**Anthropology
by Freddie Clegg**

## Introduction

This story is set in Kushtia, a narrow strip of a country that runs along the northern edge of the Hindu Kush. If you've read other tales of mine you'll know about Kushtia from "Market Forces" but if not here's a short introduction....

Once part of the Russian empire, Kushtia is now, after a series of coups and counter coups, a (sort of) democratic republic. The Kalinin, the hereditary ruler, presides over a ruling council of elected representatives in the capital Kolin. The deep respect for tradition within the country means that almost all those elected to council are from the families that furnished the tribal leaders that had dominated Kushtia before the Russian era. Kushtia is a secular state with a slowly growing economy but still follows many of the traditional ways of its pre-Russian past. Women are largely disenfranchised and subject to men in most matters. Men may have several wives and often have concubines as well although in reality only the wealthy or tribal leaders can afford to. Kushtian society is organised around the household, a grouping of family and servants presided over by the man of the household.

Last year Dr Karen Armstrong, an American anthropologist, wrote an article on the way of life in some of the Kushtian hill tribes. It was published in National Geographic Magazine to much popular interest. Armstrong had smuggled herself into Kushtia, disguised as a boy. Travelling across the border from the north with a trading caravan, she had taken some extraordinary photographs of the life of the women of the northern tribesmen. The article described the life of the tribesmen; a very similar society to that in Kolin but without the sophistication of city life. Armstrong speculated that the growth of urban culture in Kolin would eventually dilute the primitive, traditional ways of the tribes and the change from the soviet command economy to a western market economy together with the growth of democracy would also lead to emancipation for the hill tribeswomen.

Armstrong's article gave rise to a great deal of interest in the west for women seeking a different lifestyle and looking to discover whether the Kushtian way had value for them. One result of this was that the Kushtian Government approached UNESCO with the idea of establishing a "world heritage culture" within Kusthia. (A guide for participants in the programme is exclusively available in my Yahoo Group)

In the meantime, Dr Armstrong has been back into the Kushtian wilderness to pursue her studies further.....

## Chapter 1: First Day - Homeward Bound

Dr Karen Armstrong dropped down from the battered, lurching, bus as it slowed passing the small temple at the end of the road where she was staying. She just missed a deep pothole in the road and swerved between two bicycles following the bus to make the relative safety of the roadside. She hefted her bag onto her back and edged her way through the group that were making their way down to the temple for evening prayers.  They seemed to take no notice of her, ignoring what looked to them like a travel stained young man, clad in the turban, felt coat, waistcoat and breeches of the local peasants. The village here had proved ideal for her purpose. It was less than ten miles from the border but that was far enough to mean that she could come and go here as she pleased.

She walked between the small, mud brick, houses. The leather roof coverings on their wooden frames creaked as the stiff wind swept across the village. Her path took her towards a hut that stood a little separate from the others. She pushed back the flap of leather that served as a door and went inside.

‘Home,' she thought as she sat down gratefully on the straw packed mattress that was her bed. Home it was, or at least as near to home as she could be; 8,000 miles from the University of Michigan where she taught anthropology.

She pulled off the heavy, grey, woollen turban and shook loose her long blonde hair. She took off the heavy grey coat and the pouch that she wore diagonally across her chest shrugged off her waistcoat, unfastened the toggles of the coarse undershirt and pulled it off too. She was tired. It had been an exhausting five days. Now all she wanted to do was sleep. She looked down at herself. Her chest was bound with strips of cloth wound around her body in an attempt to conceal her breasts. It had allowed her to pass as a young lad of the hill farming people for five days but for those five days she had been in permanent fear of discovery. Five days continuously having to watch her every move, her every word. Five days of trying to maintain the coarse accents and grunts of the local dialect. Five nights terrified in case she talked in her sleep or woke up suddenly to cry out in English.

She unwound the cloth strips, freeing her breasts. The relief was extraordinary but suddenly there were these things on her chest. It was as if they had just grown there in the instant. It was a peculiar sensation that took her back to puberty and the time when she had first realised that her body was changing from that of a girl to that of a woman. It called back all the uncertainty, all the confusion of that time. She shook her head as if to dislodge the memories. She pushed off her breeches and lay back on the mattress. There was a large embroidered woollen rug beside the bed. She pulled it over herself. It was time to sleep.

