

Anthropology



Dr Armstrong & Kushtian Culture

By Freddie Clegg

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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 Kushtia. (A guide for participants in the programme is exclusively available via my Blog: <https://freddiestales19.wordpress.com>)

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

* Some of the interest this caused is documented in Market Forces, available from my blog. ☺

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 can join the others.

Dawn was breaking, the soft pink light that heralded another day of heat 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. "Yavechil!" 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 scabbled 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 that 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 three 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 intrigued by her small breasts. He gave a grunt and turned to Miyako and then Anouk. They fared 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 finger nail 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 laying 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 fore arms 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 cloths 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 they 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."

Chapter 6 : Twelfth Dawn – Rude Awakening

It must have been a week later. It was just about dawn. Karen had become used to the first glimmer of light that gave them their last few moments of peace before the efforts of the day began, the short period of cool before the cold of the night gave way to the day's unremitting heat.

She looked across at the others. Miyako and Natsumi frailer than ever. They had found yesterday's tasks almost too much. Their faces had taken on a blank, empty look suggesting that they had withdrawn somewhere deep inside themselves. Anouk still strong, maybe as strong as Karen was. She seemed determined not to show that she could be broken, though all of them knew that they could stand little more of the treatment they were receiving and the lack of food.

Karen wondered how many women had been through here; used until they could do no more and then left to die or killed when the work they could do no longer repaid the food that they needed to keep them alive. It was more brutal than anything she had seen on her trips into Kushtia in the past. She wondered if she would ever see anything more, ever again.

This time though the pink glimmer of dawn came with another light; the bright white light of a magnesium flare and the sharp detonation of explosives. Anouk was suddenly awake startled from her sleep by the noise. Karen and the others pressed closer together hoping against hope that this was a rescue.

There was the chatter of automatic weapon fire. A single booming gunshot in response – Karen assumed it was the old man's rifle, a rusted weapon she had seen him carrying one day while she was trudging around harnessed to the pump. More automatic fire answered it. More thumps and bangs. The four girls tried to huddle together, terrified in case they should be hit in the exchange of fire.

And then Karen realised the shed was burning. Fire had broken out in the straw bales piled against one wall. Already acrid smoke was starting to fill the shed. She grabbed Anouk's shoulder and pointed to the smouldering bales. The two of them tried to pull at the chains that held them prisoner in the shed. They were no more able to break themselves free than they had been when they first arrived. The chains were as strong as ever before and the girls, if anything, were weaker. Karen looked down at her wrists, now the bruises from her shackles were made raw and bloody by her efforts to free herself. Miyako and Natsumi were screaming, pulling at their own chains. Anouk had been able to reach a log. She tried to lever the ring that held her chain from its fixing in the wall. The almost rotten wood split and splintered without effect. The smoke was getting thicker. All four girls were choking and coughing as the air got hotter, sparks and stalks of burning straw whirling as the draft of the fire scooped up the air in the shed.

It was then that the door to the shed burst open. Two figures in combat fatigues carrying machine pistols were silhouetted against the smoke and flames and daylight beyond. They ran into the room. Taking an axe, one of them smashed the ring that their chains were fixed to and grabbing Miyako by the arm pulled the four of them from the shed as it began to collapse in flames around them.

They ran, still chained together, through the smoke and flames, as quickly as the shackles on their ankles would allow, stumbling and falling as they tried to keep up with their rescuers.

Karen looked back over her shoulder to see the corrugated iron roof of the shed collapse as the flames consumed the timbers that had held it up. She stumbled as she missed her footing on a petrol can discarded in the path. Two other soldiers were still firing into the homestead, lobbing grenades into the smoke and flames. The shed where they had been kept was now well ablaze, a pillar of smoke and sparks reaching up into the dawn sky. Other buildings in the farmstead were flaming or in ruins. Sticking out from beneath a heap of planks and timbers that had been the shed housing the pump, Karen saw the legs of the old man; his rifle beside him. Whether he'd been killed by gunshots or the collapse of the shed she couldn't tell but there was no doubt he was dead. Beyond him the younger man lay, on his back eyes open, staring at the sky, as dead as his father, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, wounds stitched across in his chest by automatic fire. Karen saw the old woman run out from one of the buildings waving her arms above her head, her shawl smouldering, face streaked with dirt. A single shot caught her and stopped her. A look of surprise came over her face as she fell to her knees. A burst of fire followed, hitting her in the chest. She fell back.

The four girls were pulled past the gruesome scene, out of the compound and towards a low rise in the ground. Behind it sat a dung brown, camouflaged, half track vehicle sat, its engine throbbing impatiently. Their two rescuers pushed the four girls inside and climbed in after them. Karen could see only smoke and rubble where the farmstead had once been. Two goats, confused by the noise and flames bounded across the ground, bleating disconsolately. The two other soldiers climbed into the half track. As they sat down and the truck moved off, one of their rescuers pulled off their combat helmet and shook out a cascade of long black hair.

"You're a woman," gasped Karen in surprise.

"Does that mean you'd rather go back?" she asked in a heavy Kushtian accent.

"Oh, no," said Karen. "No. Of course, no. It's just that I didn't think there were any women in the Kushtian armed forces."

"You are right," the woman said. "There aren't." She lapsed into silence as the truck ground on, the tracks clattering as they propelled them forward, the engine roaring insistently as it took each hill and dip in turn. It was hot in the truck, the sweat of the girls and their rescuers mingled with the stink of diesel as they drove on. They were heading west, the light of the rising sun streaming in through the back of the truck, dazzling Karen. She looked around at her fellow prisoners. They were all asleep, exhausted by the relief of rescue.

Karen wasn't so sure.

Chapter 7 : Day Twelve PM - The Camp

Their destination turned out to be another cluster of sheds, little more impressive than the ones that they had left. But at least when they arrived they seemed to be welcomed by a cheering group.

All women, Karen thought as she peered out from the truck, about twenty of them. Mostly in combat fatigues, a few wearing western style skirts or jeans, two veiled in the traditional Kushtian chanoosh. Whoever they were, Karen could see that they weren't part of the Kushtian army or any regular troops. Their rescuers helped them down from the truck and led them across to one of the sheds. A woman appeared clutching a set of bolt cutters and sheered through the hasps of the padlocks that closed each of the four girl's shackles. As their chains fell away the four could not contain their relief and gratitude, hugging one another and the woman with the bolt cutters in turn. Other women arrived; one with a bundle of clothing, two more carrying bowls of steaming water, soap and towels. Anouk, Karen, Miyako and Natsumi, grabbed at the soap, splashing water from the bowl and cleaning themselves as best they could. They had seen no hot water since their capture.

They dried themselves, picked clothes from the heap and dressed. Karen found a shirt that was long enough to serve as a dress, Anouk a tee-shirt and shorts, the two Japanese girls found jeans and sweat shirts that weren't too large for their small build. "Thank you," Karen said to the women that had brought them the things. "Thaknarish. From all of us," she waved at her colleagues, "thaknarish."

Another woman appeared with a tray carrying four bowls of the hot, spiced lentil, soup and a pile of the simple flat breads that were a common staple in the uplands. The girls grabbed at their first real meal in two weeks.

Karen was sitting on the floor scooping at the last of the soup with a piece of bread when the dark haired soldier that had been one of her rescuers returned in the company of an older woman of maybe forty, her own dark hair starting to grey, her face lined. She wore an immaculately white tee shirt, khaki combat trousers and desert boots. She looked at the four girls and then spoke briefly to the soldier, muttering quietly in Kushtian that Karen could not really make out. She seemed to nod in agreement with what ever the soldier was saying. Three other armed women had appeared in the door. "Aargn," the older woman said, waving the three others in, "Laringi!"

"Laringi?" thought Karen first of all thinking she had misheard. "Lock them up? That can't be..." Her puzzlement was cut off by the clatter as each of the soldiers pulled back the bolt on their AK47's and strode towards them. Karen put her hand up to fend off the grip of the first soldier that grabbed at the sleeve of her shirt. She was rewarded with a blow from the butt of the woman's rifle. Winded, Karen felt herself dragged to her feet. With the gun's barrel against her ribs she was pushed from the shed and across the courtyard. Behind her she could here the others being dragged out as well. There was another shed, smaller, barely ten feet square. Karen was pushed through the door. Disorientated by the dark she stumbled and slammed into the opposite wall. Winded, she sank to the floor as the three other girls were pushed in behind her. The door to the shed slammed shut behind them, cutting off the light from outside. She heard the familiar clack of a padlock closing. They were prisoners again.

"What's happening?" Anouk's voice in the darkness. "Why have they locked us up? Who are these people?"

Karen's eyes became accustomed to the gloom. She could see Anouk sitting against the opposite wall, Miyako and Natsumi beside her.

"I don't know," said Karen. "It doesn't make any sense. They're not government troops. They must be some sort of militia, I suppose."

The door opened again. One soldier stood beside it, weapon cocked. One other came in, grabbing Miyako and pulling her to her feet. Natsumi tried to pull her back and was rewarded with a cuff to the head. Miyako was pulled outside, yelling in Japanese to her friend. The door was locked again. Natsumi was hammering at the door.

"Are they going to kill us?" Anouk asked.

"I don't know," Karen said slowly. "I really don't know."

All three girls sat straining their ears hoping to hear something hoping not to hear other things. It was perhaps an hour. The door opened again. Miyako was pushed back into the cell. Apparently unharmed she sank down beside her friend. "Pro-hram," she said with a puzzled look on her face. "Pro-hram?"

It was evidently Anouk's turn. The guard pointed her weapon at her and gestured for her to get to her feet. With the barrel of the guard's AK47 against her ribs she was pushed out of the cell. The door closed and locked again. Karen ran to it and managed to find a crack at one edge. She watched as Anouk was prodded across the compound to the largest building on the far side.

Another hour or more passed. Again the clunk of a key in the cell's padlocked door heralded the return of the guards. Anouk was pushed back in and Karen was grabbed. As she was pulled to her feet, Anouk said, "They want to know about something called 'The Programme'. When did we join it? Where did we come from to it? I didn't understand what they were talking about."

Karen was hustled away. It was getting late in the day now. The sun was starting to set, shadows lengthened across the compound as the peaks of surrounding hills cut off the sun light sooner than it would otherwise have gone. Karen followed the same path that Anouk had been taken along, up some creaking wooden steps, across a veranda and into the building.

From the corridor a wooden door opened into an office. Behind the desk sat the same old woman that had ordered their imprisonment. Another woman similarly dressed in tee shirt and combat trousers stood beside her. An empty chair stood in front of the desk. Karen was pushed across to sit.

"Please," the woman behind the desk gestured to the chair. "Please sit down."

Karen did so warily. "Who are you? Why are you keeping us here? I am an American citizen, I demand to be put in contact with the American Embassy in Kolin."

"Kolin is a long way from here," the woman said. "Not perhaps as far as from your last accommodation, but a long way. You ask so many questions. You don't say, 'Thank you for rescuing us.' Isn't that a little ungrateful?"

"Yes, yes, I guess so," Karen seemed chastened by her captor's accusation. "But you have locked us up and"

"Or perhaps you regret being rescued, being taken away from your dream?"

"Dream? Nightmare more like! Your people saw how we were being kept. Like animals. How could that be a dream?"

"I don't know," the woman replied. "But then I haven't subscribed to the programme, I'm not a participant."

"When did you join the programme?" the woman standing beside the desk cut in, conversationally.

"What programme? I'm not part of any programme. I was kidnapped, brought over the border into Kushtia, sold in a market somewhere and dragged off to where you found us."

"Your colleagues tell a similar story." The woman behind the desk looked directly at Karen.

"I'm not surprised. For my part it's true. Who are you?"

The women ignored her question. The woman standing spoke again. "So did you sign up for the programme in America or when you travelled to Kolin?"

"I've told you I'm not part of any programme. I've not been to Kolin. Well not recently. I'm an American citizen, you must tell the American Ambassador."

The woman behind the desk shrugged her shoulders. "Communication is difficult," she said. "We need to be sure what is going on first. Thank you. That will do for now."

The guard gripped Karen by the arm and pulled her to her feet. The two women in tee-shirts turned to one another and began talking quietly in Kushtian. The guard pulled Karen away. As she was hustled out of the office she called over her shoulder, "I'm Dr Karen Armstrong, from the University of Michigan. I'm an American citizen you must call the American Ambassador. Call him!" They seemed to take no notice as she was taken outside, back across the compound and into the cells. They took Natsumi after that. She came back muttering about the "Pro-hram" just as Miyako had done.

It was dark. The four girls sat waiting. The cell door opened once more. A guard ushered in a figure clad in the traditional chanoosh, the all enveloping robe and veil of the unmarried Kushtian woman. She carried a tray with four more bowls of food, bread, some fruit and four cups of a creamy yogurt based drink. She set it down in the centre of the cell. Kneeling beside

it she beckoned to the girls forward. "Daraghl, eskeidi," she said. "It is good. A lentil dish. Eat. Please."

Karen crouched down beside her looking over her shoulder concerned that the guard might prevent them talking. "You speak English?"

"Some," the veiled woman said, "Not well." She lowered the lids of her eyes in the sign of submission that Karen had observed so many times from the veiled women of Kushtia. The girls reached for the food, scooping up the dahl like mixture eagerly.

"Where are we? What are these people?" Karen asked of the girl.

"I should not say. The guard," she nodded to the door. "They oppose the programme; that much you must know. But you are safe here. They will not harm you, I think."

"What is this 'programme' that everyone talks of? We don't understand."

"It is all right," the girl said lowering her eyes again. "I see why you want to be like us. They think it is harmful though. That it will hold back change. They see a different future for Kushtia."

The guard appeared again at the door and gestured to the girl. "I must go," she said, collecting up the empty bowls and cups. With that she left them and the door was padlocked shut behind her.

Chapter 8 : Day Thirteen – An Interview

“Do you have the first idea of the trouble that you have caused, Doctor Armstrong?”

It was morning. Karen was back in the office. The guards had come for her after the veiled girl had brought them a breakfast of yoghurt, grains and oats. This time though as they had pulled her to her feet they had wrenched her hands behind her back and cuffed her wrists together. She was sitting in the same chair that she had been in before but this time the mood of her captors seemed uglier.

“This has been the cause of our problems,” the older woman gestured to a dog-eared copy of the edition of National Geographic that had carried Karen’s article, “Veiled and in Chains”. She scowled across at Karen. “This caused the Programme. This started it all. Those pigs in Kolin.”

Karen protested. “I don’t understand what you are talking about. That article was published a year ago. I have been out of America for six months. I only came back to Kushtia two months ago – I’ve been living in hill villages and just over the border. I’ve not been anywhere near Kolin and I don’t know anything about a programme.”

