**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 9 � Kim's second punishment**

Dukov and Kim returned to the Central Police Station as soon as the classmates had entered their school. Kim removed her cape as soon as they entered the building, since she was strictly prohibited from wearing it inside. She folded it over her arm and followed her Spokesman back to his office. Upon getting back upstairs, Dukov and his client helped the secretaries set up four recovery tables.

All of the Spokespersons previously had agreed among themselves to help Eloisa's classmates as much as possible. Spokesman Havlakt had persuaded the sentencing judge to grant several concessions to ease the suffering of the group. The most important was forcing the punishment to be moved indoors. There was the psychiatric release for Eloisa that spared her any physical humiliation by forbidding the punishing officers to touch her. Finally, the sentencing judge had agreed that as soon as each criminal's switching was over he or she would immediately be released back into the custody of the Spokesman, instead of having to wait for the entire group to be finished.

The police had arranged to switch the ex-students in groups of four. Once each group was punished, there would be a brief break while the punished criminals left the school, and then the following group would be tied down and punished. The ex-students had agreed that the women would be punished first so they could be released and returned to Spokesman Havlakt's custody as soon as possible.

Part of the males' motivation for allowing the women to go first was out of self-interest. The men knew they faced sexual humiliation at the hands of the female police officers assigned to punish them. They did not want their female friends to see that part of their punishment, so they preferred to have the women from the group leave the school and return to their Spokesman's office before their own switchings began. There were eight women and 20 men, so the first two groups to be punished would be the females.

Spokesman Havlakt hired a van to bring the punished criminals back to the Central Police Station, paying for the service out of his own pocket. The other Spokespersons helped by having their recovery tables set up in their offices. Dukov planned to take four of the criminals, including Eloisa.

Kim was hoping to have Sergekt come to Dukov's office. She wanted to comfort him, but Dukov explained why that would not happen.

"Kimberly, it is not proper that you see Sergekt after he has been punished. Nor is it proper that he be present following your punishment. If you love another person, do you really want to see him broken, crying, and humiliated? Is that how you would want Sergekt to see you?"

"No, Spokesman Dukov, I guess not�I guess I really wouldn't want him to see me�"

"Then you will allow Sergekt to preserve his dignity in your presence, and he will do the same for you. You must not see him after he has been whipped. The person who needs you today is not Sergekt, but Eloisa."

About a half an hour after the recovery tables were set up, Spokesman Havlakt called Dukov to let him know that he was coming in with the first four women from the group, including Eloisa. The van pulled to the side door of the police building that was closest to the stairs leading up to the Spokespersons� office area. Dukov, Kim, one of Dukov's secretaries, and two other Spokesmen-for-the-Criminals were on hand to receive the four women and help them get upstairs.

Spokesman Havlakt opened up the side door of the van to reveal four naked women, all of them Kim's friends. He helped each one get out. Eloisa's face was distorted with pain and tears were running down her cheeks. She was not crying. The other three were sobbing and holding on to each other, but Eloisa was absolutely quiet.

The three sobbing women quickly went inside and made their way upstairs, guided by the other two Spokesmen. Kim took a quick look at their backsides. The bottom of each was badly marked up with dark reddish lines, punctuated with ugly-looking purple welts. All of the women had been struck across the upper thighs as well. One had four red lines across her upper back. However, as bad as the marks were, in no place had the skin been broken and within two weeks all traces of the punishment would vanish from the women's bodies. It would take much longer for the marks to vanish from their minds.

Eloisa stood alone in the cold, shivering with her arms wrapped around herself. She sadly stared at the ground, seemingly unaware of her surroundings. Forgetting about Eloisa's fear of physical contact, Kim walked up to her friend and tried to touch her shoulder. Eloisa squealed and backed away. She looked at Kim with a truly horrified expression.

"Eloisa�please. You have to come upstairs. I promise I won't try to touch you again. But you have to get out of the cold. You'll get sick if you stay out here."

Dukov stepped near Eloisa, gently adding, "Eloisa, please come with us. Kimberly is here to watch over you. You must come to my office and rest."

Shivering ever more violently, Eloisa nodded and slowly made her way to the door. By now her body was almost white from the cold, making her switch-marks looked like red slashes of paint laid across a marble statue.

Dukov and Kim breathed a sigh of relief when Eloisa made it through the door into the heated police station. She was shivering violently and still hugging herself, but with a slow, unsteady walk she managed to climb the steps.

Kim studied Eloisa's face as she ascended the steps alongside her Danubian friend. Kim realized that Eloisa must not have cried at all during her switching. She had focused all of her internal torments into one purpose, to not let the police hear her cry. Kim could tell that she still was tensed up from that effort, and she needed to release her pain and emotion. Eloisa's face almost seemed locked in that horrified expression.

After a very slow, laborious climb up two flights of stairs, Dukov's secretary held open the main door to allow the Spokeman and the two criminals to enter. Eloisa stopped in the reception area, staring the four recovery tables. She put her hands on one of them to steady herself.

"It's my fault" she said quietly. "It's all my fault. I'm the reason the others have to do this."

Rather than argue with her, Kim decided to try to get Eloisa to release her pent-up anguish. She stood close to her friend, as close as she could without touching her.

"Eloisa, you are a very brave girl. You did good not to cry. But now you're safe, with people who love you. It's all over, and you have to let yourself cry now. Please, you have to cry. It's OK. There's just me. No one else will hear."

Eloisa looked up at Kim, then straight ahead. Suddenly she did start crying quietly. She sank to her knees, holding onto the table and burying her face in her knuckles. Kim so badly wanted to hold her, to try to re-assure her with a simple touch from a friend, but she couldn't. She worried that if Eloisa completely sank to the floor, there would be no way to get her up.

"Eloisa. Eloisa. Please, you have to get on the table. I have to make sure you're not hurt."

Eloisa struggled to get back on her feet and slowly positioned herself face-down on the table. Her body jerked with sobs. Kim studied the red and purplish stripes on Eloisa's bottom and legs. They were no worse than the markings on the other three classmates, but Kim felt that to punish Eloisa in such a manner was an abomination. She had suffered so much, and through no fault of her own, continued to suffer.

As Eloisa lay crying, Kim studied her backside. The welts on her bottom now formed hard, ugly ridges where the switch marks had crossed each other. It was obvious it would be several days before she could sit normally, not until the blood drained out of the welts and the skin had softened again. In spite of Eloisa's fear of being touched, Kim planned to wait until she went to sleep and then would gently spread some lotion on the welts to soften them.

When Eloisa finally cried herself to sleep, Kim set to work with the lotion. She put small amounts on her fingertips and very gently applied the lotion to the welts. As she softly touched her friend's damaged bottom, Kim again felt that strange sensation of arousal and sexual excitement. She totally forgot about her earlier view that punishing Eloisa was an abomination. At that moment Eloisa looked so graceful and tragic, lying on the table with her pale body contrasting sharply with the dark red and purple marks from the switch. Kim now badly wished she could have witnessed Eloisa's switching, instead of just being tempted by studying its aftermath. As Eloisa's body relaxed and her bottom spread, Kim could see her open labia and bottom-hole, nestled in a small patch of unmarked skin among all those welts. Like the others, Eloisa had shaved prior to her punishment, so the most private parts of her body were completely on display. Kim suddenly felt the urge to lean down and gently kiss Eloisa�

Kim came to her senses with a start. What in the hell was she thinking? This was her friend, and here was Kim, getting aroused by the sight of her punished body. She felt horribly guilty. And yet, Kim continued to see a strange beauty in Eloisa at that moment. Somehow it seemed that suffering fit the melancholy singer, just as her collar and welts seemed to complement her beautiful figure and soft pale skin.

