

**DIGITAL DREAMS**  
A Novel

By: Povey Balkanski

## New York, 2123

The man was crawling among the many pipes, cable raceways, and installations in the narrow corridor. He was in the underground of some kind of large building. It was like a maze of crisscrossing, branching tunnels. Water was dripping from the ceiling at spots and he was trying to step through the puddles as quietly as he could. He reached an intersecting tunnel and peeked around the corner. Not far down the corridor he noticed one of the multi-spiked hopping creatures. At the same time, it took note of him and scurried towards him. The man leaped to the side and, while falling, killed the creature with a well-aimed burst from his plasma gun. He was about to stand up when the nearby wall collapsed and the newly formed crack spat out one of those huge toothy creatures, covered in scales. The man chucked two grenades at it and managed to kill it, but due to the proximity a shrapnel stabbed into his leg. He got up on his feet and ran, limping and looking back over his shoulder. That is how he overlooked the small recess on his left, from which one of the spiked creatures leapt out. The man barely managed to scream, before the creature tore him apart. He slid down in a puddle of blood and everything around him froze. In the air in front of his eyes, a 3D sign appeared:

GAME OVER.

It then changed to:

DO YOU WANT TO PLAY AGAIN?

YES/NO.

The man picked NO.

The room was not too big and the furniture in it, mostly positioned along the walls, didn't take much space. It was pretty dark. In both ends of the room, there were two low platforms. One held a small kitchenette, with a bar countertop. While in the middle of the other platform was a wide armchair, occupied by a man. On his head, there was a light helmet of a semi-transparent material, connected through a cable to the computer, placed on a table next to the armchair.

The man took the helmet off his head and laid it down next to the computer. He got up and headed towards the kitchenette, passing by a large flat TV screen, which turned on by itself. The dusk, dispelled only by a couple of small night lights in both ends of the room, was pushed back a bit further by the TV screen's light. The light revealed large blinds, covering a window between the two platforms. A commercial rang from the TV:

*'Have you tried Sony's new ST500 virtual sets? They immerse you in a wonderful new world. With them, you can play anywhere and anytime you want...'*

'Yup, tried it already', he said, approaching the window. The sensors detected his presence and the bars of the blinds slowly started drawing, revealing a dark-blue, cloudy morning outside. Huge skyscrapers, each one taller than the next, traffic lanes, colorful advertising panels, cars and trucks and buses – the hive of civilization was swarming in every possible direction. 'Until the morning', he added. Then, he headed towards the sleeping platform, left his cup on a small table by the TV and said, 'Bed!'

At this command a panel rose from the floor, rotating in the air and coming to a stop a short distance above the ground. A dresser full of blankets

dropped from the ceiling. The man took one and laid down prone on the bed. He kept lying for a while, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Then he shut them and prepared to sink into the abyss of sleep.

Right then, a beep came in. The videophone's indicator light flashed and the screen showed a neat, freshly shaven, frowning gentleman, dressed up in a smart suit.

'Crookmoon, pick up!'

Nothing happened.

'Crookmoon, get your hairy ass out of bed and pick up the call! I haven't got all day!'

Cursing at all the gods he knew, Mercue Crookmoon rose from the bed and entered the videophone's field of vision with disheveled hair, puffy eyelids, red eyes, and a dry mouth.

'Aaah...' Captain Gotten drawled out. 'Don't you look great!'

'Thanks.'

'Did you play all night again?'

'Mind your own business, Gotten! What do you want?'

'I want you here in half an hour, all showered, shaven and shined up. You're going to the Moon!'

'Ha-ha-ha', Mercue let out an affected laughter. 'Look, I know you had a fight with your wife this morning, but go take it out on someone else. You know that I'm on a break today.'

'My wife and I,' Gotten said, 'had some amazing sex this morning and she's quite happy now, thank you. My bosses from the Agency, though, who want a detective on the Moon before the end of today, won't be very happy to know you've taken a break, and they might even decide to have some sex with your career. So dress something smart on your way here.'

'Dammit, man, can't you send Adams?'

'No! If they wanted Adams, the order would have his name on it. But instead it says, I quote, "Mercue Crookmoon." Any other questions?'

Mercue looked miserable.

'See!' Gotten waved a piece of paper in the air. 'This is your ticket. I'm waiting for you.'

Then he hung up. Mercue sat in front of the empty screen for a moment, then got up, rubbing his eyes, and went to the window.

'All right, then. It's gonna be a work day, after all.'

It was always noisy at the station. The incessant ring of the phone, objects clattering, doors creaking, and the terrible cacophony of human voices never lulled. It was 24/7, 365 days per year. New York was simply a big city and there was always work to do in the central police station. Mercue thought the city was actually too big and it was impossible to keep the order, even with such a big station, but that was just his opinion. He made his way down the maze of folder-flooded desks and the crowds of employees, carrying documents around. 'It's the 22nd century and we still haven't gotten rid of paperwork,' he thought as he stood in front of a matte glass door with a sign that said, "Gregory Gotten. Head of Department, Digital Crime." He knocked and went in.

Gotten was seated in a chair, facing the window, looking outside.

