**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 7 � Kim's birthday presents**

Upper Danubia's daily rhythm was changing rapidly by the end of September. Farmers were harvesting their crops, school was in full session, and extra trolleys appeared on the streets, ready to begin transporting commuters who had been riding their bicycles all summer when the weather was sunny. The trees began changing color and the nights became colder and colder. Kim and Sergekt began wearing their bright orange winter boots, as did Danube City's other criminals. For the first few days the boots made Kim all that much more aware of the nakedness of the rest of her body. Over time she got used to her new outfit.

Kim's weekly social routine was set by the end of September. One night each week Sergekt came over to Dukov's house to eat dinner with the family. One night per week Kim went over to Sergekt's house to eat dinner with his family. Two nights out of the week Kim and Sergekt joined his friends at the Socrates Club. Another night each week Kim and Sergekt joined some of his friends to play cards at one of their homes. The normal games were card games from Eastern Europe. However, Kim contributed to the card playing by teaching the group how to play Poker, something she had learned in high school the previous year.

Criminal # 98945 now was a full member of Sergekt's social group. No longer was she just "Sergekt's American girlfriend". If the women had something they wanted to do without the guys, they called Kim and asked her if she wanted to join them. The language barrier still impeded her somewhat, but as the weeks went by that barrier became less and less.

Kim's friendship with Sergekt's female classmates solved one important problem in her life, her need to get an indoor job during the winter. The group's lead singer, a petite blond girl called Eloisa, worked at a music store owned by a friend of her father. As the weather got colder and Christmas loomed ever closer, Eloisa suggested Kim to her boss as a new employee. The store owner agreed. As a result of the music store job, Kim's last day working for Victor Dukov was September 30.

Kim dreaded breaking the news to Victor, thinking he would be furious and give her an unpleasant lecture. He surprised her with his response: "Kimberly, you smart girl. I know winter comes, and you no ride bicycle with cape. I know that. But, maybe, in Spring you come back? Ride bicycle for me? Maybe I no good boss, but I like you. You good girl and good worker. So you come back?"

Kim responded by doing something she never imagined she would want to do. She promised Victor Dukov she would work a second summer with his courier service. Victor threw a small party the afternoon of her last day. He drank some wine with his workers and became quite cheerful. Kim thought to herself, maybe this guy isn't so bad after all, if he could just loosen up.

The next day Kim started her new job at Danube City's largest music store. The store had a huge inventory of both traditional and modern Danubian music. It also had music from other parts of Europe, and many lesser-known artists from the United States. There also was a wide variety of musical instruments and sheet music. The one thing lacking from the store, and from any other music store in Danube City, was music from popular radio play-lists in either Europe or the US. Danubians regarded the radio station play-list concept and billboard charts with utter contempt. The entire country rebelled against the global music industry by officially banning any music that was featured on billboard charts in major European and US markets. Danubians took pride in thumbing their noses at global pop culture and instead developing their own music industry, to the ire of both the US and the European Community.

Unlike Victor Dukov's courier service, every employee in the retail area at the music store was a criminal. Kim's new boss was convinced that only criminals understood music and he also wanted to promote the image that his store was at the forefront of the Danubian music scene. There even was a small studio upstairs where employees were encouraged to test and rehearse songs, and there was access to musical instruments for employees who did not have their own.

A few ex-criminals also worked at the store in the stock room or in the accounting department. Because they had completed their sentences they were allowed to work out of public view. However, the store had the same rule for all employees that the Socrates Club had for its patrons, that all ex-criminals in the firm had to show respect to those still serving their sentences by staying naked during working hours. Even the store's owner adhered to that rule, in spite of being in his late 50's and never having been a criminal himself.

Kim's nationality placed her in a unique position in the store. She was the only English-speaking employee and therefore on-call to attend any foreign tourist who had entered looking for "typical" Danubian music to take home. Over and over Criminal # 98945 found herself explaining about the Danubian manner of writing songs and the unique role criminals held in the country's music scene. Kim quickly became the store's unofficial tour-guide. Of course nearly every tourist also wanted to know why she was in the store, as a naked American wearing a Danubian criminal's collar. Kim simply told the truth, giving an abbreviated account of her arrest at the beginning of July and a stern warning not to possess or use drugs in Upper Danubia. "�unless you want work here and have me train you as a new employee," she always concluded joking.

Kim felt quite relaxed being among naked co-workers, many of whom were friends or acquaintances from the Socrates Club. However, she noticed a huge difference in the between the demeanor of the criminals and that of the ex-criminals working in the store, in spite of the universal lack of clothing among the store employees. To the ex-criminals nudity was simply the store uniform. As soon as they left work they could get dressed and return to their normal lives on the street and at home. They could leave Danube City, or even cross the border and leave Upper Danubia when they wanted. Most importantly, they did not have to think about their next upcoming judicial punishment. Their burden of wearing a collar and facing constant judicial punishments had passed.

