

DREAMING UNDER AN ELECTRIC MOON



KRIS POWERS

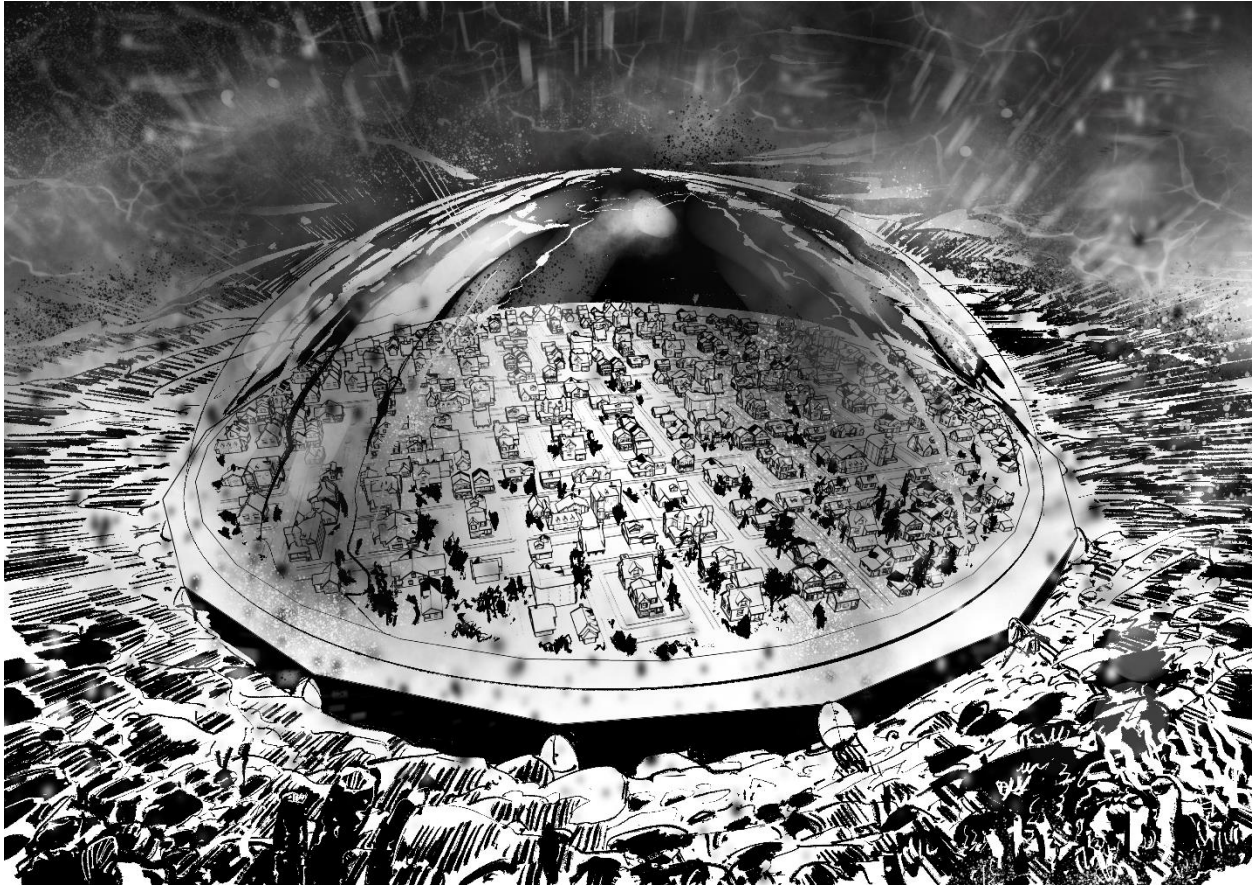
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AN
ELECTRIC MOON

BY
KRIS POWERS

*Illustrations by Clovis Batebola

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Chapter One

“Rose!” Tommy Howser screamed before he fell from his bedroom balcony onto the concrete walk two stories below.

