

**MIRO**

A.E. NASR

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To the memory of my father,  
Emile Nasr

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I

FIRST, THE ESCAPE

## CHAPTER ONE

MIRO KNEW why men went mad in the dark. In the blackness of his cell, the revelation came cruelly disguised as a happy dream, urging him awake on a day of the week he could not name, at an hour he could only guess had come too soon.

His eyes snapped open, exposing wet insides to the icy air that pressed down. The darkness swirled above him, identical to the inky gloom behind his lids. Miro squeezed his eyes shut again. He pulled his hands deeper into his sleeves, until the flannel grated against his shoulder blades, and wriggled closer to his brother. Markus was never cold.

He directed his thoughts to a warmer place—the dusty haven of his father’s old work shed—and saw it clearly: the big man at the bench, thick fingers dwarfing his carving tools; his brother sweltering as he hauled timber onto stacks; his mother’s voice calling him into the garden and out of harm’s way. Humid nights. A breeze billowing the flowered curtains. The smell of wood polish and wheat.

Markus shifted his weight. The width of the concrete ledge could accommodate only one of them lying flat; Miro rolled onto his side to give his brother room. He listened for the others, aware when he paced the rise and fall of his chest to match theirs.

They were all awake. After nine years, Miro could tell. The sun had risen hours ago, but in here it made no difference. Time moved in circles, trapped between the walls. Blood boiled in the brain. The mind

lashed out, racing through open fields of random thoughts in compensation. Madness in its infancy.

Captain rose first and with muffled groans began to rub the stiffness from his leg. The bone had mended but the blood would never again flow as it should. As he did every day, he made his way to the rear wall. His limp marked by the uneven slap of his feet against the floor, he walked the length of the cell. Seven paces to the prison bars, seven paces back.

‘One,’ he counted between his teeth.

He had earned the rank of Captain in the army. Same as Markus, he had fought the invasion despite absurd odds. Later, as a member of the resistance movement, his title had stayed with him. In their prison under the ground, they had no other name to call him.

‘Is the mad professor awake?’ he said, gaining momentum. ‘I hear you mumbling, Alex. Are you talking to the friends in your head?’

‘Was I?’ croaked Alex. ‘What did I say?’

‘Something about a fire. Maybe we’re finally going to hell.’

Alex yawned. ‘*Fire cleanses, sins burn, said the prayer beads to the temple urn.* It must have been a good dream.’

‘Here we go.’

‘We’ve been to godlier places than most could wish for, Captain. Here, in this cell.’

Captain’s breath quickened. ‘Markus, I think the professor’s turning holy in his old age. Remind me to beat it out of him when the lights come on.’

Beside Miro, Markus inhaled deeply. ‘To each his own, Cap. I’ll give you two guesses what godly things I was dreaming about.’

Three months ago, the quip would have won an appreciative grunt from the men. Today, it barely registered. Another long winter had taken its toll.

‘Is it cold in here, or are you shivering with joy?’ said Markus. He lowered a hot palm onto Miro’s forehead, then he brought his hand to rest over Miro’s mouth.

They had learned all the ways to read each other in the absence of light; had Miro’s cheeks not been frozen, he would have relented with



a smile. A smile would cost him nothing—a small lift of the chin to signal his attempt. But his face refused.

‘Here, let me rub your chest,’ said Markus.

Miro gladly accepted and, bit by bit, the chill released its grip. The warmth rippled through his torso, trickled to his limbs. He uncurled his fists and took a deep drink of air, relieved when it passed freely to his lungs. He ventured another and another, more confident now, and better prepared for the jarring volume of Alex’s morning ritual.

The former professor of history drew himself up with the appropriate rumble and launched into a throat clearing session of thunderous coughs. These were soon outdone in decibel value by an ear-splitting yawn, followed by an unleashing of his lecture hall bellow: ‘Aidan, lad, come take Captain’s place on the ledge before you freeze.’ He beat his fist against his chest, as if to plumb its true depth. ‘Aidan, lad!’

From the floor came no response, only the crunch of rags and a weary sigh. Three years Miro’s elder at 24, Aidan suffered the same misfortune of youth in the time capsule of their cell, where he would forever be the ‘lad’, and Miro the ‘boy’.

Captain completed his final lap—one more than the day before—and returned to the ledge. For a few minutes, his laboured breaths were the only sound. Then came the thuds from above.

Miro listened with one ear. There was a time when the terror had claimed him completely like a disease. Now the familiar numbing fear washed over him, settling into his bones like the murky sediments on an ancient riverbed. Reckless with his newfound warmth, he blew hot air into the dark, hoping to catch a shift in the shadows, a silver mist. Or a shape he could mould into something better. Only when his eyes began to burn did he know to close them.