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Kim's first Christmas in Upper Danubia was the most emotional she ever experienced. She badly missed her family in the U.S. She envisioned her parents and her sister, her cousins and grandparents, all gathered to celebrate without her. Kim knew full-well there would be plenty of uncomfortable discussion about why she could not be in the United States this Christmas, and why she would miss the next Christmas as well. Kim knew that her actions had left a huge hole in her family's soul. Once again her heart filled with remorse as she remembered last year, how she had been so desperate to break away from her parents to go off with Tiffany and Susan and get drunk with a bunch of classmates. If only she had known, if she could have appreciated�but now of course it was too late.

Kim's Christmas in Danube City, however, promised to be full of fun and social events. She had to divide her time between the Dukovs, Sergekt, Eloisa, her co-workers, and her friends at the Socrates Club.

It was only natural that Vladim and Maritza Dukov would want Kimberly to spend as much time as possible at their house during Christmas vacation. She made the rounds to visit various relatives and friends of both Maritza and Vladim as they took her to dine at other people's houses. The elder Dukovs also took her to several churches and pageants. Often the events required her to stand outside for long periods of time, so like it or not, she had to wear her criminal's cape.

One night, as a member of Vladim Dukov's family, Kim even had dinner with Vladik's fianc�e and her family. The visit to the house of Vladik's fianc�e was the most awkward of that first Christmas season, because she was the only criminal in a house full of 25 people. During dinner the American was forced to sit naked at a table full of formally dressed members of Dukov's family and the family of his future in-laws. To make things worse, Dukov was treating Kim in the same manner he treated his own daughter, and introducing her as though she was family instead of a foreign client serving a two-year sentence. Dukov's future in-laws stared at Kim with unabashed curiosity throughout the dinner. Things got even more uncomfortable when Kim's singing career was mentioned and she was asked to join eight other women in singing Christmas hymns. The group stood in the living room, Kim's bare figure contrasting sharply with the bright dresses of her companions. However, in the end Kim survived the evening and was left with the impression that everyone in the household liked her.

The elder Dukovs treated Kim very warmly on Christmas day. She cooked dinner with Maritza and Anyia. Later she ate with the entire family, including Victor Dukov, his wife, and their two sons. Kim had to spend this Christmas separated from her own family in the US, but she was fortunate enough to be part of another.

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Kim spent more time with Eloisa than she originally had planned, given that Eloisa's singing was very much in demand at the end of the year. Kim found herself on stage with Eloisa's other back-up singers almost every night between December 20 and January 1. On December 24 the five singers appeared at Danube City's main cathedral to sing several ancient Danubian Christmas hymns. The event was televised, with Eloisa's performance prominently featured as part of the Christmas programming. Many Danubian television viewers were intrigued by Kim's appearance among the back-up singers, amazed to see the American "Maragana Girl" singing Danubian folk music that was hundreds of years old.

During all their Christmas performances, including the televised one, Eloisa and her back-up singers remained completely naked except their collars. In spite of their contribution to the nation's Christmas celebration, the five young women were criminals, still subject to the laws that denied them the privilege of wearing normal clothing at any time during their sentences. When they finished, always to loud applause, the five lead singers, as well as the men who were playing the instruments, acknowledged both their gratitude and their place in society by kneeling on stage and touching their foreheads to the floor instead of bowing. Kim knelt and leaned forward to put her forehead to the stage floor along with the others. The practice had long since stopped bothering her. She was a Danubian criminal and it was what society expected of her.

By the end of the year Kimberly Lee's identity had undergone a profound change. She no longer saw herself as a graduate from her high school, as a tourist from the United States, nor even really as an American. Kim instead had become a full member of Danubian criminal society. All of her closest friends were criminals, her co-workers were criminals, and even her de facto parents were ex-criminals. In some ways Kim's life was fairly easy. As a part of the criminal sub-culture she was forced to adhere to very strict rules and protocol. She had her place in society, a place as well defined as that of a professional such as Vladim Dukov, or even that of a policeman such as Vladik.

Kim's friends were the most important part of her existence. The group was very close. Kim felt that any of them could be a soul-mate, not just Sergekt and Eloisa. She could talk to any of them about anything. Most importantly, her Danubian friends were people she could trust. They shared everything: their free time, their suffering, their hopes for the future, their dreams.

The place where Kim most fit in was the group's musical band. She sang in harmony with Eloisa's other three back-up singers, to the point that Eloisa decided to start training Kim to sing songs with Danubian lyrics. Eloisa listened attentively to Kim's singing, occasionally telling her how to re-sing a word of phrase to cover her English accent. By January, the American was a full member of Eloisa's group of back-up singers, able to perform as well as any of the others. Kim's soul came out in her singing every bit as much as Eloisa's soul came out while she was on stage.

One part of Kim's life as a criminal was not easy, however, and that was building up the courage she needed to face the next of her four corporal punishments. As Christmas passed and New Year's day rapidly approached, Kim's soul filled with apprehension. The punishment would take place on January 2. Vladim Dukov confirmed that the arresting officer would be available to switch his client. In fact, the female cop was planning to cut short a vacation in Vienna with her boyfriend precisely to be on-hand to punish the American. Dukov also learned that the cop's male partner also would be present for sure. He planned to cut short his vacation with his family at the other end of the country to return to Danube City on the 1st, to be on-hand for Kim's punishment the following day.

Dukov was concerned about the two officers' enthusiasm. "Those two seem quite determined to punish you. It is not common for a police officer to cut short a vacation solely to be present at a particular criminal's punishment. You know that police officers can stand in for each other, but in your case the two officers have been adamant that they will remain in charge of your punishment."

Kim spent New Year's Eve with Sergekt and his friends. By this time the group's members were fully recovered from their punishments and back to their normal selves. Kim spent the entire evening in extreme apprehension, nervously watching the clock. Within 36 hours she would have to face those two cops again. She wondered if the two officers had thought of some horrible new way to punish or humiliate her. She trembled at the knowledge that the two officer's hands would be able to touch her wherever they wanted. She knew they would, that their rough hands would fondle her most intimate regions, that her body would hide no secrets from her two tormenters.

Sergekt was as kind as he could be to Kim throughout the evening. He knew what she was going through, having gone through the exact same emotional turmoil just two weeks before. There was very little he could say to comfort his girlfriend, other than to tell her to remember that, however horrible the moment of her punishment might be, at some point it would be over. "I tell myself that every time I have to face the switch. It doesn't help when I'm actually being punished, but it helps a little bit before because it is the truth, nothing lasts forever."

Kim and Sergekt stayed as long as they could at the Socrates Club after New Years Eve. Before returning to Dukov's house they sadly and quietly made love in one of the "intimacy rooms". When Sergekt finally said goodbye to her in Dukov's livingroom the following morning, Kim held him tightly as tears rolled down her cheeks. She faced punishment in less than 24 hours. She would not see him again until after the switching.

Dukov now had to get his apprehensive client through the day. He and Maritza took Kim back downtown to watch some New Year's festivities. Dukov's idea of keeping her busy that final day worked. In fact, there were moments, however brief, that she was able to focus on something other than her upcoming punishment. The day went by fairly quickly and pleasantly. That night, Kim followed Sergekt's advice and shaved off her pubic hair. Shaving beforehand ensured that at least she would not suffer the indignity of being shaved in public or by one of those sadistic medical students in the medical classroom in the basement of the Central Police Station.

