

MARIA KOROLOV



Gift of the Meatheads

A SHORT STORY FROM THE WORLD OF KRIM

The Gift of the Meatheads

A short story of the Krim virtual world.

Maria Korolov





Praise for Krim Virtual World Novellas

"If you enjoy Terry Pratchett, you will definitely love this." -Grumps, Amazon review

"Unique and entertaining storytelling." -Far-ranging Reader, Amazon review

"This mystery story takes place within the world of an online game, with the characters simultaneously their in-world personas and aware of the larger world, for an effect that's unique and entertaining." -Francesca Forest, GoodReads review

"I'm looking forward to the next story, and hope to learn a lot more about the backstory to some of the key players, all of whom have the most unexpected quirks!" -L. Pierce, Amazon review



The Gift of the Meatheads

On Thursday, Mitchell sat down in his online travel comfort chair and was about to leave meatspace and go virtual when he remembered his girlfriend's warning. Before going to visit her on Krim, he should make a trip to the bathroom. Or, at least, put on a diaper.

He wasn't about to put on a diaper. That would be silly. And did he need to go to the bathroom? No, he didn't.

He leaned back in the chair and glanced up to activate the control menu, then stopped. Maybe he needed to go to the bathroom after all.

Some people had personal hygiene functions built right into their comfort chairs, but Mitchell preferred to take real rest breaks.

Machines couldn't be trusted to do right by his private parts. Plus, Mitchell and technology didn't always get along.

On the way back from the bathroom, he stopped by the portrait of his grandfather that hung on his living room wall. Grandpa died before they had revival technology, so all Mitchell had left of him was the animated portrait.

"It's our six month anniversary, grandpa. It's our first date at her place, and Donna is cooking dinner." He turned all the way around so his grandpa could see how he looked from all angles. "What do you think?"

"You look great," said the AI-generated facsimile of the dearly departed relative. "But lose the tie."

"You're right, it's too formal." Mitchell loosened the tie and took it off. "You always give the best advice."

"Years of experience," said grandpa. "Young people like yourself haven't seen as much of the world as I have. But you'll get there."

Grandpa had died when he was sixty-eight and Mitchell was nearly twice that age now, but to his grandpa, Mitchell looked like he was in his

twenties. Mitchell didn't correct him. No point in confusing him with new information and breaking the AI. Besides, life was harder back then, in the early 2000s. Folks probably didn't have any modern conveniences at all.

Mitchell was only a little kid when his grandpa died, but he distinctly remembered that things were tough back then. Walking to school in the snow. Chopping wood. Milking cows. He couldn't remember the details anymore, and his parents always insisted that they'd never owned a cow or a wood stove, but they were probably just trying to spare him the memory of his traumatic past.

"I'll never be as smart as you," Mitchell yelled back over his shoulder as he hung the tie back on the tie rack. "I bet you chopped a lot of wood in your life."

"Chopped wood? Oh, sure. I was a master woodchopper. Chop, chop, chop. But we didn't have axes back then, you know. I had to chop wood with a hammer. Sometimes, I had to use a spatula. That toughens you up, kid."

"That's what Donna says about the place where she lives. It's supposed to be just like the old days. She says everything was better in those days."

"It sure was." Grandpa nodded inside his picture frame.

"People were more real."

"That's certainly true. Look at me. I'm a real salt-of-the-earth kind of person. Authentic. No filters."

"You're right, grandpa. I would never use filters."

Mitchell used all the filters. He had filters on his facial expressions and body language to make him look more self-assured. He had filters on his voice to make it sound deeper and more authoritative. And that was just in the physical world. Online, he was practically all filters. But grandpa didn't need to know that. It would just confuse him.

"Hey, grandpa, should I wear a diaper? Donna told me to."

“What are you talking about, kid? You’re too old for a diaper. Or too young for one.” Grandpa chuckled. “We didn’t have diapers when I was a baby. I was toilet trained at three months. The 1950s were a tough time. And then, of course, I was killed in action, in the great MySpace war of 2018.”

“Wow, grandpa. But I thought you died in a nursing home.”

“I was visiting your grandma. She had early-onset Alzheimers, you know. And tempers were high back then. Everyone picked a side. The war pitted brother against brother. Husband against wife. And then I lost my AOL password. I tell you...”

“I’ll want to hear all about it when I get back, grandpa.”

Mitchell sat back down in his comfort chair and dropped into virtual reality.

He raised his hand and watched it lift up and out of his body. He never got over how cool that was. He stood up and looked back at himself. There was a little drool starting to form on the side of his mouth, but otherwise, he was as handsome a devil as he ever was.

He walked out through the front door, closing his eyes as his virtual projection passed through the solid wood.

Outside, he glanced back at his house. He loved the way it looked. Tiny, with hardly any lawn to speak of, but the borders of shrubbery and flowers that separated it from its neighbors made it feel like his own private oasis. There were roses, and petunias, and gardenias nestled inside white picket fences — both the ones around the perimeter of the garden and smaller ones along the sides of the house.

It was his land, not just an apartment in a high-rise. He inherited the land from his grandpa, and it was the most valuable thing he had. They couldn’t make more land, after all.