KEYS RATTLED in the cellblock door.

Miro bolted upright, and waving an elbow quickly gauged his brother’s distance from him when he brushed against an arm. But the whisper of the hinges soon gave away the visitor’s identity; he breathed a sigh of relief.

Footsteps pattered past the three empty cells and came to a stop just before theirs, the last in the block. Out of a dusty glow, the silhouette of a hand appeared, pushing a tray of dishes along the floor. The cook's timid assistant had drawn the short straw today.

As the boy unloaded his consignment, Captain crept along the wall. 'Just tell me what day it is.'

The boy leapt back.

'Wait. Wait!' Captain snatched at the air, pressing his face between the bars to yell at the fleeing shadow. 'What day is it? *What day is it?*'

The cellblock door slammed shut, plunging the inmates back into blackness.

Miro felt his way towards the food on his hands and knees, then, having sniffed the bowls for urine, he passed them out. A cursory sweep of his hand across the floor revealed a wayward wet chunk; he scooped it up and tossed it in his mouth.

'Come eat, old man,' said Markus to Captain, who murmured obscenities to the wall between fits of throwing himself at it. 'There's no piss at least.'

'A good meal shared with brothers,' said Alex.

The meal tasted to Miro the same as it did every other day: salty sludge of unclear origin, with undertones of rot. Alex often claimed to have found fresh vegetables in his bowl, a notion the others indulged given the professor's precarious relationship with reality. Whatever the contents, Miro wolfed them down, spooning solid parts into his mouth with his hands and tipping the bowl to slurp the liquid remains.

'Beans,' said Aidan.

Captain groaned. 'I'll take the floor tonight. I'd rather freeze to death than suffocate.'

A silence swooped down. Miro, too, had gone in his mind to that strip on the floor—the three corner tiles they would not tread, even in the dark. On the night that Byren died, they had heard their friend take his last breath. And the following day, they had turned their backs to the corpse when they ate and faced it when they slept. They had eaten less and slept more each day until a week later, when the guards saw fit to take the body away.

Now the five men grunted and sighed as each rearranged himself to face the hallway outside their cell, where the light fixture hung that had yet to be lit.

An hour went by. Or what passed for an hour: the time it took for the toilet tank to fill. Markus padded to the corner where the relic sat, lidless and gutted. The drip broadened to a gurgle when he uncorked the nozzle to take a drink.

‘It’s warmer,’ he said, settling back on the ledge. ‘Should be any day now.’

THE LIGHTS came on.

The men blinked through the onslaught, flinching away at first. Then they turned up their faces to bathe them in the spotlight.

Miro held his icy hands outside the bars, as if this proximity to the wall-mounted bulb would warm them faster. He tried to ignore the hunger pangs. Again he wondered how his brother could make do with so little; eight years his senior and twice his size, Markus had consumed whole animals for snacks in their former life. He had checked Miro over in the light—that unconscious inspection native to parents of small children—and now draped a solid arm over his knee, the picture of quiet strength as he took in the artificial rays.

The professor hummed. The toilet sputtered. Aidan resumed work on a new leg brace for Captain, weaving strips from filthy old clothes into a stiff mat.

‘Make it tighter around the knee,’ said Captain, chasing an itch across his scalp.

‘I’ve done this before,’ said Aidan.

‘But how many times have you done it right?’ Captain pushed back hair the colour and consistency of straw, bound it at the nape of his neck, then proceeded to rake his fingernails through his beard. ‘If I get lice again, I’m setting myself on fire.’

‘Have I told you about the summer I worked as a grave digger?’ said Alex.

‘Yes,’ said Captain.

‘Really? When?’

‘Last week, every day. The week before that, every day. The week before that—’

Aidan giggled.

‘You exaggerate,’ said Alex.

‘Tell it again,’ said Captain. ‘Markus can’t wait to hear it. Look at Miro, he’s so excited he’s turned blue.’

Markus folded Miro’s hands between his own to work the warmth back into them. ‘Ignore him, Alex. You can tell it as often as you like.’

‘Let’s ask Miro,’ said the professor. ‘He remembers best.’

They turned to him. Even Aidan looked up from his mat, absent-mindedly rubbing the hardened skin on his cheek—a scar eternally at odds with his soft features. Miro refused to set any one of them against the other, so he chose a different truth. ‘I dreamed we escaped.’

Captain frowned.

‘You say it like it’s the first time,’ said Aidan.

Miro wanted to tell them how elated he had been, how the air had felt against his skin and how lightly and swiftly he had crossed great distances. He had never dreamed of running free before, not in his nine years of captivity, and for that he was now grateful. Because then he had woken, heart hammering in his chest, only to find himself back in his cell, flailing for an anchor in the blackness, his body heavy and brittle and cold. This was the reason men went mad in the dark.

