I

The sun rose over the city with its typical optimism, only to be blotted out by the toxic titanium sky. Patches of pale cantaloupe shone here and there through the random holes in the cloud cover, but sickly bands of pollution diffused the light in such a way that though the sun was shining, it was difficult to determine its exact position in the sky.

In this early morning haze, the inhabitants of a city unknown outside the Republic were awakening for another day of factory work. Li Fenfang finished her morning exercises and pulled aside the thin curtain from her seventh-floor window to reveal the same thing she saw every day – the ants marching with rhythm and purpose, clad in their light blue beetle suits, shuffling to and from the driverless cable cars which would take them deep into the heart of the industrial districts where the majority were employed. But there were no children, and no schools – only the incessant industrial production and the endless work week.

Crossing to the kitchen, she pulled open the refrigerator with a gloved hand. The protein shakes in three flavors were lined up on a shelf on the door. Li Fenfang chose a different flavor than yesterday and shook the container before puncturing it and inserting the straw through the mouth hole of her white polysuit. When she was finished, she tossed the container into the recycling chute, brushed her teeth quickly with a few drops of her weekly ration of purified water. Then with some more of the water she made tea for her roommate. Ren YiLing worked nights, and would be home in about a half hour.

Li Fenfang stepped out into the vestibule and sealed the door behind her. She slipped into the thicker polyblend, a hooded sweater with a mesh mask. Her boots and gloves went over that second layer, then she pulled the light blue shell from the wall. This was her beetle suit, standard issue radiation shield.

The walk to her stop was less than five minutes, and she had timed her routine to never wait more than three or four minutes for a driverless cable car in the morning. When the doors slid open, blue-clad shielded people elbowed each other and jostled to get a seat, but Li Fenfang waited a few moments and entered the car just before the door closed. She stood near the center of the car, taller than most of the women and some of the men, holding a handrail to avoid the worst of the squabbling as passengers came and went from the cable car. Two transfers later, she was at the gates of the Number Twelve Solar Cell Factory, where she showed the guard her ID badge and clocked in for work. She gave her beetle suit to the second guard, who scanned a corner where the ID chip was embedded and checked it in to a giant cloak room.

There were more than one thousand employees working in three shifts around the clock at the plant, and Li Fenfang's unit of eight women was one of several responsible for inspection and shipping. Much of the assembly line for solar cell production was robotic, so this human oversight was vital for quality control.

The guard signaled her to scan through the gate, and then she was on the platform waiting for the maglev train. The minimag shuttled between the three big districts within the factory. All of the robotics and more sensitive equipment were further inside the labyrinth, where a worker needed clearance to pass. She had heard that all of the solar factories in the

district were connected in a ring by a larger maglev system, but she had never been able to venture inside. She worked in Inspection and Shipping, and only had clearance for the first stop.

Once inside her building, Li Fenfang found her way to the gymnasium, a euphemistically named holding area for all employees to gather before they went unit by unit to the decontamination chambers. She got to the area for Unit Five-B, and even through their polyblends she could make out the narrow-waisted frame of Lu Yilin and the chubbier outline of Zhang Chumin, her two closest friends at the factory. When the last of the eight women in her unit appeared four minutes before the shift began, they stepped into the decontamination chamber together. When the jets shut down, they opened their unit locker and methodically changed into their lighter work suits—green nylon shells with a soft microfiber facemask filter that was more breathable and flexible for the ten-hour shift ahead.

Light instrumental music cascaded down from the speakers in the ceiling, and the women worked for three hours on the inspection line scrutinizing and shipping solar panels before the welcomed chime of the morning exercise bell. They had decided long ago to seek permission to split the mandatory exercise hour into a morning and an afternoon session in order to break the monotony of the workday into more manageable chunks, and their foreman had agreed. Zhu Yihan, the oldest of the group, led them in the Tai Chi routine which they all now knew instinctively. With their bodies tuned and synchronized, they were free to let their minds drift up and over the Number Twelve Solar Cell Factory, to take flight however they saw fit. When it was over, the hour and a half before lunch flew by rapidly.

The cafeteria was a square, lead-lined chamber with the food service on one side and the tables on the other. Beneath the din of voices, the cafeteria was also filled with the purring of air purifiers lining the walls. At capacity, the room held about two hundred people, so the workers ate by division in shifts. Lunch was a rowdy affair because it was the one hour a day that the workers got to unzip their nylon cocoons and interact face to face with people who were not in their own unit. So although Li Fenfang could barely hear herself above the cacophony, she didn't care. Lunchtime was her daily dose of companionship and her chance to hear a little factory gossip.

