

Chapter 4 “Slavers”

Leaving the horses tethered to a scrawny sapling to graze, Taciturn and Matilda carefully crawl their way up a crest overlooking the slavers’ encampment. With each cautious, elbowing push forward, James senses his indexation watch continuing its silent countdown. He pauses to pull up his map. As a display of the surrounding area manifests above his watch, James judges the distance to the bordering Locale. He’ll be cutting it close. They’ll need to take out this band of slavers and be quick about it.

Prone at the top of the rise, James pulls out his binoculars and scans the area below. Armed guards patrol the outpost, and it doesn’t take long to deduce where the captives are being held. Sentries protect the gate to a chain-linked barrier that partitions the holding-pens from the rest of the camp. James surveys the ramshackle sprawl of the outpost and marks the location of the slavers. He notices a separate squad of soldiers guarding a wooden platform at the encampment’s center that supports a hulking, asymmetrical apparatus. Zooming in, James recognizes the equipment.

“Bastards.”

It’s a crude re-indexation mechanism known in the Cyberside as a brainshredder—a machine designed exclusively for the purpose of completely eradicating a victim’s memories and essential information. What remains is little more than an ambulatory husk, a receptacle ready to be filled with whatever task mandates are desired. Taciturn finds himself clenching his teeth.

A sudden commotion pulls James’ attention back to the holding paddock. A handful of slavers are charge-prodding an elderly captive out of the pen. The man’s ragged flannel shirt and torn, soiled jeans alone bear witness to the probable duration of his captivity.

Once outside the holding area, other guards shove, batter and shock the prisoner toward the brainshredder. The old man screams and twists, but his attempts at escape are as futile as they are painful to witness. A vicious rifle-butt to the back of his skull ends any further attempts at resistance.

The captive only begins to regain his senses as his captors strap the rusty, helmet-like device onto his head. His screams, curses, and cries for mercy go unheeded. The man weakly sobs as the last strap is tightened around his chin. A nearby slaver slams the brainshredder's facemask shut and gives a thumb up to someone outside James' view. Within moments, the old man's body thrashes as thin, blinding bursts of violet lightning arc from and around the device. James is thankful that he's too distant to catch the scorching reek of seared flesh and ozone.

It takes only a few seconds to complete the gruesome process, to irretrievably delete a lifetime's worth of memories. When the helmet is removed, the tear streaks remain but a subservient emptiness lies beneath the man's glazed eyes. The mortal husk is pulled from the chair. James zooms out but continues to track the slavers' movements to the other side of the platform. Several slavers drag their docile, silent prisoner towards a gateway-like aperture and an awaiting technician. The technician makes a few adjustments on the command console, and a transportation portal flickers to life within the gateway. What remains of the old man is shoved through and vanishes instantly.

James does not need to see the rest to know the fate of the old man. After being transported through a series of locations, the new slave will be treated as merchandise – one of many marginally sentient drones used to maintain traffic levels in some other, far-flung quarter of the Cyberside. As he gradually reacquires his faculties, he will be taught when and how to make low-level requests of the System, and to perform a routine checklist of menial

tasks. For this, he will receive food and credits. If he deemed to be “premium” stock, he will be groomed for the purposes of a higher clientele, or perhaps registered for the global entertainment services.

Taciturn puts down the binoculars and turns to Matilda. He is already formulating a plan of attack—but stops when he notices the dangerous glow around the Scry’s eyes. Dropping her pack, Matilda unbuttons her jacket and repositions her large arsenal of knives.

James doesn’t need to individually scan the blades to know they hold power. Imbued with deadly viruses, such weapons are doubtless designed to cut off access links between a potential victim and the System. As a Taciturn, he’s seen similar blades in the hands of ruthless killers—but he has never seen such an array in the hands of a single user. Task-specific and lethal, these weapons can only be the implements of a seasoned specialist—or a high-functioning psychopath. They require a master’s skill to be wielded effectively, and can lead to an incredibly fast death—or an excruciatingly long one.

Matilda rolls her shoulders and cracks her neck with a cold determination. Following suit, Taciturn loosens his arms and pulls his gun from its holster. He checks the revolver’s cylinders and sees the same exotic, high-velocity rounds he’d intended to use on the Scry, secure and gleaming in their oiled chambers. James wrote the code for these bullets himself and has been prudent enough to leave caches of them stashed throughout the Cyberside. Each bullet is a nasty cocktail of malicious intrusion and corruption routines, expressly designed to penetrate the defenses of even the toughest hostiles with a simple yet caustic virus. Upon impact, it spams a target’s defenses until it bores through and switches off the target’s mind. A quick and quiet death—in stark contrast to that offered by his companion’s arsenal.

