

Chapter 9 “The Tower”

Matilda and Taciturn stare up at the looming presence of Donovan’s Tower. For the first time since their arrival in Babylon, James is starting to seriously doubt they’ll have enough time.

He wants to trust the information Matilda has acquired with her Scry powers, but it’s led them to an offshoot of the complex – and a dead end. His frustration reaches a critical point when he notices the girl continuing to walk towards the wall.

“What... what are you doing?”

She either ignores him or doesn’t hear. Stepping right up to the wall, Matilda pushes on a wad of gum stuck to it. A holographic keypad appears, and Matilda quickly enters a series of codes. Once she keys the final code, the wall retracts, revealing an entrance. Satisfied, Matilda turns to face him, grinning.

“Did you see that?”

Nodding his acknowledgment, James steps through the discovered doorway. The passageway is dark, but eventually leads to a large chamber. Large statues flank both sides of the room.

“Um...this wasn’t part of Dominic’s memories. What the hell is this?”

Perplexed, Taciturn cautiously evaluates the chamber.

“I don’t know. Stay close.”

Pistol in hand, he steps past large statues of Osiris and Isis, Thoth and Amon, Gor and Meshenet. All are dwarfed by the massive Sphinx that resides at the far end of the chamber.

A noise from behind the Sphinx startles them both. James steals behind Thoth, pulling Matilda with him. The Scry silently unsheathes one of her blades. James was hoping to avoid a fight—or to at least get farther before one started.

“How did they know we were coming?” Matilda whispers next to him. “I bet that Hermit sold us out.”

Instead of the tromp of combat boots, James hears the squeaky wheels of an approaching cart and the wet *splot* of a mop hitting the marble floor.

Before he can stop her, Matilda emerges from behind the statue.

Taciturn preemptively winces, anticipating an instant onslaught of gunfire. Instead, Matilda’s voice echoes through the chamber.

“Uh, hi there. How’s it going?”

An unfamiliar voice answers, equally augmented by the acoustics of the hall. “It’d be better if you’d tell your friend back there to stop leaning against the statue. I just cleaned it.”

Succumbing to his curiosity, James peeks from the safety of his cover. He’s surprised to see a grey-haired man in drab overalls mopping the floor in front of the Sphinx. Seeing Taciturn, the man grunts.

“Put that pea shooter away, young man. You’re likely to hurt yourself, and *I’ll* have to clean it up.” James lowers his weapon. “Good. Now, what are you two doing, sneaking around this late? Don’t you have better things to do?”

Matilda steps forward.

“I’m Matilda, and this is James. We’re trying to speak with Donovan. I think he’s been trying to have me killed.”

Dumbfounded by her frankness, Taciturn raises his gun again. His internal analysis shows no outcome now that doesn't lead to violence.

But it is only the old man's laugh that reverberates throughout the room.

“Oh, that's a good one. Seriously, darling. If everyone Donovan Craze was trying to kill showed up, we'd have a line out the door. Hell, I'd probably be standing in it. So, you're trying to see the big man, but don't know how to get past the riddle room, huh?”

Now Taciturn steps forward. “Riddle room'?” He looks at the gun he is still pointing, blinks, and lowers it again.

The old man leans on his mop, “Yeah, you know. ‘To enter, you must answer these three questions’ nonsense. Idiotic, you ask me.”

James scans the severe, sculpted faces of the statues around them.

“What type of questions?”

The old man nibbles the inside of his cheek before answering.

“Jeez, you'd think I could remember them all by now. The first one's some riddle about man and gods. Something about what separates ignorance from knowledge. Hold on, it'll come to me...”

Taciturn steps closer to the Sphinx.

“Time.”

Matilda's says from behind him, “Yeah, I get it. You don't think we have time for this—”

Taciturn shakes his head. “No, that's the answer. That's what separates ignorance from knowledge. *Time.*”

The old man's eyes widen.

“Yeah, I think you're right. Hold on, this is good. Let me think of the next one...”

Matilda moves closer to the custodian.

“Have we met before...?”

He waves his hand dismissively and chuckles.

“I doubt that, darling. I'm sure I'd remember someone as lovely as yourself.”

Matilda smiles but still raises an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Uh huh. Well, thanks for helping us with this.”

The old man leans forward on his mop.

“Eh, don't mention it. It's not like Donovan's done anything good for me. Unless you count constantly making messes. You should see the one he's started up there.”

Taciturn slowly holsters his pistol but can't shake the feeling that they're being watched.

The old man continues. “Let's see, the second one goes something like, ‘Our world is dead, but life goes on. What truly then is life?’”

Taciturn scans the expanse of the chamber, wondering if their breach into the Tower has been noticed. If patrol routines are already tracking their presence. If the old man is stalling.

“On second thought, we need to get out of here. If you can't help us...”

Taciturn rests his hand back on the butt of his pistol. And then Matilda suddenly blurts,

“An idea!”

Both men look at her—the one beside her startled, the one before her simply pleased.

“I know this one,” Matilda says. “‘An idea can bridge both time and death.’

Something like that. Am I right?”

The custodian’s nodding, smiling face answers her question.

“Smart girl. Brilliant girl. How did you know that one?”

Matilda's excitement vanishes instantly. Her forehead wrinkles with concern. “I... I don’t know. I just remember hearing it a bunch of times.”

James scans the room again, this time for exits. “Do you know the last one or not? We really don’t have time for this.” A thought occurs to him, cold and unwelcome. “Wait. How did *you* get in here?”

The elderly man strokes his beard, suddenly coming to attention as if from far away. “Hmm? Do what, now?”

