

## Fast Awake

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He couldn't believe he had missed the alarm call. Alex Dutton had asked the telephonist to ring him at seven, and now it was ten to eight, which meant that Max would have a head start. His first meeting was due to start in ten minutes, before which he had to shave, shower and dress. At least he could dispense with breakfast; the multi-course supper in the old town had not concluded until two that morning. On business trips he was used to making do with four hours' sleep. Clients expected elaborate meals, good wines, thick sauces, and the service in the crowded fish restaurant had been perversely slow, requiring a consolatory drinking session in the hotel bar afterwards. He dry-shaved while booting up his laptop, downloaded the day's emails while donning his trousers and slipped into the Negresco's main conference room as soon as the break in the opening address allowed. Outside, through the opaque curtains, he could see girls roller-skating in sunlight along the Boulevard Des Anglaises as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"Where have you been?" whispered Naimn, his assistant, "you missed the Hong Kong delegate."

"Overslept."

"So I can see." She pulled his collar straight at the back. He wondered how she always managed to appear so immaculate. She looked as though she spent the night in bubble-wrap, a treasured doll preserved by an obsessive collector. Some people handled corporate life so fluidly that they seemed to have no other existence. "Max was here fifteen minutes early."

"He always is."

"Maybe he sabotaged your alarm call."

"He wouldn't do something like that, he's a straight arrow." Everyone needed a business rival to keep them on their toes, but no-one needed a rival like Max. Always on time, always one step ahead, always completely honest with his customers, always—damn it - five and a half years younger. Wherever Alex went, Max was there first, wide and bright, buttering up the clients and tying up the deals.

"Daniel wants you to go to Frankfurt for the AngloCom presentation."

"You're joking, I thought he was going to handle that himself. I've only just got here." He had arrived in Nice the previous evening for a three-day event. "Please, not Frankfurt again. I was there Tuesday."

"I've got your tickets." She handed him a thick white envelope. "You're on the four o'clock."

"Why so late?"

"You have to see Raphaella in Ventimiglia first. I've got you a ticket for the ten twenty train."

"This is horrible, Naimn, do you realise I've done five countries in under a week?"

"It gets worse," Naimn replied. "Nice to Heathrow business class was full. You're in Economy." And Max would be in first class, no doubt. How did the son of a bitch do it?

Alex was evil-eyed by his client as he slipped back out of the room. Naimn would check him out of the hotel, leaving him free to head for the station.

A thousand mobile phones bleeped with the same message as the packed Nice-Ventimiglia train passed across the Italian border and the networks changed. The meeting with Raphaella took twenty minutes—long enough to hear her late delivery complaints, long enough for her to tell him that she had signed a three-year deal with Max Harwood—and he headed back toward the passenger-crazed station. On the boiling platform he helped to hoist an old lady up the two-foot high step to the double-decked train. Behind them, lying against a wall, a young African woman was in labour. The police, used to standing around and singling out gypsies to check on their identification papers, had draped a red woollen blanket over her while they waited for transport to arrive.

Alex sank back into the seat and watched the stations flash by. The little stations of Roquebrune, Cap D'Ail and Eze were separated by enticing bays of fierce sapphire sea. He longed to tear off his shirt and join the bathers he saw floating far below in these still coves, but there was no time for such frivolities; there was never any time. The department refused to hire more staff because it had been a bad year; it was always a bad year. His hours and workload had incrementally increased until he only managed to see his daughter every third weekend. Whenever he saw Jade, he noticed that she was falling more and more under the influence of her newly religious mother. Donna had taken up Buddhism and was determined to share her enlightenment with anyone who would listen, but at least this time she was in the thrall of a user-friendly religion. He wondered how other people managed to keep it all together. What did they have that he didn't have? *Age on their side*, he thought bitterly. A certain freshness. Max talked to every client as if it was his first day on the job. He had the kind of disturbing honesty you almost never saw anymore.

The Nice-Heathrow flight was full of red-faced English couples in striped shirts and ridiculous straw hats wrangling with check-in crew about luggage allowances. He sat with the other businessmen in a shadowed corner of the sunlit lounge, where they could jealously eye each other's laptops, mobiles and Palm Pilots. He fought back a surge of jealousy as Max boarded ahead of the herd with a brushed-steel Vaio

tucked beneath his arm. Tall and slim, wearing his suit as neatly as if he had been slotted into it, he was the kind of man who elicited responsive smiles from attendants. It was more than just good tailoring. Max drew attention without ever meaning to, just as Alex tried and failed. The eyes of hotel and airport staff slipped over him, writing him off as a faintly desperate businessman with whom they wanted minimal contact. Lately, Max was becoming less of a rival, more of a nemesis.

