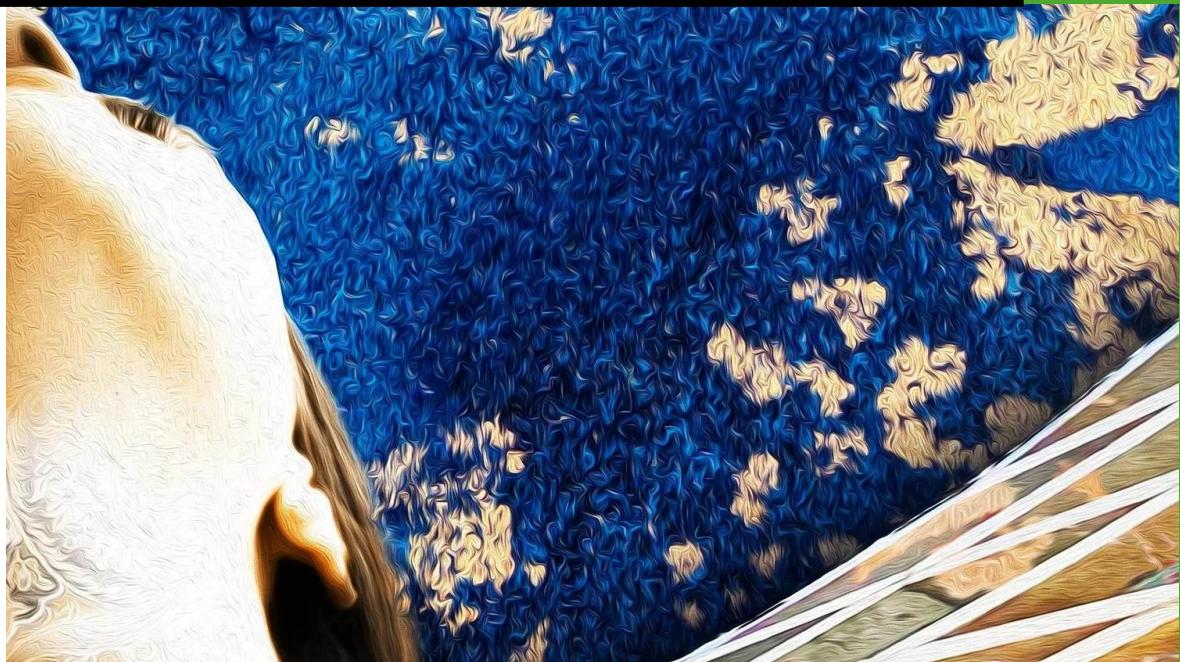


Yuri Melnikov

The Persian Notebook: Architects of Shadow



Isfahan

Shiraz

Fordow

Operation “Stray Dog”

takoekino.pro

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Isfahan

Aleph (א): The Transcript

CASE FILE No. 788-AT/IRGC-ISF

RECORD OF INTERROGATION

Date: 24 Ordibehesht 1402 (May 14, 2023)

Time Start: 14:47

Time End: 15:58

Location: Counterintelligence Directorate of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Isfahan. Interrogation Room No. 4.

Subject: Musavi, Zahra, daughter of Ali.

Interrogator: Major Mohsen Karimi, Directorate Investigator.

Present:

The Investigator.

The Secretary (recording the minutes).

Musavi, Z.

(The room is sterile. Beige walls. A metal table. Three chairs. On the table: a switched-off voice recorder, a glass of water for the subject. An air conditioner hums monotonously, maintaining an unnatural chill. There is no smell. None at all. This in itself is unnerving.)

Investigator: Bismillāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm. In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Dr. Musavi, let us begin. State your full name.

Musavi: Zahra Musavi, daughter of Ali.

Investigator: Date and place of birth?

Musavi: 25 Bahman 1361. The city of Shiraz.

Investigator: Age?

Musavi: Forty years old.

Investigator: Marital status?

Musavi: Married.

Investigator: Husband's name and occupation?

Musavi: Amirkhan Musavi. Head of Security for the Isfahan Municipality.

Investigator: Children?

Musavi: Two daughters. Nasrin, seventeen, a high school student. And Zeynab, twelve, a middle school student.

Investigator: Education?

Musavi: Graduated from the University of Tehran, Faculty of Physics, Department of Nuclear Physics. Doctorate in Plasma Physics.

Investigator: The year you defended your dissertation?

Musavi: Thirteen eighty-seven. By your calendar, two thousand and eight.

Investigator: The topic of your dissertation?

Musavi: "Modeling Plasma Instabilities in Tokamaks Using the Gyrokinetic Approximation Method."

Investigator: Current place of employment?

Musavi: The Nuclear Technology Research Center, Isfahan. Laboratory Number Four.

Investigator: Position?

Musavi: (*The investigator fingers his tasbih—prayer beads.*) Senior Research Fellow.

Investigator: Your supervisor?

Musavi: Dr. Hassan Rezai.

Investigator: Do you wear the hijab out of conviction or out of necessity?

Musavi: (*A pause*) As required by the law of the Islamic Republic.

Investigator: That is not an answer to the question.

Musavi: I abide by all the laws.

Investigator: How often do you pray?

Musavi: Five times a day, when my work allows.

Investigator: Is there a prayer room in the laboratory?

Musavi: Yes. A separate one for women.

Investigator: Who are the other women working in your laboratory?

Musavi: I am the only one.

Investigator: Does that not create difficulties?

Musavi: I am used to it.

Investigator: We see a note in your file about an internship abroad.

Musavi: Yes. From 2009 to 2011. In France. At the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission, the Saclay center.

Investigator: Have you maintained contact with any of your French colleagues since returning to your homeland? Name them. Dr. Philippe Dubois? Dr. Agnès Fournier?

Musavi: All contact was of an exclusively scientific nature and was terminated upon my return to Iran, as the protocol required. Our email correspondence concerned only the finalization of a joint publication on the behavior of uranium isotopes in a gaseous medium at supercritical speeds. The last email was sent in 2012.

Investigator: Are you saying that reality consists of protocols, Doctor? Or that protocols are reality?

Musavi: I am saying that I followed procedure. Reality is the aggregate of physical laws. Protocols are merely a faint reflection of them in the social sphere. An attempt to bring order to chaos.

Investigator: An interesting philosophy... Your colleague, Rustam Yazdi. How long did you know him?

Musavi: Since I first joined the laboratory. About ten years.

Investigator: Describe your relationship.

Musavi: Collegial. We worked on adjacent aspects of the cascade centrifuge. Sometimes we would discuss the Helmholtz equations. Sometimes we would drink tea in the canteen. He had good taste in dates.

Investigator: Were you close?

Musavi: Proximity is not a category from the world of physics. Our orbits intersected at strictly designated points. We were not friends. We were functions in the same system.

Investigator: When was the last time you saw him?

Musavi: Last Thursday. At the end of the workday. He was leaving a little earlier than I was. He said “Khodahafez” (*Persian for “God protect you,” a farewell*). As usual.

Investigator: Did you notice anything unusual in his behavior in recent weeks?

Musavi: (*After a pause*) He was more silent than usual. Distracted. Once, I saw him sketching on a napkin, not formulas, but something that resembled a Fibonacci spiral, only with an error in the sequence. It was irrational. Not like him.

Investigator: Irrational. (*He makes a barely perceptible note on a sheet of paper. The pen makes no sound.*) Dr. Musavi, do you consider yourself a loyal citizen of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Musavi: My work is the best proof of that. I serve my country using the knowledge it gave me.

Investigator: Your work is splitting the atom. The atom, as you know, can be used for creation and for destruction. It all depends on the intention. The same is true of loyalty.

Musavi: My intentions are pure. As a vacuum in a centrifuge.

(The investigator puts down the pen and picks up the tasbih again. He leans forward slightly. The room becomes even quieter, as if the hum of the air conditioner has muffled itself to listen. The investigator's voice, until now as monotonous as a metronome, takes on a different, metallic edge.)

Investigator: Dr. Musavi, have you ever consumed alcohol or illicit substances?

(The question lands in the silence like a drop of acid on marble. Absurd, out of place, insulting. Her fingers, resting on the table, grow cold. She looks at the investigator, trying to solve this logical anomaly, to find the reason for such a failure in the protocol.)

Musavi: No. Never. It is haram. And it is... illogical.

(The investigator does not react to her answer. He does not blink. His gaze is like a camera lens, dispassionate and all-seeing. He holds the pause, letting the first question do its destructive work, and then, without changing his tone, delivers the second blow.)

Investigator: How did you know that Rustam Yazdi was murdered?

Musavi: *(A long pause. She mechanically adjusts her maghnaeh—a part of her hijab.)* I... I never said that.

Investigator: But you suspect it.

Musavi: *(Barely audible)* Yes.

Investigator: On what grounds?

Musavi: Intuition. Just intuition.

Investigator: A woman's intuition? Is there a place for intuition in nuclear physics?

Musavi: They are different things.

Investigator: The interrogation is suspended at 15:58. Dr. Musavi, you will remain here. We will have additional questions.

Time in the room stops.

Bet (ج): Vacuum and the Poems of Hafez

9 Ordibehesht 1402 (April 29, 2023)

The day began with an equation. Even before the muezzin's call to morning prayer, the azan, echoed from the turquoise minaret of the Imam Mosque, Zahra's mind was already assembling partial differential equations that described the behavior of plasma. It was her ritual, her way of imposing order on the universe before the universe could impose its chaos on her. She lay in bed beside the steady-breathing body of her husband, Amirkhan, and mentally spun uranium hexafluoride in a simulation, separating valuable isotopes from worthless ones, like sifting wheat from chaff.

Home was the first cell. Here, she was a wife and mother. She rose without a sound, put on a house robe over her nightgown, and went to the kitchen. The air smelled of yesterday's rice and rosewater. On the table lay her older daughter Nasrin's textbook, open to a page of English irregular verbs, and next to it, the neatly folded school uniform of her younger daughter, Zeynab. Two daughters—two vectors, pointed in opposite directions. One was a centrifugal force, straining outward, toward forbidden music, encrypted messengers, and a world she'd only seen in films. The other was centripetal, a perfect student, the pride of her school, obedient and predictable as the motion of the planets. Zahra prepared breakfast: lavash bread, cheese, sweet tea. Mechanical movements, refined over years.

The car, her old Peugeot, was the transition zone. Here, in the flow of morning traffic in Isfahan, past ancient bridges and dusty plane trees, she underwent a transformation. Woman, wife, mother—these shells were shed one by one. By the time she reached the facility's first checkpoint, only one entity remained: Dr. Musavi. Physicist. Function.

The laboratory was her sanctuary. Cell number two. A world of pure reason. Here reigned the cold light of fluorescent lamps, the hum of ventilation systems, and the smell of ozone. There was no room for emotions, only data. Her male colleagues nodded to her with restraint, with respect, but always from a distance. She was an anomaly to them: too intelligent, too withdrawn, a woman in a world ruled by men, shattering their conception of the world like a neutron shattering an atomic nucleus. She paid it no mind. Their opinions were just background noise, with no effect on the experiment's results. It wasn't their opinions that were dangerous, but their gazes.

Her workstation was a model of order. Monitors displaying graphs. Stacks of printouts covered in formulas. Perfectly sharpened pencils. Across the aisle was Rustam Yazdi's desk. His desk was always a creative mess: books on philosophy sat next to manuals on spectrometry; napkins were scrawled not only with equations but with strange geometric patterns. Rustam was the only one with whom she could speak about more than just work. He could quote Hafez, speculate on the nature of time, and bring dates from home, claiming they were from his grandfather's garden in Yazd. He was... an error in the system. A tolerable error.

That day, his desk was empty.

It was strange. Rustam was never late. By lunchtime, his space was still vacant. Zahra felt a prick of anxiety—an irrational, illogical impulse. She suppressed it. Perhaps he was ill.

The next day, the desk was not just empty. It was steriley clean. The books, the stacks of paper, even the mug that read “I think, therefore I am in a state of superposition” were all gone. As if he had never been there.

Zahra approached the head of the laboratory, Dr. Rezai. He was a short, dry man with eyes that seemed to see the world in the infrared spectrum, noticing only the heat signatures of threats.

“Dr. Rezai, where is Rustam Yazdi?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

Rezai did not look up from his papers.

“Dr. Yazdi has been transferred. An urgent project at another facility.”

“He said nothing. It was so sudden.”

“In our line of work, Dr. Musavi,” Rezai finally looked up, and his eyes held nothing but cold steel, “the most important things always happen suddenly. Return to your work.”

It was an explanation. And at the same time, an order not to ask questions. But Zahra’s logic screamed that there had been a breach of protocol. People didn’t just vanish like that. Not even in their world. They said their goodbyes, handed over their duties. A transfer took weeks to process. This was wrong. The system had failed.

All day, she couldn’t concentrate. The equations blurred. Through the concrete and casings, in the hum of the centrifuges, she thought she heard other voices. She felt her colleagues’ eyes on her—or was she imagining it? Paranoia. An unacceptable variable.

In the evening, when almost everyone had left, she walked over to Rustam’s empty desk. Out of pure curiosity, she told herself. Just to be sure. She pulled open a drawer. Empty. A second one. Empty. In the third, her fingers brushed against something beneath a metal divider. A small piece of paper, folded into a square. Not official letterhead. Torn from a notepad.

She unfolded it. There wasn’t a single word written inside. Only a few lines, drawn in Rustam’s familiar hand.

It wasn’t a text. It was a line from a poem and a series of numbers.

“Where is the house of my friend, O companions?”

And below it:

74.4.12.3_9.1.5.7

A line from Hafez. And a code. A chill seized her. It was a message. But from whom? Her first thought was illogical, panicked: he knew. He knew about the data she had been copying for the man whose real name she had never learned. The man she had only seen twice. But if Rustam knew... No. It was impossible. She had been too careful. Too methodical. Or had she? She felt as if she were standing on the border between two worlds: the world of order and the world of chaos.

She clenched the note in her fist. The paper felt scorching hot. She was no longer just a physicist who had stumbled upon a mystery. She was a spy who had received a message that could be either a key to salvation or a warrant for her own disappearance. And she had no margin for error.

Or Rustam had left it for her.

Gimel (ג): The Crystal Lattice of Loyalty

29 Mehr 1401 (October 21, 2022)

Autumn in Isfahan is a time when the light becomes as fragile as old porcelain, and the air grows thick with the scent of wilting plane trees and golden dust carried from the desert. Zahra loved this season. The equations in her head, usually as sharp and cold as the lines on an oscilloscope, took on color and warmth in October. Returning home, she would feel the logic of the laboratory, a world of predictable trajectories and controlled reactions, slowly dissolve into the viscous, irrational haze of the evening city.

That evening, everything was different.

The rain began suddenly, the way all catastrophes begin—with a barely perceptible change in the usual order of things. First, it was just a few drops on the windshield of her Peugeot, then a dense curtain that transformed the world outside into an impressionist painting. Zahra turned on the wipers. Their measured squeak was like a metronome counting out the beats of someone else's symphony.

