

Truffington Meets His Match ...

Many were the jobs Truffington had dispatched Alfie and Giles to take care of over the years, jobs that mostly involved bashing someone about. And the truth is that, although he disliked the two of them in strictly personal terms, he also admired them, after a fashion.

“Right rough boys they are,” admitted Truffington to his personal *confidant*, Geoffrey, the two of them sitting toe-to-toe in the Carlton Club over post-prandial brandy and cigars. “I wouldn’t mind a little swagger and punch like that myself, once in a while, Geoff. A little whack on the knee with a cricket paddle would do nicely, I should think, very nicely indeed! Show a little backbone. What’s an empire for, anyway?”

Unfortunately, Truffington’s hands were far too soft for any such imperial high-jinks as he liked to imagine himself carrying out; and besides, he would never want to muss up his clothes. Too expensive. “Paid a pretty penny for them, I did!”

Still, he could dream ...

On this particular night, however, his dreams came crashing down around his ears when a valet brought word that “two gentlemen are waiting in the lobby to speak to Sir Randall.”

“What? At this hour?” Truffington checked his pocket watch to calibrate his indignation. “Did they give their names?” he asked.

“No, sir,” said the valet, “but they did look rather desperate.”

“Very well, tell them to wait. I’ll be right down.”

Truffington already knew who they were, and although he didn't want them mucking about the Carlton Club, even down in the lobby, he also wanted their report on that *impudent cowboy* known as "Owl Man."

He picked up his glass, tossed off the remaining brandy and left Geoffrey to doze by the fireplace, then strode manfully down to the lobby, where the two quivering sewer rats sat waiting to deliver the bad news. They both stood as he approached.

"Well?" said Truffington.

Since Giles was the self-appointed spokesman for the two, he took it upon himself to respond. The only problem was that he could barely speak.

"Uh, uh, uh, he uh—"

"Stop blathering, you fool," shouted Truffington, even though they were all standing in the Club lobby, within earshot of everyone at the front desk. Word would get out in minutes, but Truffington didn't care. He was fuming. "Just get on with it. What happened?"

"The bloody cove he, he—" Giles still couldn't finish a sentence.

Truffington turned impatiently to Alfie and said, "What have *you* got to say for yourself?"

Surprisingly, Alfie found his tongue.

"He fucked us over right good, he did, m'lord, an' he said if you pulled another stunt li' that there'd be 'hell to pay.' That's what the bloke said: 'Hell to pay.' He sprung a trap on us, *like he knew we was comin'*, I swear he did. We're lucky we're alive, I'd say. Said to tell you don't mess wi' him again or there'd be 'hell to pay', that's what he—
"

“OK, OK, that’s enough. I get it. You can stop now.”

Alfie was taken aback. Giles didn’t let him do much talking, and he found he liked it. He didn’t *want* to stop talking, but he didn’t dare cross ‘Little Lord Fauntleroy’, as he privately called Truffington.

“Sir,” he said, and touched his forehead with his knuckle, as if in salute. And he held his tongue.

Truffington told Alfie and Giles to “disappear” for now. He’d call them when he needed them. So they dispiritedly trudged out of the Club and drifted over to the Bucket o’ Blood for a few picker-upper pints of ale.

As Truffington walked back up to the cigar lounge, he muttered to himself, “Queenie. It’s got to be Queenie behind this. Queenie, with her incessant meddling, I’m sure of it. She just can’t keep her gloved hands out of my business.”

And with this speculative certainty came a wave of lower abdominal rumbling. Queenie was the last person on earth Truffington wanted to go up against.

“Better leave the cowboy alone for now, old boy,” he told himself.

Owl Man and Heron Man try to reason with Xhactu (PM) ...

From the gleaming anteroom to the gleaming bridge of the gleaming spaceship commanded by (His Imperial Viceroy) Commander Xhactu (no miserable first or middle names allowed), Owl Man and Heron Man were escorted into Commander Xhactu's presence for an audience.

“Get up, you fools!” commanded Xhactu to the two kneeling earthlings. “What do you think this is, a bloody sci-fi TV series from your so-called 1950s? Hereafter you will exercise proper courtesy by calling me by my rightful name, Xhactu. And while you're at it, stop groveling like porcine idiots.”

