

*A plethora of fingers ...*

Throughout the galaxy—and for countless millennia—alien spaceship commanders such as Xhactu had routinely taken pride in the *plethora of fingers* at their disposal—not that they ever got to make *use* of all those fingers at the same time, of course, the way, let's say, professional earthling musicians, such as pianists, flautists, piccolo or bagpipe players can do.

So, it was not just the *number of fingers* that kept Xhactu's tanks-of-pride so filled-to-the-brim. The *potential for deftness* of said fingers was also widely prized, admired and anticipated.

With so many fingers flying back and forth so deftly, one would have thought that such “classical,” earth-bound musical-instruments as the *booming pianoforte*, the *tinkling harpsichord*, or maybe even the percussive, *bongo drums* for musicians with long, strong, gristly fingers—perhaps these advances would have accelerated the *evolution of all music* in the public spaces of the galaxy.

But it did not happen that way.

No matter how tempting or commonplace all those plethoras of digital deftness might have been, they did not yield any advanced musical traditions to speak of. In other words,

music was scarce in Xhactu's home-corner of the universe. It was mostly Space Age engineering, engineering, engineering. Also, the predominance of Big Bang static did not help inter-species communications—whether verbal or musical.

Even with the help of his refurbished *universal translator*, which he could use to search the local air-waves for simple folk tunes, Xhactu, being old-school, sometimes referred to the entire galaxy as “Ye Olde Dairy Road.” This archaic formulation naturally derived one way or another from the original Latin— the “*Via Galactica*.”

Still, Xhactu was tireless in his quest for the elements of music, a pursuit that was about as popular as his enthusiasm for the obsolete Probing Protocols was gaining in unpopularity.

Sure, one could always tune in to the *grand* frequencies, also known as Pythagoras' Music of the Spheres—the vast, cosmic, rumbling, humming, and buzzing of planets, moons, asteroids and stars, as they orbited, spun, swelled, shrank, plunged and exploded, all the while traveling along the dancing Hindu arms of the spiral galaxy at unheard-of orbital speeds. The “spheres,” however, required no deftness of digits.

Compared to the Grand Symphony of Creation itself, such remaining forms of musicality as could be found in Xhactu's home-galaxy, were decidedly amateurish and folk-musicky, issuing as they did from widely dispersed collections of crude, hand-made instruments—mostly made from the exotic scrap metals of the space-ship fabrication junkyards—and simple, folksy tunes. Thus, the potentially deft plethora of Xhactu's facile fingers for use in advanced musical performances, passed for naught.

*UNTIL*, that is, Supreme Commander Zrrongo sent Xhactu on this special mission to Earth, which is where he lost the “narrative thrust” on his immense spaceship, thanks to interference from the fictive, algorithmic filters of the DCL Narrative Section servers in

London. Xhactu had been stalled for weeks in a holding pattern over The City, though it must be said that he did not panic, the way so many earthlings were prone to do. Xhactu did get angry, though, which he *was* often prone to do.

This mid-air space-ship “stall” triggered an extended “quarantine,” a medieval holdover from Venetian trading restrictions during the Black Plague—the term *la quarantina* comes from the Italian word for forty, *quaranta*—the number of days in quarantine before the trading ships could unload in Venice Harbor. For Xhactu, that metaphorical *quarantina* was an ill wind indeed, but still it managed to blow him some good. For it resulted in several fortuitous events:

(1) His meeting and falling in love with Irma at her downtown Seattle diner—*Irma’s Diner*—after many past-lives. Let’s call her the “Bride of Xhactu.”

(2) *Irma’s Diner* is where Xhactu learned how to become an expert, three-legged *clog-dancer*, thanks again to Irma’s skilled guidance as applied to his own natural talents.

(3) Finally, after selling the diner to her long-time line-cook—Lou, He of the Purple Nose—but, long prior to their attending the *cèilidh*, Xhactu and Irma slipped out of the Local Group of Galaxies and went on a space-time/wormhole honeymoon trip together.

