on to her wrists. As she stood up to leave Henry saw that the bracelets were linked by a short length of heavy brass chain.

"What are those?" Henry said.

"These?" said Anch turning towards him. "These are manuses."

"But they're like handcuffs. Do you walk home wearing those in the street?"

"Yes, of course. Many Kushtian girls wear them. These are very grand. You see how the cuffs are broad and the chain is quite short. That is very much the way they are being worn this year."

My household was very good to buy me such fashionable ones. My friend Harana is very jealous. Her's are not so wide. She tried to hide them under her shawala when she saw mine." Anch laughed. "I will see you tomorrow Mr Henry," she said and left him bewildered.

Henry shut up the things in his office and made his way back to the hotel along the empty streets of Kolin. The hotel lobby was deserted he grabbed his key from the rack behind the reception desk and made his way upstairs to his room.

He flicked on the TV. Three channels of TV Kushtia all showed a blank screen with words that said the same thing. "Back at 20:00" he looked at his watch. It was 20:15. There wasn't anything else. He looked out across the square. It was empty. There didn't seem much else to do except to sit down and go through the Koresh file. Oh, and maybe introduce himself to the contents of the mini-bar.

By the time it came to think about dinner he'd formed a good view of the nature of Mr. Koresh's finances. The mini bar had been a disappointment. In a country where you had to show your passport to get hold of alcohol it shouldn't have surprised him that the small fridge contained only fruit juice. He was glad to toss the file aside and go in search of food and a drink to go with it.

Chapter 5 : The Household of Kushnati Koresh

Henry's car bounced its way across the potholes on the road leading out of Kolin. They crossed the bridge across the almost dry river bed of the Kolin River and headed out through scrubby rocky countryside.

The car stopped outside a large, low, seemingly derelict building. A honk of the car's horn brought someone to the tall door that filled a high archway halfway along the front wall. Henry peered out of the car. This didn't look very impressive for someone that was supposedly a Kushtian Council Elder. He climbed out and headed to the door.

As he entered, his opinion changed. The doorway gave onto a courtyard that, in contrast to the barren land outside, was filled with luxuriant foliage. Water played from fountains in the corners of the courtyard. Two veiled women sat chatting on a bench to one side; two others were carrying large baskets of fruit across the courtyard. Henry's bemusement at the extraordinary difference between the courtyard inside and the countryside outside the walls of the building was interrupted by the muscular young Kushtian man that had opened the door. "For Mr Koresh? From the bank?" he said.

Henry nodded and the young man led the way further into the building. The verdant greens of the courtyard gave way to opulent gold silk and purple velvet wall hangings and finely knotted silk carpets inside. Henry was astonished by the sheer luxury of the surroundings. His mouth was still hanging open when he was shown into a large room furnished in even greater splendour. At one end of the room an old wizened man sat in a wheel chair, gazing vacantly across the room. To the side, on two large padded leather couches, two women reclined, talking to one another in animated fashion. Henry recognised one of them immediately as the woman he had seen earlier on the cover of Yassi! Magazine. The other, much younger, he took to be Koresh's wife. She got up and approached him, her long skirt brushing across the floor.

Henry offered his hand. "Henry Clegg," he said. "from the People's Bank."

Koresh's wife and the woman from Yassi! exchanged puzzled glances but then waved him towards their couch. "Hi," the woman said in a sharp Brooklyn accent, "I'm Lauren - wife of Kushnati Koresh. My friend here is the wife of the eldest son of the Kalinin. He calls her Victoria."

"I can see why," Henry said, conscious that she was watching him closely. "I understand that your husband wishes to discuss some financial matters." Henry looked across to where Kushnati Koresh was sitting in his wheelchair. He didn't look as if he was up to discussing anything much.

"Of course," said Lauren. "I will bring him over. I shall need to translate for you." She walked across to where Kushnati sat, unlocked the brake on his chair and wheeled him back to where Henry was sitting. He stood up and offered his hand. Kushnati Koresh continued to stare straight ahead giving no sign that he had any awareness of Henry's presence. "I will explain things," said Lauren. "but first, tell me, Clegg isn't a very common English name is it? Do you know a Freddie Clegg? A dark haired man with a wiry moustache."

"Well yes. It's not a common name. Freddie Clegg is my uncle. That sounds exactly like him. How do you know him?"

"Ah - both Victoria and I had some involvement with one of his companies before we came to Kushtia."

"I'll mention it when I talk to him next," said Henry sociably.

"Oh, I shouldn't think he'd remember us," Victoria said acidly.

Henry blinked, puzzled by her response. He knew Freddie had some dealings with the Kushtian's but why these two women should have been involved he couldn't imagine. Lauren

interrupted. "Can we get on?" Henry nodded. "OK, here's the pitch. Mr Koresh here has very good contacts with the elders of the tribes in the northern hills. For many years they chose their wives from Russian stock. Recently they have found it difficult to find wives. Through my father in the Trade Ministry I have found how I can solve that. What is need is funding to allow us to satisfy that need; finance for the initial expenses until we can recoup them from our fees."

Henry was bemused. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm not sure if I've got this straight. These elders will pay you to find them wives? Oh, I'm sorry I should be talking to your husband, shouldn't I?"

"Of course," said Lauren, "everyone knows that a Kushtian woman cannot borrow money." Even so Kushnati Koresh showed little sign of understanding what was going on. "But yes, you're right. They'll pay a premium because of my husband. He is well respected. They will feel his choice guarantees a good wife."

"A premium brand?"

"Precisely."

"So you'd be running a sort of marriage brokers."

"Sort of."

"And is it easy to persuade Russian girls that there is a good life to be had in Kushtia?"

"Easy enough. But that will be what we're doing." She pointed to herself and Victoria. Henry wasn't at all sure how Kushnati could contribute anything to the business. He was lolling limply in his chair, dribbling from one corner of his mouth.

Henry quizzed Lauren on the funding required. She made a pretence of consulting her apparently unhearing husband on several occasions but gave Henry all the data he needed. The costs appeared to have been well thought out with substantial sums allocated to the recruitment of potential brides. The girls were very confident of the level of fees that the business could charge. They explained how they needed cash to support it although there was sufficient collateral with Kushnati's assets.

Well, it was hardly the Dragon's Den, thought Henry, but, apart from the fact that Kushnati Koresh looked to be pretty much a sleeping partner in the enterprise, there seemed to be no reason why the bank shouldn't advance the money. "If you can have your husband sign the necessary documents, I am sure that the bank will support this," Henry said.

Victoria raised an eyebrow at Lauren but she simply said, "Leave the forms with me, I'll get him to sign them when he's feeling better. Won't you darling?" This time at least Kushnati managed a flick of an eyelid, though whether of agreement or not Henry could hardly say.

Henry got up to leave. Lauren rang a bell and a muscular man appeared. He gave Lauren a lascivious leer. "Our overseer will take you back to your car," Lauren said. The man looked disappointed but turned to Henry to indicate the way he should go.

As Henry began to walk towards the door, the overseer stepped between Lauren and her husband and, ignoring the old man in the wheel chair, gripped Lauren in a tight embrace, locking his mouth onto hers and pawing at her breasts.

Victoria looked on with an air of amused tolerance. "He's too eager," she said. "Lauren, you really should tell him to control himself."

Lauren disentangled herself from the overseer's grasp and shooed him away. With a disappointed air he gestured for Henry to follow him towards the door. Henry felt grateful to get back to his car.

Chapter 6 : Financial Evaluation

In the office, Anch was in shocked disbelief. "You actually met Victoria? The wife of the Kalinin's eldest son?" Henry had hardly got through the door, Anch hadn't even removed her manuses but she was anxious to hear the slightest bit of gossip and was bombarding him with questions. "There are really shocking rumours about her now. Some say that she has men that she treats as her doenyas – her servants. That she has made her own properta for them to wear in secret. That she makes them wear manuses for her or even the chanoosh! Can you imagine a man doing such a thing?"

Henry didn't know what to say. Victoria had just seemed like one of many pushy women entrepreneurs he had come across. He wouldn't have been surprised by anything that she got up to in the bedroom if she felt it would help whatever scheme she was involved in.

Anch was still chattering on. "Is she as beautiful as she looks in the magazine? What was she wearing? Are her breasts really like they look in the photographs?"

"You shouldn't worry about your breasts so much," Henry chided, enjoying the fact that Anch was wearing an exceptionally tight sweater that provided him with all the information he needed to reassure her.

"We shall have to go in the cubicon later," she flirted, "so you can be sure."

"Well, Miss Astana" Henry responded playfully. "I am most anxious to be certain. We shall most definitely find some time to review the matter. For now though I would like some coffee."

Anch nodded her head and got up to go in search of the brass pot and tiny cups. They had only time for a single cup before Kerren Kerrish summoned Henry to his office.

"So, Mr English Banker, your assessment of this project, please. Should we advance money?" Kerren was in expansive mood.

Henry was keen to tread carefully. "Well, Mr Kerrish, the business proposal seems sound and the sums involved are not large. Of course the credentials of Mr Koresh are beyond reproach and in any case there is sufficient security."

"I am hearing an unspoken 'But' in your assessment, I fear."

"It is only my concern regarding his wife, Mr Kerrish. It seemed to me that this was more her scheme than his, if you understand me."

"Indeed I do, Indeed I do. Many of those who take westerners as wives or concubines discover that their women find it hard to give up their traditions of independence. Fortunately we need not worry. In Kushtian law no woman can make a contract. So the husband is always responsible for the actions of his wife."

"But in this case – with Mr Koresh so unwell - I suspect he is much less able than his wife pretends."

"You are right to be concerned. I think we should proceed as you suggest but we should also protect our interests. I think you should keep a close eye on this business enterprise. It would be most unfortunate if anything were to embarrass a council member or, worse still, the Kalinin."

"Oh good," thought Henry. "No pressure." What he said was, "Absolutely, Mr Kerrish, you can rely on me. I will arrange review meetings with Mr Koresh's wife, so that she can keep me up to date with progress."

"Very good. I will inform Mr Koresh that the bank will approve the loan."

When Henry returned to his office, Anch was waiting for him. "Your ten o'clock appointment is

here, Mr Henry," she said. "Mrs Hallanan wishes to discuss with you a loan application."

"Anch, I'm puzzled," Henry replied "I did not think that the bank could lend to a woman. This is not more of the Koresh business is it?"

"No, not at all. The loan is for her husband but she has come here to plead his case."

Henry was beginning to wonder if any Kushtian man handled his own financial affairs. "Well," he said, "I suppose that I had better see her."

Henry's reluctance was immediately overcome by the appearance of the woman. Although veiled, of course, she was dressed for the rest in the most elegant of western fashions, with a conspicuous display of expensive finery. Henry wondered how much of a loan her husband was looking for. It had to be substantial, otherwise he could just pawn his wife's designer clothes. "

The woman spoke out in a stream of a guttural dialect of Kushtian. Henry had to apologise. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't understand. Do you speak English?"

His question brought forth a similarly unintelligible response. Henry called Anch across. "This is no good," he said, "you'll have to translate for us."

Anch looked slightly embarrassed. "She says she has been sent by her husband to do anything that you need in order that the loan is approved."

"Well," said Henry, misunderstanding comprehensively, "I'd better look at the file, make sure that all the forms are here and so on."

Anch blushed. "No, Mr Henry," she said. "She says she must go to the cubicon with you for discussions. Her husband insists. This is how things are done."

Henry looked at the dark almond eyes of the woman as she stared intently at him over her veil. He took in the way that her well cut suit fitted what was evidently a trim figure and how the shortness of her skirt showed off the shapeliest of thighs. It would, he decided, be rude to refuse to discuss matters further and gestured to the cubicon. The woman took him by the hand and led him to the curtained couch..

Almost as soon as he had spread himself out on the couch the woman was kneeling beside him, gabbling away. "Anch," Henry called, "You must come and translate. And bring your pad, there may be things we need to keep a note of."

Anch looked embarrassed but joined Henry behind the cubicon's curtain as the woman started to fumble with Henry's fly zip. She chattered on, apparently unconcerned by the presence of Anch who was translating as best she could to keep up with the woman's constant stream of talk. "The loan details should be all that the bank requires," Anch translated, "There is quite sufficient security to meet the bank's requirements and there should be every reason to grant the loan. Of course it is recognised that first families get priority in these matters but surely the bank recognises the importance of the stimulus to the economy.. " by this stage the woman had pushed Henry's trousers and underpants down and had knelt astride him, pushing her skirt, with some difficulty, up over her hips.

Henry, somewhat nonplussed by the turn of events still managed to turn to Anch and ask "What is this about first families?"

Anch explained the way in which Kushtian society was divided into two well defined ranks. There was the upper rank that made up the Council and the Kushtian elite with people like Kushnati Koresh. Then there was the next rank, people like Anch's own family. The policy of the bank was very clear. There needed to be a much more convincing case made for loans to those of the lower rank. "And," said Anch, "that is why Mrs Hallanan is here to plead her case..."

Mrs Hallanan had by now taken Henry's cock between her hands and was drawing her long scarlet finger nails up it in a way that Henry found both arousing and disconcerting. A short statement was translated by Anch, "Mr Banker, I am sure that you will see the benefits of

advancing to my husband his requested sum he has asked me to make sure there is no amusement in your desires that is left unsatisfied, Perhaps I could. .. Oh!" Anch stopped evidently embarrassed by Mrs Hallanan's offer. Mrs Hallanan however continued her monologue, ignoring the fact that the translation had ceased, and instead, taking her cue from the Henry's steadily increasing tumescence. Then, without further remark and with seemingly practised ease, she pulled aside the crotch of her knickers and slid her cunt down over Henry's erect prick.

"Ah, haha, ahhh, Mrs Hallanan," Henry tried to remain calm as the woman sat perched astride his member, "I will - - ahhh - of course - mmm - give appropriate consideration to your husband's request. But the bank's conditions on security are quite stringent. I need to know - ahh - against what we would be advancing the loa - oh -oh - n." Anch still evidently embarrassed by having to stand by while Mrs Hallanan sought to ply her influence, translated Henry's words. Mrs Hallanan nodded and muttered some more remarks leaving Anch looking scandalised as she scribbled in her notebook and Henry abandoned himself to the attentions of Mrs Hallanan's virtuoso flexing of her vaginal muscles.

Mrs Hallanan stopped, evidently waiting for Anch to complete her translation. Anch evidently distressed stuttered a few words for Henry. "She will give you her daughter ... as security... to hold in the bank's employ or in your own household as a doenya or if you so please a concubine. She has learned well from her mother and has all the energy of an eighteen year old girl."

It was hard to tell who was the more horrified, Henry for whom such a thing was barely believable, or Anch who had never even imagined that such a thing could be considered by a parent. Henry, in spite of Mrs Hallanan's attentions, was the first to recover. "Please," he said to Anch, "tell Mrs Hallanan that I will give her request due consideration and that she has been eloquent indeed in putting forward her case." Henry gasped again as another flexing of the woman's muscles gripped at his engorged prick. He was almost kicking himself as he spoke his next words. "But Mrs Hallanan must go now." I have another appointment. Perhaps we can discuss this again when I have taken some time to examine her husband's application further." Anch translated. Mrs Hallanan looked disappointed but then disentangled herself from Henry, stood up from the couch, smoothed down her skirt, adjusted her veil and muttered some more words of Kushtian before bowing towards Henry and respectfully backing out of the cubicon. Henry felt relieved as the woman left; frustrated, certainly, but relieved.

Anch felt able to vent her anger. "How could she do that? Offer her own daughter! For a mother to do such a thing! It is the thing a man may do; often such arrangements are made by a father to make a good alliance or to help further his daughter in society. But a mother? Never! Unthinkable!"

"I'm sure she didn't really mean that, Anch," Henry replied, trying to calm Anch.

"What do you know?" Anch responded angrily. "You know what she said last of all? 'I will come back when you have had the chance to examine the application'...."

"That's not unreasonable, Anch," Henry interrupted.

"I didn't finish the translation," Anch said, still outraged. "...I will come back,' she said, 'and I bring my daughter too so you can be sure of the good will we extend to the bank.' Of course she meant it!"

Henry was nonplussed. He tried to comfort Anch, telling her that he thought the woman's behaviour was, indeed, outrageous. There could be no question, he said, of his decision being influenced by such a thing. And besides, the woman's promiscuous behaviour compared badly with the open hearted and delightful way that she, Anch, had always treated him.

Anch looked more cheerful immediately. "That is a nice thing to say, Mr Henry. For that I give you a treat right now in the cubicon. You need to relax after that unpleasant woman..." Anch began to peel off her sweater, revealing her ample breasts. Henry lay back on the couch resignedly. Oh well, he thought, when in Rome... And besides, the woman hadn't been that unpleasant.

