**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 17 � The Brat on a Bicycle**

Criminal # 98945 finally returned to her normal routine as August drew to a close. She continued to deliver Victor's packages and messages, greet customers at the music store, and deal with a backlog of issues affecting Eloisa's band. She continued to rehearse and sing. She divided what little free time she had between Sergekt, Eloisa, and the Dukovs. Kim's life was completely full, about as full as a person's life could be.

Ironically, Kim's job with Victor Dukov became a refuge of sorts in her life. Her constant activities and social obligations might have worn on her patience had it not been for the days she spent alone on her bicycle, pedaling hard around Danube City. Victor no longer had to exhort Kim to ride fast to make her deliveries. She was under so much pressure from the other areas of her life that she vented her stress speeding along the quiet streets of the nation's capitol. She moved about so quickly that her boss stopped nagging and berating her. She became his favorite employee, held up as an example of what Victor wanted from his riders. That was not entirely a good thing, because now he placed Kim in an uncomfortable position because he constantly asked his other employees why couldn�t they deliver their messages as quickly as she was delivering hers.

One afternoon Kim saw Victor berating Malka Chorno. True to her word, it was obvious Malka was quite used to being yelled at unfairly. She quietly stood at attention while Victor exhausted his long list of complaints and criticisms. Kim saw a huge irony in the situation, as Malka stood straight, listening to the complaints of a small businessman. In spite of losing her uniform, and in spite of everything else that had happened to her, Malka still looked and acted like a cop.

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Kim's first night back at the Socrates Club was filled with celebration. Every criminal in Danube City was jubilant over the double cancellations of switchings; Dukov's two-month suspension of corporal punishments for their help with the farms, and the added cancellation of one switching for each criminal who participated in the fire-fighting effort. The criminals had undergone a harrowing six weeks of hard work and danger, but then returned to Danube City to receive a respite from some of the harsher aspects of their sentences. The past hardships and current absence of pending physical pain changed the criminals' outlooks on their lives. Kim noticed a difference in both the speeches and the music of the Club from the year before. The music, especially, became much more philosophical instead of morose.

Kim sat at her usual table, drinking Danubian beer and eating the usual salted deep-fried vegetables with her friends. It had been exactly one year since Criminal # 98945 started coming to the Socrates Club. Her friends commented on the anniversary and on how different she was now from whom she had been when she first came in. Kim ordered another round of beer and then stood up at her table. She put her hand on Sergekt's shoulder and smiled at him. Then, in Danubian, she addressed her group:

"A year�it's really hard to believe it's been a year since I've known all of you. In some ways it seems like it's been a lot longer, and in other ways it seems like the last year went by in a flash. But�your friendship�it means more to me than I could ever express, even in my own language." With that she raised her glass. "Here's to this time next year, to our freedom, and our continued friendship!"

Everyone at the table enthusiastically raised their glasses.

Later that night Kim and Sergekt went to an intimacy room for the first time in nearly two months. She was desperate for some good sex. Once they had the door closed it was Kim who took charge. She pushed Sergekt on the bed and grabbed his hands to pin him to the mattress. For a very long time she held him down as she passionately kissed him. She could feel him getting hard, so she began licking around the base of his penis and kissing the tip. As he got even harder he arched his back and ran his fingers through her hair. She got up and straddled him, grabbing his hands and pushing them back down on the mattress. Kim's gritted her teeth in an intense passion as she lowered herself on him. She guided his hands to her breasts. He massaged her nipples as she came, and then came again. Two months! There was two months of sexual frustration pent up in Kim.

The couple waited for a while, and then resumed their love-making, this time in Sergekt's favorite position, with Kim on her elbows and knees, and her bottom spread and high in the air. Kim seductively moved her bottom back and forth, as Sergekt remembered his girlfriend on her bicycle from last fall. That's right, he thought to himself, I'll owe her a nice hard spanking if I ever catch her on that fancy American bicycle she's got. As he pushed hard into her and she groaned with pleasure, Kim didn't realize her boyfriend�s thoughts were on spanking her cute brown bottom.

Kim briefly fell asleep on her stomach, as Sergekt gently ran his hand over her bottom cheeks and his fingertips ventured into the darker area in between. As he studied his lover�s bottom and lay recovering from his exertions, Sergekt pondered the problem of how he could catch her while bicycle riding in a place private enough where he could put her over his lap. The only solution would be to somehow find a shortcut where he could secretly pass her and then surprise her by catching her from the other end. Yes, he thought, there is one such spot on the way to my mother's garden plot, a utility path that bypasses the main bicycle trail. Sergekt gently patted Kim's bottom, thinking about the attention that it was destined to receive the next time they went bicycle riding.

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Malka Chorno entered the Socrates Club for the first time at the end of August. She quietly asked the doorman whether or not she should wear her policewoman's belt, given the club's rule about clothing of any kind was very strict. No, was the answer; that comes off. Here you are a criminal, just like the rest of us. We're not worried about who you were before you were sentenced.

At the beginning Malka sat alone, given that she had no friends in the club. She watched several groups perform, and then Kim and Eloisa perform together on stage with three of Eloisa's musicians. As she watched Kim perform, Malka had a chance to reflect on her misplaced loathing of the American. She felt bad about how she had treated Kim, but couldn't see how that damage could be repaired.

Malka was extremely lonely. Because everyone in her former life had turned their backs on her, Malka had been completely by herself since she had been sentenced. She felt she deserved what was happening to her, but the pain of the betrayals by her former friends weighed on Malka tremendously.

Malka's isolation ended before Kim's singing was over. One of Sergekt's classmates, Tuko, noticed the ex-cop as she quietly sat by herself. Tuko had a girlfriend prior to the riot at his school, but her parents prohibited her from seeing him after he was sentenced. Tuko had not been able to find anyone else to go out with, and had given up hope of having a normal relationship until his sentence ended. That was too bad, because of all the members of the group, Tuko and Sergekt were the most adventurous when it came to reaching out in their personal relationships.

The disgraced ex-cop presented Tuko with an opportunity and a challenge. He found her fascinating and wondered how approachable she would be. She was 7 years older than the members of Sergekt's group, but Tuko didn't care about that. She was pretty and tough looking, as well as somewhat mature, precisely the kind of woman Tuko secretly fantasized about having in his life. Well, here was his chance. Finally he walked over to Malka's table and asked her to dance.

Tuko's relationship with Malka took off very quickly. Malka accepted the first dance out of sheer boredom and loneliness. At the beginning she had real reservations dancing with a criminal almost a decade younger than her. However, Malka knew that the old rules and protocol in her life no longer had any relevance. She now was a criminal herself, and if this guy was still in his teens, so what?

While Sergekt and his classmates watched in dumbfounded silence, Tuko bought some beer and fried vegetables for himself and Malka and sat with her. It was weird to see her smile and converse. Kim and Eloisa could tell that both Tuko and Malka were sexually aroused, something that became very evident the next time Tuko invited her to dance. Shortly afterwards the Socrates Club's newest couple headed towards the stairwell door and disappeared to go to an intimacy room.

Sergekt and Dima looked at each other, a bit shocked at Tuko's departure from their table and its result. "Well, that was fast."

The group now was faced with a dilemma. It was customary that any member who started dating someone from outside the group would bring his or her partner to the table, and the person would become a de facto member of the group. That was what happened the year before to Kim when she started dating Sergekt. Malka, however, was much more of an outsider to the group than Kim ever could have been. Kim, although a foreigner, an English speaker, a drug user, and Asian, at least was the same age as Sergekt and his classmates, and like them, a recent high school graduate. More importantly, she never had been a police officer. Kim had no past associated with her, nothing to make anyone hate her before meeting her.

An ex-police officer was different, especially one with Malka's background. The beatings Kim's friends had endured left them traumatized and afraid of anyone in a blue uniform. Until two months ago Malka Chorno had been among the cruelest of the police officers, one of the worst tormentors of criminals. Now she was a criminal herself, precisely because she had stepped over the line in her mistreatment of Criminal # 98945. How could she sit with the group? And yet�the group's subculture and their friendship with Tuko demanded that any partner of his would become one of them.

Fortunately that night the group was not confronted with the issue, because Tuko and Malka never re-emerged from the intimacy room. The group discussed how to handle the situation with Malka, should she continue to go out with Tuko and he ended up bringing her to the table. Finally Sergekt stated:

"Look. Officer Chorno is really Kim's problem. I think it is up to Kim to decide how we should treat her. As far as I'm concerned, whatever she says is what we'll do, and there'll be no further discussion. It's Kim's choice."

Kim was not pleased that Sergekt was dumping the problem in her lap, because she felt she really had no choice. She felt morally obligated to come to terms with her former nemesis, but she really did not want to do so by mixing Malka with her social life. Nevertheless, Kim's conversation with the old priest at the Temple gave her no alternative other than to forgive Malka for what she had done. Kim knew that Malka had repented and even tried to apologize�sort of� That meant she had to treat Malka like she would treat any other fellow criminal.

"I�suppose�that we're all criminals, and now Malka is one of us. She's not a police officer anymore�or at least not until she gets her badge back. You're asking me what I want, but that's the wrong question, because what I want doesn't matter. You see�I don't have any choice. That priest obligated me to forgive Malka, and I'm going to have to, as hard as it is, I'm going to have to. So�when Tuko brings her, I'll just deal with it."

