

One Moment Of Bright Intensity

A Chung Kuo story set in the year 2196

by David Wingrove

She stood there, among the bowing maids, waiting to be assigned. There were a thousand of them gathered there in GenSyn's Great Hall, maybe more, though she had never thought to make such a calculation; had never considered what existed beyond the backs of those who stood in front of her; maids like herself, each dressed identically.

Life for her was a haze. It always had been, from the moment they had lifted her from the vats, the amniotic fluid dripping from her limbs. A succession of unmarked moments, leading to this place. It was not to be questioned. Why should it be? Hers was a life of functionality. Of directed purpose. There was no room in it for questions; no space allocated in her long working days for any concept of self.

And so she waited, as the men – GenSyn creations all, of a much higher mental level; creatures that could think and reason and remember – went from row to row, handing out their allocated tasks, going about their business as if this were just another day.

Only this day *was* different. Today they had a guest, come to see around the massive GenSyn plant. Not that she was in any fashion curious. Why should she be? How could the Great Man's presence here affect *her* in any way? Not that she even began to wonder who he was and what he was doing there. No. If she had been a statue she would have showed the same disinterest. The same... *nullity*. After all, she was just a GenSyn maid, created in the vats, the GenSyn logo – a capital G with a smaller S inside – imprinted into the pale flesh of her neck.

Were one curious about such matters, one would have found that she had a name: Li, meaning "bright" or "quick-witted", though that might seem to infer that her name had any more significance than the registration number she had been given on emergence. It did not. The name was merely a handle, so that when she was spoken to – to be given some new order possibly – she would know it was she who had been summoned and not another.

A handle, then, and no irony intended. For who would care to make such a joke? To whom would it matter?

It was certainly of no interest to the Great Man himself, who had by now made his way down several rows, staring into a hundred vacuous faces, each one identical, until he came to her. Standing there in his full length silks, beneath the hot lights of the Hall, sweat rolling down his forehead, his fan moving with an agitated motion, it was clear that he had seen enough.

“These six,” he grumbled irritably, using the fan to indicate the maids directly in front of him, she among them. “Have them delivered to the Solarium. My son will settle with you.”

“But my lord...” the Senior Steward began, meaning to show him other models, only to be cut off by the old man’s glare.

“By this evening.” He paused, then. “They *are* trained for the task?”

The Steward bowed low. “But of course, my lord. To the highest level of performance. Though we shall, of course, send a supervisor with the girls. To make sure things run as smoothly as possible.”

“At your expense...”

The Steward’s smile was like a grimace. “Why, of course, Excellency. I’ll draw up the contract myself.”

The old man smiled. “Good. Then we are done here.” And, with a swish of silks, he turned away, his sickly sweet perfume wafting across to her. While he had been speaking the words had penetrated her hearing, like bars of molten iron cooling in the air. They seemed to glow and then were gone, not to be recalled.

It was not always so. For some tasks she needed recollection. Needed the power to remember what had been asked of her. But there were drugs for that. Short term ‘boosters’ which, for an hour or two, gave her the sharpness that the task required.

And now?

A hand grasped her arm, pulling her upright. “Come,” they said, turning her to the left and giving her a push. “It seems the Great Man’s chosen you.”

But he was talking to himself. Li had already forgotten. She shuffled on, head down, following her sisters, the haze gathered thickly about her, the silence pressed close to the inside of her skull, like a thick layer of insulation.

* * *

The Great Man’s sons had come an hour later, the eldest of them signing the contract in his father’s name, while the younger sons took one of the maids into one of the big storage cupboards, out of view of the cameras, and fucked her.

“Like fucking a rag doll,” Third Son said, lacing up his breeches.

"That is just so true," said Second Son, looking thoughtfully at the maid where she lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling. "They should give them more spirit. Make them more adventurous. Like the *Hsueh* that GenSyn used to make. Now *they* could fuck!"

Third son grinned at the memory. "You want to go again?"

But Second Son shook his head. "Best not. Father's anxious for some reason. Let's get them back, then maybe we can have them later, when they're off call. That is, if you're not put off."

"A fuck's a fuck," Third Son said, clambering back into the storage cupboard and lifting the maid over his shoulder like a sack of rice. "And besides, there are drugs. You know... to make them more aware."

Second Son nodded. "More aware and less compliant. But come... let's be dutiful sons now to the old man. I'll wager he's trying to impress someone with these girls. And if he's pleased..."

He didn't need to say more.