Content with his weapon's condition and ready to formulate a plan with Matilda, he looks up—and is struck momentarily speechless. The Scry is already making her way down the slope, on a blatant, straight-line bearing for the slave camp.

“Dammit, you’ve got to be *kidding* me—”

Hurriedly holstering his weapon, James lunges after her—but she is already setting foot on the camp's perimeter before he can cover even half the distance. Even factoring in his best estimate of her potential Scry skills doesn't offset the fact that she has just put both of their lives in danger.

Twenty paces short of the camp's reinforced gate, the Scry brazenly approaches a squad of sentries. They are so taken aback by her casual demeanor that she has closed to within six paces before even one of them thinks to start unshouldering his weapon, a shabby-looking field carbine.

Still trying to close the gap between them, James clearly hears Matilda say, “Sup, dudes?”

To his credit, the sentry with the shabby-looking carbine does manage to raise one hand in an authoritative, palm-outward halt gesture. It doesn't do a thing to stop the first of Matilda's blades from opening his throat in a spray of blood and data. Even as he dies, his expression looks more bewildered than frightened—and in the next moment he keels over. Matilda has surgically opened up a second member of the now-shouting patrol before James finally clears his holster.

“*Shit* she’s fast,” James mutters as he opens fire and advances steadily, gunning down targets as he marks them.

Confident now that Matilda can efficiently dispatch those threats closest at hand, Taciturn begins picking off the rattled, yelling reinforcements who are only just now starting to rally their forces.

In his peripheral combat-vision, Taciturn registers knives eagerly slicing into necks and bloodied, jacketed bodies thudding lifelessly to the hard-packed dirt. Taciturn picks off a rifleman trying vainly to get a bead on Matilda without harming his comrades. He puts a round through the wrist, and then neck, of a gate watchman trying to fumble some sort of radio to his lips. Taciturn's bullets tear into chests, and data-blood mixes with dirt. The camp's defenders barely comprehend what's happening as more of their numbers fall to the ground. Nearly half of the encampment is down before the slavers seem to grasp that things are going badly for them. Their return fire is sporadic and poorly-aimed. Armed with archaic, standard rifles, these fighters pose little threat to a Taciturn and a Scry.

James activates a combat protocol which populates the immediate battleground with data. Before a bullet leaves the barrel of an enemy rifle, James sees its intended trajectory, his myriad defensive/cover options, and his potential retreats if needed. The number of cartridges left in magazines is superimposed over each hostile. Surveying the battlefield, James is confident. There are not enough combatants remaining to pose a threat.

A blur moves past Taciturn. Like a berserker, Matilda charges toward her next target. Refusing to evaluate the battlefield, the Scry uses sheer speed to run her prey to ground – her foes never stand a chance. Three steps forward, a combat roll, a quick push off the ground, and her knife slips into the small of a slaver's back. James watches an irregular, cruel, and horrifying melee unfold before him. It's clearly the fusion of multiple bounty hunters' skills with her powers, and James is captivated by the gruesome sight of Matilda slicing her way through every slaver who finds himself within her reach.

A bullet whizzes past James' face and hits the decrepit seam-welded wall behind him with a loud, metallic *bang*. James staggers and drops to one knee as another round sends his hat flying.

“Fucking idiot.”

Taciturn scrambles for cover. Scanning the bullet hole in the wall, he traces the trajectory back to a slaver hunched beside a rusting console on the main platform. He counts to three, rolls out from cover, finds his target and pulls the trigger. His would-be attacker tumbles lifelessly over the edge of the platform and falls out of Taciturn's line of sight. There is a thick, wet, unseen thud that sounds like equal parts blood and dirt.

As the dust settles, the quiet weeping of the surviving captives gradually replaces the clamor of the battle. Surveying the carnage, James spots the Scry by the platform. Matilda wipes sand and blood off her face and calls over to him.

“Give me a sec. I need to collect my knives.”

Heading to the prisoner paddock, Taciturn breaks the lock on the gate and swings it open on its shrieking hinges.

“It's all right. We're not here to hurt you. You're all free to leave, but I just need a few questions answered. Did anyone overhear where they were planning on taking you?”

He knows his words are falling on traumatized ears. The captives cower in the farthest corner of the pen. James closes his eyes and reprimands himself. Leaving at least one or two the slavers alive enough to answer questions would probably have been the right move. He looks around for Matilda.

“If we had just taken a moment to *think*—”

A bloodied, malnourished woman warily approaches him from the huddled group in the corner.

“Thank...thank you.”

The Taciturn nods.

