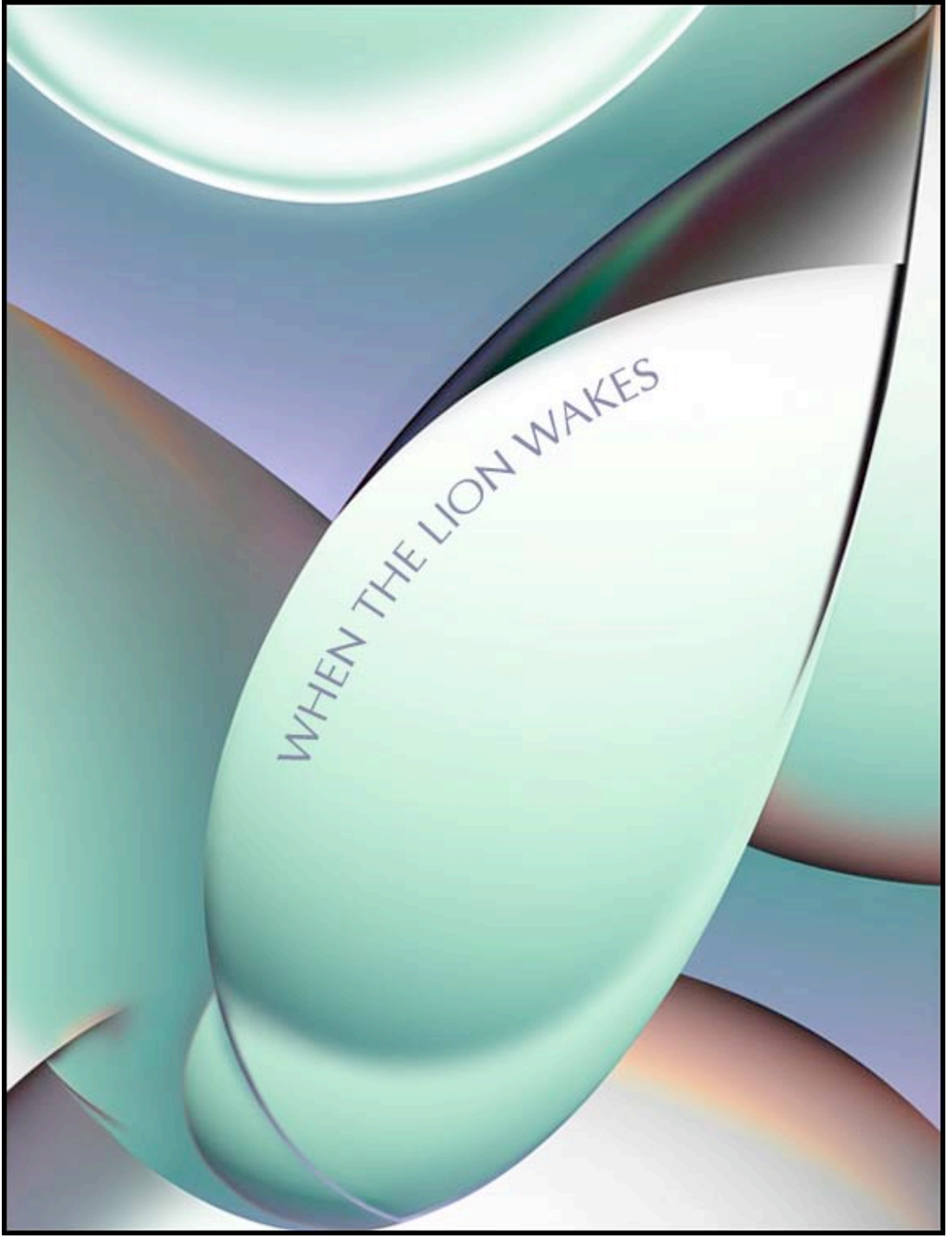


WHEN THE LION WAKES



WHEN

THE LION

WAKES

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a STORY *by* H C Turk

.....
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*...meet
again in
memory....*

He did not know how to hide the grenade so his sister would not see it. Concealing a hand grenade in his pants did not seem rational, so Alex clipped it to his belt in back, and donned a jacket. Despite the occasion, he had not selected his embroidered coat, but a workday jacket. Fine clothing would draw questions inside his home, and draw fire outside.

As he left his room, he felt that he was sagging. Though small, the grenade was heavy, like a fist-sized rock. As boys, Alex and his friends had tossed rocks at cans and goats, and at one another. Now they threw bombs.

Yes, something from behind was pulling him down.

