

Xhactu's Complaint ...

Though it was a topic of embarrassment around Transition, and the Narrative Section generally, everyone was well aware that their efforts were occasionally hampered by a sort of static interference in their transmissions—that is, their infusions of “new life.” The problem was that bloody *reincarnation* the Hindus were always moaning about: “Oh my golly, this is my one millionth incarnation. Last time around before this, I was a dung beetle! Can you believe it? I still recognize the dung-aroma! That’s how I know!”

But elsewhere in the galaxy, reincarnation was a simple matter of record. Nor were the souls of the deceased always recruited for return to the same planets where they had expired. Xhactu, for example, before his reincarnation as a spaceship commander, had been a Basque shepherd in the Pyrenees, tragically killed by wolves in 1912 while roasting rabbits over a fire. He was 35. Having mastered the mysterious Basque language during childhood, it was a simple matter for Aingeru Itxaso—his Basque name—to take up his new identity as “Xhactu”—not so different from the Basque, really. The crossover was not instantaneous, however. Aingeru floated aimlessly through the Magellanic Clouds for what seemed forever, before his number was finally called and he was summoned to take command of the space ship, whose former captain had

accidentally tripped an explosive airlock device and been sucked out into space. A quick replacement was needed, and Aingeru was available nearby.

The wolves, incidentally, had gobbled up not only Aingeru but his traditional Basque cap—his *boinu*—and the crispy rabbits as well. The fire pit was washed away in a sudden downpour, the bones were dispersed, and the mystery of Aingeru’s disappearance was never solved.

Now, as commander of a gleaming, wormhole-certified, inter-galactic space ship, Xhactu had access to all the latest post-digital, mentalistic technology, including MTLB: Mental Translocational Beaming. Naïve observers still compare this technology to old Star Trek episodes where Kirk and companions would stand under a de-materialization beam as Kirk ordered, “Beam us up, Scotty.” But that required the precisely synchronized energy levels of de- and re-ionized molecules—that is to say, breaking them apart and gluing them back together again in the same exact configurations as before, a complicated and hazardous procedure that left more than one crew-member stranded, half-assembled, on some nameless asteroid.

Men-tran, as it was called, did away with all that. So long as the proper activators were activated, the only thing required was to *think oneself* into a different place. A stunning advance

indeed, based on old research into OBEs, or out-of-body experiences. Anyone thus empowered could go anywhere, instantly, so long as one could control one's thoughts—a potential bug that engineers were still working on.

Now, Xhactu was a patient man—er, alien—but after languishing for God knows how many earth-weeks, hovering in front of Grabblestone while caught in a *suspended narrative*, Xhactu had had enough. He stomped on his three legs, down the corridor leading to the interrogation room where Truffington was shackled, still awaiting the probe.

Xhactu glared at Truffington, demanding: “Who in charge here? You or me?”

Truffington jerked awake, having just nodded off. He gazed at Xhactu's slightly out-of-focus image and replied, “Well, you are, old boy, obviously. I wouldn't exactly be shackled up for a probe if I were in charge, now would I?”

“Could be, earthling, could be. How Xhactu supposed to know? You Brits famous throughout galaxy for kinky taste.”

“Don't be ridiculous!” said an offended Truffington. “Now where's my Darby, my dear Owen? What have you done with him?”

“He your man?”

“Yes, he’s my man, damn you, and if you’ve harmed one single hair on his precious head I’ll—” Truffington sputtered, growing lightheaded.

“Relax, Earthling. Xhactu want to know who in control of story.”

“What? Oh, the story? You mean this one?” Xhactu nodded.

“Oh, well, that’s a different pot of porridge then, isn’t it? Why, let me see. In this case the story is being narrated by—emmm—by Cedros CM, if memory serves.”

“Liar!” shouted Xhactu. “Xhactu’s spies report two narrative layers above this idiot CM!”

“Well,” said Truffington, almost blushing with modesty, “I do occasionally embellish a detail here and there. Strictly amateur, of course, but improvements nonetheless.”

“More, earthling!” said Xhactu, dialing in the most menacing tone on his *universal translator*. “Tell more. Who above you?”

“Mmmm, yes. There’s only one person above me at Narrative Section, isn’t there? Besides the old fool, Brabazoom, of course, who doesn’t count. Yes. It’s the Queen I believe you’re after, Her Majesty herself. Fancies herself quite the storyteller, she does.”

“Where Queen now?”

“You’re the alien spook. You find her!”

