

*The Adventures of*

# FEX & COO

A Serialized Novel Novel

by

Russell Lockhart and Paco Mitchell

**Episode One**



**OWL AND HERON PRESS**

© 2021

Everett WA and Santa Fe NM

### *Sal leaves Ling Bank early ...*

Sal had come in early today, on account of the big brouhaha with Fex and Coo, the bastards. Fex wanted a pow-wow at Tully's, just like that. So Sal would have to leave before his shift was over. He couldn't miss this meeting. What do they mean, "it's urgent"? It's going beautifully, just the way Sal had planned. Just a few more days, Sal was thinking, a few more lousy days. Did they screw up in some way? Fex was the impatient one, always the big show up front, but in the end he's the first one to walk. "Coo's not so bad, just nervous," Sal said out loud. The teller next to him looked up and said, "What? You OK, Sal?" "Sure, sure, yeah I'm fine. Just talkin' to myself." Gotta watch my step, thought Sal. This place is giving me the creeps. Maybe I'll get outta here now and grab a coffee at Tully's before Fex and Coo get there. We gotta straighten this thing out.

After closing out his cash drawer and balancing his books, Sal told the supervisor, Miss Jolene Baker-Tomlins, aka "The Bitch," that he was taking the rest of the day off.

"What? Again? That's four days so far this month, Sal."

"Look, Jolene, I came in early today and I'll come in early tomorrow. I got gastric upset. Just lay off, OK?"

Miss Baker-Tomlins sniffed and swiveled away from Sal. She took a small spiral notebook from her desk drawer and made an entry. By the time she looked up, Sal was gone.

Outside, Sal glanced around to see if it was safe. An old habit. He looked up. Rain again, but starting to stop. Make up your mind, thought Sal. A FedEx delivery truck pulled up just as Sal stepped off the curb. Hey! Watch out! He pulled up the collar on his coat, walked behind the truck and started across the street. A big red Caddie Escalade honked and swerved, the driver lowered his window and shouted, "Idiot!" then drove on. Easy, Sal. Watch your step. There's a lot riding on you. Talk to Fex and Coo first, see what's going on, before you let yourself get flattened like a pancake. You dreamed up this opportunity, now don't blow it.

Sal ducked behind a UPS van parked in front of Tully's. What gives? FedEx, UPS, and over there, Costco? Delivery hour, I guess. Gotta keep the American consumer happy. No drivers in sight. They're probably all at Tully's. Inside, he looked around

again. Crowded, but no sign of Fex or Coo. He ordered a double mocha latte and sat down on the only empty chair, next to some old guy with a computer. Sal took a sip of his coffee. Too hot. He blew on it. He figured Fex and Coo wouldn't be here for another twenty, thirty minutes. OK, then. Time enough to cool my jets, figure out a plan.

“Do you mind?”

Sal looked up from his coffee. The old guy was looking at him. Sal shot back, “Do I mind what?”

“You're sitting on my coat.” The old guy's coat was on the chair.

“Hey, ain't that somethin'? Sorry, pal. I thought it was the upholstery.”

The old man wore a thick turtleneck sweater, a white beard, glasses and some sort of leather fisherman's cap. He looked like a big owl. An owl wearing a hat. “What are you workin' on, Pops? The Great American Novel?”

The man looked at Sal and fixed him with a steady gaze. Sal shifted uneasily in his chair. Who is this dude? he wondered.

“As a matter of fact I am working on a novel. How great it is, remains to be seen.”

Sure, Pops, sure, Sal thought to himself, not about to buy the pitch.

*Owl Man shows Sal his computer screen ...*

“Since you have sat on my coat, we have achieved a certain level of intimacy. With this as permission, I have looked into your eyes, and though you quickly averted them, I can see you are both doubtful and fearful. You have no reason to fear me, so I will ascribe that to other matters, which we may come to discuss. The doubt seems to be in relation to my novel. Are you doubting that I am writing one, or doubting it is the great American novel?”

Sal fidgeted and was put off and fell into a fummy state at the owl man’s words. “We ain’t discussin’ nothin’, old man. But I will call your bluff. If you’re writing a novel, let me see it.”

The owl man turned his computer so Sal could see what was written there. Sal’s smile vanished as he looked at the screen. Sal read it out loud:

“Sal is a teller at Ling Bank. He does not yet know that Fex and Coo have decided ending it is the key. They have been held up by matters that do not concern us. You may not agree. That’s fine, it is not a requirement. Just wait. You will see.”

“How the hell—?” Sal interrupted himself, covering his mouth with his hand.

“What is it, Sal? You have lost a good bit of color. Are you feeling unwell?” The owl man turned his computer back around and looked at Sal’s closed eyes.

“How—?” Sal interrupted himself again and could not continue.

*Owl Man gets on Sal's nerves ...*

The owl man spoke softly. "Don't worry, Sal. I'm not a monster."

"Listen, mister, I didn't mean nothin', I shouldn't ... this ah ... you know." Sal twisted his napkin, mind racing. He was trying to figure out how this owl man, this witch doctor, got the goods on him, how he could have known what he and Fex and Coo were up to. Unless. Wait a minute. Unless Mr. Owl Man here and Fex were in cahoots.

"Say, listen," began Sal. "You don't happen to know—"

"It's all right, Sal. I can see you're confused. It's understandable. You want to ask me if Fex put me up to this. I assure you he didn't. Not directly anyway. I've never met Fex before in my life. At least not before later today. And as for your other friend, Coo, I don't know him either. Perhaps you can describe them for me. It would help my novel immensely."

"Sure, sure. Fex and I go way back. But Coo ain't no friend, I'll tell ya that up front. He's a ... an associate. We're ... business partners."

"Oh, really? What kind of business are you in, Sal?"

"You tell me, wise guy." Sal was recovering his balance. It'd take more than a witch doctor to get a full-nelson on old Sal. "You found out I work at Ling Bank, somehow. If you know so much, what kind of business am I in?"

Owl Man smiled. He drew a small packet of delicate tissues from his pocket, took off his glasses and polished them with the tissue. "Special paper," he said to Sal. "Doesn't scratch the lenses."

"Quit stallin', pal. That book of yours. What do you know about my business?" Sal was definitely edgy, and getting annoyed. He was fighting the impulse to run.

