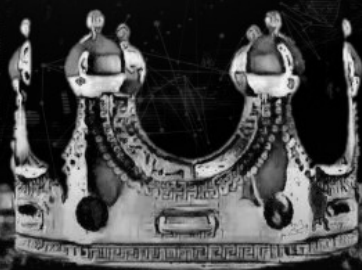


KRIM VIRTUAL WORLD 1

THE LOST
KING OF
KRIM



MARIA KOROLOV

The Lost King of Krim

By Maria Korolov



1

In 2120, World of Battle was one of the largest fantasy-themed role-playing games, a virtual medieval landscape stretching for thousands of miles in each direction.

The game was popular with casual players, people who hadn't yet abandoned their physical bodies for fully virtual lives, for people with work or family commitments, anyone who wanted to pop in for a few hours, have fun, and log out again.

But there were also hardcore players who logged in for weeks, months, even years at a time.

Ellison Davo was hunting one of those players and had tracked him through friends, guild members, and a judicious application of bribes to the right administrators.

He circled on dragonback above a hill overlooking a field that was recently the site of a bloody battle, a hired bodyguard on his own dragon just a couple of dragon lengths ahead of him.

The first dragon had to work hard to maintain the lead, since the bodyguard, Red Stare, was heavily armored and carrying weapons. Ellison carried nothing but some papers and a flask and wore tight leather pants and a bright red silk shirt.

Ellison looked down and spotted the cluster of war leaders at the top of the hill and took his flask out from under his vest to celebrate.

The bright red silk was too much of a temptation, and several archers below sent off arrows, which just failed to reach their target.

Ellison Davo cursed as the dragon swooped away and the flask slipped out of his hands and dropped down onto the battlefield.

They circled once again, lower, Ellison's dragon following along behind Red's dragon, carefully staying out of arrow range until they landed

at the foot of the hill at which the commander and his forces were gathered, on the side away from the main brunt of the battle.

Red Stare gracefully leaped off his dragon, then patted the beast with a gloved hand. “Thanks, Betty.” The dragon let out a puff of smoke, then sniffed at the nearest corpse.

“Shoo, shoo!” said a fighter who’d been looting the dead body. The dragon backed away a few feet, then lay down, keeping one eye half open on what was soon to be her lunch.

“Oof, this place stinks,” said Ellison, jumping down with slightly more grace, since he was wearing much less leather and no metal to speak of.

He checked again that the papers were still safely tucked into his shirt.

“Our guy should be somewhere at the top of the hill, with all the other war leaders,” Ellison told Red.

“Do you know what he looks like?”

“No, but I’ll know him when I see him.”

“You’re going to yell his name and see who turns around?”

“As a last resort,” said Ellison. “No, I’ve got this party trick I do. If I’ve ever seen someone or a decent video of them, I can spot them again no matter what body they’re in.”

“Must be handy.”

“Not really. In real life, all anyone needs to do is pull up your profile. It’s one of those mostly useless superpowers, like being able to balance a spoon on your nose.”

“I’ve got one of those, too,” said Red. “I can hum and whistle at the same time.”

Ellison looked up at the hill. “Maybe we can wait for them to come down.”

“That could be hours, and it’s hot,” said Red, and started climbing. After a couple of minutes, he realized that Ellison wasn’t following.

He turned around and was surprised to see Ellison riding up on the back of a mule. "Where did you get..."

"Borrowed it in return for my contact info," Ellison said with a wink.

"You traded sex for a mule?"

"Yes, aren't I clever?" said Ellison. "I get sex, and I don't have to walk up this hill."

"Sounds like they got the short end."

"Trust me, they're definitely getting the long end," said Ellison. "I am very very good in bed."

Red scoffed.

"Actually, they're getting the better end of the deal in more ways than one," Ellison added, "since I expect to be dead in a few minutes, and they'll have their mule back sooner than they expected."

Red looked back at him, offended.

"No aspersion on your skills," Ellison said. "It's just that I'm bearing bad news, I'm afraid. People have a tendency to take things out on the messenger."

"I'm surprised you're not wearing armor then."

"What can I say? I'm a lover, not a fighter. Besides, it would just slow me down."

As they got closer to the top of the hill, the path got more crowded. The guard yelled, "Messenger coming through. Make way. Make way!"

Another group of fighters parted to let them through, but, at the top of the hill, the ones closest to the leader blocked the way.

At the top, Red stopped to catch his breath as Ellison hopped off the mule.

A group of fighters approached, swords raised, and Red straightened up and said, "He's just a messenger, he's unarmed."

Ellison stepped forward, his arms up in the air, and spun around. Then he took the papers out and waved them around. "Just letters! The worst thing that's going to happen is that someone gets a papercut!"

"Let him through," barked their leader.

Ellison stepped through the ring of guards and glanced around.

“What have you got for me?” asked the leader.

“Oh, it’s not for you,” said Ellison, spotting his target.

He handed the paperwork to the man standing next to him, who took the roll of papers by reflex. “John Robins, you’ve been served.”

The men standing around Robins stepped back from him. “What did you do?” one swordsman asked in amusement. “Piss off an ex-wife?”

Ellison spun around and jumped back out through the row of fighters.

“Get that scoundrel!” Robins yelled.

Red drew his sword as Ellison ran up to him.

“Help me get out of here!”

“Rot in hell,” said Red. “You didn’t tell me you were a damnable process server.”

He stabbed Ellison through his stomach, leaving his sword embedded. “I thought you were someone respectable.”

Red then stepped away, empty hands raised. “I didn’t know who he was,” he told the other fighters. “You can have him.”

Ellison grabbed at the sword at his belly, blood pouring out over his hands.

“No, not my silk shirt,” he said, sinking to the ground.

“Off-world scum,” Red added, and spit on Ellison’s face.

John Robins fought his way through to Ellison.

“You just ruined my life, man,” he said and kicked Ellison in the side. “How did you find me? I paid extra for the highest privacy settings.”

“I have a particular knack for finding people,” Ellison said, coughing up blood.

“Swiver.” Robins kicked him again.

“You can change your name, you can change what you look like,” said Ellison. “But you can’t change who you are on the inside. And you, John Robins, are a snake on the inside. I can see it.”

Robins took out his sword.

“My. Name. Is. Prince. Consort. Gervase.” With each word, he chopped at Ellison’s neck.

Ellison tried to roll away, but the other fighters kicked him back.

“And you can just sard off,” Robins said, finally hacking through Ellison’s neck.

He and the other fighters then kicked the severed head around until they worked off their anger and finally got bored.

With a final kick, Robins sent the head spinning down the hill, eyes popped out, mouth frozen in an endless scream.

The head rolled and bounced down until it rested at the feet of Betty the dragon, waking her up.

She looked down at Ellison’s head and his dead eyes stared back at her.

She studied the head, first with one eye, then the other. She sniffed it. Then she chomped the head down with one loud bite and went back to sleep.



2

The business offices of Crewe Investigations were located in a slightly seedy, down-market business district on Facework.

In 2120, a company could put its offices anywhere in the metaverse, but Jerald Rex Crewe paid extra—well, a little extra—to be in close proximity to marginal law firms, shady bail agents, and third-tier insurance companies.

Some companies also had physical offices, on Earth or one of the other populated planets, or on a space station. But since all his work was virtual, and since Jerald Rex Crewe himself hadn't had a physical body for decades, Crewe Investigations could do without one. For now, at least.

Maybe someday, if business picked up, Crewe would be able to afford the expense. Maybe even at a prestigious address in London or New York City.

Crewe was still living in his physical body, which was an expensive choice. Having a physical body was a little bit like owning a house. At first, it seems cheaper, because you're not paying rent—or, in the case of a virtual body, for hosting and memory storage. But, just like houses, physical bodies required constant—and expensive—upkeep. There was food, housing, transportation, clothing, health care and a million other expenses that added up.

For Crewe, a physical body was a matter of pride, even though he was spending so much time online that adult diapers and concentrated food supplements were eating up all of his disposable income.

He just couldn't get ahead.

But his new client Elea Carlyne could change all that. Her deep pockets could finally put the company in the black, and her name recognition and connections could bring in more clients.

And here she was, in his office. His little virtual office in a low-rent business district.

For some reason, she had declined to sit in the visitor chair and instead perched on his desk.

Long-legged and blonde, she wore a suit just this side of too prurient for work. Her legs were crossed, and she swung one high-heeled business pump off the tips of her toes, turning the otherwise sedate accessory into a sexual lure.

Crewe nodded as she talked about the assignment, but he kept glancing down at the profile information popping into his field of view. Her net worth was still significant, even after all the lawsuit that followed the demise of her previous company, hosting firm Civinos. And her family's wealth and resources were astronomical.

"I see you in the news all the time," Crewe said, and she smiled.

"It is nice to see the media finally focus on something positive," she said. "Too often, people seem to want to focus on the past."

They heard someone teleport in. They both looked out through Crewe's open office door to the main reception area.

"And speaking of the past," Elea said. "Ellison Davo, As I live and breathe."

"Hello, brother," Ellison said, then nodded at Elea. "She-devil." He leaned back against the door jamb. "I thought I'd returned from the dead, but I see I've landed in hell."

Crewe glared daggers at him.

"Be nice, Ellison," said Elea. "I haven't seen you in years! We have so much to catch up on. And why in the world are you hanging out in this horrible little office park?"

"Well, you never did pay my final bill," said Ellison.

Elea laughed.

“Oh, I had nothing to do with that at all,” she said. “That was completely up to the receivership administrators. Take it up with them. In fact, I wish you would.”

She looked thoughtfully at Ellison. “You were extremely useful back then, weren’t you? I’d forgotten all about it.”

Ellison scoffed.

“But anyway,” Elea said, turning back to Crewe. “I hear you are quite the expert on a little virtual world called Krim. I need to find someone who’s been hiding out on that grid for the past decade.”

She waved her hand and assignment details flicked up on the wall behind her.

Crewe hesitated.

“I am familiar with Krim,” he said. “But I risked my life the last time I was there, and it’s going to be hard to convince one of our freelancers to go. It’s an extremely unpleasant place.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I agree. The place stinks. If I didn’t have to... well, never mind. This is the guy I’m looking for.”

She motioned at the video behind her of a very average looking, gray-suited man. The scene shifted, and now the same man was dressed as Henry the Eighth.

“That’s Taylor Tupper, one of the early investors in Krim. I need to get some paperwork to him, and it’s urgent.”

Crewe looked doubtful.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll add a hazard pay bonus. And hire a security team. I’ve got a lot of projects related to the grid that could use your investigative services. Your company is going to do very well if you’re in business with me. Don’t turn me down. I hate it when people turn me down.”

When Crewe still didn’t react, she leaned down and looked him in the eye.

“Take the job,” she said, and Crewe’s expression immediately softened.

Ellison looked from Crewe to Elea and laughed. “Oh, for God’s sake, Elea! Are you still doing your con artist shtick? You know, someday, the courts are going to figure out how you’re doing that and make it a crime.”

Elea sat back. “You’re probably right,” she said. “Which means I have to move fast while I still can.”

“You and all the other cult leaders,” he said.

She looked at Ellison and tapped her lips. “You know, I could really use you at my side again. We used to work so well together.”

“You have got to be kidding,” said Ellison. “The last time I worked for you two thousand people died.”

Elea put on a sad face. “That was tragic,” she said. “I’ve since dedicated my life to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again to our subjects.”

“Subjects? They’re people.”

“Right, right,” said Elea. “People.” She waved her hand and a recording icon appeared in the air in front of her. “Assistant, when I get home, remind me to practice referring to returnees as people.”

She swiped left to get rid of the reminder. “After five years, you’d think I’d have it down.”

She turned back to Ellison. “Anyway, I want to make sure that they’re hosted in perfectly safe facilities. In fact, I’m dedicating my life to it.”

“Unlike the facilities you hosted them in before.”

“I might be legally prohibited from ever working in the hosting industry again,” she said. “But there’s nothing stopping me from raising money to support fundamental research. I’m working to make things right.”

“I can’t believe anyone would fall for that,” Ellison said, ignoring his brother’s dirty looks.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “Everybody believes that. Everybody. I’ve worked really hard for the past few years convincing them.”

“Well, I’m convinced,” said Crewe.

“Thank you, sweetie,” said Elea, and patted him on his head.

“Aside from all the unpleasantness, we had fun, though, didn’t we?” she asked Ellison. “You find me the people with the right... attitudes... and I get them to do what’s needed. We were a perfect team.”

She turned back to Crewe.

“Can you start tomorrow? There’s a bit of a time crunch.” She slid off the table. “Meanwhile, I have to go. I’m being interviewed on BuzzWord this afternoon. Got to look my best!”

She teleported out.

“Don’t take the job,” Ellison told Crewe. “I can see what she’s doing and I guarantee that there will be trouble.”

“You just have a grudge because she moved on with her life and you haven’t,” said Crewe. “You could learn a lot from her.”

“Like how to kill two thousand people and get away with it? Or how to lie to a jury with a completely straight face?”

“It’s time to let this go,” said Crewe. “Get some therapy. Move on with your life.”

Ellison tossed back what was left of his drink and threw the glass behind him, where it disappeared into the air.

“I’m not going to move on from the fact that she was the one who did the crime. She was the one on trial. She was the one everyone testified against.” He grimaced. “But somehow, I’m the one who wound up with all the blame.”

