

“Perhaps a Life Worth Living”
A “Hybrid World” Story
Part 2
PTC - 2022

Day 1

A long, sleepless night behind him, Peng descended the stairs again and entered the kitchen. The plate he'd left on the table was empty, consumed by his new, unwanted guest some time during the night. He placed it in the sink, rinsed it, and wandered out to the living room.

There was a small canvas sack he'd forgotten about in his usual chair, and a manilla folder containing the excessively long-winded paperwork detailing the life he was now unexpectedly and undesirably responsible for. In the sack he found a set of worn work clothes, the ones the girl had been wearing when he'd found her in that cage, cleaned and repaired to at least some basic standard. She would doubtless be more comfortable wearing them than the absurd clothing she'd been delivered in, and he would certainly be more comfortable seeing her that way. The dress was visibly cheap and flimsy, and made her look like some sort of living gift meant to be 'opened' by whomever received her. He recoiled at the thought; the knowledge that such things did indeed happen in the city had always disgusted him. It was never really spoken about though, an open secret behind closed doors, simple enough for willful ignorance and blind eyes to ignore.

The paperwork seemed important, and he sat, tossing the canvas sack into the opposite chair before beginning an idle perusal of the folder's contents. "Certificate of Ownership" it said, in big, bold characters at the top of every page. The phrase made him feel slightly nauseous, deeply guilty, and its presence on every sheet of paper almost seemed to taunt him.

He'd been taught and told repeatedly that the Hybrids were 'lesser' beings; that they lacked some sort of innate, unique sense of identity that only humans possessed. That it was perfectly fine to see them as nothing more than some sort of automaton; a living object existing specifically to follow orders and perform tasks. That they couldn't even speak, could barely think, could barely even understand the orders they were given. Some literature on them insisted they couldn't even truly feel pain, and the shock collars were merely meant to 'reset' their primitive minds. It was so easy to just accept and move on; out of sight, out of mind.

What really bothered Peng was the idea that he was the last to learn what appeared to be the actual truth. Everyone he knew with their own house-bound Hybrid spoke of them exactly the way the books and teachers and authorities spoke of them; as if they were merely machines, programmed through force to perform menial tasks. Surely someone had heard them speak, or witnessed the incredible pain the shock collars inflicted, or seen them cry from fear and loneliness. Did they merely make excuses to explain such occurrences away? Were they so truly convinced of their own superiority and privilege that they could continue to simply ignore the clear signs of intelligence the Hybrids displayed? Perhaps, instead of being the last to know, he was merely the only one who didn't, who couldn't, look away.

He flipped through the pages, pausing to more thoroughly read through the section containing specific facts and statistics pertaining to the girl. Much to his dismay, the girl's name was missing from the list of data about her. In fact, there didn't seem to be a place to put a name at all, which was, upon reflection, not surprising. There was very little about her past aside from her age, listed as 'early to mid-teens', a small

asterisk indicating rather obviously that this was just an estimate. But, that couldn't be correct, could it? She was so...small; barely 130 centimeters if the paperwork was to be believed, and frighteningly underweight. The only ailment mentioned in the document was malnutrition, which seemed like an incredible understatement, given her supposed age.

The rest of the papers contained little of interest; a standard contract, some rules, regulations, and guidelines, an all-purpose hotline to call in case of problems. Most of the rules and guidelines were obvious, if needlessly cruel, and he'd already broken several pertaining to showing what he considered basic care and compassion. He would likely break several more eventually, even a few he'd not thought about before seeing them. So long as he didn't go too far, and kept up the proper illusion around his coworkers and acquaintances, there didn't seem to be much risk to himself or the girl for such transgressions.

A brief glance at the clock showed the time to be late morning, now, and he became mildly concerned. He stood and quietly approached the closet door, straining to hear some sign of life from within, relieved at the sound of slow, quiet breathing, and just the slightest hint of a snore. With what the girl had gone through as of late, she needed all the rest she could get, and it wasn't as though their time together would be ending at any point soon; he'd try to make sure she was comfortable and well-fed, and let her decide on her own terms whether or not to come out of her shell, or indeed, this closet.

Much of the rest of the day was spent in his study, arranging papers or tending to other work assignments; anything to keep his hands busy and his mind occupied. At one point he heard the door to the restroom shut, relieved that the girl had at least awoken again, if only for a short time. There were no further indications of her presence to be had, however, and as the sun began to set, and Peng's own stomach demanded his attention, he returned to the kitchen in hopes that perhaps another meal would at least entice her to show her face again.

With the leftovers now gone, he turned to the few basic staples still kept in the pantry. Rice was simple to make, simple to eat, and, while perhaps not the most flavorful or nourishing dish in its plain cooked state, it would at least be filling. He thought he'd seen a carton of eggs tucked away in the refrigerator, and a quick glance inside confirmed this; boiled eggs and rice it was, then. The rice cooker was located and filled, a pot of water set on the stove to boil, and there was nothing left to do but wait.

Xiao stretched and yawned amidst a tangle of blankets, still tired, though whether from not enough or too much sleep, she wasn't sure. The blankets were soft, and warm, and smelled nice, and the floor she lay on was certainly more comfortable than anywhere else she'd rested her head as of late. Maybe she could just stay in here for the rest of her life; that might not be so bad.

It had been dark outside when she'd first awoken, and she'd crept as quietly as she could through the cool, empty house to the kitchen. The food she'd left uneaten was, thankfully, right where she'd left it, and while it had been considerably better hot, it was still well beyond what she was used to in terms of flavor and quantity. This time she ate a bit more slowly, though, forcing down a few more bites than she probably

should have in an effort to clean the plate. Two meals in a single day was nice and all, but there was still no telling when or even if she'd receive another one, so down it all went; then it was back to the tiny room for more rest.

She'd woken up a few more times after that, usually spending a panicked moment remembering where she was before rolling over and falling asleep again. A few times she'd awoken needing to use the restroom, and she'd held it off as long as possible until there was no choice but to slip out of the relative safety of the tiny room. Thankfully, there had been no sign of the man, and, her needs addressed, she'd quickly returned once more to sleep.

Now, though, she could once again detect the scent of cooking food, and although her instincts weren't currently screaming at her to eat something or die, her stomach was empty again, and if she didn't at least investigate, she probably wouldn't be given anything. The first golden rays of sunset filtered through the closed blinds as she crept through the living room, and before long she'd again arrived at the doorway to the kitchen, peeking timidly around the corner, body tense, ready to flee back to her hiding spot at a moment's notice.

Peng, having forgotten to set any sort of timer, had to guess when exactly to remove the eggs from the boiling water. Now seemed as good a time as any, and he switched off the stove, placed the eggs in the sink, and ran a bit of cold water over them to make them easier to peel.

