**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 13 � The American Financial Expert**

Kim always marveled at the ability of her friends to bounce back after each punishment. The very next evening all 15 members of Eloisa's musical group were at rehearsal, following an ordinary day at work for each of the band's members. It was no surprise that the women should be ready to rehearse, given their switchings had been extremely lenient. However, the band's ten male members all were viciously marked up; with the passage of 24 hours only making the marks appear darker and more severe. But they all were present, all with their instruments, all following the direction of the lead singer. It seemed that once they started with the rehearsal, they were able to step out of the pain and humiliation of their lives and enter the spiritual world of song.

On May 1st there was an International Labor Day celebration in Danube City's Central Plaza. Eloisa's group received prominent billing, performing in front of an audience of 22,000 people. The country's Prime Minister and many deputies from the Parliament sat on the building's main balcony, enjoying Eloisa's talent and attractive figure as much as the crowds in the plaza below. Eloisa's group was only one out of six that performed that afternoon, but it clearly was the crowd's favorite.

The May 1st concert also was the first concert in which Kim sang with Eloisa for more than just one or two songs. The American stood with her Danubian friend at the main microphone for 9 out of a total of 22 songs performed by the group. Once the final song was completed and the group knelt in appreciation of the applause they were receiving, Eloisa brought Kim foreword and had her kneel up front along side her. At that moment Kim realized that Eloisa considered her an equal partner at the microphone.

In the US, and in most other countries, the popularity of Eloisa and her companions would have encouraged their fans to pressure the government to commute or shorten their sentences, or in some other way try to ease the burdens of their lives. In Upper Danubia the public's mentality was very different. Most of the people in the crowd saw no contradiction between the group's popularity and their status as criminals. To the contrary, the performers were held up as examples of how successful the Duchy's justice system truly was at forcing violent offenders to reform and lead productive lives. The public would applaud and honor the group, but at the same time would expect them to complete their sentences.

How Kim's friends saw themselves and their situation also differed tremendously from how a group of people in the US might react to a similar situation. Kim knew that Eloisa never stopped blaming herself for what happened to her friends, but how she dealt with that guilt was extremely productive. She believed that if the others had been so willing to sacrifice for her, it was her duty to be as successful in her personal life as possible, so the others could feel good about the sacrifice they had made. According to Eloisa's line of reasoning, had she failed in life or led a mediocre existence, the others would have sacrificed for nothing. It was her duty, her social obligation, to make sure the sacrifices of the others had been meaningful.

As for the others, there was neither regret nor resentment, not against Eloisa nor the Danubian government. They viewed what happened to them as inevitable. A friend's honor had been violated; it was their social duty to restore her honor and face the legal consequences. There was no choice in the matter, because Danubians believed that a person who had lost his honor was nothing more than a living corpse housing a dead soul. There was no "what if" in any of their minds. Keeping their souls alive was more important to them than evading the suffering they were enduring now.

May progressed with an important development in Eloisa's personal life. She had recovered enough from her experiences that she now was able to hold hands with her boyfriend. Her progress was slow, but it was real. At the Socrates Club Kim noticed her friend's hand constantly resting in Dima's hand on the table, as she nervously forced herself to confront her fear of being touched. One night Kim noticed Eloisa actually walking down the street with her boyfriend, holding his hand as they walked.

Kim could tell that Eloisa was uneasy, but at the same time she was living a real adventure, confronting the demons that had taken over part of her soul. Eloisa was happier than she had been at any time since Kim had met her the previous year. Maybe, just maybe, she had been wrong about herself. She was indeed broken, but, with time and patience from Dima, perhaps the damage could be fixed.

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For all the performing they were doing, it seemed to Criminal # 98945 that she and her companions were receiving very little money for their efforts. In many cases, such as holidays, they performed for free, expected to do so as their contribution to the celebration. However, the group also performed in theaters where the public did pay. The only money she ever saw for all her efforts were incidental funds for meals. She also received money to compensate her bosses at the music store and the courier service for her absences, but that was it. When Kim approached Eloisa about the issue, the lead singer simply responded.

"We've been getting a lot of money for our concerts. You haven't seen it because we're not allowed to use it. It's being held in trust by the Spokesperson's credit union until we finish our sentences."

"But how do I know it's even there, if I never see any of it?"

"Is there anything in particular that you need and don't have?"

"Well, no�but�"

"So what's the problem? We'll receive our compensation when we're no longer criminals. Of course, if you have a pressing need�for example Valia�" (who was one of the back-up singers) "�lost part of her family's house in a fire. Our Spokesman released the money she needed to give her parents so they could rebuild."

"And how do you know he didn't keep any for himself?"

Eloisa gave Kim a puzzled look. "Why would he do that? He's adequately paid by the government. He doesn't need our money."

Kim was troubled by her friend's nonchalant attitude about the band's earnings. She decided to bring up the matter with Vladim Dukov. The first thing she wanted to know was how much money she had earned herself. The Spokesman opened a filing cabinet and pulled out her criminal's file. He took out a small bank book and handed it to her. There were various entries with a final sum of the Danubian currency equivalent to $ 14,500.00.

"I understand all of you have the same amount in your accounts, the active band members, that is. Eloisa has paid your songwriters and assistants half the salary the stage performers receive."

"So she's just splitting the money evenly among us?"

"That is correct."

"And you know for a fact that...I mean...are you sure the others are getting their full amount?"

"Of course they are, Kimberly. Why would they not? Anyhow, the compensation is in their bankbooks."

Kim was not satisfied and decided to ask Sergekt for his opinion. He seemed every bit as oblivious as the others. She tried to make him understand why the financial arrangement worried her.

"Look. In my country there's no way a group of people like us would just let a bunch of money come in and get divided up without someone taking a look at the books and seeing what's going on with it. How do you know $ 14,500 is what we all should be getting? What if it's more, and we never saw it? How would we even know?"

"Spokesman Havlakt is a man with honor. I can tell you he wouldn't take our money."

"Sergekt, when it comes to money, no one has honor."

Sergekt gave Kim an offended look, irritated at her questioning his Spokesman's intentions.

"Well, he does! He's not a capitalist! What is it that you want? Do you want to take control of our finances? Maybe you could talk to him and work out an arrangement."

When Kim brought up the issue with Spokesman Havlakt, her concerns were put at ease to some extent. Yes indeed, all his clients had bankbooks in their folders with the correct amount. There was a separate folder with the band's pay receipts and everything looked in order when she tallied up the income and outgoing expenses. The Spokesman addressed the young criminal when she returned the folder.

"Kimberly, I want to tell you that I understand your concern and I am not offended. But there is something you should know. Eloisa is in charge of arranging contracts between your group and the concert halls. Up until now that has not been a problem because they pay standard compensation to performers. By American standards it is not much, but by our standards it is fair. Remember, the Duchy's yearly per capita income is only $ 5,500. My concern is what will happen when Eloisa tries to negotiate recording contracts. She is quite naive on the matter and the assistance I can provide is rather limited. Maybe you, with your American capitalist background, can help?"

Kim sighed. Spokesman Havlakt, just like everyone else in this country, seemed to assume that she was a business genius just because she was from the US. She wasn't, of course, but at least she knew what questions to ask.