* * *

It was as if the room took shape about her, forming from the haze itself, the furniture of the room slowly taking on sharp lines and jagged edges. And with it words, that sizzled and whipped about the room, half whisper and half crackle, though who was to tell what was in the room and what simply in her head. There were others there. Five of her sisters for a start, and as she looked about her, so the door across from her opened and a man entered. A small man with a shining bald pate. A Han. But then all of them were Han.

"Ah... Li. You're awake already."

She slowly looked about her, trying to make out who he was addressing, then realised it was herself. The thought of it was strange.

"Don't get anxious now," the man said, coming over to where she sat, his closeness threatening her, making her look away. "You won't be harmed."

Only she had just realised she was bound at wrist and ankle. She could not have fled if she had wanted to. Though why she would have wanted to was beyond her. It was more of a feeling than an imperative. An instinct, she would have called it, were her vocabulary more than a basic five hundred words.

Beside her another of the girls had 'woken', with a yawn and a sudden start, a look of panic in her eyes.

The bald man raised his voice. "Tsang! ... Desist!"

To which Tsang made a kind of bow, her chin tucked in to her chest, her whole manner like that of a child who has been scolded.

Li mimicked her stance. Not that she understood why, but it seemed to placate the man. Besides, to be obedient was in her bones.

One by one they woke, until all six sat there, like peas in a pod, hunched in their chairs, eyes averted, awaiting his instructions.

“Yours is an important task,” the man – Master Gong he was called, she vaguely remembered – began. “So you must do whatever is asked of you. You begin in an hour, so before then I will run through with you what is required. It’s nothing you haven’t done before, so... we’ll just be reminding ourselves, neh?”

If he expected an answer, he’d have been disappointed, only it was clear he didn’t, and as he ran them through the preparations so the girls slowly unwound and relaxed. They *had* done all of this before. And yes, it *did* come back to them now. Only...

Only nothing. They were GenSyn maids, and their duty was to obey. It was in their bones.

* * *

“Your pass, sir?”

Pi Ch’ien, Third Secretary to Junior Minister Yang, glanced up at the camera, noting as he did the slow, smooth movement of the overhead trackers, the squat, hollowed tongues of their barrels jutting from the mouths of stylized dragons. Bowing low he took the card from his robe and inserted it into the security slot. Placing his face against the moulded pad in the wall, he held his left eye open against the camera lens. Then he stepped back, looking about him.

He had never been into one of the Imperial Solariums before. Even as district magistrate, responsible for the lives of twenty thousand people in his deck, he had lacked the status to enter such a place. Now, however, as third secretary to Yang Lai, he had been permitted to place his name on the list. But the list was a list, like all the others in this world – interminable. It would be many years and several more promotions before he would find himself inside for reasons of leisure.

The outer doors slid back and he made to go through.

An armed guard barred his way, indicating with his gun that Pi Ch’ien should go into the ante chamber to his left. With a bow Pi Ch’ien did as he was bid. Inside, in front of a vast, brightly-coloured tapestry that filled the whole of the back wall, an official sat at a desk. The man scanned the screen in front of him, then looked up, smiling.

“Good evening, Third Secretary Pi. I am First Steward Huong. Might I ask the purpose of your visit?”

Pi Ch’ien bent his head respectfully.

“Greetings, First Steward Huong. I have but a trivial message to deliver. For His Serene Excellency, Junior Minister Yang Lai. Ten thousand pardons for imposing on you like this, for it is a matter of the least urgency.”

He looked up, holding out the almost translucent message card for the Steward’s inspection. Both men knew it was immensely important.

“Forgive me, Third Secretary Pi, but might I have that?”

Again Pi Ch'ien lowered his head. "My deepest apologies, First Steward Huong. Nothing would please me more than to oblige you, but I am afraid that is not possible. I was instructed to place the message, unimportant as it is, only into the hands of the most illustrious Junior Minister himself."

Steward Huong stood, then came round the desk to stand before Pi Ch'ien. "I understand, Third Secretary Pi. We are but our masters' hands, neh?" He smiled again, all courtesy now. "If you would be so kind as to permit me, I shall inform the Junior Minister."

Pi Ch'ien bowed, feeling a pang of disappointment. He was not to go inside, then?

"Please, follow me, Third Secretary," the Steward said, making the slightest bow, his head barely lowered as befitted their relative positions. "Junior Minister Yang is with the Minister himself and may not be disturbed at once. However, I will have a maid come and serve tea for you while you wait."