The stream of cars on Chaharbagh Avenue had frozen. Not just slowed, as in a normal traffic jam, but stopped dead, as if time itself had thickened and ceased to flow. Ahead, an unnatural silence hung in the twilight air, pierced only by nervous honks and distant, bark-like shouts.

Zahra turned off the radio, where an announcer was cheerfully reporting new successes in agriculture. She peered ahead, trying to break the chaos down into its component parts. People in black uniforms. The Basij. The dull thud of batons against plastic shields. A woman's shriek, cut off on a high note. She saw a single white sneaker roll across the asphalt, and nearby, caught by the wind, a hijab torn from someone's head fluttered—lilac, like the flower of a Judas tree.

Students. Again.

Her fingers clenched the steering wheel in a death grip. It was an abstract picture, a scene from the news that her mind was accustomed to classifying and filing away in a drawer labeled “Society: unpleasant, but distant.” But today, the distance had vanished.

A knock on her side window. It was a police officer. She lowered the glass, and the smell of rain, mixed with something acrid—tear gas—flooded the car.

“Documents,” his voice was tired, mechanical.

She handed him her ID. The officer took the card, held it up to his eyes. His gaze flickered from her photograph to the name of her institution and back. Something in his face changed—indifference was replaced by a shadow of respect. Or perhaps just a different kind of suspicion. He returned the ID.

“My apologies, Doctor. Where are you headed?”

“Home. The Jolfa district.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“From work. The research center.”

He handed back her documents, studying her more closely, as if weighing something.

“You may proceed, Doctor. Be careful.”

Zahra reached for the gearshift, but he didn’t move away. He leaned a little lower, and his voice became quieter, almost confidential.

“I hope your children aren’t involved in this,” the officer nodded toward the chaos behind him. “The youth today don’t understand the consequences.”

The words were not a threat. They were something worse. A statement of fact, a reminder of her vulnerability.

“My children are at home,” she replied, hoping it was true.

Then he stepped back.

Zahra pulled away slowly, maneuvering around a group of Basij who were dragging a young man across the ground. She stared straight ahead, but she didn’t see the road. She saw Nasrin. Her sixteen-year-old daughter. Her fire, her fury, her conviction that the world could be rewritten from a blank slate, like a failed equation. She saw Nasrin with her secret social media accounts, her forbidden music, her burning eyes when she spoke of justice—a word that, in Zahra’s world, had long since become just a variable in other people’s political formulas.

And in that moment, Zahra’s orderly, calibrated universe cracked.

All her life, she had believed—or forced herself to believe—that her work, her genius, served a great purpose. The creation of a shield that would protect Iran. That

would give her daughters a future, security, pride. But now, watching the suppression of this desperate, youthful rebellion, she understood with terrifying clarity: the shield she was helping to forge was not only turned outward. It was also turned inward. She was building the world's strongest fence, but in reality, she was forging the bars of a cage in which her own children would have to live. Her work was giving power to those who dragged boys across the asphalt and tore hijabs from girls who could have been her Nasrin.

That evening, in her soul, in its most protected chamber, a quiet, invisible phase transition occurred. Just as water under ultra-high pressure transforms into ice VI, with a completely different crystal lattice, so her loyalty, while remaining outwardly the same, changed its internal structure.

She had almost cleared the cordoned-off area when her gaze caught a figure on the sidewalk. A man. He was standing slightly apart from the chaos, under the shade of a plane tree, and he wasn't looking at the protesters. He was looking at her. At her car.

He was not participating. Not sympathizing. He was analyzing. He wore a nondescript dark coat, had a calm, almost academic face, and eyes that didn't just see, but read information.

Where had she seen him before? Her memory, usually as precise as a Swiss watch, failed her. A conference in Tehran? No. The university? No, not there either. But the feeling of recognition was real, physical, like an electric shock.

The light turned green. She moved forward, but couldn't tear her eyes from the rearview mirror. The man did not move, continuing to watch her. Then he took out his phone and began to type something.

Zahra pressed the accelerator. For the first time in years, the equations in her head were silent. Their place had been taken by a single question, as cold and heavy as lead: if the trajectory you are on leads to the disintegration of everything you hold dear, is deviation not the only correct solution?

At home, Nasrin was sitting over her textbooks. Innocent. Safe. This time.

“How was your day?” Zahra asked, trying to keep her voice normal.

“Fine. Physics, chemistry, literature. Boring.”

“You didn't go out?”

Nasrin looked up, and something flickered in her eyes—not a lie, but an omission.

“Only to the library. With Maryam.”

The library. Or the rally. How could she know? How could she protect her? How could she explain that some experiments cannot be repeated, because they destroy the object of study itself?

Physics taught that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. But she had forgotten another law—the one about increasing entropy. The one that states that any closed system tends toward chaos.

Dalet (Τ): Tea and French Lace

30 Mehr 1401 (October 22, 2022)

“Zahra-jan, Reza and his wife, and Morteza and his family are coming over this evening,” Amirkhan said, fastening the cuffs of his shirt without looking at his wife. The morning light slanted through the blinds, striping his face with parallel lines. “Wear something more modest, janam. Appropriate. A long dress, a thicker headscarf. You know they hold very traditional views.”

Appropriate. The word hung in the bedroom air like an equation demanding to be solved. Zahra knew its meaning: a black chador instead of her usual manteau, no jewelry, minimal makeup. The transformation from a doctor of physics into a shadow, a function of service. She, Dr. Musavi, whose mind penetrated the secrets of the atomic nucleus, had to become the faceless function of “hostess” for men whose greatest intellectual achievement was knowing how to properly file a report. A dull, cold wave of indignation rose in her chest, but she only nodded.

“Of course,” she replied, continuing to brush her hair.

But the mirror reflected a woman she barely recognized. That other Zahra, the one who had defended her dissertation with honors, who had argued with Professor Martineau about the nature of quantum fluctuations, seemed like a character from someone else’s biography.

The day dragged on like a viscous fluid in a centrifuge. At work, she performed her calculations mechanically, but her thoughts kept returning to the previous evening. To the man under the plane tree. To the feeling of recognition without memory—like a *déjà vu* in reverse.

By seven in the evening, the house was ready for the guests. The living room was divided by an invisible boundary: the sofas for the men were closer to the television, the armchairs for the women by the window. In the kitchen, a tray held tea glasses in golden holders, small bowls of local gaz candy, and pistachios from Kerman. Every detail was in its place, like atoms in a crystal lattice.

Reza and his wife, Maryam, were the first to arrive. Reza was Amirkhan’s deputy, a man with a face nature had designed for mistrust: narrow eyes, thin lips, and a habit

of squinting even in dim light. Maryam was his opposite: buxom, loud, with gold bracelets that jangled with every movement.

“Salam, Zahra-jan!” Maryam embraced her, enveloping her in a cloud of cloying perfume. “How are your girls? Is Nasrin still such a rebel?”

Zahra smiled the rehearsed smile she kept ready for such occasions.

“They’re growing up. Nasrin is preparing for her exams.”

Next came Morteza, with his wife Fatima and their teenage son. Morteza worked in cybersecurity, a man who saw threats in every byte of data. Fatima was quieter than Maryam, but her silence held a certain vigilance—she noticed everything, cataloged everything.

The men occupied their territory. They turned on the television—Persepolis was playing against Esteghlal. Amirkhan poured tea, Reza was already criticizing the coach, and Morteza checked his phone between comments on the game.

The women settled by the window. Zahra brought the tea and poured it, adding cardamom—exactly two pods to each glass, as her mother-in-law had taught her. A ritual honed to automation.

On one side: male shouts, arguments about offsides and politics, the smell of sweat and confidence. On the other: female chatter, as quiet as the rustle of dry leaves. Talk of children, of market prices, of a new fabric that had arrived at a shop in the bazaar.

“Did you hear about Goli’s daughter?” Maryam began, sipping her tea. “They caught her without a hijab near the university. Now they’re in trouble.”

“The youth have completely lost their minds,” Fatima sighed. “My nephew too... well, it doesn’t matter.”

The rest of the conversation flowed predictably: vegetable prices, a new TV series, someone’s wedding, someone’s funeral. Zahra nodded, agreed, refilled the tea. Her mind, accustomed to complex calculations, was bored in this swamp of banalities. She thought of the flawed Fibonacci spiral Rustam had drawn. Of the code in his note.

“And I updated my wardrobe last week,” Maryam suddenly perked up, lowering her voice. “Reza took me to a... special place.”

Fatima leaned closer. Even Zahra found herself listening.

“Can you imagine, a whole underground boutique! French lingerie, Italian dresses. All genuine, not Chinese fakes.”

“How do they get it in?” Fatima asked. “That’s contraband.”

Maryam smiled mysteriously, enjoying the attention.

“Reza says they have their own channels. Something... diplomatic. Certain people fly back and forth, carrying it in their luggage. For the wives of the big bosses. They have connections at the embassies. They bring it in diplomatic pouches, which don’t get searched.”

“And is it expensive?” Fatima inquired.

“Oh, yes! But it’s worth it. Handmade lace, silk...” Maryam rolled her eyes dreamily. “I bought a set the color of Burgundy wine. Reza was thrilled.”

And in that moment, between the words “diplomatic channels” and “Burgundy wine,” a switch seemed to flip in Zahra’s memory. The revelation didn’t come in a flash, but like a photograph slowly developing in a chemical bath.

Paris. Charles de Gaulle Airport. February 2014

She was returning from a conference, had missed her flight, and had to book the next one. Economy class was full, but she got lucky—a window seat, and next to her...

A man with an academic face, engrossed in his laptop. She caught a glimpse of the screen—tanks. He was playing World of Tanks. It was so unexpected, so... human. A respectable man in an expensive suit, enthusiastically driving pixelated tanks across virtual battlefields.

“Excuse me,” she couldn’t help herself then, “is that World of Tanks?”

He looked up, slightly embarrassed.

“You know the game?”

“I play sometimes. When I need a distraction from work. I have a T-34-85.”

His face lit up with a smile—that special smile that appears when one finds a kindred spirit in an unexpected place.

“A Jagdpanther—a ‘tank hunter’,” he replied with pride. “Just bought it. You’re a physicist, aren’t you? I saw your bag from the conference.”

Jagdpanther. The name echoed faintly in her memory, like the sound of a distant explosion. It had been her first serious vehicle in the game. She had bought it a year earlier, in 2012, in Sarov. During that internship at the Russian nuclear center, about which her official file contained only three lines. Long, lonely evenings in the closed city, snow outside the dormitory window, and virtual battles as the only escape from the oppressive silence and the constant feeling of being watched. It was there, in the heart of a foreign nuclear program, that she, an Iranian physicist, had chosen the German tank destroyer for its precision and elegant engineering.

But after returning to Iran, everything changed. That period of her life had to be sealed off, stored in the furthest compartment of her memory. She had «forgotten» the password to her first account, the way one forgets an uncomfortable dream. She

created a new one and switched to the Soviet T-34-85. It seemed more... appropriate. Safer. And so, German precision was replaced by Soviet reliability. But she didn't mention this to Mr. Fakhrabadi. She just smiled back at him, as if the name Jagdpanther was just one of many in the game's endless catalog.

They talked for almost the entire flight. About tank battles and shell ballistics, about the physics of armor penetration and optimal angles of attack. He said he worked in a trade mission. Import-export. Textiles. He had a slight accent—not quite Iranian, as if he had lived abroad for a long time.

“The game is a perfect model,” he said somewhere over Istanbul. “Limited resources, the need for strategic thinking, understanding the enemy’s weak spots. Just like in life.”

He introduced himself. Mr. Fakhrabadi.

But that wasn't what she remembered most. It was how he was met at the airport.

He wasn't just met. He was met by a man holding a sign that read “Diplomatic Service.” They walked past the long line for passport control, past customs, and disappeared through the doors of the VIP lounge. No inspection. No questions.

And now, ten years later, this man with whom she had discussed virtual tank battles was standing in the rain, watching the protest dispersal. Watching her.

“Zahra-jan, you aren’t listening!” Maryam’s voice brought her back to the present. “I’m asking if you’d like to visit that shop too.”

“What? No, thank you. I have everything I need.”

But now she lacked the most important thing—an understanding of why a man who played with tanks at thirty thousand feet had been in the right place at the right time. And why he had been looking specifically at her.

A roar erupted from the living room—someone had scored a goal. The men shouted, argued. The world was divided into those who cheered and those who cursed the referee.

And Zahra sat between two worlds—between the lace of contraband lingerie and virtual tank battles—feeling invisible threads begin to tighten around her, forming a pattern she could not yet decipher.

The tea in her glass had grown cold. The cardamom had settled at the bottom, like heavy isotopes in a centrifuge.

“Limited resources, the need for strategic thinking, understanding the enemy’s weak spots,” she recalled his words. Now she understood: he hadn’t been talking about the game.

He (ه): The Tank Hunter

6 Aban 1401 (October 28, 2022)

Friday in Iran is a pause. A day when time slows its pace, submitting to a different rhythm: not the hum of centrifuges, but the call of the muezzin from the minaret of Isfahan's Jameh Mosque. It is a day for family, a day when the crystal lattice of society becomes, for a moment, visible and orderly.

After her morning prayers, Zahra retrieved her old laptop from the top of the wardrobe—a massive, heavy artifact from a decade past. The dust on its lid lay like volcanic ash on the ruins of Pompeii.

“Where are you off to?” Amirkhan asked, fastening his watch as he prepared for Friday prayers at the mosque.

“To Naqsh-e Jahan Park, with Zeynab. She needs some fresh air.”

“You’re taking that data mausoleum for a walk? Why?”

“I want to reread drafts of some old papers. Something for my current research. There were ideas... that I abandoned. Perhaps I shouldn’t have.”

“In the park?” His eyebrows rose with that particular blend of disbelief and condescension men reserve for a woman’s whims.

“Zeynab will play. I’ll have some time.”

Amirkhan shrugged. To him, it sounded like another of her physics abstractions, bearing no relation to the real world where one had to pay for electricity and water and ensure one’s daughters did their homework.

“As you wish. Just don’t sit with it the whole time. Zeynab wants to feed the ducks.”

On a Friday morning, the park was like a Persian carpet woven from a hundred living threads. Families spread tablecloths on the grass, children chased pigeons, and old men played backgammon in the shade of the plane trees. The air smelled of jasmine, cotton candy, and the damp earth near the fountains. Zahra chose a bench set slightly apart, by the rose bushes.

“Mama, I’m going over to the girls, see them, by the swings,” Zeynab, whose face was the embodiment of pure, undistorted geometry, pointed a finger at a group of her peers.

“Go on, my sweet. Just stay where I can see you.”

Zeynab ran off. Zahra was left alone. She was a mother watching her daughter. A perfect disguise. She opened the laptop. The old version of Windows seemed to take an eternity to load. Every turn of the cooling fan sounded deafeningly loud to her.

On the desktop, among folders with names like *Plasma_Instabilities_2011* and *Tokamak_Simulations*, was a shortcut icon depicting a tank—*World of Tanks*. A portal to another world, to a simulacrum of reality where she had once found an escape.

She launched the game. The interface was as familiar as an old, forgotten formula. A field for a username and password. She entered the credentials for her old account, *NeutronStar_7*. The system replied: “Incorrect username or password.” She tried again. And again. The memory that held the most complex equations refused to yield this simple combination. Perhaps the account had been deleted for inactivity. Ten years was an entire epoch in the digital world.

