**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 15 � The punishment of Officer Malka Chorno**

Spokesman Vladim Dukov and his client Criminal # 98945 went to his office very early Friday morning. The chief police doctor was waiting for them, to examine Kim and clear her for attending the hearings that would determine the course of Officer Malka Chorno's future. As the doctor�s assistant had predicted, Kim's bottom was well on its way to healing. He removed the bandages and was quite satisfied with the condition of Kim's injuries. �We may even avoid the scar on your thigh. Anyhow, if you have it, it won't be noticeable unless you're looking for it. That pretty brown bottom of yours will be back to normal in another week.�

Kim cringed with dislike as the old doctor studied her bottom. The doctor was the same man who had given Prisoner # 98945 the drug test the year before and whose students delighted in sexually humiliating criminals. Kim would have expected the doctor and his staff to oppose Spokesman Dukov and his proposed reforms. However, on the question of injuries, the police doctors fully agreed with Dukov. Under no circumstances was it appropriate to actually injure a criminal. The doctors' objections to some of the more severe beatings that had recently taken place took priority over the head doctor's belief that there was nothing wrong with the sexual humiliations. The medical staff had become reluctant supporters of portions of Dukov's reforms. As for Criminal # 98945, the head doctor was every bit as concerned as was her Spokesman that she recover as completely as possible.

Before going to Malka Chorno's hearing, Kim had to go to the booking room of the Central Police Station to have her second mugshot taken. Throughout their sentences, Danubian criminals had to have their files updated each year, which included new yearly mugshots. Criminal # 98945 looked quietly into the camera as the flash went off. Later, when Vladim Dukov added the second mugshot to his client's file, he had a chance to compare it to the picture taken immediately after her arrest. The contrast was so startling that it was hard to believe that the two pictures were of the same person. The difference went way beyond Kim's changed hairstyle. Her entire expression was different; the very inner working of her soul was different. When Dukov compared the two photos, he realized how much Kim truly had changed and matured during the first year of her sentence.

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Dukov escorted his client across the Central Plaza to the Central Courthouse. They entered the ornate building and the courtroom where Criminal # 98945 went on trial the year before. Dukov explained to Kim that today was one day she was not to kneel in the presence of the public officials running the hearing. Kim was the aggrieved party in this case and was due an official apology. She would attend the hearing standing, although because she was still a criminal, she could not salute. Criminal # 98945 and Spokesman Vladim Dukov walked to the witness area immediately to the right and slightly behind the judge's desk. They stood together, as several cameras focused on them.

The courtroom was packed, filled with police officers, all of Danube City's Spokespersons, many law students and professors, and even some human rights activists. A number of criminals who had been punished by Officer Chorno also were present, eager to see the demise of her career.

The case would be a sensation, by far the most exciting trial of the year. Prosecutions against police officers were rare, so when they happened they always drew a great deal of public interest. Criminal # 98945 was relatively well-known and well-liked throughout Upper Danubia because of her singing. She was a familiar sight around Danube City on her bicycle and a fixture at the information counter at the city's main music store. Officer Malka Chorno also was well-known, especially as a result of the fire-fight in which she coolly shot four bank robbers with her service revolver as their automatic weapons sprayed bullets all around her. Finally, Spokesman Vladim Dukov was the most recognized of Danube City's 20 Spokespersons because of his success in representing criminals and because of the controversy surrounding his legislation pending in Parliament. It was for sure the entire incident, from Kim's switching and Officer Chorno's attack against the Spokesman, to the dismissal and prosecution of the policewoman, would be televised. Probably it would crowd out the transmissions of any other trials and punishments for that Sunday evening and be discussed for weeks.

Officer Malka Chorno quietly entered the courtroom in her uniform, accompanied by her partner. She had taken special care that her uniform look its best; her boots were thoroughly shined, her badge and buttons had been polished, her police tunic was crisply pressed and ironed. Officer Chrono knew this was the last time in her life she would have the right to wear her policewoman's uniform. She wanted to treat her outfit with special respect and care before she had to surrender it. Kim noticed one detail indicating the direction of Malka Chorno's future. There was no pistol in her holster. Her service weapon already had been taken away from her.

Malka and her partner silently stepped into the middle of the courtroom. They quietly stood on the empty floor, facing the judge's desk. Both the prisoner's stand and the punishment bench had been removed, because during a police disciplinary hearing neither was used. Errant police officers were harshly disciplined in Upper Danubia, but protocol prohibited them from being disciplined in the same manner as common criminals. It was partly for that reason Officer Chorno entered the courtroom still dressed in her uniform. The official stripping of her uniform would signal the beginning of her punishment.

From her spot in the witness area Criminal # 98945 looked at her nemesis. Officer Chorno looked neither broken nor defiant. She really did not even look sad. She looked�empty, as though the life force had been taken out of her soul. As Kim studied the officer's attractive face and immaculate uniform, she knew that Malka Chorno had changed. No longer was she the same person who had tormented Kim in the park nor the one who so had viciously beaten her a few days ago. Suddenly she felt somewhat sorry for the disgraced cop.

There were no such thoughts of pity from Vladim Dukov. He was determined to destroy Officer Chorno to the point she never could be a danger to anyone again. That cop was out of control and needed to be removed as a threat to the judicial system. She had violated the spirit of the 1780 judicial code continuously since the beginning of last year. She had shown absolute cruelty against anyone unfortunate enough to fall under her discipline. She held the city's Spokespersons for the Criminals in total contempt. Last year she had come very close to murdering Kimberly Lee. Her charisma made her dangerous because of the bad influence she had on other police officers. On top of everything else was the kick to his stomach. That kick was unprecedented. None of Dukov's co-workers ever had remembered a police officer striking a Spokesperson, and certainly never in court. Dukov would have had a hard time admitting it, but for the first time in his life he had developed a deep personal hatred and thirst for revenge.

�DOC-DOC DANUBE!�

The entire room stood up and saluted, including Malka's partner. She did not salute. She simply remained quietly standing at attention. Kim, her brain conditioned to dropping on her knees every time she heard the official salute, struggled to remember that she was not to kneel in court.

The person entering the judge's chair was not a judge at all, but the Chief of the Danube City Division of the National Police. Most of the other presiding officials were wearing police uniforms as well. There was an arraignment panel, but all three of them were senior police officers. The first hearing was not about the criminal charges pending against Officer Chorno, but instead her violations of the National Police Code of Conduct. The criminal charges would come after Officer Chorno's status as a police officer was settled.

The Chief of Police spoke from the judge's chair.

�Officer Malka Chorno. You will remove your badge and your hat. Place your badge inside your hat. Place your hat at the foot of my desk. Once you have done that, you will return to where you are standing.�

Malka's partner un-pinned her badge and handed it to her. She took off her hat and, following the chief's instructions, placed it upside down at the foot of the judge's desk. She returned to her position standing next to her partner.

�You're responsibilities as a uniformed officer are suspended from this moment, pending the outcome of this hearing. That suspension will become permanent should this proceeding determine you are guilty of the violations of the National Police Code of Conduct pending against you. Do you understand the violations pending against you?�

�Yes, Chief of Police, I understand the violations of the Code of Conduct.�

�You will state, in your own words, the first violation pending against you.�

�I am charged with violation of Article 3 of Item 18 of the Grand Duke's reform of the Judicial Code of 1780. Specifically that means, during the course of punishing Criminal # 98945, I struck her to the point of bleeding, in clear violation of Article 3 of Item 18.�

�You will state, in your own words, the second charge pending against you.�

�I am charged with violation of Article 4 of Item 18 of the Grand Duke's reform of the Judicial Code of 1780. Specifically that means, during the course of punishing Criminal # 98945, I ignored my responsibility to stop striking that criminal when her Spokesman raised his hand to make me pause for medical evaluation of her injuries.�

�You will state, in your own words, the third charge pending against you.�

�I am charged with the violation of Insurrection. In violation of Article 9 of Item 5 of the Judicial Code of 1524, I struck a public official while he was performing the duties of his office. I struck him while I was supposed to be performing the duties of my office. Specifically that means, when Spokesman Dukov attempted to intervene to suspend the punishment of Criminal # 98945, I deliberately struck him full-force in the stomach by kicking him. I kicked him in court, while wearing my police uniform. I struck him in the stomach wearing a boot issued to me by the National Police Force.�

�You will state, in your own words, the fourth violation pending against you.�

�I am charged with a second violation of Article 4 of Item 18 of the Grand Duke's reform of the Judicial Code of 1780. Specifically that means, after I incapacitated Spokesman Dukov by striking him with my foot, I resumed striking Criminal # 98945, even though I could clearly see she was bleeding.�

�Officer Chorno, do you refute the veracity of any of the four violations against you?�

�No, Chief of Police, I do not refute the violations.�

�Can you give this court any justification for your behavior, any reason why you felt it was necessary to strike either Criminal 98945 or Spokesman Dukov?�

�No, Chief of Police, I cannot provide any justification that would alter the legal standing of the violations.�

�Do you understand that your two violations of Article 4 of Item 18 of the Grand Duke's reform of the Judicial Code of 1780 and the violation of Insurrection will require this court to terminate your service as a uniformed officer of the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia?�

�Yes, Chief of Police, I understand that.�

�Very well. Malka Chorno, as of this moment you are no longer a member of the National Police Force. You have proven yourself unfit to wear that uniform.�

Malka knew what was coming, but to hear the actual words pronounced struck at her soul. Being a police officer had been the purpose of her life, the reason she existed. The finality of what had happened finally sunk in. Malka's expression changed slightly. She looked stricken. The Police Chief's next comment was directed at Malka's partner.

