

The Way Things Are

Two figures walked briskly along the sterile, white hallway before reaching their third security checkpoint. The man wearing a white lab coat labeled Ethan Han fidgeted as he unlocked the Biometric Sensory Array. The other, a teenager with wavy, dirty-blond hair and a rugged physique that barely fit in his hospital gown, accompanied Ethan. His name tag read Robert Baldwin, but since childhood, and to the confusion of many, he insisted on being called Beecher. As they started down another hallway just past the security checkpoint, Beecher thought about all that had happened before his first trip to APM.

Seven months before he'd come, a devastating illness had ravaged his home district of Riverside like a tsunami, leaving almost everyone with multiple health problems. His mother's immune system had crashed, leaving her vulnerable to other viruses and bacteria, and his dad had developed debilitating arthritis and vision loss. Inexplicably, Beecher hadn't become physically ill himself, but after months of caring for his beloved parents, he'd felt himself succumbing to depression and hopelessness. How could he help feeling like a lost child as he watched his formerly strong, capable, and resilient parents become dependent invalids? Initially, Ladue, the wealthy neighboring district, had quarantined Riverside, but six weeks after infecting almost everyone in Riverside, the disease began sickening some Laduites. While epidemiologists hadn't shown concern when only Riverside, a working-class, immigrant district, had been affected, the appearance of the disease in Ladue had triggered an immediate response. Epidemiologists wearing bright blue suits and carrying serpentine-like tubes labeled "Level A Demtox Hazard" had swarmed over Riverside, collecting blood and tissue samples from Riverside victims. About a week into the investigation, they'd discovered Beecher: the only known Riverside resident who seemed to be immune to the disease. Two days later, Beecher'd been ordered to report to APM to participate in research.

Initially, Beecher had resisted, fearing what might happen to his parents when he was away. His parents, nevertheless, encouraged him. "Beecher, you've got to go. If there's any hope of finding a cure, you might be the answer," his dad had said.

"Finding a way for you two to recover is the only motivation I have," Beecher'd replied. "But even if the best happens, I'll always resent the Laduites for their self-centeredness. They only care about themselves."

"Beecher, anger won't help. Perhaps once they meet you, they won't find Riversiders so despicable," his mother had reasoned.

Less than an hour later, Beecher had exited the magionic transport that traveled across the thirty-foot poly-carbon wall separating the two districts. The tinted glass building crowned with the hologram "Analysis of Pathogenic Materials" had captivated Beecher. The property boasted Gymno-Control courtyards, filled with a sea of ever-blooming, unnaturally bright flowers. For Beecher, who'd always lived in Riverside, the facility was more magnificent than anything he'd ever imagined. Mentally comparing it to dilapidated Riverside structures, Beecher had felt intimidated and apprehensive as he

approached the entrance. Then seeing a white-coated figure smiling at him, Beecher had relaxed.

“Welcome to the Institute for Analysis of Pathogenic Materials, APM for short. I’m Ethan Han, head geneticist!” Ethan had exclaimed while aggressively shaking Beecher’s hand.

“Uh, hi. Beecher Baldwin,” Beecher had said with a cocked eyebrow.

“Aren’t you Robert?”

“Just call me Beecher.”

“No problem, Beecher. Make yourself comfortable. Next door’s a Nutripaste Cafe and our magionic transport goes everywhere in Ladue.”

“Well, I’m from Riverside.”

“Oh, our transport doesn’t go past the poly-carbon wall,” Ethan had stammered awkwardly before gesturing to Beecher to follow him, “And here’s our lab! State of the art genetic engineering... Er, this lab where we look at these tiny, little things on some cells. Oh, wait, do you know what cells are?”

“Huh, what are cells?” Beecher had replied sarcastically, “Yes, I know. My family owns an HD Enhanced Education Device. Do you think Riversiders are dumb?”

“Sorry. It’s great you have a HEED. I didn’t think Riversiders...,” Ethan had replied, embarrassed, “You and I are going to eradicate Pestis-Viscera.”

“Pestis, what?”

“Pestis-Viscera. It’s the name we’ve given to the disease rocking the two districts.”

“My team will be using CISION genetic identification to determine which marker makes you special.”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘special.’”

