**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 27 � Vladik Dukov's "Proper Partner"**

Kim spent the afternoon making arrangements for Tiffany's future. There really were only two issues that needed to be addressed; where Tiffany was going to live and where she was going to work. Kim already had both details partly settled, so her calls that afternoon simply were to confirm her previous arrangements. Tiffany would start at the music store the next day. As for living arrangements, Victor Dukov reluctantly agreed to rent her a room, with the understanding she would move to Vladim's house following Kim's marriage.

Tiffany was up within just a couple of hours. She struggled off the table, wincing at the pain from her badly marked up backside. Tears rolled down her cheeks, as she again thought about the grim chain of events that brought her to her current state in this office. For a few minutes she stood with her hands on the recovery table, trying to steady herself.

Kim ordered Tiffany to go into the back office and quickly explained her job and living arrangements. Tiffany dried her eyes and partially recovered after drinking some tea. Her next statement hugely surprised Kim.

"I was curious�could you take me to the store, you know, so I would see it�maybe meet some people there?"

"Well�uh�sure�except you don't have to report in until tomorrow."

"No. I want to do it today. I want to get started, or at least know what it's gonna be like."

"Alright, I'll take you over. You really think you can make it over there with your butt like it is?"

"It's not that bad, at least if I don't sit down."

The two women left the Central Police station. In spite of Tiffany's assurance she was fine, she did have some trouble getting down the stairs. Once they were out on the street Tiffany was able to walk fairly normally, although she had to walk more slowly than usual.

At first Kim was surprised that Tiffany didn't seem to be bothered by being out on the street wearing nothing but her collar. At this stage in her sentence Kim had been mortified at the thought of being so completely exposed to the world, and thus was surprised by Tiffany's acceptance of her situation. However, during their walk Kim remembered that Tiffany already had spent nearly six weeks in the nude in the National Hospital rehab program, and before that she had worked as a stripper. Any modesty about her body had long since been purged from Tiffany's mind.

Tiffany, in fact, wanted to be exposed, and have her punished backside exposed, to the view of the population of Danube City. The punishment and her collaring marked the final break from her past. She no longer was a stripper, no longer a prostitute, no longer Raymond Stark's girlfriend, no longer an active meth and heroin user. She now was a Danubian criminal and eager to move ahead with her life as quickly as possible. Subconsciously Tiffany actually was proud of her collar and welts because of what they symbolized, a new beginning for her.

Once they arrived, Kim, following store protocol for employees, stripped off her dress and hung it up in the employees' break room. She then led Tiffany around the store and introduced her to the owner and everyone working the afternoon shift. Kim then explained how Tiffany would start out. She would begin by doing manual chores such as window washing and cleaning up until her Danubian was good enough for her to train as a cashier. Over time she would start at the information counter, to provide an English-speaking presence when Kim was not working. It was possible that later on Tiffany might be promoted to a job at the studio and recording complex, perhaps as a guide or information assistant.

Kim was amazed at how happy Tiffany was upon hearing the explanation about the routine she needed to follow and the steps she would go through to get promoted. Tiffany now knew she had escaped, really, truly escaped. Her life in Danube City hardly would be exciting, but after two years of squalid drug-addled adventures, she felt she needed a routine life and a break from "excitement".

There was another surprise for Kim coming from Tiffany that afternoon. Before they left the store Kim's client noticed disposable cameras for sale and asked Kim to buy her one. Kim then shot the entire roll on Tiffany posing in front of the store, in the store, and later in the Central Plaza. Once they got back to Dukov's office Tiffany did something that struck Kim as extremely odd; she placed her hands on the recovery table and looked back at Kim over her shoulder. The pose emphasized her welt-covered bottom. Kim took two pictures of Tiffany in that position and finished out the roll of film. Once the film was used up Kim handed the camera back to Tiffany. The criminal then got on her knees and thanked the Apprentice for doing her the favor.

Shortly afterwards Kim took her client by trolley to Victor Dukov's house. She met his family and partially ingratiated herself by kneeling when she greeted him. With that Kim got ready to leave, with the weird sensation of seeing her former boss and her former best friend standing next to each other. Tiffany knelt and in heavily accented Danubian said "Goodbye, Apprentice Lee, until we meet again."

"Goodnight Tiffany. I'll be here at 7:00 tomorrow to take you to work. I'm scheduled to be there all day, so I'll be helping you train."

With that, Kim departed to return to the other part of her life, rehearsal with Eloisa and the other singers of "Socrates' Mistresses" for the upcoming Day of the Dead Equinox ceremony.

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Kim and Sergekt returned to their classes at the National University two days after Tiffany's sentencing. For the first time they entered classes as free citizens, but the euphoria of entering the university in their new status quickly wore off. Kim and Sergekt realized their second year of classes would be extremely demanding for both of them. Sergekt, in particular, faced a rough year, studying chemistry, engineering, and geology, with the promise of a third year that would be just as difficult.

Kim did have one pleasant surprise on campus when she ran into Anyia's friend Jennifer. It turned out Jennifer had decided to stay in Upper Danubia to go to college for at least a year. Upper Danubia had grown on Jennifer during her year in high school as an exchange student. She now felt comfortable in the country and was not ready to give up her friendships with Anyia and some of her other classmates. More importantly, she was not ready to give up her relationship with her naked boyfriend. At the university caf� he was by her side, in his usual subdued manner, with his bottom pink from constantly being slapped. While they were talking Jennifer ordered her boyfriend to get her and Kim some fruit punch. The order, as every other command she gave him, was accompanied with two sharp slaps on the bottom as he left, and two more when he came back with the drinks.

Kim was surprised to find out where Jennifer was living. She was staying with her exchange-program counselor, the same woman who had punished her in high school. It turned out that her counselor had helped her enroll at the university and complete the paperwork needed to extend her student visa. Obviously Jennifer needed to behave with proper protocol at all times in the woman's house, but in public she rebelled by wearing jeans and keeping her non-Danubian hairstyle.

The grim and politically charged atmosphere on campus worried Kim and her fianc�e. The campus was bitterly divided between students coming in from the eastern provinces who supported the Greater Danubian Progressive Party, and the ones from the capitol and the surrounding Central Valley, who mostly supported the Party of the Duchy. That afternoon Kim, Sergekt, Eloisa, Dima, and Valia sat down to afternoon tea at a university caf� to discuss the country's future. Sergekt, the most politically aware of the group, explained the Duchy's political situation to his increasingly dismayed friends. He concluded:

"This country is going to be in a lot of trouble, no matter who wins the next election. Our choices are just terrible. The "Nobility" doesn't have a viable candidate and they think it's still 1945. The "Progressives" have been bought out and want to hand us over to foreign companies. The "Dissidents" couldn't organize making a pot of tea. Who will we vote for? Or maybe we'll just have election after election�"

Sergekt looked at Dima, who sighed and buried his hands in his hair. The three women had no clue what to say.

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Officer Vladik Dukov invited his partner to his father's house a couple of weeks after Kim and her friends started classes at the university. Vladik thought it would be a perfect afternoon for a quiet tryst with his lover, with Anyia in school, his fianc�e and Kimberly Lee at the university, and his parents at work.