Ellison banged a clenched fist against the door jamb. “I didn’t make anyone do anything they didn’t want to do.”

He turned around and started walking off.

“Wait!” Crewe stood.

“What?”

“So will you go to Krim?”

“No.”

“The company needs the money. In fact, we’re getting paid twice—some university also hired us to find him.”

Ellison looked at Crewe.

“Conflict of interest much?”

“Listen, you owe me,” said Crewe. “I’ve been dealing with complaints about you for a whole week.”

“And I was decapitated,” said Ellison. “That took a lot out of me. Luckily, a nice mermaid orgy perked me right back up.”

“Oh, come on,” said Crewe. “It was a decapitation on World of Battle. I bet you hardly even felt it. In fact, it probably hurt me more than it did you since I’m the one who’s had to deal with all the fallout.”

“What? That oaf, Robins, went crying to his mommy? He should know better than to try to evade his real-world responsibilities.”

“Like you do?” asked Crewe. “But no, not just him. He got all his friends to file grievances, too. Turns out, they’re all big-name players on the grid, and we might wind up permabanned. I keep telling you—when you serve people, do it discreetly. There’s no need to publicly embarrass them.”

“But what would be the fun in that?” asked Ellison.

Crewe sighed.

“I’m scrambling to keep the company afloat here,” said Crewe. “Elea Carlyle’s money will help a lot. Plus, her family is a big investor in World of Battle—she’s got some influence there, too. We need this gig, and we need to make sure we do it right.”

Crewe shook his head.

“I had no idea that Elea actually liked you. For the first time, you being here would be an asset to this company. Don’t mess this up.”

Ellison backed away from him.

“Well, I don’t like her. I don’t want to work for her, and I never want to talk to her again.”

“I really doubt that you’d be bumping into her on Krim. It’s basic bio. She’s not a basic bio kind of woman.”

Ellison stopped. “That’s actually a good point,” he said. “Elea loves her comforts.”

“And there’s another thing,” Crewe added. He waved a hand, and a copy of the contract appeared in the air next to him. “She’s covering all in-world expenses. That includes food, lodging, and...”—he pointed a finger at the relevant line item—“an unlimited bar tab.”

“Well, that’s tempting! But no. Get a freelancer.”

“They’ll mess it up,” said Crewe. “Plus, what else do you have to do?”

“Well, actually, I have a very busy social calendar,” said Ellison. “To start with, there’s an angels and devils sex party that started...”—he looked up in the air—“oh, four hours ago now. Great! I’ll be getting there just in time for the good parts.”



3

Loud music blared as naked writhing bodies floated in the air, flames leaping up from below, and rays of light beamed down randomly from the clouds above.

Half of the partygoers sported white shimmering angel wings while the rest had black bat wings, horns, and pointed tails.

Ellison was one of the devils, sandwiched between another devil and an angel.

“Come with us,” the devil whispered into Ellison’s ear as she snuggled up against his back.

“I’m too stoned to go out in public,” Ellison moaned.

“Oh, come on,” begged the angel wrapped around him from the front. “It’s the Metaknots. It’s the concert of the season. You’re supposed to see them stoned. Please come.”

She licked his neck.

“I just don’t like going out in public,” said Ellison.

“Maybe he’s famous and paparazzi are after him,” said the devil. “Come on. This party’s getting stale.”

“Oh, be bad and come with us,” said the angel. “We’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’m sure I’ll regret this,” said Ellison. “But I’m too wasted to care.”

The three of them teleported to the concert arena still in their angel and devil avatars, but the outfits were sedate compared to what everyone else was wearing and the crowd around them barely noticed.

The warm-up band was already playing.

The devil girl stepped back and pulled up Ellison’s bio. “Let’s see if you actually are famous,” she said.

“I’m already regretting this,” said Ellison, beginning to sober up.

“Oh my god, you’re Ellison Davo,” said the devil. “You’re not a movie star. You’re that jerk from the Civinos trial.”

The angel’s eyes widened, and she stepped away from Ellison as well.

The devil looked at her friend. “I’m done with him. My family came this close to using that platform. My grandma almost died.”

She spit in Ellison’s face and walked away, swearing.

Ellison wiped the spit off and shrugged at the angel who was looking at him with concern. “I’ve heard worse.”

The angel put her hand on his shoulder.

“You must feel so alone,” she said. “And the guilt—it must be unbearable. No wonder you’re trying to drown yourself in meaningless, anonymous sex. You poor man.”

Ellison tried to back away, but she held him close and looked up into his eyes.

“I’d love to help you. Do you need someone to talk to? I’m a licensed therapist. You don’t have to suffer alone. I’m here for you.”

“Now, this is unbearable,” said Ellison, and broke away. “For God’s sake, save your pity for someone who needs it.”



4

“For God’s sake, put some clothes on,” said Crewe after Ellison teleported back in.

A weaselly man standing in front of Crewe’s desk turned around just in time to see Ellison wave his hand and switch to his regular appearance.

“Did I just traumatize you for life, brother?” Ellison laughed.

“And sober up,” said Crewe. “You’re in a place of business.”

“As I was saying, I normally do background checks, but I can do more missing person cases...” said Crewe’s visitor.

Ellison pushed him aside. “Sod off.”

“I’ll go to Krim,” he told Crewe. “Send me all the details.”

Ellison’s message alert pinged. He glanced at the message in the air in front of him and swiped to dismiss it.

“And if anyone tries to reach me—mom, shrinks, creditors, anybody—tell them I died.”



5

Neurophysicist Rona Mills-Mills-Mills stood in the middle of a vast amphitheater, the air around her filled with columns of numbers. She waved her hands and the tables moved around her, the numbers in the summary table in the middle changing from mostly red, to partly yellow, until, finally, they were mostly green.

She lowered her arms and sighed.

Her boss, Toros Alaia Oppenheimer, coughed softly behind her.

“Dr. Oppenheimer,” Rona said and turned to face him. “I didn’t see you pop in.”

“Dr. Mills-Mills-Mills.” He nodded back at her. “Just checking to see how you’re doing.” He gestured up at the floating numbers then looked at her and waited.

“I know,” she said. “We hit our targets a month ago.”

“You’re bringing people back from the dead, and you’re keeping them alive,” he prompted.

“Yes,” Rona said.

“And?”

“And...” she hesitated. “I know it’s time to move on to the next phase. The money is there.”

“Yes, the money is there.”

Dr. Oppenheimer, the chair of the Department of Neurophysics at Hogarth University, had shepherded the grant money, assembled from government, non-profit, and industry sources.

“And the team is ready to go,” he added. “Ready to spend the money. Before the donors change their minds.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Everything is ready. But...”

“But you haven’t been out of the lab in five years and aren’t ready to move on?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I have some concerns.”

Dr. Oppenheimer walked closer to her and patted her on the shoulder. “We’re not going to make the same mistakes we did five years ago,” he said softly. “We have several additional levels of review. We’re not going to lose people.”

Rona waved a hand and the floating displays around her disappeared, replaced by the usual view of the lab outside her office. She turned to look out at her staff.

“How can you be so sure we’re not going to lose people?” she asked.

“Look at the numbers,” he said. “Our returnees do better on Krim than they do anywhere else. The difference is dramatic. We have to go ahead—we owe it to the returnees, and to their families.”

“By sending them to the deadliest, nastiest place we can find?”

“Maybe it’s time for you to get out of the lab and do a site visit,” Dr. Oppenheimer suggested.

“I think we need to wait, do more research,” she said.

“Families aren’t going to stop bringing back their loved ones,” he said. “And families are losing them to deanchoring. Modern life is too much of a shock. We have a way to increase survival rates by five hundred percent. We have to move ahead.”

She shook her head. “It’s too risky. I can’t sign off on it. If our returnees regularly die just from the shock of seeing someone teleport in or out, then the shock of being stabbed in the heart on some medieval death grid can’t possibly be easier to deal with.”

She glanced up at her office wall where a news article had been printed out and framed. It was a picture of a grieving family, their arms around each other, tears running down their faces. The headline read, “More than 2,000 dead in revival disaster.” Rona remembered personally assuring the family that the new platform was a better hosting option than any of the alternatives.

Her boss followed Rona's gaze to the clipping.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, then paused. "There's a middle option," Dr. Oppenheimer finally suggested.

She glanced at him.

"Grid management is holding a board meeting next week," he said. "They're voting on some policy changes that will allow us to expand operations without having to fully commit to the project. Meanwhile, why don't you do a site visit?"

"What? To Krim?"

"Look around," he said. "See if you notice anything that sets off alarm bells. If there are any problems, we'll move to our first backup site and start over with the testing."

"I can't go to Krim..."

"There's nothing for you to do here," Dr. Oppenheimer said. "You've been rerunning the same numbers for a month. Go on, get out there. Get some sun. Meet our returnees, see how they live."

"And watch them die first-hand?"

"Nobody is going to die," he assured her.



6

Krim was a much smaller grid than World of Battle. It had fewer permanent residents, hardly any tourists to speak of, no dragons, and was permanently on the verge of bankruptcy—possibly because of the lack of dragons.

Its game engine was an obsolete expert system instead of a modern artificial intelligence and the physics simulation was so basic that people might as well have been living back in the physical world—in the year 1500.

Some people liked it.

Matilda Scarletstrike was one of them.

She was a large woman, with a buzz cut and fitted leather breastplate, a sword on her back, and half a dozen knives hidden away in various strategic spots about her body.

She ignored the Do Not Disturb sign and banged on the hotel door.

“Go away,” came a muffled voice from inside.

“If you don’t come out in five minutes, I’m knocking the door down,” she yelled.

There was no response.

“Then I’ll whack you on the head with it.”

“Fine, fine, I’m getting up.”

Satisfied, she went back downstairs to wait at the bar.

One drink later, while she was considering going back up and breaking down the door, Ellison finally appeared at the top of the stairs.

He was wearing a long, black leather assassin’s coat with bright red cuffs and collar, over black leather pants, black vest, and a red silk shirt.

He walked down carefully, clutching at the banister, holding his head with his other hand.

"You're the one banging on my door at this god-awful hour of the morning?"

She looked around. "Nobody else here. So I must be the one." She poked him in the chest. "You were supposed to meet me yesterday. I've been back here twice looking for you."

"Well, things came up," Ellison waggled his eyebrows and nodded back towards the stairs.

Two wenches were coming down the stairs.

"The wenches?"

"Who you calling wenches?" asked one of the wenches.

"Us, we're the wenches," said the other wench. The first one looked down and saw that most of her chest was bare. "Oh, yeah, I forgot."

The wenches left.

"No, not them," said Ellison. "Them." He gestured at the group of burly men who followed the wenches down the stairs.

They walked up to Ellison and one of them reached down and tousled his hair.

"Killer, Beastmaster, Foofoo, I'd like to introduce you to..." he looked at Matilda. "I didn't catch your name."

"Matilda Scarletstrike," she said.

"You work for the Chamber, don't you?" said Foofoo. "Say hi to Joe for me."

She nodded.

"Join us next time," said Foofoo. "This guy is really good."

He slapped Ellison hard on the back, nearly knocking him off the barstool, then he, Killer and Beastmaster walked away.

Matilda looked at Ellison and raised an eyebrow.

"You don't look like you're all that great," she said. "You look weak and frail."

"You'd be surprised," said Ellison. "I have a knack for knowing what people want in bed."

He ordered a drink.

“And so this is Krim,” he said. “It smells much, much worse than I expected. And the streets are filthy.”

“There’s nobody to clean them,” said Matilda. “No bots, no NPCs, no machines, no magic. And there are very, very few people who want to role play as street sweepers.”

“Well, I certainly don’t blame them,” said Ellison.

“Cleaning builds character,” said Matilda. “You could use some.”

She looked him over and frowned at the outfit.

“You don’t look like you’re dressed for Krim,” she added. “What kind of outfit is that? Is that the sexy assassin default avatar?” She laughed.

“The face and body are all mine,” Ellison said. “The way nature intended. But if you could recommend a good tailor, I would be very much in your debt. I do hate going around looking like a noob.”

He patted his chest. “This thing doesn’t even have any pockets. I’m going to have to find a tailor.”

He opened his coat, pulled a leather water bottle from where it was hanging off his belt, and handed it to the bartender. “Just top it off. Places to go, people to see.”

He turned to Matilda.

“Do you know where the newspaper is?”

“AviNewz? Why? You want to put out an ad?”

“No, to find out who was close to Tupper way back when,” said Ellison. “Find out what he likes to do in-world. I’ve seen videos of him in real life, but I can’t go around looking at everybody who lives on the grid to see if it’s him. I’ve only got a week. Well, six days, now.”

He looked back at Matilda.

“Unless you know him?”

“No, before my time.”

Ellison turned to the bartender.

“Jeff is it? Right-o. Have you seen this Tupper Taylor around? Was a big shot on the grid a few years ago?”

“Sorry,” said Jeff. “I only got here a week ago. Who is he?”

“Tupper is famous,” said Matilda. “One of the first investors in the grid. But then there was a big scandal and he vanished. Rumor is, he’s still hiding out somewhere around here, planning revenge.”

“Excellent!” said Ellison. “So you do know something, after all, my fearless warrior! I believe this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

She stood up and glowered down at him. “Maybe. If I don’t kill you first.”

