

Owl Man Lands in London ...

Owl Man took the express train from Heathrow to Victoria Station. He had rented a small, third-floor, walk-up flat along Ebury Mews, to which a black diesel taxi carried him through the labyrinthine streets of London. The driver was a chatty cove who told Owl Man, with a wee bit of pride, that it “took *four bloody years* of studyin’ and bein’ tested on the maps o’ London ‘fore I could get me taxi-license, mate!” And judging from the endless tangle of streets they were winding through, Owl Man believed him.

After checking in and dumping his bags in the flat, he took a leisurely stroll in the direction from which he’d just come, passing Victoria Station again and continuing a few more blocks to Wagamama’s, a popular chain of noodle-shops. With alacrity—one of Owl Man’s favorite words—the steaming bowl of noodles he devoured at Wagamama’s cut through the London chill that was on the verge of settling into Owl Man’s bones. Warmed to the core, he took another taxi back to Ebury Mews. This driver, however, was a silent cove—not a peep from him, so Owl Man just dozed in the back seat.

The next morning, after a “full English breakfast,” Owl Man drifted back toward Victoria Station, where he grabbed a tabloid newspaper from a vending stand. London tabloids, he figured, were a good bet for picking up any current news about the Deathling Crown Lottery, if such a thing really existed, as his old friend Menachem had insisted.

And the tabloids did not disappoint. Perhaps it was just dumb luck, but it felt to Owl Man like a powerful synchronicity, related to his dream and his conversation with **Menachem Bayner**, that, on this, his very first day in London, *this* was the blazing headline that greeted him:

“CEDROS-CM NEW DCL GRAND PRIZE WINNER! GETS TO NARRATE
ARTHUR COMPTON TO HIS NEW LIFE!”

The breathless article went on to say, “Current DCL Grand Prize Arthur

Commented [PM1]: This is an actual name, the inventor of VIX. Should we change it???

Compton ready to be narrated back to life, now that the customary affidavits, liability forms and such have been signed by the winner, counter-signed by Narrative Section Chief Sir Randall Truffington III, and notarized by the Queen's personal secretary, Darrold Hornby! First narrative installment coming soon! Stay tuned! This one promises to be a doozie!"

"Hmmm. Lots of exclamation marks," noted Owl Man. "Is that a sign of existing popularity, actual value, or a wheedling attempt to drum up value out of nothing? Maybe it's an indication of the VIX activity Menachem spoke of?"

For all its journalistic flair, the article made no attempt to explain why this prize narrative should be any different from previous ones, let alone why it should be a "doozie."

Owl Man read a few more follow-up articles, made some notes and set out for the main offices of the DCL Narrative Section, whose address he found on the Internet. The DCL-NS had its own website and blog, with a "Comments" section that ran on for pages. Very popular, apparently, with lots of arguments—good for VIX.

In a pinch, he decided, he could pose as an American journalist working on a DCL article, maybe explore the financial angle a bit. "Find out just how big a mouth this Truffington has," Owl Man muttered aloud. Maybe he'd be lucky and they'd forget to ask him for his journalist's credentials. Why wouldn't a passport and a little blarney do just as well? Perhaps even some off-the-cuff intimidation? He'd find out soon enough.

After entering the six-story building—all devoted to Narrative Section by the looks of it—he passed through a security gate monitored by a bored, uniformed guard staring at the X-ray display screen. Then, after checking a Directory Board, Owl Man crossed an immense marble-floored lobby, and entered the first of who-knows-how-many Narrative Section offices.

A plumpish but well-composed secretary sat just inside the door. It didn't look like she ever had much to do, but at the moment she wasn't doing anything so trite as reading a movie-fan or diet magazine, or applying nail-polish to her nails. But there was a TV Guide sort of thing on the credenza behind her chair, within easy reach, and it didn't look like much time had elapsed since the last time she had done

her nails—or had them done. No stars or fluorescent-colored stripes or glitter on the nails, at least. And no tattoos that the Owl could see.

“Yes?” she said with the minimum of courtesy required to keep her job.

“Sir Randall Truffington III, if you please,” said Owl Man with great, almost overbearing dignity, and just an edge of “don’t-fuck-with-me-lady” aggression.

“Do you have an appointment?” This was standard delaying tactics, which Owl Man fully expected. He came prepared.

