**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 3 - Kim's new life**

Kim sullenly accompanied her Spokesman and his secretary across the plaza back to his office at the Central Police Station. Her body still was in considerable pain, not only from the searing welts, but also from her cramped muscles. The American walked stiffly and slowly, with Dukov and Tatiana slowing their own pace to allow her to keep up with them. The plaza was crowded with commuters and people relaxing in the afternoon sun. Kim, with her bare body, Asian features, metal collar, and marked backside, drew a lot of attention from the public as she walked by. They've turned me into a freak, she thought bitterly. And for two years I have to stay like this.

On the steps of the police station Dukov gave several short interviews to local television reporters, with Kim and the secretary standing behind him. His client felt deep bitterness at that moment, being forced to stand on the steps while the Spokesman cheerfully spoke to the cameras. The Danubian official was in very high spirits, having reduced his client's threatened 20-year sentence to just 2-years. Kim still did not fully appreciate how difficult an accomplishment this had been. She did not yet realize the reduction of her sentence by 90% in this very high-profile case had been one of the most significant victories of Dukov's career.

As the young criminal painfully followed her mentor up the steps, the cameras focused on her backside, filming the dark welts on her bottom and shoulders.

Finally the three were back in the Spokesman's office. The secretary who had stayed behind at the office had a recovery table set up; a massage table with lotion and disinfectant. Kim's body was stiffer than ever, and she was grateful for the opportunity to simply lie down. The secretary at the recovery table examined her to make sure her skin had not been broken anywhere, then she gently spread lotion on the welts to soften them. It was standard procedure following a judicial punishment. Six months from now Kim once again would be lying in this office following her second punishment.

Kim had no desire to move once she was on the table. Even the slightest movement hurt. The pain and stiffness were so overwhelming that she could barely imagine a time that she didn't feel such agony. She started to cry again, not only from the physical torment she was enduring, but also from the emotional suffering she had undergone that day and the overwhelming feeling that her life was ruined. She couldn't imagine that there could be any future for her after what she had endured. However, physical exhaustion finally overtook her and she fell asleep.

Kim did have a future in Upper Danubia, which Dukov spent the rest of the afternoon arranging. His first concern was making sure his client had a job. The court was dead serious about her needing to be gainfully employed within 48 hours. Kim would most definitely present a problem, given that she spoke no Danubian. Over time she would learn, but that did not resolve the issue of the moment.

Dukov decided that the best temporary position his new client could take would be to work as a courier. In a country where fax machines were still very rare, couriers were an important feature of Danubian business communications. Working as a courier would put Kim outdoors most of the time and keep her moving. Dukov suspected that the young criminal was a restless girl and needed movement to stay focused. At the end of September, when the weather started to get cold, she would have to change jobs and do something indoors, but that problem was still three months away.

Kim needed a place to live as well. A convicted criminal in Upper Danubia usually simply returned to live with his or her family. Kim, of course, had no relatives in Danube City, nor anyone else with whom she could stay. Dukov had to get her a room, but that presented him with another problem. He knew from his professional experience that his client would be extremely depressed over the next few days, until she got used to her new life as a convicted criminal. That transition was difficult for anyone; with Kim it would be even more so because she had to get used to living in Danube City as well as get used to her new legal status. She had to live with someone who could watch over her, and yet leave her alone when necessary.

Finally, there was the issue of Kim's forfeited life in the US. Dukov needed to contact the US Embassy and arrange an interview with her. She needed to contact her parents and let them know that she would not be coming home for two years. Whatever college plans she had would have to wait. Dukov wondered if the hardest part of Kim's punishment was yet to come, having to explain to everyone in the US what happened.

Dukov spent the afternoon on the phone, first calling the US Embassy. The Spokesman had an unpleasant conversation with a consular official, who ripped into him about the barbarity of Upper Danubia's justice system. Dukov was a bit taken aback, given that he was the equivalent of a public defense attorney in the US and by Danubian standards he had successfully defended Kim in court. Finally his temper snapped.

"You will listen to me now. I have been to your country. I have seen your jails. You choose to keep your criminals in useless confinement and your useless system does not work. Its failure is evident for all of us to see plainly. We conduct very speedy trials and return our criminals to society right away. They work, they contribute, they lead productive lives, they learn respect, and they do not re-offend. What is your preference, that Kimberly spend two years in a prison cell, or that she spend two years working?"

Dukov then called his brother Victor Dukov, who ran a courier service. Kim had to be trained and learn her way about the 10-kilometer circle in which she would be delivering messages. Dukov spent over an hour discussing the details with his brother.

Finally there was the issue of where Kim would live. Until she learned how to speak Danubian, the only workable solution would be for her to stay with Dukov and his family. Anyhow, it was getting late and Dukov needed to go home, and take his client with him. He woke her up.

"Kimberly, you will come with me. Tonight you will dine with my family and sleep at my house."

Once again Kim sadly accompanied her Spokesman out onto the street. Once again she had to contend with the constant barrage of curious glances. The sight of a naked young woman with welts on her backside and a collar on her neck normally was not something that drew an extraordinary amount of attention from passers-by. However, the site of a naked young Asian woman with welts on her backside and a collar on her neck was something completely new. Along the street, at the trolley stop, and on the trolley itself local residents shifted around and strained their necks to get a better view of Kim's badly marked body.

At first Kim looked at the ground to avoid the sight of all her on-lookers. However, when Dukov noticed what she was doing he admonished her. "Kimberly, you must keep your head up. You must show your face to the world. A convicted criminal in this country is not allowed to hide her face."

Sadly Kim complied and lifted her head. She had to ride to Dukov's place standing up, even though there were several empty seats on the trolley. Criminals could use public transportation for free, but they were not allowed to occupy a seat. Dukov, realizing how difficult all this was for his client, chose to stand next to her.

The commute took the Spokesman and his client to the outer edge of the Danube City collar-zone and almost into the countryside. Dukov's house was about the size of an average US tract home, but it was solidly made from cinderblocks and polished wooden paneling. It overlooked a beautiful valley of mixed forests and pastures, one of the places Kim and her friends had hoped to visit. However, a yellow sign, visible along the street only a block past Dukov's house, reminded her that valley was now off limits.

