

Krim Cross

A Krim virtual world novella.

Maria Korolov



Chapter 1. Perchance a missive

“**W**orld of Battle doth have much to be admired.” The speaker raised his flagon of ale, spilling some on the bar patrons around him. “To the World of Battle!”

Someone tossed a fried skirret at his head. It bounced off and landed in Ellison Davo’s beer mug.

The beer was mostly gone, anyway. Ellison got up from his table, edged his way past the World of Battle fan down to the end of the bar, where he found an empty stool. It was never a good sign when local residents started spouting fake Elizabethan English.

“What? Forsooth, ’tis true.”

“Shaddup.” Someone tossed another skirret.

“Hark! World of Battle is home to dragons of noble purpose and deathly flames.” The speaker drank down the rest of his ale. “From whence... I mean, wherefore... Sard it. What’s the point of having a medieval world if there art no dragons? Dragons! I want my dragons!” The man slammed his flagon against the heavy wood of the table, which was pre-distressed when it was first created ten years ago at Krim’s founding, and more distressed since then by being kicked, scratched, stabbed, and vomited on.

“If you like WOB so much, why don’t you move there?” asked someone at a nearby table.

Ellison leaned over and grabbed a used copy of the local paper and opened it in front of his face.

“Perchance I shall!”

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back as the speaker stood up, then a cut-off scream and a gurgle.

Blood splattered across Ellison's newspaper. He waited for a beat and lowered it.

The World of Battle fan was on the floor, blood still pouring out of his slit throat.

The killer wiped his knife on the victim's surcote and sat back down.

"Hey, you kill it, you clean it," yelled the bartender, and pointed to a soot-stained sign on the wall that said "No littering. Offenders will be disemboweled. Repeat offenders will be sold to Glad the Impaler."

The killer smirked. "I've always wanted to see Glad's torture dungeon."

"You sure about that?" The bartender leaned over the bar and scowled.

The killer glanced around at the other patrons, looking for support.

"You know, on World of Battle, they have ghouls to take dead bodies away," someone else said. "Takes care of the cleanup problem." The bar grew quiet as everyone waited to see if there was going to be another stabbing.

The throat-cutter eyed the ghouls, who paled and stood up. "I'll help you clean up." Two of them dragged the body out the back of the bar.

Ellison pulled out his flask and poured out the little that was left into his flagon.

The ale at the King's Arms was notoriously watered down.

Most patrons didn't care. All they were looking for, really, was something to water their throats after getting their first few lungfuls of soot and aerosolized excrement that composed Krim's air.

The King's Arms was located kitty corner from the Krim City Hall and across the street from the Krim Central Plaza, which was home to the Krim Main Gate, the main entrance for visitors to the Krim Virtual World. It was referred to by some residents as The Grid, and by the rest of the residents by a variety of colorful, earthy Anglo-Saxon phrases ap-

propriate to the era of 1500s England that Krim was ostensibly inspired by.

Ellison had been nursing his own ale for more than an hour now, topping it off with whiskey from a flask in one of the dozen-plus pockets of his assassin's cloak.

He didn't choose the outfit because he wanted to role play at being an assassin. Rather, it was the default costume closest to the suits he used to wear in real life. He couldn't really see himself in chain mail, as a peasant, dressed as King Henry the Eighth, or as a buxom wench.

Plus, on the off chance that he really was an assassin, or aspired to be one, people tended to give him a wide berth.

Ellison put the flask away and retrieved the documents he kept in another pocket.

If his target didn't show up soon, he was going to go home.

Usman Powell.

According to his wife, Usman was planning to disappear on Krim so that nobody was ever going to find him.

Ellison's brother, Jerald, the owner of the agency Ellison was freelancing for, even included some recent photographs.

Krim's mail service turned them into historically-appropriate woodcuts, making it hard to tell what Usman actually looked like.

Ellison held the printout up to the candlelight, but it didn't help.

The photos would have been useless in any case since the first thing people did when they decide to hide out in a private virtual world was to change their face, shape, and, usually, their gender as well.

Fortunately, Ellison had a particular and rare skill that came in handy for identifying people no matter what avatar they happened to be in.

It wasn't a particularly valuable skill. Most places, finding out someone's real identity was trivial, with personal and professional profiles accessible with a blink or a quick gesture.

Krim, with its idiosyncratic decision to restrict the use of modern technology meant that users didn't have access to their usual interfaces. All the world had was the basic biological interface that nature provided. Or, to be more technically accurate, a computer emulation of the basic bio interface.

Ellison scratched under his collar. He suspected that he might have been infested by a flea, or maybe a louse, or another medieval parasite.

For a world that supposedly didn't have enough money to be able to provide decent customer support or in-world security, it was certainly spending a lot of computer resources on emulating pests and vermin.

Ellison put away the packet and finished his drink. He was just about to get up and leave when a group of people he knew walked into the bar. One, Rodge Bannister, he recognized as a local mercenary guild leader. The other four, were, dressed, respectively, in chain mail, as King Henry the Eighth, as a buxom wench, and as a peasant.

The back door slammed shut and the throat-cutter and the guy who really missed having ghouls around came back into the bar, looking slightly nauseated.

Ellison considered walking out the back before the new arrivals saw him, but then he might miss the opportunity to grab Usman quickly. The worst case scenario was if Usman joined some role playing group and traveled out of the city on a quest to some distant mountain somewhere. Ellison wasn't a fan of long excursions.

He decided to order another ale, instead, but the bartender had already rushed off to serve Roger and Ellison's old friends. A waiter had already brought them an assortment of bar foods — standard Krim tourist fare, including turkey legs, skirrets deep fried long enough that they could almost pass for skinny french fries, fried cheese and hot pepper poppers.

They didn't allow potatoes or jalapenos on Krim, but there was a movement afoot to change that. Yes, they weren't popular in England in the 1500s, but they did exist somewhere on the planet at that time.

Some residents were building sailing ships and organizing expeditions to find local sources of those plants on Krim. If they did, it would revolutionize Krim City's restaurant industry.

If Usman happened to join one of those expeditions, Ellison might never find him.

His patience was rewarded when Usman himself sidled in, trying not to be noticed. He wore the default adventurer outfit and had apparently been shopping on the central plaza since he was carrying two large canvas sacks and had several knives on his belt and a blow slung across his shoulder.

He was surrounded by a faint aura that only Ellison, and a handful of other people, could see. None of those other people were on Krim, though, and most probably didn't realize that their visual impairment was anything other than a mild case of synesthesia.

Even without the aura, though, Usman would have caught Ellison's attention by the furtive way he tiptoed around the tables to find the darkest spot at the bar.

Ellison watched with amusement as Usman tried to be inconspicuous even as his bags and bow kept hitting the other bar patrons.

Finally, he dropped his bags by an empty stool and squeezed in right next to Ellison.

"God, I'm thirsty." Usman coughed up some phlegm into the palm of his hand, stared at it, then wiped it off on his pant leg. "What the hell is that?"

"Pollution," said the patron sitting on the other side of Usman from Ellison.

"I didn't know they had pollution in medieval times."

"It gets better once you get outside the city."

"That's a relief." Usman pointed down at his bags. "I'm planning to go on a long trip. But I've got to say, Krim isn't what I expected."

"How did you hear about Krim, anyway?" Ellison asked. "There are lots of friendlier grids out there."

“I read about it on Escape Master,” said Usman. “They say that Krim is so unpleasant that process servers won’t come here.”

“They can still subpoena the grid owners,” said the other patron.

“Yeah, but only if an actual crime has been committed and there’s a court order,” said Usman. “Not for civil disputes.”

“I see you’ve thought about this,” said Ellison.

“I’ve been planning for months,” said Usman.

Ellison reached into his pocket.

“I just want some breathing space, you know?” Usman sighed. “Is it so wrong to just want a little peace?”

“No, it’s not wrong,” said Ellison, dropping his hand.

“Do you know what it’s like to have people hounding you all the time?”

Ellison nodded. He did know.

Usman waved his hand towards the exit door. “Out there, on the other side of the gate, in the real world, it’s just a constant stream of messages,” he said. “Do this, do that. Go to therapy. I’m sick of it.”

He took a sip of the ale the bartender brought over and grimaced. “This is foul.” he shook his head. “But anything is better than dealing with the old ball and chain and those whiny brats.”

“Oh, you’ve got children?”

“Yup, three of them. Good thing no kids are allowed on Krim!” Usman laughed.

Ellison stood up and took a step away, then turned back and slapped the paperwork on the bartop in front of Usman.

“You’ve been served.”



Chapter 2. Mayhaps a petty chare

Ellison walked away, not glancing back. If Usman was going to stab him in the back, Ellison wanted it to be a surprise. He didn't want to see it coming. It was the anticipation that was the worst.

He was nearly at the door when it slammed open and a group of tourists walked in.

No, not tourists. Former colleagues. Bob, Linda, and Jake. Ellison hadn't seen them in years. What were they doing here?

Bob was in the lead and recognized Ellison first. He stopped short and his jaw fell open.

Ellison braced himself and Bob lunged at him, grabbing him in a bear hug.

"Oh my God, Ellison! You haven't changed a bit!"

Ellison wriggled free. "Hi, Bob."

"Listen, I was going to come visit..."

"We missed you!" Jake clapped Ellison on the back.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Pitching Elea Carlyle." Linda normally had a large pair of wings that sparkled in the light, as did the rest of her. Now, though, she looked drab in her Krim default 16th-century peasant garb.

"What happened to your wings?"

"Oh, they wouldn't let me keep them when I created my avatar," she said.

"They wouldn't let me keep my eyes either," said Bob. Normally, Bob had diamond eyes, but now they were a normal muddy brown. Historically appropriate, maybe. But without his eyes, and Linda without her wings, and Jake without his reptile skin, well, they looked naked.

Then Bob glanced back at the fourth man with them, who'd been staring at Ellison as if trying to place him.

"Rodge, this is Ellison Davo," Bob told him. "An old colleague of ours from way back. Ellison, this is Rodge..."

"Bannister," Ellison said. "We've met."

Rodge squinted at him.

"At Elea's ball, two weeks ago. Right after you had me kidnapped."

Ellison had been working on a missing person's case. Someone hadn't been happy about that and asked Rodge for a little favor.

"Oh, right, right." But Rodge still looked blank.

"Ellison is famous," Linda told him. "Didn't you see the news? He saved a returnee's life. He's the best detective this world has."

"I'm the only detective Krim has," said Ellison. "But technically, not a detective. I'm a process server."

Rodge snapped his finger. "Now I remember you. You worked on a missing person case. And you found the guy."

"Ellison was always really good at finding people," said Linda.

"Well, that calls for a drink!"

Ellison was dragged back to the bar, where Rodge yelled at the bartender that the drinks were on him.

"Wait till you taste this," Rodge said. "You won't believe how much better everything is when you're living viscerally. You won't be able to go back to modern life afterward. I swear, each time I leave Krim, everything is more plastic than I remembered."

Ellison's old colleagues glanced at each other and Linda, out of Rodge's direct line of sight, rolled her eyes.

"Yes, well, it's certainly invigorating when they warn you about evisceration and dismemberment before letting you in," said Bob.

"Don't forget about the auto-cannibalism," added Jake.

Rodge waved his hand. "Ignore all that. It's just for tourists. Hardly anyone gets dismembered. Most of the time, you just get stabbed. Dismembering takes too much work."

He raised his flagon. "It's the risk of agonizing pain and imminent death that makes life worthwhile."

"Right, right," said Bob.

Suddenly, Rodge whirled at Ellison and stabbed him in the chest with an iron-hard pointing finger.

"You are a detective," he said.

"Process server."

"You find people."

"Yes."

"I need to find someone for me. A thief."

"You want to hire a thief?"

"No, no. I want you to find the scoundrel who robbed my office last night." Rodge held up a finger. "Right after I come back from the little murderer's room."

Rodge put down his flagon and headed off to the back, his bulk pushing other patrons out of the way. But the far end of the bar was empty. Usman was gone. Ellison glanced around the bar. The man was nowhere to be seen.

"So," Linda waited for Ellison to turn back to them. "Is everyone here crazy? Or just him and Elea?"

"She refused to meet anywhere else," added Bob. "We want her as a client, but honestly, if we don't get the account I have to say I'll be a little relieved."

"No offense, but Krim smells like a pigsty," said Jake. "If I never have to come back here again, I'll be perfectly happy." He tasted the ale and spit it back out into the flagon. "Horse piss." He pushed it away from him.

"I haven't stopped itching since I got here," said Linda. "I have no idea how you could stand it." She looked Ellison in the eye. "You're not exactly a roughing-it kind of guy."

Ellison shrugged.

“And everyone here looks like they’re miserable and in pain,” Jake added.

Ellison looked around. Yes, all the patrons of the King’s Arms looked like they were battling digestive diseases. Well, this was Krim, so they probably were. In fact, he realized with a start, everyone on Krim always looked unhappy. After five years in prison, he’d gotten used to sour faces. But, out in the real world, people’s facial expressions were usually calibrated to be as pleasant as possible.

“Don’t you get it? He’s doing a redemption arc,” said Bob. “It’s genius, actually.”

“I’m not...” Ellison began.

“Right, sure, you didn’t have a team of public relations consultants find this place for you?” Bob gestured around. “You’ve got the returnees, you’ve got Lifeworks, you’ve got Elea Carlyle, and when the media show up, they can see how you’re suffering.”

“You’re right, it’s brilliant,” said Linda. “Who did you hire to do the PR? Never mind, don’t tell us. You were drawn to this place because...”

“Because you felt the need to atone, and to give back to the returnee community,” said Bob.

“And you went and saved the life of that old returnee.” Jake slapped Ellison on the back again.

“The public loves a redemption story,” Linda nodded. “You’ll be back to your old job in no time.” She looked up. “Oh, Rodge is on his way back. Remember to smile, everyone.” Her smile looked fake. It was hard to look authentic when you had an AI help you with facial expressions for most of your life.

“So what do you guys think?” Rodge said loudly as the bartender topped up his ale. “Is Krim the best place in the metaverse, or is it the best place in the metaverse?”

“It’s amazing,” said Linda. “It really makes you feel alive. If we get a chance to work with Elea, it would be a dream come true.”

“It’s unique,” said Bob.

“It reminds you of what it feels like to be really human,” said Jake.

“You guys are alright,” said Rodge. “I’ll put in a good word for you with Elea.” He chuckled. “Hell, I’m probably the one who’s going to be paying your bills.” He downed his ale. “Another round!”

“Ah, no, no,” said Bob.

“We really have to get going,” said Linda.

“We need to get some preliminary research together for Elea,” said Jake. “She’ll be expecting it shortly.”

“Well, I’ll take you to the gate, then, just to make sure you don’t get too murdered,” said Rodge and threw a pile of coins on the counter, at least double what the drinks were worth. Then he turned to Ellison. “And you, you go talk to my housekeeper. Tell her you’re working for me, and that you have to talk to all the household staff, examine the crime scene, whatever you have to do. Just find my stuff.”

Ellison was going to turn him down but decided to wait until his colleagues were gone. No point in messing up the deal for them, even if they weren’t particularly enthusiastic about it.

He watched them walk away and thought about how typical it was that Elea Carlyle, the obscenely wealthy and world-famous philanthropist, was still spending other people’s money. But then again, that was probably how she got to be wealthy, and how she stayed that way.

He didn’t want to work for Rodge. Personal grudges aside, Ellison didn’t like roleplayers much and Rodge was a roleplayer through and through. He didn’t need the money that much either. Though Rodge did have a lot of it and, unlike Elea, liked throwing it around.

Ellison stepped out of the bar. It was damp and chilly and he shivered as he glanced around. Usman was nowhere to be seen, and neither were the half dozen or so other people who wanted Ellison dead.

He started walking back to his lodgings at the Barley Mow Inn. He was stabbed before he got to the end of the block, and he totally didn’t see it coming.



Chapter 3. Back from the dead

One benefit of dying, Ellison thought, was that he got a fresh new avatar.

A washed avatar.

An avatar wearing new, clean clothes.

Krim was full of people who liked to drink and to fight and people who liked to dress up in old-time clothes. But it didn't have too many folks who wanted to role play at doing laundry.

He adjusted his collar as he walked into the Barley Mow. It was fresh and crisp and felt almost pleasant against his skin. Nothing on Krim ever felt completely pleasant. Everything came with minor little annoyances. Die-hard residents said this added to the appeal of the place.

To Ellison, it was a constant reminder that he needed to get out, back to his real life. He could get a nice civilized apartment on Facepage. They were free, if you didn't mind a few ads. But if he had a job, he could find someplace nice.

A real job, that is. Not the penny-ante process serving he was doing now.

He was about to order when his best friend on the grid walked in. Matilda Scarletstrike. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a short haircut that did well in hand-to-hand battles. There was nothing for the enemy to grab onto. Matilda was in a lot of hand-to-hand battles, and tended to win most of them. Of course, she started most of them, too.

She walked up to his table, mumbled something, and slapped the table's surface hard enough for the inn-owner, Quimby, to look up in a panic from his spot at the front desk. When he saw that it was Matilda, he decided to stay right there, safely behind it.

Ellison thought about joining him.

Matilda followed Ellison's eyes to the front desk, then stepped to block his view and slapped the table again.

"What did I do now?" Ellison asked.

She cleared her throat, then spit a wad of phlegm on the door. The city air was full of pollution. Smoke and wood ash. Aerosolized manure. Dust. Dirt. It all ended up in the lungs. People thought that London in the year 1500 was a natural environment, but judging by the air of Krim City, it must have been anything but.

"You've cost me work," she said, then dropped into the chair across from him. It creaked under her weight, which was mostly muscle. What wasn't muscle was armor and weapons. "Because of you, Lifeworks doesn't trust me with returnees anymore."

Lifeworks was a company that brought dead people back to life. Well, to virtual life. It was one of several such companies, but the only one with a presence on Krim.

All the other companies thought that Lifeworks was crazy. Krim was just about the most dangerous and unpleasant world around. But it turned out that people who'd been alive in the old day were used to things being dangerous and unpleasant and had a hard time acclimating to the modern world. They all hated Krim, but they all understood it. They didn't understand Facepage or any of the other worlds that modern people lived on. The way that people teleported around, changed shape on a whim, soared into the air whenever they felt like it — that all freaked them out and caused them to doubt the reality of their existence. And then — poof — they were gone. Back to the quantum ether from which Lifeworks originally pulled them.

On Krim, the worst that would happen was a nasty stabbing. Though Lifeworks was lobbying the Krim administrators to add some protection features for its returnees.

