

The Resilient

Among the Forewarned

Adam K. Ogden

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The Resilient: Among the Forewarned

A people ruled by fear is a people ruled of their own choosing. A prisoner of their own free will...

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Ryker's Log: October 15, Metropolitan.

The Ghost has proven to be as elusive as the wind. He exists as whispers in dark corners. Whispers that, if spoken of too loudly, vanish as though they never were. There are stories told of The Ghost, legends per se, of his fantastic feats. Prisoners disappeared from the most secure compounds. Even dangerous terrorists.

The closest I have come to stopping The Ghost was in Agridemesne. A chance encounter. We apprehended his comrades. But the man... I can't even be certain he was ever there himself. He has proved a resourceful and worthy adversary. He is the first mission I have yet to bring to completion. He is the one blemish on my otherwise impeccable record.

I wish I knew who this man was. Despite my best efforts, I can give him neither a name nor a face. The Ghost could be watching me at this very moment, and I wouldn't know it. Such thoughts haunt me.

Six months ago, Colonel Hempton assigned me a new partner. Natalie. I was supposed to be training her to become an asset in her own right, but we have formed a good team. She has proven herself a great ally. In her former life, she would have been my rival. She was once a member of the rebel group, Defiant. Thankfully, she has seen the error of her ways since then. With her help, I feel as though I am on the trail of capturing The

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Ghost. Soon, I hope my writings center on success and not of longing. Until then, he is my mission. I will find The Ghost.

I am Asset Seven. I am Ryker.

PERCHED HIGH UPON A ROOFTOP in Metropoliian, Ryker waited for his target. He had gathered information that The Ghost planned to visit a man across the street. Even with the strict scrutiny of the Intolerance of Criminality Act, the act that gave the Federal Police unfettered power, the man still eluded them. Colonel Hempton had assigned his asset, Ryker, to the mission. Although part of the Federal Police, assets were separate from the grunts as they called them—the general officers that patrolled the streets. Assets operated in the shadows. They didn't exist.

Ryker liked it that way. Since the day Hempton recruited him, he lived the life of espionage. He was calm and collected. Even now, sitting on that rooftop as he watched his target, he was writing his thoughts into his tablet.

"Ryker," a voice called his attention away from his writings. His relaxed approach to the mission annoyed his partner, Natalie. She had a penchant for the exhilarating.

"Patience, Twelve," Ryker said. "The streets are empty. We have plenty of time."

He placed his tablet inside his coat pocket and peered through the scope of his rifle. Their target sat reclined in his chair, watching the nightly news. He wasn't The Ghost, but a man whom he had contacted. Joseph Morelli had made a profession out of dealing in identifications. It was believed The Ghost was seeking a new one, and he was to offer it.

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Natalie would have stormed into the room and strung him up by his bathrobe to gain information. She was already loading her third pistol. Ryker wanted to wait. It was likely The Ghost may come to that apartment. If he did, they would stop them both.

The street was quiet beyond the mews of cats diving in the dumpsters. There were no cars parked on the curb. No people wandering down the sidewalk either. It was an all-too-common sight in Metropolian. Hempton had begun enforcing curfews lately. Crime rates had fallen under his authority, but a new threat loomed. The Anderton virus, they called it. A debilitating neuro-virus unleashed by a known terrorist. At first, many thought it was another virus called the terrorist's curse spreading throughout the populace. It had plagued the nation for the last few years in small numbers. But this new virus was more contagious, more dangerous than anything that had swept the nation before. Most people feared it, choosing to keep themselves quarantined in their homes without arguing with the law enforcing it. At that hour, though, there were very few lights on in the apartment building across the street.

Ryker looked through the scope at the target again. The man was nodding off. His head would fall, and he would rapidly raise it up. If he were waiting up for The Ghost, he would have to wake him. As he watched the man drift, echoes of metal filled the air. Natalie rose to her feet. The fall of cans knocked off the dumpster by the cats had almost sprung her into action.

"Calm down," Ryker said. "We don't need to alert the neighborhood to their feline problem."

