

The Resilient

Out of the Forbidden

Adam K. Ogden

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The Resilient: Out of the Forbidden

Be careful who you trust, for wolves lie in sheep's clothing, and lions are but little lambs...

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1

WAR WAS NEVER FAR from Michael's mind. Even in that bitter cold shack he called home. Though he tried to forget the days when the Northwyn terrorists destroyed the life he had known, nothing had ever been the same. Not since the rise of the United State Federation.

He pulled his tattered jacket a little tighter around him. The thought of what existed beyond his small home chilled him more than the night air. Even on nights when the cold wind seeped between the cracks in the walls, he was glad to have fled to the abandoned lands of the Forbidden Zone. The ravaged, war-torn area had once been inhabited by the very terrorists he had fought against. But in that small nook, he and his family had created a shelter for those in need.

There were eight of them together in that collapsing three-room shack. It had once been a grand house, but it had become a lingering scar from such a terrible war. Left to rot after most of the rooms had been destroyed. Years ago, it was Michael's childhood home. Now, it was his sanctuary from the horrors he had seen.

After the war, he returned to it with his wife, Rebecca.

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Together, they started a new life with their now-six-year-old daughter, Allie, and the band of refugees that hid with them. Though everyone there considered themselves equal, he and Rebecca had become the caretakers of their house. As he watched the dying embers in the cracked fireplace, his mind went to the small amount of firewood that leaned against it. More would need to be cut in the morning. Tonight, he chose to endure the cold, listening to the bustle of the others playing a game of cards.

In the kitchen, Rebecca was hard at work making dinner from the scraps that had been collected. It seemed to be less of that lately too. But she was the best cook of anyone he knew. He felt lucky to be living through such hardships with someone who was once a professional chef. Thinking of food took his focus off the fire and on to the growing rumble from his stomach.

He peered into the kitchen through the splintered boards that had taken over the dining room. The only remnants left of an unusable second floor. Through the gaps, he could see movement, but not enough detail.

"How's dinner coming, Becca?" he asked.

"It'll still be a little while, sweetie," she said with strain in her voice. The stress of trying to feed so many with so little took its toll on her lately.

"What are we having?"

"The usual. Mexican beans and beetles."

"Sounds delicious, just in mine can you hold the beans *and* the beetles?"

He had never been a fan of beans, but the idea of mixing in beetles made them even more repulsive. But there was no use in being picky. Food choices were limited to what could be grown or killed, and supply for both had dwindled to almost nothing.

When he was younger, he never dreamed his life would

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turn out that way. He had always planned to live in a big city. He had moved nearly a thousand miles away to the city of Chicago. At the time, it was one of the fastest growing cities in the country. They had even given it the new name of Metropolian. But he only made it as far as a chemistry professor at Endelboro University. The war ended those dreams.

Although it wasn't the life he had planned, he felt like he had purpose. Survival was harsh in the Forbidden Zone. Helping those that were with him gave him a sense of accomplishment. It had also brought him a lot closer to Rebecca. In Chicago, he had spent so much time working she had taken a backseat in his life. Now they were working together to take care of their family and their friends. He was no longer tied to the day-to-day grind of a job. He was helping them stay alive.

Even with his childhood dreams out of reach, his newfound purpose allowed him to still be thankful. He was thankful Rebecca had stayed with him after all these years. For their three children, wherever life had taken them. For being alive and having a place to call home. Most of all, he was thankful God had never forsaken him. Even in his darkest times.

Rebecca would have been proud of him for thinking that way. She was always the spiritual one. She would spend hours every day praying for him and those in their care. Despite their circumstances, she believed everything happened for a reason. After what she had been through, Michael admired her for that. She never seemed to let it affect her, holding on to her faith and her hope.

Such faith was rare in those days. Michael wanted to believe there was something out there that had a hand on his life. That somehow, in the end, everything worked out. But when the government outlawed everything to do with

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religion, hope seemed to have died with it.

Despite the law, Michael tried to hold on to his beliefs. He mostly did so because of Rebecca's insistence. It also brought him some comfort after the wickedness he had seen. Wickedness that his own hands had caused once. The memory made him shudder as he pushed it as far from his mind as he could.

"You okay, Mike?"

The sudden voice invaded his thoughts. He didn't realize anyone was watching him. When he looked back, he saw Wesley staring at him from the corner of the room. He had gathered the cards in his hand into a neat stack, stopping the game he was playing with the others.

Michael smiled and nodded at him. After all their years together, the two had become good friends. Wesley and his wife, Joanna, had stumbled upon their shack not long after Allie was born. He once was a police officer before the war changed the world. Even living in desolation, he kept his strength and determination. His muscles still stretched the fabric of his shirt from laboring around their home.

