

A STORY OF KRIM

Krim Times



Maria Korolov

A World on the Brink of Collapse.

Krim Times

A novella of the Krim virtual world.

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Praise for Krim Virtual World Novellas

"If you enjoy Terry Pratchett, you will definitely love this." —Amazon.com

"Unique and entertaining storytelling." — Amazon.com

"I'm super picky about what I read. For me the ideal story has to not only have a great plot, but also be well written and it needs to have that warm and cozy feeling. This one hits every spot!" — Grumps, Amazon.com

"This mystery story takes place within the world of an online game, with the characters simultaneously their in-world personas and aware of the larger world, for an effect that's unique and entertaining. The only thing even vaguely like this that I've read is The Unfortunate Decisions of Dahlia Moss--which also featured a mystery and an online world (and was a lot of fun)--but I have to say that Krim Times has a more original approach to telling the story. " — Far-ranging Reader, Amazon.com

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

"Nice futuristic look at the metaverse, and people's hopes of someday what technology might bring." —Da Admiral, HypergridBusiness.com

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Once upon a time, there was a virtual world that was almost, but not quite, completely unlike 1500s England.

The assassin peered out from the window overlooking Leadenhall Street. It was mid-day and there were plenty of targets. Local residents, mostly, but also a fair number of tourists and would-be adventurers looking for quests. The tourists drew the eye with their colorful, impractical period clothing still mostly unstained by city filth. It was tempting.

But the assassin was waiting for someone else.

Murder and robbery were not, as such, against the grid's terms of service. Neither were torture, cannibalism, or open warfare.

That made the job of law enforcement a lot easier.

Marshal Henderson Trask, security chief for the Krim Chamber of Commerce, had a very narrow area of authority, and he liked it that way.

Grid administrators handled serious offenses like grieving and violations of the Krim Terms of Service. Outside city limits, disputes between residents were usually settled by local kings, bandit leaders, and other local bigwigs. Disputes between kings were settled on the battlefield. Private disputes between residents inside city limits were taken care of with beatings or murders.

Trask only got involved when a problem threatened to affect city commerce. More specifically, the business interests of Chamber members.

It was an important job.

Visitors came to the grid for the quests and other role-playing opportunities, but the city was where they spent their money. They bought the weapons they needed for the quests, their clothing, and the provisions for their trips. This is where they came to raise armies for their campaigns. This is where they sold the produce they grew or the goods they crafted. And this is where they rented their homes and workshops.

The big battles that took place outside the city, and the weird sex cults that flourished in the hinterlands, those were all appealing, and prominently featured in the grid's marketing materials. But it was Krim's central business district that actually brought in the money and helped keep the lights on.

The Barley Mow Inn on Leadenhall Street was one of Constable Marshal Henderson Trask's favorite places to eat.

The walk from the Chamber of Commerce was less than half a mile, with no hills, and the menu was full of carbohydrates and fats. No potatoes, but you couldn't get them anywhere on the grid.

Skirrets are what the grid's residents had to eat instead of potatoes. They were more historically accurate but also nasty and thin. After you peeled them there was hardly anything left. But add some salt, deep fry them in lard, and you almost had french fries.

"I'll have the day's special," Trask told Quimby, owner and head cook. "Extra salt on the fries."

"The skirrett delivery hasn't come in today," said Quimby. "Lots of delays everywhere because of the sniper. You getting close to catching him?"

"We are, we are," Trask assured him.

Then he thought—what sniper? Where? Today? Here?

He glanced out the window but didn't see anything unusual. Just regular pedestrian and wagon traffic. Though now that he thought about it, maybe a little less than usual.

Trask pulled out a notepad.

"We've got all hands on deck," he added. "Believe me, it's our top priority. Now tell me what you've seen."

"Nothing, I haven't seen anything." Quimby slapped his towel against his leg. "Do you know who it is?"

"Certainly," said Trask. "We have several suspects."

But the only suspect Trask could think of was Larry the Lifter, who wasn't so much in the sniping business and more into picking pockets.

Quimby took the rest of Trask's order and stomped back to the kitchen.

While he was gone, Trask waved at the other occupants of the dining room, a trio of dice players at the central table.

"Any of you boys saw anything?"

They just glanced over and shook their heads. For a second, he considered getting up and investigating, but immediately dismissed the idea. It would require too much exercise. He drank his ale.

Quimby returned and dropped a plate of wet suckets in front of Trask with a thud, almost knocking over the tankard. Quimby accompanied the food with a loud "harrumph" and stomped back to the kitchen.

Trask had a policy of not asking people what was bothering them, on the off chance that it might cause them to start telling him about their problems. Worse yet, the problems were often Trask's fault.

Instead, he tucked a corner of a large, dirty cloth handkerchief into his collar, in an effort to protect the front of his shirt and doublet from food stains, and dug in.

In his personal style, Trask modeled himself after King Henry VIII. Not only was this somewhat appropriate to the grid's setting, but it also allowed him to look even larger than he was.

However, without an army of servants to help him with clothing, keeping it even somewhat clean was a challenge. This was a significant concern of his life on Krim. When he was inside, spilled food and drink were a constant threat. Outside, he had to contend with mud and manure and refuse of all kinds—and chamber pots thrown out of the second-story windows that jutted out over the thoroughfares.

Trask was twice as wide as his chair, only some of that due to his own physical flesh. The rest of the width came from his box coat, stuffed with historically accurate straw for added volume, with puffy upper sleeves and a fur lining.

"Hey, dalcop!" yelled one of the regulars swilling strong ale at the central table in the room.

"That cutpurse is back!"

"Dalcop?" asked one of his mates. "Did you get that from your word of the day calendar?"

Trask glanced out the window. Larry the Lifter was half-hiding behind a cart piled high with skirrets.

