

The change came quickly. She blinked and then needed to reorient herself to the newness of the scenery. The uninteresting, unpopulated, and untouched greenery passing across the windows hit the edge of a vast city – not the glamorous city of people rushing from one task to another, innumerable aerial motor vehicle (AMV) ports aligned in spirals between tall buildings, and the ever present glare of the weather bubble in that one spot in the sky when she looked up, but rather a city she had only ever read about in reference to the history of the Daulch War. The general aspect of the looming downtown was short and stout. The few buildings tall enough to be seen from the outskirts of the town were visibly crumbling.

The road narrowed and the world started closing in. A thick cloud of damp and rotting waste threatened to swallow the odd form of a dark AMV skimming the air in broad daylight. The peeling layers of paint and buildings once built with some aesthetic considerations no longer had any real purpose except to mark a change in times for the city. Once, these buildings were homes, tended to, cared for, lived and loved in. Now they were the jagged border of a city on the frontlines of a war that no one cared about. Even as insulated as she was behind the thick glass of the AMV window, crisp leather beneath and strong currents of air-conditioning above, Dana could not keep the shock and morbid curiosity from forming as the few wandering creatures, dirty and tired, stared at her as they passed. She hadn't realized that she had made some base assumptions about the outskirt cities that simply weren't true. Perhaps she wasn't as prepared to meet her new sister as she had thought.

Lina looked over at her husband. The entire ride had been in silence. She could guess the thoughts in both her calm-looking husband and quiet brooding daughter. Anger, guilt,

confusion, and anxiety were mixed in with those thoughts, no doubt. The idea that she had a daughter who had grown up out here tore up her insides as if the juices in her stomach turned to sulfuric acid and seeped through the rest of her gut to quietly but assuredly dissolve her from the inside out.

The AMV stopped abruptly in front of a building that may have been a warehouse in its prime. The family made its way silently to the door.

“Wha’ d’you want?” yelled a surly voice from indoors.

“We’re looking for Erin Balen?” Dana’s father, Cabe, rumbled.

Creaking noises preceded snaps of locks being undone and a curious half face peered at them through an open crack of door.

Dana could see the face trying to process their presence here.

“Wha’ d’you want w’ Rin?” the face demanded.

Lina, choked out, “We just want to see her--”

Cabe interrupted, “Is she here?”

After a handful of awkward moments and jumbled confusion on both sides, they all sat around a living room furnished with a three-legged sofa and a crudely pasted-together bench, across from Erin.

“I’ll give ‘er t’you.” The owner of the face turned out to be female, an angry lady younger than her looks with frustrated determination couched in the eyes above hardened, twisted cheeks and a pair of tight lips. One of her dry, tough hands gripped Erin’s thin wrist at an angle. “What’ll y’ give *me*.”

Cabe and Lina looked at each other as Dana continued to stare at Erin. “W-what would you like?” Cabe stammered out.

Dana thought she saw the ends of the woman's lips twitch upward.

"House an' a job in a central city." She continued to stare down the soft city couple.

Cabe looked at Lina once and stared back. "Done."

Erin said nothing throughout the entire affair. She was a slip of a girl and there was no telling what she was thinking. Lina frowned. The child was definitely old enough to understand what was going on. She was barely a child anymore, having seen the same 16 years as Dana. Why wasn't she more interested? They were only discussing the rest of her life.

Dana looked from her mother to Erin and back again. She could see the resemblance. Same high forehead, same perfectly proportioned nose and delicate, long neck, all in the same shade of light brown, MG 35. Given the appearance of the woman who raised her, Dana was surprised at how clean and clear Erin's skin was. Even in clothes that had obviously seen a lot more than clothes ever should, she managed to look elegant. Dana felt a sharp pang just below her rib cage. It wouldn't take long for Erin to take back everything that she was supposed to have. But it was okay. Goodness knew the Winsols had enough love to go around.

They were back in Kalvir, the capital of the central cities, by the time the sun set. The newly enlarged family had a perfunctory conversation around the dinner table. Then Erin was shown to her room and everyone tumbled off to bed rather unsatisfied.

Cabe watched his wife get ready for bed. She was worrying about something and not just Erin becoming a part of the family, something more specific. "Ready to tell me what you're thinking?"

Lina tucked her feet under the covers and sat next to Cabe. "Doesn't she seem a bit... passive?" Lina gestured with her hands. "I mean, she grew up within one of the most vicious

street cultures in the world. Even Mr. Blandall told us when he found her that it was a miracle she had survived in that place. Doesn't that mean she has a rather impressive fighting spirit of her own?"