“What is your name, madam?” Owl Man used his stentorian voice of authority, the voice of one who is not accustomed to being questioned by underlings.

This caught the secretary by surprise.

“Uh, why, uh, my name is . . . Mary, sir. I mean, Mary Marlegate.”

“Your middle name?”

“Uh, Abigail, sir. Abigail Marlegate, Mary.”

Now she was confused.

“And your rank?”

“My rank? Why, I’m . . . my rank is, uh, Sir Truffington’s initial secretary, that is, I take the initial clients who wish an audience with Sir Truffington.”

“You mean you’re like a *triage nurse*? You decide who gets to see Dr. Truffington—I’m sorry, I mean *Sir* Truffington—and who doesn’t? You know, *triage*? Like who gets their leg chopped off and who just bleeds to death instead?”

This grisly war-and-horror-movie imagery seemed to have the desired effect.

“Well, uh, if ya put it li’ that, yeah.”

She had slipped into her childhood accent, with a cockney glottal stop on “like,” and with “yeah” instead of “yes.”

“Very well, Ms. Marlegate, I won’t report you this time. But you must understand that I will not tolerate insubordination, or any other form of disrespect. Is that clear?”

“Oh, yes, sir, very clear indeed!”

“Excellent. Shall we just skip the formalities then, and you skip off to tell Truffington that *Owl Man* is here to see him about this latest bloody lottery? And tell

him that he needn't play games with me or I'll have Her Royal Highness the Queen breathing down his neck before the next rugby match grinds to a halt!"

Owl Man wasn't sure about English sports, their seasons, time-frames and so forth, but he knew that *authority* was a key that opened many doors in the bureaucratic world.

"Owl Man, I say, come in, come in, how wonderful to see you!" said Truffington aloud, standing and offering his hand. And silently to himself: Who the bloody hell is this bloke? And does he really know Queenie? Now what does she have up her sleeve?

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Truff," said Owl Man. (He knew that the familiar touch would catch Truffington off-guard.)

"Here, have a seat. Care for some sherry? Or perhaps you prefer spirits?"^[SEP]

"Scotch, single-malt, if you have any, Truff. Let's say, 18-year Macallan?" said Owl Man, as if this were the most ordinary request.

"18-year? Hmm. Well, perhaps I *do* have some hidden away on the back shelf."

A minute or two of rattling and clinking bottles, and Truffington brought out a dusty, *unopened* bottle of 18-year Macallan. Owl Man knew this was probably the most expensive Scotch Truffington had in his liquor cabinet. A good sign. If he cracked the stopper on this one, Truffington was all his.

"I won't take too much of your precious time, Truff—thanks, old boy, cheers! I've just come from the States—that moldy old clutch of rebellious colonies—ha, ha."

Truffington didn't know what this "Owl Man" was driving at, but his instincts said, "Play this one safe, Truff. You don't know whom you're dealing with."

Truffington returned the laugh as if it were the funniest thing. He threw his head back and squinted at the ceiling while uttering *ha ha ha* a few times. Just two good old boys having a laugh at the expense of the populace, right, Truff?

"Mmmmm. 18-year Macallan. Can't beat it!" said Owl Man. "Now, to business. My business is that I'm here to find out *what the fucking hell* is going on with this Deathling Crown Lottery of yours. Arthur Compton? CedrosCM? Are you kidding me, Truff?"

Truffington began to defend himself, but stopped in mid-exclamation. He thought he'd better find out what the charge was before he began exculpating himself.

"Well, yes, Owl Man, sure, I mean, it's just a *fucking lottery!*" (This last at higher volume and slightly higher pitch.)

Normally, Truffington swore in more of a 19th-century landed gentry or Grand Duke manner. But this crude American, this *cowboy* called "Owl Man," had lowered the level to the point where Truffington was losing his wits, regressing to the typical American vulgarisms.

"Fucking-A!" continued Truffington, raising his glass in the air, the Macallan already working its magic.

"Very well, Randall. Shall I call you 'Randy'? All I require from you at the moment is that you keep me 'in the loop,' as they say. I want to know everything that happens with this particular lottery. Every narrative installment. All the files. All the movements of Compton, CedrosCM, and the agents you assign to tail them—you do assign tailing agents, don't you?"

"Oh, of course, we've got agents coming out the bum-hole!"

