

The Website:

Internet crime

Finding the children: Old enmities leave bitter trails

by Miriam Verbeek

Saskia van Essen, an amateur detective immersed in the world of the internet, works with Interpol and police around the world to track down those who misuse the dark net to post images of exploited children. She lands on Si'Empra to help Einar and Lian Marene find who's the manager of a dark net site posting images of Crystallmaker children. In short order, she finds herself immersed in not only tracing code but untangling messy relationships with origins in past conflict and changing social rules.



CHAPTER 1:

CHAPTER 2:

The people and setting of this book are fictional but, as with all Si'Empra books, the events are based in reality. Interpol, in partnership with police from all its member countries, deals daily with the fraught problems caused by corruption and twisted minds that hunger for domination and pain. This book is dedicated to those who strive to make the lives of the majority of us safe and happy.



CHAPTER 3: CHAPTER 1 (ROTTERDAM)

Cars streamed in one continuous line from the cavernous interior of the Hull-to-Rotterdam ferry. On the dock, people jostled with luggage and waved and called to one another as they disembarked. Beyond the ferry, vessels churned through the grey, choppy sea. A cold breeze tugged at Saskia's coat and whistled through the straps of her bike helmet. Not far away, a tall, thin man also leaned on the guard rail. He had not glanced at her when she stepped up on a cement block to give herself enough height to watch the hubbub.

Her phone rang. She touched her earbuds to answer the call.

"Hi Saskia. It's Simon Perrot. Can you talk?"

"Hi Simon. Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I'm standing on a block of cement, leaning on a railing and taking in the view of Rotterdam Harbour. The ferry from Hull has just berthed."

Simon chuckled. "That's a comprehensive answer. Lucky you. Are you on holidays?"

"Visiting my family for a week. What's up?"

"I thought you'd like to know. New images of those pale-looking children have turned up."

"Tell me they're not new. Tell me they're recycled, Simon."

"Unfortunately, no. They are new. New young victims. But, as far as I can tell, they're taken in the same place – the children have the same features."

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Still no idea who they are?" It was a forlorn question. Years of searching by police units around the world, dedicated to fighting crimes against children, had failed to locate the pale-skinned, purple-eyed children or to shut down the website selling the images.

"No idea."

"Damn!" What else could she say? This was not her case. She'd seen the awful images of the children on a previous case and had asked Simon to keep her informed.

Saskia thanked him for the information, popped the earbuds out and zipped them into the pocket of her cycling jacket. The news had made the music she'd been listening to sound tinny.

Sick minds! She gripped the rail and shook it violently. "Grrrr!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the thin man turn towards her, an eyebrow crooked up enquiringly. "Out of sorts?"

"Am I being obvious?" she growled.

The man grinned. “Oh, I’m just guessin’. Thought I was in a bit of an earthquake there for a coupla seconds.” His broad accent marked him as an Australian.

She wasn’t in the mood for talking to anyone. She turned her attention back to the ferry. “The Netherlands is not on a seismic zone,” she muttered.

“Is that a fact.” The man tilted his head, looking her over. “I like the way most of you Dutchies can speak good English.”

Irritated by his bold inspection, she returned: “Is that what you’re speaking?”

His grin broadened. “I do my best, love. I’m just a sailor and la-di-da talking isn’t my thing.”

Shamed by his refusal to be offended by her tetchiness, she said, “Us Dutchies not only know how to talk English, we know how to be rude. Sorry.”

“Didn’t notice, love. Got the hide of a rhino, I do.”

She laughed. “Thank you.”

“You a sailor?”

“I can swim, but I’d prefer not to be on the water.”

“Racing bikes?” He nodded towards the bike she had laid on the grass nearby. It was a modified child’s bike and the thought that she would be able to join a peloton on it made her laugh again.

“It’s just my recreational pursuit.” Saskia nodded in the direction of the waters before them. “Is your boat out there somewhere?”

“Way over there.” He pointed into the distance, past the ferry, cargo ships and other craft to the opposite shoreline. “You probably can’t see it. That two-mast one over there. Been all over the world in her. *Westrunner*’s her name. My mate’s just taking her for a bit of a spin. We’re waiting for another job to come in.”