Anyway, despite all the nastiness on Krim, or maybe because of it, returnees survived. In fact, they thrived. Lifeworks hoped that eventu-

ally they would adapt well enough to their new virtual lives that they could leave Krim and safely live in the rest of the modern world. Or, at least, its online areas. And, down the road, they might even be ready to start trying to print new physical bodies for the returnees.

“Why don’t they trust you? You helped bring Alfred back after his granddaughter killed him.”

“Great-granddaughter. But I also helped you sneak Alfred out after hours and got him beaten up.”

“Well, I think she would have tried to kill him either way. How’s Alfred doing now?”

Ellison liked Alfred. He was a crotchety old man. Well, old by historical standards. He was in his early sixties when he died. Ellison was ten years older, but looked half his age. Part of that was due to modern medicine, and the rest to the fact that he’d lost his physical body in an explosion five years ago and now lived online free of all biological constraints.

But Ellison didn’t like Alfred because of his age. He liked him because he owned a cane and wasn’t afraid to use it. Only recently, he’d used it on Elea Carlyle.

“Alfred’s fine. He’s still looking around for a place to put his shop. He got a nice settlement from Lifeworks for not protecting him well enough, and he’s using it to start his tailoring business.”

“I’ll have to stop by. I need a new suit.” He pulled at his jacket. “I hate wearing this default outfit.”

Ellison was wearing assassin garb, the closest thing Krim had to a business suit in its starting avatar selection. Today, he was wearing black pants and a black jacket over a dark red silk shirt.

“So buy something else,” Matilda said. “Go to the market.”

“Everything else they sell here is even worse.”

She reached for her sword.

“I mean, it’s fine if you’re in the murder and mayhap business, but I’m looking for something a little bit more...”

“Corporate?”

Ellison nodded. Even his clothes were telling him that he needed to go back to civilization.

She tapped her fingers on the table and sighed. “So why aren’t you jumping on Rodge Bannister’s gig? It’s real money.”

“It’s worse than that,” Ellison said. “Some friends from my old life dropped by for a business meeting with Elea Carlyle. Rodge is her friend, and they want me to help him out. They’re working on some business deal, and a good word from Rodge can give them the edge.”

“So?”

“So if Rodge vouches for me, and Elea vouches for me, and they vouch for me, I might be able to get my old job back.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“There was some unpleasantness five years ago.” Ellison didn’t explain that the unpleasantness led to his death and a five-year prison term. It was a long, boring story. “But I’m not taking the gig. I don’t want Rodge vouching for me, and I certainly don’t want anything from Elea. She’s a psychopath.”

“Then she picked the right place to settle down,” said Matilda. “But seriously, if you don’t do it for your career, do it for the money. And I want in. You find the thieves, I’ll bash their heads in, and we’ll both get paid.”

She stood up and grabbed him by his jacket collar. “Let’s go.”



Chapter 4. The oldest artifact

“The man had me kidnapped and tortured.” Ellison tried to dig his heels in but Matilda easily dragged him out of the Barley Mow Inn and onto Leadenhall Street.

“I know, I’m the one who rescued you.”

Ellison found his footing and began trotting next to her as she walked in the direction of the Armforge Guild.

“I don’t think I can work with someone who did that,” Ellison said, but continued to follow her.

“On Krim?” She scoffed, but released her hold on him. “You can’t let a little kidnapping and torture get in the way of your business relationships. If you did, you’d have nothing left. Besides, the biggest jerks are often the ones with the most money.”

They went all the way down Leadenhall Street, crossed Banking, then took a Tiding Crossing to Knots Hollow and turned left. The Armforge Guild had an entire gated compound to itself, with high stone walls all around.

The walls had embedded spikes pointing both inward and out. It would have been just as difficult to climb over the wall to get in as it would have to get out again.

A guard watched them approach and saw Ellison looking at the spikes.

“They’re poisoned, too,” the guard said. “We caught a guy trying to get over using ropes and blankets just the other week.”

“What happened to him?” Ellison asked.

“He’s rotting away in our dungeon. Literally rotting. We have good poisons.” The guard smacked his lips. “Nobody steals from us.”

“Except last night,” Ellison said.

The guard's face darkened. "Well, that had to be an inside job," he said. "We had a lot of guests walking around this week." He lowered his voice. "And we've had some of them." He gestured across the street.

Ellison turned and looked at the Pressed Flowers Gifts and Boutique.

"Not, not them," said the guard. "Them." He gestured again.

"He means Lifeworks," said Matilda. The Lifeworks compound was far to the east, all the way at the other end of Leadenhall Street. "There were scientists here last night?"

"No," said the guard. "I don't mind the scientists. Well, they're useless and entitled. Think they're all brainiacs, looking down on us physical types."

Matilda reached over and tilted the guard's helm up. "I know you," she said. "Charlie, right? Don't you have, what, three PhD?"

"Well, yes," the guard said, shifting back on his feet. "But they're in the hard sciences. Materials engineering. Not whatever voodoo they're working on over there."

"So they were here?" Ellison interrupted. "And you suspect them of the theft?"

"No, the scientists weren't here. Their guinea pigs were." The guard sniffed. "The oldies. Did you know one of them killed a seamstress last week? Not that I mind a little light murder. But we've got a shortage of decent clothes on Krim as it is." The guard shook his head. "Going after creators is only something an uncivilized savage would do."

"It wasn't a returnee that killed her," Ellison said. "It was the guy's granddaughter."

"Great-granddaughter," said Matilda.

"Right," said Ellison. "The old guy was framed."

The guard's face lit up in recognition.

"You must be the detective. Elliot, right? Rodge's waiting for you."

"Ellison," Ellison muttered as the guard ushered them inside. "The name's Ellison."

Rodge was downstairs, in the guild's torture dungeon.

They had a man chained by his arms and legs to a damp stone wall. It must have been extremely uncomfortable, especially since the arms were already turning black. His torso was exposed, red welts showing where he'd been stuck by a whip. The whip itself was in Rodge's hands.

He saw them walk in.

"Oh good, you decided to come." Rodge held the whip out to the side and a masked figure stepped out of the shadows and took it away.

Ellison hesitated briefly, then stepped closer. He wasn't the one being tortured.

"Is that one of the thieves?" he asked.

"It's a thief." Rodge shook his head. "We caught him trying to break in a week ago and kept him around for torturing practice. I don't want to have to keep paying Glad the Impaler every time we need work done."

"His prices have been getting exorbitant lately," said Matilda.

Rodge sighed. "He's got the torturing market cornered." He turned and looked at the thief. "But we might have to call him in. We haven't had any luck finding out if this guy knows anything."

"The fact that he's still here might be a clue," said Ellison.

"How so?"

"Well, he's a thief, right?"

"Yes, we found his guild card on him."

"So if other guild members were responsible for yesterday's invasion, wouldn't they have tried to rescue him?"

"Those wastrels? They know nothing of honor!" Then Rodge paused to think. "If it wasn't professional thieves, I have a hard time seeing how amateurs could have pulled it off."

"I heard you suspect an inside job," said Matilda.

"That's right." Rodge led them out of the dungeon and back up to the guild's main floor. A line of terrified staff stood lined up against a

hall wall. Rodge walked past them without a single glance in their direction.

“This is my study.”

The two guards stationed outside the heavy doors pulled them apart and Rodge walked in.

He stopped in the middle of the room and turned around. The place had been ransacked. Glass display cases stood open, locks broken. Whatever had been inside was gone. Books had been pulled off the shelves and dumped on the floor.

A leather sofa and two leather armchairs had been eviscerated, stuffing and springs pulled out. Paintings still hung on walls, but the canvases had been slashed.

A heavy iron safe in the corner had been opened, its contents removed.

Ellison turned to Matilda. “Do you know anyone who would have wanted to do this?”

She walked around the room and examined the damage, stopping at the paintings.

“Whoever it was, they were pretty angry,” she said and turned to look at Rodge. “I can think of at least a dozen people.”

“At least.” Rodge smiled. “I make a lot of enemies.”

“But I can’t see how any of them could have,” Matilda added.

“Talk us through what happened,” said Ellison.



Chapter 5. All fun and games till someone gets their throat slit

Rodge Bannister led them to the other side of the room, where heavy curtains hung across the entire back wall, a guard at each corner. Rodge nodded at the guards to open the curtains.

Beyond them was what was left of a set of glass French doors.

“We were celebrating the discovery of the Rhotarr.” Rodge lowered his voice. “Fifteen thousand years ago, when the great god Krimtheros first created the world he gave it as a gift to his only child, Krimceyar. To help him rule the world, Krimtheros created the Rhotarr, a scepter that Krimceyar could use to communicate with Krimtheros. It also gave him the power to move landmasses.”

Ellison started to zone out. Krim was barely ten years old.

“Hold on,” Matilda interrupted. “Are you saying this thing is a communicator and terraformer? Does it give you god powers?”

Rodge cleared his throat. “Not as far as we can tell. It seems to be an ordinary quest item. Well, a very rare one.”

“So it’s a bauble that doesn’t do anything?”

“It’s a rare and valuable quest item.” Rodge walked over to the largest display case. “It was right here.” He waved at the other cases. “We had other valuable artifacts on display here as well, but nothing that equaled the Rhotarr.”

“What does it look like?” asked Ellison.

“It’s a silver scepter topped with a clear jewel. In its center there’s a thin crack in the shape of the letter K.”

“It’s a fancy stick with a knob on the end,” said Matilda. “Got it.”

“It’s valued at about a quarter million golds.”

Matilda whistled.

“How did they steal it?” asked Ellison.

Rodge walked back to the French doors and pointed at the floor, still covered by shards of glass. “As you can see, they broke the glass from the outside. Then they opened the latch and came in.” He opened the doors, stepped outside and waited for them to join him.

From the outside, they could see that there was a set of iron bars, like those in a jail cell, on either side of the French doors. “We normally have these bars closed for extra security, but they were open for the party.”

“So anyone could just break the glass and come in?”

“No,” said Rodge, and pointed to a shrubbery to the left of the doors.

Ellison stepped closer and realized that there was a dead body behind it, a guard, his throat slit open.

“That’s Two Teeth Tom,” said Rodge. “He was guarding the doors that night. Someone must have snuck up behind them.”

“Or was someone he knew,” said Ellison.

“Right, or was someone he knew. Then they killed him, and hid the body so that they wouldn’t be discovered.”

“Wouldn’t have someone noticed he was gone? Or heard the glass breaking?”

Rodge motioned to them to follow him and led them into the guild’s interior courtyard. It was a disaster area. There was a small stage with a curtain behind it that had been half torn down. Wooden picnic tables haphazardly arranged, one tilted on its side. Wooden chairs and benches had been knocked over and some were broken apart. And the muddy grass was littered with broken glass, wooden plates, gnawed bones, uneaten fried skirrets and other party remains. The air smelled of vomit, urine and gunpowder.

“We had music and fireworks here last night,” said Rodge. “Everyone was drinking heavily. We wouldn’t have heard anything. Then the rain started and everyone went inside. We have a big common room

and the entrance is on that side of the building.” He pointed to the right, opposite to the direction they’d come from.

“So nobody needed to go around to the back where they could have seen that someone had broken in?” Ellison asked.

“Assuming that they broke in when the fireworks started, at eleven, it was a couple of hours until the break-in was discovered. By then, everything was gone.”

Ellison turned around. The courtyard and the house was surrounded by a high stone wall. He couldn’t see any way that someone would have climbed in, not with the spikes. Especially not in the rain and carrying sacks of loot.

Matilda saw where he was looking. “There must have been a lot of stuff for them to carry,” she said. “How did they get it out?”

“We don’t know,” said Rodge. “When we discovered the theft, we searched the guests. We might have missed something small, but a lot of the items were pretty sizable. The scepter alone was three feet long.”

Ellison looked back at the stage. “What about the musicians and the fireworks crew?”

“They were all searched, even the instruments and their cases. Also, they were all in full view of everyone all night.”

“They didn’t take any breaks?”

“No, and they complained about it.”

“Is there a back entrance?”

“No, just the main gate. And the guards were sure that nobody had come in or out who wasn’t supposed to.”

“So someone did come in and out! The caterers? Some of the guests?”

“No, just three of the guild members who left early. They got drunk. Very drunk. Vomited everywhere.”

“Maybe it was a cover, so they could sneak the loot out.”

“I doubt it.” Rodge shook his head. “Look here.” He pointed to a pile of clothes and armor behind a table at the far end of the courtyard.

“They got so sick that they threw up all over their clothes, took them off, and just left them there.”

“They walked out naked?”

“Practically. We all saw them. They were singing loudly and off key. They left right after the rain started, as we were all going inside.”

“So the artifacts must still be on the property somewhere,” said Matilda.

“That’s what we thought, too,” said Rodge. “I’ve had teams searching the place all morning.”

“Maybe the guards at the gate were in on it,” said Ellison.

“Good point,” said Rodge. “I’ll have them tortured.”

“Or maybe the people who are doing the searching,” said Matilda.

Rodge rubbed his forehead. “I can’t afford to torture everyone.”

“Maybe Glad can give you a bulk discount,” said Matilda.

“No, no, I’m happy to pay his full rate. I just won’t have anyone left if I do that. Plus, the housekeeping staff are off-limits. They’re all returnees.”

“What, all of them?” asked Matilda.

Ellison thought some of them looked familiar as he walked past them in the hall. He must have seen them at Alfred’s funeral last week. Except for the one blonde woman, he recognized her as Donna, a waitress at the Barley Mow Inn, where he was staying, and where he had most of his meals.

She was flighty. He hadn’t expected her to last long at that job.

“Yeah. Elea Carlyle supplied them for the duration of the party. I was thinking of keeping a couple on permanently. It’s so hard to find anyone on Krim who can cook and clean.” He shook his head. “Now I’ll have to let all of them go.” He turned back towards his study. “I was opposed to having them on Krim, you know. And with what happened last week, I’m even more concerned.”

“You mean, when one of them was murdered?”

“No, when the murderer was arrested,” said Rodge. “It ruins the whole character of the world if you have to stop and think if the person you’re torturing is a returnee who might get his feelings hurt.”

“What are you going to do if you find out that the thief was one of them?” asked Ellison.

“Nothing,” said Rodge. “What can I do? I mean, I’ll fire them, and complain to Lifeworks, but that’s about it. I was thinking of firing them all now, but then the place will never be cleaned up, and also we’ll never get the artifacts back.”

Rodge punched his fist into his hand and Ellison jerked back.

“I’ll get you whatever you need,” Rodge said. “Someone’s made a fool of me and I can’t let that stand.”



Chapter 6. The list of suspects

“Well, I’ll leave you to do whatever it is you need to do. Let me know when we can move the body.” Rodge frowned at the corpse. The flies had found it, and were beginning to buzz around it.

“Hold on, what do you expect us to do?” Ellison asked.

“Well, you know,” Rodge waved his hands. “Chalk outlines, dust for prints, I don’t know. What do detectives normally do?”

“Real detectives? They check the footage.”

“Nah, I’ve tried that before, for something else but the grid admins say they need to see a subpoena first,” said Rodge. “They figure stealing is just part of the game.”

“They turned over the tapes of Alfred’s death,” said Ellison. He hadn’t seen them, but he’d heard it was gruesome. Alfred’s great-granddaughter had strangled him to death, over and over again. It wasn’t all the murdering that killed the old man. It was the betrayal by the person he cared for the most. It didn’t take much for a returnee to lose their attachment to existence. Anything that made them feel out of place would weaken the bonds. Ironically, physical violence wasn’t an issue. If anything, most types of pain actually made returnees want to hang on to life even harder.

“You’re right,” said Rodge. “They turned over the tapes because the Krim board of directors sided with Lifeworks. After Elea convinced them to.” He rubbed his chin. “You’ve got something there. Elea’s on the board now. If you guys can’t come up with anything, I’ll ask her for a favor. But, frankly, I’d rather not ask her for help if I don’t need to. But back in the old days, before everything was recorded all the time — what did investigators do then?”

“In the 1500s? They tortured people,” said Ellison. “But if you want chalk outlines and fingerprints... I don’t know how much good that will do on Krim.”

“We wouldn’t have anything to compare them to,” said Matilda. “If anyone even suspects that we’ll be looking for that, they’ll just go and get a different avatar.”

Rodge huffed. “The whole reason I wanted to bring in you guys is because I heard you did forensics in your last case, and interviewed witnesses, and all that. Well, I want that here. All of it. I want the whole package.” He scowled at them. “So get to work.”

He turned away and went back into the guild hall.

“We’re going to need some real detectives,” said Matilda.

“No, I think we can do this,” said Ellison. “Go find us someone who can take notes for us.”

“You don’t know where those detectives went, do you?”

Ellison thought back to the team who’d helped them on their last case. Eggatha Crispie, Hugh Dunit, and Earl E. Demise. Did they ever say where they lived? He couldn’t remember.

“We don’t need them,” he said. “Nobody on Krim can keep a secret. The thieves are going to be bragging about what they did. Probably in the bars tonight.”

“And they’ll be trying to fence the goods,” Matilda added.

“When we find them, we can ask them how they got everything out.”

For the next hour, the two of them, together with Donna, the young woman Rodge assigned them as an assistant, recorded all the details of the crime scene, of the armor abandoned by the drunk guests who left early, descriptions of all the missing items, and lists of all the guild members, staffers, performers, and miscellaneous guests and dignitaries who’d been at the party the night before.

Before they left, they reviewed the list of suspects with Rodge.

The guild leader swore that none of his mercenaries would have done anything like this.

“I know who they all really are,” he said, rather ominously.

Ellison wondered briefly whether Rodge would really go after someone in real life just because of the theft of some game item. Just because someone was rich and connected... Right. Rodge was rich and connected and a bit of a sociopath. Why wouldn't he go after someone in real life?

“Focus on the servants,” Rodge said. “The oldies. The returnees. They're basically savages.” He turned to the young woman who'd been taking notes for them. “How long were you dead before they brought you back?”

“I don't know. A few seconds?” Donna shrugged. “It was hard to tell. I have memories of angels and bright lights. It felt like it lasted centuries. It was beautiful and serene and I felt I was at one...”

“So you're not a returnee,” Rodge interrupted.

“No, I'm just a regular dead person.” She giggled. “Well, undead, now. I work as a waitress at the Barley Mow. I was here last night helping with the catering.”

Rodge pursed his lips. “So you weren't vetted.” He turned to Ellison. “Focus on her, and on the returnee housekeeping staff. I'd bet that none of them know how to act around civilized people.”

Donna's mouth tightened but she didn't say anything.

“Maybe you're the one who slit Two Teeth Tom's throat and let the thieves in,” Rodge told her.

Donnar stepped back. “No, I would never!” She clutched her notes to her chest. “I believe that life is precious.”

