Chapter 3 "Traffic"

The early morning light reveals a strange pair of traveling companions. The Scry, Matilda, confidently leads the way down a dirt road. The Taciturn, James, walks solemnly behind her. Hours earlier, James had entered Homestead with the express intention of ending this creature. He now finds himself in her employ.

As they set out for the slavers' camp, Taciturn struggles to jigsaw all of the details together. They resist.

First, there's the true nature of the Homestead Contract. Nothing good ever comes out of Babylon. Next is the Scry. In addition to the woman's peculiar personality, James finds her fixation on eliminating the slavers bizarre in the best light. How can a person, a *creature*, that systematically kills in order to live have any moral stance at all? Add to all of that, the Scry's amnesia.

And finally, looming over everything else, the Fall Water Lake connection – a wellspring of too many memories from the past life of one James Reynolds.

James methodically puts one foot in front of the other while he tries to process all the details, until a muffled voice finally makes its way into his immediate awareness.

Realizing Matilda is speaking to him, or at least trying to, James brings his attention back to the road before them and the business at hand.

 "So…I'm getting the feeling you don't like to chat much."

 James offers a single grunt in response.

Matilda turns around to face him but continues walking backwards.

"No, that's cool. That's cool. I get it. You're committed to this whole 'strong, silent type.' Makes sense. You mercenary guys weren't really creative when you called yourselves *Taciturns*. I can just image how *that* meeting went. All of you standing around with your stern faces, trying to see who could come up with the most serious name…."

James looks past the young woman.

"Was there something you wanted?"

A childlike smile appears on Matilda's face. It's a sight James is becoming more familiar with.

"I mean, a better word was right in front of you the whole time. *Ronin*. Right? I mean, *duh.* Wandering, masterless Samurai. You guys really goofed on that one. 'Ronin' would have been a much better name."

James sighs and unclips the canteen attached to his belt. He looks at his indexation watch's relentless countdown.

"Yes, the wandering is a part of it. To avoid indexation, all Taciturns need to be nomadic. But the name is there as a reminder to be detached from our work. It helps keep our memories intact."

The smile fades from Matilda's face and sudden seriousness takes over.

"What do you mean 'keep memories intact?'"

James notes her sensitivity to the subject of memories. Considering her current circumstance, he supposes it makes sense.

"Everyone has finite memory storage, and when a person is indexed, part of their storage is filled with information from the Locale they're added to. Taciturns avoid

indexation by 'wandering.' But everything we do fills up space. Run out of space, and new memories replace older ones. So we stick to routines. Limit our interactions with others in the Cyberside. We're reserved because we don't want to fill up space. Behind the 'stern faces' are memories we don't want to lose."

Matilda stops abruptly, forcing Taciturn to halt as well.

"Well…what are the memories you're holding onto?"

James pushes past the Scry and keeps his attention on the road.

"Look, I appreciate the small talk, but we need to keep moving. If what you're saying is true, it will take us a while to get there, and I'm already concerned about how much time I've wasted here. Just…just give me a moment to think."

The Scry catches up to James and walks besides him.

"Think about what?"

James glances over at her.

"Transportation. I know you don't have to worry about Indexation, but if this plan goes belly up, I'm stuck in Homestead."

Matilda nods and looks around at the desolate landscape surrounding them.

"Sure, sure. Good point. What are you thinking?"

Taciturn takes another pull from the canteen and surveys the rolling hills.

"I don't know. Most of the communication nodes in this section have been turned off by the System, and I didn't really see much on my way into Locale 24-6."

Matilda snaps her fingers.

"I got it! Let me check some of the data I absorbed. There's gotta be something from those Hunters that came after me. Maybe something useful."

James feels his hand opening and closing again.

"I'm not sure that's…"

Matilda cuts him off.

"Don't sweat it, Gramps. This shouldn't take long."

Before James can interject, a strange glow appears in Matilda's eyes—an indication that the Scry is accessing information from some previously-absorbed target. Over the course of their conversations thus far, James had briefly forgotten what he was talking to.