The flight was shorter than the journey back from the airport. He would have loved to stay on in Nice, maybe drive along the coast to one of those permanently misty mountain villages surrounding Monaco, but the idea was inconceivable with so much work to catch up on. He had never found time to do it before; why did he think he'd be able to now? This wasn't living, it was working in your sleep.

He pit-stopped at the office to file his report in person, swung by the flat for clothes and headed back to the airport before realising that he had failed to call Jade and wish her happy birthday. It was too late to make amends; his mobile was switched off because he was already about to board another flight.

Alex arranged licenses for homewares, the items everyone could live without, the vanilla room sprays, matt cream vases, citron-scented candles, silver picture frames and embroidered napery that cluttered expensive shops throughout the world. It sounded pointless when he explained it to outsiders, not that he often did, but when you added in the fairs and exhibitions, the fluctuating territories, the fashionable crazes that turned inefficient little factories into panicked and robotic corporate suppliers, it was a big deal, and each country could be persuaded to stock the other's goods. The urbanised Italians, French and Spanish had a flair for luxuries. The equivalent English items were artless and overpriced, cursed by generations of home-county conservatism and the loss of a manufacturing base. Alex was a vice president of European territories, but his opposite number was in the employ of his biggest competitor, and Max was easily winning the battle for orders, sewing up each European territory as he went.

It didn't seem as if it was possible, but the events of the week gained speed. In the departure lounge at Schipol, Alex watched a man of roughly his own age undergoing what appeared to be a fatal heart attack. He slumped in his seat and slid sideways, and no-one would have noticed if he hadn't dropped his drink on the floor. Whisky soaked into the man's socks as the business lounge hostess vainly tried to set his body upright for the sake of decorum. Later that evening, from a hotel window in Birmingham, he saw the couple in the room across the courtyard having a fight, which they resolved by noisily making love. It seemed in those twelve hours of fast-changing scenes he witnessed every form of human behaviour, yet none of it touched him. Travel had thrown open the world, but reduced it to nothing more than a series of distant tableaux.

He was pleased when the office called to redirect him once more; a new project would at least end this passive observation. His itinerary was checked and locked. The destinations blurred; he displaced his thoughts and stared from the glittering black windows of departure lounges, holding bays for the executives who kept The Continent, as it was once called, competitive.

The night was stormy; he was in Cologne or Berlin, one or the other, waiting to board a delayed flight to Amsterdam, when the sky broke with a bang. He remembered thinking he had flown through worse weather when the plane bucked and dropped after its rough climb into the flaring night; then there was nothing but grey dead air. The sensation lasted for the remainder of the flight. He landed in Holland, dazed and unable to think of anything except putting one foot before the other, getting through the next ten seconds. With a buzzing head he attended a meeting about cushions in Bruges, flew to Gatwick but missed his daughter, took off again, landed again, but now the sense of keeping up and coping had come undone, as though the rhythm had faltered between what he saw and what he was doing, like soldiers breaking step or an orchestra losing its way in a difficult passage.

He no longer recalled his journeys as a linear parade of events, but as underlit Polaroids of an indistinct life; shelves of room colognes, boardroom tables, drivers holding signs that bore his name, club lounge wet bars, cocktails and canapes, order books, pens, endless counters of smiling women checking tickets against computer screens, arguments over napkin rings and candlesticks - none of it made sense. He held a meeting about leather placemats as though his life depended on it. The tableaux raced past in a garish blur of sights, sounds and moods.

He even forgot about Max, despite his name continuing to crop up in emails and trade magazines. At least, he forgot until the night of the International Soft Furnishing Awards, when Max picked up a Golden Vase honouring him as salesman of the year. Even that wouldn't have been so bad, but Max had to stop by his table and smile "I guess you blinked, old chap," at him.

He drank too much—he was angry, damn it—and found himself at the bar with other executives whose working lives had passed unrewarded and unhonoured that evening. Pretty soon a slanging match started, with Max Harwood as the object of pity and envy.

"He fucks all his female clients," said Peter Olexa from the Milan office. "Then as soon as he's got them to sign for three years, he's gone."

"He never delegates, and he sets a pace no-one else can keep up," complained Simon Carter-Phillips, an overweight also-ran from the Chelsea Emporium. "He gives the rest of us a bad name." As

they knocked back their scotches in agreement, Alex found it hard to be bitter. Christ, the man was good at his job, and everything else was just jealous bullshit.

On his way back to the room he passed Max's door just as the man himself was entering. He wanted to say—actually, he wanted to ask Max how he managed to top his own personal best each season - but he found himself becoming angry with Max's arrogant attitude instead.