Unless you counted the space habitats, of course, but Mitchell preferred having real ground under his feet and a horizon that sloped down, not up.

He double-checked his away message and, with a quick hand gesture, teleported out.



MITCHELL FOLLOWED DONNA'S invite and landed in Krim's welcome area.

A big sign proclaimed that he was entering the 1500s and a greeter immediately approached him, a bot dressed in an old-fashioned outfit.

Good thing that Mitchell decided not to wear a tie. It probably wouldn't have fit in.

Not that it mattered. As it turned out, visitors had to choose a new avatar before entering Krim proper.

Michell rejected the fancy dress and the chain mail and settled for something neutral, with his normal face and body. He wanted Donna to be able to recognize him.

The time-consuming part was agreeing to Krim's terms of service.

"Do you understand that the only way into Krim was via a teleportation gate?"

Yes.

"Do you understand that the only way out is back through the gate, or by dying?"

"Okay, sure."

"Do you understand that Krim is a basic biology world?"

"Uhh, yeah, whatever."

"Do you understand that you will not have access to any virtual communications or other interfaces?"

"Okaaaay...."

And it went on like that. Yes, he understood that there might be extreme discomfort and pain.

Yes, he understood that he might be tortured or maimed.

Yes, he understood that he might be killed and that this could be very painful and he agreed not to sue the world of Krim if this should happen.

Did he understand that he might have to cut off his limb and eat it to keep from starving to death?

What?

“Are you joking?”

“No,” said the greeter with a straight face. Of course, it was programmed to keep a straight face., but that didn’t mean anything. Eating your own flesh - that had to be just a marketing gimmick.

“Sure, whatever.” Mitchell agreed to the rest of the stipulations and was pleased to learn that Donna’s invite also included a discount on the virtual currency.

He traded in a week’s salary and got a handful of coins in exchange.

Finally, he was ready for customs, where he had to pay another fee—in real money, not Krim coins—so that he could bring in a piece of paper with the directions for how to get to Donna’s place.

“Remember that it might hurt!” the greeter yelled at his departing back. “And you can’t sue us!”



“LOCAL TIME IN KRIM City is two-thirty in the afternoon. Local weather is cloudy, with a high of sixty-two degrees Farenheight and a low of forty-six. The current temperature is sixty-one but due to current wind conditions, it feels like fifty-eight. The humidity is ninety-three percent. The local rains are scheduled...”

Mitchell stepped out through the gate. He was immediately assailed by foul smells, by a cloud of dust that made him cough, and by other pedestrians who elbowed him as they pushed past him. There were people speaking all around him. The noise filters didn’t kick in.

“Out of the way, noob!” The voice came from right behind him. He started to turn around when a shove nearly sent him flying onto the cobblestones.

Mitchell barely kept his footing and stumbled away from the gate, hands over his ears, until he found some clear space in front of a stall selling used, guaranteed blood-stained armor. And weapons. Swords. Knives. Pointy sticks. Big metal balls with spikes on them. T-shirts saying, “I got stabbed by Wolfgang’s finest.”

“Good day, master! How met?”

Mitchell took his hands off his ears and looked at the vendor manning the weapons stall. He was wearing one of his shirts, and a piece of paper pinned to it said, “I be Wolfgang. Asketh me any thyng.”

A particularly shiny sword caught Mitchell’s eye, and he was about to ask how much it cost when he saw the one next to it was pitted with rust and slightly chipped.

He’d almost made the mistake of buying a brand-new one. That would definitely have marked him as a noob.

He pointed at it when the owner of the next stall over coughed loudly.

Mitchell stopped.

“Thou thyself art a sensible squire,” the other merchant said. “Prithee, behold, yon carl assays to chicane.”

“What?”

“Yon steel, tis of a surety a mere and peccant periapt,” said the other merchant.

“What?”

“Yeah, I didn’t follow that either,” admitted the sword seller.

“I quoth...” The other merchant stopped and began again. “I mean, Wolfgang’s swords are worthless. They’re brittle, don’t hold an edge, and he nicks them himself with a rock.”

The swordmaker reddened as Mitchell stepped away.

“Thanks, you saved me from making a fool of myself,” Michell backed away from the swords.

“Thou art most welcome.”

The sword seller swore under his breath as Mitchell walked closer to the other merchant’s booth.

Rolls of sepia paper were piled up. One, unrolled and anchored at the corners with rocks, was titled, “Mappe of oure faire citee of Krymme.”

That looked useful. Mitchell bent over it.

“That one is just for tourists. I’ve got something better for you.” The map seller bent down, holding onto the table with one hand. He was missing his left foot, the pant leg tied off just below the knee. On the ground, partly hidden under the table, a basket was filled with more rolled-up maps. These were much more faded and worn than the ones displayed on the table. He pulled one out at random and straightened up.

“I’ve been saving this map for someone special.” The merchant looked around and lowered his voice. “It’s the only one I’ve got. It points to a secret treasure trove. I’d go get the treasure myself but...” The merchant pointed at his leg.

“What happened?” Michell asked.