It was still dark when she woke. She suddenly realised that she had no idea if she had slept for two hours or ten, she hadn't taken a watch with her and she couldn't remember where it was now. She fumbled around at the head of the bed, finding the small stub of candle that she kept there. She pulled the Zippo lighter from the pocket of her breeches and lit the candle. The Zippo had been the one piece of western technology that she had permitted herself. It was possible that a young hill farmer might have such a thing she'd argued to herself. It hadn't attracted any attention from anyone except from Ternet, the young man that had acted as her guide. She could tell by the way that he looked at it every time she took it out. She'd decided to leave it with him when she left.

The light of the candle guttered for a moment in the draft from the door. She hunched her shoulders and then stretched her arms. Her chest still felt as though the binding cloths were wound about it. The roof the hut was creaking in the wind, the leather roof covering stretching and rubbing across the timbers, the stone weights that held it down, clacking against the walls as they swung with the motion of the roof. Apart from that it was quiet. Quieter here in the village, she thought, than on the hill side. There, at night, she had always had the bleating of sheep or goats, even in the dark of the night.

She found her watch. Two in the morning. She needed to be on her way by ten. There'd be a bus about then. Back into town. Then she'd find a taxi. Out to the airport; well, airstrip. She wondered what they would be using this time. A Dakota if she was lucky. There were a few of those around. An An-2 if she wasn't. They were the worst.

She fumbled in her pouch and pulled out the camera. These digital cameras had made things so much easier, she thought. This tiny box with maybe 1500 pictures in it and a lens every bit as good as the Leica she used to use. Tiny, silent, easy to conceal, simple to use and such great pictures. The editors had been so pleased with her last trip.   "Veiled and In Chains" the article had been titled. Sensationalised, of course, Dr Armstrong thought. But if it got people's interest, helped them realise there were still people out there that didn't live life in quite the same way as they did in Champagne Urbana, then it was all to the good. And the paper she had delivered had been well received in the faculty. Plus she'd had her chance to tell her story all over the place -- even Europe!

There would have been no problem getting the funding from the university for this trip but she'd wanted to do it herself. That way she'd have the freedom to negotiate on the best price for the pictures. And beside it was her vacation, why shouldn't she take it where she wanted?

She flipped on the camera's power switch. It gave a quiet ping and pushed its lens forward. The glow from its tiny screen was brighter than from Karen's candle. There was hardly any power left in the battery but that didn't matter now. She thumbed the buttons that allowed her to scroll through the pictures stored in the camera's memory.

It was hard to tell on the screen, it was so small, but Karen thought she'd done a good job. They looked every bit as good as the last ones but this time the subject was more powerful yet. The pictures showed a traditional Kushtian wedding with the gift of the wife to the husband. There were shots of the wife before the ceremony and after; shots that showed that Kushtian wives were viewed as little better than slaves and shots that showed unmarried women were treated worse. What was more puzzling though, she thought as she zoomed in on one of the frames, behind the veil she was sure that the bride had quite western looking eyes and, come to that, so did her maid servant. It would be easier to tell on a bigger screen, she thought. It was funny she hadn't noticed it while she was there.  She guessed she'd been concentrating so much on taking the pictures that she hadn't been looking at the wedding ceremony in the dispassionate, focused way that she encouraged her students to adopt.

She flicked off the switch. The glow of the camera's screen faded, leaving the light of the candle as the only illumination in the room. She blew out the candle and turned over to sleep again.

She was woken again soon after by a voice outside calling her name. "Dr Armstrong, I must talk to you."

She recognised the voice. It was Ternet, the guide that had travelled alongside her over the border into Kushtia. They'd shared working with the goats and sheep that were her camouflage and his livelihood. And he'd shared her secret. She pulled her undershirt on and went to the door of the hut. She pushed her head around the edge of the leather flap. It was still pitch dark outside. She looked up at a sky pierced with stars made all the brighter by the dark of the surroundings. "Ternet?" she called.