Kim woke up the next morning after spending most of the night wide-awake, tossing in her bed. Dukov entered her room with a very forlorn expression on his face. He no longer saw Kim as a client. To Dukov she was his daughter. He wanted to protect her and save her from hardship, but in this case Danubian law was firm. Kim had to be punished, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Kimberly, we must go." He held up Kim's criminal cape. "Do you want to wear this?"

Kim shook her head. "No, Spokesman Dukov. I'll just go in my boots."

With that Dukov and his client silently took the trolley downtown. Once they got to the police station Kim took off her boots. Once they entered his office Dukov instructed her to get a drink of water and use the bathroom one last time. When she came out, the Spokesman told her to kneel in the middle of the reception area and wait for the police escort to arrive. The police escort would handcuff her and take her downstairs for the switching.

As much as she had feared this moment for the last several weeks, when the time actually came for Kim to wait for her escort, she felt very little emotion. She felt a bit numb from fear and depression, but that was about it. She quietly stared at the carpeting as her Spokesman sorted through her file and pulled out several forms.

When the police escort arrived, Spokesman Dukov saluted while Criminal # 98945 knelt forward and touched her head to the carpeting.

"Put your hands behind your back."

Kim complied, and quickly felt the metal cuffs wrap around her wrists. The numb feeling quickly vanished from Kim's soul, replaced with fear. The fear seemed to grip her chest and restrict her breathing. She felt the officer's hand roughly grip her arm.

"Get up," he snapped.

Kim struggled to her feet as the officer's fingers dug into her upper arm. She heard Dukov's voice, sounding as though it was coming from very far away. "Tatiana, please set up a table. I expect Kimberly and myself to be back in an hour."

Kim walked down two flights of stairs to the main police corridor. She relived the ugly memory of her first day at this station as she was marched down the busy hallway and passersby stared at her. However, instead of being taken across the plaza to the courthouse, she was led to a much smaller room towards the back of the main police building. Because Kim was not on trial, there was no reason to have her punished in the court.

The audience for Kim's second punishment was much smaller than it had been back in July. An assistant police doctor, three medical students, three policemen, one court photographer, and five witnesses were sitting in the audience area. The judge presiding over the punishment was not the same judge who had presided over Kim's trial. A single video camera was pointed at the punishment table, with its operator adjusting its settings.

The two arresting police officers were present, but the female cop did not have the same enthusiastic look in her face she had back in July. Her expression was neutral, perhaps even a bit upbeat. She had remembered that officer was quite pretty, but taking another look at her Kim was amazed at how pretty the cop really was. She was not pretty in the way a model would be pretty, but rather she had a cute country-girl appearance. She wondered if perhaps the officer would not be so harsh this time.

The officer and Dukov saluted each other. The female cop had a question for him.

"Spokesman, are there any restrictions concerning the punishment of this criminal that I need to be advised about?"

"No Officer, no special restrictions."

"Very well."

With that Dukov reluctantly let his arm down, ending the salute and indicating that Criminal # 98945 had been released into the custody of the officer. The female cop and her male partner walked up to her and took off the handcuffs. She knelt forward and kissed each of their shoes, four shoes altogether.

"Young lady, stand up and face me."

Criminal # 98945 stood, looking the police officer directly in the eyes. There was no cold hard stare, just a very relaxed expression. At that moment something very strange and very unfortunate happened to Kim. Along with her fear she was feeling a hint of erotic excitement.

The cop picked up on the criminal�s mixed emotions and decided to go beyond simply punishing her. The officer began by gently running her fingertips down Kim's breasts, down her stomach, and over her shaved pubic area.

"Kimberly Lee, it was very considerate of you to have shaved for me. Too many criminals don't do that. Too many criminals don't respect authority. But you�"

Very gently the police officer brushed her fingertips up and down Kim's body until she began to relax. She then concentrated on her victim�s inner thighs and lightly touched the sensitive area between her legs. Against her best judgment, Kim spread herself slightly to allow the cop to explore her further. She felt genuine erotic excitement as the cop�s fingers gently brushed her clitoris.

"You know, Kimberly Lee, you are very beautiful."

Kim then felt another set of hands gently touching her back. The second set of hands glided to her bottom. It felt so good, so relaxing and yet so stimulating.

"You lovely American�Does it feel good? Do you like it?"

Kim gasped "It�feels so good�oh."

Dukov watched the scene with alarm. He knew what was about to happen, but he had no way of being able to warn his client. He was prohibited from interfering in the punishment other than to prevent serious injury. Had he tried to intervene now, he could risk losing custody over Kim and seeing her re-assigned to another Spokesperson. The officer looked over at Dukov and smiled. She said nothing with words, but her challenge to Dukov was clear enough in her expression�do it, Mr. Spokesman, say something. I dare you.

The two officers gently led Kim to the punishment table. While the male officer tightened the straps around Kim's wrists and ankles the female continued to gently play with Kim's body. It felt so good, totally the opposite of what Kim was expecting. Kim's defenses were completely down. She thrust herself backwards, desperate to feel the tender caressing fingertips in her most sensitive areas.

The female cop nodded to her partner. Very quietly he passed the punishment switch over to her, as she continued to gently caress Kim between the legs with her free hand. The male then took his partner's place caressing Kim as she positioned herself to begin the switching. Kim gasped with her eyes closed, totally unaware of what was about to happen. The female cop gave a sharp nod to his partner. He quickly jerked his hands away as the switch descended against the lower part of Kim's bottom and her exposed labia.

Kim screamed as the pain seared into her exposed flesh. The shock tore into not just her bottom, but also into the sensitive area between Kim's bottom-cheeks. Kim was caught completely off-guard. The officer did not wait, but instead quickly struck four more times, landing savage blows close to where she landed the first. Kim screamed each time the switch landed.

The officer quickly changed sides and laid five additional blows against Kim's bottom from the other side. Again and again Kim screamed, as the switch marked Kim's bottom with bright pink stripes.

The officers smiled to each other. Their plan had worked beautifully. Today it seemed "Maragana Girl" wasn't so tough after all. Her resistance had broken with the very first stroke. Now she was reduced to a sobbing spectacle, and the officers still had 40 strokes to go. They had all day to deliver them, if they so chose. They could take their time and enjoy Kim's suffering.

The female cop waited for Kim's crying to die down a bit. She delivered two vicious blows across Kim's left bottom cheek that set her screaming again. She waited for the sobbing to die down. She then passed the switch to her male partner, who laid two vicious strokes across Kim's right bottom cheek. Two more strokes, two more screams, much more sobbing. The cops stood back to gloat over the spectacle of the crying American.

The cops spent the next hour punishing Kim at a very leisurely pace. They never struck until Kim's crying had died down. They continued to take turns. The female officer always struck first, with two sharp strokes to Kim's left bottom-cheek, then her partner took the switch, to concentrate two blows on the right side. The pain was savage in its intensity. Kim sobbed over and over as the punishment went on and on.

It was nearly an hour later when Dukov finally was able to raise his hand to re-direct the switch against Kim's back. The officers had punished Kim with precision, delivering a total of 46 vicious blows against Kim's bottom and thighs without breaking her skin. Dukov was hugely relieved when the switch started descending on Kim's back, because it meant the punishment was close to ending.

More than an hour after the switching had started, the female cop finally laid the 50th stroke against Kim's upper back. The American continued to jerk with sobs as the two cops undid her straps and released her from the table. However, Kim remained stretched on the table, in too much pain and too traumatized to move.

The female cop moved her head close to Kim's tear-stained face and addressed her in Danubian. "You thought you were pretty tough, didn't you? You thought you were better than me, and that you could resist me. Well, Maragana Girl, here's my answer. You don't try that with me. You are nothing but a pathetic little cry-baby druggie, and that's all you'll ever be." Then, returning to her broken English, the cop ended with "I much hurt you, Maragana Girl. You much cry."