The woman seated behind the desk turned to her colleague and nodded. She turned back to Karen. “The curious thing, Ms Armstrong, is that I believe you. I’m not sure that it changes anything but I believe you. Let me explain.” Her colleague seemed to lean forward to object but the woman behind the desk waved her back. “Since you have been good enough to identify yourself, I should do the same. It is polite. I am Kalasa Karench, my husband is a Council member so I suppose you could say I am, or have been, part of the Kushtian elite. I believe passionately in our culture and values but I know they must change. For women especially, Kushtia is not an easy country in which to live. Unless you have seen nothing else.”

“I know,” Karen interrupted, “that’s what my work has shown. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes,” Kalasa nodded, “but it is not the truth that we are looking at here. It is the consequences.”

“Consequences? Some academics were interested in that article. There was some hoo-hah in the popular press. Some lascivious comment on television. I stopped doing chat shows about it – I found the undercurrent of innuendo unpleasant. But it will all have been forgotten now, The public has a short memory.”

“You would think so. But it is not the case in this instance. There were many who saw your article as a romantic dream. An idyllic society in which men are men and women are grateful. There are always those women for whom such a society has its attractions.”

“But surely the fantasies of a few western women cannot affect Kushtian society? Change will happen here. I said so in my article. As Kushtia becomes more open. The United Nations, for example, ..”

“Yes, the United Nations. Part of the problem, I fear, not part of the solution. Many women responded to your article. The Kushtian Foreign Ministry had many applications from women wanting to immigrate, to be part of this imagined ideal society. They didn’t see the sort of conditions that you and your friends were being held in. They only saw the romantic idyll.”

“And how has that changed things here?”

“The Council is wary of change in the ways of men and women. Council members have many wives and concubines. Why should they want things to change? They see as you did that pressures would come upon them. To enfranchise women. To allow them to own property or make contracts. To choose in the matter of their husbands or lovers. They feared that outsiders might take a different view of human rights to that of their own. And then one of them had a very clever idea. They are not stupid or backward. They are politically very clever. Their ambassador to the United Nations met with a representative of UNESCO. How interesting, he said, that the UN supports world heritage sites, that the buildings and environment of important places are protected. Should the same protection not be extended to cultures – the ways that people live? The UNESCO representative thinks this is a good idea, that it will give them a way to increase their influence. They make a proposal to create ‘World Heritage Cultures’ in which the way of life of an indigenous people can be protected from outside influences and under which the UN will fund education activities to promote cultural understanding in the world outside. It is seen as non-controversial, something on which the Russians Americans, Chinese and British can agree for once, and is passed. The Kushtian culture is declared as the first World Heritage Culture.”

“And makes change difficult within Kushtia. Change that you believe is needed.”

“Worse than that. UNESCO funding is being used to run the programme.”

“You keep talking about this ‘programme’. I still don’t understand it.” Karen wriggled her wrists against the handcuffs. “Can you take these things off?”

Kalasa shook her head. “The programme is the ‘Kushtian Cultural Experience Programme’, women from all over the world coming to experience Kushtian life and culture.”

“Isn’t that good? Bringing in outside ideas? Won’t that make change easier?”

“No. That’s not how it works. This programme attracts a certain sort of woman; one that finds the ideals of traditional Kushtian society attractive. They come to live in households as servants or concubines. To be treated as chattels of the household. You know how women live in Kushtia, Dr Armstrong. As virtual slaves. There are many in the programme. A hundred or more. The Council is claiming this is a validation of Kushtian culture, that western women are seeking something not found in their own societies. That is not the case. In truth, they are sex tourists, validating the regime. It’s a reason for not giving way to change.”

“Change that you want to make happen?”

“This group share my ideals. But it is hard for women to take action. Because we cannot own property, everything we need we must steal. We have learned to be hard, to fight, to fend for

ourselves. Many women in the programme are not happy. The romantic ideal is not as they thought. We try to help them. We wish to give them a voice. We thought that you four were like that. Programme participants in appalling conditions. You would be an important voice for us, speaking out against the evils of the programme. Like the others will."

"The others? You have already brought others out of the programme?"

"Oh yes. There are five. Women that have been freed from the programme."

"But if they have returned home, they will be speaking out, change will happen."

"No. They have not returned yet. They are still here. We have to keep them here until we are ready to speak out."

"Imprisoned as much as if they were still in their households?"

Kalasa shrugged. "Sometimes immoral acts are needed in a moral cause."

"And is our imprisonment an immoral act in pursuit of your moral cause?"

"I haven't decided yet. Your friends are inconvenient. Evidence of slavery in Kushtia is not something I wish to present, that might create too great a call for international intervention. It confuses things. And you, you Dr Armstrong, are even more of a problem. It might be dangerous for you if people in Kolin knew you were in the country. Or it might be dangerous for us if those in Kolin knew you were here. We will decide. But until then you will have to be handcuffed, I think. I'm sorry."

"I accept your apology," Karen said with irony, "but you'll excuse me if I don't applaud your caution."

Kalasa nodded and turned to her colleague, "Don't put her back with the others for now, Alana." She gestured to the guard and Karen was pulled to her feet. "Use the guard room." She left the room more worried than when she had entered it and was marched towards the back of the building.

Chapter 9 : Day Thirteen PM – A Proposition

Karen was sitting alone in the cell that she had been taken to. Her hands were still cuffed behind her; she had tried flexing her wrists in the cuffs but it was clear that she wasn't going to be able to free herself. She sat on the iron frame bedstead that was the only piece of furniture in the cell and looked up at the barred window and then across at the heavy wooden door. It was starting to get dark.

She heard the clattering sounds of a key in the lock and the door to the cell opened. Framed in the door stood Alana, the guard. Karen watched as she stepped into the cell and pushed the door shut behind her. In spite of herself and her situation, Karen found the confident air of the dark skinned woman alluring. Her own sexual drives were as likely to favour women as men and the bright white of Alana's tee shirt tight against her well formed body, contrasting with the dark brown of her skin, together with the woman's confident air at a time when Karen's own resources were at such a low ebb, triggered a response that Karen found all too familiar. The lock crashed home. "I thought you might like some company," Alana said. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of her shorts, took one for herself and offered one to the handcuffed Karen. She shook her head, rejecting the offer.

Alana took a deep drag on her cigarette and exhaled, blowing a stream of smoke across the cell. "You're an attractive woman, Doctor Armstrong," she said, smiling as she looked down at Karen. "I could make your time here much less uncomfortable." Alana reached out and ran her hands up the back of Karen's head, toying briefly with the short, soft hairs she found there.

Karen moved her head, trying to escape Alana's attentions. "Aren't you supposed to wait a while for the Stockholm Syndrome to kick in?" she asked intending to discourage the guard but instead revealing her own feelings with a lick of the lips and a coy look in her eyes.

Alana gripped Karen by the hair tightly and twisted throwing her back on the bed. As she fell back with a soft "Ohh!" the guard knelt across her. Alana reached behind her back and unclipped her riot baton from her belt. Karen tried to wriggle free but Alana's weight on her belly made sure she could not. "Get off me, you, gruunggh," she tried to call out but her cries were cut off by the side grip of the baton as Alana pushed it into Karen's mouth. Alana gripped either end of the nightstick, pushing Karen's head back against the bed. Karen groaned as the baton cut into either side of her mouth. With all of Alana's weight behind her grip on the stick, Karen couldn't move.

"You be good or that stick will choke you," Alana spat. "Now, you gonna behave, yankee?"

Karen helplessly handcuffed could only grunt compliance.

"That's a good girl. That's good," Alana smiled. The guard took her hands off the stick. Karen caught her breath, freed from the risk of choking. "Now you just suck on that like it was your boyfriend's piece." Karen needed no encouragement; she had a strong oral response to sexual arousal and was already sucking and gnawing on the baton's grip. Alana was fumbling at the buttons of Karen's shirt. Eventually she lost patience with trying to unfasten them and wrenched the shirt open. She greeted the sight of Karen's breasts with a sigh of approval. Immediately her hands were on them pinching and squeezing at Karen's nipples. As she saw

Karen's reaction in the stiffening of her nipples and the increased rate of her breathing, Alana bent her mouth to Karen's breasts and set to nipping at each in turn with her teeth.

Karen's response was to mmmph and groan ever more loudly mouthing her passion around the grip of the baton. Alana sat up and pulled the stick clear of Karen's mouth, watching her bright eyed look of arousal as she reached back with one hand to squeeze one of Karen's tits. "Decadent Yankee," Alana teased.

"Preverse Kushtian," Karen responded. Alana chuckled in return. She picked up her riot baton and slid the tip of it along the inside of Karen's thigh. She gasped quietly spreading her legs to welcome the intruding ebony stick. "Mmm," Karen whimpered as the tip of the stick came closer to her vulva. Her muttered appreciation changed to a moan as Alana moved her head down to substitute her tongue for the probing rigidity of the riot baton.

The two women tumbled together in a tangle of desire until in time each was sated.

Karen sank back, exhausted. "How did you know?" she asked Alana.

The guard grinned. "I didn't," she said. "I just fancied fucking you. You weren't in any position to stop me." She traced a finger along the one of the steel cuffs that secured Karen's wrists. "You still aren't."

Karen groaned. "Can't you take those things off me?"

"No, I don't think so," Alana responded. "You get some sleep. We can talk in the morning." She got up from the bed and pulled a blanket up over Karen as she lay back.

Curiously liberated by the guard's attentions, Karen watched as Alana left her, studying the woman's smooth tanned skin, noticing the tattoo of two intertwined K's on the side of her thigh as she picked up her clothes. Exhausted by their love making, Karen was asleep by the time that Alana reached the door of the cell.

It was light again before Alana came back to Karen's cell. Karen was just stirring from a night's sleep made fitful by her shackles. She struggled to sit up, shrugging off the blanket, infuriated by Alana's look of amusement as she twisted herself around, wrenching her shoulders as she tried to sit herself upright. "Huna!" she snapped. "Bitch!"

Alana wagged a finger in response. "You don't have to be kept like that," she said.

"I know. You can undo these anytime you choose," she turned her back on Alana, offering her the opportunity to unlock her handcuffs.

Alana sat down on the bed beside her. Karen's shirt had pulled from her left shoulder as she had tossed and turned in her sleep. Alana slid it back into place. Karen responded to her gentle touch. "You can help us," Alana said. "Help us expose the Programme. Help us change things."

"Why should I do that?" Karen replied.

"So you can go home," Alana grinned as she watched Karen's attempt to look relaxed. "But, if that doesn't matter to you, so can Miyako and Natsumi and Anouk too. They don't need to be kept like this," Alana tapped Karen's wrists cuffs, "either."

Karen started at the mention of the girls' names. "But they should go, they're no use to you and they know nothing about the programme."

"You are right Yankee. They don't understand Kushtian society. You do. They don't speak our language. You do. They do not even know how they came to be here. But they do have one important thing about them." Karen looked at Alana with a puzzled expression. "You care enough about them to think they should go home and you can do the things we need done," Alana said coolly. "Help us and they can go home."

"Huna!" Karen spat.

Alana gripped her by the shoulders and spun her around pushing her back on the bed. "I thought you liked me like that." Alana lay across her pressing her hand down across Karen's mouth to silence her. "Now, keep quiet, Yankee and listen. I'm gong to tell you what this Huna wants you to do." Karen tried to struggle under Alana's grip. "You're going to help us abduct one of the programme members and then you'll take her place. You'll be inside the programme. You'll help us to break it." Karen stopped struggling her eyes wide with disbelief as she looked up at Alana over the hand that was clamped over her lips

Alana slid her hand away. "You must be mad," Karen said. "You must be mad and you must think that I am mad. You're a mad huna!"

"Maybe but I'm the mad huna that can help your friends get home." Alana knew what Karen's response would be.

Chapter 10 : Day Fifteen – The Airport

Sometimes patience is the only option.

Karen kept on quietly pushing the broom across the dusty floor of the luggage claim hall of Kolin airport. A woman cleaning, dressed in a chanoosh, attracted no attention even though there were few others there. Two security guards lazing in a corner, sucking on hand rolled cigarettes under a 'no smoking' sign, apparently deep in debate about some abstruse aspect of the performance of the Kushtian national football team, ignored her and everything else around them.

The flight from London had arrived not long before. A steady stream of passengers that had known better than to trust their belongings to the whims of Kushtian Baggage Handling were leaving the hall clutching cases that tested the limits of the concept of hand luggage. A few, less experienced travellers were waiting in the hall. One, Karen could see, was the one that they were looking for.

She was standing not far from the trolley that would eventually be towed away to be replaced with another containing the bags from the London flight.

She was wearing a loose beige skirt and a comfortable silk top, she held a light coat over one arm, a handbag over the other. Her long straight hair was tied back with a paisley patterned scarf, sunglasses perched on the top of her head.

Most important of all though, she was clutching the blue and white folder that singled her out as a participant in the programme.

Karen hadn't believed it at first when they had explained to her how things worked. Participants coming into Kushtia were cleared through Immigration. There an official explained to them that they would be met by their hosts after they had collected their baggage. Immigration explained that they would retain the participant's passport for the duration of their stay and in return they issued a card which held the participant's name and reference number, together with a welcome pack and details of the host that they should expect. Then they were simply waved through and left to collect their baggage and find their hosts.

Karen could see how that reduced work for Kushtian Immigration. "But," she said, "doesn't that mean that unless someone gets the passport and the participant together again at some later stage, there's no way of knowing that the person leaving the airport is the person that came in on the flight."

"Exactly," said Alana, "and with security so poor in the luggage reclaim, almost anyone could swap with an incoming participant once they have their welcome pack but have yet to meet their hosts." Alana waved a picture of one of the blue and white folders. "But why would they want to do that?" she said with a wink.

Karen waited for a while to see if the girl would do as they had expected. She was looking at her watch impatiently wondering where her cases were. She noticed the sign for the

washrooms and headed off towards them. Karen was pleased. It had saved her suggesting that the girl used them before she left.

Karen swept her way across the hall and followed the girl inside after dropping an “out of order sign on the washroom door. Shortly after her, two other women followed, one pushing the other in a wheel chair, both wearing the all concealing chanoosh.

It only took a matter of moments.

Karen was first to emerge, wearing the girl’s clothes and clutching her welcome pack. She’d pulled her sunglasses down but the security guards would only have noticed her if she’d been wearing the Kushtian football team’s new strip. She walked over to where the luggage trolley had now appeared. There were only three bags left on it now, the others had all been claimed. She checked the flight ticket she’d found in the girl’s handbag. Baggage receipts tallied with two of the bags on the trolley. She lifted them off and headed for the exit.

It was only as she reached the exit that the guards seemed to notice her but only to leer at her legs as she passed them by. They didn’t take any notice at all of the veiled woman in a wheel chair being pushed by another as Alana took the unconscious Lucy out of the luggage hall and across to a parked van.

Karen saw a man holding up a card saying “Lucy Baildon”, the name that tallied with the one on the welcome pack she was holding. She walked across to him and showed him her welcome pack. “Aaargn,” he grunted approving and gestured to a battered Mercedes that stood outside the terminal building. He didn’t offer to take either of Karen’s bags. She followed him out.