Xhactu consulted the Universal Translator Read-Out monitor, currently on his belt, to make sure that his words were being given the proper emphasis in this inferior Earth-language, English, as it was called. That was affront enough already, he noted to himself with satisfaction. Then, with a magisterial sneer, he turned back to the two earthlings.

“Shall I cut off their heads, Xhactu?” offered one of the guards, who brandished a laser-honed blade fashioned from some exotic inter-galactic metal and mounted on a long wooden pole—the original pole-material having been shattered from gravitational forces while crossing an asteroid field.

“No, leave them. We’ll decide their fate later, after I see what their sniveling is all about, and after, of course, they’ve been properly probed.”

This last word was given special emphasis, drawn out, almost slurred, as if with secret passion. It was well-known among the Galactic Officers’ Clubs strewn throughout the galaxy that Xhactu was “old school,” having long been a devout follower of the Galactic Probing Protocols, as they were known, even though younger officers, who knew nothing of tradition or discipline, were agitating for retiring what they privately termed “the Old Stick-It-Up-Their-Bum” code.

Xhactu, in a bi-polar flip-flop of demeanor worthy of any earthling political candidate, suddenly was all gracious consideration, offering Owl Man and Heron Man a plate of earth-figs and pomegranates, roast pig, and dancing girls—“Although I’m afraid I can’t offer you the roly-poly ‘ta-tas’ that you earthlings make so much of a fuss over.”

It was Owl Man who spoke first. “Your Highness is too kind—” he began, before being abruptly cut off by Xhactu.

“Stop it, fool. I told you. It’s Xhactu, Xhactu, Xhactu! Watch your tongue before I have Ingklic here cut it out!”

Owl Man said nothing but bowed his head in awed submission.

“Yes, Xhactu,” he finally said.

“Very well, then,” said Xhactu, having gotten control of his galactic temper.

“What was it you wanted to see me about?”

Instinctively, Owl Man started to grovel again, his eye on the razor-sharp blade eagerly wielded by the alert guard, but Heron Man quickly intervened to avert another potentially lethal explosion.

“Xhactu, I think what my colleague, the esteemed Mr. Owl Man, is trying to say, is that, well, things are not going very well for us in this difficult transitional period, what with the fictional thrust of our story having been stopped cold, and even this grand Intergalactic Space Ship having been grounded in fictional limbo—”

“Fictional what?” shouted Xhactu.

“‘Fictional limbo,’ Xhactu. It’s very much like when this magnificent spaceship’s thrusters don’t work for shit.”

Xhactu consulted his Universal Translator again and sagely nodded his head. “Yes, that’s it. That’s exactly it. Well said, earthling, well said. The narrative thrusters don’t work for shit.”

“Anyway, Xhactu, we were wondering if perhaps you had access to some galactic fictional thrusting devices or techniques or secrets that would enable us to get our story moving again.”

At this, Xhactu seemed taken aback, and hesitated a few moments. Then he began beaming, as if a wonderful idea had just occurred to him. “Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place, earthling? I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Heron Man, Xhactu. My name is Heron Man.”

“Yes, yes. Heron Man. You see, you and this other earthling have no trouble at all. You only *think* you do. The answer to all fictional troubles has been the same since the inception of the galaxy—well, this galaxy at least. When your fictional progress grinds to a halt, all you gotta do is probe, probe, probe! That’s all you gotta do.”

After patting his Universal Translator Read-Out device with satisfaction, Xhactu then surprised the two earthlings by breaking into an imitation Scottish jig, which was no

mean feat considering the number of feet he had—three feet on three legs, at last count. A problem of coordination.

Once he had finished his jig, Xhactu clapped twice, authoritatively, and ordered the guard Ingklic to escort the two earthlings down to the same Probing Rooms where Truffington and Compton were sequestered, assuming they were even alive. The Probing Rooms were their “last-known whereabouts” when the spaceship—including Commander Xhactu, it must be said—had completely lost its own narrative thrust, the ship’s metaphorical thrusters not working for shit, as noted, a development that seemed to have taken place light-years ago.

