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The Mutants

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*Bonobos are... ambassadors from a primordial world
of peace through pleasure, inviting us in one kiss at a time.*

Susan Block, *The Bonobo Way*

It was not Kiki's fault. Let Mother screech as much as she wants, she thought. What had happened was an accident, and nobody should be punished for it. If fault was to be apportioned, it had to fall on Gagumi, but nobody would blame him, because bonobos males are stupid and act only on impulse.

Gagumi had come over to the nest of branches where Kiki was resting and, noticing that Kiki's genital area was distended -- indicative of her being in heat -- had pointed his erect member at her and, before she could react, was penetrating her from the front. Although surprised, Kiki was receptive and experienced a measure of enjoyment from the sexual encounter, which was hardly her first: since reaching puberty she had frequently coupled with males and often engaged in intimate rubbing with other females.

The act had been observed by several females and they had expressed their solidarity with Kiki through shrill screams and gestures. No disapproval was shown to Gagumi, because he

was Mother's eldest son and it was not good policy to antagonize the matriarch of the troop by criticizing an act by her favorite.

Kiki had gone through three litters and her youngest offspring, a cute little thing called Lala, was still nursing, so according to her experience she was still infertile; thus, she anticipated that her incident with Gagumi would leave nothing but a memory behind. However, several weeks after that afternoon Kiki began exhibiting clear signs of pregnancy. When vomiting and morning sickness were accompanied by swelling of her belly, it became evident to her and others that she was pregnant with a child from Gagumi. That is when Mother started screeching: she intended better mating partners for Gagumi than low-ranking Kiki, and wanted any future grandchild to bring a powerful female directly into Mother's family. Mother could not abide by Gagumi making a child that could interfere with her dynastic plans and unjustly blamed Kiki for the developments.

Kiki resented Mother's outbursts and responded with screeches of her own. Matters went from bad to worse and one afternoon Mother and several of her acolytes roughly pushed Kiki out of the boundaries of their encampment and, baring their oversized canines, made it clear that she would not be allowed to return. Kiki was unable to resist her ouster, and knuckled-walked into the dense rain forest and continued to march across it, farther and farther away from her former friends and mates, to start the solitary existence of an exile.

As night fell, Kiki found herself in an unfamiliar forest of very tall trees that all but shielded from the ground the light of the moon and the stars. She had been feeding on vegetation and small animals that skulked on the forest floor, but was increasingly hungry. It was then that she noticed a very long vine that rose from the ground, adhering to the trunk of one of the trees

by a series of cylindrical stems from which dark green protrusions resembling leaves shot out. The stems were highly branched and covered much of the tree's trunk, and from one of the lower stems hung a large bud that was slowly opening.

Kiki watched with fascination as the bud became a very large, white, funnel-shaped flower whose fragrance filled the night air. The pleasant smell reminded Kiki that she was quite hungry and she reached up and snapped the flower from the stem. She then sat on the tree's above-ground roots and ate the flower slowly, enjoying every bite and letting the juices drip down her chin.

She had nearly finished chewing on the flower when the accumulated burden of the difficult day made her weary and she collapsed against the tree trunk and fell immediately asleep.

Kiki was awakened by a growl uttered somewhere nearby. She had spent all her life foraging for food in the company of males and females from her troop. On those occasions, the males were tasked with facing off the lions, leopards, pythons, and other predators that threatened the group. The role of Kiki and the other females was to gather foodstuffs, not fight hostile creatures; thus, she was unaccustomed to defend herself against such perils. Rising to her feet, she hurried away from the threatening sound. She was still clutching the remnants from the flower she had been savoring before falling asleep and, as she ran away, she saw that the trees in her vicinity held numerous dead flowers identical to the one that had been her dinner.

Her flight led her to a water hole, which that early in the morning was inhabited only by tall birds with long, skinny legs. Kiki was thirsty and bent over the edge of the pond to have a drink. In doing so, she made an astonishing discovery.

She was used to gazing at herself in analogous circumstances and could easily distinguish her features from those of other members of her troop, since there were marked physical differences among the various females, and even more when females and males were compared. The image that Kiki was seeing reflected in the waters was different from anything she had encountered previously. Her head had become elongated, her jaws had receded, her teeth had changed shape, now featuring smaller molars and canines and larger front teeth. The pink coloring of her lips had faded, and her skin had become the color of fresh honey. She did not recognize herself and was terrified by the changes. She concluded she had somehow been poisoned by the strange flower she had eaten the night before.

Kiki wondered whether these changes were real or an illusion due to the false morning light's reflection on the waters. But there was no time for speculation: she had to get food and put some more distance between herself and her former troop mates, who had threatened to come after her to enforce her banishment.

The forest she was traversing seemed to have no end. Row after row of tall trees massed together to form a barely penetrable wall. Along the way, she encountered more dead blossoms like the one she had eaten the previous night; she ignored these, for she was in the mood for something more substantial. She caught a movement underfoot and, in a quick move, captured a small lizard-like creature, which she proceeded to devour while it was still writhing in agony.

Later, Kiki sought relief from the rising heat of the day. She found a thin stream that originated in a hollow in the ground and flowed erratically across the clearing where she stood. The turbid waters were unappetizing and she considered moving on, but thirst overcame reluctance. She bent down and, between gulps, tried to see herself in the water. The stream was shallow and muddy and there was almost no reflection, but the little that she saw confirmed her

earlier surprise. Somehow, she had changed overnight and become some sort of monster. She got up with a start and moved away quickly trying to distance herself from the vision.

