

Chapter 5: Half-Humans

Matilda gazes out the dirty window of the rattletrap empty Greyhound bus and lets out a dispirited sigh. She's been stuck in this decrepit vehicle for almost eight hours. Evidently, the communication lanes out of the Wastelands are teeth-gnashingly slow, and she doesn't care much for how the System has decided to manifest the transportation.

Outside the bus, she's seen nothing but the dreary landscape that's been procedurally generating for hours. As bored as she has ever been—that she can recall—Matilda turns to regard the mercenary. He rests quietly across the aisle. So far, her closest approach to diversion has been repeatedly asking “Are we there yet?” It raises some visible annoyance on the Taciturn's part each time, but she has to admit, it's a becoming a game of rapidly-diminishing returns.

She is about give him another one when the bus comes to an abrupt halt. At the front of the driverless cabin, the passenger door opens with a wheezing, hydraulic hiss.

James rouses himself, stands and collects his gear.

“Good. We're here.”

Matilda looks at him, turns to press her face to the grimy window, and drinks in the exact same, boring yawnscape stretching infinitely in all directions. She turns back to regard him blankly.

“Um. What?”

Ignoring her, James moves up the aisle and exits the bus. Exhaling, Matilda shoulders her pack and trudges after him.

Stepping out of the vehicle, the Scry is engulfed in a strange, blinding light. When her vision finally returns, Matilda finds herself on a platform nestled on a dizzyingly-high coastal

cliff. The brilliant sun shines down onto a crystal blue ocean below, surging with white-crested waves. It is a million times better than the dry heat and gory mess they left behind in the slave camp.

Matilda blinks in awestruck wonder at the panoramic beauty swelling and crashing on the rocks below her.

“This...this is Hawaii?”

Matilda shifts the weight of her pack and absently billows her shirt above her navel in a halfhearted attempt to cool herself off.

“Is it always this humid?”

“You’ll get used to it,” James mutters.

Matilda starts to say something, and suddenly becomes aware of four statues near the platform. Even from a distance, something about their design feels sinister. James strides toward them without hesitation, but Matilda hangs back. Humanoid in design, the sculptures tower twenty feet tall. Carved from some type of tropical wood, their grotesque, exaggerated faces are more monstrous in their mien than welcoming.

Taciturn abruptly motions for Matilda to stop, but her quick scan of the cliffside reveals only the mercenary and the tall, carved figures.

“What?” she asks.

The gunslinger slowly removes his pistol from its holster—and then places it gently on the grass.

“Just give me a moment. And *don’t move.*”

A sheen of sweat forms on Matilda's face. *Humidity*, she tells herself, but as Taciturn inches his way towards the statues, she feels her stomach start to tighten.

Matilda looks down, examining the grass at her feet. Scattered among the mostly-lush greenery, Matilda notices small patches of blackened grass and scorched blast marks at her feet. She raises her gaze to the mercenary, aware all at once of the numerous singe-marks and scores of charred dirt and burnt turf all around him.

Matilda opens her mouth to speak but stops when she sees the eyes on the statues begin to glow. The knife is in her hand, just under her clothing, before she is even conscious of the fact—but something tells her this is not a situation she can solve with steel. Reluctantly, she stashes the blade back inside her clothing. The statues are intently focused on *her*. She can feel it.

She can sense the power radiating from behind those eyes. She closes her own eyes to avoid their carved-rictus scrutiny.

Matilda can feel something forming in her throat. A warning, or a scream. She—

“Hey, come on. Stop fooling around.”

Opening her eyes, Matilda spots James, standing well past the statues. He beckons her forward. Hesitantly, she runs to catch up, deliberately navigating around the blackened spots.

Up close, the towering, many-faced poles are even more frightening—larger than life. Gaping mouths reveal rough-sawn rows of jagged wooden teeth. Exaggerated, wide-eyed facial features make the statues appear more alien than human. Matilda realizes she has been holding her breath, and greedily takes in great lungfuls of air as she crosses into the clearing beyond, leaving the hideous sculptures behind.

She does not look back. “What the hell are those things?”

James tilts his head.

“They’re the Guardians of the Ohana. The islands’ defense system.”

James gestures to the lush, tropical landscape around them.

“They protect the last bastion for half-humans, idealists, and anyone else curious enough to merge their minds with the machine...”

“Um...even without freaking amnesia, everything you just said was total gibberish.”

James stops and turns to face her.

“The Ohana is the network of islands separated from the main hub of the digital world. This isolated region is mostly populated by replicants—autonomous routines that have absorbed too many emotions and memories from human entities in the Cyberside.”