"I can't say I'm looking forward to beans and beetles either, but I'll never doubt Rebecca's cooking skills. She fixed some delicious squirrel skins earlier." Wesley placed one hand on his stomach, and his mouth moved as if he could still taste it.

"Oh no, it's not that. I was just thinking," Michael said.

"Well, snap out of it. Come play some rummy with us. We've only got thirty-eight cards, so it's kind of a challenge. I'll even be nice and tell you a few of the ones we're missing."

Michael chuckled but shook his head. "I think I'll go check on the ladies in the kitchen. I'd hate for Becca and Allie to be all alone in there. Besides, I am hungry."

He squeezed between two boards and into the narrow

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passageway through the dining room. Turning half sideways, it never felt safe even after they had reinforced it. When Allie learned to walk, he always said he would make a better way. But with the weight of the second floor above them, his attempts had made it worse.

On the other side of the rubble, he had a clear view of the kitchen. The sight wasn't what he expected. Instead of seeing his wife and daughter finishing up dinner, Allie was cleaning it off the floor. Rebecca was nowhere to be found.

"Allie, what happened? Where's your mother?" he asked, picking up the still hot boiler.

"That new lady," she said. "She was asking a lot of questions that made Mommy mad. She dropped supper and ran down the stairs crying."

Michael glanced at the stairwell to the basement turned bedroom. It was still dark, but he could hear Rebecca's sobs. He ran to see what had happened. It was unlike Rebecca to get mad at anyone, much less mad enough to waste the food that was so scarce to come by. As soon as he stepped through the doorway, the other woman, Amanda, was in his face.

"You killed him!" she screamed. "You killed my son!"

"What are you talking about?" Michael took a step back. "I barely know you."

He studied the older lady in front of him. The wrinkles of her brow had deepened beneath her short, white curls. He had only met her two days ago when she came to them for refuge. Rebecca had been the one to welcome her in after she claimed to just be passing through to get to her own family. Michael was uneasy about letting a stranger in, but Rebecca reminded him they were all strangers once. Because of her age, it seemed safe enough. But now, she approached him with a vengeance.

"You're the reason he died," Amanda hissed. "You

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killed him.”

“Ma’am, I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t even know who your son is.” Michael kept searching her face, looking for any sign of familiarity.

“I have searched this world over to find you. You will pay for what you did to him. Don’t pretend to be so ignorant. You killed Cade.”

At the mention of that name, realization flooded over Michael. He did know Cade. He knew him well. His death, however, was a distant memory. It was as if his mind was clouded. All he could remember was Cade falling helplessly toward that oncoming train.

“You’re Amanda Simon,” Michael said, finally understanding her hostility. “I didn’t kill Cade. It was an accident.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Amanda said. “I know what happened. I have the proof.”

She reached into her pristine purse, pulling out a letter and some photos. Michael took them from her hand, looking through them. The images were fuzzy, copied from security camera footage. But there was no denying they were taken the day Cade died. He saw himself walking up to Cade near the track at the station. The next one showed him with his finger pointed at Cade in anger. Then one where both of his hands were at Cade’s collar, pulling him in toward him.

The fourth photo was the one she considered proof. He saw Cade falling onto the tracks as the train approached. He saw himself with both arms outstretched toward him. Looking at the photo, it seemed like he had pushed him.

Michael felt dizzy. He dropped the photos, passing Amanda as he stumbled down the stairs. He couldn’t believe what he saw. It couldn’t be true. Cade had been Michael’s closest friend. They had worked at the same

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university, where Cade taught biology. When Michael joined the war, Cade followed him. Although his memory of Cade's death was hazy, he was sure it was an accident. There was no way he could have killed his friend.

He sat at the foot of the makeshift bed next to Rebecca. Despite her own tear-stained face, she put her arm around him and tried to comfort him. But Amanda was relentless. She followed him down the stairs, continuing her accusations.

"Your wife tried to tell me you didn't even go see him that day, but the pictures don't lie," she said. "Neither does this letter I received from Metro Underground."

"I don't know what that letter says, but I knew Cade for a long time. Why would I want to kill him?" Michael asked.

"That's what I want to know."

"I know. They're fake," Rebecca sobbed. "Michael couldn't have had anything to do with it because he didn't go. We found him dazed in the woods after he tried to drive there."

Michael took Rebecca by the hand. It was true he had tried to drive through the nonexistent roads of the Forbidden Zone to the Metropolitan train station. Two years after the war, Cade had reached out to him. He sent Trent, another member of their military unit, to find him. Trent had even loaned him the car. When they found Michael slumped against a tree, they assumed he had wrecked it and tried to walk the rest of the way. For a long time, he believed it himself. He never told Rebecca when flashes of memory began to come back. Memories of Cade in that train station.

