**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 5 - Two Dukovs in Court**

Vladim Dukov was a Spokesman-for-the-Criminal. He son Vladik was a police officer. It was only a matter of time before Vladim would become the Spokesman for defendants arrested by his son.

The same day his daughter's school uniform issue was "settled", at least in Vladim Dukov's mind, Vladik arrested two burglars. Over the summer they had broken into several homes around the Dukovs' neighborhood to steal money and jewelry. In two of the burglaries they had killed family dogs protecting their owners' houses. It was a Danubian crime-wave that terrified the entire neighborhood.

The two men finally were caught while trying to sell the jewelry to a Russian who was working undercover for the Danubian police. The case was fairly straightforward, except the two suspects had been classmates of Vladik, and were assigned to Vladim as clients.

The case gave Kim a chance to see the trial and punishment of two newly convicted criminals up close. Kim's schedule of running all over Danube City was changed that day, because Victor decided to have Kim go directly to his brother's office and handle all the messages related to the trial. Kim would have to spend the entire day relaying documents, signature sheets, evidence, photos, and conviction packages between the police chief, Vladim Dukov's office, Vladim's son Vladik, and the court officials across the square. Even though Kim would have plenty of down-time that day as she waited for the case to run its course through the trial, it made more sense simply to have one courier moving the documents instead of constantly calling whoever was available at the moment. The lovely part of the entire arrangement for Kim was the temporary liberation from her boss's cell phone. Cell phones were strictly prohibited in both the police station and the courthouse. As a result Kim's cell phone sat silent in Victor's office during this particular assignment. She looked forward to spending an entire day not having to listen to her boss's voice.

The day started with Kim picking up the arrest report from Vladik and taking it upstairs to Dukov's office. As she entered she passed two very scared-looking naked young men kneeling on the floor of the reception area. Kim sympathized, but at the same time felt a twinge of erotic excitement. She would be on-hand to witness the collaring and punishment of these two thieves, an event probably just an hour or two away.

Dukov came out to unhook the handcuffs of the two suspects and had them follow him into his office. As he did for Kim, the Spokesman offered his clients a light breakfast, although this time it was just tea and breakfast rolls, no fruit. As the two suspects ate, Kim handed Vladik's investigation and arrest packages to Dukov. The Spokesman thumbed through the folders and sighed. He addressed Kim in English.

"There is very little in these papers that can help them. I do not believe I can rightfully request leniency; not with what is here. I can only hope that by conversing with them I might uncover something in their favor not reflected in these reports."

Dukov signed several acknowledgements of document delivery and then sent Criminal # 98945 across the plaza to the courthouse to deliver them.

Kim returned to Dukov's office with a trial schedule. Within 30 minutes the guard would arrive to take the suspects across the plaza to their trial. Conviction and a full sentence were a sure thing for these two. The evidence against them was overwhelming. Worse, while Kim was at the courthouse, Dukov discovered that both men were ecstasy users, which was why they were stealing. Under Danubian law he did not have the right to withhold that information from the police. Dukov called the police doctor downstairs and relayed the information. The two suspects now had to be tested for drug use before their trial. Dukov then called the judge. The trial had to be delayed, pending the drug test.

Vladik and his female partner quickly showed up to handcuff the two young men and take them downstairs, where the police doctor and his medical students were waiting. Kim had to go as well, with a couple of medical questionnaires. Once those were filled out she had to run them back across the plaza to the courthouse. She felt a grim sense of nostalgia as she entered the examination room. This room was not a place of happy memories for Criminal # 98945. The medical students all looked at the American as she entered, but fortunately today she was not the subject of their testing. As Vladik and his partner entered the students saluted them. They saluted back and turned the offenders over to the head doctor.

The police doctor was holding his switch, just in case there was any hint of rebellion from these two thieves and drug-users. They knelt on the floor as the doctor explained to his class they would be testing the two subjects for ecstasy. He passed out testing kits and then called three female medical students to step forward. They would help prepare the suspects for their medical exam.

The doctor gave one of the kneeling suspects a sharp tap on the shoulder and ordered him to stand up. He hooked the suspect's handcuffs to a metal ring on the side of the examination table and ordered him to spread his legs and lean back a bit. Once the suspect complied his pubic area was completely exposed to everyone in the room. A female medical student then lathered the suspect's pubic hair with shaving cream and pulled out an old fashion straight-edged razor. The student needed to shave the suspect, and she decided to have a little fun with her assignment. She held the razor close to the suspect's terrified face and smiled. In Danubian she taunted him: "You better stay VERY still when I shave you. If you don't, something else besides your hair might end up on the floor, something I really don't think you'd want to lose."

With that the student carefully shaved the suspect. She fondled his penis and testicles, gently massaging and pushing them back and forth. By the time she finished the suspect had a furious erection. The female medical students from the class stood in front of their victim, commenting on the size of his organs and joking about the hard-on. The older doctor and the male students stood back, smiling and making crude sexual jokes at the expense of the suspect. The female student assigned to shaving finished by rinsing off the suspect with a warm washrag, something that aroused him even more. She gave his penis a gentle squeeze and then unhooked his cuffs from the examination table. She ordered him to kneel on the floor, his erection pointing up from between his legs and a truly miserable expression on his face.