The couple turned off their police radios and parked their bicycles near the front door of the Dukov residence. There would be a nice three hours to have some wine, a small meal, and a pleasant session of lovemaking under the sun in the back yard. The two cops had done this plenty of times before. There was no reason to suspect today's adventure would end any differently.

The two officers finished their meal and went into the back yard. Their uniforms came off and Vladik caressed his partner's lean, muscular figure, enjoying the feel of the hot sun on his backside and his lover's hardened sweaty body underneath. Maybe he was engaged, and maybe she was married, but it seemed�

The kitchen door swung open and banged loudly against the back wall. The two naked cops looked up to see Vladik's fianc�e, holding a camera. The camera clicked twice before the young interloper dropped it down her blouse. The photographer addressed the policewoman with a tone of quiet rage in her voice that frightened both cops.

"I expect you to put on your uniform and be off this property within a minute. If you take any longer than 60 seconds your section chief sees these pictures tomorrow morning, and your husband will see them tomorrow afternoon."

The policewoman jumped up to grab her uniform and quickly got dressed in the living room. As soon as she had her tunic and boots on she scrambled out the door and sped off on her bicycle. Vladik reached for his uniform as well. His fianc�e snatched away the clothes before he could reach them.

"You will not put this on. You have proven yourself unworthy to be a police officer, just like you have proven yourself unworthy to be my husband."

She reached back and pulled her silver hairpiece out of her hair, and then quickly tore off her necklace and her ring. She threw the items at Vladik's feet.

"Your father had no right to call you Vladik. You are a disgrace to our King's name, and you're a disgrace to your family's name."

Vladik had nothing to say. There was nothing for him to deny, she had seen everything with her own eyes and it was on film. There was no point in trying to persuade her to give him a second chance, in Upper Danubia a dishonored engagement never got a second chance. Finally he choked out a question:

"How did you know?"

"I could see it in your eyes, Vladik. I could see it in your eyes for more than a year, but I kept deluding myself it was my imagination. Anyhow, I have a classmate whose younger sister is a friend of Anyia. Last week she mentioned your partner's little visits to this house, and I became more suspicious. But, what I want you to know is that it was not your sister who gave you away. You gave yourself away."

"I suppose I did�"

"You made a final mistake today. I saw the bicycles and let myself in. You were very foolish to have left those bicycles there and not to have locked your front door."

"I�I don't know what to say."

"Well, I do know what to say, you dishonored liar. Your life is ruined. I will see to that. It's up to you to decide whether you want me to ruin your partner's life."

"No�you can ruin my life, but not hers."

"That's up to you. If you wish to spare your partner you will resign from the National Police, effective immediately. If you wish to spare your family and those two Americans, you will resign. That will be my revenge, destroying your career. Next Monday I will check the National Police roster. If your badge number is still active, your section chief, your partner's section chief, your partner's husband, and your father will get copies of the pictures. If your badge number is removed, then I will send the pictures and the negatives to you, after I'm absolutely sure your resignation is finalized."

With that she threw Vladik's uniform on the ground and walked out. As she went through the front door, the woman's controlled rage became a bit less controlled. She picked up Vladik's police bicycle and with all her strength flung it at Dukov's front window. It shattered several panes and broke part of the window frame. It was a very un-Danubian display of temper, but one Vladik realized he deserved.

Vladik lost no time putting on civilian clothes and folding up his uniform. He got on his bicycle and rode back to the Central Police Station. He knew his ex-fianc�e would be true to her word, whether he chose to resign or attempt to keep his job. She wanted revenge against him, not anyone else, not even his partner. However, she was perfectly willing to destroy the other people in Vladik's life if he did not accept the punishment she had laid out for him. Vladik's concern was to protect his father and his lover from his mistakes, not himself, so there was no question his police career had ended.

Vladik went up to his father's office and typed out a letter of resignation on one of the secretary's computers. He printed several copies and then went downstairs to present them to his stunned section chief. He handed his folded uniform to his chief along with the letters.

"I dishonored myself, my uniform, and my father's house. I am unfit to wear this uniform and am returning it to you."

"Have you lost your mind?! You're one of our best officers! You're up for promotion! You could be a section chief within two years!"

"No, that would never happen. I�did something that if you knew, you'd understand. It's not just my life that's involved, but also several others. It is best�for everyone�that I resign. That'll spare the honor of several innocent people, including you."

Vladik's dumbfounded boss reluctantly signed his resignation letters, realizing his star employee apparently was resigning to prevent a scandal. The section chief was torn between wondering what on earth Officer Dukov had done that was so terrible and hoping not to find out.

With that Vladik went back upstairs to his father's office. Kim was at her desk, researching some of Dukov's old cases for an upcoming class project. Kim, upon seeing Vladik in civilian clothes and with a stricken look on his face, realized something was very wrong. He sat down and buried his forehead in his hands.

"You will need to find someone else to punish your client Tiffany next year. I'm not�I'm not an officer with the National Police anymore. I'm dishonored, and I have only myself to blame."

For a moment Kim stared in silence at Vladik, who didn't even look like the same person with his broken expression. She decided it would be a good idea to get him out of the police station and then get him to talk about what happened. She told him to accompany her to the nearby river park. He listlessly complied and walked with her down several city blocks to the spot where Danube City gave way to the strip of parkland that lined the Danube River.

Kim knew, because she was not Danubian, Vladik would be able to speak to her and not have to be afraid of being judged according to the harsh standards of the Duchy's morality. Vladik did what he most needed to do, talk. In a single afternoon he had lost his fianc�e, his mistress, his job, and his self-esteem. The fallout from his mistakes would continue that evening when he would have to face his irate parents and uncle.

"I don't know myself what was wrong with me. She was perfect: smart, determined, educated, pretty, from a good family. Her parents liked me and Mother certainly liked her. She got along with Anyia�she's a woman with honor. And what did I give her up for? I gave her up for sex with a woman I preferred, but one who I knew could never be mine."

"Vladik, did you love your fianc�e at all?"

"No. The woman I love is my partner. I respect my fianc�e, but I don't love her. I don't know why. She's everything a man could possibly want, but in my heart I never appreciated her. That is why I'm so dishonored."

"Well, I'm going to be honest and tell you that, from my point of view, I think you got what you deserved. I never said anything, but I knew what was going on because it was a bit obvious. I think what you did to both those women, especially your fianc�e, was totally wrong. The only thing I can say is I do admire you for taking the blame yourself and trying to protect everyone else."

Vladik said nothing. Kim thought for a moment and then continued with a statement that over time would change how he saw himself and what he wanted from life.

"I was wondering�you know, about how you Danubians see love. Maybe you're all a bit too logical about it. It's always 'good family' and 'honor' and 'logical partner', and never 'how do you actually feel about this person'. Maybe she was too perfect for you. Maybe what you need is a woman with flaws and problems, someone you can love for who she is and how she feels about you, not for what she is. If your parents approve, that's great. If they don't�" Kim shrugged her shoulders, "that's their problem, not yours."

"That's not how we think, Kimberly. A proper partner is necessary to have tranquility in life."

"Really? You had a 'proper partner', and how tranquil was your life? You deceived and lied to everyone you knew, and you wasted four years of her life because you didn't love her. To me that's not how you should live. It's definitely not living with honor."

"Very well, Kimberly, since you seem to have the answers, let me ask you this. What do you think I should do next? What advice can you give me?"

