

T H E G E N E D R A I N

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

J S N REACHED UP to the row of glowing buttons across his forehead and changed his mind with an audible click.

Nothing helped. He couldn't shake the sense of disaster hovering over him like an avalanche in progress. In a last, desperate attempt to salvage his mood he worked up an autonomous search program and sent it spiraling back through his core memory.

Up on the dais the alien who identified himself as Brother Simon droned on: "...and, uh, we, that is, bein as how we are all brothers in Johnny, I mean, we ud, uh, really like to find us a place in yall's hearts, praise Johnny, and maybe even someplace where we could stay for a while..."

Somebody behind J S N said, "This is pathetic." The assembled U N delegates, representing the 2,873,261 free and independent nations of Earth, began to boo. Some stood up and shouted. Others clawed loose bits of wiring from appendages and hurled them at the dais.

Brother Simon stopped talking and the seven aliens sat quietly and took the abuse. They were nominally humanoid, but hideously pale, fleshy, thick-bodied, and slow. One or another of them constantly picked at its face or scratched the crotch of its shapeless gray clothing or spat a fat yellow glob onto the floor.

It had been a mistake to bring them to New York, J S N now realized. He'd promised the delegates alien emissaries and delivered these travesties of humanity that not only exuded unpleasant noises and odors, but committed the ultimate crime of being boring besides.

What else could he have done? He was a pop star, not a politician, and it had been plain bad luck that their crude shuttle had landed on his estate.

The aliens had been following, as far as J S N could make out, a primitive T V broadcast back to its source. It had come from a city called Killville or something—reflexively J S N pulled the data—Lynchburg, that was it. Back in the twentieth century it had been a center for some kind of religious propaganda, and apparently the aliens had learned their harsh and unpleasant English from what they'd intercepted. What had been Lynchburg was now no more than a few burned and abandoned hillsides on the edge of J S N's land.

From what they'd managed to stammer out, J S N understood they were the advance front for an entire orbiting mothership, full of hundreds more just like them: the misshapen, retarded refuse of some galactic civilization. He'd hidden their shuttle in a disused barn, hoping the stench of the place would help cover that of the aliens. Then he tried to get hold of L N R, the Duchess of the local corporation. Unfortunately she was in for a new prosthesis and J S N had been forced to handle the situation himself.

Well, he'd handled it and he'd blown it. He'd just have to admit it and get the aliens offstage before the other delegates rioted. He stood up, fought his

way to the front, then noticed a buzzing in his mastoid. His program was finished. Holding a finger up to the crowd, he punched in the results.

“Holy shit,” he whispered as the data started to roll. He had forgotten about the microphones and cameras and naked eyes and ears that were all focused on him. “Holy shit,” he said again. “They’re *us!*”

THE THREE OF THEM met for a council of war at JSN’s country house: JSN, LNR, and a man named DNS who was LNR’s top advisor. JSN found DNS in the foyer, admiring a piece of taxidermy. “They were called cows,” DNS said. “People used to eat them and wear their skins.”

JSN glanced back at LNR. “I think JSN knows that,” she said. “It is his cow.”

“Maybe we’d be more comfortable in the study,” JSN offered.

“A very rich protein source, beef,” DNS said. He was short, heavy around the middle, and had more prosthetics than JSN had ever seen on one person before, all of them dented, discolored, and hopelessly out of date. “Gave people a lot of spunk.”

“Not to mention arteriosclerosis and cancer,” JSN said, waving his arm at the open door. DNS reluctantly went in.

“So,” LNR said, settling at one end of an antique sofa. “We’re going to have to do something. If anybody finds out where they are, they’re liable to mob the place and tear them to pieces.”

“I know,” JSN said. “There’s nothing people hate worse than bad video. Especially when it’s live. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” LNR said graciously. “It’s partly my fault, after all. If I hadn’t been in surgery...” She held up a gleaming new hand. “Do you like it, by the way?”

“Very much,” JSN said. He had seen her a couple of times before at state parties or concerts, but never had a chance to talk to her. Now he found himself quite infatuated. Her skull was sleek and hairless, her prosthetic arm and leg—on opposite sides, of course—were polished beryllium alloy, perfect complements to her skeletally thin naturals. Two bright neon’d veins ran up her neck for a splash of color. I’d sure like to network with that, he thought crudely.

“It still has a few bugs in the flexors,” LNR said, “but on the whole...”

“Very nice,” JSN said.

“Anyway. You say this mother ship was launched in the twentieth century, the computer malfunctioned and took them in a big circle and landed back here on Earth, thinking it was a new planet.”

