

It begins in a dream ...

The Deathling Crown Lottery

A Cautionary Dream Tale

Arthur Compton, 63, died peacefully in his sleep. This was usually the end of it, but not this time. His death was one of the jackpot prizes in the Deathling Crown Lottery.

The winning ticket in the narrative section was purchased by CedrosCM, a frequent player, and one who dreamed often of winning the chance to narrate a life back into existence. Most of his ongoing narratives remained just that: *dreams* that floated perpetually in his head, never finding their way to the written page, often involving females he imagined narrating to his pleasure.

That would change now, of course.

He knew the rules held no restrictions whatever on the narrative text. Whatever he wrote would come about in the new life of Mr. Arthur Compton, soon to be among the living. Whether he remained as CEO of Reticular Medicinals, Inc., was now completely up to CedrosCM. There in fact was only one rule: the winner must write a minimum 100-word narrative addition each day, weekends and holidays included. No exceptions were permitted. The penalty for failure was spelled out as well. The winner would himself become a prize in the Deathling Crown Lottery.

A Letter Sent ...

HOLLINGSWORTH LAW FIRM

Rhys Barton Hollingsworth, Esq.

Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, UK

TO: The Deathling Crown Lottery Awards Committee, Narrative Section

RE: Recent Prize Winner Mr. CedrosCM

Dear Sirs and/or Madams:

As you know, Mr. CedrosCM is a recent prizewinner in the esteemed Deathling Crown Lottery, Narrative Section.

In my role as his solicitor, he has asked me to convey his profound thanks to the Awards Committee. He shall be forever grateful to the Committee for this great honor, which he accepts with deep appreciation.

Although the rules of the lottery competition are admirably explicit, there are some minor technicalities which Mr. CedrosCM would like to clarify before taking actual possession of his prize, to wit, narrating Mr. Arthur Compton back to life.

The first question is this: In the event that, through no malice or intent on my client's part, Mr. Arthur Compton should meet an untimely or unseemly *second* end, would my client incur any liability whatsoever for said misfortune?

Second, in the further event that my client, while exercising his full and legal narrative rights to Mr. Compton's new life, should locate

said life within any time frame of which he, Mr. CedrosCM, lacks direct knowledge—will any liabilities or penalties be incurred as a result of unforeseen events happening therein?

In short, my client wishes to be assured that he is subject to no liability or responsibility for the well-being of Mr. Compton, and that his creative narrative rights are free, total and unencumbered, as is implied by your admirable Statement of Purpose in the Lottery Guidelines.

If I can be of any assistance to you in determining and clarifying Mr. CedrosCM's legal position in this matter, please do not hesitate to call on me.

Yours sincerely,

R. B. Hollingsworth

Rhys Barton “Bud” Hollingsworth, Esq. Solicitor

A Letter Received ...

THE DEATHLING CROWN LOTTERY

12 Highgate Meadows

London, UK

Dear Mr. Rhys Barton “Bud” Hollingsworth, Esq., Solicitor,

We are in receipt of your inquiry regarding your client’s liabilities following upon his winning the Narrative Section Prize in the most recent drawing.

The *Deathling Crown Lottery* is under no obligation to provide guidance for your client beyond the primary rule. The rule is such that it takes into account all eventualities when considered sufficiently in relation to the nature of the narrative undertaking. We are sure, upon deeper reflection, that you will come to the same conclusion as the basis upon which to advise your client.

We are compelled to urge you to inform your client that the performance requirement begins the moment the winning ticket is verified in the main office (address above) and once again, that there are no limitations of any kind on the narrative itself.

A common inquiry, lacking in your letter, concerns the consequences should the prize be declined. There are no instances of record of this eventuality. If the “clock” does not begin ticking until the prize is claimed and verified, then the clock does not tick. That is our present surmise, but this should not be regarded as a guarantee without a formal decision of the Royal Commission.

With hopes we have been responsive to your concerns,
we remain,

Respectfully yours,

Truffington

Sir Randall Truffington, III
Director, Narrative Section
The Deathling Crown Lottery

A Phone Call ...

Hollingsworth hit the redial button for the tenth time and CedrosCM finally answered.

“Where the bloody hell have you been?” Hollingsworth was steamed up proper like a Bournemouth clam.

“Where have I been? I’m at the Bucket o’ Blood, Hollingsworth, tipping a few with Nigel and the boys, celebrating the lottery. So what? I’ve been waiting to hear from you. What’d that bloke Truffington have to say?”