He let her put her own cases in the boot of the car. She clambered in to the back sinking down onto the seat, its plastic covering hot and sticky against her thighs. It sagged discouragingly beneath her. The car stank of cigarette smoke and other smells that Karen, even with all her experience of the Kushtian way of life, could not identify. Her driver turned around – gesticulating, pointing to her face and then to the seat beside her. She found a small parcel and unwrapped it. It contained a simple veil. Obviously the driver was concerned at the impropriety of being seen with an unveiled young woman in his car.

Karen took it out and draped it across the lower part of her face. Somehow her sunglasses seemed wildly inappropriate. She took them off. The driver looked up at his rear view mirror, evidently inspecting her. “Aaargn,” he said, turning the key in the ignition and starting off.

Chapter 11 : Day Fifteen – The Household Of Keshren Kerrich

Karen had worn a veil many times in the past but somehow this felt particularly odd. To be sitting there, in normal clothes, especially someone else's, but with her face obscured from view, felt strange. Added to that, the fact that the veil concealed not only herself but also her assumed identity, felt even more curious.

The driver seemed unconcerned as the car bounced through the suburbs of Kolin. It slid to a dusty halt outside a large wooden door. He turned around, pointed to Karen and then to the door and waved for her to get out. He made no attempt to get out to help her with her luggage so she pulled the cases from the boot. No sooner were they out and she had closed the lid than the car roared off, leaving her standing in the gravel and dust beside the door. On the side of the door was a battered enamel sign that read in Kushtian script, "The Household of Keshren Kerrich."

There didn't seem to be a bell or knocker so she just made a fist and hit against it. Almost at once there was a sound of Kushtian voices from inside. She reached up to ensure that her veil still gave her an appropriately modest look and waited for the door to be opened.

The door was opened by a man she took to be the household overseer, the one charged with keeping good order amongst the servants and ensuring that the tasks needed to keep the house running smoothly were carried out. She showed him her blue and white folder. He grunted in recognition and showed her in, muttering a greeting in Kushtian. Karen thought it not a good idea to show that she spoke and understood, Kushtian. After all, the real Lucy Baildon almost certainly didn't. She showed the overseer her folder, pointing to the name on its cover and then to herself, saying "Lucy, Lucy."

He looked at her, seemingly uninterested and pointed her to a small room where other women of the household were sat. Some were working at a loom, others mending clothes, others still folding clothes that had evidently just been laundered. Her arrival caused something of a stir, the women clustered around her, plucking at her clothes, unfastening her veil, taking her by the hand and gesturing for her to sit down all the while, muttering the Kushtian welcome greeting, "Venesh. Venesh."

Karen smiled in response nodding her head, keen to make friends with the women of the household as soon as she could. One of them offered her a small clay cup of steaming liquid and Karen took it gratefully. She pulled the small phrase book given to all programme participants from her bag and thumbed through it. "Thaknarish. Thank you," she said haltingly trying to not to let her grasp of Kushtian pronunciation appear too competent. She pointed to the book as if not confident that she was being understood. "Thaknarish." She smiled again and held up the cup, taking a drink of the strong black tea.

Two of the other women clapped approvingly. "Thaknarish. Thaknarish." They nodded, showing Karen that they understood. They took her by the hand, led her to a range of cushions alongside one wall and indicated for her to sit. Karen did so. As she did so another woman appeared in the room. She was younger than any of the others, barely twenty Karen thought, and her pale skin marked her out from the others. As soon as she saw Karen she rushed across to her.

"Are you English?" she asked. "Here as part of the programme?" Karen nodded. "Oh, thank goodness. I've been so lonely, it's been so strange. Not at all like I thought it would be. I so

want to go home and ..." she stopped as suddenly as she had started, conscious that all the other women in the room were looking at her. "Please," she said, "please help me."

A moment later the Overseer appeared and barked some orders at one of the elder women. Karen managed to make out some of it. "The young English woman. She is for concubine tonight. For the first son. She will dance for him. Then he will dance with her. Dress her. And manuses."

The girl obviously understood little of what was said apart from the last word. Manuses - the shackles worn as a symbol of a woman's dependence on her household. She shook her head. "No manuses," she said, "no manuses." The other women clustered around her, ignoring her protests, pulling her to a large chest in the corner of the room.

"You dance," the oldest one said slowly in stumbling English. "Dance for Kesrentic." The girl looked worried. The other women were helping her take off her dark brown robes; one of the others was rummaging through the contents of the chest. "Shake bosom. Make Kesrentic happy. He like that."

Karen had a pretty good idea of what "dancing" for Kesrentic would mean. It was common practice to select one of the women of the household to give the eldest boy of the family his first sexual experience. Whatever dancing skills the girl had, dancing would not be all she was expected to do tonight. The girl stood naked, shivering but not from cold. The women had found a costume for her. The silver, sparkling, halter neck top was adorned with silver coins stitched to it like monetary chain mail. The grey silken skirt was trimmed in silver wire embroidery and cut in panels so that as she moved it exposed her legs. Silver slippers and a heavy, broad, coin-hung, belt to sit around her hips were brought from the chest as well. They fastened bangles around her arms. They put rings on each of her fingers, with fine silver chains linking one to another. The oldest women brought out a fine grey silk veil, draping it carefully across her face, and fastening it to her hair with pins. In spite of the reassuring clucking and fussing of the women, the girl's eyes were still wide with fright and her fear became worse as they brought the heavy iron manacles, the "manuses", for her wrists.

As the girl wriggled in her manacles, prepared by the women of the house for her fate, the Overseer returned. Smiling with approval he took the girl by the arm, quelling her struggles with a violent shake. "Come," he said. "Dance." He dragged her away. Behind her veil, it was clear she was sobbing in distress.

Karen stared after her. She had a good idea of the fate that awaited the girl. "Dancing" was a common euphemism for copulation in Kushtian and it was usual practice for a young girl from the household to be selected as the initiation partner for any male of the household at their coming of age. "At least," Karen thought, "it will be short if not sweet." At best Kushtian lovemaking was fairly perfunctory; for a male just coming of age she would be unlucky if it took more than a few moments. Frightening, yes, degrading, yes, but Karen could imagine far worse forms of forced sexual encounter.

The other women took Karen and set her to work, cleaning pots and dishes. She listened to their chatter as she worked away at the tub of grimy water, hearing the gossip of the household of how the Overseer was cheating on his two wives; of how the chief wife of the house had discovered that her husband had a new concubine that she had not been told of; of the price of rice in the market and poor quality chickens that had been brought for the week-end's meals. As the sun began to set the women drifted away to different corners of the room. There was no artificial light and the onset of night meant there was nothing to do but

sleep. Karen found her own corner, pushing a sack of rice to the floor as a pillow and dragging a strip of worn carpet across to cover her as she slept.

She was woken by the return of the girl. In the gloom of the room she watched as the girl was pushed back into the room. She looked around her before she saw where Karen was and made her way towards her, crouching down alongside her. "Please," the girl said, "please help."

Karen sat up. The girl fell into her arms. Karen could see that her costume was torn, that there were scratches across her shoulders and chest. Her veil hung loosely from the pins in her hair but no longer covered her face. Karen just held on to her, the girl sobbing quietly. "Did he rape you?" she asked quietly.

The girl looked at her. "Yes – no – well, no, not really. He tried but he's not been with a woman before. He was just violent. Rough, brutal and he made me, well, no...."

"Its all right," said Karen. "Come here and rest. We'll make things right in the morning." She took the girl in her arms and the two of them lay back against the sack of rice, both sleeping fitfully beneath their carpet blanket, Karen still in the street clothes she had stolen from Lucy, the girl in her torn dancing costume, her wrists still locked in their manuses.

Chapter 12 : Day Sixteen – Working For Keshren

Karen was woken by the quiet sobbing of her companion. A pink flush at the barred window of the room announced the imminent arrival of dawn. The other women were already stirring busying themselves at lighting the cooking fires and heating water. One of the overseer's men walked up to their couch, pushed Suzie over onto her face and unfastened her manuses. The girl sat up, rubbed her wrists and pushed the hair away from her tear streaked face. "I'm sorry," she said, you must think me so foolish. To have got into this and then to complain so."

Karen smiled sympathetically. "No," she said reassuringly, "of course not. It's frightening." The girl gave a grateful grin. "Look, I'm Lucy Baildon," she said. "Perhaps we can help each other?"

The girl nodded. "Suzie," she said, "Suzie Barwick. The women here are all right really. They've been kind. It's just... well, it's just all so strange. In the programme they said I would be a part of the household, a doenya?"

"Mmm," said Karen, "like a servant. I think that's what I am to be too."

"And that is fine. The work is hard but the other women have helped me a lot. They are all very kind. But the men! They are far worse than I thought. They see any woman and they think of sex. I was cleaning in the bathrooms yesterday with one of the other doenyas. The head of the household came in – Keshren Kerrich – he told the other girl to suck his... his thing .. his cock. And he told me to stand and watch. To learn. So I would know how the head of the household needed to be treated. And she just did it. And he said nothing to her. He didn't touch her. He just... well stood there. She didn't even pause. She just dropped to her knees and did it. Right there. Just as he asked."

"Of course," said Karen. "She would see it as an honour." Suzie looked startled. "For a doenya to be asked by the head of the household. That is a matter of status for her. She will have boasted of it to her friends."

"It's true. There was a lot of talk when we got back to the doenyas hall. I couldn't follow it."

"I'm sure that's what it was. I know it must seem very strange." Karen wanted to do what she could to reassure Suzie, but he knew from her studies that Kushtian men viewed sex as something to be taken when desire arose. The only good thing was that they were usually satisfied fairly swiftly. "Just think yourself lucky you're not a concubine! At least as a doenya anything like that is going to be occasional. Concubines are expected to be on hand for the head of household at any time, day or night. And they are supposed to amuse and entertain him, playing music, joining in games. I'd rather be working in the kitchen!"

"Me too," said Suzie with a smile, evidently pleased to have found an ally in Karen. "But why didn't they give a concubine to Kesrentic? Why me? He hurt me. Look." Suzie showed Karen the scratch marks on her shoulder.

"It's a tradition," Karen said. "A young man is considered too inexperienced to go with a concubine. They are only for someone that has achieved some experience in the 'art' as they see it. So they use a servant. It's the usual way."

"Oh," said Suzie. "You know a lot about this, Lucy. I don't remember seeing that in the programme guide. But then the programme guide doesn't really prepare you for this does it?"

Karen shook her head. "No it doesn't, does it? But I'm determined to learn from this what I can. That's why I came on the programme."

Suzie nodded, "Well, yes. Mostly it's not so bad. As I say, the other women are kind and not all of the men are brutes. It's a simple life here and somehow the work lets you think, It's quite – well – peaceful in some ways."

Karen looked sympathetically at Suzie. "I can imagine it is. That's what I hoped to find here."

Suzie seemed to gather herself together. "Well, Miss Lucy Baidon," she said with new found confidence, "I'd better show you around. Just let me change." She shrugged off the tatters of her dance costume and pulled on a simple one piece robe that covered her from neck to ankle. She reached out a hand to Karen. "Come on," she said. "I can't take your manuses off, though. The overseer will have to do that." Suzie led the way across the doenyas hall. A large bowl of water stood on a table. She splashed her face and then turned to Karen before picking up a cloth to dry herself. "Here," she said, "we might get hot water for a wash later but this is all there is for now."

Karen nodded and followed Suzie's example. She had barely finished when she became aware that the women in the hall had fallen silent. She looked around. All of them, Suzie included, had drawn their veils across their faces. Standing in the door to the hall was a heavily built man that Karen took to be Keshren Kerrich's overseer. Karen pulled her own veil into place. The overseer beckoned her forward. As she responded to his gesture, one of the other women went forward with her. The overseer grunted out a stream of instructions in Kushtian. Even though Karen understood most of it, the woman translated slowly into broken English.

"He says you are here as a doenya in the household of Keshren Kerrich. Kerrich say you are to be freed of your manuses so that you can take up your duties. Hold out your hands." As Karen obeyed the overseer's instructions he took a key from his belt and unlocked the cuffs from around her wrists. Another stream of Kushtian followed. "Now you must take off those western clothes. Here a doenya wears Kushtian dress." Karen looked around. The other women were all watching her as she stepped out of the skirt and pulled off her silk top and the overseer was staring appreciatively as she stood there in her underwear. The woman who was translating passed Karen a robe like the one Suzie had put on and Karen put it on over her head. The overseer grunted his approval as she allowed the robe to fall loosely into place and then reached into the pocket of his tunic. He took out a metal disk that carried the same design that had appeared on the door plate of the household. Karen knew what it was – a properta, the symbol worn by all women showing the household to which they belonged.

The overseer hung the disk on its cord around Karen's neck and muttered some further words. "He says, this is your properta as part of the household of Keshren Kerrich. Remember to follow the traditions of our household. You will follow our rules and the household will care for you." Karen nodded her head in acknowledgement. The overseer nodded in response and left without a further word.

As soon as the overseer left the other women clustered around Karen. They had thrown off their veils now and were smiling and laughing, welcoming her to the household. Suzie stood by on one side. "You see," she said. "They are pleased we are here."

The woman who had translated for the overseer said, "Now for some work. Then some food. You bring water. She," the woman pointed to Suzie, "she will show you where."

Karen followed Suzie's lead. The two of them worked hard for an hour or more, both fetching water from the well, emptying the pottery jars they carried into the great stone cisterns to one side of the kitchen area. After a dozen loads, the older woman signalled that they should take a rest and brought them each a bowl of tea. Karen felt as though every one of her muscles were aching already. The two of them sat quietly enjoying their tea. Karen looked up and saw two of the overseer's men approaching. Instinctively she pulled her veil across her face and lowered her eyes in the way she knew Kushtian women were expected to. It was only when she heard the chatter of voices beside her that she turned to see the two young men attempting to flirt with Suzie. "Hello lovely lady," the taller of the young men was saying, Karen heard. "Don't work too hard, you come play with us," the other said. Karen wasn't worried by the conversation – these two would be under as strict supervision by the overseer as the women were in the doenyas hall, this would be just an amusing way for them to pass a few moments in their busy day. It was only when Suzie turned towards her that she realised the reason for their flirtation; surprised by their approach, Suzie had forgotten to pull her veil up over her face and was now enjoying their attention, not registering the fascinated stares on the young men's face as they stared into the face of an unveiled woman for what was probably the first time.

A barked order from behind Karen disturbed the two men and Suzie. The overseer pushed Karen aside as he jerked Suzie to her feet. The two men scuttled away. The overseer dealt Suzie a hard slap to the face before he pulled her veil up, snarling at her all the time that she was immodest, little better than a whore, seducing his workers. Suzie was sobbing as she tried to break free of the overseer's grasp. Karen knew better than to try to help her. By failing to cover her face she would give offence to any traditionally minded man. Even the most licentious of concubines was expected to offer at least the pretence of covering her face.

