Nothing to Declare

By

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CHAPTER 1 - CARGO

Abbas

The stench of stale sweat was strong in the cab of the battered Ford Transit van where Abbas Kairo sat, parked in the shadows at the edge of the Aire du Monde rest area. Must be pretty ripe in the back there by now, he thought, where six of his cargo had been crouched for the best part of three hours.

The kid that pretty young Somalian girl brought with her had been a problem earlier on, kept snivelling, moving around. He nearly had to call the night off, but the second time he went out he'd shown the stupid bitch how it's done. There had been no noises after that. Next time he'd have to charge double for kids. They're nothing but trouble. Her 'part-payment in kind' hadn't been worth it either. That other one though, last week … The twitch of a smile flashed across his mouth, and he rubbed the ragged scar above his left eye with a rough finger at the thought of that night.

Abbas was alert; he needed to be. This was a dangerous game. Only one police patrol had been through since midnight, but they'd shown no interest in him, just drove straight through. The police weren't the problem. The Armenians were the problem around these parts.

Nothing had moved for over an hour. Abbas had already selected his target, watching the UK-registered truck & trailer pull in just after 1 am. He knew the company; he'd seen them going through here many times. He had even checked inside one of their trailers once - the labels on the pallets inside had London addresses on them that time. No heavy padlocks, just a plastic tag on the back doors. Easily cut, easily glued back together. Most of these drivers

never even check anyway; they just get out, piss against a wheel, get back in again and drive off.

Abbas opened the driver's door and stepped out onto the wet tarmac, stretching both arms up and yawning heavily, scooping up the McDonald's-branded packaging from the dashboard and discarding it all on the grass next to the van.

He opened the back doors and signalled to the occupants to stay quiet while he ushered them out. The trailer he'd selected was across the way, in the row of parked trucks, all with their cabs' curtains closed for the night. He shepherded the group to its rear.

The Somali girl was lagging behind, dragging the kid with one hand, a large bundle of her possessions over the other shoulder. He jogged back and pulled the bundle away from her, flinging it far into the bushes. She squealed, and he silenced her with a backhanded slap. She joined the rest of the group, head bowed, sobbing over the kid.

Carefully snipping the plastic tag, Abbas opened one of the trailer's huge double doors. Plenty of room inside - low pallets of goods, with a Basingstoke label. One by one, the six climbed into the back of the trailer. They did as previously instructed: moved forward, found spaces between pallets and under machinery, hid themselves, and prepared to stay quiet for as long as it took to get through port security.

Closing the door gently behind them, Abbas replaced the seal and super-glued it closed. Good enough.

He returned to the van and slumped back into the driver's seat, closing his eyes for the first time in many hours. He'd wait for the morning - usually about nine hours after a truck arrived, they tended to move off again.

He just needed to make sure his cargo left safely for the port. What happened to them after that was not Abbas' concern. No guarantees in this business.

Abbas reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. Empty. "Perfect," he muttered. The dashboard clock showed 02:17. He considered sleeping but knew better. Sleep was expensive in this line of work. People got arrested while sleeping. People got robbed while sleeping. People got stabbed while sleeping. He settled for stepping outside. The air was cold and damp. Somewhere beyond the motorway barriers, a freight train rattled through the darkness.

The rest-area looked different at night. Cleaner somehow. The litter disappeared into shadow. The graffiti vanished. Even the broken benches looked respectable from a distance. He walked towards the service building. A pair of Romanian drivers sat smoking outside the entrance, speaking quietly. One glanced at Abbas and then looked away again. Good. Being remembered was dangerous. Inside, the fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Abbas bought coffee from a machine that claimed to serve espresso but tasted mostly of hot disappointment. Three euros. Three bloody euros. In Aleppo that would once have bought enough coffee for a week. He stood alone beside the vending machines and drank half of it anyway. A family entered. Not migrants. Tourists. Father, mother, daughter. The girl couldn't have been older than ten. She wore oversized headphones and carried a stuffed rabbit under one arm. The father was exhausted. Abbas recognised the look immediately. Long drive, not enough sleep. The daughter tugged on his sleeve and the man bent down to listen. She said something Abbas couldn't hear. The father laughed. The girl laughed too. Just a few seconds of nothing important. Yet Abbas found himself staring. The father ruffled her hair before walking towards the toilets. The girl followed him. And then Abbas remembered another little girl, not ten, only five, holding up a drawing during a video call - a house, with a tree, and the sun in one corner. "Darya, that's very nice." "No, Baba." She'd rolled her eyes dramatically. "The little person is you." Abbas remembered laughing - actually laughing. The memory

irritated him. He crushed the paper coffee cup and threw it into a bin. The tourists disappeared down the corridor. Good. Enough of that.

