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## John

Our guests, like us, are thirsty. I go to the fridge and produce four bottles of Gatorade. They look puzzled, turning the bottle this way and that.

“Here, like this.” I unscrew the cap on mine and take a swig. “Good stuff this. Replaces all the salts and stuff you lose when running. Take a seat. Tell us about yourselves.” I indicate a couple of chairs as I move to sit.

But they, rude buggers, don’t sit. They seem more interested in our house. Clutching their drinks, they walk around gazing at the walls. They enter the kitchen and open the fridge, poke around in our bedroom—all the while jabbering to each other in their fast lingo. They ask us surprisingly obvious questions: “What is this for?” “How do you use that?”

Now I’m a racially tolerant person. I’ve lived in Hong Kong for a year and England for two years, but this is a bit much. Sure, they’re newcomers, they’ve probably never seen anything quite like this, they’re interested and excited—but.

Liz and I quickly confer during our perambulations. We agree they are harmless, so we decide to do the decent thing and scratch up some spaghetti bolognese and salad, and then doss them down in the living room. Meantime, we need to shower and change. We explain that we’ll shower first and while they’re taking theirs, we’ll prepare something to eat.

Liz and I are in the shower for a good fifteen seconds when the shower curtain is abruptly pulled back. We stand motionless. Franji’s eyes move over our bodies. She pulls at her suit and it falls around her ankles. “We too would like to be clean.”

Naked, she moves into the shower recess, with Kalen immediately following her. Did I say something about subtlety? I’m about to protest, even vigorously, when Liz grabs my hand with a shrill yelp. I look again.

*There’s no difference between them!*

Slim, super fit-looking, but with lots of fine, furry hair—yellow on Kalen, brown on Franji—running up their arms and their sides. Lots centring around the crotch—but that’s all! They don’t have any sexual organs!

We push past them and out of the shower. I throw a towel around Liz who’s panting like she’s just finished a fast run. I’m more astounded than terrified. They’re not at all threatening.

“Who are you?” I demand.

“What are you?” Liz corrects in an almost incoherent yell.

Kalen says gently: “Your friends. Please, do not be frightened. Here.”

They both hold out their hands for us to take, their eyes glowing *friendship*. No doubt about it.

We take their hands me Franji’s, Liz Kalen’s. We are led, dripping wet, into the living room. They take charge and we follow. Simple as that. Liz is breathing normally now, but she walks on the balls of her feet, like she’s ready to sprint into the wide blue yonder any second.

“Let us sit down.” Kalen squats on the floor, Liz and I follow. And they start singing. *Singing!* Nothing much like normal singing. In harmony, but a strange tonal scale. The purest of pure voices surround us. Imagine, if you can, two counter-tenors singing medieval love lyrics composed in quarter-tones by a musician from the Imperial Court in the Tang Dynasty. It was something like that. To me, the effect is weird, certainly weird, but soothing. I like it. But Liz gets the giggles that become a tad on the wild side.

The *singing* stops.

I squeeze Liz’s hand and put my lips to her cheek, like you would to a child frightened of a big but harmless dog. Turning to Kalen and Franji, in as controlled a tone as I can muster, I ask, “Who are you?”

Kalen smiles at Liz, and Franji at I. Wise smiles, kind smiles—the smiles of knowing teachers about to tell their beloved pupils the mysteries of creation. Convincing. So we two little children obediently sit; we learn how our wise teachers from the distant planet Kozlar have come to help us—to help the world save itself from greed, aggression and waste. They need a host couple and they have chosen us. Us. Are we willing to help them, to be their hosts for a few days? That’s all they are asking. Nothing much. We huddle close, trying to ingest each other’s thoughts through our skin.

Franji is watching me intently and her look holds me. Kalen I notice is watching Liz similarly. For maybe ten seconds intense eroticism is in the air. It vanishes, leaving a vacuum that has to be filled with an answer.

We answer simultaneously.

“Yes.”

Looking back, I think they must have hypnotised us.

Back in the real world, we dress and start preparing the spag. They seem interested in everything: how we make the meat sauce, boil the spaghetti, prepare a salad. They think chopping up uncooked, strong-tasting vegetable matter and tossing it in oil is a strange thing to do.

“Is not the taste too strong?” Franji asks.

“Not at all. Try this.” I bite the green top bit off a spring onion, chew and swallow. I give the bulb to Franji. Aren’t I a bastard? Well, they’ve been scoring the points so far tonight.

She chews and gags in a second. “So strong!” Eyes streaming, she spits it into the kitchen sink. “Water, please!”

“You’d better get used to our food, you know.” Hey, this is interesting. “What’s yours like, then?”

Kalen looks blank. “We do not think about it much. The sjenden prepare it, and we eat it. We only insist that it is healthy. It is not as elaborate as your food, I think.”

Good, so we’re teaching them for a change. That’s food out of the way. Now sex. I ask the obvious.

“How do you have sex? You know, reproduce?”

“We have sex only in the Season. Then I look more like you, Franji like Elizabeth. We are not in Season now.”

“So you can’t have sex now.” Liz turns to me with relief. That’s one possible threat out of the way.

“That would be a motivating idea ...” Kalen smiles “But no. Let us talk about something more important even than that.” He stands up, walks over to Liz, and sits at her feet. He places her hands on his head. Franji does the same with me.