‘An excellent change of topic,’ said Alex. ‘You’re a diplomat and a gentleman, Miro. I’ll have you all know I taught him neither, but will take credit for both. My dream last night revolved around a smoke-filled labyrinth and a three-legged—’ He stopped short when Markus shot out his hand, demanding silence.

They had all heard it—the stomp of heavy boots drawing closer. Markus managed a glance towards Captain. Then the cellblock door crashed open.

Practised muscles propelled the cellmates away from the prison bars.

‘Against the wall!’ the guard yelled down.

But they were already in position, crammed shoulder to shoulder along the back of their cell, their palms spread high against the stones.

Their whispers died as two sets of footsteps meandered to a stop outside their cell.

‘Have you girls been sleeping in again?’

The voice belonged to a snake of a man called Faska. Miro pictured the oiled, black hair, the hollow cheeks. He had once seen the soldier push a spike into a prisoner’s eardrum to see how far it would go. Now he felt the bulbous eyes boring a hole in the back of his head.

‘Why so shy? I come to pay you a visit and this is the welcome I get?’ Faska had flogged prisoners for so much as breaking contact with the wall, let alone speaking. On alternate visits, he had flogged prisoners for failing to respond.

From Miro’s left came the familiar sound of Captain grinding his teeth. Markus breathed evenly. The silence throbbed in Miro’s ears.

‘How do they stand the stench in here?’ said the second visitor.

‘They’ll live in their own shit.’ Faska churned up a ball of mucus and spat it out. ‘All right, get on with it.’

The moment arrived sooner than expected.

‘How about the little one, boss?’

## CHAPTER TWO

THE FLESH rose on the back of Miro's neck. Markus stiffened.

'You, by the toilet,' said Faska, 'come here.'

Miro peered over his shoulder. Outside the cell, the two soldiers stood dark under the spotlight—Faska and a younger man with close-shaven hair and shirtsleeves rolled up to his biceps. A new recruit judging by the tight grip he held on his rifle.

Propped against the doorframe, Faska favoured a sinister tilt of the head and a heavy lidded glare. 'Yes, you,' he mouthed, flashing a row of hideously misaligned teeth. 'Move it.'

A moment passed before Miro's limbs obeyed. Avoiding his brother's eyes, he peeled himself away from the wall and began the trek towards the bars, his leg sweeping the side of the concrete ledge until he arrived at the door. There he gave his back to the soldiers and locked his fingers behind his head.

The cell seemed narrower from this vantage point, and longer to the granite stones where his cellmates stood. Alone by the bars, Miro saw the four men as the guards saw them: captive and faceless; long hair falling on lean shoulders. Clothes worn in mismatched layers, threadbare and grey, and barefoot since the day their shoes were confiscated nine years ago. Markus pushed against solid stone and Captain inched towards Markus.

The iron bars rumbled open behind Miro. A steel grip circled his arm, then he was reeling backwards into the hallway and slamming

against the opposite wall. Pinned by the neck, Miro drew a strangled breath.

The new recruit burst into shrieking laughter. ‘Did you see how he jumped? The rat is shitting himself! Did you see that, boss?’ The soldier played, first screeching in his ear, then pounding his weight against Miro’s back and howling with glee.

‘Shut it, Heller,’ said Faska.

‘Boss!’

‘It’s Sergeant, you idiot. Get him cuffed, I don’t have all day.’

Miro’s breath came fast and hard; he bit down on the cries of protest that threatened to spill out of him, but it was Markus who broke the first rule.

‘Are we going somewhere, officer?’

A chorus of whispers went up from the cellmates, but the damage had been done.

Faska rolled shut the iron bars with a clang of finality. His eyes remaining fixed on the inside of the cell, he leaned against the wall where Miro’s cheek rubbed against the grit. From his pocket he withdrew a small knife, then carefully freed the blade from its sheath.

‘I shouldn’t have spoken.’ Markus’s deep voice came from a shallow place in his chest.

‘Cuff him,’ Faska said to Heller.

The cold shackles scraped around Miro’s ankles and dropped like rocks onto his bare feet.

‘There’s no need to punish him,’ said Markus. ‘Take me in his place, I’ll do what you want.’

The rest happened quickly. With speed and precision, Faska clamped Miro’s right hand against the wall, and positioning the point of the blade at the tip of Miro’s middle finger, proceeded to drive it under the fingernail. The pain exploded. A scream rang out that Miro soon realised was his own. He reared back against Heller, who pinned him in place. Faska adjusted his grip, then drove downwards again, ripping through nerves towards the nail bed. Miro’s knees buckled and his vision blurred. Then Faska pulled back on the blade. Miro’s finger yawned open, the fingernail arching back from the flesh as the blood spilled down his arm.

