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John

We're on board the small craft; Rittar at the console, Weyen beside him. We sit in two seats behind them. The lights suddenly dim and there is a high pitched humming. The lights of Exeter twinkle on the left of the craft for a few seconds. Next thing, we're through the cloud layer. Weyen switches on a cabin light, then swings her seat around to face us. She leans forward, studying us intently, her elbows on her knees and her chin cupped in her hands.

Now I can see her clearly; and I tell you what, she is something. Really something. Her bright green hair falls around an oval face similar to Franji's. A perfect creamy complexion, cute little chin, perfectly formed nose. And those big, lustrous green eyes, topped by long, green eyelashes, are just *shining* with warmth and friendliness. I feel so much better just looking at her. Then she speaks in English, with that very musical Kozlan accent.

"We have heard a lot about you. Kalen and Franji thought much good of you both. You are not quite what we expected from sjenden."

My good feelings collapse as quickly as they came. So, the specimens in the bottle. But what else are we?

"Well, I hope we don't disappoint you."

Rittar listens to this exchange, does something to the controls, and then he too swings his seat around to face us. He is maybe slightly larger, squarer, than Kalen. His skin is a light, coppery tone, and his hair bright red—not ginger, red—and, as seems to be the way with these guys, matching red eyes. These eyes look alarming at first, but after the initial shock we see that he too is looking at us warmly, searchingly, as if he's trying to find a way to put us at ease.

"John and Elizabeth. Welcome. And by the way," he says, turning to Weyen, "remember that although they are split-brained, they are not sjenden. As such. We do not want to hurt their feelings."

Weyen shrugs an apologetic smile at us. The knots in my belly loosen once more.

"I guess we're a little nervous." Liz forces a laugh.

"You will return to Earth within a half of your year. We promise you that. You should know by now that you can trust us."

"It's difficult to trust something, or someone, you don't understand; who you *can't* understand."

Their reply is to embrace us, and *sing*.

We dock inside the mother-ship. We step out of the shuttle and are taken through several corridors to a large stateroom. I lose my sense of direction almost immediately. I'm surprised at the gravity. Less than Earth, certainly, but far from weightlessness. This stateroom could belong on a medium-sized luxury

cruise ship, except that it is so sparsely equipped. What furniture and other equipment there is seems to be purely functional. On a luxury ship there'd be decorations, paintings, flash looking chairs, piped music—but there's none of that here. It makes sense, I suppose, as I guess they'd want to keep the weight down, but it looks strangely Spartan for such a technologically advanced people.

An older man, with fading brown hair and a network of fine lines around his eyes, sits at a large desk. Several other people are there. Some are Whollies, sitting in easy chairs around the room, watching our entrance with interest. Then there are the others, who clearly are not Whollies. They stand against the walls, dressed in brown suits, shorter and much stockier than the Whollies, with dark hair, and eyes of varying shades. Their dress is drabber, their features coarser, and their manner subservient. They must be sjenden—split-brained like us.

Rittar motions us to sit on two chairs by the desk. The older man smiles what seems a genuine welcome, and speaks in amazingly good English.

“We welcome you, to this ship and to our planet. Kalen has told us about you; we think we know you well. I am Hergon, the coordinator of this expedition. But I can see you are tired and bewildered.” He waves his hand to a sjenden standing by a cupboard. “Let us drink some *sjleva* while we are talking.”

The sjenden produces a tray of goblets and fills each of them with a brilliant, reddish liquid from a pressure-fed decanter. He walks over and offers me one. I deliberately hold his eyes to see if I can get anything, any message, from them; after all, we are in the same boat in more ways than one. He just stares back, resenting his role of servant to a fellow Splitty. So I give him a big comradely grin. He narrows his eyes a little, swivels them in the direction of Hergon, winks imperceptibly—and then back to surly nothingness. So I get some sort of reaction, but what is it supposed to mean? I'm bugged if I know, beyond a very general 'Us-Splitties, Them-Whollies'. Given the relative positions of the Splitties and Whollies I have observed so far, that doesn't augur well for us, does it now?

I taste the drink. So this is the famous *sjleva*. Some winespeak suggests itself. Intensely fruity, but not like any fruit I can name; quite dry, a quite marvellous taste that sinks into the palate and lingers on. Beats Gevrey Chambertin by a long chalk; beats even a whopping big shiraz, a top Clare Valley like Armagh. Now that *is* saying something; and unlike Armagh, it's free. Yours for the asking. After the first sip, I can feel the tiredness drain from my bones, and my brain lifts. The post-alcoholic fog that was the legacy from our desperate farewell dinner clears.