Chapter 7 : Over The Border

Natalya Uranova sat quietly in a small room at the one hotel in Pestrovya waiting to be called. She was looking forward to the interview. Everything she had heard about the job made her think that it would offer her the chance she longed for to leave this provincial town for a more exciting life.

It wasn't clear what the job was really about; she was hoping to find out more at the interview. All she knew was that it would involve travel. As far as Natalya was concerned that was what she was really interested in. When she was shown into the interview room the exotic appearance of the women interviewing her was enough to make her think, "Yes!" straight away.

The two women introduced themselves. "Victoria," the small dark girl said, offered a gloved hand to Natalya. She was dressed entirely in black, wearing the tightest of high necked tops and leggings. The severe, sleek look was only relieved by a silver neck band from which hung a large jet plaque set in a silver surround. If her appearance was daunting, her demeanour was welcoming. "Take a seat," she said. "Please don't be nervous."

"I'm Lauren," the other woman said as Natalya sat down. Even from those two words she was obviously American, but although her accent said USA, her clothes were those of a high ranking Kushtian woman. Her outfit was as loud and colourful as the other woman's was sober, a brightly striped wrap over a deep turquoise coloured robe. Natalya felt very drab in comparison. Her pale green blouse and the straight, dark green, skirt had seemed like sensible dress for an interview but now she was not so sure.

Natalya smiled in response. It was even exciting to be talking in English. She had studied it at school, of course, and there was always plenty of American television to practice her understanding but she hardly ever had the chance to speak it. "Thank you," she said.

The interview got under way. Natalaya was pleased with how it seemed to be going. Lauren asked most of the questions. "How did you enjoy your studies? What were your favourite subjects? What do you enjoy in your free time? How does your boyfriend feel about you taking a year away from here?"

The last one was the easiest to answer. Her boyfriend had been pretty cross when she'd told him she was thinking of doing this. He seemed to think she was there just for his amusement. Well, Natalya had told him she wasn't going to build her life around him. Natalya hadn't minded, it wasn't as though it was any sort of life-time commitment.

Lauren nodded with an understanding smile. Both she and Victoria seemed to be happy with Natalaya's replies, she thought. Victoria nodded to Lauren and Lauren asked if Natalaya would like some tea.

Natalya nodded. "Yes, please," she said. Victoria disappeared for a few moments and returned with a glass of pungent black tea. It was stronger than Natalya liked as a rule but she didn't complain, sipping it happily as the questions continued.

Suddenly she felt a little odd. She reached forward and put the glass of tea down, worried about spilling it on the carpet. As she sat back she felt even more peculiar; as though her arms had become like logs; as though every joint had become frozen. She tried to speak but even her mouth would not do as she wished. Victoria was the one now smiling as she stepped forward. "Good," she said, "that's the last one."

"No!" Natalaya was thinking. "You don't understand, I can't move. Please help me."

Victoria stepped forward towards her. Far from coming to her aid, Victoria reached for Natalya's blouse, unfastening the buttons and pulling it open to expose her. "There," she said, "I told you this one would be all right."

“What does she mean?” Natalya was thinking. “All right for what? And why can't I move?”

Natalya was helpless to resist as Victoria and Lauren went to work on her. First they laid her on the floor and then began fitting straps around her arms and legs, fastening them so tightly that even if Natalya had been able to overcome her paralysis she would still not have been able to move. With the straps in place Lauren disappeared for a moment and then returned with a small trolley. Together she and Victoria lifted Natalya onto the trolley and wheeled her out into an adjacent room. Four large cases, each of them black with chrome plated strapping and corner reinforcements stood along the far side of the room. Another case stood open in the middle of the room. Inside Natalya could see heavy padding and more straps. Victoria pushed the trolley across to it and together she and Lauren began fitting the unresisting Natalya into the case.

Lauren and Victoria went to work with the straps, fixing Natalya in a sitting position within the padded case. It was as they fastened the last of the straps that Natalya began to feel some feeling returning to her muscles.

“Uh oh,” said Lauren, “she's coming out of it more quickly than the others. Let me have the mouangf.”

Natalya didn't recognise the Kushtian word but she knew what it was as soon as Victoria responded, passing Lauren a leather plug gag. Lauren pulled Natalaya's mouth open and pushed the plug of the gag in. The plug held her teeth apart and filled her mouth. As Lauren fastened the strap around her head, Natalaya felt the muffling effect as the heavily padded face piece pressed down over her mouth. The slight groan she managed as the effects of the paralysis subsided died in her throat. Lauren smiled, evidently pleased at the effect of the mouangf. Natalya, feeling movement returning to her arms, tried to struggle against the straps but to no effect. Lauren smiled again and fitted two more straps, one around Natalya's forehead and one more over the mouangf locking Natalya's head solidly in place. As Lauren began to close the case, shutting her into inky blackness, Natalaya caught sight of the other cases again. She wasn't alone, she thought. There must be four other girls like her in those other cases. What on earth was happening to them all?

She had no chance to do any more than think. As the case closed all light was extinguished and she felt the padding of the lid press all around her. Only immediately in front of her face was there any gap between her and the padding of the case. At least I can breath, she thought. There was a clunking noise; locks fastening on the case, Natalya guessed. Then there was nothing. No sound. Nothing. Just the blackness of the inside of the case and nothing.

Natalya had no idea how long the nothing went on for. She tried to push against the straps a few times but with no result. In time she resigned herself to whatever was to happen.

Then there was noise and movement. Words barked in Kushtian heard faintly through the padding of the case. Scraping sounds. And then the sensation of the case she was in being moved, lifted she thought; onto some trolley she guessed. Then she was taken on to a truck, if the next few hours of throbbing vehicle vibration and sound were any guide. What ever was happening to Natalaya, she knew that she wasn't staying in the hotel and that she was leaving Pestrovya behind.

Chapter 8 : Anatoly's Call

"Come on Freddie, this is not like you," the voice of Anatoly Kustenky was quiet; a sign that always worried Freddie. "We have an agreement I think. I don't piss on your patch, you don't piss on mine."

"Anatoly," Freddie Clegg responded in similar tone. "Please be assured there is no pissing on your patch from my side. We have plenty to do here without trying to take on Mother Russia."

"You say that Freddie but I know you. You see a chance, you take a chance. This has your finger prints on it Freddie, it's just your style."

"I don't have a patent on any of this, Anatoly. I just make it up as I go along."

"Listen, Freddie, this is just like you and it's right across the border from Kushtia. We agreed you could play there. We even thought you might come to us for some product to ship there. Now we find you're sourcing your own in our back garden. That's pissing on my patch, Freddie. Pissing on my patch."

"Anatoly, I give you my word. This is not a Clegg operation. There are no Clegg Enterprises people in Russia. Hell, there aren't any Clegg Enterprises people in Kushtia right now. This is nothing to do with me."

"So if it's not Clegg Enterprises picking up nice girls from Pestrovja, taking the bread out of my mouth, who is it?"

"I don't know but I'll talk to the Kushtian's and see what I can find out. All right? And if it's anything they are up to I'll see what I can do. If they are freelancing I'm not sure I can do anything about it. Sure they are supposed to take product from me but I can't stop them doing their own thing. I'll do what I can, Anatoly."

"OK Freddie, just be sure you're not pissing on my patch."

Clegg put down the phone, annoyed that Kustenky hadn't seem ready to believe him. It was, however, odd, he thought as he looked up the location of Pestrovja. The Kushtian's hadn't shown any signs of wanting to get into the business themselves but Pestrovja was just over the border. It was only a little later that he thought he had only been technically accurate when he said there weren't any Clegg Enterprises people in Kushtia right now. After all Henry didn't work for Clegg Enterprises. The only problem, Clegg thought, was Anatoly might think that was a bit too much of a technicality. Freddie looked at his watch. It would be early evening in Kolin. He tried to call Henry.

The line was terrible. It crackled. Henry's voice faded in and out.

"Hello... hello... yes, Fred? Fred?"

"Hi, Henry .. Henry? Yes. How's it going?"

"Good. Yes. Good. The bank's fine. Very friendly people, if you know what I mean."

"Uh huh..." Freddie knew exactly. "Listen. Can you do me a favour?"

"Sure Fred, sure ... Fred?.. Fred? Yes, sure."

"Can you find out if any of the bank's customers have an interest in Russia. Could be around the borders of Kushtia. Possibly in a place called Pestrovya."

"Can do Freddie, I owe you one at least. Can do. This could be an easy one though. One of the customers I'm working with has a marriage broking scheme for Russian women. I think they've been doing something in Pestrovya. It's Kushnati Koresh. Well his wife really. And one of the

wives of the Kalinin son. I'm sure you know them. Lauren and Victoria.”

Freddie's heart sank. He remembered Lauren and Victoria all right. Victoria had been one of Larry's first acquisitions and Lauren had nearly caused a lot of problems when the Kushtians had been trying to set up shop in the UK. He could quite believe that they might be involved in something. And “marriage broking”? Good grief!

“Henry, can you let me...? Henry? Henry? ... Are you there?” The line had finally given up. He cursed the inadequacies of Kushtian Telecoms. It was only when he picked up the phone to talk to Harry his operations manager, that he realised the phone line had been dug up outside their office.

It took them four hours to reconnect the line. Freddie, fuming, disappeared off to his club. In the interests of international harmony and avoiding the more excitable sort of responses that Anatoly could be capable of, Freddie called him back.

“So, Freddie,” Anatoly sounded abrupt. “You find something with these Kushtians or you want to tell me that you are pissing on my patch?”

“No pissing, Anatoly, I told you,” Freddie responded. “Here's what I've found. There are two clients of the People's Bank of Kushtia involved in some enterprise in Kushtia. Those clients have taken product from me in the past. It's possible there is some free-lancing going on.”

“Not nice, Freddie, when customers start doing that. Still as long as it's not your boys. I can clean things up without problem.”

Freddie was afraid that he was going to say that. It wasn't what he wanted. “Well, it might help if you'd hold off for a bit. I'd like to see if I can sort it out from the Kushtian side of the border.”

“Freddie, that's a big favour. Why shouldn't my boys go in and close this down?”

“No reason at all, Anatoly. If I were you I'd want to as well. But, it will be untidy. It will upset people. I think maybe I can sort things out more easily. Isn't that what friends are for?” Anatoly listens without responding. “Look, Anatoly, give me a couple of weeks. If any more girls go missing in Pestrova, give me a call.”

“So two weeks? I can live with that. Nobody from Moscow wants to go to that backwater, anyway.”

No, thought Freddie, and no one from his London operation would want to go either but it was better that he sorted things out. If Anatoly's boys went storming in there would be blood on the carpets and plenty of other places as well.

Chapter 9 : Ellie's Trip

Ellie was less than enthusiastic when Clegg broached the idea with her. She adopted the pensive, quiet look that Clegg always found worrying.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Freddie?" she said. "Why not just let Anatoly clean things up from his side."

"Because it's our customers that are involved and a confrontation with Anatoly could seriously affect their ability to business with us in the future. That and the fact that I don't trust Henry not to get caught up in it."

"But, Freddie, you know what the Kughtian's think of women. If it's Council Members or the like that are involved, I won't have a chance to get close to anything that's going on." Ellie folded her arms, convinced that she'd produced a winning point.

"True," said Clegg. "But, from what Henry said, I don't think that's what is happening. This sounds like a little private enterprise from Lauren and sweet little Victoria. If it is, you'll be ideally placed to sort it out. As a woman. Besides if Henry has got his sticky paws on this then I want it to be kept in the family. You're the only real answer, Ellie."

Ellie shook her head. "I don't think I am but I can't think of a better one right now," she said.

Clegg sat back looking pleased. Ellie looked at him in exasperation. He was impossible when he was right, she thought.

While Ellie was getting ready for her departure, Lauren was helping Natalya become acclimatised to her new home. When the case she had been strapped into was opened, Natalya was astonished by the sight of Lauren and Victoria confronting her.

Lauren and Victoria had evidently determined that the best way to start the induction of their captives was with process of intimidation and that the most intimidating thing for the girls would be to be greeted by a site as bizarre as anything that they would ever have seen.

The two girls had taken full advantage of the extensive fetish wardrobe that Victoria had acquired as a result of the indulgences of her husband and the various men that had placed themselves in her thrall in the hope of gaining influence with the Kalinin's son or the Kalinin himself.

The four girls had been forced to their knees. Lauren and Victoria stood before them; Victoria in a black rubber cat suit that she had topped off with a sinister gas mask, and Lauren in leather trousers and jacket. Both were wielding vicious looking whips.

"Welcome, ladies," Victoria began before she went on to explain how they were now to be trained as concubines for Kushtian men that would pay well to have reluctant Russian girls in their beds.

It was only after Lauren and Victoria had left that Husna Hannish, the Overseer, felt able to express his distaste. As the door to the room shut behind Lauren he spat a plug of chewing tobacco in its direction.

"Hunes," he muttered under his breath. "Bitches." His colleague nodded in agreement. It was all very well for the two of them to flounce in here, parading up and down in their high heels and acting like they owned the place but now something needed to be done with the women they had brought back. Husna had thought he had an opportunity to better himself with Koresh's wife, but then she had seemed only interested in sex. Now there was this other game.

"A secure place, Hannish," Lauren had said to Husna, when they arrived. "Until we can arrange for the girls to be seen by their prospective husbands. And they should learn to be docile and compliant. Like good Kusthian girls."

Husna looked down at the four helpless women. Good Kushtian girls! It took a lifetime to make a good Kushtian girl. You couldn't expect to turn these Russians into anything much without time. They didn't even know how to dress respectably. When did you last see a Russian in a veil? Even when they ran the country they didn't respect the traditions!

He called Hakshim, the young man he was schooling to as apprentice overseer. "Do you think these girls are going to be any use?" Husna said to his colleague as they pulled each of the girls in turn to their feet.

Hakshim didn't seem impressed. "Too thin," he said. "Like western girls. Look at this." He put his arm around Natalya's trim waist. "You shouldn't be able to get that far around. You should need both arms. And these," he prodded Natalya's breasts. "How can you rest your head on these."

"She may give other comforts. Here," he said, unbuckling the strap of the plug gag that filled her mouth. "Let's try this."

"Won't the lady of the household object? She seems to see these as her own property."

"A woman with property? Absurd. She takes advantage of the master's sickness. He has always said that his overseer should have such use of the girls of the household as they see fit. Not his wives, of course, but the doenyees; that is all right. These are the rights of the Overseer and must be exercised or they will be forfeit through lack of use."

Hakshim smiled. He was happy to take the advice of his mentor. Natalya looked back and forth at the two men, not understanding a word of their exchange, barely able to make out the individual words from their guttural dialect. 'Doenyees' was one word she understood. 'Servant' it meant. Perhaps that was what they were intended as, servants in this household. A moment later she came to realise that there was more to it than that. The older man – the one that was called Husna – grabbed her by the hair and twisting brought her to her knees. The younger one stepped up to stand legs astride in front of her. Unfastening his belt, he dropped his breeches, confronting Natalya with a dark, thick and steadily lengthening cock.

Husna twisted again at Natalya's hair. As she cried out in pain, Husna pushed her forward and Hakshim buried his cock in her mouth. Natalya, choking as Hakshim pushed against her, tried to struggle but could not break free of Husna's grip. The two men were laughing, exchanging remarks that, even without understanding their Kushtian, Natalya knew to be coarse encouragement of each other. There was more laughter and more jokes as Husna and Hakshim changed places. Husna's shorter, stubbier, cock was less of a choking mouthful than Husna's but the younger man had now found a strap to thrash across Natalya's buttocks, encouraging her to try harder to please the Overseer. Natalya caught sight of the other girls, still gagged, their eyes wide in terror as they each began to realise what was to be their fate too.

Chapter 10: The Bank Manager Cometh

Henry had become rather annoyed. Lauren had agreed that she would provide a report on their progress before his regular weekly meeting. She hadn't and, as a result, he had had to suffer the embarrassment of trying to explain to Mr. Kerrish why he still didn't have the details on their plans for repayment of the loan.

He'd called her several times. Mostly he'd got her voice mail and, on the few occasions that he had actually managed to speak to her, she'd promised to call him back and then hadn't.

The only way to resolve it, thought Henry was to go out and see Lauren, whether she was ready to have a discussion or not. Anch was not at all happy with the thought. "I'm not sure that you should be planning to visit a Kushtian woman without the permission of her husband," she said.

"I'm sure you are right Anch, normally," said Henry. "The difficulty is that he doesn't seem to be in any condition to give his consent. He's very unwell, I feel. The only time I met him, I wasn't even certain that he was conscious."

