

The Marchers: A Novel

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BOOK TWO: The Flood *continued from previous issue*

Chapter 31

The Iraqis Were Advancing Along a New Front

The Iraqis were advancing along a new front threatening the city of Ahwaz. The news of Iraqi troop movements in southwest Iran and the oil fields of Khuzestan spread throughout the country. The enemy's long-range missile attacks on Iranian cities as far inland as Tehran shook the confidence of Iranians everywhere. News of military setbacks reached even Evin Prison and profoundly affected the way Revolutionary Guards treated their prisoners in general and the Mojaheddin members in particular. The Mojaheddins' stand against the war gave the guards an easy excuse to torture and execute their members and supporters as spies for Saddam Hussein. Waves of new prisoners, most of them antiwar activists or sympathizers of the Mojaheddins arrived every day. Evin Prison and other newly constructed prisons throughout the country were packed to capacity. Hundreds of new arrivals were kept under poor sanitary conditions in halls, corridors, and under staircases. By the mid-eighties the number of political prisoners had grown to the tens of thousands. The number of daily executions, to hundreds. The unbearable life of prisoners continued everywhere and extended to the small cell where Bahram and seven other prisoners were kept. They had recently lost four of their comrades: two died under torture, and two had been summarily executed at dawn. However, their slots were quickly filled with new prisoners.

One morning the Revolutionary Guards dragged Bahram and three other cellmates out into the corridor and shoved them into the larger interrogation room at the end of the hall. There they were made to stand up against one wall, while a Revolutionary Guard handed them each a form.

"This is your last will and testament," the guard explained. "It will be kept in the prison office until we send it to your family. Sign it."

The penultimate sentence of the bottom paragraph stated that the undersigned was a member of the Mojaheddin. The form ended with an entreaty by the undersigned for mercy and forgiveness from Imam Ayatollah Khomeini and God for the sins they had committed.

Bahram refused to sign, but the other three who were still recovering from wounds and bruises signed without raising a question.

"I am not a member or sympathizer of the Mojaheddin," Bahram stated as firmly as he could.

The guards took the three who had signed the papers out to the courtyard. After they had left, the remaining guard looked at Bahram with sarcastic disdain.

"I'm beginning to like you. Today is not your turn to go to hell. But I'm sure your turn will come soon."

When Bahram returned to his cell, three new prisoners had already settled in. No one asked about the others. Everybody knew what had happened, and it didn't matter anymore. They had witnessed the change-out so many times already. Every life hung in

the balance, and each one of them could be next. Later that night, when Bahram was taken to the restroom, he overheard Revolutionary Guards mention that several hundred suspected Mojaheddin members had been executed in the courtyard that day. The guards were complaining about having to haul dead bodies to the disposal trucks all afternoon. By now the corridors were so crowded with prisoners that the obligatory time for washing and praying was reduced to three minutes each.

Before dawn the next day, Bahram's cell door banged open, and three armed Revolutionary Guards rushed in. They dragged out two cellmates and kicked them toward the end of the long corridor, screaming at them the entire time. All along that and other corridors, and in other sections and other buildings, cell doors banged open and guards yanked out suspected members of the Mojaheddin. They assembled these poor wretches in a walled square surrounded by concrete blocks far away from the prison's main buildings.

Another Revolutionary Guard entered Bahram's cell and ordered the remaining cellmates to follow him. The prisoners were frightened, but the guard calmed their fears.

"Don't be scared. We just need a few volunteers to help usher at a special event. You don't even need to cover your eyes today."

The prisoners followed the guard with reluctant, dragging steps toward the courtyard where they joined scores of other ushers, all of them without blindfolds, on one side of the courtyard behind a row of armed guards.

The skies over Evin Prison were still dark. Large floodlights shed bright light over a grim scene. They observed with horror as three rows of blindfolded inmates stumbled against rocks and each other. The guards ordered the ushers to tie the blindfolded prisoner's hands behind their backs with old cables. A loud command and a phalanx of guards marched forward and pushed the shackled inmates tightly against the wall on the far side of the courtyard. They were jammed shoulder to shoulder and body against body. Any prisoner who tried to resist received a rifle butt in the chest and face.

This ghastly scene with blindfolded prisoners huddled against concrete blocks under the loud curses of Revolutionary Guards was etched into the minds of the ushers. It numbed their senses. The area along the wall filled up with row upon row of blindfolded prisoners, numbering more than three hundred. There were men and women of many different ages, several pregnant women, and some teenage boys and girls.

Another command and the Revolutionary Guards moved like one body to the opposite side of the courtyard, pulling along all the ushers. A long line of armed Revolutionary Guards in military uniform with wide black bands over their foreheads marched in. At a command they stopped in the middle of the courtyard, about thirty feet from the blindfolded prisoners. They raised their machine guns upon another command.

The mellifluous sound of verses from the Quran came from the loudspeakers fixed along the edge of the tower above the courtyard. The musical tone of the recital was in dramatic contrast to the frightening gathering below. A man's voice praying for the success of the glorious Islamic Revolution interrupted the recitation. He implored God to assure that Iran would prevail in its just and holy war against Iraq. He wished the Iranian soldiers victory on the battlefield and success with liberating Iraqi Shites from Saddam Hussein's tyranny. Without a preamble his soft tone ceased and he began shouting angrily.

"Today, all you Iraqi spies have a last chance to redeem your soul and save yourself from hell. You rose up against our Imam,

