

Chapter 1 “Taciturn”

His worn, dusty jacket normally feels like a second skin, but as Taciturn stands at the crossroads overlooking the valley below, he contemplates taking it off. Even as the sun sinks behind him, he can't help but notice how warm it is.

Unusually so.

It's likely nothing more than the byproduct of an overloaded network, or perhaps simply a remnant of faulty code. But by any reckoning, something doesn't feel right. This far out into the Cyberside, details are often overlooked. How many people even know about the sleepy cattle community before him? Nestled within rolling hills, the meager township barely merits a *first* look, let alone a second. Taciturn supposes that may be precisely the point.

A warm breeze stirs the thin strands of black hair straying from beneath his bullhide hat. With one hand, he pulls the wide brim down to just above his eyes. His other hand rests on the grip of the pistol holstered low on his thigh. As his fingers slide across the polished grain, Taciturn inventories his remaining cartridges, his eyes scanning the heads-up overlay before him. Satisfied with his findings he nods the display away.

“Not making that mistake again.”

The wind picks up, and a cloud of information dust swirls in the heat, forming a dust devil. He tracks the vortex of discarded data as it begins its meandering journey down towards the serene landscape below. Modest cottages and unassuming frame homes cluster around a main street of shops and businesses running parallel with the nearby riverbank. Even from a distance, it's not difficult to mark the decidedly suspicious lack of activity throughout the quiet countryside.

This rural, family-centric paradise had once beckoned new Cyberside arrivals to establish a life far from the hustle and bustle of the ever-more-congested real-world cities. Enticed by the promise of a simpler way of life, the settlers had come in their droves, hoping to start anew.

Whatever rustic wholesomeness those earnest pilgrims had once come seeking, a palpable pall now hangs over these territories, the state of the remaining community a mute testament to the radically-diminished population. Relegated to a small cluster of data nodes on some server in the Real World, this town represents just a minute, backwater portion of the sprawling, generated world known as the Cyberside. Much like the run-down state of the township, the Cyberside is, if not a broken dream, then at least an eroded one.

“Well, better get this over with,” Taciturn mutters, to no one in particular. As he moves closer to the town, its dilapidation becomes increasingly more apparent. As one of the early-generation colonies within the Cyberside, this place—and so many others like it—had been one of the initial creations meant to offer humanity refuge from a dying planet— a digital escape designed to be a utopia. And destined to become a ruin.

A hawk cries out somewhere above him. Squinting into the sky, Taciturn continues muttering to himself.

“For a new home, we sure brought a lot of horrors.”

A ping to his communicator brings his attention back to the road. Stopping to push the bridge of his glasses up the ridge of his nose, he acknowledges the transmission and scans the Locale interface.

“Locale 26-5, this is James Reynolds, requesting access.”

The sound of his real name, even from his own lips, still makes him wince. It's information he begrudgingly relinquishes when dealing with different Locales, an all-around unfortunate reminder of things past. These days, he goes by the name of his profession—Taciturn. The name for the silent, ruthless, efficient mercenaries who roam the Cyberside. The word *Taciturn* has long carried weight in the digital realm—a world that's quickly devolved into a new Wild West.

Taciturns live without homes, taking on all manner of jobs, never asking too many questions—and naturally keeping to themselves. It's not a path many would choose, but it suits James just fine.

The ruminations on his chosen career-path are interrupted by a soft, friendly female voice eerily devoid of accent, inflection or the slightest suggestion of regional derivation.

“Welcome, Mr. Reynolds, to Locale 26-5, known to residents as ‘Homestead.’ From our scans, it seems...”

Taciturn interrupts the program. “Yes, your scan is correct. I have no permanent Locale index.” As a gun-for-hire, he's lost count of how many times he's had this conversation, and he knows it by heart. “I'm simply declaring a request for a temporary visit.” Methodically, he recites the catechism for which the Locale Program is already queuing up queries. “Reason for visit, business. Intended visit duration, less than 24 hours. Occupation, Taciturn. No previous visits to this Locale.” (“And no future ones if I can help it,” he finishes, under his breath.)

He takes this last opportunity to survey the township from a distance, waiting for a response. After a few seconds of silence, he wonders if his rote recital has somehow overwhelmed the outdated program with too much information. Eventually, the female voice responds.

