

The Resilient

Into the Forgotten

Adam K. Ogden

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*Everyone is the hero of their own story.
Victim or villain is only a matter of perspective...*

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SAFE? How did he think they could ever be safe? Michael urged his wife and daughter into a small crawl space beneath the stairs of an old brick duplex. The patter of gunfire sounded like rain, pounding against the concrete steps above. Marauders were firing at them from somewhere down the street. Michael wished he had more allies going up against the dangers of the west. After the fall of Defiant, they were on their own. Only Maps, Watch, and Damien had been able to escape with his family.

Michael stayed behind the steps, using them as cover. He tried to return their fire with his rifle, but they were pinned down. Maps crouched beside him, firing his own. It was no use. There were too many outlanders, and they were ruthless. It had been such a long journey over the mountains. Watch had promised them civilization on the other side. Civilized was not how Michael would have described them. For a moment, he thought he would have been better off taking his chances with the Federal Police. His friends, Wesley and Tobias, had.

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He knew all too well why Wesley chose to stay behind. He had to avenge his wife's death. Michael knew that feeling. He thought he had lost Rebecca forever. He was beyond thankful that he had been wrong. He would never forget that day. When it seemed hatred had consumed him, she walked through the door to him as if nothing had ever happened. Of all the days of his life, that was one of his favorites. It was the day he got back not only the daughter he had searched so hard for but the love of his life.

He glanced under the stairwell. Rebecca's motherly instinct had taken over. Not only was she shielding Allie but Watch also. He couldn't imagine the fear they felt. For him, it had become commonplace. He had stood up to the Federal Police and came out alive. The adrenaline gave him a high. If he could take on the United State Federation's national police force with their sheer number and all their resources, he could take on a band of outlanders.

A few more bullets ricocheted off the hard surface of the steps, sending specks of dust into the air. Michael was irritated. Three weeks they had travelled, finding next to nothing along the way. The west was just as dangerous as the Federation. Considering that all the people they came across tended to be hostile, sometimes Michael wondered if it was actually worse. Whether it was from the outlanders' attacks, the fact that Damien had disappeared during the night, or just the growing rumble in his stomach from lack of food, he didn't know, but he had had enough.

"Watch over them, Maps!" Michael yelled, throwing his rifle over his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Maps asked.

"Up," he said, pointing to the roof of the duplex. Michael had become an excellent marksman with his time spent as a sniper in the war. He was determined he wasn't going to let them keep his family pinned down.

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He crept low, staying as close to the wall as he could to avoid the barrage of bullets. He didn't want the outlanders to see him and give away his advantage. The town, like the rest of the west, was mostly vacant. The buildings within it had boards covering their windows. The owners of the duplex had chosen to go with another option. They had metal bars fixed to the outsides of their windows. Michael used them to help climb onto the roof.

He stretched out on the flat, tarred surface and steadied himself, taking aim with his rifle. He hesitated, trying to figure out the best thing he could do. He was a fugitive from the USF, and they desperately needed the resources of that town. He couldn't risk alienating himself from the outlanders by killing one of them. He ripped off part of his sleeve and tied it to a pipe sticking up from the roof. He watched it blow in the breeze as he gauged his wind direction.

The shot had to be perfect. It had to force them to surrender without killing them. He looked through his scope, pressing the rifle tight against his shoulder. Five outlanders were perched on top of the roof of an abandoned convenient store, using it as a vantage point. Four were shooting. One was giving orders. There was his mark. He licked his fingers and tested the wind once more. He shot.

The recoil pushed him back, but he didn't take his eyes off the leader. The bullet pierced through the air, finding its target. The thin line of red forming. The outlander dropped to his knees as his hands reached up to grasp his ear. The battle was over. The other outlanders scampered off the rooftop. Only the leader remained, clutching his wounded head.

"Nice shot," Maps said as Michael climbed down from his perch. Michael nodded, but his focus was on the outlander. From the ground, he could barely make out the top

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of his bald head. He didn't want to give him a chance to regroup.

"Do you want to take another shot at me?" Michael shouted as he walked down the road.

"You are trespassing," the leader shouted back. "This is my turf."

"We're just looking for a boy who wandered into this town during the night."

"That boy was trying to steal from us. We're going to give him what he deserves."

The thought of these merciless outlanders kidnapping Damien flashed through Michael's mind. They all thought Damien's injuries had gotten the best of him. That he was trapped in one of the buildings. But these outlanders had kidnapped him.

Michael sprinted toward the convenient store. He couldn't believe Damien was foolish enough to venture into that town during the night. He knew it wasn't safe. Michael should have known he would try something. The town was all he had talked about yesterday. He spent most of the day with Watch on the mountainside, looking at it through a set of binoculars. It was the first town they had come across in days, and they had exhausted their food supply. Not even Rebecca's culinary skills could help them. After they ran out of fuel and were left stranded, the town was a miraculous discovery.

The man's head disappeared from Michael's view. He wasn't deterred. He kept running for it. Damien couldn't be far. They had found him a set of crutches at their last stop, but he was still slow to get around. He had to be close to that convenient store.