For Criminal # 98945 and the other 23 cashiers and information clerks, the collars and the ongoing sentences they represented were a reality that was never far from their minds. Each week at least one employee, and usually more, returned from the Central Police Station with his or her bottom freshly marked from a recent switching. Kim realized something that scared her, no matter how many times a person was switched, it hurt just as bad each time. The welts were every bit as red, the blows every bit as painful, the experience every bit as traumatic. It never got any better, no matter how many times a person already had faced punishment. It was common for co-workers who had held up well during their most recent switching to come back to work, excuse themselves, and cry for hours in the break room. Kim sighed whenever she heard crying coming from the break room's closed door. It'll be my turn in January, she thought bitterly.

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Kim's 19th birthday was on October 18. She woke up very depressed, thinking about her 18th birthday the year before and how much she partied and how the world seemed to open up to her at that time. She had gotten drunk with Tiffany and Susan and a bunch of other friends from high school. It seemed like it was a lot of fun, although�she couldn't remember because she passed out. Tiffany got stoned and Susan spent the evening pulling up her top and flashing the guys at the party. Kim was sick the whole next day�and�hmm�maybe that wasn't such a great birthday. Maybe this year would be better.

Indeed it was, thanks to two presents. One was from Kim's parents and the Dukovs, the other was from her friends at the Socrates Club.

The Dukovs, of course, went all-out fixing their guest an elaborate lunch and an American-style cake. The four members of the Dukov family, plus Vladik's fianc�e and Sergekt, stuffed themselves with traditional food. A Danubian birthday party was never complete without singing, and the three Danubian women sang several traditional songs in honor of the birthday girl. Dukov then sent his daughter to the tool shed to get Kim's birthday present.

"Kimberly, your parents, and Maritza and I, decided that for your birthday you should not have anything new. Perhaps what is old in your life is what is best for you. But with an old gift we all wish you much happiness."

With that Anyia came in with an object painfully familiar, Kim�s mountain bike from her parents' house in the U.S. It was the second time the bicycle would be presented to her, but the first time she could really appreciate it.

"Uh�Spokesman Dukov�how�?"

"I talked to your parents about what would be best for your birthday. I suggested they ship your bicycle to you. I took responsibility for bringing it through our customs. This item is what you most need in our country, is it not?"

"Yes�Oh thanks!"

With that Kim hugged the elder Dukovs and their daughter. She then called her parents to thank them and update them on her life.

That evening Criminal # 98945 proudly rode her bicycle downtown to the Socrates Club, as Sergekt rode Vladik's old bike, trying to keep up with her. At the club there was universal good cheer and jokes about now having to re-write the song "Nem�t mi bicikl�t", given that Kim was reunited with her mountain bike. She joined Sergekt and Eloisa at their usual spot at the table, along with 15 of Sergekt's classmates and three of her co-workers from the music store.

Kim was in a very upbeat mood. The sad songs coming from the singers on stage made her reflective, as opposed to melancholy. She actually felt good about her life, better than she had felt in a very long time. She knew this feeling was only fleeting, but she would take Spokesman Dukov at his word and try to enjoy the small pleasures in her world as much as possible.

The group's birthday present to Criminal # 98945 was three songs dedicated to her, one of which was written by Sergekt himself. Sergekt's work was a deeply moving love song. He knew better than to try to write a sentimental love song; instead he had written about Kim's strange journey through life and his own efforts to understand her. Sergekt played in the band with his usual balalaika-looking instrument, while he entrusted the singing to Eloisa and a male classmate.

The next song was loosely based on Kim's arrest and the fact the arrest prevented her from going to Prague and dying of anthrax. The final song was titled "A question I cannot answer", and focused on Kim's painful conversations with her mother. It was sung by 5 women, with Eloisa in the lead and the others providing back-up voices. The back-up singers punctuated Eloisa's singing with the peculiar and complicated deep-throated vocals that were unique to traditional Upper Danubian music. The song and its music was the most complex Kim had heard in the Socrates Club. The vocals left her marveling at Eloisa's talent and her ability to organize and lead four other female voices, all of whom were singing different notes.

Criminal # 98945 was deeply moved. She had given her friends ideas for their music; in turn so far they had produced four incredible songs dedicated to her. How many other people could say that, having provided the inspiration for such music?

Kim spent the rest of the night dancing with Sergekt, mischievously rubbing herself against him and looking into his eyes with a very seductive expression. She was totally aroused. She had not had sex with anyone since the end of May. She had waited long enough. She badly wanted Sergekt.

Sergekt now had a bit of a problem. He was hard, his erection pressing into his girlfriend. He could not separate from her, not unless he wanted to make a total spectacle of himself in front of 200 other people. However, he was not the first male in the Socrates Club in that situation, and he knew exactly what to do. He eased his partner towards a back entrance that led to a staircase going upstairs. As soon as they got to the door, Sergekt quickly slipped through and pulled Kim through with him. As soon as the door went shut he separated from her and took her face in his hands. He kissed her passionately. He ran his hands over Kim's breasts and down her stomach, as she reached for his penis and gently squeezed it. Sergekt gasped.

"Geem�Geem�Ya lub�k tebe�Ya lub�k tebe�" Danubian for "I love you".