“Look, is there *anything* you overheard? *Anything* that could help?”

Tears start to form in the woman’s eyes. “After they...” she stops and looks at the ground. “They said I’d fetch a ‘good price’...once I reached Babylon.”

James reaches into his bag for a handful of rations and approaches the woman. Slowly extending his hands, James waits for the woman to accept the small offering of food.

“Did they say anywhere in particular? Anything a little more specific?”

The woman continues to look at the ground but reaches for the food.

“One of the them said this was their big break. They were just waiting for some contract to finish, and they’d be transferred back to Donovan’s Tower.”

Nodding his head, James mumbles, “Thank you.”

Matilda approaches, wiping blood from a knife. Seemingly satisfied with its cleanliness, she sheaths the blade.

“So, is that where were going next?” pointing to the active portal on the platform.
“Babylon, and this Tower?”

James shakes his head and steps away from the holding pen. The other prisoners, still huddled in the far corner, watch him warily.

“No. It’s too dangerous to go there like this.”

Picking up Taciturn's hat, Matilda wiggles her finger through the bullet hole.

“What could be so dangerous?”

James doesn't immediately answer. Babylon is a big place. The source could be from a myriad of potential threats, but there's one in particular that concerns him.

“Not a *'what'...*” James mutters.

Matilda rolls her eyes.

“*Ugh. Okay. Who?*”

James becomes aware of the humming from the transportation portal as he starts walking back to the platform.

“His name is Donovan Craze, and he's the ruler of Babylon”.

Matilda steps over a body, tosses the hat aside, and follows the Taciturn.

“So, you know this guy.”

The humming grows louder, filling James' head, vibrating the air. The sensation causes his hand to start clenching and unclenching.

“I do...I did. We used to work together, back in the real world.”

An unseemly excitement overcomes Matilda, and she springs forward.

“Oh, someone from your past. What's he like?”

The unpleasant humming and vibration both increase, and Taciturn feels the slightly-unsteady urge to sit down. He looks down at the ground and sees Matilda's reflection in a standing pool of data blood.

“Look, I'm going to go to work on the portal. It's our ticket out of here, but I...I need

a minute. How about you go back and check on those people. See if they need water or something.”

James doesn't look up, but he can see Matilda's concern in the reflection.

“Sure. If we don't need the horses, maybe they can ride them out of here.”

Matilda starts to walk away, then turns around.

“Seriously, though—you all right?”

He looks up at her, digs for a package in one pocket, and pulls out a cigarette.

“I'm okay. Just need a minute.”

The concerned look on Matilda's face slowly morphs into a sad smile.

“Okay, Gramps. I get it. Guess that was more exercise than you've had in a while.”

Taciturn grunts but waits until Matilda goes away before sitting down. Desperately, James takes a drag from the cigarette and tries to put his mind back together.

Donovan. Donovan fucking Craze.

James exhales a long, slow plume of smoke.

“Just my luck...”

As the portal's buzzing continues, Taciturn closes his eyes. His mind wanders back. To a meeting that changed his life forever.

#

Yet another long night at the office, another dinner with the family missed. James waves to the security guards making their rounds of the nearly empty building. The red hue

of the sky casts an otherworldly glow on his workstation. It's almost beautiful—save for the fact that the light outside would burn his eyes, were it not for the protective film on the windows.

Coffee cup in one hand, James finishes writing the code that will integrate new functionality into what they have come to nickname “The Cyberside.” He had planned to leave work 30 minutes early for a change, to beat the traffic home, but one last-minute request had led to another. And another. And here he remains.

Lost in thought, James is startled by the sound of his office door opening behind him.

Calm, expensive-sounding footsteps make their way to his desk. Without looking up, James knows who's intruded in his space—Donovan Craze, the head Marketing Director for the company, has just decided to drop by his office. Craze has an uncanny ability to exude an uncomfortable amount of hearty good cheer towards his co-workers, while also remaining the most razor-toothed shark in the business.

“James! First one in, last one out. Good man.”

Turning around in his chair, James regards him. Fit, well-dressed, early forties.

“Mr. Craze, you're still here?”

Donovan moves to James' desk and starts rifling through the personal effects. He lifts up James' nameplate that reads CHIEF SOFTWARE ENGINEER.

“The Executive Corner has its own concerns. We're negotiating with the Asian partners. Time zones and all that. We're going to need them like hell for a project like this, buddy.”

Donovan places the nameplate back on the desk and makes his way over to the window. Though his speech is perfect, James can smell the lingering alcohol on his breath.

Donovan looks out the window at the city's skyline. The reddish tinge of the light compliments that of his own bloodshot eyes.

