

Xhactu learns the pipes ...

Looking back, it all seems like something from a magical, space-age fairy tale.

Just think about it.

There was the intergalactic mission to Earth. There was Xhactu, serving as commander of an enormous, high-tech space-ship. The space-ship was an impressive, long-distance vehicle that underwent a shocking *loss of narrative thrust* while in London, thanks to interference-patterns from the Deathling Crown Lottery servers and routers; there is the present *cèilidh*; and so on and so forth.

And we're not even counting Irma yet, Bride of Xhactu, with her many past lives, almost all of them as an Egyptian Princess, no doubt.

Exciting!

However, we know that Xhactu had always been prone to an ill-tempered moodiness, hence the iridescent green color around his neck. But when he found out about the loss of narrative thrust, he entered a different mood-phase, known among galactic residents as “a really, really nasty mood.”

Naturally, Xhactu's visitors on the Command Bridge—mostly ambassadors—got used to being yelled at (“Liar!” was one of his favorite Earth-speak *invectives*, which comes from the Latin for “attack with words”), but the ambassadors got over it soon enough. Xhactu never really hurt anyone, he had Bradhu and Mixtak for that. But he liked to keep his assistants on their toes with his threats, which is why they often subjected Xhactu's orders and intentions to clarifying questions, such as, “Shall I cut off his head, Xhactu?”

At one point, Xhactu even went 180 degrees in the other direction and developed a transference-crush on Owl Man. In pursuing this aim, he arranged to be transferred at “warp-speed,” via a worm-hole, from the space-ship in London to Irma's Diner in Seattle where

Owl Man and Heron Man had moved their daily caffeine operations. That's where Xhactu met Irma, and the odd couple fell in love on the spot.

But the whole point of this particular *cèilidh* was for the main characters to relax, get to know one another out-of-character, and let go of the inevitable tensions that develop around creative, free-form, fictive enterprises. Owl Man knew all that in advance, which is why he had leaned on Truffington to provide beanbag chairs, lots of Macallan, and so forth—all paid for out of the DCL coffers. Nothing from Truffington's own pockets, of course.

When Her Majesty first met Xhactu at the raucous *cèilidh*, having glided up from the garden on Arthur Compton's arm, she felt an immediate bond of "moody kinship" with the tiny alien. At the *cèilidh*, Xhactu's reputation had preceded him, to the extent that the London tabloids were practically screaming over the rooftops of the City: "Xhactu the Alien Space Commander," the headlines proclaimed, "now known as the Big Daddy Spaceship Captain."

The *mood* Her Majesty was referring to was one she was well familiar with, from her own experience. When she was under its spell, she called the mood "Your Royal Foulness." On those occasions when she might want to minimize her moodiness—so her subjects would stop referring to her as a "niggardly person"—she might downshift a bit by calling it, "a Royal Snit, but just a teeny one."

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Owl Man was impressed that Xhactu had such a passion to learn the pipes. He also knew that Xhactu had already picked up a few tips from other pipers he'd met in the course of his galactic travels. After all, bagpipes, while not common in Xhactu's neck of the woods, were popular in many other places. In fact, Xhactu had developed what he called "my special hypothesis," which held that—after the probing protocols, of course—piping, drumming and

marching counted as among the oldest forms of music in the universe. This explained, in part, his intense desire to learn the pipes.

Owl Man motioned Alasdair over to meet Xhactu, and to give him his beginning piper's lesson. The former had taken a keen interest in his new piping student, all three feet of him—not to mention the hands, fingers, third-leg-with-foot, greenish tint to his skin, froggish eyes, etc.

For his part, Alasdair stood six-feet-four and weighed sixteen stone. He sported a bristly red beard, curly red hair, a tartan kilt and a smart black vest, and he fairly towered—or did he loom?—over tiny Xhactu. He did a quick double-take of the alien, glanced at the Owl and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Owl Man just smiled and nodded. He was astute enough in matters politic, that he was prepared to smooth the troubled, intergalactic waters—should it be necessary.

