

*Xhactu and Irma get it on . . .*

Lou brought the fresh coffee carafe out to Irma, who said “Thanks, hon,” although Lou, with his purple nose, overhanging belly, sparse gray hair, and a hidden bottle of vodka, seemed anything but a “honey.” But that was just Irma. Everyone was “hon” to her, even Xhactu.

So, not long after Xhactu’s sudden arrival through the wormhole, he and Irma were holding hands across the counter, gazing into one another’s eyes, sharing the most intimate of thoughts and stories derived from past lives.

Xhactu told Irma about how he had been a Basque shepherd killed by wolves in the Pyrenees in northern Spain, how he had floated through the galaxy in spirit-form for a few centuries before being pressed into service—reincarnated—as Commander of an inter-galactic spaceship, due to an unexpected shortage of talent.

Irma, on the other hand, told Xhactu about her past life as an Egyptian princess, whose name was Something-or-other Hotep—she had never quite gotten it straight—but who had been betrayed by a palace concubine and was condemned by the Pharaoh to death by live-burial in the sand. She came back briefly in the early 16th century when she was promptly burned as a witch, so, when her next chance came, in contemporary Seattle, she played it safe by operating Irma’s Diner, slopping hash, dishing out donuts, and pouring coffee, with Lou smoking, cooking and drinking in the kitchen.

Xhactu had to consult his Universal Translator to see what “slopping hash” meant in galac-speak, but he smiled and nodded when he saw the actual meaning.

So, Irma’s present life was safer by far than her past lives, like the one where she told fortunes with Tarot Cards in the Massachusetts Bay Colony under Cotton Mather. The only clear and present danger she endured in Seattle was the occasional palm-reading for slightly unstable customers. The truth is, she was often too blunt, too forthcoming with her opinions, and once in a while she would provoke a tempest. But, on the whole, it was a peaceful life, into which Owl Man and Heron Man always brought their welcome and exotic variations. Besides, they always understood what she was trying to say.

And now they had brought the magnificent Xhactu into her life!

Meanwhile, Heron Man and Owl Man sat watching the rapt couple, glancing knowingly at one another on occasion, fascinated by the sheer unpredictability of the amazing, yet at the same time, unsurprising, conjunction taking place before their eyes. Irma and Xhactu—of course! How obvious!

“What do you think, Owl Man?” whispered Heron Man.

“Too soon to tell, of course, but it looks promising. As for the future?”

Owl Man just raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

“As for the future,” said Heron Man, “can you imagine Irma going for an inter-galactic spaceship honeymoon ride as the Bride of Xhactu?”

“Well, now that you mention it, that’s easy to imagine! The culmination of Irma’s past lives. Her destiny! What a movie that would make! Bride of Xhactu!”

Then Heron Man suddenly had a troubling thought. “Uh, Owl Man, do you think that Xhactu can ... you know ... ”

“Get it up?”

“Well, I didn’t want to be quite so blunt about it.”

“Why, Heron Man, I hope you’re not getting prudish in your old age!”

“I hope so too, Owl Man. It’s just that—”

“Yes?”

“It never occurred to me that Xhactu and Zrrongo and Mixtak and Bradhu and all the rest actually ... propagated. Did they have childhoods? With toys and things? Were they suckled by mothers?? Were they hatched from eggs? Are they mammalian? Reptiles? Amphibians? Without that Universal Translator on his belt, for example, what kind of language does Xhactu speak?”

“Hmmm. I see what you mean. I guess we’d have to do some probing, heh, heh!”

This was Owl Man’s idea of humor. He continued.

“It is a stretch to imagine baby Xhactu in a cradle! But with 3 legs you would think that requires a lot of galac-milk to grow those bones.”

“Yes, but we should be careful not to import too many earth-bound assumptions into an experience field that outstrips ours by so many light-years.”

“Mmmmm, I suppose you’re right.”