Matilda pauses and considers the Taciturn. For a guy who supposedly likes to keep quiet, he sure has a habit of rambling on sometimes – especially when it comes to explaining how things work. At least, she reflects, most of what comes out of his mouth is interesting. She wonders how much of that can be chalked up to losing all your memories beyond the last three months or so. “How did some software absorb *emotions*?”

James clears his throat, a sign that he’s preparing to pontificate. Matilda finds herself smiling. The Taciturn has probably kept quiet for a lot of his life. It must have been difficult.

“See, what happened is, when the System went online, it populated the Cyberside with a slew of AI bots—to make the whole transition easier, or at least that was the idea. The goal was to make this world feel alive, dynamic. They were called 'NPCs'—'non-player characters'. It's all from the video-gaming roots of the System. Their functionality was focused on manufacturing and entertainment purposes. Primitive in their initial scope, NPCs

were limited to very basic AI.” For an instant, the expression on his face becomes unreadable.

“But designed to look exactly like humans.”

James resumes walking inland. Matilda follows, a pace behind him.

“So, they’re not human.”

She can’t see James’ face from behind. But she can hear the change in his voice.

“Not exactly...well...not at first. As time passed, their neural networks grew to understand—well, mimic—human emotions. The more they observed us, the better they became at simulating human behavior.”

Matilda considers her time in Homestead.

“They looked like humans, but were different. So, let me guess. People didn’t like them. If the replicants had to move here, I’m gonna guess that things didn’t go so well for them in the rest of the Cyberside.”

Taciturn points to a small structure ahead, but doesn’t slow his pace.

“Well, you’re not too far from the truth. After Humanity’s mass migration to the Cyberside, things began to change. Bots began to interact with people beyond the protocols of their initial coding. People settled into their new home, started sharing information with the NPCs around them. It didn’t take long before somebody wanted to merge their code with a replicant. So they could...”

Matilda catches up, walking abreast of him.

“Could what?”

James tries to hide it, but Matilda can see his cheeks turning bright red.

“Uh...you know. They... erm.”

Matilda wonders if all Taciturns are this strange.

Clearing his throat, James continues.

“Let’s just say they became intimate. He gave some of his coding to her, and she became a little bit more human. It went beyond the physical. I mean—the engineer was effectively giving the machine a soul, if you will. Once the process was discovered, it wasn’t long before others followed suit. More and more of the System’s NPCs started feeling. Seeking knowledge outside their parameters. Questioning their directives.”

As they near the structure, Matilda can see that it’s some sort of kiosk next to a paved parking lot. The Taciturn continues explaining as they approach.

“People started calling them 'replicants' as a derogatory term. Conflict was inevitable.”

Matilda’s knowledge of engineering is limited, but she frowns at the statement just the same.

“As written programs, they shouldn’t be able to attack their creators. How could there really be a 'conflict'? Wouldn't that be kind of—?” She makes a hammering gesture with her fist.

She notices James’ own fist, clenching and unclenching – a funny thing he seems to be doing more and more often lately, possibly without realizing it.

“You’re right. It *was* one-sided. Surviving replicants left humanity to its downward spiral. They rewrote part of the System’s code and left with the few humans that were on their side – those smart enough to realize what was coming to the rest of the Cyberside. Together, the replicants and humans created a haven using the memories of those they had—
“ —he only hesitates a moment— “ — interfaced with. The Ohana is a paradise off the grid

from the major Locales, only accessible to those who have been granted access. They're extremely protective of their home, but they're still bound by the coding that prohibits them from harming humans. To get around the Asimov Laws the few humans that came with them actually built the defense system. It protects them from all unwanted outsiders."

Matilda looks back at the four statues in the distance. Reflects on the charred divots and scoring in the grass.

"Well, it's a good thing you had access."

James nods his head.

"Yes. Thankfully, Stephen made sure I can come and go as I please. I just had to convince them about you."

As they approach the kiosk, Matilda nibbles the inside of her cheek and wonders what the Taciturn had to say to 'convince' them. She doubts they have ever had any Scry visitors.

At the kiosk, Matilda watches as James pushes a few buttons on the display, cycling through car selections. She pounces on the mention of 'Stephen'.

"Okay, so this Stephen character. How exactly can your buddy help us? Is he like a warrior-monk or something? Are we here to train with the Master, who lives here in exile?"

One of the benefits of spending this much uninterrupted time with the Taciturn is learning how best to push his buttons. And he has a lot of buttons.

Sure enough, James turns around to stare at her. Matilda smiles and shrugs.

"What? I was hiding in an abandoned comic book store waiting for more of Donovan's goons to show up. Had to pass the time somehow."

Her smile widens as James shakes his head. She continues.