“I was on a campaign down south. That’s where I got this map.” The merchant patted it, then wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “But at a price. What a price.” He shook his head. “My foot was caught in a trap and I had to hack it off.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Don’t worry, it didn’t go to waste. I roasted it and ate it. Kept me going long enough to reach safety.”

A sour, stinging taste rose in Mitchell’s throat. He pulled out his money and poured it out on the table. “How much is it?”

The merchant took a couple of coins, then glanced up at Mitchell’s face and took a few more.

“I’m giving you a discount.” The merchant pushed back the rest of the money. “Ye art a kind sir. Gramercy and fare thee well.”

As Mitchell walked away with the map he heard a scuffle break out behind him and he started to walk a little bit faster.

“Wretch! Do you think you can get away with stealing customers from an arms dealer?”

“So what? You’re going to stab me with that butter knife?”

“You think this is a butter knife? I’ll show you a butter knife!”

“Oh, no, I’m so frightened! Is that a sword or a spoon? Or are you just glad to see me?”

There was an angry roar and what sounded like wood breaking and metal clattering. Then there were grunts and screams.

Mitchell did not look back but picked up his pace even more until it was almost a run.

He weaved through the rest of the stalls, avoiding eye contact with merchants, clutching his map to his chest.

He was able to get to the edge of the plaza having stepped in only one pile of manure and found a line of horse-drawn carriages waiting for potential passengers.

Mitchell fought his way to one of the coaches and handed his slip of paper with Donna’s address to the driver.

“Can you tell me how to get there?”

“Hail and well met, good master!” The driver took the note and peered at it. “Oxhead. An amiable destination of womanly commerce. Alas, the mildewed burden doth scour the firmament’s misgivings.”

“Huh?”

“O rotten fear! From whence doth glorious looseness burn not for thy sovereign’s faults?”

“What?”

The driver sighed. “I’m telling you that the grid admins didn’t invest in navigation.”

“So?”

“The owners of this here virtual world didn’t bother to put up street signs.” The driver turned and pointed. “Walk that way until you get to the Blue Peacock Inn. Their sign’s fallen, but you can still make out where it used to be. Don’t confuse it with the Red Peacock, though. If you see that one, you’ve gone too far. Make a left there. No, wait, that’ll take you longer. Go straight, about halfway to the Red Peacock, and then make your left. Keep going until you see a pub on the corner. Well, there’s a pub on every corner, practically, but this one is a bit more decrepit looking. The sign on it says King’s Cross, but if you ask for it by that name, nobody will know what you’re talking about...”

“Never mind. How much to just take me there?”

“Hmm... let me think...” The driver counted on his fingers while mumbling to himself.

Mitchell dug out his money and the driver’s eyes flickered down and away.

“That’ll be sixty-five pennies, my good sir,” the driver said.

Mitchell looked up at him, then back down at his money.

“One of those large bronze ones and three medium ones.”

“That’s a lot. I can pay you sixty-two.” Mitchell started to put his money away.

“How now!”

Mitchell paused. “Sixty three?”

The driver harrumphed.

“Sixty-four? But that’s the highest I’ll go!”

“You drive a hard bargain,” said the driver. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a man as astute as you. Nay! Thou art the sun’s unworthy conscience.”

“Huh?”

“Get in. I’ll take you.”

Mitchell paid, put away what little was left of his money, and climbed into the rickety, wooden carriage. It was little more than a wagon with a couple of benches and a swinging door that barely latched.

“Let’s go, Misty.” Without waiting for Mitchell to sit down, the driver flicked the reins and Misty took a step forward, then stopped and looked back at the driver reproachfully. Michell fell onto a small and uncomfortable wooden bench.

The driver flicked his reins again and Misty started moving.

The ride was slow. Pedestrians routinely passed them as the coach lumbered over the cobblestone street. Every intersection involved lots of shouting and pushing since there were no streetlights or traffic cops. The way was often blocked by carts, loose wagon wheels, errant livestock, or sword fights. Michell saw one man get stabbed in the side and fall screaming, clutching at the wound. Nobody paid any attention and the attacker quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Sitting on the bench hurt. Michell changed his position frequently as the coach jostled through the streets. His backside was going to be covered with bruises when he finally got there. The locals all probably had calluses on their buttocks.

After a while, Michell got used to the motion and no longer had to clutch the side of the coach to keep from falling off his seat. At first, the city itself kept his attention. The locals were dressed in a wide variety of costumes—everything from full-on Henry the Eighth getups to simple tunics and breaches to chainmail bikinis. As they got further away from the main gate, the costumes got less elaborate and more practical, and more boring to look at.

He looked up to activate his control interface so that he could check his FacePage news, but there was nothing there. He blinked, he gestured, finally he tried to do a hard reset by pressing one finger in his ear and the other on the tip of his nose.

Nothing happened.

For the first time that day, Mitchell realized how isolated he was. There was no interface. He couldn’t check his mail. He couldn’t read the news. He couldn’t even find out what time it was.

Panicked, he took a few deep breaths and immediately started coughing.

The driver turned around to look at him. “Don’t go breathing too much. You know what all this air pollution is?”