The doctor then tapped the shoulder of the second suspect, and another female student repeated the shaving ordeal on him. There were more comments from the females in the class and more jokes from the males. Kim shuddered. Holy shit... at least they didn't do this to me, she thought to herself.

The doctor laid two bedpans in front of the two kneeling suspects and ordered them to pee. One of them emptied his bladder with no problem, but the other had the same problem Kim had, he just couldn't piss in front of a room full of people. The doctor picked up the leather switch and struck him hard across the shoulders four times before the suspect was able to comply with the demand to fill the bedpan.

There was the same testing on the urine samples that there had been when Kim was the subject, and there were 40 positive results, two for each student. Oh yes, documented drug users!

There was the same test on the suspects' blood and the same over-all medical check-up. However, one of the female medical students had a wicked idea when she noticed one of the suspects once again had a hard-on. She whispered the idea into the ear of the head doctor, who smiled and commented. "Ha, Magda, you are an evil little thing, aren't you? Sure, let's have some fun before these two go to trial."

With that the eight female medical students in the class split up into two teams, and the males placed bets on which team would win. Kim wondered to herself... win what?

The women ordered the two suspects to stand up. Two members of each team each grabbed an arm of their victim with one hand and started massaging his chest with the other. The other two team-members put on medical gloves and took up their positions, one behind the victim and the other in front. The student behind each suspect shoved a finger up his bottom and quickly located the suspect's prostate gland. The student in front grabbed the suspect's penis in one hand and his testicles in the other. At a whistle from a male classmate the females began rubbing and massaging the two suspects' prostates and penises. Quickly both young men had furious erections. They shivered and groaned as they came, shooting sperm across the floor in front of them. The male students whistled and applauded. They noted where the semen had landed and cheered Magda, the leader of the winning team. Her suspect had ejaculated first, and had ejaculated farthest. As Magda smiled and blushed, the whole room laughed and shouted: "Doc-doc Magda! Doc-doc Magda!"

Kim stood dumbfounded, wondering if Dukov was aware of what was going on down here. Anyhow, Vladik and his partner were quietly watching the whole affair with disapproving expressions on their faces. Finally in voice that reflected impatience and disgust he commented: "Doctor, I would very much like to get these two to trial. If you want to have sperm races down here I'd appreciate it if you do it on your own time, not mine."

With that the fun ended. The two suspects were briefly un-cuffed to shower and then re-cuffed to take across the plaza. Kim, meanwhile, ran the confirmation sheets up to Dukov's office for his signature and then over to the courthouse for more signatures, then back to the Spokesman's office. By now the two unhappy defendants were standing outside his door, ready to be taken over to the courthouse by Vladik and his partner.

Kim was on-hand to witness the trial and punishment of the two thieves and newly-identified drug users. As a courier, she had the right to sit in the press area of the courtroom, something she took advantage of to get a better view.

Dukov was not in a good mood at all. Not only was he on opposite sides from his own son; there was absolutely nothing in this case to allow him to argue for a reduced sentence. Still, he considered it a point of personal honor to argue for some sort of modification of the punishment. Finally he settled on the idea of reducing the number of switchings the two thieves had to face in favor of frequent drug-testing. It was the best he could do. As in every case he handled, his goal that day was to reduce the suffering of his clients as much as possible.

The trial went quickly and the sentence was standard for the crimes. The criminals got five years for the burglaries, two years for vandalism and animal cruelty, and five years for ecstasy use. They would be tested for drug use every 30 days and switched every five months. Furthermore, they were prohibited from having contact with each other during their sentences. To make sure they could not see each other, the judge ordered that they would have to draw lots to see which of them would move out of the Danube City collar zone and into Rika Chorna. Dukov's only success that day was reducing the frequency of switchings from once every three months to once every five months. It wasn't much, but at least he had done something for them.

The two criminals looked at each other in fear as they knelt to have their collars fitted and put on. Once collared, they knelt forward to put their heads on the carpet, their exposed bottoms and testicles high in the air for anyone behind them to clearly see. Dukov ordered his clients to stand up and led them to his son and his female police partner. The Spokesman saluted his son and presented the two young men for judicial punishment. Both knelt to kiss the shoes of the two police officers.

Although Vladik had been the arresting officer for both men, he needed to turn over the punishment of one of them to his female partner. He had been classmates with both criminals, but one of them in particular he knew very well, the two having played together in the school's soccer team. Under Danubian social protocol, Vladik could not punish his former friend, nor would he have wanted to. He needed to turn the punishment of his former teammate over to his female partner. The other criminal he would punish himself, since he had not known him that well in school and did not have the same social prohibitions against punishing him.

Vladik quietly addressed his former teammate. "You might as well go first. My partner will administer your punishment. I want you to show some courage while she switches you, which is something you seemed to have lost over the last couple of years. It hurts me to see you like this, but you did this to yourself."

"I'm sorry Vladik. I really am."

"I'm not Vladik to you anymore. You have dishonored our friendship, you have dishonored your teammates, and you have dishonored our school. You are now a criminal and I am a cop. You will address me as Officer Dukov. Please don't make that mistake again when you talk to me. But... but, I guess... I'm sorry too."

With that Vladik and his partner took his ex-teammate's hands and guided him over the table. They secured his wrists and ankles with the straps. Vladik's female partner pulled him to the side and quietly asked him.