Matilda looked down on the servant. “I don't think she could have done it. She's tiny.” Matilda pointed to Donna's hands. “Look at how thin her wrists are. No muscle tone. It would have taken some strength, and a bit of skill, to cut Tom's throat. Where is he, anyway? We can just ask him.”

“Hasn’t come back yet,” said Rodge. “Probably embarrassed to show his face after being killed by a little girl.”

Donna shook her head and shrunk back even further.

“She would have gotten blood all over herself,” Matilda added. “Has she had a chance to change?”

“No,” Rodge conceded. “But still, look at all the servants first. Then check the thieves’ guild, in case there’s someone bragging about how they managed to break in and get out again. My boys will be listening for any gossip, too.”

“What about the other guests?” asked Ellison. “Do any of them have a grudge against you? Or a particular interest in the artifacts?”

“All of them have an interest in the artifacts. That’s why they came to the party. To see the artifacts. But they all respect me too much to make a move like that.”

“What about Elea?”

Rodge laughed. “You got me there. She doesn’t care about the artifacts at all.”

“Could she have done it?”

“Why would she? She doesn’t want them. They’re valuable, but she doesn’t need the money.”

“Maybe she has a grudge against you?”

“Listen, if you find something, I’ll listen to you. But I’ve got to tell you, Elea is the last person you should suspect. I’ve got my reasons for saying that.”

Ellison had his reasons, too. Reasons that put Elea at the top of his suspect list.



Chapter 7. Time to see the wenches

Before leaving, Ellison and Matilda had a chat with some of Rodge's security team.

They weren't happy that Rodge had brought in outsiders to deal with the problem.

"It's almost like he doesn't trust us to do our jobs," said Two Teeth Tom, newly back from the dead. "Just because someone got the drop on me, stabbed me in the back, and stole all his stuff."

"Well, we can do things that you can't," said Matilda.

"Like what?"

"Like, I can go to a bar, and get drunk with my friends, and find out if they heard anything," said Matilda. "They'd tell me stuff they won't tell you."

"Well, fine, I can kinda see that," said Tom. "But what about him?" He pointed his thumb at Ellison. "I can't see anybody telling him anything."

"He finds people," said Matilda. "Once we know who we're looking for, he'll find them."

Tom grunted.

"And when we do, you guys can do whatever you want to them," she added.

Tom perked up.

"So did you find anything when you searched the servants?" asked Ellison.

"Just a humorous drawing of Rodge," said Tom. He dropped his voice. "But don't tell Rodge. He's a little sensitive about his eyebrows. But the girl is good. She should be an artist or something." He gazed pensively into the distance. "She was... ethereal."

“Which girl?”

“Donna, she was doing the catering.”

They left Tom and the other guards searching the entire guild property yet again, just in case they missed something the first time, and headed down the street to the rooming house where the drunk mercenaries from the night before were known to stay.

“Being covered with vomit is a great way to keep people from looking too closely at you,” Matilda told Ellison as they walked.

“I don’t see how they could have snuck anything out, though,” said Ellison. “Didn’t they leave their clothes behind?”

“Okay, here’s my thinking,” she said. “They had accomplices on the roofs of two tall nearby buildings, and stretched a zipline between them. Then someone slid down the line until they were over the back area, somewhere out of sight. The accomplices loosened the line, letting the other guy drop down low enough to grab a big bag of all the stolen loot. Then the accomplices tightened the zip line again, and the guy slid down to the end.”

Ellison stopped and looked back at the mercenary guild compound. “What tall nearby buildings?”

The wall around the compound was at least 20 feet high, with spiked overhangs facing both in and out. The two buildings on either side were low, and set well away from the walls.

“I’ll need to work on that,” she said.

“Maybe they tunneled in,” said Ellison. “Or maybe that scepter the thieves stole has actual admin powers and they opened a portal and just carried the loot out.”

“I really doubt that,” said Matilda. “Krim’s owners are pretty strict about the no-magic policy. I must have heard a million rumors about power items, but nobody’s ever found one. I’m sure it’s just another meaningless artifact like the dozen others that Krim sprinkled around the place when they launched the grid. It’s all a little childish.” She

sniffed. “Grown men playing make-belief soldiers on a make-belief world with a make-belief history.”

Ellison wouldn't have expected her to feel that way. He looked over at her. “Isn't that what you do?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “But I don't take it, you know, seriously. Now let's go talk to some alcoholics.”

Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle were still asleep when Matilda kicked open their door.

“Get up, you fakers!” she yelled, walking into the room. The three men were sprawled across three narrow cots with barely enough space between them for her to stand. She kicked at one of the cots then took a deep breath before kicking the other and immediately gagged.

“I don't think they're faking,” she said, backing out of the room.

The sick stench of vomit followed her out and Ellison put a hand over his nose.

It eventually took a couple of buckets of cold water to get the three men up and out of bed and a promise of free drinks to get them out of the room and into the bar across the street.

At first, none of the three could remember anything about the night, other than the fact that there had been a party.

“Do you remember the fireworks?” Ellison asked.

“Sure, there were fireworks. Must have been.” Hellcut turned to Gorehair. “Do you remember fireworks?”

“Perchance?”

“What about the musicians?” asked Ellison. “Do you remember those?”

“Most assuredly, I remember the musical entertainment,” said Gorehair. “Rodge Bannister is a firm believer in period-appropriate soundscapes. I distinctly remember the madrigals.” He touched his index finger to his chin and stared up at the ceiling. “I'm a big fan of complex polyphonic vocal music.”

“Right, sure. Musicians,” said Hellcut.

“And food,” added Rainbow Squirtle. “There’s always food.”

“And drink.”

“And wenches,” said Rainbow and smacked his lips.

“Incontestably, the wenches,” said Gorehair. “Beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“Lucylicious was there,” said Hellcut. “And Lovely Lora.”

“And Derek the Wench,” added Rainbow.

“I don’t remember seeing wenches on the guest list,” said Ellison, pulling it out.

“And nobody mentioned anything,” said Matilda.

“Well, that’s odd,” said Rainbow. “How could anyone have forgotten the wenches?”

Gorehair took a sip of his beer, leaned back in his chair, and steeped his hands. “It’s a common defect in society to undervalue the individuals who provide the most intimate of services.” He shook his head. “I’m invariably disappointed but never surprised. The grande horizontale is the world’s oldest profession, but its representatives are considered fallen souls.” He raised his glass. “A toast to the slattern!”

“Hear, hear,” his buddies answered, and lifted their glasses. “To the wenches!”

“To the ladies of the night!” said Gorehair. “The lads of lays! The filles de joie! To the strumpets and the courtesans!”

They all drank, and then Hellcut and Rainbow broke into a spirited chorus of “Camptown Ladies.”

“I think it’s time to see the wenches,” said Matilda.



Chapter 8. The street of ill repute

Marylebone Place was a street of ill repute. Not because of its various houses of prostitution but because it was a street that saw a great deal of vehicle traffic but was located far enough from city center that Krim administration kept forgetting to do repairs. The cobblestones surface was torn up, making it a hazard to wheels and pedestrians alike.

With the descriptions provided by Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle, Matilda was able to track the wenches to the House of the Writhing Fun, one of the fine establishments on Marylebone, conveniently located a couple of blocks south and two blocks over from the Armforge Guild. The area was also home to the thieves' guild and the assassins' guild and several other mercenary houses.

Ellison looked up at the sign hanging over the door.

"It actually is the House of the Writhing fun," he said.

"That's what I said," said Matilda.

"I thought you might have been slurring the words. Writhing Fun. It sounds like a lisp."

She ignored him, and walked right in like she owned the place. She marched straight through the entryway and headed for the central lounge, where wenches were hanging out as they waited for the night's business to start walking in. A couple were gossiping over a game of backgammon. Another was filing her toenails.

Lucylicious and Lovely Lora were not around, but Derek the Wench was artfully draped on a settee, wearing silk pajamas, reading a fashion magazine.

They all looked up when Matilda came in.

One of the backgammon players scooted over and patted the bench next to her. "Matty, join us!"

The wench filing her toenails sat up, tucked her feet under her, and thrust out her chest.

Derek jumped up and met Matilda with air kisses to both cheeks.

"Darling," he said. "You look fabulous!" He looked over at Ellison. "And who's this... your accountant? Real estate lawyer? Undertaker?"

"I'm a private investigator," said Ellison.

"Oooh," said the wench with the nail file. "Are you here to investigate our privates?"

"Can we talk in private?" Ellison asked.

"Sure, honey," said Derek and winked at him. Then Derek leaned in towards Matilda and added, "No charge for you darling, but I'll have to charge double for him."

He led them further into the house, but instead of letting him take them upstairs, Matilda veered off into the house's small kitchen. "We're actually here to talk business," said Matilda.

"Oh, pooh," said Derek. But he followed her into the kitchen and started making tea.

Ellison sat down at a bench at a rough-hewed wooden table.

"It's herbal," said Derek. "Chamomile." He sat down with a sigh. "I own stock in the Great Krim Tea Company," he said. "Five expeditions so far, and still no tea." He took a sip then put the tea down and cupped his chin. "So. What brings you here?"

"It's about a party at the Armstrong Guild," said Ellison.

"Rodge Bannister's place, sure," said Derek. "Good tipper. His boys and girls can get a little rowdy sometimes, but nothing we can't handle."

"What about last night?" asked Matilda.

"What about it?"

"Did you see anything unusual or suspicious?"

"You mean, did we see thieves come around bragging about how they ripped him off?" Derek laughed. "The rumors have been flying all

over the place. But no, nobody's been by. So far, at least. I'm sure once they fence the goods someone will stop by to celebrate." He made a zipping motion across his lips. "But you know what we say, what happens at the Writhing Fun, stays at the Writhing Fun."

"What about at the party itself?" Ellison asked.

"What about it?"

"When you were at the party, did you see anything?"

"First, I wasn't at the party. Second, what happens..."

Matilda interrupted him. "Hold on. So who was there then?"

"Not anyone from the Writhing Fun," said Derek.

"Are you sure?" asked Matilda. "What about Lucylicious and Lovely Lora?"

"They both retired. Opened a little wine shop on Lothbury, in the art district." He shrugged. "You can go talk to them, if you want, but they were very definite about giving monogamy a go. We threw them a party and everything. They donated all their crotchless underwear and frontless gowns to our museum."

Ellison was surprised to hear about a museum of crotchless panties and it must have shown on his face.

"Our customers love it," said Derek. "If you pay extra, we let you try everything on."

"That sounds disgusting," he said.

"That's the fun of it," said Derek. "Anyway, the last time any of us were at the Armforge... Actually, now that I think about it, it was all three of us, about two weeks ago. Someone was having a retirement party. A lot of that going around these days." He shook his head. "Krim is really going down hill. Everyone is leaving."

"Did you see Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle there?"

"Those old alkies? Sure. They threw up on my assless chaps. I had to throw them out. You know how hard it is to find a good pair of assless chaps on Krim?"

"And where were you last night?" Ellison asked.

Derek leaned back. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

Ellison shrugged.

"Sure," said Matilda.

"I had an off-world meeting. Don't tell anyone, but I'm a logistics consultant for an asteroid mining concern. The last three days, we've had to negotiate several contracts." He shook his head. "But I really don't want people to know."

"That you're a wench on Krim in your spare time?" asked Ellison.

"No! That I'm a logistics consultant! I come to Krim to get away from all that. But the minute people find out, they start asking me about distribution routes, and if the rumors of new tariffs are true, and want to hear investment tips. I just want some peace and some fun sexy times, that's all."

"Are the rumors of new tariffs true?" asked Matilda. "I've got some money invested in nitrogen futures."

"See? I can't get away from it! Forget I said anything."



Chapter 9. Time enough for Lovely Lora

It was getting late in the afternoon, but Derek decided he had enough time to walk them down to Lothbury Street.

“I haven’t had a chance to visit the wine shop yet,” he said. “I’d like to see how Lucy and Lora are doing.”

They walked east along Marylebone to Aldwich, then followed Lothbury Street all the way north, where it ended at Upping.

But almost as soon as they were out the door, Derek returned to his previous complaint.

“Everybody wants to get investment advice,” he said. “There’s a gold rush out there right now with the new exploration routes and expansion out beyond the asteroid belt. But I can’t talk about any of it. That would be insider trading. The regulators are cracking down.”

Matilda looked at Ellison and rolled her eyes.

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” she asked. “It’s probably just a slap on the wrist, right? It’s one of those, you know, minor little white-collar crimes. No real punishment. It’s like anyone would go to jail.”

Ellison winced. He had spent five years in jail on a white-collar crime. Alleged crime. It was why he was now serving subpoenas and interviewing alcoholics instead of making a cushy living in a nice corporate job.

“Oh, they’re serious,” said Derek. “And it’s a common misconception that conversations on private worlds like Krim are completely anonymous. They’re not. All the regulators need is suspicion of collusion and then can subpoena Krim records and get the recordings of all the conversations that even hint at insider information being exchanged.”

“But how would they even get suspicious?” Matilda asked.

“They track investment patterns,” said Derek. “So I have to be really careful. People forget that everything in-world is recorded. But I don’t forget. I can’t forget, because I have to attend mandatory compliance seminars. I had to sit through a two-hour refresher yesterday.”

For someone who didn’t want to talk about work, Derek talked about work a lot. He complained about the compliance seminar all the way to the wine shop.

There, Ellison and Matilda were disappointed to find out that, in fact, Lucylicious and Lovely Lora had retired and weren’t anywhere near the Armforge Guild party the night before.

“Last time we were there was two weeks ago,” Lucy said.

They both remembered the three alcoholics, though.

“They threw up on my dress,” said Lora.

“And my mink stole,” said Lucy.

“In fact, that’s one of the reasons we decided to finally retire,” said Lora. “That, and the fact that this shop became available.”

“It’s a prime location,” said Lucy. “All the art galleries around here have openings, and like to serve wine and cheese.”

“And artists like to drink,” added Lora.

“But the clientele is much higher class. Nobody has thrown up on us once since we opened.”

Ellison and Matilda left Derek behind at the wine shop and trudged back to the rooming house where Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle were staying.

Something wasn’t adding up.

“If nobody else at the party saw the wenches, and the wenches themselves say they weren’t there, then Hellcut and the other two guys probably imagined the whole thing,” said Ellison.

“They seemed pretty sure,” said Matilda.

“Maybe they were confused,” said Ellison. “Maybe they were thinking of that other party, two weeks ago.”

When they returned to Knots Hollow Way, they found Hellcut and his pals still drinking at the Butt and Oyster, the bar across the street from the rooming house. The three of them were only barely vertical.

“We’re not going to get anything out of them,” Matilda said.

But the bartender remembered the three from the night before.

“They’re always here,” he said. “We get all the mercenary traffic, and the wenches.”

“Anything unusual happen?” asked Ellison.

“No,” said the bartender. “They came in, they said something about wanting to get a head start on drinking because they were on their way to a party.”

“What time did they leave?”

“I don’t know. Maybe around seven or eight?” The bartender tried to think back. “One thing was unusual, though. There were a couple of wenches who helped them walk out. Bought them drinks, too.”

“They bought drinks for the wenches?”

“No, the wenches bought drinks for them. They were barely walking when they left. I didn’t think they’d drunk that much, but they were kind of out of it. I’d be surprised if they ever actually made it to the party.”

“Well, we know they did,” said Matilda. “Maybe they sobered up just enough to make it over there.”

“Who were the wenches with them?” asked Ellison.

“That I don’t know,” said the bartender. “I know most of the local talent fairly well, so I’m guessing they were tourists. Didn’t walk like wenches, either.”

“What were they wearing last night?” Matilda asked.

The bartender glanced over at the three men, two of whom had slid down to the floor and were half-leaning against the back wall. “Same thing they’re wearing now.”

“Are you sure?”

He shrugged.

Matilda walked over to Hellcut, who was still draped across the table, snoring. She bent down and examined his shirt.

“I think this is the shirt he was wearing when we woke him up,” she said. She sniffed at it, then poked at some of the dried stains. “I’d say he’s been wearing it for a few days now.”

“So they got drunk here last night,” said Ellison. “Then they walked across the street to the rooming house, and changed into clean clothes. Then went to the party, threw up on their clean shirts, took them off, walked back home, and put the old shirts back on.”

Matilda slapped Hellcut several times, until he woke up.

“Huh? What?” He grabbed his head and moaned.

The bartender stepped closer. “They usually hold their liquor pretty well,” he said. “I haven’t seen them this bad before. Well, last night. But not prior. Usually, they just drink enough to get rowdy, not passing-out drunk like this.” He shook his head.

Matilda shook Hellcut until he looked up and focused on her face. “Did you go home and change your shirt last night?”

“What?” He blinked up at her. “I only have this shirt.”

“You don’t have a second shirt?”

“No.” Hellcut blinked hard, then wiped at his eyes. “If I need clean clothes I go in and out through the gate.”

“How much did they have to drink today?” asked Matilda.

“Just one beer each,” said the bartender.

“And last night?”

“Two or three, maybe.”

“I think they were drugged,” said Matilda.

“Why?” asked Ellison.

“To get them out of the way,” she said. “Somebody didn’t want them going to that party.”

“You think they were knocked out and someone impersonated them,” said Ellison.

“Nobody got close enough to talk to them last night,” she said. “And it was dark.”

“Still, whoever did it must have been pretty good at disguises,” said Ellison.

“Not disguises,” said Matilda. “Avatar design. Someone created three avatars that looked identical — or close enough, anyway — to these three guys. Close enough to fool their friends, as long as nobody looked too hard at them.”

“Being covered in vomit would keep people away,” said Ellison. “So it’s a dead end.”

“No,” said Matilda. “Not a dead end. I know who did this.”



Chapter 10. Horse sense

“They’re the Gang of Four,” said Matilda. “They’re famous. They case their targets, figure out who has access but doesn’t interact with other people much, and steal their identities while they commit the crime. They usually knock their victims out and tie them up somewhere, but getting Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle passed-out drunk was genius. Or would have been, if we didn’t figure it out.”

“Great,” said Ellison. “Where do we find them?”

“Don’t know.”

“What do they look like?”

“They can look like anyone.”

“Do you know anything about them at all then?”

“I know there’s four of them,” said Matilda.

They were standing outside the Butt and Oyster. It had been a long day, with a lot of walking in it, and Ellison could still smell a slight whiff of vomit in the air.

“I’m done,” he said. “I’m heading home.”

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll go to the thieves’ guild on my own. I’d probably do better without you along, anyway.”

He started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll be going past Armforge on the way home, so I’ll stop by there and see if they’ve found anything in their search. I mean, even if we know who did it, we still don’t know how.”