“Ah, yes, I see you like our *sjleva*. It is a good relaxant, but you will find you will not want more than one or two drinks. I do not think that, with us, you will drink to excess.” Hergon smiles like a trendy bishop, my spiritual knuckles smarting where he has rapped them with painful accuracy.

“But all these things you will soon discover for yourselves. Now. We shall be in transit in just over a week, your time. You have been allocated a cabin and a sjenden who will help you learn our basic common language, *sjenda*. That will be quite necessary for you, but it is simple, and I suspect

that you will have little difficulty. Our own language is another matter, however. I doubt that you would ever learn that.”

No doubt about these guys—they know how to shit on you. He continues.

“Weyen and Rittar are to be your friends and consultants. They will be in the cabin next to yours. I suggest that you now retire. In the morning, we shall show you everything and answer your questions. Goodnight to you, my friends.”

I awake in broad daylight. Rittar had told us to expect a normal day-night cycle, as the ship was programmed that way. Liz is quietly amusing herself pushing her feet and body against an elastic blanket that covers us. We soon discover that it is a useful accessory for a double bed in a low gravity situation.

A sjenden enters—a shapeless female—carrying two track suits like those Kalen and Franji were wearing when we met them. She adjusts them to fit us perfectly. As soon as we are dressed, she grunts and jerks her head towards the door.

Rittar and Weyen are just emerging from their room. They greet us and take us to a large common room. Several others, all Whollies, are sitting around, eating and *conversing* like soft, variable-pitch machine guns. The food is unexciting. While we eat, Weyen and Rittar tell us about the routines and other things they seem to think we need to know.

Suddenly, a rich, vibrant sound emerges from all round us. We jerk upright. About twenty Whollies are *singing*. Each appears to be singing a separate part, but there is no clear separation between voice qualities. The females sing the upper parts, and the males the lower, but in between it is impossible to distinguish the gender of the voices. I am reminded of the Tallis forty-part motet. Great swelling waves of perfect harmonisation, in crystal-pure voices. I’m also reminded of one Sunday morning in Hong Kong. The Filipino maids, thousands of them, attended Mass in the open air in Statue Square in Central. After Mass they formed a huge circle, arms on neighbours’ shoulders, and sang. My friends and I found ourselves inside that circle. It was so intense we had to leave, our throats paralysed.

Now here. Only twenty voices, but multiply all those other experiences by ten, and you may get something of what we are experiencing. Liz’s throat muscles are working, as I can feel mine are. Tears are dropping. The singers suddenly stop. Weyen leans forward and whispers, “Perhaps we should go now? There is much to show you.” Her eyes too are large and moist.

“But we’d like to stay ——.”

“No. No. You must leave. Come.”

She steers us out. Unlike on Earth with Kalen and Franji, Seasonal activities here are not for the likes of us.

The crucial difference between this language lab and Norma's is that the Splitty at this console is male and ugly. He's called Troga. The language *sjenda* is a pidgin, we discover, basically a primitive language with some sophisticated touches: a deliberate attempt by the Whollies to create a cosmic Esperanto out of existing *sjenden* languages.

Sjenda itself is uninflected, adjectives and nouns piling up into compounds that allow surprising refinement of meaning. Like Cantonese, the language is tonal, the meaning of a word changing according to its relative pitch. However, Cantonese tones are bastards for non-native speakers to recognise and reproduce. The *sjenda* tones are fewer, and much easier. And in *sjenda*, also unlike Cantonese, the same phoneme at different tones yields semantically related words, which makes for economy of vocabulary and expression. Words tend to be disyllabic, with equal emphasis on each syllable, the tones doing the fine-tuning.

The Wholly language, let's call it *conversation*, is on the other hand a vastly more complex development of a tonal language; so complex that you need super-tuned ears and vocal chords, and a sense of absolute pitch. But enough of the language lesson. All that was for Norma's benefit; just thought I'd let you all know anyway.

Troga is a good teacher, but useless otherwise. A nonperson. He won't be drawn on anything non-linguistic. What role do *sjenden* have in Wholly society? Are you married? Do you have a Season? What's it like to get really pissed on *sjleva*? Nothing. Can we trust the Whollies? More nothing. Surely there must be some feelings simmering away behind that desiccated face? But a faint smile, a lowering of the head, and "You will see" is the best we can get out of him.