He felt as though he were being watched, and turned, slowly, toward the doorway, catching a glimpse of orange beyond it. The girl's face appeared, and he gestured for her to enter, trying to force what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Hello again," he said softly. "I'm...afraid I don't know what to call you; could you...tell me your name?"

Xiao looked at the floor and shook her head, stepping back slightly, fearful of some reprisal that, almost to her surprise, never came.

"That's alright, you don't have to." It would be nice if he could think of her as something more than 'the girl', but it seemed like tonight would be another one-sided conversation.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, okay? Were you...comfortable enough? Did you manage to get some rest?"

She nodded, still staring at the floor, only briefly looking up at the man, long enough to ensure he wasn't making any threatening moves. Please, just give me something to eat and let me go back to the tiny room, she thought.

"Good, that's good. I've made, well, it's not much, I'm afraid, but I hope you'll enjoy it." He watched and waited for some response, and, upon receiving none, turned back to peel the eggs. "Please, have a seat. It should only be a few moments more."

The path between the doorway and the table was clear enough, but sitting there would leave her with her back either to a wall or to the man. Neither felt like a particularly good idea, but she didn't want to risk upsetting him, so she snuck along the wall and behind the table, sitting in the chair there and staring in the direction of the stove.

Preparation complete, Peng again retrieved a pair of plates from the cupboard, loaded them with food, and brought them to the table, followed by water and utensils,

and finally, himself. Seated, he gave the girl a smile again, and broke open the eggs on his plate, mixing the yolks with the rice and hoping they weren't too undercooked.

Carefully, Xiao picked up a spoon, watching the man for a moment and mimicking his actions. She was familiar with the food before her, yes, but had never had it in quite this arrangement, or quite this fresh. The first mouthful was a little jarring; there was more firmness to the rice than she'd expected, and the egg yolk was threatening to run down the side of her chin if she wasn't careful. Her body was again filled with a pleasant warmth while she ate, and she hoped - if there were more meals like this to come - that she would never tire of the novelty of hot food.

It had been just enough to fill her, carry her through another day, and she drank her water, scraping up the last few grains of rice before setting the spoon down, and leaning back from the table. Could this really continue? She was always told that if something seemed too good to be true, it was; surely the man wouldn't just keep giving her such meals in exchange for nothing. There had to be some expectation, some plan to extract worth from her, whatever form that might take. And when that time came she wasn't sure what she would do or if she could even do anything, but at least, for now, her stomach was full.

Peng finished his own meal and began to clear the table, reaching across to grab the girl's plate and suddenly pulling back as she began to recoil.

"I'm sorry, I...wasn't thinking. Could you, perhaps, give your plate a little push this way while I take this to the sink?"

Xiao waited until the man had taken several steps away before sliding her plate as close to the center of the table as she could. His behavior was so strange; he acted as if he were almost as afraid of her as she was of him, but that didn't make sense. Yes, she had threatened him in her initial panic with the promise of teeth and claws, but she didn't even have claws, and her teeth were barely sharp enough to pierce the skin of an apple, let alone a human. Plus he was just so much taller, and heavier, and at the end of the day, he had the button, and she had the collar. What was there for him to be afraid of?

While she thought, the man returned to the table to retrieve her plate, giving her a quiet nod before walking away again. Was that it? Could she go back to her hiding place, barricade the door with blankets, and sleep until tomorrow?

"Thank you," said Peng, quickly rinsing the plates, turning to once again face the girl. She was still frightened, clearly, and likely only time would change that, but at least she didn't appear as though she could collapse from exhaustion or starvation anymore. Now that she was rested, however, she could try to run away, and as much as he hadn't wanted this, as much as he didn't want to give her more things to be afraid of, he knew full well what could happen if she did; and then all of this would have been for naught. It had to be her choice, though; if she thought the risk of running was preferable to staying, then to stand in her way would only prove her fears correct.

"Could you come with me for a moment, please? There's something I need to show you, to tell you." He beckoned for the girl to follow, and she stood, taking a few tentative steps in his direction, enough to convince him she would follow.

Only a few steps from the kitchen, Peng stopped, waiting for a moment for the girl to enter behind him, before gesturing to the door at the end of the foyer. The girl looked up at him quizzically, and he cleared his throat, searching for the right words.

"This is the front door," he began, his expression becoming serious. "I...want to make it clear that I will do nothing to stop you if you want to leave. But knowing what that collar they put on you can do should tell you all you need to know about how your kind are looked upon and treated here in the city." He paused and cleared his throat again, shaking his head.

"If you were to leave it is likely you wouldn't make it very far. Under the best of circumstances you would simply be returned here, under the worst I fear you may end up somewhere not unlike that cage you were in, awaiting a similar fate. And so while I will not attempt to stop you, I will beg of you; please do not try to run. Please."

Could that really be true? Was a single, unlocked door the only thing keeping her in this house? How bad could it possibly be if she were caught running away? Xiao absent-mindedly reached up to adjust the collar around her neck, and froze. Bad, she thought; it could be very, very bad. The stubborn, angry part of her was skeptical, wanted to try anyway, wanted to try right this second, but was it really worth it to find out for certain when she still didn't even know why she was here?

"That's all," said Peng. "I just want you to know, it's your choice. As difficult as it is to believe, I truly, truly do not want to hurt you, nor do I wish to see anyone else hurt you. I do hope we can have a less one-way conversation soon. Oh, one last thing; the people who brought you here gave me your old clothes; if you'd like them, they're in the living room, on one of the chairs." He took a breath, and forced a smile. "Alright, I'll let you get back to hiding, now."

Xiao gave a nod and rushed back to the tiny room, shutting the door and curling up among the blankets again. Eager as she was to be rid of the awful dress, it could wait a bit longer, until the man was asleep and the house was dark and quiet again. She was still somewhat tired, but didn't want to oversleep and miss out on an opportunity to be, she hoped, just a little less uncomfortable. Maybe a nap, though. Just a little nap. Just enough to pass the time. She clicked off the light overhead, and closed her eyes.

Silence. Xiao leaned out the open door and concentrated, listening for the tiniest of sounds that might indicate the man was still awake, might just be waiting for her to let her guard down, a moment she was vulnerable. But there was only silence. She breathed a sigh of relief, and carefully maneuvered her way through the darkness, finding a small bag of some sort on one of the chairs. The fabric inside felt familiar; she pulled it out, crept back over to the restroom, and gently shut the door before turning on the light.

She'd never been so excited to see her tattered old work clothes, finding them to be somewhat less tattered, holes patched and tears sewn shut. They were still definitely hers though, and she set them on the floor, trying to figure out how to get rid of her current outfit.