{O blessed Macallan! thought Owl Man to himself.}

"Excellent, Randy. Here's my present address. I'm working under cover, of course. Eubury Mews. Nobody, not even Queenie herself, would think of looking for me there. And don't bother sending any of your goons around to intimidate me. They'd never get close."

"You know Queenie?" said Truffington, changing the subject.

Owl Man ignored the question. He went on to say, "Everything, Truff. I need to know *everything*. Daily reports. Any change. The slightest nuance. There are very important people who are counting on me, Truff, and therefore on you. Do you understand me? People with vast power. People before whom even Queenie, in her royal quaintness, trembles!"

"Oh, yes, I understand completely, Owl Man. May I call you Owlie?"

"No, you may not. 'Owl Man' is sufficient for now. We'll see from your reports how we get along. Meanwhile, I'm sure you won't mind if I just take the rest of this

18-year Macallan. Working undercover and all, it really is tedious.”

“Oh, by all means, Owl Man, take the Macallan. In fact, I might have another bottle back there!”

“No, Truff, this will be sufficient. And I do thank you for it.”

“My pleasure, Owl Man, my pleasure, indeed.”

“And, depending on how your reports are received, I may have to call on you again, perhaps unexpectedly.”

“Any time, Owl Man, old boy, any time at all. And the Macallan will be waiting for you!”

By the time Owl Man finally left, Truffington was sweating like a Louisiana bayou hog, just escaped from a Cajun *jambalaya* butcher.

Giles and Alfie Meet Owl Man ...

It would be a grotesque understatement to say that Alfie and Giles—Truffington’s “enforcers”—were not the slickest operators in London. Oh, they fancied themselves tough and all, because they liked breaking things. But if a job required any finesse, or judgment, they were at a loss.

First of all, they were loud, and found it next to impossible to keep their mouths shut for very long. They practically had to hold a discussion before putting one foot in front of another. Owl Man heard them coming long before they reached the ground-floor entrance to his flat. He did not yet know their names, but he soon would, since by the time they reached the third floor he would have been listening in on their conversation for some time, which heralded their approach and was coming through loud and clear.

“What’re ya doin’ that for, Alfie?” said Giles as they turned into Ebury Mews, boots clattering on scattered boards and scraps of plywood..

“Doin’ what, Giles?”

“That thing in yer pocket?”

“What, this?”

“Yeah, that’s wha’ I’m talkin’ ‘bout.”

“Why, it’s a bloody rope, not that that’s any yer business, Giles.”

“Yeah, but what’s it for, Alfie, is what I’m sayin’?”

“Jesus,” said Alfie, close to yelling, both men oblivious to the sounds reverberating off the metal dumpsters and brick walls.

“Whaddaya think? To tie the bloke up with, natch!”

This sort of exchange served Alfie and Giles as a conversation, and they continued blustering in this desultory manner even as they clomped up the three flights to Owl Man's flat.

The Owl's kitchenette paring knife, which he had used to open the sealed box of documents from Truffington, had come in handy once again, this time as an electrician's tool. He used it to strip insulation off of some electrical wires he had rigged up into a little surprise package, along with some water, a sponge and two metal mop-buckets from the janitor's closet—Owl Man, a regular MacGyver!

First, he very gently unscrewed the light-bulb on the landing outside his flat until it just barely flickered off-and-on, off-and-on—just enough to distract Alfie and Giles, thus creating the proper atmosphere for his surprise.

He calculated that Alfie and Giles would not have the wits to enter the flat without first testing the main door-handle, a stout, bare-metal knob whose many coats of paint had long since worn off. Besides, as further invitation he intended to leave the door slightly ajar, and the boxy old cathode-ray-tube TV blaring at high volume.

So, after some clever pairing of several 230v. exposed-copper conductors taped to dry insulating strips of sponge on each side of the metal knob, he carefully lifted two buckets of water and perched them precariously atop the partially-opened door. Then he fastened the plug-end of the stripped-wire assembly to a wall outlet, so that the exposed copper he'd taped to the door-knob was now "live." There was nothing left to do but wait for his visitors.

For this, he sat just inside the door, holding in his hand a counter-weighted

Malacca cane he'd picked up on a trip to Spain some years ago, and had brought with him to London this time. The counter-weighted tip of the cane served admirably as a further security device, a devastating bludgeon when swung with intent, perfect for warding off attacks by purse-snatchers, muggers and the like on the streets of Seville. And yet it was stylish at the same time.