Eloisa gave the guys an angry look, and interjected "It's not fair to put this decision on Kim."

"Life's not fair, Eloisa. I think you know that better than any of us at this table. It's not fair, but I have to forgive Malka. So, when the moment comes, she'll join us. That's my decision."

Tuko spent the next two Saturday nights sitting alone with Malka, as both of them worked up the courage to re-join his group. Finally, on the fourth Saturday Tuko and Malka were together, Kim decided to approach them and resolve the issue herself.

"You might as well join us at our table. You two look ridiculous sitting here by yourselves, so come sit with us."

Malka gave Kim a sad, but gratified look. The invitation meant an end to her isolation. She sat quietly and was extremely reserved around the others, but now she had her place at the Socrates Club. Even when she was not with Tuko, his friends would expect Malka to join them at their table. It was the beginning of Malka's transformation, the simple act of sitting at the same table with a group of fellow-criminals.

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Sergekt's life changed radically at the beginning of September. He decided to reduce his hours at his restaurant and enter Danube City University to study hydrology. He knew right away what he wanted to do with his degree. He would seek to improve Upper Danubia's irrigation and public water supply systems, to assure that severe droughts never again could lead to a national disaster like the one the country recently had endured.

Sergekt had to seek permission from the sentencing judge to enter the university. Kim and Eloisa attended the hearing, as did Sergekt's mother and aunt. Sergekt knelt with his head on the floor while his Spokesman presented the formal petition. The judge then ordered Sergekt to kneel upright and explain his plans. Sergekt quickly summarized the experiences he had endured over the summer. He started by describing the collective humiliation of the young men clustered around the pumps as they watched their efforts to save their parents' gardens end in failure. Right after that came the mobilization to save part of the nation's commercial crops, and finally the horrific week fighting forest fires. He saw all that had happened to Upper Danubia that year as unnecessary.

"What distressed me, your honor, was that the water to meet our needs was there, deep underground, but we had no way of getting to it. The technology to get that water also exists in the world, but in other countries and thus is useless to the Duchy. Now I know what I want to do, and what path the Ancients have chosen for me. I will try to become educated to help solve our nation's water problems."

The hearing was really a formality, since there was no doubt what Sergekt wanted was perfectly reasonable and useful to the country. He would have to attend his first year of classes naked, of course, but there was nothing unusual about that. Plenty of convicted criminals studied at the university, and there were even a couple of criminals with lengthy sentences working as professors.

Kim noticed Sergekt's confidence in himself rose as the semester progressed. He became concerned about his future and looked upon his present as a temporary phase in his life. Just a few months before Sergekt had confided to Kim that he felt he would never be able to see himself as anything other than a criminal. Now, with the beginnings of his career as a hydrologist crowding out other concerns in his life, Sergekt's entire focus had changed. He had found his purpose.

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Cynthia Lee decided to visit her sister for the second time in the middle of September. Originally she had wanted to visit in August, but had to delay her trip because of Kim's fire-fighting duties. She re-scheduled once it was obvious the fire danger had passed and there was no further chance Kim might be mobilized to fight forest fires.

As before, it was Spokesman Vladim Dukov who had to pick Cindy up from the airport, given its location outside the Danube City collar zone. However, the whole tone of Cindy's trip would be different this time, because the only reason she was visiting was to see how Kim was doing and spend some time with her. Kim requested a week off from both her jobs, which freed her during the days to spend time with her sister.

Because Cindy arrived before the equinox, Kim did not have her winter cape yet. She was naked when she greeted her sister at Dukov's office, and would stay naked the entire time Cindy was with her. This time Cindy managed to get over the shock of her sister's constant nudity rather quickly. One thing that helped was seeing how accustomed Kim was to living naked, to the point she no longer even noticed. Her younger sister was perfectly comfortable with her body, which made Cindy question, for the first time, the values of a society that required people to be dressed at all times, whether it was practical or not.

Danube City was at its best during the late summer and early fall, so Kim had the opportunity to show Cindy around and familiarize her with the many monuments and historical sites the area had to offer. She took her guest to the Temple of the Ancients and King Vladik's Castle and explained the historical significance of both locations. Cindy marveled at Danube City's beauty: its fancy old buildings, endless parks, and quiet streets. Cindy thought to herself, this place has some real tourist potential, if these people could ever figure out how to market themselves.

Kim spent hours talking to Cindy about her life and what had happened to her since last Spring. She told Cindy the story of her final switching and its results, and tried to make her understand the underlying values and line of reasoning that determined how the whole affair was handled after the offending officer was arrested and sentenced. Kim eventually moved to the topic of the entire Danubian judicial system and its emphasis on corporal punishment instead of incarceration. She shocked Cindy with the following statement:

"It's actually a pretty good system, even if it has its problems. I mean�people really do have the chance to turn their lives around, and we criminals have a chance to do something useful and get ready for our futures. Yes, I got my butt whipped three times, and it hurt worse than I think you could imagine, but I'd take that over a jail cell anytime."

Kim's conversation with Cindy moved on to Dukov's stalled judicial reform pending in Parliament and what he hoped to achieve and change by trying to re-write the 1780 punishment code. The legislation had not gone anywhere over the summer because of the constant emergencies afflicting Upper Danubia. Kim suspected the legislation would eventually be forgotten, which was a real pity. Cindy disagreed.

"Kim, I don't think either you or Spokesman Dukov understand what an opportunity you have. You say there's a lot of good will towards criminals because of the fire fighting. Use it. Have all those people you helped call the Parliament and pressure the�deputies? Is that what they're called?" Kim nodded. "Alright, deputies. Have people call up the deputies and tell them this is how they can thank you for putting your butts on the line in that forest fire. Pass that reform."

Kim thought about her sister's idea. Cindy pressed her point. "Look, I've been taking some political science classes in college, so I have some ideas. What Spokesman Dukov needs to do is have his supporters lobby the Parliament. Have them call the deputies. Have the firemen you helped call the deputies. Then have them hold demonstrations in Rika Chorna Province and here in the capitol. Make sure you get the press involved. You do all that, and you'll get that reform passed."

"I don't think they do things that way around here."

"Probably not. That's why, the first time there is a real public relations campaign to make some changes it'll be such a shock that it'll shake things up. I'd bet, maybe once the public gets used to nagging the Parliament over things they want, things in this country might change and the system won't be so stuffy."

"Well, you ought to talk to Spokesman Dukov about it�see what he thinks."

That night Cindy had dinner at Dukov's house. She discussed her ideas at length with Kim's Spokesman, who listened with interest.

"You suggest what you call a 'public relations campaign'. You will understand public pressure is not the normal manner of conducting political policy in our country, but I presume in this case, such a concept might indeed prove successful. You are correct about public sentiment. At no time in our country's history have people had such a favorable opinion of criminals."

During the weeks following Cindy's departure, that conversation would put new life into Vladim Dukov's ambitions to reform Upper Danubia's corporal punishment system. Whenever he had any spare time, Dukov was on the phone, talking to anyone who had been helped over the summer by Danube City's criminals. He called the religious leaders of Rika Chorna Province and obtained their full backing for the reform. On Sundays, in churches throughout the province, priests exhorted their followers to contact Parliament and pressure deputies to pass Dukov's reforms. The nation's fire chiefs told their firemen to support the reform, as did the Danubian Forest Service and the Directorate of the Rika Chorna Reservoir. Within just a couple of weeks, Dukov found himself on national television giving a joint press conference with the governor of Rika Chorna Province and the Chief of the National Fire Department. Together the three officials exhorted the need for a judicial system that would protect criminals by standardizing corporal punishments and enforcing limits on how a police officer could treat a criminal during a court-ordered switching. They had the backing of a large segment of the population, while the opponents of the reforms had to stay quiet or face the wrath of the people of Rika Chorna Province.

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Cindy was on-hand to watch Upper Danubia's bizarre "Day of the Dead" ritual during her week in Upper Danubia. She and Anyia followed Kim and her friends to the plaza in front of the Temple of the Ancients the afternoon before the march. Kim's sister and the teenager stood among the spectators as Kim and 2,600 other criminals had their bodies painted and received torches. As the sun set there was the usual mournful singing, the ancient hymns begging the Saints/Ancients to get Upper Danubia through the coming dark days of winter. There was the usual sermon admonishing the country for not having given proper respect to the past, and the usual prayer hoping the dead might have a chance to return to life and ward off evil through the living bodies of the marchers.

Once the marchers began filing towards the river, Cindy followed Anyia back to Dukov's house on Kim's bicycle. Upon her arrival at his home, Vladim gave Kim's sister a black robe and a long black shirt to put on underneath. Once she was changed Cindy then followed the Dukovs and Vladik�s future in-laws to a small local church for a service, then out to the dark road where the marchers would be passing by. She knelt with the Dukovs, noting that her host and his son seemed lost in their prayers. The whole affair still had a veneer of Christianity, but Cindy could see how quickly Upper Danubia was returning to its Pagan roots. Upper Danubia was supposed to be a Christian country and still was very religious, but not in a way that would be acceptable to most Western churches.

After the marchers passed, Cindy accompanied the Dukovs to the Plaza of the Ancients for the religious ceremonies to be held during the day while the marchers were resting. To Cindy the Day of the Dead was strange beyond belief; leaving her with the feeling she somehow had jumped out of the 21st Century and gone back several millennia in time.