“I just don’t understand why we can’t go to this Babylon place right away.”

Settling on a car choice, James pushes a button. In a nearby parking space, a convertible materializes out of the humid, breezy air. Matilda squints from the sun’s reflection on the immaculate white paint. The roof automatically retracts as James approaches the vehicle. “This is bigger than just a bunch of slavers. Donovan basically controls Babylon, and charging head first into his fortress is a one-way ticket.”

As she trails behind him, Matilda starts stabbing the air with her hands. “I don’t know, that’s always worked for me before.”

Before opening the driver door, James gives Matilda a rare, genuine smile.

“Use only that which works, and take it from any place you can find it.”

Matilda stops her imaginary attack and looks at James, “I don’t get it.”

Grabbing the handle, Taciturn says, “Never mind. Forgot who I was talking to.”

As he slides into the driver’s seat, Matilda jumps over the passenger side door.

“Look, we’re going to have to play this smart. We’ll need a disguise to walk around Babylon, and the replicants make the best. That’s why we’re going to see Stephen. He’s an old friend of mine, and he’ll help us.”

With the push of a button, the car rumbles to life. As they exit the parking lot, Matilda lets her hair down. James seems to know where he’s going, taking them along a winding coastal road. The cool ocean breeze is refreshing.

“So, this friend of yours--you met him in the Cyberside?”

Matilda notices James’ hand tighten on the steering wheel.

“No...it was long before all of this.”

They continue to ride in silence. The island's beauty strikes her anew around every curve in the road. She imagines how pleasant life must be here. How different things would be if she had woken up here instead of Homestead.

Taciturn drives as stoically as ever. For a man about to visit an old friend, Matilda finds him rather grim. Turning her attention back to the ocean, Matilda can only guess what's going on inside the mercenary's head.

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At lunch time, the Fall Water Lake cafeteria is like an ant colony. There are just too many people stuck in crunch, and frankly not enough time to waste eating. There was a time when everyone had his or her own schedules and eating practices until HR passively-aggressively reminded everyone that the one-hour lunch break was mandatory. Now, everyone rushes to waste their hour waiting in line. Just another example of HR's sterling good intentions. James suspects productivity has likely taken a huge hit, rather than seeing the increase which was presumably the point.

All James wants to do is to eat his food and get back to work as quickly as he can. That is, until he notices Stephen, his friend and project manager. Stephen waves his hand and motions for James to sit next to him.

“What's going on, buddy? What'd you grab from the line?”

James sits down to see Stephen's tray loaded with a variety of food and drink, all of the major Coding House food groups represented. Grease. Salt. Sugar. Caffeine.

“Oh, a sandwich huh? Me, I'm starving. Overslept after staying late last night. Only had time for coffee and cigarettes.” Stephen laughs between bites, and with each laugh pieces

of fried chicken fly out of his full mouth. “But I’m preaching to the choir, aren’t I? I’m pretty sure you’ve replaced your blood with Red Bull, by this point.”

Grinning, James starts the arduous task of forcing nutrients back into his body.

Undeterred by his silence, Stephen continues, “So how’s Sarah?”

“Good,” James lies as he starts to eat.

He hasn’t been on good terms with his wife since he started the most recent crunch cycle. Every argument eventually leads back to the point that he spends no time with his family. Taking up the staff of comradely lunch break chitchat, James asks, “How’s Helen?”

“Great,” Stephen lies in return. Both know better than to push the issue. Though Stephen’s tone is upbeat, James can see the same exhaustion creeping in behind his friend’s eyes. He looks around the buzzing, chaotic lunchroom. Fall Water Lake doesn’t need to be reminded to take its lunch breaks. It’s consistently eating away at its employees. Breakfast, lunch or dinner, it never misses a meal.

Steven shovels a handful of fries into his mouth and asks James to pass the salt. “I’m not gonna lie, James.”—and suddenly the upbeat, optimistic mask is gone. “This whole thing is really starting to piss me off.”

James stops, mid-bite. This side of Stephen rarely comes out.

“This company, man. They think free lunch makes up for everything they do to us. I’ll gladly pay for plate of fucking chicken if it means I can go home at night. I swear to God, I’m this close to grabbing my family, leaving this whole shitty city, and...”

James sits in awkward silence and listens to his friend vocalize a feeling that everyone at the company has running through their heads on a daily basis. Visibly agitated, feeding on his own frustration, Stephen continues.

“...I was going to say, ‘get some fresh air’, but it’s not like there’s any *left*. ” Steven looks down at his tray of foodlike substances. “Anyways, I gotta get my progress report to Scott by end of day. So just send me your projections when you get back.”

The friends spend the rest of their meal in silence.