The night found Kiki near the end of the forest. Looking for a branch where she could rest out of the reach of predators, she came upon another vine-covered tree that showed a few buds of the mysterious flower she had feasted on the previous day. She climbed to a branch near a bud and debated whether to eat it before the flower it enclosed opened. Curiosity won and Kiki sat, expectantly, near the bud waiting for it to reveal its secrets.

She did not have to wait long. Little by little, the bud's petals separated and a very large, fragrant flower opened, and Kiki could no longer contain herself. She struggled to pluck the flower from its stem and, succeeding, bit greedily into it. The taste of the fresh bloom was even more delectable than she remembered from the night before. She gorged herself on the soft, moist substance and, once finished, issued a contented grunt, and fell into a deep sleep.

The morning was somewhat advanced when Kiki's eyes opened with a start. No beasts appeared to be in her vicinity; however, in the distance, there was a familiar clamor, characteristic of her kin: screams, barks and grunts signifying that an organized foraging operation was in progress.

Under normal circumstances, Kiki would have rushed to return to the fold and begged her peers to forgive her offenses. However, Mother was known to be vindictive and was unlikely to have forgotten how Kiki had failed to show due respect for the elder's leadership. Beset by doubt, Kiki hesitated.

Then, through an empty spot in the woods, she could see the approaching group. They were not her clan, but the strange creatures that lived across the big water. They were shorter, heavier versions of Kiki and her troop; they had thin, dark lips that broke into cruel grimaces,

lighter skins, and muscular bodies. Most importantly, they were led by aggressive males and were quite forceful in defending their territory. Kiki was certain that, if they caught her, they would do her harm, maybe even kill her.

Kiki started to speed away and, in her desperation, rose on her back legs and discovered that she could move faster if she used the strength of those legs than if she depended on her knuckles to propel herself. After a while, she had left the sounds of her potential pursuers behind and had moved into a grass-covered plain that extended far towards the horizon.

She paused to consider her situation. This area was unfamiliar, and she had no recollection of ever being in a place like this before. Behind her was the end of the familiar forest, but she did not dare turn back for fear of running into the threatening strangers. There was no turning back: she decided to press on, in the direction of the rising sun.

She traveled east for many moons, traversing higher plains and hills covered with savanna grasses and woodlands, having to modify her diet from fruits and tree leaves to grasses and insects, supplemented by small mammals and wild bird eggs, when she found them. As her belly inflated, the rest of her body became sparser and she came to fear she was starving to death.

At long last, he reached the end of the lowlands and entered an area of dense vegetation, almost as thick as the forests in which Kiki had been reared, but comprised mostly of unknown, low growing shrubs interspersed with a few tall trees. Walking through that jungle was difficult, and Kiki felt her energy dwindle with each passing day. She was reluctant to eat the lush greenery for fear of poisoning herself and the unborn, so she lived on berries and the few edible plants she recognized.

She was at the end of her strength and almost ready to lie down and die when the jungle ended abruptly and she was confronted by a sight of staggering oddness. Before her lay a long area of empty, reddish, flat rocks; beyond, in the horizon, there were bodies of water and then the land rose steeply to form a conical mass that went up into the sky, so far above the ground that its end was shrouded by clouds. Kiki had never seen a mountain before and there was nothing in her experience that prepared her for the awesome vision. She held her breath so long that she felt she would choke, but recovering herself she gained a new resolve: she would go to that great hill and give birth there, so her child could grow in that majestic environment.

The trip to the mountain consumed the last bit of energy that Kiki had left, so that by the time she stood at its foot she had no strength left to start climbing. She found a sheltered corner under a tree, built a rudimentary nest with small branches and leaves, and went into labor.

It was a miracle she survived the ordeal of childbirth. The baby, a female, came out facing away from her mother and her head and body rotated after the head had emerged. The newborn dropped to the ground unaided and lay there, drawing her first breaths anxiously as if eager to get going. Kiki, however, was unable to reach for the newborn. The pain had only subsided a little and, after a few moments, labor resumed, and not much later another infant dropped from Kiki's birth canal: a male this time, only slightly larger than his older sister.

Giving birth to twins was a phenomenon that had not occurred in Kiki's existence. Having one baby was painful enough, she thought. Having two seemed like punishment from the heavens.

It took Kiki only a moment to regain her composure and allow maternal instincts to take over. She picked up the female and hauled her to safety, ignoring the placenta and the umbilical cord, which dangled for a few hours until they dried up and fell away. With the female securely

laying on her back, Kiki picked up the male and did something unusual: she ate the placenta and the cord, and then ingested the abundant amniotic fluid, following which she licked the affected areas clean.

Perhaps she was following the ancestral customs of her troop, wherein mothers were always protecting their sons; or maybe she had the presentment that the female of this pair would grow strong and self-sufficient whereas the male would always need female care and attention. Whatever the reason, she laid her offspring next to each other and contemplated them with a mixture of love and awe.

For her children were like her, and yet different. Superimposed on her recognizable features – wide eyes, pointed ears, curving mouths – were traits that included, and accentuated, the changes she had noticed in her own body. They had long limbs, jaws that receded, misshapen teeth with small molars that would create difficulties in chewing tough roots. Their lips were thin and colorless, their skin light, their bodies almost devoid of hair. Kiki thought they were strange, but in their own way beautiful.

The sight of these unique beings injected a new urgency into her exhausted body. She had to live, at least for several transits of the seasons, and protect her offspring until they could take care of themselves.

She carried both infants in her arms and began foraging for edible sources of nourishment. She would eat fruits and nuts if she could, grubs, worms and little animals if she must. She walked on, holding the new kind of creatures she had managed to unleash upon the world. She could not envision their destiny, but felt it was her duty to help bring it into fruition and hope for the best.

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