"Really there's only two things. First, start over. Get another job, or maybe go to college. Maybe with the end of your career with the National Police Force you've been blessed instead of cursed. Think about it. Maybe now you can just enjoy yourself instead of worrying all the time about your responsibilities and what other people think about you. Then, you'll be free to find a woman who you actually like being with, instead of a 'proper partner'."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Well it's not. It's easier to do things the way you've been doing them, because everything was laid out for you. But it's obvious to me that you can't live an easy life. You need a life where you have to make your own choices and suffer the consequences. If you can accept that about yourself, then you have the chance to be happy."

Kim and Vladik came up to the grounds behind the Temple of the Ancients. Suddenly Vladik decided to go in and talk to a priest. He knelt and confessed what had happened while Kim stood nervously watching. The priest repeated much of what Kim had told Vladik, that he needed to start his life over with a better understanding of what he really wanted. The priest then suggested Vladik undergo a purification ritual and perform public penance during the week leading up to the Day of the Dead Ceremony. Public penance would allow Vladik time to divide his life between who he had been up until that day and who he would become after the Day of the Dead. Vladik agreed, nodded, and stood up.

Two female attendants dressed in black robes took Vladik by the hands to a stone platform behind the main Temple building. There was a fire-pit with an active fire at one end, and a small prayer stand at the other end.

Vladik stood at attention in front of the prayer stand. The two attendants quickly undressed him. One of the women handed Kim his wallet, watch, keys, and a religious medallion. The rest of Vladik's belongings went into the fire.

Vladik then knelt at the prayer stand, as the priest stood in front of him and an attendant stood to either side. There was a lengthy set of ancient prayers that Kim could not understand, some burning of incense, then more prayers. Vladik then began a series of confessions. The priest was much more interested in Vladik's habit of lying than in his physical acts of adultery. Merely confessing to a lie was not enough for the priest. As he confessed to each incident in his life, Vladik had to go into detail concerning what he actually said, why he told the lie, and its result. Kim could tell that Vladik was becoming increasingly scared, because his confessions were far more numerous and detailed than he had anticipated. It was obvious the priest was determined to dig deep into Vladik's soul, to find out what made his mind work and what motivated him. In the end, Kim found out much more about his secret thoughts than she cared to know.

The priest asked Vladik what he wanted for his future, but he only could answer by referring to his past. He wanted to live differently, but wasn't sure how. To Kim's surprise the priest did not have much advice, apart from telling him the obvious, that he needed to be more truthful. However, Dukov's disgraced son now faced a radical change in his daily life, which would last at least through the upcoming Day of the Dead ceremony.

The priest began Vladik's public penance by collaring him. The collar was a special Temple issue instead of a standard Ministry of Justice issue. It was smooth instead of grooved, lacked the metal loop, and had no transmitter. It could be unlocked by a priest, taken off, and reused. Its purpose was not to control Vladik's movements, but rather mark him as serving public penance. The rules Vladik would have to live under were very similar to the rules of a "willingly repentant" criminal such as Malka Chorno. Like a convicted criminal, he was prohibited from wearing any clothing at any time, the standards of criminal protocol applied, and he could not take a seat on public transportation. The only difference was the option of ending his penance whenever he chose. In Vladik's case, the priest assumed he would serve his penance up through the Day of the Dead ceremony and participate in the march, but then turn in his collar and start the second phase of his life once the march was completed.

It was getting dark by the time Vladik and Kim left the Temple. It felt extremely odd for Kim to be out on the street with Vladik, their roles reversed with her wearing normal clothes while he walked alongside collared and naked. Finally they boarded a trolley and headed back to Spokesman Dukov's house.

Dukov and Maritza both were waiting in the living room with plenty of questions. Upon seeing their son nude and wearing a penance collar, their questions about what happened multiplied. Vladik, now in his new role of performing public penance, had to kneel upon greeting his father, who still was a public official. Dukov did not give Vladik permission to stand up.

The news that day for Vladik�s parents had gone from bad to worse. First came word of Vladik's resignation through his boss. The section chief called Dukov, wondering if the Spokesman had any clue that would explain his son's sudden resignation. Dukov was infuriated upon hearing the news, not so much over the resignation itself, but because Vladik had not talked to him about it. Then came a call from Maritza with information about their smashed front window and the engagement jewelry thrown in the back yard. Maritza had thought something must have gone wrong between Kim and Sergekt, but when her husband relayed the information about Vladik's resignation it became logical to assume the engagement jewelry must have been from Vladik's fianc�e, not Kim. Dukov, extremely worried, made a series of phone calls but was unable to find out anything more.

Vladik, his head still pressed to the ground, filled in the missing information. He admitted to having an affair with his police partner and that afternoon his fianc�e had walked in on them. That prompted a round of angry questions from Maritza, which brought out the detail that Vladik's fianc�e had suspected the affair for more than a year and finally captured proof of it on film. The threat of exposure explained his sudden resignation from the National Police, because he and his partner had been conducting their affair during hours they were supposed to be working.

Maritza was livid. Her intense anger frightened Kim, given that she never had seen the woman lose her temper any time before. She tore into her son about disgracing the Dukov name and ruining his chances to marry into one of Upper Danubia's "best" families. And for what? Sex with a vulgar, skinny, ugly, uneducated peasant, and one who already was married on top of everything else. You gave up your future for that?

As Maritza continued to berate and insult her kneeling son, Kim realized something about the elder Dukovs. It turned out they never had fully recovered psychologically from their sentences and were determined to move the family as high as possible through "proper" marriages for their children. Kim realized Maritza had gone to great lengths to set up meetings between Vladik and several young women from the country's "old blood" and was enormously pleased to see him engaged to a fine young woman. Kim also realized Vladik had become engaged to placate his parents. Try as he might, he never actually loved the "proper" young woman to whom he was engaged. Now he was paying a terrible price for his misdirected efforts.

Maritza landed several vicious kicks at her son's upturned bottom and then stormed out of the room. For several minutes the room was full of tense silence, with Vladim Dukov wondering if he should ask Kim to leave and Kim wanting to tell him to let his son get off his knees.

In spite of the immediate crisis, Vladim's mind already was moving ahead. He broke the silence by asking Vladik how long he planned to perform public penance, and then what he wanted to do afterwards. Vladik, still kneeling, responded that he figured going to the country's military academy would be a good option. He didn't see why he couldn't be a good military officer and two years of academy training would be waved because of his police experience. As for the penance, he wasn't sure how long that would last.

"Very well, Vladik. I'll make some calls to assure you receive a slot in the January class. In the meantime you'd better get a job that keeps you busy in the evenings. I can tell you your mother isn't going to want to see you for a while."

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Kim took Vladik to the music store the following day to see what work might be available for him. The other employees gathered around, shocked at seeing Officer Vladik Dukov out of his uniform and performing public penance. The store's owner did have an appropriate job for Vladik, as a temporary contractor to recommend upgrades for the store's security system and run checks on the wiring and fire safety equipment. Another tasking would be to create an emergency evacuation plan for both the store and nearby studio complex. The work easily would last until Vladik's Academy date in January, but with the condition he had to remain naked during working hours, no matter what. Vladik agreed, and simply decided to extend his public penance until the end of the year.

