

The Cèilidh of Dreams ...

Chairs, stools, benches, bean bags, and a small sofa had been set up in a large elliptical array that included a couple of late comers who made do with sitting on pillows. No lights were on, as the outsize rocky fireplace sent out plenty of dancing glow as well as enough heat to reach into and warm the cockles of everyone assembled.

The general din diminished as Owl Man rose and flapped his arms about as if loosening up for some pugilist bout—a rather common occurrence in late-at-night *cèilidhs*. But it was early yet, and Owl Man's intention was only to welcome everyone and to provide a bit of guidance for those who'd never been to a *Cèilidh of Dreams*.

Every one Owl Man had invited was now present except for Fex and Coo, who, Owl Man knew, would make a show of their grand entrance at some point further on. No matter. The festivities could begin without them.

Owl Man's arms settled down to his sides and he bowed and bobbed in this direction and that in a gesture of welcome. Some nodded back, some bowed their own heads, some offering their hands out palms up, as if urging Owl Man on to get the *cèilidh* going.

Which he did without further fuss.

“Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming. You will be glad you did. To begin, we will go around, give our names, where we are from, and because this is a *Ceilidh of Drea*--

“Where the fuck's the booze?” It was Arthur Compton's shrill pitch that broke into Owl Man's introduction.

Owl Man's feathers were unruffled though there was a rising tide of murmuring babble in response to the uncouth interruption.

“Everyone, quiet, please. Let me introduce Mr. Arthur Compton, formerly CEO of the mega-corporation known as Reticular Medicinals, of more recent fame as the first prize in The Deathling Crown Lottery.”

Owl Man turned and faced Compton directly.

“Mr. Compton, I have not been directly involved in your being narrated back to life, although as a consultant to the Queen's Lottery Commission, I have been kept fully informed of your, what shall I say, your 'adventures' let's call them. But for now, our primary need is for a *Keeper of the Cart*, to which I now appoint you. In the kitchen you will find a most elegant cart bearing a full panoply of the finest “booze,” as you grossly put it. Please, wheel the cart in now to

the center of our gathering so we may all gaze upon the finery of distilled spirits and the most elegant products of our local vintners, whetting our tongues, so to speak.

Compton, grumbling inarticulately under his breath, did as he was told and soon returned to a chorus of oohs and aahs.

Owl Man continued.

“Now, before we partake of this splendor, we must complete the first ritual, the telling of our names, naming where we are from, and, most importantly, recounting a recent dream.

No one may attempt any interpretation or any other commentary on dreams presented. But when you are moved, you may tell a dream of your own, or sing out an image. Sally, please begin for us this *Cèilidh of Dreams*.”

Sally's expression went blank as her cheeks grew cherry-red, obviously dismayed at being first. Sally's black hair was stuffed up under a fetching Scot's bonnet, and she ran her hands down her eye-catching fully-filled cashmere sweater and Blackwatch plaid skirt, getting the wrinkles to behave as she gathered herself up to speak.

“Hi, all. I'm Sal's girl, and my name is Sally. Not sure about where I'm from since most of

what I remember is becoming Sal's girl." She bent down and patted Sal's knee, and Sal took in the view with eyes bugging at his sweetie's natural endowments.

"I do have a dream and it was just last night, but it's pretty silly. There was a bunch of people, just like here, except the chairs were arranged in rows like a school-room. And I was up front, pacing back and forth, and everyone had pencils and pens and notebooks out and scribbling down whatever I'd say, even though their heads were up and all going back and forth like they were all synchronized with my pacing. I didn't have a clue about what I was teaching, but I was going on anyway, almost like I was speaking some foreign language I didn't know, but that's impossible. Then the bell rang and it woke me up and I heard myself shouting, 'class dismissed!'

Sally began to sit down when she stood straight up again and pointed at Heron Man.

"Hey, Heron, what's with the writing?" Heron Man had been furiously tapping the keys on his laptop.

"Just like the dream, Sally, just getting down what you're telling." Heron's matter of fact tone was followed by Owl Man's typical explanatory oration.

"Standard procedure at a *Cèilidh of Dreams*, Sally, don't be alarmed. And don't let this

inhibit you folks in the slightest. The record of what happens tonight is important, and Heron Man here has volunteered to get it all down and for that reason, he will not be partaking of the delights of the cart this evening.”

“Well, speaking of bells, it was bells of Westminster Abbey that were ringing frantically in my dream last night, bloody angry bells they were, believe me.” This revelation was delivered by Sir Randall Truffington, III, Director of the Narrative Section of The Deathling Crown Lottery. “And I think it was in response to the Queen's fury at your not having invited her royal highness to the *cèilidh*. You know how she loves a good party! How could you not invite her?”