"Can I see the letter?" he asked.

Amanda snorted, shoving it toward him. He carefully took it out of the envelope and read through its accusations.

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Ms. Amanda Simon,

My name is Ben Rogers, captain of the security guard for Metro Underground. I've written this letter regarding the investigation of the death of your son, Cade Simon. We've been working closely with the Federal Police to determine what happened that day.

I wanted to reach out to you personally because I witnessed the event. With Federal Police approval, it seemed only right to tell you what I saw. The day in question, I was monitoring activity near the tracks. There was a man arguing with Mr. Simon, which soon became very heated. Before I could reach them to resolve the issue, I saw the other man push Mr. Simon in front of the oncoming train. He then fled the scene as officers and security arrived.

Along with this letter, I have sent stills from the security camera that filmed the incident. We have identified the assailant as Michael Anderton, a known terrorist at large. Despite reports to the contrary, we have yet to apprehend him. He managed to evade us. The man we arrested that day was part of an elaborate plan of Anderton's. We know he has prior history with Mr. Simon. We believe this is the reason for the altercation. We hope that if he has contacted you, you will aid us in bringing justice to your son.

Thank you,

Ben Rogers

Captain, Metropolitan Underground Station

Michael couldn't believe what he had read. He had been accused of murder by not just Metro Underground

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Security but the Federal Police. They even had evidence and a witness against him. It didn't seem possible. He couldn't have pushed Cade. But he couldn't doubt the argument. Cade wasn't the same after the war. His struggle to cope with returning to normal life had driven a wedge between them. The fights they had at the end had caused them to drift apart. Michael had convinced himself it was because he had chosen to hide in the Forbidden Zone while Cade stayed in the city. It made him feel better than knowing he had lost his friend. But there was no reason he would have ever murdered him.

Searching the corners of his mind, he looked for any other explanation for what happened. The harder he tried, the more his head spun until he felt nauseated. Blanks were scattered across the memory hidden from himself. Maybe he did kill Cade. Maybe his brain had blocked out those moments to protect him from himself. He squeezed Rebecca's hand again, feeling her fingers wrap around it. And then pull back.

"I know you, Michael," she said. "I've known you for a long time, before any of this even started. Before the suffering. Before the war. I've known you. I can't believe any of this. I tried to tell Amanda you didn't go, but I can see it on your face that you did. Why didn't you tell me?"

Her words cut deep. Although she didn't accuse him like Amanda, the lie had left her shaken. He cursed himself for not telling her sooner. She had as much right to know what happened to Cade as he did. So did Trent. But he never fully believed it. Not when it started coming back to him like a nightmare. Not when he had done worse.

The nausea grew in the pit of his stomach. Rebecca and Amanda seemed to drift farther away. He tried to speak, but no words came out. For a moment, it felt like he was floating above them. Then the world around him faded to

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black. Replaced by the memory of Cade. Of that train station. The still images he had seen began to move. They came to life in his mind. And then all at once, the memories flooded in.

2

CADE TWITCHED as he walked toward Michael. He glanced in every direction, wringing his hands. His colorless face was an ashen white. Michael stood on the platform, waiting for him. He had grown accustomed to his nervous habits. Two years after the war, he still hadn't changed. He was one of the unlucky few who never could return home from it. Michael had hoped this time would be different. He hoped to see his old friend again. Trent had told him he had been getting help. With the way their friendship had ended, he thought it was why Cade had sent for him. Watching him panic anytime a pedestrian got too close, he realized he was wrong.

"Hey, Mike," Cade mumbled as he stood next to him. Even standing there, he was apprehensive. "I'm so glad Trent gave you my message. There's something you've got to know, and it won't be easy to believe..." Cade took a breath, running both hands through his hair. He leaned in close and began whispering. "Everything you know, everything you believe...it's all a lie. None of it is real."

There it was—the same paranoid story he had heard a thousand times. Cade was no better now than he had been.

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Anger shot through Michael. Both hands snatched Cade's shirt. He didn't mean to be so angry at his friend, but there seemed to be no other way to get through to him. Michael was frustrated. He wanted nothing more than to have his friend back. He wanted to help him break through the paranoia that haunted him. It was almost like an obsession, and it had ruined their friendship. Michael thought he would be better with time. That he would be cured. He was obviously wrong.

"You need to snap out of it, Cade," he said. "There is no conspiracy. There is no big puppeteer in the sky pulling at the strings. Whatever the heck you believe is going on isn't being caused by anyone. That's not real. That's the only thing not real. I know the war was hard on you. I know we did things...terrible things, and maybe this is your way of dealing with it. When Trent told me you had spent the last few months in a hospital, I had hoped your stay had changed things. I had hoped they made you better."