“I see,” Saskia said. “Is Rotterdam the usual place you get your jobs from?”

“No. Truth to tell, this is only the second time I’ve been here. Like the place though. Big harbour. Lots of things going on.” He gave the grey sky a rueful glance. “Don’t go much for this weather though.”

“It is tedious. But it is also coming into winter. Where do you usually dock your boat?”

“No place usual. Been all over the world in her – as I said. Seen things and met people you’d never imagined even existed.”

“Any with purple eyes?”

“Purple eyes, eh? Yeah. I seen them.”

The response so startled Saskia that she stared at him, tipping her head back further to take in his full measure. “Really?”

“Yeah. I have. Strange little people. Live underground most of the time.” His eyes narrowed as he regarded her. “So, why’d you ask?”

“Oh! Well. Well – I saw a picture of one and wondered if – you know – contact lenses?”

“Nope. They all got eyes like that. Something to do with the gases underground that these beasties they live with produce.”

Saskia frowned.

The man grinned, crow’s feet around the man’s eyes deepening. “You think I’m kidding, don’t you?” He pulled a mobile phone from out of his coat pocket. “Here, I’ll show you.” He tapped for some time and handed the phone down to her. “Here’s one of me with one of them.”

She took the phone and studied the image, expanding and moving it around with two fingers on the screen. The person standing next to the Australian was dressed in brownish, loose trousers and coat. A wide-brimmed hat shadowed a porcelain-white face but the large, rounded eyes definitely had a purplish tinge.

“They’re little,” said the man. “He’s full grown and one of the taller ones, too. He don’t even come to my shoulder, and I’m just shy of six foot. Usually, you can’t see their eyes. Real light-sensitive they are, so they keep sunglasses over them. But I got this guy to take off the glasses for the photo. That’s why he’s squinting a bit.”

“Where did you meet this person?”

“Oh, you only ever see them on their island. They never leave there, apparently. None of them people who live on that island leave the island.”

“Do they all have purple eyes?”

“No. Only them as live underground. Crystalmakers, they call them. Leastways, that’s the English name for them. They don’t talk English – the underground ones. Some singsongy language. There’s people who live on top. They call themselves Skyseekers. They got their own language too but lots of them speak real good English. The above-grounders and the under-grounders had a bit of a – you might say – a bit of an altercation about fifteen year ago. I was crew on *Westrunner* then.” The man gave another nod in the direction of his boat. “The captain as used to own the boat and me and another mate, Joe, we ran some supplies out to them a few times. Real intense they are. Don’t take much to strangers. But I hear they got quite a tourism industry going now.”

“What’s the name of this place?”

“Si’Empira. So, what’s got you so interested? You don’t look nearly so crotchety no more.”

“I think I needed a distraction and you’ve provided me with one very nicely. Tell me how you spell the name of this island.”

“Jeez! Now you’ve got me.” The man screwed up his face. “Just got to call up the island on the sea chart.” He tapped the side of his head. “Got the chart of that part of the ocean in my head,” he muttered. “S I – and I think there’s one of those high comma things, and then E M P R A. If you’re thinking of going to visit, take your warm woollies ’cause it’s bloody freezing there. That island’s almost on the Antarctic Circle and the wind just about never stops.”

“So, visitors should pack their skis?”

“Probably not, love. Snow on the mountains all year – bloody big mountains – but no resorts up there. Winter’s black as sin. Antarctica’s not a place you want to spend time in winter unless you’re a scientist or something.”

Her mood having lifted into the realms of hope, Saskia stayed to talk to the Australian for a while longer. He had little more to tell her about Si’Empra but was eager to expand on other of his adventures, which, she gradually came to believe, involved activities that were highly dubious if not downright criminal.

Saskia took her leave and retrieved her bicycle, eager to get to her computer. She tightened the helmet straps under her chin and then, in smooth almost simultaneous moves born of much practice, she clicked her shoes into the pedal cleats, hunched over the handlebars and set the bike in motion.

“Who would have thought,” she murmured. “Who would have thought that a chance encounter could deliver this information.”