There weren't any visible fasteners keeping it on, so far as she could tell. Trying to pull it up and off wouldn't work either; it was just a little too tight in just the wrong places, and awkward enough that she was likely to tumble over and cause a racket if she kept trying. The attempt did seem to add a few new tears, though, and closer examination showed many of the seams beginning to unravel.

Lacking any other ideas, she hooked her fingers beneath the top of the dress,

taking a few deep breaths before pulling as hard as she could manage. Damn it, she thought; she used to be stronger than this. Her arms began to shake, her fingers began to slip, and just as she was about to give up...success! A large tear down the back of the dress left her shoulders exposed to the cool air of the restroom, and she knelt for a moment to catch her breath before standing and pulling again.

Little by little the seams gave way, the fabric loosened, until, finally, it was done. She kicked the dress along the floor and took a few long, deep breaths, realizing only now just how restricted her movement had been, taking the opportunity to stretch in all directions. The air, however, was quite chilly, and the thought of being intruded upon in this state was utterly horrifying, so she quickly pulled on her old clothes, turned off the light, and exited the restroom, leaving the torn and shredded dress behind.

She stepped quietly through the living room, and her eyes had just barely acclimated to the darkness when she felt the carpet underfoot give way to cold wood; tentatively, she approached the door to the outside world and reached out for the knob. The man's words from earlier rolled around in her mind; would he really just leave the door unlocked for her? His plea for her not to go seemed genuine, from a place of caring rather than a place of controlling. But she couldn't help herself. With a twist of the knob and a gentle tug, the door - somewhat heavier than she'd anticipated - swung open, revealing a dark, quiet city street. She stood there a moment, taking in the scene; her first view of a city, and in the middle of the night, no less. The street seemed to stretch on forever in either direction, flanked at regular intervals by tall metal poles that cast a pale amber light onto the pavement. A soft breeze carried on it a plethora of distant sounds and faint smells; a bit of oil from a leaky engine, rich earth and fresh grass, remnants of a cigarette long since extinguished.

This place was certainly new and unfamiliar, but could it really be as dangerous as the man had implied? It seemed like there were plenty of hiding places in the darkness, well beyond the reach of the isolated circles of light. She sat on the threshold, contemplating, brief gusts of wind rustling her hair and fur. What if, she thought, playing out the scenario in her head. Say I make a run for it. Say I manage to stay perfectly quiet and perfectly hidden; I somehow find the exact route out of the city without being seen by anyone along the path. Then what? The impossible task of escaping her immediate surroundings, plus the impossible task of continuing on unseen and likely unfed for days in whatever could be considered the 'correct' direction, and to what end? Trying to quietly integrate into a group of other Hybrids would prove to be a third impossible task; housing and hiding a runaway was a risk few would be willing to take. And the humans weren't stupid. They'd recognize a new face immediately, and the whole group would likely be punished.

So then, what could she possibly do? She was angry, yes, but more than anything she was afraid; of the old man, of everything leading up to this moment. It was going to take a lot more than a few kind words and a couple meals to change that. On the other hand...well, he hadn't actually lied to her up to this point, had he? She'd begged him to get her out of that cage; to spare her from whatever terrifying fate awaited her at the hands of the strange, tall man who spoke in gibberish. But the old man promised he'd get her out of there, and he did; not in the way she would have wanted, not even remotely, but...he did. And when she'd awoken to find him just sort of...standing there, watching her...yes, it was terrifying, and she'd panicked, and THAT

happened, but he hadn't even been standing all that close, hadn't made any remotely threatening moves.

Afterwards, during their meals, his expression wavered, certainly, between curiosity, fear, hope, regret, sadness...but, at least as far as she could tell - humans were way harder to read than other Hybrids - never anger, or, god forbid, lust. She'd kept a close eye on him the whole time, and hadn't seen or felt his gaze wandering to uncomfortable places. Of course, he could just be very good at hiding his true intentions, but, well, maybe she was being a little paranoid. She'd often heard that the simplest explanation was the most likely, and if he really wanted to have his way with her, he could far more easily just use the shock collar to force her into submission or unconsciousness, as opposed to some elaborate meal-based surprise attack.

She sighed, stood, and reentered the house, quietly pushing the door closed behind her. There was food and shelter here, it was clean and quiet, and she had a small place she could hide away, at least for a time. After all, she'd only been here a day; maybe sticking around for a while wouldn't be so bad? If the man's intentions were really as pure as he claimed, maybe he could figure out a way to get her back to the village she considered home.

Dawn was likely still several hours away, and there really wasn't much else for her to do but sleep until the old man awoke. She would, eventually, have to talk to him; after all, talking to him was what had gotten her into this mess, for better or for worse, and likely the only way to get her out. Sooner was probably better than later, she thought, walking silently back across the house to her tiny room. Tomorrow...she'd try. She'd try to put the fear and anger aside and finally open her mouth for something more than shoving food inside. Just a few questions, asked and answered. Then she'd go from there.

Day 2

Peng made his way downstairs, unable to shake the anxiety that had kept him awake for half the night. The house was quiet and still, as usual, dimly lit through the closed curtains. He turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs to find...no. Oh no.

The front door was slightly ajar. He rushed to it, ran outside barefoot and disheveled, frantically looking for some sign of the girl but there was none. Perhaps he'd not been clear enough as to what consequences she'd likely face; or perhaps he'd been too clear, too melodramatic to be believable. Or perhaps she felt the situation to be so utterly unbearable that she was willing to take the risk to get away from his home, to get away from...him. In any case, there wasn't much he could do for her at this point, save for quietly hoping she found some safe haven, so he returned to the house, shutting the door behind him.

There had been some sort of contact number in her paperwork, but perhaps there was someone else; some magic words he could whisper into the right ear, some money he could slip into the right hand, to ensure she would remain unharmed. Having her brought back to him would likely make the tension between them, and her anger towards him, just that much worse, but the alternative was, in all cases, far less desirable.

A sudden sound from the far corner of the house brought him back to the here

and now, his worry suddenly turning to relief. You old fool, he thought. It hadn't even crossed his mind to check the closet; he'd merely assumed the worst on seeing the door. It was almost embarrassing to have wasted so much emotional energy without even bothering to confirm his fears, and the relief he felt was nearly overshadowed by the shame of having had so little faith in the girl.

Peng took a few breaths to center himself, went to the study, and picked up the phone, dialing the city's information line. Breakfast wasn't often a meal he concerned himself with, especially on days when he was expected at the office, but today felt like the sort of day to have it. Besides, there was another mouth to feed, one that would benefit greatly from an additional daily meal, physically if not emotionally.

There was, surely, at least one restaurant in the vicinity that would be open at this hour; perhaps he should order for dinner, as well. It was either that or eggs and rice again. A few minutes and some jotted notes later, he made a second call and placed an order. All that was left now was to wait.