“Umm... soot? Ashes?”

“Some, sure. But most of it dried dung that’s been pulverized into dust.”

Mitchell coughed again and noticed that his nose was running. He had never had a liquid drip out of his nose before.

He gestured again in an attempt to pull up his body controls menu. They couldn’t have gotten rid of that. How were people expected to manage their bodily processes without the controls?

But again there was nothing. There was no visual menu. Hand gestures had no effect. Mitchell subvocalized his activation command, and, when that didn’t work, spoke it out loud. “Avexa, open settings. Avexa, open settings! Avexa!”

The driver turned around again. “That’s not going to do you any good, guv. They should have told you when you first logged in. We’re a basic bio grid here on Krim World. We’re as basic as it gets.”

The driver laughed.

More liquid poured out of Mitchell’s nose, and, now, his eyes as well.

“Hey, it’ll be okay.” The driver reached back with one hand to pat Mitchell on the shoulder. “A little snot isn’t going to kill you.”

Mitchell hiccuped. He clutched at his face. His body was falling apart. Was he dying? Was he having an allergic reaction to something in the air? That used to happen to people. They had allergic reactions and they died. This was the Middle Ages, after all.

The plague. They had the plague in the Middle Ages. He had caught the plague.

He’d made a big mistake falling in love with Donna. If this was how she lived, then she couldn’t possibly be the love of his life. He would have to break up with her.

“Donna, my love, my darling,” he rehearsed to himself. “It’s not you, it’s me. I work too much, I can’t give you the attention you deserve. You should be with someone better.”

By the time they arrived at Oxhead, Michell was shaking uncontrollably. He would have asked the driver to take him back to the gate if he’d had enough money for the return trip.

“We’re here,” the driver said and pointed across the street.

Oxhead was narrow, barely wide enough for the coach and a couple of very skinny pedestrians. On either side, stone buildings crowded in. The upper stories hung over, blocking the sky. The day was cloudy, so there was little enough light to start with, and the overhangs made it even darker. Claustrophobic, even.

Mitchell wiped his face on his sleeve and gave the coach space to pull away.



MITCHELL STOPPED IN front of Donna’s shop and looked through the front window. It was a little dusty, but he could clearly see her, working away, attaching beads to a purse, lit by the light of candles and oil lamps.

Several purses were in the window, embellished with pink and purple glass beads in the shapes of hearts and unicorns.

Donna was such a talented artist. Mitchell’s heart swelled with pride. Now that he’d made it to her door, he realized that Krim wasn’t as bad as he thought. The trip had been a test, a rite of passage. He hadn’t been murdered or killed by the plague. Surviving it proved that he was a real man.

He knocked on the window and waved when she looked up. Her smile when she saw him was electric.

Donna ran to the door to let him in and the hug, when they embraced, was more thrilling than he'd ever felt before. He inhaled deeply. She smelled of smoke and incense.

"My love, my rabbit, I've missed you more than my heart can bear," he murmured in her ear. "I never want us to be apart again."

She hugged him back. "Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"No, not at all. I think a couple of people were killed."

"Oh, no!"

"But I'm okay."

"Oh, thank God!"

"And the driver did try to charge me sixty-five pennies."

"No!"

"Don't worry, I bargained him down to sixty-four."

Donna squeezed him tight. "You are so smart and brave."

Donna stepped back and pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, spit on it, and used it to wipe Mitchell's face.

Instead of being repulsed, he felt a warm tingling through his body.

"Oh, and I got something for you." He pulled the rolled-up treasure map from inside his jacket. "It's a treasure map."

She clutched the map to her chest and teared up. "This is the nicest thing..."

"Donna, there's water in your eyes! Are you sick?"

She wiped the tears away. "No, just so happy. Come on."

She took his hand and led him around her shop.

In addition to the purses, she also sold crystals with natural healing properties and copper bracelets that rebalanced the body's organic energy flows.

"Everything I sell is hand-made by local Krim artisans." She gave him a crystal to hold. "Do you feel its energy?"

"I think I do."

She tied a hemp bracelet strung with wooden beads around his wrist.

"This will keep you safe on your way back to the gate."

“What happens to it when I leave Krim?”

“Nothing. It will still be there when you come back.” She stepped back away from him and looked into his eyes. “You will come back, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

“Isn’t this so much better than meeting at some generic cafe on FacePage?”

“Hey, what are those?” Mitchell pointed up at the wall, where there were several hand-colored charts.

“These are astrology charts, unique to Krim,” Donna said. “There’s an astrologer down the street, and she says that our constellations don’t exist anywhere else. They’re mythical.” She lowered her voice and looked up at Mitchell’s face. “They say that if you get far enough out of the city, you can see the stars at night.”

“Have you ever been?”

“No.”

“We should go. Together.”

“And we can look for the treasure. Oh, Mitchell, it will be so wonderful.”

She took him upstairs, where she had a kettle of water and a heavy iron pot warming on a small wood stove.

He breathed in deeply.

“It smells wonderful.”

“It’s mutton and skirrets,” Donna said. “I normally make porridge or go down to the inn for dinner, but I wanted to do something special for you.”