“Look for a secret tunnel,” she said, waved goodbye and walked south on Knots Hollow while he turned north. The Armforge Guild was less than two blocks up. He’d just look in a minute and see how things were going.

Things were going badly.

Two Teeth Tom was at the gate and he looked as tired as Ellison did.

“We’ve turned the whole place upside down twice,” he told Ellison. “Nothing. Did you have any luck?”

“Maybe,” said Ellison. “We might know who did it. Is Rodge around?”

Tom yelled back at the group of guards standing further inside the compound, by the entrance, then opened the gate for Ellison.

After one of the guards came over to relieve him, Tom led Ellison to Rodge.

“We have a lead,” Ellison told the guild leader. “There’s a chance that your three men, Hellcut, Gorehair, and Rainbow Squirtle, weren’t actually here last night, but were impersonated by members of the Gang of Four.”

“They did seem unusually stand-offish,” said Tom. “I should have suspected that something was off.”

“I knew I should have insisted on passwords,” said Rodge. “Wait, did you say Gang of Four?”

“Yes.”

“So who’s the fourth man?”

Ellison shook his head. “No way to know. Could have been a get-away driver, or a look out.”

“Or maybe they’re still inside,” said Rodge. He spun around. “Teeth! Get everyone in here.”

As Two Teeth Tom hurried away, Rodge turned back to Ellison. “How do I know you’re not one of the thieves, sneaking back in to get the loot you hid somewhere?”

Ellison wanted to say that it was because the treasures Rodge was so excited about were stupid in-world junk. But, to be honest, it was valuable junk, and he could use the money.

“Do you want to talk about that time you had your men kidnap and torture me?” he asked instead.

“Fine, fine, I believe you,” said Rodge.

“Anyway, Matilda says they usually impersonate loners, people who don’t interact much with others. That way, they’re not as likely to be spotted because their voices or mannerisms are all off.”

“Do we have any loners here?” Rodge yelled out at his mercenaries, who were running in.

They stopped and looked at each other.

“I’m not a loner,” said one.

“I’m pretty sociable, too,” said another.

“I want to know if one of my men has been replaced by a member of the Gang of Four,” Rodge said, then looked over at Ellison. “Explain why.”

“They’re masters of impersonation,” said Ellison.

“Sure, we’ve heard of them,” said one of the mercenaries. “Who hasn’t?”

“They’re famous,” said another.

“So cool that they hit us.”

“We should get shirts made. We were robbed by the Gang of Four, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.”

“Quiet!” Rodge roared. “I said, is anybody here a loner?” He looked around. “Has anyone been skulking around, not associating with anyone else?”

The mercenaries looked at each other warily. Finally, one of them took a step forward. “What about Gervis?” he asked. “The stablemaster?”

“Is he still here?” Rodge said, then turned and started walking to the back of the building before anyone could answer.

Ellison and the other mercenaries hurried after him, through the hallway where the four servants were still waiting. Now, though, they were sitting on the floor, playing cards.

“Out of the way,” Rodge yelled at them as they scooted off to the side.

Ellison followed Rodge and his fighters out the back, across the back courtyard, to a small barn.

Rodge flung open the back door, starting Gervis, who’d been brushing a horse. The horse neighed and pulled away from him.

Gervin turned around. “Out, out,” he told them. “You’ve searched the place twice already, and you’re scaring the horses.” He shook his head. “As if the fireworks last night weren’t bad enough.”

“That’s not why we’re here,” said Rodge. “Can you prove you are who you say you are? There may be an impostor in the compound.”

Tom leaned over to Ellison. “We searched this barn top to bottom.” Ellison glanced at a pile of manure in the back corner.

“Even that,” said Tom. “I poked through it myself, too. Nothing in there.”

Meanwhile, Gervis had been regaling Rodge with the history of the guild.

“I first started under Prince Searl,” he said. “Now there was a fine figure on a horse. Treated everyone equally. Wonderful leader. If you disagreed with him, he’d cut your head off. You always knew where you stood with Searl. Then there was Randulfus. He took over when Searl’s wife finally tracked him down and dragged him home. Then there was Baron Roule. Forced to eat his own horse, you know. That was during a campaign up north. He ate poor Jupiter. Never got over that.”

“He also had to eat his own leg,” added one of the mercenaries.

“Yes, but it was eating poor Jupie that led to the breakdown,” said Gervin.

“Fine, fine,” said Rodge. “Damn it.” He hit the barn door with the side of his fist, shaking it and startling the horse again.



Chapter 11. Stabbing, the old-fashioned way

“I really thought you were onto something there,” Two Teeth Tom told Ellison. “One of the maids saw Gorehair and the other two walking back from this direction. Plus, Gervis is the most antisocial of us all. He could easily be replaced by an impostor and we wouldn’t notice.”

“Hey,” said Gervis. “I’m standing right here.”

“Well, am I wrong?”

“No.” Gervis stroked a horse’s neck.

Two Teeth left, leaving Ellison alone with the stable master.

“It sounds like you’ve been in this guild longer than anyone else here,” said Ellison.

“That’s probably right,” said Gervis.

“You must know if there are any secret passages or tunnels anywhere, right?”

“They already asked me.” Gervis tilted his chin down and frowned. “I couldn’t think of anything.” He looked up. “I don’t spend much time in the main house, you know. I’m mostly just out here. And the guild just isn’t what it used to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, take Prince Searl, for example. He became the guild master fair and square. He killed everyone who disagreed with him, and kept killing them, until finally folks started to see sense. That’s how it should be. Single combat, to the death. Searl was all about keeping up the proper traditions. Randolfus was more about stabbing people in the back repeatedly, but still, the man didn’t mind getting his hands bloody. That’s what a leader is supposed to do. And Baron Roule was all about

the torture. Sure, he ate Jupiter, but when it came to torture, he was an artist.”

Gervis patted a horse’s neck. “You agree, don’t you, Satie?” He looked up at Ellison. “Saturn and Jupiter grew up together. Satie’s never been the same since he died.”

“They’re simulated horses though, right?”

“Technically, sure,” said Gervis. “Nobody is going to pay to bring a horse back to have it live here on Krim. It’s not exactly a paradise for animals, is it? But they might as well be alive, as far as I’m concerned.” The man’s voice trembled slightly. “Jupiter was one of a kind.”

Ellison forcibly restrained himself from letting his annoyance show on his face. Did everyone on Krim have mental issues? “Well, that’s been informative,” he said. “I’ve got to get...”

“But you know how Rodge got to power?” Gervis interrupted. “He bought his way in. Promised to outfit everyone for the winter campaign, paid for the guilt hall renovation. Hardly tortures anyone at all, really. And all the throwing money around for artifacts...”

He spat on the ground. “If you want an artifact, you should go out there and find it yourself. Put in the time. Take some risks. You don’t just show up at an auction and buy everything in sight. Sure, everyone says they’re happy now, what with all the food and drink, and musicians, and wenches, and fireworks.”

“People probably enjoy not having to worry about being stabbed in the back by their fellow guild members,” Ellison said.

“You shouldn’t be on Krim if you mind that kind of thing,” said Gervis. “It’s part of the authentic Krim experience. When someone gets what he wants in life by peaceful means — well, that just don’t sit right with me.”

“Because it’s a mercenary guild?”

“Any guild!” Gervis leaned forward. “My husband didn’t get to be the leader of the Threat Crafters Holiday Gala committee by peaceful means. He got the job the old-fashioned way, by stabbing Mildred

Bowling with knitting needles and decapitating Agatha Birnbaum with her own fabric shears.”

“I thought it was bad form to kill creators,” said Ellison.

“Well, yeah, while they’re creating, maybe,” said Gervis. “But this was about committee assignments. That’s war.”

“And his guild was okay with that?”

“No, the crybabies kicked him out. But you know what? We’ll get back at them.”

There was a murderous gleam in Gervis’ eyes.

“Well, it’s getting late,” he said, and backed out of the stable.

He walked around the courtyard, where a couple of guild members were poking at the earth around the base of the outside wall, probably looking for hidden tunnels.

Rodge was at the front entrance, being harangued by a woman Ellison recognized.

Dr. Rona Mills-Mills-Mills headed up the Lifeworks project on Krim, and was responsible for the returnees, the people that Lifeworks brought back from the dead.

She had a team of guards with her, but Ellison had a hard time imagining why she thought she could go up against a whole mercenary guild.

“If anybody has been hurt, in any way, we’re filing civil charges off-world,” she said in a low, even voice. “You don’t want the publicity, and Elea Carlyle isn’t going to want the publicity.”

“They’re witnesses,” Rodge sputtered. “We’re just getting their statements.”

“Well, you’re done,” she said. “If you need anything else, you can go through me.”

The front door swung open and the four returnees stumbled out, looking tired and wary. A mercenary gestured at them to keep walking, and Donna, the waitress who found the body, flinched away.

“They’ve been traumatized,” said Rona. “They’re going to need counseling.” She turned to Rodge. “Mr. Bannister, we’ll be sending you a bill.”

She watched as her guards escorted the returnees out through the main gate and into a large coach with the Lifeworks crest on it, then followed them out.

“Damn it,” said Rodge, and hit the side of the guard booth with his fist. He turned around and glared at his fighters. “I’m reactivating the cleaning roster,” he said.

The fighters groaned.

“Well, if our security had been better, we wouldn’t have been robbed, we wouldn’t have had to keep the cleaners for interrogation, and we’d still have a housekeeping service,” he told them. “Once I get my hands on those thieves...”

“You’ll make them clean?” asked one of the mercenaries.

Rodge stopped for a second and stared at the questioner, who shrunk away. “That’s.... that’s actually brilliant,” said Rodge. “That’s what we’ll do. We’ll find them, torture them a little bit, then make them clean.”

He spotted Ellison. “Well, what are you waiting for? Go out and find them.”



Chapter 12. Around the corner

Ellison stepped out through the front gate of the Armforge guild, onto Knots Hollow Way, and debated about whether to head straight back to the Barley Mow for some dinner, ale, and a good night's sleep, or to try to catch up with Matilda.

On the one hand, Matilda could be just about anywhere.

On the other hand, she was most likely to be at the King's Armpit, the favorite hangout for the dregs of Krim.

Back on the first hand, The King's Armpit was a longer walk than the Barley Mow. And it was already dark. He didn't want to be caught outside in the nightly rains.

But on the second hand, both were in the same direction. He didn't have to make a choice until he got to the corner of Banking and Leadenhall.

Or he could just go straight north on Knots Hollow until he got to the central square, leave through the gate, and go swimming in a warm tropical lagoon with sexy mermaids. The sexy mermaids would bring him tropical drinks with umbrellas in them. And some coffee. And maybe a side of fries. Also, some mashed potatoes, and maybe some potato salad. Potato soup. A loaded baked potato. Potatoes au gratin. Those spicy, curly potato things. Who needed mermaids? He could turn off notifications and go straight to his apartment, watch some videos, catch up on celebrity gossip, and just eat potatoes all night by himself.

Plus, Knots Hollow was reasonably well lit the whole way, while going back to the inn would take him down Butters Place, which was narrow and dark. He'd probably be stabbed several times over.

"Out of the way."

As someone shoved Ellison to the side, he realized that he'd been blocking the exit.

"Oh, it's you. The detective." The shover held an oil lamp up over Ellison's face. "Didn't recognize you in the dark. I guess you're busy thinking about clues and whatnot."

Ellison squinted back.

"You were on guard duty, right?"

The guard stuck his hand out for Ellison to shake. "Two Toe Tom, pleased to meet you and all that. Well, actually, it's Clarendon Emberthorn the Undying. But if you call me that I probably won't even recognize it!" Tom guffawed. "So it's easier just to call me Tom, which is my name, but there's already another Tom, so they call me Two Toe because there was some frostbite a while back." He stomped his feet. "Got my toes back. Tried to get them to call me something else, like Tall Tom or even Tiny Tom. Maybe Temperamental Tom, I don't know." Tom started to walk north down the street and Ellison automatically followed.

"Where were you last night, exactly?" Ellison asked.

"I was manning the back wall," said Tom. "We've got a little watchtower up there. Best view of the fireworks."

"See anything suspicious?"

"No, and I was on the corner there, and had a good view of the whole back wall and the north wall." The guard turned left into the alley that ran along the north wall of the compound. "The south wall is where all the festivities were, so lots of eyes there. And we had a team at the front gate."

"Could anyone have thrown anything over?"

Tom looked up at the wall. "It's twenty-two feet high. And the computer built it solid." Tom slapped his palm against the tightly-set stones. "Original construction, you know, from when Krim was first launched." He stepped back from the wall and looked up at it. "I guess if you put some swing into it, or used a slingshot, and did it from right

next to the stables, you could throw the smaller pieces over without me seeing it. But not the larger shields or the scepter. Rodge had a few guys try, too.”

Tom lowered his lamp and used it to examine the ground as he walked.

“Did you see anything of the crime itself?” Ellison asked.

“Nope. Stables were in the way.”

Tom bent down and picked up a shiny pebble. “Just a rock,” he said and threw it aside.

Ellison followed it with his eyes and saw that it landed next to a length of twine.

“Is that a clue?” Tom asked when Ellison picked it up.

“Probably not,” said Ellison. “Probably a million reasons for twine to be here.”

“Sure,” said Tom. “It could have come from a sack full of stolen jewels, or it could be from a hay bale.” He looked back up at the wall. “If it was from a sack of jewels, and they tossed it over the wall right here, they’d be right around the stable. They could hide in the shadows.”

“That wall is something like three stories high,” Ellison said. “And sacks of jewels can’t be that aerodynamic.”

“You’re right, I’d probably have noticed something like that,” said Tom. “At the very least, it would have taken a few tries, and I’d have heard the sound of it hitting the wall.”

Tom silently walked down the length of the alley, then turned left again when he reached the end of the wall and let out a startled yell. Ellison caught just a glimpse of a fleeing figure before Tom stumbled back into him and both of them fell. By the time they disentangled themselves, whoever it was had vanished.

“I saw his face for a second,” said Tom. “Wasn’t anyone I knew.” He shook himself off. “He was holding a burlap sack, too. Probably full of jewels.”

Ellison looked back up at the wall. At the top of it, in the little guard tower at the corner, he saw some movement and then it was gone.

“Who’s manning the wall now?” asked Ellison.

“I am,” said Tom. “I mean...” He shook his head. “Rodge has everyone out looking for secret tunnels. Oh, I’m going to get tortured tonight. I don’t suppose you recognized them?”

Ellison shook his head.

He’d never seen the thief before. Not his face, and not the faint aura surrounding him. Ellison had a mild case of synesthesia. Normally completely useless but, on Krim and other private worlds, it was a good way to identify people who changed their appearance.

“No, I didn’t recognize him,” he said. “But I would, if I saw him again.”

“He’s probably halfway to the gate by now to change his avatar.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Tom nodded. “Right, right, you’re a detective. You can recognize him by his body movements, right? And unconscious micro expressions and whatnot?”

“Something like that.”

“Listen, do you mind not mentioning to Rodge what happened here? I’m not in a mood to be tortured for letting the thief go. We’ll just show Rodge the twine, say that someone must have been throwing things over the wall.”

“They weren’t throwing stuff over the wall,” said Ellison. “They climbed up to the top, and tossed whatever it was down to their accomplice.”

“Let’s skip that part, too.”

“Sure.” Ellison wasn’t in a mood to be tortured, either.



Chapter 13. A cold walk to a dank place

Two Toe Toe continued his circumnavigation of the Armstrong Guild compound, but Ellison had had enough. He was tired, and his bones hurt from having fallen on the stones and then being crushed under Tom.

He retraced his steps through the alley back to Knots Hollow. As he approached the street, he saw Gervis the stablemaster heading north towards Krim center.

Ellison caught up to him. “Gervis!”

Gervis jumped and looked around nervously.

Ellison looked around nervously as well. This was Krim. There was a lot to be nervous about.

“I didn’t see you there,” Gervis said.

“I’m just heading home,” said Ellison, and walked alongside Gervis.

Home, which was a little freebie virtual apartment that came with an annoying virtual assistant who kept trying to sell him virtual real estate. But on the other hand, it was warm, and dry, and had an endless supply of potato-based dishes and coffee. Mashed potatoes with butter and chives...

“Me too,” said Gervis.

“What?”

“I meant, I’m heading home, too,” said Gervis.

Gervis sounded anxious. He probably had to walk through a nasty neighborhood. “Where do you live?” Ellison asked.

Gervis coughed and looked away. “Well, actually, I’m not going straight home,” he said. “I’m headed to the King’s Armpit, first. It’s a bar. I don’t know if you’ve heard of it. It’s just off Upping Street.”

“Sure, I know it,” said Ellison.

“Well, right, you’re a detective,” Gervis said with an unconvincing chuckle. “You probably have the map of the city memorized.”

The stablemaster pulled at his collar. It probably itched, like everything else on Krim.

Back in his apartment, Ellison had silk pajamas and silk sheets. Freebie silk pajamas and silk sheets, with corporate logos on them, but compared to Krim, they were the epitome of luxury. He could slip under those sheets, in his silk pajamas, pull up the latest celebrity gossip show, and dig into his bowl of mashed potatoes...

“I’m meeting my husband there,” Gervis said.

“I think my associate, Matilda Scarletstrike, is there now,” said Ellison.

Gervis flinched.

Many people flinched when they heard Matilda’s name. She had a habit of stabbing people who annoyed her and she was easily annoyed.

They were walking past Butters Place now. It was the most direct route to Leadenhall Street and the Barley Mow Inn, but it was also dark and narrow. It didn’t look very appealing at all. Plus, the Barley Mow’s sheets were scratchy and the mattresses were lumpy and uncomfortable.

He kept walking next to Gervis along Knotts Way. He felt a little safer next to someone he knew.

“So,” said Gervis. “Do you have any suspects? For the theft?”

“Yup,” said Ellison. “We know who did it. Oh, speaking of who did it, did you see anyone suspicious tonight? You know, maybe hanging around the stables just before you left?”

“What? Me? No,” said Gervis, scratching at his collar again. Maybe he had fleas. Working in a stable, it was probably a regular hazard of the job. And it was too bad that Gervis was more interested in his horses than in the other guild members.

The Armstrong Guild was filled with people. Any of them could have snuck out while Two Teeth Tom was away from his post, climbed

up to the watch post, and thrown the bag of loot down to an accomplice.

Or it could have been a visitor.

“Any outsiders come by tonight?” Ellison asked.

“There was a strange lady coming in when I was leaving,” said Gervis.

“Strange how?”

“She was dressed like Jesus,” said Gervis. “White robe. Sandals. She must have been freezing.”