"It makes no difference," said Anch emphatically. "For a Kushtian man, his wish is his wish. Would you visit his wife when he was sleeping because he could not give his yes or no?"

"I think its different Anch. And I'm worried that his wife may be taking advantage of the situation."

"No, that cannot be possible. A Kushtian wife can only respect the wishes of her husband."

"I think you are forgetting that Mr Koresh's wife is not of Kushtian upbringing. I feel I must go and see what is going on."

Henry arrived at Koresh's estate late in the afternoon. He was welcomed, if that was the right word, at the door by Koresh's overseer.

"Mr Koresh not seeing any one," he said, helpfully. Husna Hannish was tired by the comings and goings. The women brought by his master's young American wife and the English wife of the Kalinin's son would cause nothing but trouble, he was sure.

"That's all right I wish to see Mrs Koresh."

"I have no permission to admit you."

"I really think you should tell Mrs Koresh that I am here."

"I cannot do that."

"Of course you can. I will wait here."

"No I cannot do that. Mrs Koresh, not here."

Henry and Husna Hannish were debating whether or not he should be admitted when a veiled Victoria appeared over Husna's shoulder.

"What is it, Hannish" she asked.

"This bank gentleman. He seeks Mrs Koresh but I tell him, she is not here."

"Quite right, Hannish, quite right. However, I will see if I can help him. Let us extend the hospitality of the Koresh to him."

With ill grace, Husna gestured for Henry to enter. Victoria led the way to one of the comfortable formal rooms off the entrance hall. She sprawled on a pile of cushions and waved to Husna to leave them. Husna, scowling, did so.

"He is a loyal servant but not very able to adapt to western ways."

"I hadn't thought that much of western morality or custom had penetrated here."

"You would be surprised what goes on behind close doors, Mr Clegg."

Henry noticed that as she stretched out on the cushions one of the slits in the long panelled skirt that she was wearing had fallen open affording him an excellent view of her legs. She reached out for the silver mouthpiece of a large hookah that stood beside the couch, slipped it between her lips and inhaled deeply. Almost at once a beatific smile came over her. She picked up a second smoking tube and offered it to Henry. "Won't you join me," she said, stretching sinuously towards him, her eyes wide and looking straight at him.

Even with Henry's usual slowness to react, he realised that what was on offer might be more than a puff on her hookah. But, as he told himself, it would be rude to refuse her hospitality and besides he really needed to get to the bottom of what was going on with Lauren's business. "Thank you," he said, sitting down beside her on the couch and taking the second mouthpiece from her and inhaling himself.

The cool smoke had a curiously calming effect. He found himself smiling as easily as Victoria was. He looked at her as she smiled back at him. "This isn't tobacco is it?" he said.

"Partly," Victoria grinned mischievously. "and partly hunashif. It is a traditional herb, burnt in the halls of the seragla, the harems, to sooth and relax the man's wives and concubines."

"Who needs relaxing, you or me?" said Henry as Victoria lay back on the cushions.

"Let's just say we believe in a more, ah, intimate relationship between a bank and its customers than might be the custom in Europe."

"Hmmm," said Henry thoughtfully, the expression of doubt and curiosity dragged out by the intoxicating effect of the hunashif.

"Mmmm," responded Victoria, stretching out a hand to Henry's thigh.

Henry looked down at it, taking another drag on the hookah that left him wondering if the hand had suddenly appeared there or had been there all along. He looked back at Victoria, somehow her shoulders were now bare, the deep green velvet of the top of her costume contrasting with the soft cream skin of her bosom and the dark shady chasm of her cleavage.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Mrs Kalinin?" he asked.

"Would you like me to?"

"I can't help but feel that might make our business dealings more difficult, Mrs Kalinin."

"It's Mrs Kalanis, Kalinin is the title of my father in law."

"Oh," Henry found himself laying back on the cushions. He took another puff from the hookah. The hunashif certainly seemed to have a calming effect. "Well, Mrs Kalanis, I most certainly apologise. The bank is at all times concerned with ..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't think what the bank could possibly be concerned with. What interest could they have in the fact that one of their senior officers was sprawled, half intoxicated, in the company of the wife of the son of the country's ruler while her hand slid sinuously across towards him and unfastened the belt of his trousers?

While Henry was enjoying Victoria's company, he didn't notice his mobile phone being slipped out of his jacket pocket. Some time later Anch responded to the bleeping of her own phone and read the text message she had received. "Most important meet you. Spice Market. Old Fountain. 14:00 Please bring Koresh file. Henry."

Anch wasn't sure what to think about the text. She was intrigued by puzzle it presented. Why did her boss suddenly want a meeting away from the office? And why in the Spice Market? Then there was the reputation of the Spice Market itself. Once upon a time the Spice Market had been notorious as the venue for secret assignations between lovers, between errant husbands and their lovers or adulterous wives and theirs. The old tenements of the spice merchants had been the scene of many an illicit tryst and the old fountain was at the heart of the maze of alleys between them. It would have been nice if Henry had discovered a romantic streak during their sessions in the cubicon. However, the fact that he'd asked her to bring the Koresh file rather implied that he hadn't.

She tossed the file into a shoulder bag and headed off towards the east of the old town.

The closer Anch got to their meeting place, the more out of place she felt. She had almost forgotten how different the old parts of Kushtia were. Compared to the modern centre of Kolin, the area around the Spice Market seemed to belong to a different century. Of course as a good Kushtian girl Anch was veiled but she wore her head and face covering with a smart skirt and blouse in the season's fashionable colours for the office. Here though the women all dressed alike in the all enveloping dark chanoosh. They bustled by her carrying wicker tubs containing their day's purchases. She couldn't tell whether they noticed her or not as she made her way through the alleyways of the old town but she felt conspicuous anyway. There were few men on the street, but occasionally as she passed a coffee house one or other would look up from a game of tavla and give her an appraising silent stare as she walked by. She was careful to keep her properta on view; that way she was seen to belong to a prominent family and should as a result be safe from molestation. Even so she didn't feel entirely safe here, she clutched the strap of her shoulder bag tightly.

Anch turned a corner into the square of the fountain. She looked at her watch. She was a few minutes early. There was no sign of Henry and the tiny square, surrounded by Merchants houses that seemed to crowd in on every side and overlooked by the houses' overhanging balconies, was deserted. She sat down on the wall surrounding the fountain.

There was a noise from one of the houses, an argument from one of the balconies. Anch stood up and looked to the source of the noise. As she did so there was a movement behind her and a hand grabbed at her bag. A sharp knife sliced through the shoulder strap and the bag was snatched away from her. Anch turned to see a woman clad in a dark brown chanoosh, running as best she could in the long robe, towards one of the alleyways. Anch gave chase.

In her shorter, albeit tighter, skirt, she began to narrow the distance between herself and the thief as they ran through the maze of alley ways. Then Anch had a stroke of luck, the thief turned a corner and found herself in a dead end. With high walls surrounding her and no doors leading from the street the thief turned to face her pursuer.

"Give it back to me," Anch demanded in Kushtian. "It's only papers, of no value. Give it back to me and I'll let you go."

The thief shook her head, clutching the bag closer to her.

"Come on," said Anch advancing towards her as the thief backed up against the back wall of the cul de sac. "Give it to mmmmm!"

Anch's demands were cut off by a hand clamped tightly over her mouth. Another reached around her waist and pulled her back. She was held tightly by an attacker from behind.

"You should have turned left not right," Anch's attacker said to the woman that had been running from her. "It's the other side of the alley. Come on." Anch felt herself being pulled backwards. Unable to cry out she was dragged across the alley and through a door, into, she presumed, one of the Spice Merchant's houses.

"What are we going to do with her? I only wanted to grab the bag."

"Why don't we keep hold of her for the time being. She might be useful."

"All right, I've got some rope here, turn her around."

Anch tried to struggle as she was first spun around and then as her arms were dragged behind her back and rope knotted around her wrists and then around her ankles.

"Put her down in the store room."

"OK. There's a moangf here too." Anch knew what was coming next. Although she had never had a moangf used on her they were common in Kushtian households. A servant that spoke out of turn or a concubine that was found guilty of gossiping might well have to wear one. Anch tried to wriggle free of her captor as the woman that she had been chasing pulled up her veil, prised open her mouth and pushed in the heavy leather covered wad of the silencing moangf. The strap was fastened behind her head and Anch knew that there was no point in trying to cry out with her mouth so well stuffed. Her two captors picked her up and carried her across the room. On the far side was a wooden chute that led to the store room below. Anch was lowered on to the chute and let go. She slid down the chute squealing helplessly into her gag as she fell to the bottom. She slammed against a pile of spice filled sacks and sending a cloud of aromatic dust up into the air leaving her gasping for breath as a result of the impact and the stifling scent of the spices. She looked up to the top of the chute. Her assailants were staring down at her.

"She will be all right there for now," the thief said.

"I guess so," said the other and then the two of them were gone, leaving Anch wondering why they had attacked her, why one of her two assailants spoke Kushtian with a pronounced American accent and why Henry had lured her into their clutches.

Henry on the other hand was greatly enjoying his afternoon with the wife of the son of the hereditary ruler of Kushtia. She had explained to him a great deal about the constitution of Kushtia, about the way in which the Kalinin was appointed and the access that this gave her to some of the most powerful men in the land. While she was doing this and servant girls were bringing cool drinks or sweet meats as Victoria asked, he had managed to lose more of his clothes. At the same time she had been able to demonstrate some most acrobatic poses learned, she said, from the great practitioners of the art of love in the Kalinin's seragla, his harem. Henry, bemused by the circumstances as much as the hunashif, had found it easy to while the afternoon away in her company, persuading himself that he was, indeed, getting to grips with a deeper understanding of his clients.

While Henry was being entertained by Victoria, Natalya Uranova was being subject to yet more humiliations as her captors insisted that she progress with her training. "You learn to be good slave girl," Husna had said to her. "You fetch and carry for your Master and Mistress. You practice that now." And so he had taken her from her cell, put manacles around her wrists and ankles and taught her how she should serve drink or offer a hunashif pipe; kneeling beside her Master and offering up the item in question with her head bowed submissively. The slightest failure to conform to her teacher's exact instruction had earned her blows from a cane. She had been beaten so many times over the past few days that she had no desire to earn more cuts and so she was trying very hard to carry out each task to the letter.

She was following her teacher along some corridors, as they passed one open door she looked through. Within, a veiled woman - another slave like herself, she guessed - was sprawled on a couch with a man, a westerner. "Your money has already bought you all of this," she heard the woman say as she leant back on her cushions. Natalya recognised Victoria's voice. Victoria's remark had been in response to Henry's expression of concern about the bank's finance for her project but Natalya interpreted it as Victoria accepting her status as the man's slave. So, Natalya thought, she is as much his captive as I. As Natalya watched the man's lascivious reaction she was in no doubt that he was the ring leader of this gang of white slavers. A moment later her trainer realised that she had stopped and returned to drag her away from the doorway.

Suddenly Victoria announced to Henry that he would have to leave, declaring herself delighted to have enjoyed his company but explaining that she needed to be ready for a dinner for some ambassador or other that evening. She swept out of the room, leaving Henry to pull up his trousers, button his shirt, refasten his belt and to try to quell his unsatisfied erection.

As he stumbled out of the Koresh's house he looked at his watch and thought that he had better phone the office. It took him some time to find his phone. It wasn't in his left hand jacket pocket where he always kept it. Somehow it had found its way into an inside pocket. "Odd," thought Henry, "I can't imagine how that happened."

Chapter 11: Cellar Struggle

Anch struggled helplessly, sprawled on the sacks in the spice store. Each attempt to dislodge the ropes that held her wrists and ankles sent a cloud of dust into the air leaving her choking, unable to catch her breath because of the mouth filling maoungf that had been strapped around her head.

The scent of turmeric, cumin and coriander filled the air. Anch wriggled herself around until she was sitting up. In her efforts to free herself she had torn her skirt and stained her blouse with the deep yellow of turmeric. Her head covering and veil lay beside her on the floor where her attackers had tossed it down the chute after her.

As she wriggled her arms once more she became aware that she could feel a little give in the ropes. She looked around. On the far side of the cellar, a hook held ropes from the cellar's hoist. Anch felt sure that if she could get to it, the combination of her struggles and the sharp hook could free her. Slowly she started to move herself across the floor of the cellar. Eventually she managed to shuffle herself close to the foot of the wall beneath the hook. Turning around, she levered herself up against the wall and finally managed to snare the loops of the ropes around her wrists onto the hook. Tugging against the hook and flexing her wrists she slowly felt the ropes begin to give.

Her efforts were interrupted by the sound of voices in the room above. She threw herself back onto the floor just as the trap door at the top of the ramp was pulled up. The veiled faces of two women stared down at her.

"She's moved," one of the women said.

"Not far," said the other, her American accent revealing her as one of Anch's assailants. "And she won't get out of there for a while."

"How is the banker?"

"Oh fine. He's busy with Victoria."

Anch was furious. It seemed that Henry was in league with these women; that he had staged the whole thing so that the Koresh file could be stolen. She had to escape and try to discover what he was planning. Perhaps he intended some fraud on the bank? He had seemed like a reasonable man but you could never tell with these westerners. And the text message that had brought her to the Spice Market had come from Henry's phone.

The cellar hatch cover was dropped back into place by the women. Anch listened quietly as slamming doors in the rooms above announced the departure of her attackers again. She worked her way back to the hook and started once more to try to free herself.

It seemed to take forever but eventually she managed to work a loop of rope free. With the freedom that gave her, she wrenched at the ropes with renewed vigour. From that moment she soon worked the remainder of the rope loose and with effort she got her wrists free.

Wasting no time she freed the ropes from around her ankles and unbuckled the strap of the mouth filling moaungf, pulling the plug free with a gasp of relief. She stood up, brushed as much of the mess from her clothes as she could and looked around hoping to find a way out.

The door into the cellar was locked but eventually she managed to pile up spice sacks into a sort of pyramid that let her climb out of the cellar and up into the room above. Listening all the while in case her attackers returned she pulled on her veil and slipped out into the street. One thing was certain, if Mr Henry was involved in trying to defraud the bank she would have to try to talk to Mr Kerrish but for now the best thing would be to go back to her own household.

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Much to Anch's concern, Kerren Kerrish was not in the office the following day, having gone up to the north of the country with Henry to meet some of the bank's clients there. Henry had been keen to go, Anch remembered. Perhaps the trip had something to do with his plans. Anch decided to stay put until Henry and Mr Kerrish returned.

It was while Kerrish and Henry were visiting one of their Northern clients that they encountered Dana Harris. "Hi," she had said with a breezy tone and an American accent. "Guess that you're a foreigner here too."

She scrounged a lift with the two men back towards Kolin and spent most of the journey telling them about herself. How she'd been in Kushtia for almost a month now, how it was so different from her home in Ohio, how she really didn't understand why the women put up with the way they were treated and so on. Kerren Kerrish affected an air of quiet interest. Henry made the mistake of asking the occasional question which had the effect of her embellishing her views with even greater detail.

"But that's not the main reason that I'm here," Dana said as the car staggered gratefully onto tarmac roads as they got into the outskirts of Kolin. "I'm really hoping to get to the bottom of this United Nations Cultural Heritage Programme. I mean, OK, it's understandable for Kushtian women to be happy with the way they're treated – they've been brought up to it, I guess. But what is it with Brits and Americans coming here to live the same way? Seems crazy to me and nothing I've seen so far is going to seem any different to my readers."

Dana's words sent a chill up Henry's neck. "Readers?" he said.

"Yes, sure. I write for a number of magazines back home. Women's issues, current affairs, that sort of thing. Maybe I should interview you about the UN Programme – it would be good to get the view of a British man living out here."

"I'm not sure," Henry responded. Actually, he was, the last thing he wanted to do was to attract attention to himself by talking to a reporter. "I don't really know anything about the programme."

"That's OK, I can give you some details."

The car stopped at Henry's hotel. He climbed out, hoping that Dana would forget about their conversation.

Dana wound the window down of the car and called towards him as he went inside. "And come to think of it, I could get your views on some of the things going on with the credit crunch in the west. Get a slant on how Kushtian banking compares. That could go down well. Especially for some of the UK titles – there's a real fuss on back there at the moment about some banker that disappeared leaving a trail of chaos. Could you see something like that happening here?"

Henry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. He was horrified. It could only be a matter of time until Dana figured out his connection with that affair.

"Well, I'll buy you dinner. We can talk then. See you at eight."

Henry nodded. Normally an invitation to dinner from an attractive, leggy, twenty five year old, American girl would have been a welcome proposition but that wasn't the case. There didn't seem to be much point in trying to argue about it now. What he would have to do was to make himself scarce for a while. He started to think about his options. As the car pulled off he was certain of one thing though. Dana was going to be stood up for dinner that evening.