His mother, Daphne, was having late afternoon refreshments with a host of her colleagues when Tommy’s body slapped the pavement. Light brown hair rested on concrete and brown eyes would remain forever closed.

The sunlight passing through the protective dome over the underwater town cast refracted patterns across his broken body. A gap in the cloud cover far above released a ray of sparkling sunshine on little Tommy before returning to a muted, foggy grey.

A full second of deathly quiet drenched the estate before Daphne’s screams broke the silence. She flew from her seat, upsetting a wrought iron table with a glass top in the process. Hair, the same color as her son’s, broke free from a purple hat matching her dress, and sunglasses fell from her bulging blue eyes. The round, glass top shattered across the concrete, accompanied by everyone’s glasses of iced tea. Daphne’s well-dressed friends stared at each other, paralyzed in their seats. Streaks of eyeliner and mascara traveled down their cheeks once Tommy’s khaki shorts and tee shirt leaked a small puddle of crimson.

Daphne crouched at her son's side. Her shaking hands kept moving to hold him, only to stop inches from his small body. Her laced hand covered her mouth as it screamed, seemingly all on its own.

Her friends' collective intakes of breath drew Daphne's attention to the balcony where his nanny, Rose, stood. The bereaved mother's face was broken with grief, but Daphne's eyes hardened as Rose's face filled them. She shrieked a heart-withering scream at the sharp-featured woman staring down at her, eyes wide.

A moment later, two security guards in dark suits yanked her from the balcony, wrenching Rose's arms behind her back as they cuffed her. A second and third guard attended to the casually-dressed Reginald Howser slumped on a leather couch against the back wall in Tommy's large bedroom.

"He looks like he had a heart attack," one of the pair in black suits said to the duo holding the nanny.

The security guards handled Rose even rougher now, hauling her out of the room without her feet ever touching the floor. While the black-clad men rushed Rose across the walk, she kept glancing over her shoulder at the sight of Daphne, crouched and crying over her son's body. Rose's mouth moved, but the sound of blaring sirens erased the words on her lips.

Two police officers opened a steel door and shoved Rose into a small, black interrogation room. The only decor was a single, broad steel table accompanied by two chairs and a large mirror embedded in one wall. The two cops forced Rose into a seat across from a burly man in black. One of his colleagues stood in each corner of the small interrogation cell.

Without saying a word, the man across from Rose took a stack of large photos and threw them across the desk. Rose smirked at the sight of Tommy's small, thirteen-year-old body splayed across the concrete in every photo.

"Fresh from the crime scene," the man said, directing his own grimace at Rose.

"My," she said, swallowing hard, "you guys do work fast. God, it smells like rat piss in here!"

"Compliments of the vU and the rats," the husky man said. He sat in his seat and moved it to within a few inches of the table. "'Course, you've got your own technological advantages, don't you? Care to share?"

Rose placed her right hand in her lap, covered it with her left, and scowled at the man opposite her.

"Men?" he asked, looking around him. Before Rose could leap from her chair, all four men in black suits surrounded her. Two held her in place while the other pair separated her hands and held Rose's right arm up in the air. The unnamed man with a narrow, black tie got up from

his chair, a vPhone on his wrist. "It's required for evidence and we are well within our rights to do it."

"Not in the Western States of America," Rose bit out.

"Good legislation they passed, I'll admit, but this is the SS of A," the man said with a smile. "Now show us the little guys and we can continue." Rose struggled against their grip, but the man's scowl filled her world. "We can do this the easy way or we can have a surgeon dig out those things, and don't think we'll bother to knock you out first!" he exclaimed as hot breath rushed across her face.

"I'm so glad to see how much you guys enjoy your work."

"You murdered a thirteen-year-old boy!" he yelled. Droplets of spittle rested on her flinching face.

"I didn't touch the kid! Okay, okay!" Rose exclaimed, feeling her eyeliner run as tears forced their way down her cheeks. She held up her right hand and squeezed her eyes closed. Three transparent tubules the length of a pinky finger popped out from between her knuckles.