“Thank you for your information, James Reynolds. Welcome. As acting protocol, let me wish you a pleasant stay in Homestead. If there is any additional information you require, I have access to over thirty exciting tourist—”

“What are your permanent indexation settings, Locale?” Another just-too-long pause. Apparently, this outlying interface is even more outdated than he first suspected.

“I must inform you, Mr. Reynolds, that due to my current settings, you will be permanently registered to the region in 24 hours after crossing the border.”

Sighing in frustration, Taciturn asks, “Permanent indexation restrictions and regulations?”

He braces himself, and the disembodied, irksomely-polite voice offers information that has far-reaching potential consequences for him.

“You wouldn’t be allowed to leave Locale borders without filing a request to the Prime Locale in the West Coast HQ. While awaiting clearance, you will be subject to all regional rules and regulations. If indexed, you will be provided with necessary accommodation and a designated vocational assignment option that fits this Locale’s requirem—”

“No further inquiries.” The disembodied voice continues to speak, but he waves the connection closed.

The cautionary notice of permanent indexation hardly surprises him. A bit of particularly-toxic fallout from the Traffic Wars, peremptory indexation is a means of keeping populations in their place – or, more accurately, keeping them where the ruling powerhouses of the Cyberside want them. The details vary from Locale to Locale, but all are founded upon the same principle: Stay in an area too long without proper certification and you’re stuck

there. In most cases, it's as quick as 24 hours. Taciturn toggles his overlay to showcase Locale 26-5's Indexation Border.

The world around him changes color to a sickly green as he cycles through settings. Thirty feet down the gently-sloping road into town, he can clearly see the pulsating, dotted lines that encompass the surrounding region and disappear into the distance. Frowning, he toggles the setting back and the world returns to the golds and reds of the surrounding countryside, awash in the hues of sunset.

As a man without an index, Taciturn is used to being on the move. His life in the Cyberside consists of moving from place to place, Locale to Locale, contract to contract. Now knowing where the Indexation Border lies, he resumes his trek down the hill.

Peremptory Indexation: Taciturn lets *that* bitter pill roll around on his tongue for a bit. To become permanently addressed is to give up any option of moving freely throughout the Cyberside—not an acceptable option. Add to that, indexation means having to follow someone else's rules—and from his experience, most of the digital world's overlords don't keep their subjects' well-being in the forefront of their minds. Like the other remaining Taciturns, James lives on the fringes of the Cyberside's virtual infrastructure and completes jobs, often every bit as dodgy as they are specialized, to make ends meet. There is always—at least, so far-- demand for someone who can move as freely as only the Taciturn can. Which is why he now finds himself at the edge of this quiet little town, hunting a monster.

Taciturn checks his holster one more time, sliding the pistol in and out, gauging the smoothness of the draw. Satisfied, he reaches into his chest pocket and removes a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He shakes the box; three sticks bounce around inside it. Moving the pack to his mouth, he removes one and lights it. With a slow, deliberate inhale, Taciturn closes his eyes and lets the smoke fill his lungs. The nicotine cloud is as illusory as everything else

here, but sets off a welcome bloom of warmth in his body just the same. It's a habit from his pre-Cyberside life, but even in this full-spectrum simulation of a new existence, old habits die hard. More importantly, it's one of the few pre-Cybercide holdovers that help him feel alive.

Cracking his back, he moves down the road. With a final deliberate step, he crosses the Indexation Border, and a quick ringing in his ears seems to harmonize with a ping from his watch. Glancing down, James sees the timepiece begin counting down from twenty-four hours. Gritting his teeth, he picks up his pace. At the bottom of the hill, he passes a weathered, splintered sign with chipped paint. It reads *Welcome to Homestead*. Finished with his cigarette, he sighs and flicks the butt at the sign.

Homestead's outskirts are silent and abandoned. A lone goat chews on grass outside a derelict building. Taciturn slows his breathing and clears his mind. Each step he takes disturbs the dust at his feet—cold, pulverized, once-important files and long-overwritten routines now reduced to particulate clouds, drifting and swirling before once again coating the parched earth with layers of dead data. The myth that data lasts forever is just that, a myth. Absent the most diligent, tireless maintenance—and too often in spite of it—everything falls apart. Even deleted files leave remnants of their dissolution. Information dust is inescapable throughout the Cyberside.