Chapter 12: Funeral Games

In the palace of Kushnati Koresh, Victoria and Lauren were taking the opportunity to provide their captives with a little further “encouragement”, as Victoria called it, in preparation for their new homes. Both Victoria and Lauren appeared in the cellar where the girls were being held. The two of them were fully robed in white silk versions of the traditional Kushtian chanoosh, appearing like malicious ghosts in the gloom of the cellar.

The overseer of the household of Kushnati Koresh, was unimpressed. These two women were causing trouble in the house with their schemes. Koresh seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about them but the last that had been said to Husna Hannish was that he should indulge Lauren and, as overseer, he would see that his masters bidding was done. That didn't mean that he liked it though. Russians in the Palace of a member of the Council! He thought he'd seen the last of that when the Russian troops had left. He watched as the helpless girls struggled against their chains. Two or three of them looked sullenly at the ghostly figures of Victoria and Lauren. The others seemed to ignore them completely. Hannish understood, they were still trying to deny their circumstances.

“So, are our little friends ready?” Lauren turned towards Husna Hannish

“They make some progress, Ma'am,” he responded, with as much respect as he could pretend, “but they still have to accept their fate. These Russians do not make good wives. Doenyees, perhaps even concubines but not wives.”

“Absurd,” responded Lauren. “They are all good looking girls, they will become well accustomed to the ways of Kushtian men. Or have they not been raped enough yet?” Lauren's taunt prodded both at Husna's abilities and at the reputation that all Kushtian men had for aggressive sex. Husna glowered at the woman. What did these western incomers understand of Kushtian men? It was all very well for her, he thought. There was only him and Hakshim. And eight girls! He had no doubts about his virility and Hakshim had all the energy of an eighteen year old but there was only so much that two men could do.

“They are little better than whores, madam. For them there is no shame in rape.” The dismayed looks from the girls seemed to give the lie to what Husna was saying but gagged as they were they could give no voice to their protests.

“Then perhaps they need more beatings,” Victoria contributed. “Or is your arm weak as well, Hannish?”

Hannish scowled at the woman. He reached forward and grasped one of the girls by the wooden yoke that was locked around her neck. Twisting it, he span her around showing how her naked back was crossed with the wheals of the beating that he had given her less than an hour before. The deep scores left by his whip showed that he had lacked no enthusiasm for administering punishment to the girl. Husna Hannish took satisfaction from the sharp intake of breath from behind Victoria's veil as she saw the girl's bloody scars.

The others knelt quietly, terrified of either the rape or beating that Victoria and Lauren's taunting of the Overseer would lead to. Natalya, who had been forced to fellate Hannish that morning, cowered behind one of the others, trying to avoid being noticed.

Suddenly two of the household doenyees, burst into the room. Agitated and obviously upset they were calling out in Kushtian, distressed and concerned. “What are they saying?” demanded Lauren. “What's the matter?”

Hannish looked seriously at Lauren. “It's your husband,” he said. “You must go with them.” The two doenyees led Lauren out from the cellar. Hannish and Victoria watched them go. As they left the cellar, Hannish said, “Her husband is dying. He may be dead before she reaches him.”

Victoria said nothing, thinking that, with Lauren in control of Koresh's estate, they would no longer have to worry about keeping the bank happy in order to fund their enterprise.

"Things will change," said Hannish.

"You bet," thought Victoria smiling behind her veil.

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Two days later, after the funeral, Lauren was at her husband's solicitors. The scene in the offices of Kushansis, Kushansis and Kosneighy was a sombre one. As became a widow, Lauren sat quietly, clad from head to foot in the heavy black chanoosh that left not an inch of her exposed, her gloved hands folded together in her lap. Behind the veil that covered her face was an expectant look of anticipated triumph as she contemplated the new freedom that access to her husband's fortune would bring. Everything seemed to be going well. The letter from Mr Kosneighy had made it clear that there was no reason for her to be concerned following the death of her husband; that she had been well provided for and need have now worries about the future. That suited Lauren just fine she thought as Mr Kosneighy came in, extended a hand and offered his condolences. "It must have come as a great shock" he said.

"Indeed," said Lauren, although the only shock from her perspective was that he had survived so long.

"Well, I expect you wish to be informed about the last wishes of Mr Koresh."

"Dear Kushnati," Lauren said with a sniff that might have accompanied a tear. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, I have the will here." Mr Kosneighy took out a thick envelope and emptied the contents onto the desk between them. From the pile of documents he selected one and unfolded it. "I shall not bother you with all the legal jargon, Mrs Koresh," he said, "the main point of the will is that Mr Koresh leaves his entire estate to his excellency the Kalinin of Kushtia to be held in trust for his son until he attains the age of thirty."

"What!" Lauren's reaction was explosive. "What sort of deal is that? I'm his wife for fuck's sake!" Kosneighy blushed, unused to such language from behind a chanoosh.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't understand. What is the problem? I thought you would be pleased there could be no better outcome."

"You said the will looked after my interests, that I was – to use your words – 'well provided for'. You said that his will left his estate to his living heir. What sort of jerking around are you giving me?"

Kosneighy looked puzzled, not understanding either Lauren's expressions or her tone. "Mrs Koresh, of course you are well provided for. As part of your husband's estate, you are looked after too. You become now part of the Kalinin's household. That alone gives you great rank. And 'to be held in trust for his son'; that could give you the chance to re-marry if his son and the Kalinin so please."

"But shouldn't his property come to me as his only living heir? I thought it only went to the Kalinin in the event of his having no heir."

"Heir? Oh, I see. Of course! Mrs Koresh, I can see that you don't understand. In Kushtia a woman does not own property, so it is not possible for a woman to be an "heir" as you say. There's really nothing that can be done. I'm sure that the Kalinin and his son will arrange things satisfactorily there is no question of your wanting for anything, I am sure. Things are already organised. The Kalinin's overseer is here to take you to the palace."

Kosneighy pressed a button on his desk and the tall muscular form of the Kalinin's overseer appeared. Without speaking he gestured for Lauren to get to her feet. As she did so, he gripped her arm and span her around clamping her wrists together in a pair of heavy manuses that her hands were locked in place behind her back. As Lauren was about to protest indignantly the overseer, with practised ease, slipped his hand under Lauren's veil and pushed the soft leather

plug of a moaungf into her mouth. In spite of her struggles and muffled objections he managed to fasten the strap that held the plug in place. The overseer nodded to the lawyer.

Kosneighy stood up and reached into his desk taking out a heavy, inscribed, gold disk. He stepped forward and took a similar but smaller disk from Lauren's neck and replaced it with the heavier one. "There," he said, "now you wear the properta of the Kalinin's household in accordance with the wishes of your late husband. I am sure that as a ranking member of the Kalinin's seragla you will find your life even more comfortable than before. I am also told that the Kalinin is anxious to see that you are well integrated into your new household and his son's chief wife has agreed to take you under her wing."

Lauren gave an irritated grunt of complaint from behind the moaungf.

"You know Victoria, I believe. She is most concerned for your well being and that you should fit into the household's traditions and customs. Indeed, it was she that reminded me that it was traditional for a newcomer to the Kalinin's seragla to arrive wearing manuses and moaungf. You see how concerned she is for you?"

Lauren's less than lady-like response was fortunately stifled. The overseer led her away.

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When Henry got back to the office he was disappointed to discover that Anch wasn't there. He had hoped that he'd enjoy an amusing half hour with her in the Cubicon and, of course, there were the notes from his trip to type up. But without his secretary both projects would have to wait.

Anch, in fact, was still avoiding Henry. She had decided that first of all she would have to try to find out more before talking to Mr Kerrish. It was possible that she might learn more if she could talk to one of the doenyas at the Korresh household. Maybe they would know something about what had been going on, perhaps they would have seen something of what Henry had really been up to, she thought.

Then as she got close to the Korresh household, she saw Henry bustling in to the front door.

Chapter 13: Ellie In Kushtia

It was hardly the best organised process. Victoria was gesticulating wildly and attempting to order Husna Hannish to prepare the girls for transfer to the Kalinin's palace while he protested that any arrangements should be made by the Kalinin's overseer as the representative of his household. Neither of them was ready to do more than bluster about what needed to be done. Finally Victoria got her way and Husna, reluctantly began to ready things.

In another room Henry, oblivious to the contents of the truck, was greeted by Victoria. His arrival had been most inconvenient but at least with Husna doing the necessary work to make the girls ready she could keep Henry distracted.

Outside the Koresh mansion, in a small roadside hut that sold vegetables during the day, Anch was waiting patiently. Having followed Henry there, she was determined to discover what was going on, why she had been attacked and what Henry's involvement was.

The truck in which the girls found themselves was no better than the one they had been brought from Pestrovka in, only this time they did not have the benefits of travelling while sedated. It was almost midnight by the time the truck set off. The air in Kolin was chill and about as clear as it ever got.

Things went wrong almost as soon as they started. The Zlin in which Victoria and Henry were travelling stalled as it emerged from the Koreshi building to turn on to the road to Kolin. The truck, braking unexpectedly, slid forward inexorably, slamming into the back of the Zlin with a crunching of metal. The two drivers got out, swearing at one another, waving and pointing and trying to attribute blame.

Watching from the shelter of the small hut, Anch saw Henry peering out of the Zlin looking irritated. What, she thought, was going on? And what was in that truck?

There was no sign that the drivers were about to resolve their differences. Victoria climbed out and was berating the two men.

Taking her chance, Anch slipped around to the back of the truck and unfastened the door catch. As she pulled at the door it came open easily and a helpless, naked, girl half fell through the gap. Anch lowered the bound and gagged girl to the road. Hearing that the argument over the collision was subsiding, she quietly closed the truck's door again and dragged herself and the girl back into the bushes beside the road. The Zlin and the truck moved off. Anch, holding the girl close to her in the cold night air, watched them go and waited to see that nothing more was happening in the Koresh household.

Natalya had been surprised and relieved at her turn of fate. She had hoped that she might get a chance to escape but she had never imagined that her efforts would be rewarded so quickly. As soon as the doors of the truck had been closed she had shuffled herself to the door and when it had opened she had simply fallen through into the arms of this other woman that had come to her rescue. She watched in dismay as the other girls were driven away but at least, she thought, if I am free perhaps I can get help for them as well.

Her rescuer started to unbuckle the straps of the maoungf that stuffed Natalya's mouth. "Oh, thank you," she blurted as the hated leather plug was pulled free.

"Shh," her rescuer warned, starting to work on the straps that held Natalya's wrists, ankles and arms. "We can talk later."

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Ellie's flight to Kushtia, on the same Tupolev 114 that had carried Henry there, gave her plenty of time to think about the approach she was going to use when she got there. First of all she would need to talk to Henry, she thought. Only then would she have the chance to work out what was going on and what to do about it. She did, however, spend some time talking to a

seemingly shy, reserved woman who was also flying to Kushtia.

"I'm Esther, she said when Ellie introduced herself, "Esther Baskin. I'm with the FSA, you know the banking regulation people."

"You must be busy right now," said Ellie with a laugh. It was the wrong thing to do. Esther, unused to anyone expressing even the least interest in her work, simply took this as encouragement to describe her role in minute detail. At the end of it Ellie could see how an FSA investigator might make an interesting subject for a movie but Esther certainly wasn't the person to write the screenplay. The next hours passed very slowly indeed but fortunately Ellie managed to disconnect herself from Esther when they arrived at Kolin Airport.

Henry was there as agreed to meet her. Ellie was glad that her bags came through before Esther's. She was pretty sure that the woman from the FSA would be pleased to see Henry and equally that he wouldn't be pleased to see her.

"Why is Freddie getting so agitated?" Henry asked her. "Everything has been going very smoothly, apart from some stupid journalist I'm having to keep out of the way of. Sure there had been a few hiccups with this client but that always happens doesn't it?"

Ellie tried to explain, patiently, that Freddie wasn't in the least bit worried about Henry. "It all concerns," she said, "some problems that Freddie is having with one of the companies that he sometimes does business with. Not a banking matter at all. In fact not really a Kushtian matter. It's over the border in Petrovka."

"Oh," says Henry. "That's a coincidence. That company I was telling Freddie about has done some business done some business there. I've got a board meeting tomorrow. I was going to ask them how their meetings over there went. Although it has got a bit more complicated now what with Koresh dying and everything. I was trying to sort that out last night. Gone midnight it was when I finished with them!"

"Board meeting?"

"Yes. Oh I didn't tell you. That's been one step up for me. I'm a bona fide board member – their financial director. Bit of a promotion, eh?"

"You're the financial director? Of Lauren and Victoria's little enterprise?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Probably," Ellie said, thinking that it was very unlikely to make Anatoly happy to discover that a Clegg was sitting where Henry was sitting. "I'll let you know."

Ellie had elected to stay at the Kolin Centrum where Henry was lodging too. After checking in and making some discrete enquiries about where she could find such interesting sights as the residence of the country's hereditary ruler, the Kalinin's Palace, she dressed herself in that most anonymous of outfits, the chanoosh, and headed out into the night.

Ellie found the palace easily enough, she even managed to get into the courtyard of the household by joining a chain of doenyas carrying baskets into the palace's storerooms. Once inside it wasn't too difficult to find her way into the kitchens and from there to palace rooms themselves; nobody seemed interested in one more veiled doenya going about her business.

The problem was that the further Ellie got into the palace, the less of an idea she had about what she might be trying to discover. The palace was a warren of rooms and corridors. It was then that she had a stroke of luck.

From a room to the side came a sound that Ellie recognised, the muffled moan of an annoyed and gagged woman. Ellie followed the sound. Peering through a curtained archway, Ellie could see the back of a slim woman with dark bobbed hair standing in the middle of the room, obviously Victoria from Freddie's description. Crouching in a small cage on the far side of the room was another woman, naked and gagged.

"This is very tiresome, Lauren," the dark haired woman said. "I had hoped that you might have accepted this change in your fortunes more willingly. It's an honour to be part of the Kalanis household, even as a doenya."

The gagged woman in the cage growled.

"Now, you know I can't do anything about that. There is only so much influence I can bring to bear on my husband's decisions." Another grunt didn't interrupt her. "And until I've had the chance to sort out the little problem with our absentee, I'm afraid I don't really want you plying your charms in his direction. Let's just say I like to keep on top of my competition and since you have no idea of where that little bitch has got to after we left the Koresh estate, I don't think you can be much help to me."

Ellie edged back from the curtain disturbed by what she had overheard between Victoria and Lauren. It was obvious that one of their charges was missing and that wasn't going to make Freddie happy.

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It was almost two in the morning when Anch and Natalya got back to Anch's household. Natalya, wearing only some blankets that they had found in the hut was shivering with cold but grateful to be free. Anch managed to smuggle her indoors and to find her a corner in out of use store room where she could hide.

"I must talk to the police," Natalya insisted. "There are all the other girls. We were going to be sold. Slaves to men in the north, they said."

"We must be careful," Anch cautioned. "It is not so easy. The highest families are involved, the police might not listen to us or worse they might take you back."

Natalya looked distressed. "What can I do? How can I get back to Russia? How can we help the others? How can we get these criminals arrested?"

"I don't know. We have to collect together all we know. Who is involved do you think?"

"There were the women, the ones they call Victoria and Lauren. Then that monster Husna at the Korreshi household and his boy, Hakshim. They raped me. Many times. They raped all of us."

"And what of the Englishman? Is he their mastermind; the one behind it all?" Anch, determined that Henry was involved, was anxious to learn whatever she could. Then she would speak to Mr Kerrish at the Bank.

"I am not sure. There was an Englishman. I thought he was their leader but I cannot really say. I saw him with Victoria, but he never came to see any of the captives."

"But Korresh cannot be their leader. He was too ill."

"No, he was not involved I think. Perhaps it was just the women?"

Anch was astonished by the idea. "I know they are foreigners but surely not! There must be someone else: Henry, or the Kalinin's son. But if that is true we must be very careful indeed. He has great influence. I am sure he would be able to prevent the police acting."

The two girls, uncertain what to do for the best decided to get some rest before morning.

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Ellie sat down with a large Martini and a deep sense of discomfort. She wasn't looking forward to the conversation. When things got difficult, Freddie was too prone to go shooting off without thinking things through. And, Ellie thought, this is all so complicated that the last thing we need is Freddie making things more confused. Still, he did need to know what was going on and he

did need to talk to Anatoly. Ellie had promised him that she would call. She didn't feel she really had any alternative.

"Freddie," she began, "how's things."

"Tolerable." Clegg's one word response was as good as she was likely to get, Ellie thought.

"Good," she said, ignoring Clegg's irritable tone. "I thought I'd give you a heads up on the situation out here. You'll be pleased to hear that it's much as you thought."