Xiao grumbled quietly to herself, unable to drift back off to sleep after waking up to use the restroom. The sun had risen on a new day, and she was still here, in this house, in this tiny room, still not entirely convinced she'd made the right choice by staying. She was feeling a bit restless after sleeping so much lately, though it wasn't as if there was much of anything to do in her current situation. There was still fear, of course, of the collar, of the man, of the unknown and uncertain future. And there was some anger, though it had mostly cooled to a general sadness; it took far too much energy to keep up that kind of anger. Loneliness, too, had crept in; she'd never been away from at least a handful of other Hybrids for this long before, and, crazy as it felt to admit it, she even missed some of the humans she'd known in the village.

She sat up, the blanket she was wrapped in slipping off her head, causing her ears to spring back into place, and she reached up to work some of the tangles out of her hair. That was something she could still be a little angry about; in any other circumstances, she could've gotten both hair and fur cleared of any knots or, well, whatever might have gotten into them while she was in that cage. It had taken years to get her hair that long, and it just felt weird having anything - clothes, blankets, whatever - touching the patches of bare skin.

On that subject, she couldn't believe how much better it felt to have her old clothes again. She'd only had this set since the previous winter, and while they weren't notably different from the ones before, aside from being a bit larger, they'd seen her through a few rough seasons. They had kept her warm when it was cool, cool when it was warm, and let her move freely without getting in the way. And now they helped her feel a little more normal in the face of such recent chaos.

With a yawn, she stood, stretching, scratching a few persistent itches. Hygiene was something she'd need to figure out soon, as well. She thought she'd picked up the scent of soap coming down the stairs when she'd been wandering around the previous night; as much as she'd love a nice bath, though, it would leave her feeling far too vulnerable for far too long. If nothing else, she could try to rouse herself in the middle of the night again and scrub herself clean with a washcloth in the nearby restroom. Far from ideal, but it'd get the job done.

A brief flurry of activity caught her ear, and she listened carefully, uncertain if she

should be afraid, or, well, more afraid, of whatever was happening. As quickly as it began, it seemed to be over, and a few moments later she was struck once again by the smell of food, fresh and hot. But it was only morning, wasn't it?

She opened the door to the tiny room, just enough to see out, watching and listening intently for any reason not to investigate. None presented itself, and so, with the same caution as always, she crept out, across the living room, to the kitchen, peering around the corner of the doorway. The man was there, of course, removing a number of small, steaming containers from a paper sack. They all smelled amazing, and she hoped he'd notice her soon and offer her something.

Oh, she thought. There was a far easier way to get his attention than waiting around; and she had promised herself to at least try to say a few words to him today. She stepped forward, cleared her throat, clenched her fists, shut her eyes, and took a breath.

Peng had nearly finished unloading the last of the dishes from the delivery bag when he heard a small sound behind him, and he turned to see the girl standing just inside the doorway, looking for all the world as if she were about to burst. He watched her curiously for a moment, wondering if he should say something, until finally...

"Hi," said Xiao, opening her eyes to see the man looking down at her. He seemed particularly pleased about something, and it was taking far more effort than expected for her to stay anchored where she stood.

"Good morning," said Peng, trying to keep from seeming too excited for fear of scaring the girl back into silence. "You're just in time. Would you care for something to eat?"

Xiao nodded and, after a moment's hesitation, took another breath. "Y-yes, please."

"Alright. Please, have a seat; I'll bring something over in a moment."

He turned back to the delivered food, and closed his eyes for a moment, giving a quiet thanks to any sort of deities that may have been listening. It was nice to hear the girl's voice again, however briefly, under less dire circumstances. Was it too much to hope this would be a permanent change?

Two plates were retrieved from the cupboard, two glasses filled with water, food dished up, and everything delivered to the table. He sat, picked up his spoon, and gave the girl a nod before digging in.

That had been harder than she'd expected, she thought, picking up her own spoon and examining what had been placed in front of her. It was rice, yes, but there was so much more in it; little bits of a whole lot of different things. She took a spoonful and chewed on it thoughtfully, her eyes closed, a medley of flavors and textures, familiar and unknown. The salty, mushy rice had been good, the gooey eggs had been good, but this was somehow even better.

Before she knew it, she'd reached the last spoonful, her stomach once again filled, and she started to feel a little less concerned about when she'd be fed next. Satisfied, she lowered her spoon, gently pushing her empty plate forward across the table as she'd done previously.

"Th-th-thank you," she stuttered, nodding her head forward slightly.

"You're very welcome," said Peng. "There's plenty more if you're still hungry."

She shook her head, and the man stood slowly, carefully taking her empty plate and placing it in the sink before hurriedly taking his seat again.

"Would you...like to talk for a bit?" he asked, eager to do so but not wanting to push too hard.

"Okay," she replied.

"Wonderful. Perhaps we could start with names? I am called Peng."

I guess we're doing this now, she thought, nodding softly. "I'm...I'm Xiao."

At last, a name. "It is nice to meet you, Xiao," said Peng, "though I realize the feeling may not be mutual."

There was an awkward silence, broken very suddenly by Xiao.

"I want to go home," she said, perhaps a little too loud, a slightly horrified expression crossing her face. "I-I mean..."

"I know," replied Peng, looking away. It hadn't been an entirely unexpected request.

"I'm sorry," she replied, her words finally starting to come more easily. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

"It is I who should be apologizing. Your being here is entirely my fault; I acted without thinking of the consequences, and unfortunately, this situation is the result."

"You don't want me here, do you?"

Peng sighed. "I'm not sure how to answer that."

Xiao shook her head. "Just...just be honest with me. Please?"

"I...would rather you be here than starving in a cage, for whatever that is worth."

"Y-yeah." She thought for a moment, not sure if she wanted to say the words. But she'd just asked for honesty, so she'd give it, too.

"Y-you...you hurt me. I...I don't trust you," she said.

"I know, and I am so very sorry for that. It was...a mistake. One of the worst mistakes I've ever made, I...didn't know what else to do."

"Are you...are you afraid of me?" She winced slightly as the words left her mouth, worried the question would be seen as some kind of threat.

"Yes, a little; at least, I was," whispered Peng, slightly ashamed. "And you?"

Xiao looked away, frowning. Of course he would turn the question around on her. No answer she could give seemed like a particularly good one, though. Saying yes felt as though she were practically inviting him to use her fear against her. Saying no would likely have the same outcome, in addition to being a blatantly obvious lie. Even if he did believe she wasn't afraid, would that just encourage him to treat her more harshly? To make her afraid, one way or another?

Just tell the truth, she thought. Reluctantly, she looked Peng in the eye, and took a breath.

