

Better Alive Than Dead

by j. h. woodyatt

After the fourth ring, a clipped monotone greets me.

"MacDonald Consolidated Agro. How may I direct your call?"

"Cinderella," I say. "This is 65402 Charlie Foxtrot."

"Please hold."

There's a barely audible click on the channel, and I stand there on the sidewalk watching the transport coaches race up Pine Street with their precious cargos of pampered salarymen. How many of them, I'm wondering, are just going through the motions until the power goes out? They've got to know the Americans will never let the city fall to the færies.

A recorded voice comes on the channel. "Error 2304: endpoint address retired." The screen shows me a red lozenge: Call Disconnected.

I think I'm going insane. The Company is not leaving me outside the perimeter. The Company is not leaving me outside the perimeter.

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They would *not* do that.

I call back twice more, and I get the same recorded exit message both times. The psylyph working the door at the Blue Room notices my agitation. I glare at her.

The Company wouldn't shut me down unless the diplomatic process was never supposed to work in the first place. I've been burned.

I throw the phone at the pavement. It shatters, sending pieces of aluminum, glass and plastic spinning and dancing everywhere. It bounces into the street and slides a couple meters down the roadway until it's run over and crushed by a half-track full of rifle-brandishing yrkhs. This saves me the trouble of prying out its SA-chip, so I decide to leave it.

It's a long walk back to my hotel on Nob Hill, and I'm seething the whole way home. The Company were the only friends I ever trusted! Now they're scattering, retreating inland. Unlisted numbers. Huh.

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When I was younger, I never had much to say about the færies.

Whenever the subject came up, I couldn't talk. Everybody else in the room would be having the usual arguments. Assimilate, or fight them off? It seemed like a pretty stupid discussion to me.

One thing that always seemed obvious: when your world crashes into the Færie Corporeal, as ours did, and all manner of fey weirdness starts crawling across of the open frontier, as they do, then the humans will be incapable of reacting with anything resembling sanity, which they did not. They didn't even try.

War was inevitable from the moment the fields collided. The only thing to do, it was clear to me, was to choose which side to be on when the fighting eventually broke out.

Stupid me: I picked the Americans.

Oh well. Better alive than dead, I say.

A crew of nomians are busy slapping up propaganda posters on the wall of the Masonic temple as I pass. They show a half-naked psyolph, replete with tattoos and a ridiculous pair of butterfly wings, standing athwart the path of a phalanx of Ogre UAV's. The caption reads: SURVIVAL IS ESSENTIAL!

I've got a bad feeling about the next seventy-two hours.

The front desk at my hotel is packed with people checking out. The city is blockaded and all comms are squelched at the metro interchange. Where do these people think they're going?

I walk up the stairs to the third floor, grab a bucket of ice, and bump my proxbadge up against the reader on the door with my hip. I walk inside, and immediately, I sense the intruder. I sidestep into the head and crouch down to the floor.

"Did Snow White really die?" It's a woman's voice. Not one I recognize. Might be Cinderella. Might be some random fool.

"We were still winning in October, when I rotated out," I say, which was a somewhat rude way of conveying that I wasn't even in Los Angeles anymore when the trells overran the Silverlight and sent our dear Ms. White into the Big Sleep.

"And the Seven Dwarves?" the woman says. It's Cinderella, I'm sure of it now. I can hear an edge in her voice. Sounds like a bad combination of hunger, terror and fatigue.

"Thorin and Durin ate the cake on a recon into Monterey," I say, stalling for time while I try to fetch the wakizashi I stashed under the bathroom sink. "Balin succumbed to the færie spike. He's probably nodding off in an intermodal outside Reagan airport by now."

"Once the war is over, he'll dry out. You'll see."

She sounds desperate to believe it. Anything to make the impending defeat easier to take.

"I heard a rumor," she says. "It's gone nuclear."

"Seattle?" I say. "Or, Portland?" I've got the sword drawn and gripped tightly in my left hand. Not entirely sure I know what she means by *nuclear*.

"Both," she says, with a little snuffle. "They'll hit us tomorrow."

"The Company evacuated. They wrote us out," I say. "We're not getting out of here until after the smoke clears. If, then. It's just you and me now. So, are you going to shoot me, or are we going to be friends until the fireworks go off?"

Silence.

"What's it going to be, princess? If you're going to dither about it all night, then I'm going to have a cigarette while I wait."

"You'll set off the alarm," she says.

"Better alive than dead," I say.

It's two days earlier. The færies have set up one of their tactical information festivals inside the old Eureka Valley railway station.

I've spent two fruitless days trying to figure out how I'm going to get close enough to General Aelfvin before they ventilate the front of my favorite shirt with their rapid-fire fletches. Eventually, I decide to hop over the railing at Castro station, onto the tracks, and just start walking.

A couple of big, augmented delvar pick me up by the collar on my coat. They put a bag over my head and haul me with my toes

dragging on the ground into a torchlit hall magicked out of the rock and cement near the east portal of the Twin Peaks tunnel. I spend thirty-six hours in an interrogation room, waiting for the general to come and interview me. He sits patiently and listens to the message I've come to deliver: the færie can keep everything from San Francisco to Seattle, but they must retreat from Los Angeles. Or they will be removed entirely from the prime material plane by any means necessary.

The general responds without hesitation. "Tell your masters that the færie do not negotiate with terrorists." Then the delvar put another bag over my head, haul me back outside, and throw me out the back of a moving minivan, letting me tumble onto the sidewalk in front of a blasted out corporate burger joint at Market and Hyde.

That didn't go as well as the Company hoped, I'm sure.

I've put down the wakizashi and come out to face Cinderella open handed. She looks broken. She's been working undercover here for I don't even know how many years.

"This can't be real," she says.

I shrug. "They say your perception changes after you spend enough time behind færie lines."

Her skin is rough. She's got scars on her face, and all over her arms and hands. The bags under her eyes are like cartoon exaggerations.

Her jeans are scuffed and stained with motor oil and filth.

"Come on," I say. "You need a bath. After that, we'll double-bolt the door and stay in bed until the world ends."

I start the water running, help her out of her clothes, get her lowered into the tub. She closes her eyes, and I hang the Do Not Disturb sign on the door. "Please don't wake me," she says. "I haven't slept since Monday."

"Don't sleep too hard. Long day tomorrow," I say.

"You're crazy," she says. "There won't be any more tomorrows. Not after the air bursts and the færies start hitting back."

"Sure there will be," I say. "There's a civil defense shelter across the square. I've got a key."

"The City will be unrecognizable."
"Yes, but better alive than dead, I say."