The sweaty man began flashing photos from different angles. Once Rose saw the flash from the man's vPhone several times, she retracted them into her hand.

"I want a few more pictures," the burly man said, nudging her with a fist.

"You've got enough evidence. Now, where's my fucking phone call?" Rose yelled. She shrunk into her chair as the towering men returned to their corners.

"Those little things are how she gets into people's heads?" one of the other four asked from behind sunglasses, lacquered ginger hair and a puffy face.

"It's how they get at the vChip in your head," another cop replied, "and your mind."

"They speak!" Rose exclaimed in mock shock. "You all look like you belong at a nineteen-fifties funeral. Bunch of Greatest Retros! Worst fad in twenty years."

"A joker and a mindhacker," the middle-aged hulk remarked from across the table. "You got into Reg's head, didn't you? They said the father had a heart attack at the sight of his son going over the balcony, but I'd bet you lobotomized him after you got what you needed from his mind. The boy walked in on you committing the crime and over that balcony Tommy went just to shut him up!"

"That sounds pretty stupid of me," Rose said, a thin smile on her lips, though her hands trembled. "I'd get caught."

"You panicked."

"Just so he could scream my name and fall to his death because I pushed him?" Rose asked, rolling her eyes. "Buy a brain, 'detectives', and figure it out: I was framed."

A broad smile of yellowed teeth appeared on the man's broad, red face. "Framed, right, boys?" he asked, looking around the other faces in the room, their expressions mirroring his. "Yeah! You wanna tell me who would frame some worthless, filthy mindhacker like you?"

“Where’s my fucking phone call?” Rose demanded, crossing her arms.

“Phone call?” the man repeated. He regarded his comrades with a smug smile under the room’s harsh, buzzing fluorescent lighting. “What phone call?”

“I am a citizen of the Western States of America and I want my phone call.”

“Ah,” said the man, pale light shining off his feathery, white hair. “Citizens get phone calls, terrorists don’t.”

“Fucking Southern States! This would never happen in the WSA,” Rose said under her breath.

The large, sweaty man’s smile widened before he leaned against the desk, the edge of his thin, black tie resting on it. “The Western States. Bunch a tree-hugging faggots, if you ask me. I’m not surprised you’re from there.”

“And we have an extradition treaty with you.”

“I never signed it,” the man said, crossing his arms and staring at her with a salacious smile. His phone rang out an incessant beep into the ambient, dead silence between them. The unnamed man glanced at it for a moment, almost shoving it back into his pocket, before his eyes flashed at the name on the phone. “Hang on.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Rose mumbled.

The detective got up from the table and waddled from the room while Rose’s eyes moved between the four sets of eyes boring a new hole into her head. The man returned a minute later and sat down, causing the metal chair to creak as he dropped into it.

“Something wrong?” Rose inquired, a sickly-sweet smile spreading across her face.

“Nothing,” he replied, straightening in his chair. “I’m just sad to say that you’ll probably get the death penalty for this.”

“You’re actually sad?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, gesturing for her to lean into the table. It was a gesture she didn’t obey. “You see: I don’t believe in the death penalty.”

“How unlike the rest of this country.”

“Call me a rebel, but I believe that people should rot in jail and suffer day after day in the worst possible ways than get the easy way out,” he said.

“Evolved thinking,” Rose remarked. “I wouldn’t call you a rebel, though.”

“Yeah, what would you call me?”

“A mother fu—” Rose began before she was interrupted by the sound of the door behind her opening and closing with a loud, metal clang. Shortly afterwards, two people in business dress walked into view.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your interrogators,” the man said, getting up from his seat. As all five police officers left the room, he stopped and looked at the male half of the duo. “Please, *don’t* take it easy on her.”

The pair waited until the other group in their fifties-style suits had left the room before the male agent rolled his eyes. “We’re not interrogators.”

“But you’re the one in charge,” Rose said, looking up at him.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Because the last guy talked to you, first.”