After lunch, the women returned to the monotony of their unit and worked for two more hours before the afternoon exercise period. While the other seven women did a different Tai Chi routine, Li Fenfang took out her violin and tuned up. She was first violin in the company orchestra, a twenty-piece ensemble that practiced together twice a week and played shows for the Spring Festival, and for high officials when they arrived for inspection.

Actually, Li Fenfang was a certified violin teacher, but of the one hundred students who graduated in her year at the Children's Conservatory in her district, only twenty-five were given music-related jobs by the Ministry of Culture. The winners were chosen by lottery, and Li Fenfang's parents, simple farmers, had nothing to give to the high officials in charge of the lottery. Her consolation was the recognition of her talent by her superiors, and the exercise exemption to practice her violin.

So the women glided and pirouetted to the strains of Li Fenfang's violin, whose sweet and dulcet tone brought tears to their eyes. After the afternoon exercise session, they were

always in a somber, introspective mood. It was as if Li Fenfang's violin sang to them all they could never say in words. And even if they could, to whom could they truly say it?

When the women left the factory in the evening, they dispersed to their respective apartments, and most nights Li Fenfang, Lu Yilin, and Zhang Chumin would play an interactive game or chat on their phones. Later on in the evening, Li Fenfang practiced her violin for an hour or two, but she had no idea what her friends did while she did so. There was no nightlife, no public meeting places that did not require a beetle suit, and no unsupervised contact allowed between men and women. On this point, the Ministry of Health was very strict, and punishments were severe. The government, citing genetic mutations, infertility, and skyrocketing incidence of birth defects right after the war, implemented the No Child Policy, but it was always rumored that they were developing a birthing program and operating it in secrecy. Eventually, the program, "Preserving the Third Generation", was publicly announced, and it acknowledged that the post-war generation was going to have to suffer in order to achieve the long-term vision of the Republic.

In the first years after the war, before the policy could be fully enforced, everyone knew that children were still being born in rural areas that were more difficult to police, and that officials tacitly acknowledged the need for population growth. But the medical risks and financial responsibilities fell solely on the offending parents. Now, eleven years since the bombs dropped, pregnancies on the surface were punishable by life imprisonment, and death if the woman would not reveal the name of the father.

But human beings still had urges. Even the government could not erase that. In the cities, of course, everyone knew about the illicit massage parlors and underground establishments, but Li Fenfang had never seen one. In the absence of a social life, her violin, her two co-workers, and the company Intranet were all she had. Even so, as a village girl transplanted to the city shortly before the war, she had it better than many others, and she knew it.

So she didn't complain as the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months. For almost four years she had labored at the factory without thought of promotion or job transfer. The window for her music teaching career had closed, and she was now twenty-five years old. A deep hunger had begun to take root within her, but she had no cultural reference to tell her that what her own genes really wanted was to procreate.

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This vague anxiety continued to haunt her as one featureless day rolled into the next. Still she went to work and played her violin, but there was nothing to look forward to except more of the same. Then, one Friday evening as she turned on her computer, she noticed a small icon in the corner of her screen that she had never seen before. Nervously, knowing the folder should not be there, she clicked on it. Immediately a document opened.

> *Li Fenfang – from tomorrow onward everything will be different, but you must remember that all is not what it seems. Look at this photo closely. You will see me again on the other side, but only if you want to be free. Keep your wits about you. The only advantage you have is that they need you more than you need them. When that changes, you will be dispensable. Good luck. – Hei Ying*

Li Fenfang felt a burning in the pit of her stomach. Hei Ying meant Black Hawk, and it wasn't a real name. It was a code name, his pirate name, because that's what he was, a computer pirate reaching across the electronic divide and scaring her in a way she had never been scared before. When the bombs fell on her city during the war, she was young and agile and acting on instinct. The fear she felt then was just the motivator for survival. This was different. She had no idea who this man was or why he was contacting her. She looked at the photo closely for a moment or two and then closed the document. When she did so, it vanished from her screen as if it had never been there, and only the chemical aftermath of her fear told her that what she had seen was real. She turned off the computer and tried to practice her violin, but she was in no state to concentrate. She pulled a book from her shelf and eventually read herself to sleep.

Sure enough, the next day, a Saturday before lunch, while the women were hard at work, Li Fenfang's unit was visited by Ma Dingxiang, a supervisor three levels higher than Chen Qiang, their daily foreman.