It was obvious anyone negotiating a contract would run circles around the band's naive lead singer. The only answer was for Criminal # 98945 to step in and help out with the finances. So, as though she already did not have enough going on in her life, Kim found herself assisting the Spokesman Havlakt with the band's records. The next day he took her to the bank and gave her authority to collect and deposit money into the band members' accounts. Then he drafted a power of attorney to allow her to sign contracts on behalf of the group.

Eloisa and Dima came into the office that afternoon and gladly co-signed the permissions allowing Criminal # 98945 to negotiate the recording contracts. Kim did not fully understand what was happening until it was too late. It was obvious the Danubians did not know anything about contracts and were nervous about their lack of knowledge. Up until that point it had not been a problem, but it would be shortly. Rather than confront the problem themselves, it would be so much easier to have the American handle everything, since everyone knows that Americans are good with business.

The only problem was that Kim was only 19 and had barely managed to finish high school. She was not qualified to negotiate anything and she knew it. That night she made a panicky phone call to her father, begging him to get her some assistance.

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Vladim Dukov faced a test of his honor. He was sworn to uphold a legal and judicial system that dated back to the Middle Ages. His goal in life was to uphold the Danubian justice system and through his position do his part to assure social peace and tranquility. He took his obligation very seriously, because Danubians believed that if a person pursues a profession, especially a public profession such as Spokesman for the Criminal, the spirits of the dead predecessors in the field watched the actions of the living. A person who failed to uphold his profession to the standards of the Guardian Spirits faced punishment from those spirits, who would return to the world to wreak havoc in the lives of the incompetent and the malicious. That belief was not just superstition, it actually was incorporated in the country's religious practices, the most important of which was the Day of the Dead in September.

Spokesman Dukov saw nothing wrong with the over-all method of punishing criminals in Upper Danubia. Criminals had to be punished somehow, and kept under control for a set period of time. The only two ways to accomplish that goal was to jail them, or sentence them in the Danubian fashion. Dukov reasoned the Danubian way of punishing criminals was far superior to jailing them, because from the very first day of their sentences criminals returned to society and were forced to re-build their lives. Reform and redemption started from day one of the sentence. On top of that the government was saved the expense of maintaining jails and prisons.

Dukov knew that Upper Danubia's system of corporal punishment was in deep trouble, in spite of his belief in that system's benefits to society. Over the last couple of years he had talked at length with his son, and fully realized just how abusive the younger police officers were becoming towards criminals. He had battled with enough police officers himself to know that things in the courtroom and the punishment chambers were headed in a very bad direction.

The older police officers viewed both themselves and the criminals they punished as having specific places in society with specific duties. The officer had his role in society with its obligations and rights, and the criminal also had his position in society with its obligations and rights. Those obligations and rights had to be respected, even when a police officer needed to whip a criminal. The judicial code of 1780 clearly laid out a system of corporal punishments designed to be painful, but not cause permanent injury. Unfortunately, the code said nothing about preserving the criminal's dignity, but for generations it had been taken for granted that a police officer should never derive sexual pleasure from his position and power over a criminal.

Over the past decade the values within the police sub-culture had changed in Upper Danubia. The concept of social responsibility had greatly diminished, replaced with the idea that police officers needed to make punishments as hellish as possible to frighten the public into not committing crimes. Because of the change in over-all values, many of the younger police officers saw nothing wrong with sexually tormenting criminals as part of their over-all punishment. They were not violating the Code of 1780, nor causing any permanent injury, so what was the problem? Given the hostility from the over-all population against criminals, most of the public saw nothing wrong with sexually humiliating them. Besides, it was fun to watch.

Dukov had struggled with the issue since Kim's first switching. When she was stretched out on the punishment table last July, a terrified foreigner who only half understood what was happening to her, Dukov's heart went out to his client when she was fondled and he stood by unable to help her. His doubts about the system intensified over the winter as he conversed with Vladik about his fellow officers. Dukov finally was convinced that concrete reforms were needed when his son decided that he needed to put his own career at risk just to protect a group of female criminals from being sexually abused by his co-workers. The entire system clearly was broken and needed to be repaired.

Vladim Dukov wanted to restore the values of the Danubian National Police back to the way they had been prior to the recent change. He wanted the system to be returned to its original goal, rehabilitation. In the past the police officer was a key figure in the criminal's rehabilitation process and fully cooperated with the Spokesman. Today the Spokesman and the police officer were enemies in court, with the Spokesman desperately trying to protect the criminal from abuse and the police officer desperately trying to outwit the Spokesman. Because of the change, the entire system was breaking down and criminals were being unfairly treated. They were being turned into entertainment for both the punishing officers and for on-lookers.

Dukov's goal was to re-establish the spirit of the Code of 1780 by changing its text. He wanted to carefully define what exactly a switching was, how it was to be administered, and define limits of severity. Most importantly, Dukov sought to create strict sanctions against any police officer who sexually abused a criminal as part of his punishment. There would be no touching, no fondling, no sexual jokes permitted, nothing that might be considered to give sexual pleasure to the officer. Dukov's legislation stipulated that any police officer who sexually abused a criminal would face the same sanction as one who drew blood during a punishment, the officer would lose the right to switch criminals in the future. Dukov planned save the system by reforming it.

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Sweat trickled down Spokesman Dukov's face as he stood in front of the National Parliament to present his bill at the end of the first week of May. Behind him stood 37 Spokespersons, 19 from Danube City and 18 more from the provincial capitols. Their support was the first surprise to the nation; that all of Upper Danubia's 37 Spokespersons agreed on the need for Dukov's bill and were standing behind him as he spoke. There was no doubt about their support, because they all saluted Dukov before he began his speech.

The Spokesman began by presenting three petitions, the one from Eloisa's old school, one secretly passed around the National Police Headquarters by Vladik's friends, and one from several religious leaders who were offended by the open display of sexuality during corporal punishments. Dukov then spoke to the stunned Parliament about the need to re-impose morality into the system of judicial punishments and restore harmony between the country's Spokespersons and police officers. A punishment code with clear rules and restrictions would help restore that harmony.

Dukov's proposal immediately proved unpopular among the legislators, as he had feared. It was attacked by numerous deputies who argued that it undermined both the authority of the police in general, and the right of the individual police officer to determine what was best for the criminal. At first it seemed that the support from Dukov's peers and other social leaders did not matter to any of the deputies. However, a deputy from the main opposition party finally broke ranks with the rest of the Parliament and spoke in favor of the proposal. Quickly two others seconded the dissident's position and also gave statements in favor of the reform. A group of deputies filed out in disgust as two others, this time from the governing party, raised their hands in support of Dukov's proposal. There was whistling and hissing from the deputies directed against each other and the Prime Minister shouting to restore order. With that the long debate over reforming Upper Danubia's criminal justice system began.

As the Spokesman stood sweating at the main podium, he was fully aware of the long difficult months that lay ahead because of his actions. He would have to defend his proposal day in and day out, argue continuously with adversaries and ex-friends, and justify over and over why a law that had worked admirably since 1780 no longer was serving its purpose. The debate would go on for a long time before finally being settled, because nothing in Upper Danubia's National Parliament ever got resolved quickly.

