

Chapter 7: Babylon

The dinginess of the rundown train is accentuated by its musty odor. It's been an uncomfortable trip, but James is thankful that Stephen's masking software has held up so far. The late afternoon light shines through the window as the train makes its way into Downtown Babylon. In the distance, massive skyscrapers stand in stark, towering contrast to the street-level grunge and poverty of the outer regions. From time to time, James notices walls and storefronts tagged with anti-Donovan graffiti, although the defacements become less frequent the closer they get to the city's heart.

Taciturn fights the urge to fidget under the unfamiliar weight of his new utility jacket. It pained him to discard his wanderer's outfit, but his next urban destination requires far less conspicuous garb. He now wears faded jeans, a V-neck shirt, dirty tennis shoes, and a baseball cap. Matilda sits silently next to him. Her appearance has changed drastically since their first meeting in Homestead. Short, red hair now rests on Matilda's shoulders. She wears a traveler's raincoat, a white turtleneck, a black skirt, fishnet stockings, and military-style boots. Her worn rucksack sits under her seat.

A voice over the intercom announces their arrival at the Van Nuys station, and the train begins to slow down. Taciturn sinks deeper into his chair. With a final jolt, the locomotive comes to a stop and the passenger doors open with a hiss. James watches a variety of travel-weary denizens file out of the car, hurrying to get to their destinations unmolested. The same emptiness fills their eyes as they take measured, habitual strides in lockstep, each person completely encompassed in the mundane immediacy of their own world. Willingly or otherwise they all produce traffic for Donovan's Empire.

Within moments, those waiting on the platform have shuffled aboard with equal apathy, and the train resumes its rhythmic, swaying journey. James shakes his head, filled

with a mounting frustration he can barely articulate. For a species that emphatically vocalizes its desire for freedom, humanity is so eager to embrace its own enslavement—so desperate to escape a dying world—that it is willing to suffer a dismal re-creation like this. The Cyberside was designed for limitless possibilities – society’s wildest dreams made real.

Matilda’s touches his elbow, directing his attention to the front of the train car. Two men in Babylon Corporation uniforms walk down the aisle. They methodically stop beside each passenger and scan their identity programs. These patrols were instituted by Donovan with two purposes – to inspect his property, and to keep his populace in line. Cogs in a much larger machine, they mutually reinforce Donovan’s stranglehold on the city.

The Scry tenses in her seat beside him, but James quickly places a hand on her arm to dispel any delusions of fighting. The smaller of the two guards brandishes a club, and James doubts he needs much of an excuse to use it. Eying Matilda in particular, the men move toward them.

“Hey, good looking—what are you doing with this loser? Don’t recall seeing you on *my* train before.”

He emphasizes *my* by poking the end of his baton into Taciturn’s chest. Keeping his face free of any slightest trace of emotion, James looks up from under the bill of his cap.

“Then you’ve got a quite a memory there, friend. But I’d expect nothing less from a Company man. Forgive my associate if she’s quiet. We’re on a hunting trip.”

James finishes his statement by granting the officer access to his newest disguise. The masking still presents itself as a Taciturn, but it doesn’t flag him as James Reynolds.

Sneering, the officer opens the ID program. “We’ll see about that.”

James waits patiently, without comment. Stephen's disguise work is impeccable. When the officer inspecting the ID program pauses and frowns slightly. James fights back a smirk. Donovan goon or no, this man understands the foolishness of provoking a Taciturn. If one is sitting here on *his train* at all, it can only mean a larger monster is at hand.

Closing the ID program, the officer inquires, with a strain of newfound deference, "Uh. What exactly are you hunting?"

James leans in ever so slightly, lowering his voice into a confidential, just-between-us range.

"We've received word that a Puppeteer is loose in the city. We're tracking its scent."

The officer's eyes widen in horror.

"A Pp..pupp..*uteer*?"