"Vladik, do you want me to go easy on him, since he was your teammate?"

"No. I don't want you to show him any mercy, none whatsoever. I want you to switch him as hard as you possibly can without breaking his skin or getting my father to intervene."

The female cop nodded. "As you wish, Vladik."

Vladik's partner positioned herself near the punishment table, lightly touched her victim's bottom with the switch, drew it back and laid a fearful blow across the base of the criminal's bottom. It was a vicious blow aimed right at a very sensitive area. Vladik's classmate groaned, his voice close to breaking at the very first stroke. She waited a few seconds, then struck again, only slightly higher than the first blow.

The female officer carefully timed the first 10 strokes, laying them across both bottom-cheeks. She struck hard, moving her entire body with the swing. Her aim was excellent. She laid one hard stroke after another on her victim's bottom, leaving it covered with vicious welts perfectly parallel and very close to each other. The criminal's voice broke at the fifth blow. By the tenth blow he was crying non-stop.

Vladik's partner methodically moved on to the next part of the switching, 10 full-force blows on her victim's right bottom-cheek and ten more full force blows on the victim's left bottom cheek. She carefully aimed at the unmarked parts of the criminal's bottom, hitting so hard that she came close to breaking the skin each time the switch landed. Vladik's ex-teammate screamed over and over, sobbing and begging for mercy. Vladik shook his head. This ex-friend of his was dishonoring himself yet again with all that racket. The young police officer looked up at the cameras focused on the criminal's punishment table. Yes, Vladik thought to himself, film it. Let the whole nation know what a coward he really is.

After just 30 strokes it was obvious there was no way Vladik's partner could continue to punish his classmate's bottom. Already both bottom-cheeks were a mass of very severe welts and quite swollen. Instead, the female officer slowly worked her way down the offender's thighs, laying seven full-force strokes on his left thigh and then seven full-force strokes on his right thigh. By now the criminal was sobbing so hard that his body was jerking back and forth on the punishment table. There were only six strokes to go, all of which Vladik's partner laid across the offender's shoulders. Six very loud screams punctuated the final set of strokes.

Vladik and his partner quickly un-buckled the straps that attached his former classmate. As a gesture of contempt the two officers pulled the sobbing criminal off the table and dropped him on the floor in the same manner they might have handled a sack of rotten potatoes. He remained on the ground, still sobbing loudly. Kim later learned that pulling a punished criminal off the switching table and dropping him on the floor was the supreme insult a Danubian police officer could level in the courtroom. Normally the punishing officer allowed the criminal to get off the table on his own, once he had sufficiently recovered to stand up.

Vladik and the female officer then saluted each other, a quick formal gesture indicating that Vladik was now taking charge of the switching table from his partner. He glanced over at the second criminal, the one he now would punish. He tapped the table with his switch. The man sadly nodded and bent over the table, extending his arms to fit into the straps on the surface. Vladik's partner quickly secured the criminal's wrists and ankles.

Vladik was a serious officer and never attempted to fondle or sexually humiliate a criminal. In that respect the criminals he punished were lucky, since he did not like to have "fun" with them at their expense. However, like his partner, he was a severe disciplinarian who carefully measured and timed the strokes to maximize the pain and impact of any punishment he administered. He wielded his switch with maximum effect.

Using the same technique as his partner, Vladim began the switching with 10 parallel strokes across the criminal's bottom given full-force, then 10 strokes on each side, once again, given full-force. He then slowly struck the criminal's bottom again, trying to maximize the number of strokes on the bottom before having to punish the subject's legs or back. As a result, Vladik's victim received 38 strokes on the bottom and 12 on the thighs, none across the back.

In spite of Vladik's talent with the switch, the criminal he punished proved to be much braver than the one punished by his partner. He gasped and sweat during the first 38 strokes, but managed to stay quiet. His voice did not break until the 39th stroke, but even then, he had the good sense to not beg for mercy and tried to keep his screams to a minimum. Once the punishment ended he forced himself to quit crying. Vladik undid the burglar's straps, but allowed him to get up on his own.

Vladik and his partner led the two punished criminals before the bench. The criminals turned their backsides to the judge, who in turn examined the welts and signed the punishment certificates. Then both criminals knelt at Vladik's feet and kissed the toes of his shoes. The braver of the two criminals immediately thanked Vladik for punishing him. Vladik touched the man's shoulder with his switch and with a salute released him back into the custody of Spokesman Dukov. The other criminal knelt at the feet of the female officer, still crying and trying to force out the needed "Spakeebo dakub moigu." Finally he sort of got it out. The female cop did not push the issue. She wanted to be rid of the pathetic creature. She touched her switch to his shoulder and released him back into Vladim Dukov's custody.

As she sat among the reporters, Kim had a bit of a problem. She was totally turned on by the whole punishment scene, and during the entire time had been gently rubbing her legs together. Now she was as excited as she had been when she saw her own punishment on TV, but she was in the middle of a busy courtroom, officially at work as a courier, and needed to spend the afternoon running messages and signature sheets back and forth. She was wet, and what was worse, a cameraman kept glancing over at her, as though he knew something. Kim quickly ran to the restroom and cleaned herself up as best she could, but the burning erotic excitement continued to torment her.