Ellison only knew one person who dressed like that. Elea Carlyle. Self-styled philanthropist extraordinaire and the most evil person Ellison had ever met.

“I knew it,” he said. “I knew she had something to do with this.”

“What? Her?”

Nobody ever believed Ellison when he warned them about the woman.

“You bought her act?” he said. “It’s all just for show. She couldn’t care less about helping poor returnees. She’s in it for herself. I just don’t get why she’d want to steal Rodge’s stuff.”

“You think she did it?” Gervis asked. He sounded surprised. “I thought you suspected me.”

“You? Why?”

“Well, you’re following me right now,” said Gervis. “And you’ve got Matilda staking out my husband. Well, we had nothing to do with it. Stop harassing us. I can’t believe Bannister brought in an outsider on something that should have been guild business. That’s not how things are done.”

He sped up, walking ahead.

Ellison caught up to him. “How should things be done then?”

“Without outsiders. Without returnees. Without detectives. Everybody knows it was the returnees who did it. You should be looking at them, not me.”

Gervis sped up again and this time Ellison let him pull ahead.

The central square and the gate out of Krim were just up ahead. Gervis turned right onto Upping, in the direction of the King's Armpit.

It wouldn't take that much longer to swing by there before heading back to the gate. It would be good to fill Matilda in on what Ellison saw behind the guild compound. And maybe she'd found something.

Ellison took his time walking there. He didn't want to accidentally catch up to Gervis and have the man turn on him and carve him up.

The King's Armpit was on Lawless Alley.

When Ellison came in, he immediately spotted Matilda at the bar. She was hard to miss.

He looked around. Gervis was there, too, at a table in the back with three other men, all tradesmen. Ellison hadn't seen their faces before, but he recognized one of their auras. One of the three strangers was wearing a different body, but was definitely the same man as in one in the alley behind the guild.

He squeezed in next to Matilda. "Don't look now," he said quietly in her ear. "But I just found one of the thieves."

"Hey, Ellison! Bartender, get this man a beer!" She raised her own mug and leaned in towards Ellison. "I found two of them."



Chapter 14. As the bowl turns

“Don’t look now, but there’s a table at the back with four guys at it,” Matilda told Ellison in a low voice.

“I know. My guy is there,” he said.

“The one who just walked in?”

“No, the one he kissed when he sat down.”

“That’s Trozganoth the Anointed,” she said. “He knits scarves and wooly mittens.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s one of the thieves. I saw him behind the Armstead Guild. Someone threw something down to him.”

“Who?”

Ellison coughed. “Well, actually, I thought it was Elea or one of her men.” He shook his head. “But I guess it was that guy’s husband, Gervis. Still... maybe she hired them?”

“Why in the world do you think that Elea Carlyle, who’s ridiculously rich, has any interest in Rodge’s gamer junk?”

“Maybe that scepter he was bragging about has magic powers after all,” he said. “Maybe, I don’t know, she plans to use it to terraform Krim.”

Matilda laughed while drinking her beer and some of it came out of her nose. She wiped her face with the back of her sleeve, tossed back the rest, and banged the mug down on the bartop. The bartender scurried up. He looked a little fidgety.

How many bartenders had she killed for being too slow? Ellison decided not to ask.

“You don’t believe in magic,” he said instead.

“I believe that the Krim grid owners are cheap,” she said. “Also, the whole no-magic thing is their big selling point. They’re giving you

the authentic medieval experience. If they decide to change that, they'd have to buy a whole new physics engine, and test it, and install it, and there will be months of community meetings and executive board reports."

She waved her hand around. "And there's rioting here and everywhere else. You see a riot?"

Ellison shook his head.

"But I also believe that there are a lot of scam artists on Krim who are happy to sell you any magic item you'd want," she added.

"Like dragon repellent."

"Right."

To be fair, Norbert Hawkins' dragon repellent did work. None of his customers on Krim had ever been attacked by a dragon. The foul-smelling potion came in handy as bear repellent, which was the function it was mostly used for, and as a chastity device, though that effect was typically unintended. Glad the Impaler was known to use it as an air freshener, to soften up his victims before the actual torture began.

Ellison raised his empty mug at the bartender, using it as an opportunity to briefly glance at the four men at the back table.

"So who are the other two guys with them?"

"I think they're the other two members of the Gang of Four," said Matilda. "Vaganath the Vagabond weaves tapestries. And Tarantula Dave is a wood turner."

"What's a wood turner?"

"I don't know, but he brings wooden bowls in sometimes, so I guess... he turns wood into bowls?"

"And Gervis takes care of horses." Ellison pursed his lips. "Do they sound like four master criminals?"

"It's the perfect cover," she said. "And I think it's how they can afford to do their crafts. I honestly can't remember ever seeing anyone wearing Noth's mittens."

"I wouldn't mind some mittens," said Ellison. "It gets chilly."

“Well, don’t get his. They’re...” She made air quotes, “... artistic. And Dave’s bowls are weird and ugly. I don’t think any of them are making money from their crafts.”

“That doesn’t make them criminals,” said Ellison. “There are probably many unsuccessful crafters on Krim, spending their savings. Or working day jobs in the real world.”

“That’s not why I think they’re the thieves,” she said, reaching into her vest to pull out a small bag on a drawstring. Shielding it from view with her body, she opened it slightly so Ellison could look inside. “That’s one of the so-called rings of power on Rodge’s list.”

“How did you get it?”

“I got a pickpocket to pick their pockets,” she said. “Shanwei O’Griffy Lamusa owed me a favor. She tucked the bag back under her vest. “I got suspicious when they giggled at each other whenever someone in the bar mentioned the theft. Like they were hiding a big secret.”

“That’s pretty lucky,” he said.

“Not really.” She reached down to her feet, lifted up a sack, and dumped the contents on the bar. Ellison grabbed one of the gold coins before it rolled away. “Is that all from people here?” he whispered.

Several bar patrons had looked over when the coins, small knives and other pocket-size valuables hit the wooden slab that was the bar surface. Then they looked at Matilda and went back to their beers.

“No, this is from the Happy Hog. There were a lot of suspicious characters in there who looked shifty whenever anyone mentioned the robbery.” She gathered the loot back into the sack and put it back down by her feet. She looked up at him. “Don’t worry, I’ll give it back,” she said. “I’m just holding it for Shanwei until the heat dies down. He doesn’t want the Happy Hoggers to catch him with the loot still on him.”

She scratched her chin. “I make a good accomplice. Maybe I should get into the thieving business once the mercenary thing gets played out.”

“We’re going to need to get a few people together to follow these guys and find out where they live,” said Ellison.

“No need,” said Matilda. “I’ve been past their shops. They’re farther down Upping, in the art district.”

“That’s a pricey neighborhood,” said Ellison.

“Exactly. They’re paying some serious rent and protection money to be there.” She glanced over at the back table. “They’re about to leave.”

“We need a plan,” said Ellison.

Matilda patted him on the shoulder. “Sure, go ahead, think of one.” Then she stood up and yelled loudly, “I’m heaving off to bash some skulls. It’ll be fun. Who’s with me?”

Two burly women a couple of seats over stood up. “I’m in the mood for a good bashing,” said one in a gravelly voice.

“Hey, Betty, didn’t see you there!” said Matilda. She drank the rest of her beer and tossed a few coins to the bartender. “Wait until our thieves leave then follow them discreetly,” she whispered to Ellison as she bent down to pick up her loot sack, then dumped it in his lap. “And watch that for me.”



Chapter 15. First one trash chute, then another

The four thieves laughed in relief when Matilda left with the two other warrior women and ordered another round of beers for the road. Then Gervis stood up and walked over to Ellison.

“I saw you sitting over here with Matilda,” the stablemaster said. “At first I thought you guys were here to arrest me, but then I realized that you could have done that anytime at the guild. I guess you weren’t kidding when you said you suspected someone else. You weren’t just stringing me along.” Gervis clapped Ellison on the shoulder. “And listen, if you want me to keep an eye out for that lady for you, I can do that.”

“Thanks, man.” Ellison looked down at his beer.

“No, I appreciate you being straight with me.”

Ellison nodded, not looking up.

“Hey, don’t be glum,” said Gervis. “I’m sure you’ll catch her soon. The lady’s bound to slip up sometime. What’s her name again?”

“Elea Carlyle.”

Gervis snapped his fingers. “Right. The charity woman. I’ll keep an eye for her. Because we’re pals, right, and that’s what pals do.”

The four thieves finished up their beers, paid their bill, and left.

Ellison picked up his bag of loot and walked out to the door, where he waited for a few seconds then slowly eased it open. The four thieves were standing a few feet away, under a street light.

“I told you guys, they don’t suspect a thing,” Gervis said. “Scarlet-strike didn’t even give us a second look. And the idiot detective? He suspects some charity lady did it.”

“Let me tell you, it gave me the creeps when I saw the detective in the alley earlier,” said Trozganoth the Anointed, the knitter of wooly mittens. “First trash chute I saw, I jumped into it.”

“Wait,” said Gervis. “I thought you went out through the gate. What about the stuff?”

“I didn’t want to risk getting caught. I figured, the quicker I got out of that body, the better. And don’t worry about the loot. I hit it well. We can come back for it anytime.”

“I think we need to hit pause for a few days, until things die down,” said Gervis. “Besides, we got most of the valuable stuff out already.”

The other two thieves began to grumble when Matilda and the two warrior women emerged from the shadows on the other side of the narrow street. The three women were spread out to block their escape.

The thieves looked back as Ellison stepped down from the bar’s entrance.

“Don’t kill them! We need them alive,” Ellison yelled.

“Aw, what fun is that?” asked Matilda, closing in, knives out. Betty, a few feet to her left, swung a giant spiked club. The other woman, over to the right, put her sword away with a disappointed look on her face.

One of the thieves, the tapestry weaver, tried to make a run for it and she knocked him out with a single blow with her fist. Then she closed in on Gervis while Matilda and Betty incapacitated the other two.

Gervis spun around, panicked. “You won’t take me alive!” he yelled and ran straight at Ellison, knocked him aside, and leapt up the front steps and into the bar.

Ellison dropped Matilda’s bag of stolen loot, and chased Gervis through the bar, then through the staff door at the back, down a short hallway, and out through the rear exit into an alley.

Gervis had one leg over the side of the garbage chute when Ellison caught up to him. Ellison tried to grab the man by his coat, but the

stablemaster easily pushed Ellison away and fell backwards down the chute.

Ellison stared down into the darkness, restraining the urge to jump in after him. He knew who he was after now. If Gervis left Krim for good, well, there was nothing he could do. It wasn't a crime to steal stuff in a place like Krim. There was no legal recourse to be had.

If Gervis left, Rodge would just have to be satisfied with the other three thieves.

"You've got to stop letting people do that," said Matilda, standing in the rear doorway.

"At least we've got some of them," said Ellison.

When they returned back to the street, all three thieves were securely trussed up.

As they were pulling the two conscious men up to their feet, a little weaselly character appeared from around the corner. He spotted the sack Ellison was holding.

"I believe that belongs to me," he said.

"Ellison, this is Shanwei," said Matilda. "Shanwei, Ellison."

"Hey, weren't you at the Happy Hog earlier tonight?" said Betty.

"Nope, must have been someone else." Shanwei grabbed the bag and darted away.

"I could have sworn..." said Betty.

"Well, I, for one, am severely disappointed that we didn't get to kill anyone," said her friend.

"Want to help me get them back to the Armforge Guild and watch them get tortured?" Matilda asked, and the friend cheered up.

"Lead on!"

Matilda threw the unconscious Vaganath the tapestry weaver over her shoulder and they set off.

The nightly rains had started by the time they made it all the way back, the two conscious thieves kicking and screaming the whole way there.

Rodge Bannister was disappointed that they didn't bring all the stolen property back.

"We're going to have to search their houses tomorrow, and hope that they haven't sold it off yet," he said.

Matilda threw Vaganath down on the ground, then turned to Trozganoth. "I suggest you tell them where you hid the stuff. Otherwise they'll tear your homes and shops apart looking for it."

"Don't say anything," said Tarantula Dave. "They'll rip our places apart, anyway."

Matilda slapped him.

"Hey," said Rodge. "Save something for the torturer."

"It's in the storage room in the back of the Knitted Kitten," said Trozganoth. "There's a stack of boxes, and if you move them aside, there's a hatch that goes down to a root cellar. My whole share is down there. I haven't sold any of it yet."

"Don't I know you?" asked Rodge. He snapped his fingers. "The family picnic this summer, right?"

"He's married to Gervis," Ellison said. "Gervis was in on it. He was the inside man."

Two Teeth Tom gasped.

"I can't believe it," said Rodge, in a flat voice. "He's one of our most loyal guild members. There has to be another explanation. And how did they get the stuff out?"

"I can probably explain that," said Ellison.



Chapter 16. A steaming pile

“I suspect that Gervis has been finding opportunities to climb that back watch tower and drop the stolen goods down to one of his accomplices standing outside the wall,” Ellison said. “It’s hard to see who’s going up and down because the guild house and the stables are in the way.”

“Well, now that’s all cleared up, I guess our job is done,” said Matilda. “I heard there’s a two-for-one sale at the Rising Fun. We can get out of the rain, dry off, play some cards, have a little fun. My treat.”

A couple of Rodge’s mercenaries looked longingly after them as they walked away.

“Hey, boss,” one said. “Since the mystery’s been solved...”

“We still have work to do,” said Rodge.

“Well, I’ll be going too...” Ellison began.

“Hold on,” said Rodge. He had the three prisoners taken down to the dungeon. Then ordered another team to go to Gervis’ house and make sure that nothing is disturbed.

“If Gervis shows up, grab him and bring him back,” he said. “Otherwise, wait there for me before you start searching. Ellison, you come with me.”

Ellison stepped back out from the cover of the house, back into the rain. It was coming down even harder now, and immediately soaked through all his clothes. If he stayed on Krim any longer, he’d probably be dead of consumption or whatever disease that was where you coughed up a little blood on day, then wasted away and died within a month.

He followed Rodge around the side of the building, into the courtyard on the south side of the building. The guild's mercenaries trailed reluctantly behind them, feet squelching in the mud.

There wasn't much to see in the dark.

The southern third or so of the guild compound was composed of an open courtyard, where the party had been held, and was open all the way to the back wall. A single covered oil lamp valiantly battled against the dark in the back corner.

"We're going to have to put another guard tower up," said Rodge, and pointed to the corner with the lamp.

The stables were at the other back corner, towards the northwest of the compound, out of sight from where they were standing. The stables connected back to the Knots Hollow Way entrance via a narrow driveway that stretched between the north side of the building and the north wall of the compound, just wide enough for a team of horses and a wagon.

The watch tower was behind the stables, located at the corner where the back, western wall met the north side wall. A guard stationed there could keep an eye on both the area behind the stables and the entire length of the driveway. But that meant that the stairs up to the tower were almost completely hidden from view, even during bright daylight.

Rodge walked through the courtyard, around the side of the building, and led the way to the stables.

"If Gervis was responsible, he must have hidden everything somewhere in this area," said Rodge. "Either right in the stable, or maybe behind it."

"It would have to be readily accessible," said Ellison. "His windows of opportunity for getting everything out were pretty short."

"We've already searched the stables, several times," said one of the guards.

“His husband said they had a trap door back home. Maybe there’s one here somewhere,” said Ellison.

“It’s a dirt floor,” said a mercenary.

“Right,” said Rodge. “Get some shovels. Start digging everything up.”

The mercenaries jumped into action. The horses were led outside, where they weren’t happy to be in the rain.

The lucky mercenaries got the job of digging in the central area of the stables, in the stalls, and in the attached wagon shed. Those who were less lucky were sent outside, to dig behind the stables. The least lucky were left with the manure pile at the very back.

There was a smaller door there, too. “That must be how he carried everything to the back guard tower without anyone noticing,” Ellison said, pointing it out.

“We have someone come every week and take the manure away,” said Rodge. “They use it for fertilizer somewhere.” He frowned. “That pile shouldn’t be that large.”

The two unluckiest mercenaries attacked the pile, loading the manure into wheelbarrows and lugging it outside into the courtyard.

“Why all the rush?” Ellison asked Rodge. “Can’t this wait until tomorrow?”

“I’m extremely anxious to recover my property,” said Rodge, in a level even tone that was undermined by a vein pulsing in his temple. “And no, it can’t wait.”

“You might never get it all back, you know,” Ellison said. “They could have already sold some of it. And Gervis threw himself into a trash chute to get away from us. Anything he was carrying is gone for good.”

Rodge tightened his lips and took a deep, slow breath.

“He might also have more hiding places around Krim,” Ellison added.

“Start thinking about how you’re going to find him, then,” said Rodge.

A second later, a shovel loudly hit metal.

“We found something!” yelled a mercenary.

He was on the far side of the manure pile, closest to the back door. As Rodge and Ellison walked over, he pushed the manure off to the side, exposing a wooden trapdoor with a metal latch. There was a lock on it, but the mercenaries pulled it off with a crowbar.

Ellison crowded in behind Rodge. The opening was about two feet wide by three feet long. He couldn’t see how deep it was, but it was big enough to hold the shield wedged in diagonally.

A mercenary pulled it out. “We got the scepter, too,” he added, getting down on his belly to reach down to the bottom of the hole.

He lifted the silver stick out and handed it up to Rodge. “The jewel’s missing,” he added.

“He must have thought it would be easier to fence them separately,” said Ellison.

“Is there anything else in there?” Rodge asked.

“Just a few other large pieces,” said the mercenary. He passed up a sword, then reached down again.

Rodge tapped his fingers against his scabbard as more items were recovered and handed off to be taken back to the guildhouse.

Finally, the last item was removed.

“Is that it?” asked Rodge. “Are you absolutely sure?”

The mercenary lowered an oil lamp into the hole to make sure he hadn’t missed anything.

“That’s everything, boss.”

“I’m going to need a complete inventory and a full report on my desk first thing tomorrow morning,” Rodge said, then turned to Ellison.

“I want to see you back here tomorrow afternoon,” he said. “And either bring Gervis with you or come up with a very good plan to find him.”



Chapter 17. Start with the toes

The rain had ended by the time Ellison left the guild and he went straight back to his room at the inn and fell deep asleep. He slept through breakfast, and through lunch as well so by the time he made it downstairs all that was left was cold cabbage that the cook was about to throw away.

He collected Matilda at the King's Armpit, where she'd already heard the latest gossip.

"Rodge searched the thieves' places this morning," she told him.

"What, personally?"

"He had a few people with him, but he basically micromanaged everything. Ripped everything apart. Found a bunch of stolen loot, not just from this robbery, but lots of other ones, too."

"So Rodge must be happy."