“You are special.”

Donna opened the wood stove, poked at the fire, then rolled up a piece of paper and lit it from the fire. She carried the flame to the tiny dining table at the window and lit the three candles that were there.

“I can’t believe you know how to do all this,” said Mitchell.

“It was a real struggle when I first got here. I had some friends who lived on Krim and got me into it. I had to learn a lot. Sit down.”

Mitchell sat at the table while Donna got a metal bowl and ladled the meat and vegetable into it.

“I only have the one bowl and spoon, so we’ll have to share.” She put the bowl in front of Mitchell and sat down next to him. “The skirrets may be a little stringy. They don’t have potatoes here yet.”

The skirrets looked like white, sickly carrots. He spooned one up and bit into it. It was barely warm and a little rubbery. On the positive side, a slight taste of radish helped compensate for the lack of salt and other seasonings.

“It’s so good,” he said.

“Not like that artificial food you get back in the real world, right?”

Mitchell nodded, chewing.

“I mean, they say it’s the real world, but these days it’s all fake,” said Donna. “Everyone has filters on their appearance, their voice, their emotions.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You never know if what you’re feeling is real.” She touched her heart. “Here, on Krim, we get the truth.”

With an effort, Mitchell swallowed the skirret and looked down at the bowl. The meat was one big chunk the size of a fist. He poked at it with his spoon.

“Maybe I should have cut it up first,” said Donna.

“No, this is fine. You’re a fantastic cook.”

He gave up on trying to carve the meat with a spoon and picked it up with his hands. When he bit into it he had to chew through the gristle, and the inside was still raw.

“Really good,” he mumbled around the chunk of meat in his mouth. “You have some.” He pushed the bowl over to her.

“I know, everything tastes better on Krim,” Donna said.

Giving up on chewing, he swallowed the chunk of meat whole.

“I have to log out for a second. I need to make a bathroom break.”

“You can’t. But there’s a privy out back.”

He reddened. “I can’t go here. I’m not wearing a diaper.” He stood up. “I have to get back home.”

“You’ll have to go back out through the gate.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s got to be a way to teleport out or log out, or disconnect, or something. What if I have someone at home just unplug me? What happens then?”

“I don’t know! You’ll probably die. Well, your Krim avatar would die. In which case, give me back the bracelet or you’ll lose it.”

“So all I have to do is tell my house to disconnect me.” He looked up, but, as before, there was no drop-down menu. He gestured to activate his house controls, but nothing happened. “Avexa, log me out. Avexa!”

“I don’t think Avexa can hear you.” Donna pushed her bowl away. “Wow, I’m full. Krim food is so satisfying.”

“I think I can hold it until I get back.” Mitchell got up from the table. “But I’ll have to get going.”

“I’m so sorry you couldn’t stay longer.” She followed him down the stairs and to the front door. “Are you sure you don’t want to just use the privy?”

Mitchell twisted his face. “If I hurry, I’ll make it.” He hugged Donna goodbye. “You are the best. See you tomorrow night? Our usual café on FacePage?”

Donna nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“And maybe you can come to my house for dinner next week.”

“I’d like that.”

Mitchell hurried back down the street, hoping to find his way back to the gate — or, at least, to find someone willing to take him there — before his bladder gave out.

He didn’t make it.



A MONTH LATER, DONNA finally agreed to visit Michell at his home instead of their regular cafe on the FacePage Main Street. The one so conveniently located right next to a cozy little boutique hotel.

She teleported in and landed right on the street outside of Mitchell's house. She stood for a minute and admired the house, the white picket fence, and the flowers. She adjusted her white dress and decided it would look very good against the garden. She reached down to open the gate and giggled when her hand passed through it.

"Wow, this is so weird."

Donna used to come home, back to the physical world, a lot after she'd first died, but the lack of physical contact crept her out. She couldn't afford to get a new body and rentals never fit quite right. After a while, she stopped coming back and just met people online.

She breathed deeply.

The air smelled of roses and gardenias, and there were buzzing drones in the air, the size of bumblebees, carefully clipping the grass and bushes.

It was a nice change from Krim's usual smell of urine and mold or the clean, antiseptic, artificially-generated smells of online environments like FacePage.

She wafted through the gate and heard a chime from somewhere in the house, the alert that someone had arrived.

Michell opened the door. He looked so handsome in his sweater, with the sleeves rolled up and his hair swept rakishly to the side of his head. Like a rich man of leisure. Well, if he could afford this house, this real, physical house, he must be doing a lot better than she thought.

"My God, you're beautiful." Mitchell stepped forward to hug her and nearly fell as he passed through her body.

He caught himself and stepped off to the side. "I thought you might get a rental."

"I hate rentals. They never fit right. And things always smell funny."

Donna could never find a rental body with the exact skin tone and hair she wanted, either, and the virtual projection of her face never quite matched the physical one. People could tell if they looked close enough. She could feel them judging her.

Mitchell stepped around her and held open the door.

“Besides, it’s so expensive,” Donna said, walking into the house. “Why bother, when we can just meet online?”