And the sheer amount of dirt surrounding and permeating this town is just as wrong as it is off-putting.

By the time he reaches Main Street, the sun has nearly concluded its slow descent behind the hills, casting lunging shadows on the buildings around him. Distant music drifts towards him from somewhere ahead, down the street. A strange folkish tune, the melody abruptly morphs into a rendition of an old, pre-Cyberside band: Creedence Clearwater Revival. As usual, the System makes a more-or-less correct assessment of his musical tastes

and has chosen to play 'As Long as I Can See the Light.' He pauses, just for a moment, to process this change. The System is the automated, supervising network that runs the Cyberside. Its decision to change the music to James' tastes isn't unusual, but it's still a distraction. And distractions can get people killed.

Identifying the source of the music, Taciturn approaches a saloon. Stepping through the door of the establishment, he quickly assesses its patrons. As a venue, it's nothing out of the ordinary. It's an American attempt at approximating a European beer-house. Decorated in a wildly indiscriminate fusion of Germanic heritage and other, decidedly Southwestern, cattle-centric motifs, the establishment plays up the myriad tropes of the town's history – a history that doesn't actually exist.

A tired-looking, homely waitress serves frosty beers to a middle-aged couple. Two young women sit at a booth near the corner, talking quietly, while a teenage boy ogles them from across the room. A weathered farmer picks without detectable enthusiasm at the plate of food in front of him.

One thing becomes apparent as soon as Taciturn crosses the threshold of the saloon. The air in the room thickens with apprehension.

Ignoring the multiple, covert glances aimed at him from all corners of the room, he takes a seat at the bar counter and signals the waitress.

“How's it going, darling? When you get a chance, a cup of coffee would be great.”

Hesitantly, the waitress pours him a cup of hot, dark liquid.

“Thanks,” he says, scanning about for the sugar—and taking in the saloon's other patrons.

An elderly woman knits in the corner, seemingly oblivious of any of the other customers. Three young men sit at the counter nursing beers they're barely old enough to have ordered. A man with a large cowboy hat sits alone in a booth and pushes an empty plate across the table. These customers do little to mask their instinctual distrust of anyone and anything around them, and James can't entirely blame them. With so much information dust coating the streets, things clearly haven't been going well for Homestead.

The patron with the large hat stands up and approaches the bar. Taciturn takes a moment to evaluate the man moving towards him. The man's cowboy demeanor exhibits some authority, but his attire fairly screams Caricature: Cartoonishly-proportioned hat, oversized, gaudy belt buckle, and garishly-loud boots.

Taciturn tries not to smile while stirring his coffee, even as the man pulls out the bar stool next to him.

Placing his hat intrusively close to Taciturn's cup, the man gestures to the waitress.

"Dolores. Be a sweetheart and get me the usual."

The cowboy turns his attention to Taciturn.

"Howdy, stranger. The name's Oliver Day. You don't mind if I sit here, do yah?"

Not waiting for a response, the man settles into the seat.

"I'm the sheriff 'round here, and since we don't get many visitors nowadays, figured I'd welcome you personally to Homestead."

Without turning to regard him, Taciturn can nevertheless feel the lawman sizing him up. "Thanks, Sheriff."

“Don’t mention it--but say, it’s hard to make a proper introduction without knowing each other’s names, don’t you think?” The sheriff slides his hat across the counter, away from Taciturn's cup. “Seeing as you know mine, figure it’s only fair to ask yours.”

Taciturn sips his coffee, debating if he should give his chosen name or his real one. Giving either could serve a purpose; he briefly scans the room again and knows which one he needs to start with. “It’s James.”

“James...?”

“Just James.” Finally, he turns to face the man. “I appreciate the warm welcome, Oliver. If it makes this easier, just check my registry with your Locale Program. You’ll see my profession listed as Taciturn. As such, I’m sure you can understand my desire to keep things from getting *too* personal.”

A glass of bourbon arrives at the counter via Dolores’ trembling hands. Still staring at the newcomer to his town, Oliver thanks the waitress. James assumes the Sheriff is attempting to access information from the same program he encountered earlier.