“The reason why will become clear enough and soon enough to satisfy even your dream's bloody bells, believe me.” Owl Man's stentorian voice hushed all the murmuring. Sir Randall re-sat himself in an undignified plop.

The Snake and His Love ...

While Sally giggled away and Truffington huffed on about Her Majesty's missing invitation, Arthur Compton was taking his duties as *Keeper of the Cart* seriously. His first official action was to select the most expensive single-malt Scotch on the cart, pour himself three fingers in a plastic cup, knock it down at one go and pour three more fingers, again for himself. Then he began pushing the cart in a winding path among the gathered participants of the cèilidh, pressing plastic cups into people's hands and taking drink orders like an airline flight attendant, humming all the while with Scottish, bagpipe-like trills.

Waiting on others was not something Compton was accustomed to doing, but it was a damn sight better than being hooked up to the tubes at Transition or standing hunched over the fingerprinting desk at London Central. Besides, free access to the cart's endless bounty—courtesy of the Narrative Section—gave Compton an opportunity to re-hydrate properly with plenty of Scotch whiskey, to which he *was* accustomed.

Truffington, still affecting indignation over the Queen's having been slighted, eyed Compton suspiciously as he approached with the cart. Compton gave Truffington an off-

balanced, mocking bow.

“Would yer Lordship care for some spirits?”

“Yes, I’ll have some of that Glenlivet, and get off my toes while you’re at it, idiot!”

“Oh, and begging yer pardon, sire, I’m sure,” said Compton in an exaggerated tone of obsequiousness. But Compton, who had been sipping while dispensing and was quite rosy-cheeked and merry, was beyond taking offense.

“—don’t know if you’d call this a proper dream or not. It was pretty stupid,” said

CedrosCM, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He had taken the floor from Owl Man.

“—not really a dream, proper, I’d say, it’s just a bunch of rubbish from the day before, you know—”

Owl Man interrupted smoothly, “Let’s not be judging the dream too harshly before hearing it, Cedros.” The Owl had heard such prejudicial reactions a thousand times. “Just tell the dream.”

“Well, I was in a house, ‘cept it wasn’t really a house, but it had these tunnels with doors, and—now this is really the stupid part—”

“Cedros! Stop it!” insisted Owl Man, cracking the whip of authority.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Where was I?” Cedros used the interruption to take a quick swallow.

“The doors,” prompted Heron Man, who was still taking notes on his laptop, like a court recorder.

“Yeah, the doors was like glass, you could see through ‘em, only they was also wood, and you couldn’t see through them—it’s hard to explain—anyway, behind each door there was some weird thing—”

“Name one thing, Cedros,” said Owl Man.

“Well, one thing was a bunch of snakes all balled up around a tree, sleepin’—the snakes, I mean. Then, I remember in another was, like, the Queen’s white Rolls all decked out like always, ‘cept there was dung all over it, like she’s driven it through a cow pasture or a feedlot about ninety miles an hour. Stuff like that.”

“That’s really creepy, all those snakes,” said Sally.

“Sally, let’s wait a while before we assess the value of someone else’s dream, shall we?”

“Oh, sure, Owl Man. Sorry. I guess I haven’t got the hang of it yet.”

“Have some more Scotch, Sally. More of your own dreams will come to you, I’m sure, perhaps even a snake dream,” said Owl Man, looking around the group. The liquor was having its traditional effect—heads were bobbing and, here and there, a few grins were plastered over

faces though no jokes had been told. “How about someone else?” said Owl Man.

CedrosCM piped up again.

“Oh, the snake sat up in bed one night
And he scratched his head and cried,
‘I ain’t e’en seen me love today
So I must be quite a sight, ohhhh,
I must be quite a sight!”

CedrosCM’s impromptu song had provoked a vocal chorus of complaints.

“How’s your damn snake gonna scratch his head if he ain’t got any hands?” yelled Arthur Compton, whose grammar was slipping, and who was now sitting on the floor next to Truffington with a half-finished bottle of Glenlivet between them.

“Snakes don’t have lovers anyway, CM, they just do it,” cried Jinny O, who had been uncharacteristically silent so far but whose tongue was beginning to loosen.

CedrosCM kept humming to himself despite the protests, inventing variations on his tune. Sally got up, raised her arms and started improvising a fast little two-step between the bean-bags. Truffington was leaning against Arthur Compton and the two of them were humming single,

extended notes, each trying to anticipate which note the other would hum next. Owl Man looked at Heron Man, who for the moment had stopped typing and closed his laptop to save battery power. They nodded at one another.