As Vladik started walking around the store with a blueprint of the building's wiring in his hands, he noticed Tiffany Walker cleaning windows and dusting the windowsills. Of all the people in the store astounded to see the disgraced cop out of his uniform, she was by far the most surprised, given that he so recently had been her arresting officer and had switched her just three weeks before. Vladik realized he owed her an explanation.

Because he was a contractor being paid by the task instead of a regular employee, Vladik was free to take breaks when he wanted. When Tiffany had her lunch hour, he decided to try to talk to her, in spite of a language barrier that still was quite formidable. He spoke a small amount of English and she spoke a small amount of Danubian. Between them they had a dictionary, so with a lot of effort they were able to communicate. Tiffany accepted Vladik's invitation for lunch at a nearby caf�, partially flattered that he was paying attention to her, and partially curious to find out what had happened to him.

As they began trying to talk to each other, they stopped referring to each other as Criminal # 98946 and Officer Dukov. From now on it would be Tiffany, (or "Deevonay", as he pronounced it) and Vladik. They were equals and, at least for the time-being, co-workers. The relationship they had as police officer and criminal no longer had any relevance in their lives, because Vladik himself now was much closer to being a criminal than to being a police officer.

Tiffany listened to Vladik's story about his fianc�e, his partner, and his forfeited police career. As first she couldn't understand why Vladik had to resign, but finally understood when he told her that he and his partner had been conducting their affair during working hours. She realized there was much more than just the detail about the misuse of work hours, some cultural stuff she couldn't yet understand. Tiffany's judgment was much less harsh than even Kim's had been. She mostly felt sorry for Vladik, because he seemed like a decent person, even if he was somewhat flawed.

Tiffany went home that night to Victor Dukov's house. She knelt and greeted him, then got up to join him and his family for dinner. As Victor conversed with his wife in Danubian, Tiffany heard Vladik's name mentioned. In spite of her very limited Danubian vocabulary, Tiffany could tell from Victor's expressions and gestures that he saw his nephew as a dishonored fool.

After dinner Criminal # 98946 thought about her own situation, her mind functioning more clearly now that she was clean. Tiffany marveled at her own recovery. She had not taken any mind-altering substance for more than eight weeks. She also had been celibate the entire time, but did not miss sex in the least. Her sexual desires had burned out, at least for the time being. Whether or not her sexual drive ever would come back was a question that still had to be answered. She presumed, over time, she might be able to enjoy sex again, assuming it was with the right guy. The right guy�

Tiffany's thoughts shifted to the disgraced young cop. She cringed at remembering the switching he had given her, but she did not hold that against Vladik. He simply had been doing his job, and she had returned to Upper Danubia knowing she faced physical punishment. The experience had been horrible, but Tiffany was quite glad to have endured it because it removed some of the self-hatred and guilt from her past. She then thought about the comment he made immediately before he began punishing her, that he wanted her to show him courage and honor. The comment made her aware of an important detail about Vladik; even though he had to punish her, he cared about her.

As Tiffany thought about Vladik, she pondered what the possibilities might be for a relationship with him, whether it be friendship or perhaps something more. She knew his life was in crisis and he could use a friend, someone not connected with his past and who would not judge him. She went to sleep promising herself she would try to get to know him better, and see what might come out of it.

The following morning, when he saw her at work, Vladik asked Tiffany to accompany him on the upcoming Day of the Dead march. Tiffany happily agreed, relieved not to have to endure that strange experience alone. Vladik�s simple gesture of friendship signaled the end of Tiffany�s isolation and the real beginning of her redemption.

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The night of the Equinox, the members of Socrates' Mistresses led hymns in the Plaza of the Ancients. This was the first year the band would sing instead of march, its 15 members performing dressed in black robes. Several cameramen were filming the concert for footage to later include in music videos. Eloisa and her singers outdid themselves presenting the most mournful music Upper Danubia had ever created as the marchers moved out and the religious ceremonies began. The music moved many members of the public to tears, but there was no applause. The morose atmosphere of the Day of the Dead demanded somber behavior from the audience. They were to listen respectfully, but not make any noise themselves.

Vladik and Tiffany marched out together, with torches in their hands and their bodies covered in white body paint with black highlights. They marched in a single-file column with 1,300 other criminals and Temple penitents. A second column of the same size headed off in the opposite direction with the plan to reunite the following morning at the rest camp at the other end of Danube City. Tiffany was quite happy to have Vladik marching in front of her during this bizarre and rather frightening experience.

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The Equinox prayers were very painful for Vladim and Maritza Dukov. In contrast with the previous year, the only member of the family present with them was Anyia. As she knelt praying, Maritza increasingly became burdened with guilt over her treatment of Vladik, and saw very clearly she had to apologize to him.

Spokesman Vladim Dukov's visions terrified him. He saw Upper Danubia as an impoverished, polluted, deforested wasteland, the historical buildings of Danube City torn down and the city's smoky streets jammed with cars. Gangs roamed freely, attacking at random, while desperate pensioners stood outside the dilapidated Parliament Building clamoring for what little the government could provide them in food relief. The plazas and parks were full of drug addicts and the hospitals full of AIDS patients. Billboards and advertising for foreign products cluttered the landscape, but from all the closed stores and factories it was obvious Upper Danubia no longer was producing anything, not even food. As Dukov's mind traveled through his nightmarish vision of his country, it seemed the only industries doing well were casinos and sex tourism.

An even more frightening scene filled the Spokesman's mind, as his imagination carried him east to the recently deforested mountains. Dukov watched as heavy rains washed vast amounts of mud from nearby hills into the Rika Chorna Reservoir. Suddenly several huge landslides plunged into the lake, breaking the dam and sending floodwaters downstream. The wall of water annihilated two provincial capitols and many villages before completely leveling Danube City. Dukov's last vision was of a Danubian flag floating in muddy water. He caught a very quick glimpse of King Vladik's empty throne, and then came back to the real world.

Maritza looked over at her husband's terrified, gasping face.

"Vladim! Vladim! What happened? What did you see!?"

"I�I watched our country die, Maritza, the entire country. I actually witnessed the last day of the Duchy."

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The following day Vladik stayed with Tiffany while she picked up her winter cape and boots. Like Kim two years before her, Tiffany was dismayed when she pulled it out and saw what a ghastly piece of clothing it was.

"This is shit! I can't wear this!"

"No Deevonay, what you say, true. Criminals no wear cape. Boot yes, cape no."

"Fuck!"

Tiffany went upstairs to get her criminal number from Kim. After kneeling and doing the protocol greeting, Tiffany jumped on the issue of the cape. Kim responded.

"Well, I got through two winters with wearing that thing maybe ten times altogether. The truth is they don't want you to use it, it's just for cold snaps and if you have to be outdoors for more than a few minutes." Kim then explained the survival strategy for wearing nothing but boots during the winter, ducking into buildings whenever possible and jogging if it was necessary to go more than a couple of blocks without having a building to warm up in.

Tiffany then went with Vladik to the Temple of the Ancients and watched as he knelt to address the priest. Vladik told the priest he wanted to continue his penance until the end of the year and asked for a pair of Temple shoes to protect his feet from the increasingly cold pavement of Danube City's streets. The priest gave him a pair of black boots with the Temple emblem. For Vladik there would be no cape. Persons performing penance stayed nude, no matter how cold it was outside.