Entering the parlor, Alex thought he might readily escape, for only Grand was present. Seated at the desk, she filled out some form with a ball-point pen. As she pressed the pen down, a light at the far end glowed. The light was worthless, illuminating nothing. As Alex approached, Grand raised her free hand in greeting without looking up. He blew her a kiss while stepping to the entry door.

“I’m on my way to the Founding Day Ceremony,” he said, but not loudly. A sound stopped him, a hard strike. At first, he thought a mortar had hit their house, and was aghast that the Nationalists had violated the safe zone. But the walls and floor were not quavering. The ceiling had not collapsed. This misconstrued emotion ended in a moment, followed by a human sound, and Alex understood that his mother had smacked a spatula against the counter top in exasperation. He could not see her apron, though he smelled frying vegetables.

“Our people will be expected to leave this day,” she called out from the kitchen. “Does your behavior have to be as foolish as your thinking?”

From along the corridor, through an open door, inside a room that Alex seldom saw, came a laugh identical to Alex’s. His parents spoke from opposite ends of the house.

“Let him be a free man instead of a citizen under siege,” said his father. “I learned years ago not to argue with his righteousness.”

Alex had stopped three paces from the entry. Three paces to escape. He did not want to be rude to his parents in their home, despite defying them in society.

“Would you eat first?” his mother asked.

Alex imagined the contents of his stomach spewing out at the climax, spraying the audience. How shameful to soil his friends when he wanted to cleanse them of the war.

“I’ll get something on the way.”

He looked at the last apple in a bowl on the table near Grand. Before the war, his people had treasured apples. The fruit were no more common now, but other food was scarce. The apple and hand grenade were the same size. Thinking of eating that hideous object against his back made him nauseated. He wasn’t hungry.

As Alex turned to the door, his sister rushed in front of him, apple in hand, holding it up like a gift. She was twelve, with long, uncontrollable hair. She had never thrown rocks at goats. When Alena reached for a rock, she found an apple.

“Please, Alex, I want to go. Willem is going to show us how to end the war.”

Grand’s ball-point pen stopped glowing.

“A hundred years ago, you would have been prince.”

Alex stepped past Alena, ignoring her, as their mother left the kitchen. He could not see her behind him, like the past ignored. One only had to look in order to learn. Alex reached for the handle.

“How can he end the war?” his mother scoffed. “Prince Willem has no authority in the government.”

“He wields the authority of history,” her husband called out, “and history is the greatest educator. Unfortunately, people are the worst pupils.”

Alex wondered of the slight change in his father’s voice, his vantage. He had stood, or turned. Perhaps he was dressing.

When Alena reached to him from the side, Alex harshly pressed her hand away. In a flash, the sight of her touching the weapon struck him. Offended, Alena retreated as her mother spoke.

“Surely, Daughter, you shall not attend. You shall not follow that route.”

“You know something we don’t,” Alena cried out from the room’s center. “You always do. I bet the invaders are going to be there, and you’ll be the only one to see them.”

“The foreigners won’t be there,” came their father’s voice, “but one of us should be. The true prince.”

Another change of voice came from behind. Alena was running off in dismay. The words over her shoulder seemed so far away.

“I might be there anyway!”

As Alex opened the door, Grand had the final words. She spoke generously, blessing her grandson with a common phrase.

“Don’t tie yourself to the lion.”

Alex had to press the door open with the wrong hand. Stepping through, he found that he held the apple.

* * *

He walked through a neighborhood of brick apartment buildings and townhouses. The remnants of the outlawed monarchy lived in a fine home, though in some respects it was empty. Each family owned an autocar, though few people traveled on business via airplane. The children he passed played pertinent war games. That boy standing in a garbage can accepted an urbane demeanor as his friends smacked his tin ineffectually. Though Alex crawled along walls like a rodent, one of these war gamers noticed him.

“Alex it is! He’s on his way to the ceremony!”

“They’ll end the war today, and we can go to the rest of the city again.”

As though ashamed of his goal, Alex rapidly continued past. Ahead, he heard distinctive cracks, but the gunfire was light this day. This holiday.

Approaching the checkpoint, a wooden gate with wire fit for livestock, Alex looked beyond the two militiamen, viewing the greater city. Along the modern street of asphalt, he saw a bus with two flat tires, settled to the rims, parked before shops and apartments exactly like those he had left behind, except for the occupants. Nothing distinguished them but that original war, and the current.

“Alex?”

He knew the two men waiting at the gate. They all lived in the safe zone, the wrong side of the city.

Alex knew the men, but little of their rifles.

“Alex?” asked the younger man. “Are you sure you want to attend?”

The older man scoffed. He was of a different generation.

“They’ll be looking for the false prince. Don’t you have enough sense to disguise yourself?”