“Ok, listen... ‘just James’: This is a peaceful town, and I'd prefer it stay that way. We don’t need any trouble here from you mercenary types. Best mind your manners while you’re here, and we won’t have any problems.”

Taciturn returns his attention back to his coffee, talking to the sheriff through the corner of his mouth.

“It’s funny, Oliver. I heard things were pretty far from peaceful in Homestead. In fact, the way I hear it, for such a small town, you’ve been having quite a lot of problems recently.” Taciturn lets this sink in, and then continues. “Of course, I’m not calling you a *liar*. I’m just

suggesting we have a friendly conversation about all the troubles your community *isn't* having.”

The room goes quiet.

James calmly sips more of his coffee and knows he's hit the right nerve. He glances up at the wall-length mirror behind the counter and watches the patrons pay close, false attention to their meals and drinks. The sudden absence of patron-chatter makes it thunderingly apparent how focused they are on the exchange between the town's sheriff and the mysterious stranger.

Oliver's shoulders lose some of their authoritative rigidity. “Well, James, you might not be too far from the truth. Matter of fact, if you're truly a Taciturn, this town might have need of someone with your particular expertise.”

Seizing the opening, James waves to the waitress. “Dolores, was it? Could I get one of whatever he's drinking?” Within moments, a fresh glass and a half bottle of bourbon have been placed in front of them.

A few drinks in, the sheriff is well on his way to elaborating on the community's problems.

“We noticed something wrong a while back but couldn't figure out what was causing the trouble. When we did... well... I'll just say it plain. I hope you've had experience hunting demons, James.”

“I've been known to.” Taciturn says, before taking a calculated, slow sip of the brown liquid. “Last time I was out this far was Locale 24-9.”

Oliver furrows his brow, staring deeply into his glass. “Christ, 24-9? Are you talking about the Bakersfield Incident? From what we heard, not many of you mercs made it out of that shitshow in one piece.”

In truth, James is surprised that much detail at all has traveled this far out, and he’d just as soon not recall any more detail than necessary. He picks up his own glass gazing into its new depths. “Yeah.”

Oliver shakes his head in disbelief. “Damn. Still...you took out the last nest of Stack Rats. That’s got to count for something. Your arrival could be just the break we’ve been looking for. I think it’s safe to say we have a pretty good idea of what’s terrorizing us, James. There’s a...*Scry* on the loose.”

Taciturn makes no sound or visible movement at the utterance of the word—but he feels the hairs at the back of his neck standing up. His mind jams up with a torrent of vivid images, none of them welcome. The dangerous mutations were created when humanity first downloaded its collective consciousness into the digital world. Defects in the process, turning people into *monsters*.

Once upon a time in the Real World, the Scry would have gone by the name *succubus*, or *vampire*. In the Cyberside, their name is shorthand for their well-developed ability to break through a victim’s firewalls and drain their life, identity, and skills. After the Scry have taken everything, only information dust remains.

And there is *so* much dust in this town.

James comes back to himself and finds that Oliver is still speaking: “At first the disappearances were few and random, but soon it was whole farms. Men, woman, and children, being taken at night. We sent out search parties but never found anything or anyone.”

Taciturn takes another drink from his glass. “And what makes you sure it’s a Scry?”

Oliver shakes his head. “See, that’s the thing. We thought it might have been raiders, but there were no signs of *struggle* at the ranches. No bullet holes. No locks broken. Only that damn *dust* everywhere. It’s almost as if—”

And Taciturn finishes the sheriff’s sentence.

“—As if something were *welcomed* in. Yeah, that fits the pattern of a Scry. Still, something doesn’t seem...” Taciturn deliberately derails his own train of thought by pouring more of the bourbon into his glass.

Confirming his assumption that everyone has been eavesdropping, the old woman yells out. “Have you dealt with one of these Scry before? Is it really true what they say about them?”

Before responding, Taciturn takes a moment to consider how truly terrible the bourbon tastes. Then he turns his attention to how he can best answer the question. Looking around the room, a plan begins to form in his mind. He doesn’t want to start a panic, just yet.