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September became October as Danube City enjoyed the final sunny days leading up to the fall rains. During the weeks following the Day of the Dead ceremony Vladik never missed an opportunity to invite Tiffany out for lunch. He found her fascinating, with her tall thin body and strange hair that contrasted with anything a Danubian woman would wear. Her personality fascinated him as well, because she was so completely different from either his ex-fianc�e or his ex-partner. Even Tiffany's past, which would have disqualified her as a partner for most Danubian men, fascinated Vladik. Tiffany was as "un-proper" as a woman could possibly be, but Vladik found himself wanting to spend more and more time with her.

During October Tiffany became increasingly acclimated to her life in Danube City, but not because of Kim. At the beginning Kim had expected to take time away from her studies and rehearsals to spend with her client, showing her around and teaching her what she needed to know to function as a criminal in Danube City. However, while Kim had lunch in the employee break-room with Eloisa and the other female vocalists, Tiffany was nowhere in sight, and neither was Vladik. When her shift ended, it always was Vladik, not Kim, who accompanied Tiffany back to Victor Dukov's house. Several times Kim and Eloisa watched dumbfounded as Vladik and Tiffany walked towards the river during their breaks, smiling and bantering with each other. Eloisa commented:

"If those two start going out, they are going to be the weirdest couple in Danube City."

Kim thought about Eloisa's comment, but did not agree. There was nothing odd about the coincidence that Vladik and Tiffany were rebuilding their lives at the same time and thus would be attracted to each other. They both were in disgrace, they both were burdened with guilt from their pasts, and they both were starting from nothing.

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The first Saturday in October Tiffany and Vladik went to the Socrates Club for the first time. Tiffany actually liked the club, but her companion was a bit nervous upon seeing several criminals he had punished while still a police officer. Finally he calmed down and focused on his own situation instead of worrying about what the others thought about him.

As he sat with Tiffany, the emotion of the past three weeks built up in Vladik Dukov's heart. A month before he never could have imagined he would be sitting at a table at the famous criminal's club, as naked as any criminal and struggling with his growing feelings towards a dishonored woman who was a recovering drug addict and former prostitute. Then the words of Kimberly Lee came back to him� "Maybe what you need is a woman with flaws and problems, someone you can love for who she is and how she feels about you, not for what she is."

With that thought on his mind, Vladik invited Tiffany to dance. Vladik had no real plans, other than to enjoy Tiffany's company. For the first time in his life he did not have to worry about protocol, furthering his career, acting "properly", or trying to impress anyone. He simply could enjoy Tiffany for what she was to him, a friend and a companion.

Tiffany was both very excited and very nervous as she felt Vladik's body brushing against hers. She had such a degraded view of herself that she found it hard to believe that she had anything to offer someone like Vladik. However, like her partner, he could give her something that she desperately needed from him, companionship and a friend who seemed not eager to judge her. At the same time she felt flattered that a man who just a month ago was so much above her socially now was accessible and treating her like he would treat any other woman. For the first time in several years Tiffany faced the hope of having a "normal" relationship. It was for sure that Vladik was nothing like Ray, nor was he like any of her former customers.

The ex-cop and the ex-stripper left the club after dancing, since there was no point in staying once the music stopped. Tiffany's understanding of Danubian was not nearly at the proficiency necessary to follow the speeches from her fellow-criminals. The issue of going to an "intimacy room" never came up that night, because neither was quite ready to make that emotional leap in their relationship. However, by the time they finished their last dance it was obvious both of them were moving in that direction. They went home by trolley, standing up according to the rule regarding the use of public transportation by criminals. Vladik kissed Tiffany goodnight, each of them enjoying the feel of the other's bare body as they hugged on Victor Dukov's front porch.

When she went upstairs into her room, Tiffany studied her bare figure in the mirror. She was surprised by how good she looked, her body fully recovered from the past two years of abuse. The only signs remaining from her drug habit were the faint remains of needle-track scars in her arms and a cut on her forehead she received from a drug dealer who had double-crossed her and knocked her unconscious. She struck several poses, and then turned her back to the mirror to study her bottom. Tiffany always had been proud of her backside, which now looked pretty good now that it had filled out a bit and the welts from her punishment were completely healed. Maybe she had something to offer him after all.

Tiffany still faced a difficult life, largely because of her ongoing cravings, which popped up unexpectedly. She had a bad one just the past week, to the point she actually looked around Danube City to see if she could find someone selling. However, true to Kim's word, it seemed drugs were completely unavailable within the Danube City collar zone. The only legal items were beer, wine, and cigarettes. The only alcohol sold to criminals was the weak and very filling beer served at the Socrates Club. The law prohibited wine and cigarettes from being sold to collared criminals.

Tiffany realized she now had a much more important reason to stay clean than the simple unavailability of drugs. She had hope of a relationship with Vladik. He was a very flawed person, of course. He wouldn't have lost his job as a police officer had his faults not caught up with him. However, he also was a courteous and resilient man, already thinking more about his future in the Danubian Army than his past in the Danubian National Police. Vladik Dukov gave Tiffany Walker a purpose in life, something much more than simply wanting to stay alive for the sake of staying alive.

**Chapter 28 � Candidate Vladim Dukov**

By the beginning of October, Upper Danubia had reached an important crossroads in its history. The "Progressives", now aided by corporate campaign donors and foreign professional political advisors, were well organized and campaigning aggressively. Their advisors had developed a slick advertising campaign against the Party of the Duchy in particular and against traditional Danubian values in general. Their candidate was a charismatic banking executive from Rika Chorna. He had a flamboyant personality and shady past, but was a gifted speaker and accustomed to appearing on television.

The opposition candidate mobilized the anger of the eastern part of the country into a populist movement of uneducated voters to oust the country's old leaders once and for all. It looked like Upper Danubia was about to be thrust, completely and fully, into a global economy of which its people understood nothing. The capitol's intellectuals saw disaster looming in the frantic rush for change, but were unsure what to do about it.

The first priority for the conservatives was to choose a viable candidate for Prime Minister, someone respected and not associated with the recently defeated government. Finally, in a closed meeting of top conservative leaders, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court suggested an unlikely candidate, a complete political outsider he had confronted many times in court when he was still a prosecutor. Most of the others reluctantly agreed. It was a choice being made out of desperation.

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Two weeks after the Equinox, as Kim and Tatiana were reading over their first major college assignments for the year, a group of old-guard Danubian political leaders entered the office. The two Apprentices were a bit awestruck, since the visitors included the country's ex-Prime Minister, several current Cabinet Ministers, and even the country's Grand Duke, who was a direct descendent of King Vladik the Defender.

The men formed an archaic and pompous group, but they greeted Dukov fully understanding the future of their country was at stake. The group also had enough common sense to realize their time had passed. They no longer were in any position to lead the Danubian people, which was why they had come to the Spokesman's office.

Dukov came out into the waiting area, a bit taken aback by the presence of men to whom he owed allegiance as a public official. He realized that was about to change when the group saluted him. Dukov invited his unexpected guests into the back office, while Kim and the two secretaries scrambled to find enough chairs, make tea, and gather up whatever refreshments they could find from other offices. They quickly entered the back room, distributed seating, teacups, and plates of sweet rolls. The three assistants then saluted and backed out. Kim glanced at Vladim Dukov, sitting at his desk. He looked very nervous.