“No, I don’t have sense enough to hide the truth,” Alex replied, then turned to the younger guard.

“Have others left?”

“Quite a few, but many left last night.”

“I should have done that. But then my parents would have worried more than usual. Did anyone drive?”

The older man scoffed again.

“The Nationalists are waiting for Mossbacks in cars. Do you want a hand grenade up your ass?”

“No,” Alex blanched, “I certainly don’t.”

“Then you might consider staying,” the older man complained. “Even going out for food is dangerous, and you want to join a ceremony on the losing side.”

“We won’t be eating in the afterlife.”

Looking past the gate again, Alex saw not one person moving, no bicycle, moped, autocar, tank. From along the block, he heard muffled laughing, or crying.

“We are not the losers,” the younger man calmly stated, “just because we accept the Nationalists’ foolish name.”

“Of course we are losers,” the older man growled. “They beat us hundreds of years ago, yet we stayed in their country. When the lion killed the first prince, we all should have died with him. Being losers, we accepted defeat instead of death.”

He shook his head viciously at Alex.

“You foolishly risk your life for this ceremony, but what will you do for the war?”

“What will you do for the peace?” Alex said, hoping his eyelid wasn’t twitching.

As Alex began pressing through the gate, the small burden on his back smacked against the older man’s butt stock. The younger man opened the gate

ahead of Alex, then followed.

“Where are you going?” the older man demanded.

“I’m doing something for my neighbor. I’m doing something for the peace.”

They began moving rapidly along the narrow walkway between buildings and street, Alex in the lead, rushed. They passed small cars parked neatly, a moped with no wheels, and a steaming manhole cover. From an upper story room, the sound of a violin screeched out like an insane animal. This musician had much to learn, or had forgotten everything.

Though he saw no refuse near, Alex smelled something putrid, like rancid fruit. He was holding it.

Removed sounds from across the city came to him as vague suggestions. A racing engine? A crumbling building? A marching army? Passing a machine shop where oil leaked beneath the roll-up door, Alex noticed a changed sound. That of his passage. He now moved alone. Turning, he saw the young militiaman lying against a truck tire, contorted and grimacing.

Alex ran near, virtually on his knees. Feeling a whisk, he saw a hole in his jacket. More holes appeared in the brick to his side, puffs of clay dust erupting away from tiny craters. The militiaman gritted his teeth, emitting hissing breath like a leak. Twisted on his side, he grasped himself as though holding something in.

“In here, in here!”

Scarcely looking to the doorway where a person waved, Alex grabbed the militiaman’s shoulders and began pulling him. The wounded man’s heels scraped a path in the dust, two shaky lines uncertain of their goal. As he grunted and strained to move the uncooperative body, Alex felt the top of the grenade press against his back, nudging him, annoying him.

He collapsed to his rear inside a mortar building with bulging burlap sacks against the walls. Several men of different ages, their backs all bent as though they led the lives of pack mules, gathered around the visitors. They poked and pressed efficiently, seeking damage in the groaning man.

“That’s not too bad.”

“Stop the bleeding. Use something already stained.”

“Yes. I’m sick of blood even on my underwear.”

“Wait a minute. These are Mossbacks.”

“Hey, Mossback, do you have cash? You can pay for your own doctor.”

“The other isn’t hurt, just frightened.”

One man turned away, speaking as he reached for a heavy, empty sack.

“Oh, they’re special. The invaders won’t negotiate with the government, only their ancestors, the losers in the first war.”

The other men began prodding Alex with stiff fingers, not seeking damage, but sensitivity.

“We took your land to make our nation, Mossback, and we’ll keep it.”

“That won’t be hard. Mossbacks are born losers, and the superior invaders are too noble to enter the war. But you need their help, Mossback.”

The sack man began beating down against Alex with his flexible weapon. Though not deadly, the assault was vicious in its disregard, and Alex considered those quiet bullets as they cut holes in brick.

He slipped through the door without retaliating. Most wars should not be fought.

Immediately the city came to him as vast and open compared to the building he had vacated, a space constricted by bigotry. Running bent, he tried not to trip on a dead cat, a broken umbrella. He tried not to stumble on a crack in the curb as he crossed an intersection. Though reflex encouraged him to look up, seeking snipers behind dark windows, he did not bother. If they showed themselves on the street, he would not be able to dodge their shots; so how could he avoid the unseen?

A huge, stinking pile of refuse brought relief, for he felt himself concealed behind its mass in those seconds required to pass. Thinking of the apple, he looked down to his empty hand. Dense and dead, the refuse was created by war and caused disease. He felt that he was carrying it, concealing it.