"No, he was furious. He beheaded Two Teeth Tom."

"So there's still something missing?"

"Yup, probably something small," Matilda said. "Rumor is, it's the Jewel of Rhotarr."

"Well, if Gervis has any common sense at all, he's hidden it someplace safe and fled off-world. Rodge will get tired of playing soldier sooner or later, and then Gervis can come back and sell it."

"Then we'll probably never find him. I mean, he could be anybody in real life."

"The problem isn't finding him in real life," said Ellison. "The problem is what to do if we do find him. Normally, I'd serve a subpoena, but there's no grounds for one here."

"I guess it all comes down to how much he loves his husband," said Matilda. "Is he going to split and leave him here to be tortured?"

“Maybe we can trade the husband for the jewel,” said Ellison.

But when they suggested that idea to Rodge, the man slammed his fist on his desk and roared, “No! I will not negotiate with terrorists!” Then he took a breath and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t just want the jewel,” he said. “I want him, personally.”

“Because he betrayed you?” asked Matilda.

“Sure, sure.” Rodge opened a drawer of his desk and rifled through a pile of file folders.

Ellison leaned over. Was there a stationary supply store on Krim somewhere?

Rodge pulled out the file he wanted and slammed the drawer shut. “Here,” he said, slapping it on the table. He opened it and pulled out the top sheet. “Gervis Gefroi. Known as Ruslan Jimmy Joe Estemirov in real life.”

“You know the real-world identities of all your guild members?” Matilda asked.

“We run full background checks,” said Rodge. He pulled out a pad of paper — where was he getting his supplies? — and copied over Gervis’ real name and contact details. He passed it to Ellison.

“Do what you have to do to get him back here.”

Ellison glanced over at Matilda. “Sure, we’ll do that,” he said.

“Meanwhile, the thieves are being tortured downstairs,” Rodge said. “See if you can get anything useful out of them.”

Ellison didn’t particularly feel like watching people get tortured, so he happily let Matilda lead the way.

She practically skipped down the steps.

“I heard they’ve got a good guy here,” she said over her shoulder to Ellison. “Not as good as Glad the Impaler, but up there. Maybe I can pick up a few tips.”

Ellison felt a sour taste at the back of his throat and swallowed, but the queasiness didn’t go away. Instead, as they entered the guild’s dun-

geon, they could now hear the screams of the damned and smell the stench of spilled body fluids.

Matilda breathed in deep. “Ah, I love the smell of entrails in the morning,” she said.

“It’s the afternoon.”

“Afternoons are my mornings.”

The followed the screams to the torture chamber, where two of the thieves were chained to the walls and the third, Trozganoth the Anointed, was tied to a medieval torture rack.

“Oh, wow, this is great,” said Matilda. “I haven’t seen one of these before.”

The torturer put down his flaming hot poker and turned to them. His black leather mask made Ellison rock back on his feet.

Ellison grabbed on an Iron Maiden for support, but Matilda stepped forward. “I didn’t realize anyone on Krim had one.”

“Hey, Matty,” said the torturer and pulled up his mask.

“Oh, my god, Danny, I didn’t know you worked here!” Matilda clapped him on the shoulder. “Nice gig!”

“Thanks, but they call me Danmak the Bonekeeper here. What brings you to my fine abode?”

Ellison let go of the Iron Maiden and stepped forward. “We’re looking for any information on how to find Gervis.”

Danny spit on the dirt floor. “That traitor. What do you want to know?”

“Well, where he might be hiding, to start with,” said Matilda.

“Sure.”

Danny turned back to Trozganoth, who was moaning softly, and slapped him a couple of times to get his attention.

It took the prisoner a few seconds before he could focus on them. His eyes were swollen, his nose broken, and he was missing teeth.

“I don’t know where he is,” Trozganoth finally whispered, barely loud enough for Ellison to hear. “But I know he’ll come back for me.” He coughed and spit up some blood. “He’ll find a way to save me.”

“Has he told you anything useful at all?” Matilda asked.

“Well, no, but I haven’t asked him anything,” said Danny. “I’ve just been torturing, you know, for the sake of the torture. I’ve got some new techniques I want to try out.”

“Oh, did you go to Glad’s seminar last week?” she asked. “I wanted to, but couldn’t make it.”

“I did, and it was great,” said Danny. “But it wasn’t just about professional development. Yes, it’s good to keep up with the latest development in the field, but it’s the networking with my peers that I find most rewarding.”

“Glad is a genius with a butter knife.” Matilda caressed the dagger on her belt.

Danny glanced down at her hand. “Want to give it a go?” he asked. “I can tell you want to.”

“Can I?”

“Just don’t kill him. Rodge will kill both of ... I mean, Rodge will make sure that both of us suffer eternal torment if this guy dies.”

She took out her dagger. “I’m going to start with the toes,” she said.



Chapter 18. A long view off a steep cliff

Ellison didn't stick around for any of the torture. He didn't think it would be particularly useful, first of all. Back in the old day, people would confess to just about anything for the torture to stop.

But also, it just didn't sit right with him.

Sure, it wasn't real. Not really real. But it felt real, and wasn't that real enough?

Just because people signed the Krim terms of service and liability waivers didn't mean that they actually expected or wanted to be tortured. He himself, for example, wasn't on Krim to roleplay at being a medieval peasant or soldier or minor prince. He was here for work.

The three thieves down in Rodge's torture dungeon mostly spend their time knitting and weaving or basket making or whatever crafts they were into.

On the other hand, they did rob a mercenary guilt. At the end of the day, they knew what they were setting themselves for.

Doesn't mean that Ellison had to watch.

His first step was the central square, where he walked through the main gate and out into the real world.

His brother Jerald had recently moved his company, Crewe Investigations, to Facepage. The company had been on a massive acquisition spree lately, buying up smaller worlds right and left, including the office park where Crewe Investigations had been headquartered.

Now Crewe Investigations was just another storefront on Main Street.

Facepage's ranking algorithm meant that the world looked different to everyone who visited it. In Ellison's case, that included several potato-themed restaurants, a movie theater, a singles bar, the Crewe In-

vestigations building, and mental health clinics on every other corner. Clearly, Facepage's algorithm didn't know him as well as it thought, since he wouldn't be caught dead talking to a shrink.

The office came with a new receptionist, a sexy bot that was included in Facepage's basic business package.

Ellison waved the bot off and walked into his brother's office. It was several times larger than his old one, and featured a floor-to-ceiling glass window that overlooked a mountain landscape. Having been stuck on Krim for the past few weeks, the greenery, and the crisp blue of the sky took his breath away. With all the soot in the air, Krim's average visibility was barely more than a few blocks.

He walked past Jerald's desk to stare out at the view while he finished off the rest of his French fries.

Jerald finished up his video call and stood up.

"You could have sent me a message that you were coming," he said. "I could have been in the middle of something."

"I've gotten used to just dropping in on people," said Ellison. "No other option, on Krim." He nodded out the window. "Nice view."

"I haven't gotten around to changing it yet," said Jerald. "That's the default background the office came with."

"Can you go out there?"

"Sure, why not?" Jerald made a quick gesture and the windows slid open allowing Ellison to step out onto a narrow balcony. The air was fresh and crisp, with just a slight chill to it.

"How far does it go?"

"How should I know? Forever, I guess. It's just the default mountain background."

"Do the freebie apartments come with those?"

"Yeah."

Ellison looked down. The balcony was embedded into the side of a cliff, with nothing below, or above, except more crags. The base of the

cliff was hundreds of feet down. He felt the urge to step off the balcony and soar off into the air.

He hadn't gone flying in... well, he flew on that dragon on the World of Battle a while back, but nothing other than that. On Krim, the only flying you'd do was in the moments after you were thrown out through a window and before your skull hit the pavement.

In prison, there were a number of therapeutic nature environments for the inmates to visit, but knowing that they were intended as therapy made Ellison avoid them. There was nothing wrong with him. He hadn't done anything wrong, and his anger at Elea Carlyle was fully and completely justified.

He didn't need therapy.

He needed a plan.

And speaking of plans...

"I need your help with something," Ellison said, tearing his eyes away from the scenery and stepping back into his brother's office. "I'm looking for a guy."

He rattled off Gervis' contact information and screens sprung up into the air around Jerald's desk.

They showed Gervis — Ruslan Jimmy Joe Estemirov — in various permutations. His work history. His academic record. His social graph. Ellison was surprised to see that he was married, and the identification print of the woman he was married to matched that of Trozganoth the Anointed. So it wasn't just an in-world roleplay relationship, but a real one .. and they'd been married for over seventy years.

That meant that Gervis was probably still on Krim somewhere, trying to free Trozganoth.

Ellison checked the location data. He was right. Gervis hadn't set foot back in the real world. After he fell down the chute and died, he must have grabbed a new avatar in the Krim welcome area and walked right back in through the gate again. Technically, he'd never left

Krim."Can you keep an eye on the guy for me?" Ellison asked. "Also, can you run a full background check and send it to me in-world?"

"This isn't for an official Crewe contract," Jerald said.

"No," said Ellison. "An in-world side gig."

"I'll do it if you do me a favor," said Jerald. "I've got a case coming in next week. Elea Carlyle wants to hire us again."

Ellison was tempted to refuse, but then again, working for Elea would give him another opportunity to figure out what she was up to.

"Only as long as I don't have to sign any binding contracts or non-disclosure agreements," he said.

"Knowing your history, I guess that's fair," said Jerald. "It's a deal. I'll watch for Gervis, and get you the background check. What should I do if he shows up?"

"Tell him that you've got an anonymous buyer for the jewel," said Ellison. "Hint that it's a rival mercenary guild and that they won't just pay for the jewel but help him break Trozganoth out."

"Right. I'm guessing that this will make sense to him?"

"I hope. I'm going to head back to Krim and track him down there. Send me the background info via the Krim post office. If you catch up to him, tell him that there will be a message left for him at the post office, under the name Jimmy Joe. Do you want me to write that down for you?"

"What, why?" Jerald gestured around at the floating screens. Immediately, one of them started playing back a video of Ellison's last few words. "You've been on Krim too long. Have you ever considered..."

"Right then, gotta go."

"Check your messages! People have been calling me trying to reach you."

"No thanks." Ellison had finally managed to turn off all notifications and wasn't about to turn them back on. "If they really want me, they can find me on Krim."



Chapter 19. Not to be taken via enema

On the way back through Krim's welcome area, Ellison took the opportunity to reset his avatar, so he wouldn't have to go back wearing his old, dirty clothes and his old, tired, body.

He still kept his same look. The body was his, back before the explosion that killed him a little more than five years ago. The clothes were Krim's default assassin outfit. It was comfortable, the black didn't show stains, and it came with lots and lots of pockets filled with a variety of poisons, a blow gun, a garrote, and several sharp stiletto knives. Best of all, since it was part of the default avatar collection, there was no extra change.

He stepped through the central gate onto Krim's central square, filled with merchants selling everything from weapons to home-spun shirts bearing the logos of local pubs.

He looked around for a top hat. Norbert Hawking typically hung around the central square, selling treasure maps, plague cures, and dragon repellent.

And there he was, in the south-east corner of the square, across the street from The King's Arms.

Ellison fought his way over through the crowd and waited patiently while Norbert sold a leprosy salve to a newcomer.

Norbert must have just finished explaining the symptoms of leprosy and how many people had died of it in the middle ages, because the newcomer was starting to look a little green around the face. Or it could have just been a natural reaction to being on Krim and breathing in the greasy combination of aerosolized human and animal excrement, congealed cooking fat, and soot that was the air in the city center.

“This salve is made with chaulmoogra oil, which dates back as a treatment for epilepsy all the way back to Ayuverdic medicine,” Norbert said. “Don’t swallow it. It will make you vomit. And definitely don’t take it via enema. It’ll give you anal fissures.”

“Isn’t there anything else?” the noob asked.

“Other treatments for leprosy include scarification, bathing in blood, and castration.”

The noob considered the options. “I’ll take the blood.”

“Good choice,” said Norbert, putting away the salve and pulling a flask of blood from another pocket. “Five silvers.”

“That hardly seems like enough blood for a bath.”

“It works just as well diluted,” said Norbert.

“Has there ever been a case of leprosy on Krim?” asked Ellison after the noob walked away with his purchase.

“No, because my salves work,” said Norbert, looking Ellison up and down. “New outfit, I see. The usual?”

Ellison nodded, and began emptying his pockets of the poison vials and weapons. He didn’t know what Norbert did with them all, and never cared to ask.

In return, he got several small bags of flea powder, which did, in fact, work on Krim’s fleas. It also worked on bed bugs. It was probably slowly killing him, too, but it wasn’t like he was going to keep this particular body long enough to notice.

Before he stowed away the last bag he sprinkled some on his clothes, because he could already feel the tiny insects creeping up his legs. The thought of it made his skin crawl.

When Ellison got to the King’s Armpit, Matilda was already there, regaling the other patrons with tales of fun things that happened while she was helping torture Trozganoth.

Now that Ellison had seen that Trozganoth looked like a kindly kindergarten teacher in real life, he was even less enthused about the torture and pulled her away to a back booth.

“Did you get any info about where Gervis is?” he asked her.

“Nope,” she said happily. “But do you want to see the latest addition to my collection of toes?” She reached into her coat.

“No, no, please don’t,” Ellison said. He swallowed back the acid rising in his throat. “I’ve got a plan for finding him.”

He laid it all out for her. Announce a reward for the jewel, ostensibly from a rival mercenary guild. And as sweetener, throw in a raiding party to go and rescue the prisoners.

“The only thing that’s missing is the reward,” he said. “Rodge said that he didn’t want to negotiate with terrorists, right?”

Matilda waved off the concern. “He’ll go along with it once we explain that it’s a trap,” she said. “Worst case, I know some other guild masters who’ll happily offer a reward to get the jewel for themselves. Actually, I’ve got a guild in mind already. They’ll go along with it.”

“If Gervis goes off-world, he’s going to get a message to go to the post office. There will be a letter there addressed to Jimmy Joe.”

“Jimmy Joe?”

“That’s his middle name in real life.”

“Anyway, we can spread the word here, as well.”

“And then we’ll nab him when he goes to the post office,” said Matilda. “Of course, we won’t know what he looks like. And they won’t let us grab him inside.”

“I’ll wait for him outside,” said Ellison. “I’ll be able to spot him.”

“By how he walks, right?”

“Something like that.”

“Unless he gets someone to go and get the letter for him.”

“So we write a letter that convinces him to show up somewhere,” said Ellison. “How about this? A rival guild leader agrees to meet him at some neutral location — say, city hall. In return for the jewel, the rival guild will stage a raid on the Armforge Guild and then he and Trozganoth can leave Krim — or sneak out of the city and live in peace somewhere in the countryside — until everything blows over.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Matilda. “I’ll go talk to my pals at the Sightless Crossfire.”

“The who?”

“It’s a mercenary guild. Located in the pig slaughter district.”

“Are they good enough to take on Rodge?” Ellison asked. “The Armforge Guild is pretty well defended.”

“Well, we’re not actually going to go through with the attack.”

“But Gervis has to believe that it’s possible,” Ellison said. “Though he must be pretty desperate about now.”

“Why do you think I’ve been going around town talking about how Trozganoth is being tortured?” said Matilda.

“I thought you just liked to brag about torturing people.”

“Well, that too,” said Matilda, raising her beer at him. “Nothing wrong with mixing business with pleasure.”

“Right. If he’s still around the area, he’s probably paying close attention to the gossip. He must be getting frantic.”

Matilda tossed back the rest of her beer and stood up. “See you back here tomorrow?”

“Sounds good. I’ll go back and talk to Rodge. If anything has changed, or if they found Gervis or the jewel already, I’ll let you know.”



Chapter 20. Send for the fishmonger

Rodge Bannister didn't want to offer a reward for the return of the Jewel of Rhotarr.

They'd recovered everything except a dozen or so of the smaller, less valuable precious stones and historic artifacts. The Gang of Four had either hidden them somewhere where Rodge and his mercenaries couldn't find them, had already sold them, or Gervis had them in his possession.

"He's been keeping his head down," said Ellison. "Gervis is still on Krim somewhere. I'll know if he leaves the grid. But nobody has heard from him. Nobody who's talking, at least."

Rodge frowned. "Well, the thieves were very good at disguises," he said after a long pause.

"That, or Gervis is staying out of sight, possibly hiding out with someone he trusts," said Ellison. "But he's been in Krim for years, so that could be anybody."

"And you think money is going to be enough to flush him out."

"No, probably not."

"So why bother?"

"We, ah, we're also going to tempt him with a team of raiders who will attack the Armforge Guild and rescue the prisoners."

Rodge closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm guessing that this is a ruse," he finally said. "Another tactic to flush the traitor out into the open."

Ellison nodded.

"I don't like it," said Rodge. "And I'm not going to offer a reward. What if Gervis has sold the jewel to someone else, and they step for-

ward to claim it? If we don't pay up, we'll be taking a hit to our reputation. If we do pay up, we're rewarding treachery and malfeasance."

He slammed his fist against the desk. "I want the names of all of his known associates. We round them all up. We will search their homes and places of business. We will torture them until they give up the traitor."

"You'll start a war with every other guild on Krim," Ellison said. "But that's okay, we have a backup plan without you having to pay a reward."

"I'm listening."

"Duke Humfridus Hubelet Hamund..." Ellison had to say the name slowly to avoid tripping over the syllables. "... of the Sightless Crossfire guild will front ten thousand golds as a reward. For that money, even Gervis' closest friends will sell him out."

"What!" Rodge rose from his chair.

Ellison backed away a step.

"You expect me to let that blithering idiot Ham get his hands on the jewel?"

"You did say it was more important to get Gervis back than the jewel," said Ellison.

Rodge stood all the way up and walked to the window overlooking the courtyard and clenched and unclenched his fists.

Then he turned around and looked at Ellison.

"I don't like it. I don't like any of the choices. Come up with something better."

"Um..."

"But while you're thinking about it, go ahead and post the reward." Rodge sighed. "I'll front the money." He sat back down. "And check with Danmak the Bonekeeper. See if any the thieves confessed anything useful yet."

Ellison didn't want to do that. Just knowing that the three men were somewhere below, screaming in pain, made him uncomfortable.

The heavy stone walls of the guild building may have blocked the sounds, but Ellison could swear that he could smell burning flesh in the air.

He dragged himself into the main hall and was relieved to find that Danmak was on a break, eating brunch in the break room.

He was on a battered couch, feet up, reading "Torture Monthly," and eating a pastry.

"Yeah, we got info," he said, wiping crumbs from his beard. "Between the three of them, they must have named half the citizens of Krim as co-conspirators."

"Like who?"