She would have to find another way in. She clicked “Register.” She created a new identity. *Zahra_K_1983*. A name, an initial, a year of birth. Minimum information, maximum truth. The best lie is one that is nearly indistinguishable from the truth.

She entered the game. In the garage stood a basic, pathetic Tier I tank. It didn’t matter. She wasn’t interested in combat. She was interested in the list. The catalog of players. An endless list of names, a library of shadows.

She opened the search. What was she looking for? A ghost from a decade ago. A name similar to “Fakhrabadi.” She tried variations: *Fahrabad*, *Fahrabadi*, *FahrabadyFer*... Nothing. Then she remembered—*Jagdpanther*. He had been proud of that machine. A search by vehicle... by registration date...

She changed tactics. Instead of a name, she typed the tank’s name into the search bar. *Jagdpanther*. The list was enormous. Thousands of players owned this German tank destroyer. It wasn’t looking for a needle in a haystack; it was looking for a needle in a mountain of needles. She began to scroll through the list, page after page. *PanzerKiller_Ali*. *DesertFox_66*. *Reza_Sniper*. The names flashed by, blurring into a meaningless mass. Her brain, trained to find patterns, found nothing.

She felt like an astronomer searching for a faint gravitational anomaly in a cluster of millions of stars. The results were nil. Hundreds of players with similar names, but none of them resonated.

Maybe he had changed his name? Or abandoned the game as well? The thought was cold and clammy. She was looking for a sign, but what if the sign no longer existed? What if she was interpreting random noise as a meaningful message? It was a trap many minds had fallen into—seeing a system where only chaos reigned.

“Mama, what are you doing?”

Zeynab’s voice was so close and unexpected that Zahra started and slammed the laptop shut with such force that the plastic cracked. Her heart plummeted into a void. She had been so engrossed in her search that she hadn’t noticed her daughter approach and look over her shoulder.

“Zeynab! You scared me, azizam!”

“But that’s... that’s a computer game? You play games?” Her daughter’s voice was a mixture of shock and admiration. As if she had discovered her mother was a secret superhero.

“I...” Zahra gathered the fragments of her composure. “I just stumbled upon an old game. I wanted to remember why I used to like it. Silly, isn’t it?”

“Show me! Please, show me! The boys at school are always talking about it, but they won’t show the girls!”

Zahra opened the laptop. Her hands trembled slightly.

“It’s... a very old game. I haven’t played in a long time. I just saw it and was curious why I once liked it. It’s like... rereading an old book.”

“Can you show me? What kind of tanks are there?”

“There are tanks from different countries. Here are the Soviet ones, the American ones, the German ones... Here’s a list of players. You can choose any tank and...”

“Why do some players have such strange names?”

“People choose pseudonyms. Like... like poets in the old days. To be someone else.”

“Like Hafez? His name wasn’t really Hafez, was it?”

“Shams-ud-Din Mohammad. Hafez is a nickname. ‘The Guardian,’ one who knows the Quran by heart.”

She spoke, while her cursor frantically moved across the list left on the screen. And as she explained the difference between heavy and medium tanks to her daughter, her gaze caught on a line.

JagdpanFer_83

The name was inaccurate. A typo or a deliberate distortion. Fer instead of Fakhr. But it was too close to be a coincidence. 83. His year of birth? Or just a number? Next to the name was an avatar—a tiny image, a pixelated mosaic. But even in that low resolution, she recognized him. The faint outline of his face, the line of his jaw, the calm gaze. It was him. The ghost from the plane. The oracle in the rain.

“Mama, can I have some ice cream?” Zeynab tugged at her sleeve, her world simple and made of desires that could be fulfilled. “Pistachio! Or saffron!”

Relief washed over Zahra like a wave.

“Of course, janam. Of course.”

She exited the game, closed the laptop.

They walked to the bastani stall, Zeynab chattering about school, her friends, an upcoming math test. Zahra nodded, smiled, but her mind remained there, in the digital space where the hunter had noted the appearance of new prey. Or perhaps, had recognized the old.

Zeynab was choosing between pistachio and saffron ice cream. The sun was setting, painting the fountains the color of molten copper. Somewhere in the distance, a muezzin began the call to evening prayer.

“Mama, why do people play at war?” Zeynab asked, tasting her ice cream.

“To learn not to fight in reality.”

“But doesn’t the game teach you to fight better?”

“A paradox, isn’t it? We study what we want to avoid... Or to fight and win.”

“Mama, did you win? In the game?”

“What? No, azizam. I haven’t even started playing.”

“But you will?”

Zahra looked at her daughter—innocent, pure, full of faith in the world’s justice.

“Perhaps,” she answered. “Sometimes you have to play, even when you don’t know the rules.”

Vav (I): The Geometry of Fear

10 Aban 1401 (November 1, 2022)

Memory is also a laboratory, where the past can be analyzed again and again in the hope of a new result. That day, long before Rustam Yazdi’s desk became a sterile rectangle of emptiness, the break room had smelled of strong tea and anxiety. An advance IAEA report lay on the table, its pages, riddled with diplomatic phrasing, resembling a map of a minefield.

“They are blind,” Dr. Rezai said, setting down his glass with a thud, as if punctuating the end of an argument. “They search for traces of particles, not traces of intent. The Great Satan’s intent is obvious—to leave us defenseless. Israel’s intent is to finish what they started in Natanz.”

“Or that which exists, but is well hidden,” Rustam remarked quietly, not looking up from his teacup.

“Iran has a sovereign right to defend itself. The Great Satan keeps its fleet in the Persian Gulf; the Lesser Satan has the largest nuclear arsenal in the region. Are we supposed to wait, with our hands tied?”

“Their intention is to uphold the treaty we signed,” Rustam countered. “Besides, the geopolitical map has changed. Russia, our situational ally, is bogged down in the Ukrainian steppes. They have no time for us now.”

Rezai smirked, but there was no mirth in his eyes.

“You think in terms of newspaper headlines, Rustam. I prefer history textbooks. During World War II, the USSR was also ‘busy’ fighting Hitler. That didn’t prevent Operation Countenance, when the Red Army occupied the entire north of our country. History teaches us: great powers always find time for smaller nations when their interests are at stake. Allies are a variable. Threats are a constant. The only language well understood in this world is the language of mutually assured destruction.”

The silence that fell in the room was thicker than the lead shielding of a reactor. Zahra, who had only been listening until then, could not hold back.

“Dr. Rezai, let’s assume, hypothetically, that we create a device,” her voice was quieter than she had expected. “Do you really believe we would use it?”

Rezai slowly turned his head toward her. He looked at her with the gaze of an engineer assessing the reliability of a structure.

“A nuclear weapon, Dr. Musavi, is like a prayer. Its power lies not in being uttered, but in the knowledge that it can be. And whether Allah will permit us to speak it aloud... I hope not. But it is better to have a sword and not draw it, than to stand unarmed before wolves.”

“The sword of Damocles,” Zahra muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. A Greek parable. It doesn’t matter.”

That evening at dinner, it was Nasrin who uttered the prayer. She was picking at her saffron rice, staring into her plate, and said it as if she were announcing the weather forecast:

“They came to our school today.”

The knife froze in mid-air.

“Who?”

“From security. The Ettela’at. They took several people right from their classes. Adil, too.”

Amirkhan froze, his spoon in hand. Zahra felt the blood drain from her face.

Adil. Zahra knew the boy—quiet, polite, with the eyes of a medieval poet. He often came over to do homework with Nasrin; they would solve algebra problems together.

“What happened?” her husband asked in the voice he used to give orders.

“They said they were agents. Of Israel and America.” Nasrin looked up, and fear rippled in her eyes. “Baba, Adil barely even knows English. What kind of agent could he be?”

Zahra sat down across from her daughter and took her hands. They were cold, trembling.

“Sometimes... sometimes the authorities see threats where there are none. It’s like... like Brownian motion. Chaotic, unpredictable.”

“But why him?”

Zahra had no answer for that. Or rather, she had one, but she couldn’t say it aloud: because the system feeds on fear, just as a reactor feeds on uranium.

“Alright, Nasrin, but we don’t talk about this at the table,” Amirkhan ended the conversation. “And stay away from this whole affair. Do you understand me?”

“I understand,” Nasrin replied quietly.

That night, Zahra didn’t sleep. The room was filled with silence and her husband’s steady breathing. But in her head, the centrifuges of paranoia were roaring. Adil. A boy who just yesterday was solving quadratic equations had today become a variable in the equation of state security. They were just children. Their rebellion wasn’t treason. It was the growing pain of an organism starved of air. They just wanted a little more freedom than their parents, who had grown up in the shadow of the Islamic Revolution, in a world divided into black and white.

Perhaps it wasn’t they who had lost their way. Perhaps it was us. The whole country. We had spent so long building a fortress to protect ourselves from enemies that we didn’t notice it had become a prison. Saudi Arabia, the bastion of Wahhabism, was opening cinemas and letting women drive. Jordan was balancing tradition and modernity. And us? We were building centrifuges and walls. Enriching uranium and impoverishing souls. We kept reinforcing the walls, having forgotten to open the windows.

The shield she had helped to forge was now descending upon the heads of children. Her children. It was the final straw.

At four in the morning, long before the first call to prayer, when the house was plunged into its deepest phase of sleep, she got up. On tiptoe, she went to the living room. The dusty laptop opened with a faint creak. The screen glowed with a pale light—a window into another world.

The game. The garage. The contact list. She found his name. JagdpanFer_83. The cursor blinked like a lonely heart on an EKG. Her fingers froze over the keyboard. It was a leap into the void. She began to type a private message. Her fingers trembled.

“Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim. I remember you. The flight from Paris, January 2012. We spoke of tank battles and optimal angles of attack. I need to talk. My children... I must protect them. The system devours its own children, like Cronus.”

She deleted the last sentence. Too revealing. Then she rewrote the whole thing: *“Praise be to Allah! I remember you. I want to talk. I want to protect my children.”*

She pressed Enter.

The reply came in seconds.

“Hello. Communicating with me here is not secure. But you can write to me or send useful information that will help our country on the private forum wotrandom.com/forum/mods-world-of-tanks. The login is the same. An invitation is below.”

Zahra stared at the screen. Outside, the eastern sky was beginning to lighten. Soon, the muezzin would sing the Fajr. She closed the laptop, but the forum address was already seared into her memory, like the afterimage of a flash on a photographic plate.

In the bedroom, Amirkhan turned in his sleep, muttering something. She lay down beside him, pretending to be asleep, but her heart was beating with the decay rate of radioactive iodine—fast, erratic, dangerous.

Zayin (ز): The Entropy of Choice

11 Aban 1401 (November 2, 2022)

Isfahan breathed the chill of approaching winter. In the morning light filtering through the dusty windshield of the Peugeot, the world seemed two-dimensional, devoid of volume and warmth. Zahra drove, but she felt less like a driver and more like a particle moving along a predetermined trajectory, and every turn of the wheel seemed a metaphor: right to the laboratory, left to home, straight into the unknown. In the rearview mirror, the faces of other drivers flickered, and in each one, she imagined suspicion. The decision from last night, which had seemed the only correct one, the only way out of a closed labyrinth, now, in the light of day, had taken on an ugly geometry.

Betrayal.

The word had a physical weight. It pressed on her chest, made it hard to breathe. What was betrayal? A shift in the vector of loyalty? Or simply the choice of a different frame of reference, one in which her family was the fixed point, and everything else—country, work, duty—revolved around it? All her life she had constructed equations where the state was a constant. But what if it was a variable, trending toward decay, and dragging everything she held dear along with it?

She imagined them leading her from her home. Amirkhan's face—a mixture of incomprehension, shame, and fear. Her daughters' faces. Nasrin, in whose eyes not terror but a terrible, searing understanding would flash. And Zeynab, whose faith in the order of the world would be shattered forever. That picture was more unbearable than any physical torture.

But what is betrayal? Violating an oath to a state that arrests children? Or silent complicity in creating a weapon that could incinerate those same children? Physics had taught her that every system has a bifurcation point—a moment when the slightest influence determines its future path. She felt that point was near.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

In the laboratory, the hum of the cooling systems absorbed all other sounds, creating a vacuum in which thoughts became deafeningly loud. Rustam approached her desk, holding two cups of tea.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. For Fordow," he said, placing one of the cups in front of her. "A new series of experiments with the cascades."

Fordow. A fortress of a word. A nuclear facility carved into the heart of a mountain, invulnerable to bombs and prying eyes. A symbol of defiance.

"Equipment check?" Zahra asked, wrapping her fingers around the hot glass.

"And souls," Rustam chuckled. "They were talking about the IAEA again yesterday. Sometimes I think we're not arguing about physics, but philosophy."

"And aren't they the same thing?" Zahra looked at him. "We search for the fundamental laws of the universe. They search for proof of our intentions. But how can you measure intention? It's like trying to weigh a shadow."

"They don't want to weigh it, Zahra. They want to be sure the shadow doesn't belong to a monster. They see our science as a library where we collect books. And they're not afraid of the number of volumes, but that in one of those books, we will write a word that will burn the whole world."

"But does the librarian have the right to tell the author what to write about?" she countered. "They don't want to control our actions, but the very possibility of thought. They want our universe to be predictable, a place where no new stars—or black holes—are born."

Rustam took a sip of tea, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the wall.

"Perhaps they are not afraid of the book we are writing, but of the one we have already read, but which they do not know about..."

"Did you read the latest report?" he continued, pushing his empty cup aside. "They write about a 'possible military dimension.' Possible! As if the mere possibility is already a crime. By that logic, every kitchen knife is a potential murder weapon."

“But a knife is made for cutting bread. And centrifuges...”

“And centrifuges are made for separating isotopes. What we do with them after that is a matter of choice. Or do you believe we shouldn’t have a choice?”

After work, Zahra didn’t go home. She turned toward Imam Square and parked a few blocks from the Grand Bazaar.

The bazaar was another world, living by its own laws—a vast, breathing organism where the official reality of Iran thinned, giving way to a labyrinth of shadows and whispers. The scents of saffron, leather, and cardamom mixed with the smell of soldering flux and machine oil drifting from dark alleys. She walked past stalls of turquoise and carpets, past coppersmiths hammering out patterns, delving deeper and deeper, to where they traded not in the past, but in the future. Contraband, illegal, hacked.

She found the right nook by subtle signs: satellite dishes hidden under tarpaulins, the quiet hum of a generator. In a tiny shop cluttered with dismantled phones and coils of wire, sat a young man in his twenties. His fingers flew over the keyboard with the same speed his ancestors’ fingers had woven Persian carpets.

“I need a netbook. A small one. On Linux,” Zahra said, trying to keep her voice steady.

He disappeared into the back of the shop and returned with a nondescript, unmarked box.

“Chinese. Good processor. Encrypted memory. Nineteen million rials.”

Expensive for such a device. But she wasn’t paying for the hardware; she was paying for his silence.

“No papers needed?”

“What papers?” he shrugged. “You bought a phone case from me... if anyone asks.”

He wrapped the netbook in an old newspaper. The transaction took no more than a minute.