Natalie sucked air through her teeth, keeping her pistol aimed at the dumpster. "A couple of rounds would take care of it."

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"Sure. Let me report back to Hempton that we failed the mission because my partner isn't a cat person."

"Well, dogs are better," she said before lowering her weapon.

"Fine. I'll call the pound tomorrow and find you an adorable chihuahua. Their almost as feisty as you. *Almost*. Can we get back to the mission now?"

"What mission? The target is napping."

"You know, this is not the worst mission we've been on together."

"You've had me on this rooftop for six hours. It's three o'clock in the morning. I'm going over there."

"No. We haven't seen The Ghost yet."

"Look, you can either watch me or shoot me. This mark is about to talk."

Ryker looked at his watch. Three-seventeen. According to his intel, The Ghost was to make contact just before midnight. Perhaps Natalie's method was better. It had shown to be quite effective in the past.

He disassembled his rifle and put it in its case. Natalie had already shimmied down the fire escape. Ryker sighed, letting out a small waft of mid-October steam. He had to catch up to her before she did something foolhardy, like storming into the building.

He was too late. By the time he reached the last rung of the fire escape ladder, she was already sprinting toward the apartment. Ryker dropped from the ladder to the sidewalk waiting a few feet below. He chased after her, slinging his bagged rifle toward the dumpster where it wouldn't be seen. He was thankful the streets were empty. There was no one to witness his suspicious skulking around the apartment complex.

When he turned the corner toward the front entrance of the building, Natalie was gone. Ryker had to admit she

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had prowess. In the few seconds' head start that she had, she had slipped into the building. Ryker ran up the steps to the door and stared into the security camera above it.

"Department of Housing. Open up," Ryker said, holding up his fake identification.

The door buzzed, and he slung it open. That early in the morning, the inside of the apartment complex was as still as the street. He walked through the hallway to the elevator. Pulling a piece of chewing gum out of his pocket, he kept his head down as he entered. He chewed it a few times, leaning against the back wall of the elevator beneath the security camera. He slipped the gum out of his mouth and pressed it onto the camera's lens.

Once any potential onlookers were blinded, he removed his pistol from his back. He took a quick inventory of its ammunition and attached a silencer to its end. Silencer—a fantastic misnomer. Adding it only meant that perhaps just one floor would hear it instead of the entire building. Ryker hoped he didn't have to use his pistol at all. It was too messy and too hard to keep its use contained. Nevertheless, he knew better than to infiltrate a mark unarmed. Especially since this mark involved The Ghost.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Ryker pressed his pistol to his side to conceal it. He leaned forward out of the elevator and scanned the hallway. Clear. There were no late-night wanderers meandering through. And no Natalie. Ryker slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket and cautiously walked through the hall. His eyes shifted back and forth from door to door as he passed. The mark's apartment was a little more than halfway down.

As Ryker approached the man's door, he could hear the droning of the incoherent babble of his television. It was louder than he had expected. The door was cracked

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open. Wood splinters protruded from the frame where the latch should have been.

Natalie, Ryker thought. He sighed heavily. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't contain her temperament. She was bold and brash. He was glad the neighbors were asleep. If they had heard her, that would have been unfortunate.

Ryker eased the door open with his shoulder. Both hands readied his pistol in front of him. He slipped through the apartment on soft, silent feet. He could see the top of the man's head as he continued to rest in his recliner. *Natalie*, however, was still yet to be seen.

Glancing at the edges of the room, everything was still in its place. She had touched nothing. She wasn't gathering information. Ryker eased himself behind the recliner. He placed the palm of his hand over the sleeping man's mouth to keep him quiet. The man didn't stir. Ryker pulled his hand back. There was no steam on his glove from the man's breath. He wasn't breathing.

Ryker paced around the recliner to look at the man. It was then he knew why the man wasn't breathing. That ability had been stolen from him. Two shots center mass. The man had been executed. Screaming permeated the apartment, shrieking louder than the television. Ryker's eyes darted up to the doorway. A woman was standing there in her pajamas. A phone hung loosely in her hand at her side.