Kim returned to her reading, although she hardly could concentrate, knowing something very important was happening on the other side of that closed door just a couple of meters away. After two hours the dignitaries came back out, as the three women stood to salute them yet again. Kim noticed the visitors seemed to leave in a much better mood than they had been when they went in.

As soon as the political leaders left, the three women rushed into Dukov's back office. He was standing behind his desk, pale and with a stunned look on his face. After a moment he seemed to partially collect his thoughts.

"I need to meet with this city's other Spokespersons," he began quietly in Danubian. "We will reassign most of my clients, except�well, three�three who I think I�absolutely need to keep. I�I need to have you train under someone else, maybe Spokesman Havlakt�because�I am�I will not be available. And�Tatiana�and Kimberly, I am leaving this office to you."

Dukov turned to his secretaries.

"You need to help me transfer the files. The path of my life�is not to be a Spokesman anymore."

Kim and her companions assumed the worst, that perhaps Dukov had been fired for his political activities. "Spokesman�what happened? Are you in trouble?"

"Trouble? Yes, in a manner of speaking. I am in deep trouble, because the tranquility of my life has just ended. I have been called upon to change my path, and I must serve."

For the first time during the time she had known him, Kim saw Dukov a bit disoriented. He stared straight ahead as he spoke.

"Kimberly, I believe you have an expression in your country: 'no favor goes unpunished' or something similar to that, is that not so?"

"It's 'no good deed goes unpunished', Spokesman Dukov."

"Yes, yes. 'No good deed goes unpunished.' That is indeed the expression you have." Dukov took a very deep breath and continued. "I am not a politician. I never wanted to be a politician. But�now, because of what I wrote earlier this year, and that speech I gave last month...I�have become�a politician. The ex-Prime Minister and the Grand Duke...they want me to lead the Party of the Duchy�in the upcoming election. If they�I mean we�win, I would become this country's next Prime Minister."

"Spokesman Dukov, that's great! Congratulations!"

Dukov angrily shook his head. "This is not something I want to do, Kimberly! At first I refused. I have never been a member of the Party of the Duchy. I do not support much of what they have promoted. In fact, I supported the 'Progressives' until all those foreign advisors took over and poisoned their souls. I want reform, but not reform as the foreigners define it. We need to make our own path for reform, not walk in one laid out by foreign money."

Dukov seemed to recover from the shock of the sudden upheaval of his life. His mind began focusing on his new task, to become a Spokesman for the Danubian nation.

"I do not like the 'Nobility'. I never liked them and I let them know it. I warned those leaders I would demand changes in their party's policies if they insist on running me as their candidate. The conservatives do not really like me either, but they seem to think I am the only public figure from Danube City with enough respect in the east to win the next election. For once they seem more concerned about the Duchy's future than about themselves. They conceded to my wishes on the policy matters, which gave me no choice other than to accept the candidacy. I now am obligated to win an election�as the candidate for the conservatives."

Dukov's mood seemed to shift, as he looked out his window at the distant mountains that rose above the housetops of Danube City. Those same mountains separated the capitol from the Duchy's interior and divided the country in more ways than one. The Spokesman's voice sounded much more distant to his three assistants as he concluded:

"There is much anger in the east, and right now it is a very destructive anger. The government never really understood the rage that arose from all those burnt villages is quite justified, not until it was too late. By ignoring what happened in the east last year the Prime Minister forfeited his right to govern. That is what I told him, and he actually accepted my rebuke. However, the message I must convey to the eastern provinces is that destroying ourselves as a nation is not the way to address that anger. We must not abolish who we are just because of a fire and some foreign money. I will speak for both past and the future of our country, and I can only hope enough of our people will listen."

With that Spokesman Vladim Dukov began the complicated task of ending his career. Within an hour he was giving an impromptu speech to the city's other Spokespersons and seeking their approval to leave his position. Following the official blessing by Dukov's peers, the staff from the 20 offices spent a very long night dividing up his caseload and transporting files.

The following morning Spokesman Vladim Dukov officially turned in his resignation, as did his two secretaries. They would follow him to his new position and cast their fortunes with his. Shortly afterwards he appeared on television in the National Parliament as the official leading candidate for the Party of the Duchy. He lost no time making everyone realize he planned to take both the party and Upper Danubia in a totally new direction and in detail laid out policy changes he planned to pursue if elected.

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Spokesman Vladim Dukov proved to be a formidable candidate and a huge asset to the faltering Party of the Duchy during the days following his appointment. His years in court made him a good public speaker and skilled debater. He had a dignified, subdued presence that contrasted with his flamboyant opponent. At first the opposition's foreign advisors scoffed at facing a public defense attorney as their main opponent. However, within a week they began to view Dukov's candidacy with some concern, because it turned out he was indeed the one public figure with enough credibility to possibly win an election for the "Nobility".

The campaign quickly got ugly. Dukov found himself being attacked for not only his political beliefs, but also for his personal life. The public learned he had been a convicted criminal for five years, and learned why. It turned out he and his wife had been members of a radical group of dissident students 30 years before. Oh, yes, "Vladim the Subversive" may look serious and quiet, but secretly he has extremely anti-democratic and anti-free market ideas. The past doesn't lie.

Dukov countered by explaining, in detail, the student group, his role in it, the conditions of his sentence, and how his personal and political beliefs had evolved since he was sentenced. Instead of trying to avoid the issue, he agreed the question was a reasonable one, and tried to address it as honestly as he could. The attack against his past backfired to some extent, because in answering the questions about his early political activities Dukov had the opportunity to explain why he believed what he believed and how his ideas had formed over time.

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The election brought out a serious division in Danubian society. The division between the two parties was not just geographical and ideological, but also professional. The ex-Spokesman's team consisted mostly of legal experts, a retired police commander, two provincial governors, and several judges, while the "Progressives" top group mostly consisted of economists, stockbrokers, and bankers. As for Danube City's businesses, the owners were evenly divided between the "Nobility" and the "Progressives". Older, more established businesses and trade unions mostly supported Dukov, but younger business owners, entrepreneurs, and importers mostly supported the opposition.

The owner of the Socrates Club and the owners of several music stores pledged their support to Dukov. They genuinely believed that Dukov was the best candidate, but also had a personal interest in seeing the "Nobility" win the election. If the Greater Danubian Progressive Party won and proceeded with its plan to build prisons, the decades-old Socrates Club would be put out of business, with all of its clients locked up. Dukov enjoyed additional support from the music storeowners largely for the same reason. With criminals in confinement, the tradition of Danubian musical groups would disappear, and with it, the entire independent Danubian music scene.

Immediately after ex-Spokesman Vladim Dukov announced his candidacy as the leader of the Party of the Duchy, Sergekt called Dima and Eloisa to discuss what role, if any "Socrates' Mistresses" might have in the upcoming election. The couple adamantly wanted to provide whatever assistance to Dukov's candidacy possible. They met with the band's other 13 members that evening to make sure no one had any objections to participating in Dukov's campaign. The meeting was mostly formality, because the band members were personally indebted to Dukov from the time they had been criminals. All of them enthusiastically supported the suggestion the band support Dukov's candidacy.

