

# The Genius Freaks

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Darting into a lighted spot in a dim pool--

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Being born-- well, Lais remembered it, a gentle transition from warm liquid to warm air, an abrupt rise in the pitch of sounds, the careful touch of hands, shock of the first breath. She had never told anyone that her easy passage had lacked some quality, perhaps a rite that would have made her truly human. Somewhere was a woman who had been spared the pain of Lais' birth, everywhere were people who had caused pain, and, causing, experienced it, paying a debt that Lais did not owe. Sleeping curled in fetal position in the dark gave her no comfort: the womb she was formed in had seemed a prison from the time she was aware of it. Yet the Institute refused to grow its fetuses in the light. The Institute administrators were normal and had been born normally. If they had ever been prenatally aware, the memory had been obliterated or forgotten. They could not understand the frustration of the Institute Fellows, or perhaps the thought of fishlike little creatures peering out, watching, learning, was too much even for them to bear.

Lais' quiet impatience with an increasingly cramped world was only relieved by her birth, and by light, which freed a sense she had felt was missing but could not quite imagine. Having reasoned that something like birth must occur, she was much calmer under restraint than she had been only a little earlier. When she first realized she was trapped, when she first grew large enough to touch both horizons of her sphere, she had been intelligent but wild, suspicious and easily angered. She had thrashed, seeking escape; nothing noticed her brief frenzy. The walls were spongy-surfaced, hard beneath; they yielded slightly, yet held her. They implied something beyond the darkness, and allowed her to imagine it. All her senses were inside the prison, so she imagined being turned inside out to be freed from her tether. She expected pain.

As she waited, she sometimes wished she were still a lower primate, small and stupid enough to accept the warm salty liquid as the universe. Even then, as she kicked and paddled with clumsy hands and feet, missing the strong propulsion of her vanished tail, she was changing. That was when she first thought that the spectrum of her senses might lack a vital part. Her environment was still more alien now than it had been when she was a lithe amphibian, barely conscious, long-tailed and free in an immense world. Earlier than that, her memories were kinetic impressions, of gills pumping, heart fluttering, the low, periodic vibration that never changed.

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-- the silver-speckled black fish settled in a shadow at Lais' feet, motionless but seeming to ripple beneath the mist and the disturbed surface of the water. Lais hunched down in her thick coat. The layered branches of a gnarled tree protected her from the sleet, but not from the wind. She shivered. Overhead, the vapor rising from the pool condensed in huge drops on the undersides of dark green needles, and fell again. The tree smelled cool and tart. Beyond her shelter, the shapes of sculpture and small gardens rose and flowed between low buildings and sleet-cratered puddles that reflected

intermittent lights. Except for Lais and the fishes, the flagstone mall was deserted. People had left their marks, bits of paper not yet picked up, sodden; placards and posters the haranguers had abandoned in the rain, leaning against each other like dead trees. Lais let her gaze pass quickly over them, trying not to see the words; in the dim light, she could almost pretend she could not read them.

If she left this place she could walk downtown for perhaps half an hour in the warmed, well-lit night, before an agent saw her smoothing people and chased her out, or had her held and checked. That she could not afford. She stayed where she was. She pulled her coat over her knees and put her head down. Staying outside was her own choice. The dump nearby would give her one of the transients' beds, but out here the cold numbed her, a free anesthetic that otherwise she might be driven to buy in more destructive form.

A scuffing through slush on the flagstones roused her. Lais crawled stiffly from beneath the tree. Pain clamped on her spine before she could straighten. She leaned against the garden's retaining wall, breathing the thin air in shallow cut-off gasps. The man was almost opposite her when she moved into the mall. "Hey, you got any spare change?"

Startled, a little scared, he peered down at her through the rain. His face was smooth, without character, the set and seemingly plasticized face of a thousand betrayers, a face she would not live to share. He had nothing to be frightened of but mercifully rapid senility and a painless death that could be over a century away. His life span would be ten times hers.

"You're dressed well to want money."

She moved closer to him, so close that she had to conceal her own uneasiness. She needed, if anything, more distance around her than other people, but she understood the need and controlled it. The man succumbed to it, and moved away from her until gradually, as they talked, she backed him against the wall. He was odorless, a complete olfactory blank, firmly scrubbed and deodorized at mouth and armpits and feet and groin, as clean as his genes. Even his clothes had no smell. Lais hadn't bathed in days, and her clothes were filthy; her damp coat smelled familiarly of wool, and she herself smelled like a warm wet female animal with fur. She built up an image of herself preying on others. It amused her, because they had been preying on her all her life.

