**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 21 � The Danubian Spring**

�Socrates' Mistresses� returned to the national stage on May 1, once again performing for the Danubian public. Like the year before, the group performed live in Danube City's Central Plaza as part of the May Day Celebrations. Once again the deputies and staff-members of the National Parliament lined up on the rooftop and balconies of the old building to take advantage of their privileged viewing opportunities.

However, the crowd was much larger during the band's second May Day performance and included large numbers of foreign fans. It was obvious that any other group performing that day simply was a warm-up for Danube City's favorite lead singer, so the other Danubian modern musical groups stepped aside for ones that specialized in traditional folkloric music.

�Socrates Mistresses� put out a grueling performance of three full hours, as the crowd shouted �DOC-DOC ELOISA� DOC-DOC ELOISA� DOC-DOC ELOISA�� between songs. Eloisa was a bit taken aback by her popularity and became visibly more nervous as the concert wore on. She looked over her shoulder at her back-up singers several times with a frightened expression. Finally, the lead singer signaled Kim to join her at the main microphone for a series of duets. Eloisa needed Kim's reassuring presence at her side, as she finally comprehended the awesome success the band was becoming. With Kim present, the magic returned to Eloisa's voice. It was at that moment Kim realized how much Eloisa truly needed her.

The group performed again the second week in May, to another outdoor concert almost as large as the May Day crowd. This time there were even more foreign fans, some of whom were fascinated at the thought their favorite group lived and performed in the nude. There were numerous television interviews following the second concert, including in-depth interviews with Kim in English from British and German television companies.

The following week a major US entertainment magazine picked up on Kim's story and did a detailed feature on her participation in the Danubian music scene. Criminal # 98945 posed for several pictures, most of which were from the chest up. However, she also posed for a full-body shot, in which she turned sideways and crossed her legs to comply with US censorship rules. The magazine wanted its readers to know that, yes indeed, Kimberly Lee had not worn any clothing for nearly two years as a condition of her sentence.

Kim, for the first time, discussed her views on drugs with the US press. She described her trial and sentence, trying to emphasize that she felt what had happened to her ultimately was extremely fortunate. She discussed the experiences that led to the writing of �A question I cannot answer�, the immensely sad retelling of her conversation with her mother as they discussed Susan's death in Prague and her own narrow escape from a similar fate. She went on to describe the origins of a second song she had largely written herself, titled �Marooned�. The second song focused on Kim's decision the year before to stay in Upper Danubia rather than return to the US and risk being unemployed and getting back on drugs.

There were further questions about how Kim became a friend of the Danubian singers, and the path that led her from participation as a back-up singer to singing partner to co-leader of the band. She discussed her plans for the future: marriage and a career as a Danubian Spokeswoman for the Criminal. The interviewers clearly were fascinated with the story as the interview went much longer and in much greater detail than they previously had envisioned.

The magazine feature about �Socrates� Mistresses� was an important step in the group's rise to popularity in the US market. The piece became much more important for the magazine's June 1 issue than the editors originally had planned. Apart from Kimberly Lee's full-body sideways portrait, the magazine also included numerous facial shots and a couple photos of Kim and Eloisa singing together, cut off just below their shoulders. The editor decided to include a second full-body shot of the two lead singers in concert, taken from behind and showing the large crowd of fans in the background. The editor defended the shot by saying: �This is their reality, and you can't censor the truth.�

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Kim did not return to work for Victor Dukov during the final spring of her sentence. She regretted not having the opportunity to ride her bicycle around Danube City and get paid for it, but she needed the three days per week to finish her university classes and attend to the growing needs of Eloisa's band.

When Kim visited Victor's office to justify not returning to work for him, she had a bit of a surprise when she saw his office. Victor clearly was about to re-direct the focus of his business, because there were a large number of fax machine promotional pamphlets on his desk. Victor explained that the Danubian Parliament was debating legislation to allow some business and legal documents to be faxed instead of forcing them to be delivered in person. The law was one of many measures Upper Danubia had to implement to get ready to join the European Community and it was getting very little attention from the public. Victor, however, foresaw the arrival of fax machines eventually would reduce Danube City's need for bicycle couriers and potentially ruin his business if he could not adapt. He was getting ready for the change by importing fax machines from abroad. As soon as the legislation passed, Victor would open a fax machine store and over time curtail his bicycle business as more local businesses started using faxes. Already he was preparing to send two of his couriers abroad to receive training for servicing and repairing fax machines. As time went on and the need for bicycle couriers slowly diminished, one by one he would send his other employees abroad for training.

�For a while I will offer both fax machines and courier services, but the change is coming.� Victor was reflective, but a bit sad about the impending transition in his business. �The courier services in our country go back many years, but I'm afraid that's one of the things we'll have to give up to modernize.�

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In the late spring Mrs. Dolkiv finally accepted the American �Maragana Girl� as Sergekt's future wife. Kim noted the difference as her fiancee's mother began treating her with warmth and kindness, as opposed to a distant cold tolerance. The change began very slowly in the fall, right after the forest fires were put out, but it was not until after the second Easter that Kim's future mother-in-law became truly nice as opposed to just courteous.

Although she did everything she could to keep her doubts about Criminal # 98945 to herself, secretly Mrs. Dolkiv had hoped at some point her son would break up with that Asian drug-addict. However, the American had proved herself a worthy woman time and time again, to the point it was obvious Sergekt could not find a better partner. Sergekt would marry the "Maragana Girl", study his hydrology, and live the path the Ancients had laid out for him. His mother knew that he was happy, happier than he had been at any time since his father had died, which was what mattered.

Mrs. Dolkiv finally accepted it was time to put her prejudices aside and treat her future daughter-in-law properly. She and Sergekt's aunt began taking up some of Kim's precious spare time by inviting her to shop and cook, taking her to the nearby temple, and teaching her some protocol the Dukovs had overlooked. Kim was not particularly thrilled about doing any of those activities, but she understood it was necessary to accept the invitations offered by her future in-laws. Kim was happy enough to have finally ingratiated herself that she took the time needed to build up the relationship, one that would be crucial for a peaceful marriage in the future.

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Kim and her friends spent the final two months of their sentences in very upbeat moods. The stress of university classes passed, their bodies finally could enjoy the warm late spring weather, and the impending promise of freedom beckoned. Kim marveled at the change in the entire group, a change that was real, and reflected, among other things, in the music Eloisa was choosing for her group's rehearsals and recordings.

The evenings at the Socrates Club were full of happy discussions about plans and hopes for the future. Psychologically the group already was making the transition to becoming free citizens, as they discussed clothes they wanted to buy and places outside the Danube City collar zone they wanted to visit. Many of the group's members planned to travel to provincial cites to visit grandparents and other relatives the week after their release, others simply wanted to relax at the campgrounds and beaches of the Rika Chorna Reservoir.

There were plenty of wedding plans for that summer. Most of the group's members wanted to get married. There were 5 couples within the group itself, including Kim and Eloisa and their partners, as well as 12 other members who were engaged to people who had not been part of the original 28 students convicted after the riot. The desire among all of the couples was to have a normal settled life as quickly as possible, even though Kim doubted the maturity of some of Sergekt's friends. Now was a time for dreaming, but reality would set in once the group's collars were off.