The seats nearest James and Matilda empty almost before James is aware of the fact. Other commuters, likely already uncomfortable with the officers' mere presence in the first place, now have a legitimate excuse to make themselves scarce. Of all the creatures that haunt the Cyberside, Puppeteers are the most dangerous, the most instinctively loathed and feared. Left unchecked, Puppeteers systematically corrupt and devour entire communities with their monstrous, replicating viruses.

Having once infected a victim, the Puppeteer maintains control of the victim's body. All the while, the Puppeteer's mind is, in many respects, hardly beyond that of a child's. The creature infects those it wants to play with—and when it tires of them, it devours them. That's the *best-case* scenario, James thinks blackly. All other outcomes are far worse.

And in a city as teeming with potential victims, as sprawling as Babylon—

James recoils from the memory of his own brush with one of these foul creatures. Unfortunately, the best way to catch a Puppeteer is with poisoned bait, bait implanted with a lethal counter-virus, a monster-killer. Like placating an ancient god with a virgin sacrifice.

The officer now looks at Matilda. Perhaps he has done some rudimentary, unpleasant math. “I...uh...see. Good luck, Taciturn.” His partner, who looks equal parts stone-faced and deathly ill, has not uttered a word.

James is confident that the very moment their patrol ends, these men will find a thousand excuses to get home early and stay inside. The fewer Donovan-minions on the streets, the better.

Matilda looks around the car, shocked. “Seriously, everybody left?”

James nods, “People tend to do that when they’re afraid.”

Matilda mutters, “Well they fear *Donovan*, and still stick around. What’s the difference between him and a Puppeteer?”

James gazes out the window at the approaching towers.

“When you put it like that, nothing.”

#

At Union Station, Taciturn and Matilda exit the train and join the flow of the departing crowd. Outside, the weary, setting sun does its best to break through the thick layer of smog. The cries of trinket-hawkers, stall-vendors and store owners compete with the constant, amplified bombardment of ads, transit-connection announcements and Babylonian propaganda.

Moving along with the surging crowd, James feels a growing knot of anxiety binding his thoughts. His years as a Taciturn have done nothing to endear him to crowds. Monsters of the Cyberside can hide in plain sight. He finds his sights continually switching to and from potential targets, fixing on free hands, on bulges in bulky clothing, on backpacks, on strollers, on every momentary glance in his direction. With this many people, every movement can herald, or hide, a threat.

Overwhelmed, he clutches Matilda's arm and pushes perpendicularly through the stream of bodies. Matilda cries out, startled and jostled as she's dragged along.

"Whoa, what gives?"

Spotting a small park, Taciturn leads them out of the main hub and towards a bench. Sitting down, James finally lets go of Matilda.

She looks at him with something between concern and alarm.

"You okay, dude?"

He nods.

"I...I don't really *do* crowds. Look, just give me a minute..."

Whatever he needs, Matilda's concerned expression is the exact opposite of it. James digs for his pack of cigarettes, partly to temporarily avoid her scrutiny. Only one cigarette remains. Taciturn doesn't look up when Matilda speaks.

"When was the last time you had water?"

He shakes his head and finally looks at her.

"Seriously, I'm fine."

Matilda offers a smile.

“Sure you are, dude. I’ll tell you what. I’m thirsty, so just wait right here, and I’ll be right back.”

Taciturn appreciates her not pressing the issue.

“Fine, but buy me some smokes. Here…”

He reaches into his inventory, creates a dedicated group account, and transfers some credits into it.

“If you’re flyin', I'm buyin'.”

Matilda smiles wider and accepts the pending invitation.

“Okay, Gramps. Stay put. With your old age, I don’t need you wandering off.”

As Matilda enters the convenience store across from the station, Taciturn allows himself a rare, genuine laugh in spite of himself. It feels good.