Something heavy hit her on the back of her head. She slumped to the ground, half out of the door of her hut, unconscious.

## Chapter 2: First Day - In Transit

She recovered stretched face down across the back of a horse. Her hands and feet were tied. Something hard and rough was tied across her mouth preventing her crying out. A tall man emerged from her hut clutching her saddle bag. He tossed it across the back of a second horse. She saw Ternet and tried to call out to him but whatever it was that gagged her choked back her cry. The two men exchanged words. As he started to lead the two horses away from the village she saw the tall man toss something to Ternet. The young man waved. She watched him fumble with it and she saw the flicker of light. He'd given Ternet her Zippo.

They got as far as the last hut and the village well. The tall man stopped the two horses, dropped two leather bottles down into the well and pulled them up again, filled to overflowing. He slung them across the back of the second horse, much as Karen herself was strung. He returned to the first horse, She watched as he groped in her saddle bag. He pulled out her camera, snarled and tossed it into the well. Seconds later she heard it fall into the water far below. Her long, uncomfortable, ride into the dark of the night began.

The ride seemed endless. They were following the track that she had used only days before through the narrow pass that led to the Kushtian border. Her head was aching from the blow, her mouth sore from the gag, her wrists and ankles raw and bruised by the combination of the ropes and the movement as the horse stepped its way uncertainly through the dark up the rocky track. Slowly she felt she could see the approach of dawn. The darkness seemed not quite so black. There were the anticipatory calls of the mountain vultures in the hope that daylight would reveal some new pickings for them. The horse stopped. The man led the two of them off of the track and began to pitch the wooden hoop frames of a small dome shaped tent. Pulling the tent's canopy over the frame he weighed each corner down with rocks from the surroundings. Karen watched as the man returned to her horse. Untying the rope that linked her wrists and ankles under the belly of the horse, he pulled her from her mount and carried her to the tent.

He picked up a heavy rock, hefting it in his hands as he approached her. She looked up at him, terrified, as he brought the rock down again and again, only inches from her, using it to hammer a steel spike deep into the ground. He grinned at her fear and pulled her across to the spike, chaining her wrists to it. He hammered another spike into the floor near her feet. He stretched her out full length and chained her ankles to that.

He left her for a moment. She tried to pull at the chains and the pegs but with no effect. He came back carrying one of the leather bottles. He bent down alongside her and undid the rope that held her gag in place. As it fell from her mouth she saw that she had been gagged with a thick stick, a gnarled joint between two branches; a woody ball that had been pushed into her mouth and held there by a leather thongs tied behind her head. She gasped her gratitude, trying to say "thank you" in both the local dialect and the Kushtian tongue. "Thanark, Thaknarish," uncertain of the nationality of her abductor.

The man ignored her but pressed the bottle against her lips. She took a deep drink, the cold water stinging on the cuts and grazes in her mouth. He let her drink, trying to avoid spilling too much of the water on the floor of the tent. He took the bottle away, picked up the stick gag and wedged it back into her mouth, tying it in place. Karen shook her head in desperation. The man pushed her down to the floor and pulled a blanket over her. "Sleep," he said, in a deep growl. "Travel later."

Outside the tent the brightening sky was heralding yet another day of scorching temperatures and skin drying winds. She tried to sleep, knowing that whatever was to come she would need her strength, dreading the rape she felt certain would come, fearing what else could be her fate.

## Chapter 3: Second Night, Third Day - Only Meat

The rape never came. She slept fitfully, jerking awake from fear or her dreams or the pain from the bruise on her head or the aching from her mouth.

She woke again as it was getting dark, the glow of the setting sun visible through the door of their tent. She felt a heavy weight across her belly. She looked down to see her captor's head resting on her, using her as a pillow. He rolled towards her as he began to stir, grunting as he saw she was awake. He took off her gag and gave her more water. It was warm now even though the tent had protected them from the worst of the day's heat. She drank what she could. He put the gag back, tying the stick in place even more tightly. She cried out in pain as the stick cut into the corners of her mouth again. He ignored it.