Kim and Sergekt were among the couples who planned to get married later in the year. Considering the hectic summer that lay ahead, the couple decided the best time to get married would be in the fall, possibly on October 18th, Kim's 21st birthday. Kim felt that marrying Sergekt would be the perfect 21st birthday present for her.

When Kim discussed her possible wedding plans with Vladim Dukov, he made it very clear that he expected her to stay at his house until she was properly married. Dukov's statement came as no surprise to Kim, since she knew that �living together� was unheard of in the socially conservative Duchy. An unmarried person always lived with a relative. In the rare cases when no relative was available, as was the case for Malka Chorno, then an unmarried person almost always lived in the household of an older person or family.

Dukov made it clear to Kim that as long as she remained in his house, the rules, protocol, and expectations of proper behavior would remain in effect. Her status in the household would not change at all, in spite of her change from convicted criminal to free US citizen with a transition visa. The Dukovs never treated Kim any differently than they would treat any other single young woman who was a member of their household.

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Over the winter the US exchange student Jennifer Thompson took her studying of the Danubian language more seriously, mostly so she could communicate with her classmates and join them in what social activities were available to high school students. She joined the girls' soccer team and did very well. She began swimming and exercising more. By the end of the school year she was in great physical shape and actually was enjoying her time in the Duchy. Most importantly, Anyia taught her friend that it was possible to be rebellious in Upper Danubia, just not in the way Jennifer had envisioned.

There was one significant act of rebellion open to the teenagers. During the spring both of them started dating convicted criminals. The two high-school girls took delight in parading their naked boyfriends around Danube City. Jennifer distressed her parents by having Anyia take several photographs of her dressed in her school uniform and standing arm-in-arm with her naked boyfriend. She delighted in sending them home to her father. That'll stress-out my dear old Dad, thought Jennifer to herself, knowing that his daughter has a nude boyfriend in Danube City.

Spokesman Dukov was not thrilled at all with his daughter's choice of a boyfriend, because the guy was convicted for a perfectly legitimate crime. He had gotten drunk and participated in a football-riot while studying abroad in Germany. He was videotaped participating in several acts of vandalism including helping his German friends overturn and burn some cars. On top of that, he threw several bottles at the German police and injured a bystander when a bottle missed its intended target. Germany quickly expelled him back to Upper Danubia, where he faced a government very angry at the negative publicity he had brought to the Duchy. Because his crimes appeared in the German press with some comments about �uncouth easterners�, he was given a rather harsh 10-year sentence for the crimes of assault, insurrection, and �dishonoring the Duchy� once he returned home.

Dukov did not treat his daughter's boyfriend with the same warmth and trust with which he treated Sergekt. The young man's crimes had not been �crimes of honor�; quite the opposite, the he had dishonored himself and Upper Danubia with his loutish, drunken behavior. Still, Dukov felt he could not openly reject Anyia's boyfriend unless he did something specific to offend the Spokesman. Dukov himself had served a sentence and spent his life representing people like his daughter's boyfriend in court, so he had to show a minimal amount of respect to the young man kneeling at his feet. That respect was minimal, however. Dukov made it very clear to his daughter's boyfriend that he was to treat the Spokesman and his wife with the proper protocol due to public officials at all times.

Jennifer's boyfriend was a straight-forward criminal, convicted of burglarizing several warehouses and trying to sell stolen merchandise. He was serving an eight-year sentence and would not have his collar off until he was 26. The relationship became rather interesting over time, because after several weeks of going out she began disciplining him. Because Jennifer was free and her boyfriend was a criminal, the American student had a superior legal status and thus could tell him what to do. The young burglar was grateful enough to have a girlfriend, especially an attractive red-headed American, so he was willing to put up with having to submit to her.

The discipline started with an occasional sharp slap to the bottom if Jennifer's boyfriend did not move fast enough or do something the American had told him to do. After a few weeks, every time Jennifer told the young criminal to do something, the order always was accompanied with a sharp slap to the bottom. Then it became two slaps to the bottom. Always. Then, shortly before Easter, Jennifer's boyfriend accidentally bumped into her back-pack and crushed a pair of sunglasses as they were entering Dukov's house with Anyia.

The house was empty, so the teenagers were free to do what they wanted. Jennifer sat on the sofa and ordered her boyfriend to lie across her lap, right in front of Anyia. The silent, embarrassed pleading in the criminal's eyes only stiffened Jennifer's resolve.

�I told you to get over my lap! Now do it!�

Once the young man was properly positioned, Jennifer began spanking him while Anyia watched. The punishment was not nearly as painful as the switchings the young man was enduring as part of his sentence, but was infinitely more embarrassing. The slaps continued for a very long time, as the criminal's bottom changed color from light pink to deep pink.

Anyia ran upstairs and grabbed a camera. To the young man's horror she began taking pictures of the spanking. When he turned his head away from the photographer, both girls sharply admonished him to keep his face visible to the camera. Once again, the girls' photo session proved far more embarrassing then the video-tapings made of the criminal's judicial switchings. To be forced across his girlfriend's lap, with another friend taking pictures�.

Finally Jennifer finished the spanking, mostly because her hand became sore and her arm was too tired to continue. The next time, I'll see if I can find a paddle or belt, Jennifer thought to herself. Still, the girls were not finished with the punishment; they wanted to do something more. Anyia came up with the idea of making the young criminal kneel in the corner, with his hands behind his head. Once he was in position, there were several more pictures. The finishing touch came when Jennifer decided to write something on her boyfriend's back. Anyia got a black magic marker and, in careful block letters, wrote in Danubian: �I stupidly broke my girlfriend's glasses and she had to punish me.�

Right after that the three went back outside and got on a trolley and go downtown. Jennifer and Anyia thoroughly enjoyed the young man's utter humiliation as bystanders stared at his pink bottom and the message on his back.

The experience changed Jennifer and made her realize she actually could enjoy her time in Upper Danubia. Yes, it was true there were no raves, drugs, tattoos, nor any other �fun� things to do in Upper Danubia, but then, where else could you spank a naked boyfriend and then make him walk around in public with a pink bottom and a punishment message written on his back?

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During the final months of their sentences Kim and Eliosa had very little time to daydream about what life would be like without their collars. Their recording company approached them with plans for a late summer tour through Europe, a series of live performances in several major cities throughout the EU. There were plans to have the group record some more music in Germany after July 2 and another possible movie deal. The two lead singers were forced to rehearse hard with the female vocalists from the band, night after night, as they tried out new music. They recorded song after song with the musicians, desperate to produce what they could while the group's music was still rising in popularity.

There were rumors the soundtrack for the Hollywood movie about the Roman invasion of Gaul would be nominated for several prizes, including best musical score. The haunting music from �Socrates' Mistresses� provided a perfect backdrop for a tragic story that dealt with the destruction of Gaul and its lost civilization. As the soundtracks sold, the group's other CD's sold, with the music stores struggling to keep up with demand.