"Oh, not very much, Sal. But I do know you and Fex and Coo have a little *divertissement* planned, and it's not going too well. Something is holding them up. That's why you're here, isn't it? To have a meeting with them?"

"Yeah, yeah, we got a little business to discuss, and it's private. You ain't invited."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of interrupting your business, Sal. On the contrary, I want to stay out of your way. Let's just see how it goes."

Involuntarily, Sal reached for his neck, rubbed it thoughtfully.

“But you were going to describe Fex and Coo for me.”

“Well, Fex is the big one, yeah, he’s big all right. Big and fat. Lotta red hair. Thinks he’s a big shot. Always wears one of them fancy Douglas Fairbanks ties, you know.”

“You mean an ascot tie?”

“Yeah, that’s it. An ascot. Pussy tie, if you ask me.”

“But he wouldn’t like to hear you describe it that way, would he, Sal?”

Sal shivered. This witch doctor was getting on his nerves. Besides, he shouldn’t be spilling his guts to him like this. But the guy seems to know everything he’s going to say.

“And Coo?” said Owl Man.

Sal snapped out of his reverie and rotated his coffee cup—clockwise, always clockwise. He was walking a tightrope, and he knew it.

“Yeah, Coo, he’s, you know, he’s the little one. Traipses after Fex like some goddamn poodle. Like Boswell chasing after Churchill.”

“You mean Dr. Johnson?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“But I thought you said Coo was an associate?”

“Yeah, sure, it’s just—” Sal hesitated, looked around.

“Go on, Sal, I’m not going to bite your head off,” said Owl Man.

Sal took a deep breath and continued, “It’s just that me and Coo don’t get along too good. He’s too—” Another hesitation.

“Anxious?” said Owl Man.

“Yeah, anxious. How the hell did you know that?”

“Well, Sal, I feel I’m getting to know you a little better now. As I said, when you sat on my coat it did establish a level of intimacy.”

“Look, mister, don’t get no ideas.” Sal leaned back suddenly and started to slip off his chair.

“Careful, Sal. And remember, you have nothing to fear from me. You don’t want to get all bruised up *before* your meeting with Fex, do you?”

Sweat was forming on Sal’s neck, and his face was definitely turning pale. Despite the coffee shop chatter he could hear his stomach gurgling.

“Well, don’t let me hold you up, Sal,” said Owl Man.

“Hold me up? What are you talkin’ about now?”

“Oh, I just meant you look like you could use a trip to the men’s room, freshen up a little.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I could use a little ‘quality time,’ like I call it.”

Sal stood up and Owl Man stood at the same time, reaching for his computer.

“Well, Sal, it was wonderful meeting you. Maybe I’ll see you here at Tully’s again. Or perhaps I’ll visit you at Ling Bank, open an account or something.”

“No,” shouted Sal. Then, almost whispering, “No, don’t come in there. I don’t want the Bitch to get suspicious.”

“What’s the harm, Sal? It would be strictly business, right? We’re not involved in anything ... illegal, are we?”

“No, no,” Sal insisted. “Perfectly legit. I’m straight.”

“Straight?” asked Owl Man.

“Yeah, you heard me. I’m legit. Straight. You comprendo, kimosabe?”

“Very well, Sal. If you insist.”

Sal looked around the coffee shop, then shot a quick sideways glance at the owl man, whose features were strangely blurred, almost distorted, like the faces you see in fast-moving clouds. Sal shifted his weight from foot to foot. For a second he wondered if the owl man was really there. Steam rose from the espresso machine, the window dripped with condensation, the barista slammed his coffee filter against the counter, violently, like a heavyweight pounding some flyweight non-contender against the ropes. Sal was getting weak.

“Hey, mister,” he said. “What’s your name anyway?”

“Just call me Owl Man for now, Sal. The novelist. We’ll talk again. Have a nice day.”

The owl man turned and walked out the door, into the sodden chill of mid-morning Seattle. He turned right and, leaning into the wind, began walking. Sal watched him disappear. Now the only things Sal could see on the street were two of the delivery trucks: FedEx and Costco—UPS had already left. But as Sal gazed through the fogged windows of Tully’s, the pillars outside were blocking his view. His left eye began

twitching. He realized that, when he really looked, the only lettering he could see on the trucks was “Fe-x” and “Co-o.”

How weird is that? he muttered under his breath.



*Fex makes his entrance at Tully's ...*

A few minutes later the Tully's door swung open. A gust of cold air blew a newspaper off a table, and a large man strode into the room. It could have been King Henry VIII entering a banquet hall, but it was Fex. Following close behind was Coo, his page, carrying Fex's briefcase. Sal shuddered. Coo looked anxious. Fex's face was redder than usual, and steam rose from the top of his gleaming red Pompadour. Fex looked directly at Sal.

*Fex and Coo join Sal at Tully's ...*

Sal motioned for Fex and Coo to join him. Tully's was thinning out from the morning rush. Fex sent Coo for the coffee, sat his bulk in the chair, and without so much as a "hello" he began his typical bravado.

"Sal, we have decided to—"

"End it. I know." Sal leaned forward to be in Fex's face as much as he could.

"Why the fuck did you talk to that old geezer about our plans?"

"Calm down, Sal. I didn't talk to no one. I don't know what you are talking about. And how did you know we decided to end it?"

Coo placed a plain drip coffee in front of Fex and sat down next to him, across from Sal.

"So you told him what we decided," Coo said, as he moved his coffee around on the table creating those circles in the coffee he liked to look at.

"No, Coo, I haven't told him. He already knows."

"How can he know if we just decided and no one told him?" Coo was trying to grasp the idea and was not helped by his hand suddenly jerking, spilling a good bit of the latte he had been swirling. In jumping up to avoid the coffee spilling over the edge, he managed to bump the table and upended his cup entirely, this time the coffee heading straight for Sal.

"Jesus, Coo, do you always have to be such a mutton head?" Sal scooted his chair over so the coffee ran harmlessly to the floor. "Get some napkins, idiot." Coo went off to do as he was told. He was good at that.

"So what's this about an old geezer?" Fex extended his arm and banged his pointed finger on the table next to Sal's cup.

"He's writing a novel." Sal said this as if it explained something.

"So?" Fex pounded his finger as Coo rejoined the pow-wow, both hands stuffed with paper napkins.

"It's about ... us." Sal's pause stopped Fex's finger pounding.

