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John

Liz doesn't seem to have realised that after last night she too has indulged in high risk behaviour. God knows what STDs, or other exotic diseases, extra-terrestrials might carry. Here is something we definitely need to clear up. So when Liz eventually rejoins us, I put the question, but from their point of view.

“Aren't you afraid of catching diseases on earth for which you have no immunity?”

Liz immediately sees the obverse. She claps her hand to her mouth, eyes wide in horror. “Oh, *shit!* Of course!”

But Kalen is, as usual, patiently arrogant in dealing with my idiotically simple question. “Not at all. We have conquered disease. We only die from accidents or old age.”

“How come?”

“Very simple when you think about it. Our most developed science is microbiology. That is largely what Project Integrens is about. We have genetically modified our immune systems so that we immediately manufacture the antibody to any noxious agent that might be incorporated into our bodies. But that of course only applies to beings descended from genetically modified Whollies.

“So we have synthesised an antigen that has the same effect, which can be injected into any species. It should be obvious that such a precaution is essential in space travel. There could be completely unforeseeable harmful organisms in different universes. We have to make sure they are harmless to us. And to our crews, of course.”

“Hey! Are you saying that if we went to Kozlar we'd be rendered immune to any disease, ever, in our lives?” Christ! There's an uncountable fortune in this!

“Yes, John, even if you didn't go to Kozlar we might arrange that.” *Might*. Is he stipulating a condition, like blackmail maybe?

Liz jumps up excitedly. “Does it work retrospectively? Like, say, we had contracted some terrible disease like AIDS or something,” and here she looks pointedly at me, “would it cure it?”

“Yes, but only if the disease was still incubating and had not taken hold. HIV is curable, AIDS probably not, as I think it would have developed beyond the point where immunity is relevant. However, we do not know for sure, as we ourselves have not experienced such cases.”

“Would you inject us? Please? Please, please, please, please, please?” She runs over to him and kisses him on the mouth.

“Certainly, Elizabeth. Shall we do it right now?”

Phew. So it wasn't a condition! They must be extremely confident about us going, and that is disturbing—like our free will has been taken from us.

But if that's the bad news, the good news is that they do exactly what they said they would do. Franji goes to their room and comes back with a small medical kit. She takes out a small syringe-

like instrument, holds it to our bare skin, and *floop!* Done. We are immune from all diseases for the rest of our lives. Or so they tell us.

I guess we'll find out, but strangely, I believe them.

Kalen announces their desire to sample more Earthlings—all in the interests of the Project, he insists. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think. Anyway, I suggest the disco bar at the Black Bull, with the warning it might be a tad roughish since the students moved on and the skinheads moved in. A likely spot for casual sex. We give them a briefing on disco dancing.

The place is crowded, dark and extremely noisy. We share a table with a party of skinheads and order drinks. Kalen is drinking in frequent, nervous gulps. Most unlike him. Franji walks slowly, slag-like, to the edge of the floor and leans against a pillar. A guy is soon dancing in front of her, leering. They move onto the floor together.

Kalen is eyeing a girl at our table. She has pink and green hair, patched overalls, and a cheeky little face that returns his obvious interest. In no time, they are both on the floor too, she clinging to him and wiggling up against him. He says something to her and they stop dancing. He leads her by the hand through the exit and up the stairs, seconds after Franji and her boy have left the same way.

Things happen suddenly. One of the youths from another table comes over and shouts, "Didja see that? That foreign lookin' bastard's trying to make it with Tessa. Let's get 'im!"

Tables empty. Liz and I, scared now, push our way through. Not only do I not want to get roughed up, I'm shit-scared the police will get involved. One too many questions and their cover is blown.

Kalen is surrounded by the time we get there. A skinhead is standing behind him with an arm around his throat; another is in front of him, ready to beat the shit out of him by the look of it. The others range around, ready with the reinforcements. But Kalen just laughs, releasing the arm from round his throat as if it were a child's. He turns, asking, "What is wrong? I do not wish any harm. I wish only to fuck this girl."

"You foreign cunt," says the skinhead, and takes a swing at Kalen's head. Kalen catches his wrist before it connects. Ducking, he grabs the skinhead's ankle and, standing up, swings him like a human club, battering the circle into disorganisation. A girl screams. Swinging the skinhead like a hammer about to be thrown, Kalen lets go. The body arcs off, landing with a sickening *crunch* against the wall on the other side of the cul-de-sac.

Franji's pick-up appears and, not seeing what's happened, throws himself on Kalen, bringing him down. The others regroup at that, then join in with boots and punches. Franji now runs up, picking the bodies off Kalen and throwing them yards away. Kalen surfaces, bringing with him the ankle of Franji's boyfriend, whom he swings above his head in faster and faster circles. Then I hear a police whistle.

"Leave him," I yell. "For Christ's sake!"

Too late. Three cops turn the corner from Penzance Road and charge up the cul, truncheons in hand. Kalen aims at the police and lets his projectile go. Police and skinhead collapse in a heap onto the pavement. Kalen, laughing delightedly, grabs Franji's hand, waves to us, and together they run down Penzance Road in the direction of home.

I don't get past so easily. Two police are now barring the way. "Bit o' trouble, eh lads?" one cop, in a nasty voice, addresses the crowd in general. Then to us, "You in this too, were you? Just 'old it a moment."

There's no way out. We give our account, such as it is. Strictly bystanders. We were leaving and saw this fight going on. Nothing to tell, really. But we have to leave our names, address and phone number. I don't foresee the need for a white lie; if found out, that would leave us in real trouble. The skinheads give a garbled account. The police obviously don't believe they're innocent, especially when they are told that their assailants were a tall fair man and a tall dark woman, each of whom was capable of throwing hulking great adults enormous distances.

