

Inside the Giant Ship ...

As Compton shuffled up the ramp, the ramp itself began retracting and closing up after him, not unlike a similar scene from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Compton continued his shuffling, not fully aware of his situation and not able to do much of anything, drugged to the gills as he was, a virtual zombie at the mercy of his new hosts.

The hosts meanwhile were viewing Compton's progress, somewhat at a loss as to why they found themselves dealing with this figure when they were about to push their many fingers on the many buttons—all this to launch a full-scale disappearance of the Queen's Chancellery Building.

Xhactu, speaking through the Universal Translator, ordered Mr. Compton to halt, which seemed to have no impact on the walking zombie. Compton kept going, in fact, until he walked straight into a wall, or what earthlings would most certainly call a wall, yet instead of bonking his nose on it, he disappeared into it. The wall was not so much a wall as a division of space produced by light, so no harm came to Compton, but his hosts were not pleased that he had walked in on their control room and the animated discussion they were having about what to do to explore the earthling who now had walked straight to the conference table and toppled over onto the lap of Mixtak, who had been making a point that was now lost in the commotion.

Xhactu, as commander of the ship and leader the mission, was not at all pleased at this queer turn of events.

"Mixtak," he said, "you and Bradhu, take Mr. Compton and place him in the probing unit alongside the one called Truffington. I'll be there shortly to deal with these

specimens. I've got to report in."

Xhactu did not relish reporting in, as he had no real sense of what was happening. He acted, of course, as if he knew full well what was going on, as was required of his superior position and all. But he did not fully understand the Truffington mission or, now, the acquisition of the one called Compton. He could remember no order to travel to this place called Earth in the first place, which, as far as he could recall from his training, had no interest value whatever to his superiors in the Kraxnar Level. But he knew he could wait no longer before reporting in. So far he had been spared any loss of fingers but he was not sure that he would remain intact after this strangeness was done.

While Xhactu struggled to come up with some sensible story he could present to his masters, Mixtak and Bradhu were herding Compton toward the probing pod.

Compton for his part was coming out of his zombie consciousness and beginning to behave like the Compton of old, issuing orders, trying to pull free of his many-fingered hosts. This proved impossible as their fingers seemed everywhere and acted something like suction cups.

"Here we are, Mr. Compton." Bradhu's politeness led only to more bullying on the part of Compton as a string of expletives showered over the aliens. The light wall opened revealing the probe room and its earthling occupant, Sir Randall Truffington, III. On recognizing Truffington, Compton exploded.

"What the fuck you got me into, Truffington? First you got me wandering about Bakersfield. Bakersfield! For Christ sake, what was that? Then you get me locked up at Metro before I can bloody well rewrite your prize winner's face. And now in some silly spaceship. I thought you had more control over that lottery thing you run. My wife's a

flaming fan of your lottery books but—”

“Shut up, Arthur. I don’t have control over what our authors write, only that they must write a certain amount each day to meet our schedule. We don’t give a crap about the quality, just the product! Not unlike your drug empire if I may bring a bit levity to the situation. If you haven’t noticed, I’m an abductee just as you are. We’ve never had this kind of authorial breach, it’s unprecedented and if I must say so, it is irresponsible and without manners. I’m afraid we are at the mercy of our authors’ intentions and not our own. That cannot be good. I spoke to the Queen just before this ridiculous turn of events, and I’m hoping she will be able to bring pressure on CedrosCM to write us out of here.”

Mixtak and Bradhu stepped back from the probing pod they had placed Compton in and seemed satisfied that everything was in readiness.

Mixtak spoke. “Gentlemen, please relax and stop talking, if you will. The probe will be rather pleasant if you cooperate. You seem to be intelligent beings as far as it goes, so I’m sure you understand the meaning of what I am telling you. Bradhu, are you ready?”

Bradhu had spaced his 32 fingers across the display of flashing lights, turned his head and nodded at Mixtak.

Mixtak, in a voice barely above a whisper, announced: “Begin it.”

The Royal Summons ...

Jinny had taken hold of CM and was working him into a lather just as a trap-door opened beneath him and he fell into six or more feet of stagnant water where there floated dead bodies and other unspeakable objects.

It was the ringing of his bedside phone that saved him from an agonizing end, gagging on who-knows-what foul remnant.

The irritating buzzer—for the ring-tone on this phone was little more than that—sawed away at his nerves, which were raw enough as it was. He struggled out of the fetid water, shaking himself awake enough to answer it. The voice on the other end lilted among peaks of propriety.

“Good morning, sir. Am I speaking with Mr. CedrosCM?” the voice asked in butter-and-biscuit tones.

“Yeah, that’s me,” groaned CM. “What bloody time is it?” CM had not yet put on his game voice.

“Oh, I rather think it’s just past noon, sir. If this is an inconvenient time I could always call back later, although Her Majesty was quite insistent that she wanted to talk to you.”

“What is this, some flippin’ bad joke? Who are you anyway?”

“Oh, do forgive me. My name is Darrold Hornby, I’m the Personal Secretary to Her Majesty the Queen. Her Majesty requested an audience with you, at your earliest convenience, of course. Today, if possible. Rather sooner than later, I’m afraid.”

