

Episode 14

40 / Imprisoned

"Michael, it has been a long time."

When Michael heard that voice, the blood had drained from his face, and a shiver ran down his spine. He knew that voice. It was the Caliph, his voice both nasally and direct. "You appear to be wavering in your commitment to the cause. You have the choice to come home immediately and of your own will in order to re-establish my trust in you. If you choose rightly, pull over to the shoulder at the next exit. Two of your comrades will be waiting to bring you back. And if not..."

Michael looked up the road and put his blinkers on. He slowed as he caught sight of the black Ford Expedition parked just past the next exit. He drove up slowly alongside the SUV, squinting to see into the heavily tinted windows. Someone honked their car angrily from behind and then whipped around him and sped o. Michael was fairly sure the men in the SUV were masked. They locked eyes with him and nodded as he slipped past.

"...just know you will never escape me."

Michael slammed his foot on the gas pedal and took o down the highway heading north.

He didn't have to look behind him to know he was being followed.

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Be careful who you talk to. It's best you forget I even existed.

Michael remembered sending that text message to Sandra. He remembered driving as fast as he could while being chased by the two masked men in the SUV. He remembered cursing himself for not filling up the gas tank when he reached rural New York. He remembered finding himself on a lonely dirt road when his Range Rover finally gave up the ghost. He remembered looking around thinking that maybe, just maybe, he had evaded his pursuers. Then he remembered the glass of the driver's side window being shattered and himself being dragged out of his vehicle.

And then he remembered nothing else.

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Slowly, Michael awakened and his senses came back to him little by little. He was lying flat on his back on a cold, metal surface. He

opened his eyes and then quickly shut them again as harsh white light pricked his irises. He waited a few minutes before opening his eyes again — this time slowly, so he could adjust to the brightness.

Realizing to his dismay that he was strapped by his wrists and ankles to the cold surface he lay on, he turned his head from side to side to see his surroundings. He was in a large room with plain white walls and a low ceiling. Two uncomfortable looking metal chairs were against the wall to his le. There were no windows and Michael got the feeling that he was underground. Looking down in front of him, he could see that his shoes had been removed. He wiggled his toes... at least they worked.

Michael wished to see behind him, so he jerked from side to side on the metal bed, but apparently it wasn't on wheels. He lay still for a moment and searched the ceiling until a bright red pin prick suddenly pulsed in his vision. Narrowing his eyes and holding his breath, Michael focused on the spot where the color had appeared in the ocean of white until it appeared again...and again. A single red diode.

Now, he knew he was being observed. But by who?

As if in answer to his question, he heard a loud noise behind him — from the direction he couldn't see in — a noise like a door being opened.

A rush of air swept into the room. Michael held his breath.

He heard footsteps of one... two... no, three people.

Lying perfectly still on the bed, Michael briefly considered pretending to be asleep, but then remembered that they'd probably been watching him all along. He kept his eyes open and stared at the ceiling.

Two black clad men bearing guns stepped into his vision, one on either side of his bed. They stood rigidly and didn't look down at him. Another man — this one wearing a crisp, green military-style flight suit — stepped into vision on Michael's right. He carried a tiny, silver key between his fingers.

Looking down at Michael he said, "Very pleased to see that you are awake, sir." But he smiled a smile which meant that he was not that pleased to see him at all.

41 / Underground Complex

"The Caliph will see you now," said the man in the green flight suit as he busied himself with the straps that held Michael to the metal bed. Using the tiny silver key, he unlatched the straps that bound Michael's ankles first, and Michael thought briefly about kicking the man in the face as soon as his feet were free, but he decided against it.

Finally with his wrists free, Michael sat up massaging his wrists in the places where the straps had worn on his skin. Michael eyed the man in the flight suit warily. He was still wearing his phony smile as he circled Michael's bed back toward where the door had opened.

"Well, come on," said the flight suit man. "The Caliph will not wait forever. I am sure you are well rested."

The black-clad gunmen on either side of him moved in unison, turning to face the door all at once as though snapping to attention. Then they stood perfectly still, apparently waiting for Michael.

Michael scowled. "Where are my shoes?"

"Your new ones are in the hall. Your old ones were destroyed. They had a tracking device in them. You cannot risk —" Flight suit man suddenly shut his mouth as though he had said too much. He smiled. "Like I said, come along."

Michael stood up. His legs were sti , and he wondered how long he had laid on the metal bed. Hours? Days?

The floor was cold, so he started moving to the door. He could see it was thick and made of metal — like the door to a bank vault, and Michael wondered whether the Caliph considered him valuable or just dangerous. The gunmen on either side of him remained silent and moved with ghostly precision, like extensions of himself.

Flight suit man swung the metal door open, and all Michael could see beyond it was a corridor which curved away into darkness. But, as promised, a pair of plain black sneakers was outside the door. He stopped to put them on.

The corridor was narrow and dark. One of the gunmen walked in front of him, and the other behind him. Michael stretched his arms out and brushed the walls with his finger tips. The surface was rock — hard, rough, and unsmoothed — further adding to his suspicion that he was being held underground. The more he thought about that, the more a growing claustrophobia seemed to take hold of him, but not before his stomach growled viciously.

"I'm starving," he announced, just as the foursome turned a corner and came upon a second metal door similar in appearance to the first.

"Of course you are," said flight suit man as he pressed his palm to a smooth-faced black device mounted in the wall beside the door. A line of red light flashed as it scanned his palm before the door began to swing open. "You will dine with the Caliph."