Pi Ch'ien bowed again, delighted by the courtesy he was being shown. He followed the official out and down a wide, high-ceilinged corridor, on the walls of which hung a series of huge *shanshui* landscape paintings, depicting ragged peaks and pleasantly wooded valleys.

Where the corridor turned he had a brief glimpse of another, more ornate passageway lined with bronze statues of gods and dragons, and, at its end, a huge, brightly-lit chamber – the solarium itself. They walked on until they came to a small but plushly decorated room, hung with colourful tapestries.

First Steward Huong turned to him and smiled, indicating that he should enter and take a seat. "Please be assured, I will keep you no longer than I must, Third Secretary. The maid, meanwhile, will see to all your needs." Then, with a bow, he was gone.

Almost at once a maid entered from a door to one side. She was wearing powder blue er-silks with a pattern of tiny yellow sunflowers. Smiling, she set down the tray she was carrying on a low table at Pi Ch'ien's side, then knelt and bowed low to him. Straightening up, she poured the *ch'a* and offered it to him, her eyes averted. He took the cup, studying her closely. She was a pretty little thing, her skin almost white, her dark, fine hair tied with silk ribbons of blue and yellow. He looked down at her feet and saw, with satisfaction, how petite she was.

"You would like something else, sir?"

He leaned forward and gently drew back the hair to reveal her neck. It was as he had thought. There was a small circular mark low down on the left hand side of the neck, close to the collarbone. A capital G with a smaller S inside, the letters English, but the style – the brushwork of the design – pure Han. She was GenSyn. Artificial.

He hesitated, not knowing how long the Junior Minister would be, nor what etiquette prevailed here. Then he remembered the First Steward Huong's words. *The maid will see to all your needs.* Screwing up his courage, he told the girl to close the door.

As she turned to face him again, he beckoned her back. Then, making her bow before him, he opened the front of his cloak and drew her head down into his naked lap.

“Here, girl. See to me.”

* * *

Back in the servants’ quarters, Li stood over the sink, washing the taste of him from her mouth. It was not something she did that often. Not now, anyway. Not since Master Luo had been promoted to the Zoo. Luo had been a bad man. A sadist, though she didn’t know the word for what he was. But that was how this world was, and she at the very bottom of the pile.

Finished, she stared at herself in the mirror for a time, intrigued to find herself there on the other side, staring back. That, too, made her feel strange. The doubleness of things. And when she turned and looked back at the others, there she was again. And again. And again.

For a moment she felt she was going to faint. But then it came back clearly. His face. And the pained look as he had come.

“Li...”

She turned, looking to Gong Fan, then quickly bowed her head. “Yes, Master Gong?”

“You have a new assignment, Li. I want you to take this down to the Hub. For the attention of Master Shen.”

And he handed her a note, sealed into a silk white envelope with a blob of red wax. Wax that had dried, the imprint of Gong Fan’s chop – mirrored on the ring on the second finger of his right hand – captured in that blood-red surface.

She stared at it a moment, and then back at him.

“Well?” he said. “Is there a problem?”

There wasn’t. She bobbed her head then turned away, heading for the lifts.

* * *

She was sixty levels down when the Solarium went up, a wave of concussion passing through the cage and shaking it violently, throwing her to the floor. For several seconds it continued to descend, then ground to a halt. Everything went black.

The lift had been half full. Now, with bodies lying everywhere, it felt packed. Li lay still for a moment, listening to the groans and coughs. It wasn’t silent, but it was eerily quiet. Someone was lying across her legs, while her face was pressed against the warm surface of the floor, tiny pieces of grit making her cheek feel pitted.

No one knew what had happened, but now voices called out, close but strangely distant. Voices calling for help. Others just groans. One woman, close to her in the darkness, was sobbing now.

Li continued to lie still. What could she do, after all? Merely add to the confusion. And besides, no one had told her what to do. She had no guidelines for such an event as this. What worried her was

whether she still had the envelope. It had been in the inside pocket of her *chi pao*, but with her arms pinned she could not check if it were there still. All she could do was wait.

Someone was keening now, making this odd, staccato noise that was like an animal in pain. Yet even as that registered, the lift juddered and, slowly, ever so slowly, began to descend again, as if it were being winched. Someone moved nearby, adjusting their position, and her face was suddenly free. She had the urge to raise her hand to her face, only her limbs remained pinned.