“Actually,” the woman said, taking the only other seat in the room, “I’m the one in charge.” She straightened her grey blazer and plum blouse just as a tapping came from the mirror, but the lead agent kept her eyes on Rose’s face.

“WBI?” Rose asked, looking up at them with doe eyes.

“FBI,” the woman corrected. “I’m Zahra Washington and this is Mason Deane.”

Rose waved away the introductions and blew a raspberry. “The FBI? As in the Former Bureau of Investigation? You guys don’t have any power! No wonder those SS officers are watching from the other side of that glass. You’re, what, a tenth of what you used to be?”

“Our staff may have decreased in size but the Treaty of Disbandment allows our organization to act as though the USA still exists under certain circumstances. That gives us a lot of power in this case, which is lucky for you, as you are now our responsibility,” Zahra said.

“How awful for you.”

“Yeah, I know. We don’t get many child killers and we like to keep it that way,” Mason said, wincing as he glanced at the fluorescent lights on the concrete ceiling.

“Mason—” Zahra began before Rose interrupted him.

“Who said that I murdered the kid?”

“His name was Tommy Howser and it seems like the entire SSA has,” Mason replied, moving a lock of light brown hair away from his blue eyes.

“Oh yes, the SSA,” the mindhacker sneered. “The same people who routinely lynched or shot people without a trial for being black. They are a bunch of backward, inbred, country turnips.”

“That was over a hundred years ago,” Zahra interjected, just as a loud tapping came from the mirror.

Rose leaned forward and smiled. “And some things never change. Now they just execute them after letting them rot in jail for a few decades.”

“They also execute child-killers,” Mason said.

“You’ve got it so wrong,” Rose said, with a laugh, “not that it matters. The real people you answer to are on the other side of that glass.”

“I can assure you that we are in charge here,” Zahra said.

“Tell that to them,” Rose remarked, pointing a finger at the two-way mirror.

“All I have to do, is to remind those gentlemen that the treaty the WSA has with the SSA is current and that they cannot interfere in a prisoner transfer. As this is a matter between two different federations of states, the FBI is called in to conduct the prisoner transfer and investigate. We have complete authority here,” Zahra said, just as an angry banging shook the mirror.

“I don’t think they agree,” Rose said, nodding her head towards the glass.

“Then I would remind them,” Zahra said, raising her voice as the banging intensified, “that the President of the SSA, himself, has approved our presence here and that he also sent a platoon of marines to make sure his orders are carried out to the letter. I believe they’re heavily armed.”

“Very heavily,” Mason remarked with a nod and a boyish smile.

The banging stopped.

“Better?” Zahra asked.

“That’s a start,” Rose said, relaxing in her heavy, metal chair. “But I don’t want to say anything with those redneck bigots listening in. Clear that room, and you have a deal.”

The door opened before Zahra could answer and the heavy-set man’s pimpled head popped into the room. “We need to talk.”

Zahra smiled and got up from the chair with Mason. “Wait here,” she said, turning for the door.

“Go talk to your masters!” Rose exclaimed just before the door closed behind her.

A dozen men lined a hallway with a haze of humidity hanging in the air, and the same large, white-haired man stood in front of her. “We are not leaving that room and you are not taking that child-killing freak with you. I think it’s time you were gone.”

Zahra raised a watch that looked like it had escaped from the 1950s to her lips, pressed a button on its side, and spoke a single word. “Uncooperative.”

“So?” the man asked, looking her up and down.

“You’ll see in about sixty seconds. I wasn’t kidding about the platoon of marines or about how heavily armed they are.”

“You’re bluffing,” the man said, curling a lip. “I’m not stupid. There’s no marines coming, so why don’t you start moving before we make you move?”

“Care to accompany us to the elevator?” Zahra asked, lowering her wrist.

“I’d be delighted,” he replied with a stiff smile. As they walked down the corridor, the rest of the policemen formed a line behind them.

“Just asking: Are we going to disappear into that elevator and never be seen again?”

