

PROLOGUE

APRIL 17, 2011
ISFAHAN, IRAN

THE demonstration was a bit dramatic for Azad Ashani's taste. Then again, he was surrounded by dramatic people.

In a setting that was markedly at odds with the confidence displayed by the Quds Force operatives in charge of the demonstration, Ashani stood at the edge of a granite cliff overlooking a sprawling valley. The night was gentle in comparison to the day's brutal heat, and even though it hadn't rained in weeks, Ashani thought he could taste a hint of moisture in the air.

Or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

In Ashani's opinion, this entire gathering was held together by naivete, misplaced hope, and blind vengeance.

A cough racked his thin frame.

Turning, he spat a wad of phlegm onto the rocky soil. Though the demonstration's fiery culmination still flickered from the rocks rimming the base of the cliff, the flames were much too far away to illuminate the color of his saliva.

No matter.

Ashani knew its hue all the same.

Red.

It was always red.

Withdrawing a red handkerchief from his pocket, Ashani ran the soft fabric over his cracked lips. He'd done an admirable job of hiding his symptoms thus far, but those days were quickly coming to an end. Ashani might be a master spy, but he was no magician. Sooner or later, he would experience a coughing fit in the wrong company, or the doctor he'd sworn to secrecy would whisper in the wrong ears, or the cocktail of medications masking his symptoms would cease to be effective. One way or another, the disease devouring his innards would make its presence known.

He was standing at the edge of a precipice in more ways than one.

"What is this madness?"

The question, though whispered, was not one that he could afford to ignore.

Ashani was in his late fifties, with a slim build and average stature. Though not physically imposing, he still inspired fear. As head of his nation's Ministry of Intelligence, or MOIS, Ashani led an organization with a bloody history. Conversation ceased at Ashani's appearance. Those who saw him on the street often crossed to the other side of the road.

But a man in his position had enemies.

Ashani had begun his career as a paramilitary officer, and he was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War. He no longer had an operator's muscled build, but there was a hardness to him. A sharp edge that even age and the ravages of his illness couldn't entirely dull. For the most part, his adversaries were external to the organization he led.

For the most part.

But a knife thrust wasn't any less deadly just because it came from a trusted lieutenant rather than a barbarian at the gates.

"I think the choice of venue is . . . inspired," Ashani said.

His questioner snorted.

Ashani had served in the MOIS his entire life, rising to the rank of

“minister” half a dozen years ago. Even so, the man standing next to Ashani was a mystery. True power in the Islamic Republic of Iran rested not with the nation’s president or any of the popularly elected officials who exercised pseudo governing authority in the parliament. These offices were just for show. A mechanism to convince the populace that they actually had a degree of say in the manner in which their nation was run.

They did not.

True power resided in just one body—the Guardian Council.

This conclave of twelve men consisted of six Shia clerics and six lawyers. The Supreme Leader, a cleric named Ali Hoseini-Nassiri, reigned over the council. This arrangement meant that the Islamic Republic of Iran was governed according to the whims of an eighty-year-old Shia imam. An elderly theocrat whose last remaining earthly wish was to witness the apocalyptic battle that would bring about the return of the fabled Twelfth Imam. Ashani did not think that the combination of a dictator fixated on leaving a legacy of blood and ashes and a cadre of sycophants singularly focused on providing him with the means to do so was a harbinger of good fortune for the nation he loved.

But he was not foolish enough to say this to the man standing next to him.

The man in question, Darian Moradi, was a relative newcomer to the MOIS. Prior to his appointment as Ashani’s deputy a month earlier, the young cleric hadn’t held an official position in government. Instead, he’d served as the adjutant to a ranking member of the Guardian Council.

A cleric who could very well be Iran’s next Supreme Leader.

Unlike Hoseini-Nassiri, Moradi’s boss seemed less focused on the never-ending quest to destroy Iran’s Jewish neighbor and more on stabilizing the regime through normalization with the rest of the world.

This made Moradi’s question both interesting and dangerous.

“Inspired by the magnificent vista?” Moradi said. “Or the giant man-made sinkhole?”

Ashani stood on the eastern side of the plateau. Behind him, the mountain continued skyward. The drivable trail that led from the mountain's base ended at the plateau, becoming a rocky path passable only to donkeys or goats. The plateau's other occupants were gathered at the western side of the terrain feature about seventy meters distant. Their jubilant voices carried across the open ground as they gestured toward the flames licking the metallic wreckage strewn across the valley floor.

No doubt the venue was chosen in part to showcase the clear night.

In part.

There were plenty of places in Iran that offered a commanding view of the sky along with the requisite room needed to catch large chunks of smoldering aluminum and plastic as they fell to the earth. The decision to hold the demonstration here undoubtedly had much to do with what had once been concealed beneath tons of cement and steel on the valley floor.

But agreeing and voicing that agreement were two different things.

Ashani eyed his companion.

At first glance, Moradi was nothing remarkable. His beard was the prescribed length, his circular turban sparkling white, and his gray *qabaa* robe elegantly tailored. Though he was ostensibly Ashani's second-in-command, the cleric clearly maintained an open line of communication with his former boss. Even so, Moradi was respectful to Ashani and did not flaunt his obvious political connections. His thin frame showed none of the corpulence often associated with Iran's ruling elite, and his short stature was not aided by platform shoes. Most importantly, the dark eyes present behind his clear framed glasses were sharp and thoughtful.

The eyes of someone who saw much but spoke little.