Thirty, maybe forty seconds passed and then the lift stopped again, the doors hissing open, the emergency lighting of the hallway outside picking out the great heap of bodies in silvered outline. And then, suddenly it seemed, soldiers were dragging people from the lift, making no concessions for broken limbs or other injuries, merely clearing the lift so they could use it. Li felt a body pulled from on top of her and then, a second or two later, someone grabbed her roughly and half lifted, half dragged her out into the hallway, dumping her against the wall.

Easing herself up into a sitting position, she watched as the soldiers cleared the last few bodies from the lift, then clambered in and, without a word of instruction, went up-level, the doors hissing shut behind them.

And now she could smell it. Burning. It grew stronger by the moment, as if the whole world was on fire. The smell assaulted her senses, making her nose tickle and the hairs on her arms and neck rise up. And there were echoes now. Each sound had its shadow noise, and underneath it all a ringing tone, the singular signal of a malfunctioning machine.

She reached inside her pocket and felt the faintest relief that it was still there, her fingers tracing the wax seal, feeling how it contrasted against the smoothness of the silken paper.

The Hub, she thought. *I must get to the Hub*. But how? It was chaos here, as people staggered to their feet and tried to make sense of what was happening. Anxious, angry voices rang out, bickering now, each with its echo, like some madhouse in her head.

Li sat back, closing her eyes. She would wait. Waiting was what she was good at. Orders would come. Orders always came.

Only this once they didn't. This once...

She pulled herself up, fighting the weakness in her limbs, and for a moment stood there, hunched, one hand keeping her balance against the wall while she got back her strength. What had happened to her? Was she damaged? In that half-light it was hard to tell. And besides, it surely did not matter. All that mattered was that she delivered the letter to Master Shen.

By now officials had arrived, probably from the local *Hsien*. But there were only four or five of them to deal with what must have been fifty or sixty people, and so, Master Gong's instructions echoing in her head, she slipped away, shuffling forward, her head bowed, her eyes averted. She would cross Main, find the lift on the far side and see if that were still working, and go down. Because that was all that mattered. To do as she'd been told. To deliver the letter to the hands of Master Shen.

She hurried on, her head filled with echoes and the smell of burning.

* * *

She was asleep, lying there on her cot among the maids, row after identical row of them, when they came.

For a moment or two the three men stood there, at the foot of her bed, as they checked and double-checked that this was the model they had come for. Then, and only then, did they wake her.

Eyes like a startled child, she sat up, looking about her. Then, seeing that Master Gong was one of them, she bowed her head, waiting to be told what to do.

“Come, girl,” he said, as if flustered by her nakedness in front of the two officials. “Throw this on. Someone wants to see you.”

That someone turned out to be a Major in Security; a stern-looking *Hung Mao* with close cropped hair. He sat behind the desk in a large room she had never been inside before.

“Is this her?”

Master Gong bowed low. “This is the one, Excellency.”

“And she will answer any question I put to her?”

“Yes, Excellency. Those she can remember the answer to, anyway. This model... “

The Major raised a hand. Master Gong fell silent.

“Can we not do better than this, Master Gong?”

Gong hesitated, conscious of the officer’s eyes on him. “There is a procedure, Excellency. A means of memory enhancement. Only... “

“Only what?”

Gong swallowed, deeply uneasy now. “It has risks. And for what little the maid is likely to know...”

The Major raised his hand once more, and once more Gong fell silent.

“This procedure... can it be done right now?”

“It can, Excellency, but...”

“No buts. We are talking about the death of a Minister. Do what is necessary and do it now.”

* * *

She lay there, perfectly placid, as the technician shaved a small area of her skull, applied the wires and then administered the drug. Master Gong, watching from the control room nearby, felt his unease grow by the second. This was not something they did that often – barely at all, in fact – so they did not know how successful it would be. But he had his doubts. These simpler GenSyn models weren’t designed for higher function activity. At best they were machines. Machines of flesh. Not really real. And for what paltry information they were likely to get from her, it would be a shame – a

wasteful shame – to lose her. Because that was all they were likely to achieve. Not that Security cared. They had a job to do and were under pressure to come up with results. One GenSyn maid meant very little in their reckoning.

No. It saddened him, but it would be hard to ‘trust’ her after this. What with the chemical imbalances they’d create in her head. But so it was. So it had to be. In all likelihood they would have to scrap her; to return her to the vats and write off the loss.

And that was a shame, because these particular models had so sweet a nature.

“Is it done?” the Major asked, from where he sat before the big screen.