A light wind came, Alex feeling that the breeze lifted him. He had traveled several blocks. At this rate, he would soon leave the city. Now he ran more upright, his arms moving freely. Catching his finger in that hole in his jacket, he winced.

The sight of an assailant ahead caused him to stop. Staring at the man, Alex fell to the walkway, trying to hide in the open. To his side, the roadway held a large hole. Though seeing nothing but soil within, Alex expected more attackers to leap out. Buildings loomed like mausoleums. Though he could safely hide within, how would his cowardice aid the peace?

The man was unarmed, and did not attack, but moved slowly away, not noticing Alex panting with his face against the pavement. The man moved slowly until several rifle shots from an upper-story window hit the pavement at his feet, then his legs, then his body.

Too terrified to look up, Alex hoped that the adjacent truck would shield him. Staring along the pavement at a coward's level, he saw those hard strikes move toward him, rapidly marching ants that would eat instantaneously through his body, leaving bloody trails.

The sound seemed innocuous, so high and far away, causing injury in another war. Rolling to his side, Alex rose and rushed to the nearest building, not seeing a door. The deadly ants marched near, accompanied by the distant cracks that sent them. Alex threw himself backwards through the window, the grenade striking first, glass collapsing as he landed on his heels. Unable to remain upright, he thrust backwards to avoid the glass, hands and elbows smacking the hardwood floor. He landed on his back, and the grenade.

Pain so completely rushed through his skeleton that he noticed nothing else, not cuts across his body, not bullet holes in his limbs. The clearest thought striking rigid, agonized Alex was that he would die suddenly, utterly, and not suffer as he did from that meager fall.

His agony did not last, soon replaced by manageable discomfort. Sitting slowly, Alex felt an added pain in his buttocks and the heels of his hands. He saw no blood, no bullet wounds, no glass cuts. He gained good thinking in time to see a family of average citizens thrust old bolt-action rifles and single-shot revolvers at the intruder, then pull the triggers.

A sound so vast filled the room that Alex felt the source had leapt into his head. He had already leapt away, not concerned with glass on the floor or the grenade's striking his spine again. Seeing the broken window, the light beckoning

him toward another foolish version of safety, Alex began crawling, hands crunching the glass. For those seconds, he felt utterly numb, the firearms' explosions filling his head with a static clog. Aware that he would not reach safety before the family ran out of shells, he stopped, raising his hands in a plea, seeing two rifles and two handguns fall to the floor, that multiple thump of failure coming as a peaceful expression of relief.

As Alex sat upright, a child began crying. Seeing that his grandmother, parents, and older brother had shot one another in the knee and ribs and back and hip, all of them sprawled in more misery than Alex, all bloody and agonized and astonished, the boy grasped the nearest knife from the kitchen table and made to exorcise the demon that had destroyed his family, hand and lips trembling as he ran to Alex.

Alex scrambled through the window as the child stabbed him in the calf. Wincing, Alex fell to the pavement only to stand and begin running. Gunshots sounded from a bank, the CLOSED banner hanging limply from a tarnished pole. The bullets struck behind Alex, who vanished around a corner, not suffering the first bullet wound, only cuts on his hands and a throbbing gash in his leg.

The grimace and wince that accompanied each step made him feel foolish. Could anyone hear? In this alley of trash cans, broken crates, and basement entries, Alex would have no opportunity to avoid a clandestine attacker. Abandoning worthless fear, he rubbed his palms together and pressed them against his pants until the bleeding slowed. Despite feeling a trickle emerge from that leg gash, he did not attend to it. The flow was not a gush, but a leak, he hoped.

Early morning light cut large, angular volumes in the alley's dark air. Alex proceeded to the end of the cobblestone without being assaulted, until an alien sound pricked his ears. Several voices burst out in laughter, their joy not muffled by concealing walls. Losing his inattentive lethargy, Alex found an even greater sensory jolt. He had lost the hand grenade. It had fallen off. Reaching behind, he felt the grenade clipped to his belt. Numbness in his spine had concealed his awareness of the tiny bomb. Tiny for a bomb, but formidable for a cancerous growth likely to kill its bearer.

Approaching the alley's end, Alex saw a woman throw a slop bucket's contents against the cobblestone, and he could smell the feces. He saw the urine flow and noticed wet pieces of paper cling to the edge of a broken brick. Erect now, he felt the pain in his back and the trickle of blood from his leg and the tenderness in his cut hands and the heavy void signifying the hand grenade, and from around the corner came some mechanical sound, a truck or tank or...

Trying to calm his fearful panting and overanxious awareness, Alex brashly stepped ahead to see several militiamen beside a truck looking toward him. As they raised their rifles, Alex began running, not feeling numbness or blood or soreness from any wound. He ran across the narrow street, entering the next alley, certainly not fleeing along his original path. He could not aid the peace by crawling back home.

