

Chapter 2 “The Scry”

Taciturn doesn't remember falling asleep, and he is already cursing himself as he cautiously opens his eyes. The fire's dying embers cast a crimson glow across the room, but it takes a few moments to make visual sense of anything.

When he finally spots the creature, every muscle in his body tenses up; James overrides his fight-or-flight instinct to react, but just barely.

The Scry, it seems, has taken the form of a young woman, not much older than 19 or 20. Large brown eyes study him from behind dark bangs. A dirty, camouflage hoodie obscures most of its figure, but slim legs dangle off the side of the rundown counter it sits perched on. Unsure why the creature isn't moving, he inches his hand towards the pistol he desperately hopes is still tucked within his sleeping bag.

Then the Scry speaks. Whatever James might have expected the creature's voice to sound like, this isn't that.

“*Whoa*, Taciturn. Pump the breaks a sec. There's no need to jump into this guns blazing.”

The creature tilts its head and *smiles*.

Dumbstruck, James tries to process the unfolding situation. The creature hasn't attacked him, despite having the upper hand. He sits up slowly, all the while continually gauging the distance between the Scry and his weapon.

“I'm still breathing, so you clearly want something, monster. What?”

The question is blunt, and he doesn't expect the Scry to answer truthfully. It's solely to buy him time. A brief scan of his internal systems shows the firewalls and defensive software intact. Taciturn continues to look for any other breaches but the search reveals

nothing out of place. His uneasiness intensifies as the creature smiles again. Like most Scry, it has a beautiful smile – a powerful weapon used to disarm its prey.

“Hmm...well, that is an interesting question. I guess I really don't know. Of all the people sent to kill me lately, you definitely seem the most interesting.”

The creature swings its legs back and forth, still casually perched on the counter.

“And that scene you caused, at the bar? *That* was pretty hilarious. Walking out on them like that? I know your back was turned, but you should have seen their faces.”

The Scry casually surveys the room. There isn't much to survey.

“So... I don't know... you seem smart enough to understand when you're being an idiot, James.”

The monster raises an eyebrow.

“It *is* James, right? Or do you prefer Jim?”

Before James can answer, the creature beams with sudden, gleeful inspiration.

“Oh, I know—I'll call you Jimbo!”

This prospect catches James off guard, and his hand momentarily stops inching toward his sleeping bag.

“No, don't call me that. Look, what the *hell*—?”

He listens to himself speaking and goes cold inside. *He's taken the bait and become over-invested with the conversation already.*

James takes a deep breath to calm himself. When he opens his mouth and speaks, it is finally in the voice of a Taciturn.

“What do you *want*?”

The Scry rolls its eyes, taking special care to exaggerate the effect.

“Jeez, dude, where are your manners? Nice to meet you too, Taciturn. I’m Matilda, by the way.”

It raises both hands, revealing no weapons—no obvious ones, at any rate. Using one hand the Scry points towards the floor, slides off the counter, and lands gently on its feet.

“All I *want* is for you to think back to when you were first approached for this job. Did anything seem *off* to you? Like, you know, sketchy?”

Taciturn is reluctant to follow any of the Scry’s leads at this point, no matter how seemingly-innocuous—but something has been nagging at him ever since his conversation with Oliver. He mimics the Scry’s raised-hand gesture, then slowly points to his chest pocket. With the creature’s nod of approval, he pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes with thumb and forefinger, carefully removes one cigarette and lights it. He wracks his brain, trying to figure out if there was some detail he missed when accepting this contract. It’s becoming more apparent that no one from this town actually hired him—but who else would be concerned for the well-being of such a remote settlement?

He starts with the simplest likely answer: The farmers in this town generate resources for somebody, so it isn’t unreasonable to assume that someone simply hired him to protect their investment. However, the more he now mulls over the clandestine nature of the contract, the shadier it starts to feel.

In the Cyberside, farmers spend their time turning processing power into consumables such as food, construction materials, or other items essential to the System’s economic structure—a straightforward-enough scheme, originally designed to reward the early adopters

and first-wave pioneers who set out to establish the digital world. The System placed a premium value on those doing the heavy lifting, and the design worked well enough until successive throngs of settlers arrived in network-significant numbers. Unfortunately, as with the majority of mass migrations throughout recorded history, ideals were frequently sacrificed at the altar of greed. As the habitability of the physical world waned in the wake of cumulative ecological and radiobiological calamities, ever-greater numbers started transferring their consciousnesses into the Cyberside. When the wealthy elite eventually surrendered their physical bodies, they had no intention of sacrificing their wealth and power. As they entered the network, the System's economic routines faltered. Hacks imposed a feudalistic hierarchy on the Cyberside, with the workers suddenly plummeting to the bottom. What could have been a bold, new world quickly devolved into a decidedly familiar one.