Michael crawled his way up onto a dumpster, then onto the roof to confront the outlander. Vacant. Dirt slung against the side of the building as the outlanders made

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their getaway in a dune buggy. Michael drew his rifle. He went to fire, trying to shoot out the tires, but he couldn't get a shot. Through the heavy dust cloud behind them, he couldn't see, and if Damien was with them, he couldn't take the chance of hitting him.

His eyes followed the streaking dirt as it made its way through the dusty valley. The convenient store was at the edge of the town. Where they were going, there were no buildings left that he could see. Nothing was in front of him but a blackened forest off in the distance and the mountain range that curled around the town. Charred lumber and electrical lines blocked the paths of the roadways leading into the area. A narrow trail ran through the mountains to his right. An offshoot of the trail he and his family had followed to get to the town. The plume of dust rising from it told him that was where the marauders were going. The dune buggy was climbing up to it.

Michael knew that was where he had to get to. If they got to the main trail, they could disappear anywhere. He climbed down from the roof and rejoined the others.

"What happened?" Rebecca asked when Michael returned to them. Watch clung tightly to her.

"I told Damien not to go. I told him we would all scope it out this morning when there was light. But did he listen? We find him a decent set of crutches, and then..." Michael had grown agitated. He was hungry. He was tired. He had slept too many nights cramped in that torro. That four seated tank of a machine that offered nothing in the way of comfort. His body ached.

"If that convenient store has gas, maybe we can refuel the torro," Maps offered.

"Even if it does, we don't have time to carry any back to it. And since the outlanders have vehicles, I'm willing to bet they drained it," Michael said.

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Maps shrugged and went to check on the pumps anyway. Michael's suspicions had proved true. The fuel tank was completely empty.

"How are we going to get Damien back?" Watch asked, her arms still wrapped around Rebecca. Michael could see the hurt in her eyes. It was clear that she cared a lot about him.

"I'm going to go get him," Michael sighed. "I saw where they went. I'm hoping they've stopped somewhere along the way. Maps, take the girls and go back to the torro. Shoot anything that moves. I am not losing anyone else today."

"You can't go after them alone," Rebecca said.

"I'd rather go alone, than put any more of you in danger. Maps will keep you safe."

Michael kissed Rebecca and Allie and began his long jog to the mountains. Hungry and tired, it took all the effort he could muster to keep pace. He trekked along the dirt and sand, following the tracks of the dune buggy. This was not how this was supposed to go. When Myers told him to go west, he expected to find allies—people like Defiant. Instead, all he had come across was callous outlanders in a barren wasteland.

He was supposed to be making a cure. One that would restore Rebecca's memories. The compound he had given her stopped it from progressing, but still, she would have moments of confusion. She had no memory of their time together in the Forbidden Zone, but somehow still recognized Allie as her daughter. Myers had been right to try to stop it. The virus was deadly. It had the power to warp someone's very reality by affecting the memories in their mind.

There was no time to waste chasing down an uncivilized group of thieves and scavengers. If that virus was

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unleashed on Metropolian or any other large city in the USF, the results would be catastrophic. Michael was disappointed in Damien. He was a genius with computers and technology to only be nineteen, but he could also make some of the strangest decisions. Often times, Michael would forget how old he was when they would talk, but it was times like these that reminded him of his immaturity. Michael was sure it had something to do with Watch.

When Michael reached the end of the small valley, he began to climb the sloped face of the mountains. They weren't as steep there as they were where they had parked the torro. The climb up wasn't too treacherous. The low, prickly shrubbery that grew along it kept snagging his clothing, but they did reveal the path of the marauders. They were flattened where the dune buggy had travelled over them. That also helped reveal more of the burnt timber scattered among it. Just above the shrubbery, next to a wall of stone, was the yellow roll bars of the dune buggy.

Michael crept low and approached it cautiously, keeping a firm grip on his rifle. He glanced around at the cliff edges surrounding him. There were no signs of life, but there was a small cave directly above him. He climbed the steep incline carefully, trying not to disturb the rocks and give himself away. At the top, he pulled a small flashlight from his back pocket. He had grown tired of exploring dark tunnels. To his surprise, the cave wasn't dark. A strand of Christmas lights lined the mouth of the cave, disappearing through a hole above a metal door a few feet inward. Michael wondered how they had electricity when the power lines were scattered on the ground below.

He stepped toward the door that had been set in the stone. It was a flat rectangle that looked to be made of iron. There was no handle, and all of its edges had been joined with large rivets. Since there was no way for Michael to

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open it, he rapped against it with the butt of his rifle. The sound echoed in the short tunnel. The small window at the top slid open, and two eyes appeared.

"Help you?" the man behind the door asked.

"You have someone I'm looking for," Michael said.

"Don't know you." The man looked Michael over and closed the window.

Frustrated, Michael resumed his assault on the door. He continued to pound on it until the rubber recoil pad of his rifle began to wear. He was hoping if nothing else, he would annoy them into submission.