"Uhhuh," Freddie's reply told Ellie that while he might be pleased that he was right, he certainly wasn't happy with the situation.

"Things appear to have been the result of some private enterprise by two of the girls that we shipped out in the early stages of the Kushtian relationship. Lauren and Victoria? Seems like they learned a few things at your hands, Freddie, dear." Clegg hunched indignantly at the other end of the line.

"As far as I can tell they have lifted eight Russian girls so far; four before Anatoly called you and another four last week."

"Hardly a major dent in the numbers of Russian women between 18 and 35. Can't see what Anatoly's so upset about..."

"Freddie, you know it's the principal of the thing. You'd be the same if you thought he was doing this on your patch." Ellie ignored the grunt from the other end of the line. "The good news is that it's contained and I can fix most of it. There's two bits of bad news though. Firstly one of their captives has gone on the run."

"Great. I take it that means repatriation will be a problem."

"It does, if I can't find her. I haven't given up on that though. On repatriation, I thought you might have a chat with Anatoly about whether he wants us to return them or whether he would like to have some involvement in their future fates."

"Mmm, well maybe. What's the other bit of bad news?"

"Henry was funding it. Up to his ears in the business. He was the Bank's nominee on their Board of Directors." The silence at the other end of the line went on for long enough to convince Ellie that the call had dropped. "Freddie?"

"I heard you. How could he be on the board of a business that's doing that?"

"Through the bank and through stupidity. You know Henry after all. He's running their business banking division. The girls had pulled a scam to get the bank to put up the cash to set things up. He says yes; the Bank says all right but we want representation and so, there he is." Ellie paused. Freddie made a noise halfway between a wince and a groan. "They were using Kushnati as a front. You heard he died?"

"Uh huh. Nothing to do with this I hope."

"No. Natural causes. He was pretty ancient wasn't he? Anyway that's complicated things – his business interests pass to the Kalinin's son, and his wives do too. So, that now puts Victoria and Lauren into the same household with a few complications that can be imagined. Anyway, while there is all this muddle I think I can find an opportunity to straighten things out but I'll need a little practical help here on the ground to get the Russian girls back and to get a few people off Henry's back. The FSA are over here and if I'm right they are looking for him. I can't imagine it's because they want his recommendations on how to solve the banking crisis. And there's some journalist here as well."

"OK," Freddie sounded at least a little comforted by Ellie's words, if only because she sounded as though she knew what was going on. It certainly sounded as though she would need some

back up. "I'll talk to Larry maybe he can suggest some back up from the contacts he's got over there. I'll get him to call you. Just as soon as I have spoken to Anatoly."

"Rather you than me," Ellie said as she ended the call. Freddie knew what she meant.

Freddie's exchange with Anatoly verged on the terse, but at the end, Freddie believed that Anatoly was convinced that he was acting in good faith.

"Isn't this what cooperation is all about?" Freddie said. "Spotting these little problems and sorting them out amicably."

There was a pause at the other end of the line. "No, Freddie, it's about not getting things wrong in the first place. But, I suppose, you couldn't have foreseen this. Thank you for being straight about this."

"And the girls? I'm going to ruffle some feathers if they're taken out of Kushtia. I mean the Kalinin is a good customer and it's not like he's been responsible."

"But his son's wife has. For a Kushtian that is the same thing. He would expect that much. He will feel obliged to remedy things." Freddie had to agree, that was exactly how the Kalinin would see it. "I tell you what Freddie. Let's be fair about this. We both know that sending them home isn't an option. Ship them back to me. I'll look after them from there on."

"I imagine that 'look after them' includes selling them on."

"Freddie, they've already lost their freedom. I don't think this is a time for moral niceties, is it?"

"Maybe not but it seems to leave you substantially up on the deal."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know what they are like. Pigs in pokes as you say. Maybe they are peasants? No price for them, we know. I take the risk on that. You're forgetting that I have to square things in Pestrovya. I can't imagine that your Kushtian friends did too neat a job. There will be loose ends. People will need to be looked after. Egos will have to be smoothed. Feathers unruffled. This is in my backyard. I have skin in this game too, Freddie. My skin too!"

Freddie wasn't happy. He didn't like the idea of Anatoly picking up eight girls for no effort at all but equally he didn't want the bother of trying to sort out the problems either. He finally agreed. "OK, Anatoly. I am told these girls are not pigs – you'll have no trouble selling them. But it's probably easier this way. I think this means you owe me maybe some small favour, sometime."

"Sure Freddie, maybe a small one."

Freddie's conversation with Larry went just as smoothly. Larry remembered the help he'd been given by Sergeant Dobranin of the Kolin police force and recommended that Ellie speak with the Minister of the Interior. When Freddie spoke with Ellie she wasn't sure that an official route to Sergeant Dobranin's talents was necessarily the best way forward but agreed that the officer sounded like a useful asset.

And so it turned out. A short conversation with Sergeant Dobranin and an understanding reached about the supply of certain items of clothing freely available in the west but in desperately short supply in Kushtia was all that was needed to provide Ellie with access to a cellar at the back of Dobranin's apartment block and a non-descript pickup truck. Further promises of a case of genuine Scotch whiskey secured the services of Dobranin's father, Desnerek, as a driver and as a custodian of whatever - no questions asked - Ellie wanted to keep in the cellar. "At least," Ellie said to herself, "I'm not flying completely solo now."

Chapter 14: Board Meeting

Henry was less than happy. He didn't see how there could be a board meeting without one of the principals present. Victoria had been adamant though. Lauren was indisposed and quite unable to join them. They were meeting in the west wing of the Kalinin's palace. It had been set aside for the household of Koreni Kalanis when he had first come of age but it was beginning to become cramped

Part of the problem was that the Kalinin's son had insisted on five wives initially, even when the most a Kushtian would normally aspire to was three and then a further five concubines had arrived. Added to which Victoria had insisted on her own extensive quarters and with the arrival of those of the Koreni household bequeathed to the Kalinin it had just got a whole lot worse. Koreni Kalanis wasn't sure what he was going to do about it. He had broached the matter with his chief wife but Victoria had not been keen for them to move away from his father's palace. "It confers status on us," she had said. "And that makes it easier for me to help you."

So, the household of Koreni Kalanis continued to occupy its cramped quarters. And, as far as the board meeting was concerned that meant he and Victoria were meeting in one corner of the great hall of the seragla, surrounded by the comings and goings of Koreni's wives, concubines and doenyees. In one way Henry didn't mind; the girls were certainly decorative enough. On the other hand it wasn't too easy to concentrate.

On the far side of the room, Koreni Kalanis was relaxing with four of his wives. His head was cradled in Emma's lap, Gerri busy with her head between his kegs as he ran his hands through her auburn hair and the two Melanie's engaged in a display of Sapphic lust for his amusement. In spite of these distractions his gaze was fixed to Victoria as she stepped into the room; her dagger like heels protruding from beneath the slim cut trousers of a grey, chalk stripe, suit. A sharp white shirt and thin black tie gave her the air of an efficient business woman but what really astounded Henry was her veil. The lower half of her face was hidden by an elaborate metal yashmak formed by interwoven golden chains and coins.

Her eyes gave Henry a piercing look over the veil. "Do we *really* need to do this?" she said.

Henry, unwilling to be discouraged by her impatient tone, sat silently for a moment. Apart from anything else he was enjoying the sight of Koreni's principal wife. She had managed to combine western and eastern styles in a way that spoke of both elegance and decadence, of primness and extreme sexuality. As she sat on the cushions beside him, she unbuttoned her jacket revealing a matching waistcoat that was cut to emphasise the swell of her breasts. Henry caught himself wondering for a moment if he should have been quite so reassuring to Anch. Victoria lounged back, the pointed toe of her stilt heeled shoes was placed with precision an inch or less from Henry's own foot as much as to say, "Get the answer to that wrong and you'll have very sore shins indeed." Victoria took one of the pipes from the hookah that stood between them, threading it behind the edge of her yashmak. Henry watched her chest rise as she inhaled deeply from the pipe. The stream of smoke that she let into his face was perfumed heavily with the scent of hunashif.

"Well?" she said.

"I'm sure we can wrap it up without too much difficulty," Henry said. "But I do need to give the bank confidence that their position is still protected."

Victoria turned her face towards him. Her eyes seemed piercingly blue for an instant but with another suck of the hookah pipe the hunashif seemed to soften her attitudes. "Hmmm? Well, let me reassure you if I can."

She moved a little closer to him but, engaged as Henry was, he was unwilling to be diverted.

"Perhaps you could summarise the position with the business. Especially since the demise of Mr Koresh."

Victoria sighed, took another suck on her pipe and began. "We have completed the first round of

recruitment and met the requirements for our initial clients. We have, of course, a little work to do in providing our new recruits with the introduction needed as potential Kushtian wives ...”

“A sort of finishing school?”

“Hmm? Mmmm.” Victoria nodded.

“The costs were included in the business plan?”

“Mmm,” Victoria nodded again.

Henry was happy. This was just the sort of detail that Mr Kerrish would want. “So, no difficulties so far then?”

Victoria batted her eyelids at Henry. “No, nothing significant,” she said.

Henry was beginning to understand why the bank didn’t make loans to women. It was almost impossible to tell what Victoria was thinking behind the yashmak. The coins and chains danced mesmerically in the light of the seragla and her blue, kohl rimmed eyes told Henry very little more than Victoria was saying. Even so, he wasn’t going to let that go. “Significant?” Henry pressed, latching on to the one remark that seemed to offer an opening.

“One of the girls is not yet convinced that her original interest was correct,” Victoria’s assessment of Natalya’s state of mind rather understated her views, she would have thought. “But all will be well. The client concerned is happy for us to make sure that she is completely happy with the idea before the two are joined together. Apart from that we have been able to bank the first tranche of payments from our clients as no doubt you have seen. We adopted, you will recall, a phased payment system and our clients have been happy to go along with that.”

Henry knew. He had ticked off the payments from the bank account statement. “It has certainly made sure that cash flow has met plan,” Henry said. “That is helping me to ensure that the bank is able to continue its support.” If there was only one drop out in this first round, Henry thought, the business will have done surprisingly well. He had half expected the thing to be a complete fiasco.

He looked up to see that Victoria had loosened off her tie and unfastened her blouse to the point where it met with her waistcoat. The dark shadow of her cleavage seemed to draw his eyes magnetically as she took another puff on the hookah and stretched languorously. “Is that what we need to discuss? Hmmm?” Victoria asked. “Can we have done with business?”

In spite of the allure of Victoria’s décolletage and the sparkle of her eyes over the yashmak, Henry was determined not to be distracted. “One more thing,” he said. “We need to regularise Lauren’s position, I think. Now that the shareholding of Mr Koresh has passed into the hands of Mr Kalanis, he is the sole shareholder for the business. Lauren was Mr Koresh’s nominee; you Mr Kalanis’s. The bank needs to know what is intended for the future. My feeling was that Lauren’s contribution to the operational side of the business was as important as your own, Mrs Kalanis.” Henry felt that reintroducing some formality would help return the discussion to a professional level. “Will Lauren continue to be involved in the business in some way.”

Victoria smirked behind her yashmak. Her intentions were that Lauren would be very much involved in the business although perhaps as stock rather than staff. She still hadn’t decided yet, it all depended whether her tight little butt and naturally perky tits presented a threat in the Kalanis household or not. It remained to be seen if she was going to stay or whether, as was a distinct possibility, she would have another role entirely. Victoria turned to Henry. “I think her main focus at the moment is resolving the problem with the girl that I mentioned earlier,” she said. “She’s going to be most anxious to put that right.” Another draw on the hookah provoked a giggle.

Henry could tell that Victoria was becoming progressively more fuddled by the hushanif but, he felt, he had got what he had come for. “That’s very good news, Mrs Kalanis,” he said. “I’m sure that the bank will be happy with that.”

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Hushna Hannish felt he was beginning to make an impression on his charges. If this first set of women were well trained, there would be a bonus and the opportunity for further amusement, he had been assured.

As far as Hakshim was concerned it was the best job he could imagine. Sure, they were only Russian girls but their bodies were good to look at and better to enjoy. And he could remember the behaviour of the Russians when they had run the country, this was a chance to pay them back for some of their arrogance.

Husna felt the same, he'd watched from hiding, terrified of being discovered as a group of Russian soldiers had raped his sister. He'd enjoyed this opportunity to take some revenge.

The seven girls were naked now, chained by their necks to rings in the wall of the small cell under the Kalanis seragla with the traditional ancluses, shackles, locked around their ankles. The woman Victoria had proved most inventive in the other restraints that she had been able to make available, Husna thought. He particularly liked the ring gags; the way that they stretched the mouth open, leaving it ready for the attentions of his cock. Now, though, they were quiet of their own accord and it was time for them to start learning how to behave as good Kushtian girls. Quiet, respectful submissive was how Kushtian men liked their wives and that was how these girls would be trained to behave.

He got Hakshim to herd the girls out of their cell into the larger room. Hakshim was becoming expert with the short tailed whip, using it to drive the women forward or to steer them to a particular spot. Under his directions the seven were soon standing, backs against one cold stone wall of the room, with their hands held up behind their heads. One of the girls bore the scarlet tracks across her belly and breasts from where the whip had shown her what to do. The others had soon fallen into place, to Hakshim's disappointment.

"You will all cover your heads and faces," Husna announced, pointing to a pile of dark cloth in one corner of the room. "Your husbands will be interested in your cunts and tits, even in your arses perhaps," he smiled seeing the effect his words had on the girls, "but you must learn modesty when it comes to your faces. Do it now!"

The words were barely out of his mouth before a snick from Hakshim's whip encouraged the girls to move quickly. They quickly fell on the dark cloth, each grabbing pieces and arranging them to cover their heads and faces. Hakshim encouraged them back against the wall as soon as they were ready.

"Better," Husna said addressing the seven veiled but otherwise naked women. "You will soon learn modesty like that."

"They need names. Names for things we can see." Hakshim volunteered. "This one; Dark Nipples." He reached out and squeezed the tits of the first girl in the line, bringing a distressed whimper. "This one; Heavy Tits," he laughed.

Husna joined in the game. "Thick Lips," he said grasping the third girl by her prominent labia with a resulting distressed cry from the girl concerned, "and Blonde Cunt." The fourth yelped as Husna took hold of a handful of her pubic hair. The other three turned towards the two men in expectation of further humiliating attention. "This one - Pit Belly - you could sink your cock in this one's navel."

"What about the last two?" Hakshim made his way along the line to the remaining two girls. He ran his hands across the buttocks of one of them. "Pock Arse, this one."

"Sure that's not your teeth marks? What about this one then." Husna played for while with the last girl's tits and belly, parting her thighs with his hand. In time, in spite of her distress, his fondling brought about a moistness between her legs. "Huh!" he exclaimed as he felt the slippery

secretions on his fingers. "Honey Dropper. That'll do for her." Hushnah confronted the girls. "Know your names, now do you?"

Vague mutters of assent came back to him.

"Well call them out. Let us hear you. We want to be sure you're getting things right."

"You start," Hakshim struck out with his whip at the first.

"Ahh!" she exclaimed in pain, "Dark Nipples, Sir."

The others sang out in turn; "Heavy Tits."

"Th – th – thick lips, Sir."

"Blonde Cunt." Husna though he detected defiance in the slight pause before the girl's response but she would soon learn.

"Uh – Pit Belly, Sir"

"Pock, Pock Arse," the next sobbed.

Then finally, "H – h- Honey Dropper."

"Very good," Husna Hannish approved. "Make sure you remember them. You'll find that you have plenty of other things to learn."

Hakshim smirked, he was looking forward to helping with their further education.

Chapter 15: Henry's Career

The lobby of Henry's hotel was scattered with the usual collection of people waiting to check out (always a long process in Kushtia), people hoping to check in (usually even longer) and people waiting for a meeting with somebody staying in the hotel. Those that had got tired of the wait sat at low tables ranged along one side of the lobby and tried to attract the attention of one of the waitresses who could, on occasion, be persuaded to fetch coffee.

As he was about to emerge from the lift, Henry thanked his luck that a row of potted palms broke the view of the lifts from the lobby. He was about to leave the lift when he saw, across the lobby, someone he knew. Unveiled, the woman was obviously a westerner. The thin lips, high cheek bones and scraped back mousey brown hair were instantly recognisable. It was Esther Baskin, senior investigator with the United Kingdom Financial Services Authority. Henry immediately suspected that Baskin's appearance meant trouble. She could hardly be in Kushtia for a holiday. She must be after him, just as Ellie had suggested.

Henry stayed where he was in the lift, letting the lift doors slide shut in front of him, closing finally as he saw Esther getting to her feet.