Eloisa, Dima and Sergekt went to Dukov's campaign office to meet with him. They walked though a barrage of reporters and conservative dignitaries, then saluted as they greeted him. Dukov greeted the band's two leaders with enthusiasm. He made no effort to conceal his gratitude. His candidacy needed any help it could get, and the support of Upper Danubia's most popular band was a tremendous asset to his campaign. The support of "Socrates' Mistresses" offset some of the publicity the "Progressives" were receiving from their foreign donors. Sergekt promised performances in four different provincial capitols and a final one in the capitol.

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Dukov�s candidacy changed Kim�s personal plans, the most important of which was the date she and Sergekt planned to get married. At first Kim wondered how she could salvage her wedding plans now that Upper Danubia�s political situation had so completely intruded into her life. It was obvious Dukov would not be able to take time out from his campaign to attend her wedding, but to Kim it was extremely important that he and his family participate. Finally she accepted the obvious, there was no way she could get married in October and have the wedding she wanted. Marrying Sergekt would have to wait. Kim brought up the problem to her fianc�e, who sadly agreed. They could not get married until after the election.

Kim called Cindy to ask her to postpone her family�s trip. Cindy changed the reservations their parents, but decided to keep her own reservation. She was working on her M.A in political science, and decided to be present for Upper Danubia�s election. She commented to Kim. �You guys are going up against American political advisors. Some of those consultants are people I�ve actually heard of. Let me come out and see if I can do anything to help Dukov�s campaign.� Kim agreed, and a couple of days later picked up Cindy at the airport.

Cindy brought with her a suitcase of political science journal articles and campaign guidebooks to prepare some briefings for Dukov. She spent hours in the former Spokesman�s vacant office watching the opposition�s campaign ads and having Kim translate them for her. As Kim watched her sister pore over her research material and prepare PowerPoint presentations, she realized what Cindy wanted to accomplish. Her ambitions went way beyond simply collecting research material for her Master�s thesis. Kim�s sister wanted to take part in altering the course of history.

Finally, on October 18, Kim�s birthday and the date she had hoped to get married, she instead sat with her sister in a room with Dukov and other Party of the Duchy dignitaries. Cindy gave her first presentation, speaking with confidence about campaign strategies while Kim translated. Dukov listened attentively to the young woman, who for free, was giving him the political advice he needed to counter his well-funded opposition.

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The week after Cindy gave her first briefing, �Socrates Mistresses� accompanied Vladim Dukov to Rika Chorna and gave a concert during a party rally. The presence of Upper Danubia�s most popular band helped Dukov�s cause in that city tremendously. However, when the band got back to the Danubian capitol, there was trouble waiting for them. A group of attorneys from the band�s record label had traveled to Danube City and demanded to speak alone with Kim. At first the owner of her music store, Spokesman Havlakt, and Dima wanted to accompany her. She decided no, I�ll see them myself and find out what they want.

Kim sat in a conference room full of rather sinister-looking older professionals. This group was a bit of a shock to her, given that she had always been treated well, and in a friendly manner, by the representatives of her firm. The lawyers quickly made it clear why they were in Danube City. They explained to Kim that by supporting Dukov �Socrates Mistresses� had embarrassed the company. There were very important business interests depending on a victory by the Greater Danubian Progressive Party. �We thought you had things figured out, Miss Lee. Our associates are advising the �Progressives� and paying for their campaign. We have the Embassy involved. And here you and your little criminal friends go off and sing for that group of has-beens. What are you trying to do to us?�

Kim sat in shock as the lawyers made it very clear that under no circumstances were the members of �Socrates Mistresses� to offer any further support to Vladim Dukov. They insinuated that Kim would end up in serious legal trouble in the US were she not to adhere to their advice, and the group would lose its contract.

Kim walked out of the meeting in shock, while the lawyers were confident they had made their point and there would be no further trouble from �Socrates� Mistresses�. Alone, Kim left the hotel and walked past the old city wall. She continued through the quiet streets of the capitol to the Plaza of the Ancients, her mind in turmoil over how to react to this sudden sinister turn of events. Then, by pure chance, she ran across Dima, who was visiting some former co-workers at his old restaurant. As Dima joined her, Kim wondered if it really was chance, or fate, that had led her to Eloisa�s long-suffering fianc�e. She told him about the meeting, and about the threat to the group�s contract. His response somewhat surprised her. There was no hesitation whatsoever in his voice.

�Kimberly, you should understand that the path of our lives is to sacrifice to safeguard our honor, our friendships, and our nation. We will stand with Spokesman Dukov and we will suffer the consequences, just like we stood by Eloisa and suffered the consequences. What I believe is the path of our lives is to be Danubian, not a bunch of rich singers.�

�But�just like that? You really don�t care about�the band?�

�I care about the band. But without our honor, our music means nothing. I never believed it was the path of our lives to be rich. I never felt good about that, all those foreign concerts and all that money. Now the money is going away, and I�m glad about it, because there won�t be anything left except the music and our honor. You can ask any of the others, if you think I�m not speaking for them. What happened at your meeting doesn�t matter to me at all. Tomorrow we�re going back east and we�re singing, no matter what the record label says.�

Kim nodded. Dima had told her, deep down, what she really wanted to hear. Finally she responded ��then I�m one of you�I�m Danubian, and I�ll sing for Spokesman Dukov.�

The next day Kim was supposed to have a follow-up meeting with her record label�s attorneys. She missed that meeting to travel to the other end of Upper Danubia to sing at a campaign rally for the Party of the Duchy. She dedicated the final song of the concert, the English rendition of �The Wall that Divides my Soul�, to the corporate lawyers by name. That night the infuriated legal team left Danube City to return to New York.

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The recording company responded to the group�s arrogance by filing several lawsuits against the members of the band, and against Kim in particular. When the corporate lawyers called her to announce the pending suit, Kim's answer stunned them: "Well, you can sue me all you want, but if you do, you'd better hope your candidates win. If Spokesman Dukov wins, you won't collect shit from me."

The company announced the distribution of the group's music would stop immediately. Overnight CD's from "Socrates' Mistresses" vanished from music stores worldwide. Radio stations stopped playing the popular music to the ire of the group's many fans. Even DVD's from the Gaul movie were pulled from distribution.

The day after the lawsuits were announced and their group's music was pulled from the shelves, Kim and Eloisa gave the first out of a series of press conferences to explain the group's position and why they felt helping Vladim Dukov's campaign by touring for him was so important. During the conferences Eloisa and Kim showed themselves as stubborn and determined young women, loyal to ideas and principles much more important to them than their careers or contracts. The press conferences made the group's die-hard fans support them even more, because now they had rebelled against the international music establishment. The music from "Socrates' Mistresses" suddenly became subversive and underground due to the group's ostracism from the mainstream music industry, and very much in demand.

The entire conflict between "Socrates' Mistresses" and the recording company made the group's outlook in life much more nationalistic. As they toured the eastern provinces, the singers performed their most traditional songs, along with a new song that was a tribute to King Vladik the Defender. The group also, at the insistence of Kim, always performed "The Wall that Divides My Soul." That song had special meaning for Kim, now that she had been hit with several lawsuits. For her there could be no going back to the U.S., possibly for the rest of her life. The audiences were well aware of the huge sacrifice the band's members were making to support their candidate, which made many of them re-consider their opposition to Vladim Dukov.