Owl Man Plans Exploratory Trip to London ...

When Owl Man told Jasmine and Heron Man about the recent series of dreams he'd had—the ones announcing the rather alarming title of *"The Deathling Crown Lottery"*—he unwittingly introduced a note of uncertainty into his and his friends' normally relaxed relations. Call it a heightened alertness, if you will, or a degree of antsy anticipation, perhaps even a jumpy twitchiness or a twitchy jumpiness.

Whatever you call it, and as if to prove the point, one Friday afternoon, as they chatted agreeably and sipped some fine, 18-year Macallan Single Malt, the phone suddenly rang—as phones will do—and all three of the *amigos* jumped several inches into the air.

Jasmine was closest to the phone, so she grabbed the device and practically shouted into it, "Hello?"

She listened for a moment, then said sweetly, "Just a moment. I'll see if he's here." Holding the phone tight against her chest she whispered to Owl Man, "It's for you, Owlie. Are you here? Somebody by the name of "Menachem something or other."

"Oh my, yes, Jaz! I'll take the call!" and he practically yanked the phone out of her hand, but not before adding softly, "Thanks, Jaz."

"Menachem, my old friend," he boomed out, pacing about the apartment as if in nervous anticipation. Heron Man and Jasmine could only gape at the suddenly-

activated Owl Man, who, against all his gloomy, overcast and rainy Scottish single-malt training was practically bounding with sun-sparkled, Spanish *fiesta-de-Jerez alegría*.

“Say that again, Menachem? Puts or calls?” Owl Man listened. “Uh huh. Uh huh. And did you say ETF or OTC? Either one, I see. Well, since you devised this instrument in the mid-1980s, it’s become a world-wide financial force. And the farther we traipse down this slippery slope, as you well know, the more powerful it has become: VIX. Every serious investor must have a position, pro or con—or at least an opinion, if not an option—on VIX.”

Owl Man listened intently.

“Uh huh. Uh huh. Soooo,” he continued at half-tempo, “if I understand you, Menachem, you’re writing VIX options—puts *or* calls—on the volatility surrounding the Deathling Crown Lottery. But ... how did you even *know* about DCL? I only just *dreamed* about it a few days ago.”

Owl Man’s eyebrows shot up toward the ceiling.

“What? Everybody in England’s talking about it? A big hit? Another Harry Potter? The Queen herself? Holy shit—uh, pardon me, Menachem, but you did catch me by surprise! Well, if it really is a functioning national lottery, as you say, I can well imagine there’s a lot of money changing hands, and in different forms.”

Ordinarily, the Owl was above such excited, exclamatory speech, let alone stray vulgarities. A muted hoot at 3 AM was more his style. But this “Menachem” person must have made quite an impression on Owl Man at one time, to get such a rise out of him.

“Let me write down those names, Menachem. Truffledon, was it? No? Spell it, please. T-r-u-f-f-i-n-g-t-o-n. Got it. Oh, *Sir Randall Truffington III*. Yes, of course. And the others? Arthur Compton? He’s the prize? And CedrosCM, the winner? No spaces, just ‘CM,’ you say? Odd name. No, no, that’s plenty, Menachem, I can research the rest. Meanwhile, I’ll check the DCL VIX quotes.”

Finally, after the obligatory inquiries after health, relatives and so forth, Owl Man said, “Thanks for breaking this astounding news to me, Menachem. It’s been wonderful talking to you, as always,” and they rang off.

No sooner had Owl Man disconnected from his call than Jasmine leaped to her feet and grabbed Owlie’s forearm, digging in with her fingernails.

“Owlie, what’s going on?”

Owl Man sat down with all the appearance of one whose head is spinning, pulling Jasmine with him onto the couch.

“I’ve had some remarkable experiences in my life, but this one may just take the cake.”

“Owlie, just forget the cake and spill the beans, please

“That was my dear old friend Menachem King, *the* options expert at the CBOE,” said Owl Man. “*The* options expert in the world, actually. He *invented* VIX, the volatility factor, and figured out a way to securitize it. He said he’s now writing VIX options for the Deathling Crown Lottery. Do you have any idea what that means?”