Night had fallen. He took the tent down around her, loading the horses and leaving to the last the release of his captive from the spikes that held her. He lifted her up, seemingly without effort and put her across the back of the horse, tying her in place as she had been before. She wriggled to try to turn her head to see what she could of where they were. Featureless scrub and a few rocks gave her no indication. There was no sign of their camp apart from the dying embers of the fire that her captor had lit. She realised he had used it to burn her belongings. Nothing remained except a charred corner of the waistcoat she had been wearing when she had returned. She was angry. He'd wanted her to see this. He came into her view, grinning at her as he crouched down beside the fire, poking the un-burnt corner of waistcoat back into the fire. It smouldered and flared. He took something from his pocket, holding it towards the flames. She realised it was her passport. He laughed as he let it fall into the fire.

He watched it burn and then said nothing but began to lead the horses off again, trudging slowly towards the mountains along the track that they had been following before.

She tried to keep track of time, jarred and bruised by every step of the horse she was tied to. Her only view of the passing miles was the stones and dust of the track a few feet below her face and the belly of the horse.

They stopped. She tried to turn her head to see what was happening but could see nothing except the flank of the animal that was carrying her. There was the sound of voices, the guttural tones of the dialect of the town where she had been staying. Two men talking; greeting one another. Her captor asking the other if he was ready. The other saying yes, she could join the others.

Dawn was breaking, the soft pink light that heralded another day of hear and dust. Her captor came back to her horse and released her from it, sitting her down on the ground. The other man came to join them. He crouched down beside her, taking her by the hair and turning her face towards him. He nodded. Stood up again and reached into his coat, pulling out a wad of the local currency. She watched as her abductor stood waiting, licking his lips as the bills were counted. The two men shook hands and her abductor reached down to pick her up once more. As he carried her around the horse she saw the waiting truck.

It was an old, weather beaten truck with a canvas cover over the rear. She was lifted up and pushed into the back over the back board of the truck. Inside were three other girls, each bound and gagged like herself, and a guard sat holding a machine pistol. The guard leant across, pulled a length of chain from the floor and looped it around Karen's neck. A heavy padlock fastened the chain in place. The truck moved off.

She groaned as the truck bounced over the ruts and pits in the unmade road. "Signechi," the guard barked, jabbing the barrel of his gun into her ribs. He was speaking Kushtian, she thought, signechi -- silence. She tried to sit back against the side of the truck but every lurching bound of the vehicle tossed her to one side or another, bruising her. She tried to look around at the other bound and chained women. Their gagged cries of discomfort had now subsided to a disconsolate silence as they stared at the floor of the truck avoiding the eyes of one another and their guard. Two of the other three were of Asiatic origin, Japanese she thought. The other looked European or American. Probably a back-packer that had found her way up here and then fallen in with the wrong crowd. Just like she had, she thought. They all looked tired, frightened, resigned. The two Japanese girls wore short, pale coloured dresses, the European jeans and a t-shirt. They all looked bruised and beaten.

The truck bounced on. Every so often there would be the piercing honk of the truck's horn, intended, she presumed, to clear livestock from its path. But then the truck slowed and finally stopped.

There were more voices. Official sounding. She assumed they were at the border. That was good. They'd be bound to search the truck. They'd all be rescued. She strained her ears to hear what was being said. "Warodny carbech?" asked an unknown voice, "what are you carrying?" She heard the voice of the man that had taken her from her abductors. "Tores carnachy," he said. "Only meat."

"Signechi," the guard hissed again. She heard booted steps outside the truck, walking towards the back. The flap in the trucks cover was pulled back. A uniformed man put his head into the gap. "We're saved," thought Karen.

"Ha!" he said. "Tores carnachy!"

"Kurich carnachy," the guard replied, "fresh meat." The two of them shook hands. Karen watched as the first man appeared at the back of the truck. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a wad of notes. He peeled off a few and pressed them into the hands of the uniformed man. The uniformed man laughed and waved the two of them good bye.

The truck started up again. Through the half open flap at the rear of the truck Karen watched the border post slipping away behind them, the border patrol guard not even bothering to watch the truck disappear. After a while the guard in the truck got up, pulled the flap shut and then slapped her face for her trouble.