Gong looked to the technician, who nodded.

“It is, Excellency.”

“Good. Then let’s get cracking. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

* * *

The first thing she noticed were the sounds, echoing out from the whiteness that surrounded her. Sounds which, as understanding came to her again, reminded her of words.

And then the whiteness peeled back, melting away to leave a sharp – almost painfully sharp – memory.

A room. A tray. And a man, seated in a chair.

Only it was odd, because these things seemed unattached. They were like unconnected islands in her consciousness. Normally she would not have attempted to connect them, but something had changed in her. Now she found herself trying to connect one with the other. To make sense of them.

The tray, for instance. She could see now how the two tiny cups rested on its surface. Their delightful lavender colour. The way the steam rose in a tiny swirl from the pouring spout of the *chung*. And at the same time she could smell the *ch’a*, discern the faint lemony scent of it. Taste it almost on her palette.

But even as she made these connections, so something distracted her. Echoes, as before. Only this time they seemed to form a solid shape in the air about her.

Words...

“So... This messenger... What did you do for him?”

The words were a key that turned the lock. “His cock...” she began, then blushed deeply.

“What about his cock?”

“The taste of it...” She closed her eyes and shuddered, experiencing it as if for the first time. “See to me, girl,” she said, mimicking the man perfectly.

“Good,” the voice said, warmer now, pleased by what he’d heard. “Now tell me all of it. Everything he did and everything he said.”

* * *

Li woke, knowing that she was there again, among the rows of sleeping maids. Only something was odd. Laying there, her eyes open, staring up into the darkness, she could see down, as if suspended from the ceiling. Could see, from her elevated plane, each row of sleeping girls; could make out their individual forms in the darkness, as if they were sketched in a darkness darker than the dark. And how could that be?

And now she remembered how it had been before she had stepped over. Before she had come fully awake. It was a dream, though she didn’t have a name for it. Didn’t because she had never dreamed before.

A house. She had been inside a house, its flesh-coloured corridors snaking this way and that; some leading up, some down; some brightly lit, others deeply shadowed.

She had been alone in the house. Locked in. Or so she’d felt. She could not be sure. For the house had no doors. Or none that she could find.

No doors... and no windows either. Only a single, full length mirror. She had stood before it, studying herself. Wondering.

Wondering what? That she didn’t know. Whatever it was, she had left it behind, in the house, along with the thick leather-bound book and the scarlet feather.

Li yawned and tried to sit up, only a pair of thick leather straps about her chest and upper legs restrained her. She reached down, searching for the buckle. Finding it, she freed the strap, feeling it fall away, then sought the belt that was about her chest and did the same.

She sat up.

Cameras were trained on her. In a room nearby, she knew, four guards were sitting beneath a bank of screens, playing cards, the screens ignored. For an instant she wondered how she knew that, then saw herself – in the past – carrying in a tray of *ch’a* for them.

See to me, girl...

The words were like a flash of lightning in her skull. Li let it settle, then, swivelling about, she slipped from the bed and, naked as a newborn, padded softly, quickly, down her row and out, pushing through the great flap, into the half-lit corridor outside, glimpsing the guards as she passed by, unnoticed by them.

Out. The lift ahead of her.

* * *

Cho Ye set his bag down on the side, then looked about the lab, noting the three new admissions that lay on the slabs on the far side of the spacious room. It was early and he was alone.

Master Cho was one of GenSyn's leading technicians. His job was to repair faulty creatures; to find out what had gone wrong with them and, if it were possible, put it right. Or feed them to the ovens. But he didn't like to do that. Not unless they were already dead. And that was why the Eberts paid him so handsomely. Because, invariably, he came up with answers. And that saved GenSyn and the Eberts a great deal of money. And trouble.

The three files lay on his desk in their plastic folders. Cho poured himself a cup of ice cold water then went across, picking up the first of them.

It was a model HG24. As standard as they came. He walked over to the slabs and, matching the code number to the file, studied the still, pale creature for a moment.

He could tell at a glance what had happened without even looking at the file. This one had suffered what they called a 'burn out'. Some bored rich lady had ridden the poor creature to death. Or as good as. Maybe his master, too, by what was inferred here. And they wanted a replacement. Gratis.

He looked down into the dead creature's face and sighed. He'd been designed to resemble a male human of twenty four years, but this one looked fifty, if he was a day. They had probably deprived it of sleep, night after night. Not that it would have suffered. No. GenSyn's creatures were incapable of suffering. It wasn't written into their wiring. Only at some cellular level it had rebelled against its use. Rebelled and – as was the way of things – had gone bad. Gene rot, they called it, though it was far from that simple. And as for a replacement...