He lights his last cigarette, waiting for the nicotine to even him out. There isn't a much more reassuring way to put it. Too much time in the wilds of the Cyberside has left him ill-equipped for a crowd of this magnitude. James looks down at his indexation watch and sees the numbers lagging slightly – the collective effect of a massive amount of entities submitting requests to the System. He weighs the chances of potential anomalies in the swarm of people around him, slowly exhaling smoke, trying to refocus his thoughts.

When humankind could no longer hold back the mounting environmental catastrophes of a dying world, waves of new inhabitants flooded the Cyberside to escape. Like lizards molting, they shed their physical bodies without question. However, the safety of the mass migration was far from certain. Even the most optimistic Fall Water Lake analysts estimated that, with the increase in demand and the bandwidth necessary to process requests, up to 5%

of transfers would almost certainly end in failure. The result of each of these transfer failures would be a consciousness partially lost—or worse, a transformation into an anomaly.

While that projected 5% failure-rate still terrified the statisticians, it was inarguably preferable to the alternative, guaranteed 100% failure rate of staying in the real world—insignificant, compared to waiting around to see if the catastrophic greenhousing would outrun the biodiversity implosion. What's 5 out of every 100 participants? Not many. Who wouldn't be ready to roll those dice? But when the sample size proved to trend into the millions, the results were as predictable as they were horrific. Friends, coworkers, and family members became psychopaths, mutants or monsters. Was it worth the price of salvation?

James feels another memory rearing its unwelcome head, and he takes another deep, lung-filling hit of the tobacco. He tries to recall something else, anything else—but his thoughts take barbed hold, reeling him back to a place both familiar and terrible. His hand opens, trembles, and closes into a fist. James feels the bytes of data start trickling back to the forefront of his mind.

In his current state, Taciturn can't do a thing to stop it.

#

It's one of his exceedingly rare days off, and his wife, Sarah, is smiling. James has taken her and their son, Timothy, out of town to the famous Reserve. A rare opportunity, even for the wealthy, to visit, however fleetingly, with the past. The Reserve still has green grass, and visitors are able to walk around without protection. It's a heavily guarded and environmentally-quarantined zone that houses a park, a small lakeside resort, an actual forest, and much-coveted fresh air—all of it protected by a carefully constructed, camouflaged dome that encloses the sector.

They've come for a three-day vacation, the longest one James has taken in recent memory. As they settle into the small bed and breakfast, James takes in the décor. Their room is themed in a stylistic flurry of early twenty-first century motifs. Anywhere else, it might seem in poor taste, things being what they are—but here, it's a perfect part of the jigsaw charm. His family finishes unpacking their bags, and they couldn't be happier. Timothy has set up his prized selection of toys on his bed, while Sarah has already slipped into her swimsuit and bathrobe. Unpacking his suitcase, James pulls out his phone – the device which tethers him to Fall Water Lake's relentless work-cycle. It's gotten to the point where the sound of an email notification causes a nervous twitch in his hand. Laughing, he tosses the device into the suitcase. The Reserve has designated cellular and Wi-Fi areas, and this isn't one of them. James intends to spend the trip without distractions.

As his son's green army men mount their coverlet-wide offensive against a stuffed T-Rex, his wife hums in the bathroom. James beams with satisfaction. Soon, they'll go to dinner at the local diner, Jannuzzi's. He'll splurge and order a juicy, real-meat burger and fries and watch his son make a complete mess devouring his favorite dish – spaghetti and meatballs. Later, he'll enjoy a bottle of wine or two with his wife, and they'll luxuriate under the holographic projection of a pixel-perfect sunset.

This is what all the hard work has been about. The countless overtime hours are finally paying off. Standing in an expensive 'roadside' motel room, James wants to hold onto this memory forever.

But his son's laughter begins to fade, and the walls crumble away before his eyes.

Something unseen grabs his shoulder and shakes him, pulling him back into the Cyberside.

He's on a bench, looking groggily up. Matilda stands over him, one hand holding a plastic bag, the other shaking his shoulder.

“Come on—let’s find you a real place to rest, and actually come up with a plan.”