The overseer was dragging Suzie by her wrist. He was shouting at the woman that had translated for Karen earlier. She in turn was remonstrating with him but eventually shaking her head went off to the side of the room, only to return with a pair of manuses. The overseer locked them onto Suzie's wrists and held her by the chain that linked them. With a twist of his wrist he forced Suzie to her knees. The girl was yelling in fear as he twisted his grip again and dragged her down to the floor. Placing his boot on her neck to keep her from moving he reached out to unfasten a rope from its cleat on the wall. As he loosened, it a large hook lowered from the ceiling. He pushed the tip of the hook through the links of Suzie's manuses and hauled on the rope. Suzie was dragged back to her knees, then to her feet and finally onto the tips of her toes her arms stretching up towards the roof.

"Whore," he spat at Suzie as he pulled a large knife from his belt. She began screaming again in terror as he advanced towards her. Karen looked to see if there was anything she could do to save the girl, deciding that the only thing to hand was one of the pots she had been fetching water with. The overseer however, seeing that Karen might intervene turned towards her and threatened her with the knife before turning back to Suzie and using his knife to slice her robe from her, leaving her naked except for her veil. He looked at her as she tried to ease the pain from her arms, stretched upwards as they were. He gave a nod of satisfaction and then spoke again to the translator before stalking from the room. "Da huna batradi," Karen heard him say. "Beat the bitch."

"Oh, please let me down," begged Suzie. "My arms ... it's so painful."

The translator shook her head. "You must stay there," she said. "To be seen without your veil is a great offence. You must stay there to think about your mistake."

"But my arms..."

"That pain is not so great," the translator said. "But the pain from the beating will be."

"No! No!" called Suzie as she saw the woman pick up a bunch of willow wands used to beat the dust from carpets. "Please you don't have to beat me."

"We must do this. The overseer insists that we doenyes carry out our own punishments. I must punish you or I will be punished."

Karen knew that there was no escape for Suzie. This was how the household managed its affairs. The overseer let it know what was needed and it happened. He didn't have to do anything, they all knew how the household had to work and they all acted to see that order was maintained. She could do nothing but watch as the woman cracked the canes across Suzie's naked thighs, buttocks and back. After a dozen strokes or more Suzie's cries of pain at each blow had combined into one continuing wail that went on even after the woman stopped beating her and loosened the rope to allow Suzie down from her tip-toes. She collapsed to the floor. The woman crouched beside her. "You must stay naked except for your veil for the rest of the day," she said, "and you where the manuses too. Now please get back to your work as soon as you can." She walked away returning the bundle of canes to the rack on the wall.

Karen ran across to the sobbing Suzie and tried to comfort her but one of the other women waved her away. "Your work," she said, "do your work. She must work as soon as she can too." Karen looked down at the sobbing Suzie and then across at the defiant Kushtian woman. She reached the conclusion that there was nothing to be gained frm making more trouble and went to fetch another pitcher of water.

In time Suzie recovered sufficiently to start her own work again and the two of them worked on into the afternoon until the sun began to slip down towards the horizon.

Karen had finished her tasks for the evening meal. Much of the wood she had gathered for the stove was piled neatly beside it; some was burning with a sweet smelling smoke within. On top, a large cauldron filled with water Karen had brought from the well was slowly heating. Suzie, moving slowly because of the pain of her beating, was working to mix the dough for the flat breads that would be baked in the side oven. She worked steadily, not speaking, embarrassed by the stupidity that had led to her punishment. Two of the other women were supervising her efforts, nodding or shaking their heads as she kneaded the dough and then teased out the flat fingers of the mixture that would go into the oven. Once she was finished she was sent to kneel naked in one corner of the room

Karen stood back from the heat of the stove pushing her hair back from her face and wiping sweat from her forehead. As she did so she saw the overseer gesture from the far door,

beckoning to her. She looked around, decided that it was indeed she the man was summoning, and went across towards him. "A visitor," he said, demonstrating that he spoke at least some English. "Not long to talk though – soon supper."

Karen nodded wondering who could have come to see her. A veiled woman in long grey robes came into the room. The overseer, not interested in women's talk, left them. As he disappeared, the woman drew back her veil, revealing herself as Alana. "Hello decadent Yankee," she said with a smile. She reached out for the disk hanging from the cord around Karen's neck. "I see you are wearing the properta of Keshren Kerrich. I had thought you might save yourself for me."

"I had no choice, even if I wanted otherwise." Karen scowled at Alana's flirtatious remark. I am here in the household as part of the programme Lucy would wear Kerrich's properta. What choice do I have?" Karen looked at Alana and saw her put her head to one side. "Besides, what makes you think I should wear your properta? Doesn't that just mean you are accepting the same standards as Kerrich? As all the other men?"

"Perhaps," Alana said. "But enough of that for now. I wanted to see how you were getting on. Have you made contact with others from the programme? Are there others here?"

Karen nodded. "Yes," she said, "one. An English girl. She is distressed. Abused. She wishes to return home. I have seen much of how she is mistreated. Help us to get away from here."

Alana shook her head. "No, you want to stay here for longer yet."

"I think you're wrong."

"I know I'm right. You know you must stay here for Natsumi and Miyako. For Anouk. They don't understand why they are being kept as they are. Anouk, she doesn't understand why she must submit to the Kushtian guard that is her captor. She was not as ready for my attentions as you were, Yankee."

"Bitch," hissed Karen but Alana just smiled in response and drew a finger along Karen's robe where it draped across her thigh. Karen bit her lip as Alana's stroking hand swept upwards to her hip. She turned to the Kushtian. "What do you want?"

"Stay longer. Find more. We need longer to be ready. Make the English girl ready to speak against her owner, not just the overseer, she must be ready to speak against Kerrich. If you do well then Anouk will be happy. And Natsumi and Miyako."

Karen scowled at the implied threats. She folded her arms, looking sullenly at Alana who smiled back, content that she had made her point.

"You must not be unhappy with me, Yankee," Alana said, her hand now trailing up to the side of Karen's face. She watched as Karen bit her lip attempting to hide her reaction to the brush of Alana's fingers across her cheek. "But, I see you are not." Alana's fingers burrowed into Karen's hair, stroking and squeezing at the nape of Karen's neck, bring forth a quiet moan from the American. "Stay here, learn more. Then we will see."

She dropped her hand from Karen's neck. Karen could only watch wordlessly as Alana left her.

Chapter 13 : Day Seventeen – Sold

Karen was woken by the sound of noisy debate in the kitchen. The overseer and one of the older women were arguing. About what Karen could not tell. The overseer seemed to have his way. He stamped out with an angry shout. A few minutes later the woman came to the room that Karen and Suzie shared. By now Suzie was awake as well. The woman came in carrying clothes; western style clothes. She pushed them towards Suzie and Karen. "Habilish," she said. "Get dressed."

Suzie and Karen shrugged off their night shirts and pulled on the clothes that the woman had brought. After weeks spent in the all encompassing Kushtian robes, wearing these new clothes felt strange. Suzie pulled on a green dress with a skirt that reached only just below her knees and short sleeves, wildly immodest by Kushtian standards. Karen took a pale brown suit, its square jacket buttoned to the neck, its skirt straight, skimming her hips. There were veils for each of them too, they found, and gloves as well. They had only just finished dressing when the overseer reappeared pushing past the old woman. He was followed by one of his juniors, the men told the old woman to leave. As soon as she had done so the two men seized Karen and Suzie, pushing them against the wall and wrestling their arms behind them. In spite of their struggles the two were soon locked into manuses, their wrists firmly fixed behind their backs.

Karen felt the overseer pulling at her veil and then something soft and bulky being pushed between her lips. A moangf, she thought, a leather padded plug gag used as a form of silencer for centuries in Kushtian households. She groaned as a strap was buckled behind her head, forcing the plug deep into her mouth. Suzie's muffled squeals indicated that she was being treated in the same way.

The two women were pushed out of the room still struggling. Karen watched Suzie trying ineffectually to break free as she was dragged off, Suzie's eyes wide with terror over her veil. In the next room the head of the household, Keshren Kerrich, was standing, watching impassively as the two women were brought in, another bearded Kushtian man standing beside him. Karen recognised him at once. It was Kolani Kustanki, the Kushtian Minister of Culture. Karen had seen his photograph in Lucy Baildon's copy of the programme participants guide but she knew him by reputation. He written an official letter to her following the publication of her National Geographic article. At the time he'd protested strongly that she had presented a distorted view of Kushtian culture, although now he seemed keen to reinforce all the features that Karen's reporting had highlighted.

Keshren walked across to the two women and unfastened the cords that held the properta disks around their necks. He tossed the disks onto a table. The other man reached into a jacket and pulled out his wallet. He took out a bundle of notes and counted a small pile onto the table beside him. Keshren Kerrich nodded with approval. Kolani Kustanki took two different disks from his pocket, walked up to the girls and hung one about each of their necks. Suzie tried to duck away from him as he did so. He laughed, slapped her face and completed his task. Keshren picked up the pile of notes and muttered an expression of thanks. "Thank you, Minister," Karen heard him say in Kushtian. The other man nodded in response and gripped Karen and Suzie each by the arm and hustled them towards the door.

Outside a large black limousine was waiting, a chauffeur seated in the driving seat. Karen was pushed into the back of the car on one side, the door slammed shut beside her. Kustanki dragged Suzie around to the other side and climbed into the car, pulling Suzie in behind him so that he sat between the two women. The car pulled away. Karen peering out from the back

watched as the house of Keshren Kerrich disappeared behind them. As the car bounced across the potholes at the end of the street, a veiled woman in grey was standing beside the road. Karen was sure it was Alana.

“Weredny, Kovash?” called the chauffeur.

“Dvorech,” the Minister called in response. “Where to, Sir? - The palace,” thought Karen. “It looks like we’re moving up in the world.” The man sat back as the car lurched over the rutted roads on the outskirts of Kolin. He reached out to either side sliding his hands up Karen’s and Suzie’s thighs, pushing Suzie’s skirt up so that her legs were exposed almost as far as her waist. The social status of their new household might be higher but, Karen noticed, there was no difference in the behaviour of this householder compared with their last. He seemed content to let his attentions go no further, though, as the car managed to pick up some speed on the tarmac of the airport road and then lurched off again onto dirt tracks.

Their final destination turned out to be a complex of low white painted buildings in the low hills to the north of Kolin. The car drove through an arched gateway and slid to a halt. A short blast on its horn brought two heavily built men out from a small room that was built onto the back of the gateway. The taller of the two flicked the stub end of his cigarette down on the ground and opened the door on Suzie’s side. He pulled her from the car and the Minister climbed out after her. The other man opened the door on Karen’s side and dragged her out too.

“Weredny, Kovach?” said the man holding Karen.

“Seragla,” Kustanki responded. Karen knew the word. “Harem,” she thought. It would seem that their new position was no longer as doenyees, household servants. It looked as though more was to be expected of them here. The man nodded. Suzie and Karen were half pushed, half dragged across the courtyard towards a flight of steps that led up to an iron grill door. An unsmiling guard opened it and allowed Karen and Suzie with their escorts into the building. Inside, the dull plainness of the exterior gave way to an opulent luxury. Mosaic tiled walls glistened with gold and deep blue geometric patterns.

They were hurried along corridors leading on through a maze like series of rooms. Iron barred grills gave glimpses of courtyards where fountains played. They turned a corner. Karen caught a glimpse of another woman, dressed in a black harem-girl’s costume trimmed with gold stitching. The woman in black, startled by their approach, swept her veil across her face and cast her eyes down as they passed. They turned another corner, right, then left. Another corridor. The same woman – or another dressed identically – stepped back into an alcove as they went by.

Eventually the men found where Suzie and Karen were to be held. The taller of the two took a large key from his belt and unlocked a heavy wooden door. Karen felt the manuses removed from her wrists but then she and Suzie were pushed inside the room. The door creaked as it was closed behind them. The sound of the door’s lock being turned served only to emphasise their captivity.

Karen reached up behind her head and unfastened the strap of her gag. She spat out the solid leather covered plug from beneath her veil as Suzie followed suit. “Oh,” she groaned in relief before turning to Suzie. “Are you all right?”

The other girl nodded as she took off her own gag. Both girls discarded their veils. "Gach!" Suzie exclaimed in disgust at the plug of material as she threw it to one side. "Yes, I think so. Where are we? What's happened to us?"

"I'm not sure but I'll tell you what I think," Karen started. "When they changed the disks over – the properta – it's so we are transferred from one household to another."

"But this man gave Kerrich money. He can't have sold us? Surely? I mean the programme doesn't allow that? Does it?"

As far as what Karen knew of the customs of Kushtian society it seemed likely and as she thought back over the Programme Participants Guide that she'd read as part of her briefing, it seemed that the programme did allow participants to be transferred from one household to another. "I think it does," she said, slowly. "It's a strong part of Kushtian culture that women can be transferred from one household to another."

"But this isn't like the other household. Where are the other doenyees? The other servants like us?"

"There will be doenyees here but this is not their part of the palace. We have not been brought here as doenyees."

Suzie frowned, puzzled by Karen's remarks. "Then what?"

"The Minister means us to serve as concubines, I am sure. This is a palace harem. The other women we saw were almost certainly concubines. "

Suzie looked shocked. She lifted her hands to her mouth. "But that's not why I came here. Not what I wanted from the Programme."

"I think now we are here we must accept whatever the Programme brings," Karen said.

"But – concubines?"

"But you must have known? About Kushtian men and their attitudes? I mean it's all in the Guide. It's pretty explicit. Isn't it? It explains all that."

"Well, yes, but, somehow I didn't really believe that side of it. I've never – well, never been with a man."

Karen held her head in her hands. "Well, whatever you do don't let them know that!"

The lock clattered again and the door opened. A girl in black – not the same girl Karen thought - came in carrying bundles of the same silky cloth that her costume was made of. The door crashed shut and locked behind her. She gave it no heed but put down her bundles and unfastened her veil, drawing it back from her face.

"I have your new clothes," she said. "What we must all wear here. Like this." She stood back with open arms showing off the costume she wore. All in black, with gold embroidery around the edges, it was cut from a silk that clung closely to the curves of her body where it covered them. The halter top left her belly naked and emphasised her cleavage. The skirt, long and panelled so that it showed her legs with every movement. The heavy belt intended to be hung about the hips, set with tiny panels on glossy black leather and ornamented along its top and bottom edges with a golden cord stitched to it. The sandals of black leather straps adorned by tiny golden bells. And of course the veil, a long length of the same silken material that hung from the black pill box hat perched on the back of the girl's head. "You must change. Now. Please."

Suzie looked at Karen. Karen shrugged and began to unfasten her jacket. She turned to the girl. "You speak good English," she said. "Are you here as part of the Programme?"

The girl shook her head. "No. But we should not speak of this. I am one of his Excellency's concubines. Here we are all alike; it doesn't matter where we come from. Please change."

Suzie followed Karen in undressing and then the two of them put on their identical harem costumes.