She turned around one last time before entering the house.

“Your garden is awesome, and the house is just perfect.”

“It’s small, but it’s all mine, including the land.”

“I hadn’t thought of it before, but you must be really rich.”

“Well, actually, I inherited the land.” Mitchell pointed it to his grandpa’s portrait. “From my grandpa.”

Donna walked over to the painting.

“So this is the young lady you’ve been telling me so much about,” said grandpa. “She’s a real beaut.” Inside the picture frame, grandpa kissed his fingers.

“Yeah, she is,” said Mitchell.

“Pleased to meet you.” Donna waved at the portrait.

“And this is my new comfort chair,” Mitchell said. “I got it three weeks ago. It’s practically state of the art.”

“Nice.”

“I figured it was time for an upgrade.”

“He means that he couldn’t get the old one cleaned,” said grandpa, and chortled.

“Never mind that,” said Mitchell. “Let me show you the kitchen.”

The table was already set, with two plates, two wine glasses, and a bottle of wine.

“I made my specialty. Grilled cheese sandwiches. They’re supposed to be black and crusty like that.”

Donna sat down at the table but when she put her arms on it they sank through the surface.

“Darn it,” she said. “I keep forgetting.”

“How come your butt doesn’t go through their chair?” asked Mitchell.

Donna looked down. “I never thought about it.” She tried to touch the chair she was sitting on, but her fingers went through it. “It is strange.”

“Avexa, why can’t Donna touch the chair?”

“I’m sorry, Mitchell, but I can’t tell you that because her environment settings are private.”

“Oh, well, I tried.” Mitchell sat down across from Donna. “I guess we’ll never know.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “This is very good.”

“It smells wonderful. You must be a really good cook.”

“Home cooked meals are always better. It’s just a waste of money to go out to restaurants. Hey, if you moved here, you could eat like this all the time.”

“You know, I sold a purse yesterday,” Donna said as she watched Mitchell eat. “I can feel that things are coming together for me. Pretty soon, I’ll be able to support myself with my art and quit that stupid voiceover job. Would you believe what my boss said today? He told me I needed to articulate better, that customers weren’t paying me to mumble!”

“That’s terrible,” said Mitchell, and took another bite of his sandwich.

“I’m glad I don’t have to be back there until next Thursday, so I have time to cool down.”

Unlike Mitchell, who had to work four days a week to pay his bills, Donna only needed to come in once a week to support her Krim lifestyle, giving her time to focus on her art.

Mitchell didn’t have any art at all around his house. She would have to do something about that. She might bring something with her next time she visited. It would be virtual, but if it was hanging on a wall, and

you didn't try to touch it, nobody would be able to tell. Maybe she could get one of her purses framed and mounted.

"Any minute, I'm going to be discovered and become famous," she told him. "You'll see my purses everywhere. Not just on Krim, but in real life, too. Not that Krim isn't real life, of course."

"I know you'll be famous. You're an amazing artist. You'll be swimming in money."

"I'll get a new body."

"You could move in here with me and we could wake up together every morning." He reached his hand out to her, palm up, and she put her hand over his.

"Maybe we could even think about a baby?"

Donna pulled her hand back. "A baby? I'm too young to even think about it."

Mitchell leaned forward and looked at her earnestly. "I know you're a lot younger than me. You're only ninety."

"Eighty-nine."

"Eighty-nine, sorry. But I'm not saying we should start having children right away. I'm only really starting my career."

She nodded. "And I have to focus on my art." She twisted a strand of her hair around a finger. "Maybe you could move to Krim, come live with me. Commute to work. I commute to my voiceover job."

"I have this house, the land. Who would take care of it? And what would I do with my body? Put it in a coma?"

"You could rent it out."

"The house? Or the body?"

"Well, both."

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I guess we'll just have to keep on going the way we are, meeting on FacePage."

"It would be nice to see you more than once or twice a week," she said. "I miss you when you're not there."

“I know. I miss you, too. Hey, I want to show you something.” He stood up and motioned for her to follow him. “I haven’t shown you the upstairs yet.” He ran up the steps. “I’ve got my bedroom here, and a couple of guest bedrooms that I don’t use much, and this balcony.”

He opened up the French doors and led the way outside, where the sun was just starting to set.

“We can get a better view from the roof.” He stepped over the balcony railing onto the roof overhanging the entryway, then turned around to offer her a hand. “Ah, right, never mind.”

She stepped through the railing without help and followed him up the gently sloping roof. At the top, she carefully turned around.

Of course, if she lost her footing and fell, it wouldn’t mean anything. Somewhere in the environmental controls, there was even a setting that would let her fly.

She walked to the end of the roof and looked down over the garden.

“It is beautiful up here.”

“The sun will be down soon and then the stars will come out.”

She sat down and Mitchell sat down next to her.

“I come up here to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July,” he said, motioning off into the distance. “The town green is over there and they put on a show every year. Or I just come up here to think.”

“So it’s just you here? It must get lonely. Where’s your family?”