Dukov and Kim entered his house. She went to the kitchen and looked out the window, curious to see the back yard. The yard was small and enclosed with a wall, as were most back yards of Danubian houses. Danubians valued their privacy and no proper house lacked an enclosed back yard. Two teenaged girls were sunbathing nude and giggling together over a pop-music magazine. Dukov called out to one the girls, asking her a question. The girl heaved a deep sigh and answered "Negat, Papa.". With that both girls got up, put on sun dresses, and began packing up the things scattered in the yard.

"My daughter, Anyia. You see, she needed to start preparing our meal, and she neglected to do so. Teenagers are the same everywhere, is that not so?"

The girl's carefree behavior struck at Kim's soul. Just a short while ago she had been in high school, doing roughly the same thing with Tiffany and Susan.

As Anyia began cleaning and cutting vegetables in the kitchen, Dukov instructed Kim to go into the main bathroom and get cleaned up. She sadly sat in the bathtub as the rest of Dukov's family returned home and he explained the situation of his new house-guest.

An hour later the young criminal was eating dinner with her Spokesman and his family. Dukov's family was about as typical as a Danubian family could be. Besides the teenaged daughter, he had an older son called Vladik who had just graduated from the National Police Academy. Dukov's wife, a sharply-dressed professional woman who introduced herself as Maritza, also was present, as was Vladik's fiance. Throughout the dinner Anyia and the fiance constantly glanced at Kim, not being able to hide their curiosity about the first Asian woman and the first person from the US to ever eat at their table.

As the women cleaned up and his son attended to his revolver and police uniform, Dukov called Kim to accompany him to his home library. The library was full of books in various languages and had two large very comfortable chairs. There were various pictures of Dukov and his family around the room, but one in particular struck Kim. That picture was the reason Dukov had brought her into the library.

It was a medium sized picture of the Spokesman, much younger than he was now, standing arm-in-arm with his future wife. Both Dukov and his fiance were naked, and both were wearing collars. Beneath the picture two open collars hung on the wall.

Kim gasped. "Mr. Dukov... you... ?"

"Yes, Kimberly. I wore the collar for five years, as did my wife Maritza. We keep this picture to remind ourselves, and our children, of who we are and where we came from. I brought you here so that you can understand something very important. Your life has not ended. Nor has it been suspended for two years. On this date, two years from now, you will be a free woman, but you cannot think about that too much; you cannot live in the future. Between now and then you must live from day to day and enjoy life's momentary small pleasures. That was how Maritza and I endured our sentences, and how we found love in each other."

Kim wondered what Dukov and his wife had done to be convicted as criminals, but she decided not to ask. Dukov had not volunteered that information. Out of respect for her Spokesman she decided not to pursue the question.

Kim slept deeply that night. She did not wake up until 10:00 the following morning. Her body was unbelievably stiff and the pain from her welts was still very much present. She would have a very hard time sitting normally for at least another day. Kim looked at herself in the guest bedroom mirror. The welts had darkened and looked ugly.

The house was completely silent. Apparently everyone had left for work. Kim looked around and finally went to the kitchen, where she peeked out the window and saw Anyia asleep nude on a towel in the back yard. As much as she hated doing it, she forced herself to wake up the girl and ask her where her father was. As Kim had feared, Anyia was none too pleasant about having been woken up. She gave a disgusted sigh, walked into the kitchen to retrieve a note and a Danubian-English dictionary, passed both items to Kim, and then plopped back down on her towel.

Kim couldn't say anything; a couple of years before she had been just as rude.

Dukov's note told Kim to ask Anyia to prepare breakfast for her and then gave instructions for taking a trolley downtown. She got her own breakfast, having no desire to bother the sullen girl on the towel a second time. Then she stepped outside to face the world alone as a Danubian convicted criminal. She carried the dictionary with her and walked up the hill to the trolley stop.

Yet again Kim had to endure all those stares as she rode the trolley into town. She wished she could sit down and cover her welts from her audience, but of course that was impossible due to the rule against criminals taking any seats on public transportation. She arrived at the Central Police Station and again endured the barrage of stares as she went up to Dukov's office. By now it was after 11:00. Dukov's two secretaries were in the front room. Upon seeing Kim enter, one of them immediately ushered her back to Dukov's main office. Dukov got right to the point. There were three problems she needed to resolve that day: find work, call her parents, and figure out where she was going to live.

The work issue was the most pressing, given that by the end of the next day Kim had to be employed. Dukov suggested the courier job with his brother. She agreed, really having no choice. Upon getting Kim's agreement Dukov took her to an old office building three kilometers away to meet Victor Dukov.

Victor Dukov spoke much less English then did his brother Vladim, but he still could make himself understood to Kim. She learned what her working life would be like over the next several months. She would be working with four other couriers, all of whom were recent high school graduates. One was close to completing a year-long sentence of wearing a collar for fighting at his school, but the other three were just average graduates. Victor issued his newest employee a cheap Danubian-made bicycle and handed her three terry-cloth bicycle seat covers designed especially for naked riders. He emphasized that she had to change her seat cover every day as a health precaution. Another item Kim was issued was a pair of bright orange courier shoes to protect her feet. Criminals who worked as couriers were expected to wear standard courier shoes while riding their bicycles, but had to take them off when not riding. Once she was outfitted with her seat covers and shoes, the two brothers filled out some papers and then Victor gave Kim her first assignment as a courier:

"You take this document of work to judge who sentenced you yesterday. You retrieve his signature. You take this paper with signature to office of my brother. You leave paper there with him. Then you return here with bicycle and receipt from my brother. And remember, you are criminal in court. You act like criminal. You show respect to judge."

Kim sighed. Her new boss did not seem all that friendly, and certainly had no qualms about putting her in her place.

Kim set out on her bicycle on her first assignment as a courier. As she eased herself on her bicycle seat her body protested in pain. However, she gritted her teeth and began peddling, merging into a cluster of other bicyclists headed in the direction of the city's main plaza.