Dang it, Ryker thought.

"Federal Police, ma'am," he said, pulling credentials from his pocket. "Do you know what happened here?"

"This... this can't be happening," the woman muttered after her screaming subsided.

Ryker tried to talk to her, to reassure her everything would be okay, but she didn't move. She was in shock.

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She just stood there, repeatedly mumbling the same phrase. Instinctively, Ryker reached back toward his belt for a vial of Amnesiac. He didn't want to waste any more time trying to spin some tale. She couldn't be calmed. It would be better for him to disorient her. Any residual memories left over by the Amnesiac serum would be misconstrued as dreams of a sleepwalker. Ryker held the vial in his hand and made his way toward her.

Doors down the hallway began a symphony of slamming. More people were leaving the safety of their homes and coming to investigate. Curiosity was stronger than their fear of any virus. The situation was escalating. A crowd would be harder to contain. Ryker returned the vial to his belt and the pistol to its holster. This was going to be a long night.

Bystanders rushed into the apartment, pushing the woman out of the way. They each froze at the sight of Ryker standing over the body. He lifted his hands and showed them the Federal Police badge he held. He hated using that badge. As an asset, he was supposed to be invisible. A man with no obvious ties to the Federal Police whose mission it was to handle the more delicate threats. Using the badge was dangerous. If any real officers caught him, Command would deny all knowledge of his existence. He would be tried as an impostor.

Ryker lowered his head to prepare for the tedious night that awaited him. Bold and brash. Natalie's best and worst two qualities. She had given him a challenge.

2

THE BYSTANDERS SLUNK BACK as officers in their black tactical uniforms replaced them. Ryker knew it wouldn't be long before they did. The woman had undoubtedly called them when she discovered what happened. After the Intolerance of Criminality Act passed, there was little crime left in the nation. The Anderton virus was said to be a desperate attempt to still inflict terror on the Federation. It proved the IOCA was working. Because of that, the people were quick to point out anything they thought was suspicious. They held each other under strict scrutiny to maintain such a lack of crime. That same scrutiny hindered Ryker's efforts.

"Identify yourself," the lieutenant said, readying his pistol on Ryker. His words were muffled by the small mask the officers had started to wear.

"Lieutenant Shallows from the Fifty-First," Ryker said, continuing to hold up his badge. "I was bringing supplies to a quarantined friend in the building when I heard the commotion."

"What happened here?" The lieutenant holstered his weapon and began looking over the dead body.

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“My guess is your patrol missed something.”

“Don’t talk down to me like that. I don’t see any stars on your shoulders.”

“No, but I see two bullet holes in this man and a company of officers that are late to the party.”

The lieutenant snarled and ordered his men to clear the room of civilians. By his demeanor, Ryker knew he wasn’t fond of him being there. He didn’t care. It was officers like him that made his job both necessary and more difficult.

“What did you touch?” the lieutenant asked.

Ryker lifted his gloved hands toward him. “Nothing.”

The lieutenant grumbled as he pilfered through the apartment, looking for clues. With the reduction in crime rates, so too was the reduction in crime scene investigation. Command had decided to train officers to investigate crimes on their own. They were already well versed in investigating people.

Ryker joined in the search. It gave him the opportunity to discover any information he could on The Ghost. He also wanted to find out more about the shooter. His initial reaction was that Natalie had executed him, but that wasn’t likely. She would have extracted as much information as she could first. There hadn’t been enough time for that, and the man wasn’t disheveled. Whoever carried it out broke in, executed the man, and left. It was a professional hit in a country without professional crime.

The thought puzzled Ryker. The Ghost had no history of executions. His crimes were much subtler than that. But the mark knew something. Something another didn’t want shared. That person had killed the man just after he and Natalie left the rooftop. Someone knew they were there.

Ryker’s pulse quickened. Natalie wasn’t there because she had already figured it out. The room and the man

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within it were no longer a priority. He had to find his partner.

Ryker excused himself from the room and made his way back to the elevator. The reason Natalie could sneak inside so quickly was that she was never inside at all. She made the man exiting the building and followed.