"Please. Your veils, we must put them on to go outside. Always when there are men we must wear the veil here. If there is no man we are free not too but outside – there are the guards. You understand?"

"No," said Suzie. "No, I don't. Where are we? Why are we here?"

"These are questions," the girl said, enigmatically. "There are often questions. Sometimes there are no answers."

Karen put one hand comfortingly on Suzie's arm. "Come on. We'll have to see what happens." She picked up one corner of her veil and fastened it to the clasp that hung on a short chain from her hat. The cloth draped down covering the lower half of her face. Suzie and the girl did so too, the three women now looking exactly the same.

The girl stepped forward, about to knock on the door to signify that the three of them were ready to be released. Suzie stopped the girl as she reached the door.

"How does he tell the difference?" she said pointing at their three veiled faces and their three identical costumes. "His Excellency; how does he know which of us ...?"

"Why would he want to?"

Chapter 14 : Day Eighteen – The Ambassador

Karen was trying to work out just how many programme members there were in the Seragla of Kolani Kustanki. It was hard to be sure. All of the women wore identical costumes. Many of the women seemed to be permanently veiled, preferring anonymity to the risk of being caught without their veil by the unannounced arrival of one of the men. To her best reckoning she had seen about thirty women in the Seragla. Of those maybe five or six were Kushtian. As far as Karen could tell the remainder were all of western origin, almost certainly programme members, although of the women she had spoken to only six had confirmed that was indeed how they came to be in Kushtia.

When she joined a large group of women in the grand hall of the Seragla that evening for the communal meal of steeped fruit, nuts and breads, the place was alive with the buzz of gossip. She sat quietly trying to overhear the exchanges between two of the Kushtian girls but Suzie, slid in beside her to interrupt. "Have you heard?" she said. "The UN Ambassador is here. He came for a meeting in Kolin and Kustanki invited him out here. Perhaps I can speak to him. Ask him to have me repatriated from the programme. Kustanki will have to agree he can't afford to make a fuss, can he?"

Karen wasn't sure. All her senses told her that Kustanki was unlikely to take the slightest notice of anyone else. But when Suzie begged her to help her to see the Ambassador she felt she had to.

Two of the palace guards appeared and announced in guttural tones that the girls were to make themselves ready for a visitor. One of the Kushtians translated their instructions into English. The girls were all to behave as they had been taught. They would wear their veils of course and were certainly not to speak to their visitors unless asked. Moments later a roll on the large gong that stood beside the door to the grand hall announced the arrival of the visitors.

The girls snatched their veils across their faces. Those that were standing dropped to their knees. Those already sitting turned towards the door.

Kolani Kustanki led a group of four others into the grand hall. Beside Kustanki the ambassador, a pale looking man, peered around at the group of women. "You see, Ambassador," Kustanki announced, "these are comfortable surroundings. Of course this is not typical for programme participants. Most are doenyees not concubines and few Seragla are as grand as this. My family is old and this palace has been here many years. We have the benefits of the luxury of years."

The ambassador nodded. Looking wherever Kustanki directed his attention. "The girls have freedom to do as they please within the Seragla," Kustanki went on. "They are fed and clothed, their duties are light. They serve to entertain the household. Dance. Music. Traditional activities."

"I see," the ambassador said. This seems most comfortable. "May I look around?"

"By all means," Kustanki responded expansively, waving his arms as much as to say that the ambassador should go wherever he liked. As the ambassador began to look at the furnishings and the rich décor of the grand hall, Karen attracted Suzie's attention.

“He’ll go to look at the fountain court,” Karen whispered. “You slip in there behind the curtains and try to talk to him. I’ll try to stop you from being disturbed.” Suzie nodded and slipped off towards the corridor that led to the fountain court. Karen walked across in the other direction towards the main entrance to the court.

The ambassador went through. As Kustanki was about to follow him, Karen stepped forward. “Excellency,” she said. “I must apologise for speaking without being asked but I felt I had to speak to you.” She ran her hand along the base of her veil, ostensibly straightening it but in the process, drawing it more tightly across her features so that the outline of her lips could be clearly seen beneath the veil. Kustanki’s gaze was fixed on her. “I have only just arrived here but I had hoped to be able to spend time with your Excellency. I hope you will find it in you to grant me that privilege at some point” Karen’s flirtatious conversation was cut off by Suzie’s cry of “No! No!” from within the Fountain Court.

Kustanki pushed Karen aside with a growl and disappeared into the court. Moments later he and the ambassador emerged smiling and laughing. The group of visitors reassembled and left the grand hall as suddenly as they had come.

Karen watched them go and then rushed back to the Fountain Court. Suzie was sitting on the tiled floor propped against one of the great lion headed spouts that gushed water into the channels that led across the court. She was sobbing. Karen bent down beside her to comfort her. “He wouldn’t do anything. He said I had to go through with the programme. That all would be well as long as I made up my mind to learn all I could of the Kushtian heritage. He didn’t want to listen at all.”

Karen tried to sympathise but her soothing words were cut off by barked orders from behind as four palace guards came into the court. Two of them seized the girls and in moments Suzie and Karen were being forced along the corridors of the Seraglia and out into the overseer’s wing of the palace.

They were pushed through a heavy wooden door into a large stone walled room. Without speaking the guards locked the girls wrists behind their backs with manuses and then fitted each of them with leather plug gags, the maoungf.

In the very centre of the room stood a cage; steel bars stretched from floor to ceiling. Only three feet square it was barely large enough to hold the two girls standing up much less allow them the chance to sit down. Then girls were pushed inside.

They stayed in their cramped prison for an hour or more. Pressed up against one another, hardly able to move, their mouths stuffed with the leather plugs, they could only whimper as guards came and went, walking around their cage, able to observe the girls from every side.

As the girls struggled in their cage two of the guards ushered in three of the other concubines. In the same costumes as the prisoners, the group of three stood in front of the cage and confronted Suzie and Karen.

One of the three stepped forward. “You are new here,” she said in Kushtian accented English. “We pass judgement on those among us that place the good of us all at risk. You acted in

disobedience. That is not the way of Kushtian women. You caused his Excellency embarrassment. You placed at risk his relationship with the ambassador.”

The two prisoners moaned in response to the litany of their “crimes”. Their judge went on. “You will stay there in the cage for twenty four hours. Then you will each receive five strokes from the overseer’s wand and spend the next week in ancluses.” Karen watched as the guards nodded approvingly. The three women nodded to the prisoners and then to the guards before leaving. Karen and Suzie, wedged in their cage could only watch as they were left alone in their distress.

Chapter 15 : Day Nineteen – A Visit From Alana

It was the end of the day. Karen was with a group of the other concubines, finishing off the evening meal served by two of the doenyas. The two servants scooped up the tray with their bowls and the remains of their meal upon it. Karen could see them eyeing the left overs greedily; she guessed that their own meals were less rich, less generous. The doenyas headed back towards the western wing of the palace where they lived. Karen looked around to see if she could see any sign of Suzie but there wasn't.

Karen put her hands together in silent greeting; bowing to the others to take her leave. It was late, her back was sore from her beating, she headed for the cubicle she shared with Suzie, looking forward to her bed, picking her steps carefully, her ankles still linked by the chains of the shackles she had to wear as punishment for her part in Suzie's attempt to talk with the Ambassador.

As Karen pulled back the curtain of their cubicle, she was confronted by the helpless form of a bound and gagged Suzie. She stepped forward to help her. The curtain slid shut behind her. Karen span around. Standing in front of the curtain, clad from head to foot in black, was Alana.

She held her finger to her lips. "You're friend didn't want to keep quiet. I'm sorry."

Karen looked down at the helpless Suzie. Her wrists and ankles locked together in a vicious hog tie, ropes jerking her elbows together until they almost touched, her own veil knotted into a gag that filled her mouth. "So sorry but so thorough," said Karen coldly. She found it hard not to stare at the way Alana's tightly fitting cat-suit defined every curve of her body.

"Jealous?" Alana smiled. It wasn't clear if she was asking about how she had treated Suzie or how she looked. Perhaps it was both.

Suzie squealed in discomfort as Karen turned to face Alana impatiently. "What do you want?"

"To hear how you are progressing." She paused for a moment. "And to see you, of course." Alana squared up to Karen's look of cynicism. "How many of the women here are from the programme?"

Karen ignored the question. "How are the others? Anouk? Natsumi and Miyako? Lucy Baildon?" Suzie gave a puzzled grunt at Karen for using the name by which she knew her. "Are they still safe?"

"You know that Kalassa will be true to her word. They are all well. Not free to leave, of course, but well. Now to my question; how many of the programme members are here? Have you discovered this?"

Karen felt a sense of resignation, trapped between the demands of the Seragla on one side and those of Alana and Kalasa Karench on the other. "Please," she said, "just let the others go and I'll get you everything you need. There are twenty women from the programme here. It will take time to learn their stories."

Alana shook her head, "First the stories, then the others are freed. Be ready next week." She nodded to Suzie as she continued to struggle on the couch. "I'll look forward to seeing your friend too. I enjoyed our tussle."

Karen looked at Alana with distaste. Alana reached up behind her neck and pulled a mask forward over head to cover her face.

"Goodbye until then decadent yankee," she said, slipping through the curtain, out of the cubicle and into the darkened corridor outside.

Karen sat back on the bed. Suzie's renewed grunts and mewling dragged Karen's attention back to the cubicle and she started to untie her room mate. "Are you all right?" she asked as she loosened the cloth that gagged the girl. Suzie gave a groan the scarf gag had been far more painful than the plug gags that were used in the palace and Alana had jerked it ruthlessly tight once she had wrestled Suzie's wrists behind her and bound them.

"Yes, yes, I think so," said Suzie, massaging the raw grooves in her wrists and ankles to return the blood to her limbs. "Who is she? That woman?"

"One of a group of women that may be able to help us. She says she can. Perhaps she is right."

"You talked about Lucy as if she was someone else."

Karen looked embarrassed. "I know," she said. "She is. I took her identity to try to help that woman. Now I don't know who needs more help. Us, or Lucy, or her."

Suzie looked shocked. She sat on the bed quietly, slowly unfastening her costume as she readied herself for sleep. She turned towards Karen. "I want to help," she said. "If I can."

"Thank you," said Karen. "Thank you. I'm not sure how but thank you. We can talk more in the morning." Karen reached over and blew out the little oil lamp that lit their cubicle. She stripped off her own costume in the dark before pulling a blanket over herself and trying to sleep.

She wasn't sure how much later it was when she heard the noise. The barking of the dogs, the shouts of palace guards from beyond the palace courtyard. It didn't last long. Karen fell asleep once more.

Chapter 16 : Day Twenty - The Courtyard

The bay window high up in the wall of the Seragla looked out across the palace courtyard. Karen sat in the bay on a pile of velvet cushions, busy with her embroidery making the best of the light that came through the iron grided window to see her stitches of black thread on black cloth.. The concubines had few tasks apart from entertaining the men but the creation and care of their costumes was one of them. On the cushions beside her were her materials, the squares of black silken cloth, the black silk thread, the gold wire and cords.

Each square was to become a new veil. New concubines, Karen assumed. Twenty squares, twenty veils, twenty more slaves.

Karen stitched the lighter gold cord along the top edge of the veil, the heavier along the bottom so that the veil would hang as it should. She took a length of the gold wire stitching it to form the inverted fleur-de-lys that marked the centre of the veil. When the veil was in place the gold embroidery would point downwards from the bridge of the nose directing the eye of the observer down towards the woman's breasts and belly.

Karen twisted to change her position on the cushions, the chains from her anklets, clinked as she did so. She was wearing her own veil - seated where she was she could be seen from the courtyard and so it was possible she could be seen by one of the men in the palace. To be caught without the veil, she knew, would only invite punishment. Today, though, there were only the comings and goings of the doenyas as they went about their domestic duties.

Karen finished stitching the veil she was working on, folded it neatly and added to the pile of her completed work. She took another square of silk so that she could start on the next. As she did so, there were sounds of commotion from the courtyard. Dogs were barking and men were shouting orders in Kushtian.

A naked woman was being pushed across the courtyard by two of the palace guards. Her arms securely bound with thick rope, a sacking cloth tied across her head and shackles on her ankles meant she could offer little resistance although she struggled against her guards as they pushed her along. As the guards and their prisoner passed below her window Karen saw the intertwined K's tattooed on the woman's naked thigh and she realised that the captive woman was Alana.

Now Karen knew the cause of the noise the previous night after Alana had left. She watched miserably as the captive woman was pushed towards the door in the courtyard that led to the small palace prison where she herself had been confined the day before. As she did so, she decided to see what she could do to help her lover. And to achieve that she knew she had to get to where Alana was being held.

To get to the cells where Alana was being held captive took longer than she planned. As she was about to make her way there, one of Kustanki's entourage had insisted she amuse him with a game of tavla. She played backgammon well and she would have found it easy to beat him even if his play hadn't been hampered. He'd allowed himself to be distracted by her cleavage and he found himself with two of his pieces on the bar as Karen began to bear off. When his hand moved from the dice to her thigh, though, Karen thought that tavla probably wasn't his main interest. It was only a call from one of the palace guards that Kustanki was looking for him that took him away from Karen and the gaming board.

Once the man left Karen was free to go in search of Alana. As she turned the corner into the cells, carrying a jug of cold herb tea ostensibly to refresh the guards, she saw that Alana had gone. The cage was empty; the door standing ajar. As Karen put down the jug, the chief guard was complaining. "They bring her in. Keep her here they say. Then she has to go, his Excellency wants her, then he doesn't, then he does. Do they think I have nothing better to do?"

Karen said nothing. She knew he wasn't interested in her views. She poured some of the tea into a small tin drinking bowl on the guard's desk. She nodded, gave a curtsey and left. Now she had to get into the palace apartments if she wanted to help Alana. She dreaded what Kustanki might be doing to her but felt she must do what she could to find her and try to help.

Back in the Seragla, Karen had enlisted the help of Suzie. Now, Karen watched as Suzie did as she had promised. At the doorway from the Seragla to the palace staterooms Suzie tried to engage the young guard in conversation. As she knew no Kushtian and the guard no English, the discussion was a little stilted but the guard was soon engrossed, his eyes drawn to Suzie's own, and of course, her cleavage.

As the guard's attention was focused on Suzie, Karen slipped past the pair of them and into the corridors of the palace. Walking as though she had every right to be there, she stepped out along the corridors towards the rooms that Kolani Kustanki and his guests occupied. The women from the Seragla were only permitted to be in this part of the palace with the express permission of one of the males. Karen just hoped that no one would ask who she was there to see.

The corridor got wider, the rooms more grandly decorated, the couches and tables that lined the corridor became more and more sumptuous. A guard walking the other way along the corridor looked suspiciously at her. She dropped her eyes to the floor in the approved manner of respect and he passed her by without comment. She passed a room from within which came the sounds of animated love making; the squeals of a concubine and the grunts of her Kushtian lover.

Karen had almost reached the end of the corridor when she came to an enormous double door that stretched the full height of the corridor. From beyond the door he heard the sound of Kushtian voices. A man and a woman in animated conversation.