Another man ran ahead of Alex, limbs swinging mechanically. No shot came from behind, only the sound of the truck motor racing, the transmission whining, gears efficiently delivering the warriors to their objective.

On the broad thoroughfare leading from palace grounds to city square, Alex ran between buildings and cars. Leaning through windows, many citizens witnessed this chase, the lead man slipping into a doorway or wall rent Alex could not discern, the truck turning to follow directly behind, slowing so the men could fire from the canvas-covered bed. Running without plan, Alex heard no bullets whiz past. He saw no shattered glass or punctured sheet metal. Not until he found his legs blown away did he look behind. No, the street quavered from a blast. As his weak legs collapsed from the concussion, Alex glanced behind to see a mortar hole spewing debris. The truck deftly steered past, into the path of the second mortar round, sheet metal and glass and flesh and bones strewn instantaneously in a hemisphere of ruin.

The truck's front axle rolled along the pavement like a stick. Alex began running again, though he could not lift his hands. Some personal sound came from the unseen audience, and Alex thought applause, though the clapping might have been dismay instead of appreciation.

Obliterating all personal sounds, invisible arcs brought more demolition to the thoroughfare. The next mortar round struck ahead of Alex, and he stopped,

staring. Debris shot from the street at startling speed, asphalt shards falling against motorcars and fabric canopies, accompanied by ripping dust that would eventually settle. Trying not to fall to his knees as the street shuddered, Alex found himself lost, both ends of his path besieged. When an explosion from behind threw him to his face, he followed that direction.

He could make no better progress than stumbling with sagging head. Between explosions, he heard screaming. The sound did not resemble a voice, but a crazed machine, a sentient being stripped of sense. Concussions transformed the block into a dust-filled box shaken by a demon's hand. Rising from his knees, an irregular shard of metal falling from his foot—the paw of some machine, the finger of a vehicle—Alex considered traversing the street, because the building beside him quavered. He ran past as the front wall fell, followed by the roof, and people. This dense sound of collapse came as a slow, inexorable wave, mortar blocks and wooden beams creating obstacles for the fleeing occupants. Upon arriving in the street's center, their hands thrown to the sky or pressed against their faces, the people were met by one more explosion. This blast annihilated a woman and crammed her pieces into her home's debris, an instantaneous, dismissive death. Her husband would last longer. Lying on his back, bleeding heavily from the chest, he faced the sky with wide eyes and reached for aid.

Alex would help him. An amnesty might settle on the nation, but peace proceeds from soul to soul. Crawling to the man over the spongy remains of a stuffed sofa, Alex saw the chest wound, and considered removing his jacket to use as a bandage. But that would reveal his own bomb, likely inspiring attack from every able citizen. Determining to use the man's own fabric, Alex began pulling on his trousers, and the leg stretched. With an expression of strange surprise, the man looked down to his feet, which were oriented impossibly. His entire person trembled, except for that leg.

More explosions came as Alex moved away. The only emotion he felt was the need to cower. Now his back was sore from bending, ducking. As the explosions continued, the sky itself seemed to be pounding against his head. Needing to rest and to hide for a moment, Alex found himself at the bottom of a crater. Rusty water dripped from iron pipes. Stiff and weak, he had to force himself to breathe

in and out, in and out. Wondering how much more of this bombardment he could survive, Alex understood that a total of six mortar shells had fallen.

When they stopped, he began again. Incapable of predicting the vagaries of urban warfare, he did not know where to run. Across the nation, an unwritten vow promised that the Monument of Founding would not be invaded by either party. Having come to retrieve their past, the visitors would not damage the site. Miles. Despite the explosive commotion behind, this area of the city was scarcely damaged. Alex only had to proceed for another few miles. If he were late, would the ceremony wait for him? Willem would, and he knew how to end the war.

Skirting the city's square, Alex saw that the brick paving was intact, though the fountain's statue had been neatly inverted by a small explosion. Perhaps a hand grenade. Beneath a haberdashery's overhang, a woman dragged the butchered leg of an animal, a horse or cow, though Alex thought lion. Past the fountain, a young couple walked shoulder to shoulder, whispering only of each other. A car moved along a side street with no desperation from the driver. Two women plucked sprouts from a window box. This normalcy struck Alex as strikingly odd. Looking around instead of only at his feet, he saw no craters in the square, no rents in nearby buildings. He heard no explosions. Why, if the war had ended, he would not have to use the grenade. Life could proceed normally, beautifully, and he....