“Naw,” the man said. “We’re not like that.”

“I bet. What was your name, again?” Zahra asked as they neared the elevator doors.

“Mister Beckwith.”

“No first name?”

“Not for the likes of you. That won’t be a problem soon, though,” Beckwith replied, just before the elevator opened to the sight of half-a-dozen marines armed with rifles. Beckwith gulped and put a hand on the pistol in his holster.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Zahra said, looking at Beckwith’s hand. “The rest of the squad is coming down the other elevators, and you’ll have these troops in front of you and another twenty behind. Do you really want to do this?”

Zahra stared down the man whose white dress shirt had several growing sweat stains across it.

“Hey, we didn’t mean anything,” Beckwith said, slowly taking the gun out of its holster by the tip of the handle with a trembling hand. He carefully placed it on the concrete floor and raised his hands. Behind him, the rest of his cohort did the same.

Zahra shrugged and glanced at her partner. “Hey, neither did we! We did do a little digging into your background before we arrived, though. Did you know that this police station has had more than a dozen prisoners go missing?”

Beckwith slouched as more marines dressed in grey camouflage came up behind his group of cops, who were already putting their hands on their heads. “No kiddin’.”

“It’s true. Now that’s something that normally wouldn’t fall under the FBI’s jurisdiction anymore, but it’s also true that two FBI agents went missing in this area just a few years ago, and two missing agents in this area does fall under our jurisdiction. At the time, your people claimed they never arrived. That couldn’t be your fault, could it? This God-fearing town doesn’t make people disappear, do they?”

The man shook his head and stared at the floor. “No, not our kind of people.”

“Now, I don’t like taking really long elevator rides and neither does my partner, at least, I don’t think he does,” Zahra said, pausing to look at Mason, who smiled and quickly shook his head. “You realize that this incident is something that I’m going to have to report, which means I’m going to have to detain you and your friends for questioning. While there, I think it’s time we got down to what happened to our missing agents.

“Now, Rose in there was right: we don’t have the kind of staff we used to. Our nearest office is in Birmingham. I hope you enjoy the ride.”

“But,” Beckwith said, looking at the angry faces around him, “that’s two hours away!”

“Oh, I know.”

“You should bring a book,” Mason said, a wide grin firmly fixed on his face.

Beckwith returned to staring at the floor while the officers broke his cadre into smaller groups and escorted them from the building.

“Thanks, Major,” Zahra said to the senior officer, who nodded and began to follow Beckwith into the elevator. Her eyes settled on a few drops of blood on the back of his hand as he turned Beckwith around. “Did one of them cut you, Major Peterson?”

“Oh,” the major said, looking at the back of his hand. “I’ll get the medic to look at it, but I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Thanks, again. By the way, Beckwith?” The slumping man looked up at her as he was escorted into the elevator. “I would have appreciated your first name. Without it, it’s going to take about three times as long just to process you. All we have to go on is Mister Beckwith!”

The man began to roar in response, but the elevator door muted most of his protestations as it closed on his red, puffy face.

“All taken care of,” Zahra said, returning to her seat. “The police are on their way to Birmingham and the station’s being run by the SSA military for the next little while. There are two marines guarding this room as we speak.”

“Okay,” Rose said, crossing both arms across her chest. “You got it done. I’ll tell you what I know. I just can’t believe the FBI sent you.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re Black!” Rose exclaimed.

“And you’re Japanese. Your kind isn’t liked around here much more than mine is.”

“Which is why I’m glad to be sitting with you rather than them. Do you know how many people disappeared around here in the last ten years alone?” she asked.

Zahra held up her slender-fingered hand in response. “We heard. Now why would you kill a little boy?”

“I was framed,” Rose said, shifting in her chair.

“Why would someone frame you?” Zahra asked, tightening her eyebrows.

Rose leaned towards the partners. “Because I just stepped in something that’s way more than I was contracted to handle.”

“So, you were contracted to get something from Howser,” Mason said.