"Some people are more generous," she said, as if someone had given her the coat. Wisps of hair clung in damp streaks across her forehead and at her neck.

"Why don't you sign up for Aid?"

She laughed once, sharply, and didn't answer, turned her back on him and guessed two steps before he called her. It was one. "Do you need a place to sleep?"

She made her expression one of disdain. "I don't do that, man."

Cold rain beading on his face did not prevent his flush: embarrassment mixed with indignation. "Come now, I didn't mean--"

She knew he didn't mean--

"Look, if you don't want to give me anything forget it." She stressed "give" just enough.

He blew out his breath and dug in his pockets. He held out a crumpled bill that she looked at with contempt, but she took it first. "Gods, a whole guilder. Thanks a lot." The insolence of her mock gratitude upset him more than derision. She walked away, thinking that she had the advantage, that she was leaving him speechless and confused.

"Do you like hurting people?"

She faced him. He had no expression, only that smooth, un-lived-in look. She watched his eyes for a moment. They, at least, were still alive.

"How old are you?"

He frowned abruptly. "Fifty."

"Then you can't understand."

"And how old are you? Eighteen? It isn't that much difference."

No, she thought, the difference is the hundred years that you've got left, and the self-righteous hate you'd give me if you knew what I was. She almost answered him honestly, but she couldn't get the words out. "It is to me," she said, with bitterness. Only fifty. He was the right age to have had his life disrupted

by the revolt, and if he did not hate her kind, he would still fear them. Deep feelings were no longer so easily erased by the passage of time.

He seemed about to speak again, but he was too close; she had misjudged him and he had already stepped outside her estimation of him. Her mistakes disturbed her; there was no excuse for them, not this soon. She turned to flee and slipped to her hands and knees in the slush. She struggled to her feet and ran.

Around a corner she had to stop. Even a month earlier she would not have noticed the minor exertion; now it exhausted her. The Institute could at least have chosen a clean way to murder its Fellows. Except that clean deaths would be quick, and too frequently embarrassing.

The wind at Lais' back was rising. On a radial street leading toward the central landing pad, it seemed much colder. Sleet melted on her face and slid under her collar. Going to the terminal, she risked being recognized, but she did not think the Institute could have traced her here yet. At the terminal she would be able to smooth a few more people, and maybe they would give her enough for her to buy a ticket off this mountain and off this world. If she could hide herself well enough, take herself far enough, the Institute would never be sure she was dead.

Halfway between the mall and the landing terminal, she had to stop and rest. The cafe she entered was physically warm but spiritually cold, utilitarian and mechanical. Its emotional sterility was familiar. Recently she had come to recognize it, but she saw no chance of replacing the void in herself with anything of greater meaning. She had changed a great deal during the last few months, but she had very little time left for changes.

The faint scents of half a dozen kinds of smoke lingered among the odors of automatic, packaged food. Lais slid into an empty booth. Across the room three people sat together, obviously taking pleasure in each other's company. For a moment she considered going to their table and insinuating herself into the group, acting pleasant at first but then increasingly irrational.

She was disgusted by her fantasies. Briefly, she thought she might be able to believe she was insane. Even the possibility would be comforting. If she could believe what she had been taught, that Institute geniuses were prone to instability, she could believe all the other lies. If she could believe the lies, the Institute could remain a philanthropic organization. If she could believe in the Institute, if she was mad, then she was not dying.

She wondered what they would do if she walked over and told them who and what she was. Lais had no experience with normal humans her own age. They might not even care, they might grin and say "so what?" and move over to make room for her. They might pull back, very subtly, of course, and turn her away, if their people had taught them that the freaks might revolt again. That was the usual reaction. Worst, they might stare at her for a moment, look at each other, and decide silently among themselves to forgive her and tolerate her. She had seen that reaction among the normals who worked at the Institute, those who needed any shaky superiority they could grasp, who made themselves the judges of deeds punished half a century before.

A lighted menu on the wall offered substantial meals, but despite her hunger she was nauseated by the mixed smells of meat and sweet syrup. The menu changed a guilder and offered up utensils and a covered bowl of soup. She resented the necessity of spending even this little, because she had almost enough to go one more hard-to-trace world-step away. The sum she had and the sum she needed: they were such pitiful amounts, pocket money of other days.