�Officer, you will remove all property belonging to the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia from the body of Malka Chorno.�

Malka stood quietly at attention as her ex-partner stripped her. He started with her boots, taking them off her feet as she raised each leg. He then took off her police belt. He removed the items from the belt, her mace, her flashlight, her nightstick, her handcuffs, and her holster from the belt. He carried the boots and items from the belt to the foot of the judge's desk and lined them up next to Malka's hat. He rolled up the thick leather police belt and placed it at her feet, because it would stay with Malka and be used to punish her following her criminal trial. Malka's partner then removed several service medals from her uniform. He placed those in the hat with her badge. Her armband and rank came off next, and also ended up in her hat. Malka now was barefoot and wearing nothing but her woman's police tunic. He paused, hoping not to have to go any further.

�You will finish retrieving all property that belongs to the National Police Force, Officer.�

Very reluctantly Malka's partner undid the buttons of her blue tunic. He took the tunic, folded it, and placed it at the foot of the judge's bench. Malka now was wearing nothing but a police shirt and the light-blue police-issue bra and underwear for female police officers. Those items had to be taken off as well. Malka's partner unbuttoned the shirt and pulled it off his partner's shoulders. He fumbled with the hook in her bra and finally got it off. He pushed her underwear to her ankles and she quietly stepped out of it.

Malka, now naked, stood at attention as tears rolled down her cheeks. Cameras flashed at the bare body of the disgraced ex-police officer. For a long time the Chief of Police left her standing, to let the humiliation sink in. Malka did not move, nor did she change her expression. The only detail indicating her inner torment was the tears flowing down her face.

�Malka Chorno, for the final portion of this hearing you will kneel. You will understand that from this point forward you are not to salute any member of the National Police Force. No longer will you stand at attention in court. You have forfeited your right to salute. Do you understand me?�

�Yes, Chief of Police, I understand.�

�Kneel.�

Malka sank to her knees for the first time in her life. She placed her hands on the floor and her head between them. She touched her forehead to the floor.

�Spokesman Dukov, you will approach the judge's desk with Criminal # 98945.�

Dukov and Kim stood at the foot of the judge's desk, as she quietly contemplated the pile of police items at her feet. Kim was awestruck that these items, which looked so fearsome when worn by Malka Chorno, now were nothing but inanimate objects lying on the ground, incapable of causing her any further harm. What was truly shocking was to see how helpless Malka looked, stripped of her uniform.

The police chief stepped down and saluted Vladim Dukov, who saluted back. He then retrieved Malka's badge from her hat and handed it to Dukov.

�Spokesman, in accordance with Article 6 of Item 18 of the Grand Duke's reform of the Judicial Code of 1780, you will present this badge to Criminal # 98945 as a gesture of apology from the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia.�

�Yes, Chief of Police, I will make the presentation.�

Dukov turned to his client. He spoke to her in Danubian.

�Criminal # 98945, the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia offers its official apology for the manner in which you were treated this past Tuesday. I am presenting you with the badge of the police officer who offended your honor and your rights as a criminal as a gesture of remorse. You will understand this badge has no authority in your possession, it is nothing more than a gesture of apology.�

�Yes, Spokesman Dukov, I understand, and I accept this gesture of apology with gratitude.�

With that Dukov handed Kim the police badge. Kim thought she could hear Malka suppress a sob. Kim felt no triumph at all, no happiness or relief. She felt awful, and almost guilty that she had to accept the badge.

Kim and Dukov withdrew to the witness's area and the Chief of Police addressed Malka again.

�Malka Chorno, my professional relationship with you has ended. I have one final duty to perform before I completely wash my hands of you. I am declaring you under arrest for the crimes of insurrection, simple assault, assault against a public official while in performance of his duty, and abuse of the authority of your former public position. I am ordering you to be taken to the Central Police Station immediately. You will be booked, arraigned, and assigned a Spokesman. Tomorrow you will go on trial, just like any other criminal.�

The Chief of Police then stood up and drew his fist across his chest. The officers and civilians filling the courtroom saluted him. One of the court guards picked up Malka's handcuffs from her hat and used them to cuff her hands behind her back. He picked up her police belt and led her out of the courtroom and across Danube City's Central Plaza to the police station. Kim's arresting officer faced a day very similar to Kim's first day as a Danubian criminal. In spite of everything the woman had done to make her life miserable, Kim felt sorry for her.

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Dukov and Kim returned to his office. Dukov had expected to see Kim elated, but could tell that she wasn't. He was about to try to talk to her when one of his secretaries handed him an ancient silver box with an archaic version of Upper Danubia's national symbol, a griffin. Dukov sighed and frowned when he saw the box.

�What is it, Spokesman Dukov?�

Dukov showed the box to Kim.

�This box is an ancient tradition in our country. No one knows how old it is or where it came from. But all of us know very well what it is. I can tell you it is something no public official is happy to see.�

�Why not?�

�This box contains a personal challenge. I must prove my honor. The document inside is a test of my character, a task that I must accomplish.�

�I don't get it.�

�In this country public officials have had a tradition for hundreds of years. If a public official considers himself important, his peers have the obligation to test his honor. If he passes the test, he may continue with his ambitions. If he fails the test, then he must desist from further public activity. The test is always a task that challenges one's inner soul.�

Dukov opened the box and removed a standard business envelope. He opened the envelope and passed the letter to Kim. The message read:

Former Officer of the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia, Malka Chorno, is officially under arrest and has been assigned Prisoner # 99348. You will serve as her Spokesman, and will protect her interests to the best of your ability. You will confirm receipt of this assignment when you retrieve her case file from the booking room.

Dukov took the letter back from Kim. He closed the silver box and packed it in its padded carrier. Later that night Dukov would have to return the carrier to the Temple of the Ancients. When it was not in use, the Temple's High Priest kept the box in his study.

�I should not be surprised. I do not know if you understand how difficult an assignment this will be for me. Malka Chorno is the first person in many years I have truly hated. I find her and her actions abhorrent. She represents everything I stand against and want to change. But now I am obligated to serve her interests.�

�Who gave you this challenge?�

�The city's other 19 Spokespersons, without a doubt.�

�But I thought they all supported you.�

�The others support me, Kimberly. This is not a question of whether they support me or not. The others believe that Malka and I must come to terms with each other. This will be as difficult for her as it will be for me. That is why she became my client.�

Dukov signed the letter and handed it to Kim.

�Please assist me in this matter. I would appreciate you going downstairs to the booking room and retrieving Malka's file.�

�Yes, Spokesman Dukov.�

Kim went downstairs to the booking room. The folder was waiting for her. Kim opened it to verify it contained Malka Chorno's documents. Kim studied Malka's mugshot, noticing the woman's glassy-eyed stare into the camera. Kim then knelt as the head photographer signed the receipt for Vladim Dukov. Dukov now was fully committed to serving a person he hated.

Criminal # 98945 returned to her Spokesman's office and handed the file to Dukov. With that he sat down to figure out how he could prepare a plea for leniency. The fact that both he and his surrogate daughter had been the victims of her violence no longer mattered.

Kim left the office to meet Sergekt. He was waiting outside the main entrance of the Central Police Station. She desperately needed to talk to him. She hugged him hard, and they sat down on a nearby bench. She showed him Malka's badge. He took the badge and traced its engraving with his fingertip.

�Kim, you're not happy about this, are you?�

�No.�

�Why?�

�I don't know. I really don't know why. She deserves everything she has coming to her, but I'm not happy about it. Tomorrow she'll go on trial, get her butt whipped and get a collar put on her neck, and the whole thing makes me sick.�

Kim was having huge doubts about the destruction of Officer Chorno's career. Her American desire for revenge clashed with her Danubian concern about what was best for the entire community. What would become of Malka now that she had lost her badge?

Kim's thoughts returned to Vladik's story about the bank robbery. It was obvious that Malka was a brave, if very flawed, police officer. Vladik's words "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� came back to haunt Kim. Was there still room in this life for Officer Malka to become a hero instead of a villain? Could she redeem herself in a way that would be truly beneficial to Upper Danubia?

Kim checked herself. What the fuck am I thinking? That crazy woman wanted to kill me for no reason. She doesn't deserve any mercy. Or does she? Who knows what the terrible fate of her sister could have done to her soul? Can a damaged soul be repaired? Maybe the Guardian Spirits were trying to say something to her, maybe that was why they had answered her prayer to get her through the punishment without crying. Perhaps this country's Ancient Guardians had done Kim a favor, only to demand that she do something in return.

My God, thought Kim�even this country's religion has gotten into my head.

As they walked in the mid-summer twilight, Kim discussed her beating in detail with Sergekt. The detail standing out in her mind was that she had prayed, actually prayed to the country's Spirits of the Ancients before her beating began, and then made it through the worst punishment anyone could remember without crying. She didn't cry at all, not even afterwards when she lay in agony on Dukov's recovery table. Could there be a connection between the two facts? And if she in some way had been helped, did it mean she had to do something in return?

Kim knew Sergekt was quite superstitious, that he took the entire Danubian Guardian Spirit thing very seriously. If there were anyone in her life who she could talk to about her question, he would be the right person.