James waits as she peruses data only she can see, awkwardly shifting his weight from one booted foot to the other. Thirty seconds feels like an eternity, and he begins to feel the warmth of the rising sun. Finally, Matilda blinks, her eyes clear, and she refocuses on the world around her.

"I didn't find much. Only a couple of old wagon stations and some rundown farms."

Taciturn places the cap back on his canteen.

"Wait, go back. Did you say 'wagon stations'?"

Matilda tilts her head and furrows her brow.

"Yes, but they didn't look operational or anything."

James waves his hand.

"Yeah, no. I wouldn't expect them to be working. How close are we to one?"

Matilda looks at him oddly, but points over a mound a short distance off the main road.

"Uhm, just a mile over there. But are you going to explain to me what... Oh, and you're walking."

Taciturn briskly heads in the direction of the hill. With each step, he can sense his Indexation watch counting down.

"The wagons will all be gone, but if we're lucky, there might still be horses programmed nearby."

He can hear the Scry running to catch up.

"Horses? What do you mean, horses?"

James shifts the weight of his backpack.

"Horses. You know, quadrupedal mammals with long faces. What do you mean, 'what do you mean, horses'?"

Matilda shakes her head, waving his question away.

"No, I mean why would there still be horses, after the System shut down the Wagon network? If the System implemented updates to the transportation grid, it doesn't make sense to keep those around, does it?"

James continues diverting from the main road, willing to take the risk.

"In the early days, horses were always kinda used as a back-channel, for engineers to travel while working on areas that were undergoing maintenance. I'm pretty sure the System doesn't have the right permissions to remove them entirely."

James notes the strange look Matilda gives him, but is thankful she doesn't ask any more questions. They continue in silence until they reach the wagon station. After a quick search finds it abandoned, the two stand in the crumbling courtyard. Matilda kicks over a decaying wooden post in frustration.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, James. I don't see any horses here. I hope you have a backup plan."

Taciturn frowns–partly at her tone, partly at her use of his name—but doesn't press the issue. Instead, he activates his backpack's inventory, navigating menus and folders until he finds an item long stashed away. Recalling it, James retrieves a simple, nondescript whistle. At the sight of it, Matilda steps forward.

"What the hell is that?"

He cracks his back, rolls his shoulders, and allows himself a slight smile.

"The right tool for the right job. It's been a while since I've needed to use this, but if horses are nearby, this should bring them."

He turns to Matilda.

"You, uh, might want to cover your ears."

He raises the whistle to his lips and a loud, piercing shriek splits the still valley air. Matilda winces and jams her palms over her ears, uselessly after the fact.

"What the *crap,* dude? We want them to come to us, not run away!"

Taciturn chuckles, stuffing the whistle back into his bag. "I have a good feeling about this, for once." He leans against one of the chipped pillars, which creaks under the weight. "Trust me. We won't have to wait long."

Rubbing her ears simply to make the point, Matilda joins him. The stillness holds for a minute before Matilda finally asks, "So, uh, you're saying that whistle thing was used by Engineers in the early stages of the Cyberside, huh?"

James nods, scanning the horizon. Matilda inches closer to him.

"So…how did *you* get one?"

Taciturn has no interest in encouraging this line of questioning. Instinctively, he cuts the exchange before it can start.

"I understand we're going to be working together, but I'm not comfortable telling things about myself to a Scry."

It comes out worse than he intended, and as the offending word leaves his lips, Matilda visibly recoils. Closing his eyes, Taciturn is surprised at the slight tinge of regret he feels.

"*But*. I appreciate the curiosity. Let's just say that I know things about the Cyberside for a reason, and I'll use that knowledge to get us wherever we need to go in one piece. Think of it as a bonus employee skill set."

Matilda is clearly unimpressed with his attempts at backpedaling—but before she can respond, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of three horses. The animals emerge from behind a service building and casually trot into the courtyard. Thankful for the distraction, James grabs his bag and approaches the nearest of the creatures. Its chestnut hair is rough to the touch, and James pats the animal slowly.