"That's crazy, Sal. Where the fuck's your brain? Nobody can be writing about us 'cause nobody knows about us." Fex pulled his arm back and glanced down at Coo on the

floor wiping up the spill.

“I read it, Fex, it was about us. I saw it on his computer. I read it, Fex. It was about you guys ending it and how I didn’t know yet.”

Coo was up in his chair again, shaking his head. Fex was staring at Sal, a scowl drawing tight across his face. Sal broke the silence.

“I’m scared, Fex. Something like this can’t happen. But it did. If you guys are putting me on and had set this guy up, I’ll—” Sal stopped. He looked at Fex and then at Coo and back again, over and over.

“We didn’t talk to nobody, Sal. That’s the fuckin’ truth. So what do we do now?”

Fex drank down the last of his drip. Coo fiddled with the pile of wet napkins. Sal was looking away, looking at the door. Looking at the Owl Man coming in.

Fex and Coo turned and looked at what Sal was looking at: Two old men approaching their table.

“Fex and Coo, I presume,” said the man Sal knew as the Owl Man. “May I introduce Heron Man. We have been talking and feel that your plan to end it is premature. There are possibilities you have not yet considered.”

*Fex demands explanations ...*

Never one to miss an opportunity for the grand gesture, Fex stood abruptly as he slammed his hand on the table.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” roared Fex.

Coffee shot like a geyser out of Sal’s cup and Fex’s spoon clattered to the floor. In full gale, Fex was an impressive sight indeed: Great belly heaving, menacing eyebrows arching up and down like Moses’ snakes, electrifying Pompadour practically aflame ... he made good use of his theatrical size. He was accustomed to an audience.

But Heron Man only said quietly, “Sit down, Fex. You’re upsetting the customers. Besides, do you want everyone here to listen in on our conversation?”

Fex looked around the coffee shop. Every eye was turned in his direction. The barista, the customers, the dishwasher, even Tully stuck his head out from behind the office door to see what was going on. Fex was used to attention, drew energy from it. What he didn’t like were the ears attached to all those heads, turned in his direction like so many little radio antennas, all tuning in, waiting for the next hot-headed broadcast to issue from his lips.

Fex cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, you might as well sit down. But I’m warning both of you. You got some serious explainin’ to do.”

“We’ll try, Fex. But we don’t know much more than you do,” said Owl Man. He and Heron Man pulled empty chairs to the small table and sat down.

“Everything all right here, gents?” It was Tully. “Can I get everybody some coffee? It’s on the house.” Tully was a good businessman, and knew better than to risk a big breakage expense when he could calm tempers with free swill. Keep the customers happy was Tully’s motto. He swabbed the table again with a damp cloth. The barista brought fresh coffee for all. Plain drip for Fex.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Tully called to the barista. “We got any donuts left? My friend here likes donuts.” He nodded in the direction of Owl Man. “Bring out the whole tray for him and his guests here. Make sure it’s a nice assortment.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Jimmy the barista rushed a tray of donuts and other pastries to the table.

“Thanks, Tully. Sorry about the accident.” Owl Man was a regular customer and knew Tully well.

Tully returned to the counter, then the office. Order was established, but not peace. Sal leaned forward. “Listen, Mr. Bird Man, or whoever you are. If you want to leave here on your own two feet, you’d better start answerin’ questions.”

“Fire away, Sal,” offered Owl Man.

“Me first,” interrupted Fex. “Wait your turn, Sal. OK now, Mister Big Bird. You swoop in here all high and mighty, tellin’ us our business like you was some fed or private dick. Business you got no right to know. What I want to know is: Who put you up to this? Who do you work for? What’s your racket?”

“Nobody put me up to this, Fex. My friend Heron Man and I are self-employed.”

“A private dick, then,” interjected Fex.

“No, I’m not a private dick, Fex. Neither is Heron Man. But you’re starting to act like a public one.” There was an edge to Owl Man’s voice.

“As for my ‘racket,’ I’m not sure novel-writing is much of a racket. Rackets are supposed to bring in big bucks, like you and Coo and Sal are supposed to be making. And you’d continue making, if only things hadn’t gotten held up the way they did.”

Owl Man turned to Heron Man and said, “How much did you make from your novel-writing last year?”

Heron Man thought for a moment and said, “Less than a nickel. I tried to itemize my deductions, but the IRS didn’t go for it.”

“Very funny,” Fex sneered.

“Go ahead, Fex. Sneer all you want. But without Owl Man and me you don’t have the wits to get out of this dilemma.”

“What dilemma?” snorted Fex.

Heron Man tasted his coffee. Dark-roast. Overdone. Too acidic. Still, it was nice and hot. Give Tully that. And in Seattle, hot is the main ingredient in coffee. Heron Man continued.

“Cut the crap, Fex. You’re here to have a meeting with Sal and Coo because you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing. Sal’s plan has gone to hell, the Feds are getting suspicious and you know it. You’re in a panic and you’re calling a halt. You’re backing out

just when things were going so beautifully, as Sal put it. Owl Man and I came here to tell you that you're being hasty, premature. There are possibilities you haven't considered. In short, you've got your head up your ass. Am I right so far?"

Coo tapped Sal's shoe under the table. Sal kicked Coo's shin in response. Both men looked at Fex, waiting to see what the big man would do. Owl Man and Heron Man were strangely calm. Didn't they know about Fex's historic Gaelic temper, his passion for venting his spleen?

Much to the surprise of Sal and Coo, Fex was playing this cool for a change. Still addressing Heron Man, he said mildly, "You still haven't answered my question, Flamingo Man. What's your racket?"

"We told you, King Kong. We're writers!" Now Heron Man was the one getting a bit steamed. Owl Man touched Heron Man on the sleeve.

"Look, Fex, you don't get it. We're trying to help you. Let's just lay our cards on the table. Fair enough?" Heron Man, almost amused now, looked at Fex, who was still calm, appraising.

"OK. Sal works as a teller at Ling Bank. Right?"

No reply from Fex.

"And we all know that Ling Bank is well-backed by Chinese 'interests,' that a lot of cash passes through its accounts. Is it a money laundering operation? We don't know. But we do know there are lots of cash deposits, big money transfers, overseas drafts and so forth. Tempting for someone with Sal's math and bookkeeping skills and his ... creativity, wouldn't you say? Am I correct?"