“Well, grandpa died in the old days. They didn’t have life insurance back then, so when he died, he died. All I’ve got left is his portrait. But my parents, brothers, and sisters are all still around. My dad’s passed on, but the rest of them still live here, in Rhode Island, in different towns.”

“Are your parents still together?”

“Oh, sure. They do what we do—see each other online. My mom didn’t want to join him before she had to because she likes helping out with the grandchildren. But they make it work. So I thought that we could make it work, too.”

“We’re making it work, aren’t we?” she asked.

“We are.”

“I love you, Mitchell.”

“I love you too, Donna.” He leaned in to kiss her and started slipping and grabbed for her and she tried to catch him but of course she couldn’t.

He screamed going down and landed with a very unpleasant sound, the sound of a stake driven through a body.

“Oh, my God!” She leaned over the edge of the roof. Mitchell was splayed on his back on the ground below, a piece of white picket fence sticking up through his chest.

She screamed, then turned around and climbed down off the roof, onto the balcony, went through the bedroom, down the stairs, out through the front door, and ran around to the side of the house.

Mitchell moaned.

“You’re still alive!”

“Call nine-one-one,” he whispered.

“There’s a stake through your chest,” she said. “What do I do?”

“Call nine-one-one,” he said in a softer voice and moaned again.

“And there are rose bushes sticking through you.” She leaned over and peered closer.

“The roses are fake,” he whispered.

“Oh, thank God.”

“But the fence is real. Call someone.”

“Who? Who do I call?”

“Never mind,” Mitchell murmured. “Avexa, call nine-one-one.”

“I’m sorry Mitchell, but there is no one named Nine One One in your contacts list,” Avexa answered. “But your vital signs indicate that you are in physical distress. Would you like me to call emergency services?”

“Yes, do that,” said Donna. “He’s hurt. Call emergency services.”

“Please,” Mitchell whispered and passed out.



AT THE HOSPITAL, MITCHELL drifted in and out of consciousness as the doctors worked on him. His family was there all the time but Donna wasn't allowed to visit until he was awake enough to give permission.

They'd been dating for months but officially she was a nobody.

She tried to focus on her work. She couldn't. Instead, she went in and out through the main gate several times a day to see if he'd left a message, to check in with the hospital about whether she could visit him. There was no word.

Her work suffered. Her hearts came out wilted and lopsided. Her unicorns looked less like magical beings and more like rhinoceroses.

The emotional toll was nearly unbearable. Finally, after the longest two weeks of her life, she got word that he was awake enough for her to visit.

She teleported in immediately, but he was unconscious again.

"It could be a few more hours," the doctors told her. "Would you like to wait?"

"I've been waiting for two weeks! You wouldn't let me come see him!" Donna burst into tears.

Mitchell's mother, who was knitting something pastel-colored on the other side of Mitchell's hospital bed, put her knitting down and stood up.

"There, there," she said, vaguely patting the air around Donna's shoulder. "Don't cry. He'll be fine. It's just taking a little longer to grow his heart back together than they thought."

"I missed him so much!" Donna sobbed. "I was worried that maybe he'd died for good."

"He's got excellent life insurance. He might have to live online temporarily, but he wouldn't die for good. These days, that never ever happens. Almost never. Well, very rarely. Why didn't you tell us you wanted to come see him?"

“I didn’t think of it.” Donna reached down to touch Mitchell’s hand, then stopped herself. What’s the use? “Is he going to be okay?”

“It might take a few months before he’s back on his feet, but the doctors are pretty confident.”

Donna sat down on a chair next to the bed. “He asked me to move in with him. But I have my career, you know.”

“The unicorn purses.”

“I’ve got some with hearts now, too.”

“And you’re ninety.”

“Eighty-nine.”

“Maybe it’s time to think about settling down, dear, getting a real career. You’re going to be hitting the triple digits soon. Time to start taking life seriously. Have you considered teaching?”

A sharp laugh caused Donna to look up. Mitchell’s father had come in.

“She’s an airhead, just like Mitchell,” he said. “What could she possibly have to teach anyone? Stop putting notions in her head. What I want to know is why the two of them were gallivanting around on the roof anyway.”

“We wanted to see the sunset and watch the stars come out.” Donna rubbed her face. “It was supposed to be romantic.”

Mitchell’s father patted her on the top of her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

The touch, and the kind words, were unexpected, and Donna started crying again. “I can’t bear to be without him.”

She stood up and ran out of the room.



SHE CAME BACK LATER that day with a rented body. It was uncomfortable. She could hold Mitchell’s hand, and kiss him on the cheek, but it felt as though someone else was doing it.

Finally, Mitchell woke up, and his parents decided to go out and get some dinner so she and Mitchell could have some privacy.

“I missed you.” Mitchell’s voice was soft and raspy. “I kept waking up and you weren’t here.”

“They wouldn’t let me see you.”

“I figured. I tried to tell them, but there was a tube down my throat.” She squeezed his hand and leaned down to kiss him on the cheek.

“You got a rental,” he mumbled.

“I missed not being able to touch you.”

“The hair doesn’t quite match.”

“I know.”

She sat silently next to him, looking at his face, holding his hand, trying to ignore the tubes running in and out of his body, to look brave, for his sake.