As she stood in a sea of painted bodies waiting to move out, Criminal # 98945 felt very agitated, almost scared. Her dark eyes shifted back and forth nervously and her heart raced as she wondered why on earth she couldn't calm down. Once she started moving along the river, the uneasy feeling Kim briefly experienced towards the end of her march last year came back early, and came back full force. As much as she tried to concentrate on simply moving forward, images flashed through her mind. She saw Susan lying dead in the morgue in Prague, as clearly as if she had been there herself. She could see Tiffany in an alley, brutally being beaten in a drug deal gone bad. She could see Malka Chorno's younger sister, dumped in an unmarked grave on the outskirts of some Middle Eastern city. She saw the images of villagers in Rika Chorna province, dying in the forest fires as they tried to save their livestock. The visions became stranger and stranger, as Kim's imagination moved into the past and into the future. She saw Vladim Dukov, slightly older than he was now, speaking from the steps of the Parliament building to thousands of chanting supporters. However, the strangest image running through Kim's mind was seeing Tiffany on trial in the Central Courthouse, in the prisoner's stance and tears running down her face. Was that the future? Was the image something that should have happened but didn't?

The images vanished from Kim's mind in a flash, leaving her with the shock of seeing the pre-dawn light and the other line of marchers approaching from the opposite direction. The entire night had passed without Kim realizing it. The marchers moved into the campground, ate, and settled down on army cots.

Kim lay down next to Sergekt but she couldn't get to sleep. Finally she walked out to the edge of the tents and saw a lone painted figure among the trees, contemplating the quiet countryside. It was Malka Chorno. Kim walked up to the woman and stood next to her, trying hard to control her feelings of uneasiness and discomfort. For a long time neither criminal said anything, but both realized they would not be able to leave without talking. Anyhow, Kim had something she needed to tell Malka.

"Malka, I�saw some things last night, during the march. Weird stuff, most of it not very pleasant."

"That's why they have us do this, Kimberly Lee. They send us out to let the dead see the world though us."

"So�do you believe in this whole thing, the march and all this about the spirits?"

"I don't know what to believe, Kimberly Lee. I don't. If you would have asked me three months ago, I could have told you very clearly what I thought about things, about life. Not now. I don't even know who I am, so how can I answer that question, 'what do I believe?'"

For a long time they stood silent, as Kim worked up her courage to tell her companion about what she saw during the march. She knew she had to tell Malka; she wouldn't have had that vision and then run into her if it were not absolutely necessary to share that image with her former nemesis. Finally Kim spoke.

"I�saw�I�Malka, do you know whatever happened to your sister?"

"My sister? How do you know about my sister, Kimberly Lee?"

"Vladik Dukov told me about you a couple of days before you punished me in July. I asked him, because I wanted to understand�why you hated me so much. So he told me about the white slavery ring, and showed me some newspaper articles. According to the articles your sister got sent out of Upper Danubia and your government never found her."

"Yes, it is true that we weren't able to find my sister. We found four others and got them home, but we couldn't find her. I imagine that's because she didn't survive."

"She didn't. Last night, when I was walking, I saw a whole bunch of stuff. Among all that I saw what they did to her�your sister, that is. There was this grave, real shallow, out in the desert, near a dirt road and some sheds. That's where she ended up. That's what I saw."

Malka sadly nodded. There was no arguing with the Maragana Girl. She and Kim would not have ended up standing together had the American's destiny not been to relay the dreadful information.

"At least I know the truth, Kimberly Lee. Now the question is settled in my own mind, and now I owe you yet another debt in life."

"You don't owe me anything. Nothing. Just�when you get your badge back�"

Malka shook her head.

"I'm not sure I want my badge back, Kimberly Lee. Maybe�maybe I want to become someone else, do something else. Leave the police work to another person. I don't know what I want right now."

Kim sadly patted Malka on the shoulder. She then left the former cop standing alone as she re-entered the tent area to find Sergekt. She looked back to see Malka's white painted figure curled up in a kneeling position on the ground. The ex-police officer was sobbing quietly and pulling at her hair.

Kim was not sure whether she had done the right thing by sharing her vision with Malka. However, as in all other aspects of her personal relationship with her former nemesis, Kim really felt she had no choice. She felt driven by forces she could not even begin to understand.

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The march ended the following morning in the exact same way it ended the year before, with the dead silence suddenly shattered by hundreds of church bells and thousands of singing voices as the criminals marched down Danube City's main street towards the Plaza of the Ancients. The marchers heaved their torches into a huge bonfire and made their way into the Danube River to rinse off death and return to the world of the living. Later in the day, after the criminals were properly cleaned up, they lined up in front of the Central Police Station to receive their winter boots and capes.

The mood in the plaza contrasted with the cheerfulness during the spring, when the criminals were turning in their capes. For one thing, no criminal looked forward to the onset of winter. For another, the Day of the Dead was a time in which every Danubian, and especially every criminal, was called upon to contemplate the meaning of life and its brevity. Many of the criminals had experienced visions during their march that left them spiritually shaken.

Kim said goodbye to her friends and found her sister, who was waiting with Anyia on the outskirts of the plaza. Kim and Cindy chatted in English, while Anyia flirted with a young criminal who looked like he was still in high school. Kim ignored what was going on with Dukov's teenager, since she and the girl had an unspoken understanding that neither would tell Vladim about anything the other was doing. Kim instead concentrated on telling Cindy about her strange experiences during the first night of the march and her conversation with Malka Chorno. Her thoughts went back to Tiffany and the image of her former friend lying horribly beaten in a dirty alley, somewhere in the US.

Later that afternoon Kim got cleaned up to go to the Socrates Club with her friends. She felt bad about leaving Cindy alone with the Dukovs, but the night after the Day of the Dead celebration was an important night for criminals to get together. Cindy shocked Kim with her reaction.

"Kim, I got a question. Could I see this famous Socrates Club of yours? You've shown me everything else in your life, but I'd like to see that club."

"You can't."

"Why not? Didn't you tell me that former criminals could go as well? And also boyfriends and girlfriends? If not everyone there is a criminal, why can't I go?"

"Well, you could go, but I'm sure you wouldn't want to. They don't allow clothes in there. They're very strict about that rule, because they want everyone to be equal as a criminal."

"And if I don't wear my clothes, I can go?"

"Uh...well...yeah, but I can't picture that you..."

Cindy paused nervously. She swallowed and continued: "I want to see it, Kim. I want to see what you do with your friends. I want to see that part of your life. I'm willing to take off my clothes if they'll let me in."

"Well, uh, OK...if you think you can handle it, you can come with us. I'd be glad to have you. I'll get you a visitor's pass to get you through the door and a bag to put your stuff in."

That night Cindy Lee accompanied her sister, Sergekt, Eloisa, and about 10 other naked criminals to the door of the Socrates Club. Cindy was the only person in the group wearing any clothing, which made her feel very uneasy while she was still on the street. As they entered the Club's reception area Kim handed Cindy a cloth bag. Cindy took a deep breath, sighed nervously, and started stripping. Within a minute she was completely naked, except for her jewelry. Kim pointed out the jewelry had to come off as well, since jewels were an indicator of social status and as prohibited as clothing. Once everything was off Cindy's body and in the cloth bag, Kim signed a claim ticket and handed the bag to the club's doorman. With that, Kim�s sister, now as naked as her companions, entered the main area of the club and sat at the group's usual table.

At first Cindy was horribly uneasy, being naked in public for the first time in her life. She was dumbstruck at the sight of hundreds of other naked bodies, male and female, mostly young but a few middle-aged patrons as well. However, within a few minutes the visitor got used to her strange situation. In the end she felt more comfortable without her clothing than she would have had she kept her clothes on. There was not a single dressed person in a room full of about 350 patrons and staff. Cindy's body drew some attention because of her tan-lines from wearing a swimsuit in the US, but she was well received by Danubian criminals eager to meet her and try out their English. Sergekt helped break the ice by asking Cindy to dance. Once they saw Kim's sister on the dance floor with one of their companions, other male criminals eagerly sought her out for dances and conversation. By the end of the evening Cindy was fully accepted as a client of the Club, in spite of her strange tan-marks and lack of a collar. It was obvious several patrons were attracted to Kimberly Lee�s sister, something that deeply flattered her.

Cindy went home two days after her debut at the Socrates Club. As Kim stood at the final trolley stop within the Danube City collar-zone to say goodbye, Cindy promised: "I'll be back at the end of next June. I want to watch that ceremony when you get your collar off."

"What about Mom and Dad? Do you think you can get them to come?"

"I don't know. But I'll be here, whether they come or not."

Cindy Lee had deeply enjoyed herself on this trip, especially towards the end. Kim could tell that her sister's second trip to Upper Danubia had changed her outlook considerably and broadened her vision of what was possible in life. She hugged Cindy goodbye and watched her depart with Vladim Dukov on the next trolley headed to the airport.

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The weekend after Cindy's departure Sergekt hatched his plot to catch Kim on her bicycle and give her a sound spanking. The day was perfect for such an outing, still plenty warm for a late September afternoon. The two criminals rode the bike-lane that paralleled the Danube River, and then turned inland to go to his mother's garden. Sergekt suggested a new route, which Kim readily agreed to explore.