�It's totally possible, what you're saying, Kim. It would make sense that the Guardian Spirits would have helped you get through your whipping, especially if you were praying to them. And you're right about giving back. If they gave something like that to you, then you must give something back. If the Guardian Spirits speak to you, you'd better listen, and follow the path where they lead you.�

�What could they possibly be saying to me?�

�I don't have the answer to that. Let's go to the Old Temple, and see if we can get one of the Priests to help you.�

As it got dark outside, the two criminals stood in front of a senior Priest. There was no kneeling, because for a Priest there was no social status among people seeking advice. The man was dressed in a simple black robe and looked about 60. Kim recognized him from last September as one of the organizers of the criminals' torch march.

Kim explained her situation, and her doubts about finishing off Officer Chorno's career. She was perplexed and bothered that she even had such doubts, given that Malka was such an evil person.

�Kimberly Annette Lee, you will understand this dilemma in your life is not about Officer Malka Chrorno. It is about you. That is why you came here, to determine what path tomorrow must lead you. For the first time you hold another person's fate in your hands. That person is someone you hate, but it must be that way, or the decision would be an easy one for you. The decision will be difficult because that is the way it must be, difficult. Once the decision is made, it is not your enemy who will be transformed, but you.�

Kim left the Temple clearly aware of what she needed to do. Two things were important. Malka had to be punished for what she had done. She needed to be punished not specifically for what she had done to Kim, but for her over-all behavior towards all of the criminals she had switched. Malka would become a criminal herself, learn what it was like to be on the other side of the punishment table, and be forced to change. However, once Malka's transformation took place, she needed to return to her rightful place in society.

Kim returned to Dukov's house very late. She spent the night in restless thought, wondering what she could say to Spokesman Dukov when he got up. As the pre-dawn light appeared out her window, Kim, a 19 year-old criminal, finally settled on a plan that would salvage both the career and the life of Officer Malka Chorno.

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Kim discussed her idea with Vladim Dukov as they made their way downtown. Dukov listened attentively once he found out about Kim's trip to the Temple of the Ancients. He was not as openly religious as Sergekt, but many of Upper Danubia's superstitions were present in his thoughts. The more he thought about it, the more Kim's idea made sense.

Vladim Dukov and his secretaries prepared a breakfast for Malka Chorno once they arrived at his office in the Central Police Station. It was a full breakfast, similar to the one Dukov had given Prisoner # 98945 the year before, complete with fruit, breakfast rolls, and tea.

Malka Chorno entered the office, cuffed and escorted by one of her former co-workers. She knelt and was left alone in Dukov's reception area. Dukov un-cuffed her as Kim and the secretaries watched. Malka knelt forward and pressed her forehead to the floor, showing respect to the Spokesman she had so viciously kicked only a few days before.

�Malka, I want you to understand that regardless of what happened between us in the past, my duty now is to serve your interests.�

�Yes, Spokesman.�

�Please come with me and have breakfast in my office. Kimberly, you will prepare yourself to appear in court while I speak with Malka Chrono.�

With that the Spokesman and Prisoner # 99348 entered the back office. Malka appeared totally broken, her soul emptied out. She ignored the food and stared blankly ahead.

�Malka, please. You must eat. Everyone who comes through my office begins with breakfast. A year ago Kimberly Lee went through exactly what you are going through. She ate breakfast, and then we discussed the trial and the charges.�

Malka forced herself to eat. Once she finished she had a question for the Spokesman.

�Spokesman, if I may ask, because my crime was committed against you and your client, isn't it inappropriate that you represent me in court? Isn't that a conflict of interest?�

�Normally it is, Malka. But the other Spokespersons of this city have determined that you and I must make peace with each other. I will defend your interests, to the best of my ability. It is a question of honor, for both of us.�

�Spokesman, I have no honor. What honor I had I squandered last Tuesday.�

Dukov paused. Most certainly what the former police officer said was true, but now Dukov was faced with the task of salvaging as much of her life as possible.

�Malka, what you squandered was your current police career. You will understand that you will not recover that part of your life. Today you will be sentenced, and with your own police belt, your body will be severely beaten. Tonight you will sleep in my office, on a recovery table in intense pain. Tomorrow that pain will slowly subside. Once your body is back to normal your life will continue, whether you wish it or not. Now I have a question for you. I would like you, in your own words, to explain to me what happened last Tuesday. I want to know what was going on in your thoughts and what you hoped to accomplish. If you ask why I should know your thoughts, that is because I want to know anything that might allow me to request leniency for you.�

Malka gave Dukov a sad look, then stared straight ahead.

�Spokesman, I wasn't trying to accomplish anything when I punished Criminal # 98945, other than satisfy myself. I simply wanted to gratify my desire to inflict as much hurt on a helpless person as I could, because it's what I enjoy doing. I wish I had some other explanation, but I don't.�

�Do you believe using your position to gratify your desires was appropriate?�

�No Spokesman, of course it's not appropriate. And I knew that someday my actions would catch up with me. I knew it would happen eventually. It turned out that Tuesday was the day. As for kicking you, I�I don't know what happened. You stood between me and my obsessions. I wanted you removed so I could continue beating Criminal # 98945. It's like my emotions took total control of me, blocking out my ability to reason. I was insane, just for a few seconds, but long enough to injure Criminal # 98945 and to kick a public official, you. But�before Tuesday�I saw it coming�I knew it was going to happen, and I didn't do anything about it when there was still time.�

Dukov proceeded to ask Malka to describe her police career at length, both the positive and negative things she had done in her life. He wanted his newest client to examine herself, and also gauge to what extent she could be truthful about her flaws. It turned out the ex-police officer was capable of being brutally honest with the most uncomfortable details of her life and her actions. She saw herself clearly for what she was, a brilliant police officer with a serious character defect that had hurt many people and ultimately wrecked her career. She blamed herself where she needed to, for striving to satisfy her lust for hurting other people instead of turning in her switch and seeking counseling.

Malka didn't grovel in regret or self-pity. She knew she was a deeply flawed person who had failed to exercise any type of self-control. She now was paying dearly for that failure. Her fianc�e had left her, her parents had disowned her, and her co-workers had turned their backs on her, including the ones she thought were her friends. Only one person in her life had stayed loyal to her, and that was her partner, a man she had so brutally bullied and bossed around ever since they had been assigned to work together. Malka suspected that over time he would reflect about his relationship with her and how awfully she had treated him, and once he did so, he too, would turn his back on her.

�My life is pretty much over, Spokesman. At least, what I knew is gone. I had a real reason for living; something the Ancients blessed me with. They gave me the talents and the abilities to do my job well and serve this country. How did I repay them? By tormenting criminals and squandering my career. I had a purpose in life, and now that purpose is gone.�

�Malka, I don't believe that is true. You are only 26 years old. The meaning of your existence is not gone. I believe, ultimately, you will return to your purpose in life. However, before you return to that purpose, you will suffer for what you have done, and you will reflect about what the path the Ancients want you to follow. I will be here to help you.�

�Spokesman, I�don't�want to argue with you, but I am facing at least an 18-year sentence. I mean�my crimes are pretty serious. How can I return to my purpose after 18 years?�

�We'll see. Now, I'd like you to get cleaned up. The criminal's bathroom is over there. There is an unused toothbrush on the sink. Use it.�

�Spokesman, do you have a razor? I suppose I might as well shave.�

�In the cabinet under the sink.�

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Malka's police escort arrived to handcuff her and take her across the plaza to the Central Courthouse. The plaza was crowded with onlookers and reporters as the disgraced officer was marched naked and handcuffed to her trial. Dukov and Kim trailed behind, both very nervous about what lay ahead. As much as the reporters photographed Dukov and his two clients, there was no crowding, no pushing, no shouting of impromptu questions. The Danubian press would never tolerate such undignified behavior from its reporters. The reporters fully expected Dukov to answer their questions after the trial in exchange for respecting him now and keeping their distance.

The trial began in a manner very similar to Kim's trial a year before. There were the same formalities, the same salutes, the same shouting of �DOC-DOC DANUBE!� Like Kim before her, Malka knelt, placing her forehead to the worn carpet and her bottom high in the air.

One difference was Kim's role in the trial. Kim stood next to Dukov, for reasons the court would understand very shortly. Because she was one of the two aggrieved parties in this trial, she was not kneeling, in spite of her continued status as a criminal.

The judge's first question in this highly unusual trial was directed at Dukov.

�Spokesman, I have a question for you. Since this prisoner is accused of kicking you, how is it that you became her representative in this court?�

�It was a collective decision of this city's Spokespersons that I am best suited to defend her interests, your honor.�

The judge smiled slightly. Dukov's answer was a very euphemistic way of saying that he had received the Silver Box. Very well, Spokesman Dukov, I hope you're up to this challenge, thought the judge to himself.

Malka ascended the prisoner's platform and spread her legs and put her hands behind her head. She had watched so many people do the exact same thing, and now it was her turn. She stood motionless, looking straight at the judge.

The majority of the trial was a review of the tape documenting Kim's punishment, mixed with the testimony of the judge presiding over what was supposed to be a routine switching. The assistant police doctor testified next, as he shot a look of dislike at Malka.