Still no reply.

Owl Man piped up and said, "There's no point in stone-walling, Fex. We happen to know that you and Sal have been discussing various possible schemes."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like, for example, the deposit schemes."

"That don't prove nothin'."

"Of course not. And Tully's is not a Court of Law nor are we prosecutors. We're just talking. But let's just say you *may* have had discussions regarding certain wire transfers to and from non-customers and unknown third-parties. I'm just speculating, of

course.”

“So what? That’s just business talk. You know, the free market? Remember? Me and Sal and Coo don’t like bein’ squeezed by too much government regulation. Puts the kibosh on private enterprise. Right, Sal?”

Sal nodded warily. Coo swirled his coffee. Fex rarely bothered to ask Coo even rhetorical questions.

Owl Man adjusted his leather cap, which he hadn’t taken off, and pressed Fex a little further. “I understand that there are generous ‘fees’ to be made for ‘expediting’ large and complex transfers across international boundaries.”

Silence.

“And convenient uses of Western Union payment channels may have crossed your minds ... ”

Fex finally broke his silence. “Look, mister. Maybe you’re right, maybe you’re wrong. Maybe you know too much for your own good. But are you sure you want to get involved in this?”

“You know, Fex, I’m sorry but our time’s up. And I was enjoying our conversation. But Heron Man just pointed to his watch and, unfortunately, he has to catch a ferry. But we’ll both be free all day Saturday. If we’re going to continue this discussion, don’t you think it’s a good idea to do it somewhere else? In a more private setting? How about this? Don’t you have a houseboat down at the marina on Lake Union?”

“How the hell did you know that?” Fex snarled.

Owl Man ignored him. “You give us a time, Fex, and we’ll be there.”

Sal jumped in. “I told ya, Fex. I told ya ... The guy knows everything we’re doing.”

Fex was starting to get worked up again. “If *we* don’t know what we’re doing, how the hell does *he* know what we’re doing?”

Owl Man interrupted: “Can you just keep the lid on for once, Fex? I already told you. *We’re writing a novel.* That may not seem like much to you, but it’s a big deal to us. And sooner or later you’re going to realize it’s a big deal to you too. Meanwhile, let’s meet at the houseboat on Saturday—you pick the time.”

“Man, this is fuckin’ freakin’ me out.” Fex paused to gather himself. “OK, Owl Man, you win. Saturday, first thing in the morning, 11:00 AM. At the houseboat. I suppose you know where it is?”

“We’ll find it, Fex,” Owl Man said casually.

“Yeah, I’m sure you will. Sal, Coo, you guys be there. And don’t be late.”

They both nodded.

Owl Man added one last caveat. “By the way, don’t bother packing heat, any of you.” Skipping the courtesies, he and Heron Man got up and walked outside. The sun was bright, the clouds were gone. Another beautiful day in Seattle.



*A visit to the houseboat ...*

Saturday came sooner than anyone imagined, partly because no one imagined it at all. Owl Man and Heron Man found themselves at Lake Union, walking along the marina. They had come from an early breakfast and were full of ideas about how the day might go.

“By the way,” Heron Man blurted out in his excitement, “which boat is it? I can’t recall just now.”

“Hold on.” Owl Man sat down on a nearby bench and opened his laptop. After a few moments and some repositioning of the screen out of the sun’s glare, he said, “Berth 27.”

Whereupon Owl Man glanced at his watch. “Wait a minute,” he said. “It’s five minutes to eleven. We’d better get this show on the road. Don’t want to keep the Great Fex waiting.”

“No, we don’t,” said Heron Man in a conspiratorial whisper. The two writers strolled toward the looming hulk of Fex’s houseboat, chatting as they went, lapsing into their hobby of word-etymologies:

“Did you know that the word ‘metaphor’ and ‘berth’ come from the same Indo-European root? This may give us a bit to play with as we continue with these characters.”

Owl Man gestured for Heron Man to proceed ahead of him down the ramp to the houseboat.

“Don’t forget that ‘ferret’ and ‘fortuitous’ were born from that root as well,” Heron Man added. “Plenty of hints, I’d say, on how to proceed.”

Heron Man sounded the bell that was hanging out from a post much in need of a new coat of sea-green paint, unless a change of color was in the offing.

*Coo opens the door . . .*

The door to the houseboat opened just enough for Coo to stick his head out and survey the scene. He had been prompted to offer the lines, “You guys are alone, right?” Coo was not one to initiate much on his own, but he carried out assignments, particularly those from Fex, with alacrity, not a word that Coo would know, Fex either, for that matter, but one that Owl Man brought to mind in an attempt to describe how Coo came so alive when Fex gave him commands to carry out.

“As you can see, Coo,” replied Heron Man, “we are quite alone, and quite eager to get on with the meeting, as we have spent the morning coming up with some—how shall I say it?— fortuitous possibilities.”

Fex’s bulk suddenly filled the doorway as he pulled Coo out of the way. “Get your asses in here.” As always, Fex issued his commands with a flourish befitting a king. Fex backed up to allow the writers enough room to squeeze by before he pushed the door shut.

“Nice digs, Fex.” Heron Man’s complement did not remove the scowl from the king’s countenance. The intruders into his kingdom were not welcome, nor did they get the common courtesies of hello and please take a seat and may I get you something to drink?

“Let’s get one thing clear.” Fex gestured a silent order for the two to sit. “We don’t know how you guys know what you know, but it stops today. Understood?” Fex was in his glory.

Owl Man opened his laptop and after watching the screen light up, he smiled and looked at Fex. “Fex, if I may, I have a question for Sal, first of all, but actually for each of you.”

“I thought you knew what we were doing, so why ask questions? Why don’t you tell us?” Fex had moved close to Owl Man and bent his bulk over to bring his face close, challenging, intimidating—or at least he thought so.

“Well,” said Owl Man, “questions are still best, because we want to know what *you* will say right now while we are here with you, not just when we are off on our own, dreaming you up.”

“What’s your question, then? Ain’t no guarantee we’re gonna answer, but ask away.” Fex straightened up and seemed pleased with himself that he was directing things.

“OK, Sal, what I want to know is if you have a love interest.” Owl Man’s question drew startled looks, not only from Sal, but from Fex and Coo as well. The gang of three seemed a bit thrown.

“What the hell’s a love interest? And what’s love got to do with this anyway?” It was Sal who recovered from the surprising question first.

