

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.