Faska wiped his hand on Miro's back. Heller hooted. Miro clenched his teeth to quiet his mangled cries. The next thing he knew, he was stumbling out of the cellblock.

'Move it!' screamed Heller.

A grey corridor separated the prison from the interrogation rooms. The cuffs sliced into Miro's ankles, cutting short his stride. He steeled himself then pushed his fingernail back into place, a shriek rising unbidden.

Heller jammed the muzzle of his rifle into Miro's back. 'Hands behind your head!'

Blood flowed freely down Miro's arm; he pressed down on the wound to stem the flow, the contact causing the pain to tear along the nerves, locking his jaw shut.

'Listen up,' said Faska. 'This one's not a runner but keep your eyes open. And if you take him anywhere near the officers' wing, I'll come and find you myself.'

'Got it, boss.'

They emerged into a massive hall piled high with crates and sacks of grain. In the far right wall, light seeped through the cracks of an old wooden door that Miro knew led to the rear lot. He followed Faska towards it until Heller's hand came down on his shoulder.

'This way,' said the soldier in his ear. 'It's just you and me from here.'

They went deeper into the building, stopping at the mouth of a darkened passage. Faska's footsteps receded as Heller picked through a ring of keys on his low-slung belt and swung open a door Miro had never passed through before. 'Inside,' he said.

Miro stepped into a stairwell cloudy with the insinuation of sunlight. The balmy air enveloped him. It loosened his limbs. He wiped the tears from his face and trained his eyes on golden rays that swept along the landing.

'What are you waiting for?' said Heller, and a new whine had entered his voice. He pushed Miro with enough force to send him lurching towards the side of the staircase. Whipping back his wounded hand, Miro met the bricks with his face instead. Metallic tasting blood welled in his mouth.



Heller paced in the cramped space. ‘You and me are going to be good friends.’ As he paced, he rubbed his head, gently at first, then in wide, insistent circles. ‘We’re going to be good friends. And this will go a lot smoother if you understand that I can kill you and get away with it.’ He giggled, then wet his lips, then swept in, his face so close that Miro could count the veins in his bloodshot eyes. ‘All you have to do is exactly what I say.’

The stairs seemed to grow taller with each step, the shackles digging deeper into Miro’s ankles. With Heller at his heels, he spilled out of the stairwell and into a sea of sunlight.

The ground blazed. Past the glare, Miro made out the edges of the courtyard in which he stood—rows of arches on three identical sides, holding up covered passageways. On the fourth side, an arched entrance framed the outside world.

Heller steered him into the passage on the right. Miro counted four numbered doors and their adjacent windows—a failed attempt to distract himself from the horrors in store—before Heller pushed him into a dark room the size of his prison cell.

The sweat chilled on Miro’s skin. A pulse pounded in his finger, still raised behind his head. The room began to topple, all shadowy corners and steel racks and a sharp smell that singed the back of his throat.

‘...these two hallways and all three upstairs...’ Heller’s voice filtered through in waves.

Miro tried to focus on the man’s face, the black hollows under his eyes.

‘I want it gleaming... all of it, floors, ledges and windows...’

On the floor where the soldier pointed sat a metal pail, a mop and a heap of rags.

‘...Take what you need and put it outside the door.’

Miro pushed back the laughter but he had no control over the grin that was spreading across his face. He smiled at the pail, then at the guard, then outside the door at the length of sunlit hallway.

He was here to clean.

A backhanded blow to the face spun his head and knocked him to the ground.

‘Are you an idiot, boy?’ screamed Heller. ‘What are you smiling about? *Are you laughing at me?*’

Miro blinked away the haze. When the guard hurled the pail at his head, he ducked too late. The metal rim cracked against the bone behind his ear.

Blood trickled from Miro’s nose and pooled under his tongue.

‘You’re all the same!’ shouted Heller. ‘Idiots, every one of you... *get up!*’

Dirt crunched under Miro’s palms as he pushed himself to his feet. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, swallowed the seepage in his mouth.

‘I need these hallways cleaned in two hours,’ said Heller, ‘so get your mop, *mop boy*, get it done, and you may just see your little friends again. Have I made myself clear?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Miro.

LOCALS CALLED it The Square, the old fort on the hill. Anchored by four turrets, the edifice guarded dozens of modest chambers built around a central courtyard in a style that echoed the country’s inward-looking past. Today it served as the provincial headquarters of the occupying army. In a grand twist of fate, the fort that had once protected villagers from invaders now sheltered the enemy and held the nation’s own as prisoners.