Matilda pulled out a small bag tucked under her belt and pulled out a rolled-up document, wrapped in wax paper.

“This is a stamped letter of introduction that says you’re working for Lifeworks.” She dropped it on the table in front of him. “They’re big on stamps around here. Can we head out now?”



7

Ellison walked into the newspaper office, Matilda following along behind, one hand on her sword.

There was nobody in the main room, but a door marked “Seymour Gellhorn” was open, and there was someone working inside, looking over page proofs.

“Hello! Mister newspaper editor!” Ellison called out.

“Yes?”

Ellison walked into the office. He looked around for a place to sit but the floor and both guest chairs were covered with stacks of paper. He leaned against the wall, while Matilda stayed in the main room, looking around at the newspaper front pages framed on the walls.

“Do you have time for a chat about an old grid celebrity?” Ellison asked Seymour.

“Sure, if it’s public record,” said Seymour.

“Tupper Taylor. Do you know him?”

“I used to, but I don’t know where he is now,” said Seymour. “Why? Have you heard anything?”

“You want to find him, don’t you?” Ellison asked. “I can tell.”

Seymour shrugged. “He’s been in hiding for nearly a decade,” he said. “It’s an old story. But sure, if something develops, I’m interested. Will you keep me posted?”

“I don’t know if I’ll still be around, and it would be off the record, but sure. So can you tell me what happened?”

“It was quite a while ago,” said Seymour. “Nearly ten years, shortly after the grid was first founded.”

“Right, ancient history, go on.”

“Turned out some of the founders were running a sex slave ring. Being held prisoner indefinitely while being raped and tortured is in the grid’s Terms of Service, so it wasn’t illegal, but it was still a major scandal. People couldn’t talk about it openly off-world, because of the spoiler laws, but rumors spread.”

“I imagine! That must have really hurt the tourism business.”

“No, actually, traffic increased,” said Seymour. “But the other grid owners were embarrassed, put some rules in place to protect tourists, and sent out security teams to all the sex clubs to free the slaves.”

“So which side was our Taylor Tupper on?”

“He was caught with his pants down in one of the clubs.”

“Oh ho! So he was a sex slaver!”

“He said no, that he was set up. But, frankly, nobody believed him.”

“I can see why that might be a little embarrassing,” Ellison said. “But hardly a reason to go into hiding for ten years.”

“It wasn’t just a little embarrassment,” said Seymour. “Tupper had invested quite a bit of money and was promised that he’d get to be king. He was a big shot on the social circuit. He lost all his friends, his status. His properties were taken over. And he couldn’t even sell his shares and cash out.”

“Why not?”

“There was a lockout clause of some kind, to make sure that the early investors were in it for the long term, not a quick buck.”

“So why didn’t he just leave? Get therapy, move on with his life? Nobody in the real world would know anything about what happened, anyway.”

“He was really angry,” said Seymour. “Before he disappeared, he was telling everyone that he was going to find out who set him up and make them pay. And all the major players are still here.”

“So would you say that Tupper is driven by anger and revenge?”

Seymour thought about it.

“Yes, I’d say that he’s probably consumed by it. Otherwise, why would he still be here?”

“So he was wronged by people close to him,” Ellison ticked off the point on his fingers. “I know how he feels.”

Ellison waved off Seymour’s quizzical look.

“Those people are still on the grid,” Ellison ticked off another point. “So he’s probably still hanging around somewhere close, looking for his opportunity. I like this guy’s style.”

“If you find him, and his book is done, tell them that AviNewz would like to publish excerpts,” said Seymour.

“I’ll do that,” Ellison said. “Now, who was he closest to?”

“My guess? Osgar Cerdic Sigeward, the director of the Krim Chamber of Commerce.”

As Ellison got up to leave, Seymour asked him, “But how do you know that he didn’t find out what he needed, and is now living in some mountain village somewhere, working on his memoirs?”

“My office says that he’s been getting his mail and corresponding with a few friends off-world. But they just address his mail ‘care of the main post office,’” Ellison said.

“Tupper probably picks up his mail in person,” Seymour added. “I don’t know if he’d trust anyone with his mailbox key.”

“That’s an excellent thought,” said Ellison. “You’ve been most helpful.”



8

Matilda and Ellison sat down at an outdoor table at a cafe across the street from the post office. A waiter came out to take their order.

“A good time of day to you, sir and lady,” he said, with a small bow. “We’ll be with you.”

“Brandy?” asked Ellison, hopefully.

“I crave your pardon,” said the waiter. “I know not of what you speak.”

“Coffee?”

“Alack the day! No such libation here on Krim, forsooth. Happily, tea is in full supply.”

“It’s not real tea,” Matilda warned him. “It’s all herbal.”

The waiter gestured to a chalkboard with a handwritten list of tea varieties.

“Chamomile,” said Matilda, then saw Ellison looking at her. “What? It’s relaxing.”

“Fine, make it two,” said Ellison. The waiter nodded and walked away.

“So tell me, my personal grid expert, who forced the waiter to talk like he was in a Shakespearean play?” Ellison asked. “He seemed rather embarrassed.”

“A lot of tourists come here,” she said. “We’re close to the main gate, all the grid administration offices, Central Square. The business owners around here try to keep up appearances.”

“What truly puzzles me is why a cafe has no coffee,” said Ellison.

“There’s no coffee anywhere on the grid,” said Matilda.

“Don’t tell me it hasn’t been invented yet!”

“No, hasn’t arrived yet from the New World. Also, no real tea. No potatoes.”

“I don’t know how you bear it,” said Ellison. “This place sounds absolutely dreadful. No wonder my brother says that Krim is the worst grid. Whatever shall I do without coffee? Or french fries. Maybe I was too quick to rent that room and order a whole new wardrobe.”

Matilda glanced out into the crowd. “So, how’re you going to spot him? Do you have a description?”

“No, but I’ve seen recordings,” Ellison said. “I’ve got some idea of what he’s like. Really like, deep inside. I’ll know him.”

The tea arrived.

Ellison sipped it thoughtfully as he watched the crowd.

“Maybe I’ll have everything stored until the next time work brings me back,” he said.

“What?”

“My clothes; the outfit I ordered this morning,” Ellison told her. “We were just there. You were there with me. Do keep up.”

Matilda snorted and turned away from him, so that she could also study the crowd, idly playing with a knife. Ellison finished the rest of his tea, took out his flask, and filled the cup.

Matilda glared at him. He gestured at her with the flask. She shook her head.

“I’m on the job,” she said. “And so are you.”

“I work better with a little fuel,” he said.

She snorted. “That’s the most ridiculous...” She looked away. “I can’t wait until this is over and I can kill you.”

“Wait, what?”

Matilda turned back to him. “Oh, you didn’t hear me the first time?” She pointed her knife at him. “The minute this is over I’m gutting you like a fish.”

“Whatever did I do to you?” asked Ellison. “Frankly, I’m shocked. I thought we were really getting along.”

“You were late. You tried to make me carry your shopping. Now you’re drinking on the job.”

“So you’ll gut me like a fish?” He looked at her carefully. “You know, I believe you would. And you would enjoy it.”

“Yup,” she said, and looked down at his belly and made a stabbing and slicing motion with her knife.. “Like a fish.”

Ellison raised his cup at her.

“I appreciate the warning.”

A few minutes later the Central Square bell, Big Bob, began ringing.

“Noon,” said Matilda, leaning over to Ellison so he could better hear her over the clanging. “The post office should be opening any minute.”

“And they’re open until three?”

“Right.”

“Not enough staff to keep longer hours? Does nobody want to role-play at being a civil servant? This is the saddest grid I’ve ever been on.” Ellison sniffed, then coughed. “Aggh, the smell. The smell is just vile. I don’t know how you people put up with it.”

“You get used to it after a while.”

Matilda looked at the people on the street in front of them. Fighters, armed to the teeth. Tradespeople and crafters in period-appropriate costumes. Tourists, dressed as if they were going to a fancy ball, trying desperately to keep their hems from dragging in the horse and mule manure.

“I like it here,” she said. “It’s different.”

They sat, waiting for more than two hours, as Ellison drank tea and then ordered lunch. Matilda sharpened her knives, taking occasional breaks to walk around the area and look for trouble.

Around a quarter to three, a Hansom cab pulled up and a woman got out, wearing black wool slacks tucked into comfortable mid-calf boots, and a blazer. She stood out like... like a woman in a business suit on a London street in the 1500s.

“Well, hello! That person is definitely hiding from something,” said Ellison, nodding in the woman’s direction. “And she looks awfully familiar. Now, where did I see her before?”

“That’s Dr. Rona Mills-Mills-Mills,” Matilda said. “She’s a scientist consulting for Lifeworks Revival. I’ve done some bodyguarding work for her before.”

“Oh, right, I’ve seen her in court,” said Ellison. “Way back. Don’t look at her, maybe she won’t see us.”

Matilda waved. Rona saw them and made her way over.

“Pretend you don’t know me,” Ellison whispered to Matilda.

Matilda stood up, towering over Rona, all but saluting, and the two women greeted each other with a hug.

“Is this the investigator we hired?” Rona asked.

“What do you mean, *we* hired?” asked Ellison.

“We as in Hogarth University,” said Rona, and held out her hand for Ellison to shake. “Rona Mills-Mills-Mills, I’m with the neurophysics department.”

Ellison took her hand. “Really?” he said. “I was told you worked for Lifeworks Revival.”

“Used to,” said Rona. “Now I’m just consulting.” She sat down next to them.

“This is Ellison,” Matilda told her. “He’s with Crewe Investigations.”

“So you know your way around this grid?” Rona asked.

“Nope, first time here.” Ellison grinned.

“So you got the job... for your tracking skills?”

“No, nepotism,” said Ellison, and laughed. “I’m Jerald Crewe’s brother. But I do have some talent when it comes to finding people, yes.”

“Does he?” Rona asked Matilda.

“Not as far as I can tell,” she answered. “All he’s done so far is get drunk, get laid, go shopping, and now he’s been sitting here ogling wenches for three hours.”

She nodded at three women walking by wearing low-cut gowns with cinched waists, holding up the hems to keep them from dragging on the muddy cobblestones.

“Well, they do seem awfully undressed for the weather,” said Ellison. He looked at another woman walking behind them. “And is that chain-mail bikini really period-appropriate?”

Matilda glanced over. “Noob,” she said. “Wouldn’t I love to stick a sword between those ribs.” She shook her head. “But I have a rule against killing tourists. It’s not sporting.”

The waiter came back over.

“Tea, my lady?” he asked Rona and gestured at the chalkboard listing the tea options.

“Which one should I get?” she asked.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly decide for you,” said the waiter.

“Just pick the best one.”

“Everybody has their own preference...”

“Just pick, please,” she smiled up at him. “I haven’t had my coffee this morning. Makes it hard to think.”

“Then I have some bad news for you, my lady, since I know not of this coffee of which you speak.”

“I know!” Rona laughed. “I’m doomed! I’ll have to avoid making any decisions my whole time here.” She leaned closer to the waiter. “So there’s nothing here with any caffeine at all?”

Ellison’s head whipped around from watching the pedestrians walking past the post office and he stared intently at the two of them.

“Well,” the waiter said, “I might have something.” He leaned closer to her. “Don’t tell anyone.”

He reached into a pocket, pulled out something wrapped in wax paper, and placed it on the table in front of Rona.

She unwrapped the paper. There were two cookies inside, a dark chocolate color.

“They’re made with real coffee beans,” whispered the waiter. “On the house.”

He left to get her the tea.

“Want one?” Rona held out the packet to Ellison and Matilda.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said and took a cookie.

Matilda shook her head. “I guess the smugglers have found another way in,” she said. “Good for them.”

“Does that mean that I might be able to find some tobacco if I look hard enough?” asked Ellison. “Maybe the good doctor here can help a fellow out. Would you like to come with me on a pub crawl tonight? Chat up the bartenders?”

“You think you’ll have found Tupper by then?” she asked.

“No, I’m sure we won’t,” said Ellison. “There are a lot of people to talk to, and it’s going to be slow going because I’ll have to visit all of them in person. Which means that I’ll be here a few days. Which also means I will need all the stimulants I can get.”

“You only have six days,” said Rona. “That’s when the board of investors is having its next meeting. We need his vote.”

“I’m delivering a calendar reminder? How boring,” said Ellison. “No wonder the poor man is in hiding.”

“We need the zoning variances,” said Rona. “And changes to the grid Terms of Service.”

“How dreadful.”

Rona snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “It means that you’ll have coffee, and tea, and potatoes, and tobacco.”

“Well!” said Ellison. “Why didn’t you lead with that? If I ever come back to this grid again, that will be very good news indeed. Well, I must be off. Duty calls. Come on, Matilda.”

He stood up and set off for the post office.

“Just one question before we go,” Matilda said to Rona. “When I was over at Lifeworks picking up my pay, I asked if they wanted to hire me

full-time to be your bodyguard. They said it's totally up to you. If you give the word, I'm hired."

Rona looked uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, but personnel decisions aren't up to me," she said.

"Well, this particular one is exactly up to you," said Matilda. "You've been spending a lot of time in-world, you should have someone on call. If you don't want it to be me, no skin off my back. I can recommend a few other folks."

"I'm really sorry," said Rona. "I don't mean to be rude. But I'm not in a good place right now to make decisions about people's careers."

