

The next morning I stopped by River Styx, the indie coffeeshop with the best coffee in town, got a double mind-blaster, so full of caffeine it would bring the dead back to life, then went to my lab.

Susan, the researcher I've shared my lab with for the last year, was not there yet. She generally comes in late morning, and works until late evening, while I am usually in the lab by 8 a.m. and ready to leave by 4 p.m.

I got the analytics program running, recleaned the sampler, and started getting the DNA samples from the glassware I'd borrowed after the party last night. It was tedious work preparing samples, I had to take three swipes from the rim of each glass, run each one through the sequencer, then put that glass back in the tray and on to the next one. Ten minutes per glass.

It was silent in the lab except for the discrete whisper of the air containment and cleaning system. The University has spent a lot of money to make the Hathman building an up to date genetics research facility. Only the genetic research lab at Coralville, the mini campus ten miles up the road is better equipped than Hathman. Visitors aren't encouraged to come to the Hathman building. Not because anything we're doing is secret, but just because the fewer times the air control system has to cycle people in and out, the better.

But it makes it a bit lonely, working all day without friends dropping by just to chat. Leah has mentioned more than once that I stand a good chance of becoming a recluse working in this lab. Was that causing me to cling too tightly to Rick? I put Rick out of my mind and concentrated on getting my samples sequenced.

For the first time in a month I felt like I was making progress. Finally I had enough random DNA samples for the testing phase of project. I've had my gene designed since last September. Its effect is to prevent plaque from coming out of solution in human blood and coating capillary walls. If plaque never builds up, there is no chance it will shed itself back into the bloodstream and cause a stroke.

I have my gene, I have my carrier, my promoter and terminator enzymes. Susan's genetic modulator will be an elegant little part of my gene, allowing doctors to modulate the anti-plaquing effect while it is in progress. And I already have the approval to use an off-the-shelf injector, which is the part of the gene that gets it through a cell membrane.

The clock on my computer showed me it was already past noon and I was starting to get really hungry. Coffee is not breakfast. But I stayed at it until I had all twenty-four glasses sampled and the data filed and backed-up.

I shut down the sequencer and stood up, creaking. *I'll go get a quick sandwich at the Campus Bistro, then a long leisurely, mind-clearing, walk around the quad in the shade of the big oaks.*

There was the quick hiss of a key card sliding through the door lock and in walked Susan.

"Hi Susan," I said cheerily. "Haven't seen you in a while." She did not look well.

"Morning," she said. She went to her desk and put an empty Campus Shoppes bag on her desk and began filling it with stuff from her desk drawers.

"I think I'm finally getting my project back on schedule," I continued. "So I'd like to have a look at your data sometime soon if you don't mind."

She nodded OK and continued clearing out her desk.

"Going somewhere?" I ventured.

She stopped to stare at the modest engagement ring on her left hand. "I'm leaving," she said.

"Leaving?" I knew she had another year on her grant, and a couple of weeks ago she'd told me she had just begun drafting her research results. This made no sense.

"Charles and I have decided to get married right away, this month."

I stared at her a few seconds, "Well, congratulations, I thought you were planning on a fall wedding and a honeymoon on a cruise ship."

"We changed our minds." She put the kitschy little framed photo of her fiancée in the bag. Her fiancée was a nice looking young guy in a corn-fed sort of way. I think she'd said he worked in agricultural equipment sales in her hometown in southern Minnesota.

"We probably won't take a honeymoon right away," she went on in a monotone. "I need to find a job...." She started twisting her ring.

My jaw dropped. "Are you serious? You're quitting your project entirely, dropping out of the University?"

She looked at me with sad eyes. "My grant has been terminated. Doctor DeSteele herself informed me." She tried a smile that didn't work. "It's probably

for the best. I'm exhausted, I need to get away from...all this." She was on the verge of tears.

I stood up and moved towards her, but I've never really been a huggy person so I just sort of stood near her, trying to project helpfulness. "Your equilibrium feedback mechanism is wonderful, you need to finish your project. You're so close..."

"I need to go home." She said. She stopped twisting her ring and looked at the green Campus Shoppes bag. "I need to rest."

I was horrified to see tears starting to run down Susan's pale cheeks.

"Sorry," Susan said, pulling herself together. "I'll go back to Worthington, Charles and I will get married, I'll find some kind of work."

"That's crazy, Susan, there's nothing..." I stopped short of telling her she would not enjoy being a waitress the rest of her life. "I'm sure alternative funding can be found. Go back home, get married, take your honeymoon; then come back." I wanted to pat her shoulder but didn't. She stood there looking at nothing.

"We all get tired," I babbled. "A few weeks away from the lab will be good for you."

She wasn't listening.

"I haven't felt well for the last few weeks," she said. "I need to go home, rest..."

"But don't burn your bridges. Maybe I can talk to the people in Grants Management, find some alternate funding. I need your project, too."

Susan shrugged her bowed shoulders, "The funds realignment was direct from DeSteele's office. I met with her. She was sympathetic, but said priorities had changed." Susan handed me a blue terrabyte external drive. "Here's a full set of my data," She tilted her head at her desktop computer. "Some of my files are there, but they aren't well organized. What's on that drive is the best set of my data."

"Thank you, Susan," I said, and awkwardly hugged her. She gave me a wan smile on her way out.

I'd never really gotten to know Susan in the year I'd shared this lab with her, but she had always been quietly cheerful. Enthusiastic about genetic engineering, just like me. And now I never would get to know her. Leah is right. I need to be more in contact with people or I'm going to become a recluse.

I thought about setting up my computer to accept Susan's files and leaving the external drive to load while I went to lunch, but decided not to. Instead, I dropped the external drive into my purse and went out into a hazy early summer afternoon.

I didn't know it then, but Susan's research data was soon going to put me in real danger.