As she cruised among the other commuters on her cheap bicycle, with her welts throbbing against the seat and the collar's feel on her neck as a constant reminder that she was no longer a free woman, Kim had a chance to reflect on her life. It was the first time in a while she had thought about anything other than partying and where Tiffany could score the best pot. All that was now behind her now. Tiffany was no longer her friend, there was no pot to be had in Danube City, and Kim doubted there would be any partying in her life for two years. She couldn't imagine this quiet city having much of a nightlife, and certainly not for someone like her.

Kim's first regret was simple and rather strange, considering all the other problems she faced. She wished that she could have her mountain bike from the US with her. The mountain bike had been a gift for her 16th birthday, but she probably had not ridden it more than 10 times altogether. Now that she would be spending her days on a bicycle, she wished fervently it could have been her own, the gift from her parents she never appreciated.

Kim's thoughts drifted to more urgent topics. She still needed to tell her parents and her sister what happened. She realized that she had so much to tell them. She had no idea where to begin. First, they had not been aware that Kim was using marijuana. That information alone would be a terrible shock to them. Once they knew she was in Danube City they would want to see her, but how could they? Kim's family was very conservative and no member of Lee family had ever seen any other member undressed. If her family were to visit they would have a horrible shock, seeing her naked in public with a metal collar on her neck. And yet, at the very least her sister would come to Danube City, and would see her. The full shame of Kim's situation would descend on the entire family, which, of course, was exactly the reason why she was being punished in this manner by the Danubian government.

Kim now regretted not having respected her family more in high school, and not having listened more to her parents. She had done all kinds of things behind their backs; lied, stolen, cheated on her classwork in her private school, played her sister and her parents against each other, and sacrificed everything at home to spend more time with Tiffany and Susan. She had always told herself that she had to treat her family badly, because Tiffany and Susan were the only people in the world who understood her. And yet, and yet, when she needed her friends to stand up for her, they instead betrayed her. What a waste! What a total waste!

Kim's bitterness towards Tiffany was only now starting to build. The shock from Tiffany's betrayal was giving way to an intense hatred. Because of Tiffany and Susan, Kim had been facing a 20-year sentence with monthly whippings for drug trafficking. She had only avoided the maximum charges thanks to the dedication of a complete stranger, not thanks to two people she had known for over five years. She now understood and could appreciate what Spokesman Vladim Dukov had done for her. Thanks to Tiffany, Kim faced losing 20 years of her life. Thanks to Dukov, 18 of those years had been given back to her.

It was true that Tiffany had panicked, but Kim was convinced had the situation been reversed she would not have turned on Tiffany, and also was convinced that Susan would not have turned on her had it not been for Tiffany's insistence. It was only natural that she should now hate Tiffany and disrespect Susan, but she also realized that she had to keep those feelings under control or they would consume her soul and force her to do something stupid upon being released and returning to the United States.

Kim looked around her. People were still staring at her, although now that she was on a bicycle with a courier's package and wearing courier's shoes, a lot of the mystery about this young Asian was resolved. People now saw her as simply another criminal who had been punished and was serving a sentence. The punishment of foreigners in Upper Danubia was not very common, but it happened occasionally. The only thing that really made Criminal # 98945 stand out from the others was that she was not European.

Kim parked her bicycle in the couriers' area of the courthouse. She winced as she dismounted. As instructed by Dukov's brother, she took off her courier's shoes and hung them on the handlebars before going in. She went upstairs to the judge's office and knelt at the secretary's desk, holding the papers out in front of her. With a very heavy English accent she repeated the phrase she had memorized: "Tutik ya mauk listok derjavnik na htre," which was Danubian for "I have an official document for the judge."

The secretary called the judge to come out. Kim handed him the paperwork and put her head to the carpet. The judge looked over the paperwork. Ordinarily he would have asked the criminal a couple of questions about her employment, but in this case he had no means of communicating with her. He simply signed and replied "Doc-doc." With that Kim got up, left the courthouse, and returned to her bicycle, having completed the first portion of her first assignment.

Kim returned to the Central Police Station and climbed the two flights of stairs to get to Dukov's office. She needed to deliver the judge's signature to her Spokesman, but she also needed to talk to someone. Fortunately Dukov was working on case files, so he had some time to talk to his client about her new life and her feelings. She started by talking at length about her building hatred of Tiffany and her concern over what that could lead to after her release.

"Kimberly, for someone who is only 18, I think you understand the issues of your life quite clearly. You are aware of the dangers that await you, and I do not blame you for hating your friend. She betrayed you. Who would not hate under such circumstances? But the question you must ask yourself is how you plan to live from today. You can obsess yourself with what you cannot change, or you can place your thoughts on becoming a better person. This is your chance to change your life... today... this moment. Is it not?"

"I want to change, Mr... uh... Spokesman Dukov, I want to do things right from now on... not like before."

"Only you can make such a decision, Kimberly. Only you can make that change."

Kim paused, and thought about her next words. She realized she had overlooked something important. "And... Spokesman Dukov... I... I need to thank you for what you did for me yesterday... in court... I mean... really thank you. 20 years... It was gonna be 20 years... and you got me two... "

"That was nothing, Kimberly. It was my responsibility to you as your Spokesman, nothing more."

Kim nodded and choked back some tears. After a few minutes Dukov spoke again.

"Kimberly, it is time you call your family and explain to them what happened. That is your chance to redeem your relationship with them. You wish to thank me. You can do so by making things right with your family. That is the first request I make of everyone who comes through my office. Now I make that request of you."

Dukov dialed Kim's home in the US and passed the phone to her. Her older sister picked up the phone at the other end, which made beginning her task slightly easier, but not by much. As Kim expected, her family members were devastated once she laid out her situation. However, she was determined to come clean with other things in her life that she had done wrong, and made several very difficult confessions. They talked for well over an hour, in the most truthful conversation Kim ever had with her family. Everyone was in tears when she hung up, but now it was over. The thing she had most dreaded, having to tell her family about her drug use and her conviction, now was past her. As soon as she managed to wipe away the tears, Dukov spoke to her.

"You still have an obligation to my brother before you leave work today. Return my confirmation ticket and your bicycle to his office. Then return to my office and I will take you back to my home. I will wait for you to return."

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The following Sunday night Kim watched her own trial and punishment on television.