With that he buried his mouth in her neck. Suddenly he grabbed her hand and led her up the stairs. As soon as they were up the stairs, Kim realized the Socrates Club, as a service to its customers, had several small "intimacy rooms". Each intimacy room had a double-bed with a nightstand and a small bathroom. The room Sergekt led Kim into was very clean and tastefully decorated. There was nothing tacky about it.

For a minute Kim and Sergekt stood near the door, passionately embracing each other. He sank to his knees and kissed the insides of Kim's thighs. Yes�oh yes�she wanted this so badly. He stood up again, and Kim massaged his penis. He was so hard�he had wanted this for such a long time�and now finally the moment had come.

Sergekt's next move surprised Kim, but greatly increased her respect for him. He reached in the dresser next to the bed and pulled out a condom. She had not even thought about that, but he did. In the movies this detail was always left out, but this was real life. Sergekt was a person who always thought ahead, even in the heat of passion. He quickly put on the condom while Kim threw herself on the bed.

It had been five months for Kim. Five months of celibacy and she was desperate. As Sergekt moved on top of her, she pulled at his head, eager to draw his face into hers. She wanted to become one with her lover, to feel his tongue against hers, to feel his body on hers, to feel him inside her. As he entered her and started thrusting, Kim came immediately. She gasped and groaned. Sergekt took his time, seeking to stretch out this moment as long as he could. Finally he climaxed and his movements inside Kim slowed down. Reluctantly he pulled out of her.

Sergekt got up and reached down to take Kim's hand. She really did not want to get up yet, but she forced herself off the bed. He led her into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Kim stepped in as he disposed of the condom. He joined her and began soaping her back. The simple feel of her lover's hands on her back aroused her yet again, but in a more relaxed and peaceful way than she had felt on the dance floor. Once again Kim had a moment to enjoy, the warm water from the shower and Sergekt's hands on her shoulders. In the shower they kissed each other with a quiet tenderness, as the water washed away the soap and remnants of their love-making.

Once they cleaned up, Sergekt surprised his lover yet again as he complied with club protocol for the room. He pulled off the sheets from the bed and took a clean set from the nightstand. Kim helped him spread the new sheets and make the bed. Sergekt stuffed the bedding into a pillowcase along with the towels from the bathroom. Quickly he took spray cleaner and squirted the shower, cleaning it with a cloth that also went into the pillowcase when he finished. Kim put out new towels in the bathroom. Within five minutes the room looked exactly like it had looked when they entered. The couple left the room and Sergekt put his name on a sign-up sheet, apparently to charge the use of the room to his account. He then threw his pillowcase into a huge hamper full of other pillowcases and they went back downstairs.

Kim and Sergekt rejoined his friends at the table, their hair still damp and their bodies smelling of fresh soap. Kim expected a lot of jokes from the group, or at least some knowing smiles and thumbs-up signs. Instead, they acted perfectly naturally, as though Kim and Sergekt had just gone to the bathroom. Later she learned that in Upper Danubia friends never joke about their sexual relationships to each other. What Sergekt and Kim had done was a natural part of being together and there was no point of anyone making an issue out of it.

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The following day was a holiday, so neither Kim nor Sergekt had to work. Kim's newly acquired mobility allowed Sergekt to invite her to his family's garden plot, which was outside the city limits, but fortunately just inside the boundary of the Danube City collar-zone. The garden plot was located completely on the opposite side of the city from the neighborhood where Vladim Dukov lived, so getting there involved a 20-kilometer bicycle ride. Fortunately the day was surprisingly warm for it being so late in the year, promising a pleasant outing.

Kim raced Sergekt along streets and hills, her fancy mountain bike easily outpacing the primitive bike he had borrowed from Vladik Dukov. She rode with ease as he struggled to keep up. Finally they turned onto a dirt road and entered the city's family garden area, an area covered with small plots of land and dotted with tiny houses that were barely bigger than storage sheds.

The area near Sergekt's family plot was completely deserted. The gardens had been harvested the week before and there was very little left to be done until the planting next year. A few older people remained at their plots to finish up canning their harvests, but no one remained near the plot where Sergekt took Kim.

Sergekt's family plot had a tiny house with a porch, a storage area for tools, a canning station, some chairs, and a very old sofa. Sergekt asked Kim to help him move the sofa onto the porch. The autumn sun shined gently onto the porch and cool breezes blew through the nearby trees. For two people who had very little privacy in their daily lives, this setting was ideal.

Kim was in a very strange mood. She wanted sex, but she also wanted to submit to Sergekt. She rubbed her legs together as she sat with him, wondering what exactly she wanted. He had his arm down at her side, gently caressing her hip. Kim realized that he actually wanted to caress her bottom. She went over his lap, spreading her legs slightly to feel the warm sun and cool breezes caress the most intimate parts of her body. Sergekt gently rubbed his hand over Kim's bottom, exploring the soft brown skin with his fingertips and his entire hand. He marveled at the flawlessness of her smooth skin. It seemed to him that his girlfriend's petite bottom was the most perfect, the most beautiful, he had ever seen.