Dukov's two criminals staggered across the plaza with their Spokesman as Kim picked up their punishment certificates and sentencing sheets. Once again she was running all over the courthouse and the police station looking for signatures, stamps, certified copies, delivering documents, picking up other documents. Finally she returned to Dukov's office and passed the two criminals lying face down on recovery tables.

Kim was a bit surprised to see Vladik and his partner in Vladim Dukov's office when she entered to deliver some papers. Vladik's presence eliminated at least one trip for Kim, since now he was on-hand to sign several medical certificates and receive a copy of the two criminals' sentencing sheets.

Vladim invited Kim to sit down and join them for a snack of Danubian fruit punch and cheese-rolls. As she sat down many questions entered her mind, among them how did Vladim and Vladik Dukov handle the conflicting goals of their jobs. Dukov's answer surprised Kim.

"Kimberly, our positions do not conflict at all. We all work for the same purpose, to keep our country safe under our laws. It is all one system. I am a part of that system, and Vladik is a different part of that system. It is like saying your hand and your foot are different from each other. Yes, they are indeed, but the body needs both the hand and the foot, just like a society needs policemen and its criminals need Spokespersons." Dukov sipped his punch, smiled at Vladik, and continued. "I will tell you that Vladik and I are very proud when we salute each other in court. I take pride in knowing he is a police officer, and he takes pride in knowing I am a Spokesman. Perhaps we must challenge each other at times, but in the end we want the same thing. We want the Duchy to be a safe and tranquil place for the people who live here."

"... and you're satisfied with the way things are here? You like... the whole thing with the collars and the switchings... and making criminals run around in the nude?"

"It is not that I like it, Kimberly. I was a criminal myself and I know what it is to dread the switch year after year. I feel very bad for the people who must suffer the consequences of their actions, which is why I studied to become a Spokesman. I do what I can to reduce the suffering criminals must face and fight any injustices that may work their way into the system. You, for example, suffered a great injustice at the hands of your friends and the prosecutor, which I had to address. Yes, we have problems, and our system has its deficiencies." Dukov took another sip of his punch and continued.

"But, think about it, Kimberly. No matter how cruel you may think things are here, remember one fact. Our country has no jails. We do not confine anyone for more than one night. The rest of the world says that what we do to our criminals is barbaric. But is it? Is it not more barbaric to put a person in a cage for many years and cut him off from his loved ones, from his work, from any usefulness in life?"

"Yes, Spokesman Dukov, I guess I see your point. To be honest, I still don't like what's happened to me, but you're right that it's better than sitting in a prison cell."

Vladik's police radio went off, calling him to an emergency a few blocks away. The two police officers excused themselves and left Dukov's office. Dukov decided to change the topic in his conversation with Kim.

"Kimberly, I would like to know something. What do you think would have happened to you if you had smoked your marijuana in peace and left the ground behind the Temple of the Ancients? If you had never been arrested and continued on your trip to Prague?"

"I guess we would have hit a bunch of discos in Prague, crashed at some friends' places... Tiff knows a bunch of people there. We'd of partied, maybe looked around a bit... probably not that much though... mostly we were partying."

"... and the marijuana? What would you have done with it?"

"Smoked it. Maybe party a bit with it... invite some friends to smoke... Tiff wanted to trade some of it for some smack... that's part of the reason we had so much with us."

"... and do you perceive that as a worthwhile use of your time... and your money?"

"No, of course it isn't. But you know how it is... people want to party and they don't know when to stop."

"Kimberly, another question... if I may... If you look back at your life in June through the prism of who you have become in September, how do you see yourself?"

Kim thought about it. Finally she answered. "If you really want to know, I don't think things were going well. I mean... we came to Europe to see it, and all we were doing was getting high. We spent a bunch of money to get to Amsterdam, and we just sat in the pot cafes all day, smoking weed. I was doing more and more of it. That's why I got kinda desperate after lunch when we got here... I just had to have a smoke. It was all weed for me, and... here Tiff was talking about smack... and I would have tried it... and I know better. That stuff fucks you up, but I would have done it anyway."

"... and there is my point. You had dedicated your life to your "partying," as you say it. Your life was not going in a good direction. It is quite possible your experience may have ended elsewhere under equally bad, or even worse, circumstances. If you believe yourself unlucky please give that consideration."

Kim sat silent for a minute. "Spokesman Dukov... there is something else that I realize. I don't like who I was back in June. I mean... I pulled a lot of shit on my parents and on everyone else. I didn't appreciate anything... all I wanted to do was party."

"Like in your bicycle poem... "

"Like in my bicycle poem. Exactly Spokesman... like in my bicycle poem. I didn't appreciate anything... not if it wasn't from Tiff and Susan... and now all that's gone, and I don't know what I want. I really don't know... "

Dukov smiled slightly. "There is no rush. You have two years to figure it out. That is one thing that seems to trouble you Americans; you think you need to have everything in your lives resolved right away. Such haste in life is unnecessary. Perhaps... perhaps your two years in our country will serve its purpose. You will have time to reflect about your life, and to think about what you really want for yourself."

Kim sighed. "I don't know." She tugged at her collar. "This sure is a rough way to do it."

"It is never easy, Kimberly. It is not meant to be easy. It is meant to work. It is meant to force you to change." Dukov stood up and smiled. "Come. Let us return to my house and have dinner. You can leave Victor's bicycle up here instead of returning it tonight. I will call him and let him know that I instructed you to do so."