"Hospital?" Cade snapped. "That was no hospital. That was a science experiment."

Michael threw Cade back and shoved his finger in his face. "You need to get your head on straight. There are still people who care about you. Listen, I'm sorry you feel that way about it. I'm sure after these last two years, it may seem like it was far worse than it was. I'm sorry, too, that I haven't been able to see you in all this time. If I had known, I would have been there."

"Mike, listen to me. I'm telling you the truth. Come with me and let me show you."

Michael hesitated.

"Why can't you believe me?"

"Because the last time I saw you, you were on a self-destructive rampage. You were going on and on about how someone was using the war for their own personal gain.

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How everything that happened was being controlled by someone higher up. But the truth is, there is no conspiracy. What happened during the war happened because there was no choice. It was the only way to survive. You let the enemy into your head, and apparently, they've never left."

"Mike, I need you to trust me. I'm not crazy, and I never was. Just get on the train with me. I can prove it to you."

"No, Cade. I don't have time to chase your wild fantasies. I've tried to go on living after the war. Me and Becca have a baby on the way."

"Mike, please. Just come with me. You, Rebecca...everybody... are all in danger. What we did is coming back to haunt..."

His words were cut off by a sound—a small gentle sound, as if an insect had caught a gust of wind. As Cade reached for the side of his neck, Michael saw something black protruding from it. It looked almost like a dart, but no more than a half an inch long. Before Michael could get a good look at it, Cade's body went limp. His eyes rolled back, and his mouth drooped.

"Cade? What about what we did?" Michael stretched his hands toward his shoulders.

Part of him was still in denial that he had seen anything on Cade's neck. He was sure it was an act to convince him. That Cade was playing into his own fear of someone being out to get him. But then he stumbled backward. One step. Two steps. He couldn't catch his balance. The train was approaching faster than usual. The whistle blew. Cade collapsed at the edge of the platform, falling toward the tracks. Glass shattered as his lifeless body crashed through the train's window.

"Cade!" Michael screamed at the top of his lungs.

He was running. His still outstretched arms reached for his friend, trying to get there in time. He was too late.

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Michael fell to his knees, sobbing. Cade was his closest friend. Closer than even his own brother had ever been. He couldn't believe he was gone. Michael's greatest hope was that one day he would get to come home from the war. One day get to be the Cade he had known. Now, he never had that chance. The last memory Michael would ever have of his friend would be him dying to his delusions.

Or was he delusional?

The scene kept replaying in Michael's mind. Each time, it would come back to the small black object on the side of Cade's neck. Michael tried to convince himself it was a coincidence. That it was a bug or a piece of lint or even his own imagination. But he had seen it. The tiny object that looked too much like a dart. If someone had attacked Cade, maybe he knew something important after all. Maybe Michael had been too stubborn to listen. With Cade's paranoia, he could have gotten himself mixed up with the wrong people. It was the only thing that explained his sudden collapse.

Michael glanced back over his shoulder. If someone had attacked his friend, he wanted to know who. But there was no one there. They were alone on the platform. He went over every scenario in his mind, trying to find an answer to what had happened.

What we did is coming back to haunt us.

The last words Cade would ever speak. Michael had always feared that what they had done in the war would come back to haunt them. The memory still haunted his dreams. He regretted arguing with Cade. He never gave him a chance to tell him why he had brought him there. Whatever he had wanted him to see was somewhere along the way of that train. Not that it mattered anymore. With the accident, it had been stopped from going any farther.

Sirens resonated through the air, jolting Michael back

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to his surroundings. Their screams rang out louder than his thoughts. Looking around, he realized he was no longer alone on the platform. A crowd had formed around him, many curious about what had happened. Some were throwing out accusations that Michael had pushed him. He saw station security taking statements from different witnesses. Some were trying to clear out people for the medical staff attending to passengers on the train. He saw Cade being closed up in a black bag. The horrid sight made him shudder. Except for the few instigators making their accusations, no one seemed to acknowledge him. Then he felt the hand on his shoulder.

“Sir, I’m Captain Rogers of Metro Underground Security. If you would, follow me to my office. I think it would be much better for you in there.”

Michael turned his head back and noticed the short, balding gentleman behind him. He wore the standard green uniform of Metro Security with his captain’s pin displayed on it. Michael nodded and followed him through the crowd to a small office on the other side of the station. They sat down across from each other at a metal table the captain had for a desk.