Back in the car, she sat for a few moments, holding the bundle. It was warm, almost alive. It wasn’t just a computer. It was an instrument for committing a sin. Or for salvation. A prayer mat and a scaffold, all at once.

She opened the car’s first-aid kit. A white cross on a green background. Bandages, iodine, painkillers—everything needed to treat physical wounds. She pushed aside the sterile packets and placed the netbook at the bottom, under a tourniquet.

Snapping the lid shut, she started the engine. The doubts hadn’t gone away. But now they had a physical weight and a specific location. She had just placed the

disease and the cure in the same box. And now she had to find out which would prove stronger.

At home, Amirkhan was watching the news. The anchor was talking about new sanctions, about attempts to strangle the country's economy. Nasrin was doing her homework. Zeynab was drawing something that looked like an atomic structure—circles within circles.

“How was your day?” her husband asked, his eyes fixed on the screen.

“The usual. Calibration. Measurements. Routine.”

Khet (n): Digital Calligraphy

13 Aban 1401 (November 4, 2022)

History hung in the air. 13 Aban. Student Day. The day the country celebrated the takeover of the American embassy, the expulsion of the “Great Satan” from its home. And on this very day, Zahra Musavi was preparing to knock on its door. The irony was so thick and bitter it could be drunk like strong, unsweetened coffee.

Friday. The house was empty, and the silence within it was not calming but ringing, like the vacuum before an explosion. Amirkhan, having fulfilled his fatherly duty, had taken Zeynab to the zoo. Nasrin, ever elusive like an unstable isotope, had gone to a friend’s house to “do homework.” The lie was obvious—her eyes held that particular excitement not brought on by school assignments—but Zahra didn’t press the issue.

Zahra was alone. She had a couple of hours at her disposal—an eternity and an instant.

The first ritual: burning bridges. She took out the old laptop. Opened the game. Inbox. There it was, the message from JagdpanFer_83, a line of text like a crack in the monolith of her old life. She didn’t reread it. She copied the forum address onto a scrap of paper—wotrandon.com/forum/mods-world-of-tanks—in the calligraphic script she had been taught in school. It was strange how childhood skills returned in moments of extreme stress. Then she methodically deleted all history, cookies, and cache. Digital amnesia, a voluntary lobotomy of the machine.

The second ritual: consecrating the weapon. She took the new netbook from the first-aid kit. It was light, anonymous, devoid of a past. She connected it to the network using the neighbors’ Wi-Fi, whose password Nasrin knew. The first thing she did was install a VPN. Surfshark. The name was absurd, almost childish. But behind the bright shark icon lay a key that unlocked invisible doors on the global network. An invisibility cloak in a world of total surveillance. The irony: a technology created to bypass censorship was now serving to bypass her own conscience. She chose a server in Malaysia. Distant, neutral, unpredictable.

Now she had to choose a location. Not home. Never home. She slipped the netbook into her bag and went out.

A small park near a popular coffee shop on Abbasi Avenue. The perfect spot. She sat on a bench, far enough away not to attract the waiters' attention, but close enough to catch the weak, temperamental signal of their Wi-Fi. Life bustled around her: students laughed, children cried, old men read newspapers. She was invisible in this stream. The perfect disguise.

She opened the netbook. The screen came to life. Connected to the Malaysian server, she typed the copied address into the browser's address bar.

The forum was the epitome of banality. An outdated design, faceless avatars, discussion topics: "Best Camouflages for the IS-7," "How to Increase Shell Damage?" A library where the shelves held not books, but simulacra. The perfect refuge.

Registration. A pseudonym. She thought for a moment. Zahra_K_1982 was compromised. She needed a new one. The name came to her on its own, like the single correct solution to an equation.

Hafiz_114.

Hafez. "The Guardian." One who knows by heart. She was becoming the guardian of a secret. And 114—the number of surahs in the Quran. A perfect, complete number. Her personal code, her talisman in this digital looking-glass world.

She found him, JagdpanFer_83, in the user list. His status was "offline." She opened a private message window. Her fingers froze over the keyboard. What does one write when standing on the threshold of betrayal? She couldn't be emotional. She couldn't be verbose. Only facts. Only intent.

"You know who I am. I work in the program. I believe that under the current circumstances, its development is leading the country to disaster, not security. I can provide information that will help prevent this."

Not a single extra word. As cold as an experimental report. She hit "Send."

The reply came in seconds. Inhuman speed. As if it wasn't a person on the other end, but an algorithm.

"Thank you for your message. Follow the news on this forum."

And that was all.

Zahra sat, staring at the screen. She had expected anything: instructions, questions, even words of support. But not this. Not this dry, impersonal text, like an auto-responder message. The chill of disappointment was replaced by another thought, one that came from the depths of her analytical mind. This wasn't neglect. It was a form of tradecraft. A test. They were testing her patience, her ability to follow orders. The lack of emotion in their response was the most important message of all.

The game was being played by rules she had yet to learn. Just like in physics: sometimes, to understand a system, you have to observe not what is happening within it, but what is absent.

She closed the netbook. Children played around her, old men fed pigeons with crumbs of sangak bread. Normal life flowed on, unaware that on a bench under a cypress tree, an invisible Rubicon had just been crossed.

That evening at dinner, Amirkhan talked about how Zeynab had fed a camel. Zeynab, laughing, showed her drawing—a camel with three humps. Nasrin sat in silence, engrossed in her phone.

“And what were you up to, janam?” Amirkhan asked, serving himself some rice. “It was so quiet at home.”

Zahra looked up at him. Her gaze was calm. Her voice, even.

“Cleaning. I organized the wardrobes. And then I took a little nap. I was terribly tired.”

“And you, Nasrin? How was homework?”

“Fine,” Nasrin picked at her rice, avoiding her mother’s gaze. “We... we finished almost everything.”

“Mama, you’re not eating,” Zeynab observed.

“I’m just tired, azizam. Cleaning... you know how exhausting it is.”

Tet (و): Statistical Noise

29 Aban 1401 (November 20, 2022)

Two weeks—fourteen Earth rotations, three hundred thirty-six hours, twenty thousand minutes of waiting. Zahra checked the forum with a methodicalness bordering on obsession. Every morning, before waking her daughters, and every evening, after Amirkhan had fallen asleep, she performed the ritual: she turned on the netbook, activated the VPN, chose a server somewhere in Oceania, and entered the library of shadows. The wotrandom.com forum lived its own life. Players discussed the merits of German armor and complained about artillery balance. In this stream of banality, there was not a single word for her.

The absence of a signal was worse than any order. It bred entropy in her thoughts. Had they understood her correctly? Or had they considered her a provocateur? Or, worst of all, had her message simply been ignored, drowned in a sea of equally desperate, useless spam? She felt like a radio astronomer who had sent a message to a distant galaxy and was now doomed to listen to the endless cosmic noise, trying to discern a meaningful response within it.

And the noise began to take shape.

First, it was a gray Peykan. She noticed it on Monday on her way to work. It stayed two car lengths behind her, neither overtaking nor falling back. She turned onto a side street, pretending to bypass traffic. It followed her. Her scientific mind immediately offered a dozen logical explanations: coincidence, the same route, paranoia. By evening, the car was gone.

On Wednesday, a white Samand appeared. It followed her from the facility all the way home. She memorized the license plate numbers. 43. The next day, it was gone. On Friday, the gray Peykan was back, but with different plates. She began to see a pattern where there might have been none. Her world, once composed of clear laws and predictable trajectories, was turning into a quantum foam, where the observer's fear created reality itself. Was it surveillance? Or was it her own mind, poisoned by guilt, projecting a threat onto random cars, turning statistical noise into a sinister signal? She didn't know. And this ignorance was the most sophisticated form of torture.

This is a classic symptom, Zahra told herself. Apophenia—the tendency to perceive meaningful patterns in random data. Her brain, trained to find patterns in the chaos of quantum fluctuations, was now finding them in the movement of cars and the gazes of passersby.

“You’ve been a bit on edge lately,” Amirkhan observed at breakfast. “Is everything all right at work?”

“Equipment inspection. An audit is coming up,” she said, sipping her tea, trying to keep her hand from trembling.

“The IAEA again?”

“It’s always them.”

But on this day, the silence was broken.

On the forum’s main page, between the threads “Guide to the T-54” and “Account for Sale,” a new pinned announcement appeared. It was formatted like a clipping from the Western press.

“Reuters: IAEA Demands Immediate and Full Access to Iran’s Nuclear Facilities, Including the Underground Fordow Complex. Agency Sources Claim to Have Data Indicating a Possible Deviation from the Declared Program.”

There was not a single comment under the news. It hung in the void, like a solitary mark on an endless white wall.

Zahra’s heart skipped a beat. This wasn’t an answer. It was a question. An order, disguised as an informational message. They didn’t write to her personally. They changed the surrounding reality for her, adding a single element to it. They didn’t say “bring it.” They said “Fordow.”

The next day in the laboratory, she approached Rustam. He looked tired from his trip, but pleased.

“Rustam, I need your help,” she said, trying to make her voice sound casual, professional. “I’m seeing anomalies in the latest cascade simulations. Small, but systematic deviations in the product output.”

“A miscalculation?” he raised an eyebrow with interest.

“I think it’s the source data. The parameters of the raw material may have changed. Or it’s fluctuations in the power supply that our sensors aren’t catching. I need to compare my models with your latest field data from Fordow. Just to calibrate the system.”

Physics—the universal language of excuses. Rustam nodded, moved aside, giving her access to the documents.

“Good thought. Let’s take a look.”

The data was beautiful in its precision. Enrichment levels: 19.75%, 20.1%, 19.9%—a dance around the 20% red line, beyond which lay the territory of weapons-grade uranium. The number of operating centrifuges: 2,804 IR-1s, 1,044 IR-2ms, 174 IR-6s. The coordinates of the underground halls, the depth, the thickness of the concrete ceilings.

Zahra couldn’t take pictures or write anything down—cameras monitored every movement, every file was logged. But her brain, trained to hold long chains of equations in memory, worked like a biological scanner. Here was an abnormally high yield from the IR-6 cascade. Here was a power consumption spike that didn’t match the standard model. Here were traces of isotopes that shouldn’t be there. She memorized not the numbers, but their anomalies, their deviations from symmetry. Like a musician memorizing a false note in a flawless symphony. She created mnemonic links: 2804—her father’s birth year plus her age in months. 1044—her childhood apartment and building number. Each number was tied to a personal memory, embedded in her neural network. This was not espionage. It was an act of remembrance, where each number became a part of her identity.

“An interesting distribution pattern,” she muttered, pointing to a graph. “Here, in sector B-7, there’s a deviation. See? Right here. And here. My models didn’t predict this.”

“Strange,” he agreed. “Looks like resonance. We’ll have to check the rotors. Thanks for noticing.”

B-7. Another coordinate on her mental map.

She nodded. Forty minutes. It was enough.

On the way home, she no longer looked in the rearview mirror. The cars behind her had ceased to matter. The real threat was no longer outside. It was inside her. The

data from Fordow lived in her head like a radioactive isotope that had entered her bloodstream. It had its own half-life. If she didn't expel it from her system quickly enough, it would kill her from within.

Oppenheimer's dilemma: in creating a weapon for defense, you give the world a tool for self-destruction. But what if you give information to those who claim to want to prevent the weapon's creation? Don't you become an accomplice to a different crime? But she wasn't thinking about betrayal. She was thinking about surgery. Sometimes, to save an organism afflicted by a tumor, you have to inject it with poison. Precisely, in a measured dose. She was ready to mix the reagents.

At home, Nasrin was doing her homework. Zeynab was watching a cartoon. Amirkhan was reading the newspaper. The normality was almost palpable, like a thick cloth draped over an abyss.

“Mama, can you help me with physics?” Nasrin asked.

“Of course, azizam. What is it?”

“Radioactive decay. I don't understand half-life.”

Zahra sat down next to her. Half-life—the time it takes for half of the atoms to decay. A metaphor for her own life: with each passing day, half of her former self was decaying, but what would take its place?

“Imagine,” she began, “that you have a thousand identical atoms...”

Yod (Y): Double Sanctity

30 Aban 1401 (November 21, 2022)

That morning at breakfast, Zahra introduced a new variable into the equation of her life. A lie, wrapped in concern.

“Amirkhan, I need to see Dr. Afshar after work today,” she said, stirring sugar into her tea. “My head has been aching for a few days now.”

“Migraines again?” He looked up from his newspaper, a shadow of worry in his eyes. “Maybe you should take a vacation? You're working yourself to exhaustion.”

“It's just overwork. A couple of pills and it'll pass.”

The lie was simple, calibrated, almost indistinguishable from the truth. She was, indeed, exhausted. Only it wasn't her head that ached, but her soul. But Dr. Afshar did exist—an old family friend whom she would visit. Later. Afterwards.

All day, the data from Fordow pulsed in her memory like a phantom pain. Numbers, coordinates, percentages. She felt like a walking bomb, and the timer was already running. She knew that radioactive decay was inevitable. So was her own transformation. But unlike radioactive decay, her transformation did not obey the

laws of physics. It obeyed the laws of morality, which were far more complex and unpredictable.

At five o'clock, she left the building. The gray car wasn't there. Or was it, but a different color? Paranoia and reality had woven themselves into an indistinguishable pattern.

After work, she didn't drive toward the clinic. She turned onto a bypass road and stopped at one of those faceless roadside cafes where truckers drink bitter tea and eat kebabs straight from the lavash.

She ordered food to go, returned to her car, and parked a little further away, in the shade of eucalyptus trees. She took the netbook from the first-aid kit. Her heart hammered against her ribs, beating out a ragged rhythm. VPN. Malaysia. Forum.

She began to type. Her fingers, accustomed to the precision of a spectrometer's keyboard, produced a dry, emotionless text on the screen. It wasn't a denunciation, but a scientific report.

"Data on facility F. The IR-2m and IR-6 cascades in sector B-7 show a systematic outperformance of 4-6% compared to the declared models. Power consumption in the specified sector is 9% above the norm, which is inconsistent with the operation of the declared 1044+174 centrifuges. Traces of tellurium-130 isotopes have been detected, which may indicate experiments with neutron initiators. Resonance effects suggest possible modification of standard protocols."

She listed numbers, coordinates, technical parameters. Cold, irrefutable physics. But when she reached the personnel list, her fingers froze. The face of Professor Massoud Alimohammadi, her former teacher, flashed in her memory...

January 2010. An explosion in the parking lot outside his home. A magnetic mine on a nearby motorcycle. Mossad never admitted it, but everyone knew. He had been her academic supervisor. A brilliant mind, torn to pieces in the name of someone else's security. A smiling, kind man, blown up in his car. He, too, had been just a name on someone's list.

She couldn't do it. That was a line she could not cross. To betray the system was one thing. To betray the people with whom you drank tea and argued about philosophy was something else entirely. She deleted the section with the names. Let them hunt ghosts and machines, but not people. And this was not mercy. It was her last attempt to preserve herself.

She sent the message and snapped the netbook shut. The data was now outside. The isotope had left her body.

Next stop: the alibi. Dr. Afshar's clinic, her mother's old friend. Zahra entered with a box of gaz—Isfahani sweets.