“I guess that depends on what you’ve heard. Scry differ in their approaches. The...” James takes a moment to internally debate terminology, then continues. “The creature typically presents itself as an attractive person, or a helpless being. I don’t know. Maybe your missing townsfolk saw an injured teenager, maybe a lost child. That’s how it gets you to welcome it. To invite it in.”

“But what do they *do* to you?” asks another unsteady voice from elsewhere in the saloon.

The crowd is responding as expected, and Taciturn continues.

“Again, it depends. Once inside, a Scry will deceive you and your family with an artificial sincerity. It won't even have to tear down your personal firewalls; *you'll* do it. All while the creature tries to access your personal logs – logs it pores over for any information it can use to string you further along. It wants you emotionally *invested* in it.” The words are like bile in James' throat.

A frightened Dolores mutters, “So it can eat your insides...”

Lowering his voice so only Oliver can hear, Taciturn mutters, “Look, Sheriff, maybe you'd like to take this conversation somewhere else...”

The sheriff pours more of the bourbon into his glass. “No, James. These people have a right to know what's happened to their friends.”

Aware that everyone's attention is focused on him, James continues. “Once the victim becomes emotionally invested, the Scry will infect their target's directories with a virus. One that increases the victim's attraction to it.”

Taciturn downs the rest of his drink, and the sheriff follows suit. “In the end, you become so immersed you don't even notice the Scry's final move. With your barriers down, it feeds on your life force picking apart and consuming everything that makes you who you are.”

The silence may mean he's said too much. James waits for Oliver to speak next.

“Sounds to me, mercenary, that you know these...*things* well enough. Okay, it's a good thing you came along. But how do you kill it?”

Taciturn cracks his knuckles. “I've found bullets work just as well as the next thing.” Letting his words sink into the room, he sets his own plan in motion. Standing up, he places some credit chips on the counter — to everyone's apparent confusion.

“Wait, where are you going?”

Taciturn nods a thanks to the waitress and turns to Oliver.

“Me? I’m going to set up camp outside of town. Sounds like you folks have a Scry problem. I’m just passing through.”

The commotion boils behind him as he heads for the doors. A confused Oliver, just slightly staggering now, follows him into the street.

“What the hell, James? I thought you were here to help. Is it about money? Our town might not look like much, but we can scrape together whatever it takes to hire a Taciturn.”

James stops and looks into the Sheriff’s glossy eyes. “I am here to help. But something I didn’t mention in there is that Scry can take the appearance of anyone they’ve consumed.” He lets his eyes linger on the sheriff’s for a moment. “*Anyone.*”

Taciturn waits while Oliver processes this new information. The Sheriff is unable to hide his horror, which at least *appears* genuine. James makes a mental note of it.

“You’re saying someone in *there...?*” He hooks a thumb back over his shoulder.

The mercenary raises his hands, palms outward. “*Could* be. Even if it’s not...either way, I didn’t want to cause a panic.”

Oliver shakes his head and gestures back to the saloon. “Well, you sure coulda fooled me, James! Everyone in there is losing their *minds* right about now! I don’t know how or if I’m gonna be able to douse *that* fire!”

James shrugs. “Then don’t. Let the gossip circulate. About a Taciturn that’s come to town. Then tell them how you convinced me to help solve that little problem you’ve acquired. And *make sure the word spreads.* I want this creature to know that I’m here for it.”

The sheriff's forehead wrinkles as he conducts his own delayed negotiations with the bourbon. "Wait, yeah--no, I get it. I think. But shouldn't we discuss your fee?"

He mulls over Oliver's question. This is something that's been bothering him since he started talking to the lawman.

"Oliver, I've already been contracted for this job. I'd assumed it came from someone higher than you. Does this town have a Mayor or something?"

More confusion washes over Oliver's face. "What? No, that doesn't make any sense. I guess it could have been the Mayor, but he disappeared a few weeks ago. No one has come forward, to my knowledge."

Taciturn frowns. He's taken on prior contracts with few enough questions asked--but something about this whole operation seems off. The town's sheriff should have known about James coming. Still, if there's a Scry on the loose—,

"Hmm...I see. Well, looks like someone's looking out for you. Better get inside and do your part, Oliver."

The Homestead sheriff stops halfway back to the pub and turns around. "Wait a second, James. How do you know *I'm* not the Scry?"

Without looking back, Taciturn strides towards the outskirts of town.

