

“Perhaps a Life Worth Living”
A “Hybrid World” Story
Part 1
PTC - 2022

Prologue - A Hybrid World

In the year 2107, humanity seemed on the brink of another 'giant leap.' A simple lunar mining operation had grown to a colony, and eventually a corporate city-state, serving as the launching point and home base for a successful asteroid harvesting effort. A self-sustaining, remotely constructed colony within a crater on the surface of Mars was completed, with its first shipful of eager pioneers on their way. A population rapidly nearing 15 billion, filling the sprawling cities near to bursting.

And then it happened.

An unwitting scientist's work repurposed into a weapon by a secretive but growing eco-terrorist organization spread throughout the atmosphere, blanketing the surface from pole to pole. Two-thirds of all humankind died in a matter of days, with billions more lost in the immediate aftermath. In the years it took for society to regain some form of order and stability, the population dwindled to only 3 billion; more than enough to stave off extinction, but reduced by nearly 80%.

Contact was lost with the lunar city for decades; it was never reestablished with the Martian colony or its ship of settlers. Life had changed irreversibly for the survivors, and the road to recovery seemed endless, but the world continued to turn, and humanity would surely thrive again.

But something else had changed. It would later be discovered that roughly a third of the surviving population had undergone a subtle genetic shift from the bio-weapon that only became more prominent through the generations. Thin, nearly invisible fur from the first generation became thicker and harder to ignore in the second. Then came colors, and patterns; changes in facial structure. Tests showed an intrusion of other mammalian DNA in those affected, and the term 'Hybrid' was eventually coined.

Mankind did what it had done time and again when presented with 'the other'. Some nations purged their borders of Hybrids, deporting or executing millions; others subjugated and enslaved them. Some integrated peacefully; others through violence. Fights became skirmishes became battles became wars; humanity's grand recovery stumbled and faltered, lost technologies remained lost, buried ever deeper among the turmoil.

Eventually, with millions of casualties on all sides, the period of violence remembered as the Hybrid Wars came to an end, but mankind was still mankind, and old prejudices were merely transposed. While most nations have integrated, there will always remain divisions, between the human races, the Hybrid types, and the two species as a whole.

It is now the middle of the 24th century. In the east, a fractured China never fully reformed, and the province of Sichuan has become a secluded empire, ostracized by most other nations for their continued subjugation of Hybrids as slaves. Lack of any meaningful trade has left the empire with technology more closely resembling the mid-20th, and a sprawling bureaucracy keeps those in the cities content and pacified, those in the countryside receiving little more than reminders of a central government with more bark than bite.

In a small, dusty village in the northeast, a young Hybrid is placed in a transport

truck; she is told nothing of her fate, joined by others of her kind as the truck continues on to a newly-operational laboratory complex on the edge of the capital city. And in the capital proper, a middle-aged bureaucrat has received a new assignment, on special order from the Emperor himself, to aid the laboratory's new chief scientist.

Day 0

Peng stood in the kitchen, leaning forward with his hands on the counter. Why did he push that damned button? Anger and regret in equal measure over what he'd done flooded his heart and mind; surely there could have been another way, a better way out of the situation? Perhaps if he'd stayed outside the room, merely communicated through the closed door, tried to explain and be reassuring somehow. But, no, that would more than likely have exacerbated the problem. What had taken place and how it had played out could very well have been inevitable, given the circumstances.

The Hybrid girl had woken up in an unfamiliar place, in unfamiliar clothes, with an unfamiliar man - a human, at that - watching over her. Of course she would panic; no reasonable person could have expected otherwise. How was she to know of his intentions, of what he was capable of doing to someone who didn't have a say in the matter? What sorts of indignities had she faced between the time he last saw her in that cage and the moment she'd awoken in his home? From what he'd been able to tell she'd been bathed, her hair cut short, her small frame squeezed into that ridiculous dress. He suspected none of these were voluntary; given her sedated state on arrival it was safe to assume she'd been kept that way the whole time.

Saddened, he sat at the table, leaning over, rubbing his temples. He didn't want this. He absolutely did not want this, this thing, this creature, this Hybrid, in his home, in his bedroom, in his life. No, he chided himself; she wasn't a 'thing', and she wasn't a 'creature'. She had spoken to him! Cried out in desperation and fear, her voice weak but her words unmistakable, her eyes tearful but bright. The cage was filthy and it stank and she was alone and he knew full well she would not survive the day if he'd simply walked away.

Hybrids could not talk; they were not intelligent, they didn't feel, they were not people, period, end of sentence. They were chattel meant to work the farms in the countryside and be house servants in the city and apparently as of late to be fodder for experimentation by a man who had been run out of his own country for his lack of morals. They were to be neither seen nor heard, to obey without question, to live and work and die unknown, unsung, unmissed.