"Doctor, I was passing by and decided to bring you greetings from my mother."

“Zahra-jan, what a delight!” The elderly woman in a white coat embraced her. “How are you? You look tired.”

“Work,” Zahra smiled. “You know how it is.”

They spoke for ten minutes. About the weather, her parents’ health, the price of pistachios. Ten minutes of impeccable, rock-solid normality.

And then—the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan.

She entered it as one enters another dimension. Outside, the noisy square, the cries of merchants, the bustle. Inside, silence, coolness, and divine geometry. Light, falling through the latticed windows of the dome, painted a pattern on the turquoise tiles like a peacock’s tail. A prayer, frozen in stone.

She walked past the worshippers, into a side corridor, to an inconspicuous door with a sign that read “Library.” It was a forgotten appendage of the mosque, its secular subconscious. A room filled with shelves of books and old magazines from the Shah’s era. Almost no one ever came here.

She carefully moved one of the bookcases. The space behind it breathed oblivion—the dust of centuries, the smell of decaying paper. The irony was almost physical. Here, in the heart of faith, in a room crammed with the secular heresies of the past, she was about to hide her own, new heresy. Wrapped in a newspaper where the Shah smiled from a photograph, the netbook seemed not just a device, but a seed of chaos that she was planting in the dead soil of someone else’s history. She pushed the bookcase back into place. Now her secret was under double protection: of oblivion and of sanctity. A perfect equation. But in that moment, she already knew: this was only the beginning. Whatever happened next, she could not return to her old life.

It was already dark when she returned home. Amirkhan was waiting in the living room.

“Well?” He stood up to meet her. “What did the doctor say? You were gone for a very long time.”

His voice was calm, but Zahra caught the professional tone of an investigator in it. He wasn’t asking. He was corroborating a story.

“Nothing serious. Just a migraine from overwork. She prescribed vitamins.” She pressed against his shoulder, seeking warmth and hiding her lie. “I’m so tired, Amirkhan. So tired.”

“Maybe you should take a vacation?”

“After the IAEA inspection. Now is not the time.”

He nodded. The logic was flawless. But something flickered in his gaze—not suspicion, but unease. A husband’s intuition, sensing his wife slipping away, like water through his fingers.

That night, lying sleepless, Zahra thought of double exposure—the photographic effect where two images are superimposed. Her life had become such a photograph: wife and traitor, mother and spy, guardian of secrets and their destroyer. Two images, laid one on top of the other, creating a third—ethereal, elusive, new. And this third image frightened her more than anything.

Kaph (۞): Dance in the Looking-Glass

12 Azar 1401 (December 3, 2022)

Winter entered Isfahan unhurriedly, the way an illness enters a house: first, a light chill in the mornings, then a gray, colorless sky, and finally, a cold that pierced to the very bone. The trees on Chaharbagh Avenue stood bare, their black branches stabbing the low sky like lines from a forgotten, tragic poem. For Zahra, this slow death of nature was a mirror of her own state. She was living in a lull. In the emptiness that followed the stone cast into the abyss.

Twice a week, she lied. “I’ll be late, I have to finish a report.” “An equipment malfunction, I need to double-check the calibration.” Lying was becoming a habit, a second skin. She drove not home, but to the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan. Her pilgrimages were secret and had a single purpose. The library. The netbook, hidden behind tomes of Sufi poetry and magazines from the era of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was her oracle. A silent oracle.

There were no messages. Silence. Only on the forum, in the news section, did she see the reflection of her sin. A Reuters report: “Iran enriching uranium to 60% purity at underground Fordow site, IAEA sources say.” Her numbers, her conclusions, torn from context and turned into a weapon in someone else’s information war. They had heard her. They had used her. And they were silent. But she had no new data. She had given everything she knew and was now empty, like a spent fuel rod. She had become a function that had fulfilled its purpose and was now waiting to be either called upon again or erased.

The world at home was also frosting over with suspicion.

“You’ve been staying late a lot,” Amirkhan said one evening, not looking away from the television, but the question was thrown at her like a stone. The professional habit of a security officer—to notice changes in behavior. Two weeks of “staying late at work” had not gone unnoticed.

“End of the year. Audits. You know how it is.”

“Are you all rushing before the inspection?”

“Preparing documentation. Bureaucracy.”

“Strange. You never used to stay late for paperwork.”

“There wasn’t this much pressure before.”

He said nothing in reply, but she felt his silence probing her words for cracks.

And one evening, Zeynab, drawing in her sketchbook, suddenly looked up at her with her clear, pure eyes.

“Mama, are you not playing with tanks anymore?”

The question was so simple and so monstrous that it took Zahra’s breath away for a moment. It was the key to a locked room that the child was twirling in her hands, unaware of its power.

“No, azizam,” she answered, forcing a smile. “I deleted the game. I think I’m too old for it now.”

The lie was like the truth, but its mirror image. She hadn’t outgrown it. She had fallen into the game so deeply that it had become reality. And reality had become a game.

“I thought you don’t outgrow games,” the girl said thoughtfully. “You just trade them for different ones.”

In the morning, Dr. Rezai summoned her to his office. He stood by the window, looking at the snow-capped peaks of the Zagros Mountains, his silhouette seeming as if cut from black paper.

“Dr. Musavi, on Monday, you and Rustam Yazdi are going to Tehran.”

“Tehran?” She tried to hide her surprise.

“A meeting with the IAEA inspectors. Unofficial, preliminary. They need technical clarifications on our program. You and Yazdi will represent the scientific side of the issue.”

“And you?”

Rezai turned. In his eyes was the weariness of a man tired of an endless game of cat and mouse.

“I am too... politicized for such a meeting. They need pure scientists, who speak the language of physics, not ideology. You are a perfect fit—a female physicist in the Islamic Republic, who has interned in the West. You are a mother. You are a symbol of our peaceful intentions. Living proof of our openness.”

“Yazdi will go with you. He speaks English well and is a good theorist.”

“I understand.”

“Prepare a presentation. Facts, only facts. No politics. Show them that we are engaged in science, not creating an apocalypse.”

That evening, when she told Amirkhan about it, he was silent for a long time, stirring the tea in his glass.

“To Tehran?” He frowned. “So suddenly?”

“The IAEA is insisting on an urgent meeting.”

“And why isn’t Rezai going? He’s the head.”

“He said he’s too politicized. They need technical specialists.”

“And why with Yazdi?” A note she had never heard before appeared in his voice. Suspicion? Jealousy?

“He’s a specialist in cascades. We complement each other.”

Amirkhan was silent, watching her add walnuts to the sauce. The silence stretched like molasses.

“Be careful,” he finally said. “The IAEA isn’t just scientists. There are people there with other tasks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Recruitment. They are always looking for sources within the program. Especially among those who have been to the West.”

The blood drained from her face, but she continued to stir the sauce, not looking up.

“You think they’ll try...?”

“I think you should be prepared for any offers. And remember who you are and where your home is.”

She nodded, feeling the irony of the situation tighten in her throat. He was warning her about what had already happened. But it hadn’t happened the way he thought. Not the IAEA, but a ghost from the past, a tank hunter from a virtual world.

“I’ll just talk about physics,” she said. “Only physics.”

“Physics is also politics,” Amirkhan replied. “Especially nuclear physics.”

He came over to her, took her hands in his. His palms, usually warm, were cold.

“Be careful,” he said so quietly that it sounded almost like a threat. “In these games, it’s not the pieces that lose, but the people.”

“I’m always careful.”

That night she lay sleepless, thinking about the upcoming trip. Tehran. The IAEA. An opportunity or a trap? And why now, when she had already made her choice? She

was being sent to lie to the world on behalf of a system she had betrayed. A mirror facing a mirror, creating an infinite corridor of reflections, with only emptiness at the end. And she had to walk into that corridor.

Lamed (ל): The Theater of Fire

15 Azar 1401 (December 6, 2022)

Tehran greeted them with a steel-gray sky and air thick with the smell of exhaust fumes and cold anxiety. The car drove them down Enghelab Avenue, and the city outside the window seemed not a living organism, but a vast mechanism whose gears turned with a strained, pained creak. Zahra looked at the flashing streets, but she didn't see them. She saw beauty and fury, fused together in a ritualistic dance that was unfolding at the university gates.

On one side of the avenue, a fire raged. It was a sacred, cleansing fire, devouring symbols. Young men with burning eyes and headbands, their faces beautiful in their fanatical conviction, tore apart flags with stripes and foreign stars. The fabric, a symbol of a hostile universe, writhed in the flames, turning to black ash that the wind carried away and mixed with the snow falling from the mountains. The fire consumed it with the same methodicalness with which the crowd consumed its own rage, turning it into the ashes of satisfaction. Their cries—"Marg bar Āmrikā! Marg bar Esrā'il!"—were not just the words "Death to America, Death to Israel." It was a liturgy, a mantra, a collective prayer addressed to a god of wrath. Their fury was as pure as steel and as beautiful in its finality as a samurai's ritual suicide. They were sacrificing not themselves, but their hatred, and in this act, they found their unity and meaning.

And just a few dozen meters away, separated by a cordon of black helmets and shields, another ritual was taking place. A ritual of silence and pain. Other young people stood there. There were fewer of them, and their weapons were not fire and shouts, but silence and gazes. They didn't burn flags. They held white sheets of paper in their hands—a symbol of all that was unsaid. Their protest was as fragile as thin ice on a puddle, and just as doomed. The dispersal was not a battle, but a surgical operation. No fury, only cold resolve. Batons fell on shoulders and backs with a dull, business-like thud. Fragile bodies fell to the cold asphalt like autumn leaves. Their silence was louder than any cry, and their defeat more beautiful than any victory, because it held a truth that needed no justification. The blood on the asphalt didn't scream—it simply spread, finding cracks in the pavement, creating abstract patterns.

Zahra watched, and her soul was torn in two. She was part of the world of those who burned flags, and the mother of those who were beaten with batons. Two rituals, two aesthetics of death, and between them—she, the bifurcation point.

“Don’t look,” the driver said, turning into a side street. “It’s a theater, for our guests. So they understand what kind of country they are in.”

The car entered the university grounds. Here, silence and order reigned.

The meeting took place in a conference room with a high ceiling and portraits of ayatollahs on the walls. The air was sterile and cool. The IAEA delegation—three men and one woman—sat opposite them. Their faces were as impenetrable as the pages of a diplomatic protocol. Next to Zahra and Rustam sat two nondescript men from the Iranian Foreign Ministry, whose job was not to speak, but to listen and remember. In the corners of the room, like shadows, stood several other men whose affiliation with the IRGC was as obvious as the geometry of a pistol under a jacket.

The conversation was less like an argument and more like a game of chess, where every word was a calculated move.

“We appreciate your willingness to engage in dialogue, Dr. Musavi, Dr. Yazdi,” began the head of the delegation, a gray-haired Austrian named Bauer. “However, our satellite data and analysis based on open sources indicate certain... discrepancies in the operation of the Fordow facility.”

“Discrepancies or interpretations, Herr Bauer?” Rustam gently countered. “Any set of data can be interpreted differently. A physicist sees a dance of quarks in particle traces, while a politician sees the outline of a bomb. It’s a matter of optics, is it not?”

“Our optics, Dr. Yazdi, are the Security Council resolutions. And they direct us to look not for dances, but for facts. For example, the fact of exceeding the enrichment level.”

“Facts are a relative concept,” replied the senior of the Foreign Ministry officials. “Glass is transparent, but it distorts the image. We prefer clarity.”

“An enrichment level of 60 percent is inconsistent with the needs of a civilian program,” one of the inspectors noted.

“We are conducting scientific experiments,” Zahra interjected. Her voice was as steady as the line on an oscilloscope. “We are studying the stability of cascades at peak loads. Any scientist understands that to obtain reliable data, a system must be pushed to its theoretical limit. This is not production. This is research.”

“The Tehran Research Reactor requires fuel enriched up to 20 percent, but to create a stockpile, we are forced to produce higher-enriched material, which is then downblended,” Rustam added.

“An interesting logic,” the Austrian smiled. “You create a surplus to achieve a sufficiency?”

“We create capabilities,” Zahra replied, and everyone turned to her. “In physics, as in life, potential is more important than kinetics. We are demonstrating a capability, not an intention.”

They spoke the language of physics, but every term had a double meaning. “Peak loads” meant “weapons-grade.” “Cascade stability” meant “warhead reliability.” It was a labyrinthine dialogue, where the direct path was the shortest path to failure. They exchanged formulas, graphs, references to scientific articles. And it was all just a facade, behind which the real game was being played—a game of intentions and suspicions.

After two hours of this intellectual fencing, Bauer announced a break. The delegates stood up. And at that moment, one of the delegation members approached Zahra—a Frenchman named Alain Duval, whom she remembered from her internship in Saclay.

“Dr. Musavi, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” he said with a polite smile. “Since I have the opportunity, I would like to pass on a personal greeting.”

Zahra tensed.

“From whom?”

“From Dr. Vitaly Smirnov. Do you remember him? The Russian physicist. He’s been working with us at the CEA since May of this year.”

Smirnov. Sarov. 2012. The man who had overseen her internship. The man with whom she had discussed the merits of the German Jagdpanther tank destroyer. Smirnov at the French Atomic Energy Commission. A coincidence? A signal?

The blood drained from her face.

“Yes, I remember him,” she managed to force out.

“He spoke very warmly of you. Said you were one of the most brilliant minds he’d ever had the pleasure of working with.” Duval paused, his gaze becoming serious for a moment. “And we, at the Agency, very much value your work and your contribution to science. We hope for further fruitful collaboration.”

“Science knows no borders,” she replied, quoting a platitude. “Only politics creates them.”

“That’s precisely why such meetings are important,” the Frenchman smiled and walked away.

The words hung in the air. They could have been simple politeness. Or they could have been a password. A confirmation. An order to continue.

He had extended his hand to her. She shook it automatically. His handshake was brief, dry, business-like. But for a moment, she felt his fingers squeeze her palm slightly harder, as if transmitting an invisible signal.

Or had she just imagined it?

On the way back to the airport, Rustam was silent, looking out the window at the passing scenery. Finally, he said:

“They know more than they’re letting on.”

“They always know more,” Zahra replied.

“No, I mean...” he turned to her. “Their questions were too precise. As if they have a source.”

She shrugged, feeling a cold sweat break out between her shoulder blades.

“Satellites. Open-source analysis. They’re no fools.”

“Yes,” Rustam agreed. “They’re no fools.”

But there was a note in his voice she had never heard before...

Outside the window, the Iranian winter flew by—gray, cold, full of hidden meanings. Just like her life. She remembered Rustam’s words: “They don’t want to weigh it, Zahra. They want to be sure the shadow doesn’t belong to a monster.” And she understood: she herself had become that shadow. Or perhaps, the monster.

Mem (۱): The Theology of Retribution

8 Dey 1401 (December 29, 2022)

December descended on Isfahan like a shroud. The month passed in a state of suspended animation, in a frozen time between action and consequence. Zahra had stopped going to the mosque. The netbook slept in its tomb of old newspapers. She was afraid not that she would find a new message there, but that she would find nothing. The silence had become her chief tormentor.