She paused.

"Do you think Ellison will be able to find Tupper?" she asked Matilda.

"Well, he's not taking the job particularly seriously," said Matilda.

"Maybe I should come along," said Rona. "I'll get a chance to learn more about the grid, too." She smiled at Matilda. "You can keep him alive, and I'll try to keep him focused on the job." She stood up and walked off after Ellison.

Matilda looked around, sighed, then reached into a small bag tucked under her belt and settled the bill.



9

Ellison glanced quickly around the main hall of the post office, where the walls were lined with numbered post office boxes, then went through a set of double doors to the left, where several clerks sat behind a high counter.

Ellison picked out the one on the far end and walked up to him.

“Hello, my good man,” said Ellison. “I’m looking for someone. And I understand that you’re the man to help me.”

He dropped gold coins on the counter in front of him.

The clerk glanced around, then pocketed the money. “I’m sorry, but if you’re asking about a privacy violation, I can’t help you,” he said loudly, then added in a low voice, “Who are you looking for?”

“Well, in that case, I’d like to buy a post office box,” Ellison responded in a normal tone of voice and slipped the clerk a piece of paper over with Tupper Taylor’s name. “I believe this should be enough to cover it.”

The clerk glanced at the post office boxes lining the wall separating him from the main entry area.

“I’m sorry, but box 442 is already taken,” he said.

“I’m really fond of that particular number. Is there any chance the owner would be willing to switch?” Ellison winked.

“I can ask for you, but the owner has already collected his mail today,” said the Clerk. “I could drop them a note with your contact information if you’d like.”

“No, that’s okay,” said Ellison. “Is 244 available?”

It was.

When Ellison turned around with his new post office key, he saw Rona standing behind him, her arms crossed, a judgemental look on her face.

“So you got nothing,” she said, falling into step next to him as he walked away. “You tried bribing the clerk and struck out.”

“On the contrary,” said Ellison. “Tupper’s post box is number 442, and he’s already picked up his mail today. However, the clerk doesn’t know what he looks like. He probably only knows the name at all because he recognized it while sorting mail.” Ellison paused and thought. “What I don’t understand is how I missed him.”

“Maybe you were spending too much time ogling wenches and not enough time looking for Tupper,” she said.

“You never know, he could be one of the wenches,” said Ellison.

Matilda was waiting for them outside. “Where to next?”

Ellison looked around and took a deep breath, then started coughing when the dust in the air hit his throat. The combination of dirt, powered manure, and the stench of urine was almost unbearable.

He took out his flask and took a deep drink.

“Hold on,” said Rona. “I’m bothered by the fact that you just bribed someone.”

“Are you concerned about the expenses piling up, Doctor?” asked Ellison. “Well, don’t worry, it’s all included in our price. And it’s nothing compared to my bar tab, I assure you.” He toasted her with his flask and took another drink.

“You induced someone to commit a crime,” she said. “I can’t have that. Not while you’re working for me.”

“Oh, I didn’t induce him,” said Ellison. “He was perfectly happy to commit the crime all on his own.”

Rona looked at him sternly. “And are you drinking?”

“Of course,” he said. “How else do you think I can work here? But I’m happy to share.”

He held out the flask to her. She hesitated.

“Oh, go on,” he said. “It’s the best whiskey the Barley Mow has to offer.”

She shook her head. "I hate to say this, but you have to stop drinking," she said. "And you have to stop bribing people."

Rona actually did look pained when she said it. She looked up at him. "I don't want to tell you what to do, but this is important. I want you to find Tupper, but you're representing Lifeworks. Please don't do anything to hurt our relationship with the grid or with Tupper Taylor."

He looked back at her. "Sure, I understand, whatever you say." He grinned and put away his flask. "See you around!"

Rona smiled, relieved.

Ellison waved at Matilda to follow him and started walking away.

"I'm so glad he understands," Rona told Matilda.

Matilda stopped and looked at her. "You can't tell he's lying?" She shook her head and laughed.

"People don't usually lie to me." Rona looked at them as they walked away, then started off after them. "Hold on, I'm coming with you," she said, as she caught up. "People don't usually lie to me," she told Ellison.

He looked at her carefully. "No, they don't, do they?" He paused. "And they usually do what you ask them to. So when they don't, it's a big surprise, isn't it? So you were able to convince Lifeworks to fund your project, but then you also fell for the Civinos scam. I wondered about that."

"I guess you looked me up before you got here," Rona said.

"Well, don't worry about it, Doctor," Ellison told her. "A lot of companies fell for it. You barely lost any people compared to some of their other victims."

"It was still my responsibility," she said. "I didn't do enough due diligence."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Ellison said. "Elea Carlyle can talk anyone into anything. You're no match for her. I suggest you stay as far away from her as possible." He held out the flask again. "Sure you don't want a drink?"



10

They walked in silence to the Chamber of Commerce.

There, both Rona and Ellison were surprised to meet Elea Carlyne coming out of the building, followed by two bodyguards.

Rona, because she felt guilty that they were just talking about Elea behind her back. Ellison, because he didn't think that Elea would ever set foot on Krim.

"Rona! Small world!" Elea said. She stretched her arms out toward Rona and made kissy noises towards her cheeks. "Whatever are you doing outside the compound?" Elea asked. "You know how dangerous it is out here."

"I don't know, it doesn't seem so bad," said Rona, and laughed. "At least, I haven't been killed yet. Plus, I've got my bodyguards." She pointed at Matilda and Ellison. "Matilda Scarletstrike and Ellison Crewe."

Elea raised an eyebrow.

"Ellison Crewe?" she asked, glancing at Ellison. "Is that what you're calling yourself now?"

"No," he said. "The doctor must be under the mistaken impression that I share my brother's last name."

"My university hired him to find one of the grid's investors ahead of next week's board meeting," Rona said. "I've decided to join him to make sure that he doesn't destroy the company's reputation while he does it."

"Well, never mind all that," said Elea. "Did I tell you how well the guest list is shaping up for tomorrow? BuzzWord is sending a reporter, and so are several other media outlets. This is going to be the biggest event of the season. It will really put Krim on the map."

She patted Rona on the shoulder. "I told you you could count on me. I know everybody!" She gestured towards the coach waiting for her. "I've

got to get going, there's still a lot of work to do, and you know, you have to watch people every second or they'll mess it all up! Come with me, I'll tell you all about what we're doing with the castle for tomorrow."

"No, sorry, but I'll see you tomorrow," said Rona.

"I insist. You must come," said Elea. "Anyway, it's not safe for you to be wandering around Krim. You've seen the Terms of Service. This grid is absolutely barbaric. You could have an army of bodyguards around you, but an arrow or a knife could still get through."

She gestured to the two men accompanying her.

"I never go anywhere without at least two bodyguards," she said. "Of course, these guys are the best. I hire them from the Armforge guild."

She squeezed the upper arm of the one nearest her. The guard's bicep featured a tattoo of a fist smashing an anvil.

"There's nobody else I would recommend, but these guys are so good, they're booked months in advance," Elea added. "But anyway, I've got so much to show you. You have to come. You know you want to."

"I think I'll be fine," Rona said. "I mean, look at me. I'm hardly a role player. Killing me wouldn't be much of a challenge, and what's the fun in that?" She laughed.

Elea stared at her, but Rona just smiled back. "I do hope that you won't get hurt," said Elea. There was an unpleasant note in her voice, that Ellison immediately picked up on, but Rona ignored. "After all, you're one of the star attractions tomorrow!"

"I'll be there," said Rona.

"I guess that will have to do," said Elea. "Ta ta for now!" She climbed into the waiting coach and drove off.

"That just sent chills down my spine!" Ellison told Rona. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone deny something to Elea Carlyle before. I'm guessing that there are going to be a lot of broken dishes tonight."

"That's ridiculous," said Rona. "But it sounded like she knows you."

"I did some work for her once," he said. "It didn't end well."

He turned away and walked up the stairs and into the Chamber of Commerce.



11

The Chamber's entry area was a wide hall, with paintings and charcoal sketches of business events—ribbon cuttings in front of new stores and residential projects, people getting honored with awards. A pair of bored guards sat at a table playing cards.

"Hey, Joe!" Matilda said to one of them. "Is Osgar in?"

"Sure, he's in his office," said Joe and waved in that direction.

"Foofoo says hello," she added.

"I used to work right here, for the Chamber," Matilda told Rona. "Until Lifeworks Revival made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Ellison came in and Matilda pointed him towards Osgar's office.

"What are we here for, anyway?" Rona asked, walking after him.

"I'm here to find out what the Chamber knows about our mystery investor," said Ellison. "I really don't know why *you're* here."

"I'm here to make sure you don't do anything criminal on my account."

"I'm afraid you're going to be very disappointed, Doctor," he said. "Criminality is kind of my thing. Not that there's much that would technically count as a crime, here on the grid. Didn't you check the Terms of Service when you signed up? It's anything goes. Murder, rape, robbery—it's a free for all. I'm surprised you're here at all."

He walked into Osgar's office after tapping on the open door frame.

"Hello, mister chamber director!" he said. "Got a minute for a quick chat?"

Osgar Cerdic Sigeward was a large, bearded man, but that may have been partly an illusion, since he was wearing several layers of clothing in the Tudor style, designed to accentuate a man's width.

The ruffled cuffs of his white shirt peeked out from under his doublet at his wrists and neckline. There was a jerkin on top of the doublet, and a box coat over the whole ensemble, with stuffed sleeves that were lined with fur.

Matilda waved from behind Ellison. “He’s here with me,” she called out. “We’re working for Lifeworks. You already know Dr. Rona Mills-Mills-Mills.”

Osgar Cerdic Sigeward waved them in and motioned to a set of chairs for visitors. “Come in, come in, make yourselves comfortable. Water? Tea?”

They shook their heads and sat down.

“I’ll be out front with Joe,” Matilda told them. “Catch me when you’re ready to leave.”

Ellison put his feet up on Osgar’s desk and leaned back in his chair.

Rona shot him a stern look which he ignored.

“So what is that con artist Elea Carlyle doing hanging around Krim, anyway?” he asked the Chamber Director. “This grid doesn’t seem like her type of place.” He sniffed. “Just the smell alone should drive her away.”

“What scam was Elea running this time?”

Rona pulled at Ellison’s sleeve to get him to sit down, but he ignored her.

Osgar walked around and sat down at his chair. “Elea Carlyle is starting a program to help find grid employment for returnees,” he said. “This is a very worthwhile goal. People from time periods before the digital revolution won’t have the skills necessary to survive in the modern world—but they are extremely well-suited to the kinds of jobs available in pre-tech grids like Krim.”

Ellison leaned over him.

“So, instead of sending people to school, she wants to turn them into menial slaves for spoiled role players?”

“No, Ellison,” Rona interrupted. “This is a good project. Not everybody wants to go to school right away when they come back. It’s good for people to have meaningful work, work that makes other people happy, and that makes use of skills that they already have.”

“Like street sweeping?”

“Like, say...” Rona tried to think of something that Ellison would appreciate. “Like sewing.”

“Oh?” Ellison sat down.

“Some returnees have excellent tailoring skills, and the work is creative, and in high demand throughout the roleplaying metaverse and on historical grids. And even in real life—someone who is good at fashion and design can make a name for themselves.”

“So she’s planning to build sweatshops?”

“No,” said Osgar. “Krim allows duplication of items. So, say, a tailor makes a jacket. They take it off-grid, usually through the Trader’s Gate on the north side of the city. It’s duplicated in a staging area, then the copies are brought back. There’s a fee the grid charges for this, but it eliminates much of the manual labor of producing goods while allowing creators to have ongoing revenue streams.”

Ellison yawned.

“We are looking for apprenticeship programs as well, to help our returnees get situated,” said Rona. “And, yes, there will also be street sweeping jobs. But that’s not a bad thing. At first, the returnees will get spending money to buy things that the basic hosting plan doesn’t cover. Then, as they get more familiar with the grid, and get bored with their jobs, they’ll start looking for other things to do. They’ll find more interesting work, or go into apprenticeships, into on-grid training programs. And, when they’re ready, to off-world universities.”

“Nearly all Krim merchants support the plan,” said Osgar. “We need the employees, and we need a bigger customer base. Krim has been stagnating the last few years, and this is the kind of project that will breathe new life into the grid.”

“You’re really sincere about this,” said Ellison.

“Yes, we are,” said Osgar. “We’ve already got several local businesses lined up for the project. We’re calling it First Jobs.”

“And you need Tupper to do all this,” said Ellison.

“Tupper? Tupper Taylor?” asked Osgar.

“Yes,” said Rona. “We need his vote next week at the board of directors’ meeting. Can you help us find him?”

“I would if I knew anything,” said Osgar. “But I haven’t seen him or heard from him in years. I’m sorry.”

Rona leaned forward. “Isn’t there anything at all you can do to help us find him?”

There was an intense look on her face that caught Ellison’s attention. A familiar look, one that he knew well from his experience working with Elea.

“You’re quite the charmer, aren’t you, Doctor?” he told her.

She waved him off, annoyed.

“All I’ve heard is that he’s writing an exposé about the grid,” Osgar told her, then saw her look of concern. “It’s nothing, really. No reason for Lifeworks to be worried. Just an old squabble from ten years ago that nobody cares about anymore.”