Across the lobby of the hotel sitting in a booth that hid her partly from view and taking advantage of the veil that hid her face, Ellie had watched the tableau unfold. Henry's ashen face told her at once that the woman at the desk was one that he was hoping to avoid. Another complication, Ellie thought.

The lift arrived at the basement. Henry could imagine the conversation that Ms Baskin would be having at the reception desk.... "Mr Clegg, I'm not sure." ... the producing of a \$20 bill "Ah, now you come to mention it." ...the surreptitious slipping away of the \$20 bill to avoid the notice of the hotel manager.. "Oh yes, no he will be at the bank." "The bank you say." ... "Yes, of course. You will find him there. His office is on" Henry thought for a moment. With luck he could duck out of the building up the car park ramp and pick up a taxi on the main road. He wasn't for the life of him sure where he was going but it was the best he could think of. As he got to the top of the car park ramp he saw Esther Baskin climb into a cab. He flagged down another and sent it off in the opposite direction. He needed time to think. He told the driver to drop him in the Square of the Revolution. At least there he could submerge himself in the throng of Kushtian office workers, trudging from the bus station to the various office buildings dotted around the centre of town.

A small stall with a few stools alongside it offered the opportunity of breakfast. Henry took a coffee and a small sticky cake, paid the stall holder and perched himself on a stool. The square was packed; a solid river of people walked purposefully by him.

A voice hailed him from the far side of the river of commuters. "Hey, Mr Clegg! That's lucky. Can we have a word? I hear the FSA has come looking for you. You'll want to tell your side of the story."

It was Dana Harris, the reporter. Henry most certainly did not want to tell his side of the story or any side of the story. What he wanted was for the story to go away. Dana was trying to push her way through the crowd of commuters. Henry took his opportunity to slide around the back of the coffee stall. He slipped away down a nearby alley way. As he ducked into a carpet seller's shop, he heard Dana calling after him. Fortunately she didn't think to come inside.

As Dana stood in the street outside, trying to decide where Henry had gone, she saw a woman in a chanoosh gesturing at her. She pointed down an alleyway to one side of the building. Dana, acknowledging the woman's directions with thanks, slipped past her and into the dark alley. The woman in the chanoosh followed her.

It took Henry some time to disentangle himself from the carpet seller. The owner of the shop was unused to tourists actually arriving in his shop unbidden. He had taken a lot of convincing than usual that no, Clegg did not want a rug, a carpet, a wall hanging or indeed any other form of woven textile product. Eventually Henry managed to push his way back out onto the street.

Fortunately Dana seemed no longer to be around.

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In the office of Kerren Kerrish, Esther Baskin was having little success in her discussions. Her rather abrupt, forthright manner had irritated the Kushtian banker almost at once. Anch watched their discussions. She wanted to tell Kerrish about her suspicions but wanted more evidence first. Natalya, hiding in Anch's household had seen Henry's involvement with the slavers but even so Anch still found it hard to believe that he was one of them. She had hoped that the English regulator's enquiries might help her to prove or disprove her suspicions about her boss but the way that Baskin was conducting herself didn't seem likely to gain any cooperation from Mr Kerrish.

"I don't see why you are finding it so difficult to help me, Mr Kerrish," she said acidly. "I would have thought that it was in the interests of the bank to avoid any involvement with corrupt and dishonest practices."

"I bow to the experience of the British FSA in that field Ms Baskin," Kerrish responded with as much grace as he could muster. "Your recent triumphs in the regulation of the British banking industry are the envy of the world of finance. Fortunately we have found that our own practices are less likely to lead to fiscal instability."

"I had not realised that the Kushtian banking system had solved the world's financial problems." Baskin found it difficult not to rise to Kerrish's remarks. "You must tell me the secret."

"We cannot claim to have saved the world. That is the province of your Mr Brown, I think. We do however, have one small principle that we apply – we try not to lend money to people without the means or the possibility of paying it back." Kerren Kerrish sat back enjoying the pained look on the face of Ellen Baskin. He was disappointed. She was a pleasing looking woman, a little thin and pinched looking perhaps but her thin waist rather emphasised her breasts which in other circumstances he would have found too small for his taste. Nevertheless he would normally have been prepared to entertain her in his cubicon but he now felt that it would be a dispiriting experience. "Let me emphasise, Ms Baskin, Henry Clegg enjoys the bank's utmost confidence. Since his arrival here our business banking division has significantly improved but the size and, I may say," Kerrish allowed himself a smug glance at Esther, "the quality of its loan book. Our own governance and regulatory mechanisms are perfectly adequate. I really don't think the bank has anything to contribute to your enquiries. Thank you, Ms Baskin. Now if you'll excuse me. Miss Ancharya, please show Ms Baskin out."

Kerrish got to his feet. Esther had little choice but to go. "Please let me know if you learn anything about his whereabouts," she said, with little hope of any further assistance, and joined Anch in the walk to the office door.

"Shame," Kerrish thought to himself watching her as she left, "nice arse."

"I beg your pardon?" Esther turned around, furious. Kerrish's thoughts had been involuntarily voiced. She scowled at Kerrish and quickened her step. Kerrish didn't mind, it just improved the view as far as he was concerned.

As she and Anch left Kerrish's office, Esther spoke directly to Anch for the first time. "Do you have any idea where I might find Henry Clegg?" she asked. "I really do think it would be best if I managed to talk to him."

Anch wasn't sure whether she should help Esther or not. Mr Kerrish had seemed very unimpressed by the English woman but Anch was anxious to help her friend Natalya. In the end she decided that at least she should point Esther in the right direction.

In the lobby of the bank, Anch stopped Esther as she was about to leave. "I think I may be able to help you," she said.

Esther paused, surprised by Anch's tone after her hostile meeting with Kerrish's. "Well thank you, I'd be grateful for any suggestion. I really don't have much to go on apart from the hotel and

the bank here. And, well, Mr Kerrish, didn't seem keen to assist."

"You could try the household of the Kalinin's son, Koreni Kallanis" Anch said. "His wife, Victoria, is involved in a business that the bank is funding. Mr Henry is supervising the bank's involvement."

"The wife of the Kalinin's son? I can see that might be politically sensitive for Mr Kerrish," Esther acknowledged. "I shall try to see what I can find out there."

"But, please be careful," Anch urged concerned that she might be driving Esther into Henry's clutches rather than helping bring him to justice, "perhaps you should get help from the police or the Ministry of the Interior."

Esther thought for a moment but then shook her head. "No," she said, "I'd rather try to find him first. I really don't have anything I could say to the police about Mr Clegg's activities here and if Mr Kerrish isn't concerned about them from the bank's viewpoint then its difficult for me to involve them. Don't worry I'm sure I don't have anything to worry about from Mr Henry Clegg."

Not far from Anch and Esther, a chanoosh clad woman sat reading a Kushtian financial paper. She looked up as Esther left the building. "You're right, she thought to herself, "you don't have anything to worry about from Henry." Ellie got to her feet and followed Esther into the street.

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Henry spent the day moving from place to place around the centre of Kolin watching out at every turn for his pursuers. As Henry thought about his problem he realised that he had an instant solution available. Where better to hide out than in his client's household. He was sure that Victoria or Lauren would be able to provide some accommodation.

It was getting towards dusk as he reached the drive leading up to the Kalinin's residence. He parked the car and headed towards the door. As he got level with a gnarled tree a woman's voice hissed at him. "Over here," the woman called in a husky, accented, voice. "Quickly."

Henry reacted by turning towards the voice. A torch was shone for a moment in his face blinding him to his surroundings. "You bastard!" the voice snarled. "All right, put your hands up!"

Henry was unclear as to what he might have done that had attracted so much venom but he felt he ought to do as he'd been told. He was standing with his hands raised when suddenly a quiet thump was followed by the light going out and a scrabbling sound. Blinking in the darkness and still blinded by the brightness of the torch, Henry stood still for a moment but nothing more happened. The woman didn't speak again, there were no more instructions. As Henry's night vision recovered he peered towards where the voice had come from but there was no sign of anybody. He decided to make himself scarce while he still had the opportunity and carried on towards the house.

Chapter 16: Ellie's Collection

Anch was worried. When she had got back to her household the night before, Natalya had gone. One of the doenyas had told her that Natalya had borrowed a chanoosh and slipped out just before dusk. Then there had been all sorts of a fuss later on when the Overseer had discovered that a pistol was missing from the hunting cabinet. Now it was morning again and there was still no sign of Natalya.

When she got to the office Henry was already there, giving her a smile as she came in. She returned it as best she could, anxious to make sure that Henry did not guess her suspicions.

“Good morning, Anch,” Henry said brightly. “A busy day today, I think. There's plenty to do. Can you bring me the Koresh file, please?”

Anch suddenly remembered that she hadn't seen Henry since the file had been stolen. If he didn't know that then perhaps he wasn't behind its absence after all. On the other hand, she had been lured to the Spice Market by a message from his mobile phone. So, perhaps this was some sort of bluff. “I'm afraid its missing,” Anch said, deliberately keeping her involvement out of the conversation.

“Well, a copy perhaps?”

“Oh no. We don't keep more than one copy of a file.”

“Ah,” said Henry. “Oh. Well, never mind, we'll have to manage without it, I suppose.”

Anch was immediately furious with herself. *That* was what he wanted to know, she thought, that there wasn't another copy. He must have been behind the theft of the file after all. She looked at him and tried to decode what lay behind his placid expression. That meant he must have been involved with Victoria and Lauren and the kidnapped Russian girls, she thought. She looked across at Henry again. Who would think, she said to herself, that such a benign face could conceal such a terrible character. Natalya was almost certainly his prisoner, once again.

“Extraordinary thing,” Henry said. “Things keep going missing. Lot of fuss today at the hotel – they were looking for that Baskin woman and someone else was trying to track down that reporter. Now the file. Very odd.”

Anch listened with even greater concern. These other women had been investigating him. Had he been responsible for their disappearance too? Was Henry boasting about his actions as a warning to her? Was this his way of warning her off? Anch sat quietly, anxious not to say anything that would make Henry think that she was anything other than a good, compliant, Kushtian secretary. Inside though she was becoming determined to stop whatever scheme Henry was involved in.

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In the cellar lent her by Sergeant Dobranin, Ellie was making sure that her efforts to keep Henry out of trouble would continue to succeed. She didn't really have a plan yet but her first objective of making sure that nothing disturbed the status quo had seemed to involve her in dealing with more pursuers than Freddie managed to attract. Three of them, Ellie thought. Who would have imagined that Henry would have attracted so much attention from the female of the species? Dana Harris, Natalya Uranova and Esther Baskin had all been hot in pursuit of Freddie's nephew although all for different reasons. Still, with luck, Ellie had been able to make sure that they didn't cause Henry any real problems.

She'd been really fortunate with Dana Harris, the reporter. When Henry had bolted into the carpet sellers it had been the work of a moment to distract Dana and send her down a narrow alley. She'd been puzzling where next to go when Ellie had clamped the drugged pad over her nose and mouth, sending her spinning into an unconsciousness from which she only woke when she was bouncing over some of the back streets of Kolin, stuffed into a large basket on

the back of Desnerek Dobranin's truck.

Following Henry had proved the right way to find the various people that were pursuing him. His lack of guile made it easy for his stalkers to stay in touch and that had made Ellie's task easy too. When Henry had turned up at the Kolanis household in search of Victoria, Ellie had not been surprised to find Natalya waiting for him. Luckily the girl had no idea about weapons. The tap of a yawarra stick on the back of Natalya's head had been sufficient to drop the girl silently. Ellie had been pleased with herself. The yawarra – or kongo as she had called it - had been a gift from an old friend. Modesty would have approved of the technique, if not the objective, Ellie thought.

Esther Baskin had been more difficult. Ellie had followed her from the bank after she emerged from her meeting with Kerrish and her discussions with Anch. Esther's visit to the Finance Ministry had been little more successful than her visit to the Bank, a fact which wouldn't have surprised her if she had thought for a moment about the Under Secretary for Finance, Kollani Kerrish, and how much he looked like his brother Keren Kerrish at the Bank. She had been quite disconsolate when she got back to the hotel and had been only too happy when the woman she had met on the flight offered to buy her a drink in the hotel bar. Well she did have more than was really good for her and she did get a bit rowdy when the barman suggested that she should not have any more. Nobody could remember who had called the police but the lady police sergeant that turned up to deal with the disturbance soon quietened things down and escorted Esther away.

Ellie's thoughts about her captives were interrupted by the arrival of Desnerek Dobranin. The two exchanged smiles. He spoke no English and, while Ellie could manage a little Kushtian, she couldn't realistically do much more than exchange the conventional greetings.

Esther, Dana and Natalya were all helpless. Dana had been the first to arrive in the cellar, She was sitting, roped to a heavy chair, her ankles tied one to each of the chairs front legs, ropes across her lap and around her waist. Her pale cream trouser suit was covered with dust and scraps of plants from the basket she had been transported in and streaked with vomit, the consequence of the chloroform that had drugged her. Desnerek hadn't cleaned her up. The smell in the cellar wasn't pleasant.

Poor Natalya, was on the floor close to Dana. Abducted for the second time in only a few weeks, she'd recovered from the kongo blow that had laid her out but she still had a powerful headache, an egg sized lump on her head just behind her left ear and a grazed arm from her unconscious fall to the ground. Once in the cellar, Desnerek had tied her to an old iron pipe that ran up one of the walls. The pipe was flaking rust. Occasional drips of water fell from the joints in the pipe. Natalya, still dressed in the black robe she had borrowed from Anch's household had her wrists tied behind her back and to the pipe. Her ankles were bound too and she had been sat with her feet pulled back towards the pipe and tied to that too. In the process Desnerek had managed to push her long robe up until her legs were bared. Looking down at the helpless girl, Ellie didn't believe it had been an accident.

Esther had been the last to arrive and was probably the least comfortable of the three. Handcuffed by Sergeant Dobranin after her "arrest", Esther had been bundled into the boot of Dobranin's police car with her ankles cuffed so that the linking chain crossed that of the one between her wrists. After she had been brought into the cellar, they had simply left her on the floor. It had taken a while for the effects of the powder that Ellie had spiked her drink with to wear off. Now all she had was a hangover, aching arms and a gap in her memory for the last 24 hours.

All three of the women had been gagged with large, red rubber balls. It was becoming an industry standard, Ellie thought, almost apologetic for her lack of originality.

Ellie looked across at the three girls. There was a certain personal satisfaction in this, she felt. She wondered how long it had been since she'd been doing something like this. For too long she'd spent all her time on contracts, administration and legal issues. She understood, now, how Freddie had felt about the archaeologists he had spent hours boring her about. When he'd got back from Greece he'd been positively smug about his solo efforts.

Natalya stretched against the ropes and groaned, attracting attention. Ellie ought to feel sorry for others of her sex, she supposed but, in truth, it didn't feel like that. It was more a case of hunter and prey, merchant and merchandise. She'd grown up trying to make sure she wasn't on the wrong end of those relationships, so it was hard for her to feel sorry for those that hadn't been as successful as she was.

On the other side of the room an alcove had been separated off with steel bars. On the other side of the bars, behind a padlocked door, there was a small pile of boxes stamped with Cyrillic characters, the remains, Ellie suspected of some local resistance to the Russian occupation. Ellie pointed towards the girls and then to the barred alcove. They would be more secure in there, she felt. She pointed to the boxes miming that Desnerek should take them out before putting the girls in. Desnerek responded with a toothy grin and an upturned thumb showing that he understood her request. He unlocked the door to the caged alcove.

The girls were evidently distressed by this further development in their captivity. But it was Desnerek's next action that disturbed them more. He paused in his task of moving the boxes and turned to Ellie once more, lifting a single finger. Ellie looked puzzled.

Desnerek pointed at Esther. "Anglichsy?" he asked.

Ellie nodded. As far as she knew Esther was English. Desnerek nodded. Pointed to Esther and himself and then made a thrusting movement with his hips which made his interests obvious. "Anglichse femnyette – kunting." He lifted his thumb again with an enquiring look.

'Kunting' – that was another Kushtian word Ellie knew. It said a lot about Kushtian attitudes that their most common word for sexual congress and the slang word for a woman's sexual parts were exactly the same. She thought about it for a moment. There really wasn't any reason why Desnerek shouldn't have some fun, she thought. She gave him a nod but pointed to the other two and the cage, indicating that they should be locked up first and then gestured to Esther's ropes to show that whatever he might get up to she should not be released. Desnerek responded with another raised thumb and a smile and set to moving the boxes from the cage with renewed vigour.

Esther had worked out the meaning of the dumb show between Ellie and the old man that was their guard. She sat struggling in fear in her ropes and trying to plead through her gag.