Outside the building, the dead, empty streets had come alive. The Federal Police had set up a perimeter around the building, looking for the shooter. Their blue lights flashed from atop their cars encircling the building. Wherever Natalie and the shooter went, they were out of sight. Ryker scanned the streets, looking for the most likely escape route. The shooter knew where their nest was, so he would have known where they were coming from. His escape route would have taken him in the opposite direction.

Briskly, Ryker walked down the sidewalk along the face of the building. To avoid the suspicions of the officers, he had to look official. He didn't have time to concoct some excuse for breaking curfew. With a murder charge looming, it would take too long. He had to get to his partner. Natalie was fierce, but she wasn't invincible. She had shown him the scar that ran the length of her abdomen. A parting gift of her former life.

What would have been suspicious enough to tip Natalie off? Ryker thought as his eyes danced from building to building.

Other than the scattered police cars, nothing seemed out of place on the dimly lit streets. Lamps spaced feet apart along the sidewalk would have illuminated someone sneaking away. With as suspicious as Natalie was, it was possible she saw a man walking away from the building and followed. Although, a professional wouldn't have allowed himself to be seen by the lights.

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A quick flutter through the window beside him stole his gaze. Ryker peered through the large frame of glass. Inside, a restaurant occupied the bottom floor of an apartment complex. Its many tables and chairs were strewn throughout its dark interior. Ryker tried the door, but it was locked. He was sure he had seen something inside the window, and not just a movement of a reflection on its surface. He placed his hands around his eyes to block out the surrounding light. There was a second set of windows.

The set of windows along that wall meant there was space between the buildings. The apartment complex wasn't as close to its neighboring building as it appeared. Ryker ran to the corner of the restaurant. He stuck his hand in the narrow gap between the buildings and noticed it widened as it went deeper. That was most likely where they went. He turned to the side and began trying to squeeze into the tight space. The concrete edge of one building scraped against his chest. His pistol at his back caught the corner of the other. He wriggled himself around enough that he could remove his holster. He crawled his way through the small gap.

The space expanded into a small secret garden. It was what the windows of the restaurant were pointed at. It was too dark to see from the sidewalk. The windows of the adjacent building faced it as well. One of those windows was open. A light from somewhere deeper in the building illuminated the fluttering curtain.

Ryker pulled his pistol from the holster he had been carrying in his hand. He lowered himself down to peek inside the open window. Finding the room beyond it vacant, he crawled into it. A mattress waited for him on the floor below. It was thin and old. Empty glass bottles and containers from the restaurant littered the floor. The im-

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pact he made with the mattress caused a few of the bottles to tip over. They clanked against the hard wooden floor.

Ryker swore at himself and readied his pistol. He remained motionless, waiting to see if he had been compromised. After a few moments of silence, he eased himself up off the mattress, making sure not to disturb any more of the garbage.

The building didn't seem to be occupied by any legal resident, but instead had housed a vagrant. The stench of body odor was heavy in the air, mingled with the moldy leftovers of the containers. Ryker made his way through the rest of the building. As he did, another smell filled his nostrils. A heavy chemical smell. He wrapped his elbow over his nose.

Whoever the shooter was, he was clever. He knew of the narrow passageway to the open window. That the apartment was left vacant to fumigate it. He wasn't just professional in his hit, but also in his reconnaissance.

Ryker hoped there were no lingering traces of the Anderton virus as he pressed on, finding the exit to the apartment. A red sheet of plastic had sealed the door, but one side of it had been torn free. He knew he was on the right track. He pulled the plastic back and slipped through the door. A hallway awaited him beyond it.

Left or right?

His eyes shifted back and forth, searching for more clues. Both directions looked the same. They each turned a corner to another hallway beyond it. He chose right—the farthest direction from the street he had come from. He ran to the corner and down the adjoining hall. There were no exits, but there were doors everywhere. The shooter could have slipped behind any of them. If Natalie were chasing him, the door would have been left open. He kept going.