They must have driven for three hours or more, the roads becoming progressively worse, the heat in the back of the truck rising as the night gave way to day. The screech of gears and the straining noise of the engine told Karen they were climbing. She tried to reconstruct the route in her head. They must have crossed the border near the town of Kushnall. She knew that there weren't many tracks, still fewer roads, but they'd been able to drive for hours without stopping. They must be in the hills to the north of Kolin. Not far from where she had witnessed the wedding.

The truck bounced on without a stop. Without the opportunity to get down from the truck to relieve themselves, the girls had been forced to urinate where they lay. The stench in the truck was overwhelming. Flies were starting to gather. Finally as night was falling the truck turned off the road. The sharp jolts of the potholes gave way to a slow ballooning motion as the truck made its way slowly across what Karen assumed was open land.  They stopped and their guard leapt down. There were more voices talking in Kushtian, some way away so that Karen could not make out what was being said.

The guard came back and dropped the tail gate of the truck. "Yavechi!" he barked at the girls, "get out". He unlocked the padlock that secured Karen's chain and jerked it, pulling her by her neck to the back of the truck. The others staggered behind, linked as they were by the same heavy chain. From the truck they were pushed into a large open sided shed. In the middle of the shed stood a series of metal fenced pens. The four women were driven into one, their neck chain padlocked to a large ring on the gate they had been pushed through.  The guard took their gags from them but left their hands tied. There was a low trough in one corner of the pen, they each drank as best they could. The guard watched, amused, as they jostled one another, on their knees, at the trough. They finished drinking. He changed the ropes around their wrists for chains, added chains to their ankles, gagged them once more, this time with leather straps and left them. They collapsed on the floor of the pen, resting against one another, and fell into a fitful, disturbed sleep.

## Chapter 4: Fourth Day -- Livestock

Karen was woken by a combination of sounds, smells and the glow of dawn's light streaming through the gaps between the planks that made up the walls of the shed. They were no longer the shed's only occupants. The other pens were filled with livestock of all kinds, sheep goats, yak, even, across from where they were chained, a pair of oxen. Men were wandering up and down between the pens peering in at each in turn, Prodding at the animals and arguing in the guttural dialect of Kusthian that Karen recognised as belonging to the northern hill tribes. None of the men seemed to be paying much attention to the girls. The goats in the pen alongside were attracting more attention.

A woman approached the pen. Young and veiled in the traditional chanoosh. She was apparently a femnyette, an unmarried girl of marriageable age. Traditionally girls were used to tend livestock. She opened the gate and unlocked the padlock that fastened the girls' neck chain to it. "Yavechi," she called, tapping on Karen's leg with the long cane that she would use to herd whatever animals were her lot that day, "Yavechi." She pulled the chain taught from Karen's neck. "Yavechi!" Karen staggered to her feet. The others followed her example and the girl led them from their pen down between the rows of animals towards the front of the shed. The closer they got, the more Karen was aware of raised voices, calling out numbers. The girl led them through a pressing throng of Kushtian men, on into an open space beyond just as two heavily built oxen were being led away. As Karen saw the man on the step across the sawdust filled space from her she realised that they were in an auction ring. With the departure of the oxen, the crowd began to thin. A small group of men stood near to the auctioneer but there didn't seem to be much interest. Karen could tell that the auctioneer was trying to drum up enthusiasm but speaking so quickly that even she could not follow what it was that he was saying.

The bidding was perfunctory. The auctioneer called something to their herds-maiden. She chivvied them across the ring towards where the men were standing and paraded the girls back and forth, tapping them with her stick to move them into the position she wanted. There still didn't seem much interest. Then Karen caught a few words. "Franksye", "Japonsye", "Americansye". Interest appeared to pick up. There was a flurry of bids, quickly shouted numbers, Karen couldn't make out what. The auctioneer, tapped down a stone on the post set into the ground alongside him. Karen took it as the sign that they had been sold. He didn't look happy at the amount of commission that he had made on this particular lot. The girl herded them away to the other side of the shed, still chained, still gagged.