He heard several gunshots from across the square. The young couple threw themselves to the ground only to rise immediately and flee in separate directions. Since the war continued, so did Alex. Shuffling away from the square induced a conflictual sensory change. Even as gunfire increased in scope behind, the sound diminished. Arriving at the road that led from the city, Alex felt that he had left the war behind, the exact purpose of peace. An historical route still paved with ancient clay, this road provided a view of rural land. At the corner of a florist's shop, his final turn, he would only have to peer along the road to see people walking calmly beyond to the hills where the monument and ceremony waited. He would only have to pass a few more houses, old, abandoned, obsolete. He only had to travel this final path, an impossibility considering the family barricade in its center.

A small sedan, the type seen on every continent, had been parked on the clay. No traffic would pass this vehicle. No tank, no truck, no moped. Peering around the corner of the florist's shop, Alex had to stare and blink, trying to clear his vision. A person stood behind the car, and Alex felt blinded. Not the driver. A rope ran from her wrist to the rear bumper. A rope, not a chain. They had not chained his sister to the car.

An unseen man spoke from across the road. The body of the building hid his person, even as its cavities transmitted his sound.

"Come for your sister before this car explodes."

Alex did not know the person, but recognized the voice. All demons sound the same.

He recognized the following voice. He knew the person, since blood connected them. Though Alex remained motionless, virtually invisible from the roadway, Alena turned to him. So far away, so far away that he could not see her eyes, but he could hear her breathing. He knew the catch in her voice. When she became so upset that her words came as sobs, even family had trouble understanding her.

"Go away, Alex."

She could only speak a few words before needing to breathe deeply, then emit another tortuous phrase.

"Don't come here."

Alex saw she wore no shoes, and felt furious that they would drag her out in public with unprotected feet.

"Don't tie yourself to the lion. I didn't."

One more road to follow. One more direction to defeat.

He heard gunshots from the inner city, but the war no longer waited behind. The bruise on his spine caused such agony that bending Alex could not straighten. The cut in his leg was so deep that even his foot tingled with heat, as though his blood were acid. He heard the mechanical sound of a dying man's weak breaths. But the breathing was his own. He had clenched his fists, the bloody cuts on his palms causing his fingers to stick together, his hands adhered into fists. Standing upright, he forced his hands open so that he could grasp her,

right before they shot him in the back; and would a bullet cause the grenade to explode? Would they ignite the car bomb first? How many of those bullets meant for him would strike Alena? What hell had he entered that would cause his sister multiple deaths?

Came a voice, the demon's delivery.

"Prince Alex, the lion will soon awaken."

As he began walking toward the car, Alex suffered the impression that he could not focus past the ends of his eyes, because there was nothing to see, nothing to see. The world had turned opaque, impenetrable, the only path remaining both impossible and unavoidable.

The next conflictual sound came as a girl's whimper driven by a courage to make a lion cower.

"Please go away, my brother."

No sound could be more attractive than those rejective words. All the world expanded into an endless street, a boulevard where sensation could not connect to action. How could he be walking when his spirit floated at the end of her life? Of course, when decision is impossible, one must suffer metaphysics.

He tried to look up when they grabbed him. He did not resist as the militiamen snatched him inside an old home with thick walls and no glazing. More disconnected sensation. As the Mossbacks dragged him into the building, speaking came from across the road, the opposite side.

"Alex, Prince Alex, you alone can keep the lion asleep."

Even as whispers, the voices seemed so harsh inside. How could they help his sister when they separated them?

"We're planning to approach from several directions."

"More are coming. When they arrive, we leave together."

"When we swarm the car, they won't likely be able to hit us and Alena."

"We don't think there's a bomb in the car."

"If there is, they'll ignite it if we wait too long."

Being spiritual, the voice from outside seemed more important than mere men plotting their doom.

"Alex, Prince Alex, the lion is awakening."

No body was attached to the sound, though the connected person was his family. Hers was the strongest voice, remaining mute while inspiring men to murder.

Since she did not speak, she did not sob, standing still with good posture, perhaps serenely. Though she could not move, she could still decide, Alex grasping the existential conflict assaulting her. What should she do? Pull at her bonds and force the men to ignite the bomb so her tortuous waiting would end? Weep and wail so energetically that she would be depleted at the end, thereby being less sensitive to that ultimate cry? Release all her hatred and fear, enlivening herself with a serenity to last her to the afterlife?

When men at the window saw a signal from friends in another building, the Mossbacks entered the street. Alex was drawn to the door despite a rebuff.

“You might wait, Alex, since you’ve been wounded.”

Cats not seen before scattered as Alex and his neighbors ran outside. He only noticed one wound, and had to reach for it, touch that injury before it killed her.