For a moment she wished she were back at the Institute with the rest of the freaks, being catered to by pleasant human beings. Only for a moment. She would not be at the Institute but hidden in their isolated hospital; those pleasant human beings would be pretending to cure her while sucking up the last fruits of her mind and all the information her body could give them. All they would really care about would be what error in procedure had allowed such a mistake to be brought to term in their well-monitored artificial wombs. Fellows were not supposed to begin to die until they were thirty, though that would be denied. Nothing had warned the Institute that Lais would die fifteen years too early; nothing but the explanation and perhaps not even that, could tell them if any of her colleagues would die fifteen or fifty years too late, given time by a faulty biologic clock to develop into something the Institute could no longer

control, let alone understand. Their days would be terror and their sleep nightmare over that possibility.

And her people, the other Fellows, would hardly notice she was gone: that brought a pang of guilt. People she had known had left abruptly, and she had become so used to the excuses that she had ceased to ask about them. Had she ever asked? There were so many worlds, such great distances, so many possibilities: mobility seemed limitless. Lais had never spent as much as a year in a single outpost, and seldom saw acquaintances after transient project collaborations or casual sexual encounters. She had no emotional ties, no one to go to for help and trust, no one who knew her well enough to judge her sane against contrary evidence. Fellows were solitary specialists in fields too esoteric to discuss without the inducement of certain intellectual interaction. The lack of communication had never bothered Lais then, but now it seemed barbarous, and almost inconceivable.

Clear soup took the chill away and let minor discomforts intrude. The thick coat was too warm, but she wore it like a shield. Her hair and clothes were damp, and the heavy material of her pants began to itch as it grew warmer. Her face felt oily.

Trivialities disappeared. She had continued the research she had started before she was forced to run. She was crippled and slowed by having to do the scut-work in her mind. She needed a computer, but she could not afford to line one. It was frustrating, of course, exhausting, certainly, but necessary. It was what Lais did.

A hesitant touch on her shoulder awakened her. She did not remember falling asleep-- perhaps she had not slept: the data she had been considering lay organized in her mind, a new synthesis-- but she was lying on her side on the padded bench with her head pillowed on her arms.

"I'm really sorry. Mr. Kiviat says you have to leave."

"Tell him to tell me himself," she said.

"Please, miz."

She opened her eyes. She had never seen an old person before; she could not help but stare, she could not speak for a moment. His face was deeply lined and what little hair he had was stringy, yellow-white, shading at his cheeks into two days' growth of gray stubble. He was terrified, put in the middle with no directions, afraid to try anything he might think of by himself. His pale, sunken eyes shifted back and forth, seeking guidance. The thin chain around his throat carried a child's identity tag. Pity touched her and she smiled, without humor but with understanding.

"Never mind," she said. "It's all right. I'll go." His relief was a physical thing.

Groggy with sleep she stood up and started out. She stumbled, and the malignant pain crawled up her spine where eroded edges of bone ground together. She froze, knowing that was useless. The black windows and the shiny beads of icy snow turned scarlet. She heard herself fall, but she did not feel the impact.

She was unconscious for perhaps a second; she came to calmly recording that this was the first time the pain had actually made her faint.

"You okay, miz?"

The old man knelt at her side, hands half extended as if to help her, but trembling, afraid. Two months ago Lais would not have been able to imagine what it would be like to exist in perpetual fear.

"I just-- " Even speaking hurt, and her voice shocked her with its weakness. She finished in a whisper. "-- have to rest for a little while." She felt stupid lying on the floor, observed by the machines, but the humiliation was less than that of the few endless days at the hospital being poked and biopsied and sampled like an experiment in the culture of a recalcitrant tissue. By then she had known that the treatments were a charade, and that only the tests were important. She pushed herself up on her elbows, and the old man helped her sit.

"I have... I mean... my room... I'm not supposed to ..." His seamed face was scarlet. It showed emotion much more readily than the dead faces of sustained folk, perhaps because he aged and they did not, perhaps because they were no longer capable of deep feeling.

"Thank you," she said.

He had to support her. His room was in the same building, reached by a web of dirty corridors. The room was white plastic and scrupulously clean, almost bare. The bluish shimmering cube of a trid moved

and muttered in the corner.