And so Xhactu ordered Mixtak and Bradhu to locate the Queen using the ship's legacy (i.e., obsolete) electromagnetic field locator, employable only on backward planets. By tuning the device to the Queen's personal EM frequency, using an algorithm well-known in rebel pockets of the galaxy, they pinpointed her location within seconds.

Xhactu did not hesitate. Once the coordinates were locked in, Xhactu stared at the numbers, squeezed his eyes shut, and murmured the code softly, concentrating his thoughts.

"And what were these bloody buggers tryin' to do, Yer Majesty?" roared Duckbill, ready to tear somebody's head off after hearing about the attack in the garden.

"Never mind that, Duckbill," Compton interrupted, "just get your willie down there and give Owl Man a hand!" Arthur Compton turned back toward the Queen, now surrounded by gawking *cèilidh* revelers. As he did so, he caught a flash of the iridescent green skin on Xhactu's neck. In alien physiology, iridescent green usually indicated intense anger.

In two quick strides Compton stood confronting Xhactu, breathing whiskey fumes into his face. "Who the fuck are you?" Compton said.

Xhactu calmly replied, "No, question is: Who the fuck you? Any way, don't waste my space-time, earthling. Take me to your fucking leader!"

After a few moments of jostled confusion, Xhactu was introduced to the Queen. Now he could finally confront the mysterious hidden presence that had ordered the suspension of the “alien segment” of CedrosCM’s narrative—a suspension that took place under threat of CM’s incarceration.

The Queen seemed mesmerized by Xhactu’s tale of woe, not to mention his thirty-two fingers, three legs, the *universal translator* attached now to his throat, and his iridescent green skin.

“Oh, you poor *thing*,” said Her Majesty. “I had no *idea* that CedrosCM had generated such a lovely and *fascinating* creature as *yourself*. Please, come sit down next to me on this *sofa* and tell me *all* about it. Hello! Someone please bring Mr. Xhactu a *full* tumbler of 60-year Macallan. Do we have any?”

Arthur Compton, who happened to be gripping a bottle of Macallan by the neck, courteously poured the remaining amber liquid into a glass provided by Jinny O.

“Thanks you,” muttered Xhactu quietly, a green tear forming in one of his eyes, all of which opened wide as the peaty scotch worked its silken way into his alien vitals.

The entire *cèilidh* now shifted focus, away from rowdy revelry and to the hushed reverence

of a circle of listeners, as Xhactu proceeded to tell the rapt Queen his story. First, he revealed, in the most personal terms, *what it felt like* to have his first mandated space-ship mission to Earth—his first command, suspended because of some silly narrative contest squabble. Later, as daylight waned, he told the longer story of his life as a wanderer among the stars—the same stars he remembered watching as a Basque shepherd, Aingeru Itxaso, lying on his back in the lonely vastness of the Pyrenees, staring up at the black-diamond vastness overhead.

The Queen tells her story ...

Her Majesty reached out and took Xhactu's trembling hand. "Why, Mr. Xhactu, your hand is cold. And you're shivering! Will someone *please* bring Mr. Xhactu a blanket?" she commanded. Arthur Compton, of all people, leaped up and rushed to a utility closet where blankets, pillows and brooms were stored. He withdrew a soft fleece throw and gently placed it over Xhactu's narrow shoulders.

The cèilidh had become strangely silent, save for the occasional ticking of ice in a polycarbonate cup. The entire group had downshifted into a lower gear, time had slowed down, and an atmosphere of crackling anticipation had settled over the gathering, as when lightning approaches from a distance.

Xhactu had stopped shaking, but the Queen had begun shivering herself, as if she'd taken up his chill. She waved her hand at Compton, who fetched another blanket and placed it over *her* shoulders. Now Xhactu and the Queen looked like two Indian chieftains sitting in a teepee, lacking only the fire-pit and the peace-pipe. The Queen's face began to glow.

"You've just reminded me, my dear Mr. Xhactu, of my own story. It's a secret, something I've never told *anyone* before." The listeners were scarcely breathing, so anxious were they to hear

this unprecedented revelation from the Queen herself.

“I was five years old, and already my life consisted primarily of *duties to perform*—one after another. Oh, I was *allowed* to play for short periods, but only with approved *friends*, of course.

Usually they were stiff little things in pink pinafores, just as wretched as I, in their own pathetic ways. But throughout one particular *summer*, whenever I could snatch a moment alone, I would *hide* behind the heavy velvet draperies in the music room, *hold my breath* and stay as silent as I could. No one knew I was *there*.” At this point the Queen closed her eyes, as if recalling the sensation of that moment.