With that the cop and her partner reached for Kim's arms to pull her off the table, but Kim still had a trace of resistance left in her. She struggled to stand up before the cops could grab her arms. She backed away from the table and quickly fell to the ground. Kim ended up on the floor, but at least it was not because the cops had dropped her there. She continued to sob at the feet of the two punishing police officers for several more minutes as they stood over her with triumphant expressions. Finally the pair of police officers grabbed Kim's arms and led her to before the judge. Kim's body still was shaking from her sobs as she stood with her back to the judge. The judge quickly signed the punishment certificate. There was no doubt this criminal had been properly punished.

There was one final part of Kim's ordeal, thanking the two officers. Kim tearfully looked over at Dukov, who reminded her to thank the cops by putting his hands together and lip-synching the word "spakeebo".

Kim managed to get into a kneeling position. She kissed the shoes of both her tormenters. Between sobs she tried to thank them. However, the female cop showed her no mercy, not even with the phrase of thanks Kim needed to utter to officially end her punishment.

"Sp� Spakeebo�d�dak..ub moi�moigu

"What was that? What did you say? You spoiled little American, you will have to speak better than that. Remember, I'm just an uneducated cop. I can't understand your foreign mumbling."

Kim sobbed, and quickly got out "spakeebo dakub moigu".

"I still can't understand you, and I didn't like your tone of voice."

Kim had to try six times before the cop finally accepted Kim's "thank you". It was Maragana Girl's final humiliation, one the cop enjoyed almost as much as beating her. But finally she did touch Kim's shoulder with her switch.

"Very well, then. I'll see you in six months. It'll give you something to look forward to."

Dukov and the two police officers saluted each other, and with that Kim was released back into Dukov's custody. Kim was still crying and somewhat disoriented. Dukov was extremely worried. Kim had to walk out of the room on her own, but once they got through the door, the Spokesman would help Kim get up the stairs. Dukov quietly addressed his client in English.

"Kimberly, walk to the door. Walk with me to the door, without touching me. Once we pass through and I close it, I will assist you."

Kim staggered to the door. Dukov was enormously relieved when Kim made it through and he kicked it shut. Kim immediately fell into her Spokesman's arms, sobbing. Dukov put his arm around Kim's waist, careful to avoid touching any of the welts. He led her upstairs as she continued to cry into his shoulder. They entered Dukov's office. Dukov wanted to get Kim up on a recovery table to make sure her skin was not broken anywhere, but she tightly held onto him as she continued to sob. Dukov quietly told his secretary to look over Kim as she remained standing. Kim continued to cry, with no sign of letting up.

This punishment had taken a much bigger psychological toll on Kim than her first punishment. Dukov had to hand it to those two cops. They had thought long and hard about how they would administer his client's second punishment. That female cop had her completely figured out. As another woman, she was able to read her vulnerabilities and use those vulnerabilities to completely trick her.

Dukov was angry at his own inability to offer any meaningful help to Kim. He felt an overwhelming desire to protect her, but when the moment came for her to be punished there was nothing he could do. He officially had to release legal custody of his client over to the arresting officer during the punishment, so at the moment she was being switched Dukov had as little control over her fate as would a bystander off the street.

For the first time in his life, Dukov began to question Upper Danubia's justice system. He had grown up in the country, been convicted himself, served his sentence, and came out quite well in life in spite of everything. His son was an excellent and upright police officer, a fine example to Upper Danubia's police force.

However, to see poor Kim like this, emotionally devastated because she had been so cruelly tricked, made the Spokesman think that perhaps some legal modification of the way the police could administer punishments was necessary. Dukov did not question the system of corporal punishments, but he did feel that the time had come to outlaw the practice of sexually fondling criminals. Dukov pondered how he could begin that process, the long, difficult task of changing people's minds and eventually pressuring the National Parliament to pass legislation.

Dukov's more immediate problem was Kim. He needed to comfort her and slowly pull her out of her emotional abyss. Tomorrow would be another day, one in which she would return to work and see her boyfriend. However, today was the day she had to get through first, a day in which a world of pain, trauma, and humiliation would be the only things on her mind. For a very long time Criminal # 98945 remained hugging her Spokesman, crying and crying.

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Kim spent the rest of the day in Dukov's office, slowly recovering from her ordeal. For a very long time she just wanted him to hold her and comfort her. She felt as though her Spokesman was the only source of kindness and stability in her life, momentarily forgetting about Sergekt and her other friends.

Finally, exhaustion overtook Kim. She lay down on the recovery table and fell asleep, at last giving Dukov the opportunity to examine her and make sure she was not injured. The young woman's bottom was badly marked up, but nowhere was the skin broken. Dukov breathed a sigh of relief. Within a week or two the welts would be gone and she could move ahead with her life.

That night Kim returned home with Dukov on the trolley. She had somewhat recovered from her switching, enough that she was able to ride home unassisted. The weather was bitterly cold, but she insisted on wearing only her orange boots. Like most other criminals, Kim took pride in not wearing her winter cape, even if it meant momentarily exposing her body to the cold at the trolley stop and her welts to public view in the trolley itself. Dukov chose to stand next to his client on the way back. Both of them tried to ignore the constant stares directed at her welts from the other passengers in the crowded trolley. She seemed lost in thought, so Dukov stayed silent as well, respecting his client's quiet mood.

Kim's body was horribly marked up. To Dukov it seemed the welts were even more severe than they had been the first time she was switched. Dukov marveled at how completely in control that cop had been, pushing the punishment to its legal limits without passing them. Under the circumstances Dukov had been powerless to really offer much help, except at the very end when he was able to re-direct a few strokes away from Kim's battered bottom.

As he looked at his petite Asian client, Dukov pondered his own role in her life. Since the very beginning he had felt an overwhelming desire to protect Criminal # 98945. That night he felt he had failed her.

**Chapter 10 � A letter from Criminal # 98945**

Kim returned to her normal life the next day. She went to work at the normal time in her normal manner, taking the crowded trolley downtown to the music store wearing nothing but her collar and orange boots. Her co-workers, of course, were curious to see the results of Kim's latest punishment. As was customary, Kim turned around and placed her hands on the cashiers� countertop to show off her welts and bruises to her co-workers. Some of them commented that the welts seemed particularly severe. Kim recounted her punishment, going into some detail about how the female cop had so cruelly tricked her. Some of her co-workers sympathized, having experienced the same abuse themselves.

There still was a half an hour before the store had to open, so there was time for Kim to talk in depth about her experience. She discovered that being able to casually discuss what had happened to her with others who had endured similar experiences helped her considerably in coming to terms with the trauma of the previous day. Her co-workers were sympathetic in exactly the right manner to help her recover. They weren't patronizing, nor did they express the phony sympathy of someone who had not endured the same experience. At the same time, they helped put Kim's punishment into perspective. It simply was something she had to face as part of her sentence; she endured it, recovered, and now had to move on with her life. Eloisa noted:

"Remember what Sergekt told you. Nothing lasts forever, not even suffering. It's over. Anyhow, tonight I need you for rehearsal, because we've got to get ready for our concert on the 6th."

"But�but I wanted to see Sergekt tonight."

"Yes, and you will. You'll see him at rehearsal. I already told him to bring his instrument. We don't have any choice. Either we practice, or we look like a bunch of fools on national television."

Suddenly another thought hit Kim.

"Eloisa, there's something else. I can't go on national television in three days. I'll still be all marked up."

"Will that affect your voice?"