In a few days we are speaking *sjenda*; not fluently, but well enough for basic communication. We have the run of the ship, so we try our luck with others apart from Troga. It's the same story. The *sjenden* avoid us if they can; and if they can't, they avoid our questions. The best we ever got was the wink from the drink waiter on arrival. The Whollies are friendly and cooperative, except when massed *singing* starts up. Immediately, someone leads us away, but ever so nicely. No one propositions either of us. Given Franji and Kalen's Seasonal enthusiasms, that is a little puzzling. It is also very reassuring. We decide we do not want to complicate our relationship this way, however safe it may be.

Three hours before transition. Liz and I are undressed, lying on our bunk. Rittar is giving us the relaxant necessary to weather the trauma of transition.

"Drink this. When you wake up you will be in a different galaxy: our galaxy. You will probably feel a little strange. But do not worry. Just lie and relax until Weyen comes to collect you."

We drink the stuff and hand the goblets back. He places them on the floor. He then slips off his tracksuit. Hairy, red and naked, he glides over me and lies on top of Liz, as if about to mount her. This is not a pretty sight at all, and I am getting fucking angry. Liz too.

“Hey, no Rittar! NO! I don’t *want* to!” Liz tries to shake him off but he only starts *singing*.

Weyen immediately follows suit, and suitless, which suits her better than it does Rittar—I am irrelevantly proud of that spontaneous triple-take *à la* Donne—climbs onto me.

“Weyen, *stop!*” I say sharply. I push against her, hard. She is enormously strong; I can’t shake free. She leans over me, smiling at me with her large, green eyes, *singing* to me. I must admit she has a lovely body, if you aren’t turned off by green hairy bits. She lightly fingers me. I can’t avoid an erection, but I frantically twist towards Liz.

Weyen and Rittar are now *singing* to each other—preparatory, it seems, to making love to us. And there’s not a thing we can do about it. I take Liz’s hand, and cradle her head in my other arm. She hisses into my ear.

“Get that bastard off me, John.” She has locked her ankles tightly.

“I can’t even shift Weyen off me. They’re so bloody strong. Darling,” I try some humour, “you know the old saying ——.”

“You *dare* say what I think you’re going to say!”

“If rape is inevitable? No, I wasn’t going to say that. Might as bloody well, but.”

My Les Patterson Australian adds the last touch of absurdity. She starts to giggle. Quite right, too—this is a real hoot, when you think about it. Here’s me being fingered by my would-be green succubus; Liz resisting entry from her wanna-be red incubus. Meantime, they are *singing* to each other! Ever been tickled when you’re eyeball to eyeball with an orgasm? Then you’ll know why in seconds we’re both howling with helpless laughter.

Rittar and Weyen, caught in mid-*song*, stop their meddling with our nether regions. They gape in astonishment.

“John, it is not funny.” Weyen looks and sounds like a petulant child.

“Well, we think you look hilarious.” Then a spurt of anger. “Anyway, how dare you come in here and assume you can rape us! You knew we didn’t want sex. We told you clearly enough, both of you.”

“But you said you *did*. In the stateroom, during the *singing*.”

“Hey, we didn’t know *that’s* what was going to happen!” Liz is at last able to struggle upright into a sitting position.

“You *must* have known. Kalen and Franji said you had sex with them and you loved it! It’s not fair!” Weyen pouts, her eyes swelling and her lower lip trembling. “And we so wanted to help you feel more positive about us before transition ... ”

She looks so cute and hurt, but she obediently slides off me.

Liz sighs, pats Weyen’s cheek, and pulling her face down to hers, kisses her. “Never mind. You’re beautiful, Weyen—a beautiful, lovely person.”

“Right. Now nick off and leave us be,” I add.

In the meantime, Rittar has, with lissom grace, removed himself from atop Liz, and is quietly putting on his tracksuit. As he picks up the goblets he mumbles, in *conversation*, to Weyen. It's obvious what he's saying. "Typical. Absolutely bloody *typical*. Stupid, bloody sjenden! They don't know what they fucking want." Or words to that effect.

Weyen turns at the door, reproaching us with a goodbye of hurt bewilderment.

By now the drug is beginning to take effect; but before we go under we both feel an enormous need for each other. Just for each other.

Our lovemaking is as relaxed as it is intense. Then bliss, peace.

We drift towards transition at the speed of light.