“Is there anybody he used to be close to?” Ellison asked. “An old squeeze, perhaps?”

“Oh, of course—that would be Valerie Kingston,” said Osgar. “She’s the director of the grid archives now. But I doubt that they’ve stayed in touch. They parted on very bad terms.”

“Maybe you’re concerned enough to have locked him up in a dungeon somewhere?” Ellison suggested. “Keep him out of the way?”

“Why?” asked Osgar. “So he writes something. Because of the anti-spoiler laws, he can’t go off-world with it. Worst case, a few people on Krim will read about something that happened years before they arrived involving people who are mostly all gone.”

“But are they all gone, Director?” asked Ellison. “Maybe some of them are still around, say? And happen to own a dungeon?”

“Well,” Osgar said reluctantly, “The Baron de Mowbray is still around. He has a castle with a dungeon just outside of town. And some of the guilds might have holding facilities.”

“Is there anyone else you can think of?” asked Rona.

“Well, there’s Valerie Kingston, Tupper’s ex,” said Osgar. “She almost became queen before everything that went down. She was so humiliated. She’s been rebuilding her social standing for years now. She would hate it if it all came back up again.”

“Oh, really?” asked Ellison. “This is promising. A scorned lover—always the first place to look. Where is she now?”

“She organizes charity events,” said Rona. “I’ve met her at a couple of fundraisers with Elea. Isn’t she also on a museum board?”

“She heads up the grid archives,” said Osgar.

“Excellent! That was our next stop, anyway!” said Ellison. “Off we go! Thank you, Director!”



12

The grid archives building was fifteen minutes away, but they were barely halfway there when an arrow flew out of a dark alleyway across the street.

The arrow came close enough to Rona's head to nick her ear and ruffle her hair.

Matilda yelled at them to get under cover as she dashed across the street, but by the time she fought her way through the late afternoon traffic, the attacker was gone.

When she returned, Matilda and Ellison were pulling out the arrow from the wooden wall it had lodged itself in. It took both of them to pull it out, and when Rona touched the tip, it cut her finger.

Matilda took the arrow from her and examined it.

"Mass-produced," she said. "But I can probably use it." She tucked the arrow under her belt, next to one of her many knives.

"Does this mean we're getting close?" Rona asked.

"If Tupper is the one who shot at us, then yes," said Ellison. "Or even if he hired someone."

"But it could have just been random," added Matilda. "There was a spate of random attacks against tourists not too long ago. And both of you look a lot like tourists. Or someone could have shot that arrow by accident. It happens."

"Maybe you should grab a cab and go home," said Ellison. "There's no reason for you to keep following us around. Plus, Matilda can't guard both of us at once, and I'd rather not get killed because of you."

"This attack was either related to Tupper, or it was unrelated," said Rona. "If it was related, then he doesn't want to be found, and if we do find him, it will take some extra convincing to get him to go to the

meeting. I can help convince him. And if it's unrelated, then the attacker probably won't try again. Either way, the odds of success go up if I come along."

"So do the odds of you getting killed or badly injured," said Ellison. "Or, more importantly, so do the odds of me getting killed or injured."

"So? It's not like this is real," Rona laughed. "I've been killed in games before."

"Not like this, I bet," said Ellison, and flicked her forehead.

"Ouch!"

"He's right," said Matilda. "The pain you feel here is real. The fact that you won't die for good won't be much comfort if you're hurt and can't get to a gate and you get septic and your limbs start rotting off."

"I've been coming to this grid for weeks," Rona said. "Nothing's happened to me yet. This arrow could have been an accident."

She set off towards the grid archives.

Matilda and Ellison looked at each other, then started walking after her.

As they walked away, their attacker emerged from the alley and looked after them, then ducked back into the alleyway and started running. If he hurried, he could get ahead of them and set up another ambush.

He was barely in time to see them walk into the grid archives. He found a hiding spot with a clear view of the entrance and settled in to wait.



13

The grid archives looked like many of the other buildings in the center of Krim—large, imposing, and made of heavy stone. It was created by the virtual designers when the grid was first founded, based on a generic Tudor church template.

Inside, the main hall was filled with desks piled with stacks of books, showing signs that people had recently been working there. Along the walls, there were shelves with more books and displays filled with objects of historic significance. Ellison headed straight to the reception desk.

“Well, hello there!” he told the woman sitting behind the desk, painstakingly writing a letter with a quill pen.

She jerked her hand in surprise and spilled a drop of ink on the paper which she immediately blotted up.

“Practicing your penmanship?”

“Actually, yes,” she said. “I’m learning calligraphy.”

“Can I see?”

She lifted the page up for him to look at.

“That is really elegant,” he said and smiled at her. “It suits you.”

“Thank you.” She showed him another page. “I’m answering a historical information request from a grid resident. This is how they usually write.”

The questioner’s lettering was large and blocky, done with a pencil almost thick enough to be a crayon.

“It looks like it was written by a child,” said Ellison.

“So, anyway, that’s what I do,” said the woman. “I answer questions about the grid.”

“And you get the mail,” Ellison added. “I saw you earlier today, just past noon.”

She nodded. “Yes, we get quite a bit of correspondence. If you want to find out about something on Krim, you can’t just look it up online. You either have to come here personally or send a letter. We have both ancient history archives here, both books and artifacts, and modern history.”

“Isn’t the grid just ten years old?”

“Twelve. Anything older than that is ancient history. After that, we have a full collection of grid newspapers, magazines, newsletters, leaflets, and other publications.”

She pointed to the periodicals room.

“Anyone write you recently asking about events from the early days of the grid?”

“No,” she said. “Mostly we get questions from treasure hunters looking for clues about the locations of ancient temples or major historical battles.”

“What about people who come here in person? Any regulars who hang out reading the newspapers?”

“Mostly we get people who died, or were gone from the grid for some other reason, and come back to catch up on what they missed,” she said. “But I don’t really know what people are looking at unless they leave the periodicals on the tables. That’s what they’re supposed to do, to keep them from getting out of order, but the regulars usually reshelve them themselves.”

“Could we get the names of those regulars?”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll need to talk to Valerie Kingston, our director, about anything like that. I can’t violate our patrons’ privacy like that.”

Rona stepped in.

“Actually, that’s who we’re here to see,” she said. “Could you tell her that Rona Mills-Mills-Mills from Lifeworks is here to see her?”

“Sure.”

The receptionist turned to the side and tugged on a cord. They heard a bell ring upstairs. They looked up and saw a woman peer down through

a stained glass window. She waved, then a few seconds later appeared at the top of the stairs.

“What is it, Sarah?” Valerie Kingston yelled down the stairs.

“Some people from Lifeworks here to see you,” Sarah yelled back up.

“Send them up!”

Matilda stayed behind, chatting with the guards while the receptionist picked up a small stack of envelopes and showed Rona and Ellison the way.

Valerie Kingston, the grid’s archivist, looked like she would have made an excellent queen. She led them into her office, where she sat down at a desk next to the glass wall overlooking the main research area.

“Hello, Dr. Mill-Mills-Mills,” she said. “Are you here about the gala? Have you heard that Elea Carlyle is holding it in Krim Castle?”

“I heard, but we’re here about something else,” said Rona.

“Can you believe that they let her buy it?” Valerie asked. “She’s basically a noob. I didn’t even know the castle was up for auction.”

“How expensive is this castle?” asked Ellison.

“Very,” said Valerie. “It’s the most prestigious address on the grid. But it’s not as expensive as it’s going to get if Lifeworks expands its presence here. If that happens, land prices will really go through the roof.”

“So it’s not something that someone would buy on a whim?”

“Oh, no,” said Valerie. “And I get the feeling that Elea Carlyle plans to be on the grid for a long time. For the life of me, I can’t imagine why.”

“Me neither,” said Ellison. “I think I might want to look into that.”

“Please do,” said Valerie. “And if there’s anything you need from me, just let me know.”

She turned to Rona.

“I was supposed to be the queen, and live in that very castle,” she said. “I could just kill that woman.”

“Well, please wait until after the fundraiser,” Rona said, laughing. “We need her help.”

“I wasn’t joking,” said Valerie. She gathered her period-appropriate skirts and sat down with a huff. “I know people who know people who can get things done.”

“You are a woman after my own heart,” said Ellison. “Kill away. But speaking of wanting to kill people, have heard anything from your ex, Tupper Taylor?”

“No,” said Valerie. “He knows better than to show up here, after what he did to me.”

She pursed her lips. “I spent years rebuilding my reputation after that scandal. I hope he’s sitting in a deep pit somewhere.”

“We heard he’s working on a book,” said Ellison. “A book about the early history of the grid.” He glanced down at the displays of historic artifacts. “Or, should I say, the recent history of the grid. Do you have any historic materials that are... say... more current and actual, as opposed to old and completely made up?”

“All our historic artifacts are real and authenticated,” said Valerie.

“Yes, yes,” said Ellison, and made a hurrying up motion with his hand. “We heard that already.”

“But we do have modern records as well,” she added. “We have a full archive of all the AviNewz newspapers, as well as many other publications and magazines. We’ve got the InWorld Review, and the OutWorld Messenger, and the Revolutionary Spirit. Sarah can take you to that section.”

“So Tupper hasn’t been in touch?” asked Rona. Valerie shook her head.

Rona leaned forward slightly and looked at Valerie’s face. “Maybe you know of some of his old friends? It could help us find him.”

“Well, I know he used to be close to Quimby,” said Valerie. “Quimby Plummer. He owns the Barley Mow Inn on Leadenhall Street. They might still be friends. I’m not in touch though... we move in different circles.”

“Blazes,” said Ellison, looking down at his aching feet. “I was just there this morning.”

“How about researchers?” said Rona. “Any of them looking at modern records?”

“I think they’re mostly adventurers, looking up lost kingdoms. Sarah, can you think of anyone?”

Sarah shook her head.

“Tupper may have changed his appearance,” added Ellison.

“I’m sure I’d recognize him no matter what he looked like,” said Valerie. “And I’m absolutely certain he’s never been here. At least, not while I was around.”



14

Matilda left the building while Rona and Ellison were still upstairs talking with Valerie Kingston.

She looked around and thought about where she would hide if she wanted to shoot someone coming out of the building. Then she headed straight for the curio shop across the street. The attacker saw her coming and ran out the back door.

By the time Matilda got to the back of the shop and into the alley, he was gone again.

“Well, at least I know what he looks like,” she said and walked back to the archives.

“Well, it wasn’t a random attack,” she told Ellison and Rona when they finally left the building and joined her. “The guy was waiting across the street for you. I scared him off, but he might be back again.”

“Was it Tupper?”

“I don’t know,” said Matilda. “I don’t know what Tupper looks like now. But I think it was just a hired thug.”

“We’ll try to be careful,” said Rona. “Now we have to go to the Barley Mow Inn.”

“Again?” asked Matilda. “We were just there this morning.”

“Apparently, we need to have a conversation with Quimby Plummer, proprietor of that fine establishment and, allegedly, Tupper’s best friend,” said Ellison. “Rona here will dazzle him with her charm, I’ll disarm him with my wit, and we’ll get the story out of him in no time, find Tupper, and then I can leave this grid for good.”

Matilda kept an eye out for the would-be assassin as they walked back to the inn but saw no sign of him. She may have scared him away for good, she thought, or he might have just gone for reinforcements. When

they got to the Barley Mow, Matilda ushered them inside, then waited by the entrance, hoping to spot the attacker again.

Ellison and Rona found the inn's proprietor behind the bar, serving drinks during the dinner rush. Quimby denied that he'd seen Tupper or heard from him or knew where he was. Ellison believed them.

"So, another dead end," Rona said.

She agreed to have a small snack before she went back to the gate, joining Ellison at a table by the window where he could watch people walk by outside. Jeff the bartender came to take their order.

"Sorry, it's hectic tonight," he said. "We lost another server. It's almost impossible to keep employees on this grid."

"That's a shame," said Ellison. "If I stick around this labor shortage is going to be a problem."

"Yes, a lot of businesses are hurting," said Jeff.

"No, I mean for me," said Ellison. "I expect to have a certain standard of living."

"Then let's find Tupper and get him to show up and vote," said Rona.

Ellison snapped his fingers. "Tell me, Mr. Bartender," said Ellison, "If you wanted to find someone trying to stay hidden on Krim, where would you look?"

"I'd stay right here, in this bar," said Jeff. "Eventually, everyone stops by for a beer."

"What an excellent idea!" said Ellison. "Now I know what I'll be doing tonight—making the rounds of the grid's drinking establishments! Business and pleasure."

Jeff left with their orders.

"What I don't understand is why Tupper is still on the grid," Rona said. "Why doesn't he move on with his life?"

"Clearly, he has unfinished business," said Ellison. "I think Tupper is holding a very well deserved grudge against most of the major players on this grid. Any of them could be trying to do him in. It makes sense that he's keeping his head down until he's ready to act."

“But what does he think he’s going to do?” asked Rona. “Publish a book? Who cares? If he tries to distribute it off-world he’ll be in violation of the spoiler laws. And if he gets it printed here on Krim, so what? A couple of dozen people will read it, if even that.”

“If it’s bad enough, it might get Lifeworks to pull out.”

“But he’s part owner of the grid. He’ll lose money if that happens.”

