**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 23 � "Willow"**

Kim's homecoming turned out to be every bit as painful as her sister had feared. She did not bother to bring up staying at her old room in her parents' house; she instinctively knew it would be better to stay at Cindy's apartment.

Now that her sentence was over, the older issues poisoning Kim's relationship with her parents resurfaced, especially the endless deceptions she had inflicted on her family throughout her adolescence to spend time with two friends who turned out to be totally worthless. The Lees did not feel comfortable lecturing her or treating her in a condescending manner, however. Their wayward daughter obviously had matured in Upper Danubia. She thought and spoke like a person much older than her current age of 20. What most surprised them was how determined she was about details of her life; her marriage, her music, and the odd idea that she wanted to become a Danubian defense attorney.

Kim's parents instead treated her with a cold tolerance, none too happy about the fact she only planned to stay in the US for two weeks before going back to Upper Danubia. Kim's braided hair and foreign appearance bothered them, as did her radically changed personality and constant use of Danubian expressions such as "the path of my life", "it is a question of honor", "proper protocol", "damaged soul", and "the Ancients have guided me". To the elder Lees, their daughter had become a complete stranger, and on top of everything else, just plain weird.

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Besides her strained and tense get-togethers with her parents, Kim spent much of her time trying to readjust to the United States. She was very uneasy during her trip and a bit dismayed at the fast pace of life and the over-all appearance of a society completely oriented around consumerism and automobiles. The crowded smoky streets bothered her, as did the enormous dirty parking lots, ever-present fluorescent lighting, the public's constant rushing, and overwhelming amount of cheaply-made products in stores and people's houses.

What bothered Kim the most, however, was the constant noise. Noise was everywhere, as though the entire nation was afraid of a few minutes of silence. Kim, after having been out of the US for two years, winced at the ever-present assault on her ears.

The three interviews went well. Kimberly Lee tried to set the record straight over who was the real inspiration for most of her group's music by trying to give as much credit to Eloisa as possible. Many US fans of "Socrates' Mistresses" had assumed Kim was the band's lead singer, because she was the band's English voice. Kim used the interviews to give US viewers a much more accurate idea of what her group really was all about.

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Cindy accompanied her sister around her hometown as she confronted the ghosts of her past. Kim understood that her life in the US was truly over. As Cindy had warned the previous year, all of Kim's old friends from high school were scattered. The luckier ones had gone out of state to college, but most had drifted into obscurity. Two friends from her past, including an ex-boyfriend, were in jail. Kim's first week back in the US ended with a painful jailhouse visit to her former high school boyfriend, and a visit to the parents of another friend who overdosed about two months after she left for Europe. Everyone Kim talked to mentioned how great she looked.

Kim's hardest encounter with her past came at the beginning of her second week, when she decided to visit to her old high school with Cindy. She talked to a couple of her teachers who happened to be giving school classes, and gave much needed apologies for some of her behavior. Kim then went around to a spot behind the gym where she had spent endless hours with Tiffany and Susan. Cindy stood in nervous silence as her sister sat down in her favorite old hang-out spot, just staring at the pavement and not saying anything.

As Kim silently sat contemplating her past, a tall, lanky teenager with a rather punkish appearance and reeking of cigarette smoke showed up. She jumped to her feet and hugged him. It was Joe Walker, Tiffany's younger brother. He heaved a sigh of relief.

"Hey, Kimmie, real glad to see ya...The guys said you were back...and fuckin' Jones just told me you were here at school...just got out of class...glad I got ya while you're still here."

Kim smiled slightly. "You're in summer school?"

"Yeah...fucked up the year again. What else is new?"

Cindy, who never really liked either Joe or his sister, excused herself, claiming she had to go to the bathroom. Cindy's departure left Kim alone with her former best friend's younger brother. She felt very uncomfortable, but at least one huge question in her life was about to be answered, what happened to Tiffany? She gathered from Joe's comments that he actually had been looking for her, which struck her as rather odd.

Kim decided to give her companion an update on her life with a very abbreviated and censored version of her sentence in Upper Danubia. She informed Joe she had just been released, and pointed to the tan-line from her collar that still was visible around her neck. She didn't mention the fact she had been nude during her entire sentence, hoping Joe was ignorant enough about foreign places that he didn't know that detail about Upper Danubia. It turned out he didn't know anything about Upper Danubia, nor had Tiffany been eager to share any details about her disastrous trip to Europe when she returned home.

"Ya know, when she got back, she didn't talk. People said a lot of shit to Tiff because of you and Susie...ya know...how she took two friends to Europe and came back solo...I don't know...She's pretty fucked right now...has been for two years...I think the trip did it."

"When you say Tiff's 'fucked', what do you mean by that? What's she actually doing?"

"What ain't she doin', Kimmie? She's doin' just about everything...weed, smack, 'K', blow, crank...I think now it's mostly crank, 'cause of her boyfriend."

"That's it? Just drugs?"

"That's it, Kimmie. Drugs. That's all she's doin'. Says she ain't no good for anything else."

"Where's she getting the money?"

"How do you think she's gettin' it? She's dancin' over at Dirty Grampy's. Strippin' and, well...ya know...gettin' paid..."

"Shit. And it's all going for drugs?"

"All of it, Kimmie. Drugs and that fuck, Raymond. That's her boyfriend. She ain't got shit for anything else."

"And that's why you were looking for me? To tell me this?"

"Kimmie, I was lookin' for ya...'cause�I don't know� I thought maybe you could talk to her...make her feel better�maybe tell her you're not mad or something�you know�about Europe."

"Joe, I can't tell her I'm not mad, because I am. I'm fucking furious at her. Do you know what it felt like, when I was in that courtroom on trial, and my defense attorney told me what Tiff told the police, that the pot she bought was all mine and that she didn't know about it? That she lied to ditch me? Do you have any idea how that felt? Because of what Tiff told them, they were gonna hit me with a 20-year sentence, and it was Spokesman Dukov who talked them out of it. No, Joe...I'm mad, and Tiff's gonna know it. But...then�I guess I'll try to talk to her, and I suppose maybe I can do something for her."

Joe was a bit stunned at Kim's last statement. "20 years? For what?"

"For dealing. The Danubians don't like drugs. You want to piss-off their government, the best way to do it is have drugs on you. I had a full pound of pot on me, and they thought I was dealing."

Kim decided to have Joe take her to Dirty Grampy's that night, along with Cindy. She called Cindy on her cell phone and told her to come back. An hour later the two women and Tiffany's brother made their way to the strip bar.

Dirty Grampy's was a juice bar, which allowed Kim, who was 20, and Joe, who had just turned 18, to go in. Cindy already was 23, so there was no problem for her. Joe was a bit reluctant having Kim see Tiffany at her current job. Kim, however, went in with the confidence that she knew exactly what she needed to do. She still was furious at Tiffany, but now she also was mulling over ideas with the hope of salvaging her life.

They entered as several scruffy middle-aged patrons turned around to see the two women's fresh faces. Kim and Cindy obviously were not dancers, nor did either seem a likely partner for Joe. The European-style braids made Kim really look out of place in Dirty Grampy's. Cindy obviously was out of her environment as well, with the clean-cut look of a serious graduate student.

Kim handed Joe two 20-dollar bills.

"Get me some singles."

"Huh?"

"I want singles. That's what you tip the dancers with, isn't it?"

Joe returned with a stack of one-dollar bills. Kim took them and sat at a barstool right next to the stage while the other two ordered smoothies and sat at a table a little further away. She watched the routine of a rather wasted-looking young Asian, who she thought looked eerily like herself. The girl ended her routine completely nude. Kim passed the dancer a few dollars to get her to do a sexual routine close up, to learn what the dancers actually had to do for their tips. Kim's companions were surprised to see her tip a stripper for a dance, but what she did next would shock them much more.