“Yeah,” Rose said, looking away for a moment at a patch of floor next to her chair, before locking eyes with them. “But I swear that my contract wasn’t to murder rich dads or their little princes.”

“He was spoiled?” Zahra inquired.

“No more than any other kid, I guess. He was my way in, you know? Get close to the kid, then his father. People like you and me do what we need to get the contract done,” Rose replied, looking up at Mason.

“People like you and me?” he repeated, his forehead wrinkling.

“Come on,” Rose said, tapping her temple with an index finger. “You’re a mindhacker, too. I can feel it. There’s some kind of buzz or something when we get around each other. Does the FBI know what causes it?”

Mason smiled and then kneeled on the concrete floor behind the table. “It’s because our implants cause some kind of feedback when we’re in close proximity to each other. Look, I’ve got to say that it does look like you were contracted to lobotomize him.”

“My contract was for information, that’s all,” Rose said, uncrossing her arms and putting her hands flat on the table. “I didn’t do it, but I can point you in the direction of who did.”

Zahra crossed her hands on the steel table. “Okay, tell us what happened.”

“Reg’s company’s got new code coming out that will help mindhackers be even more effective than they were before.”

“And you were paid a lot to get that information,” Mason said with a knowing smile.

“A fortune, but there was something different about this one.”

“Like what?” Zahra asked.

“You know that every mind is different, right?”

“Wouldn’t they be?” Zahra asked, shrugging her shoulders.

Rose smiled before replying. “Hacking into a person’s mind is like hacking into their internal world, their *innermind*, where they live in their dreams. Everyone’s different, so the world they live in is like a fingerprint: unique.”

“I saw someone’s innermind that looked like a world out of a fantasy. It was incredible,” Mason interjected.

Rose nodded. “Some of them are like that. Some are kinda bland, and some are pretty scary.”

“What was Reg’s innermind like?” Zahra asked.

Rose chuckled at the question. “Ordered. It was like some kind of old-world office; You know like they had in the 1920s with all of that wood paneling and Tiffany lamps? There was even one of those old-style radios with the round tops playing ragtime music, but the only desk

in the room had this computer from the nineties sitting on it. It was like Art Deco with tech. Weird, right?"

"So, what happened then?"

"I had to get at his controls to get the info I needed," Rose replied.

"Controls?" Zahra repeated.

"She means the controls to a person's mind. They can be just about anything," Mason said, loosening the vibrant blue tie around his neck.

"Like the wheel of a ship," Rose said, nodding at him.

"Or, it could be the cockpit of a plane, or a fuse box," Mason said, returning the nod, "or even a desktop computer from the nineties."

"Right, but there was someone else at the controls instead of Reg," Rose stated.

"That's impossible!" Mason exclaimed, scowling at her.

"Why?" his partner asked, looking between their faces.

"A mindhacker goes into someone's head, gets information, and gets out. They can't just leave a copy of themselves behind. It would be like you visiting someone's home and leaving a clone of yourself behind; You can't do it."

"I thought so, too," Rose remarked.

"Who was it?" Zahra asked, leaning towards her.

"The guy who killed Tommy and put Reg in a coma," Rose replied.

"So, you were nowhere near Tommy when he fell over the balcony?" Mason asked.

"I was on the other side of the room just coming out of Reg's innermind when Tommy screamed my name and fell over the balcony," Rose said, her voice breaking as she talked.

"A mindhacker who leaves copies of himself behind in someone's head? You know how that sounds, right? It's more likely that you're making all of this up to get out of going to an SSA prison," Mason said.

"Which is why I was framed! Think of it, FBI: Why would I get the information I needed, wake up, have Tommy come in on us and then stop him from talking by throwing him over the balcony when I knew his mother was having lunch with her BFFs below?"

"Yeah," Zahra said, putting an elbow on the desk and placing a fist under her chin. "Why would you do something that cruel to all those rich people who never understood you?"

"I couldn't care less about what her or her friends thought about me," Rose said, rolling her eyes. "They were too boring to hate. Now ask yourself something else, Agent Washington: if I already had that information why wouldn't I just leave?"