"I don't," he calls back over his shoulder. "But if you are, you'll still want to protect your hunting grounds. If that's the case, you'll know where to find me."

It's dark by the time he reaches an acceptable location. Taciturn approaches one of the abandoned buildings at the town's edge. James assumes it belonged to one of the Scry's victims. He puts his weight on the door, and it gives. Inside, he prepares for the inevitable encounter.

Rearranging the furniture, James takes some of the broken pieces of wood and starts a blaze in the fireplace. He unrolls his sleeping bag, hiding his pistol inside it. Now it's a waiting game. He sits down and warms himself by the roaring fire. As the flames consume the wood, his mind begins to drift. He watches the dancing cast shadows on a nearby chair. With a broken leg, it leans towards the flames as if it too is trying to soak up whatever warmth it can in this lifeless house. James yawns and studies the rest of the room, trying to keep his mind active. Something about the fading wallpaper seems familiar. Styled like an old navigational chart, it maps the Old World in great detail, but the fringes of the New World are filled with serpents and mermaids. James has seen these creatures before, but in an old memory he's locked away. As his eyelids become heavy, that memory gets the best of him.

#

It's a memory he's seen before. Countless, painful times. His son, Timothy, eagerly tries to wake him, but James pretends not to hear. Another sleepless night at work, stuck in yet another brutal crunch cycle before the current project's delivery date. But how does one explain any of this to a child?

“Dad, Dad, Dad! Hey *Da-a-a-a-a-ad!*”

The younger James Reynolds opens his eyes and sees the decorative wallpaper of his bedroom. Sea monsters and mermaids stare back at him. James is still surprised that his wife has let him keep it. Rubbing his bloodshot eyes, James looks over to see the gap-toothed smile of his son. The clock on the nightstand mocks him with the knowledge that he's only slept four hours.

“Where's your mother?” James asks.

“She’s taking Ninja for a walk,” Timothy says, happily, now that he’s finally summoned his father back to life. To further celebrate his victory, Timothy begins bouncing on the bed.

“She tried waking you up, but you just kept snoring. You’ll miss everything if you sleep in, Dad.”

Scoffing at the notion that he’s ‘slept in’, James groggily kicks off the warm comfort of his sheets and stretches. Opening the drawer to his nightstand, James pulls out a can of Red Bull and downs half of its contents with one gulp.

Timothy gives the can a disapproving look and says, matter-of-factly, “Mom says that stuff is crap.”

“I know,” James replies with a smile, “but sometimes adults need to drink something to wake up.” He heaves himself up into a sitting position. “And don’t say ‘crap’.”

In the bathroom, the ice-cold water on his face works in tandem with the lukewarm energy drink in his body. Reluctant gears and relays in his head start groaning into operation.

Standing by his father’s side, Timothy looks up impatiently.

“Hurry up, Dad. You said we’re going to the park today.”

James’ haggard reflection in the mirror stares back at him. He lets out a defeated sigh.

“Tim…”

Timothy knows his father’s tone all too well.

“But you promised.”

Reluctantly, James looks down.

“I know kiddo, but Dad has to go back to work today. Everyone’s working hard…”

Before his father can finish, Timothy is already running out of the bathroom. Sluggishly moving after him, James sees a last, fleeting glimpse of his child dash out the doorway-- the doorway that his wife, Sarah, now occupies.

“James, we made plans. You can’t keep doing this.”

Unfortunately, James also knows his wife’s tone just a little too well, and he wishes that *he* could bolt out of the room as easily as his son just has. Shaking his head, James veers off towards the dresser to disengage. His wife isn't having it and alters course to intercept.

“You can’t keep letting them do this to you. They can’t keep taking advantage of you like this.”

James pulls a fresh shirt on over his head.

“Sara, I’m the Chief Software Engineer. I have a responsibility to...”

This is the wrong word-choice, and James regrets it almost instantly.

“Responsibility! You have a *responsibility* to this family. He is your son. I am your wife!”

From down the hallway, James hears the door to Timothy’s room slam shut. Tired, hungry, and defeated, James walks past his wife towards the front door. He’s already late for work. As he crosses the threshold of his house, the golden rays of the sun mercifully cast his mind in the darkness of digital nothing.