It turned out Tiffany was the next performer. Her stage name was "Willow", because she was so tall and thin. Kim watched in anger and disgust as Tiffany moved about the stage and peeled off her clothes. Once Tiffany had stripped down to a loose blouse and G-string, Kim pulled out two dollars and held them up. The flash of money drew Tiffany's attention, but as her glance met the face of the young woman holding up the cash, the dancer froze in horror.

Kim's dark, angry eyes bore into Tiffany. She waved the cash.

"Willow, it's a tip. Please show me what you do for tips. I tip very well, but I expect value for my money."

Tiffany went white, but the club DJ and several patrons were looking at her, expecting her to put out the usual reward for hard cash. She had no choice. The dancer got on her knees and began waving her bottom in Kim's face. Kim slipped the money into Tiffany's G-string and then held up two more dollars. Once again the cold stare of Kim's dark eyes confronted Tiffany.

"Show me what you got�Willow."

Reluctantly Tiffany peeled off her blouse and flashed her breasts in front of her former friend. Kim took a look the dancer's arms, noting the needle-tracks. Kim held out yet more dollar bills, touching them to Tiffany's scarred arms. Yet again, Kim's cold, hostile stare tore into Tiffany as their eyes met.

The dancer reluctantly pulled down her G-string and slipped it over her feet. Kim showed her no mercy. She held up five dollars as the other patrons and the club DJ stared intently, wondering why a young woman was shelling out so much just to catch a few close up glances of Willow's body. With tears flowing down her cheeks, Tiffany spread her legs and waved her bare vagina in Kim's face. Her spectator's next comment was sarcasm in its purist form.

"Willow, you are so hot. I wish you could dance like this for me all night."

"Willow" couldn't see how she could be any more humiliated, but she was forced to face yet another indignity when the third song of her routine was played. The song was a slow piece by "Socrates' Mistresses" from the soundtrack of the recently released Gaul movie. As Kim listened to her own voice singing along with Eloisa, her lips tightened and her eyes flashed with anger. She held up dollar after dollar as she forced Tiffany to completely degrade herself throughout the final song.

Joe sat next to Kim's sister, silently looking into his glass. He was very afraid of meeting his sister's gaze or having her realize he was sitting in the audience. Cindy stared hard at the young woman on the stage, very curious to watch the infamous false friend who had landed Kim into so much trouble in Danube City.

The Danubian song ended and Tiffany, holding 30 of Kim's dollars in her hand, sadly collected her clothing and left the dance stage. There were a few whistles, sex-whoops, and some half-hearted clapping from the guys in the room.

Kim's moment of revenge had passed. There was no way, none whatsoever, that she could have found a better way to completely stun and humiliate Tiffany. Kim's idea was to first break her former friend, and then get her to talk. Once Tiffany was talking, she could try to figure out what to do next, with the ultimate hope to find some way to help her. The dance-floor encounter had its place in that plan. Kim could tell Tiffany was indeed broken and had nothing left to hide. Also, she now felt completely in control of the relationship.

Tiffany retreated to the dancers' changing room in shock over what had just happened. She had not known Kim even had been released, let alone that she was back in the US. Tiffany was as amazed seeing her as she would have been seeing someone she thought was dead. Finally, the drugs in her body, combined with the horrible experience she had just endured on the dance stage, made her sick enough to throw up in the bathroom. Once she finished, Tiffany tossed Kim's money all over the floor and began crying.

As soon as Tiffany left the stage, Kim got up to join the others at their table. Cindy was stunned at her treatment of Tiffany, while Joe was incensed.

"You fuckin' bitch! What the fuck...what'd you do that for!?"

Kim stared at Joe with a cold calmness that somewhat disarmed him.

"Joe, you will not call me a 'bitch' if you want me to do anything for Tiffany. I did that for a reason, so that when I talk to her she won't try to bullshit me. And besides, what did I actually do? I paid her to do her job, Joe; that's all I did! I just paid her to do her fucking job!"

Before Joe had a chance to respond, Kim stopped a waitress and passed her a five-dollar bill. She told the waitress she wanted to buy a drink for "Willow". She passed the waitress some more money for the club's very over-priced smoothies. The waitress took off to bring the smoothies and summon her co-worker. Kim then turned to her two companions.

"OK, I'm going to try to talk to Tiffany. I need you guys out of here. Go next door and get something to eat. I'll catch up as soon as I'm done."

Joe quickly got up, eager to leave before Tiffany had a chance to see him. Kim's sister also got up quickly, having no desire to stay in this awful place any longer than she needed to.

As Kim's companions vanished through the door, the waitress came back with Tiffany and the drinks. Kim handed the waitress another five-dollar bill, mainly to make sure the waitress stayed on her side if there were any problems.

Tiffany was dressed in her G-string and skimpy top. She looked wasted, but still was rather attractive. Her breath smelled of toothpaste and a hint of vomit. This was not the first time she had cried and thrown up but still had to face a customer.

The last thing Tiffany wanted to do was to see or sit with Kim. However, the drink on the table signaled that her high school friend had purchased 10 minutes of her time. Over the last year she had sat with plenty of unsavory people and with some of them negotiated an hour in the cheap motel across the street. In this place the only real language was money, and Kimberly Lee spoke that language quite well.

As soon as Tiffany was seated, Kim's temper rose up in her. Suddenly the memory of that moment, in the middle of her trial when Dukov told her "�the most important witnesses are missing, your two friends. It is quite unfair you should go on trial and they should not." Unfair. For a second her emotions took over and she forgot the main reason why she had Tiffany sitting with her. She angrily leaned forward, tilted her head to the side, and pointed at her neck. The tan-line from her collar had darkened a bit, but still was somewhat visible. Again her dark eyes bore into Tiffany.

"OK, Willow. Ask me what this is! Ask me why I have a white stripe around my neck! Ask me where I've been and what I've been doing over the last two years! Come-on...Willow...ask me! Then I've got some questions for you!"

"I...I know the answer...I don't have to ask you...'cause I know. You were in Danube City all this time. They busted you because of me."

Kim calmed down slightly, a bit ashamed of her outburst. She took a deep breath and tried to focus. "Tiff, what I want you to understand is that I'm not mad about the conviction itself. That would have happened no matter what. What really hurt me was what you told the police. And I'm going to tell you how I found out about it. It was in the middle of my trial, when I asked my Spokesman what was going on, you know, 'cause I didn't understand anything that was happening. And that's when he told me�that you two had been released and gone to Prague. Then he told me why."

Tiffany sat silent, staring into her smoothie. Kim continued with a question.

"Tiff, I want to know, for real, whose idea it was for you two to play dumb about our stash."

"It was my idea. At first Susan felt bad about doing that to you, but I talked her into it. I mean, we were scared, Kim, both of us. We panicked."

"You panicked. And how scared do you think I was, standing there by myself in court the next day, naked, up on the prisoner's stand, facing the judge with my arms behind my head and four spotlights shining on me? How scared do you think I was when Spokesman Dukov told me you two had left and that I was facing 20 years�20 years, Tiff�for marijuana dealing? How scared do you think I was?"

"I'm sorry Kim. I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry."

Tiffany reluctantly sipped her smoothie. She looked like she was going to be sick again, but she forced herself to talk.

"If I could go back and take your place I would�and maybe I'd be better off. Maybe that's what should have happened, and if I'd told the truth, it would've been me in that courtroom and you and Susan would have left and come home. And�Susan would have come back. It was because of me she didn't. Maybe life is punishing me 'cause of what I did. Maybe�"

"OK, that's my other question. What happened to Susan?"

"When we got to Prague, she just wanted to get on a plane and come home, and maybe try to get you some help. I�I don't know Kim. I knew you were fucked, and I�just�didn't give a shit. So, I hooked up with some local guys, and we partied while Susan sat in the hostel by herself. The next day she told me to go fuck myself and that she was going home, and we had a big fight. Then I�grabbed her plane ticket and told her she wasn't going anywhere unless she partied with me one more night, you know, 'cause I didn't want to be alone with those guys. So she came with me, and we shot up�and then we all got sick."