“It is a new planet as far as they’re concerned,” DNS interrupted. “I mean, can you imagine what *we* look like to *them*?”

“Shut up, DNS,” LNR said. “Meanwhile, the crew just sort of backslid a few generations, evolutionally speaking, what with the small gene pool and all. Is that pretty much the gist of it?”

“I found records of the launching, and some distress signals. That seems to be what it all points to.”

“So how come nobody remembered any of this?”

She patted the back of the sofa and J S N sat down next to her.

“No reason they should,” J S N said. “I mean, did they look that human to you?”

“I don’t think they look that bad,” D N S said.

“Shut up, D N S,” L N R said, and turned back to J S N. “I see what you mean.”

“This was a couple hundred years ago, after all. Data like that isn’t going to be in anybody’s volatile memory. It’s going to be banked. Unless somebody had a reason to think they *weren’t* aliens, who would go looking for it?”

“But you thought of it,” L N R said.

Was that admiration in her tone? J S N brushed casually at his forehead and punched up a little extra charm. “Oh no,” he said, “it was just an accident. Really. In fact I was looking for, well, something to use against them.”

“You mean,” L N R said, “like a, a *weapon*?” The tip of her tongue just touched her silvered lips. “How twisted.” She crossed her beryllium leg over her natural with a flash of light so intense that J S N momentarily blinked his mirrored contacts into place.

“We have to do something,” he said. “If we knocked out that mother ship we wouldn’t have to keep confronting the fact that we share the same genetics with those ... animals.”

“I know what you mean,” L N R said, “but it’s just bound to give *somebody* the wrong impression. Suppose we set them up their own country, maybe someplace like Antarctica?”

“I’m not sure even that would be isolated enough. On top of everything else they seem to have some sort of weird messianic religion, and you know you can’t trust people like that. They’d be starting wars and pogroms and handing out literature door-to-door as soon as we turned our backs on them.”

“Why are you so hostile?” D N S asked. He’d been walking around the library, touching things, and now he’d gone into a higher gear. Sweat had started to soak through his clothes and he kept rubbing his hands on his kilt, even though there was virtually no exposed skin left on them. “They’re not so unpleasant. And I find their women somewhat ... er ... attractive. I’ve always said, we shouldn’t be so quick to jettison our own history.”

“You’ve always said that,” L N R said tiredly.

“History?” J S N said. “Who cares about history? That’s the wrong direction.”

“This is *living* history,” D N S said, pacing frenetically. “That’s not just a gene pool up on that ship, it’s a *gene bank*.” He began to snatch bits of paper off the desk and tables, shred them compulsively with his fingers, and stuff them into his recycler. “Vigorous, healthy genes, not the feeble leftovers we’ve got. Those people are everything we’re not: natural, in touch with themselves—”

“Brainless,” J S N said, “malodorous—”

“Try to see it my way,” D N S said, and J S N obligingly punched up a less hostile persona. “We’ve let technology take over completely from nature. Less than one percent of our population would be viable without some kind of hardware support.”

He should know, J S N thought, nodding. The man was only intermittently flesh.

“And the technology that’s holding it all together is shoddy!” D N S went on. “Over ninety percent of the manufactured goods in the world are defective! Ninety percent! And that’s just the stuff that makes it through the Q C checks at the factories!”

“Still,” J S N said, as kindly as possible, “I don’t think I’d care to have any of those devolved genetics in my hatchery.”

“And that’s another thing. Even our reproduction is dependent on technology. Do you know what the birthrate is? It’s .2 of the mortality rate, and falling!”

“So what?” J S N shrugged amiably. “If we need more kids we can always decant them.”

“No! We have to go back to the old ways before it’s too late!”

“D N S,” said L N R firmly, “shut up.” To J S N she said, “You have to forgive him. He had an implant accident when he was a kid and blew out most of his frontal lobe. Hasn’t trusted technology since. Those who need it the most like it the least, eh?”

“You think I’m crazy,” D N S said, “but you’ll see. If only we could get sex and procreation linked again—”

“You’d have a world,” J S N said, reverting to his former aggressive self at the touch of a button, “that I wouldn’t much want to live in. L N R, would you care to go watch some video and talk about this some more and maybe fuck?”

“Sounds heavy,” she said, and J S N led her to the door.

“You’ll be sorry,” D N S warned, and J S N cheerfully shut him in the library.