Kim shifted on her boyfriend's thighs to get into a more comfortable position and tilted her bottom up slightly. For a long time she was content to simply enjoy the feel of his hand gently passing over her bottom-cheeks. But then her fantasies returned, and she wanted to do something more to show Sergekt that she truly belonged to him. The strong sexual urge came back. There would be love-making, but Kim wanted something else first, something intense�something�and then she remembered that her birthday had been yesterday. Sergekt owed her a birthday spanking. She went wet with just the idea. In Danubian she commented:

"Sergekt, in my country we have a tradition. A naughty girl like me gets spanked on her birthday�one good hard spank for each year. So�you want to do that for me�spank me for my birthday?"

Sergekt couldn't believe his good fortune. This beautiful, flawless bottom stretched over his lap, and its owner requesting a spanking. He could smell her excitement. He gently ran his fingertips over Kim's vagina. She was very wet. He was completely hard, his erection pressing into Kim's side.

"So this is the birthday present you really wanted, hmm? Very well, Kimberly, happy 19th birthday."

With that, Sergekt drew his hand up and delivered a sharp SLAP! to Kim's right bottom-cheek. He gently caressed the reddish area, and then delivered an equally sharp SLAP! to Kim's left bottom-cheek. Kim moaned with excitement. Slowly Sergekt delivered another sharp SLAP! to Kim's right bottom cheek and yet another to her left bottom cheek. Kim shifted again on his lap. The slaps were just the right intensity and she wanted more�she was desperate for more.

Slowly and lovingly Sergekt continued Kim's birthday spanking. The fact that Kim would only receive 19 swats made him want to make sure that every one of those swats would count. He wanted Kim to feel and appreciate each sharp slap. As Sergekt continued to spank and caress Kim, her sexual desire intensified. She gasped, arching her back and thrusting herself up, completely exposing her wet vagina to the warm autumn sun. She wanted to feel his hands touch her most intimate areas, to tease her there and perhaps punish her there as well. However, he remained concentrated on her bottom and the increasing the reddish color on her bottom cheeks.

For the last five swats, Sergekt pressed Kim back down so he could give her extra sharp slaps. Kim's eyes were partially closed and she was gasping, her voice breaking. When Sergekt finished his 19th slap, he kept his hand on her bottom for a few seconds and then delivered one final slap, an extra for her next birthday and good luck.

Sergekt led Kim onto the grass and ordered his lover on her hands and knees. Kim's bottom and vagina were on full display, spread wide and glistening in the sunlight. It was a sight that would have tempted any man, but this lovely bottom belonged to Sergekt's own love, his own "Geemberglek". He quickly slipped on a condom and entered her. She pressed back into him and he thrust hard, so hard it almost hurt. Kim moaned and gasped through two of the most intense orgasms she ever had experienced. Sergerkt climaxed immediately, but continued thrusting, hoping for a second orgasm. Kim climaxed yet again, and Sergekt finally got what he wanted, the coveted second orgasm that left his legs shaking and his body completely relaxed. It was so good he almost blacked out.

Finally they pulled apart, their bodies shining with sweat and covered in dirt. However, a chilly breeze hit the two lovers at that moment, a reminder the day was short and it quickly would be getting colder as the sun dropped in the sky. Sergekt got up to fetch a bucket of water from the garden's pump. Kim giggled as her lover pushed the lever up and down in an effort to tease some water into the bucket. Finally some water came up and the couple was able to sponge off and head home.

As they rode back to Dukov's house, Kim showed Sergekt no mercy as she rode her mountain bike. She easily outpaced her boyfriend as he struggled on his primitive one-speed. She lifted up from her seat to tease him with her bottom, and then shot ahead, forcing him to petal hard just to stay within sight of her. She then dropped back, again lifted up to tease him, and again took off.

"Kim, I ought to spank that naughty bottom of yours for doing this."

"Maybe, but you got to catch me first."

He never did manage to catch her that day, but both knew that there would be plenty of days next summer, plenty of bicycle rides, and plenty of opportunities for Sergekt to catch Kim and give her that well-deserved lover's spanking.

**Chapter 8 � Eloisa**

The weather quickly changed a couple of days after Kim's birthday. Cold rain and sleet constantly bombarded the dreary streets of Danube City, with the promise that there would be no let-up until next spring. The pavement was covered with cold water and the last of the bicyclists were driven off the streets and into the city's trolleys. The entire fleet of trolleys and trolleybuses was working non-stop, but all public transportation was packed with commuters at all times.

In spite of the cold weather, Kim learned from Sergekt that she really did not need to wear her criminal's cape during the day. The criminal's cape was a truly humiliating piece of clothing, to be used only during the most inclement weather. Sergekt and most other criminals took pride in wearing it as little as possible. At the beginning Kim had thought about wearing her cape, but over time peer-pressure forced the American to leave hers at home as well.

Kim's orange boots kept her feet warm, and she quickly learned how to keep the rest of her body warm enough to move about in the city. Of course, the packed trolleys were so hot that the criminals actually were more comfortable than the average citizens who stood sweating in their coats. As a courtesy, average citizens usually allowed criminals to get on the trolleys first to let them get out of the cold as quickly as possible.