“Sal,” Heron Man explained, “everyone knows a novel needs a love interest for the main characters. Owl Man simply wants to know how well we have done in bringing your love interests to light. You certainly have not said much about Sally, for example, since we met.”

“Sally? You know about Sally? How can you? Not even Fex or Coo knows about Sally.” Sal was sputtering, and had a look on his face that could only be described as bloodless, as the shock of revelation took its toll.

“Sal and Sally—that’s the ticket,” Owl Man said, as if this explained something, and set his fingers moving at the keyboard of his computer.

*Fex has a fainting spell ...*

Owl Man typed away while Sal blanched, Fex drew deep breaths and Coo sat paralyzed. Heron Man, unconcerned, stood and walked over to a small porthole-sized window next to the galley sink. For all practical purposes they were in a small house. But it was also, technically, a boat, since it floated; so words like “galley,” “porthole” and “head” were just as applicable as “kitchen,” “window” or “bathroom.”

“Where’s the head, Fex?” said Heron Man.

Fex glared at him suspiciously, but Heron Man, with a look of innocence, just raised his eyebrows in a questioning way.

Fex jerked his head to the right. “Back there. But don’t snoop around none. And ya gotta pump the handle a couple a times before you flush. Coo, go with him.”

“But there ain’t enough room for two of us in there, Fex.”

“I meant go with him and stand guard outside the door, meathead. See that he don’t pocket nothin’ or stick his nose where it don’t belong.”

“Oh, okay, Fex. I didn’t understand—”

“Shut up, Coo.”

Coo closed his trap with alacrity and stood watch outside the head after Heron Man went inside.

Owl Man was caught up in his writing. He looked at the ceiling, then back at the laptop, pecked at the keys some more, chuckled, continued pecking.

“Ain’t you done yet, Hemingway?” Fex was not in a tolerant mood this morning. “We ain’t got all day.”

“Sorry, Fex. Sal just gave me a couple of ideas. I wanted to write them down so I wouldn’t forget.”

“Sal don’t have no ideas. I’m the idea man around here.”

“Well, Fex, in that case, let me ask you the same question: Who is *your* love interest?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Of course not. But if your book is going to have any chance of success, Fex, you’ll have to have a love interest. People expect it.”

“My book? Don’t hang your book around my neck! Besides, I don’t give a damn what people expect. They been treatin’ me like dirt since I was a kid.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Fex. Do you think that might have something to do with why you’re so ... combative?”

“How would you like it if someone busted your chops on the way to kindergarten? And the same creep kicked you in the nuts in the third grade? And stole your bike in the fifth?”

“I wouldn't like it at all, Fex. I think it would make me bitter, make me doubt myself, and I might try to bully my way through life to cover up the pain.”

Owl Man looked at Fex with an air of genuine sympathy, of compassion.

Fex lowered his gaze, stared at the green indoor-outdoor carpeting on the floor. A teardrop nearly formed in the corner of his eye. A slight moistness, verging on a tear—but not quite. Fex turned and shouted at Sal, “What the hell are you lookin’ at, chicken neck?”

“Nothin’, Fex. I ain’t lookin’ at nothin’.”

As a matter of fact, Sal’s neck did bear a faint resemblance to a chicken’s, but Sal’s neck had a suntan. He may have worked in a bank, in Seattle, but he believed in treating himself to a tanning bed session now and then, along with a pedicure. Make up for the Seattle climate. Besides, Sally liked him tan, with nice toenails. Boy, that Sally. What a broad!

“Hey, keep your eyes open, Sal,” barked Fex, deflating Sal’s ballooning fantasies about Sally. “Where’s that other Bird Man?”

Heron Man and Coo were standing in the kitchen, or rather, the galley. They had returned unnoticed while Fex was bawling and blustering to Owl Man. Heron Man’s hand was on Coo’s shoulder, supportive, and Coo was drawing a glass of water for himself. His hand was shaking.

Sal glanced in their direction. If he was not mistaken, now Coo was crying! What the hell is this? Sal had never seen one single tear surmount the barrier of Coo’s eyelids, to break free and run down the cataract of his cheeks. Now he was crying freely, big tears dripping like garbanzo beans into his hanky.

Fex saw it too. This was too much. He lurched to his feet and began to march

toward Coo, intending to slap him silly, but Heron Man held out his hand, palm forward, like a crossing guard stopping traffic.

Fex kept walking. Heron Man pushed him back with authority.

“Sit down, Fex. Coo and I are just having a little talk. It’s private.”

“What is this, a friggin’ love-in? Dr. Phil? Oprah? I can’t believe this. Whose dump is this anyhow? Yours or mine?”

Fex was breathing rapidly, shallowly. A green sweat stippled his forehead. His rumpled ascot was soaked. He stepped backward, unsteadily, toward his chair.

Owl Man was still typing furiously on his lap-top. “Excellent, excellent, very good,” he said to himself, *sotto voce*. He looked up just in time to see the immense bulk of Fex falling past him on its way to the floor.

And as Fex fell, his body was stiff as a board, like an old-growth sequoia toppled by husky lumberjacks. His head thumped against the false-bottomed floor. The booming sound of the impact reverberated over the muted sloshing of the hollow bilge below.

The great body of Fex the Rex finally lay still, save for a quiet breathing.

Fex had fainted.

*Sally and Heather appear ...*

When Coo saw the heap on the floor that was Fex, the glass slipped from his hand and fell to the galley floor. It didn't break, but it rolled in an impossibly straight path toward Fex. Coo extended his foot to stop it, as if some sport was in play. Coo didn't know why he did this and no one seemed to require an explanation, but Coo's aim, if that's what it was, was off a tad, and instead of stopping the tumbler he managed to lose his footing and tumbled himself atop the Fexian hulk.

Fex emitted an indescribable sound audible to all, as Coo's scrambling efforts to right himself seemed to revive the fallen man so reminiscent of Rabelais' *Gargantua*. His mumblings became steadily more coherent until it was clear that Fex was pissed beyond measure. His state was far from the monarch image he was accustomed to presenting to the world, and his ordering everyone about fell itself to a more questioning manner.

"Who the hell are you guys?" Fex puffed and huffed himself into a hands-and-knees position, looking first at Heron Man and then at Owl Man, who had stopped keyboarding his laptop.