James looks at his cigarette. A long cylinder of ash clings to a burned-down end. The Scry continues to watch him, not saying anything.

In a slow dawn of logic, James finds himself focusing less on the Scry and more on the details of the contract. Poring over the data, he notices the single, glaring detail he can hardly believe he missed. The masking was so conventional, a measure most Taciturns wouldn't even give two consecutive glances. The contract's indexation was masked to mimic Locale 26-5, but its actual point of origin is a far more dangerous quarter of the Cyberside, with which James is all too familiar.

The name escapes him like an expletive. "*Babylon.*"

He angrily flicks his cigarette away into the gloom. The Scry beams and claps its hands, just slowly enough, the impudence fine-tuned to the point of mastery.

"Aha! So, the wheels are finally turning in there, huh? Maybe if you hadn't been so eager to fight another *Monster* you would have seen it earlier, Jimmy."

The Scry doesn't wait for him to interject.

“Look, I *get* it. You're a mercenary that likes to deal with glitches...let's say, *directly*. But it's also pretty clear you've got a paragon-complex thing going on. Otherwise, you wouldn't have gotten yourself wrapped up in that Bakersfield Incident. Hell, you were willing to come out all this way just to help this little town. But have you ever stopped to actually think about what you were doing?”

James continues listening to the Scry—'Matilda' with mounting unease. With each word, each new byte of information, he's becoming more invested. He hears his own words of warning, back in the Homestead saloon—and yet, he can't seem to break his own fixation on the creature before him. But everything the Scry says has the ring of truth.

Matilda raises an eyebrow, and the captivating smile reappears. Her eyes pierce into his own.

“And now, James, the big question. Why would someone conceal their identity just to trick a Taciturn into killing a Scry? We already know it wouldn't have taken much to convince you in the first place.”

He finds himself clenching and unclenching his right hand—a nervous tic he thought he had long ago conquered.

“I don't know, but maybe this is all bullshit.”

The raised eyebrow jumps nimbly to the other side of her forehead.

“Come on James, you're so close. Something's clearly going on here with these people.”

Taciturn tries to regain the upper hand in this conversation and points an accusing finger at the Scry.

“Let’s get one thing straight, 'Matilda'. You’re still a Scry. Just because someone put me up to this, doesn’t mean you haven’t been harming these people.”

A soft, dispirited sigh escapes her. “Okay. Granted. I get what you’re saying, but just put that aside for one moment. If it isn’t me, what’s the logical alternative? Why else would people be disappearing?”

He reaches for another cigarette and finds an empty container. Noticing this, the Scry reaches into her jacket pocket and tosses him an unopened pack of Lucky Strikes, which he snatches out of the air. Taciturn is impressed with her mindfulness in even the small matter of his brand-preference, but she doesn't need to know that. The Scry, it would seem, has been observing him longer than he could have suspected. He turns the pack over in his hand, analyzing the code. With no trojan files detected, James cautiously pulls one out and lights it.

“Well, taking you off the table—and I’m not saying I am—I can only think of one alternative. As unlikely as it seems, somebody wants you dead for another reason.”

Inhaling, he looks at the girl and raises an eyebrow of his own. Smirking, she nods and gestures for him to continue.

“If people are disappearing out here and it’s *not* you, it’s most likely slavers. Damn good ones at that, if they didn’t leave any traces.” He mulls over his own words. “And smart enough to leave dust everywhere. If they want you dead, it’s probably because you’re mucking up their operations.”

Matilda claps her hands in approval.

“All right! Way to go, Gramps! It took you a little while to get there, but I believed in you.”

Taciturn regards her blankly. “First, don’t call me that. Second, even with all of that said, we haven’t moved past the fact that *you’re a Scry*. Clearly, you’ve killed people. How can I trust you? What’s really stopping me from killing you right now?”

Matilda's shoulders sag. Her voice is equal parts indignation and disappointment.