Kim was in a very naughty mood. She shamelessly teased her boyfriend by lifting up in her bicycle seat and stretching her bottom seductively as she pedaled her fancy mountain bike. She then raced ahead, leaving him gasping for breath as he tried to catch up on his more primitive Danubian model. When Kim noticed that Sergekt seemed not to be trying so hard to catch her, she teased him all that much more. As he came close to catching up, she darted ahead; passing a small dirt side trail that did not catch her attention. Kim rode so fast that she didn't notice Sergekt no longer was behind her. She sped around a long curve that overlooked a forest-park, and finally noticed he was not in sight. Kim shrugged her shoulders, thinking she must have really outpaced him this time, and casually rode down the trail at a leisurely pace. She rounded another corner that was obscured by trees. Her heart stopped when she saw Sergekt standing in the middle of the trail, his arms crossed and his bicycle blocking the path. So...he had out-witted her. Now she was caught, and would have to pay with a sore bottom.

Kim's heart raced and she was wet between her legs. She was totally aroused; thrilled that he had been able to catch her after-all. He would punish her bratty behavior with a long, slow, sensuous spanking. Then, once Kim's emotions were fully aroused, the best part would come, the release through passionate lovemaking.

Sergekt grabbed Kim's hand, lovingly but firmly. She had been teasing him every time they had gone bicycle riding, making fun of his inferior bike. Now she was outwitted and caught. He kissed her, but then patted her bottom with a warning tap, letting her know what was coming. Kim nodded. "You got me. I guess my bottom is going to pay for my impudence?"

"That's right Kim. Park your fancy bike next to mine near that tree."

Kim complied, moving her bike off the path. Sergekt then took her hand and led her a few meters away from the main path up the shortcut. There was a park bench hidden in the bushes. Sergekt sat down and pulled Kim over his lap. For a long time she lay quietly as he gently caressed the flawless brown skin of her small shapely bottom. Sergekt lovingly patted Kim's bottom cheeks, but with a firm warning to comply with his next instruction.

"Spread you legs a little and lift your bottom up."

Kim obeyed, feeling the cool autumn breeze caress her exposed bottom-hole and vagina. The combined physical sensations and the tension of the impending spanking drove Kim wild with anticipation.

"Kim, you're 20 in a couple of weeks. That means a birthday spanking. But since you were so naughty to me on your bicycle, that will be a complete birthday spanking on each side of your bottom, plus another for your whole bottom. How many birthday spankings is that?"

"Three. Three good hard spankings on my poor bottom! I guess I really have been naughty, to deserve three whole birthday spankings!"

"That's right. Maybe you'll think twice about waving your cute behind at me when you're speeding on that fancy bicycle of yours."

"Hmm. Maybe, but I doubt it." With that Kim wiggled her bottom slightly.

Sergekt rested his hand on his partner�s right bottom-cheek. He lifted his hand up and delivered a slap, one that wasn't all that hard. The feeling was just right. He slapped again on the other side. Slowly he spanked, alternating between Kim's bottom cheeks and gradually increasing the severity of the swats.

Kim's bottom was only slightly reddened at the end of her first birthday spanking. She felt a warm comfortable sting coming from her rear-end, and an extreme arousal radiating from between her legs. Sergekt knew her, and knew what she needed. The spanking would move from playful to sensuous to severe. Sergekt had allowed himself 60 slaps to build up Kim's arousal, although if he felt she needed more, he was ready to sentence her to yet another birthday spanking.

SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!�

The spanking grew louder and louder as Sergekt picked up the force of his slaps in the second part of Kim's punishment. She gasped and moaned, as the increasing heat in her bottom transformed itself into increasing arousal. Kim was so excited that Sergekt could smell her, even in the open area with the breeze blowing around them. She bit her lip as tears and sweat ran down her face.

Kim released control of her body to Sergekt. As he slapped harder and harder, he carefully gauged the effect his swats were having on his girlfriend. He took her to a level of pleasure she never before had experienced, through the sharp physical sensation of her punished bottom. Kim trusted him fully and surrendered completely. Kim was so aroused she was almost tormented, but she wanted to feel that torment, that wild mix of moderate pain and extreme pleasure.

At the end of the 40th slap Sergekt gently massaged Kim's swelling bottom, which by now was quite red. Kim groaned with pleasure, as she felt Sergekt's hand rubbing her bottom through the sting of her spanked skin. He slipped his hand between her legs, but tease and torment her, not to give her any relief. Kim would have to wait until the 60th swat before she could expect any release of her sexual tension.

Sergekt rested his hand on Kim's bottom for a few seconds. "Happy Birthday, Kim."

SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!� SLAP!�

Sergekt struck quite hard for the final part of Kim's spanking. There was much more of an element of punishment in the final set of slaps than there had been during the first two sets. By now Kim was experiencing some serious pain, but psychologically she was ready, and pain was what she wanted. As the tears flowed down her face, Kim felt the emotional release she so desperately needed. However, as Sergekt came to the end of the third set, he delivered the final several swats more gently, allowing Kim to wind down a bit before the spanking actually ended. He began rubbing and massaging Kim more and more, and finally slipped his hand between her legs again. Kim closed her eyes and concentrated on the intense sensations coming from her bottom and her clitoris. Somehow the pain from her bottom and the gentle teasing of Sergekt's fingertips on the most intimate part of her body went together, along with the gentle rustling of the leaves in the forest and the cool breeze blowing against her body, to give Kim a sensation of sexual and physical bliss.

Sergekt kissed Kim's bottom. He leaned over and kissed her shoulders. Finally he motioned her to get up. He took her hand and guided her behind the bench. He had Kim bend over the back of the bench, placing her hands on the seat. Kim spread her legs and arched her back, completely exposing herself to her lover; putting her red bottom and wet vagina on full display. Kim wanted to surrender herself completely, to let Sergekt do what he wanted with her body. She wanted him to take her.

Sergekt entered Kim. He thrust hard, grabbing her breasts with his hands. He squeezed her nipples hard between his fingers as he massaged Kim's chest. Kim groaned and thrust her head back, as she pressed her bottom backward to get him even further inside her. He thrust hard, with force. The thrusts bordered on painful, but they were enough to give Kim deep satisfaction as her lover pressed into her. Kim climaxed and almost blacked out, it felt so good. Sweat poured down Sergekt's body as he pushed into Kim's body over and over. He held back with his orgasm as long as he could, wanting to relish the feel of Kim's body and the sight of her sweaty back and reddened bottom. Finally he was forced to release into her, as she groaned and climaxed yet again.

Sergekt pulled out of Kim, but she was so exhausted she remained bent over the back of the bench. He fought to regain his breath as he admired his lover's body. Finally he drew her to him and sat with her on the bench. She cuddled in his arms, although she moved a bit from the discomfort of sitting on her still sore bottom.

Sergekt felt deeply satisfied with life at that moment as he looked down at his lover. Kim's heart belonged to him. She was his, the woman with whom he would share his life. He was totally satisfied with her. Kim was a partner with whom he could play and share his sexual fantasies.

Kim looked up at Sergekt with a very naughty expression.

"I'm still going to tease you on my bike, and don't think you're going to catch me here again. So I think my bottom will be pretty safe for a while."

"We'll see. Of course when I do finally catch you again you'll get a nice rough spanking. We'll have all afternoon."

"Well, you have to catch me first, and I don't see how that's going to happen."

Sergekt patted his lover's bottom. "That sounds like a challenge to me, and I always am up for a good challenge. Your bottom will pay for your impudence, Kim."

Kim pinched Sergekt's chest hard and smiled mischievously. "I still have the faster bike, so don't get your hopes up."

Of course, they both knew that someday Sergekt would figure out how to catch Kim again. Once he did, she would end up with another sore bottom. Kim wanted that more than anything, but she had no intention of making it easy for Sergekt. After all, she was quite a brat.

**Chapter 18 � Paths towards the Future**

Malka Chorno's final integration into the criminal community came much more quickly than anyone could have anticipated and from a completely unexpected source, the owner of the Socrates Club. As he watched Malka and admired her muscular cop's physique, an idea popped into his head. He decided to approach the former police officer about becoming a physical fitness instructor for the Club.

The Club's owner had heard predictions that winter would come early, which would force Danube City's criminals off the streets and seek refuge indoors. Many of them would lose any opportunity whatsoever to exercise, since no gym in Danube City admitted criminals as members. The Socrates Club's owner realized he easily could fill that need, since part of the Club's sprawling property included an empty armory. The building was a 300 year-old historical landmark and thus could not be torn down or renovated on the outside. The structure had sat empty for years, but now the Socrates Club could, with the simple installation of a heater and a new floor, convert it into a fitness center. The only element lacking was a criminal who knew how to conduct physical fitness training. That problem now was resolved with the addition of an ex-police officer to the club's clientele.

In the middle of September the Club owner called Vladim Dukov to relay his plan to offer a job to Malka. The former cop took a break from Victor Dukov's deliveries to see about the new position. The Club owner took her into the armory and discussed his idea.

"What I want is for the physical fitness program to be included in the Club's dues and room fees. It won't be a separate charge, because I know most of my clients couldn't afford a health club fee. But I think they'll come exercise if it doesn't cost them anything extra, and if they have a charismatic instructor. It won't cost me that much, since all I need to do is put in a floor and a heater, in a building I really can't use for anything else. If you agree to do this, what you do is up to you, as long as it's general fitness. It's your chance to stop being yelled at by that bicycle guy. You'll get to yell instead."