Dukov continued to stand in front of the cameras of the nation, unsure whether to leave the podium or not. Finally he directed a question at a deputy Prime Minister.

"Sir, may I be dismissed?"

"Spokesman, do you withdraw this piece of treason?"

"No sir."

"Then you stay there, at that podium. Look into the camera. Let the nation see you for the subversive that you truly are."

The term "subversive" stuck and appeared in the nation's newspapers the following day, under a picture of Dukov's sweating, nervous face. As the debate raged about the need to pass the reform, Kim's Spokesman became known as "Vladim the Subversive". Over the next few months the Spokesman and his supporters eventually took the nickname as a badge of honor.

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May of that year was abnormally hot throughout Central Europe. Kim enjoyed the hot weather, the high temperatures reminding her of a summer in the United States. However, for Upper Danubia the hot temperatures were a concern. Recently planted crops struggled in the heat, farm animals were under a lot of stress, and the population of Danube City was forced to shed much of its clothing.

Anyia was elated with the crisis, because her school building was sweltering. As a concession to the students, the dress code was lifted and the very next day every girl in the school showed up in a mini-skirt and light blouse. Anyia went to school in the absolute skimpiest outfit she thought she could get away with, a loose-fitting back-less blouse, a very short loose mini-skirt, and sandals. Maritza Dukov watched with concern as her barely dressed daughter scampered down the street with her equally scantily clad friends in the abnormal heat.

The month progressed with no rain. The East Danube River dropped, opening up river beaches that normally did not open until August. The beaches, lakes, and public pools filled up with thousands of naked bodies as the city's population sought to escape the heat. In some places the ground was hard to see because of its covering of thousands of tanned human bodies.

Everyone at the beaches, public parks, and public swimming pools, without exception, was completely naked. Upper Danubia was the only country in the world to outlaw the use of swimsuits in public locations. Danubian society looked at swimsuits as yet another effort by foreigners to impose their moral values and fashion standards on the nation's people. The government's response was simply to make all swimwear illegal. The prohibition of swimwear was another act of defiance from Upper Danubia against the rest of the world.

As Kim rode making deliveries on the days she worked for Victor Dukov, she looked longingly at the people relaxing on the ground near any body of water. She had a few opportunities to swim, but not nearly as much as she would have liked. She worked 9-hour days, six days a week. She had rehearsals three nights per week, a concert at least once a week, and a recording session at least once a week. Whenever she had an evening free Kim could count on Vladim and Maritza Dukov to have something planned, and when that was not the case she could spend a little time with Sergekt.

Sunday hardly was a day of rest. Sundays always included the weekly tradition of Sergekt having dinner with the Dukovs and the preparations needed for the meals. Kim had to help Maritza prepare the dinners, since it was Kim's boyfriend who was coming over. As much as she wanted to drop the whole idea of those stupid dinners, she knew better than to say anything. The Dukovs would never dispense with the tradition and both parents felt that it was very important for them to maintain an on-going relationship with Sergekt.

On top of everything else, Sundays were the only chance Kim had to attend to her newest duty, the singing group's income and contracts. There was much that she had to learn very quickly, about basic accounting, the group's expenses, negotiating performance details with the theaters scattered around Danube City, and beginning to understand music recording contracts.

Kim found out that Eloisa had been contacted by a German company who wanted to sign up the group to produce several albums. Kim spent many hours researching the details of the deal being offered. She faxed pages of documents back and forth to her father in the US, who in turn showed them to a friend he had in the music business in the US. The verdict? Don't sign anything with them, they are trying to cheat you in a big way.

Kim brought the bad news to Eloisa and Dima, expecting an argument. The response was "Kimberly, you are the business expert among us. If you think a contract is no good, I'm not going to argue with you. You know what you're doing, and we don't. That's why you're in charge of the money."

Kim said nothing, but a sick feeling rose in her stomach. Eloisa, I don't know what I'm doing either, she thought to herself. I don't have a fucking clue.

Criminal # 98945 approached her boss at the music store about her dilemma. He surprised her by actually understanding her situation and by being the one person in Danube City who realized that being born in the US does not make a person a business expert.

"Kimberly, there is only one solution. You will have to make yourself into the expert everyone thinks you are already. You have significant number of people whose lives depend on your actions. Is it fair that you should suffer this responsibility at age 19? No, but fair or not, this reality has become your life. You must succeed, and I will strive to help you."

Kim's boss spent many late evening hours over the summer giving her a crash-course in everything she needed to know to negotiate music contracts and make sure everyone was paid properly. She was amazed he was willing to spend so much time with her. When she expressed her surprise and gratitude her boss replied:

"Kimberly, I have spent my entire adulthood promoting music. It is the purpose of my life, it is the very reason I exist on the planet. I have seen many musical groups come and go, many wonderful songs played for a while and then forgotten. But when I hear Eloisa, I feel different. Her voice touches me more than anyone else I have ever listened to. There is something about her, something that will make her unique, and I don't really know what that something is. But it's there, and I want the world to share it. Not just Upper Danubia, Kimberly, but the world. She has that potential to touch the world with her singing. So for me to spend some time with you to make sure you negotiate the right contracts is nothing to me. And when you do need to talk to anyone about contracts, please let me know. I will go with you."

"Really sir? You'd do that?"

"Yes Kimberly, I think it's that important."

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During May and June Kim saw very little of her boyfriend except during rehearsals, concerts, and the Sunday dinners. While she was struggling with her two jobs and the band's finances, Sergekt was desperately trying to save his mother's garden from the drought. Hour after hour he spent at the garden plot pumping water from the ground and carrying it in buckets to dump on the garden's plants to keep them alive. It was a losing battle that left him exhausted, but at least he had to make the effort. By June Kim noticed the effect Sergekt's efforts were having on him. He had lost weight and become much more sinewy, his hands were callused from the work and his face continuously exhausted and stressed. There was little she could do to help him, other than lend him her mountain bike to let him get out to his family's garden plot more quickly.

Kim found out it was not just Sergekt who was struggling to save his family's garden. Most of the other male members of the band also had family plots to attend to, and it was Danubian tradition that a grown son should bear primary responsibility for the heavy labor needed to keep the gardens productive. All around Danube City young men desperately pumped and carried water to pour on their parents' vegetables as the sun blazed and water levels dropped. The women noticed the male members of the band become increasingly depressed as stories circulated that wells were running dry around the country. Kim's friends knew it was only a matter of time before their own water stations would run dry, and when that happened their efforts to save their families' food would end in failure.

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The worsening drought suspended debate on Vladim Dukov's proposal to reform the country's corporal punishment system, which was ultimately proved fortunate for the reform's proponents. Had the initial vote been held on schedule, the reform proposal would have been defeated by a 3 to 1 margin in the Parliament. However, Upper Danubia was facing a food crisis that needed more urgent attention. As much as the country prided itself on being self-sufficient, it was obvious that year the government would need to import a large part of the nation's food supply. There was money set aside for such emergencies, so the only real issue was to negotiate the best deal for importing basic food items, most notably wheat, animal feed, and potatoes.