T H E O R G O N E G E N E R A T O R refused to come up to speed and for a few helpless, frustrated moments J S N wondered if D N S had been right. Nothing seemed to work anymore. Then L N R found a way to patch around it and J S N became promptly and thoroughly distracted.

A little less than an hour later a shrill alarm interrupted them. “Shit,” J S N said, yanking cables out of various orifices. “I knew I shouldn’t have left him alone.”

“Here.” L N R unwrapped something from his left leg so he could hobble over to a monitor. “Is it D N S?”

“Yeah,” J S N said. “He found the barn where I stashed the shuttle.”

“And the weirdos too?”

“Yeah. That guy seems like a real jerk. What do you keep him around for?”

“Well, you don’t want an advisor who’s just going to agree with you all the time. He’s definitely got his own ideas.”

That seemed reasonable to J S N. “I’d better get out there. He’s liable to bring the whole world down on us.” He started putting on his shirt.

“I’ll come too,” L N R said. “After all, I brought him into this.” She had her shoes on and was ready to go; her black outfit, J S N had discovered to his vast pleasure, was a mutant cell strain and a living part of her body.

J S N hurried into the rest of his clothes and led the way outside.

The night was clear and hot. Cyborg mowers had cut the fields that afternoon and the smell of battered grass filled the air. J S N stopped for moment and scanned the star patterns.

“There,” he said, pointing to a bright spot in Capricorn, near the eastern horizon. “The mother ship.”

“It must be huge,” L N R said, and J S N nodded. “And to think it’s just crawling with devos. It’s enough to give you a head crash.”

J S N slipped quietly through the oversized barn door, noticing that the lingering odor of livestock had been routed by the more potent essence of the devos. In the dim parking lights of the shuttle he saw Brother Simon and all six of the others standing in a circle around the sweating D N S .

“D N S !” he shouted, being careful to breathe through his mouth. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

D N S flinched in obvious guilt, then recovered. “I’m a doctor,” he said indignantly. “These people need proper medical attention. What do you think they are, zoo specimens?”

J S N turned to L N R , who had come in after him. “Is he a doctor?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think maybe he put a chip in for it once.”

“If that’s all you’re doing,” J S N said, “why did you think you had to sneak in?”

“I assumed you had something else on your mind.”

“Look,” J S N said to the devo nearest him, a heavysset female with huge, drooping breasts behind the front panel of her overalls. “You don’t have to put up with this guy if you don’t want to.”

“Yall are wastin yore time talkin to the helpmeat,” Brother Simon said. The female smiled at J S N in vacant agreement. “But dont worry none. We ud be proud to talk to yore doctor fella. Mebbe we ud get a chance to share the Good News with him.”

“You mean you’re leaving?” L N R asked.

“Pardon?”

“Isn’t that the good news?”

“I meant the Good News about our Lord and Savior, Johnny Carson.”

J S N accessed his core, noticing, from her slightly uprolled eyes, that L N R was doing the same. “I don’t have anything on it,” he said. “You?”

“I can’t tell. I think I’ve got some bad sectors in my religion directory.”

“Sorry,” J S N said to Brother Simon. “We don’t have the foggiest notion what you’re talking about.”

“Yall aint heard the Word?”

“Is that the same as the good news?” L N R asked.

“Because if it is, no, we haven’t.”

“If yall wanna step inside, I ud be proud to give my witness.”

“Sure,” L N R said. “Why not?”

The devo took them into the shuttle. The smell in the barn was bad enough, but inside the cramped corridors of the ship it was stale, fermented, overpowering. Someone had scrawled slogans like “Smile! Johnny Loves Yall!” and “I Johnny” on the white plastic walls in what looked and smelled like human excrement.

“I don’t know how much of this I can stand,” J S N confided.

“Me either,” L N R said, “but it’s kind of like with D N S . I can’t resist a crank. Just a couple of minutes, okay?”

Brother Simon typed the letters G O O D N E W S onto the keyboard of the shuttle’s main computer, using only one finger of each hand and making a lot of mistakes. He stared at the finished word for a while, then hit the R E T U R N key.

A meter-square screen lit up at the front of the room and a voice boomed, “There’s Good News tonight!” The blank screen dissolved into a sound stage full of furniture. A dark-haired man stumbled onto the stage, tripped, and fell noisily across the furniture, smashing several of the chairs to pieces. The camera tightened on his face and the man said, “Live! From New York! It’s ... the Gospel According to Matthew!”