"I know about that part. Spokesman Dukov told me about it in his office, after my mom sent him Susan's obituary. Anthrax?"

"Yeah."

The waitress came by, looking at Tiffany and tapping her watch. Before Tiffany could say anything, Kim handed the waitress a 20-dollar bill to shut her up.

"Tiff, I gotta talk to you after you get off work. We gotta sit down some place quiet and we gotta talk."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Raymond wouldn't let me. As soon as I get off work he's here to pick me up and he doesn't let me out of his sight unless I'm here or across the street with a customer."

"Yeah, your brother mentioned Raymond. You really did fuck up your life, didn't you?"

Kim shook her head at the thought of Tiffany's abusive boyfriend. Obviously Raymond wanted to prevent precisely what was happening right now, the possibility that someone could enter Tiffany's life, get her to talk about herself, and get her to think about her alternatives. Kim realized it was vital to keep Tiffany talking. She decided to purchase some more of Tiffany's time.

"How much do you charge?"

"What?"

"I want you to myself, for an hour. How much is it? You and the room�how much?"

"300 dollars."

"OK, Tiff, I'll hit the ATM. For the next hour, your ass is mine."

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Kim felt driven to talk to Tiffany, as though some force were pushing her from within. What she was doing made no sense whatsoever, to drop $ 300 that would either fuel her friend's drug habit or go to Raymond, but she was desperate to have an hour of uninterrupted time with Tiffany.

She called Cindy and explained she would be with Tiffany the next hour. She told her sister to take Joe home, and then come back to pick her up. With the cash in her hand and the other members of her group dismissed, Kim prepared to cross the street with her former best friend.

For the next hour the two women brought each other up to date on their respective lives. They both realized something extremely important, that over the last two years Kim, while serving her sentence, actually had enjoyed far more freedom than Tiffany, who had never been arrested. Kim, the one who had been arrested, faced a fulfilling and interesting future, even if it was a future that cut her off from her past.

Tiffany, on the other hand, had spent a horrible two years, first recovering from her bout with anthrax, then facing the ire of both the Lees and the Taylors, then drifting and getting high, and finally her somewhat more settled life dancing at Dirty Grampy's and servicing the club's customers. Kim's friend, between the torment of her chemical dependency and Raymond, led a grueling and horribly restricted life. She was in continuous discomfort from the drugs or withdrawal, exhausted from her work schedule, and living in constant fear of Raymond's paranoia and his tweaking from meth. Kim sat dumbfounded as Tiffany described one squalid event in her life after another.

"I don't know� I'm just�such a waste. You know�I did OK in school, better than you for sure�could've gone to college, but�look at me. I probably won't see my 30th birthday even�I'll probably O.D., or get AIDS, or get stuck long before that."

"Tiff, I'm curious, from something you just said. Do you think you'd have been better off if you'd gotten sentenced in Danube City?"

"I know that for a fact. I mean�look at you. You're clean. You look good, I mean�really good, like you've been at the gym. You got your friends and your singing and your Spokesman, I mean you've got a really great life. Kim�I mean�just to be clean, to not think about your next hit, I'd go back just for that."

"You'd go back to Upper Danubia?"

"If it'd get me out of this shit life of mine, yeah, I'd go back. I'd give anything to exchange my last two years for the ones you had."

The image of Tiffany on trial in the Central Courthouse of Danube City flashed through Kim's mind, as did the comment from Dukov. That's it! She realized there was one place Tiffany could flee to, one place where she could kick her drug habit. If Tiffany were to travel to Danube City and live under the restrictions of a convicted criminal, she would be forced to kick her addictions, because drugs were completely unavailable in the Danubian capitol. She could escape Raymond, and all the other horrible details of her current life.

"Tiff, I have a question for you. Do you want to live to see your 30th birthday? Live without drugs? Walk around in a clean place and have some people in your life who care about you? Have a real job? Maybe even a family? Is that what you want from life?"

Tiffany nodded.

"I can give that to you. It'll be very hard and you'll have a rough transition, but I can give you all that, if you really want it. I can give you your 30th birthday, if you want it bad enough."

"Kim, how�I'm totally fucked."

"Yes you are, but there's very little in life that can't be fixed. You don't have HIV, do you?"

"No, not yet, at any rate."

"Then you can just walk away from all this�just walk away."

"I can't. I tried and I can't."

"Well, I'm leaving for Upper Danubia in four days, and if you come with me, I can guarantee to get you off drugs. You won't have any choice. There's no drugs in Danube City, so no matter how hard it is for you, you'd be forced to get clean."

"But, I can't go back there. I'd get arrested."

"That's right, you would. You'd be arrested right at the airport, and I'd go with you down to the Central Police Station to have you booked and arraigned. After that I'd take you to the hospital, where you'd dry out and go through withdrawal. Once you're cleaned up, you'd go on trial, get a long sentence, and be restricted to Danube City for many years. And things between you and me would be very different from what you're used to. I'd hold legal custody over you. I'd be telling you what to do, and you'd better damn-well do it. I won't be nice to you, because 'nice' isn't how you're going to turn your life around. But I can promise you something that I hope would make it worthwhile�your 30th birthday, in good health, and many more after that."

Tiffany said nothing.

"You'd have a lot of your choices in life taken away from you, but maybe that's been your problem, too many choices. Yeah, your life will be restricted, but what about now? How much freedom do you really have, right now?"

"I don't have any."

"Well, that's my offer. Spokesman Dukov has a lot of pull in the country 'cause he got his legislation passed, so I'm sure he can get you in. I'm warning you, though, it's gonna be rough."

Tiffany suddenly was very agitated, at the thought that she really did have a viable alternative to the life she had at the moment. Her hands shook slightly as she played with the hem of her blouse.

"Would they whip my ass�like they did to you?"

"Yes. That's part of their whole justice system, the ass-whippings. How many you'd get would be worked out in your sentence."

Oddly enough, the last detail put Tiffany somewhat at ease. She hated herself and felt she needed to suffer. At the same time Kim was being up-front about the fact she was offering Tiffany a very restricted life. Life in Danube City would be hard, but it would be livable. Her current life was not livable. Just since the beginning of the year two of her co-workers had overdosed and another had been murdered by a customer. Tiffany knew full-well she was living on borrowed time.

"Kim, if I go, can you forgive me for what I did?"

"I want to forgive you, Tiff. That's something I need to work out with myself, just like I had to work it out with that cop. I'd find it easier to forgive you if I knew you wanted to save yourself, if I knew you wanted to do something else with your life besides get high and support a tweaker. It's going to take me a while, but I think I can forgive you, if you put some effort from your end to make some changes in your life."

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm flying out Friday afternoon to Frankfurt. I'll be back in Danube City about noon on Saturday."

"I'm gonna be working Friday. That's my early shift."

"Well, that's perfect, if you want to come with me. I can simply come over here on the way to the airport and pick you up."

"But I can't come here with my suitcases, everyone will see."

"Tiff, there's no point in packing anything. You're not gonna need your clothes. Whatever pictures or what-not you want just stick in your purse. Now, one more question, where's your passport?"

"I think my mom has it."

"Not Raymond?"

"No. My mom took my passport when I got back. If she didn't throw it out she still has it."

"Well, then I'll get it and hold on to it. So you're coming?"

Tiffany nodded.

"No, don't nod your head. I want to hear, out of your mouth, what's happening Friday."

"On Friday I'm coming to the club and wait for you. You're gonna pick me up and take me to Danube City."

"You're not going to wait, Tiffany. You're going to act perfectly normal and do your first dance. Once you finish I'll buy you a smoothie and have you sit with me. Then, you and I go out the door. I'll take care of everything else. All I need from you is to be here at work on Friday and dance one more time, and between now and then for you to be careful about what you do with your customers."

Tiffany sat silent for a long time, almost to the minute she and Kim had to vacate the room. She had a final question for Kim.

"I�don't get it. Why are you doing this? Why do you even give a shit about what happens to me?"

"I do give a shit about what happens to you, Tiffany. What we're doing is very important to me. I need to get you on that plane."