"No, but�"

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is I'd like to think I still have some pride in myself. I don't want to show up on television with a bunch of welts on my butt."

Eloisa sighed. "Kim, the reality is that you are a convicted criminal. In this country criminals are beaten. When we are beaten we still have to show ourselves in public. It's part of our punishment. It's the way things are and everyone understands that. You just accept it and you move on with your life. Now, as for you and your 'pride', if you really want to take pride in yourself, then you need to show that cop who switched you that she didn't break you. The only way you can do that is to sing with us on the 6th."

Kim remained silent. Eloisa continued.

"Look, the rest of us did the exact same thing the days leading up to Christmas. We were all marked up, but we still sang and we did it where everyone could see us. And why? Two reasons. First, the music we create is more important than is any one of us individually. It is our gift to the nation. Without us there is no music. So, no matter what each of us must suffer, we cannot let that interfere with our purpose in life. I sing, no matter what, and that's what I expect from all of you; to sing, no matter what. The second reason is to show everyone that, maybe we're nothing but a bunch of naked criminals, but they can't defeat us. They beat us, they humiliate us, and we suffer, but we move ahead in our lives, and we can take pride in that. Now�think about that cop who switched you. If she sees you singing your heart out on TV just four days after she punished you; it will show her she didn't win after all. You're still here, in spite of what she did to you. If you try to hide, then she really will have defeated you."

For a long time Kim was quiet, while her friend waited for an answer. Eloisa then added, "Didn't that cop tell you that you were nothing but a pathetic cry-baby druggie and that's all you'll ever be? Don't you want to get up on stage and prove her wrong?"

Finally Kim agreed. "OK, I'll stay for rehearsal tonight. Any new music?"

"Yes, we have two new winter solstice hymns we practiced last night that you need to learn. I'll go over them with you during lunch break. I think if you and I practice a bit this afternoon you should be ready for the rehearsal tonight. There's something else I want to try with you, an experiment. I'll explain at lunch."

With that Kim took up her position at the store's information counter as another co-worker unlatched the front door. Customers were crowded outside, because in Upper Danubia January 6th was an important gift-giving holiday, almost as important as December 25th. Kim was still quite stiff from her ordeal 24 hours before, but life moves on and does not wait for any single person. She spent the morning answering questions about the store's music and trying to ignore the customers' stares at her marked backside. She wondered what Eloisa had in mind for her.

In the lunchroom the American was shocked when Eloisa told her that she wanted Kim to help her sing lead in one the hymns. The hymn required two lead singers, one who would sing immediately ahead of the other. Eloisa would sing and Kim would echo her, while the other three women would provide the back-up voices.

Kim wondered why none of the others objected to Eloisa's arrangement, given that the others were Danubian and thus one of them rightfully should have been the lead singer's companion at the main microphone. However, in reality she knew the answer; it was because Eloisa's instinct for music was so powerful that everyone else had long since stopped questioning her judgment when it came to choosing the group's songs and deciding how they were to be presented. The group�s lead singer liked to take risks, but in every case the success of her decisions proved her right. Now she was gambling that the American had a better voice for the hymn than any of the others. It was not because of any favoritism for Kim that Eloisa wanted her to help sing lead, it was because Eloisa genuinely thought Kim's voice was the best for that role.

Eloisa led Kim through the hymn with ease during the short time they had for lunch. Kim was amazed herself at how effortlessly she was able to follow Eloisa's voice through the immensely sad notes of the ancient hymn. The song was a true Danubian lament of suffering, written hundreds of years before, probably in the dead of winter during a famine. It was a dark, morose piece of music, infinitely sad and moving, perfectly suited for Kim's mood at the time.

Kim spent the next three nights rehearsing with her friends, which turned out to be the best way for her to get over her punishment. Under Eloisa's leadership, her mind fell in line with the rest of the group in pursuit of a single purpose in life, the January 6th presentation.

As much as she needed to spend time with him, during the first week of January Kim's time alone with Sergekt was limited to quick trips home on the trolley, very late at night after practice. Like everyone else, his mind was on the presentation. His voice was not good for singing, but his ability to play was a true asset to the group. Thus Kim and Sergekt gave up their personal lives for something far greater, the presentation to be led by Eloisa.

Very late at night, in the bitter cold, Sergekt always took Kim back to Dukov's house. They hugged each other closely in the trolley connecting their bodies as much as possible for warmth. She felt guilty about him having to go home alone in the cold after leaving her, but he was stubborn. However, in the brief moments they were together, Kim and Sergekt realized how much their souls truly were connected.

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On January 5, the day before the concert, Criminal # 98945 changed her outward appearance to better match the changes taking place inside her soul. She remembered she had not cut her hair since her arrest and she decided to try to get it styled. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she realized that her hair was long enough to braid in the traditional Danubian style. That night Kim approached Dukov's daughter about helping her with her hair. Anyia, who fortunately happened to be in one of her rare good moods, spent the next hour braiding Kim's hair and explaining how to do it. When the American went to work the following day, her co-workers greeted her new hairstyle with complements and enthusiasm. Eloisa was especially happy to see Kim's hair done up in traditional braids, since it made her fit into her group of singers even more.

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The January 6th concert was a turning point in the lives of Kim, Eloisa, and the other members of the music group. Eloisa and fourteen of her friends were performing on stage at the National Theater, 5 female vocalists and 10 males playing various instruments. As required by their sentences, they performed completely naked except for their collars, in front of 3,500 people and the cameras of the National Danubian Television Network. The fading switch-marks on the American's bottom and back showed up vividly, a message to the world that Criminal # 98945 was condemned to suffer but had learned to overcome it. Kim took Eloisa's message to heart and concentrated on one thing that night, singing as best she could. She owed that not just to Eloisa and her friends, but also to the audience who had taken time out of their lives to listen to the music.

Eloisa and her four friends sang for nearly two hours, all of it televised. The performance was flawless, a very public demonstration of Eloisa's incredible talent for singing and conducting the other voices in her group. Upper Danubia was amazed to see the American "Maragana Girl" in traditional Danubian braids and taking the lead microphone alongside her Danubian friend. The public was even more amazed to hear the American perform an ancient song in flawless Danubian. Kim even surprised herself, realizing that she could sing Danubian much better than she could speak it.

As the criminals knelt on stage to thunderous applause at the end of the performance, they were able to appreciate just how popular they had become. They had come from nothing, a group of convicted high school rioters and an American marijuana smoker. However, under the leadership of their talented lead singer, the 15 individuals on stage stood on the threshold of something truly great. The coming year would be filled with recording sessions and public performances, hard work and endless time at rehearsals. Their music eventually would be heard beyond the borders of Upper Danubia. The music had been the purpose of Eloisa's life, but now it would become the purpose of all 15 members of the group. They would face the future together, putting whatever personal plans aside for their greater purpose. At that time Kim was only vaguely aware of that fact, but her own plans for the future would be completely set-aside for Eloisa and her music.

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The hairstyle change symbolized a significant turning point of how everyone around Kim saw her and how she saw herself. Increasingly Kim's American identity was fading away, replaced by a new perception of herself as Danubian. To a bystander on the street Criminal # 98945 might still have had a somewhat foreign appearance, but to the people she knew, Kim was one of them. She was a full and trusted member of Vladim Dukov's family, a full and trusted member of Eloisa's musical group, and just another employee at the music store. Her romantic heart belonged to Sergekt, to the point that she no longer could imagine her life without him. She no longer judged people's behavior through the eyes of a person from the US. Her definition of proper behavior and values now were forged by the society in which she lived, not the one from which she came.