What they were not supposed to do was beg you for help, to save them from certain doom, to plead and tell you they did not want to die. They were not supposed to utterly shatter your heart when you looked into their eyes and knew without question that this was a person, this was a living, breathing, thinking individual and that if you did not do something, anything, they wouldn't be for much longer. They weren't supposed to lash out from sheer terror, they weren't supposed to scream like that, my god for that

scream to come from such a small body the pain must have been unthinkable.

They weren't supposed to lay there, and cry, helpless, begging you but this time begging you to please not hurt them again, please do whatever you want just don't hurt them like that again. But she did. She did all of that.

He wanted to hold her and calm her and tell her how sorry he was, that he was scared, and confused, and unprepared and didn't know what else to do but he was so, so very sorry and he would never, ever do that to her again. Yes, she was a Hybrid and yes she had fur and a tail and a snout but beyond that she was just a frightened little girl, who just didn't want to die.

And now she was here, trapped in this house, in his house, completely alone, separated from whatever life she may have known before. Did she now regret calling out to him? Hoping against hope for an act of kindness from a complete stranger only to end up like this?

Did he regret wandering off from the lobby and through that door and into that dark and inhospitable tomb of a holding area? Of course he did. If he had just stayed put for a few minutes longer, if his car had arrived just a few minutes later, he would have met with the man he was there to see and listened to his ramblings and given his sincere apologies on behalf of the Emperor and promised a new batch of subjects would be there soon. He would have returned to his waiting car and sat quietly in the back reviewing documents and preparing for his next task and then he would have come home to his quiet, lonely house by his quiet, lonely self and had a quiet, lonely dinner and never been the wiser. And the girl would have met her untimely end and no one would have known or cared. The veil would still be in place, his willful ignorance carrying him blissfully on, blind eye casually turned toward any and all discrepancies in the story he was told and the facts he was taught. Just like before. Just like everyone else.

But that hadn't happened. The veil had fallen, ignorance was lost, the blind eye could see with perfect vision. The story was wrong, a lie, an intentional deception to keep people like him, and his coworkers, and his neighbors from questioning the status quo. From questioning what they did to people they had denied personhood.

Dinner. Right. He could scarcely think about food at a time like this but his stomach reminded him he'd not eaten all day, having to rush out the door first thing in the morning for what should have been just another phone call from his office but became a catalyst instead. Had he really just spent two full hours running the same series of events over in his mind, lamenting the choices that seemed impossible, feeling sorry for himself? He needed to do something to distract, however briefly, and maybe if he could get something down it would help him to think more clearly.

The refrigerator contained nothing but leftovers, the freezer devoid of any of the pre-prepared meals Mrs. Chou would leave for him when she came to clean the house. He could probably just get by mixing together and reheating the remnants of a couple rice dishes, but there wasn't much point leaving everything to sit in there another night and besides, the girl would need to eat, too; she'd looked as though she was already dangerously close to starvation.

He made his way over to the stove, placing down a high-walled pan, and began extracting the various small bowls from the fridge, giving each a cursory sniff before emptying its contents into the pan. One bowl contained what he was mostly confident

used to be a soup or broth of some kind, now congealed into a wobbling, jelly-like mess. It melted in the heat of the pan, replacing some of the lost moisture of the rice, giving the dish a thick, porridge-like consistency. Eventually, the bowls ran out, and he gave the pan a stir, placing a lid on top and giving the dishes a good rinse in the sink.

As he stood there, staring blankly at the stove and running various scenarios over in his mind, he heard the sound of someone trying very hard to descend the staircase silently. Through the doorway he could see the shadow cast by a small figure, which stood there, timidly, until its stomach growled unexpectedly.

Peng turned off the stove and faced the door, crouching down and trying to make himself look as non-threatening as possible. "Please, come in," he said, in as soothing a voice as he could muster. "I won't hurt you again, I promise."

Xiao took a breath and stepped into the doorway, her face still damp from tears, the dress she found herself now wearing crumpled and slightly torn. She tried to put on a brave expression, only for it to fade quickly back to one of sadness. Who was she kidding, she thought; she'd been in a cramped truck and a filthy cage with no food and barely any water for...she really wasn't even sure how long it had been. At least a few days. There was no bravery left to show off.

Despite the incredible fear that had made every step through the hallway and down the stairs agonizingly slow, despite her shaking limbs and aching muscles and feeling as though she could simply collapse at any moment, her survival instinct told her that she needed to eat something soon or she would never eat again. And so she'd made her way here, to what looked like a kitchen, to the source of something that smelled so good after being so hungry for so long she could barely keep from salivating.

But the man was here, too, and now he was trying to get down on her level, trying to coax her closer but for what? After the panic and the shouting and the...the pain...he'd simply left her there, trailed by an unending and meaningless string of apologies. He'd left behind the button that had activated this new, much heavier, much bulkier, much scarier collar around her neck; she wanted to destroy the button, to hide it, to do...something, anything to keep it from being pressed again, yet too afraid to get too close to it. But the man was down here, and the button was up there, and she hoped with everything she had left that that meant he couldn't hurt her again, at least not right now.