The old man took her to a broken sandbed and stood uncertainly by her. "Is there anything... do you need... ?" Rusty words learned by rote long before, never used. Lais shook her head. She took off her coat, and he hurried to help her. She lay down. The bed was hard: air was meant to flow through granules and give the illusion of floating, but the jets had stopped and the tiny beads were packed down at the bottom, mobile and slippery only beneath the cover. It was softer than the street. The light was bright, but not intolerable. She threw her arm across her eyes.

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Something awakened her: she lay taut, disoriented. The illumination was like late twilight. She heard her name again and turned. Over her shoulder she saw the old man crouched on a stool in front of the trid, peering into the bluish space of it, staring at a silent miniature of Lais. She did not have to listen to know what the voice was saying: they had traced her to Highport; they were telling the residents that she was here and that she was mad, a poor pitiful unstable genius, paranoid and frightened, needing compassion and aid. But not dangerous. Certainly not dangerous. Soothing words assured people that aggression had been eliminated from the chromosomes of the freaks (that was a lie, and impossible, but as good as truth). The voice said that there were only a few Fellows, who all confined themselves to research. Lais stopped listening. She allowed early memories to seep out and affect her. The old man crouched before his trid and stared at the picture. She pushed the twisted blanket away. The old man did not move. At the foot of the bed, Lais reached out until her fingers almost brushed his collar. Beneath it lay the strong thin links of his identity necklace. She could reach out, twist it into his throat, and remove him as a threat. No one would notice he was gone. No one would care. A primitive anthropoid, poised between civilization and savagery, urged her on.

When he recognized her, he would straighten. His throat would be exposed. Lais could feel tendons beneath her hands. She glanced down, to those hands outstretched like claws, taut, trembling, alien. She drew them back, still staring. She hesitated, then lay down on the bed again. Her hands lay passive, hers once more, pale and blue-veined, with torn, dirty fingernails.

The old man did not turn around.

They showed pictures of how she might look if she were trying to disguise herself, in dark or medium skin tones, no hair, long hair, curly hair, hair with color. The brown almost had it: anonymous. And she had changed in ways more subtle than disguise. The arrogance was attenuated, and the invincible assurance gone; the self-confidence remained-- it was all she had-- but it was tempered, and more mature. She had learned to doubt, rather than simply to question.

The estranged face in the trid, despite its arrogance, was not cruel but gentle, and that quality she had not been able to change.

It had taken them two months to trace her. They could not have followed her credit number, for she had stopped using it before they could cancel it. They would have known only how far she could get before her cash ran out. She had gotten farther, of course, but they had probably expected that.

Since they knew where she was, now was almost identical to later, and now it was still light outside. As she allowed herself to sleep again, she tried to imagine not recognizing a picture of someone she had met. She failed.

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Lais woke up struggling from a nightmare in which the blue images of the trid attacked and overwhelmed her, and her computers would not come to her aid. The old man pulled his hands from her shoulders abruptly and guiltily when he realized she was awake. The windowless room was stuffy. Lais was damp all over with feverish sweat. Her head ached, and her knees were sore.

"I'm sorry, miz, I was afraid you'd hurt yourself." He must have been rebuffed and denigrated all his life, to be so afraid of touching another human being.

"It's all right," she said. She seemed always to be saying that to him. Her mental clock buzzed and jumped to catch up with reality: twelve hours since the trid woke her up.

The old man sat quietly, perhaps waiting for orders. He did not take his gaze from her, but his surveillance was of a strange and anxious childlike quality, without recognition. It seemed not to have occurred to him that his stray might be the Institute fugitive. He seemed to live in two spheres of reality. When she looked at his eyes, he put his head down and hunched his shoulders. His hands lay limp and half-curved in his lap. "I didn't know what to do. They yell at me when I ask stupid questions." No bitterness, just acceptance of the judgment that any question he could ask must be stupid.

She forced back her own useless flare of anger. To awaken hate in him would be cruel. "You did the right thing," she said. She would have said the same words if he had innocently betrayed her. Two other lines of possible reality converged in her mind: herself of two months or a year before, somehow unchanged by exile and disillusionment, and an old man who called Aid for the sick girl in his room. She would have told him exactly what she thought without regard for his feelings; she would have looked on him not with compassion but with the kind of impersonal pity that is almost disdain. But they would have been more similar in one quality: neither of them would have recognized the isolation of their lives.