�I have worked here for 22 years. Not once during that time have I seen a criminal as brutally treated as Criminal # 98945 last Tuesday. I was appalled and disgusted when I treated her injuries. Spokesman Dukov was well within the responsibilities of his position when he ordered a halt to that punishment.�

There was more testimony from other police officials and the court guards who pulled Officer Chorno away from the punishment table, this time to support the charges of insurrection and assault of a public official while he was performing the duties of his office. Because of Dukov's task of representing Malka, there would be no direct testimony from him about what happened when she kicked him.

There was the usual break, and the usual drink of water for the defendant. Then Dukov spoke in defense of his former enemy. Dukov refuted none of the facts presented by the prosecution. Instead he concentrated on the need to give Malka the chance to reflect on her life and return as soon as possible to being a productive citizen. He presented Malka as she was, a brilliant but flawed individual who needed guidance and the opportunity to redeem herself.

Dukov's arguments were typical for such a case, but what followed wasn't. Criminal # 98945 stepped forward to testify. She was terrified, but courage welled up inside her to fulfill her purpose for being present on the floor of the courtroom. She addressed the court in accented Danubian as the cameras rolled and flashes went off wildly.

Kim spoke at length, explaining her deep fear of Officer Chrono before the final switching, her personal determination to overcome her fear, and most importantly her prayer that she make it through the punishment. She described her doubts as she received Malka's badge and at seeing her former nemesis reduced to a naked kneeling prisoner during the police hearing. The audience then sat in dumbfounded silence when Kim described her trip with Sergekt to the Temple of the Ancients and her talk with the old Priest there. Kim drew a deep breath, and finally proceeded with the mission she had assigned herself, making the effort to re-direct the destiny of Malka Chorno.

�The government of Upper Danubia has sought to apologize for what happened to me last Tuesday. I don't know how I should feel about that, because what happened to me is something that shouldn't happen to anyone. It did, and now I must move on with my life. The problem I face is that because of my trip to the Temple of the Ancients last night, I do not believe it is the destiny of Malka Chorno's life to be destroyed because of me. I want her to repair her damaged soul, and then I want her to return to serving this country. She is a brave and capable woman in spite of her damaged soul, and one who ultimately will serve this country well.�

Kim then held up Malka's badge.

�Your honor, I request from this court permission to deliver Officer Chorno's badge to the National Police Academy and to surrender custody of it. I ask, once Malka Chorno has had an opportunity to reflect on what path in life the Ancients want her to follow, that she return to the National Police Academy, retrain, earn her badge back, and return to her duties as a police officer. If she needs to start over, at the lowest rank, so be it. But what I ask is that this woman's life not be wasted.�

The judge tilted his head slightly, trying to make sense out of what Kim had just said.

�Are you saying that she should be exonerated of her charges, Criminal 98945?�

�No, your honor, not exonerated. She does need to be punished. She needs to learn what it is to be a criminal and to dread the punishment table. She needs to wear a collar and for a brief time live among the people she abused. However, once she passes though those experiences, my hope is that she will change, and that she will turn her back on who she has been up to this moment. My hope is, your honor, that in the future she will use her talents to serve all of Upper Danubia's people, criminals included.�

�What is your definition of a 'brief time', Criminal # 98945?�

�I'd guess a year, your honor. Definitely no more than two years.�

The judge turned his attention to Malka.

�Malka Chorno, to be honest, I am shocked by the attitude of Criminal # 98945. She seems to have forgiven you, which is something that I, in her position, would have been reluctant to do. Now I will ask you. Do you think you can transform yourself? Do you have the same confidence in yourself that Criminal # 98945 has in you?

�I don't know, your honor. I don't know if I can change or not. Criminal # 98945 has placed faith in me. I cannot answer, even in my own heart, whether or not I deserve that faith she has placed in me.�

The judge leaned back, thought for a few seconds, then leaned back forward.

�You gave me an honest answer, Malka Chorno. You don't know. If you don't know, then maybe there is hope for you. Fine. Here is my verdict. There is no doubt in my mind that you are quite guilty of all of the charges pending against you. Those charges include the crimes of insurrection, simple assault, assault against a public official while in performance of his duty, and abuse of the authority of your former public position. In ordinary circumstances the convictions would require you to wear the criminal's collar for 18 years. However, in your case I will not put a definite time limit to your sentence. If I am persuaded you are able to fulfill the faith that Criminal # 98945 and Spokesman Dukov have placed in you, then I will suspend your sentence and allow you to return to the National Police Academy. I am giving you something that you clearly don't deserve, the hope that someday you can redeem your life. Do you understand me?�

�Yes your honor.�

�Criminal # 98945, I want to thank you for your gesture of concern for what is best for our country. I don't really know what to say, other than your thoughtfulness and consideration go far beyond what I would expect from a person only 19 years old. If you decide to carry through with surrendering the badge of former Officer Chorno, I will notify the director of the National Police Academy. He will receive the badge from you directly. Then it will be up to former Officer Chorno to earn it back.�

�Thank you, your honor.�

�This court is ready to pronounce the tentative sentence of former National Police Officer Malka Chorno.�

With that, Malka dropped to her knees.

�Item One: Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno will wear the criminal's collar for an undetermined period of time. The collar will identify her as a criminal, monitor her movements, and alert the police should she try to leave this city. For duration of her sentence Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno is prohibited from traveling more than 10 kilometers from this courthouse.�

�Item Two: for the duration of her sentence Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno is prohibited from covering any part of her body with any article of clothing. She has disgraced herself and our city with her actions, and Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno's disgrace will be shown to the world as a result of this sentence.�

�Item three. Finally, for the duration of her sentence, however long that should be, Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno will receive a vigorous punishment on the naked buttocks and thighs with the leather belt originally issued to her as part of her police uniform every 120 days. Every 120 days Former National Police Officer Malka Chorno will be immobilized on the punishment table and beaten to the limit of her endurance, in accordance with the standard treatment for a former member of the National Police Force.�

�Malka Chorno, you are now convicted and sentenced. You will descend to the foot of my desk to receive your collar.�

Malka quietly knelt as the collar device closed around her neck. There was the familiar hiss and dull click signaling the final locking of the collar. Like every other criminal sentenced in the courtroom, Malka's hands went involuntarily to her neck, to finger the metal that now separated her from her life as a police officer. She had finished crossing to the other side. Malka Chorno had become a convicted criminal.

Malka was now to be punished. The table was waiting for her, but Kim noticed the restraints were set up differently. Instead of bending over the table, Malka would lie on top, with her wrists and ankles strapped to the table's four corners. As a former police officer, the protocol of her punishment would be somewhat different from that of an ordinary criminal.

Besides the different position, the punishment of a former police officer in Upper Danubia was different from the punishment of the average criminal in other ways. Because police officers punished ordinary criminals with switches, the National Police Code of Conduct prohibited switches from being used on police officers, even former ones. A former police officer instead always was punished with his or her police belt, beaten on both the bottom and the backs of the thighs. A former police officer always was punished by police officers of higher rank. In Malka's case that meant only the precinct's section chiefs could punish her, since she had the highest rank possible for a patrolwoman.

The Chief of the Danube City division of the Danubian National Police approached the punishment table, holding Malka's police belt. The belt, stripped of its accessories, was a simple thick leather strap, very heavy and pliable from being used for several years. It was the only part of Malka's uniform that would remain with her. Once her punishment was finished she would have to wear it around her waist, and bring it with her to her next punishment. Now however, it would remain in the hands of Malka's former bosses, who would take turns punishing her.

Dukov saluted the Chief of Police as Malka knelt. She kissed his shoes and he tapped her on the shoulder with the belt. With that Malka climbed onto the table. The Chief of Police handed her a hard pillow that looked like a cylinder, which Malka placed in the table's middle. She positioned herself lying over the pillow, which pushed her bottom up high, fully exposing it. Two court guards positioned Malka's ankles and wrists at the corners of the table and secured them with straps. Malka now lay helpless and completely exposed for a long and harsh punishment with her own police belt.

At first Kim thought the being punished with a belt would be more lenient than being punished with a switch. However, soon she would realize that was not true at all. Unlike the standard 50 strokes for a criminal, there was no set limit on the number of belt swats a former police officer could receive. The belt itself was thick and heavy, far heavier than a normal belt worn by a civilian. Malka would be badly bruised for days after her punishment. On top of everything else, as part of her sentence she would have to wear her belt around her waist when she went out in public, to show the world she was a disgraced former police officer.

The Chief of Police spent a long time studying Malka's spread bottom and exposed vagina, but he did not touch her. Finally he walked around to the side of the table. He doubled Malka's belt and laid it across her bottom. Malka quietly looked back at him, then straight ahead. Finally her former boss lifted the belt from her bottom, lifted his arm up and back, and marked the middle of Malka's bottom with a tremendous CRACK!

Malka flinched, but stayed quiet. That did not surprise Kim. She expected Malka to be extremely stoic about her punishment and that she would resist crying for a very long time. The Chief of Police struck again, laying a second swat immediately on top of the first one. He struck a third time, laying yet another swat in the exact same place.

CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!�Malka's former boss struck her hard a total of 10 times, always in the exact same spot. The swats were so loud that many of the court spectators flinched in sympathy. The police chief paused for a couple of minutes as the solid red band of pain marking the woman�s otherwise white bottom darkened and swelled. The man tightened his lips and stuck hard, although this time at a different spot across Malka's backside. Viciously he struck again and again at the spots immediately above and below the vivid red stripe marking the first 10 strokes. Malka began crying. She didn't scream or make any noise, but her body jerked with sobs that she tried to keep quiet.