Lina seemed to analyze things he would never have noticed, but they were always important. "I suppose she is a bit quiet. Wouldn't that have been good on the streets? It would help not to get noticed so easily."

Lina looked at Cabe as if he had grown a third head. "I don't mean to sound judgmental, dear, but did you *see* the girl? She doesn't have to *try* to attract attention."

Cabe agreed. "She looks just like you did at that age."

"But with your eyes."

Cabe had noticed that, too. Hopefully, Dana didn't feel threatened by the stark physical reminders that she was not supposed to belong. They had talked about it all as a family, before going out to the abandoned outskirts town of Lob. He had made sure that Dana knew she was always and would always be their daughter.

"Dana will be fine."

She always knew what he was thinking.

"Yes, I do always know what you're thinking." Lina smiled. It was an old routine, comfortable because it was familiar. She gave him a kiss and then settled back into the bed. "I suppose we'll see Erin's true form soon enough."

"What about krimac?"

Lina had deliberately forgotten about that. She closed her eyes and remembered the first session in six months of continuous family counseling.

The starved psychiatrist sat across from the numb-stricken family and tried to summarize what he had just learned. He leaned toward Lina. “So, early on in your pregnancy, you decided to implement the krimac treatments to augment your daughter’s abilities.” He nodded toward the daughter. “And you had no idea that this child was not krimac before a couple weeks ago?”

Lina barely recognized her normally calm, easy-laughing husband. Being a teacher at the middle school required so much patience, but she could detect neither calm nor patience in Cabe’s barely reined-in rage rippling through his tense jaw, clenched fists, and legs ready to bolt and run.

Cabe’s voice rumbled, sending a flicker across even the motionless face of thirteen-year-old Dana. “What the hell does it matter if she’s not krimac? Dana is my daughter. Nothing else matters. This is foolishness.”

Lina looked to her daughter. The girl had barely spoken in the past two weeks. Who knew what was going through her mind. In a single moment she had lost her whole world, no doubt she had a lot of thinking to do.

When Lina began to speak, Cabe stood, “Can’t you stop!”

Lina continued, hoping Cabe would break out of this unreasonable denial. “The blood test was for her entrance into the secondary school. The school authorities sent us a letter directly after they got the results. I do agree with my husband, Doctor, Dana is our daughter. But we can’t deny that there must be another girl out in the world-”

“No,” Cabe’s voice shook, and more quietly he choked out, “no.” He left the office in an almost drunken stagger.

After the door closed behind him, Dana started to speak without looking at the psychiatrist or her mother. “Give him some time. He’ll come around. You should hire an investigator to find the girl. Don’t tell him until there’s something to tell.”

That was when the psychiatrist made his first mistake. “How do you feel about all this, Dana?”

Dana smiled and looked straight at the doctor. She reminded him of a porcelain doll with a china face, mocking him with the knowledge of the universe. The sharpness in her dark eyes dulled for a moment. “I’m no different than I was. It’s just a matter of dealing with perception – and perception can be manipulated.” She crossed her legs and leaned against a leg of the chair and laughed.

Lina marveled at her. This was the first time she had seen her daughter laugh in weeks, and just moments after looking like she could have lunged at the doctor and broken his scrawny little neck! She was joking with the doctor – but the doctor would take it at face value. Maybe Dana wished him to. Her daughter had already started becoming more of a stranger to her in the past year before this revelation. “What are you talking about?” she asked her daughter.

Suddenly Dana’s face loosened and she looked like a happy, carefree teenager rather than an iron statue. “It’s about how I present myself. As long as I don’t act like anything’s changed. As long as I still act happy and sociable, the world won’t step away from me. It’s a matter of manipulating perception,” she repeated with a smile. “I’ll be fine. I still have my whole life ahead of me to find out who I am. It’s you and Dad that need to figure out how you’re going to deal with all this. After you find her, are you going to bring her home? Will she already have a family that you will meet? You’ve already decided that you’re not going to throw me away. So, go deal with your other daughter.”

Dana felt the light on her face and started rolling over to the wall to turn off the light show alarm. She prepared for the drop to the floor from her bed but instead of hardwood floor, she fell on blankets. She opened her face to find herself nose to nose with her new sister. Dana swallowed a scream. “Erin! What are you doing in here?” She sat up, now fully awake.