In their admittedly limited interactions, Ashani had yet to put the man in a box. Moradi asked intelligent questions, did not trade on his former boss's influence, and wasn't prone to ravings meant to demonstrate his religious fervor. He reminded Ashani of a particularly keen aide-de-camp. This was a man with whom it would be easy to let down one's guard.

Which was why Ashani intended to do the opposite.

"It is a very nice evening," Ashani allowed.

This was true.

April and May were two of the more pleasant months in Isfahan. The bitter cold of winter was a thing of the past and the spring rain briefly returned life to the desert. Only two weeks ago, Ashani would have needed a thick coat and gloves to survive the brutal winds that buffeted the cliff face, but tonight the temperature hovered around 18 degrees Celsius and the breeze felt gentle and warm.

"You are a cautious one," Moradi said with a chuckle. "Willing to discuss the weather but no words for the sea of flashing red lights?"

The red lights in question winked from atop the type of portable barriers that normally heralded a stretch of road marred by construction. But the constellation of crimson beacons blinking from the valley floor had a different purpose. Ashani was not a civil engineer, but he didn't believe anything would be built upon the concrete cairn the barriers ringed in this lifetime.

Or even the next.

The barriers were meant to prevent the unwary from venturing too close to a radioactive cavern. A cavern that had once contained the centrifuges and feeder reactor that were critical to Iran's nuclear weapons program. Billions of dollars lay beneath the rubble.

Billions the Islamic Republic of Iran did not have.

Ashani sighed.

This was the second time the cleric had brought up the elephant in the room.

"What happened here was a tragedy," Ashani said.

"How many died?"

Ashani turned from his contemplation of the massive crater to find the little cleric's eyes on him. This time no merriment shone from their depths.

"Too many," Ashani said.

"You were almost one of them."

Moradi's response seemed more statement than question, but Ashani knew he still owed the cleric an answer.

"Yes."

"What do you think about the disaster?" Moradi said.

"The loss of life was tragic," Ashani said. "The perpetrators should be brought to justice."

"Yes, yes," Moradi said, waving away Ashani's answer. "You are suitably outraged, and we must swear vengeance on the Americans, the Jews, the Kurds, or whoever sabotaged our supposedly impenetrable nuclear weapons research facility. I will save us both the trouble and pretend that you regurgitated the appropriate rhetoric, but you've misunderstood my question. I want to know what you think about the site's purpose—the development of an atomic bomb."

This time Ashani didn't have to fake his reaction.

Though the two men were standing apart from the huddle of figures gathered at the cliff's edge, Ashani still couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Belief in the necessity of the Iranian nuclear weapons program was canonical in its fervor. Tens of billions had been spent on the effort, and the ensuing international sanctions had crippled Iran's economy. Even so, continued adherence to this strategy wasn't given any more thought than questioning why water was wet.

It simply was.

Moradi might as well have been asking Ashani if he believed that Muhammad was Allah's prophet. Ashani hoped for a coughing fit or some other excuse not to speak. A burst of laughter echoed from the group of men clustered at the far side of the bluff.

Fools.

They were all fools.

A gaggle of clerics from the Guardian Council in their formal robes, the vice president of Iran in his Western-style suit, and the man who'd conceived this plot—a Quds Force colonel.

Originally brought into existence by the first Supreme Leader with the goal of safeguarding the resistance, Quds Force had become a na-

tion within a nation. Ashani often thought of them as akin to the Nazis' feared Schutzstaffel, or SS. Operatives answerable only to the Supreme Leader himself. That these fanatics were responsible for tonight's demonstration and the scheme it supposedly validated came as no surprise.

That Iran's ruling class was considering their plan was.

While Moradi's former boss was not in attendance, tonight's gathering included power brokers from across the Iranian government. This event was indicative of a seismic shift in Iran's approach to the West. A shift Ashani suspected would prove to be the undoing of the nation he loved.

Where did that leave him?

"What I think about the program is immaterial," Ashani said, choosing his words carefully. "I do not make policy decisions. I serve the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini-Nassiri."

"Of course you do," Moradi said with a smirk, "but what about the operation the Quds Force operatives are proposing? If you were the Supreme Leader's advisor, would you counsel that such a venture was wise?"

Ashani would not.

Yes, what the Quds Force imagined had a chance of working, and yes, even he had to admit that their operational planning was impressive. But as the concrete tomb at the base of the cliff could attest, grand schemes often led to grand failures. The flames consuming the downed aircraft's wreckage looked more like a funeral pyre than a victory bonfire.

"If the Supreme Leader desired my thoughts, I would provide them," Ashani said, locking eyes with the cleric, "but my words would be for him alone."

Moradi held his gaze for an uncomfortably long time before slowly turning away. As a career intelligence officer, Ashani prided himself on his ability to read people, but he couldn't tell what the cleric was thinking.

“This is madness,” Moradi said, whispering the words. “Absolute madness. And no one can stop it.”

Moradi strode away before Ashani could reply, which was just as well, since he wasn't sure how he would have responded. Yes, this was madness. If the Quds Force plot succeeded, there was a very real chance the Middle East would be plunged into a regional war. If it failed, the radioactive cavern at the cliff's base would look like a playground in comparison to what the Americans would do to his country.

Ashani was in violent agreement with Moradi on the cleric's first point.

Not the second.

There was someone who could stop this rush to madness. A man who terrified Ashani in a way that even the disease consuming him did not. Sometimes survival required a willingness to do the unthinkable. Ashani was a dead man, but perhaps his wife and daughters didn't need to share his fate.

It was time to make a deal with the devil.

A devil known as *Malikul Mawt*.

The Angel of Death.