After the 50th stroke the police chief stopped. Malka's bottom was horribly red and had small purple marks on it. Kim thought the punishment had ended. Hmm�that wasn't so bad. But as that thought passed through Kim's mind, the police chief saluted an older woman, who she recognized as the member of the arraignment committee who had spoken to her in English following her own arrest for marijuana possession. The woman removed her jacket and took the belt. She doubled it, swatted it through the air to test it, and then, full force, delivered a tremendous CRACK to Malka's already badly marked bottom.

Once again, Kim flinched at the ongoing CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK!� CRACK! She felt bad for Malka, but could take satisfaction in knowing that her former nemisis did not face having to put up with this horrible punishment for 18 years. She certainly had incentive to reform, and do so very quickly.

After 25 swats the arraignment committee member was breathing heavily and ready to stop. She saluted another older uniformed officer and passed the belt to him. He struck Malka's dark red bottom viciously another 25 times. By then the errant cop�s bottom was deep red and covered with purplish bruises and welts. Kim winced in sympathy. Malka now no longer was Kim's sadistic enemy. She was a fellow criminal who was suffering tremendously. Like any other criminal, she was trying to follow the informal code of honor by trying to stay as quiet as possible as long as possible. Her body continued to jerk with silent sobs as she attempted to hide her face from her former supervisors, who now had become her tormentors.

The older officer passed the belt to yet another section chief. Dukov raised his hand and pointed at Malka's thighs. The man nodded and struck hard at Malka's legs, concentrating on the sensitive area immediate beneath the base of her bottom-cheeks. Malka's resistance began to wear down. Her voice broke with each tremendous CRACK targeting her legs.

Two other section chiefs punished Malka's thighs before Dukov raised his hand. By now Malka's bottom had darkened and looked ugly. Soon Malka's thighs would darken as well. When Dukov's hand went into the air a second time, Kim thought the punishment finally had ended. Kim was wrong about that.

The police chief snapped his fingers at four of the court guards.

�Turn her over.�

The guards unbuckled Malka. One of them jerked the pillow out from under her. The guards then roughly grabbed Malka's wrists and ankles. They flipped her on her back and wrapped the restraints around her wrists and ankles. Kim gasped in horror as yet another section chief took the belt. He placed the belt on the upper part of Malka's thigh, lifted it up, and delivered a frightening CRACK to the previously unmarked skin of the former police officer's muscular right leg. He struck hard five times, then walked around the table to strike her left thigh another five times.

Malka, her face turned upward and her body spread and immobilized on the table, lost what little dignity she had left. She screamed and cried as the belt crashed into her skin over and over. Her body weight and movements pressed on the welts marking her backside, adding to her agony on the table. Her breasts jiggled back and forth as she sobbed, and her shaved vagina was on full display to the court cameras and her former colleagues in the police department.

After 25 hard swats to the fronts of Malka's thighs, there was another salute. Yet another section chief took the belt. The belt struck Malka's thighs yet another 25 times.

Kim gasped and stared at the scene in disbelief, looking at the broken, sobbing woman on the table. Dukov raised his hand a final time and looked at the judge. The judge drew his hand across his chest, indicating the punishment was over. The court guards undid the straps. Malka struggled to get off the table and fell into the arms of her former enemy. Dukov held the sobbing woman until she had recovered enough to finish the formal proceeding.

The judge needed to sign Malka's punishment certificate. Malka had to present herself before the judge, instead of having the person who disciplined her perform the presentation. She struggled to stay upright as she faced away from the judge and presented her backside. Her final duty was to thank her former supervisors for punishing her. She dropped to the floor, struggled to her knees, and one by one kissed the shoes of her tormentors. Malka was facing away from Kim, so Kim had a good look at her bottom. It was so dark that Kim was appalled. No...most definitely being beaten with a police belt was no more lenient than being beaten with a switch.

The police chief touched Malka's shoulder with her belt and released her back into the custody of the Spokesman. He then handed Malka's police belt to Dukov.

The presiding judge had a final word for Malka.

�Malka Chorno you will arrange gainful employment with your Spokesman within 48 hours. You know the rules so I will not need to explain them. On this date, four months from now, you will present yourself to the Central Police Station for your second punishment. Do you understand?

�Yes, your honor. I understand.�

With that, Malka Chorno, the brilliant young police officer whose character flaws had so thoroughly ruined her life, reported to the court photographer to have her official post-sentencing identification pictures taken. Once the photos were completed she silently accompanied her Spokesman back across the Central Plaza to the Central Police Station. She climbed on Dukov's recovery table and cried herself to sleep.

**Chapter 16 � The Bus Driver**

Kim had to return to work at the music store immediately following Malka's punishment. Eloisa entered Dukov's office to remind Kim that she was needed at the customer service counter. She stopped to look at Malka's prostrate body and collection of dark welts and bruises. She was awestruck by the severity of Malka's punishment, and also by the fact that one of the most feared officers in the National Police had been reduced to a beaten and semi-conscious criminal, wearing a collar and lying naked on a recovery table.

Kim left Dukov's office to return to her normal life. Eloisa came to fetch her friend not only for their boss, but also to make sure she would be available for a recording session planned for that evening. A representative from a French record company would be on-hand to witness the session. Eloisa hoped for a foreign distributor for her band's music and needed all the members to be present.

Spokesman Dukov watched the two naked young women descend the stairs as they left to go to work. Suddenly he felt very satisfied about Criminal # 98945 and her future. For the first time he knew, not just hoped, but actually knew, that his client would come out of her two-year sentence a much stronger and better person. Kim's courage had been tested, her physical endurance had been tested, and her need to come to terms with an enemy had been tested. The young woman's character displayed incredible strength in the face of some very harsh realities. Dukov reflected that, once the restrictions of Kim's sentence ended, she really would be capable of achieving great things in this life.

Dukov's immediate problem was not Kim, however. His immediate problem was what to do with Malka Chorno. The former police officer had neither a job nor a place to live. Prior to her public disgrace Malka lived with her parents, as was the case for any young woman who was not yet married. She had a very formal and traditional relationship with a fianc�e, although rumors circulated that she had enjoyed affairs with several of her co-workers. All of that ended when Malka lost her badge. Her father locked her out of the family house, her fianc�e left her, and her old lovers and friends turned their backs on her. She literally was starting from nothing, having to completely re-build her life living among people she had abused and humiliated just a week before.

In many ways Kim had an easier task adjusting to being a Danubian criminal than would Malka. People generally sympathized with Criminal # 98945 because she was just 18 and a foreigner. She had no reputation prior to her arrest nor any enemies. She did not have to face the humiliation of being a criminal in front of her family and friends. Malka, on the other hand, was well known and hated by many people. She was 26 and Danubian, so there would be no patience or consideration from other Danubians like there had been for Kim.

Malka's life would be one of constant and on-going humiliations. Any day she had to take care of business in Dukov's office she would have to walk through the Central Police Station past dozens of ex-co-workers. Every time she saw a cop on the street, she would know that person. Undoubtedly she would pass members of her family or her ex-fianc�e's family every so often. Worst of all would be constantly facing other criminals, people who she had terrorized and abused in the past. Malka, of course, now held no special status among criminals, so the others would be free to jeer at her as much as they wanted.

Dukov wondered what on earth Malka could do to earn a living. Kim's music store definitely was not an option. Dukov hardly could imagine Malka smiling at patrons from a store's customer service desk. The only logical solution was his brother�s courier service. It was far from perfect and a solution that could only be temporary, but working as a courier really was the only thing Malka could do at the moment.

Dukov called his brother. Not surprisingly, Victor objected to the idea of having to employ an ex-police officer. All of his other employees were only a year or two out of high school. Just how would an ex-cop fit in with a bunch of high school graduates? Dukov knew that his brother eventually would agree to employ Malka, if only on a temporary basis, but he spent nearly an hour begging and arguing before Victor finally agreed to issue Malka a bicycle.

"I will tell you this, Vladim. You had better let her know that around me she won't be any better than one of my other employees. Don't expect me to be nice or courteous to her because I won't be. When I snap my fingers, she'd better damn-well jump."

Dukov sighed when he hung up. Victor, always his same unpleasant self.

Malka's next problem was where she was going to live. Dukov did have a possibility. He had a classmate from high school whose husband had just died. The woman was trying to raise three children and manage a small goose farm by herself. Anyone who has ever been around geese knows that geese are quite ill tempered. Well, Malka was even more ill tempered. No goose would be a match for the ex-cop. Vladim called his ex-classmate to suggest giving Malka a room and board in exchange for help with the geese and a small monthly rent. Overwhelmed with the loss of her husband, the Spokesman's classmate quickly agreed. Besides, the woman's children were getting out of hand, and having a cop around might help them calm down.

Vladim Dukov then called his secretaries in to have afternoon tea. In Upper Danubia mid-afternoon tea was a custom in all professional offices, a time when a boss and his employees sat together to relax. It was the one opportunity the Spokesman and his two assistants could sit together as equals and chat about their lives. Today's topic, of course, was the disgraced police officer recovering in the reception area and the events that led her to her current situation.