Because of his English and experience in the United States, Spokesman Dukov was included in delegations ordered overseas to purchase several shiploads of wheat. The wheat would be off-loaded into barges and brought to Danube City, and from there sent to the provinces by rail. As the negotiations progressed and the contracts were signed, the nation's emergency fund shrank and eventually was used up. However, the end result was the purchase of enough wheat and animal feed to get the country through the next growing season.

Dukov was out of the country during almost the entire month of June, with the handful of other government officials who spoke English. The other officials had been scandalized by the Spokesman's efforts to undermine the nation's centuries-old justice system. At the beginning the others treated Dukov with disrespect, but over time he was able to win their confidence. Slowly, very slowly, he explained why the reforms were necessary, using different strategies to convince different members of the trade delegations. Dukov, in his quiet friendly manner, managed to win the support of several important government officials and deputies, who later in the year would return to their posts and talk to other officials about the need for reform. It was a slow process, but he began to feel confident that he might win the hearts and minds of enough people to make a difference.

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June sped by as Kim struggled to become the financial expert everyone thought she was already, and as the male members of the band fought to stem the slow death of their families' gardens. The solstice came, and with it a series of celebrations and national religious services. As always, Eloisa's group performed for the nation, this time in the Plaza of the Ancients, right next to Sergekt's restaurant and the Temple of the Ancients, where Criminal # 98945's legal problems began a year ago.

Kim looked at the Temple and her heart pounded. A year ago. Shit. She suddenly remembered she was due for another switching on July 2, less than two weeks away. The anniversary of her arrest was coming up, the anniversary of the horrible two days that so completely demolished her old life.

Two days after the solstice Kim rode her bicycle over to the Temple of the Ancients. She needed a break and called Victor Dukov to tell him she was taking an extra hour for lunch. Immediately he objected, but she calmly responded: "Mr. Dukov, I need to take the hour. You can cut my pay or do whatever you want, but I need the hour, and I am turning off my phone. Goodbye sir, I'll talk to you in an hour."

Criminal # 98945 decided to walk behind the Temple and visit the spot where she had been arrested the year before. It looked exactly the same, except the park bench was a bit more worn. Kim decided to sit down and simply enjoy the view of the river. The water level was very low, exposing sandbars she had not seen the year before. The trees didn't look all too healthy and the grass underfoot already was dried out. Oh God, Kim thought to herself, I hope there's never a fire here, all this would go up like matches.

Kim's thoughts wandered to Tiffany. She wondered what had happened to her. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. Was it possible that Tiffany was consumed with guilt, being responsible for the death of one friend and the imprisonment of another? Was she so blitzed out on drugs that she no longer cared? Was she already dead? No one in Kim's life knew the answer.

Kim's thoughts wandered to her own life and the rest of the summer. The switching loomed in front of her, but then it would be over and within a couple of weeks she would be completely healed. She was more worried about her crash course in the band's management. She was grateful for all the help she was receiving from her boss, her father back in the US, and Vladim Dukov, but the enormity of what she was taking on frightened her. Still, she knew something very important. She knew that, ultimately, she would succeed.

As she got up to leave, Kim heard some footsteps coming up near the bench. Her heart jumped when she saw it was the female cop who had arrested her a year ago. The cop gave her a pleasant look and a slight smile, but Kim knew that was quite deceptive. Suddenly her conscience was filled with dread and horror.

Shaking, Criminal # 98945 knelt at the feet of the cop, touching her forehead to the ground. She waited for permission to stand up. The cop stood silently for several minutes, letting Kim fully appreciate her submission in this situation.

"Criminal # 98945, I see you're a bit sentimental. I presume you are fondly remembering our first meeting in this spot. You know, our meeting here is something that gives me very sweet memories."

"Yes, Officer."

"So tell me, Criminal # 98945, are you looking forward to our meeting next week?"

"No Officer, of course I'm not looking forward to that."

"Good answer, Criminal # 98945. You're being honest with me. You know that lying to a police officer in this country is a crime."

"Yes Officer, I know that."

For a long time the cop left Kim kneeling. Finally she interrupted the silence.

"Criminal # 98945, since you and I are here alone, I want to ask you a question. Do you think your sentence was fair? I ask you that because normally you would have received five years, and the switch every three months. But you, because of your sweet-talking Spokesman, only got two. Do you think that's fair? And I want you to answer me with a simple 'yes' or 'no'."

Kim had no idea how to respond. She thought the sentence was more than fair, given that nowhere else in Europe would she have been so cruelly treated for a simple marijuana possession. But by Danubian standards her punishment was extremely light. Finally she answered.

"Yes, Officer, I think my sentence was fair."

"Oh really? Two years out of a five year sentence? Four whippings when you should have received 20? I don't think it's fair at all, Criminal # 98945."

"You are entitled to your opinion, Officer. What more can I say?"

"Oh, I'm entitled to much more than my opinion, you pathetic little druggie. You think you're so Danubian, with your fancy singing and your hair done up like you were one of us, but you, and that group of hooligans you hang out with, and your criminal Spokesman and his traitor son�you're all social garbage as far as I'm concerned. You'll never be Danubian. None of you. Well, I can't do anything about the others, but I'll be making your life pretty miserable next week."

"Officer, I request permission to speak."

"What is it?"

"Why are you this way to me? What did I ever do to you to make you hate me so much?"

"You're a criminal, and a spoiled rich American on top of everything else. I hate you all, all you criminals and all you foreigners. If it were up to me there'd be none of you, no criminals and no foreigners, contaminating our land. As for you, I really don't know why I hate you so much. I just do, and I don't see anything wrong with it. You will learn that hatred is a powerful thing in life, Criminal # 98945. Anyhow, I'll be able to vent my anger on that sweet brown bottom of yours. I guarantee that next week, while you are strapped to the table, I WILL break you. I'll have you screaming, just like last time, only more so."

"You won't be able to surprise me Officer. I now know what to expect."

"Oh, I'm not going to try to surprise you. I'm simply going to beat you as hard as I legally can. I'll make it nice and slow, take my time, enjoy myself. No, there will be no surprises this time�just me and you�and lots of pain. I've had plenty of time to practice, on other criminals, that is. But when I beat them, it's you who I'm always thinking about."

Kim started to shake. As much as she tried to stop, she couldn't. The cop noticed Kim's quivering body.

"I see that you are indeed scared, as you should be. Well, I must continue my patrol, so I'll leave you. Have a pleasant afternoon, Kimberly Lee. I'll see you next week."

With that the cop walked off. Kim sat back on the bench, her pleasant reflective mood totally shattered. For a long time she stared blankly at the ground at her feet, immobilized with terror.

**Chapter 14 � Kim's third punishment**

Kim finally forced herself to turn on her cell phone, which was blinking with four messages from Victor Dukov. Instead of listening to the messages, Kim decided simply to return to Victor's office and tell him what happened in the park.

The moment Victor saw his wayward employee, he knew something was very wrong. He had the decency to hold off on berating her for the unauthorized break until he found out what was bothering her. In a frightened, broken voice, Kim told her story. It was obvious his employee could no longer work that day, so Victor told her that she was released.

"Kimberly, you understand that what you did was very foolish, first ignoring your duties to me and second, going into that policewoman's patrolling area. What did you expect would happen?"