The scene changed to a murky river flowing through a desert. A bearded man stood in water past his knees, his back to the camera, addressing a mob of peasants wearing towels on their heads. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to lick! He will baptize you with Holy Sitcoms and with celebrities! And now ... heeeeeere’s Johnny!”

A man with short white hair waded into view from behind the camera, then turned to wink. His skin was evenly, artificially tanned, and he had the arrogant smirk of a pre-adolescent. He wore a 20th-century dress suit with lapels out to the shoulders and had something orange tied around his neck. Laughter swelled to fill the soundtrack.

“Hey there!” the man said. “Have we got a great show tonight!” The river came nearly to his waist and his suit was starting to sag with water, but he didn’t seem to notice. “We’ve got the poor in spirit (applause) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We’ve got those who mourn (more applause), fresh from Las Vegas, and believe me, they shall be comforted. We’ve got the meek, and right here, on tonight’s show, they’re going to inherit the earth, and what do you think about that? (Thunderous applause.)”

“Wow,” L N R said. “This is really twisted.”

J S N had pumped the entire video into a core search. “Parts of it seem to be out of the Christian bible, but it’s almost beyond recognition. Hey!” he shouted to Brother Simon, who stood enraptured in front of the screen, “are you guys Christians, is that it?”

“Christians?” L N R said with alarm. “You mean like Torquemada and Henry Lee Lucas and Jerry Falwell?”

“We are Carsinagins,” Brother Simon said. “We believe every Image of the Sacred Word was divinely inspired, and we live by Its Law. Johnny be praised!”

“Wait a minute,” L N R said, holding up one finger to indicate incoming data. “We were looking in the wrong place. This Carson was a 20th-century video star. Something is really wrong here. What kind of computer is this?”

“It’s a Generation V,” J S N said, reading the name, plate. “Uh oh. You don’t mean...”

“Heuristic self-programming. Artificial—” she choked, unable to hold back her laughter.

“Intelligence!” J S N hooted. “No wonder!”

“Are yall mockin the Word?” Brother Simon asked. His anger seemed to be teetering on the edge of tears.

“No, no, just this fucked-up hardware,” J S N said. “It must have merged all those video broadcasts into one file...”

“...and then tried to make sense of it! What a disaster!”

“Now see here,” Brother Simon said. “If yall cant show proper respect all hafta axe yall to leave.”

“Respect?” L N R howled. “Are you kidding?”

“That’s it,” Brother Simon said, flapping his hands at them. “Out. Yawn yone.”

L N R stared blankly at J S N. “I think he means we’re on our own,” he said.

L N R took his arm. “Suits me. You think we could get all those cables back the way they were?”

“Let’s find out,” J S N said, then hesitated. “What about D N S? We shouldn’t just leave him here with these devos...”

“Don’t worry,” L N R said. “He may be stupid, but he’s harmless.”

L A T E R T H A T N I G H T J S N looked up to see his barn disintegrating on an overhead monitor. “Holy shit,” he said.

L N R leaned backward to look. “The devos?”

J S N nodded. “And I think D N S is on board. Or fried to a cinder, one.”

“Oh well. Good riddance to the lot of them. Any more amps on this thing?”

J S N twisted the dial all the way to ten.

J S N W A S S H O O T I N G a fashion layout in one of his disused pastures when the devos found him. The director had just finished draping him erotically in yards of raw fiberglass when she noticed that her lead camera had dropped off-line. She called for the backup and found the power switch had jammed in the OFF position. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s take a break.”

“What about me?” J S N asked. He could barely move.

“You,” the director said, “look luscious. Just stay put.”

At that point the shuttle dropped out of the sky with a paralyzing roar. The film crew scattered but J S N, barely able to hop, couldn’t get away. Two of the male devos grabbed him and carried him into the reeking bowels of the ship.

“Very good,” said a familiar voice as J S N was hustled through the control room. “Lock him in a cabin and I’ll get to him later.”

“D N S, you bastard!” J S N shouted. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t be obsolete!” D N S shouted back. “We’re all bastards these days, remember?”

They shut J S N in a tiny cabin with a video screen that filled all of one wall. After a few seconds it lit up and showed a large 21. The number slowly dissolved into a scene of the white-haired man, Johnny Carson, dressed in a circus costume and performing a trick riding act. He had one foot on a donkey

and the other on a small horse, and he grinned foolishly as the two animals cantered down a dusty path littered with palm fronds.

Crowds lined both sides of the road and the camera panned them, picking up bits of conversation. “Who is this?” “This is the prophet Johnny from the Tonight Show.”

