

Fex Encounters Xhactu ...

“And who might you be?” Xhactu had somehow enlarged himself as he now looked down on the big man calling out for Owl Man.

“Well, I might just be your worst nightmare, so out of my way, thingy. I need to chinwag with the Owl. I got big news.”

Fex began to muscle aside “the thingy” but Xhactu was having none of it. He put hands on each shoulder and with the third began to tug at Fex’s ascot.

“NO!” wailed Fex.

“What’s you hidin’ there, big man?”

Fex, not used to being stopped in his movements, suddenly was speechless, a rare event indeed. But worse. How did this thingy, whatever it was, know Fex’s big secret?

Fex’s face paled as if he was face to face with a ghost, or worse.

“Ah, now what have we here?” Xhactu bellowed. By now all eyes were eager to take in this odd turn of the Cèilidh, as Xhactu pulled the bright red silky ascot from Fex’s neck.

A chorus of gasps and shrieks and assorted exclamations filled the air as Fex frantically tried to keep Xhactu from revealing what there was to see, but he failed to stop the unveiling. Everyone saw the large tattoo of a gaping mouth with long tapered teeth about to lurch on a cowering mouse.

“Hey, Owl Man,” Xhactu yelled, “what you make of this?”

Fex was struggling to cover up the lurid scene, but his arms remained pinned by Xhactu. Fex’s face had turned from ashen white to the color of the Ascot which now found itself on the floor. Fex had yet to find his voice.

A path in the crowd opened p and Owl Man stepped smartly forward.

“Well, Xhactu, what you see is known only to a few and as you can see there is good reason for Fex to want to keep this image secret. Heron, tell the story of Fex’s tattoo.”

Heron Man came forward as Fex was trying to shake his head no but was restrained by Xhactu’s third hand. Heron Man began the recounting, always a proper thing at a Cèilidh.

“Fex had a difficult childhood: abandoned by dad, smothered my mum. Never feeling he belonged anywhere. As a teenager, he fell in with a bad crowd, and when they invited him to join their secret brotherhood, he could not resist in spite of his horror at what was required in the ritual of initiation. I’ll spare you the details but let it be said that Fex manned up indeed and became a proud member of the Mice Eaters Gang. The full ritual required the tattoo you see here, and it was required to keep it covered and only to show it to members or to those they

wished to threaten. As Fex matured, he found the petty if brutal acts of the Mice Eaters more and more distasteful. By this time, Fex had grown into his full bulk, as you see him here and this coupled with wanting to be ‘his own boss,’ led him to leave the gang behind. But his dodgy activities, schooled by the leaders of the Mice Eaters, along with his mum’s taking up a life of more extreme dodginess, set Fex on his path which has now led to being a big shot deal maker in Hollywood. Believe me, this is the short version of Fex and his tattoo.”

Xhactu let go of Fex, bent down and picked up the fallen ascot, put it on Fex and straightened it up proper. “Hey, Compton, bring this fella a tinny, he needs a bit of tipsy after that display.” Xhactu’s universal translator was bubbling over with earth-slang.

At this point, the crowd broke out in laughter and merriment and began to circle dance, well, like a circle dance, even if it was a shape hard to describe with everyone a bit off their balance.

“Well, Fex, I hear you got some big news for me. Shall we repair to the garden where you can tell me in private? Though I think I know what it’s about.” Owl Man pointed the way.

A Stroke of Genius ...

It must have been some stroke of genius on Owl Man's part that, for this particular cèilidh, he chose to award the first and most important official duty—the Keeper of the Cart—to the character least likely to warrant the honor: the DCL Grand Prize Arthur Compton. Did Compton have any experience in this area?

The answer comes in a flash: Arthur Compton's qualifying experience falls within a precisely defined ambit—that of drinking large quantities of expensive, single-malt Scotch—quite a bit of it, actually.

Nor was Owl Man himself any slouch when it came to “sampling the delights of the cart.” In fact, the cèilidh he was currently hosting in London was dedicated to the pleasure and relaxation of the cast and crew of Fex & Coo and The Deathling Crown Lottery. Basically, whichever characters could make it to the party were welcome. We can thank Truffington for ordering the beanbag chairs, the case of McCallan as well as other delightful spirits and treats.

The second dutiful office Owl Man awarded—also traditional—was The Recounting of the Log. That was a task little known by less experienced players, but performing the Recounting of the Log was an honor indeed. Still, it did come at a modest cost. Fortunately, it was a cost that Heron Man was willing and able to pay—to accept the award of that second office, Heron Man would indeed have to forego the “delights of the cart.”

Heron knew that his self-imposed single-malt drought “were a wee price to pay” for the honor of recording these amazing stories, songs, poems, dances, and so forth. In a traditional Scottish cèilidh, the kinds of feelings stirred up by these creative offerings play a major

role, not only in terms of reaching into the depths of sobriety, but also in reaching into the heights of ecstatic intoxication, such as cèilidh participants have always fomented and enjoyed, in both directions, high and low.

Such feelings and emotions as these jingled like a gypsy's silver bracelets, amidst all the dancing and clogging feet, and the singing throats. In this context, Heron Man's “Recounting of the Log” of Fex's difficult childhood was hailed by the listeners as very moving.

“A work of genius,” one person exclaimed. “He's a regular artist,” added another. A third person contributed a few words from an old pop lyric: “My tears fell like rain.”