Erin sleepily propped herself up onto her elbow. She reminded Dana of a reclining cat or a sphinx on a throne of royalty. “Sorry, it was too strange falling asleep without the sounds of other people nearby. You were already asleep when I came in and I didn’t want to wake you to ask.”

Dana breathed. “Okay. That’s fine. We can just move your bed in here if you’d like that.”

Erin cocked her head ever so slightly northwesterly. “It doesn’t bother you that I’m here, does it?”

Ugh. It was too early for this kind of talk. “Does it bother you that I’m here?” she returned irritably.

“No.”

“Then, no. Now go back to sleep.” Dana threw a box of tissues at a button in the wall and the lights turned off. Early morning wasn’t her best time of day. “Do you want the bed?” she asked to the dark.

“No.”

Dana fell asleep.

At school, Erin got a lot of attention being the new girl, even at a school with 18,000 students. First, clusters of the prettier girls tried to take her in, believing her to be a fitting addition to their group. Then, as she began to outrank top students, various school groups sought her attentions and her membership in activities: debate, math competitions, and dance. Erin rebuffed all equally. She rarely was approached with a good enough offer to merit a verbal response. It was so much easier to simply walk away. It had been so difficult at first to understand how different the social structure was here. The first time someone had reached out to her, trying to get her attention in a crowded hallway, she had snapped his wrist and slammed him into the wall before she realized that he hadn't been trying to hurt her – such a foreign world.

After the initial surprise of finding Erin in her room, the girls pushed their beds together. Erin found that she had a lot to learn from Dana, and the sisters stayed close. Not confiding or talking to one another very often but very much bound by their common ground as outsiders of the typical workings of the school system.

The fact that Erin was a krimac hadn't escaped the notice of some of the elitist krimac 'modifieds,' however. They gave her a few weeks to find her own and then they descended on her like vultures to a fresh kill.

Richard was the first to approach her. Erin had been lounging on a slab of concrete at the normal after-classes meeting spot, waiting for Dana, when a strikingly dark, incredibly tall boy with chin length black hair – the same shade as Erin's – strided toward her. Erin waited for the giant to speak.

After a moment of posturing, a meeting of eyes, Richard spoke as he pointed looked past her. "You're a mod."

Erin wanted to laugh at his presentation but the boy seemed so utterly serious that she thought better of it. “And you are?”

“Tall, dark, and handsome,” Dana’s bright voice came from behind Erin. “Hey, Richard. Long time no see.”

Richard’s entire demeanor sank and even Erin could see that he was not used to feeling uncomfortable – it didn’t suit his long, dark, clear face to be furrowed much.

“It’s okay, Richard. I take it the big bad wolf wants to meet my sister?” Her words were taunting but her voice was earnest.

“She’s one of ours.”

Dana raised her eyebrows at Richard. “I think that’s up to her, love.” She lifted herself up next to Erin. “You want to meet the other krimac?”

“Sounds good to me.”

The two girls hopped off the concrete and stated toward Richard when he raised a hand. “He only asked for the mod.”

Erin quickly looked at Dana for a reaction, but she took it without so much as a hesitation.

“Ah, yes, of course. Send the wolf my love.” Dana looked at Erin. “You can get home all right?”

She nodded, curiosity piqued and energy itching for release.

Now Erin understood the wolf reference. He really had that quality – making people just a bit more wary and edgy around him. “Dana sends you her love.”

The wolf grinned, baring some of the most pearly whites she had ever seen. “I’m Tavin.” He sat – no, sprawled – on a sofa. She also sat on the sofa across from him. “And what do you want from me, exactly?”

Tavin took his time starting to talk as he played with a fraying spot of fabric on an arm of the sofa. “We’re not normal, you know. You can go to school with them, you can even live with them, but you will never be one of them.” He paused as he gauged her response. “We’re better. They know that. They know that we know that. They’re also boring, wouldn’t you agree?”

“My life has been a little too interesting. I have to say I’m enjoying the change in pace. And Dana isn’t boring.”

A crease formed on Tavin’s forehead as he frowned. “Yes, boring is definitely one thing she is not. She is different – but not one of us.”

Erin sighed. “There is no us, mister wolf. And now you’re the one boring me.” She stood.

“We may be genetically superior, but the only way to be superior in fact is to train and push our bodies and minds – to find what that gap between modified and natural really is. That is what we do. That is what we can offer you.”

