

Buffalo Dogs

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Getting arrested a few days before I was to head back to Earth was the last thing I had in mind. I'd been working the *Lil Doggie*, the only spaceport lounge on Gibrahl, for the past three and a half weeks. My contract called for two shows a night, with an additional matinee on Saturday. I had Sundays off. A day on Gibrahl runs near enough to twenty-four hours as not to quibble, but the weeks last for eight of them instead of seven. My agent back on Earth hadn't bothered to look into the extra day issue before booking me into a contract that paid by the week. It meant that the two shows I was required to do on Gibsday were freebies; all the work for none of the pay.

The marquee out front read "THE AMAZING CONROY, MASTER HYPNOTIST" and cycled through a google of colorful hues in a blatant attempt to remain eye-catching. It worked. My smallest audiences were decent, and the large ones packed the place. Venues like Gibrahl are always hungry for any kind of entertainment, and a stage hypnotist can make a good buck.

The humans in my audience were all on Gibrahl for the same thing. Every one of them was in some way involved in the buffalo dog trade. The buffalitos were the only resource on Gibrahl, the single commodity responsible -- directly or indirectly -- for bringing people here. It was a colony world, and it wasn't our colony. Gibrahl belonged to the Arconi, and the human presence was limited to a single square kilometer base. The Arconi laid down the rules, and as long as they had something Earth wanted we abided by them like good little humans. Which is why I got arrested.

Earlier in the day the Arconi had arrested a buffalo dog courier for attempted smuggling. The Terran consulate insisted it must have been a paperwork snafu, but the Arconi possess a limited psychic faculty concerning truthfulness and discovered otherwise. Arcon justice is as swift as it is certain. The man had been tried, convicted, and executed before the end of my dinner show.

Everyone needed a distraction, and for better or worse I was it. I began with a few jokes to break the tension and put people at ease. Seeing a hypnotist, even as entertainment, tends to make some folks nervous, as if with just the lift of an eyebrow I could make men reveal their darkest secrets or women throw themselves into my arms. Don't I wish. They say Anton Mesmer could do that sort of thing centuries ago. More likely he just had a better agent than I do. Me, I need a compelling induction and a good five minutes of relative quiet, not to mention a waiting car if the thing doesn't work. Hypnotic blackmail and seduction may make for good vids, but in real life sticking to the script is a lot safer. That's not to say I never dabble or dally, just never during a show. Later on, that's a different matter. I always install a post-hypnotic backdoor when I'm performing; you never know when it might come in handy. Even after a week's time I can whisper the magic key phrase and presto, you're back in a trance and wonderfully open to suggestion. What can I say, I love my work.

That night there were several tables of Arconi present, as there had been at all of my performances. Fifty shows, and none had ever laughed, never so much as cracked a smile. And they could smile, I was fairly certain of it. The Arconi look like tall, stretched humans, like something in a funhouse mirror. Their skin tone runs through a range of whitish shades, from eggshell to ecru, and their body hair is generally the blue-black of comic book heroes. They have mouths and lips and teeth, and as far as I knew they used them for all the same things we did, but I'd never seen them smile. It wasn't that they didn't enjoy the show, they just couldn't understand it. It was that truth sense of theirs. Arconi always know whether or not they're being told the truth. Among themselves they never lie; they simply can't. It's a small thing, but when you start to work out the incidentals you discover just how ubiquitous deception is in human history.

Arcon society has almost no crime. Sure, they have crimes of passion, same as us, but anything premeditated gets nipped in the bud when the local magistrate asks you if you did it. For the Arconi, the concept of lying didn't come up until they started dealing with humans. They find us fascinating, utterly bizarre. It's like knowing how gills work, a nice safe objective knowledge that you know doesn't apply to you but that opens up interesting theoretical possibilities just the same.

Quite a few Arconi had put great value on seeing a hypnotist make people believe things that were obviously false. They'd flocked to the human district to catch my shows every night since I'd arrived. The first two nights I brought a few up to the stage. They went under just like humans. I had no trouble getting them to cluck like chickens, but they couldn't accept any suggestions that violated their objective reality. They couldn't believe they'd actually become chickens. No imagination, totally grounded. Bottom line, they made for a dull show, and I stopped taking them as

volunteers.

Anyway, I was doing my usual show for the last week of a gig. Ten minutes into the performance I had two young secretaries, an elderly bank loan officer, and a middle-aged security guard on stage with me, all of them deeply entranced. I'd told the secretaries they were Arconi diplomats and had them explain the Arcon plan for human enlightenment. There's no such thing of course, but neither secretary/diplomat knew that, and they elaborated and expounded on all sorts of made-up nonsense with great sincerity while the human portion of the audience hooted and laughed.