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Deeper down the hallway, a potted plant had been knocked over. Its soil spread across the carpeted floor. The plant itself had been trampled. Boot prints formed a trail down the hall.

They ended at a stairwell. Ryker darted up them, bounding them by twos. He had wasted too much time in the apartment. Natalie and the shooter were too far ahead. Inside the apartment complex, he could lose them. He feared he already had.

Why would you climb the stairs? Ryker thought. Being a professional assassin himself, he tried to understand the methods of the shooter so that he could anticipate him. The stairs offered him no way out. *Unless you're going to the roof.*

Ryker bolted up the rest of the stairs until he reached the top. The door to the roof was closed but not sealed like he expected. At some point, the lock was carefully cut. Ryker readied his pistol and eased the door open.

The pulsing of wind filled the night air as Federal Police helicopters circled above. Still no sign of Natalie. With the Federal Police scouting for suspicious activity, he had to be careful. He couldn't be seen on that rooftop. He leaned against the edge of the doorway, scouting the area. A flat surface with a few pipes jutting up from it randomly was all he could see. The pipes meant the shooter didn't have his own helicopter standing by. At least, not on that rooftop.

Ryker watched as the helicopters made another pass. When he was sure he was out of their sights, he sprinted to the edge of the roof and hunkered against the short wall. The next building was close. Its roof was also flat, but without pipes. The only thing that filled its top was a brick structure housing the stairs up to it. If the shooter didn't fly out, he could have gone down those stairs.

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As the helicopters circled again, Ryker leaped over the gap between the buildings. He landed with a roll, coming back up onto his feet. He ran for the brick building. With his back pressed against it, he made his way around to the doorway. The door was locked, but the sight he saw surprised him. Natalie was standing in the frame.

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RYKER WAS GLAD he had caught up to Natalie. With her hands on her hips and her head cocked to the side, she didn't seem to be any worse for wear. He pressed himself in the stairwell's doorway with her to hide from the Federal Police.

"It's about time you got here," Natalie smirked.

"You could have left me a clue to where you went," Ryker said.

"I'm sorry. I was all out of breadcrumbs. Did you question the mark?"

"The mark's dead."

"I knew that guy looked suspicious." Natalie curled her lip into a snarl. "I followed him up here, but he had a helicopter waiting. A refurbished Federal Police helicopter."

"Was it The Ghost?"

"I don't think so. My best guess, it was a spook."

Ryker stroked his chin in thought. A spook explained his skills as an assassin. Although the CIA claimed to never operate domestically, it wasn't the first time he had come across one of their operatives in the field.

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“Our mark dealt in identities. There’s no way to know who he has made one for,” Ryker said.

He was attempting to reassure Natalie, but he couldn’t reassure himself. The spook had been watching them. He was certain of it. It was too coincidental. They were assets of the Federal Police. No one outside the program knew of their existence. He didn’t know how the Agency discovered their mission unless they had a mole.

That would have to be tomorrow’s problem. As it stood, he and Natalie were pinned down on the rooftop. Since they didn’t exist, they had no authority and no means of protection. They would be at the mercy of the Federal Police officers. He had seen it happen before. Colonel Hempton held his assets in the highest regard. Failure of any kind was not permitted. Ryker’s former partner had killed a mark by accident that he was ordered to apprehend. Hempton had demoted him to being a grunt. He was lucky.

Ryker knew he had to salvage his mission somehow. Although his mark was killed by a CIA spook, he wouldn’t be relieved of the responsibility of it. If he found The Ghost, the matter would be moot.

For now, they had to find a way off that rooftop. Natalie had already tried the door, Ryker was sure. She wouldn’t have stayed pressed in the frame if she hadn’t. The helicopters circling above and officers patrolling the streets below had them trapped.

Ryker eased out of the doorway slightly to get a better look at their surroundings. The helicopters shined their spotlights on the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. Their roof was two buildings away. He waited for officers to come bounding out of the stairwell of the building he had left. After a second thought, he knew he was giving

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those officers too much credit. From the looks of their surroundings, they had nowhere else they could go.