"More than you could ever imagine," she said, her voice wavering unexpectedly.

"Oh," said Peng, finding himself at a loss for words. "Is...is that so?"

"Look, I..." She paused, her fear surging, thoughts and words and memories flooding her mind. It was just too much to hold back; the dam had burst, and she didn't want to do this, she didn't want to tell him but the flood of words could not be stopped.

"I don't have the words to tell you how scared I am right now. How scared I've been for days. I'm scared to even tell you that I'm scared, okay? I don't even

understand what's been going on lately, I..."

She cleared her throat, blinking back tears. "You don't know what it's like, being one of us, not having any say over your own life. One day you're doing what you're told, just trying to make it through to tomorrow, and some people you've never seen before wearing fancy uniforms show up and throw you in a truck and, and maybe they dump you out in another village and say 'you live here now', and so you try to go back to just doing what you're told but you don't know anyone and the villagers don't like you because you're a stranger and the Hybrids don't like you because you're just a new mouth to feed but you don't really have any choice and eventually if you're lucky and you work hard enough, things will start to feel normal again before the harvest."

"But maybe instead of that, they keep filling the truck with more and more people and it feels like you've been stuck in there for days and when the door finally opens you're all shoved into a giant cage in a weird dark room and it smells like blood and...and you...you hear screaming but...you don't know what's happening..."

She was crying now, but she didn't care. "And the crowd in the cage would get smaller and smaller and you'd turn your back for just a second and the person whose name you'd just learned would be gone and so you'd stop bothering to even talk to anyone, you just try to hide instead and eventually you can't stay awake anymore and you fall asleep and when you wake up, you're alone. And you know they're all dead and you don't want to die so when you see someone who doesn't belong, who's not one of the guards you take a chance and call out to them because nothing could be worse than this, right? And the guards come in and they stick a needle in you and you fall asleep and sometimes you wake up but you can't move and it's bright but you can't see and it's loud but you can't understand and you can feel but you can't tell what they're doing to you..."

There was another pause as she sniffled, caught her breath, and wiped her eyes. "And then you wake up in a house on a bed and you're wearing clothes you've never seen before and you see a man you don't know watching you and suddenly all the rumors you heard about the things humans use Hybrids for in the city seem like they're coming true and you're scared and you panic and you shout and then the world explodes and you can't think and your whole body hurts more than you thought it could ever hurt and then it's quiet again and all you can do is lay there and cry and wait for the worst to happen because you'll do anything to not feel that pain again. And you start to wonder if not wanting to die was wrong and if you should've just stayed quiet in that cage..."

Xiao continued to weep quietly, her head in her hands. Peng sat, silent, wanting nothing more than to provide some sort of comfort, knowing even the slightest movement would only add to her distress. It was frustrating, infuriating, to know he was powerless to do anything, for her, for the countless others of her kind who had and doubtless would experience something similar.

Had the story come from the mouth of a human girl, there'd be no end to the outrage. Investigations, trials; why, even the Emperor himself would personally condemn the perpetrators. But, coming from someone like Xiao...would any of his coworkers feel even the slightest emotion hearing such a tale? Would his neighbors or acquaintances find it in any way moving? Would they even listen?

"But then," said Xiao, her voice quieter, slightly hoarse. "But then maybe the man

gives you something nice to eat, and somewhere warm to sleep, and maybe you're still so scared but you sit down with him, and talk, and you haven't talked to someone in so long that everything just comes out all at once. And all you can really do is hope he listened, and that it means something, that he won't...hurt you again. And maybe telling him all this won't help you be any less scared but...you hope maybe it'll help him understand just how scared you are."

Silence descended again, the pair occasionally glancing at each other, looking for some indicator of what the other was thinking. Eventually, after wiping her eyes again and taking a few slow breaths, Xiao leaned forward, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Sorry," she whispered, more to herself than Peng.

It had been far more than she wanted to say, to anyone, really. But the fear and the stress had been building for days, and though she felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from her chest, all that did was just leave more room for fear. Was it too much? Would he use it against her? Would he even believe her? It wasn't like she could prove it to him. Could someone like him ever understand what it was like to be someone like her?

Say something, she thought; say something please, before I start to regret ever opening my mouth today.

"You are correct, of course," said Peng, finally breaking the silence. "I...do not, and cannot ever truly know what it is like to be you, to be so frightened, to have endured so much in such a short time. And it is true that I did not want this. I...thought that I was doing the right thing, only to find I have caused you yet more fear and suffering, to have merely exchanged one impossible situation for another."

Xiao stared at him, stammering. "If you didn't want this then...then why didn't you just...tell them to send me back home?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. I would gladly see you returned to your home; especially knowing what I know now, what you have been through. But I did not have that power, do not have that power. I do not know if anyone has that power. I had only two options, and the other was to walk away. And I just couldn't do that."

"What if you...just told them you don't want me here?" asked Xiao, a slight desperation in her voice.

"You would be taken away, to another cage, and...I can't be certain what would happen to you after that." That wasn't entirely true; he knew full well she would merely be placed in another house, become someone else's possession. And she would be stripped of her name and cease being a person, never again allowed to speak, never allowed privacy, never allowed to feel safe.

"Then I guess...I guess this is home now," she said, defeated. It was hard to say, and even harder to accept. In a way, it wasn't really all that different from any other time she'd been loaded into a truck and taken to a new home; except this time it was just her, and him, and the fear, far away from everything and everyone she'd ever known.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Xiao sighed, and looked up. "So...now what?"

"That's...up to you, really. I'm afraid I don't have much to offer; talk, food, rest."

"I need a little time to think...If that's okay?"

"Of course. Please, take all the time you need."

They both stood, glancing back and forth awkwardly across the table, Xiao nervously inching her way toward the door. Just before she reached it, Peng held up a hand and cleared his throat.

"Xiao, I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, let alone your trust, nor even for you to accept any apology; my ignorance and my actions have hurt you and from the bottom of my heart, whether you believe it or not, I am truly sorry. For all of this."

"We're...we're still being honest, right?" Xiao asked, timidly.

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to steady her nerves, her hands and voice shaking. "I want to believe you, I really do. This would be a lot easier if I could. And...I'm grateful, for the food, for a place to sleep. I'm grateful you haven't hurt me again, or tried to...do things to me."

"But you could," she continued, after a pause, motioning to her collar. "I...I know you say you won't, but you could. And unless that somehow changes, all the promises and apologies in the world don't mean anything. I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted to hear."

"Perhaps not, but I would rather you speak your mind now than live under the illusion that all is well."

"You're not mad?"

"Not at you, no. At myself, certainly, but not you." Peng forced a weak smile. "You could have remained silent, and I would have had no hope at all of understanding what you went through, what you are still going through. I would never have even known your name. It's entirely your decision, but I hope we can keep talking."

