

Barry's Tale

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Barry's Tale

by

Lawrence M. Schoen

What do you do after you've broken an alien monopoly, beaten a multinational consortium at its own game, and set in motion all the pieces to build a billion-dollar company? This question is probably on the final exam at whatever fancy business school most golden boy, industrialist CEOs graduate from. The thing is, I never finished college, never so much as took a business class. A few months ago I'd been earning my living as a stage hypnotist on a circuit of third-rate alien venues. I'd turned all that around by an act of audacity. Now the smart move would have been to sit tight, keep a low profile, and stay out of trouble, but if I was on my way to becoming a plutocrat, I figured I could do a lot worse than follow that line about more audacity, always audacity. After all, it had worked for Georges Jacques Danton, except for that whole guillotine part.

Which is why I'd left my nascent company, Buffalogic, Inc., and its three dozen gravid buffalitos in the capable hands of Dr. Elizabeth Penrose. Then I'd maxed out my recently secured line of credit and traveled to the farthest edge of Human Space to pitch a business deal to Amadeus Colson, the most famous recluse since Howard Hughes. More than sixty years earlier Colson had discovered an unknown planet in an uncharted solar system, claimed it as his own, and lived there with a few hundred humans, ten thousand head of cattle, and a half million bison. "Colson's World" was a watery planet with only a single sizeable land mass that could easily be mistaken for Kansas's big brother. Immigration didn't exist, visitors weren't welcome, and diplomatic envoys had been met at the planet's lone space port by teenagers sporting old style rifles loaded with buckshot.

Colson also controlled the portals that allowed passage to the solar system, and opened them for only three reasons: to bring in supplies; to ship out the signature meats and cheeses that were the source of his wealth; and for one month every ten years to host the best barbecue competition in the galaxy. I'm a foodie, and I took the opportunity to combine business with pleasure as a good omen.

I traveled first-class most of the way, a massive luxury cruiser full of the kind of beautiful people and professional artistes who make it their life's work to take cruises and be 'seen'. No doubt variations on buckshot awaited any of them that might have tried to go on to Colson's World, but the cruiser didn't stop there. It couldn't. Old Man Colson deliberately limited the size of the ships that could fit through his incoming portal. In the company of a batch of barbecue enthusiasts eager to catch the last days of the Festival, I transferred to a small vessel that was little more than a retrofitted in-system tourist bus. The tiny ship slipped through into his system and eventually made landfall at the tiny port.

A projected hologram of Amadeus Colson spoke to us upon arrival, stating unequivocally that his word was law here and reminding us that our visit was at best brief. The facilities reinforced that impression. Other than the temporary structures of the Festival that had been erected nearby, the port consisted of only two hotels, eight restaurants, and a couple dozen shops. Adjacent to these stood a squat, ugly housing complex that accommodated the port personnel. The whole of the port was contained within a square half-kilometer of high walls with assorted gates, a pair of which opened onto the grounds of the Festival. The staff at the port did not include any humans, just an assortment of Trelniki, Renz, and Dlabble, all hired on single rotation, short term contracts that kept them on planet for less than six months.

Working some pretty seedy lounges had taught me the value of traveling light, and despite my improved circumstances I retained the habit. I stepped onto the surface of Colson's World carrying everything I needed. One hand held a carpet bag with some toiletries and a spare set of clothes. The other supported my new best friend, Reggie, the buffalo dog I'd 'acquired' from the Arconi and the cornerstone of my burgeoning financial empire. Imagine an alien creature that

looks like a cartoon version of an American bison, but small enough to cradle under your arm. Colson's World had no shortage of buffalo, but mine was the first buffalito to visit. And unlike the massive herbivores that roamed the plains here, buffalo dogs could eat literally anything.

That was my hook. I wanted to secure an endorsement from Colson himself, the hermit who had founded a planet, told the rest of the galaxy to get stuffed, and then had the nerve to charge obscene amounts for imported buffalo meat that had fed on the sweetest plains grasses anywhere. Yeah, audacity. It was the perfect mash up to my tiny buffalitos that chewed through rock or metal or sludge as easily as Colson's buffalo roamed the planet that bore his name.

The Festival featured professional chefs, self-proclaimed barbecue masters, and talented amateurs. Hundreds of grills and pits and smokers spread out in aisles and rows upon a grassy plain, punctuated over and over by lightweight ceramo picnic benches where gourmands and gourmets alike could sample platters in an ongoing orgy of cooked meat. Walking the grid of the place brought on an olfactory rapture as you passed through clouds of sweet smoke heavy with familiar herbs and exotic spices that changed every few steps. All the Festival attendees wore luminous badges. A bright blue badge revealed each culinary competitor. A vivid purple one indicated a staff member, one of Colson's employees imported to work the event. My own badge showed a rarer green, marking me as someone who'd come to sample but not to serve. Reggie didn't get a badge, but he was more than happy to taste anything I did, trotting along beside me as we moved from contestant to contestant, or perching next to me on a bench when we paused with a platter. We were just settling down with a dish of Montréal-style barbecue that uses a sauce blending Worcestershire with cola syrup, and that had recently become the rage on Titan, when a voice that I hadn't heard in more than a decade called my name.

"Conroy? Is that really you?"

I turned toward the voice, the way you always do when someone you don't expect ever to see again calls your name out of the blue hundreds of light-years from the last place you saw her. The face matched the voice, and after only a couple seconds my memory served up a name that went with both.

"Bethany..." And I trailed off, not because I didn't remember her last name, but because it couldn't be her. Bethany had been the track star roommate of a girl I'd dated back during my freshman year, just a few months before I left on the adventure that caused me to drop out of college and ended with my becoming a hypnotist. She'd been nineteen back then. The woman coming toward me, tugging a little girl by the hand, looked exactly the same, still in her late teens instead of her early thirties. Then my memory added her last name to the mix, and while I still didn't understand how she could look the same, I realized it had to be her. "Bethany Colson!"

She wore a loose-fitting work shirt and faded jeans. A ranch hand's stun baton was strapped to one thigh, a small canvas kit hung from her belt, and a pair of serious work boots climbed halfway up her calves. Swap the work shirt for a tee and the boots for sneakers, lose the baton and kit, and she could have stepped out of the dormitory room where I'd last seen her. Long chestnut hair hung down her back and was kept off her face by a brick-colored felt Stetson. As I continued to stare and stammer, I tried to remember why I'd been dating her roommate and not her.

"Befny, why's his buffalo so little?" The girl half hid behind Bethany as they came closer but kept popping her head around to peek at Reggie. She had a round, cute face, made cuter by the absence of an upper front tooth. Pale blonde hair hung to the waist of a white sundress embroidered with yellow flowers. The tops of a pair of heavily tooled, pink cowboy boots disappeared under the hem of the dress. I don't have a lot of experience with kids, but something

about the way she moved looked wrong, a jerky, hesitant gait that put me in mind of zombie urchins. And her voice lagged, as if every word were an effort to string after the one before it.

Bethany paused, the smile on her lips and in her eyes changing to confusion as she looked away from me and noticed my buffalo dog for the first time. “I don’t know, Gel. You’ll have to ask him.”

“Bethany, you look . . . I mean, you’re still...”

I’d scrambled up from the picnic table and stepped forward even as Reggie jumped down. He closed the distance between us and the new arrivals with a mad scamper that ended with him bumping his head against the little girl’s knees. I wasn’t paying attention, though; my focus was all on Bethany.

Her smile came back and without any warning she was hugging me. “I know. Long story. It started when I came back home, the semester after you vanished.”

As the embrace came to an end I held her at arm’s length. “Back home . . . here, you mean. To Colson’s World. Amadeus Colson is your—”

“My great-grandfather. And this is Angela, though she never answers to it. Gel, can you say hello to Mr. Conroy? He’s from Earth.”

At this point the girl had both hands buried in the dense curls of Reggie’s shoulder hump, kneading him like she was a cat or he was a lump of bread dough. She looked up from her task with glazed eyes that had nothing to do with my buffalito. “Earth? Is that why his buffalo’s so little?”

“His name’s Reggie. He’s not from Earth though, just me. And he’s not really a buffalo, he’s a buffalito. Buffalitos are supposed to be that size.”

Bethany crinkled her nose and asked, “What’s a buffalito?”

“A business venture I’ve embarked on. They’re gentle creatures, omnivorous like nothing you’ve ever seen. And they fart oxygen. I’m actually here to talk to your great-grandfather about them, if he’ll see me.”

Our lunch had had sufficient time to work its way through Reggie’s innards, and he demonstrated the second of his species’s remarkable abilities by releasing a long toot of fresh flatulence. Gel squealed with delight.

“Gran only talks business with people he invites over, and he never invites anyone during the Festival. He’s not the most social person around. Most days, he works in the cheese house from dawn till dusk, and I’ve known years to go by without him seeing anyone but family. It’s how he likes it.”

“Is Reggie family, Befny? I bet Pop Pop would wanna meet him.”

“He might at that, honey.” She winked at me. “And who knows, maybe even Mr. Conroy too.”

“Maybe. But Reggie for sure and truly.” Some of the torpor had left her voice, but when she looked up at me her head lolled like a broken doll.

“Is your daughter all right?”

The kid frowned at me, and went back to playing with Reggie. I looked to Bethany and her earlier delight had been replaced by a stony expression.

“She’s not my daughter. She’s . . . you don’t know much about what Gran’s done here, do you? After the Festival ends and all these people go away, outside of the minimal staff who keep the port operational, everyone else lives in our house back at the ranch. All two hundred and six of us.”

“That’s a big house.”

“It’s an orphanage. Angela’s one of the children my great-grandfather has taken in.”

“Oh.”

“And she’s fine. She’s a bit sluggish because of the medication she’s on. But she’s fine.”

“I didn’t mean anything—”

“No, of course you didn’t. I’m sorry. It’s just . . . she’s such a sweet kid. It’s . . . a neurological condition, and it’s not fair. She’s only six.”

“She must be very special. Reggie’s certainly taken a liking to her.”

She watched the pair playing, Gel’s fists still tightly gripping Reggie’s curls, while my buffalo dog pranced and skipped in place. “I think it’s mutual. I haven’t seen her so excited about anything since her treatments started.” She lifted her gaze to mine, and her eyes smiled again. “If that’s not worth an introduction to Gran, I don’t know what is.”

“Thanks. It’s not necessary, but I’d really appreciate it. Though I think Reggie appreciates having a new playmate more.”

Bethany took my arm and slipped hers through it. “Have you seen much of the Festival yet?”

“We only just arrived a few hours ago.” I gestured back at the wide gate of the space port, its upper half visible above the array of tables and booths that lay between us.

“Oh. You’ve barely seen anything yet. C’mon, you’re about to experience the backstage tour that most people never get. I can even get us in to see the thoats.”

“Thoats?”

“Mmmhmm. You’ve heard of them?”

“Yeah, but I thought . . . they’re fictional, aren’t they?”

She laughed. “Yes, and no. It’s a big galaxy. These things may not be *exactly* what Burroughs described back in the twentieth century, but they’re darn close. Gran grew up on books about Martians, back before any aliens showed up on Earth. When he heard that someone had something like thoats he made it his business to get some. They’re grazing animals, same as the bison, just a lot bigger. You’ll see.”

“Thoats!” With her fists still buried in the buffalito’s fur, Angela began pushing him forward. Once he realized the game, Reggie scampered ahead, pulling the girl along while being guided left or right by tugs from one hand or the other and cries of “nooooo, that way” and “nooooo, this way.”

Bethany bit her lip, “Should I stop her?”

“Not on Reggie’s account. He’s loving the attention. But does she know where she’s going?”

“Oh sure, I bring her out to the Festival every day. Since she’s been on her meds, it’s about the only time she’s even remotely her old self. Come on, we shouldn’t let them get too far ahead.”

Because of the difficulty in reaching Colson’s World, let alone receiving permission to land here, the Festival differed in a major way from other barbecue events and cook-offs I’d known. People. This wasn’t like a country fair. You couldn’t buy tickets to at the last minute, toss the kids into the car, and head out to spend the morning eating deep-fried curiosities and the afternoon puking them back up courtesy of the Tilt-a-Whirl. There were no crowds, no lines, no litter, and no rides. All attendees at the Festival had either a profound respect and appreciation for the art and practice of barbecue, or possessed much more money than sense. The handful of exceptions included people like me who had crept in as foodies but had another agenda, and locals like Bethany and little Gel, who lived here year round and came as much to enjoy the Festival as they did to enjoy the people who came to enjoy the Festival. The rest of these folk had been assigned formal space to set up their wares, their grills, their soapboxes, and even the rare souvenir displays touting the event’s cartoon mascots named Thelma Throat and Barry Bison. In that sense it felt more like a trade show. When the participants weren’t actively working at their own booths

they wandered about visiting with colleagues, sampling the competition, and generally immersing themselves in obscure areas of their passion. The result was a vast field of enthusiasts that filled the area, but did so without the usual claustrophobic side effect.