Malka quickly accepted the offer. She had plenty of time to give notice to Victor Dukov, since she still had to wait for the installation of the new floor. She also took advantage of the time to read over her old police training manuals and set up several exercise regimes for different tastes. She decided to set up two classes of general military exercises and one class of non-combative martial arts. Malka would lead the classes by exercising herself as she shouted commands. She would lead by example, showing her classes what she wanted with her own body.

The gym was ready at the end of September, just as the weather was becoming too cold for Kim and Malka to continue delivering messages for Victor. The first Saturday night of October Malka stood on the stage of the Socrates Club for the only time during her sentence to announce her exercise classes and her schedule. She concluded:

"I have taken the entire exercise program for the National Police Academy and adapted it for you. I will work with you in the same way my instructors worked with my class at the Academy. That means, don't expect me to be nice, because 'nice' is not how you get your body into proper shape. But I can guarantee my regimen will keep you fit and in better health. This is the chance for you not to become a bunch of fat slobs over the winter."

With that, Malka began her classes. Three times per day, six days per week, Malka's snarling voice could be heard on the street outside the old armory. Malka's classes started out full, but at the beginning many criminals came and left. By the end of the year the exercise groups had stabilized with a regular crowd. For the ones who stayed, Malka became something of a cult figure, the ill-tempered ex-police officer who now dedicated her life to helping anyone who cared to spend time with her get into top physical shape. Kim and Eloisa attended Malka's late afternoon sessions three times per week and always left completely exhausted. They jokingly referred to the armory as "Malka's torture chamber"

Malka became a totally different person when she was instructing her classes from any other time during her sentence as a criminal. Malka was very quiet and almost shy when she was among Tuko's friends, or with Victor Dukov, or with her Spokesman. The exercise sessions gave Malka the chance to be her old self again. In her classes she was boss, period. She had a clear idea what she wanted from her students and very quickly snapped at the ones not performing to her expectations. She pushed her classes mercilessly, but she led by example, exercising in front of her students during the sessions. As she shouted commands, Malka's sharp eyes scanned her group for anyone using poor technique. She didn't interrupt her class for errant students, but after class she worked one-on-one with anyone she noticed who was having problems doing the exercises properly. Malka's own body was in constant physical movement, pushed by the woman's incredible drive and determination.

The ex-cop managed to settle into her life as a criminal largely because of her unusual relationship with her young boyfriend Tuko. Malka came from a very strict and upright family of small farmers. Prior to her arrest she had dated the same man for years in the traditional manner. In every sense Malka had been a hard-core traditionalist, only to have her world disintegrate during the days following Kim's final switching. Malka realized the loss of her old life was not all bad, because now she could do something she couldn't have done in the past, simply live life for herself and enjoy the moment. She did not need to follow any formal protocol with Tuko. She could joke with him and touch him where she pleased. At a moment's notice the two could run upstairs to an intimacy room. They could experiment with different sexual positions and wrestle, something Malka would not have dreamt of doing with her old fianc�e.

When it came to sex, Tuko and Malka were evenly matched. Both had very strong sexual urges and pent-up erotic desires. Tuko had a stronger drive and physical endurance than anyone Malka had ever slept with previously. For the first time in her life Malka had a man who could keep up with her craving for sexual gratification. Very quickly Tuko learned to be rough with Malka, because that was what she wanted. During sex he pushed hard when he entered her, grabbed her hair when he kissed her, and slapped her bottom hard when he wanted to position her for a new sexual posture. Malka was every bit as rough with Tuko. She dug her fingernails into his back or bottom during intercourse, frequently bit him, and grabbed his penis and squeezed it, looking at him with clinched teeth and flashing eyes, warning him he'd better become erect quickly...or else. There were plenty of evenings that Malka and Tuko returned to the Club's main floor after sex with their bodies all marked up from their exertions. The other members of the group tried not to notice.

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Dukov's teenaged daughter returned home one mid September afternoon with a bit of a surprise, a classmate from the United States. The girl's name was Jennifer Thompson and she was a high school exchange student spending a year abroad in Upper Danubia. Jennifer was living with a host family, who had sent their own daughter to live with Jennifer's parents in the US.

Jennifer was petite and quite pretty, with pale skin and short red hair. In the US had enjoyed sports and cheerleading. She freely admitted that the cheerleading had gotten her into a lot of trouble, as she ran wild with fellow cheerleaders and football players. Like Kim, in her high school Jennifer had been quite the party girl, which was why her parents decided to send her for a year abroad.

Jennifer was elated about going to Europe, where she had heard that societies were more liberal than even California, which was where she was from. She had not heard of Upper Danubia, but hey, Europe was Europe, so she expected to have a blast. No drinking age, lax drug laws, tattoos, raves�what more could a 17-year-old want?

Jennifer's father had sent her to Upper Danubia knowing full-well what lay in store for his daughter. Yes, his little Jennifer would have a bit of a shock awaiting her when she started her high school in Danube City. Among the papers he signed was a release allowing Jennifer to receive corporal punishment while in school, if it proved necessary. Jennifer's parents gladly signed the release, and with that Jennifer was on her way to the airport.

Jennifer was somewhat taken aback by the conservative appearance of Danube City and its busy, but very quiet streets. The bars, discos and tattoo parlors she was expecting were nowhere in sight, but occasionally she did see a naked young person running around on foot or on a bicycle. Like Kim the year before, she wondered about that, but did not think to ask due to her lack of language. The only thing she enjoyed was swimming naked at her school pool, free from the hassle and discomfort of having to wear a swimsuit. However, that hardly made up for the lack of anything else exciting to do. She balked at her school uniform and her host family with their endless rules, formalities, and protocol. She didn't bother to study Danubian in her orientation classes and wrote angry letters home asking her father, what the hell was with this country...I thought Europe would be fun...this place totally sucks.

Jennifer's heart reserved a special resentment against Helga Tolkiv, the exchange program counselor at her school who always was telling her how to behave. Counselor Tolkiv was relatively young and quite attractive, but her long skirts, old-style braided hair, and tall statuesque figure made her a rather imposing woman. She spoke in a quiet, but bossy tone of voice, always using extremely correct English. She was Danubian to the core, very serious and obsessed with "honor". Counselor Tolkiv was Jennifer's main teacher, another aspect of her year abroad that grated on her.

Jennifer became popular in school, quickly making friends with several Danubian girls with similar personalities and interested in hearing about how wild life in the US was for high school students. Jennifer embellished a bit, as her classmates struggled to understand their American friend's stories given in English. Jennifer became the center of attention of the school's more rebellious girls and a growing source of concern for the school's teachers by the end of September. Both Counselor Tolkiv and the school principal began wondering how they could exert their authority over Jennifer and lessen her influence over her classmates. Finally it was Jennifer herself who provided the school authorities with a justification to make an example out of her in front of her peers.

In California Jennifer frequently had skipped class at her high school. No one thought anything of it because so many of her classmates did the same thing. No one in Jennifer's clique took school very seriously and the teachers were glad to be rid of the more troublesome students. Jennifer skipped class for the first time during the third week of the school year to smoke a cigarette in a nearby park. Her classmates marveled at her reckless courage, but Counselor Tolkiv gave her a very stern lecture about the need to stay in school.

"You are dishonoring yourself, the exchange program, and your teachers with your behavior. I trust you shall not dishonor us again."

Jennifer rolled her eyes. That act of disrespect earned Jennifer an hour standing in the corner while the teacher graded some papers. Unfortunately the lesson did not sink in.

Jennifer skipped class again the following week, but this time the consequences were far worse. As she sat smoking in the park, a police officer noticed Jennifer's high school uniform and detained her. He demanded to know which school she had come from, getting a response in heavily accented Danubian that she had been let out early by her exchange program coordinator. The story sounded unlikely to the cop, so finally he handcuffed her and took her to several nearby schools to find out where she needed to be. Jennifer was incensed at being paraded around in handcuffs, not yet realizing there was much worse to come.

Finally the officer led Jennifer to the correct high school and into the director's office. Jennifer could tell the principal was furious. He called Counselor Tolkiv to his office and berated her in front of both Jennifer and the cop. The woman gave the girl a hostile look, angry that Jennifer, after having been warned, was responsible for making her lose honor. On top of all that, the exchange student had committed a criminal offense by lying to the policeman and was facing arrest. Counselor Tolkiv stood at attention in front of the two men and addressed them in Danubian, after giving the American another quick, hostile glance.

"Officer and Director, my student has insulted our school and the honor of each of us. I wish to take responsibility for her actions and for assuring you this incident shall not be repeated. I request your permission to properly discipline her."

The principal looked at the cop, who reluctantly nodded. "That request is granted, Counselor. If you are willing to administer a proper punishment, I believe we can let this incident be forgotten."

Counselor Tolkiv then turned to the teenager and spoke in English. "I need to chastise you, Jennifer. I am unhappy about having to do this to you, but you have only yourself to blame. You shall suffer because of the choices you made."

Fear and anger swept through Jennifer as the cop led her to an unoccupied classroom. Counselor Tolkiv trailed behind, shutting the door as they entered. The cop took off Jennifer's handcuffs as her counselor issued her next order.

