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Halfway, Oregon

Maria watched her parents from an upstairs window of the ranch. They were on their horses, checking some of their freak crop experiments, using their own freak intelligence, courtesy of the United Nations. A whole freakin' family of freaks.

She knew she should get back to her homework, but she needed a break. The house was quiet—her brother Peter was working on a degree through the University of Oregon, and had a study session with friends in Baker City. She could have gone into school this morning, but she hadn't felt like it. Instead, she had participated in the first two classes through the live feed on the Net, and downloaded the rest of the day's assignments to get them out of the way. The homework was easy but tedious. She stretched and scratched the back of her neck.

A flash of sunlight reflected off something in her father's hand. More specimens, no doubt, to feed their pride and make them think they could really control the world around them. Maria grimaced.

She watched them ride back to the barn and disappear inside with the horses. A cat sat in the sun by the barn door, lazily licking a paw. In the distance, a pickup truck moved silently along a straight country road, kicking up a small cloud of dust. After a while her parents emerged from the barn. Maria returned to her desk before they could see her. She heard the screen door slam, and—a few moments later—the sound of her father talking to a news feed in the kitchen.

"Zac, give me some music," Maria commanded. The computer complied, tuning into her favorite Net mix, at her pre-set preferences for volume and balance. She sighed and returned to her homework.

Maria Blair was well beyond the normal course of instruction for a high school student, but her teachers had been able to construct a custom curriculum for her from the vast resources available on the Net. She was required to spend an hour today on physics, and her assignment was to demonstrate her understanding of the latest research on the grand unified theory.

A Nobel Prize winner was lecturing on the screen, summarizing the work that had been built on the old foundation of string theory. It didn't seem relevant to Maria—so what if we figured out what

happened in the first microseconds of the creation of the universe? What good would that do for anyone?

Restless, she stood up and again and went to the window. Clouds were rolling in from the northeast, ominous and dark. She held out her arm and counted the seconds it took for the clouds to move along her thumb. The mental calculation was almost subconscious—her mind nimbly juggled distances, scale factors and trigonometric equations—and she immediately knew the speed of the advancing front, and the time it would take to reach her house. Who needs Doppler radar, she thought.

To force herself to concentrate on the physics lecture, she doubled the playback speed, snickering at the way the lecturer's voice sounded. It helped: she had to pay attention to keep up with the progression of formulas. For thirty minutes she absorbed the lecture, occasionally nodding in understanding. Suddenly, she uttered a command.

"Zac, stop the playback." She scratched her head. "Back up two minutes. Play back normal speed." She watched and listened intently. "Backup and play again."

The physicist had displayed a wave function to bridge two threads of the theory. Maria knew it was the wrong function, and as she thought about it, she realized it completely altered the final conclusion. She watched the rest of the lecture, and scratched some figures on a pad of paper.

"Zac, compose notes," she commanded. "Title: Physics class, April 20, 2044." She stopped to think. If she told her science teacher what she had discovered, the logical next assignment would be to replicate the lecture notes, substituting the correct formulas. It would be a lot of work, and it could make her life complicated if the school sent in the results to someplace like the National Academy of Science.

Let the cards fall as they might, she decided. She recorded her notes and instructed the computer to send them to her teacher's mailbox.

She finished her studies around 4:00 and wandered downstairs, looking for her mother. Maria didn't mind walking to school in the rain, but what really bothered her was that her parents wouldn't buy her a car. Peter had one, and a few of her friends had one. It wasn't the money, she knew. Her folks had a big thing about the environment, but that didn't stop them from driving, even if it was an underpowered electric van.

"So Mom, can I take your car to get to school?. It's raining, if you haven't noticed."

"Afraid you'll melt, huh sugar?" Consetta asked.

"No, I won't melt. But I have to take my warm-ups for the game and they're gonna get soaked. So, will you?"

Her mother took a last look at her screen, where she had been running an analysis of variations in a group of microbe agents, and then shut it down. "All right. What are you going to do for dinner?"

"I'll get a sandwich at the McDonalds at school. Okay?"

"Yes, I suppose so. We can bring you something, but I guess that would be too close to game time."

"I'll be fine."

“Well, have a good afternoon. And good luck tonight—we’ll be cheering for you.” Consetta kissed her daughter on the forehead and gave her a hug.

Maria checked messages as the van drove, ignoring the scenery around her. The windshield was obscured by rain, and the wipers wouldn’t go on unless she wanted them too. The van could see fine without them.

It stopped in front of the school and waited while Maria collected her bag and closed the door. It beeped twice in farewell, and pulled away to return to the farm.