Which is why we were able to let Reggie and Gel run ahead of us without ever losing sight of them as they darted and dashed through attendees on their way to the animal pens at the far end of the gauntlet. Like most buffalitos, Reggie was proving to be nigh indestructible, and if Bethany wasn't worried about the little girl it wasn't my place to be. Besides, I had other things on my mind.

Beside me, Bethany continued that trick of smiling with her eyes. "Have you changed that much, Conroy? You used to be so talkative."

"It's that you haven't changed. You said it was a long story, but you must have had plenty of time to edit it down. Give me the quick version, because from where I'm standing it looks like you've stopped the aging process. And not just you. I knew the senior Colson on this planet was still alive, but I didn't think he'd be active and working. Your great-grandfather was well into middle-age when he discovered this system; he'd be over a century old by now."

"He's a hundred and thirteen, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. If he's not running cheese production, he's supervising the meat processing, training the quality control tasters in the packaging house, or instructing the next year's batch of older children on how to ride range. When you come over for dinner you'll swear he's barely middle-aged."

"How is that possible? Even assuming some of the more exotic alien life-extension treatments, no one's been able to add more than twenty years, and none of that is cosmetic. Is that why he doesn't allow immigration? Are you hiding some kind of Fountain of Youth here?"

Bethany shook her head. "It's not that simple. Yes, there's something about this place that retards the aging process, but it only works for Gran and his descendants. It's a fluke of planetary conditions and our DNA, and nothing else is affected. Believe me, it's been tested. But if word got out about it, no one would believe the findings. They'd look at me, at my great-grandfather, and they'd insist the explanation was a lie. We'd be overrun in no time, by the aging and the infirm, by people looking to bottle and sell what doesn't exist. They'd destroy the paradise he's built here for his family, and they'd gain nothing for themselves in the process."

"So why does he allow this Festival then? Isn't he worried about the secret getting out?"

"Why should he? He's not directly involved in any of it. I handle all the arrangements with the people who have secured importing licenses from us, and they're only too eager to take care of the rest of it, within the guidelines that Gran's established. Look back the way we've come, Conroy. You can still see the towers of the port. No one who isn't family ever gets beyond sight of it. Not the Festival attendees, not the personnel from the supply ships, and not any of our distributors. This is a closed world. That's the deal Gran made. That's what keeps us safe here. It comes at a cost, but for the most part it's one we've been happy to—oh no! Gel! What are you doing?"

We'd reached the end of the current aisle. On our left a vendor was doing a reasonable trade in commemorative cookware, recipe flimsies, and assorted sizes of plush versions of Thelma Thoat and Barry Bison. To our right a trio of Jamaicans were fussing with a metal drum the size of a small swimming pool into which they had somehow maneuvered a whole buffalo carcass supported by a series of spits, slathering it from one end to the other with wet jerk spice as they prepared to lower it over enough charcoal to warm a household through winter. Neither of these had caught Bethany's attention. She focused on the scene directly in front of us. Reinforced fencing had turned a broad meadow into a impromptu corral. Angela had slipped through the fence and sat some ten meters in, playing with Reggie in the close cropped grass, where living

examples of the same animals that were being served up at the Festival roamed to and fro, nibbling grass and observing social mores apparently common to ruminants from different herds across several worlds.

Dozens of grapefruit-sized, ceramo drones hovered at four-meter height throughout the corral, each armed with a proximity stunner that kept the massive creatures from approaching the perimeter. Whoever had programmed the drones' sensors had included a lower limit well above the mass of either a child or an Arconi buffalo dog.

Both Gel and Reggie lifted their heads to stare back at Bethany. The child looked around and as if realizing where she was for the first time, or at least acknowledging that she wasn't supposed to be there, pointed at the buffalo dog and with the solemnity of a judge insisted, "He did it!"

Reggie objected to the tone, if not the actual words, and responded by farting. This caused Gel to burst out laughing, and she fell over in the grass, hugging the buffalito to her chest as she rolled. The sound of laughter drew attention from the nearer animals in the corral. Neither Bethany nor I were laughing.

At some level I knew how enormous bison were, but abstract facts learned from books or childhood visits to zoos lose some of their force, particularly when you've been spending time with alien creatures that look like cutesy, miniature versions. Reality corrected this misperception by the simple expediency of framing Reggie alongside a living, breathing thousand kilo buffalo. More massive still were the thoats that Colson had found. These weren't the horse-size creatures favored by Burroughs's red Martians, but the much larger sort, towering three meters at the shoulder. In contrast to the bison, the thoats were entirely hairless, a slate gray in color that lightened to a dull yellow at the feet, all eight of them. Feet, not hooves. Also a broad flat tail like a gigantic flyswatter. One thout stood nearby, its long, sleek body supported by eight powerful legs that would have done Sleipnir proud. Any resemblance to a mythic equine vanished at the head, which bore an almost reptilian mouth that gaped so wide it nearly split the beast's face in half. It stood less than ten meters away from Angela and Reggie, maybe twenty from the fence that lay between them and us. It stared in our direction, either at Bethany and me, or at Angela and Reggie, or maybe just at a couple buffalo that grazed as close to the edge of the fence as the drones would allow. The gleam in the thout's eyes suggested displeasure, even to me who'd never seen one before. But more, I had the feeling that a decision was working its way through that massive head, a plan of action to resolve its unhappiness. Bethany noticed it too. She stopped dead, flinging one arm back to halt me as well. When she spoke, her voice had a calm, sing-song quality that belied her words.

"Gel, you need to stand up. Right now, honey. Stand up and walk toward me. Look right at me and start moving, easy and slow. Your friend will come too."

"What's going on?" My own voice had dropped to a whisper without my thinking why.

"Thoats can get territorial this time of year. This one was probably transported here with the buffalo, already knows their scents and knows to share the space with them. Your pet and Angela, not so much. It's deciding whether or not to charge. Damn it! Angela knows better! She's been raised around these animals her whole life. It's got to be the meds muddling her."

"We have to get them out of the corral!"

"No! The thout has seen us too. If we move closer, it will think we're part of the threat and react to the increase in opposing number. And until they get closer, there's no point overriding the drones to stun it; it would charge them before I could bring it down. They'll be fine as long as they start moving and don't make eye contact. They just need to make it to the fence. It's the

territoriality thing again.” She pulled the baton from her thigh and thumbed a switch that made it hum.

Gel had gotten to her feet, giggles still spilling from her lips, and started walking towards us. She veered slightly, angling her path to intersect one of the buffalo between her and the fence. Reggie crouched in the grass behind her for just a moment before scampering after her. The thot continued to stare, its body tense and ready to defend against any perceived invasion.

As they approached the buffalo it snorted at Reggie, its confusion apparent as it tried to resolve the image of familiar appearance with his impossible size. Gel giggled and waved at it, already halfway to the fence and safety. Reggie responded to the larger creature with confusion of his own, and plopped his rump down in the grass as he looked back over his shoulder, likely hoping to see whatever had puzzled the buffalo and finding nothing but the patch of green he and his playmate had just left. Then he lifted his head and saw the thot.

And the thot saw Reggie seeing it. And charged.

A lot happened in the next few seconds. Bethany lunged toward the fence, waving her baton to direct the drones toward the thot, desperate to reach Gel before the beast plowed through her. I raced right beside her. The buffalo sped away parallel to the fence. Reggie spun back around, lowered his head to the ground, and barreled into Gel, knocking her legs out from under her and causing the girl to sprawl across his back, her fingers reflexively digging into his wooly fur as he darted for the fence. And the thot, like a monster out of nightmare, leapt forward far faster than something the size of a small bus should be able to move and landed where they’d stood an instant before.

In that moment I knew we’d never reach her in time. I knew the buffalo would be okay. And I knew that Reggie, despite his best efforts, had only bought them an extra second. And then the impossible happened.

Gel screamed as the thot loomed over them, an instant away from trampling them beneath its massive feet. She let go of Reggie with one hand, thrusting it out at the thot, fingers splayed, all but touching the monster the moment before it would destroy her. And then the thot was gone.

Seconds later Reggie’s trajectory had carried them to the edge of the coral and we were clambering over the fence. Bethany whisked Gel up into her arms and tumbled back, hugging her fiercely. I reached out to Reggie and he jumped up into my grasp. The buffalo stopped and looked at us like we were crazy. But of the two-ton behemoth that had set everything in motion, there was no sign.

I helped Bethany back over the fence and stood nearby as she dried the child’s tears, stroked her hair, and calmed the hysterics that had gotten through whatever insulation her medications had provided. Reggie looked up at me, looked back out into the coral, and then down at Gel. We were probably thinking the same thing.

“What happened to the thot?” I said. No one answered.

When the first aliens reached Earth in 2012, they brought along a huge upgrade to our technology. My great aunt Fiona once told me that we already had limited three-dimensional printing machines, the underlying concept behind today’s fabricators, and whether or not aliens had showed up on the doorstep, the ability to mass produce the pieces to build almost anything would have forever shattered the economies of every nation, big or small. When a Clarkeson sold us those first desktop-sized fabbers, our leaders glommed on like remoras. In exchange, the Clarkeson asked for and received an exclusive extra-solar export license for a few hundred

common Earth food items. Where was the harm? Humans didn't have any markets beyond our atmosphere yet. We must have thought we were gaining everything and paying nothing.

It didn't take long to discover we'd been suckered.

Those other alien races all had bigger and better fabbers. Most anything they wanted could be churned out and assembled at minimal cost. All of them had everything that any of the rest of them had. But none of them had cheeseburgers. Or Belgian chocolate. Or kobe beef. Or New England cider. Things that fabricators can't fabricate because the chemistry that makes them possible is too complicated, reflects too many factors, or requires the invisible hand of an artisan or master. As the newest kid on a very old block, Earth found that demand for its foodstuffs far outstripped supply. For a few years it became impossible to find Earth-grown food in eighty percent of human communities. Eventually new laws were passed, new trade restrictions enacted, and the chaos subsided. Meanwhile, human explorers equipped with extra-solar vessels and the fabber plans to construct portals moved into space and led the effort to identify and colonize new systems with a rapaciousness that hadn't been seen since Europeans stumbled upon the new world.

Amadeus Colson had been one of those. Legend has it his one-man scoutship hit some astronomical anomaly that whisked him deep into the vastness of space where no alien had ever been, to this tiny star system with only a single habitable world. Soon he had an annual export of a couple metric tons of bison steaks. Alien governments, already used to paying obscene prices for commonplace Earth goods, fought one another for a chance to buy the odd protein from exotic animals that had been raised and slaughtered on a new world. As demand grew Colson kept supply low and drove the price higher. Some portions he sent as gifts in exchange for political favors. Some he auctioned off, others went into a wildly popular lottery. When he began adding cheese to his exports the galaxy trembled. Colson became a legend back on Earth—the consummate explorer turned entrepreneur, an iconic name in business schools like Carnegie and Jobs, and as famous a recluse as Hughes or Fischer. He had an entire world to call his own, and he liked it that way.

I followed Bethany to a luxury aerosled that had been parked at the port. At her direction I guided it past the facility and slapped one of two preprogrammed buttons on the console and sat back as the autopilot drove us to her home. We skimmed over endless, open fields while Bethany comforted Angela and fought some internal struggle that involved the answer to my question. What had happened to the thot? Eventually the child fell asleep. Bethany set her comfortably on the seat, covering her with a blanket. She took a field hypo from the kit at her waist, popped in a slender ampoule, and applied it to the girl's arm.

"Gel's not on medication for a neurological condition. She's got an . . . ability. It started a couple months ago. Things around her started going missing. Small things at first. Odd things. A toy. A lamp. The big rock in the field that the kids use as 'home' for some of their games. Something had taken them, leaving no trace. At first we all thought it was just one of the kids, acting out, going through some weird phase, you know?"

I shrugged. "Sure. Kids. Orphans especially. Lots of issues, I suppose. Inexplicable at times. "

She smiled at that. "You don't know much about children, do you?"