“Make yourself comfortable, son,” the captain said. “If there’s anything I can get for you—water, food, anything—let me know. Despite what a lot of the hoodlums out there are saying about you, I know you didn’t push that man. I saw him fall myself. Everyone’s so riddled with fear these days, they’re quick to blame anybody. I would just like to take a few minutes of your time to find out the truth about what happened.”

Michael was still shaken after what happened to Cade, but he was relieved when the captain said he knew he didn’t push him. The accusations of the bystanders had only left him feeling worse. He did his best to collect himself

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so he could answer the captain's questions.

"Um, sir...I mean, Captain...I," Michael stammered.

"Please, call me Bill. Captain sounds too official in times like this. Just relax and tell me what happened."

"Well, Captain...Bill, sir, my friend Cade, the man who...well..." Michael took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. He wasn't sure what had happened. Cade would often lose himself to his fantasies, but the image of the dart kept creeping back into Michael's mind. He chose to tell the captain only what he was sure of. "Cade wanted to meet with me to tell me something. Before he could, he fainted and fell in front of the train."

"So, he just fainted?" Bill asked, writing something down in his notebook. "So, no groaning, no signs of a heart attack or a stroke, nothing? Just fainted?"

"Yes, sir. To the best of my knowledge."

Michael didn't know what else to say. Nothing he had seen made sense. It had looked like he had been drugged by a dart that came from nowhere. He wanted to ask the captain if the medical staff reported it when they tended to Cade's body. But he stopped himself, fearing it would make him seem guilty. If it had been reported, he was sure the captain would have asked about it.

The captain looked up from his notes, staring straight into Michael's eyes. "So, it had nothing to do with the little argument you two were having right before?"

The question made Michael squirm in his seat. The uncomfortable feeling found him again. He didn't want to try explaining Cade's paranoia and what they were arguing about.

"The argument is a long story, but it was really about two old friends who had drifted apart over the years," Michael said. "We were about to board the train together. There was something he wanted to show me. It had

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something to do with whatever he had to say.”

“You know, son, after talking to you, you seem like a pretty nice fellow. I know this has to be hard for you. My theory is that the argument caused him to overexert himself enough that he had a heart attack and collapsed. That’s what I’m putting in my report at least. I’m sure the medical examiner will have the same conclusion.”

“Wait. Are you saying...” Michael winced at the idea that it could have been his fault after all.

“No, no. I don’t think it’s your fault. But I’ve seen these things happen. The problem is the Federal Police called, and they’re stepping in to investigate. They’re going to want an explanation. I’ll give them the tape, and you tell them what you told me. Everything should be fine.”

Before Michael could ask questions, Bill walked out of the room. Through the frosted glass window, he saw three black-suited figures meet him outside. They spent several minutes discussing what Michael assumed was the accident. He hoped Bill had shared his theory with them. While Michael didn’t like the idea that his anger could have contributed to Cade’s death, it was the only answer that made sense to him.

Two of the men walked away with Bill. The other one turned and came through the door. He wore the standard black tactical uniform of the Federal Police. His shoulders were well decorated, letting Michael know he was a high-ranking officer and the man in charge of the investigation.

“Mr. Anderton, it seems we may have a problem,” the officer said in a dry, creaky voice. The sound of it irked Michael.

“Yes sir, we do have a problem. My best friend just died,” Michael said, sounding snider than he had intended. For some reason, the arrogance the officer portrayed on his face unnerved him. He didn’t have the same warm and

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comforting personality as Bill did.

"Yes, about this friend. What can you tell me about him?"

"His name is Cade. He was my best friend. We used to work together, and then during the war, we even served together."

"So, you two were very close."

"Yes sir. Until recent years. Cade had difficulty after the war. He suffered from post-traumatic stress and has been hospitalized for the last couple of months. He was recently released."

"You're saying this man, Cade Simon, told you he was released from the hospital?"

"Not explicitly, but I assumed."

"Mr. Anderton, the truth is your friend escaped. Violently. Two nurses and a security guard were shot. So, my real question for you is not what caused today's accident, but how were you involved in his escape?"

"Involved? Escape?" Michael's blood boiled. Why didn't Cade mention any of this to him? Was he really on the run and trying to use Michael's friendship to escape? Michael doubted it. He seemed genuine in what he had told him, regardless of how illogical it seemed. "Listen, I don't know what you're talking about, but I haven't seen Cade in two years. More importantly, I know him. He may have had his problems, but I know he couldn't have done what you're accusing him of."

"You are very right, Mr. Anderton. He couldn't have done it. He had to have had help. You were a skilled sniper when you served, were you not?"

"Listen, you cannot pin this on me. I served my country proudly, and when the job ended, I haven't picked up a fire-arm since."