Kim's changing identity did not mean she loved or idealized Upper Danubia. Her integration into her surroundings was complete enough for her to have balanced view of Danubian society. The society that had so forcefully adopted her was unjust and close-minded, superstitious and obsessed with its own past. Upper Danubia would never be a powerful or influential nation, largely because its people lacked much imagination for anything other than music. Still, Kim realized that the society had many positive points. The Duchy's lack of imagination and ambition meant that its people lived quietly and courteously, not competing against each other. The noise and aggressiveness of other major cities was totally absent on the silent streets of Danube City. Upper Danubia was a very peaceful country, not eager to impose itself on the rest of the world, but also determined that the rest of the world should not impose itself on Upper Danubia.

The duet Kim sung with Eloisa on January 6 was the first out of several songs the two women sang jointly. The group's lead singer had taken a real liking to Kim's voice and her ability to sing and the fact that her partner's voice was slightly different from any of the other voices in her group. As a result, Kim found herself not only echoing Eloisa, but later actually singing side-by-side with her. The American "Maragana Girl" became a feature of the stage at the Socrates Club, as many song-writers were curious to test their music with the Eloisa-Kim duo.

Kim's life continued uneventfully throughout the rest of January and February. The marks from her switching were gone within two weeks. She continued to eat with Dukov and his family, or with Sergekt's friends, or with Sergekt's mother. She continued to dance with him at the Socrates Club and spend time with him in the club's intimacy rooms. She spent endless hours with Eloisa, not just at rehearsals, but also talking alone with her and relaxing with her in general. There were recording sessions and performances, praises and parties.

The beginning of the year sped by. Kim's prior existence became only a distant memory, which only intruded upon her when she talked to her parents in the US. Her life had become quite pleasant, in spite of the limitations placed on her by her sentence. She had everything any reasonable person could want, a great romantic relationship, a wonderful host family, close friends, a reasonably fun job, and the challenge of her music. All of that far outweighed the restrictions of her sentence. In fact, it was precisely because of her restrictions that Kim was able to fully appreciate the positive aspects of her life.

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As much as she was forgetting about her American life, Kim's situation was a constant torment for her family back in the US. The thought of their poor daughter stuck in that awful back-water country, naked and with a collar around her neck, filled the Lees with horror. They easily could have traveled to Upper Danubia to visit Kim, but they could not bear the thought of seeing her in her current status as a convicted criminal. The very thought of seeing their daughter naked in public made them physically sick.

However, Kim's father spent a considerable amount of time and money researching ways he could extricate his daughter from Upper Danubia. He thought of everything, ranging from litigation to a human-rights campaign. He even briefly considered hiring mercenaries to grab Kim and get her out of Upper Danubia by force. Finally he settled on a lawyer who claimed he could obtain her release through the European Union. Upper Danubia was not yet part of the EU, but its government wanted to join and could ill-afford to do anything major that would upset Brussels. The lawyer proposed including Kim's release as a condition for some upcoming trade negotiations between Upper Danubia and the EU. It would be expensive, but the lawyer seemed reasonably sure that he could get her released before her next switching in July.

The elder Lees decided to send Kim's older sister Cindy to Upper Danubia to explain the situation and let her know that her family in the US was trying everything they could to get her out of Upper Danubia. Cindy flew to Europe on March 2, first to Frankfurt, and then on to Danube City in a connecting flight. Vladim Dukov rode a trolley out to the airport to pick up Cindy. He went alone because the airport was 15 kilometers outside Danube City, well outside the Danube City collar-zone and inaccessible to any convicted criminal.

As they rode back to the Danube City's Central Police Station, Cindy Lee quickly laid out her father's strategy for getting her sister out of Upper Danubia. Dukov took Cindy to his office to discuss the matter in greater detail. Dukov was somewhat dubious about the whole idea. To him it seemed to include a criminal's release as part of a trade deal was a bit far-fetched and to be honest, an insult to Upper Danubia's justice system.

"Well, the other option we got is to litigate this through the courts, either here or over at the EU."

Dukov admitted that was possible and told Cindy he was willing to help argue the case in Kim's favor, should it get to that level. However, privately, he did not believe releasing Kim from her sentence at that point in her life was a good idea. She was doing extremely well with her job, with her friends, and with her participation in Eloisa's musical group. She had a fulfilling life in Upper Danubia, and probably did not have much of a life waiting for her back in the US. If she were released, would she go back to using drugs? Would she track down Tiffany and do something stupid to get even with her? How long would it be before she could get into college? And what about Sergekt and Eloisa? It wasn't just Kim's life at stake anymore, but theirs as well.

Dukov ultimately knew that his client would have to make her own decision about appealing her conviction. He suspected she would go along with the appeal, even though he felt that would be a mistake. It was only logical that a convicted criminal would want out of having to serve her complete sentence and most certainly Kim would want her freedom back. What concerned Dukov was what she would do with her freedom, especially if she were expelled from Upper Danubia and not allowed to return.

Dukov and Cindy met Kim at the music store when she got off work. To avoid totally shocking her sister, Kim had taken her criminal's cape to her job and wore it as she left the building. As soon as they entered another building she would have to take her cape off again, but she would deal with that problem and her sister's reaction when the moment came. The two sisters tearfully hugged each other. They had talked enough on the phone to be caught up on each other's lives, so the conversation focused on Kim's job. "It's actually a lot of fun," she concluded, "and I'd like you to come over tomorrow and meet everyone."

"Yeah�sure. I guess it'd be good for me to see what you're doing."

Cindy still was not checked into a hotel, so Dukov made a few phone calls and booked her a room. The hotel was within walking distance of the Central Courthouse and the Central Police Station, the two places Cindy would have to visit frequently if she decided to pursue her project of obtaining an early release for Kim. They had to go back to the main police station to pick up Cindy's suitcase. Upon entering the building Kim would have to take off her cape and boots, and thus confront her sister with the most disturbing reality of her sentence.

Kim knew that Cindy would be deeply troubled and probably offended the moment she stripped off her cape. Kim and her sister had not seen each other naked since they had been very small children. Cindy knew what was coming, which, in fact, was why she had come instead of her father. Still, when the moment came to actually be confronted with the sight of Kim's naked body, Cindy would have to overcome a terrible shock to the values she had grown up with. As they climbed up the steps outside the Central Police Station Kim warned Cindy:

"You know that once we get inside I'm gonna have to take off my cape. I don't have any choice, it's part of my sentence."

Cindy breathed deeply. "There's no way you could keep it on? I mean�"

"Sorry�"

With that Kim quickly pulled her cape over her head and kicked off her boots. Cindy looked away. However, Dukov and his client had to walk up the stairs ahead of her sister to lead her to the Spokesman's office. Cindy could not avoid studying her sister's bare backside as she followed her upstairs.

As they entered Dukov's office everyone hung up their coats. Kim picked up a tray of tea and sweet rolls the secretaries had left before going home for the night. She returned with it to Dukov's desk and poured tea for herself and the other two. However, Dukov decided to leave the two sisters alone for a while. He quickly emptied his cup and stood up.

"Kimberly and Cynthia, I believe it is appropriate that I should excuse myself from your conversation for a while. I must go to the courthouse anyway. I will return within an hour. Cynthia, once I return we will accommodate you at your hotel. Kimberly, you may stay with Cynthia or return home with me, as you see fit."

Cindy was enormously relieved to see Dukov depart, but his absence made Kim feel somewhat uneasy. For the first time Cindy had a chance to get a good look at her sister's face and see what eight months in Upper Danubia had done to her. There was, of course, the sight of her collar. Kim's hair was a bit of a shock as well. She looked so�different�with her hair done up in braids. There was the expression in Kim's face. That was different as well. Cindy had expected to see her sister with a broken, miserable demeanor, but instead saw a look of relaxed confidence that somewhat unsettled her. Cindy realized that no matter what might have happened to her, Kim was not miserable.