"Well, like half the members of the guild, to start with." Danmak polished off the rest of the pastry, put down the magazine, and swung his feet off the couch. "Chamomile tea?"

"Thanks, I'm good."

"Who else? Oh, the grid admins. The head of the chamber of commerce. The woman who runs the historical museum. Some fishmonger. The head of the assassin's guild."

"Which one?"

"The Paladins. But also a few of the assassins from the Avatars of Doom." Danmak shook his head. "I'm starting to suspect that they're just naming everyone they can think of so I stop torturing them. But they could be telling the truth. Gervis has been around a long time. He's probably got lots of friends." He reached for another pastry. "Rodge has already sent someone out after the fishmonger."

"Do you ever.. you know... feel bad about the torturing?" Ellison asked.

"No. Why should I?" Danmak picked up his magazine and leaned back. "It's in the terms of service. If people don't want to be tortured, they shouldn't come to Krim." He leafed through the magazine to find the page where he'd left off. "Oh, this is a good one." He held up the magazine. "It's a Heretic's Fork."

Despite himself, Ellison leaned forward to look. The page featured an engraving of a prisoner with a leather strap around his neck. The strap held in place something that looked like a fork, one that had two tines on both ends. The fork was wedged under the prisoner's chin, forcing him to tilt his head back.

"That doesn't look too bad," said Ellison.

"No, no, this is great," said Danmak, and read out loud from the magazine. "The device is wedged between the breastbone and the throat. The prisoner is unable to talk or fall asleep and delirium usually leads to a confession." He tapped on the page. "I'm going to put in a requisition for one of these. It says here that these forks were used a lot during the Spanish Inquisition."

"How does the prisoner confess if he can't talk?"

"Good point," said Danmak. "Can't be hand gestures. If their hands are free, they'd just move the fork." He rubbed his beard. "I guess you could ask them, 'Are you ready to talk yet? Blink once for yes, twice for no.'" He looked up at Ellison. "All sorts of nuances in the torture business. It's not as easy as people make it sound. It's hard work, actually. Let me tell you about this one prisoner I had once..."

Ellison backed out of the room. There was a bloodthirsty killer out there waiting for him. Namely, Matilda.



Chapter 21. Pretzels, fur coats and trash chutes

The city hall was, in theory, a great place for secret meetings. Krim administrators didn't allow any hanky panky inside the building. They had no problems with their residents being subject to grotesque acts of violence, but didn't want to become victims themselves.

Any user who violated the rules could be permanently banned from the world.

Meanwhile, the city hall looked over the south side of the central plaza, just on the other side of Tuppung Street. The main gate was on the far end of the plaza. City hall was a convenient place for new arrivals to stop by and be told that no, they couldn't buy currency there and had to go to the central bank. And that no, they couldn't get their mail there, they had to go to the post office. And no, they couldn't complain about getting robbed or knifed in the back because those things were perfectly legal on Krim. But it was also the place where merchants got import and export permits, so it wasn't utterly useless. Just mostly so.

Nonetheless, there was a constant stream of visitors, many of them newcomers to the grid, going in and out of city hall. Most left disappointed. It was easy for someone wearing a noob outfit to walk in and out of the place withdrawing any suspicion whatsoever.

Gervis should feel completely safe to walk in there, meet up with Duke Humfridus Hubelet Hamund, reach a quick agreement, and leave again. Gervis would recognize the Duke when he saw him, and could easily check whether he was alone or not.

Ellison didn't know how Matilda convinced Ham to go along with their plan.

"Do you think he'll bring the jewel with him?" Matilda asked Ellison.

They were both standing behind a pretzel cart on the south side of the plaza. Ellison's job was to spot Gervis as he walked into city hall. Matilda's job was to grab him as he came back out again. To help her out, Rodge had lent a few of his mercenaries. They were scattered around the area, all wearing new avatars so that Gervis wouldn't recognize them.

Ellison had his assassin hood up over his head as a disguise.

Matilda was wearing a borrowed and oversized fur coat that covered her head to toe and hid her armor.

She stroked the pelt, which was only slightly matted from being exposed to the Krim elements.

"This is warm," she said. "I should get something like this."

The fur smelled strongly of wet dog.

Ellison glanced up at the giant clock over the city hall entrance.

"Gervis should have been here half an hour ago," he said.

"Maybe he's being cautious, seeing if he can spot a trap," said Matilda and bit into a pretzel.

"Or maybe he's waiting for Ham to show and go inside," said Ellison.

"He was already uncomfortable enough about helping us set a trap and lending his name to it," said Matilda. "Best he could do for us was put his seal on the message and lend me this coat. He didn't want to be here when it went down."

"I'm going to do another circle of the plaza," said Ellison. "If Gervis is anywhere out here, I'll spot him."

Half an hour later, he returned to the same spot.

“He isn’t anywhere around here,” he told her. “I checked everywhere with line of sight of the city hall entrance, and then some. I don’t think he was ever here.”

Just then an armed fighter walked up to the top of the city hall steps, turned around, and, at the top of his lungs, yelled Matilda’s name.

“That’s not Gervis,” Ellison said.

“No, that’s one of Ham’s guys,” said Matilda.

“Matilda Scarletstrike!” the fighter yelled again. “Is there a Matilda Scarletstrike out here?”

Matilda walked around the pretzel cart and waved at the fighter until he spotted her and came down the steps.

Ellison staggered after her, buried under the coat.

“I’ve got a message from Duke Humfridus Hubelet Hamund,” the fighter said. “Gervis contacted him. Wants to meet at the Barley Mow, instead.”

“He must have thought that this place was too exposed,” said Matilda.

“The Barley Mow isn’t going to be any better for him,” said Ellison.

“He probably thinks he’s being clever, changing the meeting location at the last minute,” said Matilda. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll just catch him there.” She turned to the fighter. “We’ll handle it from here. I’ll get Ham’s coat back to him later on.”

The fighter looked at the coat appreciatively.

“I’ve always wanted to try it on,” said the fighter, and reached out to pat the fur. “It feels like it would be pretty warm. I should get one of these.”

“I know, right?” Matilda said. “I want to know where he gets them.”

“Maybe from up north? I heard...”

“We don’t have time for this,” Ellison interrupted. “Gervis might be gone by now.”

He and Matilda walked east on Upping, towards the King’s Arms, then turned south on Banking Street.

A few of Rodge's disguised mercenaries saw them walking away and trailed behind them.

When they got to Leadenhall Street, Ellison pulled his hood back up and forward so that it cast his face in shadow.

Then, just before turning the corner, they waited for Rodge's men to catch up. The Barley Mow was two blocks down Leadenhall, just past the post office.

"Wait here while I go up ahead and see if Gervis is there," Ellison told them.

As Ellison walked away, one of the mercenaries asked Matilda, "How's he going to recognize him?"

"He says by body language," Matilda told them. "But I think he's got a grid admin on the take."

Ellison didn't bother to correct her.

Instead, staying on the opposite side of the street and keeping people between him and the Barley Mow, he got close enough to see through the front window. There was Gervis, sitting right in full view of the street. Instead of the bulky form he had before, Gervis was now a slight man, with long wispy hair tied back in a ponytail and a sparse goatee. He wore a loose tan home-spun shirt. The avatar he wore looked vaguely familiar.

Ellison couldn't see if he had anything with him.

He returned back to Matilda and the mercenaries and described Gervis to them.

"Sounds like the default minstrel outfit," said Matilda.

That's where Ellison saw it, far down the list of default options in Krim's welcome area.

Matilda sent a couple of men ahead to stand guard on the other side of the inn, in case Gervis ran in that direction.

"Walk past the inn," she told them. "Don't look at it. Repeat, do not look at the inn. Stay across the street from it, keep people and vehicles between you and him, just in case he recognizes you by how you

walk. Just go a couple of buildings past it and wait. We'll go in, and then if you see him come running out with us chasing after them, then step in and grab him."

"The Barley Mow has a back door," Ellison reminded them.

"Right." Matilda sent another man to go down the alley and wait at the inn's back entrance. "If he comes running out, tackle him. And make sure he doesn't go into the chute."

Ellison winced. He'd recently lost someone he'd been trying to catch when the guy dove into a trash chute and died instantly. Well, the avatar died. The guy himself just landed right back in Krim's welcome area and waltzed right back in through the central gate.

"I'll wedge the chute lid closed," said the mercenary. "This ain't my first rodeo."

That left two others, whom Matilda positioned across the street from the inn, near the post office.

When everyone was in place, Matilda led the way.



Chapter 22. Fork full of skirrets

“Wait at the entrance,” Matilda told Ellison as she walked into the inn. “Don’t let him go upstairs or into the kitchen.”

She pantomimed a knife across her throat.

“You want me to slit his throat?” he whispered.

“No. If he gets to the kitchen he might slice his own throat and we’d lose him for good.”

Ellison nodded. Of course. They might not get a second chance to trick Gervis into showing himself.

“And keep an eye out for a large bag,” she added. “The minstrel outfit comes with a lute.”

“Loot?”

“A fat guitar.”

“You want me to get his guitar?”

“He probably ditched the guitar,” she said. “I’m saying, keep an eye out for the bag. He might have the loot in it.”

“Lute?”

“Ah, forget it.” She slammed the door open, pushed past a startled waitress, walked into the inn, and made a left turn into the dining room.

Gervis froze when he saw her and turned pale, holding his forkful of skirrets in the air in front of him.

Before he had a chance to stab himself in the neck with it, Matilda was at his table.

A lot of people had the urge to stab themselves when they saw Matilda coming at them. That, by itself, wasn’t proof of Gervis’ identity. Without Ellison’s special skill, they wouldn’t have known that this was Gervis.

She pulled the fork from Gervis' hand, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him to his feet. There was a bag under the table. She glanced at it, then at Ellison, and he pulled the bag out and looked inside.

"It's mostly clothes," he said. "It looks like he's packed for a long trip."

"He was probably hoping to liberate his fellow thieves and flee the city," Matilda said, and shook Gervis. "Is that right?"

"You've got the wrong guy," Gervis said. "I'm just a poor traveling minstrel."

"So where's your lute?"

"I pawned it for alcohol," he said. "It's a disease."

"Sing something for me."

"Tra la la," Gervis sang, off-key.

"He's pretty good," Matilda said. "Better than most of the minstrels around here. Are you sure we've got the right guy?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Ellison nodded.

He slung Gervis' bag over his shoulder and they dragged the man outside. Rodge's mercenaries quickly closed him and took Gervis off their hands.

The former stablemaster was quickly trussed up, the remaining mercenary fetched from behind the inn, and they set off for the guild.

Ellison and Matilda walked a few steps behind.

"How do you feel about turning over Gervis to be tortured?" Ellison asked her in a low voice that wouldn't carry to the mercenaries up ahead.

Matilda shrugged. "He knew what he was signing up for. He read the terms of service. Then he went and robbed the guild. He had to have known what was coming. They all did. There are no innocents on Krim."

"Speaking of innocents... did you see the waitress who was leaving as we walked in?"

“The blonde in the white dress?” Matilda whipped her head around. “I don’t see her anywhere. Darn it. She was probably in on it.”

“You think so?”

“It’s the same one who was catering the party, right? Donna?”

Ellison nodded.

“What are the odds that Gervis would end up at the same place where she worked?” She paused. “Never mind, I take that back. Krim is pretty small, so the odds are high. But still, it’s suspicious.”

“I kind of got the sense that she was innocent,” said Ellison.

Matilda snorted. “There are no innocents on Krim.” She walked quietly for a few steps, thinking about it. Or maybe planning her next meal. Or her next murder. It was hard to tell.

“We don’t have to mention her to Rodge,” she finally said. “Unless there’s a specific reason to. He’ll just have her kidnapped and tortured on general principles, even if she had nothing to do with anything.”

“It doesn’t matter now, anyway,” said Ellison. “We got Gervis. What else could Rodge ask for?”

Turned out, there was a lot more Rodge could ask for.

Trozganoth had already confessed about where he had stashed the small bag of loot he’d been carrying when Ellison and Two Teeth Tom stumbled on him outside the guild wall, but the jewel of Rotarr wasn’t there. It wasn’t in Gervis’ bag, either, though a couple of other stolen items were. Gervis also had some gold on him, either savings, or profits from selling stolen merchandise.

But that wasn’t enough for Rodge.

He ripped apart the clothes and supplies in Gervis’ bag, then went down to the basement.

Matilda followed him down, then quickly returned.

“He’s just whipping the thieves, yelling at them to tell him what else they stole,” she said. “Gervis already passed out from the pain.”

A few minutes later, Danmak the Bonekeeper joined them upstairs.

“I’ve never seen Rodge like this,” he said. “And I’m not one to tell other people how to torture — everyone has their methods — but I don’t think he’s going about it right. He’s letting his emotions get in the way.” He shook his head. “They’re just going to die on him and then he’ll never get what he wants.”

“Is this all about the jewel?” Ellison asked.

“I don’t know,” said Danmak. “But I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, he kept yelling at them, ‘What else did you take, what else did you take,’” said Matilda.

“He’s not normally like this,” said Danmak. “Well, he’s a little like this. But not quite this bad. I mean, these are just artifacts. He bought them. He can buy more.”

“Maybe he thinks the jewel is really magic,” said Matilda.

“No,” Danmak said. “I remember when he bought it and first put it on display. He thought it was a joke. Just another piece of fake grid history. He liked owning it, but I don’t think it was anything special to him.”

“Well, we’ve still got the reward up,” said Matilda. “Maybe it will show up.”

“I haven’t a feeling we’re not going to get paid until it does,” said Ellison.



Chapter 23. Not bad for an amateur

Matilda left, to put up more reward signs and to listen for gossip about the jewel.

Ellison stayed behind. With Rodge down in the basement, whipping the thieves, it could be a good opportunity to talk to the guild members.

And have some chamomile tea.

Danmak had a pot going in the break room and a fresh batch of pastries had just been delivered.

Ellison sank down into an overstuffed chair and listened to Danmak complain.

“The thing is, nobody understands that torture is an art form,” Danmak said, gesturing with a pastry. “Take the whip, for example. People think that it’s just about upper body strength. And yes, that’s part of it. But it’s mostly about finesse.”

Ellison nodded, following the pastry with his eyes. Was that a croissant? On Krim?

“There are nuances,” Danmak said. “It’s in the flick of the wrist and the angle of incidence. It’s a whole science. I spent three years getting a degree in medieval torture, then did an internship, and then every year I go to continuing education seminars. It’s not just something you learn once and boom, you’re set for life. You’re always learning. Torture is a journey.”

He finished off the pastry.

“Rodge is down there, and he’s got plenty of enthusiasm,” he continued. “I’m not going to lie. For an amateur, he’s not half bad. Not squeamish. Good form. Solid follow-through. But there’s a difference. It’s like... like...”

“Like someone who bakes some cookies at home, and someone who runs a bakery?” Ellison suggested.

“Exactly, but more so. Like... like someone who puts on a band aid at home, and someone who’s a surgeon.”

“Uh huh.” Ellison glanced at the table with the pastries.

“You know, when they advertised for this position, there must have been a couple of dozen applicants,” said Danmak. “From all different grids. It’s a very competitive field. In fact, most people with my degree never even work in the profession. They’re film consultants, or work in museums. If they’re lucky to work in the field at all.” He shook his head. “When I told my parents what I planned to study in college, do you know what they said?”

“I kind of have to get going,” said Ellison, lifting himself up a bit from the chair.

“How about a pastry?”

“Well, if you insist.”

It was, in fact, a croissant.

“Where do you get them? Is there a bakery around here?”

Danmak shrugged. “The guys at the front gate bring them in,” he said. “But as I was saying about my parents...”

Ellison ate the pastry. And drank some tea. Then had another pastry. By the time he was full, Danmak was almost finished with his story.

“So I told her, if you can’t stand to see me covered in blood and entrails then you don’t get me. So I got a parrot. And let me tell you about Jake...”

“Wait a second,” said Ellison. “I really want to know what happens next — but before you go into that, I’ve got a quick question.”

“Shoot.”

“What do you think Rodge is really looking for? Was there something else that was valuable that was stolen? From the list he gave us, it looked like the jewel was the most expensive piece.”

“Did the list have a notebook on it?”

“No, the list was just on a piece of paper.”

“I mean, was a notebook one of the missing items?”

“Ah, no. There was nothing like that.”

“It could be nothing,” said Danmak. “But I saw Rodge putting a notebook away in the safe once. He was careful with it, and acted like he didn’t want anyone to see it. But when we were robbed, the safe was completely empty. No notebook.”

“What did it look like?”

“Like a regular notebook from the stationary supply store.”

“There’s a stationary supply store on Krim?”

“Off of Upping, in the art district. But Rodge could have just moved the notebook somewhere else before the robbery. Or maybe he wrote his to-do list in it, then finished the to-do list. Or maybe he was writing a love letter in it, and sent the letter off and didn’t need the notebook anymore. Really, it could be anything.”

Danmak leaned forward.

“If you ask me, Rodge’s problem is psychological. He feels violated. He thinks violence will fix things, make that feeling go away.”

“So what you’re saying is that Rodge doesn’t need to get his jewel back, he needs to get therapy?”

Danmak nodded. “There’s a type of people who come to Krim because they have unresolved emotional issues, and they prefer to hide away instead of dealing with issues head on. I, myself, am here to pursue my craft. Not too many places in the metaverse where you can work as a medieval torturer. It’s one of those heritage arts that isn’t in high demand these days. But I’m sure you understand.”

“I do?”

“You’re a heritage detective of sorts, right? An old-school-style private eye. Out in the real world, it’s all about digital forensics. But here on Krim, you get to experience detective work the way it used to be, where you go around talking to people, and collecting clues. I mean, how many places can you do that?”

Danmak leaned back on the couch and swung his feet up. “This one time, back when I was still doing my first apprenticeship...”

Ellison tuned him out. Instead, he thought about notebooks. Somebody else had mentioned a notebook recently. It was one of the guards, maybe.

“I just realized something,” Ellison told Danmak. “I’ve got to go.”

“Oh, but I was just getting to the good part,” said Danmark. “Have another pastry.”

“I remembered a clue,” Ellison said.

“Oh, in that case, don’t let me keep you.”

Ellison walked out to the front gate, where Two Teeth Tom was twirling his sword in the air and catching it by the hilt, except occasionally when he dropped it.

“Just keeping reflexes sharp,” Tom said when he saw Ellison approach.

Ellison waited until Tom wiped the dirt off his sword and put it away.

“Listen,” he said. “Do you remember, right after the robbery, when you searched everyone?”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t you say you found a notebook?”

“One of the maids had it, the blonde,” said Tom.

“You mean the waitress?”