Again Kim thought about the many things Vladim Dukov had told her during the two years she was a criminal, and her visions from last year's Day of the Dead.

"I learned something while I was serving my sentence. I think everything in my life during those two years happened for a reason. Everything I did or experienced in Upper Danubia led to something else. I mean everything. You're part of all that. I'm here to pull you out of this mess because that's part of the path of my life, the path that has been laid out for me. I can't really explain it. I think once you get there and get settled into your daily routine you'll understand a bit better."

Kim squeezed Tiffany's hand and the two women headed back to Dirty Grampy's.

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Cindy was sitting alone in the restaurant next to the strip club when Kim left the motel.

Kim watched Tiffany disappear through the door and then waved at her sister to come out. Cindy was more than skeptical when she explained her plans about Tiffany. Kim was going to take a tweaker to Upper Danubia and expect her to turn her life around? Yeah, right.

Kim, however, seemed oddly calm about the whole affair, which to some extent persuaded Cindy that maybe her sister knew something she didn't about either Tiffany or Upper Danubia. More than anything else Kim talked like a professional, with Tiffany being the first case out of many she would handle through Upper Danubia's court system during her life. Her sister's next comment made Cindy understand how she saw herself and the extent to which she had internalized Danubian values.

"Right now I believe the path of my life will be to help people repair their broken souls. That is the role of a Spokesperson. I now understand the Ancients are testing me, and it's something I foresaw last fall. Tiffany is the first test the Ancients have presented me with. She is the first test of my honor and the first broken soul I will try to redeem."

"And what if this doesn't work out? What if she doesn't make it?"

"Then I will understand I'm called upon to seek a different path in life."

The next day Kim spent several hours working out the Danubian portion of her plan to redeem Tiffany. She talked on the phone with Spokesman Vladim Dukov and Officer Vladik Dukov, making arrangements for the details surrounding Tiffany's entry into Upper Danubia, her arrest, her detoxification treatment, her trial, and her post-sentencing employment. She called her boss at the music store to set up a job for her future client. Tiffany would begin her Danubian life in a manner very similar to Kim, as a cashier.

Vladim Dukov decided to put Kim formally in charge of what would happen to Tiffany and award his prot�g� legal custody of her wayward friend. That meant she had to be officially certified as a Court Apprentice, something that usually did not happen until an aspirant studying to be a Spokesperson had completed the second year of university classes. However, because Kim was bringing another American to Upper Danubia to get her off drugs, the country's Supreme Court judges agreed to grant Kim the legal status she needed to handle Tiffany's case. Kim would become a provisional Court Apprentice, which gave her authority to argue Tiffany's case at her trial and negotiate her sentence. Officially she would be known as Apprentice Lee, which was how Tiffany would have to address her in public.

Dukov informed Kim that Tiffany faced three charges if she chose to return and submit herself to the Danubian justice system. The most serious violation was not the five years she would receive for marijuana possession, but 30 years for perjury. Tiffany would be sentenced to 20 years for committing direct perjury for lying to the arraignment panel about the marijuana during her interrogation following her arrest with Kim. She faced a second charge of indirect perjury for encouraging Susan to lie to the arraignment panel. Indirect perjury carried an additional 10-year sentence. Tiffany was facing a full 35 years of confinement to Danube City. Dukov asked how Kim planned to handle the seriousness of the charges.

"She'll serve the full 35 years, Spokesman Dukov. I need to keep her under my control, because if she's not, she'll relapse."

"Even after several years?"

"The danger will go down over time, but with as messed up as she is, I'm not taking any chances. I'll argue for leniency on some of the conditions of her sentence, but the time she has to wear her collar won't be one of them."

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Kim's only real concern was retrieving Tiffany's passport. She met up with Joe and he took her to his mother's house. As Joe smoked one cigarette after another, Kim explained what she had in mind for his sister in terms he could understand. Kim compared what was about to happen to Tiffany to a very long rehab session. She didn't mention Tiffany's rehab session would last 35 years, but Joe did understand that Tiffany was leaving for a long time.

Tiffany's brother became agitated. He got up, unlocked a trunk in his room, and came back with a bottle of whiskey. He took a drink out of the bottle and offered it to his guest. Kim smiled, but held her hands up and shook her head.

"Joe, I gotta tell you something. You're�kinda fucked yourself. I mean�you're just 18, and if you keep this up your gonna be worse than Tiff in a couple of years."

"Yeah, Kimmie, I know, I'm fucked. I don't know, I think some of it's from watchin' Tiff. Ya know�seeing her like this as a fuckin' tweaker and whore. Maybe if I know she's OK, over there in�Danube�or whatever the fuck you call that place�"

"Well, for that I need her passport. Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah, I'll get it."

Joe went to his mother's room and rummaged around a bit. Just as Kim was beginning to worry that Joe might not find the passport after all, he came back into the living room and handed it to her. A huge feeling of relief swept through her. She opened up the passport and looked at the stamp Tiffany got when she and Susan were expelled the night after their arrest. She put the passport in her pocket.

Joe took another drink from his bottle.

"Ya know, she's been in fuckin' rehab�didn't do shit for her. What makes you think this'll work?"

"Do you have any other suggestions?"

"No."

"Then we gotta make this work, don't we? Now, the plan is I'm renting a car on Friday, and me and Cindy are heading over to Dirty Grampy's at about 2:00. Our flight leaves at 5:00, so we should be OK for time. Cindy's staying in the car, while I go in and get Tiff. I'd like you to come as well, to see us off. You can meet us at the club and we'll head to the airport together."

"Sure Kimmie, I'd like that."

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The final two days in the US Kim spent with Cindy. As much as she wanted to make up with her parents, that was not to be, at least not during this trip. Kim's parents were deeply bothered by the enormous changes in their daughter. In spite of everything their two daughters had told them about Upper Danubia, they had not fully realized how much Kim was committed to her life in that country until they saw her in person.

Cindy, now her parents' favorite after so many years of doting on Kim, tried to explain the significance of Kim's transformation. She sadly commented: "If you just would've gone to her de-collaring ceremony you would have understood what's going on with her. You didn't, after I begged you to go. That's why you don't get it. Now, she's getting married in October, and I'm going. What I want is all three of us to go."

The Lees finally agreed to attend Kim's wedding. Hugely relieved, Cindy began making plans for the October trip. It would be in October, not July, when Kim and her parents finally would begin the long, difficult process of rebuilding their relationship.

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Kim rented a car the morning she and Tiffany were scheduled to leave. As planned, Kim went in and watched her future client perform her final dance. While up on stage Tiffany's eyes scanned the audience, looking for her future Spokeswoman. Finally the dancer's eyes met Kim's and they exchanged nods. Once Tiffany was off the stage, Kim ordered two smoothies and asked for "Willow" to join her. Tiffany came out, wearing her usual G-string and skimpy top. Kim quickly stood up and the two women went to the door. Tiffany pulled a mini-skirt out of her purse and stepped into it. The top was not appropriate for traveling, but Kim planned to pull a T-shirt out of her suitcase for her companion to change into at the airport.

Joe was standing outside, smoking a cigarette and wearing a very forlorn expression. Tiffany took the cigarette from her brother's hand, took a very deep drag, and nervously nodded.

"OK. Let's get out of here before someone sees me and calls Ray."

Tiffany jumped in the back seat, with Joe beside her. Kim swung into the front seat and with that Cindy sped off.

The trip to the airport was uneventful. Kim, Tiffany, and Joe stood in line to check-in while Cindy parked. There was a brief question concerning the stamp in Tiffany's passport forbidding her to travel to Upper Danubia, but Kim countered with a fax from Dukov's office that over-rode the prohibition. Kim produced a second fax that granted her provisional custody of her companion, which struck the airline employees as odd, given both women were US citizens. All the time Tiffany was looking fearfully at the door, terrified Raymond might show up. However, in the end there was no real reason to hold up the travelers and finally they were issued their tickets.