"Regardless of what you say, Mr. Anderton, we know

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the truth. You helped your friend escape. You told him to meet you here. It's a public place where you can avoid suspicion. From there, you were to board the train together, heading south to sneak into the Forbidden Zone. You have a childhood home there. We know that's where you've been since you defected from the armed forces. It was the grand escape plan. You knew no one would think to look for him in such a deserted place because no one has yet come looking for you. The plan was quite brilliant, but at the last minute, you had a change of heart. You did not want to live your life as a fugitive. Defecting from the armed forces is a serious crime, but aiding a known murderer is much worse. You secretly wanted to one day rejoin the rest of society, so you pushed him in front of the train. You tried to erase your wrongdoings by making it appear as an accident. But it's too late for you, Mr. Anderton. You're in too deep, and it's time for you to reap the consequences of your actions."

Before Michael could even think about the accusations, much less defend himself against them, two officers were behind him. They slammed his face down on to the table and cuffed his hands behind him. He was then gagged, and a black bag was put over his head. They pulled him to his feet and forced him out of the office toward the public area of the train station.

Through the hood, he could make out lights from the various camera crews that had come to film the incident. He could hear crowds cheering at his arrest. Michael knew he was innocent, yet the crowds seemed to mock him and ridicule him as if he were a captured terrorist. He winced at some of their words. Not only did he lose his best friend, but he was also humiliated and belittled on television. His only solace was that at least they gave him the dignity of hiding his face.

The officers pushed their way through the people to

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some type of vehicle. Blinded by the hood, Michael couldn't tell what type, but the cheap, uncomfortable seats seemed suited for prisoners. When they had arrived at wherever they had taken him, they led him to a room. There, they chained him to a chair bolted to the floor.

Once the hood was removed, he could see that it was a dark room with only a single light. To his right, he could see the arrogant officer he met at the train station. In front of him sat another man, but the light was too dim to see any details. His silhouette, cast in such a soft glow, seemed menacing.

The man leaned forward to reveal himself to be an older, slightly overweight man with a very stern gaze. The man had the look of a politician. He even wore the purple velvet robes of one. A small, black onyx ring adorned his little finger. The same ring that was worn by the arrogant officer. Michael could only assume it was something worn by the elites of the Federal Police.

"Hello, Mr. Anderton. My name is Richard Myers, secretary of security of our great nation."

So, the man is a politician, Michael thought. It had been a long time since he had seen Myers on television, but he recognized him. The Office of the Secretary of Security was a high office to have. His job was to oversee the Federal Police and maintain security within the nation's borders. The position was created during the war to deal with the reoccurring terror attacks. He and his army of Federal Police were key in securing victory against the Northwyn terrorist groups.

"You've already met Colonel Hempton," he said, referring to the arrogant officer. "We've brought you here today on grave charges. Multiple accounts of murder, aiding a fugitive, and terrorism."

"Terrorism?" Michael exclaimed. The longer the day

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went, the more charges were being brought against him. What started out as trying to help a friend had led him to several charges that carried a death sentence.

“Yes, terrorism. It has come to our attention that your partner had planted several explosive devices at a medical research facility.”

“Sir, I can explain. Talk to Captain Rogers at the train station. He’s the head of security there. He will tell you I’ve had nothing to do with any of this. I went to the train station simply to meet with an old friend.”

“We have spoken with Captain Rogers and viewed the security tapes. It seems they agree with what I’ve said. However, there is a bright side to this, Mr. Anderton. My superiors want this problem handled. You took care of one half by eliminating Cade Simon. We took care of the other half by broadcasting your arrest over national television. The headlines have been how one deranged terrorist turned on his partner right before their escape. That terrorist was then apprehended by the Federal Police. You see how it all works out? The terrorists have been either captured or killed. There were no other casualties. And the Federal Police prove we are protecting our citizens. Everyone is satisfied with your arrest. Now, that arrest should be followed by an execution after this interview, but that’s *your* bright side. You are too valuable of an asset for that to happen. We are in need of you, Mr. Anderton. Therefore, we have selected another criminal to take the fall for you.”

Michael didn’t know what he meant by being “in need” of him. After the war, he had left everything behind and was just surviving in the Forbidden Zone. That was his only true crime, other than leaving the army. He wouldn’t have done that if they hadn’t forced him to do such an appalling thing. Somehow, that had to be connected. Cade tried to warn him it was coming back to haunt him. But still, he

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didn't know why they needed him. He had never been a part of the Federal Police and was sure he had never had any contact with any politicians. Secretary Myers continued before Michael could collect his thoughts.

"Another good thing for you is that by tomorrow, you won't remember any of it."