Ellie had some sympathy for the poor girl but on the other hand, she needed to keep her staff on side and Desnerek deserved a little bonus. Anyway it would give them something to worry about while she sorted out the next problem on her list. What was she going to do about the rest of the Russians?

Chapter 17: Russian Roulette

Leaving Desnerek to amuse himself with Esther, Ellie presented herself to the Kalinin with considered formality. Of all the possible approaches – from forcibly removing the girls from the palace through to buying them back at the auction that Victoria had planned, the straightforward approach was, Ellie had decided, the one most likely to succeed.

It is good of you to see me, Kalinin,” she said nodding her head in respect as she entered the office of the Kushtian Head of State.

“And I am happy to see you once more too, Ms Grant,” the Kalinin responded warmly, his lilting, inflected English making his words sound all the more sincere. “Please remove your veil if you wish and sit by me.” He gestured to a large pile of cushions to one side of his desk. “Will you take some hunashif?” he held out a carved wooden box and lifted the lid to offer Ellie her pick of the carefully hand rolled joints.

Ellie demurred, thinking back to her student days when the offer would have been more than welcome and wondering why she had never come up with the idea of a gold trimmed roach. Such elegant decadence! “Thank you, no, Kalinin,” she said as she took her seat. “While I welcome the hospitality, I fear the effects might cloud our discussions.”

“Ha!” the Kalinin grinned, snapping the box shut. “It is only fair that we speak with clear heads. You must tell me how I can help you. And you must tell me how is my very good friend Mr Clegg.”

“Mr Clegg is well and sends his greetings. He greatly appreciates your patronage and hopes that the business continues to deliver satisfaction to one he is proud to know as a friend.” the Kalinin smiled, and nodded accepting the compliment. “I have a favour to ask,” Ellie went on, getting to the point of her visit. “And it involves your son.”

The Kalinin looked tired. “I try to keep him diverted. Your Mr Clegg has been most helpful there. His last project, the story tellers, most excellent. But, even so, he has yet to find a role. He does not yet find state affairs as fascinating as the affairs of the bedroom.”

Ellie smiled. By all accounts the Kalinin himself was no slouch in that direction but no one could doubt his diplomatic skills either. After the Russian withdrawal, he had managed to orchestrate his return to power from the other side of the globe and without the violence that might have been expected as a consequence of the change in regime.

“It is not so much a problem with your son as with one of his wives. Since she was provided by us, we feel in some part responsible.”

“That is what I would expect of Clegg. A man of honour, even if there are those that consider his calling dishonourable.” The Kalinin laughed cheerily. “Let me guess,” he said. “Victoria?”

Ellie nodded.

“She is a useful presence here, you know. A distraction for many of our people from some of the concerns that might otherwise excite them. Of course she is scandalous but the people enjoy a little drama. They like to think their leaders are corrupt and glamorous whereas for the most part we spend our time in the simple drudgery of statecraft. Her scandals are harmless, those amused by them have less attention for other matters.”

Ellie felt that the Kalinin was being disingenuous, but there seemed no reason to interrupt him.

“I suspect, from the concern of Mr Clegg, that this is somehow related to the little enterprise that she and her friend Lauren have been engaged in? Do you suppose that their plans to provide wives for my friends in the North were other than proper? If so, I am sure something can be done.”

"I think that is the case, Kalinin," Ellie responded. "And that their actions have the potential to disturb your Russian neighbours."

The Kalinin frowned. "That perhaps is something I should have foreseen. I have always considered that the best way to avoid being mauled by the Russian Bear is to refrain from poking it with sticks. I am disappointed if my son has not come to a similar conclusion. He does not always see it fit to intervene in his wife's activities. Still no matter. We must deal with things as they are. What is to be done?"

"There are eight women, I believe, that have arrived in Kushtia from Russia as a result of your daughter-in-law's entrepreneurial spirit. One is no longer with her – I have already taken her into my own care." The Kalinin gave Ellie a knowing look. "She and the remaining seven should, I believe, be repatriated. I can arrange this in such a way as to reduce the concern of your ursine neighbour. But," Ellie looked squarely at the Kalinin, "I have to be honest and say I do not know whether this will cause problems with those who might have expected to be in nuptial delight and will now potentially be disappointed."

The Kalinin folded his hands across his belly. "Perhaps," he said with careful consideration. "But perhaps as well it is better for them to know that the gift of such things can be in the Kalinin's hand rather than in the hands of others. I am sure that your Mr Clegg would be able to arrange alternatives or that we can divert some resources from the United Nations Cultural Experience Programme. My daughter in law must recognise that in a market there may be some competition. And my son should realise that it can be unwise to allow a wife too free a hand."

"From what I hear of the your Cultural Experience Programme that would seem to be an excellent suggestion," Ellie replied. She knew that Freddie would not be interested in the sort of subsidised arrangement that the Kalinin would no doubt be expecting to sort out this particular problem. Cash flow was bad enough and he was probably going to be out of pocket on the repatriation and the expenses of Ellie's trip. On the other hand she did have some assets of her own she reflected, thinking of Dana and Esther, which could either defray the costs of this exercise or ease the solution of the problem in some other way.

"Excellent," the Kalinin replied. "I shall see that things are arranged. The head of the program, my son and his wife, should be involved, I think. And also a representative of the Bank. In case there are any financial issues to be resolved. Does that accord with your own thoughts?"

"Thank you, Kalinin. That does indeed sound the best combination." She wasn't sure that Henry would actually be needed but there would be no harm in his being there.

"Very well, I shall arrange things with the Emir of Kolin."

"The Emir?" Ellie was foreseeing a complication.

"Yes, the head of the UN programme on behalf of the Culture Minister. A sound man, I am sure you have met him."

Yes, thought Ellie, I've met Brad and I've seen what's been happening to his daughter, Lauren, at the hands of Victoria. I wonder if he knows about the way that the wife of the Kalinin's son has been treating his daughter. She said, "Absolutely. It will be good to see him again."

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Returning to the Dobranin household, Ellie was presented with a scene of dissipation in the cellar. Desnerek was asleep on a pile of cushions, laying on his back, his mouth open and snoring loudly. Not far from him, Esther sat, her wrists handcuffed to one of the pipes. Desnerek had – as Ellie insisted – left Esther roped up but that didn't appear to have much interfered with what he had wanted to do with her. The jacket of the suit she had been wearing when Ellie had kidnapped her had been wrenched open and her blouse torn, exposing her breasts. They looked sore, Ellie thought. Esther's skirt was torn and her knickers pushed down around her ankles. The red ball of her gag no longer filled her mouth, it now hung around her neck like some brightly coloured necklace. She didn't seem to want to cry out, through, cowering back against the wall at Ellie's approach.

The other two girls, in the cage on the far side of the room, looked to have been as traumatised by Desnerek's actions as Esther had been. They were looking towards Ellie with pleading looks, as much as to say, "Please don't let him have us too."

Ellie wasn't sure whether or not she would be able to help them. Desnerek's behaviour might be brutal but it looked like he'd be able to keep the girls occupied until Ellie decided what to do with them. She pushed Esther's gag back in her mouth and re-buckled the strap that held it in place. The girl's look of desperation brought a small pang of sympathy from Ellie. She picked up a blanket and wrapped it around the shivering, frightened woman.

There wasn't anything more she could do for her for a while. And even then, Ellie thought, the outlook wasn't much better than the present.

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The offices of the Kushtian Cultural Exchange Programme had been set up in one of the most extraordinary buildings in the centre of Kolin. Overlooking the river, inside a high walled enclosure a forest of a dozen or so minarets of varying heights clustered around a courtyard. Bradley, showing Ellie across the courtyard, gestured to the towers."It's completely impractical of course. The Forest of Minarets it's called. These towers only have a single small office on each floor. The accounts people are in that one, the allocations people up there, the people responsible for UN liaison in that one. The staff spend half their time running up and down stairs."

"No lifts?" Ellie was looking up at the tallest of the towers. It must have been ten stories high.

"No," Brad said. "These are historic buildings. Can't touch them according to the Heritage Minister. Besides, they're so narrow if we put lift shafts up the middle there'd be no room for the offices. We do have the benefit of view from the conference suite, though."

Brad opened the door at the base of one of the towers, ushered Ellie inside and the two of them climbed the spiral staircase inside up to the top. The conference room did, as promised, offer a view across the river and the low, flat roofed houses that made up the outer suburbs of the Kushtian capital as well as back across the centre of the town. Ellie wasn't sure that it had been worth the climb.

The others for the meeting were already in place. Koreni Kallanis, the Kalinin's son, sat at the head of the table. Victoria sat beside him. Evidently she had been told of the purpose of the meeting. Her face was a picture of irritation. The Kalinin's son didn't look much happier. Henry sat with them on their side of the table but with an empty place between himself and Victoria.

"OK," said Brad, perhaps I can kick things off. Let's see if we can get ourselves a touch down in time for lunch." The Kalinin's son nodded. Victoria looked impassive.

Ellie simply said, "Fine by me."

"Good. Let me see if I have the facts right. Your wife's enterprise," Brad looked across at the Kalinin's son, "has eight clients that have contracted for wives."

Koreni Kalanis nodded. Victoria continued to say nothing.

"And the bank has been providing the funding to back this enterprise?"

Henry nodded in agreement too.

"And the proposal is that we should meet these contracts using the resources of the Cultural Experience Programme?"

The Kalinin's son nodded again. Ellie was beginning to wonder if anyone else could actually speak.

Brad went on. "You all realise that this is an exceptional situation. The programme exists to enable participants to experience everyday Kushtian life." he gestured to the United Nations insignia on the wall behind him, "in line with our agreement with UNESCO to act as a pilot for their World Cultural Heritage scheme. The girls that join the programme are normally assigned to the role of doenyas. Their presence as a source of domestic servants has been of great value in freeing up some of the most talented of our young Kushtian women for positions in commerce and industry. A very small number of them have made the transition from doenya to concubine. I do not wish, and I do not think the Kalinin would wish," Brad paused as if waiting for contradiction. None came. "for this to be seen as some sort of precedent. With that understanding, I am happy to allocate eight of the current programme participants to meet this requirement."

"Thank you Emir." Koreni Kalanis son spoke for the first time. His tone was clipped, talking under duress, evidently having been well briefed by his father. "Please make whatever selection is most convenient for you."

Victoria looked across at him frowning and was about to speak when the Kalinin's son went on. "Of course, my wife's clients may have expressed particular requirements. However," he turned towards Victoria, "I am sure that my wife's undoubted capabilities extend to being able to sell what she has rather than troubling you for anything specific."

Victoria scowled. Ellie imagined that she was anticipating some difficult conversations with her clients.

"I'll arrange for eight girls to be shipped to your household. They will be new arrivals, I'm afraid. I'm not going to disrupt girls already in the programme. You'll have to bear the effort of their induction to Kushtian culture." Victoria was about to object but her husband held up a finger to warn her to keep silent. "Your wife and my daughter should be able to organise that between them. They will be arriving in Kushtia as part of the next batch of applicants next week. I'll have them shipped in manuses and moaungf, I understand that's how you wife likes to start with newcomers to your household..."

"Ouch," thought Ellie, "he's evidently well informed about what Victoria has been up to." The Kalinin had obviously decided to use this opportunity to help his son to put his household in order and the Emir was taking the opportunity to score a few points too.

The Kalinin's son nodded in affirmation. "And the Russian girls?" he asked. "What is to be done with them?"

Brad looked across at Elly. "You want to pick that up?"

Elly sat forward. "Yes," she said. "They will be repatriated. I understand that you can make some transport available, Emir? If so, I will need a few days in which to arrange things on the Russian side but otherwise I think we can consider things settled."

The Kalinin's son stood up and nodded stiffly to Brad and to Ellie before waving his wife towards the door.

Ellie was pretty sure that she didn't want to be Victoria when the two of them got back to their household.

Chapter 18: Resolutions

Anchari Astana was facing a difficult dilemma. She was suspicious of her boss but she understood enough of the way of the world to know that denouncing him to Mr Kerrish was unlikely to result in anything other than her being dismissed from the Bank. Only if Henry's actions had threatened the Bank in some way would Mr Kerrish even think of considering action on the word of a mere secretary. And besides, Anch told herself, she didn't have any sort of proof, just a lot of supposition and guesswork.

On the other hand, she certainly had been less than willing to extend the usual pleasantries of the cubicon to Henry, leaving him rather confused as to whether he had broken some unwritten rule of the bank or committed some horrendous social gaffe that Anch would not discuss with him. In fact things had now got to the point where they were addressing one another as Miss Astana and Mr Clegg.

Only one thing served to thaw the frost. The news that Henry had actually been present at the meeting where Victoria's scandalous actions had finally come home to roost tempted Anch with the prospect of undreamed access to the stuff of gossip that would keep her in her friends' debt for many months.

As Anch's curiosity drove her to reopening discussions with Henry she found herself revising her opinion of him.

"Do we need to do anything as a consequence of your meeting with the Emir, Mr Henry," Anch asked, hoping that this might open to door on some indiscretion about Victoria's activities and her actual fate as opposed to the speculation from the pages of Yassi!

Henry, surprised by the use of his Christian name for the first time in a long time, looked up. "Let me see," he said. "No, I don't think so. It seems the entire project was being carried through without the knowledge of her husband and he is less than happy. The financial risk in the project is being born by the Kalinin's son, so we are indemnified against any losses. Even the United Nations are involved in trying to sort things out."

Anch could quite see how Henry might have been duped by the scheming Victoria. It was harder and harder for her to think if Henry as some sort of criminal mastermind. "But Victoria... If things are as it is said, she will be finding it difficult to continue with her involvement in the project. Do you think that she or her partner will be able to revive her business ambitions?"

Henry was coming to realise that Anch's interest was not entirely professional. "Still," he said to himself, "if that cheers her up around the office it can only be to the good."

"So, is she still free to act, or are the rumours about her and her husband true?"

"Anch," Henry fell easily back into using the girl's familiar name, "You know me, I can't keep track of the ins and outs of Kushtian intrigues."

Anch exclaimed with a disbelieving, "Pooh!"

"But," Henry said with a conspiratorial air. "I did see something. Though I am not sure if I should say."

Henry's remark may not have been calculated to fire Anch's curiosity but it certainly had that effect. "Come," she said, "to the cubicon. In there all confidences can be put to one side for what is said in the cubicon may not leave the cubicon."

Henry was happy to follow Anch behind the curtain and into the alcove. An hour or so later he felt much more relaxed, while Anch was further reassured. And, for her part, she had heard of the way in which Victoria had been led away in manuses and a moaungf like some common doenya rather than a wife of a Council member. It was an exceptional tale and, of course, she would respect the confidence of the cubicon.

Except with her friends, naturally. Well, she felt, tradition is only tradition but friendship is friendship.

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Ellie stood by the steps of the white truck, watching as the heavy wooden doors at the back of the Kalinin's home were opened. As the doors swung open she could see the group of seven women huddled together in fear in the courtyard. She waved to them gesturing for them to get into the truck. The Russian girls, relieved by the sight of the UN letters on the truck pressed forward, eager to put their experiences at the hands of Victoria and Lauren behind them. "Thank you, oh thank you," one of the girls gasped in gratitude as she clambered up into the truck. "There is another of our party, missing still,,,,," she went on.

"Don't worry, she's over there," said Ellie gesturing to the UN ambulance parked not far away where Natalya lay helpless, silent and sedated in the back.

The other girls joined the first, each almost breathless with thanks. "This humanitarian stuff has its compensations," Ellie thought to herself. Besides, she quite liked the combat camouflage of her uniform. And the powder-blue beret rather suited her, she felt.

With the girls inside she slapped the driver's door, indicating that they were ready to go and took her seat in the ambulance, following behind the truck as it headed towards the Russian border.

When the truck stopped and the girls disembarked they were all relieved to see the huts with the Russian flag, border control troops and a heavy Kamaz truck waiting for them. Ellie walked up to the leader of the Russian troops, saluted smartly and spoke briefly before two of his men began to help the girls into the Kamaz. Natalya, barely able to walk and disoriented by the drugs that had been used to sedate her was helped from the ambulance into the Kamaz as well.

As the rear door of the Russian truck closed, Ellie spoke again to the Russian officer. "There you are Anatoly, all as promised."

"So I see," the Russian said gruffly. "I am glad Clegg sorted this out."

"It was hardly his fault, Anatoly," Ellie said. "And, besides, you are well up on this one, aren't you?"

"Hmm, maybe," he replied. "We'll see. It depends on what they're like. Customers are getting more selective."

"Come on Anatoly. It's not like you had any expenses on this. And Freddie wasn't even obliged to do what he did."