As Heron Man filled in the glaring blanks in Fex's past, his seamless recounting laid bare one of the more tender periods in Fex's childhood memory-vault—that is to say, the “jail sentence” he served as a tattooed member of the petty, brutal, and secret brotherhood of the “Mice Eaters Gang.”

There was something about this memory that Fex wanted to talk to Owl Man about.

“Get the bird brain's take on it, ya know?” said Fex with easy Hollywood confidence, which Fex often used to cover up his anxiety over what Owl Man's honest response might be.

Leaving the boisterous cèilidh behind, the two men rode the elevator in silence, down to the ground floor, and stepped into the walled garden where they could speak privately. Owl Man did not want Fex to dominate this entire cèilidh. Rather, his mind was focused on getting back to Queensie as soon as possible. There had already been one recent attempt on the Queen's life, and the Owl wanted to rejoin the cèilidh while Her Majesty was still in one piece, so as to gather his forces for the next assault.

For his part, Fex was all agog, at first, anyway, with the idea that the Queen had actually joined the party, and had acknowledged him—Fex—with a flurry of Royal Courtesies, a skill she had mastered as a young child. Fex, of course, thought it all had to do with him.

“How have you been, Fex?” Owl Man offered, as the elevator stopped and they walked out toward the garden. “Long time no see!”

It was second nature to Owl Man that, as soon as they entered the green-leafed precincts of the garden, he should quickly glance around in both directions, including toward the top of the ivied wall. That spear-pointed wall-top had been the launching pad for the crashing and crunching of the four heavies that Owl Man had subdued and tied up, and that Duckbill had hauled away, not so long ago.

Owl Man wanted to make sure there were no more miscreants at large, the kind who aim to do mischief, as before. So, just in case, he had brought his re-loaded chrome Derringer palm-pistol and placed it in his modified left-hand vest pocket. This time, however, he also brought a loaded, snub-nosed, six-shot, .38 revolver and placed it in his right-hand coat pocket.

In the elevator, Fex hadn't said a word. Once outdoors, however, he began yelling, as if he couldn't wait to sound off: “Hey, Owl Man! Yeah! How ya doin'? I been busy, ya know? Like always. Ha ha! Got a lotta projects going on with Bobby, Leo, Marty, Al. Ya know? The gang. Ha ha! Marty calls us the ‘four horsemen.’ Bobby wants me to star in a new film he's workin' on.”

“Do you mean to tell me, Fex, that Bobby DeNiro wants you to perform the starring role in a new film he's working on?”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, not exactly. He wants me to play this character he likes a lot. He's writin' the part for me, 'cept he'll hire an actor to do the film, but just the actin' part. Wants me to be a consultant. Big honor, ya know. Bobby, Marty and all. They're always calling me, wantin' to know what's on my plate, if I can take on another project, what I think about this or that idea. Boy, Owl Man, you oughta spend some time in the Big H. I'm tellin' you, that place is poppin'.”

It took some coaxing, but Owl Man finally got Fex to spill the beans.

“You wanted to tell me something, Fex, before I return to the cèilidh and check up on Her Majesty?”

“What? Oh. Oh yeah.”

“Hmmm?” said the Owl.

“Well,” said Fex. “You know, Owl Man.”

“No, I don’t know, Fex. Tell me.”

“Uh, well, uh, I just did.”

“Really?”

“Jesus, Owl Man, do you have to rake me over the coals like this?”

“Like what, Fex?”

“Like you’re doin’.”

“You call this raking you over the coals?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I just say that? Now, what was I gonna tell ya, Owl?”

“I don’t know, Fex. Was it something embarrassing?”

“Now what are you talkin’ about?”

“You tell me, Fex. Isn’t this the conversation you wanted to have?”

“Huh?” said Fex. “Now what kinda Ouija Board stuff are you runnin’ down now?”

“No Ouija Board, Fex. Just give me the facts.”

“Okay, Here’s a fact for you: I’ve had it.” Fex practically spat the words out. “You’re gonna weasel it outta me, aren’t you, Owl Man?”

“You go first, Fex. But wait—did it, by any chance, have something to do with what Heron Man read to the audience?”

“Huh? Yeah, maybe it did.”

“Well, what about it?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing, Owl Man.”

“What, the part about the gang?”

“No, the part about eatin’ mice.”

“Hmmm, yes, I see. You didn’t like it?”

“Hell, no. Would you?”

“Probably not, Fex. What would you like me to do about it?”

“Do about it? What are you talkin’ about?”

“Well, since all that mice-eating happened during your younger years, I’m not really sure there’s anything to be ‘done’ about it now. Since nobody is forcing you to eat mice, maybe it’s your attitude about eating mice that needs to change.”

“You mean now I gotta tell the mouse he’s my bro—like, I love you, man?”

“No, Fex,” said the Owl. “You just have to stop fixating on eating mice. And while you’re at it, maybe there’s a tattoo parlor here in London where they can erase that tattoo on your neck. Can you do that, Fex? After all, the neck-tattoo could be part of the problem, part of why you just can’t let go of the mice. Like it’s imprinting the image on your bloodstream, or something. You think?”

“Hmmpf!” snorted Fex.

Whereupon Owl Man pivoted on his brogues and headed for the elevator. Fex stayed in the garden, to stew in his juices a little longer, while Owl Man rode back up to the cèilidh to check on Her Majesty and the pipers.