“Maybe revenge is more important to him than money,” said Ellison. “Sometimes, in order to be able to move on, you have to settle scores. Say there’s a woman who completely destroyed my life. I might want to find out what she was up to, find a way to spoil those plans. Expose her for who she really is.”

“What makes you think that Tupper blames Valerie for destroying his life?”

“Valerie? The archivist? Yes, I guess she could have been responsible. She may have been behind the slave ring, set Tupper up to take the fall, destroyed his reputation. Ruined him financially.”

“So who tried to have us killed this afternoon?” asked Rona. “Matilda said it wasn’t random. Was it Tupper?”

“I think it was Elea Carlyne,” said Ellison. “Of all the people we talked to this morning, she’s the one who’s the most likely to have someone killed.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Rona. “She’s been amazingly helpful. Half the funding for my department’s research projects comes from her foundation.”

Ellison waved his hand. “That doesn’t mean anything. She’s just trying to whitewash her brand.”

“She’s trying to make things right,” Rona insisted. “You don’t understand what it’s like to be living with such a horrible mistake. You wake up every morning, knowing that all those people are gone, all those families are devastated. Just because you bet on the wrong technology. Weren’t careful enough to spot the warning signs.”

Ellison scoffed. “She doesn’t care about any of that.”

“Of course she cares! She almost committed suicide. She’s been in therapy, dealing with the grief and the guilt. I’ve heard her talk about it in interviews. She’s been amazingly brave, sharing her struggle.”

“Don’t you blame her for destroying your career?”

“No, of course not,” said Rona. “My decisions were my own. I signed off on the project. Lifeworks went with her technology, even though it had problems, because I didn’t do my due diligence.”

“You fell for her scam then, and you’re falling for it now,” said Ellison. “Everyone always does. She goes around, destroying people’s lives, but people keep giving her second chances.”

Rona shook her head. “You don’t know that.”

“I do, I know people. I understand what they want. I know who they are.”

“You didn’t even spot Tupper when he walked right past you at the post office,” said Rona. “Matilda said you weren’t even paying attention. She said you were drinking and ogling wenches.”

“Well, of course, I was drinking,” said Ellison. “This is Krim. I have to drink just to be able to tolerate this place. But I was paying attention—I saw Sarah, didn’t I?”

“Who?”

“The receptionist from the grid archives.”

“You’re right,” said Rona. “She was at the post office.” Rona tapped her chin. “And there was a giant stack of mail at her desk,” she added. “Maybe Tupper talked her into picking up his mail. I think we should go back to the archives again.”

“Why?” asked Ellison. “I assure you, neither of those two women is hiding Tupper. I know this for a complete certainty. It would be a total waste of time. But if you want to go back and sit and read old newspapers on the off chance that Tupper will drop by, be my guest.”

“Maybe they don’t know it’s him,” said Rona. “Look, there are three things that we know about Tupper. He used to be in love with Valerie.

He is trying to investigate the early history of the grid. And he got his mail today. Each of those things points back to the archive.”

“I’ve got a long night of pub crawling planned, which I think is much more likely to be productive,” he said.

“Humor me,” she said.

“What good is it possibly going to do?”

“Because you’re going to ask Sarah the one question that you forgot to ask earlier.”



15

Sarah was still at her desk at the archives. Valerie was upstairs in her office, packing up for the day. She saw Rona and Ellison walk in and waved down at them.

At the reception desk, Sarah asked if they needed anything else. “But we’re closing in half an hour,” she added.

“That’s okay, I just have one more question,” said Ellison. “I forgot to ask you when I was here earlier.”

He glanced at Rona, nodding his thanks, then back at Sarah.

“Did you collect mail for box 442 earlier today?” he asked.

“Of course, I check it every day, it’s for one of our regulars. But I can’t tell you who.” She glanced at someone behind them, then quickly looked back at Ellison.

Ellison looked around and saw an old man with a cane hobbling to the exit.

“Why can’t you tell us?” asked Rona, as Ellison turned and began walking after the old man.

“Our patrons have a right to their privacy,” said Sarah.

Ellison caught up to the man he was chasing and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Tupper Taylor, I presume?” he said. “We’ve been looking all over for you.”

Tupper spun around, looking panicked, then turned to the exit.

But Matilda was in the way, standing at the door with her arms folded.

“That’s definitely him,” said Ellison, and reached into his jacket. “Mr. Tupper Taylor, you’ve been served.” He took out a thick waxed envelope

and tucked it into the man's belt. "I mean, you've got mail. Well, more mail."

Then he stepped to the side and gestured to Rona.

"My work here is done. Doctor, he's all yours."

"I'm sorry if we scared you," said Rona. "I'm with Lifeworks Revival. But we just wanted to tell you that we're hoping that you will be able to make it to the grid's board meeting next week. It's a critical vote, and vitally important to the future of the grid."

"Well..." said Tupper.

"I know you care about the grid," said Rona. "But membership is dropping and the infrastructure is out of date. However, it's perfect for what we want to do. We're hoping to bring a lot of new people to the grid, both returnees and their family members, and it would mean a lot for the grid's economy."

Tupper shook his head. "I don't know..."

"You don't have to decide now," she said. "Please, just come to the meeting and hear us out. That's all we're hoping for."

"It's not that I'm opposed," said Tupper. "It's just that I'm at a critical point in my work. I don't want any interruptions. And I haven't been to a board meeting in years. I don't need the drama right now."

"Please?"

Tupper wavered.

"Fine," he finally said. "You guys are better than the Nazis, anyway."

"What Nazis?" she asked.

"The humanists who are trying to buy up the grid," he said. "They keep sending me offers. Say they want to keep the grid safe for real people. But what they really mean is that they don't want AIs, they don't want anyone born online, and they don't want any returnees. Who are they to decide who's human or not?"

"I'm really grateful," she told Tupper. "This really means a lot to us and to the families we're helping. There aren't a lot of grids out there like Krim."

“Isn’t the good doctor terribly convincing?” asked Ellison. “Inspirational, really.” He smirked at Rona.

Then he turned to Tupper, took him by the arm and led him towards the door. “But what I’m really interested in is this scandal of yours. Was it really juicy? I want to hear all about it! Come on, I’ll buy you some tea.”



16

“No, no, I really must be getting home,” Tupper said, standing in the street outside the archives. “There are people looking for me. Besides you, that is. I don’t want them to see us together. There are a lot of groups working against me.” He glanced around. “The grid admins are in on it.”

“If the admins were in on it, they’d have found you already,” said Matilda.

“Would you like us to walk you home?” asked Rona. “Or we could get you a ride.”

Tupper shook his head.

“He doesn’t want us to know where he lives,” Ellison explained. “And who can blame him?”

“He’s right, I don’t,” said Tupper. “I really don’t know you people. You seem trustworthy, but I’ve made that mistake before.”

“One more question before you go,” asked Ellison. “Why are you still on Krim? You’ve got the whole metaverse out there to enjoy. You could be doing anything you want.”

“If I leave it means they’ve won,” said Tupper. “They beat me. But I still have a chance to expose them, and all the answers are here, on Krim. It’s my mission.”

“Well, that was dramatic,” said Ellison, as they watched Tupper walk away.

Once Tupper was out of earshot, Rona turned to Matilda.

“Do you think you should follow him, find out where he lives?” she said. “I want to make sure that he’s safe, and that he makes it to the meeting okay, but it’s totally up to you. I don’t want to push.”

“Sure,” said Matilda. “I’ll send you the bill.”

Matilda waited for Tupper to get further away, before following him. Rona and Ellison watched Tupper hobble slowly down the street.

“Well, my work is done,” Ellison said. “I’ve got places to go, people to do.” He smelled himself. “Try to get this hellish stench off of me.”

A Hansom cab pulled up in front of them. The door opened.

“And speaking of hell...” said Ellison.

Elea Carlyle climbed out of the cab.

“Oh, hello!” said Elea. “Rona, Ellison.” She looked at Tupper, walking away. “Is that him, or a false alarm?”

“It’s him,” said Ellison.

Suddenly, they heard a loud yell from the direction where Tupper went.

“Hey, let him go!” yelled a woman.

“That’s Matilda,” said Rona. “Something happened to Tupper.” She ran after them, elbowing other pedestrians out of the way.

“Did you give him my letter?” Elea asked Ellison, in a low voice.

“Yes, he has it,” Ellison said. He looked in the direction Tupper went. “But I don’t know if he’s going to get a chance to read it.”

“Well, if they kill him, I can easily contact him off-world,” said Elea, waving a hand in dismissal. “It’s fine, either way.”

“Why do you care about the vote so much, anyway?” he asked her. “What’s your plan here?”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Elea said, slapping Ellison lightly on the shoulder. “I don’t care about the vote. I care about his shares. I plan to make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“What? You’re going to threaten to kill him?”

“No, of course not,” she laughed. “I’m going to offer him a very large amount of money.”

“You do know that he can’t sell them? He’s still in the lockout period.”

"I'm buying a purchase option," she said. "For when he can legally sell them. And, until then, I also get his voting proxy. That should make Dr. Mills-Mills-Mills very happy with me." She smiled.

Ellison heard screaming from down the street. It sounded like Rona.

"I suppose you'll be heading home now," Elea said. "You'll miss the big party. All the Krim movers and shakers will be there. The ones who aren't off playing their silly little war games. I could use your help. Your insights were always most illuminating."

Ellison heard more screaming.

"Oh, sard it," he said. "I'll go see what's happening."

"I'm sure the little bodyguard can handle whatever it is," said Elea. "Why don't you come with me? You and I can have a little pre-party celebration of our own. Get to know each other again."

She looked intently at Ellison. "You deserve a bonus for your quick work," she said, touching his lips. "And I do mean money. Let Rona take care of herself."

Ellison started to pull away.

"Don't do something impulsive you're going to regret," Elea said, with force. "Going after them won't do you any good, and may become extremely unpleasant. Focus on what's really important."

Ellison paused and looked at her.

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?" he said. "What's important?"

"For me, world domination, of course!" She laughed. "For you? Fun, of course, and money!"

She pulled at his arm.

"Is it, though? Is it, really?" Ellison asked and walked away.

Elea sighed. "It's not going to end well."

Then she saw Valerie Kingston come out of the archives building.

"Valerie! Darling! Just the woman I wanted to see!"

Ellison ran towards the sounds of the struggle. He turned the corner and saw Matilda fighting with two of the attackers, another one on the ground with a knife through his throat.

“Let him go!” Ellison looked around for Rona and realized she was inside a covered coach.

He carefully skirted around Matilda and her attackers, narrowly avoiding being skewered with a sword, and looked inside the coach.

A mercenary was trying to tie up Tupper, while Rona was trying to pull him off. Ellison climbed in to help her. The mercenary saw that he was getting outnumbered, and yelled out, “Some help here, guys!”

The coach shook slightly as someone else climbed in behind him, and Ellison felt a sharp blow to the back of his neck. As he fell, he saw the first mercenary punch Rona in the face. By the time the coach was moving, he was unconscious on the floor of the vehicle.



17

“Wake up, wake up!”

A sliver of light was coming in through a high window as Tupper wriggled on the floor, arms and legs tied, and tried to kick at Rona and Ellison.

Ellison woke up with a moan.

“My head hurts,” he said. But when he tried to reach up to touch it, he discovered that he was tied up as well.

“Where are we?” asked Rona.

She rocked back and forth, tugging at the ropes around her wrists and ankles. Then she pushed herself with her feet until she was sitting up against a stone wall. “Ow, my face hurts.”

Ellison rolled around until he was able to sit up, then looked at her face.

“I think your nose is broken,” he said. “You have a black eye, too. It’s not a good look.”

He looked down at himself. “My clothes are ruined. This was a brand new outfit.”

“I’m so sorry about all this,” said Rona. “It’s probably our fault that they found you.”

“I told you that people were plotting against me,” said Tupper. “You led them straight to me.”

He glared accusingly at Rona and Ellison.

“Who was it?” asked Rona.

“I don’t know,” said Tupper. “I didn’t recognize them.”

“Do you know who they were?” Rona asked Ellison.

“No, I’ve never seen them before,” he said. “At least, not the four men that I saw.” He looked up at the small window that let in the little light that their cell had. “It must be morning already.”

“What do we do now?” asked Tupper. “Do you know what they’re going to do with us?”

“In my experience, this is where I get tortured and killed,” said Ellison.

“That happens a lot?” asked Rona.

“A fair amount,” said Ellison. “But never on a basic bio grid. So this will be a new and interesting experience.”

“What is it usually like?” she asked.

“On places like World of Battle, you mean? It hurts, but not too bad,” said Ellison. “And you pass out quickly. It’s more of an embarrassing inconvenience than anything else. Here? Let’s just hope that they don’t have plans to torture all of us.”

Rona paled.

“I don’t know why anyone wants to come to this grid at all,” said Ellison.

“Because it’s the most real place I know,” said Tupper. “On Krim, everything matters. It’s important. Every day is another opportunity to find out what kind of a person you really are.”

As Ellison scoffed, the door to their cell slammed open.

“Time to go!” sang out one of the attackers, a tattooed giant of a man, muscled to the limits of what the grid allowed in its avatars.

Tupper hunched away. “I’ll die before I go with you,” he said. “And tell the Baron that I won’t be intimidated! And I won’t be silenced!”

The giant laughed.

“He’s not with the Baron,” Ellison whispered to Rona. “He’s working for Elea.”