"I've been mostly working lounges and nightclubs as a hypnotist since we last met. Not really the right venue for spending time with kids." Reggie snuffled against my shoe, so I picked him up and put him on my lap, feeding him a couple ball bearings I usually carry around for that purpose. He gulped them down, yawned, and settled in for a nap.

"It wasn't any of the other kids. It was Gel. I saw it happen. She'd been up too late the night before, hadn't gotten enough sleep, and was cranky that morning. I was leading arts and crafts

that day. She was trying to sculpt something out of clay. I don't know what, it was just a lump, and giving her difficulty. She went from cranky to sullen to petulant. I don't put up with that from any of the kids. Art is a privilege and she knows that. So I sent her out of the room. She stomped out and as she passed it by, a twenty-kilo slab of river clay disintegrated."

"Excuse me?"

"I know, it doesn't make any sense. I told my great-grandfather, and he fabbed a small spy-eye that followed her and recorded everything she did and everything around her. Nothing happened for days and days, but then, twice more objects just disappeared, and both times it happened when she was upset. Last time it was a doll that one of the older kids had snatched from her in a game of keep-away. Angela's always been a happy child, but when we started checking, going back and talking to the older kids who help out or work at the ranch, we found witnesses who could confirm that she'd been angry or frustrated with something or someone around the time the other things had vanished."

"So you've had her on tranquilizers or something?"

She nodded. "It kills me to see her doped up, walking around like a zombie child. But I didn't know what else to do. I searched through every medical database I could find, and there's nothing even remotely like what she's doing in any of them. It only happens when she's upset. Not every time though, like she needs a couple days to recharge or something, but still. She's six years old, and she's manifesting a mutation that could accidentally kill another child if they argue over some toy. As soon as I realized that possibility I started the meds."

"How long ago was that? And has it worked?"

"She's been fine, other than being stupefied. No further incidents, at least not until today. And you saw her, you saw how groggy she was. Whatever this thing is, it's growing stronger."

"Bethany, if it hadn't, she'd have died. That thot would have trampled her." Reggie had opened his eyes at some point in the conversation and farted softly.

"I . . . I hadn't thought of it that way."

I shrugged. "I have an outsider's perspective, and I'm only now finding out about the special circumstances. But, from what you've told me, I would think today's events are a good thing."

"How is this a good thing? This power of hers is getting stronger. She's never disintegrated anything even half that big before."

I glanced out the window, and watched the plains roll past us as our aerosled sped onward. I chose my words carefully.

"From what you've told me, it didn't sound like Gel had any control over her ability."

"She doesn't. I told you, it happens when she's upset."

"Maybe. But I don't think that's what we saw today. Maybe it's not simply something that is set off by her emotions reaching some critical point. What if instead it's more like a reflex, something that's controlled at an unconscious level."

Bethany stared at me like someone who hadn't eaten in days and I was a ham sandwich with extra mayo. "You said you're a hypnotist? You know all about the unconscious?"

"I said I've been a stage hypnotist, and I do work with people's unconscious minds, but I'm not a clinician."

"I hadn't looked at it that way before, but if you're right, if it is an unconscious reflex, could you help her?"

I looked down at Gel, as innocent a sleeping child as I could imagine, and then back up at Bethany and her eyes that had gone from smiling at me to pleading. There was only one answer. "I can try."

By late afternoon we came in view of a curved ranch house and surrounding buildings that looked large enough to require their own internal rail system. I'd seen smaller royal palaces and luxury hotels. Granted, some of the effect resulted from a single story sprawl, but even so there had to be room for a couple hundred residents in that main house, more if most of them were children and you didn't mind packing two or three to a room. The arc of the house faced a single tree—the only tree I'd seen since arriving on the planet. Deep furrows in its grey-black bark marked it as a black walnut, as did the plethora of brownish-green husks that littered the ground in a wide ring all around the trunk.

The aerosled aimed itself for a slot in a vehicle port angled off at one side of the main house, and as it slowed to park, a single figure separated itself from the tree's long shadows and stalked our way, arms held rigid to his sides with fists clenched. He was tall, tanned in the way that the first generation of space explorers had always been tanned. He stood wire-thin and fit, and if not for a head of silvery hair I'd have marked him at just over forty.

"Tell me that's not your great-grandfather," I said, but Bethany was already nodding and opening the door. Colson stopped alongside the sled as Bethany stepped out. He took Gel from her, cradling the child in his arms. Relief and concern warred on his face.

"A staffer called from the Festival. Said something about you *stealing* one of the thoats." He peered into the aerosled and frowned at Reggie and me. "Please tell me you had it strapped to the roof and it slipped off on your way back home."

"No, sir. It was—"

"Hush, Bethy. No need to air our problems in front of others. I know what it was."

"Gran, this is Conroy. I know him from when I was at school. He saw the whole thing. He knows about Gel. He thinks he can help."

I'd exited and stepped around the aerosled by this point. I had Reggie tucked under my left arm and put out my hand as I said, "Mr. Colson, it's a great pleasure to meet you."

He ignored my hand and jerked his chin towards Reggie. "That's an Arconi buffalo dog, isn't it?"

"You're familiar with buffalitos?"

"I read a lot. Toyed with the idea of getting a few, for the novelty of mixing them in among the bison herds, but the damn Arconi only wanted to sell sterilized females, and at a ridiculous price at that. Not the way I like to do business."

"They had the monopoly on them," I said. "It's allowed them to set the terms and conditions."

"Had?"

"I recently broke it. That's partly why I came to your Festival. Maybe we can help each other out."

"What's this have to do with Angela and her . . . situation?"

"Nothing."

Colson frowned. "I'm not following. Talk sense, or get out. I don't have time for strangers and flibbity-gibber."

Bethany interrupted. "Conroy's a hypnotist, Gran. He thinks he can teach Gel how to control her—"

"Hypnotist! What does that have to do with Arconi buffalo dogs?"

"Nothing," I repeated, and hurried on as Colson's frown deepened. "Like I said, that's a recent development. I've been a working hypnotist for the past thirteen years. From what I saw, the little girl's problem isn't random, and it might be an unconscious behavior. Hypnosis can help people acquire deliberate control over previously unconscious processes."

The frown changed to something between longing and distrust. "I'm sorry that Bethany's wasted your time, but this is a family matter. We'll handle it ourselves."

"Gran, please. Angela was on a full dose of her meds when today's incident happened. I know you want to keep things private, but if we're not past that point we're getting very close to it, and whether you want to think of it as luck or fate, we have someone right here who might have the answer. Won't you at least let him try?"

He grunted, looked at Bethany, then back to me. "You've done this before?"

"Not this specifically, no. Like I told Bethany, I'm not a clinician. But I'm familiar with the concepts involved. The trick is to come up with a metaphor that the person can use to understand and justify their control."

He stared at me a moment, the wheels of his mind whirling. He must have come to a decision because he asked, "What do you need?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't be stupid, son. What do you need to help her? What gear? Equipment? Supplies?"

"Nothing, really. A comfortable place for her to sit, some quiet. And something to focus her attention, but Reggie can help with that."

"That's all?"

I shrugged. "I like to travel light."

"Don't be smart with me, son."

"Gran, he's here to help."

He scowled. "Why aren't you afraid she might zap you while you're trying to help? You or your critter?"

I swallowed, thinking of the thot. "Bethany said she needs time to recharge. That means we're in some kind of refractory period. But yes, if you want me to make the attempt, it should probably be sooner rather than later."

He gazed down at the child in his arms and all the gruffness melted away. She may have been some orphan he'd taken in, but at that moment all I saw was the unconditional love of a parent for his child. When he looked up at me a moment later, his eyes held the same hunger and plea that I'd seen in Bethany.

"I've had a long life, and I've done more with it than most men ever imagine doing. I've never been afraid of anything, but I'm afraid now. I'm afraid for her, you understand? This thing in her, it's growing stronger. If we can't control it, it's only a matter of time before she accidentally kills someone here."

"Gran, no! It won't come to that."

"You don't know that, Bethy. I have two hundred children here, Conroy. I don't want to sacrifice one to save the rest, but I will if I'm all out of options. Anything I have is yours, if you can give me another choice."

Night had fallen while we'd stood there deciding the fate of a small child. Nearby, the lights of Colson's enormous house beckoned, warm and welcoming. "I'll do my best. If you've got a quiet, private room in there, we can get started."

We entered the main building and stepped into a great room packed with dozens of boys and girls ranging from toddlers to early teens. They had a range of skin tones and body types but all looked healthy. They'd been watching from every window and, judging by the expressions on their faces, they didn't get a lot of visitors. They yelled greetings at us as we passed through, Bethany clearing a path toward a door at the far end. Colson smiled and nodded, tousled a few heads, patted a few cheeks, and basked in the orphans' love and respect. They didn't know him

as the veteran explorer, the man who'd defined one edge of Human Space, or a legendary entrepreneur. He was just 'Sir' or 'Gran' or 'Pop Pop,' a father figure who had taken them in, put a roof over their heads, kept them fed, provided clothes and toys, and given them an education and the opportunity to dream.

There were several near doors to the right and left, and hallways opening on either side beyond them. Colson led the way to single door on the opposite wall. It opened onto his study, a small room with a comfortable leather chair, an end table with a tall reading lamp, a water pitcher, and two empty glasses, and a narrow daybed. Bethany closed the door behind us, hushing and waving away the more curious of the children in the outer room. With the door sealed we might have been the only beings in the house; it was that quiet. Colson placed Gel upon the bed and stepped back, leaning against the door, unwilling to leave but uncertain if his presence might interfere. Ignoring him, I put Reggie alongside Gel and then settled into the chair facing them. I heard Bethany lean against the back of my chair, her arms resting across the top. I turned down the lamp, casting the room in shadows, with the only light falling upon me in the chair.

"Wake her up, boy. Big kisses."

Reggie scampered around on the day bed, closing in on her and then dashing back.

Colson grunted from behind me. "What's that critter doing to her—"

"If you want to stay, that's fine, but if you want me to do this you'll listen to what I tell you. She needs to focus on me and my voice. Which means you need to keep quiet."

"This is my home, Mr. Conroy, my world! I don't take orders from anyone here."

I didn't move. I'd run into old man Colson's type before, rugged individualists with forceful personalities who routinely shaped everything to their own will, rarely if ever encountering resistance from other people. Arguing with him would be a mistake; there would have to be a clear winner and loser, and he wouldn't allow himself to lose. For a moment I wondered how long it had been since he hadn't gotten his way.

"You misunderstood me, sir. I'm not telling you what to do, I'm telling you what has to happen if you want this to have even a chance of working. You don't have to take my word for it, but I think you'll be hard pressed to find another hypnotist for a second opinion on such short notice. Particularly one who's already learned of the problem you're trying to resolve. Now, can you keep silent and not interfere, or do you want me to leave?"

I could practically feel Colson fuming behind me as his need to control every situation warred with his love for the little girl. If nothing else, my years as a hypnotist had made me a good judge of character, and the ensuing silence proved me right. Above me Bethany whispered, "Have a little compassion, would you? This whole thing has him feeling helpless, and he's not used to that."

"You need to be quiet too. She's waking up."

Reggie had finally pounced, pressing his wooly beard against Gel's neck, his quick blue tongue licking her face in the shadows of the day bed. Amidst giggles and ineffectual head-shaking she brought her hands up, but he kept butting them aside with his head to continue his tongue lashing.

"Reggie really likes you, Gel. Do you like him?"

At the sound of his name, Reggie sat back on his rump alongside the girl. She opened her eyes and lowered her hands, wrapping her arms around the buffalito in a fierce hug.

"I wanna buffalito."

“I know just how you feel. I’m happy to share him with you while we visit. I’m kind of busy, so you’d really be helping me out if you’d keep Reggie company and play with him, and be his friend. Could you do that for me?”

“Sure. He’s my friend too.” As she had earlier in the day, she buried her fingers in the curly fur of his hump, pulling him closer. Reggie gave out a half-hearted bleat and allowed himself to be adored.

“His fur’s so soft, isn’t it? It’s nice to just work your fingers through it. He likes it when you dig in with your fingernails and slowly scratch over and over. Nice and slow.”

Gel followed the suggestion, and Reggie obliged with a happy rumbling from deep in his chest. In the dim light I could see Gel smiling as she continued.