“Well, I just heard from him. He says no deal. Says you’ve got four bloody hours and fifteen bleeding minutes—make that fourteen—to get Mr. Arthur Compton back into action. I called Transition and they’re holding Compton there already. If you don’t activate him by midnight GMT, then he goes back into Cold Storage and *you* become the next Grand Prize. So, get your bloody arse in gear!”

“You were supposed to buy me some time, Hollingsworth! That’s what I’m paying you for! I haven’t had time to piss in a pot let alone write a script for old man Compton! This is going to take some time, you know.”

“Well, you haven’t got any, CM. Listen, here’s what I’ll do. I’ll run a bloody appeal past the Royal Commission even though all they do is fart into their Carlton Club spittoons all day—Pall Mall this, the Queen Mum that, and all that sort of rubbish. The appeal is a bloody long-shot, and you know it, but I’ll give it a bash. Meanwhile, just make up something and write it down. They won’t hold Compton in Transition forever, you know, just because you’ve got a writer’s block up your arse. He’s getting warm.”

“You mean they’re thawing him out already?”

“Are you serious? From what they tell me he’s not just thawed out. He’s awake.”

“Oh ... my ... God.”

“That’s right. The boys at Transition say he’s thawed out, awake, and royally pissed. Says he doesn’t want to be narrated back onto some Nancy boy’s fantasy island. Says he’s got unfinished business back at Reticular Medicinals. I’m afraid you’ve got a bit of a rough patch ahead, if you don’t get a hustle on.”

“OK, OK, Hollingsworth. I’ll write up something, but I warn you, it won’t be any *Gone With the Wind* or *War and Peace*.”

“Don’t warn me. Warn Compton. Anyway, it really doesn’t matter. Just write him up somewhere—anywhere. Just write him out of Transition, and then you can re-write him to somewhere else tomorrow, when you’ve got more time.”

“Yeah? If he’s pissed now, in Transition, what’s he going to do when I start re-writing him all over the map?”

“He’s got no choice. Either he puts a sock in it and takes his lumps, or back he goes into the Meat Locker. Now let’s stop wasting time, shall we? Make up your mind, CM: Where does Mr. Arthur Compton land when you narrate him back?”

Hollingsworth rang off and began composing his appeal to the Royal Commission, while CedrosCM put his head in his hands. He’d had a few too many celebratory pints at the Bucket o’ Blood, and his head was spinning. Where exactly *would* Arthur Compton land? And who exactly *would* he be? Or *what*?

Another Letter ...

HOLLINGSWORTH LAW FIRM

Rhys Barton Hollingsworth, Esq.

Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, UK

Lord Brabazoom of Tarara, Deputy Chairman
Her Majesty's Royal Commission on Sports and the Arts
Westminster, House of Lords
London, UK

Dear Lord Brabazoom,

It is with great pleasure that I make this appeal to Your Lordship and Her Majesty's Royal Commission, on behalf of my client, Mr. CedrosCM, most recent winner of the Deathling Crown Lottery, Narrative Section.

To be brief, as I know you have many duties, my client wishes to appeal Sir Randall Truffington's Narrative Section ruling that no time extension be allowed, from the exact time of the awarding of the Deathling Crown Lottery Grand Prize, to the onset of the "clock ticking," as Sir Truffington rather commonly put it.

My client reasonably wishes to start the clock ticking, say, forty-eight hours after the awarding of the prize. He claims the artist's prerogative, that creativity cannot be forced by fatuous and irrelevant deadlines. As his solicitor, I believe that in this matter he is correct.

I apologize for disturbing your evening at the Charter Club. But I am sure you will realize that time is of the essence for my client, since his life, in effect, is at stake. Hence, I am sending this appeal to you by personal (motorcycle) courier service.

Mr. CedrosCM and I await your decision on this appeal.

With great appreciation,

R. B. Hollingsworth

Rhys Barton “Bud” Hollingsworth, Esq., Solicitor

A Decision from the desk of ...

Lord Brabazoom of Tarara

Deputy Chairman

Her Majesty's Royal Commission on Sports and the Arts

Westminster, House of Lords

London, UK

Truff ...

Hollingsworth appeal denied.

Brabazoom

Meanwhile, at Transition ...

Among the staff, Transition had a number of affectionate names: the “meat locker,” of course, and more realistically, “cold storage.” Among the spiritually inclined, it was known as “Limbo” or “Bardo.” When the younger employees suited up for their morning shift, they often said things like, “All right, let’s do the Limbo Rock,” or, “Show me your Bardo Face today, baby,” and they high-fived each other. This *esprit-de-corps* was encouraged by the Transition supervisors.