"Stop it," the man said, reappearing in the window. "I have customers. Unless you have something of interest to trade, I suggest you leave."

Michael thought for a moment about what he could trade for Damien. All that he knew he had of value was his rifle, and the man didn't seem too interested in that. He reached into his pockets, but there was nothing. Then he felt something hanging off his belt. A canteen.

"I have fresh water," Michael said, holding up his canteen. "Not river water. Not rainwater. Purified fresh water from Metropolitan."

It was Damien who had found the canteens stowed away in a compartment in the torro. It had been a precious find. Their travels had taken them so close to the desert, water had been scarce. It seemed only fitting that Michael trade it for Damien's life.

The door swung open to reveal a large, hairy man tending to it. It had been a while since Michael had shaved, but this man looked to have been born with a beard. The man held out his hand for the canteen. Michael untied it from his belt and gave it to him. The man continued to block Michael's path until he took a large swig of the water.

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"Welcome to Sajak's Bazaar," the man said after gulping down the water. He stretched out his arm, ushering Michael inside as if they were old friends. "The finest outpost in the west. What can I get you? Toilet paper? Soap? If you have more of this, we can talk more expensive items. Perishable foods perhaps?"

"I'm looking for a boy who was kidnapped," Michael said.

"I'm offended. I do not deal in children here." The man thrust the canteen back to Michael.

"The owner of the dune buggy outside says differently."

"Ah, I see. I don't normally rat out my customers. What kind of reputation would I have if I did? But this delectable water will buy you a conversation. But there's no killing here." The man patted the rifle Michael kept clutched in his hands. He then pointed to a tunnel on Michael's right and beckoned him to go on.

The tunnel led to a cavernous area that had been turned into a type of stockpile room. Heaps of random objects lined the walls. Each was sorted by type. Electronics, weapons, paper goods, canned food. Pile after pile of different objects, ranging from almost new condition to broken beyond repair, filled the space. Several men were digging through them. A few were standing by, watching them. Michael recognized three of the diggers as the outlanders. Their leader was stretched out on pieces of an old sofa, tending to his now-bandaged ear. All of them had their backs to Michael, oblivious to him.

"Who was at the door Sajak?" the leader asked.

"Me," Michael said, readying his rifle. The room froze and turned to face him. "I told you I wanted the boy back."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to talk to this side. It seems someone has shot off my ear," the leader laughed. He was

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too relaxed. He barely turned his head to face Michael. The others in the room chuckled at the leader's words. He silenced them with his hand.

"Unless you want to lose them both, I'd suggest you start talking." Michael stepped forward, his rifle trained on the leader. He wasn't sure if he really wanted to shoot them, but he had no qualms against intimidating them.

When Michael got closer, he realized why the leader was so nonchalant. The ones that were watching the others had drawn pistols. They were all around Michael. He held onto his rifle, keeping it steady. He couldn't let them know he was afraid. He went there to get Damien. He wasn't going to leave without him.

"Hey! What did I tell you?" Sajak asked as he pulled Michael back. "No killing in my establishment."

"Don't worry, Sajak," the leader said. "I guarantee he's empty."

"Are you willing to count on that?" Michael pushed toward the man still on the couch. He tried to keep a straight face, but the leader did make him think. He never checked how many bullets he had before he ventured off to confront them. For all he knew, he was empty.

"Stop it, everyone," Sajak said. "You all know the rules here. If you want to keep doing business here, I'd suggest you take it outside."

When Michael didn't move, Sajak snatched his rifle away. Michael clenched his fists ready to fight, but Sajak just shook his head. He looked the rifle over in his hands and popped out the clip. It was empty. Sajak chuckled at the revelation and threw Michael's rifle over his shoulder. He then lifted up Michael's canteen and shook it.

"I said this buys a conversation," he said. "So, converse."

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"I just want to know what you did with the boy," Michael said as he turned back to glare at the leader.

The leader just laughed hysterically. Michael's emotions boiled to the surface. He may have lost his rifle, but he wasn't weaponless. He swung his still clenched fist at the man, connecting it with his missing ear. The man screeched and fell back against the sofa. The others stepped back away from Michael. The watchers and their weapons didn't flinch. Michael was thankful.

"Okay. Okay. Okay," the outlander cried, clutching his face with both hands. "He's gone. Janyx's crew took him from us as soon as we found him. They have a problem with boys becoming bandits. I tried to tell them he was already a thief, but they took him anyway."

"Where do I find this Janyx?" Michael asked.

"You don't want to find him! I promise you."

"Where?" Michael asked again, taking another step toward the man.

"He runs Orthanton. It's a city about twenty miles west of here. Just past the mountain range. Please don't kill me, man!"

Michael gripped the outlander with both hands and threw him back against the sofa. His head bounced off the cushioned armrest beneath him. Fearful eyes watched Michael as he searched through the man's tattered vest and found the keys to the dune buggy.

"This is a trading post, right? Keep the rifle. I'll take these," Michael said, rattling the keys. "Have a nice day, guys."