James points an accusing finger at the man. “How do *you* get into this room? Clearly you don’t solve a bunch of riddles every time you come through here.”

The man’s cheeks redden. He looks at the floor.

“Look, mister, before you get mad—I just got caught up in it all.”

“Um—” Matilda begins, from behind him.

Taciturn draws his pistol out and advances on the custodian. The old man throws his open hands up, letting his mop handle fall *thwack* to the marble floor.

“A key. I have a *key*! Just take it easy—”

Without a word, Taciturn sticks out his hand, palm up.

Reluctantly, the old man reaches into his pocket and pulls out a metal key, flinching as Taciturn grabs it. The custodian points to the far side of the room.

“There’s a service exit over there. Before you do anything, just remember—I’ve been more cordial than I should be, things being what they are. Two folks sneaking about and such...”

Key in hand, James balls his fist. “Come on, Matilda. We’ve wasted enough time.” Matilda follows him across the room, her gaze darting back to the custodian.

James steps up to the door and slides the key home. As he unlocks the door, James hears the old man’s voice from the chamber:

“What is between mystery and music, between doors to the future and answers?”

Looking down at the key in his hand, Taciturn then turns to once again see an old man pushing his cart and humming to himself.

Matilda grabs his hand, “Come on. Let him go. He helped us.”

James follows her, pondering these kind words from a merciful Scry.

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James drives the old man from his thoughts. He follows Matilda down the otherwise-featureless service corridor to an exit, but something about the door he finds there feels eerily familiar. James swears he’s seen it before but can’t place it.

Before he can say anything, Matilda pushes the door open, and James is blinded by a bright light.

When his eyes adjust, James finds himself in the spacious foyer of Fall Water Lake's California branch, exactly as he remembers it.

Exactly as he remembers it.

The late-evening Babylon gloom has instantly given way to a bustling early Southern California morning, the beginning of the day for the assiduous ranks of Fall Water Lake's employees.

Furnished with a Postmodern scheme and trappings, the reception room exudes expensive excellence. Couriers dart around delivering packages, harried-looking interns hastily go about their assigned tasks, and high-level employers talk on their phones while striding purposefully toward the elevators.

If the new, bustling scene comes as a surprise to James, it does so triply for Matilda: “What the shit?”

“It'll be fine, trust me,” Taciturn says, moving towards the reception desk.

As they step forward, another light ripples over them—they've moved to a dedicated server, via a seriously fast connection. A quick glance at his indexation watch shows, to James's relief, that the count has reset. He wonders how close they just cut it, and then decides he doesn't want to know too precisely. Within seconds, the System reads and calibrates the new interface. Both of them are visibly startled by their sudden change in appearance.

James' street gear has been replaced with shorts and a striped polo shirt, identical to his code of dress during his brief tenure at the real-world Los Angeles office. Next to him, Matilda's clothes and gear have been replaced with an unlikely, light summer dress that

swirls with her every movement. Sandals, handbag, neatly packed blond hair, and sunglasses make the Southern Californian guise complete.

Almost as an afterthought, James reluctantly looks down to where his holstered pistol should be, and isn't.

Matilda's personal arsenal has also evidently disappeared with the passing light. She pats her body instinctively, trying to find the blades that aren't there. "Oh, you've got to be kidding."

James feels something welcomingly familiar in his own pocket and reaches in. Muttering a word of indiscriminate thanks, James feels his trusty crumpled pack of cigarettes.

"Suppose they don't kill fast enough to be taken away," he says to himself.

Looking over at the reception desk, James notices an attractive woman waving at him. She sits behind the desk, ever vigilant, just as James knew her to be once upon a real world. Sizing up the baffled pair, the woman at the desk offers a sad smile.

"Hey there, James. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Taciturn approaches and rests both hands on the desk counter.

"It has, Rachel. You look... good."

The woman rolls her eyes and lets out sigh.

"Sorry. It just stops being a compliment, these days. Or at least, it'd be more of a compliment if I actually had a choice in the matter." She stops her own rant before it begins. "But thank you, James. I appreciate it."

Rachel opens a drawer at the side of her desk and produces two yellow guest passes with their names and photos on them.

“Here, keep these with you at all times. They’ll give you access to everywhere you’re allowed to be. They’ll be active for 4 hours, but my understanding is you’ll be out of here much sooner.”

James takes the badge handed to him, but Matilda is conspicuously hesitant to take her own from Rachel’s extended hand.

“Wait. What? But... how could you have...?”

Rachel smile fades as she closes Matilda’s hands around the pass.

“Oh, honey. If he didn’t know you were coming, you wouldn’t be here.”

Rachel shifts her focus to Taciturn.

“Donovan is waiting for you on his floor, James. He also said that he’s very much looking forward to discussing everything with you.”

James tries to find the right words.

“Rachel, I...”

But they elude him.

“I guess, thanks,” is all James gets out before turning to move toward the elevators.

Matilda fidgets with the badge around her neck. Once they are out of earshot, she speaks up.

“So, you want to explain that to me? She seems too nice to be here.”

Taciturn clenches and unclenches his fist, finds himself doing it, wills himself to stop.

“I’m sure if she had the chance, she’d slit Donovan’s throat just as soon as you would.” Matilda nods toward Rachel’s desk.

“She *works* for the monster.”

The elevator hums as it descends to their level.

“She’s trapped here just like everyone else. I doubt she’s even allowed to leave that desk.” Matilda looks again, this time with quiet, dawning horror, in the direction of the lobby.

“But... why would Donovan do something like that? It’s so...*messed up*.”

The elevator doors open with a cheery *ding*!

“I don’t think Donovan sees it the same way she does.”