"Oh, all that security would stop you if Tommy cried out for his daddy."

“So, I make it a million times worse by killing him. Come on,” Rose said, directing a tight frown at her. She shook her head and dropped both of her arms to her sides. “Look, all I wanted was the information. If everything had gone according to plan, Reg wouldn’t even have known what happened and I would have left a note the next day saying I had a family emergency and then just never come back.”

“But Tommy did walk in on you,” Zahra said.

“Tommy was already there,” Rose said, rolling her eyes. “He goes online for three hours every day. His father’s rules. You can check the time on the *vU*: Tommy was online until seconds before he went over that balcony.”

“So, this control guy in Reg’s head was the one who did it?” Zahra asked, raising an eyebrow.

Rose sighed and nodded. “Ask your partner: if someone can do that, then they’re really dangerous and they need to be stopped.”

“I need a name,” Zahra said, standing up.

“You got it, but only after I’ve been transported back to my country and have a whole detachment of agents around me. Oh, and I want immunity! I also want into that, what do you call it, where they give you a new life?”

“The Witness Protection Program?” Zahra supplied.

“Yeah!”

“That’s a lot to ask just for the name of a person you found in someone’s head,” Zahra remarked.

“Sure is,” Mason said, also getting to his feet and wiping away the dirt from the knees of his simple suit.

“You know that person shouldn’t have been there!” Rose exclaimed, slamming her hands against the table. “He couldn’t be, but he was! I know what that means and so do you.”

“If you’re lying to us...” Zahra said, leaving the sentence hanging in the air.

“I’m not.”

“Mind if we talk outside for a minute?” Zahra inquired.

“Knock yourself out,” Rose replied after a shrug. “Although, I bet that once the locals find out what you did here, they’re probably going to want to do something about it.”

“Excuse us,” Mason said with an easy grin before crossing to the door and leaving with Zahra. It was only once it was closed behind them that she spoke again.

“This sounds absolutely insane to me. Mindhackers that stick around in someone’s head and a boy who’s somehow lured to his death by a phantom Rose pulled out of her hat?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“I know it sounds farfetched,” Mason admitted, “and the explanation that she’s behind all of this is the simplest one.”

“But, it doesn’t fit,” Zahra said with a shake of her head. “Something about all this doesn’t feel right. What about her story that this guy’s somehow virtually possessing people?”

“It’s supposed to be impossible to do that in the Virtual Universe, but if they could get in someone’s head, take it over and leave a copy of themselves behind,” Mason said, with a deep sigh, “then they could be behind any face.”

“That’s assuming that she’s telling the truth.”

“I think she is,” Mason said.

“Why do you say that?”

“For one thing, her story’s too preposterous to be made up. She would’ve been better off telling us Elvis Presley was still alive and he’s our guy!” Mason exclaimed, raising his eyebrows.

“And, did you notice how she spoke about Tommy?” Zahra asked. “She used the present tense a lot. He’s still alive to her because she’s not ready to accept he’s dead yet. Even her voice breaking when she talked about Tommy’s death seemed real.”

“You believe her?” Mason asked.

Zahra nodded. “I wish I didn’t.”

Mason sighed and looked at the scratched, metal door of the interrogation cell. “Yeah, I do, too. I’ll check the times on the vU when she said Tommy was online, but I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that it’ll only corroborate her story.”

“Contact the WSA. We’re going to need to get a lot of balls rolling on this and Rose wasn’t wrong: the locals are going to show up sooner or later and there is no way I want to be here when that happens.”

Zahra gazed out of a crystal clear window onto the ruins of the outlying suburbs of Memphis. She frowned when the train slowed as it passed street after street of radioactive, burned-out homes and businesses.

“Are we there yet?” Rose asked, placing her bag in the overhead storage of their compartment. A mischievous red smile spread across her face.

“We left less than a minute ago.”