There a small collection of animals of various kinds stood waiting patiently. The chain that held the four girls together by the neck was linked to the chain that already ran from oxen to yak to mule, and on to goat. Two men appeared and loaded saddle bags across the back of the mule. The younger of the two men worked his way down the line of animals checking the tether of each in turn. The first of the girls struggled as he went to check her chains. She earned a back handed slap to the face. The other girls, Karen included, offered no resistance.  He returned to the front of the small column of animals and women and began leading the oxen away. The girls could only follow, pulled along by the chain that linked them to the other animals, starting on the next stage of their journey. The other man following behind, tapping with his stick at any of the train, girl or beast, that showed signs of slowing on the march.

They trekked for ten miles or so. The countryside was hard. The rough stone walled fields surrounding the village and the market soon gave way to low foot hills strewn with rocks and scrubby, thorn covered plants that scratched at the girls as they brushed past them. Beyond the hills they trudged into a sandy, desert like stretch, cutting around the edge of dunes, sand bowing in their faces, staggering as they missed their step in the loose sand beneath their feet.

The chains were chafing at their ankles and their necks.

Karen found it hard after her treatment over the past few days but she at least was fairly fit, made hardy by her weeks with the Kushtians before her capture. The others found it harder; their stumbles earned them blows from the older man's stick. Even Karen was handed her share of beatings. Soon she was soaked in sweat from the heat of the sun, her body caked with grains of sand stuck to the sweat, her buttocks and the backs of her thighs striped with red wheals from the drover's stick. The girl in front of her, the European, was faring no better. The two girls behind her, the Japanese, were struggling.  Every so often one of them would stumble and as she fell the chain between them and Karen would be jerked tight around Karen's throat.

They emerged from around the edge of a dune to another rocky stretch. A track took them up over a low ridge and down again to a small stream bed. The stream itself was dry but some pools of water remained. The two men bent to the pools and each took a drink. They returned to the column and took each of the animals in turn to drink, the ox first, then the yak and the mule. Finally the four girls were herded down to the pool together. The men watched as they scrabbled to scoop water from the dribbles remaining in the pools and then dragged them back by their neck chains to take up their places again in the string of animals.

The small caravan started off again following the track, back up onto higher ground across a pass between two scree-covered slopes. Karen looked at the others, their feet bleeding from the rough ground. All three of them looked ready to drop. The beatings were becoming more frequent, the pace no slower. The track they were following wound around the end of a narrow rocky gully. Tucked against the wall of the gully was a group of low buildings, and a number of loosely fenced animal pens. The buildings were made of roughly piled stone walls with rusting corrugated iron sheeting roofs, the roofing held down against the raw winds hat blew down from the mountains by a net of ropes stretched taut by bags of rocks hanging down from the roof. The pens looked as if they wouldn't hold any animal determined to be elsewhere but, on the other hand, there wasn't anywhere for them to go. The men came and worked their way along the chain, taking the women into one of the sheds, the animals into the pens.

The younger man came and took off their leather strap gags and gave them water. He unlocked their wrist chains but fastened their ankle chains to rings in the wall of the shed. The four women watched as the last of the daylight slipped away outside, leaving them alone, and naked, sitting on the straw covered floor of the shed. Karen tried to talk to the others. The Japanese girls spoke no English and she no Japanese but she discovered that their names were Natsumi and Miyako.  The French girl, Anouk, spoke good English, Karen could manage some French. It was dark. They'd drunk all the water from the small bowl and tried to bathe their cut feet, bruised arms and legs.

The younger man came again to the shed, holding a guttering lamp that threw a shaky glimmer on the rough stone walls of the shed.  In his other hand he held a small bucket and four tin cups. He left the bucket and cups for the girls. They scooped greedily at the coarse pulse stew in the bucket, gulping down mouthfuls of the gritty, stodgy mess, grateful for any food at all.

Then the older man came. Karen had been expecting it but still had prayed it wouldn't come. She knew the Kushtian man's view of women, their principle purpose and the man's rights of use. She'd seen no other women here; she knew why they'd been brought here.

He started with Natsumi. She'd tried to cower away from him, as if she could hide in the bare stone walled room. He ran his hands over her body, she whimpered as he parted her thighs and pushed his fingers inside her. He took her head turning it this way and that peering into her mouth, stroking her hair. He seemed in intrigued by her small breasts. He gave a grunt and turned to Miyako and then Anouk. They faired no differently; his hands exploring every part of them, prodding, stroking, squeezing, pinching. He gave a grunt, seemingly satisfied, got up and came towards Karen.