No gunshots, no mortar shells, no explosions, no grenades. The Nationalists did not rush out en masse, did not ignite the car bomb. Their offensive had to wait for history, which approached from the palace end of the city. A dark sedan with the nation’s flags flying at all four corners drove rapidly toward the Mossbacks, its horn blaring imperially. A score of Mossbacks wielding knives and carbines and self-loading pistols stood panting in the road, looking in every direction for Nationalist assaults. Only Alex walked directly to that bombed car and the prisoner who had captured him.

As the limo abruptly stopped nearby, three men exited, none armed, led by an average young man with flat shoulders and a tidy beard. Wearing a suit that Alex would never be able to afford, Willem raised his hand while looking to those buildings where voices had threatened the lion’s release from slumber.

“On the honor of your nation, you will release her.”

No one left those buildings until Willem angrily waved his hands at the Mossbacks.

“You will all retreat with your weapons and your war!”

Panting men anxious to kill or die, eyes flitting to every side, they finally

turned to one another, then returned to the buildings that had disgorged them, understanding that Alex would remain.

Standing beside his sister, he looked at the bumper, her rope, her wrist. Simple knots connected them. He saw no injury in Alena, a view she could not return.

“You look awful.”

In their formal attire, the three newcomers might have been attending a ceremony. Showing no concern for Alex or Alena, the three waited for militiamen to approach from the other side. They did not wear uniforms, but simple pants and shirts, their weapons unexceptional, the same as the Mossbacks’. They all looked the same.

No individual stepped forward to display leadership. In this phalange, Willem wielded authority.

“Return the girl unharmed, at the peril of your soul,” he commanded, waving his hand at the lesser car.

Alena looked only at Alex as two Nationalists puzzled over her wrist, determining how to untie the knot. Another man simply whisked a knife blade through the rope’s bumper end. Willem nodded for one of his associates to enter the smaller sedan along with one Nationalist, and the speaking girl.

“I would love to attend,” she said as Alex waved toward the door. Her final expression implied a smile, one of honorable desire. “I would love to see the war end.”

Turning to Alex with a glare, Willem nodded sharply, and the girl was pressed inside.

As the car drove away, Willem extended his hand to Alex. Though Alex made to clasp his counterpart’s hand, Willem pulled away.

“I would have the grenade.”

After reaching behind, Alex placed the weapon in Willem’s palm. He did not sense its absence. No explosive burden had been lifted from his back. Willem concealed the grenade in his clothing, but Alex did not notice the location. The bomb would not go far.

“We might be late, and we should not be late,” Willem said while staring at

Alex's bloody pants, his filthy shirt.

Willem turned to an associate and slapped his lapel. Alex looked along the street, opposite ends. Alena safely returned along one route. The other waited for the war to end. He scarcely noticed the man removing his jacket and pants. While changing clothes, Alex heard himself grunt, caused by some skirmish from the past.

The seminude man faced the choice of wearing Alex's bloody pants or proceeding in only his undershorts. He entered in front with the driver, Willem and Alex in the rear.

Alex felt claustrophobic because he could not escape the car. On the street, he could run from alley to alley, and leap into buildings, but the car entrapped him. He had no choice. The man who wore his bloody pants leaned over the seat to wipe Alex's face with a clean mechanic's rag. Alex smelled oil, but it was only a suggestion, not a stain.

With no effort shown by the machine or its occupants, the car left the city. The journey seemed unreal, an observation detached from experience, a story or a game. In the slow autocar behind, Alena proceeded at a rate whose safety surpassed the running of any jeopardized man. From hills visible as a wavy horizon line, a flock of birds left foliage for the sky. Alex had not seen a bird in the city. He saw no craters in the land.

As though extending in time or devolving, the clay road became a sandy trail. Past fields and stands of trees, a future road ran parallel to the trail, a clay street evolved into a perfect length of modern texture, a substance never to be washed away by water or rearranged by winds, immutable if not immortal. The invaders had built a road to nowhere, for Alex could not follow.

He would not look ahead and focus on the mass. Those people waited for a new beginning, but in nature, the purest beginnings are generated by sudden ends. Slaughtered animals feed the young. Fires kill disease, allowing fresh growth. Violent surges are eliminated during war, making way for new societies.

The autocar passed walking people. No one shared salutations. Alex felt that he was dragging his feet or pushing the car with his legs. He could not move slowly enough to delay the outcome or move quickly enough to end the anxiety.

He knew his sister was safe. Now for the nation.

During this time travel of evolving transportation, the autocar passed horse-drawn wagons, a supposed improvement over shoes in the way of conveying people to their destinations. Their destinies. Though Alex could not bear to focus ahead at those thousands, he felt an urge to rush out and run, joining them in a new beginning that he would provide not with courage, but with zeal.