Erin finally laughed, true ab-working laughs. “*You train me?* What makes you think I care to find that gap? What makes you think I don’t already know?”

“You don’t get it, do you? One of these days – sooner rather than later, as nearly 15% of pregnant women are getting krimac now – people are going to want to know what that gap is. And how do you think they will go about trying to find out? They’ll hunt us down, at least a dozen or two from each generation of krimac, and test us. We’ll be lab rats. It was a miracle

that we weren't put into labs as soon as we were out of the womb." Tavin's tone was passionate and sincere. It was a speech he had given more than once before.

Erin felt a familiar knot form in the pit of her stomach. She didn't think she'd have to fight for survival again. But the wolf was right and he was also wrong. There would probably be a short-lived scare about the exponential growth in krimac and that would start some testing and maybe the formation of activist groups and the ones that already existed would ramp up abuse directly to krimac. A scene flashed through Erin's mind. She had been six years old at the time she had to throw away a knife wrapped in bloodied clothes for the first time. She pulled herself out of her memory and stalled for time. "What makes you think those labs don't already exist?"

Having said it though, she believed it. The krimac may have been developed in the private sector, but the Central Government (CG) would have had to approve it. Both the CG and Krilake, Inc. would have created labs of krimac testing that would still be around now to record growth patterns of the krimac at different ages. So, Tavin was wrong. They didn't have to worry about being rounded up for testing... they had to worry about being eliminated entirely because the labs found something they couldn't understand or control. She doubted that Tavin and his friends had been as hard on themselves as life had been on her. They were right to want to know the gap between natural and modified, but they were underestimating the extent of that gap, no doubt.

Tavin sat back into the sofa. She had hit on the very question that he had been brooding over for years. The labs existed. But who were the krimac in those labs? Were they the same as him and his friends? Was there something important about their development that the labs were measuring and they had no idea about? He looked up at Erin and was struck for the first time by

the near translucence of her light brown skin – about MG 40. It may have been the trick of the light, but he saw a flicker of sharply honed anger ripple over her face. “We don’t know; we can’t make any assumptions. We don’t want to take chances. This is about being prepared for anything.”

Erin smiled at Tavin and leaned back onto her heels. “I understand where you’re coming from. But I don’t need your help for that.” She held a hand out to him. “It was nice to meet you, mister wolf. And good luck – with everything.”

Tavin watched her leave. It wasn’t until a few moments after she had left that he realized that he hadn’t heard a single footstep or door as she left.

Cabe and Dana were laughing nearly to tears in front of the display in the living room when Erin walked in.

“Hey, Erin! How was your day?” Cabe choked out between hysterical laughter.

The two’s laughter paused enough for another line in the show to start them up all over again. Dana motioned Erin over to the couch. “Sit, watch with us!”

Erin sat down behind Dana as she tumbled off the couch in another bout of laughter. Erin couldn’t help smiling at the family. As calm and collected as she was at school, Dana was all loose laughter and debate at home. Typically, she laughed with her father during one of their shows or debated with her mother about all aspects of life. Erin was surprised to realize that during her walk from the wolf’s den she had been looking forward to coming back here. This must be what it felt like to be part of a family. Just like that, it hit her. This was home. She stretched a hand out to Dana and tucked stray hair behind her ear. The girls’ eyes met – one pair filled with tears of laughter and one pair of newfound hope – and they both started laughing.

Cabe continued to watch the show, but inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Erin had been so distant at first, even when she participated in family antics.

“Hey! You guys want dinner any time soon?” Lina poked her head into the room from her home office.

“ye-ep!” replied Cabe and Dana.

“Well, you’re going to have to make it yourselves, kids. I’ve got to finish this model by midnight.”

“ye-ep!” said Cabe, Dana, and Erin as they jumped up to go to the kitchen.

“Don’t burn anything!” Lina called behind them. She retreated back into her office and closed the door. She sat down at her desk and stared at the paperwork. Mr. Blandall had been thorough with his research. A burning sensation in her rib cage extended up to close her throat as she looked down at the pictures of Jack Novin (16, melanin grade (MG) 85, 80kg, 193cm); Mary Willis (19, MG 10, 57kg, 165cm); Don Kavin (27, MG 35, 69kg, 178cm); Sev Li (15, MG 30, unknown weight and height due to complication with remains). These pictures were Erin’s resume, accumulated within the last year alone. Mr. Blandall strictly stated that these were the only records of deaths attributed to Erin, but that most of the public records were fabricated and mere slivers of the reality. ‘Erin may not have had anything to do with these people,’ Mr. Blandall had tried to reassure her. But as Lina looked down at the mangled, torn and twisted remnants of Mary Willis, she couldn’t help fearing the laughter coming from the kitchen.