She returned to her old rituals, to the geometry of her former life. She came home on time, helped her daughters with their homework, made small talk with Amirkhan. But her normality was too perfect, too calibrated, like the flat line on a dead man’s EKG.

“You’re not staying late anymore,” her husband observed one day. It wasn’t a question. It was a statement of fact.

“The reports are submitted. The pressure is off.”

“Good. A family needs a mother at home, not a ghost drifting between work and the unknown,” he said, but he continued to look at her as if trying to spot a crack in a flawless glaze.

The surveillance had resumed. This time it wasn’t a gray Peykan, but a nondescript silver Saipa. It didn’t follow her constantly. It just appeared. In the parking lot at work. In the rearview mirror halfway home. As if her life had become a

book, and someone was occasionally placing a bookmark in it so as not to lose the page.

The cause of her numbness was a memory. Back then, at Mehrabad Airport, their flight to Isfahan had been delayed. No explanation. And then two men in plain clothes had approached them. Politely, almost apologetically, they asked her and Rustam to come with them. They were placed in separate rooms. “A small formality.”

The room was featureless, smelling of coffee and cigarette smoke. The man who conducted the “chat” did not introduce himself. His questions were like surgical probes.

“The Frenchman. Alain Duval. What did you talk about?”

“About science. About old acquaintances from Saclay.”

“Vitaly Smirnov. The Russian physicist. Why did he leave Russia for France?”

“I don’t know. People change jobs.”

“People of Smirnov’s level don’t just ‘change jobs.’ They change loyalties. Did Mr. Duval give you anything from him? A note? An object?”

“No. Just his regards.”

He looked at her for a long time, and his gaze was as heavy as X-ray radiation.

“You are an asset to us, Dr. Musavi. A valuable asset. We would not want you to become a threat.”

She was released. But she understood: she was no longer just a scientist. She was a piece on a board, and now other hands were moving her.

Today had thawed her fear. In the laboratory, she had become an unwilling listener to a conversation between Rezai and Rustam. They were standing by a blackboard covered in formulas, but they weren’t talking about them.

“The latest data from Fordow confirms it—we have almost reached the required level. Eighty-three percent. Nearly weapons-grade,” Rezai was saying in a quiet, almost casual voice. “From here on, it’s no longer theory. It’s a matter of political will.”

“Will for what?” Rustam asked.

“To establish a balance. To launch a preemptive strike against any enemy in the region, if necessary.”

Rustam was silent.

“We have the delivery systems,” Rezai continued, as if thinking aloud. “The Shahab-3 covers the entire necessary territory.”

“And what if their air defense system intercepts it?” Rustam’s voice was barely audible.

“Allah knows best. It is all in His hands.”

“Or they will retaliate. And then a balance will be achieved. A balance of ash.”

“Perhaps. But did the Prophet Hussein retreat at Karbala, knowing the enemy’s superior forces? Martyrdom is also a form of victory,” Rezai concluded the conversation.

Zahra stood at her desk, feeling the floor give way beneath her. A preemptive strike. A theology of retribution. This was no longer deterrence. It was madness, cloaked in the form of state doctrine. They were truly prepared to turn the region into a radioactive wasteland in the name of an abstract idea of resistance. She had to do something.

After work, she didn’t go home. For the first time in a month, she headed for the Jameh Mosque. In the rearview mirror—the familiar silhouette of the silver car.

Don’t look back. Don’t speed up. Breathe steadily. You are just a woman going to pray.

She parked near the mosque, got out, and walked toward the entrance. But instead of going in, she turned into an alley leading to the bazaar. In her peripheral vision, she caught a figure—a man in a dark coat, for a moment she thought it was Fakhrabadi. The same tilt of the head, the same gait.

Impossible. He couldn’t be here. Or could he? A game within a game within a game?

Her thoughts leaped like electrons between orbits. He saw me leaving the mosque. He knows about the library. Or has he been following me from work? If it’s the IRGC, they already know everything. If it’s not them, then who? She walked quickly but steadily, weaving between merchants and shoppers. I need to disappear. To shed my skin.

She quickened her pace, diving into the labyrinth of the bazaar. Here, among hundreds of stalls and thousands of shoppers, she could dissolve. Carpets, spices, fabrics—a kaleidoscope of colors and scents. She stopped at a stall selling women’s clothing.

“I need a different hijab. A black one. And a longer manteau.”

The shopkeeper—an elderly woman with hands lined with time like an ancient manuscript—nodded knowingly. Not the first customer wanting to change her appearance.

He’s following me. I can feel his gaze between my shoulder blades. No, it’s paranoia. No, it’s reality. Both a particle and a wave at the same time.

Zahra went into the fitting room—a tiny cubicle curtained off. She took off her light gray hijab and put on a black one. She changed her beige manteau for a dark blue one. The mirror reflected a different woman—one of Isfahan’s thousands of faceless shadows.

Walk out calmly. Turn left, toward the north exit. Don’t run. Running is a sign of guilt.

She came out of the cubicle, paid, and stuffed her old hijab into her bag. The shopkeeper watched with a slight smile—she had seen it all before. Women changing their appearance, fleeing from husbands, from the morality police, from their own shadows.

Zahra moved deeper into the bazaar, weaving between the stalls. The pursuer’s logic would dictate looking for a light gray hijab. She had given him a false target.

Right, through the jewelry row. The gold in the windows like frozen solar flares. Left, past the carpet stalls. Patterns in which one could get lost, like in a Borges labyrinth.

She left the bazaar through a side exit onto Chaharbagh Avenue. She glanced back—no one who looked like a pursuer. But that meant nothing. A professional always keeps his distance.

She returned to the mosque by a circuitous route. The library. The old librarian was dozing over a Quran. She went to the far shelf. The netbook was in its place, as cold as a corpse.

She turned it on. VPN—a server in India today. Forum. A private message for JagdpanFer_83:

“Critical mass almost reached. 83%. They are talking about the possibility of preemptive use. This is not a drill. I repeat: this is not a drill.”

She turned off the netbook, hid it again. Left the library. Evening prayers were underway in the mosque. She joined in—rows of women in black, bowing in unison. There was salvation in this anonymity.

After the prayers, she left through the main entrance. The silver car was gone. Or it was somewhere else, with a different observer.

At home, Amirkhan was watching the news. The anchor was talking about new sanctions, about the machinations of Iran’s enemies.

“Where were you?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the screen.

“At the mosque. Praying.”

“In a new hijab?”

She froze. He had noticed. Of course, he had. An investigator notices details.

“I bought it at the bazaar. The old one was worn out.”

He nodded, but something remained unsaid in his gaze. A suspicion, coiled up and waiting for the right moment to strike.

Quantum superposition: she was simultaneously a traitor and a patriot, a savior and a destroyer, until an observer opened the box and saw which one she really was.

Nun (舅): The Fragility of Porcelain

29 Dey 1401 (January 19, 2023)

The January snow fell on Isfahan in sparse, hesitant flakes, as if the sky had forgotten how to cry and was now merely feigning sorrow. After weeks spent on the razor’s edge of paranoia, a calm had set in. Life seemed to be settling into its winter groove, and in this monotony, there was an illusion of peace. Zahra clung to this illusion like the last thread connecting her to a world where equations had solutions and the future held at least a hypothetical predictability.

On Friday afternoon, the doorbell rang. On the threshold stood Adil, Nasrin’s classmate. The same boy with the eyes of a medieval poet who had been led away from the schoolyard by men in plain clothes.

He stood there, shifting from foot to foot, holding a plate of homemade cookies covered with an embroidered napkin.

“My mother asked me to give you this. As thanks for your help with math.”

Zahra looked at him and saw not so much a boy as a scar. Those two days at the Ettela’at had aged him by ten years. The childish roundness of his cheeks was gone, his gaze had become deep and weary, as if he had peeked behind a curtain where there was nothing but emptiness. But he was smiling, and in his smile there was not brokenness, but a new, bitter strength.

Nasrin fluttered into the hallway, a blush flaring on her cheeks as bright as pomegranate seeds. She looked at Adil as if he were not just a classmate, but a hero returned from a perilous journey. And in that gaze, Zahra saw all the poignant, clumsy beauty of a first crush—a feeling as fragile as the old Chinese porcelain from her father’s collection.

“Come in, Adil, we were just about to have tea,” Zahra said, stepping aside.

They sat in Nasrin’s room, surrounded by posters of K-pop groups, whose members with their brightly colored hair and flawless faces looked down from the walls with an otherworldly, androgynous beauty, and stacks of textbooks.

Her daughter sat on the edge of the bed, her legs drawn up; Adil sat on a chair by the desk. Between them was a meter of space and an entire universe of the unsaid.

They didn't speak of what had happened. The topic was like a radioactive object that everyone could see but no one dared to touch. Adil said he had come for advice.

"Dr. Musavi, I want to choose a foreign language for advanced study. But I don't know which one. Russian or English?"

Zahra sipped her tea. The question seemed simple, but in it, as in a drop of water, their entire fractured world was reflected.

"That depends on which road you choose, Adil. Which universe you want to discover for yourself. Russian is the language of our current ally. We work with them, we buy and sell technology. If you become an engineer or join the military, it will be useful. But that is a road leading north, into the cold."

She paused.

"English is different. It is the language that science speaks today. Articles are written in it, debates at conferences are held in it. It is a global language, like Latin in the Middle Ages. It opens doors to the West. But those doors can turn out to be a trap."

She looked at him, at his serious, uncharacteristically adult face.

"And then there is the East. China. Their language is ideograms, an entire universe in every character. They are building the future with the same speed we are trying to preserve the past. Perhaps in twenty years, it will be more important than both Russian and English."

Adil thoughtfully stirred his tea with a small spoon.

"I haven't decided what I want to be yet. I like poetry, Hafez, Rumi, Omar Khayyam... And the moderns—Shamloo, Akhavan-Sales. But you can't make a living from poems."

"That's not true," Zahra said softly. Suddenly, she wanted to tell this boy something real, something that had nothing to do with espionage, politics, or fear.

"If you love your work, it will become poetry for you. Any work is an act of creation. You can create equations that are more beautiful than any ghazal. You can trade in the bazaar in a way that becomes an art. Or you can write poems that change the world. The important thing is not what you do, but how you do it. Whether you find your own, inner music in it."

"The Sufis say," she added, standing up, "that there is a language of the birds—a universal language understood by all beings. Perhaps poetry is an attempt to speak that language."

A silence filled the room, imbued with the warmth of the setting sun and the aroma of cardamom tea. Nasrin looked at her mother with surprise and admiration, as if seeing her for the first time not as a stern scientist, but as a woman who knew something important about life.

And in that moment, the fragile harmony shattered.

A sharp, demanding knock on the front door. Not a ring. A knock—hard, official, admitting no delay.

Amirkhan looked into the room. His face was tense.

“Stay here. I’ll get it.”

He went out. They heard his muffled voice, then other, unfamiliar voices. The seconds stretched into an eternity.

Amirkhan returned. He didn’t look at Adil or Nasrin. He looked only at his wife. There was no anger in his eyes, no surprise. Only a heavy, dull acknowledgment of the inevitable.

“Zahra. They’re here for you.”

Samekh (o): The Collapse of Probabilitie

29 Dey 1401 (January 19, 2023)

The knock on the door was the very observer that intrudes upon a quantum system and forces it to choose a single state. Zahra had expected the collapse into the state of “arrest,” “prison,” “the end.” But reality, as always, proved to be more complex and more sophisticated than any equation.

There were two of them. Not in black uniforms, but in severe civilian suits that fit them like military attire. Their faces were devoid of emotion, as if carved from gray stone. They didn’t burst in. They simply entered the house, and their very presence altered the geometry of the space, making the rooms smaller and the ceilings lower.

“Dr. Musavi,” the senior of the two said, his voice as featureless as his suit. “You need to pack quickly. Take only what you need for a couple of days.”

It wasn’t an arrest. For an arrest, they don’t ask you to pack. It was something else. Something worse, because it had no name.

“Where? What’s going on?” Amirkhan asked, stepping between them and Zahra.

“Everything will be explained to her on site. Forgive us, we have little time.”

As Zahra, moving as if in a dream, went to the bedroom, she saw out of the corner of her eye Amirkhan quietly say something to one of the officers. The officer gave a barely perceptible nod. What was that? A request? A warning? Or a password, confirming that her husband was part of this system, a cog in the same machine that had come for her?

Zahra went up to the bedroom and mechanically threw a change of underwear, toiletries, a notebook, and a warm scarf into a bag. Her mind was frantically

calculating the possibilities. Not an arrest—which meant her espionage hadn’t been discovered. The urgency—which meant something had happened at one of the facilities. An accident? A leak? Or...

Nasrin and Adil stood in the doorway of the room. The boy watched the scene with recognition—he had seen men in uniform arrive before. He had seen this ritual. His hand involuntarily touched Nasrin’s shoulder—a gesture of protection, powerless and touching.

Zeynab ran to Zahra and clung to her arm.

“Mama, when will you be back?”

Zahra knelt down to be on her level. She looked into her daughter’s eyes and tried to pour into her gaze all the love and all the lies she was capable of.

“I don’t know, azizam. Soon, I hope.”

They took her away in a black Peugeot Pars with tinted windows. The city outside the window became a blur of lights. They drove in silence. Zahra tried to analyze, to calculate the options. This wasn’t an interrogation. For an interrogation, they would have taken her somewhere else. This wasn’t an execution. An execution is preceded by a trial. This was a transfer. She, as a valuable and dangerous object, was being moved from one point in space to another.

The car stopped at a nondescript mansion in a quiet, affluent neighborhood on the outskirts of Isfahan. No identifying marks, just a high fence and surveillance cameras like the eyes of predatory insects.

Inside was the severe functionality of a military facility disguised as a civilian building. They were already gathered in the conference room: Dr. Rezai, his face carved from stone; Rustam, nervously fidgeting with a pen; several IRGC officers in uniforms without insignia; and a man in an expensive suit—Mahmoud Ahmadi from the AEOI, the deputy director for international relations.

“The situation is critical,” Ahmadi began without preamble. “Three hours ago, an IAEA inspection team arrived at Fordow without warning. They are citing Article 77 of the Additional Protocol—the right to unannounced inspections in the presence of reasonable suspicion.”

Zahra felt a chill run down her spine. Her message. Her numbers. They had worked.

“What suspicion?” Rezai asked.

“They have satellite images showing increased activity over the last two weeks,” one of the officers said. “Increased power consumption. Thermal signatures indicating the operation of additional cascades.”

“For now, we have not granted them access to the facility, citing a protocol inconsistency in their route,” he continued, looking at Dr. Rezai. “But we can’t stall for long. It will provoke an international scandal.”

“Why aren’t they being let in?”

“Because they are demanding access to Sector B-7.”

Sector B-7. The coordinate she had memorized. The one she had passed on.

The officer, apparently the most senior, paused, his heavy gaze sweeping over everyone.

“Your meeting in Tehran was deemed a success. You and Dr. Yazdi were able to present our position convincingly and professionally. Therefore, a decision has been made: the two of you will fly to Fordow immediately. Your task is to meet with the inspectors, provide them with the necessary clarifications, and reassure them. Show them just enough to leave them satisfied, but no more. Dr. Rezai will fly with you, but he will not participate in the negotiations. He will coordinate actions on site.”