"See, I told you…"

Matilda has already approached the two other horses. A white stallion trots forward to Matilda. The other, a black mare, waits nearby, its dark hair gleaming in the morning

sunlight. James holds his breath as Matilda approaches the two creatures. The stallion stomps closer but the mare waits anxiously at the courtyard's edge. Looking back out at the grassland, it seems ready to gallop away.

Slowly, step by step, Matilda makes her careful way past the stallion. Transfixed on the female, the Scry mutters words of comfort.

"Easy, girl. You're okay. You don't have to worry. I'll take good care of you."

Matilda continues toward the black horse, and it snorts anxiously. Extending a hand, Matilda finally touches the creature's black coat. The mare immediately stops. Suddenly calm, the horse nuzzles Matilda's shoulder with its nose. Turning around, the Scry smiles brightly at her traveling companion.

"She's amazing!"

Unsure of what he has just witnessed, he mutters a quiet, "Yeah. She sure is."

After securing his gear, James mounts his own horse. Together, they make their way back to the main road and resume their hunt for the slavers.

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Content with the travel time saved by riding on horseback, James suggests a break from riding. They rest at the first farm they encounter, seeking shelter from the midday heat. Like the wagon station, the ranch house is completely deserted and in disrepair. As James gathers water from a well, he wonders if this is the handiwork of the slavers they're currently hunting.

After pouring the water into a trough, James joins Matilda in the shade of the house's porch. Sitting down, he pulls out an energy bar and starts unwrapping it. Without looking, he can sense Matilda eyeing the bar eagerly. He no sooner extends the snack to the Scry than it

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is snatched from his grasp. He unpacks another bar, and the two chew in silence, watching the horses greedily lap up water from the trough.

Finished with his bar, James lights a cigarette. As the smoke rises in the afternoon air, Matilda points at the two animals.

"So, explain this to me. Why do you have to keep them alive? You said yourself that they were just used by Engineers as transportation. What's the point of eating? Like, aren't we *all* just, zeros and ones on a server?"

Taciturn stretches his legs.

"Sure, and those servers are located in secure facilities deep underground. Thankfully, they're far away from the destruction on the surface, but they still need to be maintained. They're run by automated drones that follow rules and routines in order to keep the hardware running efficiently. Without the drones' coding in place, everything would break down. Likewise, the System has established rules in order to keep the Cyberside running. I don't know, maybe eating has something to do with how our consciousness works. As humans, if we don't go through certain motions, we can't cope with this world not actually being physical. Regardless, it's a rule the System was designed to follow."

Matilda continues to watch the animals.

"That's kind of a 'fuck off' answer. 'It's that way because that's the way it is?' If everything has to follow rules, there shouldn't be things like slavers, but there are. The System should do something to stop it."

James draws deeply on the cigarette, reflecting on what the Scry girl has said.

"Sometimes when rules are established, people can find ways around them. Ultimately, what the slavers are doing is adjusting the rules of traffic for their own gain."

Matilda throws a rock into a nearby field.

"What the hell is *traffic*?"

James takes another drag and exhales a reflective plume of smoke.

"All those 'zeros and ones' are the code of unique personalities. As data sources, every person sends constant requests and demands to the System. That's called 'traffic'. The more traffic that's generated by a region, the more the System allocates priorities and resources to meet the demand. So, high traffic volume essentially means a bigger budget for the entities overseeing it. More budget means more influence."

Matilda crumples the energy bar wrapper in her hand.

"So, you're saying the more traffic you control, the wealthier you are. So, someone at the top is probably organizing all of this."

He makes a note of how quickly she processes information.

"Yeah, but there's more to it. If a location has too few active users on it, the System can forcibly relocate the inhabitants and shut down the underperforming Location, to optimize energy consumption"

She cracks her neck and looks at him.

"You're describing a structure that just rewards you for having the most people, *and* if its ruler steals from somebody else, they can potentially shut down a rival. Who's the idiot that came up with this great idea?"