“You know... it's quite possible that when our boys in North Carolina finally crack this transference thing, humanity will actually have a chance.”

Quiet instinct tells James to quash his first response to this. His second doesn't come out sounding much better.

“Look... Donovan, I've told you this before. All we're going to be able to do is let people interface with a system and interact with each other. You can enter the world and fool around all you want, but it isn't designed for long term use. It's just entertainment.”

Donovan turns away from the window, regarding his Chief Software Engineer levelly. James presses on.

“Besides, the real focus for the last decade has been the space program to colonize—”

Donovan cuts him off.

“Don't be an idiot, James. I've always told people you're smart. Don't make me regret it.”

Donovan steps over to James' side cabinet and helps himself to a brimming rock glass of whiskey.

“I've haven't been dick deep in the Washington scene for those assholes' senses of humor. The entire space program is a bust, and they all know it. They're just hawking that shit to buy as much time as they can, before everything changes.”

Clenching his hands in his lap, James starts cycling through a whole series of possible responses, but once again stops himself. Over the years, James has learned not to engage

Donovan when he's been drinking. At the end of the equation, Craze is still his superior. James reminds himself that being silent isn't technically supporting Donovan's claim. It's the path of least resistance.

Unchallenged, Donovan continues.

“This thing that we're building... it's a second chance. For Christ's sake, we won't even be able to walk around in sunlight soon. Mankind needs a new home, and it's sure as shit not in space.”

Donovan points at James' computer.

“It's in *that*.”

Unable to hold his tongue, James counters.

“With all due respect, a lot of people would disagree with you on that. Just the other day I read about a company out of Colorado that says they're working on bio-domes. Or that company out of Maryland, working on those underground vaults.”

Despite Donovan's mocking laugh, James is determined not to relent.

“What about everyone with families? You're going to ask them to give up everything they *actually* have, for a virtual...*habitat*?”

Donovan's eyes and voice turn instantly cold. He gestures emphatically with the hand holding the glass, somehow not spilling a drop.

“Who said anything about *asking* them? We TELL people what they want, and they love us for it. People don't like making decisions, James. They *do* like being cool. We route hundreds of yottabytes of traffic on a daily basis. And each of their clicks in our direction is

control and power. Power, James. So yes, we *will* make decisions for them, when the time comes.”

These words run down James’ spine like cold water. Part of him wonders just what sort of company he is working for. Another part of him wonders if Donovan will even remember having spoken these words.

With eerie alacrity, Donovan's scowl evaporates. He beams and claps a chummy hand on James’ shoulder.

“Anyway, good talk, James. See you around, buddy.”

Only after Donovan leaves the room does James remember to breathe.

#

A kick to his boot jolts Taciturn back to his surroundings.

“Seriously, are you okay? Do you normally just space out like that after a fight? As your employer, that might be good information to know.”

He gets to his feet without comment and moves toward the gateway platform. Pushing a body aside, James lights a cigarette and inspects the device. He smokes pensively, attempting to jigsaw this situation’s insane pieces together –the slavers, Matilda, and Donovan. The answer eludes him. *Is Craze involved?* he wonders.

If so, why would he send assassins after Matilda?

James watches Matilda dead-check a slaver by casually giving the body a hefty kick. The body remains motionless. Spatters of data-blood and smears of dirt, marks of the slaughter he has witnessed, still cling to her jacket. James has dealt with Scry before—but

Matilda is unlike anything he's ever encountered. He takes stock of the carnage around the platform, committing the wake of the bloodbath to memory.

Matilda's disarmingly-beaming smile appears as she rubs her hands together.

"So...we going to visit this guy or what?"

James leans down to access the portal controls and makes necessary adjustments.

Curiosity piqued, the Scry stands over him.

"So, what? You going to ramble on about some guy you used to know, and then go back to the creepy silent treatment? You going to tell me what we're doing next, or not?"

James spits the cigarette butt onto the bloodied dirt and continues tinkering with the portal's controls.

"We're going to need help with this. I think it's best if we go see a friend of mine first."

Matilda takes an exaggerated step backwards, palms extended before her.

"First, I see we're still keeping things in the 'vague as hell' column. Second, did you just admit that you actually have a friend?"

Closing the hatch to the maintenance panel, James stands up.

"The best friend any Taciturn ever had. A program."

James adjusts a final knob, and the portal comes back to life. James reviews the device's diagnostic screen and frowns.

"Pretty shitty connection out here, but it should hold up for a bit."

Matilda claps her hands to her forehead.

“*Where. The hell. Are we going?*”

James gives her a slow grin.

“You ever been to Hawaii?”