“Brains. They are basically the only difference between you and us. Possibly you can see that our prefrontal areas are bigger.”

I can see this. They have extra high foreheads that go nicely with the shape of their eyes.

“And the connections between our hemispheres are much more complex than your corpus callosum.” He moves Liz’s hands over the left and right sides of his skull. “And most important of all, those between the limbic system and the neocortex.”

I’m about to ask how he could possibly have picked up this detailed terminology, when Franji turns her head under my hands, looking up at me. Her eyes actually glow at me, throwing me right off track.

Kalen continues. “So you see we have integrated thinking and feeling. You could call us ‘Whollies’, while you, the sjenden, and other animals, would be ‘Splitties’, because your brain is split between lower and higher parts. You are intrinsically defective.”

“Defective?” I jerk my hands off Franji’s head, as if ‘Wholliness’ is the defect and contagious as dandruff.

“You make your major decisions with your lower brains. You use your higher brains only to carry them out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at your wars you are always fighting. Why do you do it? It is so irrational. It is not worth the cost. Yet you do it,” Kalen adds, wagging his finger at me as if I were Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush packed into one unWholly skin, “because your limbic system tells you to. You use your cortex only to design sophisticated technology to fight those wars. We have not fought a war in the millions of years of our existence as a species.”

He sits back smugly; that is, if those with integrated brains can be smug. But what he said makes sense. And there’s a parallel to Liz’s thesis. Why do intelligent young people, with the world in front of them, engage in high risk sexual behaviour when they can so easily take precautions? Thanks to our visitors, I can now tell you why: our midbrain overrides our cortex.

“Liz! This has a lot to do with your thesis, you know!”

“You bet it has.” She is leaning forward excitedly. “But I don’t like the message that kids fuck around because they’re hard-wired dumb. I’d prefer a more hopeful explanation than that.”

“Please?” Franji looks inquiringly from me to Liz, who explains.

Franji laughs. “It is like you people are always in Season! That is very interesting.” She catches Kalen’s eye.

“We shall return to that question later. But yes, I agree it is very interesting. Now,” Kalen the schoolmaster addresses us, “we have told you many things you must be confused. Do you have questions?”

“Yes, I do.” I look at Liz. “For a start, you say you have a mating season. Humans here have evolved out of that. Here, only animals have a season. How come you have regressed to the level of our animals?” A touch of aggro there, but I’m now sure they’re not likely to harm us, and it’s such an obvious point. Anyway, bugger it, we need to stand up for ourselves.

“I think your animals have a mating season for survival reasons—to match the availability of food, for example. Our reason is cognitive. Not even *our* brains have been able to control sexual drives, just as you have said yours do not. Sex is the one feeling that can lead us into irrational behaviour. Therefore, we separate sex from the rest of existence in the form of the Season. We created that through genetic engineering. During the Season, we stop working and focus on the pleasures of sex, which serve the purpose of reproduction, to be sure, but essentially it is a time of fun and friendship.”

“Fiesta time. Carnavale in Kozlar,” Liz says. “Well, that’s one way of solving the problem. I’ll see that it’s proposed at the next Student Council meeting.”

But what about those animals. “You mentioned *sjenden*. What are they?”

“They are a humanoid species on Kozlar with brains similar to yours. We have made up a simple language for them, called *sjenda*. Chardas are intelligent home animals. They can talk a little *sjenda* too.”

Which reminds me of their own mastery of English, which has improved noticeably while talking to us. I mention this to Kalen.

“This too is because of our brains. Your languages have two dimensions, words and grammar, but ours has four: words, grammar, speed and pitch ...”

“Cantonese and other Oriental languages use pitch,” I interrupt.

“Yes, yes, but it’s not the same,” he says testily. “We can say in seconds what would take you, including the Chinese, minutes. And *we* can say things you cannot say. You cannot understand or even reproduce our language via the use of your brains, but yours we understand easily and reproduce accurately. We quickly learned English from your radio and TV waves, and from your Net. Even as we talk to you we remember and recode your grammatical and phonetic rules. Thus, we improve all the time.”

I recall their beautifully economical and efficient running style. “So by ‘integration’ you mean not only feeling and thought but motor responses as well?”

“Of course. You see, Kozlar is larger than Earth, our gravity about 30% more than yours. Animals with unintegrated brains, sjenden and chardas, cope with such an environment by becoming muscular and large-boned. We, on the other hand, evolved by becoming light-boned, relying on long muscles and large vital capacity, because our brains are complex enough.”

A bell rings, something I’ve read. Ah yes. “One writer, Arthur Koestler, said something close to what you are saying, but he thought evolution was far too slow a process. He thought we should try to discover a chemical, or a gene, we could drop in the world’s water supplies to give our evolution a boost—”

Liz interrupts, her face alight. “My God! Are you *us* umpteen generations hence?”

Kalen looks pleased, nodding. “More or less, Elizabeth, more or less. But you must understand that we are a different *species* from you.” He’s got the smugs again. “As different from you as you are from your ancestor *homo habilis*. Possibly even further back.” After a pause: “I wonder, what should you call us?”

Facetious suggestions run through my mind, but Liz is serious. She stares at him wide-eyed. “I don’t know if you’ve have picked up much Latin from our media, but what about *homo integrens*: integrated man?”