“And you were doing *so* well. Do you need me to spell it out? Yes, I’ve been killing people. That is, if you count slavers as people. I don’t—but if you do, I guess you’re right. We’ve come to an impasse.”

The Scry, like all the other monsters created during the Transition, became one of James’ sworn enemies the moment he chose the Taciturn path. Since then, he has never hesitated in killing them, but this woman’s disarming, cheerful behavior continues to perplex him. James stubs out his cigarette and offers the pack back to her.

“Nah, it’s cool. I don’t smoke.”

Grunting, James puts the pack into his own breast pocket.

“Okay. If we’re going to discuss this, let’s discuss this. Let’s say I believe you—and again, I’m not saying I *do*—why are you telling me all this? Who are you really, and what’s the endgame?”

Matilda breaks eye contact to look out the cracked, dust-filmed window, her sunny expression suddenly eclipsed by a somber one.

“That’s the problem, dude. I don’t remember who I am or how I got here.”

Taciturn stares at her levelly.

“Bullshit.”

The Scry gives a soft, humorless chuckle.

“Yeah, I don’t expect you to believe me, but you wanted the truth. I woke up in this town three months ago and realized that I have...uh...*powers*.”

She shifts her gaze away from the window, back to him.

“The only thing I had is this necklace, with this silly logo on it.”

Matilda grips a dog tag hanging from a chain around her neck and holds it at eye level. Even in the moonlight filtering in through the grimy window, James can tell it's Titanium. A material with no expiration date. Back in the real world, it would be expensive. In this world, wars would be fought over it.

“Super weird, I know. When I... realized what I could do, I hid. That’s when I first came across the slavers. I guess they figured a lone woman would be easy pickings.”

She leans back on the counter.

“I defended myself—but I knew there would be consequences. It didn’t take long. The first hunter came shortly after. Over the next few months, there’d be five more. Each one different, each one probably more expensive than the last.”

The Scry opens her coat to reveal a collection of knives, their blades gleaming quicksilver in the gloom.

“I’m sure you can imagine the things I’ve seen and the skills I’ve learned by...taking them.”

James offers no reaction to the glittering, intimate armory strapped to the inner lining of her coat. But he counts the knives.

“You have amnesia? Sure, okay, fine. Let’s say I believe your whole story. What...do...you...*want*?”

“Well James, that’s a tricky one too. I want two things. First, I need to finish what I’ve started. I’ve been hunted all over this region. So, I want to end these slaver bastards once and for all. Like I said, you seem different than the others—and to be honest, I could use the help.”

The fist balled at his side opens and clenches, opens again and clenches again.

“Sure, great, a Scry with a conscience. What’s the other thing?”

Matilda removes her necklace and tosses it, chain and dog tag, to him. It skitters across the floor to stop at his feet. He tentatively touches the cold, smooth metal tag.

“That’s the only clue to who I am, and I want to find out what it means,” Matilda says. “As a Scry, I can mimic indexations to get around, sure—but I need someone else who can travel freely. As a Taciturn, that’s kind of your deal, right? Help me find out what *that* thing means, and it’s yours. That is, unless you’re still determined to kill me.”

James scoops the necklace off the floor and hefts it in his palm. The titanium tag alone, already enough to pique his interest in its own right, is fairly large as such adornments typically go, nearly closer to a badge than a 'dog tag'. Its uncanny lightness fills him with genuine surprise.

But this surprise is as nothing to his stunned disbelief at the 'silly logo' and inscription he finds on the back of the tag.

FALL WATER LAKE North Carolina

The company that created the Cyberside.

The company that James Reynolds used to work for.

Struck speechless, James looks up from the tag to see the youthful face of the Scry woman studying him intently. Those piercing eyes, searching his face for any indication that *he* knows what the tag means.

He exhales sharply, something between a cough and a gut-punch wheeze, and flings the necklace back at her. Matilda catches it, eyes never leaving James.

“So, what now, James? We going to fight, or hug this one out, or what?”

James gets to his feet and starts collecting his things.

“Like you said, I get payment once the job is done, and before we figure out whoever *you* are, we need to take care of something first.”

Another captivating smile forms on Matilda’s face.

“Oh yeah?”

With his pistol now back in its holster, James tests the smoothness of the draw.

“Those slavers aren’t going to kill themselves.”

The Scry's smile reaches from ear to ear.