Fortunately, on their leisurely way back to London, neither Xhactu nor Irma suffered from “space-time lag,” having just returned from the “Outer Banks.” This phrase does not refer to the Grand Banks off-shore of the New England coastal waterways. Or the Outer Banks off-shore of North Carolina and Virginia. Rather, in this context “Outer Banks” refers to the famous, extremely-distant “star nurseries” of the early universe.

Xhactu’s timing had always been impeccable, but his navigational skills were getting rusty, so he ordered Bradhu to accompany him and Irma, to serve as the navigator for their honeymoon. We thus have Bradhu to thank for the well-navigated, post-honeymoon arrival of

Irma and Xhactu in London, just as Owl Man's *cèilidh* was getting off the ground, so to speak.

Before Owl Man and Fex had retired to the garden for their talk, Xhactu motioned Owl Man into a corner, where he began whispering to him in a low-pitched warble. He wanted to let Owl Man know of his deep desire to learn the bagpiper's skills.

First, there was the sheer number of Xhactu's fingers—the more the merrier, he explained to the Owl. Next came the awesome *deftness* of those fingers, flying back and forth across the keyboard, or the sound-holes, or even the tongue flicking against the oboe-like reeds of a bagpipe *chanter*. All depended upon which instrument was in play. Having so many fingers to work with, for example, would provide pitch-perfect maneuvers for Xhactu to execute a Scottish melody-line on the *chanter* of the 'pipes.

That was Xhactu's secret aim—he wanted to learn the skill of piping, the droning, the whining melodies. The only things Xhactu needed to launch his new, musical "career" were a few instruments to try out basic techniques, and some professional pipers and drummers to teach him the elements of those techniques—rhythmic Scottish marching, drumming and whining.

Then came a serendipitous moment. The band of pipers and drummers had been delayed by a massive twenty-car pile-up on the southbound lane of main artery A1, running into and out of north London. But now they finally arrived, and began piling out of their bus, tumbling through the door and into the *cèilidh space*, their arms loaded up with instruments, black cases and sheet music, and so on.

Xhactu suddenly smiled and faced the band. The musicians hadn't paid any attention to the *cèilidh* partygoers, preoccupied as they were with unpacking their instruments, tuning, lubricating, inflating, warming up—all the typical musician's chores. Arthur Compton left Truffington on the floor, leveraged himself to his feet and rolled the Cart into the midst of the

musicians, plying them with quick snorts of Macallan. That was part of the lubrication process. Part of the music. Part of the *cèilidh*. Part of the party.

Xhactu's reputation for digital deftness preceded him. Word had spread throughout the galaxies about his many years of experience, devoted to the traditional Probing Protocols aboard intergalactic spaceships.

Thus, it came as no surprise to the tipsy revelers that Xhactu showed such enterprising talent and skill in repositioning and styling Fex's brand-new, colorful ascot, after having removed it a bit precipitously. There were actually a few muffled oohs and aahs from the onlookers, but they had gotten accustomed to surprises from Xhactu, and so their responses were not as manic as they first had been.

For example, word had raced through most other space-ships in the fleet—great green gobs of greasy grimy galactic gossip—to the effect that Xhactu practically had “the hands of a neurosurgeon,” so smooth, silky, and skillful were his movements. Never a complaint from the “probees,” as they were called. Even Truffington and Compton, distracted by Fex's arrival at the *cèilidh*, both agreed. After they'd polished off the bottle of Glenlivet, and watched Xhactu finish ministering to Fex, they concurred that Xhactu indeed was a “master of many talents.”

But Xhactu had another secret personal skill they were about to witness. It was one whose rudiments he had learned in a past-life of long ago, as a shepherd in the Pyrenees, playing and practicing various ingenious, hand-carved flutes and simple stringed-instruments. These were like toys the shepherds invented to amuse themselves while watching over their flocks. Any musical instrument requiring special dexterity in the use of fingers, would be a fitting display for Xhactu's natural talents.

“Instruments! Xhactu need instruments!”