The secretaries finished their presentation and received thunderous applause from the humans in the audience. I thanked them and escorted them back to chairs on the stage which I'd already assured them comprised the lush Arcon embassy back on Earth. I returned them to a deep trance. They'd done a great job, surprisingly original and clever, and the audience was breathless to see what would happen next. I turned to the security guard and, after a wink and grin at the audience, began her instructions.

"Butterscotch Melpomene," I whispered to her, using the key phrase I'd implanted at the start of the show. Her posture changed, not so much a movement as an attitude. Though completely relaxed she was now almost painfully alert. I turned back to the audience and waved them in, as if inviting them along for the gag.

"You're a native of Gibrahl," I said in my stage voice, all mellow tones and booming resonance. "You're intelligent and articulate, educated and urbane." The security guard sat up straighter in her chair, her face composed and confident, her eyes still closed. "I'd like you to tell us about Gibrahl from your own unique perspective, if you don't mind. Would that be all right?"

She nodded, licked her lips, and raised one hand in the start of a gesture.

"That's fine. You'll begin to do so when I count to three," I said. "Oh, and one more thing. You're not human, you're a buffalo dog. One... Two..."

"STOP!" An Arcon at one of the rear tables was on his feet. I recognized him. He was a real regular; he'd come to at least one of my shows each day since I'd arrived, always sitting at the same table, always watching with rapt attention. He'd even been a volunteer, a pretty good subject for an Arcon. His name was Loyoka, and he stood pointing a weapon at me. Most of the audience laughed, assuming it was part of the act. I knew better.

"Everyone on the stage is under arrest," he continued. "Do not move. Cooperate and you will not be injured."

Loyoka made his way to the stage, those long long legs allowing him to mount the platform without effort. I'd frozen as soon as I saw the gleam from his laser sight. He approached the security guard, squatted until they were on the same level and asked, "Are you a buffalo dog?"

There was a ripple of laughter from the audience; most still thought the Arcon was part of the act. The woman didn't answer him. She couldn't answer. The only voice she could hear at the moment was mine. Loyoka figured this out pretty quickly and turned to me. "Why won't she speak? You indicated she was articulate."

"I haven't finished counting," I said. "She won't follow the instructions until I do."

"Three!" said the Arcon, his eyes fixed on the security guard. Nothing happened. More snickers from the audience. "You say it," he said to me, without turning his head.

"Three," I breathed, and the guard opened her eyes, smiled brightly, and nodded into the Arcon's face scant inches from her own.

"Are you a buffalo dog?" repeated Loyoka.

"Oh my, yes," agreed the guard. "I was born here on Gibrahl, and let me tell you, it's not an easy life. It's a wonder I'm still here at all. I've seen all of my litter mates and all of my childhood friends shipped off to other planets by you Arconi. Shameless, I tell you, just shameless."

She rambled on and on, confabulating a complete history as an alien creature with a brain no bigger than a walnut. The Arcon's jaw dropped lower and lower as he listened, his psychic faculty assuring him that the human believed every word of it, that despite appearances she *was* a buffalo dog.

Ten minutes later I was in Arconi custody and sitting in a detention cell. My four volunteers were no longer entranced and as far as I knew were being similarly 'detained' by the authorities. My out-system visa had been confiscated. The *Lil Doggie* was closed, pending the outcome of the investigation. The management lodged a complaint with my agent, and filed a lawsuit against the interstellar stage performers' union. There's no business like show business, especially when it comes

to blackballing. Even assuming I got out of the current predicament it was highly unlikely I would be able to get work anywhere off Earth again. For the moment though, that was the least of my problems.

Hours passed. I spent the first few going over the show in my mind, again and again, trying to figure out what had pissed off the Arconi. I couldn't think of anything. I dozed, off and on, and jerked fully awake when the door to my cell finally opened and Loyoka entered with two other Arconi, each dragging a short stool. They perched on the stools, feet flat on the floor, their long legs bent, knees at shoulder level. It left them at eye level with me as I sat on my bunk. They stared intently, all of them.

"Tell us... a lie," said the one on my right.

"A lie?" I asked. My gaze moved from one stern face to the next. Their eyes looked just like human eyes, but it wasn't comforting.

"Yes, Mr. Conroy, tell us something you do not believe is true. Do it now," he said.

My mind went blank. The only thing I could think of was the aborted show.

"I'm an Arconi diplomat," I said. "I have a plan for human enlightenment."