Taciturn starts to protest, half of him still in another world, the memory still a critical drain on his reserves. Spotting a battered-looking motel not two blocks distant, James points at its unpromising neon sign without saying a word. Abruptly, he finds himself on his feet, walking slowly towards the motel. Eyes fixed on the ground, he finds Matilda walking alongside him, helping maintain his balance. They enter the motel lobby through old wooden doors that announce their arrival with an irritating chime.

Standing behind the nearby counter is a scruffy, elderly man who watches James with piercing blue eyes. Eyes that recognize a Taciturn, and Taciturn and know enough not to ask unwarranted questions.

James concentrates on the old man to help refocus his mind on this reality. Something about the man seems familiar. “We’d like a room, please.”

The clerk nods and extends a hand holding a room key. That’s when James notices the crossed rhombus tattoo on the man’s right forearm – a sign that he’s dealing with a Hermit. An enigmatic group, Hermits have resigned to live in this new data obsessed digital world of the Cyberside, but avoid filling their consciousness with meaningless information. The tattoo is a program designed to safeguard their cherished memories by minimizing the impact of day to day events on the Hermit’s storage capacity. At the end of each System-day, they carefully select what is committed to their permanent memory. Exactly *how* a Hermit determines what is important enough to commit to memory is a mystery to James.

With a calm, measured voice, the man answers. “Room number nine. Up the stairs, to the left.”

Cautiously, Matilda takes the key from the motel owner's hand. She returns to James' side, and they both make their way to the stairs. It's only when they reach the first step that the owner calls out again.

“And, Taciturn—you're responsible for the Scry.”

Matilda's hands instinctively reach for her blades, but James reacts quickly to stop her, fixing her gaze with his own. “As you say, Hermit,” he answers, casting a glance over his shoulder. “No innocents will be harmed tonight.”

An unnatural smirk breaks through the folds of the old man's wrinkled face and unkempt beard. He shakes his head.

“There are no innocents, Taciturn. All are guilty of something.”

The Hermit's other hand reaches up from behind the counter and James tightens his grip on Matilda. He can feel the muscles of her body tensing, but the Hermit's hand rises in the form of the *mano pantea*.

“Death comes for all in this town, Taciturn. For both those who deserve it and for those who unknowingly await escape.” The Hermit lowers his hand, “I will remember you.”

The mercenary releases his grip on the Scry, exhales, and concludes the ritual phrase of the Hermits.

“As I do remember you, Hermit.”

A run-in with a Hermit is no small matter, and the experience has shaken James' mind nearer to wakefulness. Side by side, he and Matilda make their way up the stairs.

Chapter 8 “The Hunt”

The instant the door closes behind them, Matilda blurts what both of them are thinking.

“How the *hell* does he know I'm a Scry? I thought the whole point of Stephen's work was to hide me!”

James slowly paces across the room's worn carpet. “I... I don't know. Hermits are strange people. Nobody really understands anything about them. He must have seen something else in you. I mean, the disguises worked on the train, didn't they?”

Matilda throws her hands up in irritation. “How the hell am I supposed to know? More importantly, how can we trust that old man not to rat us out? I mean, right now, how do we know he isn't—”

Taciturn's hand is flexing open and closed.

“He isn't. Probably. Hermits' whole philosophy revolves around them not interfering with others. They're too preoccupied with holding onto their own past.” His words don't sound as comforting as they're supposed to, even to himself. He sits on the edge of one of the beds. It groans under his weight.

All at once, it's as if the sound brings the whole of the room's squalor to their keen attention. They're surrounded by dilapidated walls with chipped paint, stained and tattered curtains, a cracked data terminal, and a bathroom that looks unsavory at the most generous assessment. Matilda sighs heavily and sits down on the other bed. It too has something to say about the state of their accommodations.

“I don't trust the guy. I don't like the way he looked at me. Which means we need to move fast. I've been thinking about it. Won't we need access codes to get into Donovan's Tower?”