At the security entrance Cindy and Kim hugged each other good-bye, but their farewell was not painful, given Cindy's plans to see Kim get married in October. Tiffany's goodbye to Joe was much more traumatic. She was leaving, probably forever. It was very unlikely her brother would ever see her again. She was crying quite vigorously, her emotions unstable because of her addictions. However she did say one important coherent thing to Joe.

"Please, Joe, please get off the booze. That's how I got started, and I don't�want what's happened to me to happen to you."

"Yeah, Tiff. If you get cleaned up, I guess I'll have to also."

Kim tapped her companion on the arm and pointed at the security scanners. "Come on, Tiffany. We gotta get moving."

Once they were in the waiting area for the first part of their flight, Tiffany became agitated again and began fidgeting. Kim worried about her client panicking and bolting right up until the time they were seated on the plane and the door finally closed. However, once the plane had taken off, Kim looked over at Tiffany. She was asleep, and did not stir until Kim shook her awake to change planes in Frankfurt.

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That night, once Joe was dropped off and Kim's rented car safely returned, Cindy turned on the local news before going to bed. The top story was the emergency closure of the international terminal of the city's airport due to a security breach. It turned out that a subject by the name of Raymond Stark had been arrested after storming through the passenger screening area with a loaded gun. Prior to the airport incident local police reported that he had rampaged through a juice bar called Dirty Grampy's, causing extensive damage and injuring two bouncers. The reporters interviewed a dancer, who speculated:

"Well, you know�his girlfriend took off with a couple of Chinese girls this afternoon, or, you know�maybe they were Japanese�and we haven't seen her since. Ray�you know�he's got this real mean temper�and �you know�with Willow gone, he just started bustin' stuff up...and then he�you know�busted Mike upside the head with a table leg�and�"

The police refused to comment, pending an investigation.

**Chapter 24 � Prisoner # 98946**

While Tiffany was asleep Kim took the precaution of rummaging through her future client's purse, looking for ID's, cash, and drug paraphernalia. Sure enough, she found all three, along with some pictures of Tiffany with family members and some others with young women who must have been co-workers from Dirty Grampy's. Kim's heart skipped a beat when she came across some worn pictures from high school. There were photos of Tiffany with Kim and Susan, and another with a friend who had been killed in a car accident last year.

Kim confiscated her companion's passport, money, credit cards, her state driver's license, and her medical records. She put those items in her own travel bag, to turn over to Vladim Dukov as soon as they were in Danube City. She pondered what to do with Tiffany's meth pipe. She thought about keeping it for her client's trial, but then thought no, I'll just get rid of it. She dropped it in the trashcan in one of the plane's bathrooms.

The two women had about a 90-minute lay-over in Frankfurt. They got off the plane with Tiffany a bit disoriented and cramped from having slept curled up in an airplane seat for eight hours.

As soon as they left the plane, Kim immediately led her companion to find the connecting flight to Danube City. At the far end of the terminal was the gate for Griffin Airlines. She saw the familiar braided hair and traditional-looking dresses of the stewardesses, shortened and modified to accommodate the needs of their profession.

Once they were near the departure gate, Kim began exercising her new role in Tiffany's life. She ordered her former friend to go into a nearby women's bathroom. While Tiffany watched, Kim stepped out of her shorts and T-shirt, replacing them with a long skirt and Danubian blouse. Kim explained that she needed to be dressed somewhat more formally upon entering the Duchy because she would be acting in an official capacity. She then put on the engagement gifts Sergekt had given her: the wedding band, the griffin necklace, and the silver hairpiece.

"I would be greatly dishonoring my fianc�e if I'm not wearing these items when I re-enter the country. By the way, one of the things I expect from you is an apology to him for the way you behaved at the caf� before we got arrested, as soon as you speak enough Danubian."

Kim then addressed the issue of Tiffany's piercings. "OK, you got the piercing in your stomach, the one on your eyebrow and the one in your nose. Any others?"

"No, that's it. I used to have one, well you know�but I had to take it out when I started having customers at Grampy's."

"Alright, I need those piercings out. Take 'em off and hand them to me. You can't be wearing anything like that once we get to Danube City. They don't allow it."

"Kim�fuck�you don't have to be so bossy."

"Give me the piercings. And get all those earrings out of your ears."

Tiffany, a bit taken aback by the tone of Kim's voice, removed the piercings from her face and stomach and handed them over. She then removed a row of cheap earrings from each ear. Kim promptly threw the items in the trash. When Tiffany objected she commented.

"That part of your life is over. You don't need 'em."

Tiffany resented Kim's sharp way of talking to her, but there was much more to come. She was becoming agitated again, as the first symptoms of withdrawal loomed in her body. Kim was all too aware of the possibility her companion might break away and try to find someone selling drugs. In Frankfurt finding drugs was quite easy. Getting them for free wasn't. Tiffany suddenly began frantically digging through her purse.

"Where's my stuff!? Where's my money!?"

"I have your ID's and money. I'm putting them in your case file."

"You can't fucking do that! That's my money! You can't take my fucking money!"

Apprentice Lee, now asserting herself in the role of Tiffany's Spokeswoman, calmly looked her client in the eyes. With a very cold, knowing tone of voice she asked:

"Tiffany, why do you need money?"

"It's none of your fucking business! You can't just take my money!"

"It is my business, because I know why you want your money. You want one last hit before you go to Danube City. Just to calm your nerves. But that's the way it's always been with you, hasn't it? One last hit! Just one last hit! One last hit before we leave Prague! Isn't that what you said to Susan? One last hit? And for her it was, wasn't it?"

Tiffany said nothing, but her silence gave Kim her answer.

"There's not going to be a last hit for you. Not this time. You're done. You've stopped using drugs. You've already quit."

"Kim�please�I�"

"It's over! You've stopped! Now, we need to get on our last plane, and you need to get your ass moving!"

Tiffany was becoming yet more agitated. Kim decided to get her on the plane immediately. She pulled out her two faxes and showed them to the ticket agent. In Danubian she explained the situation with Tiffany and the possibility her forlorn-looking companion might start going through serious withdrawal on the flight. The ticket agent got on the loudspeaker to ask in Danubian if there were any military or law enforcement personnel waiting to board. Two men in civilian clothing responded. Apprentice Lee saluted them and showed them Dukov's faxes. The ticket agent opened the door to the plane, allowing Kim, Tiffany, and the two police officers to board first.

Kim ordered Tiffany to sit next to the window and sat down next to her. The cops sat in the seats behind. Tiffany was running her hands through her hair and fidgeting, but had calmed down slightly. She was very nervous, knowing a hellish several weeks lay ahead. Kim's next words did not reassure her.

"Tiffany, now that we are on a plane that's Danubian and there's two cops sitting behind us, as far as I'm concerned, we're in Upper Danubia and you're under arrest. Do you understand?"

Tiffany nodded.

"OK. Here's the deal. I now hold legal custody over you as your Spokeswoman. I'm not officially a Spokeswoman and won't be for several years, but with you I have been granted a provisional status. As far as you're concerned, the word 'provisional' doesn't mean anything. You will treat me as your Spokeswoman, and you will do what I tell you. If you make any major decisions, like changing you job, you have to clear it with me first. If there's a guy you like, I have to meet him and say whether or not you can go out. And I can have you tested for drugs when I want, which at the beginning, is gonna be at least once a week. If you don't obey me I can have you charged with insurrection. If I have any doubts about anything I'll consult with Spokesman Dukov. You also have the right to appeal any decision I make to Spokesman Dukov, if you think I'm being unfair."

Tiffany buried her forehead in the hands.

"Do you understand?"

"Yeah-Yeah! I understand!"