As for outdoors, the survival tactic adopted by Kim and the other criminals was to duck into stores as much as possible, warm up, and then dash to the next store, warm up, and keep moving. In Kim's case there really was no problem, since the music store was right next to a trolley stop. The store employees waited at the front door for the trolley to come by, then quickly dashed across the sidewalk to get in once it had stopped. The Socrates Club presented even less of a problem during the winter. The club had built an enclosed heated trolley stop right outside its main entrance to accommodate the patrons who did not want to wear their capes.

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Kim settled into a stable, peaceful relationship with Sergekt during November. They got to know each other better as Kim's ability to speak Danubian improved, they hung out at the Socrates Club, went to an occasional movie, ate at each other's houses, and just enjoyed being together. They made love every so often in one of the Socrates Club's "intimacy rooms", enough that Kim considered taking birth control pills to free Sergekt from the responsibility of always wearing a condom. Kim had established her routine with her boyfriend and felt very satisfied with that part of her life. Sergekt was the most serious relationship Kim ever had experienced, very different from the casual encounters and partying she had done the previous year.

During November another relationship opened up for Kim, her growing friendship with the singer Eloisa. Eloisa was by far the most unusual woman in the group. She was deeply philosophical and serious, but she could talk about anything and made a good conversation partner. There was something very sad and haunting about her, a pain in her soul that came out in both her conversation and in her music.

Eloisa was dating one of the guys in the group, a very serious young man called Dima Chern�kt. It was obvious they were very serious about each other and they planned to get married. Dima was with her constantly and she seemed to rely on him to give her protection. And yet, not once did Kim notice the couple ever touching each other. No hugs, no kissing, no physical contact whatsoever. The relationship was not platonic nor a simple friendship, but it was by no means a normal relationship either.

Kim asked Sergekt about Eloisa's strange behavior. He responded:

"Eloisa has been through a lot. She has suffered much more than anyone else I have ever known. That's why she sings the way she sings. She has been to the dark places of life, places I hope I never have to see."

"But what happened to her?"

"I can't tell you. If you get to know her better, maybe she might�but that's up to her. I can tell you that what happened to her is something that shouldn't ever happen to anyone�but it does, sometimes even here in this country."

Sergekt had given up very little information, but it was enough, together with Eloisa's obvious dislike of any physical contact, for Kim to figure out what happened. She guessed that Eloisa must have been raped. That was true, but when she later found out the full story Kim would much better understand, not only Eloisa, but also Dima, Sergekt, the group of classmates, and the social values of Upper Danubia.

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Kim's friendship with Eloisa began when one of the band's back-up singers completed her sentence at the end of October. The young woman was a fellow employee at the music store, and as a result the store shut down for a couple of hours to allow the employees to attend the de-collaring ceremony. The young woman left the courthouse wearing a traditional Danubian dress and a raincoat. She returned to work for a brief party, bade everyone a tearful goodbye, and disappeared from their lives.

Kim's co-worker had been accepted to study at Upper Danubia's most prestigious medical university, which was located at the other end of the country in the distant capitol of Rika Chorna Province. She needed to board a train immediately to attend an orientation and was out of Danube City by nightfall. The woman's departure left Eloisa with only three back-up singers, and for much of her music she needed four.

The next day Eloisa heard Kim humming a song that she had heard several times and liked. She listened attentively to Kim's voice, realizing its pitch was identical to the pitch of the voice of the friend who had just left. During lunch break Eloisa asked Kim to sing some notes...Excellent�Now deeper�From deep in your throat�Not bad�Try it again�Good�Now try this� By the end of lunch Kim had a new obligation in life, as a back-up singer for Eloisa.

It was obvious that Kim would not be able to sing songs with words because of her accent. However, Danubian music often relied on a group of women singing different notes, in the same way a band uses different instruments. Each female voice was part of the background music, unique and indispensable for the entire song to work. It was the pitch of Kim's voice that Eloisa needed, not her ability to sing actual words. It was as though Eloisa had lost a musical instrument and needed to replace it with another.

That night Kim found herself rehearsing with the other three back-up singers, closely following Eloisa's lead. The following Saturday night Kim was on stage at the Socrates club during the group's musical presentation. She now was more committed than ever to her new life in Danube City.

Kim spent increasing amounts of time with Eloisa when she was not at work or with Sergekt. As much as she participated in the Socrates Club, her group, and in her personal relationship with her boyfriend, the internal torments in Eloisa's soul set her apart from everyone else. She was part of the group, but at the same time different and somewhat apart. Kim was in a similar situation, being Asian, being an American, and being a convicted drug-user. She was part of the group, but at the same time she was "different". As a result Eloisa and Kim gravitated towards each other.

Eloisa seemed to understand Kim better than anyone else, including Sergekt. Sergekt understood Kim from a male perspective, but there were certain things about her he could not understand due to the barrier of sex. Eloisa did understand Kim and could even understand why Kim had done so many stupid things in her life prior to getting arrested. Even Kim couldn't understand everything about herself, but it seemed that Eloisa had her figured out.