When Arthur Compton first was transferred to Transition, he was cold and really stiff. In short, Mr. Compton was dead and frozen, so he didn’t feel the nitrile-gloved hands that were shifting him from the pull-out, stainless steel, cold-storage cabinet drawer and onto the stainless steel worktable. Nor did he feel the gloved hands transferring him from the table and into the tub of gently-circulating, temperature-controlled water.

At first the water temperature was near freezing—one degree Celsius. The boys at Transition, in order to avoid the shock of a too-rapid thawing, took pains to raise the water temperature only gradually. It wouldn’t do, for example, to have Mr. Compton’s heart trying to pump blood into still frozen pulmonary bronchioles or alveoli. Slow and easy was the Transition motto.

This is why the boys in Transition started working on Mr. Compton well before the selection of the Grand Prize lottery winner. They wanted to make sure Arthur Compton was alive, awake and healthy, ready to assume his new identity—if any—in whatever his new life was to be.

It was not unusual to give all stiffs some hot chicken broth, once they had completely thawed out. The idea was to supplement the IV drip nutrition and re-hydration procedure. Stiffs were always hungry when they “woke up,” were “brought back” or were “re-

constituted”—different crews had different terms to describe their unusual but crucial work. Besides, the chicken broth added just that much more of a personal touch, for which most stiffers were grateful.

Not, however, Arthur Compton.

Once he was completely thawed, rubbed down with warm towels and given his broth, once his limbs were exercised and stretched and the on-duty MD had given him a thorough exam and pronounced him alive and fit—with a cautionary note about a probable build-up of plaque in his arteries—by that time, Arthur Compton was fully awake.

This is when the boys realized how pissed he was—not “pissed” as in drunk, but “pissed” as in really, really angry. In short, “pissed off.”

He lay on the warming bed in his blue hospital johnny, open at the back, and looked around blinking. Then he heaved his chest upward and drew in a deep, rasping breath of air.

But instead of simply exhaling, he began bellowing like a hog in heat.

“Where the fuck am I?” he demanded. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” “Where the fuck are my clothes?” Fuck, the boys noticed, was a big part of Arthur’s vocabulary, an old military habit, they assumed.

“Hey, Arthur, you’re back! Great to see you!” They were trying to distract him.

“Back from where?”

“Back from ... emmmm ... well, you see, Arthur, you were ... dead.”

“Dead? Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Clive, sir. Clive Harbaugh.”

“Well, get me some decent clothes, Harbaugh, and my wallet. And there better not be any cash or cards missing or it’ll be your neck.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that just yet sir. You haven’t been released into custody.”

“What in bloody hell are you talking about?”

“You see, you’re a prize. A narrative prize ... in the lottery, you know?”

“What, the football lottery?”

“Oh no, sir. Not football at all. You’re the Grand Prize in the Deathling Crown Lottery. It’s a great honor.”

“Get the supervisor in here. I want to talk to him. Now!”

Mr. Compton was issuing orders just as he had at Reticular Medicinals, except he was no longer there, no longer the CEO. He had no employees, no secretary, and no leather desk chair or chauffeured Bentley. All his accounts, assets, holdings were tied up in probate. This was a deliberate policy on the part of Truffington and his underlings. It was important to sever all material ties to the old life, in order for the “narrative thrust” to take hold.

Narrative Thrust ...

“Nigel!”

CedrosCM shouted over the din trying to get Nigel’s attention. He stood up and shouted again at his friend in the next booth.

“Hey, beanhead, I need to borrow your computer.”

He needed something to write it out quicker than quick and Nigel was the only one around married to what he called his “I touch it all the time” tablet. He carried the bloody thing everywhere. I bet he showers and who knows what else with it, but now he needed it and he needed it bad.

“No way, man. We’re here to drink not to pet the tablet. Hey, someone get Cedros another pint!”

CedrosCM hefted himself to the top of the booth, nudging Mikey aside, and grabbed at Nigel. Nigel, quick of butt, scooted out of range, causing Cedros to land flat on the table top, knocking over both Nigel’s and Bumbles’ brews. Bumbles leaped out of the booth, his pants full of beer.

“Bastard! You lousy bastard! Look what you done! People gonna think I pissed me pants! Jinny, get me a towel! Jinny, be quick.”

CedrosCM paid no mind to Bumbles. He was his usual excitable brute. Cedros needed a computer and he needed it now.

“Nigel, I need it now. Please man. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Cedros’s last words caught Nigel’s attention and he looked at the hapless CedrosCM, flat atop the table, his motley old sweater sopping up puddles of beer.

“Life *and* death?”