Quite what happened in the next few seconds remained a mystery to him for several weeks. Certainly, there was a scuffle that tumbled them into the room, and Max seemed to trip over the edge of the bed. He whacked his head on the corner of the minibar and fell face down so hard that Alex heard his septum crack. The blood that pooled around his head was as black and glossy as tar. Alex gingerly checked his pulse and found there was nothing, not the faintest beat. The blood in Max's veins had simply stopped moving. They had all been drinking heavily—Alex had read somewhere that your blood vessels ruptured much more easily when there was alcohol in your system, so much so that a simple fall could kill you, and Max looked pretty much one hundred percent dead.

Alex staggered back into the corridor, pulling the door shut behind him, but even in his confused state of mind was mindful enough to wipe the handle clean of prints, just in case he'd touched it. The corridor was empty—it was nearly midnight—as he headed to his room on tiptoe and rinsed the bitter sweat from his body in the shower.

As much as he was sure that someone would find out what had happened, Alex felt equally convinced that no-one could directly link him to the death scene. After all, the guy had fallen over and died in his own room. There was nothing to connect the two of them. They hadn't shared a lift to the floor. There were no closed-circuit cameras in the hall. The pair hadn't spoken since the awards ceremony earlier, and then they were seen to be on good terms. Even so, he didn't sleep a wink all night.

Nobody noticed that Max had failed to appear for breakfast. He usually ate on the road and beat everyone to the airport. It took a few days for the rumours to start. At a conference in Berlin; "Have you heard about Max Harwood? He suffered a stroke after the Soft Furnishing Awards and died." In Paris; "Max had a massive heart attack. Too many hotel dinners with rich sauces. They're looking for someone to take over his territories." In Amsterdam; "He'd been drinking, choked to death on something he ordered from room service. Just shows how the stupidest thing can bring a good man down."

Alex applied for the position because it seemed stupid not to, and was so amazed to be offered the job that he first assumed they had made a mistake. He accepted within two days of applying, just in case they changed their minds. A breezy heavysset American in his fifties named Brent Kaye welcomed him to the fold, and invited him to a small gathering of company directors the following Friday. They had drinks at an underlit bar in a Holborn hotel, then Brent took him off for dinner, where they sat in a quiet alcove, behind sharp white linen. Brent drank quite a lot for an American, and handled it well.

"Glad to welcome you aboard," he said, playfully punching Alex on the shoulder. His manner was corny but rather endearing. "You've made it to the club. You're one of us now." Alex assumed he was talking about the company, but Brent pointed to his lapel, and the small gold and black enamel pin stuck in his buttonhole. The badge formed a pair of entwined letter E's. "Seen one of these before? Sure you have!"

Now that Alex thought about it, he had. Over the years he had noticed the discreet initials pinned to a number of ties and lapels. "What does it stand for?" he asked.

"Executive Elite," Brent explained. "You mean you never heard of us?"

Alex wondered if it was something to do with the Elks. "No, but it seems—" he waved a finger over the badge, "—I've seen that logo around a lot."

"Hell, it's more than a logo. You've seen it because you travel in the same circles." Brent drained his wineglass and refilled it. He dug in the top pocket of his jacket and produced a slim fold of brown leather, which he slipped across the tundra of tablecloth to Alex. "Go ahead, big guy, we think you've earned it."

Alex unfolded the little pouch and shook out the gold pin. "I don't understand. What did I do to get this?"

"Come on, you don't need to be modest. I think you know very well what you did. You're gonna find that this little baby opens a lot of doors for you." Brent watched while he clipped the badge to his lapel, but wouldn't be drawn further on the subject.

Throughout the next day's meetings, Alex took note of those executives who wore the badge—although they were from many different countries, they seemed to have something in common, a look, a manner, something he couldn't put his finger on. If other members noticed his pin, they didn't comment on it. At the weekend he spent time with Sylvie, a copyright lawyer he was seeing in Paris, and watched her television while she was dressing, noting a number of officials at a televised UN meeting who appeared to be wearing the same pin. He was starting to get a bad feeling; the more he looked at the damned thing, the more it looked like a modern-day version of the SS insignia. And the ones who wore it—mostly men, but one or two women—they looked like the kind of people who denied having anything to do with military atrocities. At night he unclipped the pin and studied it carefully, tipping it into the lamplight.

E E.

Executive Elite, what the hell did that mean? Did you get Air Miles or something with every deal you clinched? He'd been promoted, but what was so elite about that, and why the secrecy? True, the senior executives he dealt with seemed to be treating him with a new respect, and sure enough, doors were opening more easily than they had in the past—that wasn't just his imagination, was it? But what had he done to deserve the honour? What marked him out for special treatment from all the other businessmen?

He woke in the middle of the night sweating ice.

It was blindingly obvious. He wondered how he could have failed to spot it before. He had murdered a man—at least, they thought he had—and it had made him eligible to join some kind of management murderer's club—a society for everyone who had managed to get away with it. They thought he had murdered Max to get ahead. He'd proved he had the right stuff to move to the inner business circle. Upright, honest Max who was loved with a ferocious loyalty by his staff, but whom everyone at the top would have hated for making it all look too easy.