Meanwhile, as the volume rose at the festive *cèilidh*, in another part of London the Queen, sitting alone, pressed a button on her desk to summon her personal secretary, whose duties included a round-the-clock responsiveness to the Queen's every wish.

Her Royal Majesty's eyes were wee slits, the corners of the royal mouth were turned down, and the royal voice was husky as she spoke into the intercom:

“Samantha, would you please bring me the files on Owl Man and Heron Man?”

The Queen's Breeches ...

“The report is that they are having a party.” Samantha presented the news to the Queen in her usual droll tone, as if nothing short of the world ending would change her whimsical attitude. But she was devoted to making the Queen’s daily miseries a bit less so if she could.”

“A party? What sort of party?” The Queen stood up from her desk, hands on her hips, looking quite un-royal at this late hour still wearing her riding breeches she’d been in since morning.

“The sort of party is not detailed, your Highness ... oh my, excuse me.” Samantha’s hand flew to cover her lips. The mock apology was another of Samantha’s little efforts to humor the Queen, and she knew how, after 30 years of personal secretarying to the woman, who was now letting out a howl of laughter.

“And never forget, my young lady, that you’re speaking to the highest ass in the land!”

Samantha curtsied and offered a bit more information. “We’ve got Duckbill on the scene and we should have more information from him shortly. What we know is that it’s an odd gathering. There’s Owl Man, Heron Man, Truffington, Compton, CedrosCM, and a whole

host of other odd birds. I can't imagine that you'd want to be party to such a thing."

"Samantha dear, it is my desire to be invited and not slighted. If I am not invited, I cannot very well exercise my royal privilege of declining in a regal huff, can I? There's an art to these things you know. Now hand me those files and let me be for a while."

"Would you like me to bring a change of garments? Those breeches must be getting a bit funky, if you catch my meaning." Samantha was ever ready to make her Queen comfortable.

"No. I think not. In fact, this not being invited has got my ire up and I may just go for a midnight ride. Tell Jason to saddle up Ruskin. Shoo now and leave me be."

The only thing the Queen learned in scanning the intelligence files on Owl Man and Heron Man was that they were involved in some questionable scheme in Seattle, Washington—a wetter place than London, if that could be imagined—and had landed earlier today at Heathrow and were now in the midst of a party to which she had not been invited. This was quite unlike Owl Man, who had always been generous to a fault in honoring the Queen as Queen.

Something had obviously changed. She would need to get to the bottom of this.

She pushed the call button for Samantha and said into the intercom: “Samantha, I’m going for a ride. When I return I want to meet with Smithers. I don’t think our Duckbill is quite up to what is likely going on, which I do not like at all. Make sure Smithers comes alone and does not pull any of his “later” shenanigans.”

The Queen, leaned over and picked up her riding crop from the floor and gave it a Royal snap on the Owl Man file. Smithers would know how to deal with Owl Man’s schemes. A broad smile spread across her Royal visage and she left her chambers eager to mount Ruskin, her favorite Royal equine, all of whom she’d named after history’s illustrious figures. She’d talk with Ruskin in that special “Queen and horse” world they shared and then she’d be up to dealing with “Smithers The Difficult,” as she’d come to call him.

Duckbill crashes the cèilidh ...

A name alone will occasionally raise expectations, naturally, but Special Agent Fergus D. Duckbill, age 42, did not remotely resemble a duck's bill. His body possessed no elegant, duck-like curves to speak of—apart from his buttocks—but it was impressive enough, in a blocky, compressed way. His father was a retired bricklayer, and as a child Fergus served long hours as his unpaid hod-carrier—shoveling sand, unloading pallets of bricks and climbing scaffolds with the mortar-laden hod on his shoulder. His neck, shoulder, leg and arm muscles had bulked up in the process, and in this way Duckbill himself came to resemble a large brick—a quirk of adaptive evolution. Such morphology required specially tailored uniforms, an unwelcome expense for Duckbill, considering the pittance levied on behalf of Her Majesty's Special Agents.

With close-cropped ginger hair and red freckles, hooded eyes that glistened within their folds like green olives, Duckbill projected a sleepy menace. Uncompromising attitudes flowed from the marrow of his bones, bestowing upon Duckbill a special edge, first in neighborhood boxing and wrestling clubs, then at the Naval Academy, finally at the Special Command Training Center west of the Thames. All served him well in the years he had spent in merciless

pursuit of various miscreants and enemies of the State. Never one to flinch at the prospect of dislocating someone's shoulder or knee, Duckbill was relentless, fearless and without remorse.