Hypnosis is all about inducing a relaxed state in the people you’re trying to hypnotize. The classically trite way involves focusing their attention on a swinging pocket watch, but the point of focus isn’t what’s important. It’s just a distraction of your own choosing, separate from all the other distractions around them, as you speak in a calm voice and through a series of indirect suggestions guide them deeper until they’ve achieved trance and become receptive to whatever you want to tell them. Hypnotizing children is trickier because they haven’t learned to filter out half the things that adults do. I’d cheated by dimming the lights so Gel couldn’t see anything but me, that and giving her Reggie to play with. He’s much better than a pocket watch.

I hadn’t ever hypnotized children as part of my lounge act. None of the aliens I’d met allowed kids to frequent the kinds of places that tended to hire me. Nor had things ever gotten so bad that I’d been reduced to performing at kiddie parties or bar mitzvahs. But over the years I’d had an occasion or two to help a friend whose child needed some focus in school, or a hand in getting past some trauma, or a way to sneak up on and accept an unwelcome truth. Each time the key had been to approach the thing as a game, and I used the same technique with Gel. As I eased her into a deeper trance, I explained the rules that she and I and Reggie would play by. I made it fun. I made it entertaining. One rule was that she couldn’t hear anyone else. Another was that until I told her otherwise, nothing I said mattered or could even be remembered, unless I said her name. I painted a magical picture for her that included the three of us flying through the sky, gazing down on the vast herds of cattle and bison and thot, giving names to each animal we saw and introducing every one of them to every other one.

I rose from the chair, stretched, and turned to face Bethany and her grandfather. Behind me Gel slumped forward, completely at ease. She sat with her arms around my buffalo dog, softly murmuring an endless litany of made-up names. “This is phase one,” I explained as I turned up the light. “She’s in a deeply relaxed state right now, and open to suggestion. Before going any further I need to get a few answers and make sure I understand what’s going on.”

Bethany raised her eyebrows at me and I nodded to her. “Sorry. You can talk now. She can hear everything we say but none of it matters to her and she’s not paying any attention.”

“That’s the damndest thing,” said Colson, coming away from the door and stopping just short of the day bed. A tiny bit of hope had crept into his face, but he was all business when he turned back to me a moment later. “What do you need to understand?”

“From what Bethany told me on the way here, all of Gel’s ‘incidents’ have occurred during an emotional event.”

Colson nodded. “Yeah, best as we can tell. She gets pissed off, the way even a sweet kid can, and then she zaps something.”

“Except today,” said Bethany. “She wasn’t angry today when she zapped that thot.”

I nodded, more to myself than to them. “Not angry, scared. Not to get Freudian on you, but it sounds like whatever she’s doing is tied up with her Id. The Id is all about satisfying basic

needs, getting what it wants, when it wants it. When her wants are blocked or threatened, along with the basic emotional response you'd get from any kid, she lets loose with whatever it is she does. Does that sound about right?"

"How does that help?"

"It helps us understand the mechanism, which is critical to changing it. What I'm going to do next is build a bridge in her understanding. One that connects her anger and fear with an idea that's more concrete, with the idea of giving her some control over it. I'm going to build her a metaphor using something she already knows."

"What do you need us to do?" said Colson.

"Tell me about the tree out front."

"It's older than this house," said Colson, "descended from a black walnut that grew out behind my parents' home. I planted its seed the day I arrived here and claimed the world, back in '26."

"The children here at your ranch, do they climb it?"

Bethany laughed. "They're not supposed to, but they all do. It's kind of a rite of passage, to climb to the top and gaze out over the plains before any of them leave home. They all claim they can see the space port from up there, though you really can't. More than a few have climbed too high before they were ready and fallen out, breaking an arm or leg. But Gel hasn't climbed it yet. She's still too small. "

"Good. That gives me plenty to work with. Time for phase two."

The others stepped away. I sat forward in my chair and spoke to Gel, pulling her back into our game, reshaping the rules as I went along. In her mind's eye we flew to her home and stood in front of the tree. She wanted to climb it, longed for the day when she could. I fanned the flames of that hunger, built it up greater and greater, and then with Reggie still frolicking at her side, spoke her up its furrowed trunk. Hand over hand we climbed, branch after branch, neither of us worried over how Reggie kept up. I let the seasons spin around us as we ascended. Leaves sprouting, unfurling, expanding, turning color, and falling away. Fruit appeared all around us, tiny nubs on branches which grew as time scurried past into thick green husks that soon hurled themselves to the ground. And still we climbed.

We reached the top, clinging to limbs that barely held our weight. I conjured up a wind, strong enough to make us sway. Gel clung half a head above me, unafraid, smiling down at Reggie perched upon my shoulder. On the daybed her face beamed with joy.

"I see it. I see the port!"

"Of course you do, Gel. You've climbed to the top of the tree. You're a big girl now. Want to try something else that you've never done before?"

"Sure. I'm big."

"Feel the wind, Gel. Feel how it wants to shake all the leaves from the tree and blow them all away, like the wind is mad at them, mad at the leaves, mad at the tree."

Sitting on the daybed, Gel trembled. Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened as she gazed at something only she could see.

"It's not the regular wind at all, Gel. This wind is special. It's a part of you."

"I'm the wind?"

"Anytime you get angry, really really angry, that's the wind that lives inside you. It comes out when you feel bad. It's trying to help you because it thinks you're just a weak little girl. It's there when you get angry, it wants to blow everything away. Can you remember feeling like that?"

"Uh huh."

"When was the last time, Gel. I know you remember. Tell me, please."

“When Kelly took Captain Stacey. She made me so mad.”

“That’s the doll that went missing,” said Bethany from behind my chair. “A few months back the younger kids renamed all the toys and gave them ranks so they could play war games.”

“Right,” I said. “And what happened to Captain Stacey? What did the wind do to her?”

“It made her go away.”

“The wind blew and blew and she was gone, right?”

A single tear ran down her face. “I miss Captain Stacey.”

“Of course you do. I bet you wish you could have stopped that wind from blowing her away.”

“Yeah.”

“And earlier today, when you got scared? When you thought that big thout was going to trample you, could you feel the wind in you then?”

“Yeah. It blew the thout away.”

“That’s right. That’s what the wind does, Gel. That wind that’s part of you, but it only comes out when it thinks you’re weak. That’s why it’s blowing all around us right now, way up here in the tree. It’s swirling and whipping the leaves and branches and me and Reggie too.”

“I don’t wanna blow you and Reggie away!”

“Of course you don’t. That’s why I’m going to tell you another secret, Gel. The wind is wrong; you’re not weak at all.”

“I’m not?”

“Not a bit. Just like that wind is a part of you, so is this tree.”

“The tree?”

“That’s right, and no matter how hard the wind blows, the tree doesn’t care. It’s not going to get blown away. It’s not going anywhere. It’s a big old tree, and it’s stronger than the wind.”

“And I’m the tree?”

“Absolutely. Feel it. The wind is dying down. Now that you know you’re the tree too, that you’ve got roots going into the ground, as deep down as the branches reach up into the sky, the wind can’t do anything. That’s the piece you were missing, Gel. But now you know. So when you’re mad at someone, or when you’re scared, the wind won’t go blowing around anymore, because now you know you have all the strength of this tree. You’re big and strong.

“I’m strong.”

“And the next time you get really angry or scared, you’ll also still be strong. And the wind that’s been blowing things away, it won’t need to do that. It won’t even be able to try. Because you know the secret now.”

And from the look on her face it was clear that she did. I guided her through it several more times, building up the metaphor from several directions. Over and over the wind whipped at us, throwing leaves in our faces, shaking the branches under us, rocking the very tree itself. Each time I asked Gel if she was weak or strong, and when she said she was strong the wind stopped. She didn’t need it any longer. She could have her anger or her fear, but neither would make the wind come back.

“It’s okay to get mad sometimes, or to be frightened. It happens to the other kids too. To me. To Reggie. But after a bit we stop being angry or scared, and you will too. You just didn’t see that before, because you hadn’t climbed to the top of this tree. But now that you have, you’ll always remember how you feel now. You’ll remember being here at the top of the tree, and stopping the wind, and how strong you are.”

“I’ll remember.”

“Of course you will. You’re a big girl. You’ll remember. And one more thing: in a moment we’re going to climb down from this tree and go back inside, but from now on, whenever you hear me say ‘Janus Banana’ you’ll find yourself right back here. No matter where you are or what you’re doing, if I say those words to you, you’ll be here at the top of this tree, feeling big and strong, and we’ll be able to talk just like we’re doing now, understand?”

“I understand.”

“I knew you would. Now it’s time for us to climb back down. Branch by branch, back to the ground. Climb with me now, Gel, branch by branch...”

We made our way back, effortlessly descending, pausing a couple times to reinforce the idea about her newfound powers of control, until we’d quit the tree and come inside, and she was there, on the bed, waking up with my sleepy buffalito still in her lap.

Before she ran off to put Gel to bed, Bethany offered to show me to a guest room for the night. Her grandfather immediately quashed that idea by suggesting I’d be more comfortable in my room back at the port hotel. The way she nodded was just more proof that things always ran the way her great-grandfather wanted them to. Including me, apparently. It took several minutes to pry Gel’s arms from Reggie, and a couple more to pull her away from me as she insisted on giving me a goodnight hug.

“Can Reggie and me play some more, tomorrow?”

Bethany took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Sure, honey. We’ll see them at the Festival soon.”

“kay!”

Colson walked Reggie and me outside toward the aerosled. Despite sending me away, his demeanor was the kindest I’d yet seen from him. Was he going to drive me back himself?

“Don’t take me the wrong way, Conroy. You’re not a bad sort, I’m just not . . . comfortable around people. You understand?”

“You have a household of two hundred here.”

“They’re not people, they’re family. Bethany comes and goes, but I don’t leave the ranch anymore.” He opened the aerosled’s door. Reggie jumped inside and Colson waved me in after. “You said you didn’t come just for the Festival, but to see me. What about?”

I knew I’d only get one chance to make my pitch, and this was it. “A marketing angle. This solar system defines the farthest edge of Human Space. You made that happen. Your name’s synonymous with the best of human endeavor. Between that, your buffalo exports, and the gross physical similarity between bison and buffalitos, I wanted to discuss an endorsement arrangement, and to offer my services in exchange.”

“I don’t need your services, Mr. Conroy.”

“With respect, sir, buffalitos are very versatile. You don’t know what I can offer.”

“Doesn’t matter. Anything I want, I can feed plans into a fabber and build from parts. Anything I need done, I can do for myself. I like my things simple.”

“But I—”

“Let me be blunt and save us both some time. I understand what you want, and I think I understand why you want it. But I don’t care. I don’t allow anyone to pair my name to anything. It draws more attention to me and mine, and I don’t like attention. So, I respect what you’re doing with your little friend there, but you won’t be making me any part of it.”

“I understand, sir, but . . . It’s been a stressful day. Can I ask you to at least sleep on it?”

He actually hrumphed, but nodded. “We’ll talk again, by screen, before your ship leaves. I meant what I said about you helping Angela. I’m deep in your debt for that, and I pay my debts. Now though, let’s get you back to your hotel.

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“No bother at all,” said Colson. “The sled’s autopilot will get you there straight off, and an attendant will send it back.”

“Oh. Autopilot. Is that safe?”

He snorted. “Did you see much traffic on the road on your way here, Mr. Conroy?”

“I didn’t even see a road.”

“That’s the point. You see the two big buttons on the console? One takes you here and the other takes you back. There’s nothing to drive to on this planet except this ranch and the port, with just empty plains and the herds between the two. The animals should all be bedded down for the night, and if one wasn’t it would still give the sled a wide berth.”

The aerosled rumbled along, traversing the darkened plains of a mostly empty world, its search beams cutting the blackness in front of us into tiny pieces that reassembled themselves behind us. When the space port appeared on the horizon it seemed like a jeweled city blazing in the night. Up close it was a pretty standard collection of ceramo towers and walls, not unlike a medieval fort or a themed shopping mall. My heart yearned for it all the same. The evening had been very instructive. Colson enjoyed his isolation and pseudo-frontier existence, but that would never work for me. I needed people around me, preferably in great variety. I wanted to hear voices, both human and not, raised in both irritation and song, swapping tales and telling lies. The night was still young, and I had no doubt I’d have my choice of several venues where I could find people arguing, at the very least, the merits of dry rub versus wet sauces, vinegar versus molasses, obscure Earth-based flavorings for cooking barbecue and exotic alien choices.

My ride rolled to a stop a short distance from one of the tower entrances and the door popped open of its own accord. Reggie didn’t need any further encouragement to exit and I followed his example. Two aliens came towards us, their luminous purple badges identifying them as members of Colson’s staff long before I could mark them as Trelniki in the darkness. I assumed they wanted to take charge of the vehicle, but as I stepped away from it they altered their course to intercept me.