Rose sighed and collapsed into a grey upholstered chair in a small cabin holding four such seats. Coincidentally, the seat complimented Rose’s black slacks and blazer over a simple blouse of dark grey. Mason sat opposite Zahra with his seat reclined and eyes closed while his partner kept an eye on their charge.

“At least you got me out of that underwater colony. I kept having nightmares about drowning. The water made pretty patterns on the ground, though.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t go after targets that live in underwater colonies.”

Rose rested a chin on her hand and shifted her gaze to the cabin’s only exit. Zahra glanced at her and then returned her attention to the holographic display on her phone. “If you need to go to the bathroom, we have to accompany you,” she said, bringing up the holographic news on her vPhone.

“What if I want to go to the bar?”

Zahra sighed and glanced at her. “Then you’re buying and I’m having club soda.”

“You guys are seriously no fun.”

Zahra smiled and continued to look at the latest holographic news on her vPhone. “Good.”

“Why don’t you just go online in your head?” Rose asked, looking at Zahra’s obsolete method of accessing the vU.

“Too distracting,” she replied.

“Not for him, apparently,” Rose said, pointing at Mason, who was reclined with his eyes closed.

“How do you know he’s not asleep?” Zahra asked.

“I can tell the difference,” Rose replied, looking at Mason. “People who are asleep, they’re more relaxed, you know: not there? But, people who are online whether it’s a chat room or a game, they look more like they’re just resting their eyes.”

“I see.”

“Ugh!” Rose exclaimed before straightening in her chair. “How long is this gonna take?”

“Five hours, total.”

“I need a drink!” Rose said, tapping her armrest with a red-lacquered nail.

“Five hundred miles an hour isn’t fast enough for you?”

“I don’t know why we couldn’t take a plane.”

Zahra rolled her eyes. “Because you kept saying that you’re scared of flying.”

“I was trying to get you to get me high for a while!” Rose complained.

“It didn’t work,” Zahra said, flipping through 3D images on her vPhone.

“Can’t you at least let me on the vU?”

“No.”

“Come on!” Rose exclaimed. “I’ll behave!”

Zahra looked up from her phone with a flash of her eyes. “You sound like someone who should go to one of those NA meetings.”

“Netholics Anonymous?” Rose said. “Please, it’s because there’s nothing to do here!”

“I’ve already told you: if you go online, even for a minute, someone could trace your location. You did say you were in danger, right?”

Rose pursed her lips and looked out of the window as the ruins of Memphis rolled past it. “I am. Whatever he was doing in there, his face was the last thing I ever wanted to see.”

Zahra looked up at her words. “You didn’t like *him* and you already *knew* him?”

Rose’s jaw dropped open, but she closed it a moment later and nodded. “It’s more like, I already knew him by reputation, but it was definitely him.”

“Who?” Zahra asked, softly.

“I’ll tell you when we’re safely in San Francisco. Now, give me your vPhone.”

“For what?”

“So I can play a game or something!” Rose exclaimed, squirming in her seat.

“It’s almost supper time. It’d be better to get it served in our cabin.”

“Can’t we go to the dining car?” Rose asked, putting both hands together in a pleading gesture.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I will sit in the deepest, darkest corner,” Rose said.

“What if they have flashlights?” Zahra asked, a thin smile on her lips. At the sight of Rose’s sullen face, she straightened in her seat. “As I said from the beginning: you sit where I tell you to sit and if anything happens, you do exactly what I tell you to do. Right now, I’m telling you to stay put and enjoy your dinner.”

“Okay, okay!” Rose said, crossing her arms, before looking at the reclined Mason seated next to Zahra. “What about him?”

“We’ll text him when it’s time to eat.”

“I bet he’s in a game right now. Probably fantasy. He seems the type.”

“Okay, it’s done. I’ll call the waiter in with a couple of menus. Cabin: pull up the dining table.”

“I think I will have the lobster!” Rose exclaimed. A thick, sturdy white surface popped up from the floor and snapped into place a moment later. Zahra called the dinner car and waited for their menus to arrive.