The three heard Malka stirring outside Dukov's door. They invited her in to join them for tea. Malka came into the office, knelt, and placed her head to the floor. When the Spokesman gave her permission to stand up, Malka took a cup and a sweet roll. She had to eat standing because her bottom and the backs of her thighs were dark and still horribly swollen. She would be very badly bruised for quite a while, so her first deliveries for Victor would have to be done on foot. There was no way her bottom would take the pressure of a bicycle seat until the bruises subsided a bit.

Dukov told his new client about her new job and living arrangements. Malka quietly nodded and thanked Dukov for taking the time to get her set up. As for her living arrangements, she was quite happy. She had grown up on a farm, so it would be a nice change from her life in Danube City. She had a comment about Victor that put Dukov's mind at ease.

"Spokesman, your brother doesn't sound any worse than several of my section chiefs. Remember where I worked is not a place known for having nice people, and I am used to taking orders. I've been yelled at plenty of times, so I'm sure your brother will be just more of what I'm accustomed to already."

The only problem with Malka's living arrangements was the location of Vladim's classmate's farm. It was a kilometer outside the Danube City collar zone, which meant that he would have to petition to have the transmitter in her collar re-programmed to allow her to live outside the normal area for criminals. Because it was Saturday, Dukov had to wait until Monday to turn in the paperwork. It would be Tuesday at the earliest before Malka could have her transmitter re-programmed. One of Dukov's secretaries volunteered to have the criminal stay with her family until Tuesday.

With that Malka put on her police belt. She was required to wear it to show everyone that she at one time had been a police officer. The belt, sitting alone on the woman�s otherwise naked body, accentuated her nudity. She sadly knelt and said goodbye to her Spokesman. Malka then left the Central Police Station with the secretary, trying to avoid the stares of her ex-peers as she made her way out of the building.

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Following the broadcast of Malka Chorno's trial that Sunday night, Criminal # 98945 became something of a hero among her fellow-criminals. The others were amazed that she had been so savagely beaten and managed not to cry. They were impressed that the American was able to look Officer Chorno straight in the eye, even as the cop was slapping her face. They were gratified that Kim's actions resulted in the removal of a feared and sadistic police officer from their lives.

Kim expected the others to be angry over her plea for leniency for her former nemesis, but they were not angry at all. Danubian criminals tended to be more religious than average citizens, so Kim's actions following her visit to the Temple of the Ancients made perfect sense to them. Many of her peers even held out hope that once Officer Chorno returned to duty, she would be changed and would encourage her co-workers to treat criminals with respect and leniency.

For the first time in her life, Kim felt good about herself. She was not proud, because pride in oneself was an emotion Danubian society ridiculed. However Kim had learned self-respect and confidence in her ability to make decisions that were morally right. Her feeling of well-being increased when her father broke the news about the arrest of his attorney in Lima, the attorney who had promised, for a huge fee, that he could negotiate Kim's release from her sentence. For the first time Mr. Lee treated her with respect over the phone, gratified by the changes that had transformed his daughter into an adult.

Kim realized something else the week following Malka Chorno's trial. No longer did she want to kill Tiffany, nor in any way harm her. Her feelings about her high school friend had changed. If Tiffany were to re-enter Kim's life, she would be concerned with doing everything possible to help her. As her hatreds dissipated, Kim found herself well on her way to achieving inner peace.

The following Tuesday, exactly a week after her switching, Criminal # 98945 took Officer Malka Chorno's badge to the National Police Academy to surrender it. As promised by the judge, the institute's director was on hand to receive it. He assembled the cadets in the parade yard as Kim knelt and formally handed over the badge.

The director of the academy ordered Criminal # 98945 to stand up and then did something that shocked everyone. He bowed his head and kissed Kim's hand.

"Your gesture has humbled the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia. I will carry through with your desire to someday provide ex-Officer Chorno the opportunity to earn back this badge. I assure you that the opportunity I will give ex-Officer Chorno will be just that, an opportunity. She will need to earn her badge. It will not just be given to her. Now, please face the cadets and remain standing."

The director then let out the loudest and most ear-piercing whistle Kim had ever heard. The cadets, in unison, shouted:

"DOC-DOC DANUBE!"

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The water crisis in Upper Danubia intensified as the hot July weather showed no sign of abating. Eloisa was forced to cut back on band rehearsals as her male musicians took afternoons off to try to save their parents' vegetable gardens. All around the outskirts of Danube City groups of exhausted, forlorn young men clustered around pumps with buckets, waiting their turn to obtain precious water for their families' dying plants. Farms began slaughtering farm animals, reservoirs dried up, and the nation's forests began to change color as the trees sickened from the drought.

The Danubian government did what it could to ease the situation. Around Danube City it set up several pumping stations to move water from the Danube River to the residents' garden areas. It approved emergency measures to make sure farmers did not lose their land due to foreclosures. The Parliament approved a plan to ration water and electricity that began July 15, as the water level behind Upper Danubia's main hydro-electric dam dropped to a critical level. Danube City ended up with electricity for only 9 hours per day: from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., then from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The main purpose of the schedule was to keep the trolleys running during rush hour, but even so, the country's Prime Minister appeared on TV to exhort the citizens to ride their bicycles whenever possible.

As bad a crisis as the drought was, Danubian society was well suited to confront it. The government's main goal was to ensure the nation's food supply through the next growing season, so every action taken by the Parliament served that purpose. The population clearly understood the need to make sure everyone would eat through the winter, so any personal sacrifices that needed to be made to save a farm, or a vegetable garden, or a herd of cows, or to import food, were accepted and supported by the citizens.

On July 15 government scientists issued a warning the water table all around Danube City had dropped, and shortly many wells would run dry. The Minister of Agriculture warned that whatever vegetables people had managed to grow needed to be harvested and canned as quickly as possible. Food prices on fruits and vegetables started going up, but fortunately there was very little speculation and no panic buying.

The Ministry of Justice ordered all the nation's criminals to report to the Central Police Station the day after the warning. The police quickly turned off the transmitters in everyone's collars and then loaded the criminals onto buses to help farmers and pensioners get their vegetables harvested.

The wells ran dry over the following week as Kim and her friends helped harvest vegetables from several farms. The farmers issued the criminals work boots and aprons, and did what they could to show gratitude for the help. In the heat of the day, after working hard all morning, the criminals relaxed under shade trees and drank cold fruit punch to avoid dehydration. They started up again as soon as the sun lowered in the horizon and worked until well after dark. They slept on army cots, but in the evenings they ate well, enjoying food provided by the farmers they were helping. In spite of the hot, hard work, Kim enjoyed her week outside Danube City and the chance to see a part of Upper Danubia that normally would be off-limits to criminals.

The criminals spent their second and third weeks helping pensioners and anyone without an adult son harvest their vegetables from private gardens. They hauled baskets of harvested food to trolley-stops, and when necessary, helped pensioners carry heavy items to their apartments and houses. The fourth week most of the criminals returned to the farms for a final round of crop harvesting.

The farmers and pensioners were grateful for the assistance they had received and wanted to find a way to thank the criminals for their help. When several of them called Spokesman Vladim Dukov, he suddenly had an idea. He presented a petition to cancel all corporal punishments due to be issued through the end of September as a gesture of gratitude from the government. The idea caught on as many of those helped by the criminals lobbied their deputies to approve Dukov's proposal. The Upper Danubian Parliament approved the measure, not really having the time or the inclination to resist a popular idea. When the news broke to Kim and her friends out in the fields, they squealed with delight. Eloisa shocked Kim by hugging her. She and the others in her group had been due for a switching at the end of August. That punishment now was canceled.

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At the end of the second week in August, the criminals were transported back to the Danube City Central Police Station and their collar transmitters turned back on. The majority of the help they could provide was over, so they were released and ordered to return to their normal lives. The criminals had been away for four weeks, working 16-hour days with only a short break in the mid-afternoons. They were exhausted, sunburnt, and reeking from not having had the chance to get cleaned up. Their hair was disheveled and the men had beards. The women did not feel particularly feminine at that moment. Still, the criminals all were quite happy. They had performed public service to a country that had expressed at least some gratitude for their efforts.

Sergekt and Kim trudged up the hill to Dukov's house that evening. They hugged each other goodbye, and with that she went inside. Vladim and Maritza were eager to talk to Kim, but held off when they saw what a smelly mess she was. The first thought on everyone's mind was getting their surrogate daughter into a bathtub as quickly as possible. Once that was taken care of and Kim was civilized again, there was a dinner waiting for her. She recounted her adventures on the farms, but soon was nodding off. She went to bed right after dinner.

The next morning Kim woke up and looked out her window. She had not seen the view for a month and was shocked by how brown everything in the countryside appeared. A landscape that normally would have been lush green instead reminded her of the time she went on vacation in eastern Colorado. The trees were green, but the ground underneath them was completely brown. Kim noticed something else in the distance that she wondered about, some smoke in the air. She figured a farmer must have been burning some harvest debris. She shrugged her shoulders at the desolate view and prepared to deliver packages for Victor Dukov, for the first time in over a month.

There was more smoke in the air when Kim got home that evening. She spent the evening with the Dukovs, because Eloisa had decided to hold off on band rehearsals until the following week, and her boyfriend was busy helping his mother and aunt preserve what he had been able to salvage from her garden. Kim and Vladik stood at her window, commenting about the line of smoke in the distance and the increasing haze.

"This isn't good. I'd better call my section chief and see what's going on."