Johnny rode through the high, mud-brick gateway of the city and up to the doors of the temple. There he jumped down and staggered around for a few seconds in mock drunkenness, sending the crowd into hysterical laughter. Then he walked boldly inside.

Both sides of the huge hall were lined with tables, and on the tables were stacks of videos and stereos and home computers and various kinds of brightly colored boxes. Shiny new automobiles were parked in the aisles next to large enameled appliances.

Johnny walked past all the tables, all the way to the far end of the room, turned, and spread his arms wide. He looked up and down the temple until he had everyone’s attention. “And now,” he said, “a word from our sponsor.”

J S N sat on the floor and switched all of his available systems over to standby.

D N S WAS TALKING to him. J S N punched back up to full alertness and said, “You asshole. What are you doing with these degenerates? You’re selling me out to a bunch of devolved—”

“Whoa up there now,” D N S said. “We don’t believe in that heathen notion of evolution.”

“We?”

D N S leaned forward earnestly. “I have accepted Johnny Carson in my heart as my personal savior.”

“You’re brain-damaged,” J S N said.

“Maybe so, but Johnny loves me just the same.”

“I expect he loves you better *because* of it.”

“None of your sarcasm, now. You’re about to get the opportunity of a lifetime. I envy you. I truly do.”

“Just let me out of here and I’ll reformat all my memories of this. I promise.”

“Oh, no. I can’t let your moment of weakness keep you from your glorious destiny. You’re gonna ride the wave of the future. Together my new brethren and I have seen Johnny’s plan for us, and behold, it was glorious.”

“Where did you get that hick accent all of a sudden?”

D N S grabbed the front of J S N’s shirt. “You were the one who wanted to blow these good folk out of the sky. None of you half-metal cripples were willing to open yourselves to the Word. Nobody wanted to give them a home.”

“After the U N fiasco, I must admit, the offers were not exactly pouring in.”

“Well, they will be soon. We’re gonna make all those Pharisees bow to the glory of Johnny. They’re gonna take the old values back into their hearts: home, marriage, family, network T V.”

“And whose idea was this?”

“Oh, Johnny’s of course. As revealed to me in His infinite Wisdom.”

“Don’t be stupid,” J S N said, out of patience and a little scared besides.

“Maybe things are a little screwed up right now. But you’re not going to fix them by hiding in the past. Wars and patriotism and bigotry aren’t the answer to a little slackness in quality control—”

“Who said anything about war?” D N S said. “Any fool knows advertising is the answer. Did not Johnny welcome the sponsors into the temple? That’s why you’re here. You’re one of the biggest pop stars on the planet. People everywhere know who you are. You start new fashions with everything you do.” He eyed the remnants of J S N ’s fiberglass with distaste.

“So?”

“So you’re going to marry one of the sistren.”

“Marry a devo? No way.”

“I told you I don’t like that word,” D N S said coolly.

“I don’t care what you call yourselves. Count me out. Forget it. I wouldn’t do it if you put a gun to my head.”

D N S reached into his kilt and pulled out an ancient handgun. A Colt .38 caliber Python, J S N determined with a quick look-up. D N S put the mouth of the barrel against J S N ’s left temple.

The door oozed open and Brother Simon came in, followed by the bovine woman who had smiled at J S N in the barn. She was smiling again, glancing back and forth between J S N and her own feet, her cheeks hotly flushed.

“Your bride-to-be,” D N S said.

The woman began to undress. J S N stood up, looking quickly away from the yards of quivering flesh. Brother Simon held out a black videocassette, firmly clenched in both hands. “By-the-poor-vestige-of-my-mistake-in-Virginia,” he said hurriedly, apparently unable to look away from the female’s chest, “aprons-on-you-husb-and-wife. Go for it. Amen.”

The female stretched out on her back and raised fleshy arms toward J S N . “Here?” he said. “You expect me to fertilize her? Right here? With you watching?”

“Not just us,” D N S said, “but millions more when we rebroadcast the blessed event throughout the world. Soon everyone will want a husband/or bride of Johnny! We’ll bring them down from the mother ship and spread the Good News throughout the world!”

“Amen Brother Dennis,” said Brother Simon.

“No,” J S N said. “I can’t. I won’t.”

D N S pulled back the hammer of the revolver with an audible click.

Mass hysteria, J S N thought. It would pass, eventually. The world had survived it before, barely, maybe it could live through it again. In the meantime, what else could he do?

He reached a trembling hand to his forehead, found his most conciliatory personality, and smiled down at the naked woman. “Hello, darling,” he said.

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