Taciturn holds his hands up, palms outward.

"Now, hold on a minute. The process was created to furnish Locales that promoted the well-being of their inhabitants. Administrators that governed justly would attract more followers and resources. That was the idea, anyway."

The look on her face tells him that there's no point in arguing original good intentions. A moment later, it occurs to him that she may have just goaded him into revealing that much more about himself.

"But…when those in power realized what was at stake, it led to a situation known as the First Traffic Wars. A conflict that had a domino effect on the Cyberside."

Matilda fidgets with the energy bar wrapper.

"Like indexation."

Taciturn nods.

"It's a tool to keep people restricted to an area and preserve a locale's powerbase. The acquisition, flow, and control of users has become an extremely profitable, ruthless business."

Matilda rips the wrapper apart.

"So who do you think these slavers work for?"

Taciturn rubs the back of his neck.

"Well, in the beginning there were a bunch of organizations. But as the Traffic Wars continued, it boiled down to handful of power players. On the East Coast, almost everything flows through Metropolis. Out here, Babylon dominates everything. The two are constantly trafficking people within their own protectorates and fighting each other for resources."

Matilda considers this before asking her next question.

"So, wait—if indexing locks you to a region, how does 'stealing someone' even work?"

James flicks his cigarette into the dirt and reaches for his canteen.

"Since indexing is a cheat introduced into the System, there are ways to dodge it. They just tend to be problematic for the people involved."

James drinks from his canteen. Matilda throws a rock out into the grass.

"There's something missing here. What do they do, once they take you?"

James wipes his lips.

"That's one of the more unpleasant parts. Each person enters the Cyberside with his or her own stack of personal memories – but remember, storage is finite. So, indexation rules began exploiting the fact that older memories are set to delete. Most traffic slaves' memory allotment is drastically cut. You're left with just enough to ensure you make requests for services, but remember nothing of your previous life—whether that means in the Cyberside or the real world."

Matilda makes a spitting sound.

"So you get indexed, they cut your memory, and you become a mindless sheep that doesn't remember anything of your own past."

When she speaks again, she does not sound contemptuous or indignant. Only concerned.

"Do you think that has something to do with my memory loss?"

The horses, well-watered by this point, meander around the abandoned estate. James contemplates how best to respond.

"To be honest, I don't think so. But I'm not sure."

James waits for the next question, but it never comes. The young woman remains silent next to him. The restlessness of the horses gives him an out from the awkwardness.

"Maybe we should hit the road again."

Matilda silently nods and moves in the direction of the well.

Back on the trail, James occasionally glances over at the Scry. Matilda. She catches him looking and grins, but all Taciturn can muster in response is a brief nod. His focus is on the small dog tag resting around her neck – a bizarre clue not only to her past, but also his own.

From a time and place long before this world, when he still had a family.

James continues on the path as the rhythmic clopping of hooves pulls his mind into the past.

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The team is stuck in yet another crunch, every department mired in another interminable attempt to correct poor planning by throwing countless work hours at a project. Keeping the company afloat in the relentless world of development means constantly working to satisfy the impulses of a demandingly fastidious customer base.

"Oh, shit. James," says the anxious man next to him. "Look—we have a new bug report!"

The man is in his mid-thirties, his pit-stained button-up shirt, disheveled hair and bloodshot eyes all hallmarks of someone caught in the perpetually-grinding wheels of digital

development. His name is Stephen, and he is the project manager—a man constantly fearful that they're behind schedule or out of time entirely. There are just too many bugs that need fixing—repercussions of a QA team flailing wildly in the throes of their relentless work cycle. Everything and everyone is gearing up for the impending stress test of the servers. All while, the upper management rages and fumes over unmet deadlines and the dire consequences of paying out too much overtime.