At the beginning of December the morale of Sergekt and his friends began to decline. They were more moody, more quiet, and increasingly apprehensive. The reason was simple enough, on December 15 they faced returning to their old school to receive the next scheduled installment of their punishment. The school authorities wanted to switch the group at their old high school to set an example for the younger students who had not yet graduated. Since vacation started on the 20th, the punishment needed to be moved up to the middle of the month, to make sure the younger students were on-hand to see what happens to criminals.

Kim sympathized, since the next installment of her own punishment would be January 2, six months to the date she had been punished in July, Kim was scared herself, and she was lucky. She only faced punishment every six months. Sergekt, Eloisa, and 26 others faced punishment every four months.

Just a couple of days before the 15th, Kim and Eloisa decided to have some Danubian fruit punch after a musical practice. They sat alone in the break-room of the store on a sofa, quietly sipping at their glasses. Eloisa sighed, thinking about the group's upcoming punishment.

"It never gets any easier," she noted sadly. "You think it will, that somehow you'll get used to it. But you never do. It hurts just as bad every time. And each time, before, I mean, you just get more and more scared, because you know, you know how bad they'll hurt you."

Kim nodded. Eloisa stared straight ahead. In a very distant voice she continued.

"You know, it's because of me the others have to do this. I'm the reason they're serving these sentences. It's because of me that 27 other lives got ruined. I should have just killed myself, and that would have saved them. Now I can't. Now I can't die. I owe it to the others to stay alive, even though that's not what I want."

Kim had no idea how to respond. She felt horrible about the consequences of her own decisions, but Kim had no desire to die. Quite the contrary, she realized how important it was to be alive. Kim treasured her life and the chance to remain on the planet. To hear Eloisa talk like this�

"You can't talk like that. Your life is a gift, and you can lose it real easily. I almost did. I mean�we all love you."

"I know. But to know what I did�and what happened�I mean it wasn't really my fault, but in a way it was�I mean�it wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for me."

"What happened? You didn't do anything�"

"Kim, did Sergekt ever tell you why we all got these three-year sentences?"

"He tried to explain it to me when we first started going out, but I didn't understand Danubian enough to follow all of what he told me. I did get that it was all out of a sense of honor that you guys all stuck together and you all got punished. He made a big deal out of that, because he was real upset about what my friends did to me�you know, when they told the police they didn't know about the marijuana in my backpack. But anyhow, I didn't understand much�he said something about a riot at your school."

"Yes, there was riot. I guess you could call it that. It was because of me it happened."

"You? What did you do?"

Eloisa sat quietly for a few minutes. Finally she forced herself to speak.

"I didn't do anything except just be a stupid kid. I thought he loved me�that's what he always said�but he made me�I mean, for three years he made me�"

Eloisa struggled to catch her breath and push back the awful memories that suddenly had surfaced. Finally she was able to tell Kim her story.

It turned out when Eloisa was just 14, she was seduced by a male teacher at the school. The relationship quickly became very abusive, especially after the teacher took a series of pornographic photos and threatened to show them to Eloisa's parents if she ever said anything or tried to break off the relationship. What the teacher forced Eloisa to do apparently went way beyond ordinary sex, it left her feeling completely degraded and nauseated by the thought of any physical contact with anyone. On that point Eloisa did not elaborate and Kim really did not want to know the details. The abuse went on for three years and got worse over time.

Eloisa's life changed the summer before her final year in school. The teacher molesting her was on vacation in Germany, and she began seeing one of her classmates, Dima, the guy she was currently engaged to. Eloisa was completely traumatized by what was happening to her and felt too degraded to have any friends from the school. Dima spent time with her, and slowly got her to realize she did have value as a person. He fell in love with her, perhaps in part because she was so distant and he hoped to bring her back.

The possibility that Eloisa could have a normal relationship with someone her own age gave her courage to start confronting her situation with the teacher. She quit seeing him after school. When he threatened her with the photos Eloisa responded. "Go ahead and show those photos. Then you get to explain why you have them."

Eloisa thought she had escaped her tormenter because she did not have any classes with him during her final year. However, he proctored a series of tests for the end of the autumn semester that Eloisa had to take. He saw the finals as a chance to get revenge against Eloisa for leaving him. He accused her of cheating and began a series of reports to get her expelled from the school and charged with insurrection. As a result of the accusations Eloisa was suspended from school, pending the resolution of the cheating charges.

The male students in Eloisa's class knew the accusations were false. They talked among themselves, trying to figure out how to save Eloisa from being expelled from school and possibly from facing a formal sentence. Finally youthful tempers started to flare, and 27 students, male and female, decided to directly confront the teacher and force him to recant his accusations. They filed into his classroom and surrounded him. When he tried to get away several students punched him in the stomach and pinned him against the wall. Dima struck him hard across the face, breaking his nose. Suddenly the teacher realized he was trapped in a room with 27 angry students who were perfectly willing to kill him.

The students extracted confession after confession from the teacher, including forcing him to reveal where he was keeping the photos he had taken of Eloisa. They were in a locked filing cabinet in the classroom with the tests, but the key was not in the school. That was not good enough for the students. The rage among the group was mounting. While Dima landed several more hard punches, several of his friends, including Sergekt, picked up the filing cabinet and heaved it through the window. Then several male students ran downstairs to retrieve the packages of photos. Sure enough, among the wreckage of the filing cabinet were several packets of very sick pictures. They ran back upstairs and waved a couple at the teacher.