'You ain't too fast!' he said as he swiveled on the chair, presenting Mercue with his ever-grinning face, the mandatory cigar lit in his hand. 'Sara, I'm off. Try not to screw everything up while I'm away. Make sure to follow the

instructions I gave you,' he said into the intercom and then rose up from the chair.

The two men walked out of the office and started making their way through the jungle of desks and people. They passed by Mercue's desk as well, which stood out with its neat appearance. He generally disliked having a mess, but the main reason for the order of his workplace was different - he used it very rarely. Gotten took a bright red rectangular folder out of the top drawer and passed it to his employee.

'I hope you haven't forgotten how to use this. The Agency requested me to grant you access to any parts of the database you need to get up to speed with all the information we have on this case.' As Gotten was speaking, they were already walking down the brightly lit corridors that led to the police station's garage. 'We'll get to the Moon in a bit more than 20 hours, so you'll have to read fast. When we get there, you need to be familiar with the situation. You will learn the rest on the spot.'

'Hold on, hold on. When we get to the Moon? You mean you're coming with me?'

'Yep, sure, aren't you happy? We're such a great couple, you and I.'

'Oh great. You not only screwed up my break, but I'll also have to put up with your face the whole time.'

'Easy, easy, there had to be at least one presentable, intelligent person in the group. Also, the largest casinos in the Universe are there. I would hate to miss those.'

They got in the police car and drove off towards the airport. They took the top highway that was also the fastest. It was nice to ride in a police car, because you could speed, regardless of whether you were actually in a rush.

The station was in the center of the city, while the new airport they were headed to was in the suburbs. That meant about a fifty miles. At first they saw the magnificent piles of glass and steel - the skyscrapers, which then gave way to lower office buildings, and then - to the endless field of single-family homes. They were grouped in separate neighborhoods with a network of streets and housed the middle class. The wide lane of the highway passed high above them. Gradually, the houses became smaller and denser, until they finally gave way to the shacks and filth of the slums - where the poor and the abandoned lived. Here people would kill each other over money, food, drugs, a pair of shoes or even just a slanted look.

The airport was several miles away from the slums. It was a huge, fenced and strictly protected place with dozens of runways. Hundreds of airplanes took off and landed every minute and the huge halls for arrivals and departures were constantly full. The highway, whose only purpose was to serve the airport, was considered to be one of the busiest traffic arteries. An entire wing of the airport compound was allotted just to flights to the Central Elevator Station.

Gotten and Mercue merged with the crowd of passengers and half an hour later were already flying towards Africa. They arrived around noon. The large airport that served the elevator station was as crowded as the one in New York. Every day, thousands of people came here to set on their journey towards Space, or returned from there and then spread out to all parts of the world. The airport and the spaceport were a vast compound in the heart of the Sahara desert. The location was selected on purpose for its unique weather conditions. The airport itself was about five miles away from the spaceport and all arrivals were guided to the transportation corridor that linked the two

sites. This way they avoided any contact with the scorching sun and the dry desert air. The canopy of the transport corridor was transparent and gave the passengers a stunning view of the cables.

The elevator to Space was the most astonishing feat of human engineering. The giant cables, 30 000 kilometers long and 5 meters thick, connected the Earth and the sky into one.

'We stitched the Earth to Space!' a scientist had exclaimed during the opening ceremony of the first elevator station. But that was a long time ago. Now there were no less than ten cables, which moved thousands of passengers and hundreds of tons of cargo both ways, 24/7.

Mercue and Gotten arrived in the waiting room of the large spaceport. The information screen showed there was an entire hour before their lift, so they headed to the restaurant to have a bite. On the way back, Gotten popped into a duty-free to buy some cigars, as he was almost out.

'As you know, you can't smoke these dried turds in the elevator,' Mercue noted.

'Hey, these are Havana originals! They're top class!'

'*The next lift to the Moon departs in ten minutes,*' the PA system announced. '*We invite all passengers aboard.*'

'This is us,' Gotten urged him.

They passed through the air gate of the first class and started climbing the inner stairs of the shuttle under the guidance of the flight attendants. They sat in their recliners in a half-lying position. The hatches closed. The cabin was pressurized and the shuttle prepared for take-off. A little later they received the green light from the command center. The shuttle took off the ground and started ascending, at first very slowly, up the cable. The further away it got from the surface, the faster it moved.

'*Approaching weightlessness in ten minutes,*' the flight attendant announced. '*Please check your seat belts.*'

'I hate zero gravity!' Gotten exclaimed.

'Didn't you say you like going to the Moon?' Mercue asked.

'I like the Moon. I hate zero gravity. Any other questions?'

'Yes. Why should I dig through all the tons of info on this case, when I already know it by heart? You know I took part in that rescue operation...'

'Yes, I know. Maybe that's the reason the Agency picked you and told me to provide you with all the available information. So, start cramming and stop yapping.'

With a sigh, Mercue switched on the folder-like portable computer, which was actually an encrypted terminal, connected to the huge police database. He put the virtual helmet on his head, connected it to the terminal and relaxed in the recliner. SCANNING BRAIN WAVES. PLEASE WAIT – the sign came up in front of his eyes. A few seconds later it changed to ACCESS GRANTED and Mercue dove into the abyss of information.

Meanwhile, the shuttle flew off the end of the cable and hurtled towards the Moon's orbit at great velocity.

Coming soon – the rest of the novel.