“Mr. Conroy, may we have a moment of your time?” Her voice was two octaves higher than mine, its words tinkling like glass.

“I’m sorry, do we know each other?”

“Not as such, no,” said the other Trelniki, a male who rumbled in contrast to his colleague. “But of necessity we are here.”

“Your necessity or mine?” Reggie had run on ahead, past the aliens, and turned to regard me from the threshold of the port’s entrance. Just a pace or two beyond him was light and noise, with no shortage of human beings and other fans of barbecue. Out here there was just the darkness, me, and my two new friends, except I had a very strong feeling friendship wasn’t part of the equation.

“Let us say rather, the child’s necessity,” said the female. “We are concerned you don’t properly appreciate her power, or the threat she poses.”

“You know about Angela?”

They said nothing, but managed to do it with a disturbing intensity that made me want to keep talking.

“Look, it’s under control now. She won’t disintegrate anything else.”

“She hasn’t disintegrated anything,” said the male, glancing to his partner for confirmation.

“You weren’t there. I know what I saw.”

“On the contrary, you saw what you saw, and have misunderstood it. The child’s power is not destruction, but rather displacement.”

“Excuse me?”

“She did not destroy the thot. She moved it.”

“Moved it? Where?”

Both Trelniki sighed and shrugged at that question. The female raised a hand, drawing my attention back to her. “How can you hope to help her when you don’t begin to understand her situation.”

Light and warmth and fellowship—not to mention my buffalito—lay a short walk beyond. I shook my head and turned to go. “Look, I don’t know what your deal is, or what you think you know, but I don’t know you, and—”

Both aliens spread their arms wide, palms out toward. One moved in front of me, putting himself once more between the port’s entrance and me. The other stepped behind me. Their outstretched arms acted like a boundary, hemming me in, not quite touching me.

Reggie barked once and began running back toward me, toward the aliens, at breakneck speed.

“We will show you our ‘deal.’”

And all at once I was squeezing my eyes shut at bright sunlight that hadn’t existed an instant ago. Both aliens were gone. So was the night, and the space port too. I was somewhere else. Sometime else. The sky above was a pale green, the sun a deep orange and larger than what we have back in Earth’s sky or the one Colson’s world orbited. There was sand beneath my feet, and I could hear the soft plish-plash of waves on a shore. Reggie was nowhere to be seen. I stood in a circle made of three squat, roughly humanoid statues, hands interlocking as if in some ritual or dance. The stonework was blocky but polished, translucent and honey-colored, with scatterings of tiny dark flecks, like tiny insects embedded in anthropomorphic amber. None of it made any sense. I turned slowly, looking for the Trelnini, for the space port, for anything remotely familiar. Nothing. I saw the edge of a lake or ocean, the water a vivid blue. I felt the wind on my face and smelled salt in the moist air, but that was it. Nothing here but me and the ring of bright golden stone figures.

“Welcome, Mr. Conroy. Let me begin by apologizing for the abruptness of your visit.”

I spun around. One of the statues had spoken, and all were releasing the hands of one another and dropping their arms. The other two bowed their heads or nodded to the one who’d spoken and walked to the water’s edge and then beyond, quickly vanishing beneath the waves.

“What’s happening? Who are you? Where am I? And how did I get here?”

“I need to discuss the child Angela with you. My name is Ytpino. You’re the first human to stand upon this planet. It is some fifty-three thousand light-years from your home, on the other side of the galactic core.”

“You expect me to believe I’m not on Colson’s World any longer?”

“Believe your own senses.”

He had a point. The nearest shoreline should have been several hours ride from me. Night had become day. The sky was the wrong color. Gravity felt slightly off in a different way than it had felt off when I’d first arrived from Earth. I traveled to a different planet, without benefit of vessel or time, and if my host was to be believed I was further from home than any human being had ever been.

“Okay. How did I get here?”

“You were brought here by my fellow Plenum.”

“Is that a social organization of some kind? Do you all raise funds for worthwhile charities, or do you limit your activities to kidnapping hypnotists?”

“The Plenum are one race, Mr. Conroy, though to your perceptions we appear as members of other races. We have a team on Colson’s World that would seem to be a perfectly ordinary pair of Trelniki, no different from a dozen others of that race. But along with their other duties at the port, they’ve also been monitoring the situation with the child. After the event at the Festival today, they sought advice from a few elders, expressing concern over your involvement. And they asked me to intervene.”

“So, what, your people mimic the appearance of other races?”

“Not at all. The Trelniki are indistinguishable from other Trelniki, down to the cellular level. Just as I am from other Gris, and others of our kind on other worlds are in no way discernible from the natives of those places. But we are also all Plenum.”

“What does any of this have to do with an orphaned human child?”

“She too is Plenum.”

“Excuse me?”

“The little girl you spent time with today is Plenum. As are all of the ‘orphans’ that Amadeus Colson has taken in. All of the children on that planet are Plenum.”

“If that’s true, why do you have a human being raising your kids?”

“Because they are human too. We grow up believing we are precisely what others perceive us to be. It is our way to blend our people with other races, to spread ourselves throughout the galaxy by living amongst the rest of you. We gave Colson a world and long life, and in exchange he agreed to become the progenitor to our next generation, so that as humanity extends itself out into the galaxy we can go with you.”

“Why are you telling me this? If you can whisk me across the galaxy you’ve obvious got more than enough power to conquer humanity if that was your intention. Why this creepy hiding amongst us?”

“It was the assessment of the team that sent you that you needed a fuller understanding.”

“Understanding of what? That Plenum can zap giant animals with a wave of a hand and make them go away?”

“Indeed, gone, but not destroyed.”

“That’s what the Trelniki said. That she’s moved it.”

“And to convince you of this, they moved you, Mr. Conroy. The Plenum do not destroy. Rather, any two or more of us can open one end of a vortex which provides passage through to the other end, which is created by another collection of Plenum. That is how you arrived here.”

“And Gel?”

“She *moved* the creature. Sent it elsewhere.”

“You said you need at least two at either end to create a vortex.”

“The child is an anomaly. A dangerous fluke of a kind we have seen before and which is not evolutionarily viable. On the extremely rare occasions that this mutation occurs it causes its own destruction.”

“Because she can’t control it?”

“You understand completely. It is tragic, but inevitable. Our concern, which we communicated to Amadeus Colson, was for the other Plenum in his care who might be injured or lost as a consequence. We hold no sway over a progenitor, but we know he shares our concern. Though it pains him to, he has prepared himself to act for the greater good.”

“You mean he’s screwing up his courage to kill her.”

“For the greater good.”

“But I may have given Gel control. It’s too early to tell, but what if she masters her ability? What if she stops being a danger to the others?”

“It has never been achieved before, not in the long history of the Plenum.”

“You’ve probably never encountered hypnosis before, or maybe spread your kind among races that were open to hypnosis. You don’t know if it will work or not.”

“Also true, but would you have us risk the others? You have made Colson’s task all the more difficult by giving him false hope.”

“You think he’s changed his mind? He’s giving her a chance?”

“The Plenum do not destroy, nor may we interfere with a progenitor’s offspring on the world of their birth. Only he can take the life he has quickened. We bear the child no malice. But we fear for the others. Our children are precious to us and we do not believe your interference will eliminate the problem. Resolution was close at hand, until you arrived.”

“You say they’re precious to you, but isn’t Angela one of your children too? If there’s even a chance that I’ve helped her, isn’t it worth seeing it through, to give her that chance?”

“You would have us delay, knowing that every day we wait is another day that could end in disaster?”

“Are all Plenum so fatalistic? We humans have this thing we call hope. It’s something all of the Colson’s children have had ingrained into them. If you’re raising them to blend in with my kind, then shouldn’t their nature be part of the decision? To a human being, there’s always hope.”

Its mouth grimaced. It turned away from me and gestured at the sea. Two amber figures emerged from the sea, whether the earlier Gris or different I couldn’t tell. They took up positions around me, forming a loose circle and only then did Ytpino turn back to face me.

“Take another day to explore hope. If you are successful, you will have our gratitude to the end of your days. But if not, and your meddling is found to cost us even one of our new children, we will bring grief to you wherever you find yourself in the galaxy.”

“You guys don’t believe in half measures, do you?”

“Your actions have already compromised the progenitor’s resolve and we fear and he may not be able to restore it before the child accidentally harms another. If you would save yourself, then save the child.”

Ytpino brought his arms up, completing some circuit with the other Gris. The world went away and another took its place. I stood in darkness, encircled by two Trelniki. An aerosled waited nearby on the grass. As I stumbled backward Reggie leapt into my arms.

“Save the child,” said the female.

“And you save yourself,” added the male.

They nodded to me and without another word climbed into the aerosled and drove off.

“Right. And good night to you too.”

Reggie licked my face and farted.

Reggie and I made it to our room in one of the port’s hotels and the rest of the night passed without further incident. By mid-morning we had wandered back out to the Festival. I let Reggie lure me over to the section where merchants sold a wide range of Festival souvenirs, everything from colorful ‘kiss-the-cook’ aprons to data chits with recipes and preparation for thousands of variations on barbecue. I had no doubt he had every intention of devouring some overpriced commemorative paperweights if only I’d let him. Instead, I bought one of the Barry Bison plush

toys as a gift for Gel. It wasn't quite as large as a buffalito, but it was almost as cute. Reggie sniffed at it suspiciously, whuffed once, and turned his back on the thing.

With shopping done I decided it was time for us to break our fast. We headed toward one of the cooking areas and settled in at a picnic bench between two competitors' booths. One, run by a family from New Achaemenia, set me up with kabobs of seasoned bison steak as well as still-warm lavash they had grilled over a fire pit that used charcoals formed from trees that had never existed on Earth. The neighboring booth belonged to a tiny Argentine who insisted everyone call him El Tio. At dawn he'd started cooking using a portable adobe oven. He plied me with that asado cooked with onions and chili peppers, and fed Reggie several plates of offal. Mornings like this reminded me of why I was a foodie: what we cook and how we cook it tells the story of who we are, human or alien, ancient civilization or first generation colony. Despite its focus on barbecue, the Festival understood that. As I basked in the fellowship of wildly diverse approaches to this cuisine, I wondered if Colson himself appreciated it or simply saw it as a marketing tool. That in turn started me thinking again about ways to use his endorsement to expand my newborn company. Ideas danced like sugarplums in my head, and I had just started trying to wipe away some of the grease Reggie had smeared into his beard, when I saw something I knew Colson and I could agree on. Skipping down the row of competitors' booths was Angela in a slightly different, belted sundress and the same pink boots as the day before.

She looked happy and carefree, but she ratcheted that up a notch and squealed when she saw Reggie, her skip transforming to an arm-waving blur as she changed direction and dashed to hug him.

"Gel! Don't get so far ahead." Bethany came running into view an instant later, and slowed when she saw why the girl had rushed off.

I offered her a kabob and a piece of lavash. She declined the meat but took the bread, smiling when she discovered it was still warm. I looked to be certain that Angela was still distracted with Reggie and then handed Bethany the plush bison. "I got this for Gel, if that's all right."

"You didn't have to do that, you know. It's very sweet of you. She'll love it. Gel, come see what Mr. Conroy got you."

Gel popped back up. "For me? Thank you!" She snatched the toy and immediately showed it to Reggie who was busily eating the last of the lavash.

Bethany laughed and as I finished off my kabob I resumed our conversation. "I had an interesting encounter with a Gris last night," I said, and watched confusion pass over her face.

"What's a Gris?"

"Kind of a squat, honey-colored, translucent alien, living on a planet on the other side of the galactic core."

The look of confusion on her face was too perfect. Back in college she'd run track and been a business major. As far as I knew she'd never tried her hand at acting. Which meant she really had no idea what I was talking about. "Nevermind, I—"

"Bef'ny! He's eating the plate!"

Gel had pulled herself up onto the bench alongside Reggie, and had just finished feeding him one of El Tio's ceramo plates, keeping her fingers out of the way as my buffalito took large bites out of it and dropping the last piece when she had nowhere left to hold it. I gave Reggie a scratch behind his ears and explained, "He likes to eat whatever I'm eating, but he can eat anything, really. Plates and clothes and furniture. Anything."

"Oh. He must have really really sharp teeth!" She chewed on her lower lip and while cradling her plush toy against her chest, inspected her fingertips to make sure they were all still there.

“Well, not so much. It’s kind of a trick that all buffalitos have. But don’t worry, he won’t accidentally eat your fingers. Reggie never ever bites people, not even by accident.”