That was not required, however. Alasdair and Xhactu had instantly formed an intuitive musician's connection and were already discussing the bagpipe scales, the number of sound-holes on a *chanter*, the low A and the high G, the double-reed, and the different types and pitches of drones. Most mysterious, complex and dazzling, of course, was the fingering.

The chanter, or melody pipe, was outfitted with seven main holes on the front, for the fingers, plus one hole on the back, for the thumb. Alasdair was about to deliver a “musical information dump,” when he realized Xhactu was so intuitive that he had already advanced beyond Alasdair's lesson, improvising melodies, trills, grace-notes, unusual chordal effects and the like.

Heron Man left off his Recording of the Log and stood to the side, stretching his legs, observing, ruminating. As he edged closer to Xhactu and Alasdair, he could follow Xhactu's

piping lesson, listen to Alasdair’s instructions, and hear his historical brief on the piper’s scales—especially the old Phrygian Scale, one of the ancient Church Modes.

Heron Man perked up when he heard that.

Owl Man was just walking past, an encouraging expression on his face, when Heron Man whispered to him: “Pssst! Owl! I think I just discovered gold.”

Owl Man looked up. “What is it, Heron?”

Heron Man replied, “Phrygian scale. An old Church Mode. The Celts in Iberia. Spanish bagpipes. Red-haired Spaniards. Flamenco music. The gypsies from India. The flamenco *cante grande* and the classical Highland *ceòl mór*—“big song.” The flamenco *cante chico* (*ceòl beag*)—“little song.”

Alasdair caught Owl Man’s gaze, his eyes wide open as he nodding approvingly. Nor was Xhactu’s rapid and stunning progress lost on the other musicians, who gathered in a circle around Alasdair the master piper, and Xhactu his master pupil. The snare-drums snared, the bass drum boomed, and the drones droned at three different pitches.

All Alasdair had to do was to hum the outline of a melody to Xhactu, and he followed suit impeccably. Alasdair had handed him a “small-pipe,” tuned to D, and he took to it immediately. Someone actually tried to count Xhactu’s fingers as they fluttered up and down the pipe, dancing through the scales in arpeggios, trills, and so forth. On next to no training, he was piping with ease.

Soon the dancers had re-formed their jigging circle, the Macallan had resumed flowing, and before anyone realized it was happening, the Queen herself had dusted off the steps she had learned and enjoyed as a child, and joined the other dancers in the circle. The intensity of the *cèilidh* rose to a higher level than ever. At first the partiers were dumbfounded by Xhactu’s effortless skill, but then it just seemed like the most natural thing that he, this alien “thingy,” as Fex called him, should rise to the top, like cream.

On impulse, and with only one hearing of the tune, Xhactu launched his own improvised rendition of *Amazing Grace*.

Xhactu the Virtuoso.

Before long, Alasdair was learning riffs from Xhactu, Owl Man was partnering Her Majesty, and Arthur Compton was picking up steps from a well-known, dazzling local Irish dancer named *Saoirse* (pron. Súr-sha = Irish for “freedom”). Meanwhile, Fex had rejoined the group, found Heather and ushered her into the circle during a general dance-break, where Fex and Heather—“the couple from Hollywood”—demonstrated their big, award-winning dance hit, *Mashed Potato Time*—as popularized in 1962 by Dee Dee Sharp.

The drummers provided Fex and Heather with the *Mashed Potato Time* back-up rhythms. And for their part, the loose-limbed, swinging, jiving couple held forth with confidence, as if Mashed Potatoes were their birthright.

The Morning Round

It was the sweetest of sounds.

The sun had not yet made an appearance. A few revelers had departed, while others had simply dropped in place sleeping and making muffled moans and snorts at Macallan-induced dreams. Owl Man was still awake, watching over The Queen as she snored and chirped in unqueenly fashion. Heron Man was awake as well, typing a slow hunt and peck of preliminary notes on *The Cèilidh of Dreams*.

The morning round of dream telling was still a ways off.

The sweet sound, of course, was Xhactu playing an impossibly soft sound from the full instrument: Chanter, Bags, Drones. Somehow during the night Xhactu had acquired a full Scot's piper's outfit and was meandering through the room full of laid out bodies. The sound of the pipes and the sound of the sleepers became an extraordinary choral mix, almost a hymn. Owl Man was smiling and nodding his head and tapping his shoeless toe to the beat.