“Listen, Darry. Can I call you Darry? You can take your bloody Queen and shove her. What do you mean takin’ up my precious time with your idiotic joke?”

“I’m afraid it’s no joke, sir. In fact, there should be a car waiting for you right now. If you’ll just look out the window you should see one of the Palace motorcars and a driver.”

“Very funny. I ain’t got a window.”

“Well, I swear to you, sir, there’s a royal coach waiting for you outside your door.”

“Yeah, I’m all chuffed up, all right. Am I going to have champagne in a glass slipper maybe?”

“It’s no joke, sir. Please, do verify this, as the Queen is waiting for you.”

CM dropped the phone, threw the covers aside and made his way to the door, which was still taped over with clear plastic sheeting where Alfie and Giles had smashed the glass. Climbing half-way up the stairs toward the street, until his head was at sidewalk-level, CM turned and found himself staring directly at the immense tires, hubcaps, and polished fender panels of a gleaming black Bentley. A uniformed driver wearing a chauffeur’s cap leaned against the purring vehicle. Having removed just one of his gray leather driving gloves, he was patiently smoking a cigarette.

CM rushed back inside and grabbed the phone.

“What in bloody hell does the Queen Mum want with me, Darry-boy?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss the Queen’s business over the phone, sir, but she’ll take that up with you directly you arrive. Shall I tell her you’re on your way?”

“Yeah, sure, but what am I s’posed to wear?”

“Oh, this is quite informal, sir. It will just be you and Her Majesty. I’ll be there too,

of course, to take notes. This is not a formal state occasion at all, just a little get-acquainted social call, let's say. She's a great admirer of your work."

"My work?"

"Yes, in particular your recent work on the Deathling Crown Lottery narratives."

Ten minutes later CedrosCM was chewing on a particularly nasty hangnail while sitting in the back of the Bentley, on his way to see the Queen.

Xhactu Reports ...

The time-honored Galactic Probing Protocols, though ever-popular among crew members, had nonetheless fallen into disuse across the reaches of space-time. The usual excuse given was the loathsome cost-benefit analysis, a favorite tactic of overzealous bureaucrats who didn't appreciate the importance of the probing tradition, never having served on one of the great space ships, let alone one as grand as the ship where Compton and Truffington were presently sequestered.

The real reason for the lapse of the Protocols was due to a rather prudish, squeamish attitude that had spread like a virus throughout the galaxy. Mere mention of orifices, for example—whatever the dialectical equivalent in local *galac-speak*—would bring blushes to the faces of the most hardened space voyagers.

But Commander Xhactu, being old-school, adhered to the old traditions. Since the ship was built according to his own specifications, he had called in some favors, pulled rank, and seen to it that the ship was outfitted with the best, most sophisticated probing devices available anywhere in space-time. The fact that the equipment resembled some of the reproductions from Xhactu's old-fashioned textbooks from his Earthling History classes—lots of tubes and tongs, augers and anodes, that sort of thing—did not detract from his pride in what he regarded as a signature touch. The probing unit was his personal laboratory or, better yet, his artist's studio. For probing, to Xhactu, was really an art.

Although he had ordered Mixtak and Bradhu to begin the preliminary probes of Compton and Truffington, Xhactu himself would personally oversee the exquisite final

operations. But first he had to report to Headquarters—a matter of some delicacy. How was he going to explain the presence of the two earthlings?

Due to an unexpected foreshortening of a wormhole conduit, the connection was activated before he had worked out his exact strategy. But he would brazen his way through the report, as always. Zhactu was nothing if not confident.

“Xhactu, you’re late!” said Zrrongo, the Commander-in-Chief.

“Only a few nano-seconds, sire,” wheedled Xhactu, still confident but already slipping.

“Our scans indicate that you have taken two miserable earthlings on board your ship. This is an express violation of orders. Need I remind you of the consequences?”

“No, sire, you needn’t go into detail. I’m fully aware of the regulations.”

“Well, then, how do you explain this?” Zrrongo seemed more than usually irritable.

“It’s definitely an anomaly, sire. We apparently passed through a previously undetected, unreported narrative field and the entire ship was diverted. Our anti-matter reactors were not powerful enough to withstand the narrative thrust. I believe that’s what the earthlings call it. Had I ordered any further resistance it is likely that the ship would have broken into pieces, according to the engineer’s report.”

Xhactu paused, waiting for Zrrongo’s reaction, but the latter seemed to be awaiting further information. Xhactu continued.

“I seized the opportunity to order some choice scientific experiments on the earthlings. Fortunately, my probe unit is well-outfitted for this.”

“Yes, you and your filthy probes. Well, since the earthlings are already on board I suppose you may continue with your ... experiments. But understand me, Xhactu: You

must maintain the tightest security measures with these two earthlings. What are they called?”

“Truffington and Compton.”

“Very well, then, Xhactu. Enjoy your little games, if you must. But again, I warn you: If there is any breach of security as a result of these wretched earthlings, I will personally see to it that you lose your command. Meanwhile, I want a full report, including a quantum-analysis of this so-called ‘narrative thrust’ effect of yours. The Council are anxious to dispose of this matter so you can get on with your mission. We’ve got bigger fish to fry, I believe is how the earthlings put it—though no one seems to know what a fish is. I will expect your report in twenty-four of your earthling hours. Understood?”