She sat quietly, staring straight at him, meeting his own appraising gaze. Her knees were drawn up in front of her, her arms wrapped around her legs. He stood beside her, looking down at her as she looked up at him. He shook his head. She shrugged her shoulders, uncurled her arms, stretched out her legs. Now he nodded, crouching down beside her. She felt his hands on her thighs on her belly, on her breasts. They were the hands of a farmer, hard, callused. A broken fingernail caught against her, nicking her flesh as the claw of a cat might. He took her hair in his hands, cut short for her disguise it was barely as long as the width of his fingers. He grunted with disapproval and got to his feet, leaving her and the others.

Anouk rolled over towards Karen. "Has he gone? Est-il parti?" she asked hopefully.

"For now, but not for long I think," Karen answered, unable to give the girl the reassurance she begged for. She was right. They heard him returning across the yard. As he came in they saw he was leading the younger one by the hand. He half pushed him across the room towards Natsumi.

"Darnichi," he said in Kushtian. "Darnichi. Fristok."

"Take her," thought Karen, "take her, your first one. He's giving him his first woman." The younger man smiled at the older. Karen looked to see if there was some family resemblance. Perhaps the older was the younger's father. The age difference was too great for them to be brothers. Perhaps the younger worked here and the older was seeing his young employee introduced to the ways of men. She couldn't tell from what was said but the younger one needed no second urging. Natsumi tried to push him away but he would have none of it. She was young and with the strength of years of hard farm labour. She could do little to restrain him. He coupled with her eagerly, pulling her close to him as he entered her, ignoring her struggles and cries. They weren't together long. He twitched and bucked as he came, his body throwing her back beneath him. The older man had stood by all this time watching. Satisfied that his work was done and that the younger man was sated, he grunted and left them, the young man lying across Natsumi as she sobbed beneath him under his weight.

In time he rolled off her, picked himself up and followed the older man from the shed.

Karen's and Anouk's ankle chains were just long enough to allow them to reach Natsumi. The three girls huddled together to gain what warmth and comfort they could from one another.

They were not left for long. Perhaps two hours passed, maybe a little more. The four women were curled up close to one another, sleeping. Karen stirred as she heard noises outside, the rowdy sound of Kushtian drinking songs. Four men appeared in the room, the older man from before and three others all of about the same age. The older man gestured to the women. "Kurich karnachy," he laughed drunkenly. "Fresh meat," as the guard in the truck had said. Two of the men came towards Karen, grabbing her by the arms and forcing her back against one of the four pillars that were set in a square in the centre of the room to hold up the roof. They pushed her to her knees, dragged her arms back around the pillar behind her, took some rope and tied it between her elbows. Her forearms flailed futilely. Two others did likewise with Anouk. Miyako and Natsumi were dragged to a similar position against two other pillars. More rope followed fixing Karen's ankles to the post, making sure she could not get to her feet.

The men gathered in the centre of the four pillars, prodding and touching at the girls. Cheering drunkenly when Anouk spat defiantly at one of them, one of them produced a bottle and they all took a drink in turn. The last up-ended the bottle, letting a few drips of liquor fall on the floor of the hut. "Sparatichi," one of them called. "Spin it?" thought Karen. "Sparatichi! Sparatichi! Sparatichi!" the others joined in. The man with the bottle crouched down, placed it on the ground between the four pillars and span it. It came to rest with the neck pointing at Karen.  "Americansye! Americansye! Americansye!" they chanted. He got to his feet stepping unsteadily towards Karen. He pulled up his robe with one hand and grasped the back of her neck with the other. As he twisted her hair with one hand he pulled his cock from the breeches that he wore beneath his tunic. Already stiff, he pushed it towards her face. Another twist to her hair brought a yelp of pain and her mouth was filled with the stiff, salty, throbbing cock, pressing against her throat. He pushed against her, forcing her head back against the hard wooden pillar, threatening to knock her unconscious with every thrust. She looked upwards at the man's drunken grin. "Suchicki, suchicki," he encouraged. "Suchicki, suchicki," the others called out too and she knew to suck until finally he came, his cock spurting jism into her mouth, dribbling down on to her naked body and sticking in her throat.   The man stepped back to a cheer from his compatriots.