"I�I wasn't thinking about her, sir. I just wanted to sit down a bit, maybe think things over. I didn't think I'd see her."

"Well, you did and here are my thoughts. You can't avoid what's going to happen to you next week. You're going to get hurt. There is nothing any of us can do about it. At least you know what to expect, but I would imagine that's no consolation."

"No sir. I sort of wish I didn't know."

"Well, you do, and I think that's for the better. Now here's some advice. I think what you should do is try to find out as much as you can about that police officer. Ask my nephew. I'm sure he knows her and perhaps can give you some insight about her."

"Mr. Dukov, what good would that do?"

"Knowledge will always help you. Find out what you can."

"I guess so, sir. I'll try."

"Now, take the afternoon off and try to calm your nerves. I'll expect to see you the day after tomorrow, ready to make some deliveries."

"Yes sir."

Criminal # 98945 quickly went back to her Spokesman's house. She expected to find the residence empty, or at most with just Anyia lying in the back yard. However, she was surprised to see two police bicycles on the front porch. When she went inside, Kim heard Vladik and his partner talking in the kitchen. They were having lunch together, drinking wine and eating some leftovers from the previous night's dinner.

Vladik looked none too pleased that the young criminal had shown up precisely at that moment, and his partner seemed a bit embarrassed. Suddenly Kim wondered if she might have interrupted something between them. She quickly knelt on the kitchen floor and touched her forehead to the ground. Kim never knelt for Vladik when he was alone, but in the presence of other people, especially other public officials, she was expected to show the formal gesture of respect. Vladik quickly told her to get up and join him at the table.

For the first time Kim was able to get a close up view of Vladik's partner. She was not particularly attractive, not nearly as attractive as his fianc�e. She had a tough tomboyish appearance about her, but at the same time she seemed to radiate an intense sexuality.

The fact that Vladik had a female partner was normal for his profession. Kim knew that in Upper Danubia, the National Police officers were roughly balanced between the sexes. Almost every police officer was assigned a permanent partner, and whenever possible that partner was of the opposite sex. The prevailing theory behind the custom was the Danubian belief that men and women see the world differently and have different forms of insight. The administrators of the National Police believed the differences between male and female officers complimented each other in the field, especially during investigations and interrogating criminals. Like almost everything else in Upper Danubia, the custom of employing female police officers went back many years, clear back to the judicial reforms of 1780.

As she sat at the table and poured herself some fruit punch, Kim was more convinced than ever she had interrupted something between Vladik and his partner, but she had to play dumb and pretend to be oblivious. Kim could tell that Vladik was making a real effort to hide his displeasure at her sudden intrusion. Well, it's not my fault you want to cheat on your fianc�e and screw your partner, she thought to herself.

Vladik's partner finally excused herself from the table when it became obvious Kim had returned home for the afternoon. Vladik stood as well, and the two officers saluted each other before the police woman mounted her bicycle to go home.

Kim was quite happy to have Vladik to herself for a few minutes, in spite of the uncomfortable situation she had just walked into. She told the young police officer about her scary encounter behind The Temple of the Ancients. As she talked, her old fear came back. Her hands were shaking. Finally she got to the point, following Victor's advice about getting more information about her nemesis.

"Vladik, I need to ask you something. Do you know that woman�have any idea why she hates me so much?"

"Oh yes, I know her. Her full name is Malka Chorno. She hasn't spoken to me since Father introduced his legislation in the Parliament. What really set her off was when she found out I was behind the petition that most of the older officers signed. She's called me 'the traitor' ever since. But I do know her fairly well from our service together before all that."

"Well, what's her problem?"

"I think that's the best way to put it, a problem. She's a powerful and charismatic officer, but she does have a serious problem. If she doesn't watch herself that problem will ruin her." Vladik paused for moment. "She's one of those officers who will end up either a complete hero or a complete villain, depending on which path the Spirits of the Ancients choose to lead her. In a fire-fight or in combat you couldn't have a better partner. She's vicious with her weapon, and when she shoots, you can count on that shot hitting its target. I'll give you an example. We had a couple of bank robberies near the border last year, just before you were arrested. Malka and her partner were dispatched to a third robbery, one in which there were hostages and four criminals with automatic weapons. Within 30 seconds of sneaking into the building Malka shot all four bank robbers with her service revolver. Clean shot to the head for each one, no thought or hesitation�she just fired. Bang�bang�bang�bang. It happened so quickly that none of the hostages were hurt. That's her good side."

"Now for her bad side, and she does have it, as you are well-aware. She loves to dominate other people. She's a bully; there's no doubt about that. She bosses her partner around mercilessly, and she's humiliated him in public a bunch of times. With criminals she's a lot worse. She'll do whatever she thinks she can get away with. She especially loves to humiliate other women. There's nothing that she loves more than to bring a young woman to orgasm against her will before switching her, but she does it with the male criminals as well. She loves to hear criminals cry and scream. I know that she'd go way beyond the 50 strokes if she could. She'd gladly punish with a whip if she could. Now as for you�you're special because you're a foreigner and you're a drug user."

"Well, what does she have against foreigners? I never did anything to her."

Vladik got up from the table and went into his father's library. He came back downstairs with a folder of newspaper articles. Kim opened them up and read about a white slavery ring that had operated in central Europe and had been responsible for the disappearance of eight Danubian teenagers. The case ended when three members of the ring were captured in Danube City. The Danubian police had no hesitation torturing the ring members to find out what had happened to their victims. The interrogation team, which included Malka, tortured the traffickers to death, saying that such criminals were not worthy of a formal execution. As a result of the interrogations four of the missing teenagers were traced to Middle Eastern countries, liberated, and eventually returned to Upper Danubia. The other four, including Malka's younger sister, remained missing.

"The people who got her sister were foreigners, and they used drugs to get their victims to do what they wanted. So there's your answer, drugs and foreigners."

"But I didn't do it!"

"That doesn't matter. Officer Malka Chorno's inner peace is damaged. She can't differentiate between you and any other foreigner. And on top of everything else was the marijuana smoking�that really drove her nuts. You're damn lucky she didn't shoot you behind the Temple of the Ancients instead of arresting you. I think she almost did."

"Shoot me?"

"Yes, shoot you. My partner overheard her a few months back. From the way she was talking, it seems she was just about to pull the trigger when she saw what you were doing. The only reason she didn't was because at the last second she realized there were witnesses, a couple of civilians who happened to be watching."

Kim was left speechless. Vladik continued.

"It's for officers like her that we need to codify a standard of decent behavior for the National Police Force. Malka Chorno is a gifted and charismatic officer, but her soul is damaged. Her attitude towards criminals has been a bad influence on many of my classmates from the Academy and on the most recent class that just graduated. The result...well, your friends suffered for it in April, and you'll get it next week."

"Vladik...do you think you could help me...like you did Eloisa? Maybe get someone else to punish me?"

"There's no way, Kimberly. Father tried, and pushed so hard that he was officially reprimanded for attempting to subvert the authority of a police officer. It is officially Malka's duty to punish you, since she is the arresting officer. The only thing I can tell you is that Father will be watching to make sure you're not seriously injured and that there's no blood. Malka cannot make you bleed, if she does she'll lose her switch. That will help you some, because it puts a maximum severity on what can happen to you. But she will punish you up to the maximum standard. And you will cry, and you will scream."