She sped along the cycle path that followed the harbour and into the city, winding her way through narrow streets, over canal bridges and into the neighbourhood of Delfhaven, in which she had grown up and where her parents still lived and operated their café. She locked her bike into a bike rack and entered the café, her cycling shoes click-clacking on the tiled floor.

As usual, the café was a buzz of cheery activity. Her brother, Sjoerd, working the coffee machine, raised a hand in welcome. She returned the gesture and walked on through the kitchen, where her parents were busily fulfilling the orders of patrons, to the stairs leading up to the family’s living quarters and into her bedroom where her laptop sat on the small desk jammed into the space next to her bed.

The word ‘Si’Empra’ typed into her computer’s search engine confirmed the island’s existence. She leaned into the screen and began to trawl through the publicly available information: a few paragraphs in Wikipedia about population size, location, topography, commerce, together with a map showing an island in the vague shape of a bird lying on its side; two towns, Baltha and Sinthen, and the largest settlement, Si’Em City, a labyrinthine city within a bluff near the island’s harbour – called The Inlet. Several websites described Si’Empran jewellery, displaying images of finely wrought fashion accessories. A few science websites mentioned instrument components sourced from Si’Empra. A number of tourism sites lauded the island as a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ destination. One tourism site targeting Japanese travellers showed images of the island: snow-capped mountains, a forbidding shoreline with high cliffs, and the huge Si’Em City monolith. Pictures of the harbourside showed a wide expanse of flat ground at the foot of the monolith; one part of it housing an open-air market. Among the images was one of a woman riding an enormous black bird with a bright red crest.

Saskia copied the Japanese characters of the caption of the bird and woman picture into a translator app: “Si’Empra’s Ülrügh and her companion bird, the glasaur, Rosa.”

Saskia expanded the image, focusing in on the woman’s face.

“I do believe you have purple eyes,” she murmured. “So, maybe that man refers to those who live in the labyrinth city as living underground.”

“Hmm. Talking to yourself and doing it in French. Is your mother tongue not good enough?”

Saskia turned her head to see Sjoerd leaning against the doorpost, a teasing smile tugging his lips. Like herself, he had inherited their mother’s tight, crinkly black hair, dark eyes and smooth olive skin. There their likeness ended. Her brother towered over crowds while she disappeared in them, barely topping the waist height of many adults. His limbs were long and graceful; hers were short and no one had ever called any part of her graceful.

“Have you been interrogating that computer screen since you got back from your bike ride?”

Sjoerd stepped forward to look over her shoulder. He bent down and let out a slow whistle.

“That is one very attractive lady. Have you given up on men and started looking for a woman to share your life with – perhaps a French one so you can talk French all the time?”

“Oh, rotten boy!” Saskia laughed, pushing at the top of his arm with a fist. “Does nothing else ever enter your head?”

“Well, my hormones run strong.” His remark was almost an aside because he was still focused on the woman on the screen. “Who is this woman then?”

“She’s called Ülrügh. Though I think that’s a title – something like a president or prime minister. She’s head of a little country called Si’Empra.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Neither had I till this morning. It’s only tiny. Has about thirty thousand people on the island. Descendants of Vikings, it would seem.”

“Are they all this attractive?”

“No idea. What do you think? Do you think her skin is paler than usual and her eyes purple?”

Sjoerd gave her a quizzical glance before returning his attention to the screen. “Hmm. Let me see... nope, she looks pretty normal. Nice red hair, though. Hard to say about the eyes. Might be sort of purplish.” He fiddled with the computer’s touch pad to bring the bird into the picture. “What’s that? A statue?”

“Apparently, she rides it. It’s called a glasaur.”

Sjoerd laughed. “Hey, big sister. You’re playing with me now. I thought you were for real. Now you’re telling me about a fantasy place.”

Saskia closed her laptop. “Maybe I am,” she said as she slid off her chair.

“How did you come by this fantasy land?”

“I spoke to a man at the port and he told me about the country. I was curious. Are you finished in the café?”

“For the time being. We’re having a late lunch. Mother sent me to fetch you.”

As Saskia followed Sjoerd into the dining area, she thumbed a message on her phone to Simon at Interpol. “A country called Si’Empra might be the source of the images.”