“Once I was *lightheaded*, visions would start to dance before me in the dark. Then, when I breathed, the visions would speak to me. Of course, I could only answer them, ah, *mentally*, you might say. Otherwise I would be found out. So, we carried on these silent, yet boisterous, conversations, my *imaginary* friends and I. There was Mr. Bobbitt the Butcher, who always saved bones for my imaginary dog, Bubbles. And Miss Whipsett the Lonely Widow, always crying so I had to loan her my embroidered handkerchief to make her *feel* better. There was Captain Geoffrey Johnstone Junior, the *rocket-ship* pilot who would take me for rides into space. Oh, there were lots of others, but I’ve forgotten most of them.”

The Queen opened her eyes and took a sip of Macallan from the glass that Compton had quietly slipped into her warming hand. Then she turned her gaze back to Xhactu and continued.

“But what you’ve most fortuitously reminded me of, Mr. Xhactu—and I can’t possibly thank you *enough* for this—is the day behind the curtains when I saw myself in my life before I became the Queen.”

Xhactu stirred, tilting his head. His universal translator crackled briefly, as if not perfectly tuned to the earth frequencies, and he said, “Don’t tell. I know.” And his eyes gleamed with a liquid luminescence. The Queen, unsurprised, simply gazed at him in open frankness, waiting.

“Before Queen, you—” Xhactu seemed to be scanning his universal translator for the right words, then he said slowly, “You command space-ship, like Xhactu.”

The Queen beamed royally, and a broad grin spread over her face. “Yes, Mr. Xhactu, I knew you’d know. Of course you would. Yes, my friends. Mr. Xhactu is correct. What I *realized* that day behind the drapes was that I, too, had commanded an inter-galactic spacecraft in a past life—a *warship*, in fact, sailing over the billowing star-fields, fighting everywhere on behalf of the good. Unfortunately, a loose bolt in the ship’s gyro—engineers cutting corners—sent the ship spiraling into a black hole and I, the crew and the ship were compressed into nano-pellets before

being swallowed whole by the yawning ‘blackie,’ as we called them then.”

Xhactu, who seemed to be the only one authorized to put questions to the Queen, asked, “How long in blackie?”

“Oh, heaven only knows,” said the Queen, her eyes closed again. “I don’t even know what *planet* I was from, so I can’t place the date by the usual *technological* markers—thrust and guidance systems and *whatnot*. Time doesn’t mean much when you’re a nano-pellet inside a black hole. I do remember, however, that it was noisy in there.”

“Then what happen?” prompted Xhactu.

“You mean, what happened next? Well, that’s it, I’m afraid. The next thing I remembered the nanny had seen my shoes behind the drapes, *hauled* me out for a good scolding, and sent me up to get *properly* dressed to meet the Tanzanian Ambassador and his retinue.”

Sensing that the Queen had finished this most extraordinary narrative, the listeners shifted in their seats or wriggled around in their beanbag chairs, uncertain as to what royal etiquette called for in this situation.

“Please don’t *stand* on ceremony, my friends,” announced the Queen. “Let the *cèilidh* continue, and *thank* you all for your attention. It’s not often a Queen gets to *unburden* herself of a

secret.”

At this point there was a commotion at the back of the room as the door swung open.

Xhactu and the Queen looked up and saw an ample-bellied, red-haired, flush-faced figure with a full pompadour towering in the doorway. It may have been an optical illusion, but steam seemed to be coming off his head. Dressed in full Scottish golf regalia—matching tweed knickers and blazer, a bow-tie and button-topped tweed cap, argyle socks and cleated Oxford wing-tip golf shoes—Fex had arrived. Behind him waited stumpy, servile, born-to-caddy Coo, Fex’s bag of golf clubs hanging over his shoulder, sagging on the carpet.

Gazing contemptuously around the hushed room as if searching for someone, Fex shouted, “Hey, where’s Owl Man? Tell him Fex is here, from the Big H!”

A mole close to the Queen . . .

While things were heating up at Owl Man's Ceilidh, across town on the fabled third floor of the Snappy Dragon Restaurant, hidden away from all those except those in the know, a quiet dinner meeting was underway. Those in the know, those secretive people with secrets best kept from anyone's view, gathered round the ancient Hanghuali table, having found itself in these secret environs traveling all the way from the seventeenth-century and an old Chinese palace, itself a secret place now, and home of Shaman Song, this gathering's host of honor.

Nothing was ever "ordered" here on the third floor, nor were there "hours." Dishes were simply brought from the kitchens of the master chefs who prepared food of such delicacy and rarity the guests often were speechless as they savored the delights. There were no "bills." How accounts were settled, if they were, was something no one spoke of.