"Li Fenfang," Ma Dingxiang said.

"Yes, sir," Li Fenfang replied, bowing.

"Your presence is requested in my office during the afternoon exercise session." He paused as the other women in the unit looked at one another. "I know you will miss your violin practice, but from what Shang Shumin says, you really don't need the practice."

Shang Shumin was the conductor of the company orchestra, another violin virtuoso who did not have the good fortune to turn his passion for music into an artistic career.

"Thank you, sir," Li Fenfang blushed, though no one could see her beneath her microfiber shell. "I will be there. Where is your office?"

"I will come down and meet you," he said curtly, and turned and walked out.

The women buzzed and chatted about what the visit could possibly mean.

"Do you think it's a promotion?" Zhang Chumin asked.

"Normally Chen Qiang does our yearly evaluations," Lu Yilin said.

"Maybe it has something to do with the orchestra," Liu Mei offered.

They traded speculations back and forth until a voice bellowed through the loudspeaker. "Unit Five-B, back to work!"

The women exchanged meaningful glances and returned to work without another word. When Ma Dingxiang returned to pick up Li Fenfang, they said nothing, but they were all burning with curiosity at this break in the daily routine to which they had all become so accustomed.

Ma Dingxiang led Li Fenfang down a hallway and then out of her assembly unit's facility. He led her down a corridor, up a metal staircase, and then over a catwalk that led to a

dock of elevators that Li Fenfang had never seen before. He pressed a button on the wall, opening the elevator to the far left, and gestured her inside. She entered timidly but he followed close behind, and only when the elevator was moving did she realize that they were going down rather than up. Calculating by the speed of the elevator in her own building, she figured they must have descended seven or eight stories into the earth before they were spit out into the cool, dank underground. When she adjusted her eyes, she saw a corridor with a smooth metallic finish and a continuous line of dim lights set into a recessed niche in the wall just above eye level that cast a pale, uniform glow.

He beckoned to one side of the corridor with his head and began walking. Li Fenfang followed, looking to both sides and even standing on her toes, but the light source was still beyond her line of sight. Unzipping his work suit, he turned and signaled for her to do the same.

"There's no radiation this far underground," he said. "You're safe down here."

She freed her head from the hood and inhaled the thick, soupy air. Her skin was ashen from lack of sunlight and circulation, but her face took Ma Dingxiang by surprise. She caught his expression before he covered it with a cough and looked away. Ignoring him, she relished the few moments without the omnipresent suit, inhaling again the dank, cavernous air of the underground complex. She had no idea that this fortress lay beneath the Number Twelve Solar Cell Factory, and she wondered how many of her co-workers knew it existed.

Finally they got to a fork in the corridor, and they went to the right for about a hundred meters until the hallway ended abruptly at what looked like train tracks. Ma Dingxiang punched a 6-digit code into a panel on the wall and a few seconds later a maglev appeared. They stepped inside and the doors hissed shut. He punched another code into the wall panel and the train accelerated, almost knocking Li Fenfang off her feet. She plunged herself into a seat , still in shock, absorbing the fact that this maglev system existed so far underground. The train stopped, and he ushered her onto another platform. Signaling for her to follow, he navigated them through a labyrinth of corridors until they reached a steel door adorned with the official seal of the Republic. He slid his ID badge into the slot and the door opened. Once inside, doors branched in all directions, but Ma Dingxiang walked without hesitation to a specific office. He knocked once and pushed open the door, signaling for Li Fenfang to enter before him. When she did so, she came face to face with six men seated at a table. The one at the head of the table, who seemed older and more powerful than the others, stood and beckoned her to sit.

"It is an honor to have you here, Li Fenfang," he said. "I am Yang WeiJung, and I am going to preside over this council. You may call me Father Yang."

Li Fenfang bowed and sat cautiously, trying not to stare too long at any of the six men at the table. Out of the corner of her eye she registered Ma Dingxiang leaving the room and closing the door behind him. She bowed her head again, but was unable to formulate a reply.

Yang WeiJung laughed. "Don't be afraid, child," he said. "We are not here to hurt you. In fact, quite the opposite."

"Fathers, I do not understand."

"No, I suppose you don't. Chen WenHei?"

A man slightly younger than Yang WeiJung cleared his throat and adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles. "Li Fenfang, your work record has been impeccable. Almost four years at the factory and not a single sick day missed." He paused, but when Li Fenfang did not respond, he continued. "Your yearly evaluations have been consistently excellent, you play first violin in the company orchestra, and now that we can see you without a suit over your face, I believe we can agree that your beauty matches your considerable talents."