Danube City averaged about 18 trials per week that resulted in corporal punishments. The average ratio of male offenders to female offenders was about 2 to 1. Crimes that required corporal punishments included stealing, fraud, public drunkenness, public drug use, drug possession, being at fault in any type of accident that resulted in an injury, vandalism, deliberately inflicting injury on another person, and "insurrection", a crime that covered any act of defiance against the police or public officials. Other crimes in which corporal punishment could be inflicted included "crimes of disrespect", an example being the accusation against Kim of disrespecting the land behind the Temple of the Ancients. (Upper Danubia also had a system of capital punishment for murder, rape, child molestation, organized crime, arson, and in times of military conflict, treason. However the capital court system was completely separate from the corporal court system and operated under totally different rules.)

Upper Danubia's unique justice system had one strange side effect on the country's society. Every Sunday night, the government television station broadcast several hours of highlights from the week's trials and judicial corporal punishments, complete with commentary. Almost everyone in the country watched the broadcasts, which were a holdover from times when criminals were publicly switched in Danube City's main plaza. As the city's population expanded after World War II, public viewing of the switchings in the plaza became impractical due to the large crowds. The solution was to televise the punishments instead.

Danubians loved to watch the punishments and debate among themselves the merits of the cases and the charges brought against the offenders. They also were curious to see how brave each offender was, how quickly he or she started to scream or cry during a switching. How much air-time the network gave any particular case depended on how many cases there were that week, how interesting a particular case was, whether the defendant was likeable, and the seriousness of the offense. Since most of the administrators at the television station were men, female criminals could expect to have their punishments, and sometimes even their trials, broadcast in their entirely. Besides, most of the public agreed that crimes committed by women were more interesting than crimes committed by men.

The case of Criminal # 98945 received prominent feature the Sunday night following her punishment. That was not a surprise to anyone, given that Kim was a foreigner, she was the first Asian woman ever punished in Upper Danubia, and because of the circumstances that led to the most serious charges being dropped. Spokesman Dukov's rebuttal of the prosecutor was aired in its entirety prior to the broadcast of Kim's sentencing and her punishment.

The guest room in Dukov's house where Kim was sleeping had its own TV, and that night she excused herself to watch herself be punished. She expected to be mortified and horribly embarrassed by the broadcast, but she was not. She found it fascinating to see herself filmed on the criminal's stand, legs and arms spread under the bright lights. She began lightly touching her breasts and stomach when she saw herself strapped to the table.

By the time the switching began on TV, Kim was sitting in her easy chair with her legs spread wide open, teasing her clitoris. Seeing herself spread, her bottom and vagina completely exposed to the camera, and seeing the cops' hands rub her welt-covered bottom-cheeks, excited her in a way that she could never have previously imagined. It made no sense. During the punishment itself sexual desire was the farthest thing from Kim's mind, and yet, seeing herself suffer on TV aroused her almost uncontrollably. She was totally wet and experienced orgasm after orgasm as she moved one hand, and then both, over and over her soaked vagina. She threw her head back and closed her eyes, as she listened to herself scream on TV. Her breath came in irregular gasps and she started moaning, biting her lip and rocking back and forth. Suddenly she was filled with an overwhelming desire to be once again strapped to that table. She wanted to have those two cops fondle and caress her. She wanted to be helpless, to be fully exposed, and waiting for the pain. She wanted her suffering and her pleasure to be prominently featured in front of Upper Danubia, in front of all Europe, in front of the entire world.

Kim went to her hands and knees on the floor. She spread her legs wide and thrust her bottom up, enjoying the feel of the room's cool air between her legs. She went down on her knees and chest, freeing her hands to fondle herself, to explore her vagina and her exposed bottom-hole. The fantasy came back stronger than ever... she badly wanted those two cops to explore, to probe, to caress, to fondle her... there. She came yet again.

Kim was gasping for breath as she lay on the floor and watched herself on TV standing behind Dukov on the National Police Station's steps. On the screen the Spokesman was cheerfully explaining his strategy for forcing the reduction of Criminal # 98945's sentence in a post-punishment interview.

Slowly the spell lifted and Kim returned to her senses. The room reeked of orgasm. She opened the window as wide as possible to air out the room and then dashed to the adjacent bathroom to clean off before anyone could smell her.

She sat in the bathtub, wondering what on earth had just happened. She had enjoyed the best series of orgasms of her life, as she watched herself being publicly humiliated and horribly switched on television. She felt ashamed that something like that could possibly have excited her. She had learned something about herself a few minutes ago, something that she really had not wanted to know. She was terrified of the dark secret in her soul, a secret that had just forced itself to the surface.

**Chapter 4 - The Socrates Club**

By the end of Kim's first week in Danube City she was partially settled into her strange new life as a convicted criminal and bicycle courier. Within a week her welts were fading and no longer hurt. She had come to terms with what had happened and even managed to pass by the Temple of the Ancients where all her trouble had started. Kim vaguely wondered if that sadistic cop and her partner were still patrolling the grounds behind the Temple, but had no desire to go there and find out. She would see the woman in six months in the Police Station for her second punishment, and that was soon enough.

Kim's new boss, Victor Dukov, forced her to quickly learn the skills needed to move about as a courier in Danube City. Victor Dukov was very different from his brother Vladim. He was gruff and impatient and pushed her very hard. He quickly forced her to learn how to ask for and understand directions in Danubian. He ordered her to memorize a map of the city and yelled at her when she made mistakes. He expected her to find and use the shortest route and to ride from one assignment to another with no breaks. His favorite line for admonishing the American was:

"Kimberly, you smart girl. You pretty girl. But you lazy girl, and you do dumb thing. Why you lazy? Why you do dumb thing?"

Kim knew that line always led into an unpleasant lecture, but over time she got used to it. She learned it was easiest to go along with Victor's nagging, and if she agreed with him and apologized that tended to shorten his lectures. Whether Victor was right or wrong, Kim simply answered "Mr. Dukov, I guess I wasn't paying attention. I'm sorry for not listening. I'll try harder in the future."

Kim did not like Victor, but she had no specific grievances against him. He did not treat her any worse than he treated his other employees. Victor never disrespected Kim for being a convicted criminal or for being a foreigner. For example, he never required her to kneel when she spoke to him, which was something that in theory he had the right to do, being her superior. To Victor, Criminal # 98945 simply was his employee, the same as four other individuals, and thus she was subject to his temper and demands no more and no less than were the others.