The two newcomers frowned at that. Loyoka recognized the line from tonight's show and the corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly. They could smile.

"You are lying," said the one on the left, his frown deepening.

"You told me to lie." I shrugged.

"Yes, and we know you are lying. In your performance, you tell other humans to do things. These things are not lies."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be difficult, but I really don't understand what you're getting at."

"Are you a smuggler, Mr. Conroy?" asked Loyoka.

"Am I what?"

"Are you a smuggler of buffalo dogs? Please answer 'yes' or 'no.'"

"No!" I said, feeling a growing dread.

"But you turned that woman,..." Loyoka glanced at a small palmpadd, "Carla Espinoza, into a buffalo dog. It was truth. I saw it in her mind."

"But, she wasn't really a buffalo dog!" I grinned. This was all some sort of joke, right? I stopped. They looked deadly serious.

"She was. I saw the truth myself. She was a buffalo dog. An unlicensed buffalo dog, Mr. Conroy." He frowned then, making a complete set of them. "Do you understand the severity of this crime? There are allegations that you are attempting to export a stolen and fertile buffalo dog to Earth."

My mind reeled. The buffalo dogs were one of the few lifeforms native to Gibrahl, and unlike anything else in known space. They looked amazingly like American bison rendered at one fiftieth scale. They were adorable creatures with cute woolly heads and tiny blue tongues that stuck out when they bleated. They could eat anything, anything at all, and thrive. And most amazing of all, they farted enormous volumes of pure diatomic oxygen, which made them incredibly useful to terraformers. Not to mention the significant dent they were making in problems of landfill and toxic waste sites back home on Earth. On any given night at the *Lil Doggie* fully one quarter of the people in the audience were couriers, slated to return to Earth on the next ship out, a thin portfolio of transfer licenses under one arm and a buffalo dog tucked under the other. The Arconi controlled the only source of the beasts, and exported them, infertile, at ten million credits a head. At that price smuggling the little guys had become quite attractive, and several sterile pups had been stolen. Not surprisingly, the Arconi government had responded with extreme prejudice. Even suspicion of involvement with black market buffalo dogs could bring a death sentence. I was in deep buffalo chips.

"But she wasn't a buffalo dog," I protested, half rising from the bunk. "She wasn't, not physically."

Loyoka brought a hand down on my shoulder, pushing me back. "I know what I saw in her mind. She *was* a buffalo dog. On Gibrahl, if a human is in possession of a buffalo dog he is either a smuggler or a courier. I can see the truth in your mind, Mr. Conroy. You are not a smuggler."

He paused and looked to either side at his companions. A silent confirmation passed among them and all three rose to their feet.

"We are very troubled by all of this, Mr. Conroy. We take even the suspicion of crime very seriously. While you've been waiting we've done a full search of all registered facilities. None report any missing stock; you're not being charged with theft. The only reason that you have not been prosecuted and convicted on the remaining charge is that Carla Espinoza is infertile."

It was just getting weirder and weirder. "How would you know that?" I asked.

Loyoka barely glanced at me. "We did a complete examination of her. Any human in possession of a fertile buffalo dog is instantly guilty of a capital offense. But, as I said, she's incapable of conception. Infertile buffalo dogs may be transported by licensed couriers. That just leaves the matter of clearing up the paperwork. We have gone ahead and tagged Carla Espinoza and drawn up the appropriate paperwork for your license."

One of the other Arconi presented me with a palmpadd and stylus. I glanced at the document and signed. They'd transferred the bulk of my earnings on Gibrahl out of my account to cover and placed a lien on future income for twice that amount the balance due for my license. I was now an authorized courier.

"Congratulations, Mr. Conroy. You've acquired a buffalo dog without paying the usual ten million credits." There wasn't a hint of sarcasm in his tone. He really meant it.

"But she's not a buffalo dog now, right?" I said. "She's out of the trance, she knows who she is."

All three Arconi frowned again and fidgeted nervously. The other two left, taking the stools with them, leaving Loyoka to bestow a few parting words. "We admit there is much about your abilities which we do not understand," he said. "While it is clear to me that your subject tonight knew she was a buffalo dog, it is equally obvious that in some ways she was not. This is new territory for us, Mr. Conroy. We'll be watching you closely for the remainder of your stay. I'd advise you to be quite careful."

"You're free to go now," he said, holding the door open for me. "Speak to the clerk at the front desk. He'll return your visa and provide you with a hard copy of your licenses. You can pick up Carla Espinoza there as well." He pointed me to the right and sent me on my way. He headed off to the left and vanished around a turn in the corridor.