The shadow of an arch framed the sun-drenched tiles where Miro knelt, picking away at embedded mud trails. Blood had soaked through the cloth he had coiled around his torn finger, and hardened, forming a pink-tinged cast. Each contact with the injured digit ignited a white hot flare of pain, but the sunlight bathed his back and the ground warmed his feet and a kind breeze cooled his temples.

He hid his giddiness from the guard. Weary of shouting instructions, Heller slouched in a wicker chair in a nearby corner, cradling his rifle in his lap. A radio crackled in a room above; sparrows beat their wings and settled on ancient shutters.

The water darkened to grey in Miro’s pail. He hitched up his trousers to carry the receptacle to the drain, his feet slapping against the tiles as he went. The hot, wet floor called up afternoons spent with his mother

washing down the balcony of their village home. She would always blame the old mills for the thick layer of dust but secretly revelled in the running water, wading barefoot in the sun.

At the opposite end of the courtyard, the towering carved doors of the entrance stood wide open, allowing Miro a view through the tunnelled entryway to the outer fence, where two soldiers manned a guard-house. They took turns kicking empty cans at a goal made of twigs. One of the men had set his pistol on the ground.

Miro pushed it aside, the image of the gun on the ground, and the memory that it triggered. The abandoned flour mill and the blood on his hands. He chewed his lip and shook it off. That ghost could wait for the dark cell. He hung his pail from a tap in the wall and, as the water sprayed into the vessel, cleaner than anything Miro had drunk in months, he ventured a longer look outside.

Under serene blue skies, he saw clear across the valley. Past the bricks and the barbed wire, he spied the rolling green hills crisscrossed with rocky ridges and winding dirt roads. He could almost imagine his countrymen going about their lives just over those hills, in clusters of villages just past that spatter of trees. Brawny southerners chopping firewood and tilling fields. Miro listened for the fall of a distant axe.

‘You know what he likes—Faska?’ In his corner, Heller sat staring into space. ‘When he was a boy, he liked to feed the neighbourhood kittens to his dog. House dog doesn’t just eat cats, you have to train it. Pull off a little leg or snap the neck. When his neighbour told his parents, he snuck into her garden and found the sand pit where her children played.’ His eyelids drooped. ‘Is he your kin? The ape that got in Faska’s face.’

‘My brother.’ Miro’s own voice sounded alien to him, carrying as it did over the open air.

‘He should’ve known what was good for him. I was waiting for Faska to cut him into little pieces.’ Disgust pulled down the corners of Heller’s lips. ‘Why don’t you people ever know what’s good for you?’ He slid lower in his chair. Afternoon sunlight streamed into the passage, draping the guard’s dosing figure.

‘You’re sitting under my sun,’ said Miro, but the words never left his mouth.

He scrubbed ledges until the shadows had grown longer, and the silhouettes of arches were bowed across the walls. The professor would want to know about the bowing arches; his cellmates would expect a full report. So Miro paused in the shade of a pillar, preparing to commit to memory the moment he stepped into the light.

But then, outside the entryway, the soldiers fell quiet. A third man had joined them at the guardhouse and, as Miro watched, a fourth arrived. They all waited at the gate as a military jeep made its way up the dirt road. A moment later, it roared into the gravelled lot, then reversed into the fort's tunnelled entrance.

The four men seemed pleased—they slapped each other's backs and crowded around to look inside the vehicle. The stir did nothing to raise Heller, who remained slumped in his chair.

Miro mopped his way towards the entrance for a better look. Kneeling over a stain in the tiles, he stole a glance, and that was when he saw it—a small hand flattened against the vehicle's rear window. Then it was gone.

He must have imagined it. A small hand had no place in The Square. He waited for it to reappear.

Taking another step, he accidentally struck his chains against the pail.

One of the soldiers looked up. The man's eyes narrowed. His hand went to his gun as he made a straight line for Miro.

## CHAPTER THREE

‘THEY HAD units of 20 dispersed along the far side of the gorge. Yustas was a tactical genius—he knew they would take the low road so he stationed his battalions here, here and along the cliff here...’ Alex drew invisible lines on the ledge as he lectured Aidan on rural warfare.

The rich timbre of the professor’s voice came as the only comfort in the icy cell. Outside in the hallway, a moth flitted over the light fixture, sending a silhouette hurtling along the walls. The shadow darted along vision’s periphery, demanding attention, and adding to the already charged atmosphere. The four men waited for Miro.

Aidan could barely bring himself to look at Markus. The man’s normally stoical composure had always had a calming effect on his cellmates; the olive skin, the wide brow and square chin, reminded Aidan of the warriors they had studied in their history books—forever prepared to make the sacrifice required. Now Markus stood anchored to the prison bars, pitching back and forth with eerie regularity.