"Writers, Fex. Authors, if you will." Owl Man took off his glasses and began cleaning them with the bottom of his black sweatshirt. The thirteen owls pictured there in muted colors caught the attention of Fex, who seemed happy to change the subject.

"What's with the owls?" Fex raised up his hand and pointed at the "Parliament of Owls."

"So full of questions today, Fex," Owl Man answered back. "Questions are important, of course, but the purpose of our meeting today is to look for answers, is it not? Questions you have; answers you do not." Owl Man finished working on his glasses, then put them back on, just as a gentle tap-tap sound announced the presence of someone at the door.

"I thought you said you guys would come alone. I've had enough of your games." Fex had found his roaring voice again.

"That would be Sally and Heather, I believe." Heron Man offered matter-of-

factly.

“Yes,” confirmed Owl man after peering into his computer screen.

“I’ll get it.” Sal broke through his speechless paralysis and bounded for the door, eager to take hold of Sally. This meeting was going nowhere so far and having a touch of Sally’s bod just now would boost his spirits.

“Who’s Heather?” Coo managed, ever puzzled, speaking to no one in particular.

Fex filled the vacuum. “She’s my girl and none of you ... no one knows ... what the fuck’s going on here?”

Sal opened the door.



*“Holy Shit!” he whispered ...*

Then he slammed it shut again. “Holy Shit!” he whispered.

“What are you doing, idiot? Open the door, will ya?” Fex yelled.

“Hey, Owl Man!” Sal continued to whisper. “Are you sure this is Heather?”

“That’s what it says here.” Owl Man patted his laptop. “Go ahead, Sal. Open the door. It’s got to be Heather. Let’s find out who she is.”

Sal opened the door again and Heather pushed him brusquely aside, saying, “Where’s Fex?”

“I’m over here, baby.” With Heather’s appearance Fex’s voice, normally a deep, cavernous, roaring baritone, shot up an octave, diminishing in the process to a quivering tenor, almost a *false* *falsetto*, *operatic* squeak.

“What happened here, Fexie? How come you’re on the floor?” Fex was still on his hands and knees.

“I think I fainted, baby.”

“You fainted? Are you hurt, baby?” Heather looked around the room accusingly, then walked quickly to Fex’s side and knelt down to console him. “Hey, didn’t any of you rats help poor Fexie here?”

Nobody answered. Everyone but Fex gaped at Heather’s imposing presence.

She was tall and runway-model-thin, wore red high-heels, a tight black skirt, a sheer silk blouse over a black bra and a short-cut, imitation-cheetah-skin jacket. Her platinum blonde hairpiece was piled high atop her head and surmounted by a red pill-box hat with a black bird-cage face-veil. The hat itself was crowned by a spray of black feathers. Outrageous, yes, but altogether a striking woman. Most striking of all, perhaps, was the fact that she was two inches taller than Fex—without the heels.

But Heather had melted when she saw Fex on the floor, and was all over him with maternal solicitude. “My poor baby. Did Fexie faint?” She carried on in this manner for a while. Heron Man and Owl Man both felt it was a little too dramatic, overdone,

like her outfit. But she seemed sincere enough. Meanwhile Fex, oblivious to the others in the room, looked into Heather's eyes with the boundless trust of a nursing infant.

"You scum!" Heather turned away from Fex long enough to castigate the amazed bystanders. She turned slightly and focused her wrath on Coo. "What about you, buster? Why didn't you do something for Fexie? Get him some water or something?" She stood up, towering over Coo, taunting.

Coo, already shaken from the events of the morning, was hard-pressed to defend himself against Heather's attack. "I tried, Heather, I tried. But I fell on top of him instead."

"You what?" Heather slapped Coo across the face. The blow snapped his head back. In the process an audible "pop" emanated from Coo's cervical area. "You crazy bitch," whimpered Coo. "I think you broke my neck!"

Heather shoved Coo onto the couch. "Shut up and sit down. I didn't break your neck, but I should have." Then she turned back to Fex and began ministering to him again.

The spellbound houseboat rocked slightly from the wake of a passing motorboat.

At that moment Sal and Sally finally entered the room. Sal's arm was around Sally's waist, his face was flushed and his eyes seemed slightly unfocused.

Sal—normally so callous, cynical and tough—seemed unusually tender, shy, almost proud. He cleared his throat and announced: "Hey, everybody, meet Sally."

Sally was cut from a different bolt of cloth than Heather. Shorter than Sal, shorter even than Coo, Sally was plump, voluptuous and—if we can borrow from the Yiddish—*zaftig*. She walked into the room leaning onto Sal as if the two of them shared one leg. Her curly black hair glistened in the diffuse light of the houseboat, and her creamy white face was highlighted by a dark "beauty spot" right about where Marilyn Monroe wore hers, between the left nostril and upper lip, almost midway toward the port beam. Her cheeks looked like they had been rouged, but in fact she was flushed like Sal, and for the same reason. Her lipstick was smeared.

They looked for all the world like teens in love.

Owl Man carefully placed his laptop on a table and, assuming an air of relaxed command, addressed the group. “Well, this is very heartwarming. Thank you all for coming. I almost feel I should be making a political speech.” He chuckled to himself.

Fex snickered once, then resumed nuzzling Heather. Sal seemed lost in the glories of Sally. Coo was dabbing at his nose, which was still bleeding lightly, thanks to Heather’s haymaker slap across the face. Heron Man, alert to nuance, surveyed the scene for subtleties. Owl Man continued.

He stood up, adjusted his cap, reset his glasses and closed his eyes. These little rituals, developed over years of teaching, had their desired effect. Everyone grew silent; even Fex’s nuzzling at Heather’s neck was soundless as his eyes wandered over to Owl Man.

*Owl Man's eyes popped open ...*

When Owl Man's eyes popped open, it was as if an owl itself had suddenly awakened, and just like those large round orbs of a hooter bird, Owl Man's eyes gathered in the scene, and everyone's attention waded into those pools.

"As we've told you from the outset, your plan is clearly a failed plan, and you were right, Fex and Coo, to end it, even if you had not yet discussed it with Sal. But as Heron Man and I have worked on it, the original plan, with a little tweaking, can be rescued and made fail-safe. It is this plan we would like to see you carry out."

Owl Man nodded his head up and down, as if agreeing with his own statement would increase its impact.