"The other issue is protocol. You need to address me as Apprentice Lee, always. That's my professional title, and they're big on using titles in the Duchy. When I get married, it'll be Apprentice Lee-Dolkivna. When I get my degree and my apprenticeship ends, then I'll be 'Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna'. There's something else, and this is going to be hard, but you gotta do it. As far as you're concerned I'm a public official and you are a criminal. That means when you greet me, whether it's to say 'hello' or 'goodbye', you have to get on your knees and touch your forehead to the ground�"

Tiffany gave Kim a horrified look. "You're fucking crazy! You're on a fucking power trip! That's why you got me to do this�to�"

"No! That's not it! It's the way they do things in Upper Danubia and you'll just have to get used to it. I can tell you, up until three weeks ago, I had to kneel in front of a lot of people, because I was a criminal and that's the way things are. All I want is to keep you out of trouble and not have you embarrass me. If you don't believe me, then you can request a different Spokesperson. Now, let's get that issue settled, once and for all. Do you want another Spokesperson when we get to Danube City? If you do, I'll have you re-assigned."

Tiffany was silent.

"Do you?"

"No."

"No, what? How do you address me?"

Tiffany looked at her former friend and current Spokeswoman. Kim looked so totally different than she had looked two years ago, with her braided hair, her Danubian blouse, and engagement necklace and hairpiece. The change in what she was wearing, however, was nothing in comparison with Kim's hard, determined expression. The Kimberly Lee Tiffany had known in high school was gone�completely gone. For the first time she really saw Kim for what she truly was, a Danubian public official�and her custodian.

"No�Apprentice Lee. I�I don't want another Spokesperson."

"OK. I know you're about to start going through withdrawal, but I'm hoping it won't be too bad before we get to Danube City. By the way, I need to know what to expect. Is it meth or heroin that you've been using? Joe told me he thought it was meth."

"I've been doing both. You know, to control the binges."

Kim sighed. "Alright, once we're in the air I'll call the police doctor and let him know. I'm not sure what that means for your detox, but that's his job, not mine, to figure it out."

Kim was interrupted by the pilot welcoming the passengers and announcing the standard emergency procedures. The stewardesses took their positions and began safety demonstrations, as Apprentice Lee and her client stayed silent. Within a few minutes the plane was in the air and on its way to Danube City. The flight would be very short, slightly over an hour.

Once the plane was airborne, Kim pulled the phone off the seat in front of her to relay the information about the mix of methamphetamine and heroin in Tiffany's body. After she hung up she continued.

"It's gonna be rough for you and I understand you'll be saying things to me over the next few days you don't mean. Whatever you say I won't hold against you 'cause I know you can't help it. This is it, Tiffany. There's no turning back now. You're gonna be clean and you're gonna see your 30th birthday. It's over."

Tiffany tried to smile, but she was terrified of the commitment she had made, a commitment she no longer could reconsider.

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The plane landed and pulled to a stop at the King Vladik International Airport. The airport was primitive, so the plane did not pull up to the terminal. Workers instead wheeled staircases to the front and back doors of the plane. Kim, Tiffany, and the two cops accompanying them walked with the other passengers to the terminal. Right outside the entrance Vladim Dukov, as well as his son Vladik and his partner, were waiting. Kim's temporary escort saluted Vladik, said goodbye to Kim, and departed into the terminal. As her nervous and forlorn client looked on, Kim saluted Vladik and his partner, who saluted back. She then presented Vladim Dukov's faxes. In Danubian Kim announced:

"Officer, I am entering the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia with the United States citizen Tiffany Walker, who has volunteered to return to the Duchy to face charges of marijuana possession, direct perjury, and indirect perjury resulting from offenses committed July 2, two years ago."

"Very well, Apprentice Lee, I am declaring your client, the American Tiffany Walker, under arrest for the crimes of marijuana possession, direct perjury, and indirect perjury."

Kim turned to Tiffany to address her in English. "OK, that's it. You're under arrest. Turn around because Officer Dukov needs to cuff you."

Once the handcuffs were on, Vladik's female partner firmly gripped Tiffany's arm, not painfully but with enough force to let the prisoner know who was in charge.

Once Tiffany was properly subdued and handcuffed, Kim saluted Vladik and made another for-the-record statement in Danubian.

"The United States citizen Tiffany Walker will require medical treatment for methamphetamine and heroin addiction before she is processed through the Danubian judicial system. I request that my client be placed under medical confinement instead of judicial confinement. Furthermore, I request that the National Police of the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia utilize the public resources necessary to conduct a full medical evaluation of her condition and to remove all traces of illicit narcotics from her body. I request that Tiffany Walker's medical needs be fully resolved before any judicial action is taken against her by the Grand Duchy of Upper Danubia."

"That request is granted, Apprentice. I will escort this prisoner to the medical treatment center of the Danube City National Hospital and have her processed for medical observation and chemical detoxification."

Kim turned to Tiffany to explain in English what was going on.

"Alright, these two police officers are taking you to the Danube City National Hospital and putting you under the care of the police doctor. They'll have to test you to see what's in your body. I'll have to catch up, 'cause I need to get my bags and get our passports stamped. I gotta drop my bags off at Spokesman Dukov's office and pick up your police file from two years ago."

Tiffany was shaking from both fear and withdrawal, which was starting up in earnest. Vladik and his partner pushed her into a nearby squad car and they took off. Kim and Vladim Dukov entered Customs to get the needed stamps for the two US passports. The Spokesman and his trainee signed a series of certificates to formally declare Tiffany's entry into the country as a prisoner. Then they went to the luggage claim area and picked up Kim's two suitcases. Since they were not police officers, they had to return to Danube City by trolley.

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By the time Kim and Vladim Dukov appeared in the hospital with Tiffany's paperwork, Kim's client was in a large hospital room with a large group of medical students. Kim realized from the noises coming from the room that Tiffany already was suffering from full-scale withdrawal. She screamed and ranted as she endured bouts of extreme paranoia and delusions. When Kim entered the room, she saw Tiffany naked on a hospital bed, with several students trying to control her by holding her arms and legs. Other students and doctors were standing near the door frantically taking notes and thumbing through reports or papers downloaded from the Internet. Tiffany was the first real case of methamphetamine withdrawal any of them had directly witnessed, which presented them with a real learning opportunity.

Kim winced at seeing Tiffany going through her personal hell. The Danubians believed in treating drug withdrawal cold-turkey, so there were no sedatives, just multiple hands holding her down. A couple of the medical students who spoke English were trying to communicate with her, but were making little headway.

Kim grimly watched for about an hour. After a protracted struggle, Tiffany finally calmed down, as her keepers nervously checked her vital signs and consulted their notes. Kim realized her client was about to crash again. She asked the old head doctor for his evaluation of Tiffany's condition. He responded by handing her a copy of the results of the medical tests. Tiffany had tested positive for high levels of methamphetamine in her body. She also had tested positive for heroin, as well as trace amounts of cocaine, marijuana, and valium. She later would need to be treated for Chlamydia and amoebas, as well as have some serious cavities in several of her teeth filled. He commented:

"There's quite a bit that's wrong with her, but fortunately it looks like we can fix all of it and she'll lead a normal life. Well, a normal life for a criminal, anyhow. She's not damaged beyond repair, and you should give thanks to the Ancients that you managed to get her treatment when you did."

The doctor handed over some additional papers and signature forms, along with Tiffany's mini-skirt, G-string, and t-shirt. Kim took the clothes, not really sure what to do with them. As a condition of her impending sentence, Tiffany would not be allowed to get dressed again until she was 55 years old.

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There wasn't much more Kim could do for Tiffany that night, so she spent the evening with Sergekt. He chose not to go to the airport when he found out about Tiffany, knowing that Kim needed to focus her energies on her new client. Kim, hugely relieved that Tiffany was safely undergoing withdrawal in a supervised situation, finally decided to go home and change, then call Sergekt.

Sergekt and Kim greeted each other in the proper manner of an average engaged couple, using correct protocol. Sergekt kissed Kim's hand and then she kissed his. They did not hug, because hugging was something done in private. Criminals hugged in public and no one said anything about that, but Kim and Sergekt no longer were criminals. They were free citizens, and with freedom also came responsibilities and protocol. They would be a serious couple determined to be strict and upright in their behavior, and exercise "proper values" at all times.