“Of course he’s not working for Elea,” said Rona.

“Tell the grid admins I’m not going to be intimidated!” Tupper yelled. “I’m an investor! If anything happens to me, there will be consequences!”

The giant laughed again.

“He’s not working for the grid, either,” said Ellison. “I told you, they’re with Elea.”

Tupper turned to Ellison. “I don’t even know who this Elea is,” he said.

“Um, excuse me,” said Rona. “You’re not really going to hurt us, are you? We’re not role players. I work for Lifeworks Revival.”

“No, stop,” whispered Ellison. “You shouldn’t have mentioned Lifeworks. He’s getting upset.”

Rona looked up at the giant, whose expression hadn’t changed at all. She frowned at Ellison.

“Please do the right thing here,” Rona begged the giant.

“I don’t think your idea of the right thing is the same as his,” whispered Ellison.

The giant spit in her face and she jerked back, shocked.

“That’s what I think of you and your company,” he said. Then he stepped over towards Tupper, who’d been ineffectually banging his head against the stone wall.

“You think you’re going to try to kill yourself to get out of this?” the giant asked him. “Well, here’s what we’re going to do.”

The giant grinned and pulled out his knife.

“First, we’re going to cut out your tongue,” he said. “That’s so you can’t bite it off and choke on it. But also so we don’t have to listen to you.” He laughed and leaned down to poke his knife at Tupper’s leg.

“Then we cut off your foot,” the giant said. “We dip the stump in hot tar to keep it from getting infected. It’s very painful.” He laughed again. “You’re not going to get far on one leg. Then we chop off a hand.”

Tupper whimpered and froze.

“If you still try to escape, we’ll pull out your teeth, and then carve out your eyes. One at a time.”

The giant put the knife back in its sheath at his belt and laughed. “Trust me, you’ll be alive for a long, long time.”

“They work for Elea,” Ellison whispered. “Tell them that you’re a friend of hers.”

“That can’t be true,” she whispered back.

“Hold on a second,” said Ellison loudly to the guard, who was just about to reach for Tupper. “Rona and I here are good friends of Elea Carlyle. She isn’t going to want anything to happen to us. You should let us go.”

The giant didn’t fall for it.

“Swiver,” he said, and kicked Ellison in the side. Ellison twisted away and leaned with a moan against Rona.

“Who’s Elea Carlyle?” asked Tupper. “Was she part of the plot against me? Why haven’t I heard of her before?”

The giant reached down and slammed his fist down on Ellison’s head.

“Elea must have hired them. Tell him we’re with her. It’ll work better if you’re the one saying it,” Ellison whispered. “Though Tupper isn’t helping much here.”

“Shut up,” said the giant, and banged Ellison on the head again. Ellison fell over.

But as the giant’s arm passed in front of her face, Rona recognized the tattoo on his bicep—a fist smashing an anvil.

She gasped in surprise and stared up at the giant.

“I recognize your tattoo,” she said. “You’re with the Armforge Guild. You do work for Elea Carlyle.”

The giant stepped back. “So?”

“I’m a friend. We both are,” she said, emphatically. “Check with her. Tell her you accidentally got Rona Mills-Mills-Mills and Ellison Crewe. She knows us.”

The giant looked at her thoughtfully.

“This has got to be a mistake,” Rona insisted. “We’re both supposed to be at her fundraising gala tomorrow...” She glanced at the window. “Well, today.”

“I might believe you,” said the giant, then nodded at Tupper. “What about him? He a friend of Elea’s too?”

Rona looked away.

“Yes, yes, of course, I am,” said Tupper. “I’m her best friend. We went to school together. We have the same caterer. I watch her dogs when she’s out of town.”

“Stop babbling,” said the giant. “I just heard you say you didn’t know who Elea was.” He kicked Tupper hard in the side, and a rib cracked.

Tupper screamed.

“This can’t possibly be Elea’s fault,” Rona whispered to Ellison. “There’s got to be some kind of mistake. She’s been helping Lifeworks for months.”

“Had you fooled, didn’t she?” Ellison said. “Tell the giant to let us go. And say it like you mean it. Tell him Elea would want him to let us go.”

The giant bent down and pulled Tupper to his feet.

“What are you going to do with us?” Rona asked him.

“Dunno,” he said. “Keep you, for a week, at least. Then, after that, sell you, maybe.” He leered at her. “Or, if you’re very nice to us, we’ll throw you down a disposal chute.”

Rona looked desperately at him, then at Ellison.

“I don’t know what to do,” said Rona.

“I’ll pay you whatever you want,” Tupper begged. “Don’t take me.”

“Elea can’t possibly be involved,” said Rona.

“Do your thing,” Ellison told her. “And hurry.”

“Fine,” she finally said under her breath and looked up at the giant. She leaned forward a little bit and coughed to get his attention. She focused intently on his eyes and felt a rush of affection towards him as the rest of the world disappeared.

“We really are friends of Elea,” she said. “I’ve known her for years. She’s been helping raise funds for my projects. And I know she’s good friends with Ellison here. I heard her say it, just a little while ago.”

The guard lowered Tupper down to his knees.

“Very good, Doctor,” whispered Ellison. “It’s working.”

“Elea really wouldn’t want anything to happen to us,” Rona continued. “Please let us go.”

Another fighter leaned into the cell. “What’s the hold-up?”

Rona immediately switched her focus to the new arrival.

“We’re friends of Elea Carlyle,” she said, giving him the same intense look. “She wouldn’t want anything to happen to us. She’s been helping me and my company with a big project. We really need to get back. Could you please let us go?”

The giant threw Tupper down. “We’ve got a slight issue,” he told the new guy, then stepped out of the cell and closed the door behind him.

“I think they’re going to let us go,” said Ellison.

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Tupper.

“No, not you,” Ellison told him. “Just us.”

“What?” said Tupper. “You’ve got to do something! Tell them I’m with Elea, too, whoever she is! I’ll marry her if it gets me out of here.”

“No, they won’t let you go,” said Ellison. “They are very committed to keeping you prisoner and torturing you, no matter what the doctor says. Plus, you already said that you don’t know Elea. That’s going to be hard to get around.”

“How do you know?” said Rona.

“I just know,” said Ellison. “I do this for a living.” He looked at Rona. “It looks like your powers of persuasion only go so far, Doctor.”

“I still can’t believe that Elea did this,” she said.

“I can,” said Ellison. “It’s exactly the kind of thing she does. She gets people to trust her, then stabs them in the back.”

“Maybe we could all rush the guards?” asked Tupper. He jerked his legs, but the ropes stayed tight.

“What do we do?” Rona asked Ellison.

“What do you mean, ‘what do we do?’” he asked. “We let the nice mercenaries let us go and then we head home and never come back here again.”

“And leave Tupper?”

“Don’t leave me,” Tupper moaned.

“I think the best we could do right now is figure out a way to kill Tupper in some quick, reasonably painless way,” Ellison said. “But if we do that, your powers of persuasion won’t keep us safe.”

“So you think we should just leave Tupper here to be tortured, maybe for years?”

Tupper moaned. And started banging his head against the wall again.

“Well, clearly, he’s a lost cause,” Ellison said. “We did our best, gave it the old college try, sorry old chap but I’ve got places to be.”

Tupper began knocking his head against the rock wall again.

“Why did you even bother coming?” Rona asked.

“I’m sure it will all work out for the best,” said Ellison.

“Best?”

“Well, best for me, of course,” said Ellison.

She stared at him in disgust.

“Well, don’t look at me like that,” he said. “I’m sure you wouldn’t enjoy being tortured alongside him,” He sighed. “Look, when we get free, we’ll send a search party after him.”

Tupper stopped beating his head for a moment.

“You don’t know where they’re going to take me,” he said. “There are thousands of places to hide someone on this grid.”

“We can’t leave him here,” said Rona. “We have to do something. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Well, if anybody is going to do something, they should do it before they get their hands and feet cut off,” Ellison suggested.

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” she said. “What should we do?”

“Save me,” said Tupper.

“Go home and get some sleep,” said Ellison.

Rona looked at Ellison, then back at Tupper.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

She heard the sound of boots coming back.

She opened her eyes and looked at Ellison.

“We need to try to get Tupper out of here,” she said. “If this is Elea’s doing, then the two of us will be okay. After all, we are old friends of hers. But Tupper won’t be. Think of something we can do.”

“Oh, come on, Doctor,” said Ellison.

“We have to,” said Rona. “If Elea is behind this then we’re the reason Tupper is here. We led her to him.”

She looked directly at him. “We have to fix this. You’ve done this before. Think of something.”

Ellison looked away.

“Fine,” he said. “But only because I’m getting annoyed about all your whining. That look you’re giving me isn’t doing a thing.”

He sighed and turned to Tupper. “Also, I must say, I completely approve of your thirst for revenge. People shouldn’t be able to destroy other people’s lives and get away with it.”

“I am so close, too,” said Tupper. “See, what happened is-”

“Never mind,” said Ellison. “There’s no time for that. The important thing is when it starts going down, drop flat on your back. Make sure your neck is exposed. Based on my extensive experience getting killed, it’s your most vulnerable part right now.”

“What?” asked Tupper, but the cell door was already opening and the tattooed giant came back in.

“Come on, we’re letting the two of you go,” he said, pulling Rona up by the collar of her shirt.

She stumbled up. “Please don’t hurt any of us,” she said and looked back at Tupper. “Or him.”

“Out of my hands,” said the giant, and pushed her out of the cell.

Rona stumbled out, then threw herself at the other guard, hands still tied behind her back, and screamed at the top of her lungs. The giant stepped back out of the cell. "What now?"

Ellison pushed himself up while the giant was turned away and hopped towards Tupper.

"Stop struggling," the giant told Rona. "I said, we're not going to hurt you." He looked at the other guard. "Throw her in the wagon. I'll get the fancy dude, and you can drop them off at a gate on your way out of town."

Rona twisted away and screamed again.

Tupper moaned slightly remembering what he was supposed to do. Then he squeezed his eyes tight, flopped over onto his back, and raised his chin like Ellison told him.

While the guard's back was still turned, Ellison hopped away from the wall, towards Tupper.

The giant shook Rona until she stopped screaming and threw her to the other guard.

Ellison took two more hops, then a big third one, landing with the heel of his boot on Tupper's Adam's apple, then stumbled off again. He leaned against the wall and looked down, where Tupper was gasping for air.

"Oh, for God's sake," Ellison said and hopped one more time.

The giant saw Tupper lying unresponsive on the floor. Ellison lost his balance and fell back down. The giant poked Tupper in the side, but there was no response. He kicked Ellison hard in the side and kicked again until Ellison was pressed against the far wall, curled into a ball.

One of the other fighters ran in.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, come help. Do you know how to do that breathing thing?"

"No, but I've seen it in old movies."

They bent over Tupper, trying to save him, while Ellison huddled in a corner, trying not to moan as each breath caused pain to shoot through his body.

Eventually, they gave up.

The tattooed giant stood up and sighed. “Some folks are going to be sarding mad. Sard it all to hell.”

“What about the other guy?” the second man gestured at Ellison.

“Kill him. Slowly.”

“Wait, wait!” someone yelled from the hallway outside. It was a familiar voice.

“What fresh hell is this?” Ellison whispered under his breath, still curled into the best fetal position he could manage with his arms tied behind him. He turned his head slightly so he could see the door.

“I came as fast as I could when I got the word,” said the new arrival.

He entered the cell and looked down at Ellison with a sneer.

“John Robins?” moaned Ellison.

“I’ve got friends on all the grids,” Robins gloated. “But please, call me Prince Consort Gervase. Last time we met, I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself—or to properly say goodbye.”



18

Rona found Matilda in the clinic of the Mercenary Guild, located in the Lothbury section of Krim City, just north of the city's Central district.

She sat down on a cot next to Matilda's when a medic spotted her and rushed over. While she was being checked for signs of a concussion, Matilda apologized.

"They broke a few bones and knocked me unconscious," she said. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop them. What happened to you?"

The medic, satisfied that Rona didn't have a concussion or a broken nose, just some bruises and a black eye, went back to work cleaning and patching a long gash on Matilda's arm.

Rona filled Matilda in on her capture and escape.

"So now I'm out, more or less okay, but they still have Ellison," she said. "I think Tupper is dead, but I'm not sure. We have to go back. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," said Matilda. "Eventually, someone from the guild found me. I had them take me to a gate to have my bones fixed. You'll get the bill for that. Then I came here to get the more minor stuff patched up." She nodded down at her arm.

"Why didn't you get everything fixed?" asked Rona. "We would have covered the cost."

"I didn't have time to wait for the broken bones to heal, so I had to get those done," said Matilda. "But the other injuries were going to get in the way too much, and I want the scars."

Matilda looked at her bandage with pride.

“Anyway, you’re lucky you caught me,” she said. “I was just about to go out looking for you. Though, honestly, I really didn’t know where to start.”

“They had me in a house,” said Rona. “It was white, with dark wood beams.”

“Did you see anything of the neighborhood?”

“Some. There were a lot of houses that looked the same.”

“Connected, all in a row? Or separated?”

“Separated. And there was an outdoor market a couple of blocks away. I got a glimpse of it as we drove through. Then we must have driven, oh, I don’t know, about half an hour or so before they dumped me out at the gate and kept going.”