During that spring music companies began approaching other Danubian musical groups, as the "Danubian sound" moved to the forefront of global popular music. The owner of the Socrates Club and the owner of the music store scrambled to prepare bands for auditions and make arrangements for recording studios. The two men eventually pooled some money and bought several warehouses close to downtown to set up as recording studios. They brought in equipment and technicians from the EU to set up a top-quality recording studio complex for Danube City. Group after group, almost all of them criminals or ex-criminals from the Socrates Club, passed through the new Danube City studio complex on their way to recording albums and receiving contracts.

The Danubian Parliament quickly had to change the law that initially had protected the Danubian music industry and kept Danubian music unique. The law that prohibited top billboard music from being played or distributed in Upper Danubia had to be overturned, or Eloisa's music would have been banned in her own country. As regrettable as removing the protection was to many of the deputies, there was no choice if the Duchy was to have any respect for its popular singer and her friends. With the passage of the new music law Upper Danubia took a major cultural step in ending some of its isolation. That step, however, was done on Danubian terms and to accommodate Danubian interests, not the interests of foreigners. Having to change the law made Danubians more confident of the country's contribution to global culture, and even more proud of the Duchy's culture and traditions.

The summer months following Kim's release would bring changes to Danube City. Foreign investors bought shares in the studio complex and soon the owners of several older buildings downtown began converting them to hotels and cafes for the increasing contingent of foreign technicians and music representatives. Following the music industry employees would be fans of the various groups and tourists interested in seeing the historic capitol of the Duchy. Within a very few years Upper Danubia was to become a major tourist destination in Central Europe. The arrival of the tourists and their money was the beginning of Vladim Dukov's hope that Upper Danubia could face the future and adapt to the world without surrendering what made the country so unique.

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The record company promoting �Socrates's Mistresses� had big plans for the group for the weeks following July 2. There was a scheduled international tour with a series of concerts in Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, Athens, and finally Vienna. The schedule would allow the group to be back in Danube City in time for their university classes, but the original idea was to have the Warsaw concert on July 6 and the Berlin concert July 12. The band members were both excited and disappointed by the impending trip. The opportunity to travel excited the group, but at the same time any post-sentence vacations had to be cancelled. Many of the group's members had wanted to spend time with relatives outside Danube City and were distressed at the thought their musical careers would interfere with their family plans.

Kim was determined to travel back to the US for a couple of weeks with her sister Cindy to visit her parents. She also felt a trip to her former home would allow her to come to terms with her forfeited life as an American. Cindy planned to travel to Upper Danubia at the end of June and be present for Kim's de-collaring ceremony. After Kim was released from her sentence she wanted to spend time with her sister, and then travel to the United States to visit her hometown.

Kim decided not to allow anything to interfere with rebuilding her relationship with her sister and her parents. She had to have the two weeks following her release to herself. Kim, sitting next to Eloisa and the owner of the music store, put her foot down on what would be scheduled for July.

"Whatever else happens this summer, there's something I gotta do. I have to go back to visit my parents for a couple of weeks, before I do anything else. I need to do that before I get married and change my citizenship, before I tour, before I record, before anything. I gotta go home for little bit, and try to figure out who I really am. Then, I'll be back, I'll tour, I'll sing, I'll do whatever we need to make Eloisa's music successful. But my going home for a couple of weeks is not negotiable."

Kim's own needs forced the group's company to alter its summer plans for "Socrates' Mistresses". The music company's representatives mulled over Kim's trip home, and decided Kim's return to the US would be a good opportunity for her to promote "Socrates' Mistresses" in the North American market. Ultimately there would be plans for the group to go on tour in the US the following year, during the summer when its members were not in class at the university. Kim's trip home would help lay some groundwork for next year's concerts, assuming she was willing to grant a couple of interviews.

The others in the group would be getting a vacation during the two weeks, time to spend with their families and getting used to being able to travel outside the collar zone. For Eloisa and her fianc�e the two weeks would be a chance for their two families to travel together to the main resort at the Rika Chorna Reservoir and spend time getting to know each other better. Eloisa confided in Kim that she and her fianc�e planned to announce their wedding plans at the summer retreat. The band's lead singer also confided to Kim that she wanted to make love in the forest and try to expand her sexual experiences.

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Malka Chorno continued with her exercise classes as the spring progressed. Her groups had stabilized into a regular crowd of hard-core students who were determined to get into top shape before they finished their sentences. Malka's sharp voice and sweaty body became a fixture in many lives, to the point that Malka had to start a third fitness section of her class and a second martial arts group. The owner of the Socrates Club installed some showers and a public bathroom in Malka's gym to accommodate her clients; a clear indication he expected Malka's service as a gym instructor to be long-term.

Malka began giving the idea of permanently being a criminal gym instructor some thought. She had discovered she really liked being a gym instructor much more than police work. Oddly enough, the ex-police officer had found herself among the Danubian criminal community, to the point she no longer identified with who she had been the year before. Malka finally decided to approach her Spokesman about a possible change of plans, wondering if the only way she could end her sentence would be to return to the Police Academy.

Dukov brought up Malka's case with the sentencing judge. Malka's sentence was a provisional sentence, which was not very common. However, Malka's case allowed for some flexibility. The judge surprised Dukov with his suggestion.

�I think�if she does not want to go back to being a police officer, she should remain a criminal. She seems to have found herself in that gym of hers, and I would like to see her continue her life as it is now. Here's what I'm willing to do. I will expect her to serve the full 18 years of her sentence, and if she wants to be a gym instructor, then I will expect her to fulfill that commitment she has made to her fellow criminals. She will keep her collar and the clothing restriction will remain in effect for her. However, I will ease two conditions of her sentence. I will re-classify her as a 'willingly repentant' criminal. Also, I'll have the transmitter removed from her collar so she can move about the country.�

Dukov agreed to suggest re-classification to his client. Malka would remain a convicted criminal, but under much less restricted conditions. Malka gladly accepted the proposal. The reclassification allowed her to sever her final ties to her former life. She was, and would be for a very long time, a criminal and a gym instructor. The gym was her life, the very real contribution she could make to improve the lives of many people. Now it was official. There would be no turning back for Malka; she could look at herself as a gym instructor instead of a disgraced former police officer.

Malka knelt in court toward the end of May to be officially reclassified, as her Spokesman stood at her side. Once the sentencing judge read the changes he asked Malka if she had any comments or requests.

�Yes your honor, I do have one request. My boyfriend wants to become a police officer. If he is accepted to the Academy, I ask that he be assigned my badge number and wear the badge that used to be mine. I think that having my badge will serve him, because it will constantly remind him he needs to take his responsibilities seriously.�

�Very well, Criminal # 99348, that is an easy-enough request to grant. The day your boyfriend receives your former badge, I will require him to stand before his fellow cadets and explain the significance of that badge to his peers. I think that will be a good lesson to both him and to his fellow police officers.�

Malka then knelt before the judge's desk to allow the collar technician to remove her transmitter. Once the transmitter was off the technician removed the steel ring from her collar and replaced it with a brass ring. The brass ring officially marked Malka as a �willingly repentant� criminal.