James doesn't answer. He stares dully at, and then distantly through, the cracked glass of the data terminal's reflective surface. He too has been thinking about how they'll get into the Tower.

"I understand."

Matilda persists, "I mean, it's not like we can just walk up the front gate and say 'Hey, just two dudes here to see the boss man'..."

She fidgets at his continued silence. "We're going to need...special access, y'know? Like, something that can get us through a side entrance or something. Like... something a security guard would have."

Taciturn's reflection stares back at him. Knowing where this is headed. Not any happier about it.

"Yes," he says.

Neither of them speaks for what seems like a very long time as the fading daylight beyond the single grimy window makes its way through the moth-eaten curtains. The disheartened reflection in the fractured terminal-glass goes through the motions of lighting a cigarette.

It is the Scry who breaks the prolonged silence.

"I mean, I'm just saying. You promised the guy downstairs that nobody is going to die tonight."

James exhales a stream of smoke. "I said no *innocents* were going to die." The Taciturn in the cracked terminal-glass meets his gaze with level, mute judgment. "I think we're both clear enough on what we need to do."

Matilda all but springs off the bed. She will be hunting tonight. The Scry instinct that's been straining at its chains fairly writhes in anticipation. In a single fluid motion, Matilda scoops up her gear. Shaking out her hair, she opens the door and strides out into the corridor, leaving a pensive Taciturn staring silently at his own reflection.

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Matilda makes her resolute, solitary way through the gathering bustle and din of the city's approaching night. Her lips are slightly parted, her movements smooth and graceful, her eyes slightly narrowed. To a passerby, she might well look drugged, and it's not too far from the truth. Now that she's on the hunt, her Scry faculties have taken the wheel, and she is as much along for the ride as in charge of it.

First, she connects herself to a plane of the Cyberside accessible only to her kind. Even as she moves with, through and athwart the street-throngs of Babylon, Matilda sees the world with a heightened perception the multitudes around her could hardly begin to comprehend. People move past her as blurs of vectored, logged data-packets, but anything she focuses on resolves in absolute clarity. Each individual's coding emanates an exclusive signature, the Cyberside analog of a given prey's unique scent, and Matilda roams the streets until she finds one of the sort she's looking for. It doesn't take her long to zero in on one, and it leads her directly to the kind of establishment she imagined from the start. A perverse, rebellious part of her hopes that it doesn't stay *this* easy.

Despite the earliness of the hour, a considerable line has already formed at the club, eager patrons awaiting the arbitrary, aesthetic judgment of the gate-keeping bouncers. Matilda makes her way to the front, where she is granted immediate entrance into the dimly-lit club—to a chorus of objections by the primped and perfumed women in line, not to

mention no insignificant number of appreciative looks from certain of the males in waiting. She makes her way into the strobelit, darkened clamor of the club.

As always, when she is close to her goal, another ability triggers inside her. Her hunger allows her to see events a few minutes ahead. Changing, transforming into the present, for the sake of the future that has already happened. She sees fragments of thoughts, clouds of desires, colors of the moods of those around her. Through the tangling mess of bodies and urges, she sees him. The one who is destined to become a part of her memories, her personal archive of information. He will disappear from the world of the Cyberside, leaving her to keep all what he once was. To be stored in her small but valuable treasure-memory, which will give her the means to live.

The Scry moves to the bar, where her target sits, staring at a half-empty glass of whiskey. The man has long changed out of his Tower uniform, of course, but she nevertheless sees its imprint well enough, still on him. A sense of pride and proxy authority flows from it, not quite masking deeper accretions of pain, inadequacy, and general, free-floating discontentment.

As Matilda studies her prey from her end of the bar, a bartender appears in her peripheral vision and asks her what she'd like to drink. She orders a cosmopolitan. While waiting for her drink, she notices her target noticing *her*, and she returns the favor. When her drink arrives, she's finally ready to start her game. She takes half the over-cranberried concoction at a single slug and makes certain that the target registers her level gaze before she makes her way over to him.