James looks beyond his panicked co-worker at an equally-panicked producer running past their room, the sustained stream of profanity issuing from his mouth matched only by the steady flow of energy drink being incessantly poured into it. It is common office knowledge that James regards this man, Scott, as a boisterous, top-tier asshole—but at least Scott can fully comprehend their situation, even with seemingly everything "royally F-ing him" in the same regularly-referenced orifice. Marketing has been mercilessly hammering the poor bastard for months to get the product out on schedule. With the ad campaign already in full media-saturation mode, it is clearly *not* going to be Marketing's fault if "massive amounts of revenue are lost."

Stealing a glance at his watch, James reads 02:45—and he hangs his head in defeat. Sarah and Tim have already long given up and gone to bed disappointed. But with the overtime he is pulling down, not to mention the miscellaneous incentives for hitting the scheduled launch, what else can he do but grit his teeth and tough it out? At least, that's the line his supervisors are constantly feeding him. Even without their inimitable brand of passive-aggressive managerial oversight, James knows well enough the importance and value of what he is doing.

This new project is unlike anything he's ever worked on before. It's a motherfucking revolution.

James rubs his eyes. Lovely—Scott's colorful vocabulary is rubbing off on him. James stares at his screen, scanning and analyzing the lines of code. Still, this *is* a revolution. He can't stop contemplating it: The transferal of one's mind—one's very emulated awareness—into a network. It's life-changing.

And it will make James' family insanely rich.

James, sitting comfortably upright in this reverie, slowly becomes aware that Stephen is attempting to get his attention.

"Hey, James—there's still more on the way, buddy. I'll start cross-referencing them on the tracker." Weary determination seems to prod him. "And I'll make another pot of coffee."

James watches as Stephen doggedly strikes out for the break room. Rubbing his eyes again, James assumes a practical, crunch-ready slouch and returns his attention to the screen before him.

"Damn, how many focus groups are involved with this?"

Fingertips poised at his keyboard, he mutters "I'll be able to spend more time with the family once we launch."

A life of relaxation and comforts to come fills his mind. Refocused, he presses Enter and resumes his quick and confident keystrokes.

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"What are you thinking, James? *James.*"

Taciturn snaps back to the Cyberside reality around him with a jolt. He doesn't know what this memory-bleeding is all about, but he does know it certainly isn't good. When this is all done, he'll run a thorough system-check.

Matilda rides besides him on the dusty road. Looking at her, James considers her current appearance. Is this who Matilda truly is, or is this someone she's previously consumed? Is it the form she thinks he'll be most receptive to?

"The past," he finally answers.

Matilda purses her lips but doesn't push. Thankfully, most have enough common sense not to pry into a Taciturn's past—even those with no memories at all, so it would seem.

James wants to ask her about her past, as much as she can remember – her past deeds, her current abilities, and just what it is she's after—but he pushes the impulse away. She's still a Scry, and opening up to a Scry has never led to anything but an untimely demise.

They haven't thus far encountered anyone else on the winding, wheel-rutted road, and James would prefer to avoid attention. Out of the corner of his eye, he steals another glance at the Scry. Somehow, this young woman has managed to singlehandedly disrupt a trafficking operation near Homestead *and* eliminate the hardened killers sent after her. Clearly, she knows how to handle herself, and has more than enough call for revenge. James reflectively rests his hand on the butt of his weapon. He has no qualms about killing slavers himself. Their barbarous exploitation of the System's errors only creates new ones. As an engineer, he finds errors both professionally and personally repellant—all the more so if they're the kind of errors that bring actual harm.

Matilda starts humming a melody in the still, warm air that is nearly as tuneless as the uneasiness creeping into his thoughts. If what she says is true, the loss of a few low-level traffic operators hardly warrants the credits spent trying to eliminate her. Pondering the

number of hunters she has consumed leaves a cold void in his gut. Their skills now belong to her.

When Matilda reins in her steed, Taciturn quickly does the same.

"What's wrong?"

Matilda slowly slides off her horse and strokes the animal's sleek black fur.

"We're close. It's better if we continue on foot."

She gestures toward and beyond the hilly landscape ahead.

"The processing camp should be right over there."