Tonight, among Shaman Song's guests was his private mole within the Queen's inner sanctum, a figure so trusted by her Majesty that his loyalty was never questioned, never brought to scrutiny. His code name was *themole*. While not very inventive, he chose it himself when given the chance by Shaman Song at their meeting many years ago when they sealed the deal. It was not for money that *themole* served Shaman Song's nefarious schemes when they involved the empire, but for the assurance that Shaman Song would publish *themole's* novels—all of them, of which there were nineteen at that time. True to his word, Shaman Song had seen to their publication under so many levels of aliases so that it was impossible to trace the identity of the real author—should anyone have wished to do so.

Number thirty-two had just been released to great fanfare in a small book shop in Rangoon. Reviews were rare; sales rarer. One reviewer, many years ago, had described *The Bookends Murder*, as "sure to gather dust and mites to your shelf; do yourself a favor and give it the toss." But *themole* was undaunted, one the *themole's* virtues Shaman Song counted in the assignment he was about to announce to his erstwhile hireling.

"I want you to crash Owl Man's Ceilidh." Shaman Song pushed an envelope across the table to *themole*. "Here are the directions and your usual payment, as well as the address for you to send your next novel. Now listen up. We've learned the Queen will be there, so there should be no question about your being welcomed. What I want you to do is to tell her majesty that Owl Man

has taken a keen interest in what she is writing and would like to see it. Just drop this as a hint, if you know what I mean. Subtlety. We just want her to bring up the subject with Owl Man. That's all you need do. Now be off with you."

While *themole* could see no possible reason for his task, he took up the envelope with gusto and bowed to his master. He was not about to question what he was 'being asked to do, even if he could see no point.

After knocking 'til his knuckles hurt, and several swift kicks with his Oxfords, the door finally opened and *themole* was greeted with, "And who might you be, my good man?"

"Never mind the 'good man' stuff, just tell the Queen that Henry is here with an urgent message for her ears alone."

"One or both?" It was Arthur Compton, swaying to and fro, the scotch doing its job well, asking a question *themole* could not fathom.

"I haven't the least notion of what you are going on about. Please, just deliver my message to the Queen."

"Well, she's right here, Henry."

Compton pulled her majesty into Henry's view. Henry had never seen the Queen being treated in such a familiar way—well, except for the Queen's regulars.

"Oh, Henry, it's you! You're not going to spoil all the fun now with some urgent business of the realm, are you? I'm being thoroughly enchanted by Arthur's telling of his *transition* and I'd like to hear more. So what is it, Henry?" The Queen was wobbling herself having imbibed a good bit more than a wee dram as she fell full into the thrall of Arthur Compton's recounting.

"I just need to speak a moment with you privately. It's urgent, but not the realm's business, I can assure you." Henry nodded toward an empty corner and the Queen reluctantly let go of Arthur's arm and followed her loyal servant.

"Now, what is it?" The Queen looked squarely into Henry's eyes and he bent closer to her left

ear.

"My sources tell me that Owl is interested in your writings. Something about a project he's working on. But he does not want to ask you directly. He wants you to ask him. I hope that's clear, your majesty."

"Yes, yes. I get it. Now let's get you some refreshment. Arthur, bring the man a Glenlivet, if you have any."

"Have any? Have any? Live it up at Glenlivet, that's my motto. Here you go, Henry. In good cheer!"

As Henry was taking his first sip, Owl Man was beside him, patted him on the shoulder. Leaned closer, so only he could hear, and said, "Welcome, *themole*."

Henry couldn't help but splash out his mouthful of Glenlivet all over the Queen.

Owl Man Recruits the Mole . . .

Arthur Compton was all over the Queen with a towel, mopping up Glenlivet from the Royal Bosom and elsewhere. So thorough was he in his attentions to Her Majesty that, before he had finished, she was asking him over her shoulder, “Well, I say, Mr.

Compton, you certainly don’t stint your chivalric duties, do you? Perhaps you’d like to join me some evening, after hours, for a wee dram? Perhaps also you can show me some of those Transition techniques you were describing.”

Compton was still engrossed in the Royal Bum, however, and at first he did not catch the full implications of the Queen’s invitation. It was Smithers the Difficult who stepped forward to explain Her Majesty’s invitation to Compton the Obtuse, thus sparing her the embarrassment of repeating herself.

“I say, Compton,” Smithers whispered, “wake up, man. Her Majesty just invited you to spend the night with her—join the queue, so to speak.”

“Hmmm? What did you say?” said Compton, his towel still moving in slow circles.