"No, Vladik, not this time. I know better. I'm not going to scream. I won't give her the satisfaction."

"Those are brave words, Kimberly, but you have to be realistic. Malka will do everything she can to break you, and perhaps it is best that you not resist her."

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Criminal # 98945 spent the next week feeling as though she was facing a death sentence. She now had enough information to suspect the upcoming switching would in some way change her. At the very least it would be a horribly traumatic experience and would leave her devastated. Deep down she wondered if Spokesman Dukov really would be able to prevent her from being injured.

Kim continued living her normal life, working at the music store and delivering packages for Victor Dukov. She rehearsed with her band, preparing for a televised concert that would take place the evening following her switching. Her voice was off, but everyone understood why. Kim was facing the switch, and of course she was scared. The others kept trying to reassure her that the switching would have to end eventually, that by this time next week Kim would have it behind her. Kim said nothing. The others did not realize that Kim was to be switched by a tormented woman who had wanted to shoot her.

On July 1, Kim followed the Danubian tradition of shaving her pubic hair to announce to the world that she was facing punishment the following day. As she sadly made her way to the music store, Criminal # 98945 felt all that much more naked, her soul all that much more exposed, as the cool morning air blew against her clean-shaven skin. She spent the day talking to customers and confirming that yes, tomorrow she would be switched.

Kim spent the early part of the evening at the Socrates Club, but alone with Sergekt. She had no desire whatsoever to socialize with her friends or hear any of the music or poetry readings. She retreated with him to an intimacy room, and from there planned to go directly home to Dukov's house. She was in a very strange mood. Her dread had subsided into a numb sadness, but what mystified her was that she wanted to begin her suffering now. She didn't want Sergekt to treat her tenderly; she wanted to be treated cruelly. She knew that her boyfriend would never go along with hurting her, but she was not in the mood for normal sex. She wanted something different, something that would not be pleasant and yet erotic.

Sergekt spent a long time kissing and licking the clean-shaven area around her pubis. Eventually Kim rolled on her stomach and spread her legs to expose herself from behind to her boyfriend. He began kissing her bottom and the tender skin surrounding her bottom-hole. It was at that moment Kim realized what she wanted.

"Sergekt, if I ask you to do something...unusual, would you do it for me? Even if you think it hurts me or degrades my honor?"

"Yes Kim, I'll do what you want. You know that."

"Then I want you to get a towel and two of those thin cleaning cloths out of the bathroom."

Sergekt complied, while Kim took all the pillows and stacked them in the middle of the bed. Sergekt handed her the towel and Kim laid it over the pillows. Then Kim settled over the pillows, her bottom high in the air. She spread her legs slightly, completely exposing herself to her boyfriend. Kim's position was extremely erotic. Sergekt took a quick look at Kim's exposed body and had a furious erection within a few seconds. It didn't seem that Kim wanted anything out of the ordinary, just plain sex.

However, Kim shocked Sergekt with her next words.

"OK, now tie my hands with the cleaning cloth."

"What?!"

"You heard me. Tie my hands in front of me. Make sure you wrap them tightly, I don't want to be able to slip out."

The cleaning cloth was long, narrow, and made out of thin material, so it was suitable for tying Kim's hands in the way she was requesting. Sergekt wrapped her wrists in a tight figure 8 and made a firm double knot. She tested the knot by pulling on it. It was tight enough to keep her hands immobilized.

"Now, take the other cloth and blindfold me."

Sergekt complied, tying the second cloth behind Kim's head.

"When you enter me�I don't want you to enter me in the normal way. I�I want you to enter my bottom�and no matter how much it hurts or how much I cry, I want you to stay in. Can you do that for me?"

"No. I'm not going to do that. You're going to get hurt tomorrow, why do you want me to hurt you tonight? That doesn't make any sense."

"I need you to do this for me. I can't explain why, but I need it. You told me you'd do anything for me, and right now this is what I want."

Sergekt looked at Kim's bottom and her waiting bottom-hole. Finally he decided to give her what she wanted, partly because he was curious himself to see how it would feel. He reached in the dresser drawer and pulled out some medical jelly, which was kept among the condoms and other sex supplies. He dabbed some on his fingertips and gently massaged it around his partner's bottom-hole. He slipped a fingertip inside to lubricate her more thoroughly. Then he put on a condom and dabbed yet more jelly on the end.

In spite of his reluctance to hurt his girlfriend, the sight of her spread bottom, with its shiny target in the middle, excited Sergekt. It would be the only time in his life he ever would do this to anyone, a chance to try something different. He placed the tip of his penis against her bottom, repositioned himself slightly, and pressed down, using his bodyweight to force his way in.

Kim's voice broke as Sergekt pushed in and the intense pressure in her anus mounted. The feeling was far different from what she expected and not pleasant at all. She pulled hard on her tied wrists as she tried to break free. The muscles in her bottom tightened instinctually to fight this unnatural intrusion into her body. The pressure was awful, especially when he started moving back and forth inside her.

Kim did indeed feel degraded by the experience. She began to cry, which was what she was seeking. As Sergekt finished and pulled out of her, Kim's intestines ached and her bottom-hole burned and felt raw. She continued to cry for a long time as Sergekt gently wiped her off and tried to comfort her. However, when he reached for her wrists to untie them, she jerked her hands away. She wanted to remain tied and blindfolded. For the next few minutes she did not want to see him or anyone else.

Sergekt looked at Kim as her body jerked with sobs. Why had she wanted him to do this to her? Sergekt thought the matter over, trying to understand his girlfriend�s emotions through his own experiences. He and his friends already had been switched six times, so he knew what it was to face a switching. However, there was a huge difference between Kim's situation and that of the others. Unlike the other members of the group, Criminal # 98945 had to face her switching by herself. When the moment came for her to be punished, she and that crazy female cop would be alone. No wonder she was so scared.

Sergekt knew Kim well enough to finally figure out what she was trying to accomplish. She intended to resist her punishment tomorrow and not cry. She believed that if she could suffer and have a good cry tonight, she would be better prepared to face her switching in the morning. Sergekt was not sure if it would work, but he understood Kim's line of reasoning. It was a question of her criminal's honor.

Finally Kim's crying died down. Sergekt untied her wrists and took off her blindfold. She winced from her still-sore bottom as she made her way to the shower to get cleaned up. While she showered, he cleaned the room and tried to rinse off the towel they had placed over the pillows.

There was very little either of them could say on their way back to Dukov's house. Kim was enormously depressed, to the point Sergekt was worried about her. Finally, at Dukov's doorstep they hugged each other for a long time. Sergekt asked about seeing her after the switching.

"I'm not sure. I have no idea what condition I'll be in. When you get off work tomorrow you can call Spokesman Dukov. He'll let you know if you can see me."

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The following morning Criminal # 98945 went with Dukov to his office. For the third time in her life she followed the routine of going to the bathroom one last time and having a drink of water to calm her nerves. Then she knelt in the reception area, waiting for the police to handcuff her and take her downstairs. Spokesman Dukov stood next to her, his hands full of the usual folders and punishment certificates. He issued the usual orders to his secretaries to have a recovery table ready. Kim looked up to see her Spokesman's expression. He was enormously depressed, knowing full well that she was in for a very rough morning.