Alex threw cold water on his face and stared at his eyes in the bathroom mirror. He wasn't a murderer. Max had slipped. It was the kind of accident that happened to people all the time. He needed to talk to someone. He had to see Brent.

"Executive *Execution*?" hissed Brent, pantomiming horror. "Jeez, Alex, this is not the place to talk about it." They were standing in the overcrowded bar at Claridges, waiting to go into the richly carpeted dinner lounge that looked like an old cinema. "Why don't we go through to the table before the others arrive?" It was twenty-five minutes past eight and the room was starting to fill up. The Americans ate early, the French ate late, and English businessmen only ever booked tables for eight-thirty or nine. Brent drank some water and licked his lips, looking a little nervous. "Like I told you, it stands for Elite. Nobody ever—*ever*—says anything about execution. I always argued that we should explain more to our new members, but the board think it's better to let initiates work it out for themselves. Where did you get the idea about the initials?"

"I worked it out for myself. Maybe that isn't what you're called, but that's what you mean."

"I always thought you were gonna be one of the bright ones," laughed Brent. "Well, you know now, so if you have any questions, it's the time to ask them."

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing. You don't *do* anything. You already earned the mark of respect. It'll get you anywhere you need to go. Take a look around, you'll meet other club members but no-one will ever really talk to you about it, because there's really no need. It's the ultimate club, Alex, one you don't have to ask to join, one that acknowledges you by one simple act that you've arrived at yourself. We have EE members in all walks of life. Insurance, banking, law, media—newspaper proprietors, we have a lot of those. What you've done is a gold pass card, man. Think about it, you surrendered your life working your butt off to keep the pistons of commerce pumping. Your world is a waking dream filled with the art of the deal, brokering, planning, forecasting, profit and loss, balancing figures, and all too soon it's over, but you, you went a step further than that to get on, it's only fair you should reap a reward."

"And that's why I get to wear the pin."

"Well, partly. There's another reason. It protects you. It means no-one can ever do the same to you. You're safe now. You paid your dues. You're a protected species, buddy. What's the point of a club if it doesn't privilege its members?" He signalled to a waiter. "Can we get some wine over here?"

He should have felt wonderful. After all, no-one could ever find out that he hadn't "paid his dues", but had merely watched in drunk amazement as Max suffered a ridiculous accident. As Alex pulled off his shoes beside the hotel bed, he only felt sick and ashamed that, in the final reckoning, this was all his working life amounted to, this was why all the sacrifices had been made. If he had chosen to push Max into an alleyway and knife him into a lonely anonymous death, he would still have been awarded the gold pin. "Clearing the path," Brent had called it, as if he had just helped to cut away underbrush that impeded the wheels of industry. Max had rocked a few too many boats, it seemed; no-one in the upper echelons was sorry to see him go.

The pin got him appointments with people who until a few weeks ago wouldn't even return his calls. He made better deals and cleared higher profits without working as hard, and after a while it didn't feel so wrong. He began to think about taking a holiday. As he watched the planes taxiing along the rain-sheened Heathrow runway, he tried to decide where he could take Sylvie, somewhere far away, a place that neither of them had ever visited before. That was when he saw Brent's face reflected in the dark glass.

The older American was standing behind him, but the customary smile that creased his face had vanished.

"Brent," said Alex as a sense of guilt returned, "are you going to Antwerp for the ceramics fair?"

"No, Alex," Brent replied. "I came to see you."

"Me? I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you do."

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked nervously.

"No. this won't take long. Why didn't you tell anyone the truth about what happened between you and Max that night?"

Alex thought quickly. He'd been over it a thousand times in his head. There was simply no way that anyone could know what had really happened to Max in his hotel room. He could brazen it out. "You know what happened."

"I know now."

"What do you mean?"

"I know because Max Harwood told me."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's back with us once again."

"But he's dead." His voice rose. Other people in the lounge were looking up at him.

"Max turned up at my hotel last night, having spent three weeks in a clinic with no fucking memory. The last thing he recalls is walking away from you and tripping over the end of his bed. Which means—" Brent leaned forward and reached inside Alex's overcoat, feeling for the pin and unclipping it, "—that you are not eligible to wear this anymore. It seems you don't have what it takes after all." Brent weighed the clip in his hand before slipping it into a pocket. "It means you're not protected anymore."

"I'm a threat to you," said Alex, realising his position.

"Maybe, but not for very long." Brent smiled. "I think they just called your flight." His smile broadened to a shark grin. "At least you know who to keep an eye out for."

Even as Alex found himself running for the gate, he knew there would never be any escape. If he thought his life was fast and frightening before, he had no idea how fast and frightening it was going to get in the next few hours.