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During the entire month of May, Spokesman Dukov spent almost every free moment of his time in his library. He returned home from work, had dinner with his family, and then retreated to his study and to a new computer he recently had purchased. He spent his time looking through a vast pile of history books stacked by his desk or typing furiously. He was driven, in a way he never had been driven before, to speak to the Danubian nation through his writing.

Starting May 15, the Spokesman began publishing a series of political opinion columns in the Danube City Post, which was the Duchy's most important newspaper. Dukov's readers expected him to discuss his ideas about criminals and their place in Danubian society, but he ignored that topic altogether. Instead Dukov wrote about his broader concerns for the Duchy's society and his vision for Upper Danubia's future.

During the two years Kim served her sentence for marijuana possession, there were two major political movements represented in the Danubian Parliament. There was the conservative ruling Party of the Duchy, which argued that Upper Danubia had to defend its traditions at all costs and shut out the outside world. The opposition was led by the Greater Danubian Progressive Party, which vehemently argued that Upper Danubia's society was a failed relic of the Middle Ages and that the country needed to modernize as quickly as possible, taking the good with the bad and become like the rest of the world. Dukov responded in his columns that neither approach served the country's best interests.

Dukov argued the Duchy's peaceful society was under tremendous threat from the outside world, in particular from globalization. In his writings the Spokesman compared Upper Danubia's current situation to the crisis which faced the country in the early 1500's, when the Ottoman Empire and the Counter-Reformation threatened to completely destroy Danubian society. The Kingdom of Danubia at beginning of the 16th Century was much larger then it was in modern times, and its nobility was confident it could be successfully defended against the growing threats posed by the Turks and the new Holy Roman Emperor. In the end Danubia did manage to survive and maintain its independence, but only because the country had a king who was smart enough to know that not everything under his rule could be saved. There were some very difficult choices and national sacrifices that only one man, King Vladik the Bastard, seemed to realize were necessary.

The rest was history that every Danubian learned in school. Before Ottoman armies invaded from the neighboring country to the south, King Vladik ordered the southern half of his kingdom to completely evacuate. He essentially abandoned all of the fertile lands of Lower Danubia to the invaders without a fight, realizing his army was no match for the heavily armed Ottoman armies. As the invaders poured across the abandoned and burnt lands of Lower Danubia, the kingdom's subjects retreated to the part of the kingdom their ruler felt he could defend, the valleys of Upper Danubia that were protected by thick forests. He ordered his knights to melt their armor into weapons that could be easily carried over long distances and used at close quarters, bought smaller, faster horses for his soldiers, and hired bandits to teach his troops how to live in the forest for extended periods of time.

The king made his stand in the woods that separated Upper and Lower Danubia, with the goal of protecting the lives of his citizens, not protecting land or property. He won the first battle against the Turks in the forests, after a savage and protracted campaign of ambushes, raids, and traps. The following year King Vladik faced another invasion from a Christian army coming in from the Holy Roman Empire led by religious fanatics who saw the Danubians as heretics and pagans. The Papal Army was routed even worse than the Turks; very few of its soldiers even making it out of Upper Danubia alive.

There were a total of six invasions over a 25-year period, none of which ended successfully for the attackers. Danubia adapted, changed, and survived. What could not be saved was discarded. Among the things that could not be saved were the farmlands and manors of Lower Danubia. That was the sacrifice King Vladik had to make to save Upper Danubia. After he was killed in battle during the sixth and final invasion, King Vladik the Bastard was remembered as King Vladik the Defender and revered by his subjects.

Dukov's history lesson had implications for the present. Upper Danubia could jump into the global economy with no consideration of the social consequences, it could try to ignore the outside world and ultimately fail, or the nation could face and adapt to the over-all threat. Dukov argued that a rational modernization plan tailored to the Danubian social values would allow the Duchy to enter the 21st Century in a way that would cause minimal disruption to the country's society.

"We stand in the shoes of King Vladik. The Ottoman and the Holy Roman Imperial armies are fast approaching our lands. We can hide and pretend they are not coming, we can surrender our souls to the invaders and change our identity, or we can face the future and determine where the new boundary between Upper Danubia and Lower Danubia is located. Our task is to save Upper Danubia, yet again, by determining what we as a society can keep and what we must abandon. The goal is to maintain ourselves as a people and as a society. No matter what decisions we make, we must ensure there will be a Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia to pass to our grandchildren."

Dukov's columns caused a sensation, because they put into words the thoughts of many Danubian citizens. Dukov gave a coherent voice to the majority of Upper Danubia's voters who thought that both parties were wrong in their approach to modernizing the Duchy. Yes, the Duchy had to modernize, but in a rational way that would not destroy the country's society.

Towards the end of May the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia entered a political crisis. The governing party lost several no-confidence votes in Parliament after opposition deputies criticized the lack of planning that led to the previous summer's fire disaster in Rika Chorna Province. Suddenly several governing party deputies announced their withdrawal from their party and the formation of a new political group. To the shock of the nation, several deputies from the opposition Greater Danubian Progressive Party joined them. Upper Danubia began a political re-alignment as a third political movement took shape over the summer.

At the time the political uproar in the Parliament was taking place, Vladim Dukov watched with the detached interest of an average public official. As a professional, the only immediate concerns he had were how the political changes might affect court appointments and the National Police. He worked from day to day, continuing to argue cases and help criminals rebuild their lives after being sentenced.

What Vladim Dukov did not realize was that the changes he wrote about in his articles, as well as the resulting political turmoil in Parliament, soon would affect him directly. By the end of the year the political changes would completely alter the course of the Spokesman's life.

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Criminal # 98945 passed her first round of final exams during the end of May. She had done well in her classes, completing her first semester in college with a cumulative class academic score of 94.5 percent. In the US that would have been the equivalent of a grade point average of 3.7 or 3.8. Kim was impressed by her own performance in college, considering that she had barely finished high school and was taking her current classes in a foreign language. She now was well on her way to fulfilling her Spokesman's vision of someday speaking on behalf of foreign criminals in Danubian courts.

Once their grades were returned and Dukov had a chance to examine their coursework, the Spokesman invited Kim and Tatiana to King Vladik's Castle. Dukov and the secretary wore their black prayer robes, while Kim, in compliance with her status as a criminal still serving her sentence, wore nothing.

They entered the ruler's chamber and knelt in front of the dead king's empty throne. A crown sat on the throne, but what struck Kim was the its simplicity. The crown was made from carved silver and brass, and inlaid with amber. There was no gold on the crown, nor any imported jewels. That crown had been made only from materials available within the realm. The crown was Kim's first introduction to Upper Danubia's greatest national hero. It was obvious he had been a modest and practical ruler.

Dukov spoke in the direction of the King's throne, but was not addressing the dead King directly. He asked, in Archaic Danubian, for the country's ancestors to bestow wisdom on him and his two prot�g�s.

"These two young women will enter their responsibilities during very trying times. Life will test them in ways that my companions and I cannot even imagine. They will need your guidance, because my guidance, corrupted by the limitations of my generation's experiences, will fail them."