Precisely because Kim and Sergekt had suffered so many humiliations and indignities as criminals, they were fixated with achieving respectability from the people around them, which was a common obsession among recently released offenders in Upper Danubia. Ex-criminals tended to over-compensate for their sentences with proper protocol and formal behavior during the first several months after their collars were off, an obsession that usually faded after while. Kim and Sergekt were in the first stages of their lives as free citizens, which meant reasserting their dignity was still very much on their minds.

As the long summer afternoon slowly faded into dusk, Kimberly Lee and Sergekt Dolkiv walked down the streets of Danube City. It was the very first time in their lives they were downtown together as normal citizens, not criminals. Kim had changed into a light sun-dress, while Sergket was wearing a loose-fitting traditional shirt and modern cargo pants. Kim was wearing the three engagement items Sergekt had given her the previous fall, which she would be expected to wear on a daily basis for the rest of her life, unless she was at the beach or exercising.

Kim talked about her trip to the U.S. and her feelings about having extracted Tiffany from her death spiral.

"It's strange how it all happened. In school she was the leader of our group. She was real popular and always got everyone to do what she wanted. You never argued with Tiffany, because if you did, she knew how to put you in your place. But, you wanted to please her, because she was a lot of fun to be around. She had real charisma and people really liked her. But now, she's�just emptied out, maybe like a glass of wine that got tipped over. There's nothing there, except her addictions and a bunch of self-pity. Everything she was in high school, the way she got people to like her, the fun, it's gone. I'm confident the path of her life is to recover, but she won't be the same. I don't know whether to feel good about that or not."

They walked in silence for a while, along the river in the twilight of the European summer. Kim continued.

"She learned a very hard lesson in Frankfurt, when I cleaned out her purse and started bossing her around. I'm not her friend anymore. I'm her Spokeswoman and she's my client. I'll run her life, and she'll have to do what I tell her. She'll have to get on her knees when she greets me and ask my permission if she wants to do anything. If she disobeys me I'll ask Officer Vladik Dukov to switch her. That's going to be hard, because I still have some pictures of us, back when we were in high school, when it was her telling me what to do. But, with her addictions, I don't see how it can be any other way."

"What does Spokesman Dukov have to say about all this?"

"He was the one who put me in charge of Tiffany, because he thinks I can understand her better than anyone else. He thinks I'm doing the right thing, by planning on being so strict with her."

"What about her sentence?"

"She'll serve the full 35 years. I'll ask that she not be allowed to leave Danube City at all during that time. I'll ask that she be switched once each year on July 12. That's the date Susan died, and every year Tiffany will be reminded how her behavior resulted in our friend's death. Every year she'll remember, and every year she'll be punished for it."

"Don't you think that's a bit harsh, especially 35 years?"

"There's two things to remember. Direct perjury is a crime that has a maximum punishment of a 20-year sentence and a switching every four months. I don't really want Tiffany to be punished for perjury, but I plan to use the perjury charge as a justification to keep her under my supervision as long as possible. I'm worried about relapses, which, with methamphetamine, can happen years after a person gets clean. I'm also worried about the heroin cravings, which she'll be stuck with for a very long time. She's a drug addict, and she'll still be a drug addict 20 years from now, even if she never touches the stuff again."

Kim was quiet for a moment. She collected her thoughts and continued.

"What she really needs to be punished for, on a yearly basis, is her role in Susan's death. I think she's full of guilt over what happened, and that guilt is what damaged her soul. That's part of the reason why she got so badly hooked on drugs. Instead allowing that guilt to destroy her though drug abuse, I'll make her suffer physically on the same date every year as a way of forcing her to perform penance. Every July 12, she'll get her bottom whipped and be forced to think about the consequences of her behavior. That should take care of the guilt problem. They used to do it that way in the Middle Ages, you know, penance. That, and her annual participation in the Day of the Dead ceremonies, should be enough to repair the damage to her soul."

"What kind of life will she have the rest of the year?"

"At the beginning she will follow my path, working at the music store. But her path won't end there. When I become a Spokeswoman-in-full-standing and represent foreigners convicted as drug users, I'll have Tiffany assist me. She's 'been there' as far as drug addiction is concerned. She knows a lot more about drugs than I do. She'll be able to help me with interviews and give me advice. She can talk to people and help them get used to being criminals. I think she will become a very great asset to me, which right now is what I have in mind for her future. Tiffany will be a very important part of my life, as my criminal assistant."

Sergekt marveled at his fianc�e's rapid change. Just three weeks before she had been a criminal herself, and now it seemed she had completed her transformation away from that mindset. She was serious and direct and had a very no-nonsense way of talking. The transition was so fast and so dramatic that Sergekt found it very disconcerting, almost frightening.

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The following day Kim and Vladim Dukov visited Tiffany in her holding cell at the hospital. She was soundly asleep, in a crashed state as her body continued the long process of expelling the mix of chemical substances built up in her tissues. Kim shook her head.

"There's no way she's ready for trial, Spokesman Dukov, and from what the police doctor told me, it'll be at least another week before she'll want to do anything other than sleep."

A delayed trial was not a normal procedure in Upper Danubia, but in Tiffany's case it was the only viable option. Anyone looking at her would know right away she was not ready to face a court hearing. Not only did she need to have her body decontaminated from drugs; she also urgently needed dental work and to be treated for amoebas and venereal disease.

Tiffany woke up mid-morning. She stunk from not having showered for three days and from her sweaty bout of delusions the previous afternoon. The first thing she did was look for her clothes, but they were nowhere in sight. Kim reminded her why.

"They gave me your clothes last night. I took my T-shirt back and threw out your mini-skirt and G-string. Don't forget you're now a prisoner of the Duchy, and they don't allow prisoners or convicted criminals to wear any clothes."

Kim sat with her client as she ate, then told her to take a shower. Once she was clean, Vladik Dukov handcuffed Tiffany to take her to the Central Police Station to have her formally booked and photographed.

An hour later, for the second time in her life, Tiffany stood in front of the police cameras in the booking room to have an updated series of mugshots taken. She listlessly followed Kim's instructions, too tired to really care what was happening at the moment. Tiffany's original criminal number, 98946, was re-activated. Kim signed the papers that officially gave her custody of Tiffany and collected the new pictures to add to her case file. At Dukov's request, the arraignment committee agreed not to interview Tiffany until she had finished her medical treatments.

Tiffany was in a very irritable mood, because she desperately wanted to get back to sleep. At that moment she cared about nothing else. Kim decided to return her to the hospital. Vladik handcuffed the prisoner and took both women back to the hospital in a squad car. Tiffany was infinitely grateful when she was able to get back in bed.

Kim then met with the doctor in charge of the substance abuse program in the hospital to make the final arrangements for Tiffany's next month. As soon as Tiffany started sleeping less, she would begin a regime of exercising, physical labor, and a strictly controlled diet, under the direction of a medical intern who spoke English. The hospital would address her other medical problems and release her for trial at the end of August.

Kim worried about Tiffany becoming bored or trying to escape.

"Our patients don't get bored. We don't give them that opportunity. Boredom will be the last thing on her mind. As for escaping..." the doctor held up a sturdy plastic collar "we collar our patients, as soon as we're confident they won't have any more seizures. You will notice this collar is blue, which is what we use for alcoholics. Tiffany Walker will have a red collar, for heroin. We don't yet have a color for methamphetamine."

"Doctor, I have another question. What about visitation?"

"Sundays, between 9:00 a.m. and noon. Our patients have Sunday mornings to rest and that's when they receive visitors. However, they can only see family members or Spokespersons. The only visitors Tiffany Walker can see will be either you or Spokesman Dukov."

The doctor then took Kim to the hospital grounds, where a group of about 40 naked patients was performing calisthenics. Kim noticed that about half of the patients were middle-aged men wearing blue collars. The others were younger people, men and women, wearing collars of various colors. An older female doctor dressed in a white smock was directing the group. She walked around carrying a police switch, ready to give a quick stroke to anyone not performing to her expectations.