What was going on was the beginning of the worst natural disaster Upper Danubia would face in over a century. There were a series of huge forest fires just getting started. Already the entire fire departments of four provinces were totally occupied fighting the blazes. Most of the soldiers in Upper Danubia's small army were on their way to the fire zones as well. Officer Vladik Dukov's chief informed him a call-up of Danube City's police officers and firefighters was imminent.

While their son was on the phone, the elder Dukovs turned on their television. Vladim, Maritza, and Kim watched news footage of huge fires burning forests, farms, and villages in eastern Upper Danubia. There were dramatic shots of frantic farmers and police officers trying to move herds of panicking cows away from rapidly approaching flames. There was one particularly gruesome shot of a pig farm on fire, with hundreds of dying pigs trapped in burning buildings.

The fires were exacerbated because the country still had plenty of forested areas, some even close to major cities. The forests were a vital economic asset to the country, as well as a traditional part of Upper Danubia's defense strategy. Having large forests near the cities allowed the Danubian military to mount guerrilla operations against any foreign invader, since there was no hope that such a small country could defend itself in a pitched battle against a large modern army.

King Vladik the Defender originally set up the forest preserves in the early 1500's after successfully using the woods to help his army repel a total of five foreign invasions. The king was a military visionary, a person whose guerrilla tactics against both Papal and Turkish armies were way ahead of their time. As they made their way through the forests, the invading armies suffered massive losses before they ever got to Danube City, at the hands of King Vladik and his guerrilla archers. Because of the forests and King Vladik's military strategy, Danube City never fell under foreign occupation at a time the rest of central Europe was devastated by wars.

The military rationale for the forests faded in the 20th Century. However, Upper Danubia still took pride in its forest preserves at a time when other European countries were trying to restore their own forests. The only problem, one that no one could have anticipated, was the vulnerability of the entire system during a drought as severe as the one currently afflicting the country.

That night Vladim and Vladik Dukov went downtown to the Defense Ministry. The Spokesman had to translate a series of phone calls, as the country's fire chiefs called overseas for advice to work out a strategy for combating the fires. Finally the fire chiefs settled on a creating a system of firebreaks to save most of the forests and more importantly, Upper Danubia's towns and farms.

The following morning Kim and Anyia watched as military convoys rolled passed Dukov's house and into the valley towards the line of smoke. A couple of military helicopters flew overhead. Kim rode her bicycle to her music store job, not realizing the fires were about to impact her life and the lives of her friends in a big way.

When Kim got downtown she saw a couple of police officers standing outside the music store talking to her boss. She noticed the "closed" sign still on the door. When she went inside, no one was working. Instead Kim's co-workers were calling their families to tell them they had been drafted into the fire-fighting effort.

Eloisa came up to her with a very worried expression.

"Kim, call home. Let them know we're heading east, out to Rika Chorna Province, and it looks like we're going to be there for a while. They're pulling every criminal in Danube City to work on the fire-break they're setting up out there."

Kim parked her bicycle inside and called Anyia to let her know that she too, would be gone for an indefinite period of time.

Criminal # 98945 and her co-workers, only two days after being released from a month of heavy farm labor, walked with the police officers to the Central Police Station. The Central Plaza was full of criminals going through a huge assembly line to get them ready to become fire-fighters. The first priority was turning off their transmitters. Kim and Eloisa tilted their heads back as the collar technician touched their transmitters with an electronic device that somehow turned them off. The next line the two women stood in was to have their feet measured for army boots. The police took down their criminal number, Spokesman's name, and foot size; entering the information into a laptop.

The next line was for clothing. Yes, clothing. This was a national emergency, so Kim and Eloisa found themselves putting on yellow fire-fighting clothing. The clothing felt extraordinarily hot and uncomfortable to Kim, who had spent the last 14 months of her life living nude, but obviously no one expected her to fight a forest fire without proper protection.

The police shouted at the criminals to find their Spokespersons. Each Spokesperson had to organize his or her clients to get on the military trucks for transport across Upper Danubia. Kim knew that Vladim Dukov still was on the phone translating for the fire chiefs, so she went with Eloisa to find Spokesman Havlakt. Sure enough, he had Kim's criminal number and her boots. He handed each of the two women a bag containing socks, a canteen and belt, a fire blanket, gloves, dust masks, and several plastic bags of US army meals, or MRE's. He then ordered the two women to turn around and slapped their criminal numbers onto the Velcro patches onto their backs. He then pointed at the long rows of Danubian Army trucks at the other side of Danube City's Central Plaza.

"Your boyfriends are in the third truck in that second row. If you hurry up you can catch it before it leaves."

Kim and Eloisa didn't bother to put on their boots. They simply dumped them in their bags and ran across the plaza in a frantic dash to catch the truck before it departed. The truck already was moving slowly, but when the driver saw the two young women desperately running behind it, he stopped to let them get on. Kim sighed with relief as she saw Sergekt and sat down next to him.

For the second time that summer Kim's normal life as a criminal was suspended as she was drafted into the service of Upper Danubia. The trucks rode out to the edge of the capitol and beyond the border of the Danube City collar-zone. The criminals whistled and hissed as they passed one of the dreaded yellow signs. It was a gesture of derision against the system that normally restricted their lives so severely.

The criminals were in a relatively upbeat mood, in spite of the danger and toil that lay ahead. It was a part of their place in society they be available for emergencies. They felt good about being able to contribute. They also looked forward to getting out of Danube City, even if it was for just a short time in a very restricted area. Most importantly, they could look forward to the possibility of having a switching canceled if they performed their duties well. If the police felt it was necessary to put a criminal in harm's way, the reward usually was to cancel a switching. That promise was sufficient to make criminals plenty willing to put themselves at risk for the good of the community.

A fairly pleasant ride lay ahead for Kim and the others, then would come days of hellish work in a smoke filled environment. The criminals filled their canteens, put on their socks and boots, and looked at their MRE's with bewildered expressions. They sang a few traditional songs, but finally settled down to sleep or watch the countryside go by. Kim relaxed in Sergekt's arms as she observed the towns and forest parks of central Danubia.

"If this doesn't get burned up, we'll come out here next summer once we get our collars off. I'm desperate for a good hike."

Kim smiled and nodded. A hike would be nice.

The criminals' convoy climbed a series of foothills, passed the Rika Chorna Reservoir, and continued through a range of low-lying mountains. As the vehicles turned out of the pass to descend into the next valley, their passengers observed with horror what was going on. A massive fire was sweeping towards the foothills and blanketing the entire valley with thick smoke. Behind the fire was an enormous blackened area containing several villages, which already were burned to the ground. A long column of evacuees and herds of farm animals streamed past the military convoy, heading in the opposite direction away from the fire zone. Helicopters circled overhead, trying to douse sections of the fire with retardant.

As bad as the situation in the valley was, what concerned the government was the need to prevent the fire from making it past the first line of hills standing between the valley and the main mountain range. If the fire made it to the mountains, it would be completely uncontrollable and char the entire central portion of Upper Danubia. Not only would the forest be lost, the water shed for the nation's main reservoir would be destroyed and Danube City would lose both its electricity and water supply. The government's solution was to create a firebreak at the top of the first ridge, and in several spots a secondary series of firebreaks in case the fire jumped the main one. Professional fire crews and soldiers had sections of the firebreak nearly completed near the main road, but beyond the main road hill after hill was waiting for firebreak crews.

The trucks stopped along the main road as firefighters divided the criminals into work crews working under the direction of a police officer or a firefighter. Several trucks ahead, Kim noticed Malka Chorno, in her collar and yellow firefighter's suit, talking to couple of army officers. The officers placed her in charge of one of the firebreak crews, her status as a criminal suspended due to the emergency. For at least a couple of days Malka could go back to being her old self as a cop and shout orders at a group of subordinates.

Malka's crew separated out first. She was placed in charge of three Danubian soldiers, who in turn led three groups of 10 criminals each. Malka and her crew climbed onto a bus and disappeared down an unpaved country road towards one of the untouched hills.

Sergekt looked around sadly at the doomed countryside, and made a comment to Kim that later would become very significant.

"I've been all over this area. It has a lot of memories for me, because my father took me hunting and camping here before he died. I'm going to be real sorry to see it burn up."

The Danubian firefighters ordered the occupants of the first 15 Army trucks to get off with their gear. The firemen divided the criminals into groups of 10. Each group had a soldier leading it, and a firefighter or police officer was placed in charge of the three soldiers. The criminals received additional equipment such as shovels and pickaxes. The soldiers carried explosives to clear sections of firebreak and canisters to set backfires. Thus equipped, each crew loaded onto an old city bus and departed for one of the hills.

Fortunately the Danubian Army had managed to move several bulldozers and earthmovers out to the fire zone. The bulldozers already were en route to the line laid out for the firebreak and some already were toppling trees and brush.

Kim and her companions boarded a bus that trailed behind two army trucks towing bulldozers. They traveled about 25 kilometers away from the main road and then turned on a narrow dirt road that passed between two low-lying hills. There were five buses altogether, one for each heavily forested hill, and the other three crews to cut backup firebreak along a large meadow. The meadow was by far the more logical spot to cut a firebreak, but there was an evacuated village located at the back of the two hills the government was hoping to save.