"I hope so, too. So, um...bye for now, I guess."

"Bye for now."

With that, she slipped out of the room, and Peng sighed, wandering back to the stove to begin putting away the leftover food. For the girl to have been so frightened and yet express that fear so clearly. It couldn't have been easy. She didn't belong here; she didn't deserve this. All he could do now was give her time, and hope they might eventually come to understand each other.

Xiao sat on the cold tile floor of the restroom, her back against the closed door, and shut her eyes, trying to process the unexpectedly difficult, and unexpectedly candid, conversation with the man. Rather, with Peng; she should probably try to remember his name, she thought.

Was it a 'good' conversation? She wasn't so sure; losing control and letting everything out like that aside. Could it have gone better? Probably, though she wasn't entirely certain how. Could it have gone worse? Absolutely, in more ways than she could possibly count. Her fear-driven imagination was more than prepared to conjure up any number of horrifying scenarios, prompting her to clench her teeth and try to shake them out of her head.

She really did want to believe him, though; wanted to believe he wouldn't use the collar again or make her do things she could hardly bear to think of. There'd been so many apologies. Maybe too many? At least he seemed to recognize how little they meant to her. She could only hope her words had meant more to him.

The tile of the floor was getting to be a bit too cold on her backside, so she stood,

stretched, and spent a few minutes in front of the sink, washing the dried tears off her face and a bit of leftover breakfast off her chin, the latter made almost embarrassingly obvious by the mirror. She stared at herself for a moment, her features, especially with her face wet, betraying just how frighteningly thin she knew she'd become, and she ran a hand through her hair, sighing.

Everyone on the farm, in what she was coming to think of as her 'old life', had been a bit on the skinny side as of late. Even the villagers. The soil had not been kind to them for several summers in a row, the harvests poor despite all their hard work. Several times, the uniformed men had come with big wooden crates full of rice and grain; though it never seemed to last that long, and every time they came another Hybrid left with them. Was that why she'd been taken? How many bags of rice was she worth, she wondered.

Shaking the thoughts away again, she dried her face, sitting back in front of the door again but this time with a thick fluffy towel beneath her. Hadn't it just been late summer? Why was everything in this house so cold?

She yawned, crossing her legs beneath her and closing her eyes. All those boring afternoons, planting rice, pulling weeds, lost in her own thoughts. Maybe not happy, per se, but content; every day predictable, every night quiet and safe. If she could just get that again, then maybe...just maybe.

Peng finished methodically cleaning up from breakfast, disposing of a few stray grains of rice from the table, wiping up a few stray drops of water from the stove. Despite the cost, it had been worth it to have something a little different, and, of course, to have shared it with another. Granted, that particular bit of positivity had been immensely outshined by his guest; her willingness to talk had given him hope that perhaps, given time, they could make this - whatever 'this' was - work.

Content of their conversation aside, it had been nice to simply hear the girl's - Xiao's - voice again; shaky and fearful and uncertain as it may have been, it had lacked the heart wrenching desperation present during their initial encounter, or the panic and confusion and anger of their second. She had a very pronounced rural accent, her inflections and vocabulary suggesting an origin in the foothills to the north and east; and although, at times, she seemed to struggle for or lack the correct words, she had no trouble making her thoughts and feelings known.

She was intelligent, clearly, at least as much as any other individual of her age he'd met, expressing fear and anger, yes, but also introspection, self-awareness, empathy, cynicism. He knew full well she had been utterly terrified from the moment they'd met, but to hear it expressed with such raw emotion; to hear of her experiences in her own words. As far as he was concerned, the only differences between her and any random human girl in this city were that she had fur and a tail and had endured hardships they would never know; and lacked the basic rights and dignities they took for granted.

The others in the city; they had to know, didn't they? Xiao may have been the only Hybrid he'd ever looked in the eyes but it had been so obvious from the first instant that there was something, someone behind those eyes. Surely, someone, somewhere would have looked into another pair of eyes and seen the same thing? And yet, how could he expect his peers to do what he, too, had never been bothered to do?

He had an idea on what the two could discuss next, at least. Calmly, he made his way to the living room, taking a seat in one of the two armchairs that had been angled to face partially at each other and partially at the never-used fireplace along one wall. The one he occupied was well-worn, host to many late nights of reading and deep thought; the other, nearly pristine, as though misplaced from the collection of furniture frozen in time behind the door of the large bedroom left unentered and unused for decades. Peng had considered moving it, or perhaps disposing of it, for many years, suddenly thankful for his own procrastination, hoping its likely new occupant would find it as comfortable as its last.

It could be some time before he found out, though. Xiao had started to seem a little tired at the end of their conversation, though he could hardly blame her after expending so much emotional energy. And, of course, she had much to think about. It was going to take a lot of time, and a lot of effort, and trying to speed things along could only set them back further.

Granted, there were some deadlines rapidly approaching. He would need to return to his office and his assignments before long, and he wanted to ensure Xiao would be comfortable spending her days alone in the house. Perhaps she would even prefer such days, though he also feared she would become incredibly bored and even more lonely. The house was not exactly outfitted to entertain someone of her age; there were few places to explore, fewer things to find in them. There might be an old radio somewhere, but he wasn't even sure it worked.

Beyond that, all he had were books, and he was all but certain she hadn't been taught to read. He was hoping he might help to rectify that at some point, if she were interested. Teaching a Hybrid anything beyond what was necessary to complete their assigned tasks was expressly forbidden, though teaching one to read or write were considered worthy of their own specific rules.

The contradiction between insisting Hybrids weren't capable of understanding language and the suggestion they could be taught such complex concepts was...very obvious, now that he thought about it. He idly wondered what other such glaring oversights had been right in front of his face, if only he'd thought to look. They surely wouldn't be hard to find, though now they would be impossible to ignore.

He stood again, realizing how long he'd been lost in thought, and stretched. It seemed clear that Xiao wouldn't be joining him again soon, so he made his way to the study to attempt to catch up on some work.

There was a sudden thud from the restroom at the back of the house, followed by a muffled shout of surprise, and a few moments later the door opened, revealing Xiao rubbing the back of her head. Peng looked over from his chair, having returned to it with a cup of tea after finishing his work, a concerned expression on his face.

"That sounded like it hurt. Are you alright?"

Xiao looked down at the floor sheepishly, her face slightly more red than usual. "A little; I'll be okay though. S-sorry if I kept you waiting."

"Not to worry, I had a few things I needed to catch up on." He motioned toward the empty chair, and she cautiously walked closer, looking it over, running a hand across the soft fabric.

"This...this looks really nice. Are you sure it's okay if...if I use it? I don't wanna

get fur all over it.”