Carla Espinoza sat on one of a bank of interlinked chairs in the lobby. She was a bit pale but otherwise appeared unharmed. Dangling from her left ear was a two centimeter disk of bright red plastic. She'd been tagged for transport. There was an angry look on her face, diffused at first but quickly focusing when she saw me approach. I started making apologies as soon as I was close enough to be heard.

"Ms. Espinoza, Carla, please, I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea any of this was going to happen, you must believe me."

She rose to her feet and glared. She was a head shorter than me, and twenty years older. I had no doubt she'd spent most of that time bouncing from one security position to the next. She outweighed me by a good ten kilos, all of it muscle. The look in her eyes made it clear that she could beat the crap out of me without breaking a sweat.

Her hands lifted, tugging at her ear lobe and the plastic tag. It unclipped and she threw it at me. "If this was Earth I'd sue you and your next three generations for everything you had," she said. "You're lucky the Arconi don't permit lawyers here."

I caught the tag and put it in my pocket. It was an expensive souvenir. I handed her my credit chip. "There isn't much left in there, but you're welcome to it. They took most of what I had to cover license costs."

"License costs?" she said.

I gave a weak smile. "They determined that since I was in possession of a buffalo dog, and I wasn't a smuggler, that I obviously had to be a courier and charged me accordingly."

Her anger melted away at this and she laughed. She'd been on Gibrahl long enough to know just how expensive a courier license was. That seemed to satisfy her. She pocketed my credit chip. "I'm going to let this go," she said, "provided I don't see you again. Otherwise I'm going to tear you a new hole. You'll be hurting so bad that a walk in vacuum would feel like a welcome relief. Are we clear?"

I nodded, trying hard not to flinch. She gave me another look up and down and stormed out. The clerk seated behind a desk at the back of the lobby had watched the entire scene without comment. He looked pale, even for an Arcon. And why not? He'd heard her every word, and knew it was all true. I collected my hard copy and left.

Judging by the position of Gibrahl's wan star high overhead it was nearly noon. I had nothing to do, no money to spend, and a full day before my ship back to Earth left. I started making my way back toward the spaceport proper, hoping to bum a meal and some crash space in exchange for a few hypnotic parlor tricks when a man in a painfully new suit locked step with me. My first thought was that the manager of the *Lil Doggie* wanted a piece of me, but the fellow was too small to be a goon, too preppy. He was a polished, clean-cut, silver spoon archetype who doubtless had an MBA from some prestigious Ivy League university's online degree program. I'm not a tough guy, but compared to me he was a weenie.

It took a moment, but I recognized him from a show. I'd hypnotized him. He was a corporate types, a middleman in the transfer of buffalo dogs to Terran business concerns. He had been at the *Lil Doggie* during my opening show, part of a larger party of still more corporate suits and prospective clients. I'd hypnotized half the people at the table. The clients had been marvelously entertained and this fellow had arranged a generous tip to show his appreciation. Even a small percentage from Gibrahl's buffalo dog traffic translated into vast amounts of cash. He could afford to tip big and to wear new suits.

"Mr. Conroy," said the tipper, "I apologize for contacting you so crudely, but I very much need to speak with you. I have a proposition."

Just when you think things can't get worse, corporate hustlers show up. Great. "I'm sorry, but I'm tired and I'm hungry and I'm really not in the mood for whatever it is you're selling," I said.

He persisted. "Mr. Conroy, my name is Jensen. Please, just hear me out. Why don't we get a nice comfortable table at *The Prairie*. My treat, of course. You can have a nice meal, relax, and after you've listened to my proposal if you're still not interested, well, that will be it."

That stopped me. *The Prairie* was the only five star restaurant on Gibrahl. That put it two stars above everything else in the kilometer city. The cost of the appetizers alone would have wiped out a week's salary. I slipped an arm around his shoulder and mustered up a tired smile. "Mr. Jensen, if lunch is on you, I'm all ears."

He look relieved and escorted me to *The Prairie*. The maitre'D fitted me with an appropriate jacket, and in short order I was sitting at an elegant table enjoying an *amuse-guele* of potato cornets layered in crème fraîche, salmon, and caviar and sipping the most delicate wine I'd ever imagined. My cares evaporated but I kept a wary eye on my host. The other shoe was about to drop.

True to his word, he had let me get comfortable before he started his pitch. I was well into the first course -- black-eyed peas arranged with antelope sweetbreads, mushrooms, and wild raspberries -- when he reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a palmpadd.

"Mr. Conroy, allow me to be direct. My superiors at the Wada Consortium are aware of your recent change of fortune, and the juxtaposition of circumstances that put you there, all through no fault of your own. We'd like to help, if you'll let us. We want to hire you."

