

Prologue for Escape (Tip of the Spear Series Book 1)

You shall not stand by while your fellow's blood is shed. Leviticus 19:16

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Cyrus Hassani could kill an opponent twenty-five different ways with his bare hands. It was as simple to him as sautéing an omelet or making love to a woman. He considered delivering a death blow, cooking, and lovemaking a triumvirate of artistic accomplishment. If asked, he would admit to being a master of all three. It had been a long time since he'd felt anything resembling an emotional connection to anyone. God, country, and family were meaningless designations holding no significance to him. His whole life centered on his work and his mission. He'd lived in the shadows so long that everything he did was suspect, even to himself. A Russian Spetsnaz commando completing his patrol of the deck grunted an acknowledgement to him, which he ignored. *Fuck him*. He had far more pressing issues to consider, like the fact that Russia and Iran were forming a new alliance.

Salty spray dampened his face. He gripped a cigarette between his thumb and index finger and leaned against the railing. The Russian warship *Uglich* knifed through the inky, black swells of the Caspian Sea toward the Port of Bandar Anzali, Iran. The moonless night provided the perfect cover for the secret shipment in its hold, a prototype for laser technology known as Silex, an innovation in processing uranium. Laser excitation miniaturized nuclear-fuel-cycle facilities, reducing cost, space, and time involved to manufacture highly enriched uranium. Iran's mullahs were prepared to back their threatening rhetoric by building a nuclear arsenal. The cargo represented a new relationship between Russia and Iran, a partnership that furthered Iran's race to become a nuclear power. His task as an assistant to the deputy director of Oghab²—Eagle²—the Islamic Republic's nuclear watchdog and most secretive department within the Ministry of Justice, was to deliver that precious cargo to the Fordow Nuclear Enrichment Plant.

The bow of the ship forged ahead through heavy seas, bearing technology that would further destabilize and shift the balance of world power. His eyes were locked on the twinkling lights of the port that lay in the distance. Shivering, he pulled his collar up against the chill. He could only imagine what lay ahead, which only made his mission more crucial.

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A caravan of trucks moved slowly from the Port of Bandar Anzali toward Fordow. Accompanying the midnight shipment was a special forces team of revolutionary guardsmen. It was a grueling seven hours' drive to the Fordow enrichment facility built into the side of a mountain just outside of the holy city of Qom.

Cyrus rode in an armored jeep at the head of a caravan of vehicles. Although fatigue lined his face, he remained alert, his eyes focused on the road. Following them, a semi loaded down with Russian rockets and two sixteen-micron lasers moved slowly over a pass through the Alborz Mountains.

He squinted. Up ahead, something solid was blocking the road.

"Stop now!" he ordered. The sound of brakes squealing and gears grinding down brought the caravan to a halt. Wearing night vision goggles, he discerned something blocking the road. He radioed for three guardsmen and two dog handlers with their dogs to join him. Grabbing his AK-

101 assault rifle, he jumped out of the cab. Three commandos joined him. Pulling their balaclavas over their heads, they adjusted their masks.

“There’s a vehicle blocking the road ahead that needs to be cleared. We’ll use extreme caution in our approach: two of us on each side of the road with a handler and his dog. If there’s even a hint of trouble, I’ve ordered our team to bring the Aras tactical vehicle forward to annihilate the threat, so be prepared to take cover.”

“Sir, if it’s Mujadeen-e-Khalq—MEK—resistance, they’re pretty worn down. It’s doubtful they could mount much of an assault.”

Cyrus glared at the young recruit. “We’ll take no chances.” He nodded at his team. “Let’s move out. You stay with me,” he ordered the young man.

The commandos moved stealthily toward the vehicle, their assault rifles raised and aimed to fire. Something wasn’t right. He felt a prickly sensation rise up his spine as they neared the truck. They got within thirty yards of the rear door of the truck when it suddenly flew up and a machine gun opened fire. He and his men hit the dirt, rolling and returning fire. He grabbed his walkie-talkie and yelled, “Take the mother out, now!” He could hear a dog howling in pain and then the unmistakable sound of an armored vehicle’s movement. Bullets rained around him, kicking up dirt. The young recruit who had followed him wasn’t moving. “Shit!” *We’ve been ambushed.* Angry, he rolled over, blocking the young man’s body from further gunfire. He squinted through the dust. Enemy fighters ran toward him, shooting. He raised his rifle and returned fire. An RPG whistled overhead followed by an explosion. He covered his head and the recruit’s body, burying his face in the dirt as fire and metal rained down around them. When he raised his head, his ears were ringing from the blast, but he detected no continuing firepower. The truck that had blocked the road was a smoldering heap of metal. He turned to see the Aras multipurpose vehicle he’d been riding in explode in a ball of fire. The enemy had mined the road. He radioed. “Report.”

“Dog and his handler down, sir.”

“Alive?”

“No, sir.”

“Any survivors in the Aras?” He looked back and could see his Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps—IRGC— troops swarming around the Aras.

A panicky voice reported, “We’ve got a couple wounded and dead, sir.”

He placed his fingers on the neck of the young man. “Get a medic to me. I’ve got an injured young man. As for the rest of the injured, we’ll take them with us. The medics can triage and stabilize en route. I’ll call command to send a helicopter to pick up the wounded. I want this road cleared immediately. We move in ten minutes.”

“Shouldn’t we assess who did this, sir?”

“Let headquarters worry about that. We have one priority, and that is to get the shipment to Fordow. I want no more delays.”

The MEK had supposedly denounced its terrorist mission against Iran. However, there were always strongholds of resistance that might not comply. He knew Israel was bound to support any element that continued to fight the mullahs and their regime. He also knew this was a dying gasp of those in opposition. Poorly manned and poorly devised, this attack was a suicide mission.

He checked the fallen soldier again. “Hold on, son. Help is on the way.”

Only when the medics arrived with a gurney did he stand and walk toward the grisly mess.