"He said the third floor, right?" yelled Giles, as they reached the landing and stopped to catch their breath.

"Yeah. Number 3-A," said Alfie, puffing. "Hey, it's right there. Look, the door's open!"

"They oughta fix that light. Somebody could get hurt."

"Hey, that's the idea, ain't it?" And they both laughed aloud with pleasure.

"Look, Alfie," said Giles, "the bloke left the bloody door open! How stupid is that? We waltz right in and punch him up a bit. Teach 'im a lesson."

"What lesson, Giles?" said Alfie, slow on the uptake.

"I don't know. How about, 'Don't mess with Alfie an' Giles'? Ha ha ha!"

"Ha, ha! Yeah, that's good," said Alfie. "Well, shall we do it?"

"Let's do this thing!" It was a line they'd heard on several action movies and TV serials—commandos, cops, the usual.

"Let's do this thing," Giles repeated.

Since he liked being first, Giles walked up to the open door, listened to the inane quiz-show laugh-track on the TV, put his finger to his lips to quiet Alfie, who was about to say something about the quiz program, which he recognized, then Giles reached out and grabbed the booby-trapped door-knob.

Instantly 230 volts of electricity shot into his bare hand, made several quick circuits through his body and sparked slightly between hand and knob, as it arced back and forth in 60 Hz alternating waves.

“Shit!” screamed Giles as he yanked his hand away. This jarred the door and upset the water-buckets above, which tumbled down on top of Giles, cracking him in the head, bouncing off the floor and slamming Alfie in the shins. The hoodlums both fell down and slithered through the sloshing water toward the top stair, while the buckets continued clattering down to the second-floor landing.

“What the bloody hell?” shouted Giles in a high-pitched shriek, holding his electrocuted hand. Alfie was beyond speech, rolling on the wet linoleum floor, moaning and grasping his cracked shin.

Owl Man calmly stepped to the door with his Malacca cane, raised it to shoulder level, and brought it smashing down on the floor next to Giles’ left ear. The report was deafening, and though he did not strike Giles directly, he certainly could have. But that was deliberate. Owl Man didn’t want to *injure* him, he only wanted to *scare* him—to issue a mild warning, though he could easily have killed him!

“You’re Giles, I take it?” he said, calmly as usual. “And that must be your colleague Alfie?”

“Uh, huh, unnnhh,” Giles replied, preparing to meet his Maker. “Please don’t do me in, mister, me old mum needs me.”

“Oh really? Needs you for what?” asked Owl Man.

Giles cowered on the floor like a wet, trapped rat, and couldn’t think of a reply.

“Oh, never mind,” said Owl Man. “Take your friend Alfie and go tell Mr. Truffington that I don’t take kindly to his idea of *tactics*, if that’s what this is. Tell him I’ll forgive him this one time, and *this one time only*. But one more misstep like this and he’ll have hell to pay. Repeat that: *Hell to pay*.”

“H-hell t-to p-pay,” repeated a stuttering, sweating, sopping Giles.

Owl Man raised the cane one last time for theatrical effect, and Giles cringed pathetically. The Owl turned and, re-securing the light bulb, re-entered his flat. He could hear the two thugs scrabbling down the stairs as fast as they could.

Inside, he pulled the plug on his little trap, rolled up the wires and cleaned off the little paring knife.

“Well, wasn’t that a hoot?” he said, and sat down to call Jasmine, who—he knew—was waiting petrified by the phone in Seattle, anxious to hear whether her Owlie was all right or not.

Owl Man Takes a Coffee Break ...

Owl Man knew that the coffee-shop just around the corner from Ebury Mews would serve well as a caffeine-oasis, insofar as his mystery-mission allowed the formation of any regular habits. The family-run franchise—*Caffè Nero*, or “black coffee”—was a charming, cramped but popular hot-spot, whose windows dripped with condensation, and whose lively roar of conversation was punctuated by hissing valves on the polished Italian espresso machine. The shop reminded Owl Man of Tully’s, back in Seattle, though it lacked the constant bluster of Tully himself and, most of all, it lacked Jasmine’s extraordinary presence.

The very thought of Jasmine—in this case her *absence*—tugged at Owl Man’s heart the way a heavy hawser tugs, through the “cat-hole” at the bow, upon a ship’s anchor or its moorings.