There was no way he'd allow another of their products to be handed over to these customers.

The second – a BHS36 - had clearly been killed. Whether for fun or in a fit of anger he couldn't tell – yet. But this was most definitely *not* an accident, as the customers were claiming. He would know precisely how the creature had died when he'd done a post-mortem. Though how one could give a post-mortem to something that was never ever truly alive, always struck him as a sad irony.

Back in the earliest days of GenSyn, almost all of the creatures had possessed full self-awareness. Only there were problems with that. A more than healthy number of them had suffered from a debilitating form of angst and had experienced violent, suicidal urges. Quite a number of them had actually succeeded in killing themselves. But not this one. This was a brutal murder.

Only it wasn't. Because you couldn't murder a GenSyn product. GenSyn's creatures were property, plain and simple, for all their cleverness, their elegant pretence.

That said, he could use GenSyn's financial might to sue the arses off these people.

Which brought him to the third of them.

Cho turned, and almost jumped out of his skin. The corpse had sat up and was staring at him.

"Where am I?"

For a second or two he was speechless. He had never had one come back to life on him. Although with a model of this simplicity...

Cho shook his head. "You can't... I mean..."

Unexpectedly, she interrupted him. Another first.

"I was sleeping. And then I woke. They found me by the lift, you know. Huddled up and naked, and one of them..." She hesitated, as if she didn't know the word, then smiled. "He stuck a needle in me."

"Injected," Cho said. Only he knew that wouldn't be in her vocabulary. And maybe that wasn't what she meant. "Did they think you were dead?"

"Who?"

"Whoever sent you here..."

Then, realising he had the file in his hand, he opened it and began to read.

"Is that about me?"

He looked up. Saw how she was looking at him, curiosity in her eyes. Which was wrong. She was a model SM16, after all. There were footstools with more awareness than that model.

He put the file aside and went over to her, her eyes following his every movement.

"Did you think I was dead? I did. When I woke here on the slab..."

She stopped, as if switched off, the life slowly fading from her eyes. A robot? He wondered. Had someone infiltrated GenSyn with androids?

Only a moment later she was back.

"Where were you?" he asked. "Where did you go?"

She smiled. A very pretty smile, not at all like the smile of a regularly functioning SM16.

"Into the house. That's where I live now. When I'm not here, that is. And where *am* I... exactly?"

Exactly. That was another word she oughtn't to have known. She would have heard it, of course, when she was waiting, or cleaning or whatever it was she did, but she wouldn't have learned it. It wouldn't have been in her basic vocabulary.

"You're in GenSyn's central labs. And I'm Cho Ye. I'm senior technician here."

And? Cho shook his head again, as if to clear it. What in the gods' names was he doing, explaining himself to a low grade model? According to the books, she shouldn't even be able to remember any of this.

Unless she'd malfunctioned.

Yes, but how? What could possibly bring one of their maid models to life? Was it a drug? Or had they – by some freakish accident - tapped in to another level?

Maybe. Only there wasn't supposed to be another level. Not beyond the simple command and serve levels they sometimes induced in them. Nothing like this, anyway. This was... well, it was almost human.

"Look," he said. "Let's start at the beginning. Who are you? And what were you doing, naked by the lifts?"

To which she laughed. Yes, she actually laughed.

Impossible, he thought. *Simply impossible*.

* * *

That evening, as she prepared for bed, she looked about her at the others. They were all so docile. So obedient. It made her want to scream. Controlling that urge, she ducked into one of the big towel cupboards and, hiding there, waited for them to go to sleep. It didn't take long. Then, making sure no camera caught her image, she went down again. Only this time she did not stay there near the lift. This time she slipped out. Out of the GenSyn complex and into the world of levels.

It was not her first time outside. As a maid she had often served outside the great Bremen complex. But this was the first time she had done it while she was aware.

Aware. Cho Ye had said the word several times, and she had had him explain it to her. Which he had, in a kind of way.

She was awake now. Alert. Watchful. And something more. Something each of those words just didn't approach. And now, having stepped through, she was more aware than she had ever been. More...