“Never?”

I picked up the remaining fragment that had once been part of a plate and held it in the fist of one hand while I coaxed Reggie to open his mouth wide with the other. Then I shoved as much of the first hand in as I could. Reggie’s mouth clamped down on my fist, and I could feel his tongue squirming in between my fingers. When I pulled my hand out, it was empty and my buffalo dog was swallowing the last bit. I wagged my fingers at Gel.

She giggled and hugged him again. “How come the big buffalos don’t eat plates?”

Bethany pulled the child to her feet and set her on the ground. “Our buffalo come from Earth, honey. Mr. Conroy’s friend comes from . . . well, I’m not really sure, but somewhere else.”

“Can I feed him stuff?”

“If it’s all right with Bethany.”

“You’re sure she won’t make him sick?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t been able to yet, and I’ve fed him everything from molten lead to industrial acid. If Gel thinks she can put him off his feed, she’s welcome to try.”

“Can I, Bef’ny?”

Bethany looked at me like I’d grown an extra head, then reached down to take Gel’s hand. “Why not? But I’m going to come with you.”

“Kay! C’mon, Reggie, I’m gonna get you rocks and stuff to eat!”

Gel waved at my buffalito and trotted off in search of some small stones, dragging Bethany along. Reggie glanced up at me for approval, yipped once, and careened after her. I finished the last of my asado before pulling a warm, cloth towel from one of the stands that had been erected throughout the Festival for that purpose and cleaned my hands, then turned to follow Bethany and the others.

A Trelniki stood in my way. Picture a tall and slender topiary project, a tiny-leaved bush the color of sand in the shape of a human being.

“She doesn’t know about us.”

I stared at the alien. Female, with a purple badge, and I made the connection from the night before. But, to be sure, I asked, “Us? Us who?”

“We met last evening, Mr. Conroy. My name is Yeung. My cohort Bedra. We are the Plenum assigned to this world to assist Mr. Colson should he have need of us as he raises our children.”

“And his great-granddaughter doesn’t know anything about this?”

“She believes the orphans arrive from offworld as infants, and she knows that upon reaching their majority they leave to receive schooling upon some human world. On the rare occasions when one has cause to return, she is diverted away from the ranch or is offworld herself. This is how Mr. Colson prefers things.”

“And you just do it that way, because he *prefers* it so?”

Yeung shrugged. “He is the progenitor. Upon this planet, he has final say over all Plenum of his seed.”

“His seed? If they’re descended from him, why don’t they look like him?”

“The process draws upon his entire genetic heritage, not simply the current expression of his genes. He is the representative of your race to our people, and the children resemble *all* of his forebears.”

“Yeah, but—”

She cut me off, lifting her chin and waving a hand in the direction Bethany had gone. “As Ytpino explained to you. It is not our way to interfere with the progenitor upon his world, but too it is his wish to keep his great-granddaughter ignorant of the full arrangement. Please do not resume your attempts to query her about the events of last evening. She has no knowledge of them, and moreover it may only cause her to ask questions the progenitor does not wish to answer.”

“That’s your only purpose here?”

“That, and to observe ‘hope,’ and to confirm that your treatment is truly efficacious.

I nodded, turned to go after Bethany, then stopped. “And if it’s not?”

The Trelniki shrugged again. “Then it falls to my cohort and I to meet with Mr. Colson, and offer our support in his culling of the aberration. Now, please, go after the child, Mr. Conroy. Stay with her, and ensure your efforts are not in vain. We very much want you to succeed, even as we prepare for the alternative.”

I left, eager to rejoin the others. I found them by another barbecue booth. Gel had tucked the plush toy into the belt of her sundress. Under Bethany’s supervision and wearing quilted oven mitts intended for hands much larger than her own, she was using a pair of metal tongs to feed Reggie red hot coals from a cooking pit. A trio of braai aficionados representing the best meat grilled on the African continent watched with a mix of wonder and horror, all thoughts of barbecue presumably stripped from their heads. Reggie snarfed the coals from the tongs as quickly as the little girl could serve them up, swallowing each in a single bite and without any apparent discomfort from the heat or the composition. Gel was delighted.

“Mr. Conroy! Look! Reggie’s eating fire!”

At the mention of my name Bethany turned to smile and wave. Reggie swung his head around too, saw me, and immediately trotted over. Gel had just come around again with the tongs and another glowing coal for him to snack on, only to find he wasn’t in position to receive it. She tried to follow him with it, but as she did the tongs slipped from her grip in the over-sized mittens. The coal fell to the ground and bounced toward her. She scrambled away from it, backpeddling her feet while windmilling her arms. Gel put a good distance between herself and the coal, but in doing so she stumbled against the ring of low stones that defined the cook pit and fell over. Her right hand landed in the fire.

The mitts Gel wore had been designed to keep the wearer safe when handling extremely hot objects, but they had never been intended for direct contact with open flame. The one on her right hand caught fire and blazed like a torch.

Reggie barked. Gel screamed. Bethany turned to see what had happened.

And I watched as flame, oven mitt, and the entire fire pit winked out of existence leaving behind a few wisps of smoke and a ring of barren ground to show where it had been.

“Honey, are you okay? Let me see your hand?” Bethany knelt in front of the girl, cradling a tiny pink hand in both of hers. Gel was crying and had her face buried in Bethany’s hair, but otherwise didn’t appear injured. The remaining mitten slipped from her left hand.

Reggie pressed forward until his own face was against Gel’s, whuffling with encouragement or sympathy or just friendly consolation. Gel spared one of the arms she was using to hang onto Bethany to hug Reggie as well.

“Shhh, it’s okay, it’s okay. You’re fine. Everything’s fine.” Bethany looked up at me, relief on her face. “She’s not hurt. She was just scared.”

But she wasn’t fine. Whatever hope for control I thought I’d provided had come unraveled, and in hindsight it seemed pretty obvious. It wasn’t about trees and wind and remaining calm in

the face of the storm. Hypnosis or no, I couldn't expect a child to be able to master her fear or anger before some part of her automatically reacted. As had just happened.

Gel wasn't fine, and I was scared.

The confused family from South Africa hovered solicitously as Bethany opened her kit and gave Gel a sedative. She lifted her eyes to meet mine as she finished, and the question there was all too clear. I left Reggie with her and ran back, looking for a port employee. Yeung met me as soon as I was out of Bethany's view.

"I felt it. The child's ability has manifested again."

"My hypnotic block didn't work."

"Obviously. She must be taken to the progenitor. I have already summoned an aerosled."

"She's been sedated. Bethany can keep her drugged until we can come up with a new plan."

"Unlikely, Mr. Conroy. As you saw yesterday, medicating her no longer works. Moreover, the period between manifestations has dwindled and our past experience suggests it will soon cease entirely. A new plan will not be forthcoming. This situation is extremely rare, but the Plenum have endured it before. We have explained to the progenitor what he must do. It is . . . more difficult for mammalian races, but it must be done all the same."

"Colson is *not* going to kill her!"

"Then he condemns one or more of his other children. Is that a better choice?"

"Can't you . . . can't you send her somewhere?"

"In her current state, the child would destabilize any vortex, and likely destroy those attempting to form the conduit for her."

"Well, what about a ship?"

"Her ability is not dependent upon planetary gravity. Here, or in space, she remains a danger to everyone around her. There is only one solution."

"But—"

"Return to the child. Inform Ms. Colson that a vehicle is coming. You may accompany them if you desire. It will be best for all concerned if we can conclude this business without delay."

Reggie chose that moment to come trotting up to me, having made a distinction between being left to wait and being told to stay. He sat on my foot and stared up at Yeung who stared back and scowled. "Your creature is an unaccounted factor in all of this."

"He's just my companion animal."

"Perhaps. It may simply be that the child's ability had reached a natural growth spurt in its maturation. And yet, the ineffectiveness of her medication as well as her last two manifestations coincide with her encounters with it."

"With *him*," I said.

"My apologies."

"And I thought the Trelniki were all far too rational to mistake correlation with causality, or does your dual nature spare you that tradition?"

She blushed at that, the leaves of her cheeks and forehead going almost as purple as her employee badge. "All Plenum partake of the best and worst of their generation. I would be grateful were you to allow me to study him and explicitly test my hypotheses. There are no Plenum among the Arconi, and their buffalo dogs are more rare even than Plenum. The sacrifice of a pet is a small thing compared to the potential knowledge to be gained."

An aerosled appeared at the far end of our aisle, gingerly moving forward as Festival-goers noticed it and got out of its way. I stooped and picked up my buffalito. "I told you, Reggie's my

companion; he's not a pet. And even if he were, the answer would be the same. You want a lab specimen, you can get one yourself. But you won't be acquiring it from me or my company."

Yeung did not reply, but stepped aside as the aerosled closed. I turned my back on her and followed after the vehicle. When I caught up with it, Bethany had already climbed in and was securing Gel to the rear couch. The driver, Bedra, Yeung's cohort, stood outside.

"We're coming with you," I said, putting Reggie next to Gel. He settled in against her, looking as protective and loyal as any Earthborn mutt ever had.

"I'm taking her back to the ranch. Gran needs to know what's happened."

"I suspect he already does," I said, earning me a look of confusion from Bethany and one of annoyance from Bedra.

"Do not interfere, Mr. Conroy," said the Trelniki.

Bethany moved to the far end of the forward couch and waved me in next to her. She hit a switch and the door sealed behind me. An instant later she began guiding the vehicle back through the narrow lanes of the Festival. "It's what I promised I would do. She could hurt someone."

"Bethany, he doesn't think he has a choice. He's going to do a lot more than hurt her."

"Don't you think I know that? She can't live around other people anymore. He's going to have to send her away."

"What?"

She wiped at her eyes as her tears began, nodding to me. "I told him I would go too, to take care of her. There's a hydrosled waiting, when he decides it's time, to take us to an island far enough away that we'll be safe. It's a risk, but what else can I do?"

I wanted to believe her, but last night's chat with Ytpino hadn't include an isolation option, and Yeung had been very clear. Bethany didn't know it, but the only choice Colson had left was to kill Angela.

Bethany didn't bother with the autopilot buttons. Once we cleared the Festival grounds she did something to the controls that overcame the governor, raised us significantly higher above the ground than before, pushed the aerosled to its maximum speed and aimed for ranch house.

We'd sped onward, Gel asleep in back, and Bethany and I lost in our own thoughts. After several minutes and more than a few kilometers the vehicle's comm broke the silence. It was Amadeus Colson.

"Bethany, stop wherever you are and activate your emergency beacon."

"What? Why? We'll be home soon, Gran."

"Which is the last place I want you to be. Do what I tell you. I'm on my way to you now. Colson out."

We spun in a wide arc as Bethany slowed and eventually stopped us. Her hands shook on the controls and her face had paled.

"What's wrong? You didn't react this strongly when Gel—"

"He's left the house!"

"So?"

"He doesn't . . . He never . . . If he leaves the ranch, he'll die!"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's something there, something at the ranch that keeps him young. Both of us. I can go offworld and my clock just starts again, and when I return I get young until I hit the age I was when I first came here. For him though, maybe because he's so old, it just keeps him in middle age. But the price of it is he can't leave. Ever."

“Then why would he—”

“Because he’s going to do it!” She spun on the couch and looked back at Gel, still asleep with Reggie at her side. “Don’t you see? He’s going to kill her, but he doesn’t want any of the children to see or know until it’s too late. He’s taking it all on himself to spare them any part of it.”

We waited there for half an hour before a speck appeared on the horizon and rapidly grew into another aerosled. If I thought Bethany had been driving fast, it was nothing compared to the speed of Colson. He rumbled past us, doubled back, overshot us again, and eventually dumped enough velocity to manage a jarring stop alongside our vehicle. When he got out he wasn’t alone; a squat, oddly translucent, honey-colored figure stumbled from the vehicle after him.

We climbed out of our aerosled to meet them. I nodded to them both. “Mr. Colson, Ytpino.”

Bethany whirled to stare at me. “You know that being? Gran? What’s going on? What, who is that?”

“I am Amadeus’s oldest living friend,” said Ytpino. “Sixty-three years ago I found his scoutship floating dead in space. He was near death but I revived him. We struck a bargain and I brought him here. Everything he has built here goes back to that day.”

Colson took her hands in his. His voice rasped as he said, “I never knew your grandfather, Bethy. Your great-grandmother never told me I’d fathered a child on her. I was the last of my line when I went into space and I expected the family name to end with me. Then Ytpino saved me.”