The voices were those of Kolani Kustanki and a woman. Karen was sure it was Alana.

Karen knelt beside the door, her head bowed, her hands clasped behind her back in the way that she had been taught to wait when summoned to any of the palace rooms. No one would think it odd that a concubine was waiting there like that but it did mean she could hear what was being said in the room. A group of doenyees, carrying cleaning things, passed her by without comment. Karen concentrated trying to hear what was being said in the room.

"And the UN Ambassador?" the woman said.

"He is happy. He does not see beyond their simple ideas about heritage. He has little understanding of the political realities," Kustanki explained. "He will continue to support the programme with Geneva. It is mainly British and Americans that are participating anyway.

Their governments seem to believe that their nationals can make their own minds up about these things. A convenience of the western democracies as far as we are concerned.”

“And Karench? What of her group?” You know they are the greatest threat to you. To us.”

“My friend the Minister for Security and Internal Affairs is most anxious to ensure that any elements that might be involved in revolutionary activities are prevented from causing trouble. I do not think you need worry about them. Your help has been most useful.”

Karen, horrified by the apparent betrayal of Kalassa by Alana, edged closer to the door and peered around the edge at the two people within. Sure enough Alana was deep in discussion with Kolani Kustanki. Kustanki wore his traditional robes but Alana was wearing western dress, a dazzling white linen trouser suit over a pale chocolate coloured blouse. Most scandalous of all was that there was no sign of the veil that Kustanki insisted every other woman wore in his presence.

“And when does the Minister for Security expect to act?” Alana asked

Karen, desperately clinging to the idea that somehow Alana was tricking Kustanki into revealing his plans in some way, listened all the closer.

“I do believe,” Kustanki said looking at his watch, “that things are already in hand. Beside I think you have seen something of the efficiency of my own guards. How was your time in the cells?”

“Irrelevant. It was the simplest way to get to see you,” Alana snapped, irritated by his manner. “As for your colleague, I hope that he is as efficient as you claim,” she said in return. “Failure could make things difficult for me. And of course there is the matter of the programme members that she holds.”

“Do not worry, young lady,” Kustanki said patronisingly. “I have high confidence. The girls of the Seragla are already working on the costumes for those that will join them. I am certain that their efforts will not have been wasted. I would hardly have them spend their time on other things than my own amusement unnecessarily.”

Karen thought of the work she had been doing that very morning on the costumes.

“Well, we shall know shortly,” said Alana. “Now if you’ll excuse me, there is one of your concubines that I need to talk to.”

Outside the door of the room, Karen realised that Alana was almost certainly talking about her. She turned and fled along the corridor as quickly as her long skirt would allow. The guard showed no interest in her as she left the palace apartments and made her way back to the Seragla. He was used to seeing distressed women passing that way.

Suzie was sitting in the great communal hall of the Seragla when Karen returned. She saw Karen’s eyes, reddened by tears, and ran towards her. “Whatever’s the matter?” she urged, hugging Karen.

Karen shook her head. "I'm not sure," she said. "I think that something terrible is going to happen to Kalasa Karench and that Alana – the woman that came to our cubicle – is behind it."

As Karen finished speaking, the door to the hall opened and in came Alana, now dressed in the robes of one of the palace doenyas. Seeing Karen she came across to her. "You're upset, yankee," she said, seeing Karen's tears. She turned towards Suzie. "Lover's tiff?" she asked. Karen said nothing. Suzie kept quiet as well. Alana shrugged. "I need to know what you have found out," she said.

"Why?" Karen responded, sullenly. "What difference could it make?"

"I thought you wanted to free your friends? I thought you wanted to help us?"

"Yes to the first; who knows about the second?"

"You can't tell me that you approve of the programme. I thought you wanted to help end it."

"Is that what you are trying to do Alana?" Karen's voice was quiet and determined. "Is that why you were talking to Kustanki just now? Just how is betraying Kalasa going to end the programme?"

Alana looked discomfited for only a moment. "What sharp little ears, you have yankee. I do believe you have been listening at doors. Well, no matter, things are moving in any case. I doubt I need your help for now. Don't judge me too harshly. You'll see. What I am doing will build a stronger place for women in Kushtia. The first woman in government. The first with her own Seragla. That will mark a change. You will be part of it, Yankee, part of my Seragla, wearing my properta." She looked across at Suzie who had listened to Alana's rant with a dumbfounded expression. "And you too, my sweet."

It was preposterous, Karen thought. The men would never let it happen. How could Alana let herself believe that they would? In one way she didn't care; any feelings that she had for Alana had been crushed by what she had heard outside the door of Kustanki's room. But, on the other hand there was still the question of how she could help the others and how she would get herself home. She looked at Alana with a defiant glare. "Do you think that you will make things better for women by becoming a man? By having your own Seragla? Your own properta? And even if you do, do you really think they will let you?"

"Of course," said Alana, "they could not have done this without me. They would never have suppressed Kalassa and her group. She would have carried on her irrelevant campaign. Women would have been diverted from their real goal. You can't break the system; you have to make the system work for you. They know that I can solve the problem. There are not many like me. It is easier for the men to let the few like me have their wish. They can seem generous. Other women will see what has been done; they will be content. There is little to threaten the established order. No danger of insurrection or rebellion."

"Is that what you call betrayal; 'making the system work for you'?" Karen's distaste for Alana's behaviour was clear on her face.

“Be careful yankee, you are earning some time in a moaungf. You’ll find my Seragla less comfortable than this if you defy me.”

Karen turned her back on Alana, took Suzie by the arm and walked away. Behind her, she heard the slam of the outer door of the hall as Alana left. Suzie spoke at last. “Can she do it?” she asked.

Karen shook her head. “It’s impossible,” she said, “Kustanki wouldn’t let it happen and even if he did he’d soon find himself thrown off the governing council. They won’t see it as Alana does. To them it’s not ‘let in a few women, they won’t cause much trouble’; to them it’s overturning their entire history. That’s why they constructed the whole cultural heritage programme. I can’t imagine that they are going to turn that upside down for anything. Certainly not because of Kalassa’s activities. They are just pinpricks to the likes of Kustanki. He knows he could ride out any criticism with the backing of the UN and the claim that it’s part of the ‘rich cultural heritage of Kushtia’. But if they start changing things maybe other people will want to see changes. No, they’ll be planning to hold the line. Alana won’t get her way.”

Chapter 17 : Day Twenty - An Evening Meal

Suzie and Karen did not have to wait long to discover whether Karen was right. That evening, when the palace overseer came to select the concubines to entertain that evening, Suzie and Karen were taken out from the Seragla to Kustanki's quarters.

Kustanki was dining with Alana in one of the large salons, Kustanki in traditional Kushtian elders robes, Alana in her western trouser suit. The two of them were sprawled on cushions beside a low table. A procession of doenyees were bringing food on platters to place on the table in front of them. Kustanki beckoned to Suzie and Karen to sit with him; Karen to kneel at one side holding a tray with a wine jug and goblet, Suzie to the other holding a bowl into which Kustanki tossed the chicken bones, fruit skins and stones as he finished with each morsel. Alana was managing to eat her meal without assistance.

"I hope you won't mind our evening being interrupted," Kustanki announced.

Alana looked at him with a mistrustful expression. "Why?" she asked.

"I thought you might like to see my new concubines," he said. A moment later one of the palace guard appeared. Kustanki waved for him to approach and the guard whispered something to Kustanki before he nodded and the guard dashed out. Moments later the guard reappeared with two Kushtian soldiers. Behind them, being dragged by a rope that linked them together by the necks, were five of Kalasa's militia.

They looked in a sorry state. All five wore the same white tee shirts and combat fatigues that Alana had been wearing when Karen first encountered. Now they all showed signs of fighting. All looked bruised and bloodied; all five had rips torn in their clothing; all were bound helplessly; all five were gagged; all five were glowering at Alana. Kustanki smiled. "Welcome, ladies," he said. "I hope you haven't come alone."

The soldiers herded the five militia across to one side of the room and another soldier appeared. This one had Kalassa Karench with him. Her neck and wrists were locked in a heavy wooden yoke. Her mouth filled with a maoungf of a size intended to cause extreme discomfort in addition to its muffling qualities. The soldier pulled her forward by jerking a chain that was linked to the lock of one side of the yoke. Kalassa looked defiant but Karen could see that her contempt for her captors was unlikely to improve her position.

"Hello, Kalassani," Kustanki greeted his captive.

Kalassani", Karen thought, "the bastard!" The Kushtians added "ni" to names when they were talking to children. It was probably the most insulting thing Kustanki could have said to Kalassa. She scowled at Kustanki in response.

"I'm pleased you do not appear to have been hurt. I know that our military can sometimes be a little heavy handed. I'm told by my friend the Interior Minister that you will have to be brought to trial. I had hoped that you would be able to join my Seragla but, I suppose I cannot stand in the way of due process of law. We must, after all, rid our society of those elements that seek to overturn our traditions and our heritage."

Karen looked at Alana, She was smiling triumphantly. Karen couldn't understand why Alana didn't see what Kustanki's words implied for her plans too. Kalassa growled through her gag.

"Your militia will face charges too, of course. But I know that you will be pleased that others will not suffer. Your associate here," Kustanki gestured at Alana, "has behaved in a public spirited manner, bringing the attention of the authorities to your activities. She will form part of the evidence at your trial." Karen thought the use of the word evidence was odd, why not witness. Then she remembered that of course women had no standing in Kushtian courts. They could not speak or be cross examined. Only a written deposition could be admitted. Not, Karen thought, that it would make much difference to the outcome of the case that Kalassa would face. Kalassa tried to lunge forward at Alana. Her guard jerked her to a halt with the chain from her yoke. "No, Kalassani, no," said Kustanki. He turned to the palace guard. "Where are the others?" he asked. The guard disappeared. In a few moments her returned ushering in a large group of young women all wearing manuses around their wrists and ancluses at their ankles.

Karen saw Anouk, Natsumi and Miyako at once. They failed to recognise her behind her veil. There were six others; the five already "liberated" by Kalassa's group from the programme and Lucy Baildon. Karen saw her, standing at the back of the group her mousey hair long and loose, her eyes filled with fear and confusion.

"Now, these young ladies, will not need to come before the court. Foreign nationals, innocent of your corrupting influences, Kalassa. They will rejoin the programme. They should not be prevented from what they came to do. They will have the privilege of joining my Seragla, wearing my properta." The girls looked dismayed. If they had thought that they were being rescued or repatriated they now knew this was not to be. Karen turned to the troops. "You can take Kalassa and what's left of her militia. If you feel the need to amuse yourselves, I am sure the Minister for Internal Security will not mind, providing they are fit to stand trial." The guard grinned as he jerked Kalassa's chain to drag her out.

Kustanki walked across to the six abducted programme members, taking stock of his new acquisitions. Karen watched him assessing each in turn, fondling their breasts, feeling their buttocks and thighs, ignoring their protests and struggles as worked his way around the group. He beckoned to one of the palace guards. "The Seragla," he said. "Have them join the others but keep them chained for now." He returned to his couch and watched as the guards took the dismayed and distressed women away.

Kustanki looked satisfied. Alana did too. "So you have what you wanted," she said.

Kustanki nodded. "I'm pleased," he said. "In the end they were little trouble but your help was useful." He reached out to either side placing one hand on Suzi's thigh, the other on Karen's neck. "And now you want to play with these two. Take them. I have other things to do tonight. I assume you'd like them shackled." Alana looked lustfully at Karen and nodded. Kustanki gestured to Karen and Suzie to turn around, cuffing Karen around the head when she was slow to obey. He secured their wrists in manuses before tossing the keys to Alana. Kustanki got to his feet. "Enjoy them," he said as he left.

Alana slipped onto the couch that Kustanki had occupied, sprawling between the helpless Karen and Suzie. She turned towards Karen unfastening her top by slipping the catch between her breasts. Karen struggled to avoid Alana's attentions earning a slap across the face for her troubles. "Keep still," Alana snapped, "you'll serve me the same way you'd have

served Kustanki. You'll wear my properta. I'll keep you veiled. And to make sure you know your place," Alana reached down behind the couch and brought up an intimidating dildo with its strap on harness. "I'll make sure you get fucked regularly. She laughed at Karen's response and turned towards Suzie. "But don't you worry. I'll save some for you, too." Alana got to her feet, stripped off her trousers and tossed them across the end of one of the other couches. Looking down in amusement at Suzie and Karen's distress, she strapped the dildo harness on. She turned to Suzie. "Kustanki tells me you've learned about sucking cock," she said. "Let's see." Alana gripped Suzie by the hair and pulled her veil to one side. She pushed the dildo toward Suzie's mouth. "Take it," she said, pulling at Suzie's hair until she yelped and opened her mouth. Alana pushed her hips forward, forcing the dildo into Suzie's mouth as she moaned and choked on the rubber.

Alana twisted herself around, reaching out with her free hand for the cord of Karen's properta. Twisting her hand she tightened the cord around Karen's neck until she felt it might strangle her. She pulled Karen towards her. "I'd really like you to suck on my tits, Yankee," she said. "Would you like that?" Karen shook her head but Alana ignored her and laughed. She dealt Suzie a cuff around the head to remind her to keep sucking and then reached up to unbutton her blouse, pushing one cup of her bra from her breast and then pulling Karen's face up to press against her. "Suck it, Yankee, suck it," she whispered into Karen's ear.

Karen coughed, the cord cutting into her neck. Suzie groaned as she tried to cope with the press of the dildo against the back of her throat. Alana pushed Suzie away and climbed up onto the couch to kneel astride Karen's belly. "Guess what's next, Yankee," she laughed, pulling on the dildo.

"No, no," protested Karen, knowing that it would make no difference. Alana cut off her cries by clamping her hand down across Karen's mouth, pushing the cloth of her veil down across her face and making it hard for her to breath. Karen struggles only served to arouse Alana further. The Kushtian bent her head to bite at Karen's nipples and then reached down to push the dildo home into Karen's cunt. Alana's laughter was punctuated by Karen's moans and whimpers.

Suddenly Karen felt a sudden blow as Alana fell to one side across her. Suzie, although her hands were cuffed behind her, had barged at Alana, catching her off balance and knocking her away from her friend. Karen sat up ready for the beating that Alana was certain to hand out but then looked down at the woman who had been raping her to see her laying unconscious as a result of hitting her head on the leg of the couch as she fell.

Karen realised that they had a chance to escape. She got down from the couch and fumbled in Alana's jacket for the keys to the manuses. Alana was starting to recover as she managed to free herself and then Suzie. "Quick," she urged. "Handcuff her." Suzie rolled the slowly recovering Alana on to her face and snatched her hands behind her, snapping the cuffs of her manuses around her wrists. Karen used her manuses to fasten Alana's ankles together so that the chain went around the one between her wrists. She pulled off her veil knotting it to make a gag for her assailant. By the time Alana was fully conscious she was also completely helpless; hog tied and growling through her gag.