Kim looked over at her mentor, a bit taken aback by the Spokesman's doubts in his own abilities. To her Vladim Dukov was one of the most knowledgeable and intelligent people she had ever met. However, later in her life Kim would realize it was precisely because Dukov was so educated he realized how little about life he really knew.

The Spokesman and his two prot�g�s left the castle. Tatiana returned to the Spokesman�s office to change her clothes and get back to work, while Kim and Dukov walked down to the park that extended along the Danube River. For a long time neither of them said anything, although it was clear to Kim that Dukov wanted to make himself available to answer her questions. Finally she spoke up:

"Spokesman Dukov, why...I mean...what's so great about King Vladik? Why did we go and pray to an empty throne?"

"Kimberly, I understand you have not taken the university history requirement for that time period?"

"No, Spokesman Dukov, not yet. That's why I'm curious."

"Kimberly, perhaps I should begin by explaining to you why I, as a Spokesman, would pay homage to King Vladik. King Vladik created the position of Spokesman for the Criminal. You will understand that prior to King Vladik's rule, a convicted criminal became subject to his accuser. Once a person was convicted, he had to serve the person he had wronged. You will understand that before 1524, many, many people were unjustly accused by others who wanted to use them as slaves. Every society has something that dishonors its people, and that was what dishonored us."

"That makes sense. So that's what he changed?"

"What the king changed was who held responsibility over the convicted criminal. In 1524 the criminal became subject to the Crown, not to his accuser. In a single decision the King swept away a justice system that had degenerated into a system of slavery. All the nation's criminals passed under his control, and under his protection. He ordered 10 of his most trusted advisors to assume custody of the nation's criminals and determine how many of them were unjustly accused of committing crimes. Those 10 advisors became our country's first Spokesmen for the Criminals. That was how our profession began. That is why King Vladik is so important to me, and to you. You will understand that you and I will have walked the same path in life before we join the dead. We began as criminals. We will have become free citizens and then Spokespersons. That was the path in life King Vladik foresaw for people like ourselves."

�And Spokesman�you really think I can do it, I mean�like�argue in your courts and hassle with your prosecutors?�

�You will. It is what I foresaw back in September. And�Kimberly, I will advise you of something important. The beginning of your responsibilities to our justice system will come sooner than you think, long before you finish your studies. Very shortly you will understand why I just made that statement.�

�Spokesman�but how�if I don't have my degree��

�Kimberly, I foresaw that very shortly you will be called upon to use our profession to save a life. As I stated before, you will understand when the moment comes.�

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The final major event in the lives of Kim and her friends prior to their release was the summer solstice festivals. During Pagan times the summer solstice was an important religious event, with festivities that lasted a full four days. The Danubian Ministry of Culture had decided to revive part of that tradition and raise the solstice events back to the importance they had held many years before. For the first time Upper Danubia would have an official four-day vacation and many ancient pageants would be revived. There would be the usual concerts in the Plaza of the Ancients on the day of the Solstice itself, but now there would be much more, as the country sought refuge in its distant past to understand its present.

There was the usual required performance for �Socrates' Mistresses�, the very last public appearance of the group before the end of their sentences on July 2. Other groups would perform as well, but there was a mutual decision between the owner of the Socrates Club and the Ministry of Culture that all the performers that day would be criminals still serving their sentences.

The concert was a very emotional one for the members of Eloisa's band. It would be their final public act as criminals, the final performance as group performing only for Upper Danubia. All of the group's members felt the concert was an official closure to one part of their lives; a good-bye to their lives as criminals. The next concert the group had planned would be in Warsaw on July 30. By that time the lives of the group's members would be radically different and much more complicated.

The songs Eloisa had chosen for the equinox concert surprised Kim. The American had expected Eloisa to choose the group's more recent and upbeat songs, to fit the general mood of Upper Danubia's only cheerful holiday. Kim did not realize that, for this final performance as a criminal, Eloisa was not interested in providing simple entertainment. The group's lead singer wanted her listeners to reflect on the meaning of life. She chose the group's saddest and most philosophical songs, along with the songs that had the most ancient musical roots or themes. She asked that the group be allowed to perform at dusk, because she wanted the long summer twilight to set the backdrop for the melancholy theme she hoped to set for the concert.

The lead singer's instinct for music resulted in what many of her fans would consider the band's greatest performance during the criminal phase of their careers. Eloisa's voice was infinitely sad, and infinitely moving. While she was on stage that night, Eloisa seemed detached from the physical world. She sang her best, because at that moment singing was the only thing on her mind.

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The following weekend Kim and Sergekt took their final bicycle ride together as criminals. As she felt the warm summer air blowing against her bare body, Kim realized there were things about being a criminal she would miss. She knew that she would miss riding naked on her bicycle, and the naughty chases with Sergekt through Danube City's forest parks. Such behavior was accepted for criminals, but there was no way Danubian social protocol allowed free citizens to act in such a scandalous manner.

Kim and Sergekt rode to the bench where he had spanked and made love to her the previous fall. They parked their bicycles and for a long time sat on the bench, simply relaxing and enjoying the hot weather and rustling leaves.

Both Sergekt and Kim knew she was due for another spanking. After sitting quietly with him for a while she went over his lap, nestling herself against his body and enjoying the feel of the summer breezes on her exposed bottom. For a long time he caressed her backside, studying her flawless soft brown skin. He ran his fingertips between her thighs and teased her vagina and bottom-hole.

Kim's lovely bottom always fascinated Sergket. After being with Kim for nearly two years, her body excited him every bit as much as it did when he first saw her. Yes, he would spank her, but just enough to put a slight shade of pink on her bottom. There would be no punishment that day, such a series of soft sensuous slaps that would heighten her sexual arousal and make her bottom even more beautiful than it was already.

Sergekt began spanking Kim, but the slaps were much more erotic than painful. Kim went wet, in a sexual bliss over the combination of sensations she was experiencing. Sergekt had been right; Kim was not in the mood for a hard spanking. She wanted the spanking to be a purely sensual experience, to feel the soft slaps of his hand over and over on her eager bottom. The pain on her bottom was slight, just enough to completely stimulate her body and her senses.

Sergekt mixed the slaps with sensual teasing between his lover�s legs, including the occasional light touch on her clitoris. Kim lifted herself up every time Sergekt's finger brushed that most intimate part of her body, hoping for more touching, but he kept her in suspense. There was more spanking, and then more teasing between Kim's legs.

Finally both of them were ready for sex, more than ready. Kim lay on her back on a towel Sergekt had brought and he entered her. He thrust long and hard as Kim closed her eyes and gasped with delight. This was good�really good. She climaxed twice, as her orgasms swept away the stress of the past several weeks.

The spell slowly lifted as the pleasant summer afternoon dragged on. Yes, thought Kim to herself, maybe being a criminal is a rough experience, but I'll miss these bicycle trips. That part I'll miss.

**Chapter 22 � Redemption**

Criminal # 98945 expected the final week of her sentence to be extremely hectic. However, because most of the issues surrounding the impending concert schedule of �Socrates' Mistresses� were settled the in the middle of June, there really was very little for her to actually do, other than make final arrangements for her sister Cindy to be present at the de-collaring ceremony in July.