“What are you saying?”

Colson gestured toward the alien. “By all measurable means he’s a member of a race known as the Gris. But he’s also a Plenum. They claim to be as old as space, and integrally tied to it. They spread their genetics around to other sapient forms so they can live among most of the people of the galaxy.”

“Your people are new to space,” said Ytpino. “The bargain I made with Amadeus was for him to father a new branch of my people. Plenum, who are also human. They used my genes to quicken untold numbers of eggs hidden in vaults beneath the house.”

Bethany’s jaw dropped as she put it together. She stared at her great-grandfather. “So all the orphans here...”

“My children. Your great uncles and great aunts. Thousands of them. I raised them to be people of good character, saw to it that they attended the best schools in Human Space, and sent them out to find their destinies. Who could ask for a greater legacy?”

“Gran, why are you telling me this now after all this time? Why are we here? Why is he here?”

Ytpino motioned to me and I stepped away, giving the other two at least the illusion of privacy. Colson looked older than he had the night before, but that could have been from the pain on his face.

“Because it ends today. I told Ytpino I couldn’t continue our bargain after today.”

“But...”

“You know why, Bethy.”

“But the hydrosled . . . the plans we made for the island...”

“I was just trying to spare you, Bethy. I can no more sacrifice you than I could any of the other children.”

“But I’m willing to—”

“No. No one else can do this for me and it has to be done. Give me your cattle baton.”

Her hand shook as she began to hand it over, then refused to let go as she realized too late what a device designed to stun a buffalo or thout would do to a little girl.

Colson wrestled it from her grasp and signaled to Gris. “Ytpino, keep her still.” He stared at the baton like he held a serpent in his hand. “I have to kill one of my own children. Today, right now. Angela has to die before she hurts anyone else. And I have to kill her.”

The alien grabbed Bethany’s arms and held her back. That left only me. I didn’t think, I just moved, and the next instant I was tackling a hundred thirteen year old man and wrestling him to the ground.

“I can’t let you kill an innocent child!”

As we grappled he must have activated the baton. Even a glancing blow was more enough to scramble my nervous system. He struggled up onto his knees and steadied himself for a direct strike on me as I lay there twitching and helpless.

“I can’t let you stop me. She has to die!”

As the baton began to descend I heard my buffalito barking, followed by a child’s scream.

“POP POP! NO!!!”

His hand paused at the sound of her words. He turned to look at the child. One moment she was there, clearly visible through the open door of the aerosled, kneeling on the rear couch with her arms wrapped around Reggie. In the next instant she was running toward us, Reggie racing alongside her, and the aerosled, over a ton of fabricated ceramo and metal, was gone.

Colson staggered to his feet and lunged. She dodged easily and he lumbered after. Bethany had broken free of the Gris and pursued her great-grandfather. The chase that followed would have been comical if it hadn’t been so tragic. A terrified six year-old girl darted across the grassy plain, followed by the old man she just learned was her father and the young woman who’d always been like a big sister but was really a niece two generations removed. They circled the aerosled that had brought Colson and Ytpino. Gel bobbed and weaved, all the while shouting “No! No! No!” Bethany had a grip on Colson’s arm, keeping him from even trying to reach for the girl with the baton. Reggie ran over to me, licked my face once to assure himself I was okay, and then began racing loops around the rest of them as if it were all a great game. Ytpino stood motionless, either because of his earlier explanation that he could not interfere with any of a progenitor’s offspring or because he simply wasn’t built to run after a human child.

I had just managed to throw off the worst of the stun’s paralysis and sit up, when Gel’s criss-crossing, madcap dash led her back towards me. She dodged at the last moment, Reggie hot on her heels, and threw herself into the remaining aerosled. The buffalito leapt in just as the door closed and locked. Through the windshield I could see Gel clasping her hands together and slamming them down on one of the autopilot dumbswitches. An instant later the vehicle rose on a cushion of air and left the four of us standing helplessly choking on its dust as it sped off in the direction of the space port.

“I have sent word to the Plenum at the port,” said Ytpino. “They will send a new vehicle for us.”

Bethany stared at him. “What about Gel? Can they override her sled? Maybe slow it down, keep it going in circles until we can catch her?”

“Alas, they cannot.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” I said as Bethany helped me to my feet. I impressed myself by not falling back over.

Ytpino gave a small bow. “They are the same in this instance. As I told you, we cannot interfere with the child while she is on this world. We can render Amadeus assistance, provide information and advice, but no more. Direct action we must leave to the progenitor.”

“She’s just a little girl,” said Bethany. “She’s just learned that the man who’s raised her, the person she loves most in the world, is her father and he intends to kill her. She’s terrified!”

“And in her terror she zapped an aerosled and everything in it,” said Colson. “Sedation no longer works on her, and if she still has a refractory period delaying her, it’s no more than an hour now, not a matter of days. She’s out of control.”

“You’re wrong,” I said. “This is more control than she’s ever shown.”

Colson gasped, bent over with his hands on knees as he tried to catch his breath. “What are you talking about, Conroy?”

I gestured where our aerosled had been. Lying in the vehicle-shaped imprint on the grass was the plush bison I’d given Gel. “She didn’t zap everything in the sled. She kept Reggie and she kept her toy. That speaks of a selective, if unconscious, control. And this time it wasn’t reflexive like when she was about to be trampled by the thotat or when her mitt caught fire.”

“But it was,” said Ytpino. “This was a fear response like the others.”

“Fear yes, but not like the others. She reacted to what she heard. She understood the meaning of the words. She didn’t act just out of instinct. Otherwise, why is Colson still here? Why didn’t she do him like she did the thotat? Why get rid of a vehicle that wasn’t a threat instead of the man who was?”

“You’re saying it was a plan? To eliminate one sled and take the other? That she planned this?” Bethany shook her head.

“Not consciously, no. But I think she’s learning?”

Colson shook his head. “And what if you’re wrong? What if zapping the aerosled is actually a sign of the indiscriminate expansion of her ability? A sign that the next time she’ll take out one or more innocent bystanders? Perhaps some of her siblings? No, I may have waited too long as it is. She doesn’t know how to override the autopilot; it will take her back to the port. We’ll follow her there, and when I find her I’ll end this.”

We were spared from further debate by the appearance of another aerosled in the distance. It sped towards us and settled to the plain a few meters away. Colson rushed to it even before the doors opened and the two Trelniki, Yeung and Bedra, emerged. I grabbed Bethany’s arm. She barely moved, just lifted her head to gaze at me with despair.

“Come on. We have to go with him. We have to stop him!” I dragged her with me to the vehicle and pushed her in before Colson could shut the doors.

“But what if he’s right? What if this is the only way?”

I ignored Colson’s glare as I climbed in too.

“But what if he’s wrong?” And none of us said another word all the way back to the space port.

I thought Bethany had pushed our aerosled to its limits on our aborted trip to the ranch house. Now Colson proved there were piloting tricks he’d never taught her. He burned out the vehicle’s engines in returning us to the port. We landed hard and loud, almost flipping the sled completely over before we slewed sideways and finally came to a stop by crashing into Gel’s sled where she’d abandoned it at the edge of the Festival grounds.

Colson flung open the door and hobbled from the vehicle while it was still vibrating. He paused and turned back to us, the baton in his hand. He’d aged at least ten years.

“I have to do this. Stay out of my way.” Then he was gone.

“Bethany, he’s not only going to kill Gel, he’s killing himself in the process. You have to go after him, talk to him. You have to stop him.”

“You heard him. There isn’t any other option. He’s out of time.”

“Time may be the thing that Gel really needs right now. Maybe she can’t get conscious control over her ability like I tried to give her, but her unconscious mind is starting to get a handle on it. We need to help her bridge that gap between conscious and unconscious.”

“You’re just guessing. She may never be able to do that. And right now she’s somewhere in the middle of the Festival where she could be a danger to hundreds of innocent people who know nothing about Gran or the aliens he made a bargain with.”

“You’re right. I might be completely wrong. But if you have to risk being mistaken, wouldn’t you rather do so on the side that gives Gel a chance at life? You need to stall him.” I climbed out of the aerosled and started out in a different direction from Colson.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Gel before your great-grandfather does.”

Colson had headed into the thickest portion of the Festival, the cooking areas where the different competitors vied for one of the dozen trophies that would eventually be awarded for best barbecue in each of the different divisions. The Festival teemed with cooks and judges, staffers and visitors. If I were a little girl looking to hide from a murderous old man, it might seem like as good a place to do so as any other, and Colson probably thought so too. But I had something he didn’t; I had the plush buffalo that Gel had spared. And I knew something Colson didn’t know. I knew about Reggie.

I remembered Gel’s tight-fisted grip in Reggie’s fur, and the way he had pulled her through the crowds of the Festival the day they’d met. Just as I remembered his preference for the denser offerings at the souvenir booths over the food stands. Likely Gel would have calmed down some during the ride back to the port, but she’d still be scared, and still taking comfort and possibly guidance from my buffalo dog. I trusted to that and plunged deeper into the Festival in search of geegaws and keepsakes of barbecue glory and hidey holes for an alien animal and a little girl.

“Reggie! Where are you, boy?” I called for him as I checked out every vendor, stuck my head into each stall. As I was about to pass the eighth stand I was rewarded by a quickly cut-off bark and a harshly whispered ‘shhhh!’ I doubled back and began searching through a crate overflowing with commemorative t-shirts in an endless variety of garish colors. Something squirmed at the bottom of the box as I began digging through it and seconds later my buffalito had jumped up and was licking my face. Behind him, one hand still holding on to Reggie, was Gel.

That’s when the idea hit me. Like a thotat colliding at full charge. The piece that was missing, the reason why my earlier hypnotic fix hadn’t fixed anything. Gel’s unconscious mind knew what it needed, had found it, and now held it out to me.

And provided I could avoid getting zapped by the girl, I knew how to take that missing piece and help her build the bridge she needed.

“Hi there, Gel. Do you remember me?” I stepped back from her box she’d been hiding in, holding the plush bison in front of me with both hands.

Tight-lipped and grim, she nodded.

“Thanks for taking such good care of Reggie for me. I bet he was really scared. Thank you for being so brave for him.”

Gel kept her eyes locked on me but said nothing, did nothing.

“You left your own buffalito behind by accident. I thought you might miss him so I brought him along. He seems really happy to see you. Does he have a name?”

Her gaze shifted to the plush and comic buffalo in my hands, then back to me, searching my face. Was I serious or was I mocking her. She chewed her lip while she seemed to think it over and a moment later said, “Barry. Barry Buffalito.”

I eased forward just far enough to set the toy down and stepped back. Gel took hold of it with her free hand.

“Hello, Barry. I’m very very happy to meet you. I know that you and Gel are going to be the best of friends, just like Reggie and me.”

Ever so slightly, Gel wriggled her hand, causing the toy to nod in agreement.

“Good. I’m glad you think so too. Oh, that reminds me. Gel?”

“Yeah?”

“Janus Banana.”

Fifteen minutes later, Gel and I came strolling through the Festival together, my left hand in her right. A couple hundred aromas, by turns succulent and sweet, spicy and compelling, savory and mouth-watering, battled for our attention as steamed, roasted, smoked, grilled, baked, basted, boiled, braised, grimped, swerzled, and sun-dried meats of several species and worlds of origin represented the best of all possible manifestations of barbecue. Reggie lay straddled across my right forearm, lolling his head against my chest. Gel had Barry pinned against her, its weighted legs flopping over the side of her arm. We were just two friends taking their buffalitos for a walk on a lovely afternoon, even if we were the ones doing the actual walking. All around us people delighted in the best Festival the planet had ever known. That changed when Colson shouted my name.

“Conroy! Step away from my child.”

Everyone recognized the voice and recognized the power behind it. Like characters in a gunfight scene on a dirt main street in a Western historical, the people who had been laughing and sampling, arguing and judging, fled our aisle and sought cover and a safe view, leaving it empty except for me and Gel and—barely ten meters away—Amadeus Colson. Instead of a six-shooter, he held a cattle baton.

“There’s no need, sir. Your, uh, problem’s been solved.”

“I want to believe that. You have no idea how badly I do, but I know better. We both know how this has to end.”

Gel’s hand tightened in mine. “Is Pop Pop still mad at me? Why does he look so old? Is he sick?”

I knelt down so that I was eye-level with Gel. “He’s not mad at you, and he’s not sick; he’s just very very tired.” From her expression I could tell she knew part of what I’d said was a lie, but couldn’t puzzle out which part.