**Chapter 6 � The Day of the Dead**

In the middle of September there was another indication that Kim was becoming more settled in her new life in Danube City. She sat at the table of Sergekt's mother for the first time. Danubian social protocol mandated that any social contact between a young man and a young woman had to be preceded by the young man sitting at the table of the woman's father, or in the case of Kimberly Lee, her guardian, Spokesman Vladim Dukov. Sergekt had complied with that custom and now came over to the Dukovs' house once a week for dinner.

The second phase of the social protocol, that the young woman sit at the table of the young man's parents, only took place if the young man decided that he wanted to become romantically involved with her. By the middle of September Sergekt had decided that he wanted Kim to become his girlfriend. He asked Kim to eat at home with his mother and aunt. She accepted, not fully understanding the seriousness of what he was proposing.

The afternoon before Sergekt arrived to escort Kim to his house, Dukov sat in his library, wondering about the consequences of what was about to happen. He liked Sergekt tremendously. He had all the makings of an excellent Danubian citizen. He was brave, determined, and had "proper values". He clearly understood the importance of friendship and protocol. The fact that he was a convicted criminal did not bother Dukov at all. If Anyia were just a couple of years older, the Spokesman would have been very pleased if Sergekt had shown an interest in her, collar or no collar.

Dukov was somewhat puzzled by Sergekt's interest in Kim. Kim was very different from a typical girl from Upper Danubia and obviously would make a fascinating friend for anyone. However, to become romantically involved with her was quite another issue. At the end of two years Kim would be going home to the US. Did he hope to go to the US with her? Did he expect that Kim would stay in Upper Danubia past the end of her sentence?

Dukov's instincts told him he needed to dissuade his client from any romantic involvement with a Danubian. However, he also remembered what he had told Kim the first night she was at his house, that she had to live from day to day and enjoy the small daily pleasures of life. A romantic relationship certainly would help her get through the difficult times that lay ahead.

Dukov glanced over at the picture of himself and his future wife on the wall, the one in which they were naked and wearing collars. The Spokesman took his own collar off the wall and studied it, running his fingers over its groves and touching the broken latch. This piece of metal had been on his neck for five years. Like Sergekt, Dukov had worn this collar not so much because of anything he had done wrong himself, but because he had refused to betray his friends. The circumstances had been different, of course, but the Danubian definition of honor had remained intact over time�a definition shared by the Spokesman and by his client's young suitor.

Kim�s suitor reminded Dukov so much of himself when he was young. He remembered the countless nights he had danced with Maritza at the Socrates club, just like Sergekt was doing with Kim�and the nights they sat at the tables of each other's families. There were the good times and the hard times�hard times, yes�very hard times. The relationship between Vladim and Maritza had survived through it all. They had been together 28 years.

Dukov's thoughts turned back to his client. Kim hardly fit the image of a proper Danubian woman, but she seemed to be moving in that direction. Two years�what would two years in Upper Danubia do to her? Maybe she was not destined to leave the country after all�

In the end Dukov decided not to say anything. Kim would sit at the table of Sergekt's mother, just as Sergekt would sit at the Dukovs' table.

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When Kim went to Sergekt's house, Sergekt's mother and aunt were dressed in old-style Danubian dresses and the same elaborate dishes the Dukovs had prepared for Sergekt were on the dining room table waiting for Kim. However, Sergekt's mother greeted his new girlfriend with skepticism. An American who was not even of European descent, a convicted drug user, someone who could not express herself properly in Danubian�what on earth was he thinking? Kim faced a much more difficult task of sitting at Sergekt's table than he faced sitting at hers.

Kim sat uncomfortably while Sergekt's mother probed her with questions that she struggled to understand and answer. She resented being placed in this awkward position, but at the same time realized that Sergekt had to do the exact same thing for her. If she wanted to live in Upper Danubia and have friends, something she had no choice over for the next two years, she had to play by the rules of the country.

In the end Sergekt's mother warmed up just enough to allow Kim to continue coming over. It was not exactly an approval, but instead a withholding of judgment. In spite of all her deficiencies, "Geemberglek" seemed like a decent-enough girl, so Sergekt's mother did not feel justified telling her son she disapproved of her. To do so would be unfair and possibly cause problems for Sergekt and this strange foreign girlfriend of his. To condemn Criminal # 98945 also would have violated the Danubian idea that a person should never form a negative opinion about another person without a very specific reason.

That night Sergekt took Kim back to Dukov's house. Once again in the trolley they held onto each other. Once again she thrilled at the feel of his body next to hers. When he left her at the front door, he took her hands in his and looked at her with a question in his eyes. For some odd reason Kim decided to answer in English.

"You can kiss me, Sergekt."

Perhaps he did not understand her words, but he did understand her meaning. They kissed, slowly at first, then passionately. Eventually they forced themselves to stop. Kim squeezed Sergekt's hand and he was on his way home. In the US it would have been different; he would have come in and spent the night. Not in this country, and certainly not in Dukov's house. In Upper Danubia the pace of relationships, just like everything else in life, was much slower.