“Look, there isn’t time to explain. Let me have the fucking thing for half an hour to write a little text and then I’ll explain. I promise not to hurt it.”

CedrosCM’s erstwhile plea bore fruit, as Nigel reached in his backpack and pulled out the beauty and set it on the dry part of the table in front of him.

“Now don’t go snooping and touching nothing you shouldn’t.”

Cedros seeks a bit of quiet ...

After scrambling out of the booth with the tablet in hand, Cedros took leave of his buddies and went to an empty booth in the back of the Bucket o' Blood pub. He booted up "I touch it all the time," and was greeted by a sultry female voice in low register saying, "Touch me, touch me. No, silly ... here."

Cedros did *not* touch the button that was blinking, but instead tapped his finger on the icon for *Word*. The screen keyboard opened in a flash and there he was staring at the blank page. *Calm down. You got more than an hour to get this done.*

"Hi sweetie, you looking for companionship?"

CedrosCM looked up from the computer and took in Miss Charming's features, which were plentiful and barely contained, as she leaned forward with her hands atop the table, her white-toothed smile big and broad enough to qualify her for a news anchorette.

"Sorry, missy, not now, I got some work to do before midnight. Maybe you come back then if you don't find anything to occupy you before then, OK?"

"No chance o' that, honey buns. You just missed the time o' your life! You take good care of yourself now, if you get my drift."

CedrosCM watched her sway away and caught his own head rocking back and forth. He looked at his watch. *Jesus! Fifty minutes.*

He stared at the screen, his hands just above the glass keyboard. He was shaking. He felt almost afraid to touch the keys.

No. He was afraid.

OK ... some decisions. First person? Third? Better make it third; I don't want to be Mr. Arthur Compton or even write anywhere close to him. OK, so third it is. But first, we need a new name. Think man, think.

CedrosCM's eyes wandered about as if avoiding the screen altogether. *Bingo!* The bottle of meat sauce. *Yes.* "Zane's Seasonings." *Gotcha, Zane. I like that.*

Zane what?

"How about a brew, dearie?"

Jinny reached out and touched CedrosCM's hand in that familiar way bar girls can do.

"Sure, Jinny. Bring me something new and different, something you never brought me before, OK that?"

CedrosCM was not adventurous, but he felt the need for something to mark the occasion of winning the Deathling Crown Lottery. Drinking the same old, same old with the boys just wasn't it. His watch seemed to come into view of its own accord. Forty minutes. *Yikes.*

"Here you go, dearie, it's a brand new one called "Sharp's Staghead of the Moors." The guys are really going for it, let me tell you. Makes for good sippin, I can testify to that myself."

Gottcha, Mr. Zane Sharp.

CedrosCM begins ...

Zane Sharp woke up in bed, stretched and yawned. And gagged, almost losing it. His mouth was a mixture of formaldehyde and ash. He smelled worse. *What the hay-ell happened last night?*

A dream wafted away that may have been a clue but he couldn't catch it.

He got up. Every bone and muscle was on fire; but a strange coldness quivered him every which way. He staggered from the bed and made it to the window. He pulled open the blinds. He was in a dingy motel on the outskirts of some city, but he didn't know which city. Looking out the grimy window, into bright sunlight, he squinted through the filter of his hand. He made out a road sign: "Welcome to Bakersfield, Southern Gateway to the Central Valley."

"What the hay-ell?" Zane groaned in his Mississippi drawl.

"How the hay-ell did I end up in this rat hole?"

CedrosCM muses ...

11:56 PM.

CM's first narrative submission was finished, coming in at a word count of 153. Just before he pushed the Send button at the stroke of midnight, though, he decided to remove two unnecessary adverbs—*unusually* and *obviously*—so the final word count stood at 151. CM congratulated himself on his terse, taut, edgy prose, since he could easily have loaded up the submission with deadwood in order to meet the quota in time. But no, he was a *writer*, and he had his pride to consider. So he fought his way to the deadline, stripping and pruning, cutting and nipping, as he went.

He hit Send.

He'd accomplished the first thing, to get Mr. Arthur Compton out of Transition, out of his old life, out of his old ways, waking him up in Bakersfield of all places, home of good old Buck Owens and the Buckaroos. We may just have to throw a few obstacles his way and give him a journey and make him a hero and all that crap. No way, Mr. Arthur Compton NKA (“now known as”) Zane Sharp, are you gonna be any body's hero.

Midnight now, and no sign of Miss Charming.

CM was about to turn off “I touch it all the time,” when the blinking button caught his eye. It was a function button at the top of the screen, flashing red in a mechanical yet lurid sort of way. He hesitated and then tapped the button with his fingertip.