At this point Xhactu was virtually bellowing to anyone at the *cèilidh* who would listen to him. But no one had a clue about this brilliant new skill of Xhactu's, which he could only unveil now, after the band of pipers had finally arrived at the *cèilidh*.

The band, mostly accustomed to piping and drumming in parades, were not averse to an occasional, discreet pay-envelope, in return for driving revelers mad with the whining pipes, with the tat-tapping of the snare drums, the hieratic marching rhythms, the proud strut, while from the background came the inevitable, periodic boom of an immense bass drum—like a chase-cannon fired at pirates from the bow of a speedy clipper ship.

We should never forget, though, the backbone of so much ancient music, and the primordial basis of what the pipers' called "lengthy joy"—that is to say, *the drone*.

### *Secrets of the Pipes*

As the pipers were gigging their gig, Owl Man pulled Xhactu aside for a private confab, though over the din no one could hear what Owl Man was whispering in Xhactu's ear—at least what one would presume was an ear.

“Xhactu, I understand your yearning to play the bagpipe and I will try and facilitate your quest. But I must tell you at the outset, the bagpipes you have no doubt heard, are not the *real* bagpipe experience. I gave a talk about this at Dunvegan during the annual bagpipe competition celebrated there. I called it the “Secrets of the pipes.”

“What is the secret, Owl Man, tell me,” Xhactu asked louder than he intended, but no one paid any attention.

“Not secret, Xhactu, *secrets*. There are three. The first is that the true bagpipe experience lies only in the lust for battle. And where can one hear that now? Nowhere. The second is that the true bagpipe experience expresses the longing for love not found, played on a moonless night at the darkest hour preferably on an island in a loch. This can still be heard if one seeks it out under the proper conditions of place and time.”

“And the third secret?” Xhactu's eyes betrayed an eager hunger for the answer.

“Well, I can tell you it's not that the pipes are an injured animal in some supreme death throw making an unearthly sound no wants to hear. But here's the rub. Although it is said that the MacCrimmons of old knew the third secret they swore an oath never to tell except to progeny who mastered the pipes beyond anyone's skill of the time. Unfortunately, near the end of the last century, a MacCrimmon lad failed to win the contest at Dunvegan, and his bonnie sis never qualified at all.”

“Then it's lost forever?” Xhactu's sad expression said it all.

“Well, Xhactu, I'll let you in on a little secret. I think I know the third Secret. I learned it from a dream. But I can tell you only if you become a best of pipers and win at Dunvegan. You may need to get permission from your commander, Xhactu, if you wish to pursue this most difficult path.”

“I’ll do it, Owl, with all my heart. And with Irma at my side encouraging me, I will surpass everyone!”

“OK, then Xhactu, I will get one of these guys to get your started.”

Owl Man walked over to the musicians who were about to launch into their playing and asked, “Who among you knows the secrets of the pipes.”

No one answered.

“OK, who among you teaches the pipes?”

“I do,” shouted out one of the players.

“Well, then what is your name?”

“My name is Alasdair MacLeod. Why do you look familiar?”

Owl Man stepped back a bit, looked at Alasdair, and exclaimed, “Ah, it was back a few years at the Silver Chanter competition. I remember you!”

“Aye, I dinna win, but I remember your talk on the secrets.”

“Why didn’t you speak up when I asked about the secrets.”

“Too shy, always too shy ‘cept when playin’ the pipes.”

“OK, then. I want you to teach my friend Xhactu here and it may be a special experience for you because of his numerous fingers. Get him going on the chanter first, but he wants to get to the drone as soon as possible. He may bring about a whole new drone voice. Is it a deal? I think we may get a stipend for you from the Queen’s Treasury. She’s taking a special interest in Xhactu, so I know she will support his desires. Supporting desires is one of Her Majesties’ desires. Agreed then?”

“Both feet in, as they say back home.” Alasdair’s smile lit up the room and Xhactu’s smile lit up dimensions far beyond the confines of the *Cèilidh*.