Because Kim's command of Danubian language and society were so limited at the beginning, Victor Dukov sent her on the deliveries that were furthest from his office, the ones that would take time away from his other employees. That meant fewer deliveries and thus fewer chances of making mistakes, but also longer trips and constant riding. Kim rode hard all over Danube City, often to within just a block or so of the dreaded yellow signs. She made her delivery, or picked up the needed signatures and receipts, and then was riding again, desperate to make the next delivery before Victor Dukov's cell phone went off to check on her whereabouts. She was always exhausted after each day's work from her hours of hard riding through the city summer heat. However, the courier job was extremely beneficial, because within a month she knew the entire city very well and understood some details about Danubian business protocol.

A delivery to a private individual or business owner was no different than a delivery would be in the US. Kim walked in with her package and her signature pad, announced herself with her terrible Danubian, completed the delivery, and quickly was out the door on her bicycle. If the delivery was made to a public official, she had to go to her knees and hold the delivery items out in front of her. Once the client took them Kim put her forehead to the floor, and stayed in that position until she felt the signature pad placed back in her hands. If she wasn't sure if the client was a public official, she asked, and dropped to her knees if the answer was affirmative.

Over the first few days following her sentence Kim was mortified at the thought of having her body on display for a full two years. However, a person can get used to many things in life. Within a week Kim's mind had accepted her constant nudity; by the end of the second week she no longer even thought about it. It seemed that the intense stares from bystanders had started to diminish and Criminal # 98945 simply received the same casual glances any other naked criminal would receive. The unwelcome attention towards her body had receded, and with it much of her self-consciousness.

What helped reduce the constant curious stares, ironically, was the broadcast of Kim's punishment on Danubian television. Kim's case generated a sensational amount of interest. However, the broadcast also satisfied much of the curiosity surrounding Kim and answered a lot of questions. The naked Asian girl with welts on her backside and a collar on her neck had been sentenced under Danubia's marijuana laws and was serving a two-year sentence as a criminal. It was that mundane, and that simple.

No one in Danube City felt that Kim should have been exonerated, since there was no doubt she had possessed and smoked marijuana. However, most of the people interested in Kim's case felt the reduced sentence was fair and that she did deserve some leniency. Kimberly Lee projected a sympathetic and likeable image on TV and there was general agreement that she had been treated shamefully by her two friends. People also agreed with Dukov that the prosecutor had behaved irresponsibly in trying to get a maximum sentence for Kim while releasing the other two Americans. But that was why a Spokesman-for-the-Criminal was needed, to argue on behalf of the suspect and work out a fair sentence. Spokesman Dukov had done his job admirably and as a result the American had received fair treatment in court.

The hot summer weather continued unabated as July became August. Kim continued her sweaty bicycle trips around Danube City. She was in great physical shape from the constant exercising. She ate well and slept soundly at Vladim Dukov's house. She spoke by phone to her parents at least once a week and tried to assure them she was fine. Kim was too busy to have much time to feel sorry for herself. She was too busy even to think about how much she hated Tiffany. While she was not exactly happy, she had achieved a daily equilibrium in her life. Kim's tranquil existence in Danube City had been one of the goals of the judge who had sentenced her.

Vladim Dukov decided to extend Kim's stay at his house until she had enough money saved up to get a decent room. He insisted that she open a Danubian bank account and deposit most of her paycheck from her job. Dukov also laid out a series of chores he wanted the American to perform at his house in exchange for her free boarding. He sent his client out to buy groceries, pay household bills, and other errands with the intent of forcing her to learn how to perform the basic tasks needed to live from day to day. Often Anyia went with Kim and helped her carry the groceries.

By the end of her first month in Danube City, Kim had become a de facto member of Vladim Dukov's family. Her professional relationship with Dukov, her dependency on him, and her lack of any other friends in Upper Danubia resulted in her becoming almost a second daughter of the elder Dukovs. Having been convicted criminals themselves, both Vladim and Maritza understood much of what she had to face. Furthermore, the Spokesman had traveled to the US several times in his life on official functions. While US society and its values were unfathomable to Dukov, at least he had a glimpse of the world that had produced Kimberly Lee and was able to understand some of the cross-cultural difficulties she faced in her new life as a Danubian criminal. Kim needed to be educated and brought up to function in Danubian society. She needed to learn what that society expected of her and how she needed to behave in many different situations, large and small. The restrictions and rules Kim had to live under as a convicted criminal only complicated her adaptation to Danubian society.

After just a few days Kim knew how to speak some phases of Danubian, the most important and most frequently used being "Ya negat rozumigut," which meant "I don't understand". Danubian was a difficult language, very archaic and with grammar and pronunciation rules that would make the average Westerner cringe. Not many average people in the isolated country spoke anything other than their native tongue, thus the task of learning Danubian was a top priority.

Oddly enough, Anyia was willing to help Kim with learning Danubian, at least during the times she wasn't sunbathing. She learned to leave Anyia alone if she was in the yard on her towel or with one of her friends, but if she was in the house alone the girl was perfectly approachable. After a short time Kim's vocabulary expanded way beyond "Ya negat rozumigut", largely with the help of Dukov's moody teenager.

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August 15 was a significant day for the members of Victor Dukov's courier service. On that day there were to be no deliveries during the morning, no bicycle runs whatsoever. On that day Kim briefly saw a different side of Victor Dukov, even if it was only for a single day. It was the day Kim's co-worker Vita completed his sentence for fighting in school. It was a significant day for Vita and one that Victor and his staff fully appreciated. Vita would enter the courtroom still a criminal, but would exit as a free man.

Unlike trials, the only day of the week that end-of-sentence ceremonies were held was on Mondays. Normally around 20 criminals ended their sentences on any given week. It was a significant event in their lives and one marked by a formal celebration of the transition from criminals to free citizens.

Monday morning Victor and his couriers went to the courthouse. Vita separated from the group to hug his parents, and then joined the group of naked soon-to-be ex-criminals waiting at the entrance of the main hall of the court. The departure of Vita left Kim feeling a bit uneasy, given that she now was the only naked member of the courier group and as of today would be the only naked member of Victor's staff. She pushed that thought aside and tried to concentrate on Vita, not herself.