More unnerving still, Captain sat splay-legged on the floor, unusually inert, his attention fixed on the tortured man at the bars.

Aidan watched Captain watch over Markus.

The master of his own plane, Alex had freed the valley and swept north, his silver-streaked mane growing wilder as the intensity brewed in his ink-black eyes. ‘...Ah but Aidan, my lad, nothing is new under the sun. The enemy made the same mistake he always does: he underestimated the vengeful resolve of a man forced to choose.’

Aidan dragged his thumb along the scar below his left cheek, long and ragged to the jaw line. An infection of the wound had nearly killed him seven years ago. *You should be grateful*, Captain once said to him. *If I was walking around looking like the poor little rich boy, I'd want someone to kick me in the face.*

*Remind me to send the officers my thanks*, Aidan had replied coolly, even though his memories of that time still had the power to wake him from his sleep. The overcrowding and the death toll, depravation and decay. And the beating that had quickly educated him about the treatment of prisoners of war. Aidan had never expected that the cellblock's foremost troublemaker would be the one to come to his aid; Captain had deflected the soldiers' ire when he had inserted himself into the fray, absorbing the larger part of the violence. In the following weeks, and despite his own wounds, Captain had tended to Aidan through the periods of unconsciousness.

It was a wonder any of them had survived this long.

'Why are we still here?' Aidan hoped he had caught the professor in a moment of clarity. 'They had us packed like rats in these cells and they picked us off one by one. Never even pretended humane conditions, not even when the Committees came. They only put us together in one cell to save time hosing us down. They could've pushed us all off a cliff years ago. Why haven't they? There has to be a reason.'

Alex surprised Aidan when he shrank away. After a long session of hushed debate with himself, the professor crept closer. 'You'll discover the reason one day and you'll judge me.'

The veiled confession would leave Aidan none the wiser.

'I had little choice,' said the professor. 'For the boy and for all of us, I would do it again.'

MIRO'S SMILE said everything. His lip was swollen and the blood smeared across his face, but he smiled in that self-conscious way that buried his enormous brown eyes behind pillowed eyelids and charcoal lashes. Aidan fought down the knot in his throat.

Markus held his brother at arm's length, a sigh bottled until he had completed his inspection.

‘Out with it, boy,’ said Alex. ‘Leave out nothing.’

Collapsing on the ledge, Miro rubbed his ankles where the cuffs had left fresh welts. ‘I thought they were going to lock me up in a broom closet. Turned out I had to clean, I just had to clean the hallways... then Heller got bored and left me alone. I think he dosed off for a while—’

‘Slow down.’ Using a soaked rag, Markus began rinsing the blood from Miro’s neck and the matted hair at the back of his head. ‘Start over. Where did they take you?’

‘Upstairs.’

‘Upstairs?’ said Aidan. In the nine years of their imprisonment—seven for himself—only the professor had ever seen The Square’s upper level.

‘I had to mop the courtyard, and all the hallways outside the rooms,’ said Miro. ‘I think it was outside the soldiers’ quarters. I had to wash down the windows too, but there wasn’t anyone inside.’

‘There’s a first,’ said Markus.

‘Don’t they have a janitor for that?’ said Aidan.

‘Heller said—’ Miro began.

‘The new one is Heller?’ said Aidan.

Miro nodded. ‘He said the new recruits had to do it. I heard him talking to another one. Said the colonel had ordered for the place to be gleaming by the time he got back from his trip.’

‘Dorien wasn’t around—now it’s making sense,’ said Markus. ‘If the colonel had been there, they’d never have taken a prisoner up. Where was Faska?’

‘He left. Heller said he’d just sold Faska a batch of the good stuff. That means drugs, right?’

‘Did you get a look outside, Miro?’ Alex leaned in, a twinkle in his eye.

‘I did. The ground was dry.’

‘Excellent,’ said the professor as Markus attempted to examine his brother’s finger.

Miro flinched away, cradling his hand protectively.

‘At least let Aidan take a look at it,’ said Markus.

Aidan’s brief stint as a volunteer at his neighbourhood clinic made him the resident health specialist, but their medical options here had boiled down to one cardinal rule: *keep it clean*.

‘I rinsed it under the tap, it’s fine,’ said Miro. ‘Markus, it’s about ten times warmer outside than it is in here. It’s spring, it must be spring. It was so quiet, peaceful even. And warm. It made me wish I could lay there in the sun and sleep for days.’

‘Well, the work has done you good. The colour’s back in that pretty face.’ Markus grabbed Miro’s head with one hand and squeezed his cheeks between the fingers of the other. The siblings tussled until Miro was trapped and wheezing.

In his corner, Captain tugged repeatedly on his beard, a silent observer until now. ‘How did you manage to see outside?’ he said.