“Which gate?”

“Central.”

“Did you cross any bridges?”

“One, I think, right before we got to the gate.”

“That probably puts them somewhere in Spitfields, near the Spitfields Market,” said Matilda. “I’ll get a couple of other guys and we’ll get a carriage and go look.”

It took a couple of hours of hunting through the area around the market before they finally found the house.

“This kind of looks like it,” Rona said. “But I’m not sure.”

Matilda cocked her head. “This is it. Do you hear it?”

“What?” asked Rona, then she heard the screams as well. “Oh my God.”

Matilda gestured for her one of her friends to stay at the front door, and the other to go around to the back. She and Rona walked around the house in the other direction, and found a small window near the ground, looking down into the cellar.

They crouched down and looked through.

“That’s where we were kept,” whispered Rona.

They both peered into the gloom. They saw the glowing tip of a hot poker, held by someone mostly hidden in the shadows. Ellison was lying on the floor, still tied up, clothes mostly ripped off. They watched as the poker descended and Ellison screamed again.

“Hold on,” Matilda whispered and stood up. She went to the back of the building and gestured for her friend to come join them. When they came back, she made a motion as if she was pulling a bow and arrow and letting it go, then stood by the side of the window.

Her friend kneeled down on the ground outside the window and drew an arrow. He pointed it at the head of the attacker, then glanced at Matilda and nodded his head.

She kicked hard, breaking the window, and the torturer finally looked up, just in time to take an arrow between his eyes.

Then Matilda ran to the front of the house, kicked down the door, and went down into the cellar.

Rona followed after, pausing only to grab a blanket from a bench near the top of the stairs.

Matilda and her friends carried Ellison up to the carriage. One stayed behind to take care of Tupper’s body, and the rest of them drove off, back towards Central Gate.

Rona’s friend sat up top with the driver, while Matilda and Rona sat inside, on either side of Ellison, propping him up.

“I can’t even imagine what he must have gone through,” said Rona, not able to look at him.

“I can,” said Matilda. She pointed at Ellison’s left eye. Rona involuntarily looked at where she was pointing, then looked away, choking back nausea.

“Hot poker to the eye, a classic move,” said Rona. She lifted up one of Ellison’s hands. “Ripped out fingernails.” She shook his hand. “Feels like all the bones are broken. Want to check his junk? See if all the parts are still there?”

Rona's stomach heaved, but she'd had nothing to eat since the previous night.

The carriage started rolling, and the jolting of the wheels over the cobblestones caused Ellison to cry out in pain. Then he passed out.

"This is my fault," said Rona, hugging herself. "I told him to save Tupper. I made him do it."

"Well, he didn't do a very good job of it, since Tupper is dead," said Matilda.

"No, that was the plan. Otherwise, it would have been Tupper being tortured, and probably for a very long time."

"Well, at least they let you go," said Matilda. "Ellison's just a jerk, don't worry about him. The important thing is that you're okay."

"Yes, I always come out okay," said Rona, bitterly. "It's other people who get hurt."

Rona looked out at the city passing by them. It was cold and gray. The few people out in the residential neighborhoods were heading home. Then their carriage joined the evening traffic over the unimaginatively named Krim River, and they were at the gate.

"Can you take him through?" Rona asked Matilda.

"You're not coming?" said Matilda. "I'd think you'd be in a hurry to get the hell out of Krim."

"No, I have someplace to go first," said Rona. "I need to have a few words with somebody."



19

Conversations stopped when Rona walked into the ballroom. First, the people nearest stopped talking and stared at her, then the silence spread to the other guests until, finally, the musicians ceased playing as well.

“Oh my God, Rona, what happened!” Elea Carlyle said when she turned around and saw what everyone was looking at.

She abandoned the group of guests she had been talking to and rushed towards Rona. Her escort shrugged at the guests and followed her.

Elea tried to tug Rona out of view, but Rona stood her ground. “You’re making a scene,” said Elea, in a low, angry voice. “The dress code is couture, not contusions. I thought I made that perfectly clear.” She looked around. “The media are here. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Tupper, Ellison and I were attacked, kidnapped and beaten,” Rona told her and looked at her accusingly. “Tupper was threatened with torture. Ellison was tortured. And the attackers were from the Armforge Guild.”

“Well, yes,” said Elea. “I’m confused.” She turned to the man accompanying her. “Rodge, what does that mean?”

“Lots of people hire my fighters,” he said. “You should have just told them you were a friend of ours.”

“This is Rodge Bannister,” said Elea. “He’s the head of the Armforge Guild. I can’t believe that happened to you.” She turned to Rodge. “I’m going to have to have a talk with your people afterward. This is unacceptable.”

“You really didn’t know?” asked Rona.

“Of course not!” said Elea. “If I had any idea at all that someone was targeting you, I would have done something about it.”

“Or I would have,” Rodge added. “Any friend of Elea’s is a friend of mine.”

“It may have been an accident,” said Rona. “They were after Tupper. I think we just got in the way.”

“Is Tupper okay?”

“No, he’s dead.”

“What? Dead, dead?”

“No, Krim dead,” said Rona. “But he might as well be dead dead as far as Lifeworks is concerned. I don’t think he’s going to think very kindly of us after today.”

She rubbed her eye and immediately pulled her hand away, wincing.

“The only thing I don’t understand is how Tupper’s enemies knew we found him,” she said. “They got to him only a few minutes after we did.”

“This is going to look really bad in the media,” said Elea, and gestured towards the exit. “Maybe you can go and change?”

“Well, actually, one of his enemies was watching us when we found him,” said Rona. She brushed past Elea and marched into the crowd.

Elea turned to Rodge. “I told your boys to scare her, not to beat her up,” she said.

Rodge shrugged. “Like I said, the guild gets lots of different jobs. They don’t tell me everything.”

The crowd parted before Rona. Nobody wanted to get blood or dirt on their fancy ball gowns.

Rona headed for the fanciest ball gown of the night. A poofy red confection of a dress that seemed to exist in defiance of the grid’s basic physics engine.

“You have to tell me the name of your designer,” one partygoer said to the woman, then stopped when she saw Rona approaching. She backed away from the woman wearing the dress, who turned around in surprise.

“I thought that was you,” said Rona.

Grid Archives Director and owner of the fanciest dress at the party, Valerie Kingston, took in Rona’s appearance with horror—the black eye, the bruises, the torn jacket, and the bloody, dirtied blouse.

“You!” Rona shouted, pointing at her. “You had Tupper kidnapped.”

“I’m so sorry,” Valerie said. “I didn’t mean...”

“You saw us last night, in the archives, didn’t you?” said Rona. “You were looking down from your office. And you said you knew people who could get things done. You must have contacted them pretty fast if they were able to catch up to Tupper so soon.”

“It was just supposed to be him,” said Valerie. “You know what he did to me. He deserved it.”

She blinked back tears. “And he was stalking me this whole time, sitting there, right under my nose, taking advantage of our volunteers.” Then Valerie looked down, and asked, “So, you all escaped?”

“In a way,” said Rona. “Tupper’s dead. Ellison is off-world, getting patched up. I have to go too. Figure out what we’re going to do next.”

As Rona was turning to leave, a woman she recognized from news reports came up to her.

“Were you attacked on your way here?” the reporter asked. “Isn’t this grid too dangerous for revivals? How can you justify risking people’s lives in a place like this?”

Rona shook her head and started walking away. “No comment.”

“Is this going to be another Civinos?” the reporter yelled after her.

Rona kept walking.



20

A man sat down at the bar at the Barley Mow Inn, a guitar slung on his back.

He gestured for a beer, then hesitantly began picking out the first few notes of “Stairway to Heaven.”

Matilda stood up from the table where she had been sitting, took out a knife and stabbed him in the back. “Hate that song.”

“Oh, thank you, darling,” said Ellison, who’d been standing at the bar, waiting for their drinks. “Can’t stand it either, myself.”

He grabbed the guitar as the man fell off the stool.

“This can’t be historically accurate,” he said and ran a thumb down the strings. “Well, it’s in tune.” He sat down on a barstool, one shoe resting on the foot ring.

He plucked at a couple of strings then played a scale, following it up with the opening notes of an old television theme song, then began singing:

“Where nobody knows your name

And they couldn't care less you came

You want to go where your bio don't show, where the world is just a game

You want to go where nobody knows your name...”

“Ellison! There you are!”

“So much for nobody knowing my name,” said Ellison, and turned around. When he saw who it was, he turned back to the bar. “Where’s my drink?”

Jerald Rex Crewe pushed the body of the dead guitar player off to the side and sat down on his seat.

“Mother’s looking for you,” he said and took one of the two drinks that the bartender brought over. “She wants to see you for dinner on Sunday.”

Ellison sipped his whiskey. “And this concerns me how?”

“And a therapist has been calling.”

“Also not my problem.”

“And we have work coming in. The Carlyle Group fixed our problems with World of Battle. There are new assignments for you if you want them. The Carlyle Group also has work for us, and they specifically asked for you. Background investigations, the kind of work you used to do. Good money.”

“Not interested.”

Crewe sighed, frustrated.

“You can’t keep hiding out here forever,” he told Ellison. “We were patient when you spent all your time partying on sex grids. When you abandoned your career. When you wouldn’t take our advice and get therapy. But now you’re completely withdrawing from life. This has got to stop.”

Ellison looked over at the untouched drink in front of Crewe. “You going to drink that?”

Crewe shook his head and Ellison took the drink back.

“You haven’t been answering any of your mail,” he said. “Are you even getting it?”

“Yes, I’ve been getting your letters,” said Ellison. “Did you know that it’s very damp and chilly on Krim at night? Your letters have been making excellent kindling.”

“I don’t know why I even try,” said Crewe, standing up.

“I don’t know either. Why *do* you try?”

“Because I care about you. Mother cares about you. Other people care about you. We want to see you get your life back.”

“Maybe there are things I have to do first,” said Ellison. “Or maybe I don’t want that life back.”

“Well, you’re not going to find what you’re looking for here,” said Crewe.

Ellison turned around to face his brother.

“On the contrary,” he said, then stopped talking as he saw Rona walking into the bar.

Crewe looked around.

“She looks angry,” he said. “She must have looked you up. I don’t think I want to be here for this conversation. Ellison, I’d get out of Krim if I was you, or, at least, change your appearance.”

“What? And mess with perfection?”

Crewe stood up and left just in time to avoid Rona as she walked up to the bar and stared down at Ellison.

“Dr. Mills-Mills-Mills!” he said. “What brings you back to this dour and squalid establishment?”

“Were you ever planning to tell me that you were Ellison Davo, the notorious Civinos headhunter?” she asked. “The man who hired people willing to lie and cheat and fake the results that led to the system crash?”

“Ah, well...” Ellison took a drink. “There’s more to that story...”

“My nightmares came back,” Rona said. “Five years of therapy out the window, because I left you to be tortured for a whole day, because I made you kill somebody. But you don’t have a problem with killing people, do you?”

“That’s not actually true, Doctor,” Ellison began, but Rona interrupted him.

“Anyway, that’s not why I’m here,” she said. “The vote is tomorrow, and Tupper sold his voting proxy to Elea Carlyle. You know her. Apparently, you know her very well. What is she up to?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I would very much like to find out. I’ve got some old scores I’d very much like to settle.”



Acknowledgments

I've been planning to write fiction for years, but it was through the support—and butt-kicking—of artist and writer Tatiana Minina that I finally got organized enough to sit down and write. You are a miracle worker, and I wish you all the best in your current book project!

Claudia Gere, a book coach based in Western Massachusetts, taught me that novels are written in layers. This was eye-opening information for me and finally put me on the right path. She is an excellent mentor and I recommend her to any aspiring author, for both fiction and non-fiction.

Bill Marcus, a journalist I met while running a news bureau in Shanghai, has been a rock in my life for over ten years. His support has been full and nonjudgmental, and I'm grateful.

My daughter, Anastasia, finished several novels while I was still dithering around. She did it while working in addition to taking full course loads in topics like graduate-level quantum physics, learning new sports, playing the violin and maintaining a rich social life. I'm amazed that I'm related to her.

Lawrence Pierce has been supporting my writing about virtual worlds since 2010. In recent years, he's helped preserve my sanity by taking on the difficult and thankless task of moderating reader comments on *Hypergrid Business*, an online publication covering virtual reality. Now, he's volunteered to read my reviews as well. The Internet is a scary place, folks! Gatekeepers are wonderful people and don't get enough credit for the work they do.

Ilan Tochner is the one to thank for catching the first round of typos and plot holes and inspiring me to hire a professional copyeditor. I ap-

preciate all his efforts, as well as those of other people who sent me corrections and suggestions.

But the bulk of the copyediting work is all thanks to Victor Serrano.

I also want to thank my other family members, including Basil, Kate, and Alex, for driving me to my office when my car is at the mechanic, for taking care of the house and animals when I'm traveling or working late on my writing, and in general, for providing the support I need to pursue my dreams.

Finally, the readers of *Hypergrid Business*—none of this would be possible without you. The support I've received from the OpenSim community has been astounding. Whether or not OpenSim evolves into the foundational technology of the virtual reality metaverse, you are the people who create the future. I'm glad to say I knew you when.

Thank you.



About the author

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Positive Futurism Press, www.positivefuturism.com

First edition

ASIN (ebook)

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