"Jennifer, you shall undress. Now."

"What?!"

"You heard me. You are to undress, immediately."

"Fuck you! I'm not taking my clothes off!"

The two adults were in no mood to argue. The cop grabbed Jennifer's arm and twisted it behind her back, as he pushed down on her neck in a grip that immobilized her. The girl's counselor pulled off her shoes and socks, then jerked her skirt and panties to her ankles. Jennifer then felt the buttons on her shirt coming undone one by one and her bra strap being unhooked. The cop shifted position to allow the teacher to pull Jennifer's shirt and bra off one arm at a time. The student struggled viciously, but in less than a minute she was naked. The cop twisted Jennifer's hands behind her back and put her handcuffs back on.

The cop grabbed Jennifer's arms and pulled her upright. Counselor Tolkiv stood directly in front of her, face to face. The girl was resisting and breathing heavily as the cop held her tight.

"Jennifer, if you wish to struggle like a criminal, you shall be treated like a criminal."

The cop led Jennifer down the main hallway to the school basketball court as her counselor followed behind. To Jennifer's horror the entire student body was assembled on the bleachers. The school principal was standing next to a small chair and a microphone stand. The chair had a sinister-looking leather police switch on it. Suddenly Jennifer realized the seriousness of what was about to happen to her.

The two adults and their captive took position next to the principal. The cop grabbed Jennifer's arm firmly to keep her standing in position. Counselor Tolkiv picked up the leather switch and tapped it in her hand as the principal gave a rather long speech about the need to respect rules. Finally he concluded, pointing to the scared naked girl standing next to him.

"Among us is a person who thinks rules do not apply to her. I presume the fact she is an American makes her think she is special in some way, but she shall learn that in this school, a student is a student, and she shall be treated as such. She shall learn the rules apply to all of you. What we have is an act of insurrection, and its perpetrator shall be punished. She shall receive the maximum school punishment of 25 vigorous strokes across the naked buttocks with a standard leather switch."

The cop removed Jennifer's handcuffs and ordered her to lie across the chair. Her eyes wide with terror, Jennifer complied, realizing she only could make her situation worse if she continued to resist. Counselor Tolkiv took a pair of small leather straps that looked like thick watchbands from her pocket. She wrapped a strap around each of Jennifer's wrists and secured the girl's wrists to chair-legs. Jennifer's hands were immobilized, but, because this was not a judicial punishment, her legs were not tied down.

The counselor tapped Jennifer's bottom with the switch and struck her hard across both bottom-cheeks. As the stroke seared into her exposed flesh, the student screamed from the pain and the pure terror of what she was enduring. She had not yet learned that in Upper Danubia a person being punished normally tries to stay quiet as long as possible. Jennifer's high-pitched scream died down into a series of sobs as her counselor tapped her bottom and struck again. Once again Jennifer screamed as her legs kicked up and down from the sharp pain of the two strokes. The teacher did not wait, but tapped her bottom and struck hard a third time.

Counselor Tolkiv proceeded much more quickly than would have a police officer. This was a school punishment, not a judicial punishment. She struck, waited for Jennifer's scream to die down, tapped her bottom with the switch, and struck again. Each stroke was accompanied by a very loud shrill scream, followed by a lot of vigorous crying and fluttering of her lower legs.

Jennifer was noisy throughout her punishment, as her Danubian classmates watched the affair with fascination. She had been something of a small celebrity among her peers because of her nationality and her defiant attitude about school rules. The Danubian teenagers had known that Jennifer was setting herself up to be disciplined. Several of them tried to warn her, struggling through the language barrier to get the American to realize that, if she pushed too far, she could expect to be switched. Jennifer rudely rebuffed the classmates who tried to caution her, so they simply waited to see how long it would take for her behavior to catch up with her.

The teacher struck the American harshly, but at the same time punished her fairly quickly and methodically. She felt somewhat sorry for the girl, knowing that what was happening was a horrible shock to her. Counselor Tolkiv did not enjoy what she was doing, but felt the switching was necessary to prevent the American from becoming a source of further disruption at the school.

Fifteen minutes and 25 strokes later, the punishment was finished. Jennifer's counselor bent down to unbuckle the straps immobilizing the girl's hands. Once her hands were free, Jennifer covered her face and continued sobbing. The American was in a lot of pain and totally humiliated.

Counselor Tolkiv grabbed Jennifer's wrist and pulled her up off the chair. She placed her hands on the sobbing girl's shoulders to position her with her backside facing the audience. Her bottom was marked with 25 red lines and was beginning to swell. For a student her punishment had been harsh, however, any convicted Danubian criminal would have been glad to change places with her.

As the American stood with her face buried in her hands, her counselor moved in front of her to admonish her. "Jennifer, you must stop crying. You are dishonoring yourself by making such a scandal over a simple switching. Furthermore, we cannot release you until you are silent."

With a great effort Jennifer managed to stop crying after a few minutes. The school principal declared the punishment over and ordered the students to return to their classes. Jennifer had to remain standing with her backside facing her classmates until the last of them was out of the room. The students filed out of the bleachers row by row, walking past Jennifer's exposed backside as they proceeded towards the door to the main hallway. All of Jennifer's classmates, hundreds of them, got a good look at her punished bottom as they slowly filed past her.

Counselor Tolkiv then took her teary student to the school infirmary where there was a bed she could lie down on to recover.

"Jennifer, if you need to cry, now is the time to do so. You may stay here as long as you wish, but once you recover enough to put on your uniform, I expect you to come to my office."

She left Jennifer's school uniform on a chair next to the bed, and closed the door to the small room. Jennifer cried for an hour, but finally got dressed and reluctantly went to the woman's office. The American endured a rather long lecture about responsibility and needing to set an example for proper behavior. The teacher finally released the girl for the day, but made it very clear to Jennifer that she expected her back in class the next day, on time, ready to study, and with her uniform presentable.

That night Jennifer sullenly returned to her host family, her bottom still quite sore from the welts. The two parents were incensed. They pulled a hard wooden chair out of the kitchen and ordered the American to sit down in the living room. Jennifer winced as the uncompromising wood from the chair pressed into her tender backside. For the next hour her host parents, using terrible heavily-accented English, lectured their guest about personal responsibility and the need to safeguard her honor as Jennifer shifted in her uncomfortable seat and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Once the lecture was finished and Jennifer was allowed to go to her room, she finally had time to give her situation some thought, without having any Danubians yelling at her. At first she wanted to call her parents in the US and have them extricate her from her year abroad. But as she picked up the phone, she reconsidered. How on earth could she explain this to them?

Jennifer then realized she was mostly to blame for her own situation. She had chosen to come here as an exchange student. She had chosen to ignore Counselor Tolkiv and the school rules. She had no one but herself to blame for not bothering to do any research before signing the papers that finalized her exchange student arrangements. She now was stuck here in Danube City, facing the awful realization she had to make the best out of her life in this restricted country.

Returning to school the next day was one of the hardest things Jennifer ever did in her life. At first she was mortified at the thought of having been switched in the nude in front of nearly 400 classmates. After a lot of nagging and threats from her host parents, she went to school almost in tears, expecting to be ridiculed by her peers.

Jennifer quickly found out ridicule was not how Danubian teenagers usually treated a fellow student who had been punished. Such punishments were common enough in Upper Danubia and were the logical outcome of rebellious behavior in school. Instead, Jennifer's classmates somewhat sympathized with the American. Several girls calmly sat down with the exchange student and explained why she had been switched. Anyia reminded her they had tried to warn her and then added a detail that made Jennifer cringe.

"Counselor Tolkiv switched you because she had to. I don't think you realize that cop was going to arrest you for lying to him, because in our country that's a crime. They would have put you on trial and made you wear a criminal's collar for a year for telling him you had your school's permission to be out of class, and then refusing to say what school you came from. Counselor Tolkiv got you out of it; she jeopardized her own honor to prevent you from being arrested. You need to be grateful to her."

That afternoon Jennifer, nervously twisting her hands in front of her, apologized to her counselor and thanked her for preventing her from being arrested. The teacher responded:

"Jennifer, you shall thank me by applying yourself in your studies. If I see you improving in your ability to study and to speak our language, then you shall have shown me you are truly grateful. As for yesterday's punishment, the unpleasantness between us has passed, and I consider the matter ended."

Jennifer sadly nodded. "I'll try, Counselor Tolkiv."

Jennifer then went to the school library, where Anyia and her other friends were sitting and reviewing textbooks for an upcoming test. Jennifer pulled some books out of her backpack and surprised them by asking in her terrible Danubian:

"I'm a bit behind, I guess, with the classes. Could you help me get caught up?"

The other girls nodded and with that Jennifer became part of their study group.

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Jennifer spent much of the rest of her year in Upper Danubia hanging out with Anyia. The two girls quickly became close because of their very similar personalities. Anyia was a bit rebellious herself, but she knew where the limits were and how to avoid crossing them. That information was something that Jennifer very much needed to avoid going nuts in her new host country. Over time Jennifer began going over to Dukov's house, but it would be several weeks before she met Kim, given Kim's hectic schedule and late night music sessions.