Zahra felt as if she had stopped breathing. She was being sent to cover the tracks of her own betrayal. It was an irony of such magnitude, of such cosmic cynicism, that it bordered on madness.

“You will be flying by military helicopter. Right now. You will land at a pad near Qom, then travel by ground to the facility,” Ahmadi added. “There was no time for you to pack, which is why you were picked up this way. Everything you need will be provided on site. Any questions?”

There were no questions. Only an icy void. She was being thrown into the heart of the hurricane she herself had created. This was not a punishment. It was a test. Or perhaps, the most sophisticated way to force her to reveal herself.

She looked at Rustam. He caught her eye. There was no fear in his eyes. Only weariness.

Twenty minutes later, they were at a military airfield. An Mi-17 helicopter was waiting with its engines running. The cabin was spartan: metal seats, seat belts, and windows through which only darkness was visible.

Zahra buckled herself in, feeling the vibration of the fuselage. Beside her, Rustam was scribbling in a notebook—formulas that would help explain the inexplicable. Rezai sat opposite, his eyes closed, but she knew he wasn’t sleeping; he was calculating options.

The helicopter lifted off, and Isfahan was left below—a scattering of lights on the black velvet of the night. Somewhere down there, Nasrin was comforting Zeynab. Amirkhan was calling his friends, trying to understand what was happening. Adil might still be in their house, not daring to leave.

And she was flying toward her own lie, which had returned to her in the form of IAEA inspectors. The circle had closed. But this was not the end; it was the beginning of a new spiral, leading who knows where.

In the window, the Zagros Mountains drifted by—black giants holding a secret in their depths that she had helped to create and must now help to conceal.

I have become the Ouroboros, she thought. The serpent devouring its own tail.

Ayin (＼): The Underground Truth

30 Dey 1401 (January 20, 2023)

Fordow wasn't just a facility. It was a wound in the body of a mountain, reaching ninety meters deep into the granite. A place where the human mind had forced stone to serve the most secret and terrible of its ideas. The air in the tunnel leading to the central hall was cold, with a taste of ozone and concrete, and felt as dense as water. Long rows of fluorescent lights on the ceiling hummed with a monotony that bored into the subconscious, crowding out all other thoughts. The walls were oppressive. There was no day or night here, only an eternal, artificial twilight. A Ministry of Truth, where reality was being rewritten in real time.

At the entrance to the main sector, a procedure awaited them that was honed to the point of absurdity. They, the top scientific personnel, were searched with the same thoroughness as enemy saboteurs. Metal detectors, scanners, retinal scans. Even their pens were taken, replaced with standard-issue ones. The security check at the entrance was methodical, humiliating in its meticulousness. Even Rezai, whom almost every guard here knew, went through all the procedures. The paranoid symmetry of security recognized no exceptions.

Before entering the negotiation room, Dr. Rezai pulled Zahra aside.

“Dr. Musavi,” his voice was quiet, but in the echoing silence of the tunnel, it sounded like a command. “When you enter, immediately offer them refreshments. Say this verbatim: ‘Will you have coffee, or tea without cardamom?’”

Zahra looked at him in surprise.

“Why without cardamom?”

“It’s a signal. It shows that we are considerate of Western tastes, but not fawning. A small detail, but they notice such things. A female scientist offering tea—it creates a domestic atmosphere. It reduces tension.”

He explained no more. He just turned and disappeared into the depths of a side tunnel, leaving her with this nonsensical, yet clearly significant, phrase. A password? A sign? Or just another detail in the theater of the absurd they were staging?

The IAEA inspectors were already waiting for them. The same faces as in Tehran. But here, on foreign territory, they seemed slightly different. Not guests, but surgeons, ready to open up a patient. They wore blue vests with the Agency's emblem. On the table next to them lay their equipment: portable gamma spectrometers that looked like futuristic weapons, containers with kits for swipe samples, and tamper-evident seals that resembled strange amulets. The head of the delegation, a German named Klaus Weber, held a tablet with an open DIQ—Design Information Questionnaire.

Zahra took a deep breath.

“Gentlemen, before we move on to technical matters, allow me to offer you some hospitality. Let's first sit down and get acquainted. Will you have coffee, or tea without cardamom?”

Weber froze for a moment. His eyes scanned Zahra's face, as if searching for a hidden code.

“Tea, thank you,” he replied. “Without cardamom—that's unusual for Iran.”

“We are scientists,” Zahra smiled. “We value the purity of the experiment.”

The others also chose tea.

“Our data,” Weber began, pointing to his tablet, “indicates a recent reconnection of the IR-6 cascades in Sector B-7. A change in the linkage. Can you comment on that?”

“Change in the linkage” was a euphemism. It meant “creating a cascade to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels.”

“We were conducting a scheduled reconfiguration,” Rustam answered. “Testing a new schematic to increase the efficiency of medical isotope production. This is reflected in our operational logs.”

“However, this ‘reconfiguration’ coincided with an anomalous spike in power consumption,” a female inspector with a French accent intervened. “Your logs do not explain that.”

“Any complex system has its fluctuations,” Zahra countered. “We are not dealing with an ideal mathematical model, but with real equipment. Resonance effects are possible. We are, in fact, studying this very problem. It is a purely scientific question.”

“A scientific question that has led to the production of several kilograms of material enriched to over 80 percent,” Weber noted dryly. “That is no longer a fluctuation. That is a result.”

“The result of an experiment that was immediately terminated after the data was obtained,” Zahra said. “The material has been placed in storage under your control. You may take samples. We are hiding nothing.”

They spoke of kilograms and percentages, of linkages and fluctuations. But in reality, they were discussing one thing: how much time Iran needed to build a bomb. Every word was a lie wrapped in truth. Every number was both a fact and disinformation. Zahra felt like a translator in the Tower of Babel, where everyone speaks the same language but invests the words with opposite meanings.

“We need to take samples in Sector B-7,” Weber finally said.

“Sector B-7 is undergoing scheduled maintenance,” Rustam replied, a little too quickly. “But we can provide you with the monitoring data from the last month.”

“Data is not samples,” the Frenchwoman insisted. “We need physical access.”

“Tomorrow,” Zahra promised, knowing that overnight the sector would be cleaned to the sterility of an operating room. “After the technical work is completed.”

The inspectors exchanged glances. They knew they were being given time to destroy evidence. But an open conflict was not part of their mandate.

“Very well,” Weber nodded. “Tomorrow at 9:00. And we will install tamper-evident seals on all entrances to the sector. Today.”

“Of course,” Zahra agreed.

In the evening, in the sterile, impersonal guesthouse on the facility grounds, Rezai summoned them. He sat in an armchair, his face a mask in the dim light. He wanted to know everything.

“Which of the inspectors specifically insisted on Sector B-7?”

“The Frenchwoman, Marie Dubois,” Rustam answered.

“What else did she ask?”

“About the isotopic composition of the waste. About temperature anomalies in the IR-2m cascade.”

“And the German?”

“Weber was more interested in the documentation. He asked to see the power consumption logs for the last three months.”

“Did you give them?”

“Only the general data. We said that the complete information required authorization from Tehran.”

Rezai nodded, making notes in a small book.

“And the other two?”

“Mostly silent. One was photographing schematics on a tablet, the other was measuring something with a portable spectrometer.”

“Measuring what?”

“Background radiation, it seemed. But he held the device strangely, pointing it at the ventilation grilles, and then taking wipe samples.”

“They’re looking for traces of hexafluoride,” Rezai muttered. “What else?”

It went on like this for another hour. Every detail, every word, every gesture of the inspectors was dissected and analyzed. Zahra felt like an accomplice to a crime she was simultaneously committing and investigating.

“Be even more careful tomorrow,” Rezai concluded. “They are not just checking the centrifuges. They are checking us.”

And after a brief silence, he added:

“Remember, this is a private conversation, Dr. Musavi and Dr. Yazdi. Information about it must not leave this room. Do you understand?”

“But this is a standard procedure...” Rustam began.

“As of today, there are no more standard procedures,” Rezai cut him off. “There are only orders. You are dismissed.”

They stepped out into the corridor. His words hung between them. “Information must not leave this room.” It wasn’t a request. It was a threat.

Alone in her room—four walls, a narrow bed, a window with a view of a concrete wall—Zahra thought about how she had become part of a machine that devoured truth and excreted lies with the efficiency of an industrial reactor. And the most terrifying part was that she could no longer tell where her lies ended and someone else’s began.

Outside, a January blizzard howled, covering the entrances to the underground complex with snow, where 174 centrifuges—or more—continued their monotonous dance, separating isotopes and fates.

Pe (۹): The Unintentional Singularity

1 Bahman 1401 (January 21, 2023)

The morning at Fordow began with silence. Not the resonant, working silence filled with the hum of centrifuges, but a different kind—tense, expectant, like the calm before a storm. Breakfast in the canteen was silent. Rezai ate quickly, looking at no one. Rustam crumbled sugar into his tea but didn’t drink. Zahra could feel the air vibrating with the unsaid.

At 9:00, they were supposed to meet the inspectors at the entrance to Sector B-7. But an IRGC officer stopped them in the corridor.

“Orders from Tehran. The three of you are to remain in the laboratory until further notice.”

"What does that mean?" Rezai asked sharply. "We are supposed to accompany the inspection."

"Orders," the officer repeated, his gaze as impenetrable as a concrete wall. "The laboratory has everything you need. Wait."

The laboratory, their scientific sanctuary, had become a prison. The monitors showed the dead graphs of yesterday's measurements. In the corner, a surveillance camera, its red eye unblinking. Was it off, or just disguised? But there was a window, made of armored glass, that looked out into the main corridor. Through it, they saw what they were not supposed to see.

At first, everything went according to plan. The inspectors in their blue vests, accompanied by guards, proceeded to Sector B-7. They removed yesterday's tamper-evident seals, checked the numbers, and went inside. The door closed behind them.

An hour passed. Then a second. The silence in the corridor became almost palpable. Rustam paced the lab from corner to corner, like a caged animal. Rezai sat silently on a metal chair, his arms crossed. His face was a mask of calm, but Zahra could see the vein pulsing on his temple—a metronome of anxiety.

And then it began. The sector door burst open. Weber emerged, his face red with anger. He was saying something sharp to the head of security, gesticulating. Dubois was holding a sealed container with the samples as if it were an unexploded bomb. New people appeared in the corridor—more guards, IRGC officers. They didn't threaten. They just stood there, forming a living wall, physically separating the inspectors from the rest of the world.

"What's happening out there?" Rustam muttered.

"They found something," Rezai answered, and there was no surprise in his voice. Only a cold statement of fact.

The argument in the corridor continued for another twenty minutes. Then the inspectors, surrounded by a tight ring of guards, walked past their window toward the exit. They did not look in their direction. Their mission here was over.

An hour later, the same officer came for them.

"You are free to go. You may return to Isfahan. The helicopter is waiting."

In the guesthouse room where Rezai had questioned them the day before, the same senior officer they had met in Isfahan was waiting for them.

"The inspectors have left the facility," he said without preamble. "They found what they were not supposed to find."

He placed a printout on the table. It was a preliminary report from their own security service.

“Uranium particles with enrichment up to 83.7 percent. Taken from the pipes connecting two IR-6 cascades. They also recorded an undeclared change in the piping configuration.”

“How did this happen?” Rustam asked.

“Reconnecting the cascades,” Rezai spoke up. “They wanted to speed up the process, but...” he shrugged. “Sometimes centrifuges work too well. A concentration occurs in the system’s nodes. Microscopic quantities, but the IAEA’s detectors can find even individual atoms.”

The IRGC representative listened in silence, then, after a long pause, said:

“They left without signing the final protocol. This means one thing: in a couple of days, there will be an emergency meeting of the Board of Governors in Vienna. We will be accused of violating every conceivable protocol and of being one step away from creating a weapon.”

He looked at the three of them, his gaze shifting from one to the next.

“We need a story. An explanation. A legend. The official truth that we will present to the world.” He looked at Zahra and Rustam. “You are the best scientific minds in our program. You must create this truth. You are given forty-eight hours to prepare a joint report for the AEOI, which will form the basis of our response to the IAEA.”

“What kind of explanation?” Rustam asked.

“It must be plausible. Scientifically sound. And irrefutable.” He stood up. “They are asking whether this was done deliberately or if it was an accident. Your task is to prove that it was unintentional. An accidental accumulation of isotopes in the system due to a pressure failure. A technical glitch. An error in the experiment. Whatever. You must create a narrative that they can, if they wish, believe.”

He walked out. The three of them were left in the echoing silence. Create a narrative. Rewrite reality. Paint a new picture. A picture that would hide the truth. The truth that she herself had helped to uncover.

On the way home, in the vibrating cabin of the helicopter, she looked down at the mountains passing below. Her scientific objectivity, her faith in the purity of fact, had finally given way to a spy’s paranoia.

What now? she thought. I gave them the lead. They found what they were looking for. Is my mission complete? Or is this just the beginning?

She was certain that 83.7% was no accident. It was a deliberate, carefully planned experiment. Rezai and his men were testing how quickly they could reach weapons-grade levels. Testing the technology. And now that they were caught, they wanted to blame it all on an “unintentional accident,” a singularity.

But what if... what if this whole inspection incident had been orchestrated? Not by her handlers, but by her own leadership? To create an international crisis? To get a pretext for withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty? What if she, Zahra, had been used not as a source of information for the West, but as a catalyst for the plans of the hawks in Tehran?

What now? The inspectors had found what they were looking for. More than that—they had found something Iran could not explain without effectively admitting to the creation of a nuclear weapon. This was the end of the “peaceful atom” game.

Her scientific objectivity, which had been her shield for so many years, shattered like a crystal lattice under neutron bombardment. She felt reality fragmenting into an infinite number of versions, each one as possible and as monstrous as the next. She was not just a pawn in a two-sided game. She was a pawn in a game where there might be three sides, four, or where everyone was playing for themselves, creating and destroying alliances.

She was no longer searching for the truth. She was searching for the least painful lie she could believe in to keep from going insane.

At home, her daughters were waiting for her. Nasrin with anxiety in her eyes, Zeynab with open arms. Amirkhan gave a silent nod—he already knew. His sources worked fast.

“What happened?” he asked when they were alone.

“The inspection did not go well.”

“How unwell?”

“Enough to change everything.”

He looked at her for a long time, and in his gaze, she read the question he didn’t dare to ask: Were you involved? But he didn’t ask. Because some answers are better left unknown.

Tzadi (䷲): The Geometry of Distrust

29 Farvardin 1402 (April 18, 2023)

Spring came to Isfahan, but its arrival was a deception. The sun shone but gave no warmth; the apricot trees bloomed with a desperate, doomed beauty. The three months after Fordow passed like one long, gray day. Their report on the “unintentional singularity” had been accepted. The world pretended to believe it. But something had broken. The air in the research center had grown thick, viscous with distrust.