“Hey mister, have a light?”

He doesn't immediately respond, but her presence and attention to him must be sufficiently alluring, as Matilda hasn't even produced a visible cigarette.

“Uh...yeah, sure.” Reaching into his pocket, he produces a plastic lighter of a neon hue that screams 'gas station'. “I’m. I’m Dominic, by the way.”

Matilda reaches out to take the lighter, and her touch lingers on his hand just so much before finally taking it from him. It doesn’t take long for Dominic’s firewalls to melt. Within minutes, they exchange views, a checkmark catalog of mutual interests, a half-dozen more artfully-accidental touches. He puffs his chest and musters what swagger he can.

“Oh sure, The Tower. Yeah, I work there. I’m pretty much the Head of Security.”

She knows he’s lying, but his clearance is more than sufficient for what they need.

“You’re keeping us all safe.” Matilda places a hand on his leg. “You don’t even know what it means to people. People like me.”

Dominic’s eyes dilate even more. He nervously slams back the rest of the alcohol in his glass.

Within thirty minutes—and after a light kiss—Matilda has woven a truly inspired backstory, a veritable rolling tapestry about a shattered family, a difficult youth. Dominic accepts this information with white-knight earnestness and begins divulging intimate confidences of his own. Despite the loud, crowded club it’s as if the two of them have cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Matilda revels in the euphoric momentum of his utter, transported enchantment. His desire to comfort her burns through his crippling shyness. An unspoken, seething heat—no less intense for either of them, although ignited by radically-different chemistries—blazes inside both of them.

Through that strange, warping fugue of mutual but variant desire, she finds herself in his dark apartment. She asks him whether he has anything more to drink, and Dominic pours two glasses of cheap wine. She takes his hand and stares into his eyes. He is completely open.

There are no barriers between them now. She puts her glass of wine on the table, and they merge in a long, deep, final kiss.

Dominic doesn't even notice as the inky darkness begins to consume his eyes

Even if he does, it's too late. That dam has been blown. Information and memories begin to flow into the devouring Scry.

His memories, his true memories, play for both to see. One losing them, the other gaining them forever. The moments of truth, the moments of his real life. All thought lost when he interfaced with the System and joined the Cyberside.

Growing up in a suburb of Los Angeles. School. The parents. Christmas in Tahoe. His first kiss. The family moving to Boston. A lonely prom. Berkeley. Joining a raucous fraternity. The brotherhood of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Working as an intern in Silicon Valley. Promotions. A wedding. Vacation in Italy. A son. Head of Information Security Department. A funeral with two caskets, one smaller than the other. Alcoholism. Lonely evenings. Mass-media chaos. Global panic. A dying world. The decision to leave for the network. Details. Details. Details. Little fragments of what had been his life. He sees it all.

Then his life in the Cyberside.

Trying to start anew. Working at the Tower. System memories substituted for real ones. Raids. Roundups. A child torn away from its mother. Endless batches of slaves entering into the city. Meeting Donovan face to face. Access codes for security systems. Hidden security entrances into the Tower. Attempts to break away from meaningless routines.

Attempts to escape from this world.

Each memory fades as the life drains out of his shell, his eyes slowly closing. As the last few stray streams of data are drained from his mind, all that he once was now becomes part of her.

She experiences his last thought. It's almost always the same, with those she's consumed: *Remember me.*

Not the way he is *here*, but as he once was—before this world.

Before the migration.

His lifeless lips part from hers. His body collapses to the floor. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Matilda sits down next to him.

“Thank you, Dominic,” Matilda says to the dark, silent room. “I’ll remember you, I promise.”

It takes her longer than usual to recover, but eventually Matilda composes herself.

Carefully closing the apartment door behind her, a solemn Scry makes her solitary way back to a dreary motel room.

Where a Taciturn waits in silence.