"Are you hungry?"

"No." That was easier than trying to explain why she was, but could not eat. He accepted it without question or surprise, and still seemed to wait for her orders. She realized that she could stay and he would never dare complain-- perhaps not wish to-- nor dare tell anyone she was here. If he had been one of the plastic people she might have used him, but he was not, and she could not: full circle.

His hands moved in his lap, nervous.

"What's wrong?" She was careful to say it gently.

As an apology, he said, "Miz, I have to work."

"You don't need my permission," she said, trying to keep her tone from sounding like a reprimand.

He got up, stood uncertainly in the center of his room, wanting to speak, not knowing the right words. "Maybe later you'll be hungry." He fled.

She unwrapped herself from the blanket and massaged her knees. She wandered uneasily around the room, feeling trapped and alien.

One station on the trid bounced down all news. She came on at the quarter hour. The hope that they had only traced her to this world evaporated as she listened to the bulletin: the broadcast was satellite-transmitted; unless they had known, they would not have said she was in Highport and risked missing her in another city. They kept saying she was crazy, in the politest possible terms. They could never say that the malignancy was not in her mind but in her body. No one got cancer anymore. People who related their birth dates to the skies of old Earth did not even call themselves Moon children if they were born under the Crab. All the normals had been clean-gened, to strip even the potential for cancer from their chromosomes. Only a few of them, and now Lais, knew that the potential had been put back into the Institute Fellows, as punishment and control.

They used even this announcement to remind the people how important the Fellows were, how many advances they had made, how many benefits they had provided.

Before, Lais had never known that that sort of constant persuasion was necessary. Perhaps, in fact, it wasn't. Perhaps they only thought it was, so they continued it, afraid to stop the constant reinforcement, probing, breaking old scars.

She turned off the trid. There was a small alcove of a bathroom off the old man's quarters; there was no pool, only a shower. She stripped and took off the dark wig. If there had been a blower she would have washed her clothes, but there were only a couple of worn towels. She turned on the shower and slumped under it with water running through her bright, colorless, startling hair, over her shoulders and breasts and back. Her bones were etched out at ribs and hips, and her muscles made a clear chart of anatomy. Her knees were black and purple; she bruised very easily now.

She left before the old man returned. Trying to thank him would embarrass him and force him to search for words he did not possess. If she waited she might lose her courage and stay; if she waited she might convince herself that she did not need to run again to defy the Institute. If she waited they might

trace her to him. It would not matter to them nor help their search if they questioned him, but it would confuse and hurt him. She felt strangely protective toward him, perhaps as he had felt toward her, as if people responded to helplessness in ways that had nothing to do with their capacity to think.

Outside it was dark again-- could be still dark, for all the sun Lais had seen. But the sleet had stopped and it was a midnight-blue morning, cold and clear, and even the city's sky-glow could not dim the stars. People strolled alone or in groups on the softly lit mall, or sat on the bronze or stone flanks of the sculptures of prehistoric beasts. Lais stayed in shadows and at edges. No frozen-young faces blanched on seeing her; no one sidled toward the nearest cmu booth to call the security agents. Many of the people, by their clothes and languages, were transients who had no reason to be interested in local news.

The haranguers were back after the rain: preachers for bizarre religions, recruiters for little outwoods colonies, proponents of strange social ideals. Lais could ignore them all, except the ones who preached against her. She could feel the age about them: they remembered. Only a few kept that much hate, enough to stand on walls and cry that the freaks were a danger and a curse. Lais crept by them on the opposite side of the path, as if they could know what she was just by looking. Their voices followed her.

Drained, she stopped and entered one of the frequent cmu booths. The door closed over the sounds. She needed to rest. The money she had scrounged and smoothed could buy no ticket now past the watchers in the port. She used it instead to open lines to the city's computers, and they returned to her the power of machines. Their lure was too great, measured against the delay. The problem lay so clear in her mind that the programs needing to be run sprang Out full-grown. She did a minute's worth of exploration and put a block on the lines so she could not be cut off as soon as her money ran out. It should hold long enough. Into the wells she inserted the data cubes she had carried around for two months. Working submerged her; reality dissolved.