“By the way, have you decided whether to introduce Jasmine to Xhactu?”

“I told her I thought she’d really like him, but first we’d have to get him away from Irma, wouldn’t we?”

“Well, we could always call Jasmine and ask her to bring some single-malt ‘product’ here to Irma’s and have a little party. The turtledoves don’t look like they’re going anywhere soon.”

“No, they don’t. OK, I think you’re right, Heron Man. I’ll call Jasmine.”

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Time seemed to have stopped at Irma’s Diner. The front door was locked and the “Closed” sign faced outward. Xhactu and Irma had been talking for hours in non-stop ecstasy. When Jasmine arrived with a selection of single-malts and some snacks, the gathering seamlessly turned into a rollicking party. Xhactu, it turned out, could get intoxicated, but he could also hold his liquor; and his mood—he was already happy to have found Irma—only got more ebullient.

Soon Irma was teaching him to clog dance—all 3 legs of him. He proved to be a virtuoso clog dancer. Owl Man and Jasmine were slow-dancing in a dark corner, while Heron Man sat talking to Lou—who hadn’t gone home. They were intently discussing the physics of French fries and hot oil, the best way to scramble eggs, and a machine gun bullet-wound to the leg Lou had sustained during the war—he pulled up his pants leg to show Heron Man the scar.

“That’s how come I gotta have the vodka back there, ya know,” Lou confided. “Ease the pain.”

Heron Man thought that over for a moment then said, “Lou, I think that’s a bunch of bull-shit. I think you just like the booze.”

“Yeah, that too,” admitted Lou.

By the time dawn arrived,<sup>11</sup> all were sitting in a circle holding hands, Xhactu included, and Irma was leading some kind of séance, to which Xhactu dedicated his Universal Translator to facilitate communication with the spirits, about which he was surprisingly knowledgeable. But then, why wouldn't he be?

Irma heard from her Aunt Eunice, who died mysteriously; Jasmine communicated with a pet parakeet she had as a child; Owl Man conversed with someone who claimed to be related to Goethe; Lou had a vision of his smiling grandfather, Max; Heron Man, though it sounds redundant, heard from the “heron-man” he first met in a dream; and Xhactu had a vision of himself as a Basque shepherd, Aingeru Itxaso, before the wolves dragged him away from the campfire.

After everyone helped clean up—even Xhactu pitched in—the party disbanded and everyone left, going in their different directions, strangely satisfied and replete. Xhactu and Irma went home together, arm in arm.

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#### #4 FC-DCL CONJUNCTION EXPERIMENT

##### *Truffington Pulls Rank on Bradhu . . .*

“I say! I say there! Bradhu old boy! Where is your captain?”

Truffington was lying on his side, smoking a cigarette, the very picture of post-pleasured ease. He was wearing a light-weight, hospital-style “johnnie,” open at the back, with a white waffle-weave throw-blanket casually draped over him, exposing his thin legs and feet. He very casually pulled the blanket aside, exposing still more white flesh to the potential gaze of the Probing Attendant—in this case Bradhu, since Mixtak was busy elsewhere on the vast ship.

“Who?” said Bradhu, who was not that bright.

“I said, your *captain*, your *boss*, your *jefe*.”

“Oh, my *jefe*? Why you not say so? My *jefe*, Xhactu, he gone in wormhole.”

“Don’t get smart with me, you idiot. Your Probing Protocols are all very fine—they don’t feel bad, actually—but *wormholes* are just taking it a little too far, don’t you think?”

Bradhu paused, then got the joke.

“Oh, very funny, ha ha. Mister joke, ha ha. Wormhole probe, yeah, ha ha. Very funny.”

“Shut up, you fool!”

Truffington was beginning to sound like Xhactu—the *old* Xhactu, that is. He of the perpetual ill-humor.

“Listen,” said Truffington, suddenly embarking on a new tack. “Where is Mr. Compton?”