Officer Malka's partner showed up to handcuff Criminal # 98945 and escort her downstairs. He treated her roughly, jerking her up and grabbing her arms hard. Every time they turned a corner he jerked her to force her to change direction. Kim had the feeling that if Dukov had not been present he would have pushed her down the stairs. She descended the same two flights of stairs she had descended six months before, and was led into the same punishment chamber where she had received her second switching back in January. Once inside, the male cop unhooked her handcuffs and Kim assumed the kneeling position on the floor.

There was the usual formality of Spokesman Dukov presenting Criminal # 98945 to the judge.

Officer Malka Chorno and her partner faced Vladim Dukov and saluted him. He saluted back, releasing custody of his client. Once again she asked:

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

Very reluctantly Dukov answered: "No Officer�no special restrictions."

Malka gave the Spokesman a slight, but very wicked smile. She was well-aware of Dukov's failed efforts to get Criminal # 98945 punished by a different officer and the resulting reprimand.

"Very well."

Malka touched Kim with her switch and Kim kissed her shoes.

"Criminal 98945, stand up and face me."

Kim complied and quietly looked straight ahead. Malka moved in front of her, staring hard into her eyes. Kim did not avert her gaze from Malka's face. Instead, her dark eyes met Malka's, indicating that she had gotten over some of her fear of what was about to happen. Malka was somewhat disconcerted by the criminal's calm, fatalistic demeanor. The cop slapped her hard across the face.

"Don't you look at me with such arrogance!" She slapped Kim again, but the American did not stop looking into the officer's face. She had not been instructed to do anything else, other than stand and look straight ahead. The cop twisted back to slap Kim a third time. Dukov raised his hand and glanced at the court officials.

The judge interrupted. "Officer! You will stop striking that criminal across the face immediately! All she's doing is what you told her to do!" The judge paused, glanced at Dukov, and continued. �Officer Chorno and Spokesman Dukov, I am subtracting two strokes of the switch from this punishment, given that Criminal 98945 has been struck twice across the face. This punishment will end at the 48th, not the 50th, stroke.�

Malka clenched her teeth in anger at the rebuke. She signaled her partner to help her with the criminal. The two officers grabbed Kim's wrists and jerked her over the punishment table. Quickly the two officers secured her wrists and ankles with the leather restraints. Kim's heart raced with fear and her face still hurt from the slaps, but she was more determined than ever to not cry or scream during this punishment. She closed her eyes and put her forehead to the table. She then found herself doing something very unexpected, silently praying to Upper Danubia's Guardian Spirits to get her through the ordeal.

Malka was in a bad mood. She despised Dukov and was offended by his presence in the room. The rebuke from the judge angered her even more, as did her resentment that she had to exercise at least some restraint while punishing Criminal # 98945. This time she was somewhat impatient, desperate to break the American as quickly as possible. There would be no slow or calculated trickery like last time, just a series of hard strokes, delivered at maximum force.

Dukov watched the officer with disgust. She had lost her temper and her self-control. None of this was about Kim's discipline; it was about Officer Chorno's personal vendetta. This was precisely the type of behavior the Spokesman hoped to outlaw with his proposed reforms. Dukov had seen police officers lose their tempers before, and that was always when things went wrong and the criminal's punishment had to be stopped. Dukov was convinced that if Malka did not regain her composure, he would have justification to end his client's switching early.

Officer Malka Chorno looked at the silent criminal and her waiting bottom; her legs parted and body stretched in anticipation of her punishment. Kim's forehead was pressed to the table and her fists were clenched. She was breathing hard, trying to control her fear. Her knees were quivering slightly.

Malka's partner handed her the switch. Malka slashed it through the air and then lined herself up beside her victim. She touched the switch to Kim's bottom, readjusted her position slightly, and then struck full-force at the base of the culprit's buttocks. The blow was so hard that the girl's entire body jerked. A vivid reddish line quickly darkened across Kim's brown skin. She gasped and bit her lip hard, but managed to stay quiet.

Officer Malka was infuriated. Once again the American drug addict thought she was better than an officer of the law. This arrogant little bitch is going to pay. Malka clenched her teeth, and with every bit of her strength, savagely slashed at Kim's bottom eight times; four blows from the left, and the other four from the right.

Criminal # 98945 tensed up, her knees shaking violently and her fists clenched so tightly her knuckles went white, but still, the only sound coming out of her were her gasps of pain. She pressed her forehead hard on the table, as she suppressed her instinct to scream. At just nine strokes, her bottom looked like it had been struck nine times with a whip. She had been struck so hard that the welts already had risen and quickly were turning dark.

Malka then struck Kim's upper back four times, trying to knock the wind out of her and break her resistance. Criminal # 98945 held her breath each time the switch landed. She would resist. If it killed her she would resist. Somewhere, from deep inside her soul, came the force she needed to stay quiet, in spite of the severity of what was happening to her.

Malka should have waited and allowed the strokes to take their toll on the criminal's endurance before continuing. However, she was shocked and infuriated that Kim had resisted 13 of the hardest strokes she had ever administered during an official punishment. She backed away and slashed savagely at Kim, quickly laying additional strokes on the welts already marking her bottom. She stuck at Kim's thighs, and then returned to her bottom. Blood blisters were quickly forming where the strokes had crossed each other.

Just 15 minutes into her punishment, Criminal # 98945 already had taken 32 strokes. She gasped desperately as she suppressed her screams. Her whole body was shaking violently. Malka still was furious, but now she was horrified at the thought Kim might actually make it through her punishment without crying at all. No, that could not be.

Dukov looked at the growing mass of blood blisters on his client's bottom and thighs. Some of them looked like they were just about to break. He raised his hand.

When she saw the Spokesman's hand in the air, Malka snapped. Disregarding her training and the standards of court punishment protocol, she ignored Dukov and, with every bit of her strength, quickly struck Kim's bottom hard two more times. As Dukov had feared, several of the blisters broke. He jumped between Kim and the officer.

"STOP! STOP! You will stop NOW!"

Malka's foot flew into Dukov's stomach. He doubled over from the force of the kick, all of the wind knocked out of him. Chaos broke out in the courtroom. Malka managed to strike Kim one more time before Dukov recovered enough to grab her arm. She hit him viciously across the chin with her free hand, but he did not let go. The tussle between Spokesman Dukov and Officer Chorno ended as court officials piled onto both of them and pulled them away from the punishment table. Malka struggled savagely as a court guard grabbed the switch out of her hand.

"I'M NOT FINISHED! I'M NOT FINISHED!"

Dukov remained doubled over and gasped as he tried to regain his breath

"Your Honor! My�client is bleeding! I�insist, under�Item 18 of�the Judicial Code�of 1780, that this punishment�be terminated immediately!"

"That request is granted, Spokesman! Under Item 18 of the Judicial Code of 1780, I am ordering this punishment terminated and Criminal 98945 released back into your custody! That is effective immediately! You may remove her from this courtroom!"

