

THE CODED MESSENGER

It's in your make-up.

BY ANDREA KRIZ

“Look,” I sighed, fidgeting with the rear-view mirror. “Boss says I’ve gotta give this talk to everyone. If you have the gene drive, it’s in your blood. It doesn’t matter if the Ash has started affecting you, if your skin has started to go all white and crumbly or not. It won’t be any better for you on the other side.”

“I promise we are not GMs,” the dark-haired woman said. “Please. Keep driving.”

She winced as we hit a bump, clutching her slung-up arm. Her eyes screamed desperation. She had no right to be looking at me like that. What with the Genome Authority drones flying around projecting her image on rubble all day. A scientist from a bioweapons lab, wasn’t it? Well, money was money. If that little girl with her wasn’t really her daughter, if she wanted to spread some of her knowledge outside the Wall, more power to her.

Ash lashed the windows, for all the world like the snow storms I hadn’t seen since I was a kid. They weren’t dressed for the journey. Not like it was easy to find winter coats nowadays. But you needed *something* to slog through the last stretch to the breach. No luggage either. Only stacks and stacks of red-covered notebooks. The little girl clutched one like a teddy bear.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“JJ.”

“You gonna escape over the Wall with us, Jayjay?”

I shook my head.

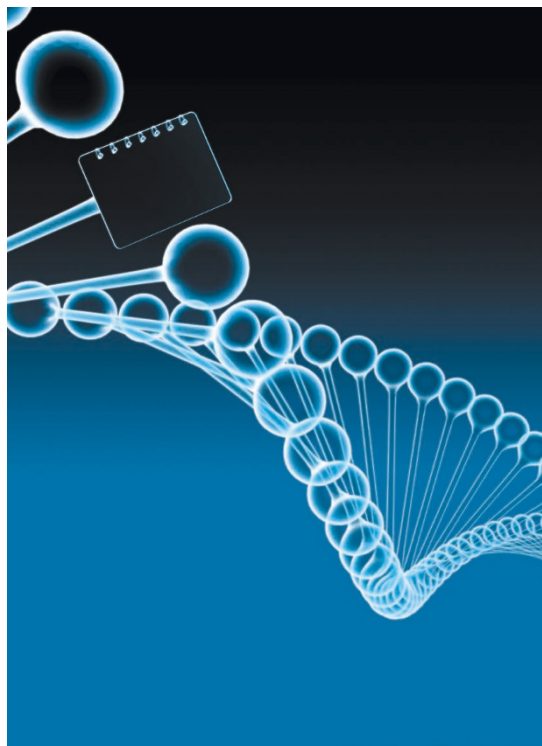
“Why?”

“People out there are afraid of people like me,” I said.

“Why?”

“That’s enough honey,” the scientist shushed her. “Try to get some sleep now.”

My sensor beeped and I jerked the wheel, pulling over to the side of the road. A herd of mammoths passed in the distance. Even through the Ash, I could make out their shaggy forms, the red helix on the backs of their gun-toting riders. The Genome Authority. I remembered when the Wall first went up. Most of us went willingly. After all, we understood that we couldn’t breed with normal humans. It made sense. It made sense, but when they sealed the gates, I couldn’t help but think of Jade, left behind in one of their labs. The mammoths would disintegrate too, I thought. They would turn to



Ash that floated like snowflakes on the wind. Like us, it was meant to happen before we reproduced. There was only supposed to be one generation of us.

“We’re going to make it,” I said, as if we hadn’t been stop-and-go, pinned by patrols on all sides for hours. “We just have to wait for the Ash to clear. They won’t find us.”

We could just see the mass of the Wall on the horizon, so near and so damn far.

“You were a soldier?” the scientist asked.

The girl slept in her lap. I adjusted my sleeve over my white-streaked skin and nodded.

“I’m sorry. You see, I’m one of the people whose research was used to make the technology — that made you what you are.”

It was the same with all these do-gooders who locked themselves behind the Wall with us and decided they wanted out now. I’d heard it all. It was a war. Our parents made tough choices for us. Better for your super-powered kid to fight and come back than get smashed in the claws of a mech on their first day, at 18. They didn’t know about the Ash. The safeguard disease in our genomes, which would disintegrate us piece by piece if

we lived past reproduction age.

“You think I give a damn that you’re sorry?”

“No. I don’t expect to be forgiven. But I want you to know my group has been working on a reverse drive — a cure — these 20 years behind the Wall. In 5 more, we could’ve. But the Genome Authority found us.”

She unbuckled her seat belt and grabbed an armful of notebooks.

“The hell are you doing?”

“I’ll tell them it was too dangerous. That I insisted on walking the rest of the way and you turned back. Please. Take care of her. Make sure she gets to the other side.”

When the little girl woke, the sun had risen. I bundled her up the best I could in my jacket and carried her outside. We found the scientist like a beacon in the Ash, her notebooks fluttering around her, her hand clutching the already dried bullet wound in her chest. This one dignity would be afforded to her — that she wouldn’t dissolve like the rest of us, at least.

“Jayjay, don’t cry,” the little girl said. “It’s going to be okay.”

“How can you say that it’s okay?”

The most important part of me had crumbled. I realized that the Genome Authority was crap. My Jade — my daughter — had been gone for a long time now.

“Your mother is dead,” I finished.

“No.” The little girl shook her head. “Mama is inside of me. Half of her DNA. Her notebooks too. She took out the extra parts of my genome that didn’t mean anything and wrote a message there instead.”

“I don’t know what that means!”

She slipped her hand into mine.

“As long as I live, the cure will too,” she said. “That’s what Mama told me. The same technology that caused this can be used to make something beautiful too.”

I clung to it. Even though I didn’t have any right to, I know. To fill the gaping hole in my chest, both physically and mentally. But I was selfish. I still grasped at it. Because I’d never got a chance to say good-bye to the people who mattered, you know?

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“It’s Hope.” ■

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