“You seem to be immune to Pestis-Viscera. If we can find the mutation that makes you resistant and replicate it with our Bio-Varitive stem cells, we’ll save lives.”

Continuing to reminisce, Beecher thought about the long hours he’d spent at APM while he and Ethan had become close friends. So much had happened since he’d first come to APM that he was amazed to think that only four months had passed, but his FLCKR phone confirmed it: February 15, 2048. Snapping back to the present, Beecher became aware of the prolonged silence between him and his normally talkative friend.

“What’s going on, Ethan?”

“I wanted to surprise you, but APM’s benefactors are here and want to meet the person behind the cure we’ve synthesized! They’re waiting behind the doors in the cafe!”

Beecher froze, facing Ethan's glowing face. "Wait. Do you mean? The, they, you..."

"Yes! We've finally perfected Biovaritive Gene Therapy. Pestis-Viscera is curable."

While he waited, Beecher fished out his Hover-graphic FLCKR phone. He scrolled to a photo dated January 8, 2047 that depicted his parents and him standing near their home. His mother's smile continued into dimples, and wet tendrils of the blonde hair that Beecher'd inherited clung to her face. Beecher's father stood with his arm around him, giving a half-grin in a failed attempt to stoically suppress his smile. Between his parents, Beecher stood, chin slightly up, with a naive grin.

Beecher couldn't help but smile remembering that day. But then he clicked on a picture taken two weeks ago. Beecher's mother's face was wan and her hair wispy gray. His father leaned on a cane. Beecher sighed, thinking of all his parents had lost: their health, jobs, and future. Since they'd had to quit working, the government had offered little help. With no credits left, the family couldn't even relocate. But now as he waited with Ethan, he began to feel optimistic. Maybe the cure would mean their suffering would soon be over

"It feels like a second ago that Pestis-Viscera hit, and I met you, Ethan."

"Yeah," replied Ethan with a smile, "Do you still remember the day you found out about Pestis-Viscera?"

"How can't I?"

"I remember the headlines and fear. I think the only thing all of us in Riverside were happy about was that some of you kings and queens in Ladue also got Pestis-Viscera."

"No one was safe," replied Ethan as he shook his head, making his glasses fall down his nose, "Not even the rich."

But Ethan's demeanor became light as he gestured to Beecher to follow him through the double doors that separated them and APM's investors.

"It'll all be over soon. Everyone will be cured," Ethan exclaimed.

"How long will it take my parents to recover? Will they be just like they were before getting sick?"

"After their bodies accept our Bio-varitive stem cells with your genetic marker, their bodies should be able to start fighting off the virus and return to normal."

"Can they start treatment tomorrow? Should I bring them here?" asked Beecher excitedly.

"Sure, they can come here or any facility on their insurance plan."

"What do you mean insurance?"

“If you don’t have insurance you can pay out of pocket, but the treatment isn’t cheap: 100,000 credits for the basic package. You know, all of the R&D, maintenance, salaries...”

“You’re kidding, right? Riversiders can’t afford insurance!” he replied, staring incredulously.

“I didn’t set the price, Beecher. The higher-ups did, and they need to make a profit.”

“So it’s just been about the money? You wouldn’t even have a cure if it weren’t for me! And now you’re saying my parents can’t get treated?”

“Your time wasn’t wasted. You’re going to save a lot of people,” Ethan replied guiltily.

“People? You mean Laduites. What about the people I care about? Please, Ethan. My parents can barely live their lives. I’ll give anything,” Beecher begged as he put his hand on Ethan’s shoulder, his eyes filling with tears.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Ethan stated firmly, “That’s the system. Don’t blame me. It’s nothing personal.”

Beecher stood stunned before his fist abruptly connected with Ethan’s face. Stumbling back, Ethan rubbed his cheek but didn’t say a word. They stared at each other silently.

Ethan finally spoke, his eyes facing the floor, “I’m sorry, Beecher; that’s just the way things are,” before pacing away and slamming through the double doors.

Beecher stared at the doors. Overwhelmed with grief and guilt, Beecher dropped his FLCKR, and it shattered into a shower of glass. In the mess, one slender shard reflected the doors opening and closing while Ethan’s final words rang in his ears.