Kim had a very slight disappointment when she learned that the actual ceremony would not be on July 2, the official date of her release. She would have to wait one extra day, because the Monday closest to July 2 was the following day, July 3. The change of date did not really bother anyone, however. Kim's friends had served three-year sentences and she had served a full two-year sentence. One more day hardly mattered.

Vladim Dukov filed a series of papers related to Criminal # 98945's impending release, including a certificate that assured the Danubian government that she was psychologically ready to be released and that she posed no further threat to the community. That was standard procedure, given that a Danubian Spokesperson for the Criminal held legal custody over the criminals assigned to his or her case-load. In theory a Spokesperson could be held accountable if a criminal approved for release re-offended. As a result Spokespersons had the legal authority to declare a criminal �not ready for release�, although in practice postponing a release date was not common.

Dukov and Tatiana went to the basement of the Central Police Station to retrieve Kim's back-pack, which was dusty and smelled strange from having sat on a shelf for two years. He retrieved the plastic bags containing the jewelry and clothes she had been wearing on the day of her arrest. Finally the Spokesman retrieved his client's U.S. passport and had one of his brother's couriers take it over to the Danubian Ministry of Foreign Relations for a �transition visa� stamp. The stamp stipulated that as long as Criminal # 98945 held her job at the music store, she could continue to live in Upper Danubia as a legal resident. As soon as she quit her job, her visa would become a simple 30-day tourist visa, with the expectation she be out of the country before the visa expired.

Dukov studied Kim's passport picture, which had been taken about six months before her fateful trip to Europe. He marveled at the change, at how different she must have been when she was still in high school. He looked at the other stamps, noting the two-year-old exit stamp from the Netherlands on July 1 and the entry stamp issued on July 2 to enter the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia. There was a third stamp, issued July 5 by the Danubian Ministry of Justice, indicating Criminal # 98945 was prohibited from leaving Danube City for two years and that her passport would be returned to her Spokesman upon completion of her sentence. Dukov initialed and dated that final stamp, to indicate he now had possession of Kim's passport pending her release.

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Cynthia Lee pleaded with her parents to accompany her to witness Kim's release from her sentence, trying to explain what a big event in her sister's life her final court appearance would be. However, the Lees wanted nothing to do with Upper Danubia, in spite of their daughter's troubled life prior to her trip and her Spokesman's kindness to her during her sentence. Certainly they did not want to see Kim anytime before she was allowed to get dressed. Once she was properly dressed, well, then it would be a different matter. However, the Lees still did not see the point in traveling to Upper Danubia, given that Kim was coming back to the US just a couple of days after her release.

Finally Cindy boarded a flight to Frankfurt by herself, filled with regret her parents could not understand the momentous importance Kim's release would have in her life. The ceremony that ended her sentence would mark her official redemption, the chance for her to apply all of the hard lessons learned over the past two years to the decisions she would make throughout her future. At least Cindy understood. Her sister's support was something that Kim would appreciate for many years to come.

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Cynthia Lee arrived in Danube City the final day of June. As before, Spokesman Vladim Dukov was at the airport to greet her, since his client still could not travel outside the Danube City collar-zone. However, the following week, when it was time for Cindy to leave, Kim would be going with her. They would fly out first-class, courtesy of their band's music company.

Once again Kim's sister would stay a hotel near the Central Plaza, to be within walking distance of the Central Courthouse and Dukov's office.

Cindy met up with Kim and Eloisa as they got off work at the music store. The store had changed, now that several of the bands its owner had sponsored were becoming successful. The adjacent building had been converted to a contracting office for aspiring groups of musicians and was very busy. The store itself was much busier than it had been the previous year with foreign music fans and tourists, with more employees and an even wider selection of music.

Cindy had dinner with Kim and Eloisa at Sergekt's restaurant. Eloisa then departed with her fianc�e, leaving Kim and Cindy alone. Kim decided to take Cindy to the Temple of the Ancients, and then to the spot where all her trouble had begun, now almost exactly two years before.

The two Americans sat on the same bench where Criminal # 98945 had sat smoking her joint, and where she had endured two very fateful encounters with Officer Malka Chorno. They sat quietly in the late afternoon shade as Kim tried to think of something she could tell her sister, something that would best explain who she had become during her two year sentence. She decided to tell her sister the story of Officer Malka Chorno. She went into graphic description about her arrest, then continued with the ugly encounter in this same spot the following year and its result. She had a hard time making Cindy understand the strange relationship she had with Malka Chorno following the police officer's conviction, the difficult efforts of the two women to come to terms with each other, and the ex-cop's genuine efforts to come to terms with herself and her flaws. Kim concluded:

�I guess we've all had to figure out who we really are. Me, Eloisa, Spokesman Dukov, Malka Chorno, and maybe even you. I can tell you that I really didn't know who I was two years ago�never really gave it much thought. I still really don't know who I am, but maybe I'm a bit closer to figuring it out.�

Cindy sat silent and lost in thought for a while. Kim's sister changed the subject.

�You know, I bet it's going to be really hard for you to go back next week�maybe more than you realize�I mean, see our old high school, Mom and Dad, your teachers�you know, everyone who knew you before you came here.�

�I know that. I know it's gonna be hard for me stay focused on what I really want from my life.�

�What do you want from life, Kim? I mean�it seems that you've sort of found yourself, here in this country. I can tell you this is the weirdest place I've ever been to, but you really seem to fit in. So, this is it? This is where you want to end up?�

�I think so. Spokesman Dukov wants me to take his place and represent all the foreigners he thinks will wind up in trouble, once we get a bunch of new tourists, Eloisa wants me to sing with her, and Sergekt wants me to marry him. So, that'll be my life, the path of my existence, as they say it here.�

�But is it what you want?�

�I don't think that's the right way to put it, Cindy. This isn't what I want; it's what I've become. It's what I am. It's what life has turned me into. Take me out of here, put me somewhere else, and what do you think I'd have left? What do you think I'd be?�

�I guess we figured that out last year�it wouldn't be all that much.�

�And that was last year�I've had another year here since then, and another year away from home. This is my life, here in Upper Danubia.�

Cindy's own feelings were in turmoil, over some very old issues standing between her and Kim, ones that went way back. During Cindy's previous two trips to Upper Danubia Kim had made several hard confessions to her sister. Now it was Cindy's turn to come clean with Kim. She felt pushed from the inside to talk, almost against her will. Cindy buried her hands in her hair and leaned forward. She spoke without looking up.