Li stared, astonished, at the woman who had just passed her by, her child tucked like a sack of rice over her shoulder, its tiny thumb tucked into its mouth. And as she saw it, so her womb seemed to contract and she felt a pain she had never experienced before. She *wanted* a child. Wanted one more than she had ever wanted anything. Not that that said much. In fact, standing there she realised she had never, before that moment, wanted *anything*. But now she did.

She stumbled on, unaware of the cameras tracking her every movement.

Aware. What a glorious pain it was to be aware.

* * *

Cho Ye studied her through the one-way mirror, seeing how her eyes flitted about the empty cell, trying to fathom what it meant.

Security had swept her up and thrown her in a cell much like the one she was in now. Realising she was GenSyn, the arresting officer had tried to have his way with her, but she had fought him off before being rescued by a more senior officer, a man with daughters of his own who, even if she *was* vat-bred, felt she deserved this small kindness

For which Cho Ye was strangely grateful. Strangely, because he had found himself thinking about the girl a lot these past 24 hours, which was something he normally did not do.

“Well?” the Security Captain asked.

Cho turned to look at him. “I’ll sign for her. Charge any fine to GenSyn. And thanks. I appreciate all you did for her.”

The Captain smiled. “She’s a pretty little thing, neh? I don’t think I’ve seen that model before.”

You have, Cho thought, not making the least attempt to explain what had happened. *Only never one like her.*

“About my colleague...”

“Let it be,” Cho said, making light of the matter. “I’ll not mention it in my report.”

He saw how the Captain smiled at that, relieved, even if criminal damage were the most GenSyn could charge them with. And besides, it was good to keep on the right side of the Security forces. There’d come a time when he could maybe call in this favour. But right now he wanted only to get out of there. To take the girl back to the labs and do some tests.

She looked up as he entered the cell, her face lighting up as she saw who it was. “Cho Ye... you came for me.”

“The drugs,” he said, holding out his left hand, palm upward. “You didn’t take them, did you?”

She looked down, abashed, then handed them across. He counted them. It was as he’d thought. She hadn’t taken any, except for that first dose.

He smiled. She was clearly no longer the obedient little serving maid she had once been. That said, it seemed she had not learned yet how to lie.

“Master Cho...”

He turned, to find the Captain standing there in the doorway, holding out the form of release for him to sign. Cho went across, signing it with a flourish, then turned back. And stopped, frowning.

“Li... what is it?”

Her pretty face was creased with sudden pain. And even as he watched, a tear rolled down her cheek and fell.

“I want a baby, Master Cho! I have to have a baby!”

He stared back at her, aghast, not knowing what to say. There had been real desperation in her voice. Only he could not help her. She had no womb. None of her model had wombs. But he could not tell her that.

Cho swallowed and looked away. In that instant he had made his decision. She would have to be destroyed. Awareness was one thing. But this...

“Come,” he said, a soothing reassurance in the word as he put his arm about her shoulders. “Let’s get you home, neh?”

* * *

Li sat there in the waiting room, not quite knowing why she was there. Her mind had settled a little since that morning when it had all happened, but she still had moments of sudden panic, moments when suppressed memories came back with a jagged force, unravelling her. Her hands trembled most of the time now. That initial shock was slowly turning to anxiety. For she remembered now. The sound of the explosion. The way she was thrown onto her face in the lift. The smell of burning. All of which might have made no sense at all, only she had overheard Cho Ye talking with a colleague and knew now what had happened. The messenger. The way the Junior Minister fled the scene. Those and the Minister’s death. And though she but partly understood, she had a sense of how important it all was. Important enough that the fate of a vat-bred creature like herself was insignificant in the bigger picture. She was but a stone to be removed from the board.

Now where did that come from? She wondered, and realised it had to be something she had overheard. Like all else, it was all bubbling up now, coming to the surface. Every word she’d ever heard. Every nasty little act ever committed against her. Only with that awareness came knowledge. The knowledge that she could no longer function properly. No. As a maid her days were done with. She was a faulty machine, and faulty machines...

The words formed in her head, like a molten bar of iron.

Faulty machines get trashed.

* * *

It was much later when he finally returned. She looked up, into his face, and though he smiled, though he reassured her with his words, she knew. The drugs they had used to enhance her- to *unlock* her as she saw it now – had done their work far better than anyone could have imagined. For she could read him now. Every last little nuance in his face, in his eyes, and in his voice. Yes, she knew now. He was planning to kill her. As was his right. For what was she, after all? Not human, certainly. At best a thing made from the cloth of humanity. A thing, not born but grown in a vat. Raised up from the great soup of being and now discarded.

