

Bute House, Edinburgh

On a Wednesday afternoon the Scottish Cabinet assembled under the direction of the First Minister in his official residence for a special meeting - one which was as brief as it was highly secretive. The head of the Scottish Regional Council had only invited the ministers. The deputy ministers, who generally also took part in cabinet meetings, had been neither informed nor invited this afternoon. Aside from the First Minister himself, his deputy, and the Minister of Justice, no-one knew the purpose of this hastily-convened session. However, the general assumption was that it concerned the referendum on Scottish independence - due to take place in one week - as well as the related poll results which had been made public just a few hours earlier. After the doors closed and the ministers were alone, the First Minister turned to his deputy - who normally welcomed the meeting participants.

“May I...?”

The Deputy First Minister nodded. Then he pointed to the Minister of Justice who had been designated to issue the official greeting and the introduction for this particular meeting. Following protocol, the politician bowed to the two female ministers, then began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen! You will certainly have read the survey results, published today by ICM and

YouGov, as well as those released by Survation two days ago. While YouGov predicted a narrow victory for us just a week ago, now all three surveys - taken in the last 48 hours, including those of YouGov - are forecasting anywhere from a narrow to an unambiguous defeat. We are not willing to lose this referendum, the positive outcome for which we have struggled so long and so hard. In preparation for the very real possibility before us that defeat should occur, we have taken certain precautions which will help to turn the situation once again in our favor. This is an arrangement affecting the soon-to-be independent Scotland, which we would have implemented - in case of victory - only with the greatest of diplomatic delicacy. But now, in the face of imminent defeat, we must announce this decision to the Scottish people *before* the referendum, in order to once again arouse an irreversible enthusiasm for an independent Scotland. This, even though it is likely that diplomatic relations with the rest of the UK will be severely affected."

The Minister for UK Negotiations had been fidgeting with his pen. Hearing this last sentence, the pen fell from his hand, rolled to the edge of the table and onto the floor.

"I'm sorry?" The dismay in his voice was unmistakable. "And why do I not know anything about this?"

Now the First Minister took the floor.

"Sorry, this opportunity arose very recently—

apparently from a higher power. Fate has played us a trump card - which I for one had never expected. To be honest, no-one could have expected it. But with the help of specialists from the Scottish Criminal Police, the Ministry of Justice and the history faculty of the University of Glasgow, we are now sure that what I'm going to reveal to you now is authentic, verifiable - and watertight!"

The First Minister of Scotland rose from his seat and walked to the window with his arms crossed behind his back. He looked down for several seconds onto Charlotte Square. Then he turned around again.

"As I am sure you know, the proposed official plan for Scottish independence will continue to recognize the monarch of the United Kingdom as Scotland's head of state."

Almost everyone present nodded in agreement, although they could not figure out what the First Minister was getting at.

"I have summoned a major news conference for Saturday night. All of the national and international press agencies will be attending. I will officially inform Buckingham Palace and Downing Street just a couple of hours beforehand."

At these words, the room's occupants became restless. Most of them squirmed nervously in their chairs. The Cultural Minister's cheeks were noticeably flushed; the Minister for Economy fumbled with his pack of cigarettes. They knew their boss long enough

and felt that he was preparing to deliver a bombshell.

“On Saturday, I’m going to tell the Scottish people and the rest of the world that, if and when Scotland achieves its independence, it will establish its own monarchy, to be led as King and head of state by the one man who is best qualified to wear the Scottish Crown.”

He got no further.

His colleagues leapt up, chairs fell over, and everyone began shouting over one another. The usual formal respect for their head of government had vanished. From amongst the clamor of voices came all manner of questions - even disrespectful ones enquiring as to whether he had lost his mind. The Minister of Justice, who was particularly admired by his fellow cabinet members for his intelligence and sensible aplomb, banged on the table with the flat of his hand, then spread his arms in a conciliatory gesture. The room became calm, and the others looked at him expectantly. In an amazingly serene tone, he said, “Seriously, it’s true. We’re not getting just any king. If that were the case, we would not be willing to take the risks associated with such an action. We will be getting *the* Scottish king *par excellence*. The king for whom we have been waiting since time immemorial, and who is qualified as no other to claim and legitimize the throne of Scotland. Just the mere announcement of this man’s ascension next Thursday will reward us with an overwhelming triumph.”