Finally, Mitchell licked his lips and spoke again. “You know, now that I’m awake, they say they can let me go online for a couple of hours a day. I can get a break from the hospital. We could go somewhere nice.”

“I’d like that.” She clutched his hand tighter. “I’m sorry you fell off the roof.”

“Don’t be. You saved my life. I’m sorry I can’t be there for you right now. These last two weeks, without you, have been brutal.”

“I don’t want to live without you.”

“I don’t want to live without you, either.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. I hate waking up without you.” He paused. “This accident has made me think about things.”

“Me too.”



A WEEK LATER, MITCHELL contacted his lawyer and arranged to have his house sold and the money transferred to Krim.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” said his lawyer. “You love the house, but the land it’s on is worth several times more. Whoever buys it will probably immediately tear it down.”

“I know,” said Mitchell.

“And you are certain that you want to move the money to Krim?” The lawyer waved his hand and checked something on an invisible screen in front of him. “The exchange rate is atrocious, their currency has no investment value, and the whole company is always on the verge of going out of business.”

“I know,” said Mitchell.

“It’s one of the worst-rated worlds out there. If you’re going to pick a world, why that one?”

“Because the love of my life lives there,” said Mitchell. “And I can’t live without her. I’ll use the money to help her launch her art career.”

The lawyer shook his head.

“No, really,” Mitchell said. “This accident has taught me how precious life is, and how important it is to spend it with people you love.”

“So you’re sure you want to pull the plug? Have you talked with your family?”

“They would just try to talk me out of it.”

“Fine.” The lawyer put a set of documents in front of Mitchell for him to sign and handed him a pen.

“It beats months in the hospital and then in rehab — and after that, what? We’ll still be apart.” Mitchell signed the first page.

“That was the house sale,” said the lawyer and took the page from him.

“I’d still only see Donna a couple of times a week.” Mitchell glanced down at the next page. “I want to wake up next to her every morning.” He signed again.

“That was the currency transfer,” said the lawyer. “This last one is the big one. Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

“I’m sure.”



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Mitchell was waiting for Donna to join him at their regular table overlooking the mermaid lagoon when he got a ping. Instead of meeting him by the seafood buffet, Donna wanted to see him at the hospital.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” her message said. “But they won’t let me into your room. I’m in the waiting area. What’s going on?”

Instead of answering, Mitchell teleported over.

She turned around when she heard him pop in. “Oh, you’re online. I was hoping I’d catch you awake. I’ve got some news.”

“Me too. But you go first.”

“I’ve made a decision,” said Donna. “You were right about me getting a new body. It’s expensive, but worth it, and we can be together, in your beautiful house.”

“But what about Krim? You love making your purses.”

“I do, but I love you more.”

“Don’t do it,” said Mitchell. “I’ve decided to join you on Krim.”

“Well, I’ve decided to sell my store and take out a gigantic loan that I’ll spend the next fifty years paying off..”

“No!”

“And join you here!”

“You can’t because I’ve already decided to join you on Krim,” said Mitchell. “And I sold my house, and I told them to pull the plug.”

She went pale and stepped away from him.

“What’s wrong? I thought you’d be happy!” He stepped forward to embrace her, but his arms went right through her body.

“You got another rental?”

“No.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t.”

“I couldn’t live without you,” she said. “When I saw you there, in the hospital bed.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me? The cost - it’s insane. You’ll be in debt for years.”

“Fifty years. And I knew you would have tried to talk me out of it. You’re doing it now.”

“Oh, no.” He stepped back.

“So I printed a new body.” She twirled around. “Do you like it? It’s just like my old one. I even had them match the scar I used to have on my knee.”

“You had that scar on Krim, too. I love that scar.”

“They charged me extra for the scar.” She paused. “Now I can live with you here in Rhode Island, in your beautiful house.” Mitchell didn’t look happy. He should have been happy. “Don’t you still love me?”

“I sold the house.”

“No!” Donna clutched her hands in front of her face.

“I wanted to help you launch your design career. I even quit my job so I can spend all my time with you on Krim, working on your art.”

She bit her knuckle.

“And I pulled the plug. I was practically dead already anyway and I didn’t want to spend months in the hospital, then in rehab. So I could wake up next to you every day.”

“Oh, no.”



BUT THE IMPORTANT THING is that the two lovers still had each other.

And, so, they went off together to the hospital cafeteria and made plans for how they were going to spend the rest of their lives.

First, they were going to sue Mitchell’s lawyer for letting him sign away his house and money while in no shape to make any decisions.

Then, they were going to sue the hospital for pulling the plug so quickly on a patient who so obviously wasn't in any position to make good choices.

Then, they would sue the body printing company for giving her a body with a scar on it. That was a long shot, but you never know how a jury would see things.

The important thing was that they had each other and a complete and utter conviction that nothing was ever their fault. And, in the end, that's what matters. Love.



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About the author

Maria Korolov has been a war correspondent, a foreign bureau chief, and, for the last few years, a technology journalist covering artificial intelligence and extended reality.

Check out her professional website at www.MariaKorolov.com.



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