Behind his back, his fellow agents called him "the Terrier."

Still, he did pause before knocking on the door behind which the Ceilidh of Dreams was progressing, but only because the Queen, in her indirect way, had discouraged him from getting too deeply involved. "Mind your manners on this one, Duckbill. No broken bones," is how she put it. And Smithers, having notified him of the duty-assignment, all but forbade Duckbill's direct intervention by curtly announcing, "I'll handle it."

But Smithers had been ruffling Duckbill's feathers for some time, and Duckbill had had quite enough. In a wistful moment, he imagined he might have a shot at a Queen's Distinguished Service Medal, by exercising just a little initiative to break open the case of Owl Man and Heron Man, and this damned *cèilidh* that was causing such a knot of furor at the Palace.

Duckbill rapped commandingly three or four times, and the door inched opened. A face floated toward him like an unmanned ship from a fog-bank.^[1]_{SEP}

“What’ll ye have, mate? Come to join the *cèilidh*, have ye?” Arthur Compton stood rocking on his heels, eyes unfocused, a wet grin on his face, the serving cart between himself and Duckbill. From the background, a surge of chatter, laughter and song sloshed over the two men like an incoming wave.

“I’ll have you weigh anchor and cast a line to starboard, is what I’ll have, sir. Step aside, and move the cart while you’re at it, if you don’t mind,” and Duckbill moved assertively forward. Compton was not so drunk that he missed the dismissive tone, however, nor had he lost his essential bulldog character in the least, no matter how full his bilge or how tenuous his status among the living. He slammed the cart into Duckbill’s shins, provoking a feral howl from Duckbill, who launched a right cross that caught Compton on the left mandible and sent him tumbling on top of CedrosCM and Sally, who was teaching CM how to sing her special note.

Duckbill, stone sober, overwhelmed the tipsy Compton in a flash, pinning him against the mirrored wall—mirrors, which stood gleaming and ready for the Tuesday yoga classes, whereupon Sir Randall Truffington III, who had served as Naval Liaison for years and held an honorary officer’s rank, reprimanded Duckbill as he would any lowly tar.

“Stand down, you bloody fool, what do you think you’re doing?” Before Duckbill could

answer, Truffington, who had actually worked with Duckbill in various official capacities, muttered, “Wait a minute. Is that you, Duckbill? What the bollocks are you doing here?”

The recognition was mutual, Duckbill being well familiar with Truffington’s visage, especially given the photos of him and the Queen that were plastered all over the trophy case at the Special Service Main Office.

“Oh, it’s you, m’Lordship. Beggin’ your pardon, sir. The Queen sent me here on a special assignment—hush, hush, top secret, tally ho and all that. Can’t really talk about it, sir. You know how that goes. Anything for the Crown.”

Truffington’s temper, which served as a kind of biochemical boiler, instantly began burning off the excess alcohol from his bloodstream. Whenever he wanted to clear his head in a hurry, all he needed was a righteous head of steam and—bang!—he was sober as a headmaster. Which is the tone he used in dressing down poor Duckbill in front of Compton, who was stretching his neck and jaw, feeling around for fractures or lesions while calculating the potential for punitive damages.

Just then Truffington’s cell phone blasted out its ringtone—a racetrack bugle.

“Truff? It’s TQ. I’ve got Smithers here. Where’s Duckbill and what’s he doing?”

Truffington muffled the cellphone and rotated his head in search of Agent Duckbill, who had disappeared with Compton into the crowd. In the uproar of the *cèilidh*, he spotted Duckbill, drink in hand, listening intently as Compton rolled up his sleeves to show off his IV scars from Transition. Before Truffington could respond to the Queen, Duckbill had rolled up his own sleeves and was showing Compton the scar from when his father dropped a mason's trowel onto his arm from the uppermost plank of the bricklayer's scaffold.

"Well, your Majesty, Duckbill is here but—" Truffington hesitated.

"But what? Out with it," snapped the Queen.

"He and Compton are comparing scars."

Good," said the Queen. "Keep him there, and out of trouble. Get him drunk, if necessary. Smithers and I are on our way. Don't let anyone leave the premises, least of all Owl Man and Heron Man. I have a dream to discuss with them—it's a matter of national security."

The phone clicked in Truffington's ear as TQ rang off. Slipping the device into his pocket, he once again scanned the group, this time in search of the two birdmen who, as it turned out, were sound asleep on the enormous beanbags, amidst the tumult.