Michael felt a sharp pain on the inner side of his elbow where an officer had inserted a syringe. Heat filled his arm as if he had been injected with liquid fire. As it spread throughout him, everything faded until all he could see was darkness. Soon, his whole body burned, and he couldn't remember why. All he could remember was being at the train station with Cade, and then there was nothing.

3

LOST TO THE PAIN inside his head, Michael screamed. If anything, it made it worse. His brain felt like it had been scrambled, pulsing with the thunderous rush of his heart. He had never felt anything that severe. He was sure he was dying. Trapped in the infinite blackness between nightmare and reality. Somewhere in the distance, a familiar voice called to him. It was faint at first, but slowly grew louder. He squinted, trying to find its source. Brief flashes of blinding light filled his vision, but he couldn't make sense of anything.

"Michael, are you alright?"

He finally placed the voice. Rebecca was calling for him. He tried to focus on her more than how he felt. The gradual warmth of her arms wrapped around him. He could hear her sobs. Forcing his eyes open, the shape of her staring at him came into focus. Her cheeks were swollen. Tears streamed down her face. She looked as if she had been crying for hours. Then he remembered. Amanda had accused him of murder.

Michael tried to pull himself up to meet Rebecca. His lies had upset her more than Amanda ever could. Although

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the pain in his head was subsiding, it was still sharp enough to make him feel weak. As he moved, his shoulders and his arms ached. Bruised from a fall he didn't remember. But he realized he was on the floor. He wasn't sure what had happened. The memory of Cade's death had come back to him so strongly, it was as if he relived it. His mind wrestled between the past and the present. For the moment, he could recall every detail as if it had just happened.

Amanda stood at the bottom of the stairs with her arms folded. The same look of scorn twisted the corners of her mouth. He was in agony, but she was unrelenting. With the memory of Cade's death alive in his mind, he wanted to tell her what had happened. How Cade wanted to meet with him. How he collapsed in front of the train before they could even talk. The dark room the Federal Police took him to afterward.

The little black dart.

Michael didn't say anything. The more he remembered, the more he felt like he was dreaming. He let himself drift off again. He felt as if his brain was overloaded. It was working so hard to regain his memory, pushing back the dark clouds of his mind, that now it wanted to shut down. He wanted to sleep. To continue to lie on the floor and let himself recover. Rebecca's warm embrace comforted him. He felt her gentle kiss on his forehead as she brushed back his hair.

"What happened?" Michael asked.

"You passed out and fell on the floor," Rebecca sobbed. "After a few minutes, you let out this awful scream. I'm just thankful you're okay."

I'm just thankful for you, he thought, nestling into her arms.

Voices murmured high above Michael. He could hear the others talking about him. His scream had likely alerted

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them. When he opened his eyes again, he could see everyone huddled together on the stairs. Wesley, Joanna, and Trent were talking to Amanda. Rebecca's mother, Nelda, stood with Allie as they both checked on Michael. They helped him to his feet, though he was still shaky.

Trent took a step down the stairs, putting himself between Amanda and Michael. With a tense jaw and arms straight at his side, he still carried himself like a soldier. Standing there in the remnants of the uniform he often wore, he even looked like one. He had joined the army long before the war ever started and was the only member of Michael's unit he still knew.

"You're here about Cade's death?" Trent asked. "I wasn't aware he had died."

"Murdered. By Michael Anderton." Amanda shook the letter in her hand, and then passed it to Trent so that he could read it. He skimmed over it quietly until the others asked to hear it as well. Although it wasn't true, it had left them shaken. Joanna most of all, even after living with them for six years. She clung to Wesley for reassurance.

"Ms. Amanda Simon," Trent read. "My name is Ben Rogers, captain of the security guard for Metro Underground. I'm writing this—"

"That's wrong," Michael interjected. "The captain's name wasn't Ben. It was Bill. That's what he made me call him. He was nice to me. A lot nicer than..."

He stopped. Although the letter mentioned the Federal Police, he didn't want to tell them he had been interviewed by them. They would only worry more. Everyone there had some reason or another to be leery of the Federal Police. Just by living in the Forbidden Zone, they were breaking the law. According to them, terrorists still had camps in the area. If they were caught, they would be treated as one.

"It's convenient you remember when your friends are

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around," Amanda said.

"No. It's not like that. The letters and the photos... I guess it brought it all back," Michael said. "But I didn't kill him. The captain said he reported it as a heart attack."

"Then why were the Federal Police investigating you?"

Michael winced. There was the truth he didn't want to admit to. He didn't have an answer for her, other than one she would never believe. He couldn't tell her that Secretary Myers thought Cade had planted explosives at a hospital. Or that Colonel Hempton suspected Michael of helping him plot his escape. Those were the parts of his memory he didn't believe himself. If it was true, they wouldn't have just returned him to the Forbidden Zone. He would have been arrested and likely executed.