But he knew there could still be hidden dangers lurking in London; and though he downplayed them for Jasmine’s benefit, he understood they were potentially lethal. Thus, he was certain that both she and Heron Man were better off, for the time being at least, in Seattle. Maybe Heron Man could join him later, and perhaps even Jasmine. But in the meantime, he knew that Heron Man would watch out for Jasmine, and vice-versa.

The dangers he was concerned about went far beyond the routine or even extraordinary risks of foreign travel, since he was not only entering unfamiliar territory, he was entering unfamiliar *fictional* territory, where shocking, unexpected factors were multiplied beyond reckoning.

“Like a wormhole,” he said to no one in particular, as he approached the counter.

In this vigilant mood Owl Man ordered “*un macchiato e due cornetti*,” flourishing his Italian for the benefit of the tall lad taking his order. The lad sported black-framed eyeglasses, spiked hair and tattooed arms that resembled illuminated manuscripts or papyrus scrolls.

“Right away, pops,” said the boy, unimpressed by the Italian.

“Pops, indeed,” thought Owl Man, recalling his encounter with Sal that first morning in Tully’s, oh, so many years ago.

Once settled down at a small corner table, the Owl took a sip of coffee, nipped off the tip of his first *cornetto* and, while munching, began musing over a difficult question that had been plaguing him. It had to do with time and fiction, or fictional time.

Most people would assume that, because he first learned about *The Deathling Crown Lottery* from a dream, the lottery was therefore *not real*. Strictly imaginary hog-wash. And he, Owl Man, was to be considered *non compos mentis*.

And yet ... here he sat in London, having rented a flat where, at this moment, a huge file box labeled “Deathling Crown Lottery, Top-Secret Official Files: A. Compton/CedrosCM,” sat on a kitchen chair, within reaching distance of a half-full bottle (note the optimism!) of 18-year Macallan hidden in a cubbyhole. He had already threatened Sir Randall Truffington III, demanding that he produce the files, and had planned and executed a clever booby-trap for Truffington’s ill-directed goons, Alfie and Giles, sent by “Truff” to bust his—Owl Man’s—kneecaps.

He had even overheard a conversation between the actual DCL Grand Prize Winner, CedrosCM, and his drinking buddies at the Bucket o’ Blood pub—on the *very*

same day the London tabloids had blared out the headlines announcing the latest winner—none other than CedrosCM himself!

That one synchronistic event in itself had Owl Man’s mind swirling. Not for the first time, he wondered if he had dropped into a *bloody* wormhole! “Now you’re starting to sound like Giles, Mr. Owl!” he said aloud to himself. “You’ve got wormholes on the brain!”

He had elected not to speak to CedrosCM in the pub, on the owlish assumption that it would be *unwise* to intervene before he knew more than he presently did. Therein lay the kernel of the problem—the “time-and-fiction” problem.

He took another sip of espresso and nipped off the other tip of the *cornetto*, which now resembled the long half of a yellow potato. He tried to formulate the problem as tersely as he could:

“*What I am experiencing,*” he began in a low, slow voice, “*is not possible.*”

Another sip, another nip, more munching—and he continued:

“Weeks ago, I dreamed about something that was only set in motion *on the day I arrived in London*—witness the dated, tabloid headlines announcing the news. OK. So far as we can tell, I had simply had an *anticipatory* dream. Or even a *pre-cognitive* dream, *if you wish.*” He didn’t know who the ‘you’ was; that is, he didn’t know whom he was addressing. Some interlocutor in his head again?

“But,” he went on, “I have in my possession official records of an extensive *sequence of events which have not yet taken place!* They’re all officially dated and even *time-stamped*—but the dates are *in the future!* And I really don’t think anyone had the bright idea of faking hundreds of documents, letterheads, entire chapters of fiction, etc.,

plus fiddling with re-setting the government time-stamp machinery over and over, just because someone named ‘Owl Man’ *might* have a dream and come to London to investigate. It’s crazy! Those machines are wired SHUT with *piombini*, an Italian word for the pressed-lead seals used for securing electrical meters! This is just too implausible, and yet I’m *experiencing it!*”

Owl Man was getting himself worked up into a fine lather, and the second cup of espresso the tall tattooed lad had brought him just intensified the effect.