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As the weeks passed Kim became a regular member of Sergekt's social group at the Socrates Club. They went to the club at least twice per week to drink Danubian beer, eat salted deep-fried vegetables, talk, and share their music and thoughts. Criminal # 98945 had found her place in this hostile country, the one spot where she felt she belonged. She chatted with the others and danced with her boyfriend. Increasingly they danced closer and closer, enjoying the feel of each other's bodies. Over time their souls became more and more connected. Over time Kim thought about Sergekt more and more when she was not with him.

In mid September Kim listened to "Nem�t mi bicikl�t" performed live for the first time in the Socrates Club. When she heard to the song and understood the words, tears ran down her cheeks. The song and its sad message of not appreciating the good things of life until it was too late deeply moved not just Kim, but everyone who listened to it. Quickly it became popular throughout the entire criminal community and the club scene. Within a year the song was featured on Danubian radio. With a simple, heartfelt speech, Kim had left a lasting influence on Danubian popular culture.

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The following week was the Autumn Equinox, and also the Danubian Day of the Dead. The holiday was the most important celebration in Upper Danubia, much more important than Christmas, New Year's Day, or even the birthday of Vladik the Defender, Upper Danubia's greatest king.

The Day of the Dead marked the end of the summer growing season and the country's long descent into darkness, cold, famine, and death. It had been celebrated in the same manner since Pagan times, and it remained very much a Pagan event. It was a dark, morbid holiday, designed to appease the dead spirits by letting them know that those still alive were all too aware of the fate that awaits all living things. It was the chance for the living to show their respect and to assure the dead spirits that they appreciated the fleeting gift of life. Once the country converted to Christianity in 900 AD, Catholic Saints were incorporated into the Day of the Dead, but the ceremony itself and its purpose were only slightly changed. Now that Christianity was on the wane in Upper Danubia as it was in the rest of Europe, the ceremony had almost completely returned to its Pagan roots.

On the day of the equinox all electrical power in Upper Danubia was shut off, with the sole exception of emergency services in hospitals. All battery-operated devices had to be shut off. All telecommunications had to be shut off. The borders were closed and no motorized vehicles could operate. The country became completely silent for 36 hours, from sun-down on September 21st to sun-up on the 23rd. The Dukovs observed the holiday by dressing in black capes, as did everyone else in the neighborhood.

Kim did not spend the Day of the Dead with Dukov's family. Kim was a criminal, and the Day of the Dead was the one day out of the year criminals had an honored place in Danube City. Criminals played a central role in the main ceremony and the collective request for atonement. Shortly before sun-down on the 21st, Kim, Sergekt, and every other criminal in Danube City rode trolleys downtown. The criminals gathered in the plaza in front of the Temple of the Ancients, joining about 900 additional people who were not criminals, but instead performing public penance. There were over 3,600 criminals and penitents altogether. They lined up in groups, where their organizers were waiting with white and black body-paint. Every criminal in the city would be painted, first white, then with black highlights. The make-up job had been done in the same manner for 3,000 years. It was primitive, but very effective. From a distance, the criminals looked ghoulish, half-way between cadavers and skeletons.

The marchers were all painted by the time it was dark. Kim was amazed at the effect of seeing 3,600 naked, painted bodies all gathered in one place. It actually did look kind of scary. Temple officials passed out 3,600 torches with over-the-shoulder torch slings and explained how to carry the torches to minimize the strain on the marchers' arms. The participants then divided into two groups and started filing out in opposite directions. They would circle the city that night and meet again on the opposite side of Danube City in the morning. The following night they would complete their march by returning to Temple of the Ancients through the city center. Kim later learned that part of the purpose of all this was to present the Spirits of the Dead with an opportunity to walk the earth again through the marchers, if they so chose.

The criminals marched all night in single file. The group that included Kim and Sergekt followed the trail upstream along the Danube River and finally turned right to head inland. They walked along dark country roads, their surroundings illuminated only by their own torches. All along the route ordinary citizens silently knelt in their black robes, apparently praying for forgiveness for whatever they had done wrong over the past year. Death seemed to hang in the air. Kim could feel it all around her, as though the dead spirits really had woken up.

Kim's eyes shifted back and forth from Sergekt's back to the kneeling crowds, as she tried to comprehend her own participation in this very strange ceremony. No one had asked her about doing this. It had just been taken for granted that Criminal # 98945 would participate along with all the others. She was a Danubian criminal and a member of Danubian society, whether she liked it or not. As such she had certain responsibilities.

Criminal # 98945 spent part of the night wondering about her forfeited life in the US. She would go back home in two years�probably. Suddenly she wasn't so sure. How could she return to her old life, after everything she had been through? Kim knew that she was changed. Less than three months into a two year sentence she had changed. Was it possible to change back? She thought so, but wasn't so confident about that anymore. This Day of the Dead, for example. Walking naked at night over silent country roads, covered with white and black body-paint, carrying a torch in front of thousands of kneeling Danubians�how on earth could she explain what she was doing to someone in the US without sounding like a total nut?

There were breaks in the marching about every two hours for going to the bathroom, exchanging torches, and drinking blackberry punch. The punch was dark red and stained the criminals' mouths. Some of the criminals, including Sergekt, allowed the punch to drip down their chests to give their body paint the appearance of being covered in blood.

Kim's group walked a half circle around the city. Shortly before sunrise she made out the torches from the other group as they came from the opposite direction. The distant line of torches and the white bodies underneath truly did look scary. The two lines converged on a campsite made up of military tents and bed-rolls. The criminals would sleep and relax during the day and after sunset resume the march back through Danube City to the Temple of the Ancients.