Cindy laid out the same strategy to Kim that she had laid out to Dukov, pursuing her release through the EU trade treaty and simultaneously litigating her case through the courts in both Upper Danubia and the EU. At first Kim was excited about the prospect of her release, especially if it could be taken care of before the July 2nd switching. To head home a year early, that would be great!

However, Kim's mind started to fill with doubts when she started talking about her current life in Upper Danubia. When she thought about her Danubian friends, the Dukovs, and even her job, she realized how much she would miss them. Kim also fully understood the devastating impact her departure would have on Eloisa's musical group. They were just starting to achieve real notoriety, and her departure would be huge blow to the entire project. And there was Sergekt�Sergekt, how could she explain this to him?

Dukov returned. He quickly looked at his client's face, hoping to gauge what was going on in her mind. He was somewhat relieved to see Kim's expression, not full of happiness, but instead full of worry and apprehension. It turned out she was smart enough to realize the difficulty of the choice she was facing.

Kim decided to spend the night with Cindy, but not to talk to her anymore about her case. There were many other issues she had to resolve with her sister, painful confessions and the hope that the relationship with the rest of her family somehow could be re-built. Cindy slowly reconciled herself to Kim's constant nudity as they talked at length about their pasts and Kim's relationships with the other members of her family. Cindy came to realize just how messed up Kim's life had been before her trip to Danube City.

At that point Kim still took it for granted she would be going home shortly. She wanted to repair as much of the damage in her life as possible, but knew going back would be extremely difficult. As she conversed with Cindy, she began to realize how difficult returning to her life in the US truly would be.

One problem Kim faced was the complete lack of a social life waiting for her at home. Her high school friends had scattered. Cindy told her sister that one of her ex-boyfriends was in jail for ecstasy-dealing, another friend had died in a car-wreck, and yet another had overdosed and never completely recovered. Some of Kim's friends were out of state at various universities, others were sitting at home, not doing anything other than getting drunk or getting high. As for Tiffany, no one had any idea where she was. She spent a long time at her mother's house recovering from her bout with anthrax, but then she vanished.

"Well, what about college? Do you suppose I'd get into college?"

Cindy sighed "Kim, that's something else I got to tell you. Your grade-point average in school was 1.9. You won't be getting into any college with that. All the places you applied to turned you down. Maybe you could take some classes at a community college�then you could build up an academic record�I don't know. Maybe you could try the military, see if that would help you. Dad seems to think that's what you should do."

The conversation turned to their parents. Details came out that further filled Kim's mind with doubts. There was a final blow coming.

"You know that you really hurt Dad with all your crap. I mean, it seems like you've changed, but I can't see that he'll ever really forgive you. I mean�we all love you and want the best for you, and of course we want you back home, but sometimes�you just push things too far and they can't be fixed. Once you get back Dad wants you to get your own place. I suppose you could stay with me a while, till you find something."

With that the two sisters got in bed and turned off the lights. Cindy immediately went to sleep, but Kim spent the night in restless thought. The familiar sound of her sister's breathing brought back many memories in Kim's mind. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she relived much of her past, the pleasant memories of her early childhood, and the not-so-pleasant memories of her more recent years. Cindy's bleak words continued to echo in Kim's mind.

"Sometimes you just push things too far and they can't be fixed."

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The next day Kim called her boss at the music store to tell him she would be late for work that day. She urgently had to see Spokesman Dukov: immediately, first thing in the morning. He went to his office an hour early to accommodate her.

Kim laid out her situation. Dukov listened attentively to what he already knew, Kim had very little to go back to in the US. She would be giving up a lot if she left Upper Danubia. With a series of questions about her life the Spokesman made Kim clearly understand her situation. She had no job, no prospects of study, no friends, no family with whom she could live, no boyfriend waiting for her in the US. Nothing awaited her except a bleak emptiness.

"Kimberly, this is your life and only you can make this choice. I will support either decision you make. If you decide you want to go home, I will do what I must, even go to Brussels if need be, to ensure your release. If you decide to stay here, your life in my house will continue as before. I cannot decide what is best for you, but I care for you and want to see you happy, no matter what your decision."

"I don't know�I mean...I wanted to go back so much�but what am I gonna do when I get home?"

"I have the same concern, Kimberly. Indeed, what will you do with your life in the United States?"

Kim sat silent for a long time. Finally she came out with a question that somewhat surprised her Spokesman.

"Spokesman Dukov, what would happen if I complete my sentence and then, say, married Sergekt? Is that possible? Like, could I stay here?"

"It is possible, yes. Upon finishing your sentence your passport will be returned to you with a 'transition visa'. That visa will remain valid as long as you retain your current employment. Should you quit your employment, your status will revert back to tourist and your visa will expire in 30 days. If you marry with a transition visa, you would have to apply to become a Danubian resident. You would be eligible for full citizenship after another year."

"Then�I hate to say this�but the truth is�I don't have anything to go back to. I mean my life's gone. It's like�I'm stuck here."

"You are faced with a choice, Kimberly. Neither choice is pleasant, but then very few choices in life are pleasant. But your decision is a real one. You can return, or you can stay. My suggestion? I firmly believe you should complete your sentence. You are changing; your character has transformed. Do you not want to see where that transformation might lead you? Do you not want to see where your time with Eloisa and Sergekt might lead you? Or do you want go home, face life alone, and change back to who and what you were before you came to our country? That is your choice."

Kim shook her head. "I can't believe this. I can't believe I'm making this decision. I mean�"

"So you wish to stay?"

"I can't go back, Spokesman Dukov�I just can't. It's not that I 'wish to stay', but�to go back� I can't do that �there's nothing there�I don't want to go back. But, what am I gonna tell Cindy?"

"Kimberly, your sister will remain in our country four more nights. Take her with you and allow her to see your life here. Let her understand what you will give up if you go home. In doing so, by showing her your life, I believe that your decision to stay will be better resolved in your own mind as well. Remember what I said, you Americans are too impatient. Not everything needs to be resolved instantly."

Kim went to work, while Dukov went to the hotel to pick up Cindy. He had to attend a trial in the morning, so he asked his daughter to take a day off from school to show Kim�s sister around Danube City. Cindy was impressed by the peacefulness and tranquility of a city that was not jammed with cars like every other place she had ever seen. Danube City, like any other European City, did not look its best during the late winter, but it still looked pretty good with its historical architecture and well-kept appearance.

Once Dukov's newest client had been switched and was lying on a recovery table in his office, the Spokesman decided to take a couple of hours off work to take Cindy to Kim's music store. Cindy was reluctant to go in when she saw the entire staff was working nude, but Dukov explained to her the reason and the store's significance in the Danube City music scene. Cindy agreed to go in and confronted the sight of naked cashiers and information clerks, all of them wearing metal collars. What struck her was the fact the staff's demeanor was that of any other store. They worked the registers, tidied up the shelves, and interacted with customers in a perfectly normal manner. Cindy watched Kim from a distance as she bantered with some German customers in English.

Kim turned the information counter over to a co-worker and greeted her sister and her Spokesman. She toured Cindy around the store and introduced her to Eloisa. Kim then took Cindy upstairs and showed her the recording and rehearsal studios. She then excused herself, needing to get back to work, but she mentioned that Cindy would be invited to have dinner with the Dukovs that night. Dukov took his guest back to the Central Police Station and temporarily excused himself as well, since he needed to finish up with his new client and contact his parents to pick him up from the Spokesman's office. Dukov encouraged Cindy to walk around a bit and perhaps visit the National Parliament, which had a famous museum of medieval artifacts.