‘The entrance was open,’ said Miro, freeing himself. ‘And on the second floor there’s a terrace between the north and south wings. I got a quick look at the grounds in the rear.’ He turned to Alex. ‘The garden’s all dried mud and covered in litter—we’ll need at least two days to clean it up.’

‘I’m considering beetroot bulbs this year,’ mused the professor.

‘We’ve already tried beetroot,’ said Miro. ‘Remember how it—’

‘Guards at the entrance?’ said Captain.

Miro wiped the amusement from his face. ‘None at the entrance, but there was a guardhouse out front at the main gate.’

‘One man?’

‘Two. Maybe three.’

‘It’s either one or the other.’

‘Two then,’ said Miro. ‘Two for the most part.’

‘How far out?’

‘About 20 paces, I think.’

‘Any others?’

‘I heard voices coming from a room upstairs... The south wing, I think. It sounded like someone talking on a radio.’

‘A shortwave radio?’

‘It may have been...’ Miro glanced at his brother.

Captain pushed on. ‘What about outside? Any patrols?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t think so or you don’t know?’

Aidan chewed on his fingernails. He knew how it felt to be on the receiving end of Captain’s glare. The hardened skin under the man’s eyes always gave the impression that he had just been in a fight; and more



often than not, he had. Captain would gladly take a beating for any man present, but patience had no part in the arrangement.

Miro picked at a scab on his wrist. 'I don't know.'

Captain pressed his palms together. 'This is important, Miro. Did you see the men at the guardhouse look up or speak to someone on the upper floor? Maybe a sniper in the turret, like the ones out back?'

'Not that I remember.'

'Think, Miro.'

'They may have. I can't be sure...'

'You were too busy making the tiles gleam.'

Miro's cheeks flushed red. 'Heller was right there watching me.'

'When he wasn't *dosing*.' Captain massaged his temples. 'What about the broom closet? What did you see?'

'Mops, brooms—'

'*Besides* mops and brooms.'

'There was a smell, probably disinfectant,' Miro said weakly.

'Pliers, hammers, crowbars, wrenches... Anything you can cut with?'

'There wasn't much time to look around—'

'All it takes is *one* look, boy, *one* look around.' Captain shot to his feet and began to pace. 'Why do I have to tell you these things? Why is it so difficult? Don't you care? Tell me. Don't you want to get out of here? You're given this chance—it's just *handed* to you—and what do you do? Nothing!'

'Calm down, old man,' said Markus. 'We're all in the same hole.'

He had used the wrong word—Aidan knew it before Markus did.

'*Calm* isn't going to get us out of this *hole*!' Captain roared, the veins bulging in his forehead. 'Why are you all so afraid of trying? They're still here, and they're not letting us out! They could put us down like dogs tomorrow. They're just biding their time, waiting for us to die. They're *waiting for us to die*! Why do I have to keep reminding you?'

The acid rose in Aidan's throat.

'We haven't had new prisoners in seven years. Maybe they've given up out there.' Captain pointed beyond the wall of their crypt. 'Maybe they're all dead.' His tone sobered and his limp grew more pronounced. 'Maybe there's nothing left worth going back to,' said the only man among them who had a wife waiting for him.

‘Cap, don’t...’ Markus began but his friend would hear none of it.

Staggering into the corner, Captain tore off his shirt and threw himself onto the floor and into the physical training that made up most of his days. He pumped his arms, leveraging his wiry frame so that the muscles in his back writhed under skin riddled with scars and hollows.

The training had kept him alive, he liked to tell them, but they all knew differently. Since his first days at The Square, his temper had made him an easy target for the guards’ brutality. When the floggings failed to curb his aggression, the soldiers devised new ways to test his limits. It worked to his advantage—an almost suicidal stubbornness had posed as a challenge to his captors and, ironically, had saved the man’s life.

Markus eased himself down from the ledge. The thin lines around his eyes creased, a strong profile shifting in subtle degrees to something malleable.

Aidan watched Markus watch over Captain.

‘No one here disagrees with you,’ said Markus. ‘But tell me something—what was the boy supposed to have done? Disarm the guards? Shoot his way out and run to the city for reinforcements? Or maybe he should have broken us out first and together we’d scale the barbed wire fence. There’s nothing but open fields out there—you should know that better than any of us. They have ten different ways of bringing us down before we reach cover. There’s no way, Cap.’

Captain pushed himself off the ground and marched the length of the cell to the prison bars. He turned to Miro. ‘What about this?’ He swung up his arm to point skywards.

Miro frowned a question mark.

‘The hatch!’ railed Captain.

Their eyes travelled upwards.