Kim and Sergekt slept holding hands. She woke up in mid-afternoon to absolute silence. Most of the others were still sleeping. Ceremonies were going on in the Plaza of the Ancients, but they were too far away to be heard from the campsite where the marchers were staying. Kim got up to go to the latrine, get something to drink, and get her body paint touched up. As she stepped outside the tent she was amazed at the absolute quiet surrounding her. An occasional bird chirping or insect flying by: that was it. It truly did seem like all life had stopped.

After it got dark there was a religious observance and group prayer for the marchers. Then the procession back into Danube City resumed. The two columns of criminals walked side-by-side along the city's main boulevard, their torches partially illuminating the spectators. Once again Kim felt death all around her. She began to get scared as strange ominous sensations swept through her body. Kim had no idea what was going on, but she had no choice but to continue walking. Finally the weird feelings passed, leaving her apprehensive and shaken.

As the criminals approached the Temple of the Ancients, they were greeted with ancient music and choir singing. Suddenly every church bell in the city started ringing. The kneeling spectators then stood up and joined the singing, in this weird mix of Pagan and Christian customs. The sudden noise after two nights of absolute silence somewhat unnerved Kim.

The marchers walked straight behind the old temple towards the Danube River. They threw their torches into a huge bonfire near the shore. To symbolize their return to the land of the living, the marchers walked out to a submerged stone platform in the river to clean off the body paint. Death was washed off, momentarily defeated. The criminals then filed back through the Temple of the Ancients and back out onto the plaza. As the sun came up they sang an ancient hymn and then dispersed.

Kim and Sergekt walked silently with some of his friends, all of them lost in thought as Danube City slowly came back to life. They made their way back to the Socrates Club to wash off properly, have breakfast, and then go to the Central Police Station.

The day after the equinox was the day that the police handed out winter clothing for the city's criminals. Criminal # 98945 was a bit surprised and somewhat relieved at the news that yes, even criminals wore clothing during the winter. She had wondered about that, with winter coming up. When Sergekt saw that his girlfriend seemed happy about the winter outfits he commented in Danubian.

"Kim, when you see what that outfit actually looks like, you won't want to put it on unless it's absolutely freezing outside. They do that on purpose, giving you something that no one in his right mind would want to wear."

Along with the others, Criminal # 98945 picked up a garment bag and a set of bright orange boots. Bright orange boots. That was not a good sign. Sure enough, when she opened her garment bag she pulled out the most hideous piece of clothing she had ever laid eyes on. It was a bright orange top that looked something half-way between an army poncho and a cape. It had a hood and a sewn-in wool shirt underneath. There was a yellow stripe running up the middle of the cape and blue reflective strips sewn around the edges. There were several drawstrings to tighten the hood and waist. On the back was a large patch of Velcro.

"You need to pick up your criminal number from Spokesman Dukov and keep it attached�that is, IF you want to wear this. They�ll let you wear the boots without the cape during the winter�which is what I did last year during the day. If you keep your feet warm and stay moving when you're outdoors it's not so bad. Not bad enough to wear this."

Kim agreed. Better to stay naked than wear a bright orange cape with a yellow stripe and blue reflectors, but at least she did have something to put on during cold snaps.

When Criminal # 98945 went to Dukov's office to pick up the Velcro patch with her number, he seemed in a very serious mood. She hoped that it was not over something that had anything to do with her, but unfortunately it was.

"Kimberly�please sit down. I need to talk to you about�a very unfortunate event."

"Spokesman? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, Kimberly, nothing like that. You have committed no transgressions. But�where to begin�I will tell you that I have taken the liberty of staying in contact with your parents in the United States. I believe that it was my obligation to make sure they understood your situation. I even sent them pictures of my house, my family, and your room, so they could see and understand�and perhaps not be so worried about you."

"Did that cause a problem?"

"No Kimberly. No problems. But the same afternoon you had to go to the Plaza of the Ancients I received a very bad piece of news from your mother, which she instructed I should relay to you at an appropriate moment. It is the obituary of your friend Susan."

"Susan�she's�dead?"

"Yes. I will let you read it, and then I will inform you about the rest of what I found out."

With that Dukov handed his client a cut-out piece of newspaper from her hometown in the US. She read:

"Tyrone and Debbie Taylor announce the commemoration and celebration of the life of their daughter, Susan Taylor, at 2:00 p.m. Saturday, July 19 at the Eastwood Baptist Church. Funeral services will be held Sunday, July 20 at the Eastwood Public Cemetery. Susan passed away unexpectedly on July 12, while vacationing in Prague, the Czech Republic. She is survived by her parents and brother. We all love you Susan. We love you so much."

Kim sat silently, absorbing this horrible new shock. "Susan�my God. But�how?"

"I called the American embassy in Prague, but of course that was foolish of me. They refused to tell me anything. So I called a colleague I have there, and he made some calls to the coroner's office and hospitals. It turned out Susan died of anthrax. I also determined that your friend Tiffany contracted anthrax, but she survived and returned to America."

"Anthrax�but�how'd they get that? Where'd it come from?"

"They were sharing a needle at a night club. Two young Czech men who were with them contracted anthrax as well. One died, the other survived."