"Tweaking? What you got in mind, bird brain?" Fex unwrapped himself from the object of his desire and brought his bulk forward, coming out a bit from his romantic fog at the prospect of the plan being revived, the promised reward once again beginning to dance in his mind.

"I still want to know how come you knew about our plan in the first place." Sal, too, had unhooked from his girl and changed into business mode, though his hand wandered to Sally's knee as he awaited Owl Man's reply.

But it was Heron Man who broke the silence. "No mystery in that, Sal. We told you, we are writers. We write things. That's what we do." Heron Man spread his arms in a gesture that indicated it was plain as day.

"But ..." Coo gave voice to his puzzlement but couldn't continue.

"The scene requires Heather and Sally to create a diversion." Owl Man's words had a stunning effect on Heather as she bolted upright, causing Fex to slip off the couch they had been snuggled into. Her hands-on-hips posturing could not have been more cliché, although gum chewing seemed to be an absent detail. That could be remedied.

"Fexie, what're you gettin' me into?" The feathers atop her hair assembly looked like birds taking off in all directions as she swished her head this way and that. "You gettin' me into some kind of kinky stuff here? You know I don't do kinky!"

"I assure you, Miss Whipsit, that nothing of the kind is planned." Heron Man reached out to calm the lady by patting her shoulder.

“It’s not Whipsit, asshole, and get your hands off me. It’s Winsnip, Heather Winsnip. Got it? Do you need a god-damned spelling lesson? Now what’s this shit about a diversion?” Heron Man retracted his hand from Heather’s shoulder, as if one of the flopping feathers had teeth and was about to bite. He mumbled something about the name, but no one could make it out. With the moment heating up, it is unlikely it would be remembered.

“It’s almost as if you were already practicing, Heather. Almost perfect. All we need now is for Sally to join in and do her part. Sally, please, up you go now.” Owl Man motioned for Sally to stand.

Sally was still her *zafzig* self, but the succulent, juicy, pinky sap filling her cheeks had gone into hiding, leaving an awful pallor behind. She struggled to gain her footing and yes, she was helped by Sal, but no easy task.

“This is ridiculous.” Sally squirmed and tussled to her full, five-foot height. “Do you really think me and Heather are going to create a ‘diversion’ here in front of everybody? Lotsa luck.”

Owl Man, still standing, remained calm. “Well, Sally, you already have created a diversion, just by arriving here on schedule. But what we want today is to do a dry-run of the diversion you’re going to create at Ling Bank.”

“Did you bring your pasties with the tassels, Sally?” Coo snickered.

“Coo! Knock it off!” Owl Man commanded, cracking the whip of authority. The effect on Coo was electric, immediate. “We need your attention here. You’re not supposed to be creating the diversion, Sally and Heather are.”

“Sorry, boss.” Coo was surprisingly compliant, considering that Fex was in the room.

“Hey!” Fex stepped forward. “He ain’t your boss, Coo, I’m your boss. Don’t forget it. I’m just stringing’ him along for now. See if he’s got any bright ideas.”

“I don’t trust him,” said Heather sourly. “He don’t look like a writer to me.”

“Why, Heather, I’m hurt,” said Owl Man. “I thought at least that my glasses, my beard, my Parliament of Owls sweatshirt, and my leather fisherman’s cap would qualify me as a literary type in your eyes.”

“Yeah, like the villain in *Jaws*.”

“Can we just get on with it? Stop the dilly-dallying?” Sal was getting impatient. “What’s the scam, Owl Man?”

A general, rumbling commotion slowly rose as everyone in the room except the two writers began to offer conflicting, irrelevant opinions.

At this point Heron Man leaped into the fray. “Wait a minute, please! Just hold your horses. It’s apparent that there’s still a lot of confusion as to our motives, our identity, why we’re here, and so on.”

“You’re damn right!” insisted Fex, who was trying to regain control of the situation.

“OK. Just give me a moment.”

“Hurry up!” It was Sal this time.

“Sal, how the hell can I finish if you won’t let me start?”

“Shut up, Sal. Let him talk. I want to hear what this bird freak has to say.”

Heather had her own whip of authority, apparently, which she gladly cracked in Sal’s direction.

“Thank you, Heather.” Heron Man looked at each participant, smiling, then winked at Owl Man.

“I saw that.” Heather wasn’t mollified yet.

“Look,” said Heron Man. “If we’re going to pull this off, it’s important that we all be on the same page, so to speak.”

Owl Man opened his computer again and quietly began scrolling.

“For that to happen you all have to understand that, to us, the imagination is real.”

“You mean like fairies? Dungeons and dragons? Gimme a break. You’ll have to do better than that, Heron Man.” Fex was not going gently into that good night.

“There, Fex. You just proved my point.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I’m no more standing in this dump of a houseboat than you are. Yet here you are calling me ‘Heron Man,’ without even knowing what that’s about. You’re starting to take me seriously. And it’s a good thing, because as Owl Man and I have been trying to tell you, without us you’re nothing but a puff of smoke in a bad dream.”

Fex scratched his neck, adjusted the ascot, reached for a handkerchief and swabbed his forehead. He took care not to disturb his Pompadour. A lot of work, not to mention expensive scented gel, had gone into that standing wave. Maybe Heather would re-compose it for him after this meeting, this circus, was over.

“I still think you’re bluffin’,” insisted Fex.

Heron Man looked at Owl Man questioningly and said, “Shall we?”

“Why not?” replied Owl Man. He fiddled with the computer and hit the Delete key.

Fex was gone.

*“Where the hell’s Fexie?” ...*

“Hey!” It was Heather. “Where the hell’s Fexie? What did you bastards just do? If you hurt my Fexie I’ll kick your face in.”

“Calm down, Heather. That was just a demonstration of our *bona fides*. That means ‘good faith.’ It was also a demonstration of power. We want you to know that we’re serious about this. So if you’d just put your arrows back in your quiver, or holster your rod, or whatever image you prefer, then I’ll bring Fex back and we can get on with our business.”

Owl Man was back in control of his unruly class.

He fiddled again with the laptop, hit the key for Undo Delete, and Fex popped back into the room. He looked exactly the same as he had moments before, except that he seemed sleepy.

“Wow, what a weird dream I just had. I was down in the bilge and there was live things and dead things floatin’ and swimmin’ around down there. I tried to get out but ... ”

“Fexie, baby, I was so worried about you.”