Bradhu frowned. “Compton?” He really wasn’t *that bright*.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” spat out Truffington, who was sympathetic to the teachings of the One True, Roman Catholic Church, despite his proper Church of England upbringing.

“Yes, you heard me. I said, ‘Compton.’ Where is he?”

“Oh, why not say so? Compton in Probing Room # 34.”

“And where is that, may I ask, my dear man?”

“Oh, thirty-four next door! Ha, ha, ha! Thirty-four next door! Ha ha!”

Truffington ground his cigarette stub to a near-powder in a polished metallic tray, then swung his legs over the side of the bed and started to lever himself into a standing position.

Bradhu would have none of it, however, and he quickly approached Truffington and rudely shoved him back down onto the Probing Bed.

“Leave me alone, you monster! I am Sir Randall Truffington III, lately Her Majesty’s favored consort, and I demand to speak to your superior officer! I’ve had just about enough of your idiotic probes—well, maybe just one more, but then that’s it! They’re addictive!”

Poor Bradhu wasn’t sure he caught the exact meaning of this outburst, but he certainly caught the drift of it, the tone of outrage, with which he was quite familiar,



thanks to Xhactu's tutelage.

"Sorry, boss. My *jefe* gone off ship. Bradhu can't let you go Compton."

Why is it, Truffington thought to himself, that inferior aliens can't ever learn to use the proper articles or even verbs?

"Now, listen, you, you—"

"Monster?"

"Yes, thank you ... you *monster*. I demand to see my compatriot, Mr. Compton, immediately, or I'll have Her Majesty's Royal Guards chop off your head in a heartbeat!"

This sounded dangerously close to Xhactu's routine beheading threats, which he sometimes ordered carried out, a fact that induced Bradhu to moderate his tone a bit.

"Yes, sire, Bradhu understand. Compton in thirty-four, next door"—at this Bradhu suppressed a snicker. "Bradhu take Probee Truffington right away."

In a flash, Sir Randall stood face to bum with Arthur "Bulldog" Compton, who was just finishing his latest probe.

"Mmmm, that was good," said Compton who, glancing at his fellow countryman, said, "How have yours been?"

"Oh, quite good, in fact. I must say, these chaps certainly know their business!"

And they each shared a cigarette in the time-honored relaxation ritual.

When Compton had finished his cigarette, he looked around suspiciously, gave Truffington the once-over, and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "We gotta get

outta here.”

“But why, old boy?” Truffington, still relaxed, didn’t see any need for haste.

“Because they’re after me.”

“Oh, you mean the Queen’s agents?”

“Yeah.”

“But Compton, old boy, they can’t get you here. Don’t you see? You’re on a space-ship.”

“So?”

“So it’s a fiction, and it’s stuck. Can’t you tell? All they do is the same-old, same-old: *probe and polish, probe and polish*, day after day. Do you ever feel any movement of the ship itself? It costs a fortune to run these things, even in idling, *sleep-mode*.”

“Well,” said Compton.

“No, of course you don’t feel anything. The ship hasn’t moved an inch since they marched us up the loading ramp. It might as well be a movie set, like that fake studio-based ‘moon-shot’ a few years ago. All fake, they say.”

“What about the probes?” said Compton.

“Hmm, yes, well, they feel real enough, don’t they?”

Compton thought about saying how he really felt about the probes, but decided against it. Truffington, on the other hand, had no such scruples. He said:

“I say, Bradhu, old boy. Bradhu!”

“Yes, master,” said Bradhu at the door. “How can I serve you?”

“You can bloody well probe Mr. Compton and me again. It’s past time, so

make it snappy.”

“Yes, sire,” said Bradhu, and he went to get the instruments he’d just finished polishing.

Truffington leaned back, anticipating, and said to Compton: “I don’t know who the so-called narrators of this bloody mess are, but so long as Bradhu keeps probing, I don’t care.”

Compton said nothing, but he had a strangely wild and avid look on his face.

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