“She had a white dress on.” Tom shook his head. “Who wears a white dress on Krim?”

“What kind of notebook was it?”

“Just the regular cheap kind from the stationary store,” said Tom. “There was nothing in it. It was blank, except for that one drawing of Rodge.” He snorted. “I should have asked her to do one of me. Why?”

“Nothing,” said Ellison. “For a second, I thought maybe I’d found a clue.”

But he left to find the waitress, just in case. She was showing up too often in this case to be a mere coincidence. Maybe there was a secret key sewn into the notebook's binding, he thought.

He might as well check it out. If there was something valuable in it, and he got the notebook back for Rodge, he and Matilda might finally get paid and be done with this case.



Chapter 24. A spider in the corner

Quimby Plummer, owner of the Barley Mow Inn, refused to tell Ellison where Donna lived.

“I know you’re working for that Rodge guy,” Quimby said. “After you two dragged my customer right out of here, I’m seriously considering kicking you out. Next time, drag them out after they’ve paid for their meal.”

Ellison sighed, then paid for Gervis’ lunch.

“If you won’t tell me where she lives, can you tell me when she’s scheduled to work next?” he asked.

“She isn’t,” said Quimby. “I fired her.”

“She lives on Oxhead,” said a drunk patron sitting at the bar.

“How do you know that?” said Ellison.

“Well, I’ve been stalking her, haven’t I?” said the drunk. “Can’t get up the nerve to talk to her.”

“Where on Oxhead?”

“About half-way down, on the south side. There’s an empty shop, and she’s got a flat right above it. If you stand outside you can see her in the window sometimes, brushing her hair.” The patron sighed. “Say, if you see her, tell her that Will sends his best.”

Oxhead was a narrow street that ran for two blocks between Lothbury and Ribble Rowans, halfway to the art district. It was barely wide enough for a single wagon. Stone buildings crowded in on both sides and the upper stories hung over, blocking the sky. Ellison felt a little claustrophobic by the time he found an empty shop in a two-story building.

A light was on upstairs. He walked up a dark stairwell, so narrow that his arms brushed the walls on both sides, and knocked on the door at the top.

Donna opened it without even asking who it was.

She was holding a candle, and held it up closer to Ellison's face.

"Did something happen?" she asked. "Is the building on fire?"

"No," Ellison began.

"Because that happened once next door," she said. "It was very frightening."

Newcomers to Krim regularly burned up their homes because they didn't know how to light fires. Ellison himself struggled quite a bit with the fireplace in his room when he first arrived.

Donna pulled him inside. "But maybe while you're here, you can help me with something," she said. She led him into her kitchen and living area. "I've got the wood, and the kindling, but it just won't light." Then she pointed at the ceiling. "And there's a spider in that corner, frightening me."

"You want me to kill the spider?"

"No, no, it's a living creature. Can you take it outside?"

"I'll do the fire first."

"I'm so glad you came," said Donna. "It was getting so chilly."

"What would you have done if I hadn't come?" asked Ellison, getting down on his knees in front of the fireplace.

"I don't know," she said. "Somebody always comes and helps."

"Listen, the reason I stopped by is to ask you if you happened to have picked up a notebook at the Armforge Guild when you were there."

Donna blushed and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, no," she said, through her fingers.

"It's nothing bad," said Ellison. "It's okay if you did."

She turned around and reached onto a shelf on the other side of the small room. “It was just lying there. I thought it was trash. I was going to throw it away.”

She leafed through the pages. “It’s just an empty notebook. I was going to give it to someone, but forgot. It got really busy, then we had to wait, and I started doodling in it.”

She flipped back to the first page and showed it to Ellison. It was a particular unflattering caricature of guild leader Rodge Bannister. “I showed it to the guards. They just laughed and told me to hide it from Rodge.”

She put the notebook down on the kitchen table. “I didn’t think I did anything wrong.”

The fire lit, Ellison stood up and picked up the notebook. Except for the one drawing of Rodge, and a few other doodles in a similar style, the notebook was blank. He shook it. There was nothing between the pages. It was stitched together with a single heavy thread and the cover was just a slightly thicker grade of paper than the inside pages. There was no place to hide anything valuable in it.

“Please take the notebook and tell Mr. Bannister that I’m really sorry for taking it,” she said. “I hope he can forgive me. And thank you so much for helping me out with the fire.”

Then she looked pointedly at the spider.

Ellison sighed and used a thin piece of kindling to coax the spider down from the ceiling onto his notebook and gingerly carried it outside into the stairwell, where, as soon as Donna closed the door, he brushed it off and stepped on it.

It was a simulated spider.

He wiped the notebook on his pant leg in case there were any traces of the spider left on it and stashed it in a pocket.

Another dead end. He walked down the stairs. But if Donna picked up a notebook and left with it so easily, maybe someone else did, too.

Like one of the cleaning crew.

After leaving Donna's building, instead of heading back to the inn, Ellison went the other way, towards the Lifeworks compound. That's where the recently-returned-from-the-dead lived in relative safety behind some of the biggest stone walls that Krim had to offer, defended by a private security force.

Lifeworks had its own general store, a whole neighborhood of small cottages, a management building with its own gate to the real world, even its own cemetery.

He told the guards at the front gate that he was looking for a cleaning crew, and heard they had a team working for Elea Carlyle and Rodge Bannister.

"Are any of them around? They did a pretty good job," he said.

One of the guards turned and looked back at the stables. "There's Chapman, but I don't think he's doing that anymore."

"Let him in," said the other guard. "I recognize him from last week. He's with Matilda."

Ellison walked to the stables, where someone else pointed him to a small horse-drawn wagon. There was someone under it, working on the axle.

Ellison bent down. "Chapman?"

"That's me." A head poked out from underneath. The returnee wiped a greasy sleeve across his forehead, then pulled himself out from under the wagon and stood up.

"Harmen Chapman. What can I do you for?" He brushed hay from his trousers and straightened. "Need a delivery service?"

"No," said Ellison. "I heard you were part of the housekeeping crew at the Armforge Guild when they had a party the other night."

"Those jerks? Sure. Glad I'm never going back there again." Chapman looked at Ellison more closely. "I remember you. You work for Rodge, don't you?"

"I'm here because I have a question about a notebook you may have picked up," Ellison said.

"Listen," said Chapman. "I'm not doing that again. I'm happy about the money." He waved at the wagon. "I got that and a horse, and I'm going to be able to open my own business, and I'm grateful for that. But that's as far as it goes. Tell Rodge that he'll have to find someone else."

"Find someone else for what?"

"For stealing stuff from Elea Carlyle," said Chapman. "That woman is a witch. I'm not working for her again, and don't bother asking the rest of the crew, because they all quit, too."

"When did you steal the notebook?"

"Two weeks ago, right after she dumped him."

That was new.

Chapman laughed. "Yup, found someone richer, she did. Personally, I think the two of them deserved each other. But anyway, I'm out of it."

"So you don't have the notebook now?"

"No, why would I?" Chapman scratched his chin. "Did someone steal it? Is that why Rodge was so upset about the robbery?" He slapped his leg. "Elea probably had someone steal it back. But it wasn't me. And if Rodge thinks I did it, he's got another think coming." Chapman squared his shoulders. "I dare him to try to take me on."

"He's got an army."

Chapman deflated. "Oh, right, he does. Okay, then, tell him I'm really sorry, but I had nothing to do with it, and I'm deeply sorry for his loss, and if I hear anything I'll send word right away."

"Do you know what was in the notebook?"

"That was the strangest thing," said Chapman. "The notebook was empty. They all were."



Chapter 25. Angel with a jewel

Why would Rodge hire someone to steal a blank notebook? Ellison stopped under a streetlight and pulled it out of his pocket. He felt the pages. There was still nothing hidden in them or between them.

He put the notebook away and continued down Leadenhall back to the Barley Mow Inn.

Maybe Harmen Chapman stole a blank notebook by mistake. But then why would have Rodge paid him for it? And paid enough that Chapman could quit his job and start a new business?

Back in his room at the inn, he threw the notebook in with his box of pornographic woodcuts.

Late the next morning, he stopped by the King's Armpit and learned that Matilda had been busy, tracking down various rumors of people who'd been looking for or selling anything that could potentially be the Jewel of Rhotarr, but hadn't been successful.

"We found one guy," she said. "He bought a crystal off of Norbert Hawkins which could have been it, though his description didn't match. Anyway, he says he gave it to a waitress who collects healing crystals. Same waitress who was at the party. Same waitress who was at the Barley Mow with Gervis. But I think the guy was just a noob who didn't know anything." She shook her head. "Anyway, Norbert confirmed that he sold him the crystal, and that it was pretty much worthless. Trust me, if it had been the real Jewel of Rhotarr, Norbert would have gotten top dollar for it."

"Well, I've got a lead that Rodge might actually be looking for something else," he told her. "Some notebook he hired a guy to steal from Elea Carlyle. An empty notebook."

“Huh.”

“Maybe there’s a secret microscopic code in it? Or it actually is a blank notebook and was stolen by mistake? I don’t know. I’m about to go ask Rodge about it.”

“So now we’re going to have to find the jewel and a notebook, too?”

“I may have already found the notebook.” He took it out and passed it to her.

“Maybe the doodles mean something,” she said, rifling through the pages.

“The waitress, Donna? She accidentally took it and drew in it. Those are her doodles.”

Matilda frowned. “That woman keeps popping back up. I wonder if she’s the secret mastermind behind the whole thing.”

“I really doubt it. She can’t even light a fire or kill a spider. I think she’s a complete innocent.”

“Well, she won’t be too innocent for much longer,” said Matilda. “If Rodge finds out she took something from him, she’s going to be in for a world of pain.”

Ellison sighed. “Maybe we can keep her name out of it.” But then he remembered that the guards had seen Donna’s drawing. Once he turned the notebook over, there was a good chance that Rodge would quickly learn that she had taken it. And the caricature of him was extremely unflattering.

Matilda put money down on the bar.

“Well, I’ve got to get going,” she said. “I’m going to head back to Lifeworks, see what work they’ve got for me.”

She stood up from the bar and turned to leave when Donna walked into the bar, holding one of the reward posters.

“Oh, I’m so glad I caught you!” Donna said. “The bartender at the King’s Arms said that you would be here.” Donna gave the poster to Matilda. “I think I’ve got it. I thought it was just a crystal.” She reached into a pocket and took out a jewel.

Matilda took it from her and held it up, then compared it to the drawing on the poster.

“This certainly looks like it,” she said.

“A customer at the Barley Mow gave it to me,” said Donna. “But I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I actually didn’t like its energy. Now that I know it was stolen, I understand why. I’m sure it will be happy to be back with its rightful owner.”

“Do you buy her story?” Matilda asked Ellison.

“Sure, why not,” he said. “It’s as likely as anything else.”

They walked her to the Armforge Guild to get the reward.

“I’m so glad that nice Mr. Bannister will be able to get it back,” she said.

“You think he’s nice?” Matilda asked her.

“Well, he can be a little gruff sometimes. But he’s got a good heart underneath. And I feel so guilty for getting annoyed at him and drawing that picture. I don’t know what came over me. But I’m sure he won’t mind. He seems like a very kind, understanding man.”

Matilda glanced at Ellison. He rolled his eyes.

“The important thing is that Rodge gets the jewel back,” said Matilda. “And we’ll be done with this job. Whether he comes through with the reward or not, though...”

“Oh, I don’t care about that,” said Donna. “I mean, the money would be nice. I could start my own crystal shop. But really, doing the right thing is more important. And I do feel so guilty about the notebook. Really, I honestly thought it was just a blank notebook that had been thrown away.”

“That’s probably all it is,” said Ellison. “Just a blank notebook. You know, Donna,” he added, while looking at Matilda. “You might not want to mention the notebook at all when you see Rodge. In fact, you might want to forget ever having seen it.”

At the guild, Two Teeth Tom led the three of them straight into Rodge’s office.

Matilda put the jewel on the desk in front of him.

“Gervis gave it to a waitress right before we captured him,” she said.

“Ah, so that’s what he was talking about,” said Rodge, picking up the jewel. “Last night, Gervis finally broke down and confessed that he gave it to an angel.” He looked up at Donna. “I guess that’s you.”

He tossed the jewel aside. “Tom, take her to see Albert. Tell him to take care of getting her paid.”

“So we’re done?” Ellison asked. “Or is there anything else missing?”

“No, that’s it,” said Rodge. “Tom, get these guys paid, too.”

Matilda followed Donna and Tom out of Rodge’s office, but Ellison stayed behind.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else?” he asked. “I heard from a couple of people that you might also be looking for a notebook.”

“Close the door,” said Rodge.

Ellison turned and closed the door.

“What have you heard?” Rodge asked.

“I heard that you might have hired someone to steal a notebook from Elea Carlyle, and it turned out to be blank.”

Rodge ran a hand over his face.

“I may have overreacted a little bit when Elea and I had our falling out,” he said. “How many people know?”

“Just a handful.”

“So she’s going to find out.” Rodge sighed. “I had been thinking of giving it back to her, telling her that I found it. Maybe I found it in the thieves’ possession. It would make sense for thieves to have it, right? She’d be grateful I got it back.”

“Sure,” said Ellison. “But why would she care about an empty notebook?”

“It’s not empty,” said Rodge. “It’s got a secret code in it. Listen, if you’re able to find it, I’ll double your fee. Elea will still want it back.” He lowered his voice. “And whoever took it from me... they’ll never see daylight again.”

Ellison felt the weight of the notebook in one of his many coat pockets.

“You know what?” Rodge said. “Name your price. What do you want? Money? A job with my moon mining company? I know your history. I’m willing to look past it, help you get your career back.” Rodge gestured around him. “I don’t know what you’re doing here on Krim, but to be honest, you don’t look like you belong here.”

And there it was. Ellison’s way back to his old life.



Chapter 26. Ale, wenches and minstrels

Ellison put his hands in his pants pockets. He could feel the notebook in one of the inside side pockets of his jacket, just under his left elbow.

“What’s in the notebook?” he asked.

“Nothing that anybody else would care about,” said Rodge. “Just a record of transactions between me and Elea.”

“Sounds very romantic.”

“I had my own copy, but got a little overly emotional and threw it out. It was a mistake, I see that now.”

“So, this is the financial equivalent of love letters?”

“Unless you’re a titan of industry, you wouldn’t understand.”

There was a knock on Rodge’s office door.

“Yes?” Rodge yelled out.

A guard opened the door and Donna poked her head in.

“I got the bank draft,” she said, waving a slip of paper. “Matilda’s going to take me down to the central bank now. I’m going to open a crystal shop! This is the best day of my life. You’re the nicest, kindest man I’ve ever met, Mr. Bannister. And you too,” she nodded at Ellison. “Once I get set up, please come by for a free aura cleansing.”

Rodge waved her away.

Donna smiled, waved back, curtsied, and turned back to the hallway. “Matilda, everyone on Krim is just the nicest. It’s just about the friendliest world I’ve ever been in.”

Ellison didn’t hear what Matilda said in response because the guard closed the door again. It was probably something sarcastic.

He thought about the notebook in his jacket pocket. It would be easy enough to turn it over. Donna can fend for herself. Or he could warn her to leave the grid, then turn over the notebook.

But if she didn't leave? She might wind up down in the basement with the thieves.

It would be nice to have a real job again. But did he even want to work for a giant lunar mining company? Everyone knew that all the action was moving to the asteroid belt.

The moon was so last century. Was he really missing out on anything?

"I'll try my best," Ellison told Rodge. "But it looks like any other blank notebook, right?"

Rodge nodded.

"The thieves might have thrown it in the mud, where it got soaked in the rain, trampled, then thrown away with all the other debris from that night. Did you tell your staff to look for it?"

Rodge leaned back. "No. I didn't want anyone to know I had it." He shook his head. "You're probably right. It's gone."

He tapped his fingers on his desk. "Elea's going to be furious. First, when she finds out that I threw out my copy. Then that I stole and lost hers." He looked up at Ellison. "Well, none of that is your problem."

Ellison turned to leave, then looked back. As long as he was here, out of curiosity. "If I do come across a blank notebook, how do I know it's the notebook you want and not some other, random, empty notebook?"

"It's numbered," said Rodge. "There should be 223 written on the first page."

Ellison nodded and left.

All this worry was for nothing. The notebook in his pocket didn't have a number. It actually was just a blank notebook that Donna had picked up. The missing one was, as he suggested, probably just thrown out with the trash.

He collected his fee from Albert, stopped by the central bank to deposit most of the money to his account, and went back to Barley Mow Inn to settle his tab. He also paid for the next month in advance before he blew all the money on wine, women and song. Or, to be more exact, ale, wenches, and minstrels.

Then he went upstairs to his room. It was a tiny space, barely big enough for a closet in any other world. The narrow bed had a lumpy straw mattress and an itchy wool blanket. He got his jar of flea powder and sprinkled the entire bed. The poison was probably giving him cancer.

He sat on the stone windowsill and looked out. He could see the alley below, a clothesline with wet undergarments, already dusty with Krim's soot.

He pulled the notebook from his pocket. All this trouble for nothing.

He leafed through it. All the pages were still blank.

He went back to the first page, where Donna had drawn a picture of Rodge with a comically large mustache holding a sword bigger than he was. It actually wasn't too bad a likeness.

There were little flowers and curlicues in the corners of the page. One of those flowers could be something more, though.

He lit a candle and held it close to the page.

Was there a number 223 hidden inside the flower?

He held the candle closer and peered at the drawing.

He could almost make out something. He lit a second candle to get a better look.

It could be a 223. Or he could be imagining it. He angled the page one way, then the other. Maybe he needed glasses.

It almost looked like writing. In fact, it looked exactly like writing. As the candle flames heated up the page, more words appeared.

He didn't know how long the invisible ink would continue to show, so he hunted around for some paper to write on. He finally used the backs of his pornographic etchings.

He copied the words, what he could make out of them behind Donna's doodles. It was a list of names, dates, times, places, and what looked like money amounts, account numbers, and passwords.

Well, just one name, Rodge's.

The list was probably useful for Elea and Rodge. But without knowing where those accounts were, and what they were for, it was pretty useless otherwise. The minute the notebook was lost all the accounts were probably changed, anyway.

He flipped to the next page in the notebook and waited for it to heat up. Again, he saw text appearing. But this time, it wasn't Rodge's name in the first column. He recognized these names. If this was a record of Elea's financial interactions with people on Krim, then she's been doing business with some very, very bad people.

He put the notebook away in the pornography chest. This was the first solid evidence he had that Elea's presence on Krim wasn't as innocent as she was making it out to be.

He didn't know what he was going to do with this information yet. But he was going to do something.