I almost choked on my wine when he said that. I set down my glass and wiped at my mouth with my napkin. "You need a hypnotist, Mr. Jensen?" I said.

"No, Mr. Conroy, we need a courier. The corporation we represent is scheduled to transfer thirty-two buffalo dogs off Gibrahl on tomorrow's ship. All of them have already been sold, and we've guaranteed their delivery. The Arcon government allows only a single buffalo dog per licensed courier, and at present we have only thirty-one couriers available."

I gave him a puzzled frown, "then why did you schedule thirty-two buffalitos?" I slipped another forkful of sweetbreads into my mouth.

Jensen sighed. "Because until yesterday afternoon we had thirty-two couriers, Mr. Conroy."

Which was about the time I remembered the execution of a smuggler. I put my fork down. My appetite vanished. That thirty-second pup was worth ten million credits to someone back on Earth, and the penalty for nondelivery was going to cost Jensen's company at least half that much.

"I'm a hypnotist. I don't know much about buffalo dogs or being a courier," I said.

"There's not much to know, Mr. Conroy. The buffalo dogs themselves require minimal care. All a courier does is carry the creature onto the ship and stay with it in his stateroom. For the duration of the voyage to Earth you simply monitor the room's atmospheric regulators to prevent excess oxygen buildup. Upon arrival you carry it off. I'm sure that's well within your talents."

"Why don't you just run someone else through the licensing procedure?" I asked.

"It takes five years to apply for a license, Mr. Conroy. Quite frankly, we're amazed you've acquired one, but we won't question it. For whatever reason, the Arconi suddenly consider you a courier, and they're the only ones we have to please to get that thirty-second buffalo dog to Earth."

He slid the palmpadd across the table. A contract glowed up at me. "I'm prepared to offer you compensation in the amount of one hundred thousand credits in exchange for you acting as our courier."

That was a lot of money, especially since I was broke and soon to be blacklisted. Still...

"Is that the standard rate for a courier?" He nodded. I paused, pretended to read over the contract while I wracked my brain, trying to remember that very first show I'd done on Gibrahl. I looked at the sweetbreads on my plate and it came to me. Spicy Egyptian. I leaned forward and whispered, "Jalapeño Osiris."

Jensen slumped back in his chair, his eyes closed. I reached a hand into his jacket and found his wallet. I flipped through it, and checked his corporate ID to learn his first name, as well as the balances on his corporate and personal credit chips. Ken had a lot of credit at his disposal.

"Can you hear me, Ken?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"That's good. We're very good friends, you know. We tell each other everything. There are no secrets between us, Ken. No secrets at all. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he murmured.

"Tell me, what's the standard fee for a courier? One who's carrying a buffalo dog from Gibrahl to Earth for your company?"

"Five hundred thousand credits," he said. No hesitation at all.

"And yet you offered me only a fifth of that, Ken. Is that any way to treat a friend? Why'd you do it?"

Jensen shrugged, looking embarrassed despite his closed eyes. "We figured

you wouldn't know any better and were so far down that you'd jump at a hundred."

"You're probably right, Ken. It hasn't been my day. But things are looking up. When I count to three you're going to have a change of heart, Ken. You're going to decide that you really don't want to screw me like that. You realize that I'm saving your ass, and you're going to rewrite this contract for the full five hundred thousand. Plus you're going to throw in your corporate credit chip, just so I have some walking around money until it's time for me to leave. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

I returned his wallet to its proper place, sat back, and counted to three. Ken Jensen blinked rapidly and sat up straight, acting like a man who had briefly dozed off and looks around to see if anyone noticed. I was staring down at the palmpadd, pretending to study the contract and shaking my head. "I just don't know..."

"Let me have that back," he said. "I think I can sweeten the deal. You're really getting us out of a bind, so why don't we call it five hundred thousand, instead?" He made the changes to the contract and slid it back to me. His company credit chip was sitting on top of the palmpadd.

"Mr. Jensen, you've got yourself a courier." The look from across the table was one of relief and satisfaction. I tried hard to keep my face from showing the same emotions.

Jensen left me to enjoy the rest of my meal, but not before he outlined the plan. I was to present my courier license at any of the Arconi registered facilities, where I'd be free to select the doggie of my choice. Before boarding my ship home I would again show my license and be questioned by an Arcon customs officer. Then, presto, five hundred thousand credits upon arrival on Earth.

I confess, I lingered over the remaining courses. I'm enough of a gourmand to know that proper appreciation requires a respectful span. Jensen had already paid for the meal, and I used his corporate chip to add to the tip before leaving. My new profession beckoned. I was off to begin life as a courier.