The phone in his pocket vibrated - a message. One of his contacts in Dunkirk. Two Eritreans and one Sudanese, looking to cross. Have money. Abbas stared at the screen. Work. Always work. He typed back. How much? The reply came almost immediately - three thousand each. Abbas nodded. That would do. The familiar calculations began turning in his head. Vehicles, routes, risks, security patrols. Profit.

The memory of Darya retreated to where it belonged, back into the dark. A few moments later he was walking towards the van again. By the time he reached it, the father had disappeared. The daughter had disappeared. The coffee was forgotten. Only the job remained. As far as Abbas Kairo was concerned, that was probably for the best.

CHAPTER 1 - CARGO

Kaaha

Kaaha pulled her daughter closer to her as the van jarred over another bump in the road. She had no idea where they were, or what time it might be. The near-total darkness in the enclosed space in the back here gave few clues. It was the middle of the night; she knew that much. They had been in there for many hours now, with the others. She didn't know their names.

Hira had become restless; she was only five. What did he expect? But that Syrian man, their "guide", had no patience at all. Kaaha didn't want him to come to the back door like that again. So she kept Hira close and quiet.

It had been such a long time now that they had not been moving. She wondered what was happening - why nothing was happening. The air in the enclosed space was thick and hot, the stench of stale sweat strong. Kaaha had pulled her hijab over her mouth and nose to make breathing a little more bearable.

Without warning, the van's rear door unlatched and slowly opened. The Syrian was there again. She instinctively recoiled - They had been quiet! She had kept Hira still! Please! He gestured for them to climb out and, with a finger to his lips, ushered them all onto the wet tarmac.

Kaaha stood with the bundle of all their things over one shoulder while holding Hira's hand with the other, trying to make sense of her surroundings. It was some kind of truck holding area. The others had quickly moved off across the open space toward a row of trucks. She hurried after them, gently tugging her daughter along. The Syrian was on her in an instant; she hadn't seen him coming. He hissed something she didn't understand into her face - his acrid breath making her wince. Then he grabbed the bundle

out of her hand and hurled it far over her head and into the bushes. She turned to go after it - it was all they had, all Hira's spare clothes, her little coat, pictures of the family at home, everything! - but the man slapped her face; he grabbed her arm and was dragging her with him. He was very strong.

They were all pushed up into the truck-trailer, and before she could turn around, the big door was shut behind them. The others were already clambering over the goods in the trailer to get further up front. Kaaha just sat on the floor and sobbed into Hira's hair, holding her so close and tight that she let out a little squeal. That must not do; she relaxed her grip on her daughter and kissed her forehead.

Together they clambered over the first few pallets, piled with cardboard boxes. There was a gap between two rows of pallets, too narrow for the others to fit in, but perfect for Hira and herself to slip down into. She pulled a sheet of cardboard that had been lying there across the gap above them both, covering their hiding place.

Their stuff! It wasn't much, but it was all they had! She couldn't help sobbing, tried to stifle it, but Hira felt it and hugged her tightly, crying gently too. Kaaha bit down on her lip and inwardly cursed the Syrian.

CHAPTER 1 - CARGO

Jim

Jim Carter exhaled slowly as he applied the air brakes and shut down the engine of his 44-ton Mercedes-Benz Actros for the final time after a very long day.

He'd hoped to have reached the Channel Tunnel and make the crossing tonight, parked up at the Airport Cafe in Kent overnight, but huge delays on the Antwerp ring had put the kibosh on that plan. A nasty accident in the Kennedy Tunnel had to be cleared up, and he'd just run out of hours. Not the most ideal of spots, this French motorway parking area, but needs must and all that.

1 am, quite enough for one day, he thought as he pulled the curtains closed in his cab, transforming it from a place of work into a very small bedsit. He popped a cold beer from the slide-out fridge under his bed and fired up the TV to watch the rest of the Peaky Blinders episode he'd got into earlier that afternoon.

Not good, these French parking areas, especially heading towards the Calais and Dunkirk crossings. It was risky, stopping here overnight - Jim was well aware of that, having been around a while, but hey - circumstances. He'd make sure the morning security checks were thorough before approaching the British side of the border. Didn't fancy copping the fine they levied on drivers if someone was found in the trailer.

As Jim's eyes drooped and finally closed, Tommy Shelby droned on to himself on the flickering screen, which eventually shut itself down on the sleep timer, as if offended that no one was paying it any attention. Jim Carter drifted off into some well-earned sleep.

An experienced HGV driver knows his vehicle, its sounds, vibrations, movements. He learns to know the difference between

a light buffeting by the wind or passing traffic, and someone climbing aboard the trailer. One, he'll subconsciously ignore. The other will have his eyes flick open, and he'll be wide awake in an instant.

Jim's eyes flicked open. He was wide awake.