The silence in the room seemed somehow louder than the uproar just minutes before. The ministers looked at their colleague as if his otherwise keen judgement had abandoned him. But, because they knew from previous experience that he never expressed an opinion before having examined the situation in great detail, they refrained from further discussion.

“We have been advised in this matter by Professor Ronald Campbell, head of the history faculty at the University of Glasgow. Please take your seats and listen...”

Trossachs National Park, Scotland

On the narrow and winding road which circled Loch Achray, Ronald Campbell was parked in one of the many lay-bys. He was at the wheel of his own Land Rover.

The motor was running.

A powerful upper body leaned over his semi-conscious frame from outside the vehicle, reaching to the center console and blocking his view. It seemed to him as if the entire world were spinning around him. His eyelids were heavy and kept closing. Half asleep, he barely registered that the other man had disappeared and that the driver's door had slammed shut. The car then began moving.

Ronald Campbell gripped the steering wheel firmly and tried to work the foot pedals, but could not. The car scraped along the guard rail on the left, forcing him back onto the slippery road surface. Campbell tried to concentrate, but it all went by in a blur. He fought against the sudden urge to throw up. The car went faster and faster, and at the first right curve, broke through the thin guard rail, crashed into the side of a tree and then slid off the steep embankment to plunge into Loch Achray's deep and frigid waters. The car's interior filled quickly through the half-opened window, and Ronald Campbell sank at the wheel of his Land Rover to the full 36-foot depth of the lake.

Two days later the phone rang in the office of Deputy Director General William Peacock of the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency, or SCDEA, in Paisley. He picked up the receiver and listened. A smile played on his lips as he asked, "what was the blood-alcohol level?"

Then he hung up. He looked out the window for a few minutes at the rainy morning sky. They'd found Campbell and retrieved his body. Peacock could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He got up and walked back and forth in front of his large desk to calm himself down.

He took a deep breath, grabbed the phone again while still standing and asked to be connected to the Minister of Justice.

"Minister, I have bad news. Mr. Campbell has had a tragic accident. He drove off the road at Loch Achray, broke through the guardrail and plunged into the lake. He had a blood-alcohol level of 2.8, and drowned. I was just informed by our colleagues from Glasgow."

"Damn! What bloody luck! OK, I'll inform the First Minister immediately; he'll have to cancel his plans for tomorrow evening. Without Professor Campbell, there's no press conference. Has his family been notified? I think the eldest son James lives in Paris and the younger one is still at home. James will surely come to Scotland right away. Ask him to call me. But on my

private mobile phone. Do you have my number?"

"Yes, Minister. I'll take care of it personally and call again."

"When is your boss coming back, Peacock?"

"From what I've heard, he's recovering well from the surgery. But he'll need a couple more weeks."

Peacock hung up and called Detective Chief Inspector Flemming in his office.

"Dick, the guy had two sons. Tell those two lowlifes who tanked up Campbell and drove him into the lake they should find James Campbell keep a watch on him until they can get rid of him quietly. It has to look like another accident. Then get yourself to Dumbarton as part of the witness-protection unit and take the younger son into protective custody. He surely knows more about those documents than his brother in Paris. We'll have to squeeze it out of him. I'll come afterwards, as soon as I can."

Alone again, Peacock sat at his desk and picked up his personal cellphone.

"Mr. Mayor? We have another little problem..."

Glasgow International Airport

As Jérôme and Chen Lu reached the baggage claim area, they immediately noticed the signs posted at regular intervals on the motionless conveyor belts: *Out of Order*.

Instead, airport staff rolled in lots of luggage carts, onto which were piled the suitcases and backpacks of the passengers.

"If I didn't already know it, it would be clear by now that we're in Scotland," said Chen Lu, after finding her backpack and grabbing it.

"How's that?" asked Jérôme.

"Conveyor belts cost money for electricity!"

Jérôme rolled his eyes. They entered the arrival hall, and he instantly recognized his old comrade from his Legionnaire days in the waiting crowd. "James!" he cried, dropping his backpack and spreading his arms as he ran forward.

"Jérôme, good to see you! Thank you for coming so quickly."

They embraced each other warmly. Chen Lu remained where she was. She had never seen Jérôme behave so emotionally. "Men, the unfathomable beings," she murmured, then hoisted both backpacks onto her shoulders. Jérôme introduced her and James to each other, then they left the building and drove away in an old Ford Focus.