His silence didn't help matters. Amanda snickered, as if it proved his guilt. Joanna shrieked, whispering something to Wesley. He raised his brow to Michael, but his lips were tightly pressed. None of them wanted to think of what it could mean. The Federal Police weren't going to forgive an act of murder or terrorism. If they still blamed him, they would still be hunting him.

"They can't still want me," he said. "They know where I live. In my interview with Colonel Hempton, he mentioned this shack. In six years, they've never come."

Michael felt confident his answer had secured his innocence, but the others didn't see it that way. Joanna had become silent, almost fainting in Wesley's arms. The tension in Trent's jaw tightened even more. In a society that claimed to be accepting of everyone, they were each its outcasts. In the aftermath of the war, outcasts weren't always seen as favorable. Most of them found themselves captured by the Federal Police. That fear convinced Michael to stay in the Forbidden Zone. He didn't want to let what happened at that train station pull him back into it.

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The others deserved the whole story. Even the parts he thought were ridiculous. He started with meeting Cade and his strange behavior. How he believed everything to be a lie and none of it being real. He told them about meeting with the captain and then the Federal Police. The dark room they had taken him to with Secretary Myers. That Myers said they were going to spare him because they considered him an asset. Even the little black dart he couldn't be certain ever existed.

His story brought more murmurs from his friends. More retorts from Amanda. But it was all he knew. Somehow, after meeting with Myers, he ended up back in the Forbidden Zone. He assumed that whatever liquid fire they had injected him with was some kind of drug. After he was unconscious, they likely dropped him off by that tree where Rebecca found him. He could only hope the others believed him.

Joanna worried about what it meant for their own safety. Wesley didn't try to comfort her. He was worried too. As a former officer, he knew what awaited them if they were captured. His only reassurance to her was that the Federal Police had known about that house for a long time but had never come. It did little to soothe his hysteric wife.

Amanda, Rebecca, and Nelda still argued Michael's guilt or innocence through it all. Despite keeping secrets from her, Rebecca remained on Michael's side. She had seen his condition when she found him in the woods. Confused and disoriented, he had to spend a significant amount of time in her care. After seeing him there, she still found the idea of a car accident more likely than his ability to commit murder.

Allie, being so young, seemed more preoccupied thinking about nothing being real. She was born in the Forbidden Zone, not long after Cade's death. She knew nothing of the

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Federal Police or life outside of their three-room home. Her innocence and naivety were often refreshing.

Trent had the most serious look of them all. He wasn't speaking, but rather seemed as if he was trying to piece it all together. His eyes kept moving about as if he were solving a puzzle in his mind.

"What did he mean by an asset?" Trent asked.

Of all the questions he could have asked, that one seemed the most logical. But it was also one Michael didn't have an answer for. It was the only reason they would have let him go. *If they had let him go.*

"I'm not sure," Michael admitted. "It seemed like he was calling me an asset to the government."

"Sweetie, I've known you since we were kids," Rebecca said. "The closest I've seen you come to anything government related is the stamp on Amanda's letter."

"Very funny, Becca, but what if something happened while we were apart during the war?"

"You never talk about the war, but if something had happened, wouldn't you know about it?"

Michael shrugged. Something had happened. Something he had never shared with anyone. *What they had done was coming back to haunt them.* Cade's last words. His last message to Michael. But he couldn't figure out its importance. Why would the government care about that? They had already questioned him about it. Commended him for his bravery of all things. While Michael still carried its guilt, they considered it following orders.

"I can't believe you're all buying into this crap," Amanda scoffed. "Can't you tell a made-up story when you hear one?"

"Actually, I can," Wesley said. "Considering my former job, I know murderers when I see one. We've lived here with Michael for almost six years, and he's been nothing but

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kind and compassionate to anyone. If there's any truth to your claim, then we've got more important things to worry about."

Amanda threw her hands in the air with a snort, pushing her way up the stairs. Michael was glad she had left him alone, even if only for a little while. Although she had left, the tension remained in the room. Everyone had their own concerns. Michael found peace in knowing it had happened six years ago. They had caught him and chained him to a table. If they had wanted something from him, they would have gotten it then. Curiosity and worry began to subside in favor of sleep, or at least the attempt at it. One by one, they dispersed to their usual sleeping places. Some on cots in the basement. Others by the smoldering fireplace in the living room. But sleep wasn't coming easy for them that night. Each of them was still filled with questions. Was Michael really a fugitive? Were the Federal Police looking for him? What would happen if they found him? Would they arrest them all for just being there with him?

Michael only wondered about one thing. What was so important about him they let him go?