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While the ex-Spokesman was out of the house campaigning in the eastern provinces, Kim noticed huge changes in the lives of Maritza, Vladik, and Anyia. All three members of the household struggled to redefine their relationships with each other and how they viewed themselves as individuals. Anyia and Vladik seemed to exchange personalities, while Maritza came to terms with Vladik's faults and Anyia's sudden push for maturity.

Over the fall Anyia's social life changed completely. She dropped her friendships with her old group of rebellious friends to associate more with the sons and daughters of other politicians. She dumped her soccer hooligan boyfriend and began dressing and acting much more seriously. Dukov's daughter did not become any nicer, but her rebelliousness evolved into a hardened support of her father in both her school and among her friends. She studied and struggled to understand the issues her father was confronting during the campaign. Whenever she was not in school, Anyia wanted to accompany Dukov while he was campaigning. She became a fixture of his campaign appearances, always at his side, or with his two secretaries, or flirting with the teenaged sons of his new political associates.

Vladik always had been the serious son of the family. He no longer wanted to perform that role. He used his penance as a justification to excuse himself from his father's political life and to live quietly. During the fall Vladik paid only passing attention to his father's struggles on the campaign trail. Vladik's focus now was on trying to determine who he was as a person and what he really wanted from his life. He was determined to do the one thing he had never done before, live quietly, live for the moment, and try to find peace with himself. He stopped worrying about the future or what anyone thought about him.

Maritza struggled with the changes in her son and daughter. Maritza's entire world was shifting under her. Vladik seemed to have lost his direction in life and any personal ambition. Anyia was trying to act like she was 30 years old, even though she still was in high school. The only person in the household who seemed to have any reasonable sense of direction was Kim, with her upcoming marriage, her singing, and her studies.

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The ex-Spokesman's candidacy took a much more patriotic approach than he originally had planned as his campaign progressed. He emphasized the need for the Danubian nation to do things the Danubian way. He laid out a recovery plan for the east and an over-all program of incremental upgrades to the nation's water supply and hydroelectric power generators. There would be a rational forest management plan and upgrades to schools and public buildings. There would be educational reform and a huge push for AIDS and drug-awareness education. There would be some road improvements, but no major construction of new roads, because under his administration the prohibition against private cars would remain in place. He argued passionately to keep Upper Danubia's justice system intact and rejected the idea of building prisons. Dukov also emphasized changes in his country�s foreign policy. He would re-negotiate Upper Danubia�s entry into the European Union and several other international organizations, feeling the current pending arrangements were giving too much away.

Dukov campaigned desperately, because he was very aware of what would happen to his country if his party did not win. He now had a personal reason to win as well. The members of "Socrates' Mistresses" faced financial ruin if he lost, because there was no question they would be sued in Danubian courts. If he won, he would have the power of his government to protect them; if he lost there would be very little he could do for them. He was angry about the threats made against his supporters, and that personal anger drove him as he gave his speeches in city after city.

While Dukov waged his campaign in the streets and city plazas, his opposition waged their campaign on television. Campaign ads attacked Dukov as being naive and his party as a relic of the past. The real future lay with complete integration into the world economy. There were dire threats about what would happen under a Dukov government, with foreign companies and international trade groups retaliating against the country should he win. Upper Danubia was on the verge of being a failed nation, according to the TV ads, making the immediate and complete opening of the country's economy imperative. The two parties were offering two very different visions of Upper Danubia's future.

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Vladik's fascination with Tiffany only increased as he quietly pursued his duties at the Danube City music studio complex. He became apprehensive about where the friendship might lead, because increasingly he wanted her. He actually felt a need to be with her, the need to be with Criminal # 98946, of all people.

Vladik struggled to accept Tiffany's past and her ongoing recovery from her recent drug addictions. He debated with himself the wisdom of pursuing a relationship with the American criminal. Here he was, recently engaged to a beautiful woman from one of the country's most affluent families. Did he want her? No. The woman he wanted was his rough, passionate, scrawny police partner. He had lost her, and now he had taken a step further down in his desires, wanting an American who was a convicted criminal, a drug addict, and an ex-prostitute. And yet, Vladik felt at peace when he was with Tiffany, more so than he had felt with any other woman he had known. If Kim was right about Vladik needing a woman in his life with flaws and problems, certainly Tiffany filled that need. None of it made any sense.

As for Tiffany, her relationship with Vladik began to restore her old self-confidence. They were together constantly, both at work and at the Socrates Club. Over time how Tiffany viewed herself began to change as she could imagine herself as more than a drug addict and stripper. As the fall progressed time began separating Tiffany from her life at Dirty Grampy�s. Her day to day life at the music store and her other responsibilities in Upper Danubia slowly crowded out the most recent memories of her life in the US.

Tiffany was aware that Vladik wanted her. Finally, after more than a month of going out with him, she felt she had recovered enough from her past that she might be able to have sex with him and actually enjoy it. She decided the moment had come one night in the Socrates Club as she was dancing with him. She danced close, enjoying the feel of his bare body against her own. As his penis brushed up against her bare thighs, it was becoming evident Vladik was becoming aroused. For the first time in many months the American felt the hints of sexual desire herself. Finally, in heavily accented Danubian she asked:

"Tebe hochesh mene?"

"Dak, Deevonay. Ya tebe hochu."

With that the couple went upstairs. Vladik found an empty "intimacy room" and slipped inside with Tiffany. For the first time Tiffany kissed Vladik passionately, putting her arms around him and hugging him tightly. Vladik's hands explored Tiffany's body, his hands traveling down her back to her bottom. Vladik relished the feel of Tiffany's bottom cheeks in his hands, and then brushed his fingers up the middle. He pressed up against her and enjoyed the feel of her breasts against his chest.

Tiffany became increasingly aroused. She knew all the tricks to arouse a man. With her clients Tiffany's job was to get them aroused quickly, finish the job, make the guy at least reasonably satisfied, and then get back across the street to Dirty Grampy's as fast as possible. Tonight she had to clear her mind of all that and let things come naturally. Her duty to Vladik was not to arouse him, but instead to allow herself to become aroused, so she could have sex with him normally.

Tiffany lay on her stomach to allow Vladik to explore her bottom. Tiffany always considered her bottom the sexist part of her body and enjoyed having it touched and caressed. Vladik spent a long time with his fingertips and lips pressed to the same bottom he had so cruelly marked up just a few weeks before as a police officer. The thought of that contrast, the cruel welts from two months ago and the soft unmarked tanned skin under his face now, totally excited him.

Vladik slowly worked his way up her back with his caresses and kisses. He pushed her hair aside to concentrate on kissing her neck. She flipped over on her back, to exchange yet more kisses and allow him to explore her breasts. Yes, to not have to do anything, just lie back and enjoy�she had not had the chance to do that for a long time.

Vladik entered her and began thrusting in his usual vigorous manner. It seemed just the right mix of pain and pleasure that Tiffany needed. She had her first orgasm in many months as she gasped and gritted her teeth. Tiffany realized that with Vladik sex could return to its proper role in her life, not as a business transaction but as a part of a relationship to be enjoyed.