As the smoke from the approaching fire increasingly poisoned the air, Kim's crew trailed behind the bulldozer, clearing debris as the soldiers set backfires. It was slow-going because of the large trees that needed to be cut down to clear the path. Three criminals who knew how to use chain saws switched off with the soldiers cutting branches, while the others exhausted themselves clearing flammable debris from the path. A local villager brought water and gasoline to the fire crew on a mule.

The villager also brought some bad news. The bus driver who had driven the bus Kim rode in on had a heart attack and had to be evacuated by the other bus driver. The other driver had to take the second bus back to the Rika Chorna Medical Center, but promised to return shortly with a replacement. That afternoon there was just one bus left near the road. There was no one to drive it, but the crew's supplies were there.

Kim's crew felt they had made good progress as night fell. The soldiers expressed confidence the village probably could be saved after all. The lead firefighter called his supervisor, who estimated the fire would reach the firebreak mid-afternoon the following day. The firefighter ordered the three soldiers to have their crews pick up their tools and follow him back to the road, where everyone would have dinner, reorganize their equipment, and camp. There was plenty of time remaining to widen the firebreak, set more backfires, and prepare to fight embers�or so everyone thought.

As dawn broke the following day, the fire crew noticed it was very windy. There was more smoke in the air, lots more, blowing up from the valley.

The firefighter was on his radio, talking with a very worried expression. What the Danubians overheard terrified them.

"What do you mean you can't get a driver over here? Can't you see we're trapped? What about a helicopter?�too windy? Look, there's 68 of us out here�You've got to get a helicopter�No! I don't know how to drive that thing!"

The Danubians seemed immobilized with fear. Suddenly most of them got on their knees and started reciting a prayer normally spoken at funerals. It was obvious the group�s members expected to be dead in a few minutes.

What the hell is the problem, thought Kim, we just get on the bus and go. She spoke up:

"Let's just get on the bus! We can get out of here on that!"

"There's no bus driver, that's why!"

"No one knows how to drive?!"

"Of course not! This is not America! We don't drive in this country!"

Kim glanced at the orange glare at the bottom of the hill. Unlike her companions, Criminal # 98945 was not yet ready to face the Creator in the Afterlife. There was only one solution. She would have to try to operate the bus and get everyone out.

"I do know how to drive! I haven't driven a bus, but I've driven a couple of vans! Everyone get on! I'll drive!"

The orange glare brightened. Kim frantically scrambled into the driver's seat of the bus. She fumbled for the ignition. The key was there, thank God. She turned it hard. The engine groaned in protest, but Kim got it running.

"GET ON!"

As Kim's 67 companions quickly filed on, she noticed the orange glowing brighter and brighter. Embers were blowing past the bus. The seats quickly filled and the final people boarding had to squeeze into the aisle or into the laps of those already seated. It was a tight fit, but everyone made it on. The firefighter took a quick look out the door to make sure no one was still outside, and climbed in.

Kim shifted into drive just as the flames became clearly visible along the road. The area was filled with smoke, making the frightened driver realize that she had a new problem, visibility. She gunned the engine and moved the bus forward, although not any quicker than the approaching flames.

Panic swept through Kim. She had to move faster, but she could only see a few meters ahead of her. The awkward and unfamiliar feel of driving such a large vehicle made things considerably worse. One wrong turn onto the wrong road, and the flames would catch them. If she lost control and went off the road, she and everyone else would die for sure. Suddenly Kim remembered Sergekt's comment about knowing the area.

"SERGEKT! SERGEKT!"

Sergekt struggled to get up to the front of the bus.

"You know this area?"

"Yes!"

"Tell me where to go! Get us out of here!"

For several harrowing minutes Sergekt directed Kim down the hill towards the village. The flames chased the bus, as though the fire was infuriated at the escape of Criminal # 98945 and her 67 passengers. The village now was doomed; the efforts of the two crews canceled by the sudden shift of wind. However, as the bus descended into flatter and more open terrain, its driver breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed the smoke was not as bad. The vehicle dashed across open fields towards the main firebreak as the fire roared behind and engulfed the village. The flames swept across the parched fields, but fortunately there was not enough fuel near the road to put the bus in any further danger. Kim sped towards her goal and rushed past the first line of firefighters. She braked, assuming, quite rightly, that the two crews in the bus were desperately needed to supplement the main firebreak. She directed her next question to the head firefighter.

"Where are we going?"

"Let's go left, towards that next hill! They'll need us up there!"

Kim turned onto a dirt road, not yet realizing the others were flabbergasted with her feat. With Sergekt guiding her, she drove along the hill and unloaded her passengers, one team at a time. The flames were approaching Upper Danubia's second, and final, line of defense. The exhausted criminals working the main firebreak cheered the arrival of re-enforcements. Because of Criminal # 98945, 68 potential fire deaths instead became 68 extra sets of hands for the drama about to unfold on the main firebreak.

The smoke thickened again as the fire approached the back-burned slope of the hill. It had run out of fuel to keep going, but in a final desperate effort to make it to the mountains, the fire shot burning embers across the firebreak. The fire-crews pounded small flare-ups with their shovels. There were plenty of scares, and one spot where it looked like the fire had indeed jumped the firebreak that had to be attacked by a tanker plane dropping flame retardant.

Finally, after two arduous days of shoveling spot fires and breathing smoke, the firefighters, soldiers, and criminals fighting the fire realized the worst was over. The central portion of firebreak had held so far. The fire still was burning towards the edges in either direction, but there were enough professional firefighters to handle the reduced crisis. The work was not over, because there was plenty of mopping up to do and the need to monitor the area, but the desperate physical danger largely had passed.

That night, as Kim and Eloisa tried to clean the soot off their faces, Eloisa mentioned Kim's hero status among her peers. Kim dismissed the entire incident.

"Look, I just drove a bus for a few minutes. That's all I did, and I wouldn't have made it down the hill if I hadn't had Sergekt telling me where to go."

"Well, you can say it's nothing, but we're all very grateful for what you did. You did save us."

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Three days later the criminals boarded the buses to go back to the main road. They would spend the night at the Rika Chorna Gymnasium getting cleaned up and resting. Then the plan was to transport them back to Upper Danubia's Central Valley to fight several smaller fires. However, that night, as they stood in the parking lot, Kim and her companions noticed it was increasingly humid. A light rain started as they went inside to eat and shower. Once clean and fed, the criminals relaxed on mattresses on the gym�s main floor. They all were asleep within minutes. The following day the firefighters came in to announce the planned operation in the Central Valley was canceled because it had rained overnight and still was raining quite heavily. Not surprisingly, most of the criminals dashed outside to see for themselves. Sure enough, sheets of heavy rain were falling in the parking lot. The police decided to collect the fire-fighting suits and other equipment in Rika Chorna, since the items no longer were needed. As the rain continued to fall some of the criminals dashed outside and splashed water on each other. Many others, including Sergekt, were kneeling on the wet pavement, giving thanks for safely making it though the fire fighting operation. Kim knelt beside Sergekt and joined him in prayer to the Spirits who had protected her.

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A week of rain put an end to the fire crisis. Upper Danubia still faced huge problems, including the rebuilding of thousands of homes burnt in Rika Chorna Province and the restocking of the area's farms. The government had to plan massive replanting operations and set up a general economic recovery program for the entire eastern half of the country. However, life in Danube City could return to normal, now that the Rika Chorna Reservoir had some extra water in it.

The government kept its promise to cancel the next switching for the criminals who had participated in the fire-fighting operation. That meant Kim's final switching on January 2 was canceled. The dreaded beatings now were behind her. Sergekt, Eloisa, and Kim's other friends now could look forward to the cancellation of two switchings, the one at the end of August, and the one at the end of December. That left them with only one switching, the one scheduled for next April, which would be the final corporal punishment for the group.

The sentencing judge decided to give commendations to several criminals whose participation in the fire-fighting operation was outstanding, including Kim and Malka Chorno. Kim found out that Malka's crew had cleared and guarded their firebreak under particularly severe conditions, and that Malka had administered first aid to three injured villagers that saved their lives.

The Danubian government made a much bigger deal out of Kim's driving than she thought was necessary. Criminal # 98945 became a hero not by being brave, but because she knew how to do something no one else in her group knew how to do. How easy it had been to be a hero. She simply was in the right place at the right time with the right knowledge. The judge asked Kim if she had any wishes in particular that she might want to make, within reason, of course.

"Yes, your honor, I do have one request. I don't want to end my sentence on July 2. I would like to complete my sentence with my friends. The day they take off their collars is the day I would like to take off mine. I know it will add three weeks to my sentence, but it is very important to me that I stand together with them the day my collar comes off."

"Well, that is an easy-enough wish to grant, Criminal # 98945. But you will take your collar off on July 2. I will shorten your friend's sentences instead of lengthening yours. So, on the Monday after July 2, there will be 29 of you in this courtroom. Considering your contribution to our country, I think that's the least I can do for you."

As they left the courtroom, Malka approached Kim. In spite of their overt coming to terms with each other, the two women still felt very uneasy in each other's presence. Malka had something she needed to say to Kim, however.

"Kimberly Lee, I have an apology I must make to you. Maybe you might think it's a trivial thing, but it has been troubling my soul in a way I don't think you can imagine. I once said that you're nothing but a pathetic little druggie and that's all you'll ever be. That was the most mistaken thing I ever said to anyone. You are much more than that�much more than that."

Malka sadly turned away and walked out of the courthouse. Kim didn't follow her. She stayed quiet, not having a clue about how she should respond.