Suzie said, "Now what?"

Karen looked down at Alana and then at Suzie. "I really don't know," she responded.

Chapter 18 : Day Twenty One – On The Run

“Come on,” said Suzie, “we can get away. Kustanki and his men will be worrying about the others. We have to get out and find some way to get help for the others.”

Karen sat on the edge of the couch, the helpless Alana struggling at her feet. She looked at Suzie and then down at the costume she was wearing. “We won’t get far like this,” she said, holding out the loose panels of her divided skirt and then clutching her torn top about herself. “And I can’t see who is going to help us. None of the Kushtians, that’s for sure.”

“Well the British embassy then, or the American embassy.” Suzie took Karen by the hand. “Let’s go. We can work it out as we go. Let’s get out of the palace and worry about anything else after that.”

Realising that Suzie was right, Karen nodded. She took strength from Suzie’s determination and got to her feet. “OK,” she said, “you’re right. We have to try.” Karen bent down and checked that Alana’s gag was secure. Alana responded with a muffled grunt of complaint.

Karen peered around the door of the room and out into the corridor. It was deserted as Suzie had said it would be. They edged along the corridor and as they came to a window that looked down into the courtyard they saw why. The soldiers, the palace guards, the overseer and his men were all gathered there. Even Kustanki was there with two of his wives and three of his concubines. A large bonfire had been built at one end of the courtyard. A small group of doenyees were busily roasting meat over a pit of hot coals.

In the middle of the courtyard was the focus of the men’s attention. Kalassa Karench had been led out and locked into a pillory. Karen could see clearly from the window that her robe had been torn open at the back from hem to collar leaving her back naked. From the raw wheals across her back it was clear that she had already suffered a beating. In front of her two of her militia had been staked out in a way that was obviously intended to amuse the soldiers and humiliate their captives. One was laying on her back, her legs spread wide, her ankles fixed to pegs in the ground. The other had been tied so that she was kneeling with her naked buttocks in the air and her face pressed against the first girl’s crotch.

Karen watched in disgust as the men took turns either at beating Kalassa or at forcing the kneeling girl to lick and kiss at the other’s sex. It wouldn’t be long, she knew before the two girls were being raped in front of Kalassa, even if she herself escaped that ordeal. Suzie pulled her away from the window. “Come on,” she said, “they’ll all be watching that. There’s nothing we can do about it but we can get away and get help.”

With the attentions of the guards distracted by what was going on in the courtyard, Karen and Suzie found it easy to make their way through the palace. As they did so a plan came together in Karen’s mind. As they passed the overseer’s rooms she saw a pile of clothes left out to be collected for laundry by the doenyees. Rummaging in it she found a pair of breeches, a tunic and a heavy long jacket. A further search brought out a head scarf and soon she had improvised the look of a young Kushtian man, just as she had when she had started her work in Kushtia so many days before. Suzie was astonished at the success of the transformation. “Can you do the same for me?” she said.

Karen shook her head. "No, that wouldn't be safe. It's better for you to remain a woman. I can speak some Kushtian, you can't but as a woman it won't seem strange if you stay silent. What we do need though is something that makes you look more like a provincial wife and less like the concubine of a high official." She found another tunic in the pile. Long and grey, it could be worn by either sex without remark. "Here, get rid of that skirt and put this on," Karen urged. "And find something that will do as a headscarf and veil. That one is far too grand."

By the time the two of them found their way to a small gateway at the back of the palace building, the couple that emerged could pass as a Kushtian man and his wife. From the battered road signs nearby Karen managed to work out where they were. It would be an eight hour walk to the outskirts of Kolin, the capital of Kushtia, and then another four into the centre to where the Embassies were. First, though, she thought, they had to get clear of the palace area. There was no knowing how long it would be until Alana was discovered and they were missed.

The two of them kept walking towards Kolin, moving clear of the road whenever they saw the lights of a car. They kept walking until the first glow of dawn began to tint the horizon pink and Karen led the way off the road and into a small patch of scrubby bush. Threading their way through the thorny branches the two girls made their way into the centre of the clump and settled down to wait out the day. The two of them spent a frightening day; trying to catch some sleep; sharing the last drips of water from the flask that Karen had stolen from the palace; taking it in turns to keep a look out; terrified even to speak because of women working in the field alongside the copse they were hiding in. Karen thought they had another four hour's walk in the countryside before they would have a chance to lose themselves in the maze of alleyways in the suburbs of Kolin.

As dusk fell they started to move again. They skirted a small ramshackle building where a bunch of men were sitting arguing, drinking tea and playing tavla. Beside the building two mules were tethered, saddle bags slung across their backs. Karen, desperate to find some food slipped up to the mules to search the bags. Finding two small loaves and a water flask, she slipped them into her own bag. Then she found something that was likely to be even more valuable. Clutching her prize she scuttled back to where Suzie was waiting. "Come on," she said. "Let's keep going this is really good."

Suzie looked at the stale bread that Karen had given her. "You could have fooled me," she said., trying to chew on it with little success.

"Not that," said Karen waving a bundle of papers, "this." Suzie looked puzzled. "Identity papers. These will let me pass where ever I want in the city even if there are police checkpoints. You are OK because as a wife travelling with her husband you don't need separate identity papers They don't carry a photo but just by carrying them we should be OK as long as no one guesses we are foreigners."

Karen and Suzie trudged on towards Kolin.

Eventually they managed to find their way to the edge of the city centre. Karen sat with Suzie on a low hill looking out over the dried up bed of the river that ran through Kolin. The river banks were perhaps 50 metres apart but most of the river bed was filled with scrubby plants, dusty soil and the rusting remains of rubbish hurled over the river banks. Not far from where they were a bridge stretched from one side to the other. Of its entire length perhaps as little as twenty feet was over water, not much but enough to mean that they had to cross it to enter the city.

Karen looked around to see that they would be overheard. Over and over again she had drilled Suzie not to speak, to prevent her from giving them away. No one was around apart from themselves. Karen pointed to some buildings on the far side of the bridge. "Over there, to the left, that's the presidential palace. The parliament building is behind it and the government's main office blocks beyond that. Over on the right are the embassies. That big building is the Russians then there's the US. The French and the Brits are just beyond that."

Suzie looked around just as Karen had and responded in a lowered voice. "So what do we do?"

"Make for the US embassy," she said. "If we can get in there neither the Kushtian military nor the police will dare to come after us."

As they approached the bridge, jostling along with the others headed towards the city, Karen saw that a police car was parked half way across the road blocking it. They joined the queue for the checkpoint. Karen fumbled in her bag for the papers that she had stolen and gave Suzie an encouraging smile. "We'll be OK," she whispered. "Just remember, keep quiet. You're a wife. You're not expected to speak." The two of them headed onto the bridge. As they approached the police car an officer held up his hand indicating for them to stop.

"Papisnic!" the policeman snapped in Kushtian.

Karen pulled out the papers and passed them over. The policeman peered at them and then at Suzie. "Mi femnya," Karen said. "My wife." The policeman snorted scornfully. Only one wife he was obviously thinking. Suzie kept silent as Karen had advised.

"Wirnit twa dissident serach. Ena americansye en ena anglicisye. Varony sich?"

Karen listened carefully to the policeman, his Kushtian dialect was from the south, easy to tell from the way he lengthened his vowels. "eeenaaa aaameerikaaansye" he pronounced it. The message though was clear. They were looking for two dissidents, one American, one English. Had they seen them? Karen shook her head. "Nee Americansye. Nee Anglicisye," she said. The policemen seemed satisfied. He took one more look at Suzie and then passed Karen's papers back to her. "Thaknarish," Karen responded in thanks as the policeman stood back to let them pass.

It was only as they went to pass the police car that the policeman called to Karen, "Good luck!"

"Thanks a lot," she answered, without thinking.

A second later Karen heard the sound of a rifle bolt being slid back from behind her. "Please stand still, and put your hands up," the policeman called in the same perfect English with which he had wished her good luck. "You are both under arrest."

Karen, feeling more stupid than she had ever done before in her life, and Suzie, furious at her friend's carelessness, had no choice but to obey.

Chapter 19 : Day Twenty Three – Return To The Palace

Karen and Suzie found themselves cuffed and pushed into the back of the police car. The police officer kicked the door closed as they shuffled together on the back seat.

“I’m so sorry,” said Karen. “And after everything I’d said too.”

Suzie sat silently, unwilling to forgive Karen’s stupidity.

Outside the car the policeman was talking into his radio microphone. Karen followed the discussion from his side, translating the southern Kushtian dialect for Suzie. “He’s asking what they want done with us. Whether he’s going to take us into the central police station or not. There’s some debate. His dispatcher is getting an officer to talk to. He’s saying hurry up, he doesn’t want to stand around here all morning.”

“Great,” said Suzie, ironically, “I didn’t want to sit around here all morning, either.” Karen felt too embarrassed to respond

Eventually the officer climbed back into the car. “Fine, we got that sorted,” he said, turning around in his seat to face the girls.

“You’re letting us go?” Suzie said hopefully.

The policeman laughed. “Sorry lady, no. But I don’t have to take you in. Seems like you’re not dissidents, just runaways. The good news is you wear the properta of Kolani Kustanki and like a responsible citizen he is ready to take you back. I get to play taxi driver. So just sit quiet and we’ll take a drive.”

He picked a cigarette from the pack sitting on the car’s dashboard, lit it and flicked the match out of the car’s open window. The car’s engine coughed into life and the policeman swung it around to head back out of town. Even with the state of the roads and tracks as they got further from the city, it only took them an hour to drive the distance that Karen and Suzie had spent the last two days covering on foot.

When they got to Kustanki’s palace, it was the overseer that emerged to take them inside, putting ankle shackles on the girls before the police officer took off their handcuffs. “Venesh grach, hunes,” the overseer smirked.

“Welcome back, bitches,” thought Karen, guessing that their escape had caused the overseer more problems than he would have wanted. He dragged the two girls into the palace and away to the cage that she and Suzie had occupied before. “Please,” Karen begged the overseer, “please let my friend go. I forced her to come with me. This wasn’t anything to do with her.”

The overseer pushed them into the cage and locked the door behind them. He shook his head, “Stay here until his Excellency can hear you. And keep quiet or we use these.” He

waved a moangf at her. Neither Karen nor Suzie wanted to have their mouths plugged with the leather gag again. They fell silent until the overseer left them.

In the cramped cage, pressed together, the girls waited.

"You don't need to take all the blame," Suzie said, speaking for the first time since they'd been re-captured. "It was a stupid mistake but we wouldn't have even got that far if it hadn't been for you."

"But we were so close; and after I'd nagged you so about keeping quiet. Oh, Suzie, I'm just so sorry!" Karen hung her head against Suzie's shoulder.

"It's OK," Suzie said. "We have to look after each other whatever happens."

Two hours later the overseer returned to unlock their cage. "His Excellency wants to decide on what to do about you," he said. "There is a hearnich."

Karen turned to Suzie. "It's like a court hearing. It's how a household handles problems or disputes that are more serious than can be dealt with by the usual summary discipline handed out by the overseer."

"You wear these," the overseer passed the girls veils and headscarves and watched as they put them on. "... and these." He produced a pair of manacles for each of the girls, using them to fasten their wrists behind their backs. With Suzie and Karen veiled and helpless, he took out a large knife. As the two girls reacted in fear he reached forward and ripped and cut at their clothes until they were both naked except for their headscarves and veils. "Now you are ready for hearnich," the overseer said, grabbing each of the girls by one arm and dragging them from the room. "Best to show respect for his Excellency. He was not pleased when you went."

Kolani Kustanki was seated behind a large desk. One of his concubines was curled up on the desk, feeding him pieces of locum as the overseer dragged Karen and Suzie into the room. A doenya stood by the desk holding a jug of tea. Kustanki's scowling expression gave Karen little comfort about the likely outcome of the hearnich. He waved the concubine away and she climbed down from the desk, bowed to Kustanki and scurried out of the room. The doenya put down the tea jug and followed.

Karen stood trying not to convey the embarrassment and fear that she felt as she stood alongside Suzie, her face covered but the rest of her naked. Kustanki looked down at some papers on his desk and then up at the two girls. "This is very unfortunate," he said. "For two concubines to attack the intended wife of the head of the household. This is a serious offence. If proven this requires serious punishment." Karen was puzzled wondering what Kustanki meant. Their only action had been against Alana. "So, we must hear our witness." The overseer nodded and left the room, returning moments later with a woman that Karen recognised as Alana in spite of the long white veil she was wearing. Alana was staring at Karen and Suzie with angry eyes. "Wife to be," Kustanki said, addressing Alana, "are these the women that attacked you?"

Alana made a growling response to the question. Karen realised that behind her veil, Alana had been gagged and could not answer.

“Speak up,” ordered Kustanki. “You have made serious accusations. Now you must give witness to them in front of those you accuse.” Alana growled all the louder but without providing Kustanki with anything he could interpret as an answer to his question. Kustanki waved to the overseer to take her away again. Moments later the overseer returned.

Kustanki turned back to the girls. “It seems that those accusations against you are without foundation,” he said with a smirk. “That you absconded, however, is without dispute. It is my judgement that you will wear the chains, manuses about your wrists, ancluses for your ankles, until it is judged you have come to accept your position here.” He didn’t wait for any response from the girls but looked at the overseer. “Put them back in the Seragla,” he ordered. “I’m sure our guest would like to meet them.”

Suzie and Karen had no opportunity to say anything before the overseer gripped them each by one arm and pulled them from the room. “You start earning your keep again,” he said as he man handled them down the corridor. “And show me you’re happy here if you want to lose those chains.”

They were soon back in the Seragla. From one of the side rooms off of the concubine’s hall the grunting sounds of sexual congress could be heard clearly. The overseer pushed the two girls through the curtained doorway. “Two more for you, Sir,” he said letting go the girls and leaving them without waiting for a reply.

Across the room, Karen was confronted with the site of pale skinned buttocks pumping up and down as their owner pressed himself on the girl on the bed. The black cloth of a concubine’s panelled skirt spread across the colourful quilt of the bed on either side. To one side of the bed another concubine knelt, veiled head bowed submissively, holding a tray containing a range of sexual toys. The man on the bed stopped, pulled himself clear of the woman beneath him, and turned around to face Karen and Suzie.

Karen recognised the pale, aesthetic, features of the United Nations Ambassador responsible for the cultural heritage programme. “Ah the absconders,” he said. “You really need to see the programme through. I’m just glad to have the chance to contribute to all these girls’ learning. He leant forward to grip the woman by the hair and drag her head up to his crotch. “Clean me up, girl,” he ordered, pulling her veil to one side and pushing his cock into her mouth. The girl whimpered but did as he ordered. As she licked and sucked at his cock, he turned towards Karen and Suzie. “I hear you two have just joined the programme. I must say I am enjoying my involvement with it. I hope you two will as well.”