The doctor explained that because it was Sunday, the day was an "easy" one for the patients. They had spent the morning resting or receiving visitors. Once the group finished the calisthenics session they would stretch and then go swimming in the large hospital pool. The swim would be followed by the patients' weekly medical evaluations and another session of stretching.

The other six days of the week had a much more rigorous routine that always started at 5:30. After breakfast, the patients spent the morning gardening or performing other manual labor tasks. The chores were followed by calisthenics. Once the calisthenics were over, the group would go swimming. They would have a session of stretching, then have lunch, and then hike during the afternoon in a nearby forest park. In the late afternoon there was more stretching, another swim, dinner, a group activity, and finally bedtime at 8:30. They could write or read letters between 8:30 and 9:00, but no television or radio was permitted. The only day patients could sleep past 5:30 was on Sundays. Kim agreed with the doctor about Tiffany not having the opportunity to be bored. With this program, boredom was not an option.

"We don't give our patients much time to think or reflect, and we do that on purpose. Our job is simply to remove the substances from their bodies and restore their physical health. Once their physical health is restored, then they will earn the luxury of thought and reflection. We believe damage to the mind cannot be repaired before damage to the body is repaired. It is our path in life to repair the body of the patient. It is the Spokesperson's path in life to repair the mind and soul."

For a while Kim and the head doctor watched the on-going calisthenics session in silence. Kim noticed all the patients were trying to exercise as hard as possible, but each at his or her own pace. The switch was for anyone who quit trying. The doctor continued:

"Tiffany Walker will walk out of here with her physical health restored. When she does, my job is finished, and your job, to restore her damaged soul, will begin."

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Kim returned to Tiffany's room, to find her awake and listlessly staring at the ceiling. She gave her client a summary of the rehab program and its expectations. Tiffany was somewhat distressed upon finding out she would not see Kim until the following Sunday. Kim countered:

"Look, the doctor's right. You gotta fix your body, and for that you don't need me. There really won't be that much for me to do until your health's taken care of. Besides, I do have a life of my own, Tiffany. I have to sing in Warsaw at the end of the week, and I haven't even started rehearsing with Eloisa. Tomorrow I have to go back to my job at the music store, if I don't want to get fired and lose my visa. And between all that I have to spend quality time in Spokesman Dukov's office reading up on the laws affecting your case, to make sure I don't make a fool out myself at your trial."

Tiffany sadly nodded.

"OK, this coming week they're gonna let you rest in the mornings, but after lunch they'll at least want you at the pool and out stretching. There's an intern who speaks a little English who'll be giving you instructions. I think tomorrow's when they'll start your Chlamydia treatments, but I don't know what exactly they're gonna do. Your teeth will have to wait 'till next week, but they will get that fixed before you leave here."

She squeezed Tiffany's hand.

"Anyhow, I gotta go, 'cause actually, I'm not supposed to be here outside official visiting hours. I know it's gonna be a rough week, but it'll get better once you're well enough to exercise. Just do what they tell you and they'll treat you fine."

Kim stood up to leave. Tiffany stayed sitting on her bed sadly looking at her. Kim stopped and flashed an irritated glance at her client.

"Tiffany, what did I tell you about protocol?"

"Kim�I�"

"That's not the proper way to address me. You'll notice I'm not calling you 'Tiff' anymore."

Kim impatiently tapped the floor with her foot. Tiffany opened her mouth to object, but the sharp look Kim's dark eyes stopped her. Very reluctantly she got on her knees. Her sad expression asked the silent question, "�what do I do now?"

"Please kneel forward and touch your forehead to the floor. Then say "Goodbye, until our next meeting, Apprentice Lee.' Next week I'll teach you how to say it in Danubian, which you'll need to know when you say goodbye to me, or to any other Danubian official, in public."

"Goodbye�until our next meeting�Apprentice Lee."

As soon as Kim left, Tiffany got back in bed. She cried very briefly, and then went to sleep.

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The following day Kim went back to work at the music store, after a three-week absence. For the first time Kim entered the store dressed, but as soon as she was inside she pulled off her dress and hung it in the employees' break-room. As it had been for years, the store uniform for all employees, criminals and ex-criminals alike, was complete nudity. She returned to the information desk properly naked except for her engagement jewelry, which was the one item she now was allowed to wear. The other employees crowded around her as she passed out shot-glasses, baseball caps, and paperweights from her hometown in the US.

Kim spent most of her first day back at work talking about her trip to the U.S. and her feelings about her scattered friends and estranged parents. What she would not discuss in detail was Tiffany. Kim confirmed that she had brought Tiffany back with her to face criminal charges stemming from two years ago, but refused to say anything more, citing her responsibilities as Tiffany's legal representative.

"The details of her case will come out at her trial, which I'm sure will cause a bit of a sensation once it goes on TV. I would be violating my relationship with her if I were to say anything now."

Once back in the store and safely at her post at the information counter, Kim truly felt that she had come home. That day she made one important decision, that she did not want to quit her job at the music store anytime soon. She would continue to work three days per week, and use the other days to handle the finances of "Socrates' Mistresses" or pursue her legal studies under the tutelage of Spokesman Dukov. In spite of the store's modest pay, to simply banter with customers, hang out with her co-workers, and talk about music offered Kim a welcome break from all her other responsibilities. Besides, the store manager had signed her "transition visa", so she was committed to stay at least until her marriage in October.

Eloisa came in that afternoon, wearing one of her stylish sun-dresses. She warmly hugged Kim, but then got right down to business: the rehearsal schedule and the upcoming trip to Warsaw for the concert, which had been moved up to Friday the 28th. Kim was not surprised to hear Eloisa announce there would be rehearsals every night until the group's departure that Thursday morning, and then another dressed rehearsal in Warsaw Thursday night. The band would return home to Danube City the following Saturday afternoon, a fact that hugely relieved Kim. The concert would not interfere with her visit to Tiffany the following Sunday.

Besides rehearsal, there were other issues waiting for Kim to work out, mostly the financial details Eloisa had delegated to her American partner. When she was not working or rehearsing, Kim spent every moment of her spare time going over the band's business arrangements with her boss from the store.

Kim noted a very significant change in Eloisa during the rehearsals. She was happier than Kim had ever seen her, but in a rather detached, spiritual manner. The transformation was very evident in the way Eloisa sang. Eloisa sang as though she were dreaming. Her voice was infinitely moving, almost unbelievably moving, perhaps like the voice of an ancient wood spirit or angel.

That Thursday the band's 15 members, plus 10 support staff, took a short flight from Danube City to the dreary Polish capitol. It was the first time out of the country for most of Kim's friends. Warsaw held few surprises for the American, but her Danubian companions were a bit dumbstruck at the barrage of signs, traffic and noise. They huddled together as they made their way to the concert hall from their hotel.

Kim sighed. This is just Warsaw, for heaven's sake. How on earth are you going to handle Berlin or Barcelona?

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That evening "Socrates' Mistresses" presented a mix of new songs and some of the original music that first made the band famous. Kim sang several solos in English, Eloisa sang some solos in Danubian with Kim backing her up, and the two sang several songs together.

Finally Eloisa worked off her stage fright. She ended the concert by performing several Danubian songs by herself, while Kim took her place among the back-up singers. The lead singer closed her eyes and focused her entire being on a single purpose in life, her music. During the final minutes of the concert Eloisa overpowered everything and everyone else, the beauty of her voice allowing everyone listening to forget the squalidness of this world for a few minutes.

As she sang with the other back-up singers, Kim watched with deep personal satisfaction as Eloisa shined on the stage. The American was a good singer, but as she watched Eloisa's soul come out with her mystical songs, she realized there was no way her own voice could possibly keep up with her friend's voice. No one's voice could keep up with Eloisa's voice.

Kim realized that Eloisa had completed her transformation from a traumatized high school student into something truly great. Her spirit finally had escaped "the dark places of life".