One Sunday afternoon Jennifer went over to Vladim Dukov's house when Kim happened to be there. It was a bit of a shock seeing a fellow-American naked and wearing a metal collar, but at the same time seeing an American, any American, was a real treat for the high school student. Jennifer and Kim quickly struck up a conversation, both relishing the opportunity to speak in English. Kim told Jennifer her story and how she had been sentenced the previous year for marijuana possession. Jennifer was shocked.

"So�you've been like this for more than a year? For smoking a joint? I mean�they never let you wear any clothes�at all?"

Kim smiled and shook her head. "No clothes. They're very strict about that. I mean, I go to work everyday, I've been on TV, I've stood singing outdoors in front of thousands of fans, always like I am now. It's part of my sentence, but it's not so bad. After a while you kind of enjoy it, at least when the weather's warm."

The sight of Kimberly Lee made Jennifer able to put her own situation into perspective. It was obvious that what had happened to her at school was nothing in comparison with what had happened to Kim.

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Kim's 20th birthday passed in celebration, first at her job at the music store, then with the Dukovs, and finally at the Socrates Club. Sergekt was very affectionate and courteous to Kim, but at the same time she could tell he was very nervous. Finally, when the night was over and they left to return to Dukov's house, she found out why. Instead of simply leaving her at the door, he asked to come in and talk to her in Dukov's living room. Once inside he opened up a small cloth bag he had carried with him and pulled out a small carved wooden box. He swallowed and handed it to Kim. He then stood silent, according to Danubian protocol.

A bit bewildered, Kim opened the box. There were three items inside, a gold ring, a silver necklace with a pendant showing two griffins standing side-by-side, and a silver hairpiece with gold in-lays. Sergekt's birthday present was an engagement box.

Kim's heart raced. She knew there had to be protocol for accepting these items, but she was not sure what it was. She took a deep breath.

"How�do we do this? I mean, what do people usually do in this country�when they get engaged?"

"You hand me the items, one at a time, starting with the hair-piece, then the necklace, finally the ring. You tell me you accept each one and I will put it on you."

Kim picked up the hairpiece and handed it to Sergekt.

"Sergekt, I accept this hairpiece with all my love."

Sergekt took the hairpiece and gently pushed it into Kim's hair.

"Sergekt, I accept this necklace with all my love."

Sergekt wrapped the necklace around Kim's neck and clipped the clasp shut.

"Sergekt, I accept this ring, with all my love."

Sergekt put the ring on Kim's finger. It fit perfectly, leaving Kim wondering how Sergekt knew her ring-size.

Sergekt then knelt, kissed Kim's right hand and then her left. He stood up, took both of her hands in his own, and looked into her eyes.

"You are the love of my present, and the wife of my future. You have my heart and in your hands you hold my happiness."

For a long time Kim and Sergekt hugged each other in the silent living room of Dukov's house. So it was done, now it was official. Kim was Sergekt's fianc�.

It was painful, but finally Sergekt had to leave to go home. Kim felt bad for him because already it was well past mid-night and her partner had to be up early the next morning for classes. She watched Sergekt's bare figure as he quickly walked up the chilly street to the trolley stop. Kim was immensely happy, but also rather scared. She had thought about marrying Sergekt, but now to be formally engaged to him made her realize how seriously she had to take her life in Danube City. So this was it. There really would be no going back to the US, except perhaps to visit. Kimberly Annette Lee would give up her US passport and take a Danubian one, and return to her parents' house and her hometown as a foreigner. She was destined to finish her life in Upper Danubia, married to Sergekt Dolkiv.

The following morning Kim proudly wore her engagement items to the breakfast table and excitedly told the Dukovs about Sergekt's marriage proposal.

Kim�s Spokesman had known about Sergekt's plans to marry her. Sergekt had asked his permission to propose, which he relayed to her parents in the US. It took some arguing and convincing, but finally the Lees reluctantly agreed to allow the proposal to go ahead. The decision was difficult for Kim's parents, because finally they had to formally accept the fact their daughter was not coming home at the end of her sentence. Following the conversation with her parents, Dukov went to the police warehouse and dug into his client's confiscated backpack to find a couple of rings to lend to her boyfriend to measure for a ring-size.

Dukov told his client that Sergekt's proposal was timed to allow him to marry her sometime shortly after the end of their sentences in July. He had followed Danubian protocol, first by dating Kim a year before proposing, then waiting another year before getting married. It was normal for Danubians to get married about two years after they first started dating. It was a common-sense approach, which allowed a couple to gradually build up a relationship over a two-year period before fully committing to each other.

In spite of her excitement over being engaged, there was one huge disappointment. Unfortunately for Kim, the prohibition against criminals wearing jewelry applied to her engagement items. She could not wear them on the street or at work. However, at any family, social or religious function, she would be expected to wear the hairpiece, necklace, and ring to show her commitment to Sergekt. She wondered about the contradiction, but this was Upper Danubia after all, with its strange rules and customs.

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Whenever Kim turned on the radio station, she had to deal with the weird feeling of listening to herself, along with Eloisa and the back-up singers, featured in the collection of music currently popular. The group's song "The Wall that Divides my Soul" was well received throughout Upper Danubia, and had been featured on the radio since the beginning of the summer. Several other songs from the group received frequent play, including the still somewhat popular "Nemat mi biciklet", the title of which, when translated to English, loosely meant "The loss of my bicycle has left an emptiness in my life".

During October, Eloisa was more upbeat than Kim had ever seen her. Increasingly she was able to allow physical contact with other people to become part of her life. She had broken the barrier of being able to hold Dima's hand earlier in the year, but now she was able to hug both him and some of her closest friends. During conversations, if she wanted to make a point, she could lightly touch a friend's hand or shoulder. Eloisa and Dima knew that sex still was way beyond her psychological capabilities, but slowly she was moving in that direction. As the fall progressed and Danube City was pelted with cold rain, the change became evident in the music Eloisa was choosing for her band's rehearsals.

Eloisa increasingly was willing to experiment with the group's music. When Sergekt and three other musicians in the group proposed trying out more modern instruments such as electric guitars and synthesizers, they received the lead singer�s full blessing. "I'm willing to try anything, as long as you know how to play it and can make it work with what we have already. The only thing I ask is that you have a clear idea of how you would want to use any new instrument, and that you practice on your own before you bring it here."

Eloisa proposed something truly visionary for her group, something that completely surprised the others. She decided to re-record "The wall that divides my soul" in English. Eloisa was smart enough to realize the group had to have at least some of its music sung in English if they were to have any hope of breaking into the popular music scene outside Upper Danubia. That meant Kim would become the group's lead singer for a portion of the group's music and Eloisa would sing with the back-up singers.

Kim was dumbfounded by Eloisa's willingness to drop into the background. However, Eloisa's proposal reflected her mentality and her desire to place the needs of the group's music in front of her own notoriety. Eloisa wanted her music to succeed, period. If that meant putting someone else instead of herself at the lead microphone, so be it. As she explained it to Kim, "It's not just about the 15 of us on stage. I have to think about everyone who ever gave us a song to sing, and everyone who gave us themes speaking at the Club. This is about all of us."

Reluctantly Kim translated several songs based on themes she had brought to the Socrates Club back to English. To help Kim, Eloisa ordered her musicians to record instrumental versions of the group's music. Kim spent hours in the middle of the night quietly singing to herself, trying to see how different combinations of words worked with the group's music. By the middle of October she felt ready to present the English lyrics of four songs, "My bicycle", "The wall that divides my soul", "A question I cannot answer", and "That's all I'll ever be".

The first evening the group had to rehearse the English version of the four songs, Kim stood at the microphone alone, feeling horribly guilty. Before she cued the musicians to start playing, she looked over her shoulder at Eloisa, who was quietly waiting with the other back-up singers. Finally Kim sighed, tapped her microphone, and signaled the musicians to start playing.

Once she started singing Kim's closed her eyes and shut out everything other than her task at the moment. Eloisa, on the other hand, was very attentive to what was going on around her. Her sharp ears listened for anything that needed improvement, the tone of a singer's voice, the timing of an instrument, a misplaced note. After the first session Kim realized how much Eloisa remained in charge when she went over a long list of changes she wanted from her musicians and singers. Maybe Eloisa did not know English, but she did know how the sounds coming from Kim's mouth should interact with the sounds coming from the rest of the band. Eloisa ordered her group to re-sing the music over and over until they got it right. Finally, one by one, the group mastered the four songs in English to Eloisa's satisfaction and recorded them.

Eloisa and Kim presented the English recordings to the music store manager to review. He was extremely impressed and could suggest no changes. Later, when Kim was alone with her boss, she expressed her feelings of guilt by displacing Eloisa as the lead singer.

"Kimberly, let me explain something about Eloisa. You did not displace her as lead singer. She knows what she's doing. She made you record these songs in English because she had to. The English versions are what will be played on radio stations in the EU. However, people will listen to you, and they'll want to hear more of your group's songs. They'll buy the CD. Then�they'll hear Eloisa's singing. That's the real music. They'll hear the real power of her voice, and our language, in your group's songs."

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Several music companies showed increasing interest in the group's music, especially now that the group had four songs recorded in English. Eloisa had become the most popular singer in Upper Danubia by that time, to the point there were real prospects of marketing the group's music outside of the country. However, there were a couple of hurdles the group had to get past before they truly could go international. One problem was their forced nudity. Obviously a group of naked singers could not produce videos for markets such as the United States and expect to be taken seriously or played on commercial television. The other problem was the simple fact the group did not even have a name.