�Kim, I�we�.uh, well�you know that up until the time you got arrested, and even a bit afterwards, I always kind of�I don't want to admit this�I hated you�ever since we were little kids. That's something I realized last fall, and I realized it only when my feelings towards you changed. I realized I hated you all my life, and now I feel really bad about that.�

�You were jealous because Mom and Dad always paid more attention to me than you?�

�Yeah. Ever since you were born, it was like you got everything and there was nothing left over for me. It was always 'Kim's younger than you and�Kim needs this and Kim needs that�' I always thought that if I was the good one, the one with the good grades and the one who never caused any problems, that over time Mom and Dad would love me. But you were the one who always got all the attention. It's like�it was all about you, and you were totally messed up, and�Mom and Dad couldn't see anything wrong with you. Not until�your trip. Then everything changed��

Cindy sat silent, still staring at the ground. She was nerving herself for what she had to say next. Kim thought she knew what was coming�

��and so you were glad when I got arrested?�

�Yeah, Kim. I was glad. I hate to admit it, but at the time I felt real good about that. Mom, and especially Dad, I mean�they were totally devastated about your pot-smoking. And then, later that summer, when they found about your grades in school, I mean�the grades you really got, when all those college rejections started coming back because of your GPA�I loved it, watching their illusions about you fall apart. I felt like I was getting even for all the crap I put up with when we were growing up.�

Kim sat quietly for a long time. It seemed that every time she sat in this spot something awful always happened. Cindy's confession frightened her. Kim forced herself to speak.

�So�why the three trips to Danube City if you hate me so much?�

�Because I don't hate you anymore, not now. A lot of what happened between us wasn't your fault, and that's what I came to realize a few months after you got arrested. Now it seems like�I'm the family's 'good girl' and you're not�and that's not right either. It's not right that either of us be 'the good one' or 'the bad one'.�

Cindy again sat silent for a while, and then continued.

�I'm telling you all this because�I realized that whatever happens between you, me, Mom, and Dad, I want to have my own relationship with you, on my terms, not anyone else's. I don't want you to be 'good' or 'bad' in my life. I just want you to be happy, I want to love you, and I want you to be my family. I want to appreciate you for who you are, not for what anyone else wants you to be. We have the rest of our lives, maybe 60 years, ahead of us, and I want you as part of my life. That would mean a lot to me. And that's what I started to realize when I came here at the beginning of last year. That's why I kept coming back, simply because I wanted to see how you were doing and because I wanted to be with you. It wasn't because of anything Dad wanted�not really.�

Kim bit her lip and nodded, overcome with the emotion of the moment. She felt, for the first time in her life, that she was destined to have a real relationship with her sister. They would live on different continents and would have to travel to make their changed relationship work, but Cindy suddenly had become an important and appreciated part of Kim's life. As Cindy had said, the two women had at least 60 years to set things right with each other.

Kim and Cindy stood up and hugged each other hard, on that Sacred Ground behind the Danubian Temple of the Ancients. Criminal # 98945's conversation with her sister was the final, and the most important, act of redemption she would experience as a result of her two-year sentence.

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The night of July 1 was the final night Kim and her friends went to the Socrates Club as criminals. Kim and Eloisa went with Cindy, who entered the club wearing a simple sun dress she could slip over her head as soon as she was inside. Once she was in compliance with the Club's dress-code, Cindy sat among a couple of Sergekt's friends and started flirting with them, as Kim and Sergekt spent the night eating, dancing, and socializing.

That night there was no singing or performing from any member of �Socrates' Mistresses�. The participation of Eloisa and her friends in the Club's creative efforts had ended. Tonight was a night for Eloisa's friends to simply relax and enjoy their final evening together as criminals. There were other performers on stage, and more recently sentenced criminals discussing their feelings about their punishments. Life was moving on. Now it was the time for others to read their thoughts, write songs, and perform for their friends.

As she danced with Sergekt, Kim looked nostalgically at the row of tables where she and her friends had sat evening after evening over the past two years. Within a couple of days the tables would be re-arranged to accommodate the fact that Eloisa and her defenders had graduated from the clientele of the Socrates Club. Kim's friends would be able to come back any time they wanted, but it wouldn't be the same. They would be coming in as guests and outsiders, not as criminals and members in full-standing. Kim found it odd thinking about how much she would miss some aspects of her life as a convicted criminal, realizing the loss of the Socrates Club and its supportive environment would leave a huge gap in her existence.

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Kim's final full day as a Danubian criminal passed very quietly. It was the custom in Upper Danubia that a criminal spend the final day of his or her sentence with family, in quiet contemplation, or at church. Kim knew that Sergekt would be at church with his family, as would most of the other members of Eloisa's band. Kim and Cindy, somewhat less religious, spent the day picnicking with the Dukovs at a nearby park, along with Vladik's fianc�e and her younger brother. It was a very quiet and anti-climactic end to Criminal # 98945's sentence, but everyone wanted to be well-rested for the de-collaring ceremony the following day.

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The next day was Monday, July 3rd. Kim woke up in her sister's hotel room after an excellent night's sleep. She had expected to pass the night in restless anticipation, but the quiet picnic from the day before put her in a relaxed mood, as did the familiar presence of Cindy.

The two sisters had a light breakfast in the hotel restaurant and then walked to the Central Courthouse. The sun already was shining hot on Kim's exposed body. In spite of the happiness she felt over having her sentence finally end, she felt slight regret over not being able to enjoy her body uncovered outside in the hot weather anymore, except when she went to the beach or relaxed in Dukov's backyard. At her job at the music store Kim would continue to work in the nude, but the morning's walk to the courthouse would be her last appearance without clothing on Danube City's streets.

Kim and Cindy met up with Dukov and his family at his office, and then the group walked across the Central Plaza to the Central Courthouse. A large group of naked criminals and their relatives already were assembled in front of the main door, waiting for the call to line up and go inside. The relatives snapped numerous pictures of the group, and group members took pictures of each other. As always, the whole affair had the general mood of a graduation ceremony, which in a way it was.

Cindy took several pictures of Kim: by herself, with the Dukovs, with Sergekt and Eloisa, and with her fellow singers from �Socrates' Mistresses�.

Spokesman Havlakt finally arrived with three workmen carrying 29 packages of clothing. He was in a very upbeat mood, very happy to see the sentences of his 28 clients, along with their added friend Kimberly Lee, finally concluded. He also was looking forward to finally being able to retire, three years later than he originally had planned.

The workers carried the packages inside while the two Spokesmen whistled loudly to get their clients to separate from their families and form a line to go inside. The relatives then quickly passed through the door and filed into the courtroom to take their seats in the public viewing area.

The 29 criminals formed a line as requested, with the women in front. They waited in silence for a minute or so, until they heard the trumpet blast from inside the courtroom. Kim and her friends filed in, 9 women and 20 men. They knelt and put their heads to the carpet, for the last time of their lives. The trumpeter blew again.

�Doc-doc Danube!�

The entire room put their right hands to their left shoulders, except for the 29 criminals in the front of the room. Kim and her friends remained kneeling, but they did not need to keep their heads pressed to the floor. Today was their day, the ceremony that was being held for them, so the court expected them to kneel upright to be able to watch what was going on.

Vladim Dukov and Spokesman Havlakt came forward. They saluted the judge, who saluted back.