“Come with me,” he told Natalie.

Ryker led her back to the first stairwell. He knew it was risky, but with officers already searching rooftops, it was only a matter of time before they were discovered. Together, they slipped inside the building unnoticed. As Ryker eased the door shut, light illuminated the surrounding cracks. He froze. He released his hands from the door and began his descent down the stairs. Whether the officers saw the open door was irrelevant. If they saw a change in it, they would have been made.

Leaving the door open, Ryker assumed it had alerted them on its own. He and Natalie ducked into a hallway about midway of the building. They followed it toward a row of doors that led to rooms next to the building they had just left.

“Federal Police,” Natalie said as she rapped against a door.

When there was no response, she pounded against it again. A short, elderly man opened the door, attempting to tie his bathrobe. His eyes were only half-opened behind the thin glasses haphazardly draped across his face. From his appearance, he had been in a deep sleep. Ryker wasted no time talking to the man. He uncapped the vial of Amnesiac on his belt and injected it into the side of the man’s neck.

“Go back to sleep, old-timer,” Ryker said as the man slumped to the floor. Ryker caught the man in his arms and carried him to his couch.

“Well, aren’t you a softy,” Natalie teased.

“Would you rather him wake up on the floor bruised? That may raise some questions.”

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"He won't remember us. Why does it matter anyway?"

Ryker just looked at her. It was his habit to tie up all loose ends, no matter how trivial. Natalie shook her head and walked through the man's living room to the window facing the nearby building. She went to pull back the shades and then quickly dropped them. Ryker knew what that meant. The officers were already searching the neighboring buildings.

The IOCA had unchained the Federal Police. They had become much bolder in their pursuits. When they received reports of a crime, especially a crime like murder, they canvassed an area thoroughly. No longer hindered by things like search warrants, it was nothing for them to barge into rooms, searching for their suspect. If they were already searching the building two over, they were most likely in his as well.

Ryker studied the sleeping man still lying on his couch. He quickly untied the man's robe and stole it from him.

"Lose the combat gear and put this on," he told Natalie as he handed her the robe. He ran his fingers through her hair, pulling most of it out of her ponytail.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You've been asleep. They're going to knock soon."

Natalie pursed her lips and threw the robe back to Ryker. He looked at it, crumpled up in his hands. It seemed Natalie had her own plan. He hoped so. His eyes shifted up to the door, waiting for the sound of that expected knock.

Natalie unbuckled her holsters and laid them on the floor beside the doorway. All of them. Between the pistols, the ammo, and the knives, she had a small arsenal waiting to alert any officer that arrived. There was the knock.

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Without a care, she threw open the door and leaned against the frame with her hand on her hip. Ryker ducked down, hiding at the end of the couch.

"What?" she asked the officer standing at the door as she pulled her hair back into place.

"Federal Police business," the officer said. "We have to search the apartment."

"Why?"

"There's been a murder in the adjacent apartment complex. Can I ask you what you're doing at this hour?"

"What am I doing? I've been quarantined inside this apartment for two weeks. But what are you doing, officer? I thought the IOCA was supposed to keep us safe from murderers. Where were you at? Were you sleeping on the job? You look disheveled. The pockets on your vest are unbuttoned. Your holster's loose. When was the last time you cleaned that pistol? You've got residue buildup all over it. So, instead of hassling me, why don't you go take care of that and find that murderer? I'm sure we could all get some sleep around here if you did."

Natalie slammed the door in the officer's face. Bold and brash.

Ryker crouched motionless behind the sofa, waiting for the officer to retaliate. He let out a heavy, ragged breath when he didn't. To have made good partners, he and Natalie were total opposites of each other. She was cocky, abrasive, and always ready for action. Ryker tended to use slower and more methodical tactics. Her way provided faster results, but his way was safer. He had been an asset for nine years. He knew safer was better.

"We'll keep the old man sedated and hide out here until the FPD finishes their search," Ryker said. "With our best lead killed by a spook and all these officers sniffing

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around, there's no chasing The Ghost tonight. He's already long vanished."