QUINTEX

Adelaide Thorne

THE METAHUMAN GENE presented itself in the form of a quintet helix, referred to as a "quintex" amongst those familiar with the five tightly woven strands of DNA. This quintex could be observed in the usual fashion; the metahuman eye was not powerful enough to replace a microscope. Some technology, however, *was* powerful enough. Portable tablets supplied the same results as a microscopic lens.

The grid tablet required only a single drop of DNA, but one could never verify the authenticity of a toothbrush, or hair collected in a comb's bristles. Perhaps the comb was borrowed; the toothbrush belonged to another. The Metahuman Training Academy had no time for practical errors. The surest way was to obtain DNA directly from the source.

Agent Chang had become an agent to hunt Grifters—an occupation spent by constant movement—and currently found herself sitting, of all places, in a civilian restaurant. Her restlessness encouraged her impatience. She'd been tasked with extracting the DNA of a potential metahuman. A *Fallow*, the civilian would be coined, if the evidence proved conclusive. Ella Kepler could not be considered a cadet, as she had spent the duration of her life outside the realm of the MTA; she would be a Fallow, one raised by civilians.

The object of Agent Chang's surveillance had not noticed her watchful observer in the booth diagonal. Kepler faced away from Chang and was so invested in her conversation that Chang knew she could steal Kepler's cup without the latter's awareness; civilians were notoriously unobservant. Chang could assume the identity of a waitress, remove the cup, and leave. Kepler would forget she'd ever requested a beverage refill, perhaps only remembering toward the end of her meal when she found herself thirsty and with no cup to quench it. However, if Kepler would enter the MTA, she would undoubtedly meet Chang again. To marry an image of Chang as a waitress with Chang as a fierce tracker would not do. Kepler would forever recall Chang first as a worker carrying dishes, and Chang's pride would not allow that picture to linger in *any*one's mind.

"… three-hundred cubic centimeters per day, how many days does Sally take to drink the box of milk?"

Six, Chang thought.

"First," Kepler replied to her companion, "no one drinks that much milk. Second… uh, six."

"Correct. I love milk. I'd drink that much."

"That's because you're weird, Kar. Next question?"

"The pool is a right rectangular prism…."

Chang rose and rescanned the attention of the restaurant's nine other patrons. The frame of the booths hid most from her view. Beside her sat no one; the only possible witness would be Kepler's companion, who read from their school assignment and paid no attention to her surroundings. Chang had long ago stopped marveling at the utter lack of awareness displayed by civilians.

Kepler had leaned forward; the cup sat in her peripheral. Chang checked the companion once more, then eyed the glass and told it to move. The exercise came as easily as breathing. A pull swept up Chang's arm, as if her veins vibrated. The glass lifted and glided across the feet of space between their booth and Chang's. Ice tinkled in the slosh of liquid, but Kepler and her companion didn't react to the additional sound. A second later, a damp cup of lemonade landed in Chang's hand. One sweep around the rim left the cotton swab fibers tacky with moisture. Chang returned the cup to its spot beside Kepler's elbow before the companion finished reading her question. The clink of glass against tabletop was unavoidable.

This time, Kepler noticed.

She glanced toward the source of the noise and found her cup in its proper location. Chang tensed, awaiting—at last—the call to action, but Kepler shrugged and turned back to her geometry. Agent Chang let her shoulders relax, disappointed.

They're all inepts, she thought. Some cadets in her level had dedicated their lives to studying civilians with the aim of acting as diplomats, ambassadors, liaisons. But even in primary school, Chang knew she needed to pursue a field of study impossible to predict. Every Grifter varied. They all died differently.

Agent Chang had orders to deliver Kepler's DNA sample directly to the nearest lab, but she had a grid and her own curiosity. For a metahuman to live through adolescence and remain undetected, either by the MTA or a Grifter—the percentage was rare. Borderline nonexistent. Chang wanted to uncover the truth first, without the aid of another. *This* was her job: to unveil.

A slot slid open from the edge of her grid. Chang smeared the swab's contents onto a film, set the square of film in the drive, and pushed the slot

back inside her grid. The screen accepted the data and began its concluding. The result showed in less than a minute.

Positive.

The word shimmered in electric blue. Five threads of DNA knotted together in their certain loop. Chang scrutinized the quintex, then Kepler. She breathed.

Before Kepler's companion could ask a fifth question, Agent Chang had already left. She pushed the glass door open and moved her phone to her ear. Bells jangled as Chang stepped outdoors.

"Andrews," he answered.

"The bogie? She tested positive."

"I'd expected to hear this information from Dr. Saini, not you."

"I was impatient."

"Not an endearing trait, Suyin. We've discussed this. Send the data to Saini."

A cluster of curious civilians ogled Chang's motorcycle in the parking lot. One look from her and they scampered like geese. "Roger," she said. Chang climbed aboard and told her helmet to float upward from its hold inside her elbow. It fitted around her head, adding a layer of blue—as seen through the visor—to her surroundings. Data crowded the screen. Her coordinates, the time, a series of six digits that identified Chang more than her name did—they washed the visor screen in electric blue.

"Suyin?" Andrews said.

Chang transferred the call to her helmet's interface and heard his question through its speakers.

"What was she like?"

"Her height is average. Probably weighs one-twenty. Poor posture. More fat than muscle. Pallor reveals she spends little time in sunlight."

"I was hoping to hear about the person. Not statistics. We are more than bodies."

"I told you what I was trained to observe. Is she ordered, purposeful, restrained, selfless? Inconclusive. Observant? No. She's a civilian, sir. Her character description could be outlined in a paragraph."

"No, Suyin, she's a metahuman."

Agent Chang finished programming her destination. Safe house 12 waited nearly four-hundred miles away. "Genetically, yes," she told Andrews. "But, as you said, we are more than bodies."

"You'll quote me when it's convenient. Back to twelve, Suyin. Send the results to Saini first."

"Already sent."

"Good."

A click resounded in Agent Chang's helmet. She released the motorcycle's clutch and let the vehicle whisk her back to routine.

Would Kepler prove to be as skilled as any metahuman, or would her time as a civilian have stunted all potential? That question was for Dr. Saini to determine. Agent Chang had Grifters to track.