"You think this customs post came for free," he grumbled. "These boys all need their wages paying."

Ellie smiled. Of course Anatoly had needed to spend a little on this. The customs post, a good five miles inside Kushtia, had been a good ruse that had certainly allayed any concerns the girls might have had. The Kamaz would take them back into Russia over an unmade dirt road where border controls were less stringent than on the main route from Kolin. Even so, from what she had seen of Victoria and Lauren's selection of recruits and her own experience of Natalya, Anatoly wasn't going to have any problem selling them on at a good price and a substantial profit. "Well," she said, "I'm sure you'll work it out."

"So, maybe." Anatoly grudgingly said. "And you Ms Grant; you will come out ahead as well. I think you may have found a way to defray your expenses. You are something more than a lawyer for Mr Clegg it seems to me."

Ellie preferred not to draw attention to herself. "I just fix the things that need fixing," she said. "Mostly it's pretty dull stuff."

"But only mostly," Anatoly smiled. One of his men waved from the Kamaz. He saluted Ellie and took his leave. "A short journey for me," he said. "A longer one for you. A longer one still for our friends." He looked across at the Kamaz as its engine started and black diesel smoke belched from the tail pipe. "Goodbye."

Ellie watched as the Kamaz pulled away and then joined her own truck for the drive back to Kolin. Freddie would be wanting to know what was going on and they needed to agree what was going to be done about Esther and Dana.

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Ellie put the phone down after her conversation with Freddie. She really wished that he wouldn't get so excited; it didn't help with the decision making. At least he was happy with how the Russian girls had been dealt with. Now there were just the other loose ends to be tidied up; Esther, Dana and, of course, Henry! One of the advantages of the remoteness of Kushtia, Ellie felt, was that at least she could get on with things in her own way. Freddie might be fretting back in London but there wasn't much he could do from that far away and Ellie would square things off with him once she got back.

She thought about her options. She was pretty certain that there couldn't be any question of Henry, Esther or Dana returning to London any time soon but if Henry was staying in Kushtia he needed more diversion than the job at the Bank provided. She had a couple of assets in the form of the two girls. They were still enjoying the hospitality of Desnerek Dobranin and Freddie wasn't worried what she did about them as long as it didn't complicate things with Anatoly. Somehow she'd be able to conjure something from all this she was sure.

As it was the solution came partly from an unexpected direction.

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"I wanted to ask your advice, Ms Grant." The Kalinin's son showed Ellie along the corridors that led into the suite of rooms he occupied in one wing of his father's palace.

Ellie, impressed by the sumptuous nature of the décor, was busily wondering how the place had survived through the Russian occupation. "If I can help excellency, I will."

"That is good. For Mr Freddie Clegg has been an excellent friend of Kushtia and he holds you in high regard, I think." he gestured through a beaded curtain into a large room. "My seragla," he announced.

Said the spider to the fly, thought Ellie. Then, deciding that with his slight post-adolescent pudginess he didn't really look like much of a lothario, she felt she was probably safe enough. As a last resort she still had her kongo, hidden as Modesty had taught her, in the plaits of her hair. She looked around the room. The floor was covered with silk woven carpets thrown across one another. Thick cushions of various sizes made up the furnishings. On one of them, asleep, sprawled a grizzled looking, middle aged, Kushtian man in a long heavy fur trimmed robe.

"We will take some sherbet. I understand that you do not enjoy the hunashif."

Ellie had not particular objection to the stuff but she didn't think this was the time for it, "At the right time, Excellency, but not if you wish for sound advice." As it was the sweet smell of hunashif smoke hung over the room as it did in so many places. She could imagine that if she ever ran for political office and she was asked if she had ever visited Kushtia she would have to say, "Yes, but I didn't inhale."

The Kalinin's son picked up a small handset from one of the cushions that lay spread across the floor and punched a few buttons. "Some sherbet will come," he said smiling.

Ellie had expected a bell or a gong or a clap of the hands to summon service but obviously things had moved on.

In response to the buttons two servant girls appeared with trays of drinks and sweetmeats.

Immediately behind them came the ginger haired girl that Ellie recognised as Gerry, one of her host's wives.

Gerry gave no sign of remembering Ellie from her short time in Clegg's Preparation Centre but then she moved in a way that suggested she had taken on enough hunashif to not remember very much at the moment. She sat down on the floor beside her husband, running her hands over his thighs in a desultory way. The Kalinin's son looked towards Ellie to see if she was concerned by his wife's behaviour.

Ellie shrugged her shoulders. She didn't mind at all. "How can I help, Excellency," she said.

"It is a matter concerning the activities of my wife Victoria," he said. "She has caused considerable difficulty. Of course money has been repaid the contribution of the Cultural Heritage programme has resolved much but there are other debts too you understand."

Ellie wasn't sure that she did but she nodded anyway.

"Some of those involved have been anxious to see that their dissatisfaction is balanced by that of those they see as responsible." The grizzled man stirred. "Kolash!" the Kalinin's son waved in greeting. Kolash grunted, got to his feet and waved back in acknowledgement with one hand while scratching himself with the other. He sat back on the cushions as the Kalinin's son pressed some more buttons on his key pad.

Gerry's hands were busily moving towards her husband's crotch. He seemed to feel no wish to prevent her. "Kolash here has been understanding. I have been able to amuse him by allowing him to see that I show my wife that such behaviour is not acceptable from a Kushtian wife. And, of course, the girl Lauren is able to show her contrition in her own way as part of my household now. Ah, here they are."

Ellie looked round to the beaded curtain where she had entered. First Lauren appeared, head bowed, wearing a typical Kushtian harem costume together with wrist chains and manacled ankles, the manuses and ancluses, that looked a great deal heavier and more constricting than the fashion items that could be seen on the streets of Kolin.

Immediately behind her came Victoria. No longer dressed in palace finery, she wore a simple length of dark cloth as a long skirt. Her upper body was naked and she wore no jewellery of any kind. Like Lauren, she too was restrained but in her case she wore a heavy wooden disk almost a metre across, padlocked in place about her neck. Her wrists were held in holes in the disk so that her hands were held up beside her head. Heavy chains ran from the edge of the disk down to her ancluses. It was obvious from the slow and awkward way that she moved that the weight of the disk and the chains made it difficult for her to move at all. Her mouth was filled with a bright red ball gag so that, even though she evidently objected to her situation, her only contribution to the conversation in the room was an "Aargnh!" of frustration as her husband waved her away pointing to Kolash.

"I like the cangue," the Kalinin's son said. "Somehow it seems fitting."

Victoria, grumbling into her gag, made her way slowly across the room to Kolash, struggling under the weight of her cangue and chains. She and Lauren knelt either side of him. Kolash set Lauren's hands busy. After her initial reluctance was overcome by a sound slap across the face she was soon at work stroking and massaging his member beneath his robes while he leant across twisting and pinching at Victoria's naked breasts.

Ellie was beginning to feel a little taken advantage of, as though her presence was being used as part of the two girls' humiliation but, even so she waited for the Kalinin's son to return to his point.

Gerry, by now, had buried her head in her husband lap and was greedily sucking and licking at his cock as he reached down, running his fingers through Gerry's long auburn hair, and looked across at Victoria.

Victoria returned his look with a scowl and a gagged grunt, jealous of Gerry supplanting her in

her husband's favour.

"There were more than were to be satisfied by the Russian girls. It seems my wife had more orders than stock. My good friend Kolash is content to see the women punished," the Kalinin's son said, "but others are less easily satisfied. In fact, two of them are insisting that the original contractual terms are met. That they should each have the delivery of the wife that was promised. I have spoken to Bradley, he feels unable to assist in the short term. My father suggested that you might be able to help out."

Oh well, thought Ellie, that solves what we're going to do with Dana and Esther; easy come, easy go. She paused for a moment and then said. "I believe I can. I am assuming, of course, that there would be commission payments associated with the supply. After all if your wife's contract is being fulfilled then I am sure your customers will be settling in line with their side of the contract."

The Kalinin's son gave a nod of acquiescence. That was good enough for Ellie. "In which case I will arrange things. Let me know when you wish to collect the girls. I will see that they are made ready for their new roles. Perhaps this should be done under the auspices of the United Nations programme. That might cause less concern back in England, don't you think?"

The Kalinin's son nodded again. Ellie left him and Kolash to their amusements with their women and the delights of a shared pipe of hunashif.

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"Mr Cregg for please in my office talking," Kerren Kerrish interrupted the work that Henry was busy with, sorting through the final arrangements for the repayment of the loan from the estate of Kushnati Koresh.

"Extraordinary things," Kerren said when Henry arrived. "I must ask you if you intend in Kushtia long remaining?"

Henry unplaited Kerren's words rearranging them in his head to make what seemed an intelligible sentence. "I am not sure, Mr Kerrish," he replied. "There are certainly benefits to working here." And, he thought to himself, it was proving easier to elude un-welcomed pursuers here than in other places.

Kerren laughed. "No cubicons in London?"

Henry returned his humorous smile. "Indeed not."

"Well, I shall make a proposal and you must say if for your wishes it is fitting." Henry nodded. "This morning a long talking with the father of Miss Anchari."

Henry looked alarmed. "I'm sure that there is no "

Kerren wagged a finger. "Not to concern. Not to concern. He is most taken with how his daughter speaks of you. He asks if you will take her in your seragla, your harem."

"What marry her?" Henry was even more alarmed at least in London fathers typically waited until you had got their daughters pregnant before making such demands.

Kerren laughed again. "No, of course not. Such an offer is not strange. When a daughter is of marriageable age but has not yet any real suitors her father may choose. To place her in an advantaged household is always a father's aim. To better his daughter. What more could be wished? Even a doenya in a high household. Perhaps a concubine. Only with exceptional luck a wife."

Henry looked confused. "Look, I don't have an 'advantaged household'. I don't have a household at all. I'm still living in the hotel. There isn't a – what did you call it – seragla."

"These are all things that could be arranged, my friend. Nothing is too difficult. With sufficient funds."

"And," Henry looked up hearing Ellie's voice from the door as she entered the office. "funds can be made available."

Kerren Kerrish got to his feet. "Miss Grant, for delighting a greeting it is," he said. Henry blinked as he switched his unscrambling on again. He could see why Kerrish was delighting, somehow Ellie managed to imbue a plain Kushtian robe with an understated elegance simply by the act of wearing it.

"I was very lucky," she said turning to Henry. "I was able to arrange an introduction for some of Lauren's friends. You remember Dana Harris and Esther Baskin?" Henry was unlikely to forget the reporter and the investigator from the FSA. He grunted. He would have been quite happy if they were forgotten and they had forgotten him. "They simply couldn't drag themselves away from Kushtia; couldn't face returning to England at all. But of course to stay here they need to be part of a household." Kerrish nodded his agreement. "Luckily I was able to make some introductions. For which I have received some valuable commission payments." Henry was confused, he really didn't understand what was going on. "But I can't take that much currency out of the country can I Mr Kerrish?"

"You have the legal affairs well grasped," he replied, listening carefully.

"So, Henry, I thought we could use this to set you up with a bit of property. A small complex where you could set up on a small scale. Brad seemed to think there would be a suite in one of the towers at the Forest of Minarets. He could use some additional help with the UN programme as well if you wanted to supplement your earnings from the Bank. I think you'd be very well set up there." Henry looked dubious for a moment. "Freddie thinks so too."

The mention of his uncle seemed to help Henry to decide. "Doesn't sound like to bad an idea to me," he said, quickly coming to the conclusion that of Freddie thought it was a good idea to stay here, he'd be better off to go along with it. "And if I have to have a seragla, then I can think of worse than Anch to inhabit it."

"Excellent!" said Kerren Kerrish. "Well, if we are all agreed I will put things in hand. The bank takes great care of those staff who show such loyalty you will see, Mr Henry."

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"So your flight back is tomorrow morning?" Henry was having a farewell drink with Ellie prior to her return to the UK. "I guess I ought to say thanks." He raised his glass in a toast. "You certainly seem to have straightened things out as far as I'm concerned. I hope Freddie feels the same."

"Oh, you know Freddie. As long as nothing comes back to bite him he's happy." Ellie looked around at the apartment where Henry was now installed in the Forest of Minarets. It looked like Henry had tried to blend Kushtian traditional with Ikea. It wasn't altogether successful. The combination of sumptuous patterned textiles and angular furniture didn't really work for Ellie. On the other hand Henry seemed happy enough.

"Well, yes. It was a good job you managed to organise things so easily with the Russian border authorities. I hadn't realised that Freddie had so much influence."

Ellie looked across at Henry wondering if he really was as naïve as he seemed. "Mmm," she said. "Hidden depths has our Freddie."

"Well it was a good thing he did. It was appalling what Victoria and Lauren were planning! And what they must have done to those girls. It was inhuman! I hope they were grateful when they got back."

"They were certainly glad to see the border," Ellie said, truthfully. "They were certainly glad to

see the back of Kusthia." Ellie had a pretty good idea of what Anatoly had in mind for the girls once he had them back in Mother Russia. If the truth was to be known they'd have had an easier life in Kushtia.

"It was pretty odd that the Kushtian police didn't want to talk to Lauren or Victoria though. You couldn't imagine being able to hush up something like that back in England."

"I think the feeling is over here that if a husband is going to deal with his wife's misdemeanours then there's nothing more to be said."

"I'd have thought kidnapping and locking up women was a bit more than a misdemeanour! But on the other hand, if the Kalinin's son is going to make sure she behaves in future then perhaps that's all that's needed."

Ellie wasn't at all sure that the Kalinin's son would succeed in the long term even if her current punishment was as effective as it looked. Ellie was pretty certain that once Victoria got out of the cangue then she'd be looking for a way of getting back at somebody. Ellie was just glad she was going to be a long way away from the Kallanis household.

"I tell you what really surprised me though."

Ellie looked up at Henry with a raised eyebrow. "What's that?"

"The way those two girls, the one from the FSA and the reporter, suddenly decided they were going to stay on here. I mean it was all very handy from my point of view and Kushtia is a pretty good place for a bloke like me. All these very agreeable ladies and all."

Ellie looked up as Anch came into the room, resplendent in the jewelled and embroidered robes of a Kushtian concubine. She curtsied to Ellie and then sat down on the floor alongside Henry.

"I mean you can see what I mean can't you?" Henry let his hand fall by his side, playing with Anch's long dark hair. "But for a western girl. All a bit different wouldn't you think? I mean I couldn't see it being the sort of thing you'd want to do."

"You're right there Henry. But perhaps I'm just a bit short sighted about different cultures. It seems to suit you, Anch, doesn't it?"

Anch looked up at Henry waiting for the look of approval that would allow her to speak. As Henry nodded, she said, "Of course. But this is what every Kushtian girl dreams of. And to be here helping to create a new household for Mr Henry. It is a great honour. I am proud to wear Mr Henry's properta." She held up the golden disk that hung around her neck.

Ellie nodded her approval at the heavy gold disk. "Well," she said, "I wish you every success. And Henry, I'd stay away from dodgy business loans if I was you."

Henry gave a rueful grin. "Thanks," he said. "Oh. And give Freddie my best."

"I shall," said Ellie. "He'll be glad to hear that you have someone to keep you out of trouble."

Anch smiled modestly at the compliment. Ellie waved and left them. Henry watched her go.

"You are sorry you are seeing her go, Mr Henry?" Anch asked as she moved up from the floor to sit alongside him.

"Hmm?" Henry responded, still looking towards the door. "Yes and no, I suppose. She's helped a lot I suppose but I'm never sure about Uncle Freddie's business associates. Somehow I always end up feeling that there's more going on than I know about."

"But all is happiness now, surely?"

"Here?" said Henry. "Certainly! This is a fine apartment and it has, if I may say, some splendid views."

“Across Kolin?” Anch was puzzled. The town was not renowned for spectacular vistas. Then she realised. He was staring right at her bosom. The embroidered top of her costume was carefully contrived to press her breasts together with a deep and dark cleavage revealed. Anch giggled at Henry’s appreciation. “So you still think I do not need to do with my breasts as Victoria?”

“Anch, I don’t think you need to do anything like Victoria.”

She laughed again and slid around behind him. “It’s rude to stare at a concubine’s breasts,” she said.

“Somehow,” joked Henry “I think that piece of information about Kushtian culture is not entirely accurate. And if it is then I most certainly am going to have to start a new tradition.”

Anch giggled again and pulled Henry back towards her until he was half laying on her with the back of his head nestled in Anch’s cleavage. “So, Mr Henry,” his concubine said, “are you pleased that you came to Kushtia?”

Henry thought for a moment, content to stay where he was, his head cradled between Anch’s breasts. Then he spoke. “Do you know, Anch,” he said. “I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

THE END

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