Later, while waiting for more important output, Lais almost idly probed for vulnerability in the city programs, seeking to construct for herself a self-erasing escape route. The safeguards were intricate, but hidden flaws leaped out at Lais and the defenses fell, laying the manager programs open to her abilities. It was hardly more difficult than blocking the lines. At that moment she could have put glitches in the city's services and untraceable bugs in its programs. She could see a thousand ways to cause disruption for mere annoyance; she could detour garbage service and destroy commercial records and mismatch mail codes and reroute the traffic, and there were a thousand times a thousand ways to disrupt things destructively, to turn a community of a million people into the ruined inhabitants of a chaotic war zone. Entropy was all on her side. Yet when the city was stretched out vulnerable before her, the momentary eagerness to destroy left her. The fact that she could have done it seemed to be enough. Taking vengeance on the plastic people would have been senseless, and very much like experimenting with mice or rabbits or lower primates, small furry stupid beasts that accept the pain and degradation with frightened resignation in their wide deep eyes, not knowing *why*. The emotional isolation that might have allowed her to tamper with the city was shattered in her own experience and existence as a laboratory animal, knowing, but not really understanding why.

She slammed at the terminal to close down the holes she had made in the city's defenses, and touched it more gently to complete her work. She used an hour of computer time in less than an hour of real time.

The results came chuckling out: first one, then a second world ecosystem map in fluorescent colors, shading through the spectrum from violet for concrete through blue and green and yellow for high to low certainty to orange and red for theoretical projections. The control map was mostly blue, very little red: it looked good. Its data had been nothing but a sample of ordinary dirt, analyzed down to its isotopes, from the grounds of the outpost, where Lais had been working when she got sick. The map showed the smooth flow of natural evolution, spotted here and there with the quick jumps and twists and bare spots and rootless branches of alien human occupation. Its accuracy was extraordinary. Lais had not thought herself still capable of elation, but she was smiling involuntarily, and for a few moments she forgot about pain and exhaustion.

The second map had less blue and more red, but it seemed unified and logical. Its data had been a bit of a drone sample from an unexplored world, and it showed that the programs were very likely doing what they were supposed to do: deduce the structure and relationships of a world's living things.

Lais' past research had produced results that could hardly be understood, much less used, by normals. It would be extended and built on by her own kind, eventually, not in her lifetime, or perhaps not even in the lifetime that should have belonged to her. This time she had set out to discover the limits of theory applied to minimal data, and the applications were not only obvious but of great potential benefit. When the hounds tracked her, they would find her last programs, and they would be used. Lais shrugged. If she had wanted to be vindictive, she would have tried not to finish, but her mind and her curiosity and her need for knowledge were not things she could flick on and off at will, to produce results like handfuls of cookies.

The screen blinked. Her time had run out long since, and the computer was beginning to cut out the obstructions she had put in its billing mechanism. But they held for the moment, and the computer began obediently to print out the data blocks after the map and the programs. She reached to turn it off, then drew her hand back.

Among crystal structures and mass spectrum plots a DNA sequence zipped by, almost unnoticed, almost unnoticeable, but it caught her attention. She thought it was from the drone sample. She brought it back and put it on the screen. The city computers had all the wrong library programs, and who bothered to translate DNA anymore anyway? She picked a place that looked right and did it by memory; for Lais it was like typing. AUG, adenine, uracil, guanine. Start: methionine. Life is the same all over. The computer built a chain of amino acids like a string of popbeads. 2D valiantly masqueraded as 3D. Lais threw in entropy and let the chain fold up. When it was done she doubled and redoubled it and added a copy of its DNA. The screen flickered again; the openings she had made in the computer's safeguards were beginning to close, and alarms would be sounding.

The pieces on the screen began the process of self-aggregation, and when they were done she had a luminous green reproduction, a couple of million times real size, of something that existed on the borders of life. It was a virus, that was obvious. She could not stay and translate the whole genome and look for equivalents for the enzymes it would need. She did not have to. It felt, to all her experience, and memory, and intuition, like a tumor virus. She glanced at the printout again, and realized with slow shock, free-fall sensation, that this was from the control data.

There were any number of explanations. Someone could have been using the virus as a carrier in genetic surgery, replacing its dangerous parts with genes that it could insert into a chromosome. They did not grow freaks at that outpost, but they might have made the virus stocks that the freaks were infected with when they were no more than one-cell zygotes. Someone could have been careless with their sterile technique, especially if they had not been told what the virus was used for and how dangerous it was.