Michael thought about that bit of information. He most certainly did not want to sit down and eat with the man called the Caliph. He had only met him once before and it had not been a pleasant experience. But he thought, perhaps it also means that I have some value to the Caliph. If only I can figure out what that is, maybe I can use it as a bargaining chip.

The vaulted door opened onto a much wider and brightly lit hallway. The floors were tiled, the walls were smooth and painted a beige color, and doors were positioned irregularly on either side of the hall.

The gunmen moved to walk on either side of him now. Michael could hear the whirring and clicking of machinery nearby. The sounds made him think of a warehouse or factory.

"Right this way," said flight suit man feigning a cheerful voice. He stopped at a door that was painted brown, placing his palm over a scanner again before the door clicked, and he ushered them in.

Michael found himself in a sort of lounge. There were plush couches and carpet in this room. Three TVs sat in three of the corners of the room on three di erent news channels. Michael caught glimpses of protests, riots, and talking heads on all three screens before his senses were arrested by appetizing smells. He breathed them in deeply and turned his head in the direction of the smells before he realized what he was doing. Is that steak? Melted cheese?

Flight suit man led him toward a hanging green curtain that divided the room. Another gunman stood guard in front of the curtain. He stepped aside when flight suit man approached and murmured something to him in tones too low for Michael to hear. Holding the curtain aside, flight suit man waved Michael in.

Michael ducked his head beneath the curtain and then straightened. He sat in a colorfully decorated room. And there before him was a tall, square table set with an appetizing meal for two. One chair was empty, and in the other chair sat the Caliph.

42 / Him and the Caliph

The Caliph was a thin man with pale skin and long white hair (although he looked to be only in his late thirties). He had sharp cheekbones and a sharp chin, his skin stretched thin over them. His eyes were a steely grey. On his neck, Michael could see the curling black lines of a tattoo, the rest of which was hidden by the collar of the long-sleeved white button-up he wore.

He sat in a high-backed wooden chair facing Michael. On the table were two plates piled with a steaming meal of steak and rice covered in hot, melting cheese. A dark red wine sat in two tall, clear glasses. Michael's stomach grumbled loudly, and he took an involuntary step toward the table, forgetting momentarily his wariness about the Caliph. Flight suit man and the two escorts crowded in silently behind him.

Michael stared at the meal for a moment and then forced himself to look at the Caliph. "What do you want from me?" he said.

"Aren't you hungry?" said the Caliph. His voice was nasally and thick sounding. Michael thought it wasn't a voice that matched his body and presumed that the Caliph was suffering from a disease of some kind.

The Caliph turned his head slightly — Michael couldn't help thinking that he'd seen a snake turn his head like that once — and looked at flight suit man. "Leave us," he said, waving his hand. Michael glanced over his shoulder as the three men turned and slipped back beyond the curtain. He waited a moment and then heard the door in the outer room open and shut.

"Did you enjoy our accommodations?" the Caliph asked fixing his eyes on Michael.

"No," Michael said remembering the cold metal bed.

"You can enjoy better if you cooperate with us," the Caliph said. Michael didn't like the way he was looking at him. "Sit and eat."

Since there was nothing else to do — and nothing he wanted to do more — Michael sat, picked up his fork and ate. He ate ravenously, and had devoured the whole steak and was starting in on the rice and melted cheese when the thought flitted through his mind that the food might be drugged. What if the Caliph was trying to poison him or slip him some mind control drug?

Michael set the fork firmly down on the napkin and swallowed the mouthful of rice he had been chewing. He wanted to wash it down with the wine but hesitated. Studying what was le on his plate, he decided it at least looked and smelled normal enough.

Out of the corner of his eye, he found that the Caliph had been eating very slowly and deliberately — like a boy brought up in a wealthy house with impeccable manners. A slice of steak here, a spoonful of rice there, a sip of wine to wash it down.

The Caliph looked up and caught Michael watching him. He set his fork down and dabbed his thin, colorless lips with a napkin.

"Let's make a deal, Michael," he said. "Let's not lie to each other."

"Okay, you first," said Michael. "Is this food poisoned or drugged?"

The Caliph looked surprised. "Of course not," he said. "Why would I do that? You would be of no use to me dead or under the control of some mind-altering substance."

"What is it you want to use me for?"

"I cannot tell you that now."

Michael shrugged. "Why not? You said no lies."

"I will tell you the truth... at the right time. But first, you must give me reason to trust you again."

Michael didn't say anything.

The Caliph continued, "I rescued you and your family from debt in St. Petersburg. I let you in on my plans. I gave you a cause greater than yourself — a way to remake yourself. A way to get your name in the history books. And then, when I sent you out into the world, you ran from that purpose. Why, Michael?"

"I came across some information, some people, that made me doubt everything you told me," Michael said absentmindedly flipping the fork over on the tablecloth. "I believe that you said things just to manipulate me." He hesitated before continuing. "And, at the time, I needed the money to provide for my wife and children, so I went along with it."

The Caliph took a sip of his wine and sat back in his chair studying Michael. "Very well," he said. "We have agreed not to lie to each other. I will tell you the truth — all of my plans. Is that what you want?"

Michael looked around. He wanted so many more answers. Where was he exactly? Why was he being held? Could he escape? "Yes," he said. "But I cannot promise that I will agree to everything you say."

"And if you do not," said the Caliph fixing his steely gray eyes on Michael, "I may tell you everything, but then I will have to kill you." He spread out the fingers of his right hand like he was making a proposal that anyone would agree to. "And then what will become of your precious wife and children?"