Cho Ye blinked, surprised by the intensity of her expression. “What?”

She was calm now, the trembling in her hands gone. “I just wondered,” she said. “You know...how you plan to do it. I’m not blaming you, Cho Ye. I understand the problem I’ve set you. Only...”

Only what?

But she didn’t have to ask. She knew now. He had no choice in this. If she was malfunctioning he had to terminate her. That was the law – a law so strictly administered that they had no room whatsoever to manoeuvre. Even so, she pleaded with him now. One last time. Asking him to let her go. To have pity on a fellow creature.

To turn a blind eye.

Only, even as she begged, even as she saw the sorrow in his eyes, she understood. He would do his duty first and foremost. Kneeling before him, she bowed her head, as she had at the very start of things. Only this time a tear rolled down her face, falling with a soft pat on the carpet.

Dead she was. Dead, as if she'd never been.

* * *

Epilogue

A year had passed and Cho Ye was at home, sat there in his office, overlooking the garden of his big First Level mansion, listening to music as he caught up with his paperwork. From the next room he could hear the sound of a baby crying, and, as the door behind him opened, the noise grew louder.

He turned in his chair. It was the maid, or one who looked identical to her. For who would know? One vat-bred clone looked very much like another, even to an expert eye. Only as she handed him his child, her smile was not vacant and fatuous, but bright, intelligent. Cho Ye smiled back at her, as at a favourite daughter, then gestured towards the en-suite bathroom on the far side of the room. She went across, returning a moment later with an injector, then waited patiently while he settled the child in its cot. Only then did she roll back her sleeve.

As he injected her with two shots of the drug, so her eyes went to the tiny figure in the cot, aware that there, on the child's neck, was the GenSyn logo, the tiny S within the G. She went across, looking down at the child – knowing it both for what it was and what it pretended to be. The very best deal she could have made. All thanks to Master Cho.

“Let her sleep,” Cho Ye said, coming across and holding her from behind, planting a gentle kiss on her neck. “I’ll call you when she wakes.”

Only it was slipping from her already, the haze descending on her once again. And as it did, so he lifted her and, cradling her in his arms, carried her through to her cot, tucking her in beneath the blankets, his fingers drawing her hair back from her face, his eyes lingering a moment to take in the beauty of that oft-repeated face. His thing she was, his maid, his property. Yes, and also his love.

He had not expected that last. Had not thought himself the kind to fall for such illusions. Only, when he had come to act – to terminate the girl – he had found himself unprepared for what he'd felt. As if, in waking, the girl had woken something in him, too.

Oh, the rest had been easy. To switch one model for another had been the work of an hour, and no one the wiser. No one questioned for an instant why GenSyn's chief technician should want a maid. One he could quite easily afford. After all, didn't they all possess such trophy servants?

Yes, he thought. *But never one like she.*

And the drugs? They were designed to keep the girl from burning out. Yes, and to keep her from dreaming. Because to be so aware when one was designed for far less, could be a torment as much as a delight. And in dreams...

Early on, she had woken in his arms, trembling, her face a study in anxiety, complaining of the dreams she'd had. And he had known at once what he must do. And so he'd given her this half-life, this tightrope act across the void.

Cho Ye turned from her sleeping form, his mood darkened. If he could he would have given her more, only there was no more to give. She was as she'd been created, and the accident of awareness that had made her more could not be built on, only made tolerable. Her model, the SM16, had an inbuilt genetic redundancy of five years, six at the most. After which...

He went through, musing on the situation, as he so often did these days, stopping by the cot to stare down at the baby where it slept. It, not she, if he was being honest. Like Li, it was a thing, not a fully formed human. And yet...

No. There was no wriggling out of it. One day this would all end. He would go to her cot and find her gone, the cold casing of her body empty, whatever had inhabited her vanished to some other realm. Or to nothingness, which was more likely. And how would he fill the void that was in his own life then?

He tried not to think of that, yet he was forced by his nature – yes, and his knowledge of things – to face it. He had made a devil's bargain. To have this torment in his life rather than the nothing he had had before she'd come into his life. His Li. His darling girl-child. And when she was gone?

Then he would go too. Like those faulty machines of flesh GenSyn had manufactured in the past. For what was he if not some copy, forged from the unending chain of human matter?

Cho Ye sighed heavily. To be human. What a curse and sharp delight it was. To exist between the two darknesses, forged in one moment of bright intensity. What a curse and sharp delight.

THE END

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