Jasmine squeezed harder. “No, but I’m waiting, Owlie.”

“That means that *my dream is happening in the world*. And not only that, but this news from Menachem tells me that enormous, speculative capital flows are

surging into the markets under the DCL banner. All the hedge funds are jumping in, the central banks, the billionaires, the Arabs—everyone looking for a way to make a killing off the volatility surrounding this—this DCL dream text, or whatever it is.”

Heron Man and Jasmine both swore simultaneously: “Jesus!” they exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Owl Man. Then, as if to himself, “I don’t see how I can avoid this now.”

“Avoid what?” said Heron Man and Jasmine, again simultaneously.

“Avoid making a trip to London ASAP, to talk to this Truffington fellow, check out the stories about Arthur Compton, CedrosCM, and so forth.”

“I’m going with you,” said Jasmine firmly.

“I’m afraid not, my dear. Not this time anyway. I need you and Heron Man to stay here, at least at first. I’ll be in touch, naturally. And if I get caught in some jam I’ll contact you and the two of you can *write me out of trouble*.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Tonight.”

Heron Man and Jasmine simply looked at each other, stupified.

Meanwhile, Owl Man went to pack his suitcase.

After Heron Man left, Jasmine walked to the bedroom door and leaned against the jamb to watch Owl Man pack. He seemed totally relaxed, and it wasn’t just the Macallan, she was sure.

“You’re not even nervous, are you?”

“Not really, no.”

“Owlie, compared to me, you must have the nervous system of an iguana!
Don’t you ever get frightened?”

“Not often, no. It’s got to be pretty bad to frighten me. Do you like this
sweater, or this one?”

“The first.”

“Thank you, Jaz.”

“Owlie, you know you’re crazy, don’t you?”

“Not exactly. What I intend to find out is *not* whether I am crazy, because I
know I’m not. What I want to find out is whether this confluence of the DCL dream
and the DCL reality is really happening. Or not. Is it a form of madness? Or not? Mere
illusion? Mass psychosis? In any event, there is a lot of risk involved.”

“Hmmm,” said Jasmine. “You mean, like, risk in dreams?”

“No, I mean in fiction.”

“Oh, oh,” said Jasmine, “here we go again! Explain, please.”

“Just think of the standard risks of fiction writing. You start at Point A and
before you know it you’re lost somewhere between Points J, P and Z. You don’t know where
you are, and you never know where you’ll end up. Do you think Melville knew that
Tashtego would nail a sea-hawk to the mast, at the end of the novel, as the ship was going
down and Tashtego was sliding under the water?”

“Boy, that’s a question I’d love to ask Mr. Melville, Owlie.”

“So would I. But my experience to date suggests that fiction—the fictive cosmos—is
far deeper, greater and *more real* than we realize. I keep thinking of that great quote by
Ortega y Gasset:

Why write if this too easy activity of pushing a pen across paper is not given a certain bullfighting risk and we do not approach dangerous, agile and two-horned topics?

“Yes. Beautiful idea, beautifully expressed. And you’re saying that the bullfighting risk of this dangerous, agile, two-horned topic doesn’t worry you at all, Owlie?”

“Not worried, no, my dear. What I feel is alert, that’s all.”

“Uh huh,” said Jasmine flatly. “Alert. Well, then, what is it about all this that has you so alert, if I may be so bold?”

Owl Man rolled a pair of socks together and tossed them into the suitcase.

“Buying time, are we, Owlie?”

“I’m sorry? Did you say something, Jaz?” said the Owl, shaken out of his sock enabled reverie. “Well, it’s hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

“I’m ... alert to the fictive possibility that, through unforeseen events, I might end up becoming the next DCL Grand Prize.”

At first Jasmine gulped, slumped and groaned, but then she straightened up and looked Owl Man in the eye. Owl Man met her gaze.

“That’s why I need you and Heron Man to be here, away from the ‘action,’ in case I need you to write me free,” he said.

“Owlie, you can count on us.”

“I know I can, Jaz. I know I can.”