"Shit�Tiff had said that in Prague we were gonna..."

"Yes, Kimberly. I recall you telling me that you were planning to experiment with 'smack', as you say it, in Prague. With needles, I presume?"

Kim nodded her head. She stared blankly at the floor, not really knowing what to think. She no longer really considered Susan her friend, but still, the shock of knowing she was dead�

"I suppose this is a terrible blow to you. I believe your mother might know more than I do, although you can relay to her what I learned from my Czech colleague. You may call her from my office if you wish."

Kim quickly dialed home. She talked to her mother, telling her a censored version about her participation in the Day of the Dead Ceremony. However, she quickly got to the reason she called. It turned out that it was only by chance her parents even learned about Susan's death. They had missed the obituary when it first came out in July, but when Mr. Lee was unfolding old newspapers to clean up an oil spill in the garage, he just happened to notice the name Susan Taylor on one of the pages. Needless to say, he was shocked to read that his daughter's friend had died only a week after she had been sentenced in Upper Danubia. Kim's parents called the Taylors, who verified that, yes indeed, their daughter had died in Prague in July. They refused to talk about it further and abruptly hung up. Mrs. Lee decided to forward the obituary to Vladim Dukov. Kim then relayed what Dukov had told her about what he learned from his end. Kim's mother had a final question for her.

"Honey, I need to know something, and you need to be honest with me. If you had gone to Prague, you would have gone to that nightclub with Tiffany and Susan, right?"

"Yeah, Mom. I was gonna go."

"And shoot up?"

"Yeah."

"Honey, how could you? How could you do that to us?"

"Mom, I don't know why�it just would have happened�we were partying�"

"And you would have died of anthrax! Just like Susan!"

"Yeah�Mom�that's what would've happened."

Suddenly Kim heard her mother crying on the other end of the line. Finally Mrs. Lee pulled herself together enough to continue.

"Honey, I�can't talk to you right now. But I gotta talk to Mr. Dukov."

Dukov took the receiver. He sat quietly as Kim's mother cried into the phone. Finally he started to answer some questions.

"No, Mrs. Lee�there is nothing like that here�Our laws are much stricter�Yes, Mrs. Lee�I assure you I will watch after her�Maybe you are right, Mrs. Lee, maybe it was for the best she was arrested...Thank you, Mrs. Lee, but it was my duty as a Spokesman for the Criminal, nothing more�Thank you, Mrs. Lee�Yes, you too, Mrs. Lee, please take care of yourself."

Dukov hung up. He folded his hands and looked at Kim.

"Do you remember what I told you a few days ago, when I said that had you not been arrested, it was quite possible your experience may have ended elsewhere under equally bad, or even worse, circumstances? That I told you that if you believe yourself unlucky, to please give that consideration? Do you remember that?"

"Yes Spokesman Dukov, I remember that."

"I believe we now know where, and when, your experience would have ended. You life would have ended in a Prague hospital, on or around July 12. Is that not so?"

"Yes, Spokesman. That is so."

"Kimberly, you will understand that you cheated Death. Is that not so?"

"Yes, Spokesman Dukov. That is so."

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Criminal # 98945 spent the rest of the day writing an essay about her feelings. It most certainly was something she wanted to share with her friends at the Socrates Club. They needed to know. Kim's story was worth hearing, because there were plenty of lessons to be learned from it. She sat writing for the entire morning at a spare desk in the reception area, in spite of having not slept the previous night. Dukov looked over his client's text in the afternoon and made some minor corrections to make some of the imagery more understandable to a Danubian audience, and then helped her translate.

That night the Socrates Club was full. The night after the Day of the Dead ceremonies always was a time when plenty of club-goers had a lot on their minds, so it was one of the few nights of the year with no music, just criminals talking about their thoughts and experiences. There were over 40 speakers altogether. However, no one was rushed. The speakers could take their time and speak their minds. The song-writers listened attentively. Usually the night after the equinox was one of their best for gathering ideas and phrases for their music.

The night after the equinox Criminal # 98945 gave her second reading at the Socrates Club. She had not had time to practice her speech and was horribly tired. However, she spoke from her heart, even more so than she had spoken about her bicycle. As Kim spoke the obituary clipping describing the death of Susan Taylor made its rounds through the audience. She spoke at length about her feelings of betrayal. She spoke about the feelings of guilt and relief over not having been in that disco in Prague when that poisoned needle was passed to her two friends. Finally she spoke of the pain of having her own mother cry on Dukov's phone over her stupidity and her narrow escape. The thoughts were burned into her soul, making up for the fact she had not had time to practice her speech. The audience was silent after Kim finished speaking. For a moment the American stood at the microphone, also in silence, as tears ran down her cheeks. Finally she added, in accented but flawless Danubian:

"The police woman who arrested me kept calling me 'Maragana Girl'. I hated her for doing that, but who knows? Maybe she knows me better than I know myself. Maybe that's all I am�just the stupid 'Maragana Girl'."

Kim stepped off the stage to rejoin her boyfriend and his classmates. For a couple of minutes she sat in her seat, crying while Sergekt tried to comfort her. Around the room sympathetic glances went in her direction. Finally she managed to calm down. That night other criminals had stories to tell. Kim owed it to the others to listen with respect and try�try to understand.