The men in the room murmured their agreement as Li Fenfang squirmed in her seat. Never in her life had beauty been discussed in mixed company.

"The Honorable Chen WenHei is not trying to make you uncomfortable, little one," Yang WeiJung said with a paternal smile. "He is simply trying to set the stage, something he is well-known for in council meetings."

The men in the room chuckled at this private joke, but Li Fenfang was still in a state of semi-shock at finding herself deep below the surface and unmasked in a roomful of powerful men she had never met before.

Finally, as if waking from a dream, she noticed that none of the men were wearing radiation protection of any kind. "You never wear suits?" she asked, the surprise in her voice escaping more than she had hoped.

"Only the kind that requires a tie," Chen WenHei said, and again all the men chuckled – all except Father Yang.

"All joking aside," Yang said, "we have called you here to bestow upon you a great honor, Li Fenfang. The council would like to formally invite you to enroll in our training program to become a birth mother. With your intelligence and your history of success, we are hoping that you can have your first child within eighteen months."

Li Fenfang's heart skipped a beat. She had heard about the birthing programs established by the republic after the wave of miscarriages and defects in the first years after the war, but only in hushed whispers. She knew that the penalty for an unsanctioned pregnancy on the surface was imprisonment for life, and so the mystique of the birthing program had grown in proportion to its secrecy. Nobody on the surface really knew how or where the birthing programs were executed. But the rumors she had heard made perfect sense. Underground, where the radiation levels were nil, would be the perfect place to orchestrate the program. "What would I have to do?" Li Fenfang stammered.

"Don't be nervous," Father Yang said. "The women chosen to propagate the future of the Republic are screened rigorously. The next generation will be smaller than the previous one, for obvious reasons. But within three or four generations, as the effects of the radiation diminish and people start resuming more normal lives, we expect the population to approach about two-thirds of pre-war levels."

Another man who had been hiding behind a stack of folders suddenly spoke up. "My name is Sun Mingshen. I will be your administrative liaison. Any questions or problems that you have, just bring them to me and I will do everything within the council's power to accommodate you. Without the birth mothers, the Republic has no future, so your role is far greater than you imagine."

"What's in the folders?" Li Fenfang asked, her hand trembling as she pointed.

"These are the potential fathers of your children," Sun Minsheng said. "Please take a few weeks to look through the dossiers. We will establish a chat link that will enable you to talk to each of the prospective candidates. Each candidate possesses a different set of attributes, but all are highly qualified and highly successful. Choose wisely, it is crucial that you feel you are making the most compatible choice."

"If all is satisfactory with your physical examination," Chen WenHei said, "and I'm sure it will be, then you will be taken to this sector's women's facility and given an apartment suite with full amenities – chefs to make your meals, personal trainers to guide you through your exercise program. After three months, it will be expected that you have chosen your mate, and the insemination will take place when the team of doctors deems you fit."

"But what about my job? What about my friends?" she protested.

"Your two friends at the factory?" Chen WenHei laughed. "They will be told that you have been promoted, and you will not be in contact with them. It is crucial that the birth mothers pass no information to the surface."

Li Fenfang fought back her emotions. "What about my violin? My computer and my things?"

"All of your things will be replaced with newer, better models. Once we begin the process with a new candidate, we cannot risk any surface contamination. Your entire hard drive will be transferred digitally and you will be able to access it from your new computer. We will also transfer all data from your phone onto your new computer, as there is no cellular network underground, for obvious reasons."

"But my violin is different. I don't want a new one."

"Yes, I expected as much," said a short, square-jawed man in a brown suit, a mustard-colored shirt, and a bowtie. "I am Liu Chuanli, Minister of Underground Culture. I will make sure every attempt is made to decontaminate your violin. If successful, you may have it back. If not, we will need to replace it with a better model. My sincere apologies for the inconvenience. As a cellist myself, I understand how the instrument becomes an integral part of the musician."

Li Fenfang smiled at the man's politeness, but she was still sweating, and her racing heart only amplified her mental confusion. "So now I just vanish? No one will ever see me again?"

Father Yang smiled paternally, and slid the dossiers toward Li Fenfang. "It would be better to see it as a promotion. You are leaving your previous life for a better one; and more importantly, you are doing your part to contribute to the glory of the future of the Republic."

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