It didn't matter to me where I got the buffalo dog, though most couriers have all sorts of superstitions about such things. My ship departed at 1:00 a.m., leaving me nearly ten hours to kill. I took my time, decided to enjoy a good walk after a great meal. Pedestrian traffic was light. I passed several other couriers, identifiable by the doggies tucked comfortably under one arm. Eventually I found my way to the facility

farthest from the space port's customs gate. I stopped in front of a kiosk and a short, bored looking Arcon regarded me from within.

"You're a courier?" he asked, barely glancing at me.

"You bet," I answered, and he waved me through, the truth of my statement as obvious as daylight.

There was a brief flight of stairs down to the holding area and sheer chaos waiting at the bottom. Thousands of bleating, yipping, scampering buffalo dogs filled a shallow area the size of an Olympic pool. Holographic signs projected warnings of extreme combustibility and the sounds of exhaust fans provided a constant background of white noise. The buffalitos cavorted, none of them able to climb up the two foot height of their pool, though they could see the area surrounding it. They eagerly approached anyone, human or Arcon, who drew near the perimeter. The humans, a dozen or so, were couriers. I watched as they reached in to lift up one creature after another. The selection process appeared to involve hefting the buffalo dog under consideration, tucking it under first one arm and then the other, peering into its eyes, and checking the shade of its blue tongue. Superstitious ritual, but conscientiously observed nonetheless. Eventually, each courier selected a doggie and carried it over to an available Arcon for processing.

After witnessing several variations on the process I followed the example. A very enthusiastic doggie spied me as I approached the edge of its enclosure and plowed through the nearer pups, desperate to reach me. I picked it up. Cute. Adorable really, but for five hundred thousand credits it could have been ugly as sin and I'd have done the job.

"C'mon, little darling," I said to it, barely resisting the urge to use baby talk, "you'll do as well as any other." It farted some oxygen, bleated at me from out the other end, and stuck out its tiny tongue. Cerulean. Fine with me. I looked around for one of the Arconi that wasn't busy, found one, and walked up to her.

"You are a courier?" she asked, her tone only slightly less bored than the fellow at the door.

"I'm a courier," I said, "The Amazing Conroy, Master Courier, at your service." She didn't look the least bit amused.

"And this is the buffalo dog you've selected?"

"Absolutely," I said. "Do I get to name her?"

She shrugged, "That is the custom sir. I'll prepare her tags once I verify the animal's health and administer a sterilizing agent." She took the doggie from my hands and pressed a medical scanner deeply into fur.

"Then I'm going to name her Regina. Regina Catherine Alyosious Nantucket Bitter Almonds St. Croix. What do you think, is it too much?" What can I say, I was on my way to being a half-millionaire, well fed, and in a great mood.

The Arcon frowned. "I would recommend a more masculine name, sir. You've selected a male. He is in excellent health, but if you'd prefer a female instead you are free to put him back and bring up another for verification and sterilization."

I shrugged, "What's in a name? No, this one is fine, I'll just call him Reggie. Go ahead, you can sterilize and tag him."

She shook her head. "I'll be happy to tag him for you, sir, but only the female buffalo dogs are sterilized." She handed the doggie back to me. "If you'll come this way, I'll prepare Reggie's tags."

Five minutes later I exited with Reggie tucked complacently under my left arm, the blue plastic disk of his new tag hanging prettily from his left ear. The entire process had taken barely a quarter of an hour. It was a long walk back to the port, and more than once I had the feeling that someone was following me. I made my way to customs and immediately recognized the officer on duty. He was the fattest Arcon I had ever seen, and for that reason alone I'd had him up on stage as a subject during my first week. He'd gone under easily and loved the experience. After the show he came back stage and shook my hand, something the Arconi simply never did. He did it again now when it was my turn at the customs gate, and added only the second smile I'd ever seen from an Arcon. I was in the presence of a fan.

"Mr. Conroy, I was so sorry to hear about your recent problems with the authorities," he said. In the little kilometer square city rumor traveled at the speed of light, and buffalo dog gossip maybe even a bit faster. "But you've bounced back nicely, I see. I'm delighted to have the privilege of clearing you. This is your first trip as a courier, isn't it?"

I searched my memory again, using the same mnemonic tricks that let me remember thousands of individual key phrases and their respective hypnotic subjects. "Thank you, and my last, I suspect. I'm a hypnotist, really. Sergilo, wasn't it?"