“Bugger off, Compton, you heard me!” snapped Smithers. “Now say something nice

to Her Majesty before I kick you in the bollocks!" Smithers the Difficult was on the verge of making good his pledge when Compton snapped out of his trance.

"Oh, Your Majesty is too kind," said Compton. "Of course, I shall be most delighted to join you. At your pleasure," he added gratuitously.

The Queen smiled blandly and said, "Smithers, put Mr. Compton down for tomorrow night, please."

"Very good, Mum," said Smithers, through his teeth, his jaws clamped tight.

Across the room, Owl Man had herded Henry into a corner where they both stood, glasses in hand, looking like nothing more than two swells at their club, discussing the day's ticker tape results. Owl Man smiled at Henry, saying, "In other words, Henry—or, if you prefer, themole—either you do as I say, or I send an anonymous letter to the London Daily Dispatch, detailing your position within the Queen's inner circle, as well as the particulars of your affiliation with Shaman Song and your role in his perfidious scheme. I expect that both Shaman Song and the Queen will be, shall we say, displeased with you."

“No, Owl Man, not that. The Queen must not find out, do you hear me? And as for Shaman Song—” Henry’s skin crawled at the thought, and the look on his face had shifted from its signature blandness to one of sheer terror. His hands were shaking as he said, “Do ... not ... tell ... Shaman ... Song! Tell me again what it is you want me to do.”

“Well, first of all, Henry, we need a new code name for you—known only to you and me, of course. Hereafter, you shall be known as themolemole. It boils down to this: You are going to serve as a double, and I’m not talking about lawn tennis. You will be a double agent, reporting to Shaman Song, as expected, even as you continue in the Queen’s confidence; but you will also be my “joe,” and I’ll be running you. Breathe a word of this arrangement to Shaman Song, and I’m afraid your life will come to an abrupt, lamentable end. Song will see to it, and his methods are always, shall we say, ingenious.”

“But who are you, Owl Man? I’ve never even met you before. How can you waltz in here and turn me into a double?”

“Never underestimate the power of the fictive imagination, Henry. Let’s just say that I

have a keen interest in the development of these narratives—something I share with the Queen, I might add.”

“Well, now I feel like more of a bloody pawn than ever,” said Henry. “It’s bad enough working for Shaman Song and the Queen at the same time, without having you come in here and turn my head upside down, dishing out instructions.”

“Like it or not, Henry, you are now a principle character in the Deathling Crown Lottery, notably, the Ceilidh of Dreams. And really, it’s your own fault. If you hadn’t presented yourself to me as you did, I could have drafted someone else to play the fool. But, you’re incarnated now, I’m afraid, and therefore you’re inevitable—no one else will do. In a word, Henry, you’re it.”

Henry scratched his head and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. “Sounds like you’ve got me over a bleeding barrel, Owl Man. What am I supposed to do?”

“For the moment, Henry, do nothing,” said Owl Man. “Just go about your business.”

“Yes, but what about Shaman Song?”

“Now that I think about it, just tell him the truth.”

“What? What kind of double agent tells the truth?” Henry was more confused than ever. “What about this conversation we’re having, am I supposed to tell him I’m a bloody double agent, betraying him? Stick my neck out so he can lop off my head?”

“You’re not betraying anybody, Henry, you’re playing your part perfectly. And I don’t think it serves Shaman Song to go around lopping off heads, though he likes to scare people. In fact, that’s the point. I want you to tell him the truth, so that he’ll know I know that he knows that I know—I know that sounds circular, but it’s meant to.”

“Let’s see if I’ve got this,” said Henry. “You want him to know that you know what he’s up to, so you’re letting him know what you’re up to?”

“Exactly, Henry, it’s like a mental chess game. You see? You’re perfect for this part.”

Owl Man could see that Henry was more than a little perplexed, but would be unable to do other than follow Owl Man’s instructions.

“Hmmm, yes,” was the only reply Henry could manage at this point. Shoulders slumped, he turned and walked dispiritedly toward the door.

“And Henry,” called Owl Man after him.

“Yessir?” said Henry, turning around.

“Shoulders back, chin up, old boy!” said Owl Man.

The mole had just closed the door when the Queen approached Owl Man from behind.

“I say, my dear Owl Man,” she said in her most circumspect, diplomatic manner, as when she’s about to bomb another country.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” said Owl Man, turning around.

“Owl Man, there’s a little fiction project of my own that I’ve been working on for some time now. I wonder if you’d be willing to take a look at it—after the ceilidh, of course. It’s about a space ship, among other things.”

“Why, Queensie, I’d be delighted to look at it. In fact, I thought you’d never ask!”