Dukov, holding his stomach and still gasping for breath, snapped his fingers at a cop standing nearby to undo the straps holding Kim in place. Kim was in so much pain she was almost passed out. In several spots where her skin had broken the welts oozed blood, and a drop of blood was making its way down her left thigh. As Kim was released from the table, Dukov grabbed her wrists and helped her up. He put his arm around her waist and lifted her hands to his shoulder. Thus supported by her Spokesman, Criminal # 98945 left the courtroom, the third switching of her sentence completed.

Dukov paged his two secretaries, who came clattering down the stairs to help both the Spokesman and his client. As they took Kim upstairs, Dukov doubled over and threw up.

"Call the doctor. I�want him in the�office immediately. I need to see�how badly she's hurt."

"What about yourself, Spokesman? What about you?"

"It's just a kick. I'll be fine. Take care of Kimberly."

A minute later Kim was lying face down on the recovery table, as one of the secretaries gently wiped away the blood and put disinfectant on her welts. An assistant police doctor arrived a few minutes later with a medical kit. He cleaned her more thoroughly, applied some special ointment to prevent Kim's skin from scarring, and placed three bandages over the most serious cuts.

"She should fully recover with no marks if she doesn't move about too much and keeps the cuts clean. She'll have a small scar on her left thigh, but I think that'll be it. This ointment's pretty effective."

"Well, what happened is still a violation of Item 18, scars or no scars."

"Oh, most definitely it's a violation. I'll write a medical report this afternoon and send it up to you. When you present that in court, Criminal # 98945 will leave the courtroom with Officer Chorno's badge in her hand."

"You think it will be her badge? Not just her switch?"

"Her badge, Spokesman. She struck your client three times after you tried to pause her, and at least one time when blood was clearly visible. There's no denying that, it's on videotape. And then on top of all that, she kicked you while you were performing the responsibilities of your office. That's her badge, and a criminal prosecution for assaulting a public official. There will be a hearing as soon as your client can attend court, and we'll release her for court attendance on Friday, after head doctor examines her to make sure she's healed properly. On Friday Officer Chorno loses her badge. I would guess she'll lose considerably more than her badge. She'll leave the courtroom with a collar around her neck."

"It's about time. She's been a problem ever since that occurrence last year with her sister. I feel sorry for her, but she's become a threat to the whole judicial system. I'll be glad to see the last of her. Maybe it will be a lesson to the others. I don't know. Maybe this will help with the reform we have pending in Parliament."

"Don't be so arrogant, Spokesman. The only result of this incident is that one policewoman is going to lose her job, and another criminal will be added to your case-load. Nothing more will come of this. Malka Chorno will wear a collar for several years and maybe will consider correcting the path in life she has chosen to follow. That's the most you can hope for."

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Kim was in a painful daze when her Spokesman was talking with the assistant doctor, so she only was partially aware of what was going on in the office. She tried to sleep, but couldn't. Dukov warned her not to move unless it was absolutely necessary. Dukov didn't need to tell Kim not to move; the slightest movement sent sharp pains shooting through her body. She spent the afternoon lying facedown on the table, her body horribly marked up and the three white bandages standing out on her brown skin. Finally, after about four hours lying motionless on the table, Kim fell asleep.

Sergekt called Spokesman Dukov as soon as his shift at the restaurant ended. Dukov decided to meet with Kim's boyfriend in Danube City's Central Plaza, and waited for him at the steps of the Central Police Station. As dictated by protocol, Sergekt knelt and touched his forehead to the ground as he greeted Dukov. The Spokesman quickly ordered him to stand up, and the two men looked for a place to sit down, finally settling on an empty bench near the National Parliament.

Sergekt knew right away that Kim's punishment had not gone well. That much was obvious when her Spokesman told him to meet outside instead of allowing him to go directly to his office. Dukov quickly summarized what happened and explained that the punishing officer was facing the loss of her badge over the abuse of his client. Sergekt sat quietly for a long time, wondering what to ask next. Finally he asked the one question that seemed to matter much more to criminals than to outsiders.

"Spokesman Dukov, if may I ask�how long was Kim able to stay quiet? During the switching, I mean?"

"She didn't cry at all, Sergekt. That's what truly amazed me. Kimberly took the worst beating I have seen in my career, and she didn't cry. She didn't make any noise whatsoever, except her breathing. I don't know how she did it."

"Spokesman�I ask because�when I was with her last night, I�it�that was the most important thing for her. She was completely obsessed with not crying today. So�she succeeded."

Dukov and Sergekt sat for a long time in the late afternoon heat, each trying to think of something significant to say to the other. The passersby glanced at the strange pair, a naked young criminal and a middle-aged professional in a business suit. Finally Dukov spoke.

"If you had seen her today�she faced her fears and her worst enemy with complete calm. Kimberly was terribly afraid, but she conquered her fear. She looked that officer straight in the eye. When the officer slapped her, slapped her twice, in fact, Kimberly straightened up and continued to look right at her. I believe that is why that officer became so unbalanced. That officer's soul is damaged, and a damaged soul cannot face the truth. I want you to understand Kimberly is an extremely courageous young woman, and I hope you are able to truly appreciate how lucky you are to be with her."

"Yes, Spokesman. I know that the Spirits of the Ancients have truly blessed me by placing Kim in my life. In my prayers I thank them every night for that blessing."

"There's something else you should know, that should put your heart at ease. The worst of her sentence has passed. Officer Chorno faces the loss of her badge over her treatment of Kimberly. Another officer will administer her final switching in January. Under the law, I have the right to choose who the replacement officer will be. Probably I'll ask my son's partner to administer Kimberly's final switching."

There wasn't much else to say. Dukov planned to spend the night at his office, catching up on his case-load and watching over his client as she slept on the recovery table. Sergekt knew better than to ask Dukov if he could see her, because he knew the Spokesman considered that improper. He would have to wait until she had recovered.

Sergekt knelt in front of Dukov to say goodbye. He then went to the Socrates Club to tell Eloisa about Kim's horrific experience and amazing courage.

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The next day Criminal # 98945 was up and moving about fairly normally. Following the doctor's advice she avoided bending or sitting to allow her cuts to heal. She carefully showered, replaced her bandages, and had breakfast in the office with Dukov, his secretaries, and Eloisa. Kim had to eat standing up. After breakfast the two criminals went to their jobs at the music store.

Once at the store, Kim followed the post-switching custom of placing her hands on the counter and allowing her co-workers to look at her punished bottom and back. The entire staff was horrified at how severely she had been beaten. Only once had any of them ever seen a fellow criminal who had bled as a result of his punishment. Kim's boss asked her if she wanted to have the day off or work a reduced schedule.

"No sir, I'll work a normal day. The whipping is over, and from what Spokesman Dukov told me, that officer won't be punishing me in January. Now I want to return to my duties. I want to live my life with honor and not feel sorry for myself."

That night Kimberly Lee, with her horribly marked backside and three bandages, sang with her friends on stage. Her voice had returned, but Eloisa noticed a slight difference. There was more power in Kim's singing and a touch of anger. The lead singer knew what was going on in her friend�s mind. She was hoping that cop was watching her sing. She wanted to prove herself, to the band's audience, and to that cop, that no, she was not defeated. Not even that savage beating 36 hours before could stop Criminal # 98945.