The courtroom was filled with relatives, co-workers, and friends of the 19 criminals whose sentences would end that day. There was a lot of happy chatter among the audience. The atmosphere was similar to the over-all feel of a graduation ceremony.

A trumpeter in a traditional Danubian tunic blew a very old horn, signaling the criminals to enter the chamber. They filed in, 12 men and 7 women. They knelt and put their heads to the carpet, for the last time of their lives. The trumpeter blew again.

"Doc-doc Danube!"

The entire room put their right hands to their left shoulders, except for the hand-full of criminals in the audience such as Kim. The criminals in the audience dropped to their knees and put their foreheads to the carpet. The judge who had sentenced Kim six weeks before entered the room, and everyone in the audience sat down. The 19 criminals in the front of the room stayed kneeling, although they knelt upright to be able to watch the proceedings.

Vladim Dukov and three other Spokespersons for the Criminals came forward. They saluted the judge, who saluted back.

The judge asked each Spokesperson if each of the criminals under his or her authority had completed their sentences and whether or not they were ready to assume the rights and responsibilities of a free citizen. He asked the same question 19 times. Kim heard a loud "Doc!" 19 times. The judge then gave a brief speech about the transition from criminal to free citizen and the significance of reform and a new start in life.

The next part of the ceremony was the de-collaring of the criminals. One by one they came forward and knelt facing a sturdy metal post. The collar technician then hooked a scary-looking device to the post and closed it around the criminal's collar. The device looked like a huge pair of pliers. It had several clamps that latched into the collar and firing pin to snap the collar's latch. The technician fired the pin into the collar's locking mechanism and pulled it apart by opening the extractor's handles. Once the collar was off, the technician quickly removed the small transmitter and then handed the open collar back to the ex-criminal.

Still naked, but now free citizens, the ex-criminals lined up for the next part of the ceremony; the passing out of their clothes. There were 19 sets of traditional Danubian clothing waiting, tunics for the men and dresses for the women. The Spokespersons placed the respective outfits at the feet of each of their clients. Once everyone was ready, the judge ordered the ex-criminals to get dressed. They did so, quickly. The Spokespersons then stepped in front of the group and saluted them. Their ex-clients saluted back, then turned around and faced their audience, smiling and holding their collars over their heads. The room exploded into cheering and camera flashes. The long suffering of these 19 persons had come to an end.

Later that afternoon Victor Dukov held a small party for Vita in the office. The party was short, because Vita later had to go home and celebrate with his family. Vita's co-workers teased him about the tan-line around his neck from where the collar had been. There was laughter and good cheer in the office. Tomorrow Victor would return to his usual dour over-bearing self, but for one day, at least, he proved himself able to celebrate a joyful moment in another person's life.

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Kim's bike routes frequently took her past the plaza where the Temple of the Ancients was located. The first couple of times she passed the Temple she experienced both fear and regret over what that building meant for the loss of her old life. However, towards the end of August the location also began to symbolize a new beginning for Kim and new hope for her future.

On a blazing hot day Kim finished her morning deliveries early. However, she was dehydrated and did not want to wait to go all the way back to Victor's office just to have some water. She decided to stop at the outdoor cafe across from the Temple, the one where she had gone with Tiffany and Susan just before they were arrested. The naked waiter was there, the same shy young man that Tiffany had tormented just before Kim's arrest. She sat down and ordered a large glass of fruit punch, and... oh please, with lots of ice.

The cafe was nearly empty, leaving the young waiter with some spare time to converse with Kim. She could tell he was fascinated with her. Suddenly she found herself somewhat attracted to him as well. He was not the type of guy she would have been attracted to in the US, but she had changed as a result of her two months in Upper Danubia. Kim realized that she desperately needed someone to talk to who was not connected to Dukov or his family. In a flash she realized this waiter was her first chance to make a friend of her own, one who she had chosen herself.

The waiter's name was Sergekt. Kim found the name hard to pronounce correctly, but he in turn called her "Geemberglek". The two laughed at the mangled pronunciation of each other's names. With that they briefly exchanged a few details about their lives. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Some new customers came into the cafe and Kim's cell phone went off, pulling her and Sergekt away from their brief conversation. With that Kim was back on her bicycle, but she shyly smiled and waved to Sergekt as she pulled away. She badly wanted to see him again.

Over the next few days Kim never missed a chance to stop at the cafe, even if she could only stay a few minutes. Finally at the end of her fifth visit, Sergekt asked her when she got off work. It turned out that Kim would be off work just after Sergekt got off, giving him time to meet her outside Victor Dukov's office. The result was a pleasant uninterrupted conversation at a nearby cafe. Kim had to force Sergekt to repeat himself many times to understand him, but gradually she found out more about him.

Sergekt had completed the first year of a three-year sentence for participating in a student riot at his high school. Kim was not able to understand much of Sergekt's explanation of why the riot took place, but apparently a total of 28 students had been convicted of the crimes of insurrection and vandalism resulting from the incident.

Kim did understand enough of Sergekt's explanation to get a perspective on how Danubians saw "honor". When the 28 students were brought before the judge, each refused to say anything about what any of the others had done. Apparently both the judge and the police chief had expected the students would not say anything against each other, and thus the group had to be punished collectively. They were sentenced to three and a half years, collared, and returned to their school. They were switched one-by-one in the school courtyard in front of their classmates, something that took up an entire school day. Because they were under-aged, their punishments were not televised. The offenders then returned to their classes as criminals, naked except for their collars. As far as everyone was concerned the matter was closed and no one ever mentioned it again. All 28 students graduated at the end of the previous May, some of them with honors. Most were now in college. However, the sentences remained, the expected price of loyalty and friendship among the group. Every four months they had to show up at the local police station near their old school to be switched, a burden they would endure until their collars came off two years in the future.

Sergekt was all too-aware of Kim's case. More than anything else he was shocked and appalled by the behavior of her friends Tiffany and Susan, as were many other Danubians. No Danubian in his right mind would ever dishonor himself by betraying a friend out of self-interest. The American tourists had violated one of the most fundamental values of Danubian society, the belief that friendship is sacred and friends never betray each other. Sergekt believed that having to endure the betrayal of her friends must have been far worse for his guest to endure than her actual punishment. Kim sighed and thought to herself, you don't know my country, Sergekt. Where I'm from it's everyone looking out for Number One.