The looming green virus particle, as absurd and obscene that size as the magnified head of a fly, dimmed. The computer was almost through the block. Lais had been in the company of machines so long that they seemed to have as much personality as people; this one muttered and grumbled at her for stealing its time. It lumbered to stop her, a hippopotamus playing crocodile.

Lais had dug the virus up outside in the dirt, free, by chance, and there was a lot of it. If it were infectious-- and it seemed complete-- it could be infecting people at and around the outpost, not very many, but some, integrating itself into their chromosomes, eradicating the effects of clean-geneing. It might wait ten or fifteen or fifty years, or forever, but when injury or radiation or carcinogen induced it out, it would begin to kill. It would be too late to cure people of it then, just as it was for Lais; the old, crippling methods, surgery, radiation, might work for a few, but if the disease were similar to hers, fast-growing, metastasizing, nothing would be much use.

The light on the screen began to go out. She moved quickly and stored the map programs, the maps, the drone data.

She hesitated. In a moment it would be too late. She felt the vengeful animals of memories trying to hold her back. She jabbed with anger at the keyboard, and sent the control data into storage with the rest as the last bright lines faded from the screen.

The data was there, for them to notice and fear, or ignore and pay the price. She would give them that much warning. The normals might find a way to clean-gene people after they were grown; they might even set Fellows to work on the problem, and let them share the benefits. Lais wondered at her own



naivete, that after everything a small part of her still hoped her people might finally be forgiven.

She left it all behind, even the data cubes, and went back out onto the mall.

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A hovercar whirred a few streets back; sharp beams from its searchlights touched the edges and corners of buildings. She walked faster, then ran painfully past firmly shut doors to a piece of sculpture that doubled as a sitting-park. She crawled into the deepest and most enclosed alcove she could reach. Outside she could hear the security car intruding on the pedestrian mall. The sucks passed without suspecting her presence, not recognizing the sculpture as a children's toy, a place to hide and climb and play, a place for transients to sleep in good weather, a place that, tonight, was Lais' alone.

There was a tiny window by her shoulder that cut through a meter of stone to the outside. Moonlight polished a square of the wall that narrowed, crept upward, and vanished as the moon set;

Lais put her head on her knees and focused all her attention on herself, tracing lines of fatigue through her muscles to extrapolate her reserves of stamina, probing at the wells of pain in her body and in her bones. She had become almost accustomed to betrayal by the physical part of herself, but she was still used to relying on her mind. The slight tilt from a fine edge of alertness was too recent for her to accept. Now, forcing herself to be aware of everything she was, she was frightened by the changes to the edge of panic. She closed her eyes and fought it down, wrestling with a feeling like a great gray slug in her stomach and a small brown millipede in her throat. Both of them retreated, temporarily. Tears tickled her cheeks, touched her lips with salt; she scrubbed them away on her rough sleeve.

She felt marginally better. It had occurred to her that she felt light-headed and removed and hallucinatory because of hunger, not because of advancing pathological changes in her brain; that helped. It was another matter of relying on feedback from a faulty instrument. The thought of food was still nauseating. It would be harder to eat the longer she put it off, but, then, perhaps it was too late to matter anymore.

The sitting-park restored her, as it was meant to; for her it was the silence and isolation, the slight respite from cold and the clean twisting lines of it, whatever reasons others had for responding. She would have liked to stay.

She walked a long way toward the edge of the bazaar. Her knees still hurt-- it took her a few minutes to remember when she had fallen, and why; it seemed a very long time before-- and her legs began to ache. Resting again, she sat on a wall at the edge of the bazaar, at the edge of the mountaintop, looking down over a city of pinpoint lights (holes in the ground to hell? but the lights were gold and silver, not crimson). The lights led in lines down the flanks of the mountain, dendrites from the cell of the city and its nucleus of landing field. She knew she could get out of Highport. She believed she could run so far that they would not catch her until too late; she hoped they would never find her, and she hoped her body would fail her before her mind did, or that she would have courage and presence enough to kill herself if it did not or if the pain grew great enough to break her. All she really had to do was get to the bottom of the mountain, and past the foothills, until she reached lush jungle and great heat and a climate like an incubator, where life processes are faster and scavengers prowl, and the destruction of decomposition is rapid and complete. The jungle would conspire with her to deny the Institute what she considered most precious, knowledge. She slipped off the wall and started down the hill. Before her the sky was changing from midnight blue to gray and scarlet with the dawn.

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