Alex and Willem began walking past parked cars. Those people ahead, wearing all types of clothing, evinced informal reverence in their poise. He noticed no weapons. His feet crunched against the gritty surface, initiating his hearing, as though he had been deaf, unaware. A bird squawked, but he would not look up from the path. Someone had been singing. The tune might have been an ancient chant or a modern melody.

In the moment of their turning, Alex believed that he had become a target again. On the street, kill the false prince so he would not attend the ceremony. But he did attend. They looked, all of them, and some spoke his name, a guilty sound compared to the exuberant announcing of Prince Willem's arrival. Young sisters spoke, their calls as bright as birds. Willem returned their view if not their smiles. They were part of the path. Alex would not look. His sister was not present. The sound of his name did not fill him with pride, but with terror. Yes, he must be the one.

Attendance was the ceremony's grandest activity. No merrymaking or dancing would commence. People came to contemplate, not revel. In all those preceding generations, no one had constructed a stage, only a stone circle with that massive post and iron loop at the center. No trace of the original rope remained, though some said it had been a chain. A chain was required to restrain the lion. A mere rope was enough to secure the victim to the drugged animal's chest. Face to face, and what of its breath? Somnambulant, snoring? A chain, connected links. Break one, break the bond. Two links make a chain, but how far can it reach? Across a nation?

Standing at the post with Willem, facing the crowd, Alex saw a man who had tried to kill him that morning. He no longer seemed the enemy. Had Alex succeeded already?

Willem stood perfectly upright because he was the genuine prince. But his posture was exaggerated, too pridefully erect, perhaps because he wielded no political power and felt the need to emphasize his position, which was mere appearance. Did any politicians attend this ceremony of the ineffectual, the attendees representing not the factions of this land, but the people?

Alex had to sag. His slouching was not caused by injuries, but by ignorance. Despite his lengthy expectations, he did not know how to face the lion.

They stood shoulder to shoulder. When Willem began speaking, Alex smelled meat on his breath. He might have been eating the enemy.

“Only two events are expected in war: you kill and you die.... How to kill the war except by dying? ...Some wars never exhaust themselves.”

Alex became sick of his speech. Willem implied profundity, but Alex felt himself the fool. These men were too small to matter in the world, in their nation, in this ceremony. Greater forces would mock their poor solution. Though the dead are blind even to solar flares, and newborns are thrilled by fireflies and moonlight, the sun shines equally on babies and corpses. Alex could not judge if he feared failure or success.

His anxiety precluded clear consciousness, leaving him in a harassed stupor wherein his nerves twitched but his perceptions sensed vaguely. Willem continued. Alex hated his words, but did not want him to stop. He knew the end. At the end, he would awaken.

“...Only two things must be done to end the war. Stop killing, and stop dying. Do not demand defeat, but settle for rejection. Do not wait for the war to end—end it. Do not surrender, but cease. Do not defeat the enemy, defeat the fighting. Our country began here, and here the war can end.”

When Willem went quiet and turned to his counterpart, Alex was able to release his nausea, his emotions spewing out, the war inside him ending.

“Some people think it never happened. No one in our country could be so cruel. At that time, the country was yours, and our people were the invaders. But nothing has changed. Everyone is amazed that friends are killing friends. You tell your son to join the forces that destroy the next street with mortars, then wonder why your neighbors shoot your children. You expect it to stop when the

other side stops killing. You blame it on your leaders, who follow your wishes. We've tied ourselves to the lion and now are looking for a knife to cut the rope. Maybe we should cut our own throats and not bother the lion. The situation is insane, because the lion is our life. Only madmen make sense of insanity."

Willem knew to reveal the hand grenade at the moment of madness. Being mad, Alex nearly laughed aloud in relief that his sister would not see the ceremony. With all of his spirit, he longed for her to see how to end the war. As he reached to hold the grenade with Willem, he felt surprise that the moderate audience became agitated, staring with painfully wide eyes at the silent speakers, trying to run away but tripping on fear, crawling along the sand while looking at the madmen whom some would call genius, and all should call kin.

In the last moment of his journey, Alex felt disembodied as though already dead, all of his anima released from the creature. Having suffered from the lion in prediction, he found that the body of his living would harm him no more, but expend itself on education, providing a history that his nation would not forget, the demonstration that the greatest horror in war is not killing or dying, but both. Though he almost felt sorrow that he would not see his family again, he knew his sister would surpass him, and they would meet again in memory.

As he pulled the pin, he felt a rush of joy, finding the answer to a question few people could confront with their living.

Smile when the lion wakes.

E N D

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