"THIS IS WHAT YOU MADE HER DO?!�THIS IS WHAT YOU MADE HER DO?!"

The police arrived at that moment, screaming and pointing automatic weapons at the students. It was a terrible scene; a smashed window, desks and chairs kicked everywhere, 27 irate teenagers, and one bloodied teacher. The next few seconds were horrible chaos, as the police shot into the ceiling to get the teenagers to lie down. The teacher, hugely relieved at being rescued, headed towards the door, but the head police officer pointed his weapon at the supposed victim and snarled, "You're not going anywhere! Not 'till we get this straightened out!"

There was a lot to straighten out. The police were smart enough to understand that no group of students could have behaved in such a manner without being severely provoked. The answer was clear enough as soon as the police officers started picking up Eloisa's pictures, which had been strewn all over the room. The teacher ended up on the floor in handcuffs along with the 27 students. Vans arrived and everyone was taken to the Central Police Station.

Because Eloisa had been suspended from school pending resolution of the cheating charges, she did not learn about the riot until that evening. She took a trolley to the police station, identified herself, and quickly was dragged into the case. It was obvious she was the girl in the photos. She had to sign several statements discussing what had happened with her teacher, which were introduced later that night at his trial and helped condemn him.

What happened next was a very Danubian resolution to the case. Partly because what was in the pictures was so offensive, the teacher faced the death penalty for child molestation. His trial took place at midnight, as was the tradition for all death penalty cases. The teacher was dressed in a black robe and ordered to stand during his trial, even as he nursed his broken nose and bruised stomach. There was not much argument over guilt or innocence, the pictures and Eloisa's statements assured the verdict. The police also had searched the teacher's home and found yet more photos of Eloisa and three other high school girls.

The execution took place at sunrise. Still dressed in his black robe, the teacher was taken back to the central police station and ordered to stand at the end of the courtyard in front of a thick wooden wall. He stood with his hands untied, since any Danubian who faces death by execution is expected to greet it with dignity, no matter how heinous his crime might have been. The 27 students, still dressed in their school uniforms, were brought out in handcuffs to witness the execution. Very quickly five police officers pointed their rifles at the teacher, there was a whistle, and a second later he was reduced to a crumpled corpse.

The students then were led to the cement circle in the courtyard and one by one ordered to strip. They too, faced trial and punishment. However, they faced corporal, not capital, charges.

Their cases were assigned to Spokesman Alexi Havlakt, who was the oldest member of Danube City's criminal defense team and on the verge of retiring. Now Spokesman Havlakt suddenly had 27 new cases thrust upon him and his retirement postponed indefinitely. Still, the path of his life was to help persons facing the Danubian court system and the fate of 27 high school students weighed on him more that his foregone years of rest. The old Spokesman prepared to mount as best a defense as he could, given the group's bleak circumstances.

The students faced multiple violations, including assault, attempted murder, disrespect for authority, vandalism, and insurrection. The police brought each frightened student in for questioning individually, but in the holding cell they all had previously agreed that whatever charges they faced they would face together. 27 seven times the police asked the same questions and got the same responses:

"�Who punched your teacher?"

"All of us, sir. We all punched the teacher."

"Who threw the filing cabinet out the window?"

"All of us sir. We all are responsible�"

The police did not push the issue once they figured out all the students would give them the same responses. In the US the police would have tried to get some of the students to testify against the others. In Upper Danubia the police understood that attempting to get some of the students to turn on the others would have violated the society's social norms, something no one in the police department wanted to do. The questioning became a mere formality. The group would have to be judged by the facts, not by what any of the students had to say.

While the 27 students were being questioned, Eloisa demanded that she be arrested and charged with her classmates. She was innocent of any wrong-doing, but the riot had taken place because of her. Eloisa's friends had sacrificed their own lives for her, and her Danubian perception of honor demanded that whatever consequences they suffered she would have to suffer as well.

Eloisa explained to Kim that under such circumstances the police chief had no choice but to arrest her. Eloisa would have lost honor had she not stood with her friends, especially in this situation where they had given up their freedom because of her. Danubian protocol demanded that, whether they had been right or wrong, it was her social duty to join them. Eloisa quietly undressed in front of the chief of police and was led in handcuffs to her classmates.

The students had confessed as a group, and they were tried as a group. Now 28 with the addition of Eloisa, they knelt naked in the courtroom as charges were read against them. The case presented a very difficult dilemma for the trial judge. Their Spokesman pointed out that the students had done nothing more than defend a classmate's honor. However, as pointed out by the prosecutor, in doing so they had broken several laws and disrupted the peace of the community. As unfair as it was, they had to be punished. In the end they were convicted of vandalism and insurrection, the charges of attempted murder, assault, and disrespect for authority being dropped. They received a standard sentence of three years, with a corporal punishment every four months. They had to kneel in line as they were fitted with collars.