As Fex and Heather enjoyed their reunion, Heron Man resumed.

“Now. You’ve got to realize that Owl Man and I mean you no harm. Otherwise you would all be wearing cement boots at the bottom of Elliott Bay.”

“Lake Union,” corrected Fex.

“OK, at the bottom of Lake Union.” Heron Man shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe we invented a bunch of scumbags like you people.”

Heron Man was kidding, to a degree, but the humor was lost in the general uproar that followed his comment. Heather picked up a pillow and threw it at him. Fex overturned the coffee table, spilling an ashtray and a bowl of jelly beans on the floor. Coo got a faraway look and started to sniffle again. Sal kicked the end table and a book went flying. It landed at Owl Man's feet.

Owl Man, unperturbed by the commotion and the sudden violence, quickly glanced at the title. It read, *How to Win Big at Poker ... Every Time*, by Monty ‘Wild Card’ Apollonia.

“I apologize,” said Heron Man. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings. I really was just



teasing. Can we start over?” Jesus! he thought to himself. I can’t believe this.

“Now, Heather, you and Sally stand over here. We’re going to run through the script.”

Reluctantly the two women moved to the small open space Heron Man had indicated. They stood side by side, stiffly, like two mannikins—one short, one tall.

“Thank you. Very good. Now, Owl Man, can you set up the scenario for us?”

Owl Man turned to the ladies, and spoke as if he were speaking to them alone. “Please relax, girls, we are not in a hurry. There is plenty of time; no need to worry.” In fact, the girls shuffled about and their bodies loosened up at the sound of the quiet words. Owl Man, seeing the impact, continued. “Now, the secret to the success of any diversion is that it must be so completely authentic as to overcome any training that would cause any of those in the situation to question it—except for those of us who know perfectly well what is happening and what is going to happen. And, as you already know, because we are writers, we know what is going to happen.”

“It’s nothin’ but crap, pure bird droppings.” This view was offered by Fex, as he watched the girls swaying. “You can’t know the future any more than anyone else. How you learned about us is still beyond me, but I intend to find out. I have my sources you know.” With that, Fex made his way to the door, opening it with a flourish, and announced: “Out you go, both of you.”

“The diversion must, of course, consist of three parts, just as a play is in three acts, a novel in three parts, any story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It’s what I call the Rule of Three.” Owl man continued speaking directly to the girls and they seemed not even to have heard Fex’s regal order.

Fex’s massive jowls had now become cherry red as his fluster grew and his spittle went flying after his words. “Out, I say. Out. You damned birds, out of here.”

“Fex, calm down and let Owl Man instruct the ladies in the structure of diversion. There is no purpose in your diverting us now and as you can see it is not working. This diversion the girls will learn is essential to the rescue of your plan. You do want your plan to be rescued, don’t you?” Heron Man spoke in a shouted whisper in Fex’s direction, and then looked at Coo and Sal, both nodding their heads affirmatively. “Sit down Fex, your friends are waiting.”

Fex stepped back into the room and slammed the door, then parked himself with his behind against the wall, folding his arms in an obvious but compliant snit.

“What ya’ wanus to do, Mr. Owl? Fexie, you shut up for now and let’s hear the plan.” It was Heather, now swaying her hips to some tune no one else heard, at least not yet. Sally was trying her best to keep in synch but was concentrating so hard on Heather’s lithesome moves it was more a parody than a success.

Owl Man noticed Sally’s problem and made a mental calculation of how he could make use of this in setting up the diversion. He looked over at Heron Man, and gestured with his finger to take a look at the girls’ disparity in motion. Heron Man knew at once what Owl Man intended.

The discrepancy in motion and rhythm between Heather and Sally was slight. It would have passed unnoticed by most onlookers, who might well have been distracted by the fantasies unfolding in their own minds. But Owl Man saw something in it. He saw the disruption of a pattern, a potential discontinuity in the fabric of whatever would be happening at Ling Bank on the day the plan went into effect. Owl Man intended to exploit that disruption, tossing a potentially explosive event, like a jalapeño pepper, into the otherwise bland, unscripted soup of the day.

“OK. Let’s try out some possibilities, shall we? Heather, what if you were to play, let’s say, a haughty aristocrat?”

“A naughty what?”

“No, not naughty. I said, ‘haughty.’”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means proud, arrogant, snobbish.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it.” This may not be as easy as I had hoped, Owl Man thought to himself. “I just want you to stand up straight and look down on people as if you were better than everyone.”

“OK. So?”

“So you need an aristocratic name.”

“Oh, yeah. Like a duchess or queen or somethin’.”

“That’s right. Now you’re getting it, Heather. Let’s call you, for now anyway,

Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Rensselaer.”

“That’s the plan? That’s stupid. I can’t even pronounce it.” Heather canted her pelvis in a severe *contrapposto* pose, like Michelangelo’s *David*, losing two or three inches in the process. She took a stick of chewing gum out of her purse, unwrapped it and began chewing vigorously, almost sarcastically.

“Don’t slouch like that, Heather. And you won’t be chewing gum in the bank. You’re supposed to be an aristocratic lady, nobility. You stand head-and-shoulders above the common people. And don’t worry about pronouncing the name. You will be presenting an engraved calling card to the security guard in the lobby. You’re going to act very supercilious.”

“Stop usin’ them big words, Mr. Owl. I don’t talk like that.”

“Just pretend you’re Queen Mary or Queen Elizabeth, and the bank employee is your servant.”

“OK, that’s better. That, I can do. So then the guy at the bank, the servant, is like ... like Sal.” Heather giggled, then Sally started in. Fex snorted, then soon was bellowing with laughter. He enjoyed humor at others’ expense. He had forgotten that he was supposed to be miffed.

“What’s the joke?” Coo didn’t get it.

Sal, whose attention had been drifting until then, got it, but he didn’t think it was funny. “Shut up, you idiots! This ain’t gettin’ us nowhere.”

Heron Man watched the scene, making mental notes. He was interested to see how Owl Man was going to bring this back around to the topic at hand. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Fex, I must ask you a question, if we are to set this up properly.” Owl Man peered in closer to his laptop screen then peeked over the top of his computer in time to see the surprise scrolling across Fex’s face, replacing the laughter.

“Shoot,” Fex ordered as if he could not help trying to take command.