It was only natural that two criminals would start out by talking about their sentences and convictions, since that was the one thing all criminals had in common. However, both Kim and Sergekt realized that to become friends they had to move beyond that topic and see each other as individuals, not as fellow criminals. They probed each other's interests, but quickly realized that Kim's Danubian vocabulary was not advanced enough to have such a conversation. Sergekt finally decided to invite Kim out on Sunday, for a walk in the park, for dinner, and for a movie. That sounded great, yes, just hanging out. She agreed, but later decided it would be a good idea to clear her plans with Spokesman Dukov first.

That night Kim found out that she was quite right in taking the precaution of clearing the planned afternoon of "hanging out" with her custodian.

"Kimberly, as long as you are in my house, there will be no 'hanging out', as you say it, with a young man who has not sat at my table. I will not tolerate such improper behavior in my household. That young man will sit at my table before you spend any time alone with him."

Kim was a bit taken aback, not only by Dukov's response, but also by the harsh tone he used when he responded. She did not feel that the Spokesman was treating her like an adult. However, the following day Kim briefly saw Sergekt and brought up her guardian's objection. Sergekt seemed very embarrassed and apologetic. He immediately agreed to go to Dukov's office and ask for permission to visit his house.

Kim somewhat resented the whole exercise in permissions. All she wanted was have a friend and spend Sunday afternoon with someone her own age. She did not want a long-term relationship, just a friend. However, apparently in this country all contact between a young man and a young woman had to be sanctioned by the girl's parents, no matter how casual it might be.

Saturday afternoon Vladim and Maritza Dukov dressed up in traditional Danubian clothing; a tunic for him and an old-style dress for her. They prepared several elaborate traditional dishes and awaited Sergekt.

Kim rolled her eyes when she saw the set-up in the kitchen. This is totally ridiculous, she thought to herself. We're just friends. That's all I want from him. On top of everything else, she was not even Dukov's daughter. But she had learned not to argue. Upper Danubia had its own logic that she could only begin to fathom.

Sergekt came onto the Dukovs' property. Because Dukov was a public official Kim's friend immediately went to his knees, touching his forehead to the ground. Dukov quickly requested that Sergekt stand up and join himself, his wife, and his client at dinner. Dukov and Maritza spoke at length with Sergekt as Kim stayed quiet. Over time Sergekt spoke more and more. The elder Dukovs initially wanted to have three basic questions answered, what had Sergekt done to be convicted as a criminal, how he saw himself as a person, and what were his plans for the future. Once Sergekt answered to their satisfaction, the conversation became more two-way.

The evening ended pleasantly enough with a strange combination of salutations. At first Dukov warmly shook Sergekt's hand and patted his arm, but then Kim's friend acknowledged his role as a criminal by going to his knees and placing his forehead on the ground. Kim did not like any of this. She resented having Sergekt essentially spend the evening with the elder Dukovs instead of with herself, and she resented all the formality. However, in the end Kim got what she wanted, Dukov's official blessing that she be allowed to spend time alone with Sergekt.

"Sergekt is a man with honor. He has proper values. He will become a good friend for you."

Gee, thanks "Dad", thought Kim to herself. I think I had that figured out already.

Later that night, when she was alone, Kim gave some thought over the significance of the Dukov's stepping into her personal life. He had handled the matter with Sergekt in the same way he would have handled it with his own daughter. She now remembered that there had been no recent mention of her needing to find her own place, no hint that Dukov and Maritza expected her to move out any time soon. Increasingly, whenever the elder Dukovs went out, they wanted Kim to go with them. It seemed that at first they had taken Criminal # 98945 in as a temporary house-guest, but now increasingly they were subjecting her to household rules and Danubian protocol. For better or for worse, with no one ever saying anything about it, Kim had become a member of the Dukov family.

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Kim spent a very pleasant Sunday afternoon with Sergekt. They went into town and walked along the Danube River, struggling to get to know each other through the language barrier. They had Kim's dictionary and were constantly looking up words. They had dinner at a cafe in the warm late-summer sun, and finally went to see a British movie. The movie must have been 30 years old, but it was in English with Danubian subtitles. Kim was grateful that Sergekt had taken the effort to find a movie she could understand. It was nice to hear something in English again.

Kim's second outing with Sergekt was a crash-course in Danubian culture. It also was the beginning of many huge changes in Kim's life; of her relationship with Sergekt, how she saw her own role as a Danubian criminal, and ultimately how she would look at herself.

Sergekt suggested going to a nightclub called the Socrates Club. Kim was thrilled. A nightclub, we can actually go to a nightclub? Sure enough, in the old part of town was the Socrates Club, which had been in that location for many years. Apparently the club was only for criminals and ex-criminals. The first thing she noticed was that everyone going into the club was naked. Not everyone was wearing collars, but club protocol mandated that anyone not still wearing a collar had to show proper respect to those who were still serving their sentences by not entering the club dressed. At first Kim felt a pang of fear, thinking that a nightclub only for criminals might be dangerous. Once inside, she realized that danger was the farthest thing from anyone's mind.

Danubians often used the saying "to sing like a criminal" to describe a person who was capable of expressing himself in a very emotional or moving manner. The expression resulted from the fact that most of the country's romantic and serious music was written and sung by criminals, and most of that music had its origins in the Socrates Club.

Kim later learned the club was a fixture in Danubian popular culture. It was a refuge for Danube City's criminals, a place where they could express themselves to a sympathetic audience, listen to each other's poetry and music, and share what they had created. The evening's entertainment started as club-goers stood before the audience to express their feelings, in as poetic a manner as possible. The poetry readings allowed other club members who had a talent for writing music to pick up ideas for songs from their companions on stage. During the ensuing week musicians in the audience wrote songs and music, which in turn were performed by the criminals who had the best talent for singing and playing instruments. It was a collaborative effort that produced a huge amount of very high-quality music, much of which eventually made it to Danubian radio.