Cindy found herself alone during the late afternoon, walking the streets of Danube City in the cold drizzle of late winter. Her emotions were in turmoil. She was angry that she had come all this way to get her sister out of Upper Danubia, and here Kim was, working at that damn store as though it were just an average day. It was a bit of a shock for Cindy to be confronted with the fact that Kim actually was happy in Upper Danubia. Somehow she had pictured her sister sitting next to a sign at the edge of her collar-zone, crying and wistfully dreaming about her lost freedom. Instead she seemed content with her life. It was obvious she was very close to that blond girl in the store and that she liked her job. And Kim was singing? What was up with that?

Cindy suddenly had her own doubts about her father's idea of bringing Kim home, especially if he wasn't going to let her live with him. Her life had been very messed up in the US. She now seemed to be doing OK, here in this weird little country. Maybe pulling her out wasn't such a good idea, not if she didn't have anything to go back to in the US. Still, no matter what, Cindy's task was to get things moving for overturning or shortening Kim's sentence. She resented Kim's nonchalant attitude about the entire project, not yet realizing the truth that her sister really did not want to leave.

Dinner with the Dukovs did not help Cindy's mood any. The traditional formal clothes worn by the Dukovs somehow bothered her. This was just too strange, having dinner at some medieval costume party, with her sister sitting naked among this family and talking to them in Danubian. And yet, Kim seemed to like these people. She had a nice room, in some ways better than the one she had at her parents' house in the US, and certainly better than anything she would be getting upon returning.

The next night Kim performed on stage with Eloisa. The performance was much simpler than the ones the group normally did. It was just Eloisa, Kim, and three guys on stringed instruments, including Sergekt; while the backup singers and most of the other musicians had the evening off. Once again Cindy was confronted by the reality that Kim actually had a life in this country. Cindy realized that her sister had a beautiful voice for singing, something that no one in Kim's life, not even Kim herself, knew before her trip to Europe. It was very strange to see her up there on stage with that blond singer, their hair done up in exactly the same manner. What was truly bizarre was that, in spite of her Asian features, she really did not look out of place among the Danubians.

After the performance, Kim introduced Cindy to Sergekt. All three of them knew that the only purpose for the introduction was to allow Cindy to see what Sergekt looked like, since neither spoke the other's language. This meeting was yet another shock to Cindy, being confronted with the sight of her sister's nude boyfriend. She felt very uneasy about the situation, but at the same time she realized this naked European was far better than anyone Kim ever had gone out with in the US.

The following night, the fourth out of six nights Cindy planned to stay in Danube City, the two sisters sat down in a booth in the back of the hotel restaurant for dinner. Cindy had spent the day very agitated that there seemed to be no progress on any of her efforts to challenge Kim's sentence. She began berating her sister about not pushing Dukov to get the ball rolling on the appeal. She only had two more full days here and could not go back without having something to show for her trip.

Kim realized that telling Cindy truth could not be put off any longer. It was time to break the news about her decision to not appeal the conviction. Kim stared at her plate and twirled a spoon on the table as she nerved herself to speak.

"The truth is, I don't think I ought to go home. I don't think this appeal is such a good idea."

Cindy's lips tightened. Deep down she knew Kim was right, but was not ready to admit that to herself yet.

"Kim that's bullshit. What they've done is they brainwashed you. Of course you�"

"No. That's not it and you know it. It's what you said the first night you were here, in your room upstairs. That's what got me thinking."

"What was that?"

"That 'sometimes�you just push things too far and they can't be fixed'. I realized that's true. Everything you told me�Mom and Dad, my friends, my grades, the job situation, it all�just made me realize�I really don't have anything to go back to. There's nothing there. So why bother with all this appeal stuff, getting the Danubian government pissed off at the US, messing up the trade deal, spending all that money�just to have me go back and sit in your apartment with nothing to do? What's the point?"

"The point is that we still love you and we want you home. We want you out of that stupid collar and with your clothes back on. We can't stand seeing you like this."

"I don't like it either, but it'll end. And maybe, by July of next year, I will have gotten something out of all this�I mean I have gotten a lot already. If you think about it, my life's really not that bad. I'm better off than a lot of my friends from school, from what you've told me about them."

"Well, yeah, but they're just a bunch of druggies."

"�and that's what I was becoming, a druggie. It wasn't just pot, Cindy. I was doing other stuff as well, and it was getting worse. When I came here I stopped, stopped completely, but it's because I was forced to. To be honest, you put me back in the US, with nothing to do�and no friends�what do you think is gonna happen? I'm gonna start using again. I won't want to, and I'll hate myself for it, but it's what'll happen. It's just the way it is."

"So that's why you don't think you ought to go back? You're afraid you'll start using again?"

"Yeah. I really don't think I ought to go back. I don't want to go back to being who I was last year. It just isn't what I want."

For a long time Cindy sat silent. Finally she asked.

"So that's it? You really don't want to push the appeal?"

"No. I can't see how it's gonna help me. From everything you told me about back home, I think I'm better off staying here, in spite of all the criminal crap I have to put up with. I never thought I'd say that, but I think it's the truth."

Cindy stopped arguing. It was blatantly obvious Kim was right. There really was nothing waiting for her in the US, apart from boredom, depression, and a return to using drugs. Cindy was convinced. The only thing left was to convince their parents. That would be Cindy's job, not Kim's.

The day before Cindy left Upper Danubia, Criminal # 98945, in her own handwriting, composed a letter to the Danubian government. The letter had to be stamped at the Central Courthouse and then notarized at the US Consulate. At Kim's request, Cindy would take an original copy with her to the United States and turn it over to her father's attorney. The letter read:

I, the United States citizen Kimberly Annette Lee, under my own judgment, wish to formally express that I have no desire nor plans to file any legal challenge to my conviction for marijuana possession and the public use of marijuana in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia. My decision not to appeal my conviction is final and I wish to have it respected in the courts of law of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia, the United States of America, and the European Community. I am determined to complete my sentence to the satisfaction of the judge who sentenced me, the laws of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia, and my Spokesman for the Criminal, Vladim Dukov.

Signed:

Kimberly Annette Lee

Criminal # 98945

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Cynthia Lee's final night in Upper Danubia passed quietly, since there no longer was any urgency about her purpose for being in the country. Cindy and Kim felt enormously depressed, at yet at the same time somewhat liberated, given that Kim's situation was settled. Perhaps what she was doing was not the most courageous decision that she could make, but it was the only logical decision, given her circumstances. There now was time for the two sisters to simply relax and try to repair the relationship between each other. Cindy promised to visit Kim later in the year.

The following day Kim accompanied her Spokesman and Cindy on the trolley as it headed to the airport. They got off at the last stop within the Danube City collar zone. Kim bid her sister a final tearful goodbye. Dukov and Cindy then caught the next trolley, leaving the naked criminal standing alone and shivering at the trolley stop. In spite of the cold she stood in the chilly drizzle for quite some time.

She had made the right decision, the only logical decision she could have made. For better or worse, life had stranded Kimberly Annette Lee in Upper Danubia. She couldn't leave without facing a completely empty and meaningless existence back home, one that would completely consume her soul and destroy her. Maybe, thinking of her lost friends, especially of Susan and Tiffany, and of her jailed ex-boyfriend�maybe Kim was the most fortunate of them all. At least she currently had a life that meant something.

Criminal # 98945 caught the trolley going back into Danube City. She headed to the Socrates Club where Eloisa, Sergekt, and the other members of her musical group were waiting for her.