He beamed, standing a bit taller and straighter as if I'd just made him godfather to the Prince of Gibrahl. "That's right, Mr. Conroy. I'm flattered you remember. Well, let's get you processed and cleared without delay. I just have a couple quick questions and you'll be free to board your ship. Ready? Are you a licensed courier? Did you obtain this buffalo dog in the prescribed and lawful manner? And is this the only buffalo dog you'll be transporting? Just answer 'yes' or 'no,' please."

I replied yes three times. The Arcon kept eye contact with me and nodded at each answer, confirming the truth in my mind. I grinned and asked, "Aren't you going to ask me if the critter's sterile?"

He shook his head, "There's no need, Mr. Conroy. You've got a male there."

"How can you tell under all this fur?"

"Blue tag. Blue for males, red for females."

"Handy system," I said.

He glanced at my visa and consulted a schedule. "Your ship doesn't leave until one this morning, so you've got plenty of time to settle in. I'm on duty here till midnight if you need anything. And if I don't see you again, well, you have yourself an enjoyable trip home, Mr. Conroy."

A few minutes later and I was in my cabin on the good ship *Bucephalous*. The economy class cabin I had shared with three other travelers on the trip in had been upgraded to the more spacious and private accommodations typically used by couriers, courtesy of Mr. Jensen and the Wada Consortium. It included a separate pen and restraining couch for Reggie as well as special atmospheric controls to ensure his flatulence didn't cause any problems.

My luggage had been impounded when the authorities closed the *Lil Doggie*, and apparently released when I was. Jensen had arranged for its transfer and everything was right where it should have been in the cabin. Reggie settled into his pen, bleating happily, and I laid back on my own couch to go over recent events. I was about to be wealthier than I had any right to be, though I was still probably blacklisted from ever performing again. That irked me. I'd just told an Arcon that I wasn't going to remain a courier, I was a hypnotist. Still, at five hundred thousand per doggie it was tempting. *But*, I asked myself, *was it any kind of life for a hypnotist?* I held up two images in my mind, courier and hypnotist, comparing and contrasting. An idea bloomed. It was risky, a gamble, but it combined the best of both worlds, if I

didn't end up executed.

I got up from my couch and checked on Reggie. He had curled up on a blanket in his pen and fallen asleep. I slipped into the cabin's tiny bathroom, regarded myself in the mirror. I created a new trigger phrase and started to implement my idea.

A half hour before midnight I left the Bucephalous and quickly made my way to the nearest registered facility. Barely a block from the space port, this one was even larger than the last I'd visited. It was like a vast buffalo dog warehouse with humans and Arconi scurrying about. I tried not to look nervous, and figured as long as I didn't lie I'd be fine. I presented my papers at the door, confirmed that I was a courier, and was in. Time was short and I wasn't very choosy. There were dozens of smaller pens, with the doggies in each assigned by particular combinations of height, weight, tongue color, and so on. I looked for one that was more or less the same size as Reggie, scooped it up and headed for the an available Arcon on the far side of the pens.

"You are a courier?" he asked, and I nodded an assent. "This is the buffalo dog you've selected?" Again I nodded. "Fine, let me have it." He wielded his medical scanner with professional boredom, studied the readout and turned back to me. "You've made a fine choice. She's in perfect health. Give me a moment to administer a sterilizing agent and you can take her."

"A female?" I said, trying my best to look disappointed. "I'm sorry, I wanted a male. It's a Friday, you know, unlucky day for females. I'll just carry this one back."

The Arcon dismissed me with a shrug, likely having heard far stranger courier superstitions. He didn't spare me a second look as I carried the doggie back toward the pens; there was plenty of other work for him. I made my way past the pens of doggies but didn't stop to replace the female. Instead I walked toward the exit, trying hard to keep my pace natural and unhurried. No one stopped me and I was back out onto the street without incident. I was now a smuggler.

The trip back to the port was the longest block I'd ever walked. That feeling of being followed returned, and as I rounded the corner I caught a glimpse of two Arconi in my peripheral vision. The trigger phrase leapt to my mind, but it was too early to use it. It was useless until after midnight. Instead I took the red tag out of my pocket and affixed it to the buffalo dog's left ear. According to the tag she was now Carla Espinoza. I entered the space port and detoured into a small pub with an elaborate exhaust system and took a seat at the bar. Most of the clientele were couriers, each with a buffalito tucked under one arm. It was common for couriers to

enjoy a drink before boarding the ship home to Earth. Say one thing for the Arcon psychic faculty, it made clearing customs efficient and quick. We'd all be able to get through in under ten minutes. Well, maybe not all of us. It was still a bit before midnight and Sergilo, my fat and friendly Arcon was still on duty and sure to recognize me. I ordered an overpriced beer, put it on the Wada Consortium chip and settled in for a half hour's wait just to be safe. I was on my second beer when four Arconi entered the pub. One of them was Loyoka.