A second stepped up and span the bottle again. This time Anouk was chosen. She sobbed, "No! No!" as the bottle stopped spinning. The slap she earned left blood trickling from the corner of her mouth and almost knocked her senseless as her head slammed back against the pillar. Her plea didn't stop the Kushtian raping her mouth.

Miyako and Natsumi were treated the same way. All four men sated themselves. They sat in the centre of the square of pillars surrounded by the four sobbing, cum choked, women, drinking from another bottle. Laughing and chatting, their tunics pulled up around their waists, comparing the lengths of their cocks until the bottle was empty and they went their separate ways. Still bound, each to their own pillar, the girls were left in excruciating discomfort, groaning in pain and shame as the night wore on, unable to free themselves.

## Chapter 5: Fifth Day -- The Shed

It was the young man that came to release them. Annouk and Natsumi fainted as their arms were freed from the pillar, falling limply to the floor of the shed. He made sure their ankles were still chained but left them to recover.

Karen was dragged to one corner of the shed. A heavy stone quern, sat beside a sack of grain. The young man fixed her ankle chain to a ring in the side of the quern and picked up a small tin cup, scooping grain from the sack into the quern. He pointed to the peg in the quern's upper stone and made a rotating motion with his hands. Karen knew what he wanted. She set to grinding the grains, realising that if there was no flour there was little chance of food.

She watched as he went back for Anouk. Gripping her neck chain he pulled her to the far side of the shed. A large copper pot stood on a low burner. An old, wizened woman appeared, carrying a large basket, a heavy pair of wooden sticks, a wooden board and a stone. She tipped the contents of the basket onto the floor beside Anouk. Bundles of clothes fell at her feet. The old woman picked up a heavy woollen shirt. She waved it at Anouk, then at the copper, then at the wooden block. She made a pounding motion with the stone on the wooden block to drive home her point. She spat on the floor and left. Anouk had her instructions; she was left to get on with washing the clothes.

Miyako and Natsumi had suffered most on the trek the day before and could barely get to their feet when the young man came to set them to their task. He dragged them outside. At first Karen couldn't see what had happened to them. She heard the sound of Kushtian curses, the crack of a stick and the cries of the girls. This was followed by a creaking, groaning sound of wood working against wood.

She caught a glimpse of the two girls through the crack between the shed's door and the wall. Miyako and Natsumi had been harnessed to a wooden yoke, the yoke in turn was fixed to a heavy beam, pivoted at its middle. At the other end of the beam two donkeys were harnessed to a similar yoke. All four trudged in a circular path, pushing the beam before them.

Karen heard another sound as the two girls and the two mules trudged on; splashing water. She realised what it was that Miyako and Natsumi were doing. They and the mules were driving a pump. The beam would be driving a chain of buckets, lifting water from a deep well. They walked on throughout the morning, the sounds of the water punctuated by the moans of the girls, the bray of the donkeys and the crack of a cane.

It became the pattern for their days. Permanently naked, permanently shackled, two of them would be yoked to the pump for the morning, the other two would work at the quern, the washing or the baking. They would have a short break in the middle of the day. All four would work on household tasks for the afternoon. They would be fed in the evening, barely enough to keep them working, a cold porridge of grains mixed with a little watered down goats milk. Then the men would take one or other of the women into the back of the shed to help them pass their evenings.

They had little chance to talk, a few words exchanged as the collapsed onto their pile of straw to sleep at night, if neither of the men were around. They could do little more than try to comfort whichever of them had been used most badly in the day, whichever had been most blistered by being harnessed to the pump, whoever had been most abused by one of the men. Between them they tried to hold on to each other, helping each to survive. Anouk even managed a joke, "It's not so bad," she said, "not so different from what my old man used to expect, apart from the pump. He just wanted fucking, food and washing."

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Dr Armstrong also features briefly in Freddie's story "Market Forces" available here.
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