Xhactu's playing took on a stronger beat and louder melody, becoming more a march than a hymn expressing in sound what the sun's rays were now expressing in the cascade dance of morning brightness. The spent party goers were beginning to rustle and murmur, and one could now hear definite but muted calls for coffee, tea, and a somewhat vague demand for "more," though more of what could not be deciphered.

As if all this were some kind of early morning prelude, Owl Man stood and shouted out, "Everyone up, it's time for the morning round."

He pointed to Xhactu, and with his finger circling in the air, Xhactu let out a blast that had everyone at sitting up, shaking heads, and rubbing eyes.

"All right everyone," Owl Man continued, "Some of you told dreams last night and I'm sure you all remember. But we come now to the morning round, and this follows our night of revelry. This may have loosened the barriers to remembering. After all, this is a

Cèilidh Dreams. We come to the main purpose of our party, telling and hearing those images and words from dreamland. And remember, there is only one rule: you must not try to interpret anyone's dream. Listen. Take in. See where another's dream takes you. Don't worry about meaning. Don't worry about anything!"

Owl Man sat down. He was not going to ask anyone to start. Or do any direction. Every Cèilidh had its own rhythm, its own way of coming about, its own way of revealing.

Arthur Compton and Sally both stood at the same time and raised their hands like students to be called on. Owl Man resisted any effort to choose between the two, rather more interested in how they would come to it themselves.

"Please, Sally, ladies first." Arthur was unusually polite. Perhaps it was a morning thing.

Sally took a couple of deep breaths, closed her eyes, and began. "I dreamed we were all here like we are now, and the sun was shining in the windows just like it is now. But then, and this is what was scary, it was as if the windows all went black, though the light of the room persisted. We all became silent, and no one said anything. No one. That was the dream."

Though Arthur stood while Sally spoke, he sat down as she finished. Everyone seemed hesitant about speaking in light of the dream.

"Can I add a bit, Owl Man? To the dream." Sally's tone was one of pleading.

"Of course, Sally, please do." Owl Man extended his hand in a gesture of support.

"It was strange, Owl Man. As the windows went dark, Xhactu's piping became jazz sounds. I'm not sure that is accurate, but it was as if the pipes were something other than bagpipe sounds and more like jazz. It was weird." Sally sat down and wrapped her blanket around her.

No one looked more perplexed than Xhactu. It was as if a cloud had come over his excitement in learning the pipes so quickly, so well, so masterfully. Sally's dream threw him.

Owl Man observed the cloud crossing Xhactu's face but made no comment.

After a long silence, Arthur Compton, stood up and crossed his arms in front of himself, like he might be cold. In fact, he did look a bit wan, and cleared his throat several times before speaking.

"My dream now feels somehow related to Sally's. It was this place, and just as we are now. But ever so slowly, to a sound I cannot describe, the whole dream scene began to move, and as the dream went on, the revolving was like some centrifugal force, a whirlpool, fast and faster, until I woke with a start. I actually felt dizzy!"

"Owl Man, help me up please." It was the queen. Owl Man stood and brought the Queen to full posture. She was a bit ruffled as everyone was, but as she stood and looked around the room, as if acknowledging each subject of her realm, she took on a regal appearance. She stood straighter yet and captured everyone's attention.

"What I experienced was unlike anything I have ever experienced in a dream or otherwise. Like Sally and Arthur, the scene was this room, with all of you present. Like Sally's dream, there seemed to be an enveloping darkness and like Arthur's dream, the room began to spin, slowly at first, then faster. It was then like everyone was up against the revolving walls and up from the center, which was very dark indeed, rose one bird after another. Yes, there were owls and herons and doves, and hawks, and all m manner of birds and one came to rest on my hand, a very small bird, I did not recognize, but it recognized me, and said, 'My Queen.' I woke with a feeling a deep contentment, a peace, something I have not felt in a very long time."

Owl Man looked across the room and saw that Heron Man was typing away. Important that we get this right and he could tell by Heron Man's nod, that he felt it too.