Without taking his eyes off the road, James

explained that he wanted to first show them the accident site at Loch Achray before they drove to Dumbarton, where his brother Peter was waiting for them.

“And you don’t believe it was an accident?” asked Jérôme from the passenger seat.

“No, that’s why I called you. My father was definitely murdered, and I want to know why and by whom. I think I’m very lucky that you, my best friend, is working at a large and, as I’ve heard, very successful detective agency.”

“What makes you so sure that it was murder?” interjected Chen Lu from the back seat.

“My father never touched alcohol. He was a fundamentalist as far as drinking was concerned. A staunch opponent of alcohol - which you’ll rarely find in Scotland, to tell the truth. Someone must have forced it into him to make it look like a drunk-driving accident.”

“Does Peter agree?”

“Yes, and he even has a theory of why it happened.”

“Which is...?”

“He said that father was a member of some secret organization; Peter was supposed to learn more about it in four years, when he turns 21. He suspects a connection with this organization, but unfortunately he doesn’t know any of the details.”

“At least that’s a start,” said Chen Lu. “If it’s true, then we’re sure to find evidence in his papers or his office,

don't you think?"

The men nodded. They had left Glasgow and its environs behind and were now driving through the vast Trossachs National Park on small, out-of-the-way roads.

"And you two actually served for two years in the French Foreign Legion together?" she asked abruptly.

James glanced over at Jérôme: "Why did you tell her about that? If you want to ramble on about yourself, that's OK, but to out a brother like that is *not* OK."

"I had to explain to her how we knew each other if I was going to drop everything in Hamburg. She wasn't born yesterday; if I'd made up a simple excuse, she'd have slapped me around." Jérôme winked at James, lightening things up. Chen Lu looked once more at the tall and wiry man in the passenger seat. She'd known him now for two years, but she'd never known this otherwise reserved man to be so open and talkative. And they were here to investigate a murder! She put a hand on James' shoulder and said, "I do know that you once saved his life in Algeria."

These words had the expected effect. After a while, James cleared his throat and glanced at her in the rearview mirror.

"My father was a professor of history at the University of Glasgow. When I finished school, he urged me to study history as well, but I didn't want to. I wanted to become an officer in the army. He put a lot of pressure on me; we fought all the time. Then one

night I just took off. I sort of wandered through half of Europe, then I applied to the Legion - where I met Jérôme. I'm working now as a fitness instructor in Paris. My father never forgave me; over the past few years we had virtually no contact. He more or less ignored me and focused on Peter, who was only eight years old at the time. Incredible how time flies."

"And your mother?"

"She died giving birth to Peter."

"Oh."

The road led past individual farmsteads, then entered dense forested land. Now and then a stream came in to view, but otherwise the route was bordered with trees, meadows or solid rock. The surface of the road was very rough in places, and potholes repeatedly shook the little Focus. Then the road began to climb slightly, and the right lane was bordered by continuous rock cliffs; on the left an embankment sloped steeply downward.

"On another topic," said Chen Lu after a while from the back seat, "did you also notice those two men in suits and sunglasses standing around in the arrival hall?"

"I didn't," James said quietly.

"I did," replied Jérôme; "why do you ask?"

"Well, teenagers who want to look cool wear their sunglasses even indoors, but with adults, business people and the like, I think that's kind of unusual, even bizarre, don't you think?"

“True enough,” said Jérôme, “but so what? To each his own.”

“I don’t know what it means, either,” said Chen Lu, “but the same two guys are sitting in that big BMW behind us.”

Jérôme and James turned and stared through the windshield of a BMW at two grinning faces with sunglasses. Just at that moment the car accelerated rapidly and crashed into the rear of the Focus, shoving it forward with great force. James clutched the steering wheel and tried desperately to keep his own car on the road. He slammed on the brakes as hard as he could, but the braking force of the small Ford was no match for the power of a BMW 7-Series. Smoke erupted from the tires, triggering a strong smell of burning rubber. Up ahead, they could see a bridge that crossed a sixty-foot chasm.

“Jérôme!” shouted Chen Lu.

James tried to keep the car under control, but the BMW pushed him steadily into the opposite lane. They were quickly approaching the bridge. An old, rotten wooden railing formed the only guardrail, and it clearly offered no protection against a plunge into the depths.

“That’ll never hold!” Chen Lu cried out in panic.