Maria met with a couple of teachers, but avoided the physics class—she would get her notes soon enough anyway. She joined some of her classmates in the food court, and tried to hide the growing feeling of excitement that she could sense in her stomach. If they won tonight, they would be the district champions, with a clear shot at the state title. As much as the girls socialized over the Net, nothing could replace the sweat, adrenaline, and physical contact of the game. Her quick mind helped her with strategy, but in this arena, it was her body that counted.

And here was a mystery that she had never solved. Along with her intelligence, her parents had obviously enhanced her height. At six feet, she wasn’t the tallest member of her team, but she was imposing enough to intimidate most of the boys she grew up with. So if her parents had given her this height, for whatever reason, why hadn’t they also enhanced her balance, and grace—and shooting ability, for that matter? She was a good guard, but probably not the best in the state, and she didn’t get any more rebounds or make any more three-pointers than any of the other starters on the team. They must have known that a six-foot daughter would be recruited for volleyball or basketball, so why hadn’t they cranked up her skills a notch or two?

Once, she had asked her mother about this, and Consetta had been evasive, refusing to talk about it. She always harped on Maria to be accountable for her actions, so why couldn’t Mother at least attempt a plausible excuse for why they made their daughter the way they did?

The bleachers were packed when the team emerged from the locker room. Small cameras suspended from the ceiling and mounted on the walls were sending a live feed to the Net, for anyone in the world to see. No doubt the coach from Klamath Falls High—the home of the number one ranked girls team—would be watching carefully, looking for any areas where they were vulnerable.

They warmed up under the hoop in a shooting drill. Out of the corner of her eye, Maria looked for her parents, but she couldn’t see them. She assumed they were caught up in one of their projects and found it more important than a mere conference championship game. But Peter was there, sitting with Laura Cheney.

At the other end of the court, the team from Baker City was warming up. Maria noticed that they almost always went in from the right when going for lay-ups, and the tallest girl, number 14, had an almost imperceptible limp—probably the beginning of a knee injury—and she tended to favor her left leg. Maria tucked the information away.

The game started fast and furious, with both teams pushing the pace. Halfway took the lead early on, but Baker City began to catch up. In the second quarter, her coach subbed Maria out for a while, and she sat on the bench, her chest heaving for air as she wiped the sweat out of her eyes with a towel. The cheerleaders were prancing around, shouting out some inane rhyme, but they were

drowned out by the noise from the crowd echoing across the gym. Maria saw her parents in the stands squeezed in seats behind Peter and Laura. It served them right for being late.

Her teammate and closest friend Julia Connor was only five ten, but she was fast and deadly accurate. Maria watched as her team got a rebound and passed to Julia for a fast break. She streaked down the court, her red ponytail flying, and leapt toward the basket in a smooth arc. Her momentum sent her crashing into the fans seated in the folding chairs behind the basket, and Maria winced.

By the end of the third quarter, Baker City was ahead by two points. Maria, back in the game, had tried forcing the attacking players to the left side of the basket, but they were still able to get some shots in. Their center, number 14, had made a third of their points, some from almost half court. She took a shot and missed, and Maria caught the rebound and made a quick pass to Julia, counting on the fact that the fans' and officials' eyes would be glued on her as she drove down the court. Maria let number 14 take three paces, waiting until her weight was on her left leg, then charged into her right shoulder, spinning her around. The girl collapsed on the floor, rocking and holding her leg, but before the crowd noticed, Maria was under the Baker City basket. The referees called a time out, and the girl was carried off, to the cheers of the Baker City fans. She didn't make it back into the game. Halfway High won with a score of 76 to 68.

"That was a lucky break, huh?" Julia asked later at the Corral coffeehouse.

"I guess," Maria said.

"Aren't you excited about winning?"

"Sure. But we should have had a wider margin. They weren't that good, and our shooting sucked. How are we going to have a chance against K Falls?"

"Hey, one thing at a time. Besides, we were all a little keyed up 'cause it was the district championship and all that. Haven't you studied any psychology yet in all those college courses you're taking?"

"Nope, I'm having to do that on my own, and it isn't a subject I'm particularly good at."

Julia sipped on a fruit drink and leaned closer. "So what's happening in the struggle to take over the world?"

Maria laughed. This was the thing she liked about Julia. She was smart—not in the supercharged sense that the genetically altered Six and their offspring were, but in the way she combined her natural curiosity with a strong dose of common sense—and she had a genuine interest in the work that her parents were doing.

"There's some stuff I'm not allowed to tell you about, but here's the latest. The Six finally took a vote, and it came down to a decision to prohibit any further genetic enhancement. It was four to two."

"And your folks were split on it, right?"

"Yep. But they don't argue about it or anything. Dad, as usual, feels that there were too many advantages that offset the risks. He's so naive sometimes. He doesn't realize that no matter how smart they are, people will still make stupid decisions, and they'll screw up peoples' lives even more."