Karen and Suzie looked sceptical. “I thought the idea was to learn about Kushtian culture, not the corrupt nature of the United Nations,” Karen responded defiantly.

“Huh, American,” Johansson responded , “what do you understand of culture?” Her waved Karen to stand by the wall, disengaged himself from the girl that had been sucking him. “Our English friend, though, is another matter.” Johansson reached out to run his fingers through Suzie’s hair. “I wonder how experienced she is?” His hand fell from her hair to her breasts, fondling them through the thin fabric of her concubine’s costume. “Let’s see.”

Johansson gripped Suzie by the arm and wrenched her around throwing her down onto the bed. Karen looked on in horror, desperate that her friend should not be faced with losing her virginity in this violent manner. She ran up to Johansson and tried to pull him away from Suzie. "No!" she yelled. "You've not right! She didn't come here to be raped by you!"

Johansson rounded on Karen as she pulled at his jacket. "Perhaps you did," he snarled, swing a blow that landed on the side of her head, half stunning her and knocking her down to the floor. "Interfering bitch!" The Ambassador aimed a kick at Karen and though she tried to dodge it his boot slammed into her side. The sharp pain of the kick left Karen in fear that she'd broken a rib. Johansson grabbed her with a strength surprising for his light frame. A backhanded slap to the face stunned her again as she looked up she saw in his grinning face the delight in the distress he was causing. "You first then," he laughed as Karen coughed back into consciousness. He pushed her back onto the bed, laying with his full weight on top of her, she struggling beneath him. He reached down tearing at her skirt and pants. Karen kept on struggling. Suzie was whimpering tearfully, begging Johansson to stop. The Ambassador was erect once more, his arousal intensified by his victim's struggles and the cries of Suzie and the others. He thrust his cock into Karen, grinding his crotch against hers.

Karen tied to swing her fists against his side. He responded by gripping her wrists and holding them above her head. "Shut up bitch," he snarled, grabbing her veil and jamming it into her mouth. Karen choked as the cloth pressed into her throat, barely able to breath and struggling for air and against Johansson's rape. Johansson let go her wrists and tore at the top of her costume, baring her breasts. Laughing as she struggled the more, he bit and pummelled at her breasts. Then, as she tried to turn underneath his weight, he reached up to push the veil further into her mouth and then dragged the loose end of the cloth around her throat. Karen was choking. Suzie terrified that her friend was about to be strangled did the only thing she could think of. She screamed. The piercing shriek cut through the palace. Sounds of distress were not uncommon in the palace but Suzie's terrified screech carried with it an urgency that told the overseer that something serious was amiss. He appeared at the door.

The Ambassador released his hold on the cloth around Karen's throat.

"Is everything all right, Sir," the overseer asked.

Johansson looked around at him. He climbed off the bed. "Of course. There's no problem," he said. "I was just finishing." With that he gripped the loose end of Karen's veil and jerked himself off into it. "These girls have been quite amusing."

"I'm sure his Excellency will be pleased that you have enjoyed yourself," the overseer said in a tone that made the girls feel that he certainly did not approve of Johansson's behaviour and that Kustanki would not either.

Chapter 20 : Day Twenty Four - The Concubines Hall

The overseer had brought Karen back from the room where she had been abandoned by the Ambassador. He led her to the couch in the cubicle where she had slept the night before.

As Karen looked at him she felt she saw sympathy and concern in his grizzled face. "He does not understand," he said. "For a woman to give herself is an offering. When the man takes her offering he should recognise what she does for him. That man is only take. He thinks he understands the Kushtian way but all he wants is his own way. He sees women as toys. That is not the Kushtian way. His Excellency will see that does not occur again."

Karen thought she understood what he meant. Of course Kushtian men saw women's role as subservient but there was still the sense that they valued the woman. She might be seen as an object but she was a precious one and she was treated that way. It might be that in order to bring her to perfection in her role she would need training or punishment but it was the quest for her perfection that required it. Of course there were abusive Kushtian men but the ways in which the extended Kushtian household had grown up was as a result of an ideal of womanhood with wives, concubines and doenyees each taking their proper place. It might not be a view of society that Karen approved of but it wasn't about the sort of mindless violence and lust that she had seen from the Ambassador. It wasn't even about the sort of casual sexism that she saw so often from her own colleagues back home. Here women might be subjects but they were respected for what they were. Even so, Karen knew there would be little point in creating a confrontation between Kustanki and the Ambassador.

"It doesn't matter," said Karen, clutching the tatters of her costume to herself. "Please don't say anything. It is hard for me to learn Kushtian ways even when, as a woman, it is expected that I need to learn. It is much harder for him. As a man he is expected to understand. An outsider cannot see the light within the Kushtian way."

"He has still to learn. Like a young man with his first woman."

"No, it is harder for him than that. A young Kushtian man has seen how his father treats his women. When he comes of age, of course he has his youthful lusts and energy but they are tempered by the lessons learned from his father and from how he has been encouraged to treat his sisters. A Kushtian man grows up a Kushtian. For others it is easy to take a wrong path."

The overseer looked at Karen in surprise. "You understand this well for a western woman," he said. "And you speak with a generosity of spirit."

Karen was flattered by his recognition of the fact. Somehow she felt his approval more important than anything she had found back in the university. She smiled at the overseer and then seeing his look of shock, bowed her head modestly and reached up to refasten her torn veil. As she did so her fingers felt the damp slime of Johansson's cum and her nose was filled with its powerful smell. She stopped herself reacting and looked down apologetically. "I'm sorry, Sir," she said. "That was inappropriate." The reaction was instinctive and, Karen was surprised to admit, felt completely appropriate.

"No matter," the overseer said with a kindly tone. "Now, you must rest. Recover from your ordeal."

Karen nodded. She stretched out on the couch as the overseer drew a rug over her.

"I must chain you here." The overseer seemed almost apologetic.

"Of course," said Karen. "I understand. Please do so."

The overseer took a stiff leather collar that carried Kustanki's property emblem and fastened it around Karen's neck. She held her hair up to allow him to fit it. He nodded his thanks as she let her hair fall loose again. The overseer fastened a length of chain from a ring in the wall to the lock of Karen's collar. "There," he said. "Now rest."

As the lock had closed on her collar she suddenly felt curiously reassured; as though the chain would hold her to a place of safety; as though her shackles were as much shields as restraints. In these few minutes she had come to understand more of Kushtian society than she had ever thought possible but not only had she understood more she found herself accepting it, embracing its mores, its views of the world its strictures and the benefits that came from them. She was as surprised by what she next said as the overseer was. "Please," Karen said, "a moaungf."

"You are sure?" he said, puzzled by her request. Karen nodded and he picked one of the leather plug gags from a side table. "You wish for this?"

Karen nodded again and took the gag from his hands. Easing the plug between her lips until it filled her mouth she fastened the strap firmly but not tightly behind her head. She nodded in thanks to the overseer. Seeing his answering nod of approval she lay down; stretching out in her shackles; feeling the comforting fill of the leather plug in her mouth.

As she stretched out on the couch each movement of her limbs was touched by her restraints. Even when she was able to move as she wished the weight of the chains and the pull on her manuses and ancluses reminded her every time that she was not free to do as she pleased. In a strange way she welcomed it. Without freedom to act she could only accept her surroundings, submit to her fate.

A deep calm came over her as she felt herself fall into the embrace of her restraints. She gazed out across the concubine's hall seeing it now not just as a place of repression but one of a curious form of liberation. One in which, freed of the need for independent thought and action, she could abandon herself to fulfilment through servitude.

In the centre of the hall, Miyako and Natsumi were learning an erotic dance from one of the other girls, giggling as their feet failed to find the right spot, tripping over each other in their efforts to mimic the movements of their tutor, laughing as they realised their efforts were only making slow progress. Somehow they seemed to have transformed themselves from the frightened pair that had shared terror with her after they had been bought at the animal market with Karen and Anouk. Now they were alive and happy. Yes, thought Karen, happy. Who would have thought that?

To one side, Lucy Baidon, had been bound tightly to a pillar as punishment for some infraction or other. She was helplessly secured with her wrists behind the post, her ankles bound together and to the pillar, ropes around her waist and across her chest. She was naked apart from her veil and the gag she wore beneath it. Even so, helpless and uncomfortable as she was she seemed to be accepting her punishment with calmness. Some of the other girls from time to time would go across to her and, under the supervision of one of the overseer's men, would unfasten her gag and allow her to drink. Although her veil covered all of the lower half of her face, Karen could quite clearly see the sparkle in her eyes that betrayed an ecstasy that might have been the subject of some renaissance martyrdom painting. If she had come to lose herself in the programme she seemed to have done so.

Karen shifted her position on the cushions of her couch, letting the rug fall from her, exposing her bruised body and torn costume. She reached up to the maoungf that filled her mouth pressing her hands against it, forcing it further into her mouth, luxuriating in the mouth filling sensation, ignoring the dribble of saliva that ran from the corner of her mouth, out from under the maoungf's strap. As she gave a quiet moan of pleasure, Suzie appeared at the curtained doorway. "Are you all right?" she asked. "The Ambassador was so brutal and now...."

Karen nodded to show she was content, gave an "Mmmm" through her gag and gestured for Suzie to join her.

She sat down alongside Karen, looking in concern at the cut on the side of Karen's forehead and the developing bruises on her arms, thighs and side. "Shall I take that off?" she asked pointing to Karen's gag, but her friend simply shook her head. "I have to thank you," Suzie said, "for saving me from the Ambassador."

Karen gave a "don't mention it" grunt. Suzie reached forward and tried to pull the top of Karen's costume together for her but it was too badly torn. Seeing that it was ruined beyond repair, Suzie helped her to take off the ripped clothes and then stripped off her own top, pressing Karen to take it from her. Karen accepted gratefully. Suzie did the same with Karen's torn skirt and veil, taking Karen's tatters for her own. Karen knew that the only way that Suzie would be able to replace the ruined costume was by persuading one of the overseer's men to provide her with new and she knew what that persuasion could mean. But perhaps that was it. Perhaps that was the point of it all; caring for each other and taking what pleasure they could. Maybe that was more important than anything in the world that they had left? The longer she stayed here, the less desire she had to return.

When Suzie returned, to Karen's surprise, she was smiling. She climbed on to the couch alongside her friend and hugged her. "I've just met the sweetest man. The overseer's steward. I had to go to him to get this," she showed Karen her new costume. "I thought I'd have to – well, you know – but he was so friendly. We talked for ages. He knows so much about the ways of the people here and he was so gentle. I wonder if we haven't misjudged them; if we haven't tried to impose our own thought and ideas without waiting to understand their's."

Karen grunted in agreement through her moaungf. She was coming to the same conclusion herself. Maybe you couldn't study a culture by looking at it from the outside. Maybe you could only truly understand it if you gave yourself up to it. Maybe that was what they all should do. Maybe that was what she would do, after all. Maybe that would be her new life.

Postscript

Karen was surprised at herself – she would never have thought that she would give herself up to her circumstances in the way that she now felt she must. As she lay on the couch watching the others, her mouth filled with the gag, her limbs heavy from the chains about her wrists and ankles she found it almost impossible to think straight. It was as if the culmination of all the experiences, of all the sensations of the last few weeks, had completely swamped her judgement, her ability to decide, her sense of self.

She tried to bring herself back to thinking about the situation as she would back in the university, positioning the various aspects of Kushtian culture into the framework she had built up over her years of study, how the men sought to maintain their position relative to the women in their culture, and how they tried to do the same one to another. She thought about the way in which the dynamics of the household seemed to have evolved to both reinforce the position of the men and to protect the women. The more she tried to analyse the cultural experience of being Kushtian, the more she found herself falling back into luxuriating in the sensation of the fine silks against her flesh, the comfort of the padding on the couch, the play of light as it bounced and shimmered on the golden and jewelled lanterns that hung from the ceiling, the sweet, hypnotic, perfume of the incense that wafted through the Seragla.

That was something new, she thought, I didn't notice it earlier. The thick, musky scent hung in the air, wafting from burners at each corner of the concubine's hall. The scent seemed to capture the essence of being in the Seragla; luxuriant, calming, almost soporific. The more that the incense bathed her senses, the more relaxed and quiescent she felt and, as she lay back on the couch, she drank in the feeling of tranquillity and the dreamy patterns that her mind conjured as she sank into a rapturous slumber, stretched out in the grasp of her shackles. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, was a memory of how sweet incense was often used in Kushitian Seraglas but its purpose and nature were lost to her.

Unnoticed by Karen through the haze of incense fumes, above the hall, on the gallery that overlooked, it a small group was deep in conversation.

Kolani Kustanki looked across the hall, the blue incense smoke hung like a Kushtian veil across all beneath it. He turned to his overseer. "I see that you are burning hunashif in the hall tonight."

"Yes, Excellency. Its vapours have a soothing effect. It spreads calm for your concubines, Excellency. After the difficulties of recent times I felt that a little hunashif would help restore the sense of well being that your Excellency values so highly in those in his service. We have been short of it until now. The harvest last year was so poor but, this year, excellent! We can return to using it regularly."

"That is good," Kustanki responded. "It will help our new guests to become more quickly accustomed to our ways, I am sure."

"Indeed, Excellency," the overseer responded. "The American woman seems to be most affected. The hunashif seems to have freed her of her drive to return to her past. She finds herself becoming increasingly given over to the ways of the Seragla."

"Good, good," said Kustanki. "In which case she will enjoy what I have in mind for her tonight. My new wife to be has been something of a trial today," he turned to Alana who was standing silently beside him. "Show my good friend here how difficult you have been," he said.

Alana gave a guttural growl that demonstrated the effectiveness of the moaungf that she evidently wore beneath her veil. Kustanki ignored her protests gripped her by the arm and span her around and tore her gown open so that the overseer could see her back.

The overseer looked closely at the criss-cross pattern of welts that Kustanki had evidently given her for some infraction or other. Kustanki knew of course the shame that Alana would feel being exhibited in this way to one of the household servants. He carefully explained how each blow had been applied and how each was contributing to the correction of Alana's many faults. "So," he concluded, "I fear my new wife to be will spend tonight recovering from her punishments. Please have the small hanging cage set up in my rooms. Whatever her misdemeanours, she should not be apart from her husband before her wedding. She will be confined there but at least she will be with me."

"Very good, Excellency," the overseer agreed. It would not take long. The cage was small but it was still heavy with thick bars as though built for some small but extremely powerful bird. It hung from a frame that could be moved on its own wheels, there would be no difficulty in setting it up in Kustanki's rooms.

"Oh, and one other thing," Kustanki said. "A man should have the comforts of a woman before his wedding, even if he cannot have them from his wife. Bring the American woman to me. I believe that an evening enjoying the delights of her flesh, abandoned as she is to the hunashif, will bring great fulfilment."

"Of course, Excellency," the overseer replied. "I am sure she will be ready to delight you." He looked down into the hall to where Karen was stretching out on her couch. The hunashif seemed effective. She would be happy to be led to his Excellency's bed chamber tonight.

THE END

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