“Certainly,” said Peng, smiling. “You don’t have to, of course; please, sit anywhere you like. Wherever you would feel most comfortable is fine.”

Xiao sat in the chair, as carefully as she could. It was even softer than it looked, with padded arms and thick cushions. The seat was springy, nearly wide enough for two of her, and deep enough to accommodate her tail comfortably. After having spent considerable time asleep sitting on the floor of the restroom, it was a welcome reprieve for her backside.

“I didn’t know a chair could be so...soft,” she said, squeezing the seat cushion with her hands.

“They are quite a bit more comfortable than the ones in the kitchen, to be sure. You’re welcome to use it whenever you like.”

“O-Okay, thanks,” she said. “This seems like a nicer place to talk, too.”

“Agreed. Speaking of the kitchen, it is starting to get rather late already, I’m afraid. I should probably get something to eat ready, soon.”

“Already?” Xiao looked over at the windows, the light filtering through the blinds turning a deep orange hue. She sighed and looked back to Peng.

“Sorry, I feel like all I’ve done since I got here is eat and sleep.”

Peng shook his head. “Please, don’t worry about that. You have clearly needed both, and I am happy to oblige. Feel free to relax there for a bit; I’ll let you know when dinner is ready. And perhaps afterward, if you’re feeling up to it, we could talk a bit more.”

Xiao nodded softly. “Okay, I’ll wait here, then.” She watched as Peng stood and walked to the kitchen, then leaned back in the chair, reaching down to squeeze the seat cushion a few more times.

Dinner had gone more or less as expected, with Peng setting and clearing the table, being careful not to move too quickly or too closely to Xiao. She had, of course, been amazed with the food, despite it having been their morning leftovers. With the dishes rinsed and anything uneaten stored away, the two returned to the living room chairs, albeit at slightly different times and by slightly different routes.

“Would you still like to talk for a bit?” asked Peng, glancing up at the clock. “I’ll need to get to sleep before it gets too late, but we should have plenty of time.”

Xiao slid back in the chair, tucking her legs under herself to get a bit more comfortable. Maybe it was the food, or having slept all day, or the softness of the chair, but something had managed to calm her nerves, at least for a little while.

“Yeah, let’s...let’s talk,” she said, quietly promising herself not to have another emotional meltdown this time.

Peng smiled, and thought for a moment. “If this is not something you’re comfortable talking about, that’s okay, but...could you tell me what things were like for you, before all this?”

“Oh, um...on the farm? I mean...sure, if you really want to know.”

“I would like to, yes,” he said.

“Wow, okay, um, lemme think a second.” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and began.

“I lived in a small village not too far from the mountains; you could probably walk

to them in a day if you tried. There weren't a whole lot of houses; more than I could count, but I can't really count very high so...oh, um, sorry. The barn we lived in wasn't that far from the houses, and in between was where the kids would play when the weather was nice. Human kids, I mean; I was the youngest Hybrid there.

"In the spring, once the ground had thawed, they'd hook a plow up to the old tractor to get the fields ready for planting, though if it didn't want to run, they'd have to do it by hand, and that took forever. I'd heard they used to have an ox to help out, but it either ran away, got eaten, or was taken by the uniformed men, depending on who you asked.

"Since I was too small to help with plowing, I'd usually end up planting rice seedlings in the paddies. Sometimes the kids would follow along on the path above, singing songs or asking silly questions. I think my favorite one was 'why are you orange'. They really liked my tail, too. Oh, and I was the only fox-type there. I guess there must not be that many of us, because whenever someone from outside the village passed through, they'd always say I was the only one they'd ever seen.

"Not long after everything was planted, the spring rains would come. They were always really cold, but usually not that heavy. Then once the rains stopped, it'd be summer. The biggest thing we'd have to worry about then was bringing water from the river up to the fields, and keeping an eye out for weeds or bugs or anything that could hurt the crops.

"Oh, and sometimes fleas. You did NOT want to be the one who brought fleas into the barn. Anyone who got them would have to get scrubbed with this really nasty smelling soap and sleep outside until we could be sure they were gone. Not that that was so bad; if it got too hot and stuffy at night we'd all wind up sleeping outside. Watching the moon and the stars go by. Some outsider once said there were Hybrids on the moon; everybody had a good laugh about that but I did wonder sometimes, what it would be like, to just go there and look back down here. I bet it's really pretty.

"And then it'd be autumn, and everyone would start getting ready for the harvest. They'd get the scythes nice and sharp, make sure the carts were ready, all that stuff. It was always kind of a risk waiting too long; once the autumn rains started coming in they didn't stop so everyone would have to hurry to get the harvest in before it got ruined. Those rains though; they were warmer, which was nice if you had to work in them, but they could get so heavy you could barely see anything, like someone pouring a bucket of water on your head except it just kept going for days and days.

"If the harvest was really good, sometimes there'd be a big feast, and they'd even invite all of us to eat with them and be really happy and nice. Not that anyone was ever mean to us normally, except when the uniformed men showed up. If they came after the harvest it usually meant they'd either take some of it or sometimes one of us. It was always pretty stressful for everyone. Except them, of course. They seemed to like bullying the villagers around.

"Then before long it would start to get cold. I never thought it was all that bad but there were a couple Hybrids that didn't grow winter fur and always complained about it. And the villagers, of course, though they'd just put on big heavy clothes to deal with the cold. There wasn't a whole lot to do once it started snowing, except maybe helping carry firewood. If it got too-too cold the villagers would let us sleep inside on their floors. You could hear the wind howling and the whoosh of the snow. It was probably for the

best that we didn't stay in the barn on nights like that but I could never seem to get any sleep.

"And I guess that's about it. Spring would come and we'd start it all over again."

She opened her eyes to find she'd been crying again, Peng listening intently with a sort of sad smile on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "It sounds like a very peaceful life."

"It wasn't the best," said Xiao, wiping her eyes, "but it was all we really knew, and it was good enough. Ugh, sorry...I didn't even know I was...when did I..."

"Just after the bit about fleas." Peng leaned back in his chair. "Did you ever find a good answer?"

"Answer to what?"

"Why are you orange," he replied, smiling broadly.

Xiao shut her eyes and covered her face, looking away. He'd caught her off guard with that, and it was taking all her effort not to laugh. She took a few deep breaths before opening her eyes again.

"No, I don't think I ever did."

"A shame. I wouldn't mind knowing the answer myself."

She shook her head. "One of life's greatest mysteries."

"Scholars and wisemen searching high and low, to no avail." He chuckled, watching her face; she was clearly trying very hard not to smile.

"Okay, this is getting a little silly now."

"Apologies."

"It's alright...a little silly now and then isn't so bad."