Kim addressed the name problem first. She thought long and hard for a name that would have some meaning for the lives of the band's 15 members. Finally she settled on "Socrates' Mistresses". She ran her suggestion past the entire group, but there were no objections. Everyone simply looked at her quietly with trusting expressions, assuming that Kim, because she was from the US, knew everything there was to know about the music business.

Once the group officially had a name, events unfolded very quickly for the members of "Socrates' Mistresses". There were several televised concerts during the end of October. The group's shows began selling out, requiring them to schedule more performances. The group's reputation began to extend beyond Upper Danubia's borders, as foreign fans and tourists started crossing the border to listen to the group in Danube City's concert halls. At the end of the concerts the crowds started chanting:

"DOC-DOC ELOISA!...DOC-DOC ELOISA!...DOC-DOC ELOISA!"

Finally, at the beginning of November, an international recording company approached the group with a serious and attractive offer about the possibility of an international concert and shooting some videos. The offer presented the band's 15 members with a huge dilemma. The restrictions of their sentences remained in effect until the following July: the prohibition against travel and the prohibition against clothing. Since fans could come to Danube City, the travel restriction was not as big a problem as was the group's forced nudity. Obviously any video taken of the band would be unacceptable in most foreign markets if the band members could not perform dressed.

Spokesman Dukov, Spokesman Havlakt, and the owner of Kim's music store had to formally petition the Danubian Supreme Court to request a temporary lifting of the clothing restriction to allow the band to wear clothes during their video shoots. The court was reluctant to grant the request for a very legitimate reason; if this request were granted it would be unfair to other criminals who continued to make personal sacrifices because of the restrictions of their sentences. In the end however, the judicial panel decided to grant the request, since it was important for the band's future to shoot a video acceptable to markets outside Upper Danubia. The ruling stipulated, however, that the band could only put on their clothing during the actual videotaping. At all other times they had to remain naked.

The outfits the band would wear were the clothes they would formally receive in court during their de-collaring ceremony. That meant formal traditional dresses for the women and traditional tunics for the men. The band and the recording company had to present a formal schedule of video shoots to assure the judges the members would be dressed as little as possible.

With that Kim was pushed into the forefront of "Socrates' Mistresses". She became the band's international face, the one member who could bridge the language barrier between the other members and the outside world. She sat nervously negotiating contracts, speaking in English and translating for Eloisa and the owner of the music store. She sat as the go-between for the concert hall owners in Danube City as the recording company worked out the final details of concert locations, lighting, acoustics and other endless details needed to make sure the live concert video-shoots went according to plan. Kim had to become forceful and knowledgeable, and overcome some very serious obstacles. Vladim Dukov or the music store owner always accompanied her, but Kim was under intense pressure because she was the only person legally capable of speaking on behalf of the other members of the band. Her biggest challenge was to force everyone to take her seriously, given that she was only 20 and often she was the only naked person in a room full of older people in business attire. In the end the recording company settled on two live concerts that would be filmed in front of international audiences, and the taping of eight studio performances, four of them in English. The videos would be used to promote two CD's containing a total of 28 songs, which already had been recorded during previous studio sessions.

The studio video shoots came first. Throughout November the band spent their evenings practicing against backdrops and props brought in by the recording company. Once the issues of choreography, lighting, and acoustics were settled the band shot the footage for the eight videos during the first three weeks of December. For the first time in a year and a half Kim put on a dress as she sang in front of the cameras. The soft fabric of the long dress felt truly elegant on Kim's body, and she loved the way the dresses looked on her four female companions. Unfortunately, the women's dark metal collars took away some of the elegance from the dresses, but there was nothing anyone could do about that. She thought the guys looked a bit silly in their tunics. However, the main focus of the video would be on the group's singers, not the musicians, so the tunics really did not matter.

The final part of the video shoot project came with the filming of two live concerts in December, one on Christmas Eve and the other on New Year's Eve. Leading up to the concerts Kim and Eloisa were interviewed by several European news organizations about the band's history and the road to their popularity in Upper Danubia. The group's status as convicted criminals and conditions of the members' sentences received much attention and comment. One interviewer asked Kim if she had any thoughts about large numbers of foreign fans coming to Danube City to see the group perform live. Kim did have a significant comment and advice for the group's fans.

"I ask everyone who wants to come see us to remember something extremely important. The Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia is not Amsterdam. Drugs here are VERY illegal. I learned that the hard way. Please...please don't bring anything illegal across the border. I want everyone to enjoy themselves, and I don't want anyone's trip to Danube City to end the way mine did." Kim tapped her collar to emphasize her last final comment.

At the beginning of January the production company packed up its supplies and its workers returned west. The project was a huge success. The two concerts received very positive reviews in the EU press. The live concert footage, combined with the studio footage, gave the European production-company what it needed to make a series of videos to promote "Socrates' Mistresses". The bands' members folded their clothes and handed them back to their Spokesman. They wouldn't see the clothing again until the end of their sentences in July.

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The members of Socrates' Mistresses had spent a grueling two months as the year drew to a close. Not only did the band members have to spend their evenings occupied with the music video shoots, but they also had to fulfill their daily responsibilities to their employers and universities. The members' first obligation was to their jobs, since it was by working regular jobs that the criminals were complying with the employment requirements of their sentences. The music was of only secondary priority as far as the courts were concerned. On top of everything else were studies. All of the male members of the band were attending university classes. Sergekt had been the last one to enter classes, simply because he had not been able to decide on a career. Now, he too, had a full load of university classes, as well as a part time job and his commitment to Eloisa's band.

Kim, in spite of her overwhelming responsibilities of the moment, began to think about her own future in Upper Danubia. Perhaps her work with "Socrates' Mistresses" would last indefinitely, perhaps it wouldn't. She knew she had to study something else, have a back-up profession in case the musical one did not work out. It was Vladim Dukov who suggested a career for her, one that had not occurred to his client. At the end of December, just before the band's Christmas concert, Vladim asked Kim to come into his office and close the door. He questioned her at length about her plans and what she might do once she married Sergekt. Right away Kim realized that even if she had no clue of what she might do, her Spokesman did.

"Kimberly, we need to start thinking about our future, and this time I am not referring to the future of only you or myself. I am referring to the future of the Duchy. I believe you will perform a more significant role in the Duchy's future than you might realize."

Kim sat silent, wondering where her Spokesman was going with this. Dukov continued:

"Kimberly, have you contemplated attending the university?"

"Uh...no, Spokesman Dukov, I really haven't. My grades from high school were so bad I can't get in anywhere in the US. I figured I'd have the same problem here."

"You figured wrong, Kimberly. There are no impediments to prevent you from attending university classes here. I believe you must consider enrolling at the university and studying as quickly as possible, starting in January."

"But...what on earth could I study? I mean, what am I gonna do here if it's not staying with the music store or singing?"

"I have given that matter consideration, and believe I know what you should do, Kimberly. You will understand I am the only Spokesman in the entire country who speaks English. I believe we must have another, that is, another Spokesperson who speaks English and can properly represent foreigners unfortunate enough to offend our laws. I believe that after several years of training, you can become that person, the Spokeswoman who can fulfill our country's needs."

Kim's heart stopped. "Me? You want me to...to...become a Spokeswoman?"

"That is correct, Kimberly. I want you to consider that as a path in your life. You can determine if such a destiny is fitting as you study and work in my office as my apprentice. If you decide such is your destiny, you could speak as an apprentice on behalf of criminals within two years. I ask you to consider this path in life for a reason. The days of our country's isolation are ending. More and more tourists will be coming to visit the Duchy, and like you, some of them will fail to respect our laws. We will be obligated to convict and punish more foreigners; people who will need a compassionate and competent official to speak in court on their behalf. You will be able to speak from the heart, as a foreigner who was herself convicted and punished. Your clients will trust and respect you, as a person who suffered what they must suffer."

"But...how could I do that? I'd have to study law and all kinds of hard things. I mean...I'm not the world's greatest student."

"And you assume I would not make myself available to assist you?"

"But you think I could really do it, I mean, be a Spokeswoman?"

"I know that fact with certainty, Kimberly. The path of your life is what I envisioned the night of the equinox. I was shocked at first, but as I reflected on what I envisioned, the more it made sense to me. I believe it is your destiny to speak in our courts, just as it has been mine to speak in our courts."

Kim paused, suddenly remembering her own vision of Vladim Dukov during the Day of the Dead march, the one of him speaking to thousands of chanting supporters. She wondered if Dukov's career as a Spokesman was about to draw to a close, if life had much greater things in store for him. If that were true, then Kim felt obligated to help him as much as she could. She would help him by replacing him, by allowing him to leave his position with the security of knowing a competent person would take his place and fulfill his current responsibilities towards his clients.

"I'll do what I can, Spokesman Dukov. I'll study and try to help you. You've done a lot for me and I do owe you."

With that Tatiana came in with a thick university packet. It turned out Kim was not the only person in the office who was destined to be a Spokesperson. Tatiana also was beginning her studies to become as Spokeswoman, with the goal of eventually returning to her home province and working in the provincial capitol. With that Kim realized she not only had a mentor, but she also would have a study partner. There was no reason, none whatsoever, why she could not eventually fulfill Dukov's responsibilities and become a Danubian Spokeswoman for the Criminal.