Julia arched her eyebrows but didn't say anything. Mathew Stone, a member of the varsity boys' team, sat down between them.

“Hey, good game.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“No, really. You looked real good out there, know what I mean?”

“Sure. Is this the first one of our games you’ve been to?” Maria asked.

“Well, yeah. But I wanted to go to some of the other ones, but I got, like, too busy. You know?”

“Uh huh.”

They didn’t say anything more, and the boy moved on. Maria had dated a few of the guys, but hadn’t clicked with any of them. The ones who weren’t intimidated by her height were threatened by her intelligence, and they all seemed so immature. The older guys were better, but the only ones she came in contact with much were Peter’s friends, and they were all geeks.

“You are such a flirt” Julia said.

“I wasn’t flirting!”

“No kidding. If you were any colder he would have started shivering. He isn’t so bad, you know.”

Maria shrugged and slouched lower in her seat.

Julia shook her hair and re-tied her ponytail. “So how’s the Commission going to take it?” she asked.

“Don’t know. The folks figure it isn’t the answer they want to hear. Mom warned me things might get ‘interesting,’ whatever that means.”

“Hmm. Sort of like telling the department of energy not to use nuclear power, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s not a bad analogy. There’s other stuff going on, but they won’t let me in on much of it.”

Julia stirred her drink with a straw. Her eyes strayed to the crowd around them. “Say, when did all this happen?” she asked.

“What, the vote?”

Julia nodded.

“Couple of days ago. Why?”

She looked back at Maria. “Well, I haven’t seen any news about it. I had the filter on my feed set for that stuff, so I should have picked up something.”

Maria shrugged. “It wasn’t exactly a public meeting. They used their Net link, and let me and Peter sit in, but they warned us that someone from the Commission always monitors their meetings. Are you surprised they wouldn’t feel like publicizing that one?”

One of their teammates sat down beside them. “Say, what are you guys talking about over here?”

“The ethical issues surrounding genetic engineering,” Julia said levelly.

“Huh? Oh, okay. Well, see ya later.”

“Yeah.”

Maria watched her leave and rolled her eyes.

Julia giggled. “She probably hoped we were talking about which of the guys has the best body.”

“Oh, I don’t know. She’s already done the field testing, don’t you think?”

They laughed together, as the last of the tension from the game drained away.

“So, you still haven’t made up your mind about next year?” Julia asked.

“No. I just don’t know. I’ve already done most of the coursework for a bachelor’s degree, and going to a college doesn’t sound like that much fun. Peter likes it all right, but he’s always been a suck up.”

Julia started to say something, but changed her mind. “Well, maybe you could get a basketball scholarship, huh?”

“Yeah, right,” Maria said. “I wouldn’t have a chance, and besides, I’m getting tired of it.”

Across the room, someone was playing back a video of the game. A knot of players and their friends huddled around the screen, hooting when the referee missed a foul call. One of them looked up and caught Maria’s eye. She looked away.

“You know what I would do if I were you?” Julia said.

“No, what?”

“How can I put it. Didn’t Mark Twain say something like, everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it?”

“Yeah, so? You would try to change the weather?”

“No, silly, I’m just using it as an analogy or metaphor or whatever. Anyway, you’ve had all this education, and all these philosophical discussions about genetics. Why don’t you try to do something with it?”

“You mean, start tinkering with the real world instead of simulations?”

Julia nodded.

Maria shook her head. “My parents are already doing that—have done it for years, in fact. And they’ve had their share of screw ups.”

“Maybe so, but on balance, your farm is probably the best ecosystem around, right?”

“Huh. But I wasn’t just talking about the farm. They had a chance with me, and made a pretty poor specimen of a human being.”

“Oh. Don’t say things like that, you know it’s not true.”

Maria just shrugged. Julia searched her eyes for a moment. “Do you want another fruitie?”

“No, thanks.”

Julia pushed her way to the counter and waited while her glass was refilled. The noise level in the coffeehouse was almost as high as it had been in the gym. In the corner, a fountain poured water over a series of stone ledges and into a small carp pond. It normally provided a pleasing, burbling white noise that made conversations seem private, but tonight it was drowned out by the laughter and conversation.

Maria was still sitting, silent and alone, when Julia returned. “So, how about it?” Julia said.

“How about what?”

“Fixing the world.”

“Yeah, right. You’re nuts.”

Julia laughed. “Speaking of nuts, it looks like most of the boys’ varsity team is here. Suppose we should mingle a little?”

“Sure. We’ll have to beat the cheerleaders back, though.”

“I’d be glad to. With a four by four.”

They giggled and moved into the crowd.