Sergekt introduced Criminal # 98945 to a bunch of his fellow classmates. They greeted her warmly, but also with much curiosity. Finally they were able to meet the young American drug addict who had been so horribly betrayed by her friends. Kim saw in them a group of determined and very serious young people, hardly a group of rioting hooligans. Again she wondered what on earth had happened at their school. She also saw in them a group of people her own age with whom she would be able to hang out. Kim was a foreigner and a convicted drug-user, and yet Sergekt's friends seemed to accept her as one of their own.

The group ordered several pitchers of Danubian beer and sat down at a couple of tables that had been pushed together. Sergekt's friends talked a bit about themselves one-by-one. For a long time Kim struggled with introducing herself and trying to understand as much as she could from her companions. That effort was cut short by the beginning of the night's activities, the poetry reading. Two of Sergekt's classmates participated in that portion of the entertainment, as did five other club-goers.

Sergekt and five companions excused themselves for the next portion of the evening, the musical presentation. As two of his classmates, a man and a woman, sang together, the other four in the group played back-up instruments. Sergekt played an instrument that looked something like a balalaika. Even though Kim could only understand a few of the words from the group's songs, she could tell they were immensely sad and moving. One song she did understand almost in its entirety. It was a duet from Sergekt's classmates, in which the male singer lamented about no longer being able to sit at the table of his girlfriend's family; while she responded that she would wait for his sentence to end, and then insist he be allowed to return to her house.

Once Sergekt's group was finished singing, several others followed, all of which had produced excellent music for their companions. The criminals sung of lost love and lost opportunities, and also of the humiliations and physical suffering they were enduring. They sang about friendship and the personal sacrifices a person sometimes had to make to stay loyal to a friend. Above all, however, the criminals sang about their hope for the future. Kim sat fascinated as she listed to one sad philosophical song after another. None of the music that came out of the Socrates Club was light and happy, and certainly was not the type of music that would go very far in the United States. However, Kim reflected that what she was listening to now came far closer to the reality of her life than the escapist industrial product coming out of Hollywood.

Sergekt and Kim got up to dance, joining several other naked couples on the dance floor. They danced slowly and sadly, holding on to each other and seeking refuge from their lives on the outside. Kim vaguely wondered if Vladim Dukov and his fiancee Maritza might have danced here 25 years ago.

Sergekt and Kim left the club very late. The temperature outside was chilly, a warning that summer was coming to an end. On the way home the couple hugged each other for warmth. Kim was thrilled at the feel of Sergekt's body against her own as they huddled together on the trolley to Dukov's house. By the time Sergekt left Kim at Dukov's front door, she realized that her feelings towards him were much more than friendship. Perhaps her Spokesman had been right after-all by taking this relationship seriously from the very beginning.

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The following day was the first day of high school for Dukov's teenager. That morning the Spokesman's household was hit by a loud crisis. It began very early with several doors slamming and Anyia screaming at her mother. Both Vladim and Maritza tried to reason with the irate teenager, but she stormed off and slammed yet another door. There was more yelling, and another door slam.

The issue was the teenager's school uniform. Having spent the entire summer tanning, the Anyia wanted to show off as much of her body as possible by converting her uniform skirt to a mini-skirt and shortening the sleeves of her blouse. Dukov was incensed. He had no problem with his daughter lying naked in the back yard all summer, but when it came to the school uniform she needed to wear it properly. Maritza had found the mini-skirt in the girl's closet and burned it the night before, replacing it with a standard school skirt. Once Anyia discovered her converted skirt was now a pile of ashes in the backyard fire-pit, she directed her wrath full-force at her parents.

The battle continued four days; screaming and door-slamming in the mornings and tense sullen silence at dinner each night. Danubians normally tended to spoil their children and rarely punished them, but by Thursday Dukov had enough. He borrowed a leather switch from the police chief and returned home with it that night. He did not really want to use it, but he was ready to if necessary. That night Vladim and Maritza Dukov sat their daughter down in the living room. Dukov pulled out the switch, tapped it in his hand, and in Danubian stated very coldly:

"I brought this switch from work today and I am keeping it in the library. I want you to understand the issue of your school uniform is resolved to the satisfaction of your mother and myself. Whether or not it is resolved to your satisfaction is of no concern to me whatsoever. There will be no further talk about your school uniform in this house. If you wish to discuss it further, you can get undressed and we'll settle matters in the backyard with you bent over a chair. Now, do you want to talk about your uniform anymore?"

The wide-eyed girl shook her head. "N... negat, Papa."

With that peace returned to the Dukov household. However, the next day, as she was heading to work, Kim noticed Anyia standing in front of her friend's house. The friend was showing the girl how to shorten her skirt by rolling it up at the waist. Kim pretended not to notice. Better not to get involved in this one, she thought to herself.

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The desire to talk burned inside Criminal # 98945 the week after she visited the Socrates Club. She had so much she needed to get off her chest. Where to begin? At night she began writing her disjointed thoughts down on paper. She wrote about everything she could think of; the kindness of the Dukov's, her feelings about Tiffany, the painful conversations with her parents, the horror of her first two days while under arrest. She wanted to talk, to be heard, and to have her feelings put into a song. Ultimately she wanted to stand at the microphone at the Socrates Club and speak her mind.

Finally Kim settled on an unlikely topic for her first reading; her mountain bike in the US. Somehow that bike seemed to represent everything she had been given in the past and never appreciated. She struggled with the words in English, trying to make sure that her listeners could understand her bicycle as a metaphor for something much greater in her life than simply an unappreciated object.

She presented her idea to Dukov, who spent three hours helping her translate the text to Danubian. Anyia then helped her go over the phrases and memorize them. Finally Kim presented the idea to Sergekt, who looked over her text. She could tell he liked it tremendously.

Two weeks after she visited the Socrates Club for the first time, Kim spoke to her fellow criminals in heavily accented Danubian. She stood at the microphone with her knees shaking as she struggled to express herself in a language she still only partially knew. The entire club listened with respect to the perspective of an American trying to come to terms with being a Danubian criminal.

Two weeks after Kim's first speech to the club a group of Sergekt's friends presented a song titled "Nemat mi biciklet". They officially dedicated the song to Criminal # 98945.