It suddenly dawned on her, staring across the room at the man; she knew him. Normally humans just looked the same to her but she could see, now, the round cheeks, the small glasses, the bald head. This was the man she'd called out to, the one who looked like he didn't belong, like there may have been some chance he wasn't involved in whatever was happening in that place. The one she'd begged, pleaded with, to just do something, anything, to get her out of there. It appeared that he had done something and now she was here and now she was his whether she liked it or not, he had full reign over her from tip to toe and my god what had she done, this was not what she wanted or thought might happen but it had. She was out of that cage, yes, she was away from that horrible place and the smells and the sounds and the knowledge of her impending, inevitable demise but now she was here and she didn't know what was going to happen to her and that was somehow even more frightening.

She closed her eyes and stepped forward into the kitchen. Whatever was going

to happen to her probably wasn't going to happen right now and she just needed something in her stomach. Another small step, and just as she was about to fall to her knees and beg for just a little something, he rose, turned, and pulled two plates from the cupboard above him.

Peng placed a large portion of food on each of the plates, filled two glasses with water, and carefully carried them all over to the table, placing a spoon beside each. He pulled out the chair closest to the doorway and gestured to it in what he'd hoped was an inviting way, then sat in the chair opposite it, and waited.

"I...know apologies must seem terribly hollow right now, and I suspect you have no desire to hear them," he began, staring down at his plate. "There's so much I need to tell you, things I need to at least try to explain, and I know you are afraid and angry and that is okay. But I also know you probably haven't eaten in days so please. Come, sit, eat something. You needn't say a word if you don't want to, but please."

This was the first time he'd actually seen the girl, or any Hybrid in fact, well lit and from this close a distance. He could see now she was a fox-type, her eyes a brilliant green, hair black, fur a bold red-orange. Her hair had been hastily trimmed and was woefully uneven and lopsided, and it appeared any sort of tangles or knots in her fur had been merely cut away, leaving patches of bare skin, most visible on her tail.

Cautiously, her steps still slow and methodical, her entire body on high alert, Xiao approached the table and sat in the offered chair. The man began to eat, so she grasped the spoon as tightly as she could in her hand, plunged it into the food on her plate, and raised it shakily to her mouth. It was mushy and salty and chewy and everything all at once and she swallowed it down and felt a warmth in her belly that had been missing for so very long and it was the most wonderful bite she'd ever taken.

Another, and another, and it was so good and there was so much of it but she didn't know if or when she would get another meal so she kept eating until she felt as though she could burst. There was still so much left but she couldn't get down another bite if she tried so she gently set down the spoon, drank her glass of water in a single long gulp and then waited.

"Was it...okay?" asked Peng. "Are you full?"

Xiao stared down at her plate and gave a small nod, the fears and doubts that had briefly retreated redoubling their attack on her mind. She hadn't been awake that long but she was already exhausted and she just wanted to be alone and get some rest, and then, maybe, she could try to deal with what came next.

He stood, keeping his own movements as slow and methodical as he could in hopes of not furthering the girl's alarm. She looked as though she could fall asleep sitting right there at the table, though, and barely reacted as he cleared his plate and glass, leaving hers behind. It was clear she needed to rest, but where could he possibly put her for the night? Somewhere small, and comfortable, where she might have some slight chance of feeling safe. Ah, yes; it wasn't the greatest, but it would hopefully do for now.

"I'd imagine you're probably very tired after all this," he began, standing near the doorway. "Please, come with me and I'll show you somewhere you can sleep. I'll leave your plate there in case you get hungry again during the night, okay?"

She stared at him, unmoving, for several moments, studying his face, looking for

a sign of...anything, really. Reluctantly, she slipped out of the chair, somewhat unsteady on her feet, advancing a few steps in his direction and waiting until he moved forward to continue.

Through the foyer, across the living room, to the far corner of the house. Peng walked slowly, occasionally glancing behind to ensure he was still being followed. Eventually, he stopped and opened the small door to a closet, pulling the string dangling from the light within before stepping aside, waiting for the girl to approach.

"I'm afraid it's not much," he said, as she peered past him, "but I hope it will suffice for now. Had I known any of this would happen, I would have tried making better arrangements. There are blankets on the shelves; you may use them however you wish, and there is a restroom just to the left here, in case you need it."

Xiao looked at the tiny room, then up at the man, then back to the tiny room. There looked to be plenty of space on the floor inside for her to lay down comfortably, and if the carpet beneath her feet was any indication, it would be soft, and warm. She looked up at the man again, gave another nod, and took another few steps forward before dashing into the tiny room, shutting the door behind her.

Peng sighed, quietly making his way back to the stairs and turning off the lights before heading upstairs to rest. He too was exhausted; perhaps it would make more sense in the morning.