Skirrets. Thank God.

It was a major point of contention between the grid's residents and its owners. Why allow coffee but no potatoes? Why have cigarettes but no guns? Why did the grid's residents have to suffer from colds, lice, and risk of gangrene but not something really fun and interesting, like the black plague?

These were all mysteries that nobody, not even the grid's owners, could satisfactorily explain.

"He's going into my report." Trask began writing.

"This is why the grid is going downhill," said the regular. "Even the cops don't care about anything. What good is a report going to do?"

"Pretty soon everyone will be gone," said another. "Did you hear that Vlad the Inhaler got his head chopped off last week? Word is, he's not coming back. Says he's going back to real life, to spend time with family."

"That's a lie. Nobody wants to spend time with family. He's probably going to sneak back in when his two weeks are up, with a new character, and get back at everyone."

"I should probably watch my back then," said the third. "I threw rotten eggs at him when he was in the stocks."

"Well, you know what they say," said the first. "If you can't handle the torture and the beheadings, stay out of Krim."

The three men raised their tankards, banged them together and drank, then went back to their dice game.

Quimby returned from the kitchen with goodinycakes and a shield of cold brawn with mustard.

"You know, we don't pay you to just sit around and stuff yourself," he told Trask. "Crime's up in all the trade areas. If you can't be bothered, the Chamber should find someone else."

"You should file a report, Quimby!" said one of the dice players.

"I'm going to take care of it," said Trask. "Trust me."

"The sniper's just the latest thing. I've been hearing about a lot of bad stuff happening," said Quimby. "All the merchants are getting harassed. Just last night, someone killed one of my customers. Choked him to death with her breasts."

The door opened.

The man who walked in was covered head to toe with leather and metal armor.

"Welcome, my good sir, and good morrow," said Quimby. "Thou art a strapping young figure of a lad. Prithee, won't thou partaketh of our fine establishment? A mighty fine repast awaits thee."

"I'm not a tourist," said the visitor. "I'm looking for the newspaper building."

"Next block over," said Quimby. "But Seymour won't get in for at least a couple of hours, and he'll stop by here first. Feel free to wait here." Quimby gestured at the open tables. "Sit anywhere you like."

"It's been quite a hike," the visitor said. He put a leather briefcase on the table, sat down and pulled off his helmet. "Got any tea?"

"Sorry, no tea."

"Isn't this supposed to be England?"

"Tea didn't come to England until the mid-1600s," said Quimby. "We're set roughly in the 1500s." The dice players looked up from their dice with enthusiasm.

"Strictly speaking," one began.

"Krim is not a historically accurate representation of 1500s England," interrupted another.

"Tea was, in fact, available in 1500, throughout Asia and along the Silk Road," said the first. "There is no reason why it couldn't have been brought to England earlier."

"We should also be allowed to have potatoes."

"And indoor plumbing."

"If the grid admins knew what they were doing..."

Trask looked at the newcomer.

He said he wasn't a tourist, but he didn't know about tea. So, a newcomer of some kind. Seemed comfortable enough in his armor, but slow. More focused on defense than offense.

"So, Quimby," said one of the dice players. "You said someone died here last night. Anyone we know?"

"Some adventurer," Quimby said. "His friends stopped by later and took the body."

"And it was a woman who did him in, you said? With her breasts? That's how I'd want to go."

"We don't get many women on Krim," said another player. "Why is that?"

"Well, there's Tattie Lovell next door. The seamstress."

"And the ladies down at the Liberties."

"And a couple in the assassins guild."

"I hear there's a sex cult goddess somewhere up north."

"Really? Sex cult? That might make me want to go out there and do some adventuring."

"Sure, I'll go with you. In fact, I hear they're recruiting at the halls now for some big battle."

"We'd have to get some warmer clothes. I hear they're heading up north."

"It can get pretty cold up there."

Trask knew they wouldn't go. It was too unpleasant outside the city limits. Sure, inside the city, you could get kicked by a horse, or run over by a cart, but if you weren't dead you could at least drag yourself to a gate. On a campaign trail you could be days or weeks away from a gate. If you got hurt, you might die an exceedingly slow and painful death.

It was all spelled out in the grid's Terms of Service.

On the other hand, there was a lot more crime in the city. The population density was higher, for one thing.

Crime wasn't technically illegal on Krim. At least, not the usual crimes like murder or robbery. There were plenty of things that were violations of the grid's Terms of Service, like attempting to evade import and export restrictions and fees. Or counterfeiting official grid documents.

Otherwise, crime was just part of the fun. Knowing that you could get bashed on the head at any time added that little extra spice that made Krim so memorable. The grid owners didn't seem to care and were happy to let most residents settle disputes on their own.

People who made their living on the grid tended to be pretty pragmatic about the whole thing. Merchants and content creators made sure that their wills were up to date and on file. If they got killed, they just took their two-week vacation off-world, then came back with a new character.

If anything, death was good for the grid, since it forced users to buy completely new outfits and convert more cash to in-world currency.

But death was also painful and inconvenient. Residents who died too many times tended to just throw in the towel and move somewhere else. Or remember that they had real-life obligations to attend to.

Lately, it seemed that crime was on the rise, especially crime targeting the most economically important residents, who had most to lose when they died—the merchants, the crafters, and various other businesspeople.

And more and more often, justice was delivered by the mob, and was swift and gruesome. In fact, the violence seemed to be breeding more violence, as the crime and its punishments drew in the most bloodthirsty. Casual tourists enjoyed seeing the occasional head on a stake, but when the violence got too close and personal, it hurt traffic.

Trask finished his meal and leaned back in his chair. He should be getting back to his headquarters, he thought, and checking in.

That was when he heard a commotion outside.

"Thief! Thief!" someone yelled.

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About the author

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

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