Instantly the screen was shot full of undulating colors and swirling forms. Once he focused his eyes, CM realized he was looking at a close-up video of tattoos on a pole-dancer's belly as she undulated

and rubbed against a brass pole. It was a blurry, smudged image taken at close range, probably by Nigel himself, at one of the local topless pubs. The writhing tattoos were too much for CM just now. Besides, he could always wander down the street and catch the real thing.

He punched the button, and the screen went blank—except for the striking-cobra/leaping-mongoose that served as Nigel’s screen saver.

“Hey, Nigel,” CM yelled into the next booth.

He had completely forgotten about Nigel, Mikey and Bumbles.

“You still there?”

“What?”

CM hadn’t realized how loud the din in the pub was.
“I said, are you still there, for Chrissakes?”

Bumble’s head appeared over the booth. A jack-o’-lantern’s grin was pasted on his face, complete with missing tooth.

“Yo, CM. Ya done with yer Shakespearean an’ all, are ye?”

“Right you are, Bumbles. Now give this little touchy back to Nigel, and where’s Jinny? What have you done with her?”

“Aw, we ain’t done nothin’ with her, she’s right here in the booth with Nigel now, aren’t ya, darlin’?”

And CM heard a squeal from the other side as he passed the touch-pad over to Bumbles.

Normally, CM would have been happy to stay, to shut the pub down with Nigel, Mikey and Bumbles—not to mention Jinny—never

being one to pass up a celebration. But for some reason, tonight he felt out of sorts. He should have felt relieved, having met his Arthur Compton narrative deadline. But instead, a muscle in his neck was spasming and his mouth was dry and malodorous in an unfamiliar way. Reeking of ashes, he would have said, or chemicals.

Weird. I taste like Arthur Compton, he thought.

He slipped out of the pub—against the pleas of Nigel and the boys to stay and have another pint—and walked alone down the dark sidewalk, past the silent hulks of London walk-ups. When he came to his cramped basement apartment he grasped the heavy, cast-iron railing and walked by feel down the stairs to the door.

Look at me now, walking by Braille. Might as well be blind, for all I can see, he muttered, as something scurried over paper near his feet. Probably a rat, he thought. Good luck to you, my friend. Found any nice dead bodies lately?

CM was startled, more by his own dark thoughts and dour mood than by the unseen rodent.

Who's the intruder here, after all, he continued, a little rodent living off the scraps of us humans? You don't take up much room, friend, not as much as I do anyway. Maybe I'm the one who's taking up your space. Maybe I'm the one interrupting you. Maybe we're the problem, us two-leggeds, with our high-and-mighty ways.

By the time he had fumbled the key out of his pocket, the rodent was gone and he felt no safer for its absence. *Come back and I'll give thee a cut of cheese, he called plaintively. But his companion had fled and CM was alone. He opened the door and disappeared into the dark, empty hole that he called his home.*

A flare-up ...

“It’s crap, pure crap! I tell you, Brabazoom, we’ve got to do something.”

Truffington was in full froth, waving CedrosCM’s initial text in the air and finally throwing it to the ground.

“Bakersfield? No one’s going to be interested in Bakersfield.”

“Look, Randall, I don’t see that we have much choice but to keep to the straight and narrow here. As long as I’m in charge there will be no repeat of the Crower affair.”

Lord Brabazoom pounded the arm of his leather chair with his fist as if making an exclamation point.

“No. I am not suggesting that we do anything as obvious and underhanded as actually picking a *writer* as the prize winner as that fool Crower did. No, no, no, not at all.”

Truffington lifted himself from his armchair and began pacing.

“Well, for now we are stuck with this clown CedrosCM. I don’t see there is anything to do but to get Publishing to work on his submissions and get the book on its way. You know, there has been a slight pickup in sales since we started to serialize these lottery writings. That did solve the problem of waiting until our winners actually finished something. Tell me, Truff, what are you thinking?”

“Suppose we think of CedrosCM as the nobody he certainly is—no doubt there. What nobodys need to become heroes is *obstacles*. Obstacles, Brabazoom, obstacles. Let’s arrange to throw some obstacles his way. Maybe there’s a hero writer lurking somewhere in

his underworld. Maybe. What do you say?"

Truffington had his hands clasped behind his back, stopped his pacing, and awaited Brabazoom's reply.

"Interesting idea. Rather like *My Fair Lady*, don't you think? Do you have something in mind as a first obstacle?"

Lord Brabazoom stroked his beard and looked up at Truffington.

"Yes, I do."