In the ceiling, centred just inside the bars, lay an iron panel one foot wide and two feet long. Aidan had forgotten about the hatch but never Captain. Every few months he found renewed hope and, climbing the cell bars to reach it, he pushed against the plank as if its constitution may have changed overnight.

Captain took a calming breath. ‘Miro... try to think back...’

‘I saw it.’ The boy’s eyes widened. ‘I saw it. Heller kept telling me not to go into the officers’ wing—I had to clean every hallway but that one. He said it over and over. So when I was on the second floor on the opposite side, I took a look down there. The last room in that wing must be right above this cell...’ His voice trailed off.

‘And?’ said Captain.

‘...and under the window there was this thing... I thought it was just a doormat pushed to the side.’

Captain grabbed Miro’s shoulders. ‘Good, now can you remember a handle or a latch? Anything—’

Miro shook his head. ‘It was too far away to see.’

‘That’s all right. You’ll get a better look next time.’

‘Come on,’ said Markus. ‘What’s the likelihood it’s not padlocked?’

‘I’ve seen these hatches before, Markus. There’s nothing to attach a lock to. Listen, did your division ever pull duty in Masta?’

‘Once.’

‘Those old buildings were just like this one,’ said Captain. ‘We used to go drinking in the empty ones between shifts. The lower levels were servants’ quarters—they must’ve used the hatch to throw down laundry or bring up supplies. No windows, just like here, so we could get loud and no one would hear us. Whoever was on lookout upstairs would yell down through the hatch if anyone was coming. I’ve seen the mechanism up close—it’s just a lever, like the arm on a clock. Three o’clock is open, nine o’clock is closed.’

Captain turned to study his favourite stone in the wall. Among all the irregularly shaped stones, some no larger than a fist, it had four clearly defined corners and a height equal to its width. The square stone had served as the blue print for every escape plan they had ever concocted. Someone had carved an x in the upper right hand corner, representing the northeasterly location of their prison cell in The Square.

Markus sighed; Captain raised a hand, asking for patience. ‘We know there’s another guardhouse at the back, and two snipers in the corner turrets.’ He pointed to the two west-facing corners of the square. ‘But if we could get through the hatch, it would give us access to the front entrance and the option of a night time escape. We can avoid the

guards at the front gate altogether... sneak past along the wall. On the north side, there's a blind spot, here, behind the garbage bins. If we can get to that blind spot, we'd have all the time we need to dig under the fence before anyone knew we were missing.'

Aidan found himself leaning in. 'The north side is closest to the tree line.'

'Yes, it is,' said Captain.

'What about the dogs?' said Aidan.

'Too far to pick up a scent.'

Markus studied the stone for a drawn-out minute. 'This *plan* of yours is based on your assumption that there's no sniper in the north-east turret.'

'That's the next step.' Captain nodded. 'We need to scout that corner of the building to make sure. The boy says it's spring, so we should get our chance any day now. What do you say? Are you ready for some action, Kaval?'

Captain had hailed Markus by his family name, as he occasionally did when calling upon their shared military background, but Markus's gaze remained fixed on the makeshift map.

'I won't be asking him to do anything stupid,' said Captain. 'Just what he can.'

Miro's head went up. 'Are you talking about me?'

Ignoring his brother, Markus made his way to the toilet where he set about working the water into his thick beard. 'You're dreaming about a three hundred year old hatch that's probably bolted shut.'

'It may be, and it may not.' Captain limped towards him. 'They're good odds for men rotting in a hole for nine years, eating shit and waiting to die. Better odds than when they came at us with tanks and all we had left were rubber bullets.'

'Don't talk to me about odds, friend,' said Markus.

'How about the odds of us walking out of here free men?' Captain stepped to within a breath of Markus's face. 'Do you like those odds?'

'I'm not saying we should ignore an opportunity,' said the larger man, assured in his altitude, 'just be clear about the consequences. How's that leg, by the way?'

'Are you saying freedom isn't worth the risk?' said Captain.

‘I’m saying, let’s not get carried away with this fantasy of escape when it’s probably the last time the boy’s going up there. Who’s to say Heller will be back for him?’

‘Heller said.’ It was Miro. All eyes shifted to him. ‘Heller said something to the other guard that sounded like he’d be taking me up again.’

Aidan noted the drop in Markus’s shoulders.

‘What did he say, son?’ whispered the professor.

‘The exact words,’ said Captain.

Miro swallowed. ‘He said, “Why should I spend my Saturdays mopping floors when I can get the cell rat to do it?”’

‘That’s it, then,’ said Captain. ‘Now all we need is to get out into the garden.’

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A.E. Nasr is a Lebanese-born novelist and magazine editor based in Dubai. Her debut novel, *MIRO*, is inspired by the classics as well as the author's first-hand experiences in a country under siege.

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