The judge asked the Spokesmen if each of the criminals under their authority had completed their sentences and whether or not they were ready to assume the rights and responsibilities of a free citizen. He asked the same question to Spokesman Havlakt eight times for each of the women in his custody. Then Kim heard the question addressed to Vladim Dukov:

�Spokesman Dukov, this court wishes to know if you consider Criminal # 98945, the American Kimberly Annette Lee, ready to assume the rights and duties of a free citizen.�

Dukov replied with a very loud �Doc!�

Kim's heart raced with anticipation. The question and the answer from her Spokesman legally ended her sentence. The question had to be repeated 20 more times for the guys. Sergekt's name came up 10th on the list, while Dima, the leader of the group and the main instigator of the unlawful actions that lead to the sentences, was the last one whose sentence was ended.

As he did for all de-collaring ceremonies, the judge then gave a brief speech about the transition from criminal to free citizen and the significance of reform and a new start in life.

The next part of the ceremony was the actual de-collaring of the Criminal # 98945 and her friends. Vladim Dukov signaled to his former client to get up and to have her collar removed first. Kim got up and knelt in front of a short metal post slightly less than a meter high. The post had handles on it for the criminal to hang on to. The collar technician ordered Kim to grab the handles and hold herself steady. The post had a metal loop near the top, to hold the collar extractor in place while it was being operated.

The technician closed the imposing-looking device around Kim's neck and closed several latches on her collar.

�Hold your breath and don't move.�

The former criminal felt a slight jolt and heard the distinct crack of metal snapping. The collar technician had shot the firing pin into the latch of her collar to break it. He then pushed the extractor's levers apart and opened the collar. A second later Kim's collar was off. For the first time in two years she felt the cool air of the courtroom against the lower part of her neck.

The technician removed the transmitter from Kim's collar and handed the collar back to her.

�Congratulations. You're free.�

With that Kim returned to her place in line, but as previously instructed, she stood, not knelt. Eloisa was next, and within a minute was back in line, standing next to Kim. The two friends stood at attention as the other members of the group stepped forward to get their collars off. It took nearly a half an hour to get through the entire group, but Kim was not rushed. The American wanted to savor every moment, to hear the satisfying �crack� of the firing pin as it broke one collar latch after another.

The two Spokesmen then carried bundles of clothing to the line of ex-clients. Each bundle had its owner's criminal number on it and was color-coded by sex, white for women and beige for men. Dukov walked up to Kim with her bundle and smiled at her as he set it at her feet.

�This court authorizes you, as free citizens, to get dressed.�

Kim opened her package and pulled out its contents. There was a traditional Danubian dress and a pair of women's sandals. She quickly slipped the dress over her head and bent down to put on the sandals. Then she looked over at Sergekt, who was adjusting his tunic and putting on a pair of traditional leather boots.

The two Spokesmen took their positions in front of the group. They exchanged glances and simultaneously saluted, putting their fists against their left shoulders. The group saluted back.

The judge spoke next.

�People of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia, this court presents to you 29 persons who have earned the right to rejoin our community as free citizens.�

Kim and her friends then turned around to present themselves to the Danubian nation. They held their collars up for the world to see they were indeed now free citizens. The room exploded into very loud cheering from the relatives of the 29 criminals. Kim only had one relative present, but Cindy was cheering, clapping, and making as much noise as possible.

It was over. Really, truly over. The emotion overwhelmed most of the members of the group, both men and women. Eloisa was crying, as she struggled to keep her collar held high in the air for her family to see.

I won't cry, Kim thought to herself. I won't cry. Even as that promise repeated itself over and over in Kim's mind, tears rolled down her cheeks.

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Kim and her friends were done with their de-collaring ceremony by 11:30. The celebratory atmosphere outside the courthouse continued for a while, as the families continued to take pictures of their newly-freed relatives, and as Kim's friends took dozens of group pictures, now dressed in their official formal clothing. Finally, however, the picture taking wound down and the crowd began to diminish as its participants began to bid the others goodbye and drift away. Within an hour the majority of the group had departed the Central Plaza with their families, including Eloisa and the rest of her band members. Eloisa hugged Kim hard and departed, along with her long-suffering fianc�e and their respective families.

Only Sergekt and his relatives remained behind, to accompany the Dukovs and Cynthia Lee back to the Spokesman's house for a family celebration. As she watched the others depart, Kim wondered if the entire group ever would be completely together again. The friendships would remain, as well as the still-growing career of "Socrates' Mistresses", but would all of Sergket's friends ever sit together in one place again?

Tuko, for example, quickly would disappear from their lives for a full year. He had been accepted to attend the National Police Academy and faced 12-months of very intense training. He would leave the Academy wearing Malka Chorno's badge and a blue uniform. He would carry a service revolver, wield a switch, and have a female partner. He would come out of training a very different person than he was now. Kim wasn't sure if she would still like him once he was a police officer.

The two families celebrated at Dukov's house, on large tables loaded with fancy food that had been set up in Dukov's back yard. It was a chance for the Dukovs and Sergekt's relatives to get to know each other better, and for Cindy to have a good look at her future in-laws. Kim and Sergekt confirmed their plans to get married in October, on or around Kim's 21st birthday. They stood arm-in-arm as they made the announcement, to much cheering and toasting. The party thus became not only a celebration of the end of their sentences, but also the public announcement of Sergekt's plans to marry Kim. With Sergekt's announcement Cindy found herself committed to yet another trip to Danube City in the fall, to attend her sister's wedding.

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Although she officially was free, Kim spent the next day wrapping up some final details of her sentence. She went downtown wearing one of the sun-dresses that was in fashion that year. The dress was made of very light material, but Kim felt somewhat uncomfortable, still having to get used to the feel of cloth covering her body after two years of wearing nothing.

Dukov called his ex-client into his office to return her passport with the new "transition visa". Kim got her musty-smelling backpack back, along with plastic bags of clothes and jewelry. Dukov held up the T-shirt with the marijuana emblem and asked her if she planned to keep it.

"Yes, Spokesman Dukov, I'll keep it. What I want to do with it is hang it in my office with my collar�to show people who I really am and who I used to be." Kim then smiled. "But don't worry, sir. I don't plan to wear it around Danube City. I think my days of wearing marijuana leaves are past me. If I wore that everyone really would call me 'Maragana Girl'."

The final detail was a post-release mug-shot in the police booking room for Kimberly Lee's now closed police file. The words "Criminal # 98945" at the bottom of the closing photo had a line through the letters to indicate Kim's criminal number had been retired from the Danubian judicial system.

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Kim and Cindy worked out the final details of their trip to the United States with Eloisa's recording company. In exchange for a first-class flight Kim agreed to grant three interviews, one to a leading popular music magazine and the others to television stations doing features on Danubian music. Kim planned to spend the rest of the time trying to repair her relationship with her parents and touring her hometown.

The two sisters left that following Saturday, on a �Griffin Airlines� flight to Frankfurt, where they would change flights to go on to the US. From the trolley window Kim watched as she passed the yellow sign marking the edge of the Danube City collar zone, and within a few minutes she and Cindy were at the small and rather primitive King Vladik International Airport.

An hour later, Kim and Cindy walked across the tarmac to the plane, which, like every other large object in Danube City, had a huge griffin painted on it. Once airborne, Kim stared out the window at the strange little country that had so completely refocused her life. The plane rose above Danube City and then banked west through the clouds to make its way to Frankfurt.