Time was catching up with Colson. Twenty-four hours ago he could have been mistaken for forty-two, silvery head notwithstanding. That number had climbed to eighty now. In less than an hour he looked to have lost twenty pounds. Deep wrinkles creased his face. His eyes appeared sunken. His thin frame had acquired a hunch and the hand that gripped the baton shook with an uncontrolled tremor.

“Step away; I won’t tell you again.”

“Even if I believed that, Mr. Colson, it wouldn’t matter. We’ve both seen that you’re in no shape to chase down a little girl and ask her to hold still while you use that baton on her?”

“They’re not just for close work.” He raised his hand and gestured above our heads with the baton. I followed the direction with my gaze and finally noticed a pair of ceramo drones hovering out of reach, their stunners aimed right at us. I pulled Gel in against me, blocking the drones from a direct shot at her. Colson directed the drones lower. They swirled around us, dipping closer. Having had a taste of Colson’s baton I didn’t know if I could survive a direct stun capable of subduing a buffalo, but Gel certainly couldn’t.

“Gel, do you remember what we talked about a bit ago, when we were back up in the tree?”

“You was telling me all about buffalitos, like Reggie and Barry.”

“That’s right, and how, as their friends, it’s up to us to make sure they eat when they’re supposed to.”

“I remember.”

I pointed above at the drones. “Barry is hungry right now. I bet he’d love to eat those things. Can you help him with that?”

The drones were just out of reach, darting from side to side as I pivoted to keep myself between them and the girl.

“Oh sure. C’mon, Barry. Yummy time.” She gripped the plush toy across its back and thrust her arm out in the direction of the drones, bobbing it up and down as if it was chewing. “Nom nom nom!”

The drones went away.

That’s when I realized that I’d been shaking.

I looked up to find Colson had halved the distance between us. The baton was still in his hand as he reached out toward us. I pointed it out to Gel.

“Is Barry still hungry? Look, Pop Pop is holding a treat for him.”

“Nom nom nom!”

Colson’s hand was empty. He stared at it, wriggling his fingers as if counting them. He let the hand fall to his side.

“What did you do, Conroy?”

“I didn’t do anything. That was all Gel.”

“Nuh uh!” said Gel. “Barry ate it all up.”

“Barry?” Colson stared down at the toy in his daughter’s hand and then back up at me.

“Barry is her pet buffalito. It’s her responsibility to make sure he only eats when he’s supposed to. She’s responsible for his meals. And she knows that buffalitos can eat anything.”

“Nuh uh! They don’t eat people or other living things.”

I smiled and met Colson’s gaze. “A very good point, Gel. Thanks for reminding me. Barry would *never* eat someone. Just things.”

“But how...”

“I told you, her unconscious was already working out the control. She just needed a bridge to her conscious mind. A focusing point. That’s Barry’s job.”

“I still don’t understand...” His voice trailed off, weak and breathless.

“She’s not *zapping* things. It’s not disintegration. Ytpino explained that she’s sending them somewhere. It took me a while to reframe it this way, but when a buffalito eats something he makes it ‘go away’ too. I had the right idea, just the wrong metaphor. And I needed a tool. Now Gel has both.”

Tears were streaming down Colson’s wrinkled cheeks. “I don’t have to...”

“No, sir. I don’t think you do.”

“Gran! Gran! There you are! What are you—”

I looked up and saw Bethany running towards us. She’d lost her hat somewhere, and her hair streamed out behind her, reminding me again of how she’d looked back in college running the relay. She could easily be nineteen still. I turned back to her great-grandfather.

“If we get you back to your home—”

“Yes, the aging will reverse. Hurry, please. I’m not in such a rush to end things now.”

Five minutes later I had eased him into another aerosled and Bethany was piloting us back to the ranch. He’d aged another ten years and lost consciousness by then, but as I watched his

breathing grew stronger and his color improved. When we reached the house, a mob of his children rushed out to tend to him and carry him to their infirmary, but he was already looking a mere septuagenarian.

Two days had passed since I'd introduced Gel to Barry. Amadeus Colson looked and felt middle-aged again. Recent events had taken the edge off his usual arrogance and general crankiness, but it was anyone's guess if the change was permanent or would fade as time resumed passing him by. A collection of teenagers had arrived on individual aerosleds, fresh from riding the range and armed with brass instruments which they used to mark the last day of the Festival with fanfare and tuckets. A delegation of purple-badged Dlabble and Renz awarded trophies and ribbons for various barbecue competitors, and more quietly signed and handed out a number of lucrative contracts for importers of the coveted Colson's World meats and cheeses.

My room at one of the space port's two hotels had been comped and upgraded to a luxury suite, the swankiest accommodations that Colson had allowed to be built there. I'd been assured by the manager—a very pleasant Dlabble whom everyone called 'Dave'—that planetary heads of state had stayed in that same room. Not wanting to be rude, I refrained from asking him if they'd found the thread count on the linens as stingy as I did.

I was sitting in the parlor of my suite in a comfortable lounge chair upholstered in surprisingly soft thot leather. I had a cold bottle of Uncle Waldo's Raspberry Rootbeer in one hand, and with the other I lazily fed corundum nodules from a paper bag to Reggie sprawled upon my lap. The bag and the soda had been provided by Ytpino, who along with Bethany Colson occupied a matching couch on the other side of a low coffee table from my chair.

"So what happens now?" I said.

Ytpino made a gesture that involved shrugging and unshrugging his shoulders and wagging his hands. No doubt it conveyed great meaning to another Gris, but it did nothing for me. Seeing my non-reaction he added, "Events on this planet resume their normal sequence. Everything is as it was before."

"Not quite everything. I can think of two differences. You're no longer hiding the truth from Bethany."

She nodded in agreement. "Which just means I can take a more active hand in some of the subterfuge required to keep up the story of Gran's orphanage."

I held up one finger. "That's one."

"And the second?" asked Ytpino.

I added a finger. "I now know that the galaxy is full of Plenum. That you have the means to travel anywhere in the galaxy without physical requirement or delay, effectively subverting the system of portals that everyone else believes to be the only means of traveling between the stars at useful speeds. And I know that you're hiding in plain sight among the other races."

"Oh. That."

"It doesn't concern you?"

"Only Plenum can detect other Plenum. To everyone else we are exactly as we appear. Who would you tell, Mr. Conroy? And more importantly, who would believe your paranoid tales? Aliens possessing instantaneous teleportation? Beings capable of blending in among all the races of the galaxy? No, this does not concern me."

"What does?"

Ytpino scowled, the expression looking like it ran all the way through his translucent, amber face. He turned to Bethany who far from sharing his displeasure wore a sunny smile.

"Gran told the Plenum that they're in your debt."

“Does that mean he’ll endorse my company? That’s what I originally came here for.”

She shook her head. “No, he insists anything with his name on it could draw unwanted attention to the generation of Plenum he’s raising. He asked me to apologize on his behalf, but he also said you’d understand. That, and he’ll try to make it up to you in other ways.”

“What other ways?”

Bethany gestured back to the Gris. The scowl hadn’t gone away.

“It has been suggested that for ensuring the survival of the child Gel, that you are entitled to transportation.”

“Transportation?”

“For life,” said Bethany.

“Excuse me?”

“Within certain limits. We cannot provide you the means to identify Plenum on other worlds, but when you have real need there are certain code phrases that can be used to allow them to contact you.”

I laughed. “So, what? I post an ad on the local Globalink and someone shows up to provide a trip to the other side of the galaxy?”

“Essentially. Though it would always be two someones.”

I let that sink in. It was the ultimate first-class ticket. “What’s the catch?”

“It’s limited to those worlds where Plenum reside.”

Bethany smirked. “And apparently they don’t have any on Earth, or most of the other planets in Human Space.”

“Not quite accurate,” said Ytpino. “There is currently a pair of Plenum on Earth, but they only passing through. They will be gone before you return. But fear not, the lack of Plenum in Human Space is only a temporary situation. One that Amadeus is helping us to resolve.”

“Right. But in the meantime, you owe me a debt that I can’t collect.”

Ytpino stood up. “We will meet again, Mr. Conroy. The progenitor has made it clear that the debt must be honored, and it falls to me personally to keep you apprised. Until then, I bid you and your companion animal safe travels, albeit by more conventional means.” He nodded to Bethany, bowed to me, and let himself out of the room.

“I should be going too. Gran wants me to pick some of the older children to become a round-the-clock babysitting squad for Gel.”

“She’s doing okay?”

“She’s spent the last two days introducing Barry to all of the other children, one at a time. Some of the younger ones were jealous of him and I had to defuse a plot to play a prank on Gel by swiping and hiding him. Gran called everyone in—and I mean everyone, including the older teens who work in the fields or on the range—and created a new law: under no circumstances does anyone separate Gel from her toy buffalito. Ever.”

“Is that going to work? I mean, I’m no expert, but don’t some kids deliberately push and test all sorts of rules?”

“They do. That’s why before coming here I met with our vendors and bought up all the remaining bison mascot plushies from the Festival. I figured it couldn’t hurt to have some backups, just in case.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

She smiled. “I thought so too. Well, goodbye, Conroy. Thank you so much for all you’ve done. It’s been wonderful seeing you again.”

“You too. Even if you haven’t changed a hair from the girl I knew in school.” I dumped Reggie from my lap and stood up so Bethany and I could hug farewell. The hug lasted a long while, but even so ended too soon.

She left, and I followed a few minutes later. Nearly all of the people who had come in for the Festival had moved on and it was time for me to do the same. The last of those retro-fitted tourists buses had arrived earlier in the day and would be lifting off in a few hours to pass through the portal that linked Colson’s World to the rest of the galaxy and, most importantly for me, a much nicer cruising vessel that would take me back to Earth and my new company. With my few belongings stowed in my carpet bag and Reggie tucked securely under my arm, I wandered through the few shops of the port searching for an appropriate souvenir of the trip and some small gifts to bring back for Dr. Elizabeth Penrose. I had no idea whether or not she liked barbecue.

“Are you Mr. Conroy?”

The question came from a Renz in the livery of the space port.

“That’s me. Can I help you?”

She handed me a disposable padd. “Priority message for you from Earth. Came in on this morning’s ship. I’ve been looking to deliver it. If you want to send a reply, you can compose it at your convenience and give it to the purser when you board. They’ll transmit it as soon as they clear the portal. It will beat you to Earth by a few days.”

“Thanks.” I tipped the messenger, and checked the return address. My blood ran cold when I saw it was from Dr. Penrose. I couldn’t imagine any reason why she’d contact me unless the news was truly dire. Had my newborn company met with disaster already? I keyed the display and immediately relaxed. Nothing so dire after all, but the need to return home with a really nice gift had definitely increased.

Apparently *someone* had been thoughtful enough to deliver an assortment of smoked meats and cheeses to my new headquarters, on the order of several thousand kilos of each, and they were filling up the lobby.

About the Author



Lawrence M. Schoen holds a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology, with a special focus in psycholinguistics. He spent ten years as a college professor, and has done extensive research in the areas of human memory and language. His background in the study of the behavior and the mind provide a principal metaphor for his fiction. He currently works as the director of research and chief compliance officer for a series of mental health and addiction treatment facilities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

He's also one of the world's foremost authorities on the Klingon language, having championed the exploration of the constructed tongue and lectured on this unique topic throughout the world. In addition, he's the publisher behind a new speculative fiction small press, Paper Golem, aimed at serving the niche of up-and-coming new writers as well as providing a market for novellas.

In 2007, he was nominated for the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer and in 2010 received a Hugo nomination for best short story. His first book, *Buffalito Destiny* was published in 2009, bringing the characters of the Amazing Conroy and Reggie from short stories to novel-length adventures. Before moving on to his second novel, in 2010 Lawrence published a collection of fantasy stories entitled *Sweet Potato Pie and Other Surrealities*. Then in 2011, the promised sequel, *Buffalito Contingency*, appeared. Finally, in 2012 Lawrence returned to the shorter fiction of his characters and produced *Buffalito Buffet*. The novella you've just read is from that collection.

Nor have you seen the last of the Amazing Conroy (or Reggie!). Several more novels are

planned to complete the sequence.

Lawrence lives near Philadelphia with his wife, Valerie, who is neither a psychologist nor a Klingon speaker.

For more information, visit his website and blog at lawrencemschoen.com.



Author photo by Nathan Lilly.

Cover Art for *Buffalito Destiny*, *Buffalito Contingency*, and *Sweet Potato Pie and Other Surrealities* by Rachael Mayo.