“Absolutely, galactically, super-nova clear, sire.”

“Until then.” Zrrongo signed off, and his image popped like a bubble. Xhactu was left wondering how many of his fingers would remain if and when he completed this mission. Still, only somewhat shaken, Zhactu convinced himself that he and his confidence had survived the report intact.

“Now,” he said importantly, “I must see how the probe is progressing.” And he strode through a door in the light wall.

The Queen's Privy ...

“Looks really old,” CedrosCM said, pointing to Darrold Hornby’s all-purpose walking stick, which was now rapping on the Queen’s privy door.

“Ancient, if not older,” Hornby answered, his tone dripping with pride, “older than most anything in the castle, if truth be known.” With that Hornby tapped again on the privy door with an authoritative motion that shocked Cedros.

“But isn't a privy a bathroom? Surely, we are not—”

“Archaic meaning, yes, but I can assure it now means only *private*.”

A chime from some unknown source must have been the signal for Hornby to enter and lead his guest into the Queen’s privy chamber.

“But—” Cedros began, trying to question Hornby about how to behave in the Queen's presence.

“No buts, Cedros, just follow me. The Queen won't bite.”

“Ah, Hornby! I see you have fetched our guest. Welcome, Cedros, and please, no formalities. Bring us some of that special Pu-Erh tea that recently arrived. Then you may leave us until I ring for you.”

Hornby left to bring the tea service. Cedros seemed all thumbs as to what to do or say. The Queen sat in a chair that was exactly in the center of the room, as close as Cedros could figure. It must be of some special significance, he thought, but exactly what, was quite beyond him in the moment. The Queen interrupted his confusion when she gestured for Cedros to take the chair to the left, set off at an oblique angle to the Queen’s centrality.

“Now, Cedros, my good man, it is so kind of you to come so soon.”

“Your Highness, your Queenship, your man Hornby left no doubt that you considered our meeting of some urgency.”

“Well, Cedros, I am sure you know that as your Queen I am most proud of our Deathling Crown Lottery. As you know it was my idea, or shall I say it was an idea that came to me in a most vivid dream. Very colorful as well, with the royal purple dominating throughout. Naturally, I take more than the usual interest in the narratives that are generated by the authors in our narrative section.”

A loud tap at the door announced the return of Hornby pushing a grand tea-cart through the door and into the space between Cedros and the Queen. In no time at all, Hornby had filled the cups with tea and cream and was off again in a flash.

“Now, Cedros, I think you will find the Pu-Erh quite stunning, but let me get to the point of our chat today. As your Queen of course I am most interested in your welfare, but also the welfare of my realm. And this is where a Queen’s burden rests so heavily. As a result of your narrative to the present time, the realm is endangered by your bringing aliens into play in a most unfortunate way. You’ve managed to allow the aliens to abduct Royal appointees, and while I may understand your intent from all that your file reveals, I cannot allow this affront to continue. So, as your Queen, I am asking you to resolve this problem in your next narrative submission. Do I make myself clear?”

The Queen sipped her tea and her eyes narrowed as she sat back in her royal chair.

“File? Whatever are you talking about?” Cedros’ incredulity could not be misread.

“Come now, Cedros, you can’t imagine that a realm can be run well by leaving things to chance. The Queen’s Royal Intelligence Service functions well to keep its

Queen informed. Nonetheless, slip-ups are possible, and we have such a case in relation to your narrative thrust, which, I hope I have made clear, needs to be remedied in your next submission. You do agree, don't you?"

"Well, your majesty, I'm not at all sure I agree. Authors have rights, prerogatives, essential freedoms that I do not believe should be so easily compromised."

"Your authorial integrity is much to be admired by one and all, but I fear in this instance Queenly rule must trump. This being so, I have prepared your next submission of 100 words myself, and if I must say so, I believe it is rather fine, solves the current dilemma, and sets you off in a proper direction."

"I honestly do not think—and in this I feel I am standing on ground which most authors would affirm—that I can agree to even a Queenly intrusion into my narrative, which I have won the right to with the only limitation being the daily submission of 100 words." Cedros found himself standing with hands on hips rather in the mode of making a pronouncement.

"Very well then. If that is your decision, I shall have Hornby escort you to New Highgate. You should find the accommodations fitting as we have up graded the former prison to what we now call a *facility* with all the new techniques and methods available to accomplish the somewhat difficult tasks confronting those who are less than cooperative. There you will be in the company of other non-compliers. Of course, you will have good meals, conversation, exercise and other sundries. You will only be my guest there for 24 hours. I can assure you of a pleasant stay. Did I mention there were no computers? Right. So, when your submission is not received, the Commission will forfeit your prize, and as the rules dictate, you, Mister CedrosCM, will become the prize."

With that the Queen's privy door swung open, Hornby rapped loudly with his stick on the floor and colorfully attired guards stepped in and began escorting CedrosCM to his temporary but fateful lodgings.