Most of the students in the group were still underage, so the court ordered they would be punished the following day at their school instead of in the courtroom. The police allowed them to get cleaned up and have dinner at the police cafeteria, and then they were locked overnight in a large room with mattresses. Early the following morning they were handcuffed and loaded into police vans to be transported back to their school to be punished. Following the punishment they would be released back into the custody of their parents.

Eloisa recalled with horror that second day, when she and the others were ordered to kneel in the cold school courtyard in front of 400 classmates. One-by-one they had to stand up and present themselves at the switching table. Each of them received 25 strokes, standard for someone under-age. As each student turned 18, later switchings would become the standard adult punishment of 50 strokes.

At the end of the day the school director gave a short speech, with the 28 students kneeling behind him. He announced that several serious crimes had been committed and all of them resolved. No one in the school, neither teacher nor student, would be permitted, under any circumstances, to ever mention the tragic events that led to this group punishment. The following day all 28 students would return to their classes and the matter would be closed.

Eloisa's parents were devastated. Over a four-year period they had known absolutely nothing about what had happened to their daughter. Eloisa had suffered in silence, her parents blissfully unaware of what was happening to her. Suddenly their bright daughter had ended up with a three-year sentence in the midst of a massive scandal. However, her father tried to make the best out of the bad situation. That afternoon he sought out Dima. Choking back the tears he had cried over what had happened to Eloisa without his knowledge, he addressed Dima:

"I would be very honored if you come to our house and sit at my table on Saturday. And you, and any of your friends, are welcome, very welcome, to sit at my table whenever you want."

Eloisa was allowed to re-take her semester finals and did quite well. A riot, an execution, and 28 three-year sentences were all it took to get Eloisa re-instated in her school as a student in good standing. The students considered that a victory.

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The riot changed Eloisa's outlook on life. She had always sought to avoid any attention and live quietly. She never trusted anyone except her boyfriend. And yet, when the moment came for her to be unjustly expelled from school, 26 other students had joined Dima to stand up for her. She was indebted to all of them. She had to come out of her world and join the others who had sacrificed for her. She always went with the group to the Socrates Club. Within two months, by pure chance, Eloisa discovered she had a natural talent for singing. Shortly thereafter she discovered that she had a real talent for organizing other singers and choreographing groups of other voices. She began singing on a regular basis. Just six months after her initial sentence, Eloisa was the lead singer for Sergekt's group and the most popular singer at the Socrates Club.

Eloisa's only release in life was singing. Standing on stage allowed her to release the sadness in her soul, a sadness well-suited to a society that valued music with morose philosophical overtones. She was a true Danubian singer, the living incarnation of the expression "to sing like a criminal".

There was another tragedy in Eloisa's life, a holdover from the abuse that she had suffered from her teacher. Eloisa loved her boyfriend in a manner that very few women could love a man. She loved him with all her spirit, all her soul. And yet the one thing she most wanted to do, to have him touch her and hold her, she couldn't. Eloisa was so nauseated by what had happened to her that she was repulsed by any physical contact with other people. No matter how much Eloisa loved her boyfriend, and no matter how much he loved her, he couldn't touch her.

"We keep hoping that, maybe someday it'll be different, that someday Dima can touch me. But Kim, I can't see how it ever will be any different. I'm broken, and I can't be repaired."

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Two days later, 28 young criminals reported to the small police station close to their old school. Spokesman Havlakt accompanied them to assure that they would not be injured and that any sexual fondling from the punishing officers was kept to a minimum. Fortunately for Eloisa, he had obtained a psychiatric release mandating that she could not be touched at all except for the switch. He vaguely hoped the officer punishing Eloisa would violate that psychiatric release, because if he did, her switching could be stopped immediately.

In spite of the unfairness of what had happened, there was very little pity for the group from the school officials and police officers assigned to punish them. The ex-students were forced to kneel while their collars were chained together. The police then handcuffed them and shackled their feet. The officer in charge walked down the line, kicking the kneeling criminals and striking them on the shoulders with his switch.

"Alright you little dishonored bastards...get your filthy bodies moving!"

The line of naked criminals struggled to stand up and slowly shuffled towards their old school. It was bitterly cold and most of them were shivering. They walked about two blocks and filed into the school's main doorway. From there they would go to the gymnasium (a concession to their Spokesman who had not wanted them to be forced to stay outside in the cold school courtyard), and one by one, each would receive 50 strokes of the switch. The terrible detail was the fact that Eloisa and Dima would be forced to witness each other's switchings. For Eloisa and her boyfriend to see each other suffer was a punishment far worse than being punished themselves.

Vladim Dukov and Kimberly Lee, for once dressed in her criminal's cape, quietly stood on the sidewalk across from the police station, sadly watching the group shuffle towards the school. Kim spotted Sergekt, who was fifth in line. She did not try to draw his attention.

"Spokesman Dukov, this is so wrong. At least I did something to get convicted. I mean�Eloisa�"

"No, it is not fair, but it is the way our justice system works. Laws were broken. Violators are punished. It has been this way for 1,000 years. In a situation like this fairness is of only minor importance."