Sitting up and carefully pulling back a corner of the cab's privacy curtain, the way the nosy neighbour from number 44 might, he looked through the side window into the oversized wing-mirror, which revealed the entire side of the vehicle in the yellow soda-light that the parking area provided.

There, sure enough, were a couple of people gathered at the rear of his trailer. How many exactly, Jim couldn't be sure. Three? Maybe four?

He felt the doors close and then watched a shadowy figure trot across the open space to a white van parked there. Just the one there, but maybe more in the van, Jim concluded. He wasn't about to get out and confront them - these people were pretty desperate, and carried knives. No point in calling the French police either. He'd done that before - totally uninterested, they were. No, he'd wait 'till the morning, drive on down to the Channel Tunnel and have Port Security remove them on the French side.

Jim let the curtain fall back into place and rolled over to try and get back to sleep - which wouldn't be easy after what he'd just witnessed.

Surprisingly, Jim's next conscious experience was hearing his phone ringing. The dashboard's digital clock showed 09:27. His wife, Sue, was video-calling from home. He reached out and pressed the green answer button. There she was, Cassie, their daughter, holding the phone far too close to her face, blurring the image and distorting her features. "Hello Poppy, how's you?" Jim asked, as he swung his legs out from under his Spider-Man duvet

and sat on the edge of his bed, activating the various systems needed to start the day.

"We had waffles for breakfast, with blue - berries", his daughter announced seriously.

"Blueberries, yum!" Jim said, pressing the single-cup button on the Nespresso machine. "Is mummy there too, or did you call me all by yourself?"

The image on screen went topsy-turvy as the phone was passed to her mother, then Sue's face settled into view "Hi, love. Did you make it across?" she asked.

"Nah," said Jim, "not even close. Stuck on some God-forsaken French 'Le Parking' overnight" "Oh, be careful then", answered Sue. She was up to speed as to the situation there. She worried about it most of the time. "Yeah, thanks, but a bit late for that. Pretty sure there's a couple of 'Clandestines' in the back there already"

Jim pulled back the curtain. Although most of the parking area had now emptied, the white van was still sat where it was late last night. Just the one occupant; he could see a man slumped behind the wheel.

"Sue, I'm going to have to call you back later. Need to have a quick check out there". "Ok, love, but no heroics, yeah?" Sue had been with Jim through most of his army career too. "No heroics, you know me" "Exactly", Sue answered "I do. Just come home. Repeat after me … ". "Somebody else's problem", Jim cut in. "That", she replied.

Jim got quickly dressed and drew back the cab's curtains. The cab was a place of work again. Starting the engine and activating the lights and 4-way indicators, he took his coffee mug with him as he climbed down from the cab for his morning walk-around checks. Kicking tyres and checking fuel caps were intact as he moved

towards the rear of the trailer. Rear lights and indicators all functioning correctly.

He glanced up at the white van. The driver was sitting upright now, watching him.

I see you, he murmured to himself as he checked the anti-tamper seal on the rear doors. It looked ok, just as he'd left it. Maybe he'd been wrong about last night. But as he gave it a light tug, it sprang open in his fingers. Nope. Not wrong.

He left it hanging and proceeded round the other side of the vehicle, continuing his checks. But Sue was right; he wasn't going to get involved with whoever was inside, or this dodgy character in the van. Not this time. Let Port Security sort it out down the line.

Jim Carter climbed back into the cab of the MB-Actros, waited for the tachograph to flip over to 9 hours' break, and pulled out of the Aire du Monde and onto the A16 motorway towards Calais.

CHAPTER 2 - RETURNS

Abbas

Abbas Kairo slept only intermittently as he slouched behind the wheel of the van. These days most of his daily activity took place after dark; he'd sleep once he got back to his room at the abandoned steel factory's admin building.

Just a matter of waiting now, for the truck he'd picked out to get started on its way. Abbas knew from experience that these drivers usually left about nine hours after they'd arrived and parked up for the night. This one wouldn't be going anywhere before nine or even ten am.

As long as the group he'd put in the back of that trailer kept quiet - went to sleep even - they wouldn't arouse the driver's suspicions.

Just a matter of watching what happens at the port security. Abbas didn't know if this driver would be heading to the port of Calais, and take the ferry, or on down to the Channel Tunnel for the trains. Either way, he had his vantage points mapped out - places where he could observe from a distance the progress of his chosen trailer through security.

It was fully light by the time he noticed movement around the target truck. Most of the other vehicles had left the parking area by now.

He watched the driver get down from his cab and walk around the truck. Some of them did this, their daily checks. Abbas watched the driver pause at the rear doors, checking the seal. Would it hold up to scrutiny? Always a risk. But the driver seemed satisfied and carried on around the other side.

A few minutes later, the engine kicked into life, and shortly after, the truck pulled out onto the motorway. Abbas followed, not