Peng nodded. "Agreed." He leaned forward again, his smile fading somewhat. "Thank you, Xiao, for sharing that with me."

She looked away. "Oh, it's...it's nothing. Thanks for listening." She let out a sort of humorless laugh. "Heh, guess that's three things I've done here. Eat, sleep, and talk about myself."

"It is appreciated, genuinely. Please remember, you're the first Hybrid I've ever really met, let alone spoken with. It has been...enlightening, to say the least."

"That's just...so strange to think about. Are things really that different here?"

"They are; though I think that is a topic best left for another time."

"Oh? Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't realize how long I'd been talking there. You need to get to sleep, right?"

"Not to worry; there's still a bit of time before I have to go for the night. Did you have anything you wanted to ask?"

Xiao leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "So much. Too much. A lot of things I'm not really sure I want to know the answer to. A lot of things I'm still too afraid to ask." She shrugged and looked back at Peng. "Lot of things that really just come down to 'why'."

Peng sighed and nodded. "Perhaps one of the most difficult questions to ask, and certainly one of the most difficult to answer."

"Yeah...yeah, I guess that's true." She paused, and shrugged again. "I don't think I can come up with anything right now though, sorry."

"That's quite alright. So long as you are willing to talk, I am willing to as well."

"Okay. Thanks again...for asking, and listening. It was...nice to revisit some of

those memories, even if, well..." She motioned toward her damp cheeks.

"Memories can certainly do that, sometimes. Shall we end there for the night?"

"Yeah, that seems like a pretty good place to stop. Talk more tomorrow?"

"I would like that very much. Good night, Xiao."

"G'night."

With that, Xiao slipped carefully out of the chair, gave Peng one last small nod, and made her way back to her makeshift bed in the closet, closing the door behind her. Peng sat for a moment longer, and eventually rose, turned off the lights, and walked up the stairs to prepare for bed.

Xiao couldn't sleep, but then, she had slept all day, so it wasn't terribly surprising to her. This could prove to be an excellent opportunity; after all, hadn't she just been thinking of getting up in the middle of the night to bathe? Or, well, something close to it, anyway.

She opened the door to the tiny room, finding the house once again dark, quiet, and still. A few moments of intense listening assured her she was the only one awake, and she crept quietly to the restroom, closing the door as slowly as possible to avoid making any noise. Lights on, she put a towel on the floor, located a washcloth, filled the sink basin, and paused once again to listen for any signs of activity in the house. She really did not want any interruptions or unexpected visitors during this.

Finally, she steadied her nerves and undressed, shivering slightly in the cold air of the restroom. Slowly and methodically, she scrubbed herself from head to toe with the washcloth, making sure to focus on the spots that had been a bit itchy. A brush would be nice right about now, she thought, draining the sink and drying herself as thoroughly as she could before quickly dressing again. Satisfied and feeling surprisingly refreshed, she hung the towels on the wall, flicked off the light, and stepped back out into the darkness.

Her eyes adjusted quickly, and there was more than enough light from the streetlamps outside to keep her from bumping into anything in the living room. With no better ideas, she made her way over to the front door again, this time peeking out to make sure the street was clear before opening the door further, and again sitting just far enough outside to get a bit of fresh air.

There was a soft, steady breeze, punctuated with brief gusts that rustled her hair, somewhat chilly on her slightly damp fur, but not enough to feel unpleasant. She closed her eyes and held her arms out to either side, letting the breeze pass through her sleeves, breathing deeply. It was a sensation she hadn't felt since...well, since before all this; another simple pleasure she'd taken for granted.

The wind seemed to be coming from a different direction tonight, bringing with it new and different sounds and smells: the distant low hum of some far-off factory; a faint whiff of car exhaust; the sour tinge of rotting garbage in a landfill somewhere. They may have been different, but none were particularly pleasant; she made a note to avoid making any more of these brief, unseen excursions when the breeze was blowing that way.

Still, it may not have been 'fresh', per se, but it was air, and while the house smelled pleasant enough inside, it could get to be a bit much. Food and water and soap and dust; if she focused too much on it, they'd mix and stack upon one another, the air

still and stale and stifling. She could probably get used to it without too much difficulty, but she liked being able to exercise her senses like this; what was the point of having ears and a nose like hers if she didn't use them once in a while?

She idly wondered just how much risk she was putting herself at by doing this. Part of her wanted to add Peng to the equation, but she was fully aware the most he'd get is a yelling at by the uniformed men; and even in the rare likelihood nothing terrible happened to her, he'd probably make her stop. But, really, it was the middle of the night, the houses were spaced some distance apart, no lights shone upon her, and in a pinch she could probably just quickly tumble backwards through the door. Besides, she would absolutely hear someone coming well before she could see them, or they could see her.

It really was just about the only thing she could do in this place, at this hour, by herself; so long as she wasn't stupid about it, she should be fine. Though she did make a mental note to ask Peng about opening one of the windows, at least for a little while, to get some air moving through. And maybe a potted plant or something.

Carefully, she turned herself sideways, leaning her back up against the door frame and looking up at the few stars still visible among the surrounding backlight of the city. This was two full days down, now; still not even as long as she'd been in the cage, at least, she thought that was the case, it had been hard to know. Accepting this as her home now was still incredibly difficult; the regular meals did help to some extent, though she still couldn't shake the fear that any given one could be the last she'd see for several days.

Forcing herself to start talking felt like it had been a good idea. That Peng seemed to actually listen to what she said helped as well; she still couldn't entirely trust that he was truly sincere in anything he did, though. He was starting to seem like less of a terrible person, though as long as that collar remained in place, he would remain a serious danger in her mind. Maybe if he'd been a traveler along the road between villages; if they'd met in more familiar territory, on her terms. Maybe then she could see his kind acts for what they were, instead of just trying to atone for hurting her, whether in the past or future.

She had to ask about it, about the collar. Wearing any sort of collar was...well, it was still pretty demeaning, but she wouldn't mind so much just having a normal one. It had felt weird not having one at all the few times hers had been temporarily removed back on the farm. The fur around her neck beneath the leather had long since worn away, the skin turned to one big calloused scar, a condition that would likely be permanent. Even if she could get this one taken off her, that fur would never grow back, and she'd probably end up wanting to wear something to cover it up.

Having had her fill of not-quite-fresh air, she gave one last look around for any signs of life before standing, stretching, and reentering the house, pushing the door closed behind her. Back in the tiny room, she curled up in a blanket and shut her eyes. Two days down, an endless number more to go. She still didn't like it here, was still horribly afraid of the collar and the man and all the terrible possibilities the two presented together; though talking had helped, at least a little. And as she'd concluded the prior night, the combination of food and shelter and quiet and cleanliness and her own little hiding spot made sticking around and seeing what happened next seem worthwhile.