"Put down the buffalo dog and step away from the bar!"

There were other couriers in the room and none of them seemed the least bit alarmed. Those at the bar were all setting their doggies down and keeping their hands in plain view as they moved away. I did the same, sliding a bowl of peanuts under Carla Espinoza's woolly beard to keep her happy. This was it. "Spumoni Heimdahl," I whispered to myself. I blinked and almost stumbled. Something had happened, but I wasn't sure what.

Ignoring the other couriers, Loyoka came for me. "I told you I'd be keeping an eye on you, Mr. Conroy. Is that your buffalo dog?"

"Yes," I said. His gaze never left mine. "Though technically I suppose it belongs to the Wada Consortium. I'm just the courier."

"The same Wada Consortium that recently employed a courier found to be a smuggler? Don't you find that a bit of a coincidence, Mr. Conroy?"

"Not really," I said. "That courier was executed. They needed another one fast and I was available. I don't see anything coincidental about that at all."

He pushed past me to the bar and picked up the buffalo dog, studying the tag on her ear. She gave a bewildered bleat as he pulled her from her bowl of peanuts.

"And this is Carla Espinoza?" His eyes narrowed.

"Yes, she is," I said, giving him a quizzical look.

"This is the woman you had on stage during your performance last night?"

I laughed. "No, this is a buffalo dog I selected from one of your registered facilities. I just named her after that woman."

He grunted then, and thrust the buffalo dog into my arms. "Then let's get you safely through customs, Mr. Conroy, I wouldn't want you to miss your ship." He nodded to the other Arconi who lined up to either side and behind me and together we all marched over to clear customs.

It was after midnight and the customs officer was a short and attractive Arcon, almost human looking. The name Sergilo came to me as I waited in line, but I couldn't place why. I was fairly certain I'd never met her; not *all* the Arconi had come to my shows. When it was my turn I presented my courier license.

She glanced at it, at me, and then at Loyoka and his friends. Loyoka moved to stand next to her, the better to see me. "Mr. Conroy," she said, reading my name from the license, I have just three questions for you. Please respond 'yes' or 'no.' Are you a licensed courier? Did you obtain this buffalo dog in the prescribed and lawful manner? And is this the only buffalo dog you will be transporting?"

"Yes, I am a licensed courier. Yes I acquired this doggie appropriately, and yes, this is the only buffalo dog I'm transporting."

Loyoka stared at me, his face bore a look of surprise and stunned amazement. The customs officer nodded and waved me through, but Loyoka stopped me as I tried to go past, turning me back to him with a hand on my arm.

"One extra question for you, Mr. Conroy, if you please," he said. His eyes burned into mine. "Are you a smuggler, Mr. Conroy? Yes or no."

Irritably I pushed his hand away. "You've asked me this before. I am not a smuggler."

He blinked and then turned to the other Arconi he had brought with him. Three other heads gave slight shakes and Loyoka returned his attention to me. "My apologies, Mr. Conroy, I appear to have misjudged you. Please, no offense intended."

"Right, you were just doing your job. Fine. Are we finished?"

"Completely. Safe travels to you, Mr. Conroy." With that he turned and left, the other three Arconi leaving with him. The customs officer gave me a perplexed look and signaled for the next person in line. I turned, and with Carla Espinoza safely under my arm, boarded the ship.

I proceeded to my assigned cabin and let myself in. My first impression was

that I was in the wrong place. Or perhaps some other courier had mistakenly claimed my cabin. For whatever reason there was already a buffalo dog in the room, secured to a makeshift acceleration couch in a pen. I spun around to leave and saw a hand made sign I'd missed before because it was pinned to the back of the door. SPUMONI HEIMDAHL it read in large thick letters. I blinked, felt a moment's dizziness, and realized I was in the right room after all. I locked the door and moved to reset the cabin's atmospheric controls.

Many hours later, long after the Bucephalous was on its way back to Earth, one of Gibrahl's registered buffalo dog facilities discovered it was missing a doggie. Reggie and Carla were getting along fine, enthusiastically doing their part to ensure the first litter of buffalo pups born off Gibrahl. To his courier, Reggie was worth five hundred thousand. To a smuggler, plucking an extra buffalito was worth ten million. But I'm a hypnotist, and I was coming away with Earth's first fertile and soon-to-be pregnant buffalo dog. I figured I could set my own price. That's show biz.

The End