“So, how’s the wolf doing?” Dana asked between mouthfuls of rice.

“He seems to be doing fine. He’s afraid that we’re going to be hunted and thrown into labs.”

Cabe frowned. "The krimac?"

"Yea. He believes the krimac need to join together and train for self-defense or something."

Dana shook her head. "If that got out, people would be more rather than less inclined to get rid of the krimac."

"Exactly."

Tavin leaned against the wall as Mich and Daniels went off again about something trivial. Sometimes he wished they would discuss what was really on their minds - but that topic would prompt others to join their argument. *Ah, Dana, why did you make this so hard for us?* He knew it wasn't her fault - she hadn't known she was natural. None of them had ever suspected it. She had always been the leader of this explosive group ever since their parents had gone to the same parenting classes and they had each other for company in the nursery. He remembered one particular incident. They had been five years old. Dana decided that she wanted to climb the outside of the nursery wall, which was on the 145th level. They had climbed up to the 148th level when they planted themselves outside a window and played peekaboo with the parenting class. Tavin smiled, remembering the reactions of their parents and the image of five-year-old Dana vehemently defending the babysitter, explaining that she only fell asleep when the kids were supposed to sleep too. His heart wrenched as he was pulled back into the present day. Daniels was on the ground, a pile of boxes scattered around him. Tavin intercepted Mich. "Hey. Calm down. We've got work to do."

The six krimac gathered. Tavin looked around at each of them: Richard, Mich, Daniel, Kate, and Vi: the first generation of krimac in society, minus one. He gave Richard a nod to start the meeting.

"It's official. T and I went last night and it's definitely where the experimental krimac are being held. Some of them seem to be as old as 38 maybe 40."

"So, if the labs exist, then what's the reason for us to be so paranoid?" growled a bruised Daniels.

"They might find something they don't like," answered Kate.

Mich slumped to the ground. "We need to get our hands on their data."

"Richard and I are going back this weekend to plant some cameras. Hopefully we'll be into their computer system by early next week."

Daniels twitched with impatience. "What about this girl, Erin? I thought you were going to ask her to meet the rest of us here today."

Tavin gave Richard a sidelong glance. "I met with her. She doesn't believe she needs us." The statement stirred the group.

"Why the hell would she think that?"

Murmurs of agreement were cut short by Vi's soft interjection, "Because she doesn't."

The group looked at her expectantly.

"She grew up in Lob. I looked up the satellite data on Lob. If she weren't krimac, I don't think she would have survived. She's gotten this far by *not* trusting anyone else and knowing how to use people. We're better off without her."

"The gap-" Tavin started.

"Ah, you and your almighty gap between natural and modified. Would you give it a break?" begged an aggravated Daniels.

"Daniels, go for a walk." Vi's voice became hard.

Daniels knew better than to pick a fight with Vi. Once he left, the others clustered closer together.

"And how do you feel today, Seb?" The voice came through a speaker an upper corner of the enclosed cell.

"How would you feel after 30 years trapped in the same concrete box?"

"I thought we really hit on something in the last session when we talked about your cell guard Davis."

No answer from the middle aged man in the cell, lying on a cot, the only piece of furniture in the room beside a sink and a toilet. He couldn't remember the last session. He had never talked about Davis.

"The day before yesterday, we talked about how Davis had made you angry and you decided-

"That he had to die," he whispered.

"What was that?" the voice prompted.

Seb lifted himself off the cot and proceeded to tear the bolts of the cot's metal frame out of the floor. An alarm sounded. Twenty-two seconds to get the restraining box to his room – plenty of time. Seb jumped from the sink to thrust a corner of the frame into the speaker, crushed it, turned to the adjacent corner's camera and jammed metal into that as well. He lighted to the floor with the rest of the frame ready to defend himself.

“Sebastian is the fifth one this month from his test group, sir. This isn’t a coincidence. There’s something wrong with this group of krimac. They’re going crazy: beginning to talk in tongues, developing schizophrenia, methodically tearing themselves apart. There’s one constant to their erratic behavior; it’s always incredibly violent. Guards and nurses have been dropping like flies. Once the Central Government receives this month’s report... Sir, I’m afraid they’re going to try to shut us down.”