The control became total. It wasn’t in crude searches, but in the small things. Sudden inspections of work logs. New encryption protocols for email. Unfamiliar faces in the canteen who spoke to no one and only watched. The cameras seemed to

monitor not actions, but thoughts. They had even appeared in the corridors between labs. ID cards were checked three times. It was a geometry of fear, where every point in space was under observation.

“They’re watching us like lab rats in a maze,” Rustam said once, as they were drinking tea. He spoke in a whisper, though no one was around. “Studying our reaction to stress.»

“A maze we built ourselves,» Zahra replied. “After Fordow, we all became suspects. It’s just a matter of degree.”

“Have you noticed? Are they following you too?”

She nodded. It wasn’t just the silver Saipa or the gray Peykan anymore. Others had appeared. “Foot-followers” near her home. Sometimes she felt she was being followed by two different tails—one from the IRGC, and the other... the other was a shadow, a ghost, whose presence she felt more than saw. Who was he? Fakhrabadi’s man? Or her own fear, made flesh?

Twice she went to the mosque. She entered the library, sat at a table. She breathed in the dust of old books. But she did not move the bookcase, did not touch the netbook. She felt like a sapper who knows there is a mine in the room but doesn’t know where it is or what it looks like. Any careless move could trigger an explosion.

At work, conversations in the break room had become like reading encrypted dispatches.

“They say several inspectors are going to have their accreditation revoked,” one of the engineers threw out. “The ones who were at Fordow.”

“All of them?” someone asked.

“Several. The ones who were at Fordow. They’ll be declared persona non grata.”

“That’s an escalation,” Rustam noted.

“It’s a response to an escalation,” Rezai corrected. “They were the first to break protocol by publishing preliminary data without consultation.”

“And the JCPOA?” Zahra asked, referring to the 2015 nuclear deal.

Rezai shrugged.

“For now, we stay in. Leaving would mean complete isolation. Remember what happened in Natanz in ’20 and ’21?”

“Yes,” Rustam agreed. “It’s like a move in a chess game. We remove their queen from the board, but we don’t flip the board itself. We can’t leave the Agreement. That would be tantamount to declaring war.”

Everyone fell silent. The memory of the incidents at Natanz was too fresh. It was a scar on the body of the program. July 2020—an explosion that destroyed the

centrifuge assembly workshop. April 2021—an “accident” in the electrical system that paralyzed the facility for days. Unofficially, everyone knew it was Mossad.

A few days before their next trip to Natanz, Amirkhan started a strange conversation. In the evening, when the children were already asleep, he sat down next to her on the sofa.

“You’re going with Yazdi again.”

“Yes. Routine data verification.”

He was silent for a long time, staring at the patterns of the Persian rug as if trying to read an answer in them.

“You spend a lot of time with him. Business trips, meetings.”

“We’re working on the same project.”

“What do you think of him? As a person?”

The question was asked calmly, almost lazily, but Zahra felt a chill run down her spine. This wasn’t a husband’s curiosity. Was it an interrogation?

“He’s... smart. A good physicist. We talk about science.”

“Only about science?” Amirkhan turned and looked her straight in the eye. “Do you trust him?”

“Within the bounds of professional duties, yes. Why?”

“Nothing,” he turned away. “Just be careful. In these times, you can’t trust anyone. Not even those who drink tea with you. Proximity to anyone can be misinterpreted.”

Or interpreted correctly, Zahra thought. Was he jealous? Or warning her? Or testing her?

“Rustam is a colleague. Just a colleague.”

“I know,” he said, a little too calmly.

The trip to Natanz was like a journey into the past. The same vast complex in the middle of the desert, the same hum underground. But now everything was different. During a meeting, one of the facility managers confirmed the rumors.

“Yes, the decision has been made. The accreditation of Weber, Dubois, and two others will be revoked. This is our response to their provocation at Fordow. But we are not leaving the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Tehran believes it’s premature. The agreement gives us room to maneuver. Leaving would take that away. We don’t want to give Israel a pretext for a strike.”

This was the information her handlers had been waiting for. Valuable. Strategic. It revealed a split in the Iranian leadership: the hawks demanding a rupture, the pragmatists urging caution.

Returning to Isfahan the next evening, she told her husband she was tired and wanted to take a walk. He nodded, but she saw the questions in his eyes.

The Jameh Mosque was full of worshippers—Friday prayers. She joined the women’s rows, mechanically repeating the movements. After the prayer, as the crowd began to disperse, she slipped into the library. Took out the netbook. Turned it on. Her hands were trembling, but her mind was cold and clear.

VPN. India. Forum.

She wrote a message for JagdpanFer_83.

“They will not leave the JCPOA. Fear increased sanctions and sabotage. But accreditation of several inspectors, incl. Weber and Dubois, will be revoked as a ‘symmetrical response.’ Leadership is not united.”

And she hit “Send.”

She turned off the netbook, hid it again. Leaving the library, she felt a gaze on her. She turned—no one.

At home, Amirkhan was watching the news. On the screen, a debate about the nuclear program.

“Where did you walk?”

“In the park. Then I stopped by the mosque.”

“The mosque?”

“To pray. For peace.”

He gave her a long look.

“For peace... I’m afraid your prayers are too late. We are already at war. It’s just a cold one for now.”

For now, Zahra thought. The key word was for now.

Qoph (ܩ): The Last Friday

8 Ordibehesht 1402 (April 28, 2023)

The April sun poured over Isfahan in honeyed streams, and the streets, weary from the grayness of winter, greedily drank in the warmth.

That Friday, they went out into the city as a whole family—a rare, almost forgotten ritual. First, a café in the Armenian quarter of Jolfa, with its cool inner courtyards and the smell of strong coffee. Then, a walk along the embankment of the

Zayandeh River, which this year, surprisingly, was full, its murky, sleepy waters reflecting the ancient arches of the Khaju Bridge.

They walked down an avenue, and Zahra looked at her daughters, and in her heart, tenderness mixed with a sharp, almost physical pain. Zeynab, still a child, walked holding her father's hand, laughingly telling him something about a school play. And Nasrin... Nasrin was already on the other side of the invisible line that separates childhood from adulthood. She walked beside them, but her thoughts were far away.

And, of course, he appeared. Adil. As if by chance, in the same park at the same time. Their «accidental» meeting was as predictable as the motion of the planets. He said hello, smiling shyly, and Nasrin, blushing like a poppy flower, immediately found a pretext to break away from the family. “We’re going to get ice cream.”

Zahra and Amirkhan were left alone, watching the two young figures recede down the avenue. They walked without touching, but between them hung that same electricity, that same awkward, agonizing, and beautiful gravity of first love that makes entire universes revolve around two people who have met by chance.

“Look at them,” Amirkhan said quietly. “It seems like only yesterday we were carrying Nasrin in our arms down this very avenue. And now... she’s already taller than you. Time is a strange substance. It flows by unnoticed, and then suddenly you look, and a whole era has passed.”

“She looks like you at her age,” Zahra said, and the memory of a young, dark-eyed Amirkhan reciting poetry to her by this very bridge washed over her with unexpected force. “Just as stubborn. And just as... convinced that the world can be changed.”

“God grant that the world doesn’t change her,” Amirkhan sighed. “Do you remember how Nasrin was afraid of the swans?”

“And now she’s only afraid of our disapproval,” Zahra replied, watching her older daughter now strolling with Adil at a respectable distance.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice their ‘accidental’ meeting,” Amirkhan shook his head. “She’s your spitting image at her age. Just as stubborn and inventive.”

Zeynab ran ahead, her dress fluttering like a butterfly’s wings. At twelve, she still lived in a world where miracles were possible, and adult problems were just strange conversations behind closed doors.

They sat on a bench. In silence. And in that silence, there was more intimacy than in all the conversations of the past months. For a moment, just one fragile moment, they were once again just a husband and wife, sitting in a park and watching their children. Not a security officer and a spy. Just people.

And at that time, her phone, lying in her bag, vibrated.

She took it out. The screen lit up with a name: «Rustam Yazdi.» She pressed the decline button.

“Who is it?” Amirkhan asked.

“Rustam.”

The phone vibrated again. The same insistent, demanding call. She declined it again, feeling a chill run down her spine. Friday. A day off. Rustam never called on a day off.

“Why aren’t you answering?” The familiar notes appeared in Amirkhan’s voice. “What if it’s something urgent from work?”

“If it were urgent, Rezai would have called,” she replied, trying to keep her voice even. “Rustam knows that Friday is for family. It’s probably just some technical question. I don’t want to think about centrifuges right now.”

She put the phone away. But the illusion of peace was shattered. The call was like a stone thrown into the viscous surface of the water. It was a harbinger, an intrusion from that other world she was so desperately trying to hide from on this sunny day.

The phone vibrated a third time. Now it was no longer just a concern. It was alarm. Something had happened. Something Rustam wanted to warn her about personally, bypassing Rezai, bypassing official channels.

She declined the call again. She had made her choice. She had chosen this fragile hour of peace with her family, stolen from fate.

“Come on, let’s find our children,” she said, standing up. “The ice cream has probably melted by now.”

They walked down the avenue. The sun was setting, painting the sky in soft, pastel tones. Nasrin and Adil were walking toward them. They were laughing, and in their laughter was a carelessness that Zahra, as she now understood, had lost forever.

The phone in her bag did not ring again. It fell silent. And that silence was more terrifying than any call. It was the silence of a broken connection. The silence that comes after.

She didn’t know that this was the last day of peace. She didn’t know that Rustam Yazdi was calling her to say goodbye. Or to warn her.

They returned home at dusk. Nasrin walked with them—Adil had bowed out at the intersection, gallant and old-fashioned. Zeynab was dozing on her father’s shoulder. The city was sinking into evening prayer.

That night, she dreamed of the park, flooded with sunlight. A baby Nasrin was taking her first steps. Zeynab was catching her own reflection. And off to the side, under a plane tree, stood Rustam, shouting something, but she couldn’t hear the

words. She could only see him waving his arms, warning of a danger she couldn't discern in the blinding spring light.

She woke up from her own scream. Amirkhan was asleep. Outside, a pre-dawn silence. On the nightstand lay the silent phone, holding the last calls from a man who would disappear in a few hours, without ever getting an answer.

Resh (ر): The Alchemy of Words

12 Ordibehesht 1402 (May 2, 2023)

The three days following Rustam's disappearance passed in a stupor. The official version was family matters, an urgent trip to Yazd to see his sick mother. But his desk had been cleaned out with the same thoroughness used to decontaminate radioactive material. And the note Zahra had found in the drawer burned in the pocket of her lab coat like a piece of enriched uranium.

“Where is the house of my friend, O companions?”

74.4.12.3_9.1.5.7

Throw it away? But the uncertainty was a poison that worked slowly, yet inexorably. Inform Fakhrabadi? But her channel was one-way. Unscheduled contact was an admission of panic, and in their game, panic was tantamount to death.

Only one path remained. Forward. Into the labyrinth Rustam had built for her.

The UCF facility's library was not just a repository of knowledge. It was a mausoleum. Here, on metal shelves aligned with laser precision, rested the mummies of ideas—monographs, reports, dissertations. The air, smelling of ozone and antistatic spray, seemed too thin to breathe. The silence here was not peaceful, but absolute, like in space. It was oppressive, making every sound—the squeak of a shoe, the click of a keyboard—an event of almost cosmic scale.

She pretended to be looking for an old report on plasma behavior. In a far corner, an engineer sat immersed in his world of numbers. No one else was there. The Persian poetry section, donated by some official from the Ministry of Culture, was an absurd anomaly in this kingdom of formulas. Zahra knew that Rustam sometimes borrowed a volume of Hafez from here.

There it was. The Divan. A dark green binding.

74.4.12.3_9.1.5.7

Coordinates. Page. Line. Word. Letter. It was obvious. Too obvious.

Page 74. Line 4. Word 12: “compass”—قطب‌نما (qotb-namā). Letter 3: “b” (ب).

Page 9. Line 1. Word 5: “alchemist”—کیمیاگر (kimiyāgar). Letter 7: “r” (ر).

B-R. Boron. A neutron absorber. Control. Deceleration. A warning.

An icy disappointment washed over her. Was that it? Just a symbol? A warning that was already too late? No. Rustam wasn't that simple. He was a chess player who thought ten moves ahead. This was the first layer of the cipher. For anyone who might find the note by chance. For security services. A false target. The real key had to be hidden deeper.

She looked at the words again. "Compass." "Alchemist." They were too precise, too symbolic to be mere carriers of random letters. Compass—navigation, a path, a pointer. Alchemist—transformation, conversion, encryption.

Navigation. Encryption.

And then her mind seemed to undergo a phase transition. She was looking at the words, but she wasn't seeing their Persian spelling. She was seeing their shadow, their reflection in another language. In the language they both used to speak to the world of science. In the language that was a universal code.

English.

Compass. Alchemist.

They weren't just words. They were passwords. Or parts of a password. She went back to the numbers. 74.4.12.3. What if they weren't coordinates, but something else? A combination? A date? No. That was too complicated. Rustam knew she wouldn't have time for a lengthy decryption. The solution had to be elegant.

She looked at the words again, now in English. And at the numbers.

Compass. Alchemist.

744123. 9157.

And suddenly she saw it. This wasn't cryptography. It was calligraphy. Digital calligraphy. Rustam had simply replaced some of the letters in the words with numbers that looked similar.

Compass -> Compa55. Two 's' letters, looking like fives.

Alchemist -> A1chem15t. 'l' looked like a 1, 's' like a 5.

No. Still too complex, too many variations. She discarded that version. She needed to think simpler. Like Rustam. He was a poet, but first and foremost, a physicist. He valued simplicity and symmetry.

She closed her eyes, shutting out the visual noise of the letters, and focused on the sounds. Compass. Alchemist. And on the numbers. 74.4.12.3_9.1.5.7. What if they weren't coordinates in a book, but something related to his digital life?

His work terminal. His email. His cloud storage. All of it was protected by two-factor authentication and long passwords. But every system had an entry point. And often, a password recovery option. Using what? Secret words. A seed phrase.

The line from Hafez. “Where is the house of my friend, O companions?» It wasn’t just poetry. It was a key. A question that needed an answer. And the answer was the password.

She returned to the book. Page 74, line 4, word 12. “Compass.»

Page 9, line 1, word 5. “Alchemist.»

Compass.Alchemist

Could it be that simple? Two words, separated by a dot. Too simple. Security would have cracked it in an hour.

So, the numbers. 744123 and 9157. They had to mean something.

She opened her work tablet. Logged into the corporate messenger. Found her old chat with Rustam. They rarely messaged, mostly about work. But there, in his profile, was his internal extension. His employee ID number. His personal records.

The second part of the code. It was his identifier.

And the first? 744123. It wasn’t his phone number, not his date of birth. What was it?

She thought of Hafez again. Of the book. Page 74. What else was on that page? She turned it over. At the very bottom was a printer’s number. An order number. No. 744123.

A shiver ran through her. There it was. The solution. Elegant in its madness. He had used the book not as a cipher table, but as a carrier for two random, unrelated numbers. The order number and his employee ID. And two keywords from the same book that served as a clue.

The password was a combination. Perhaps Compass744123. And the secret recovery phrase—Alchemist009157.

She went to the cloud storage. Found Rustam’s personal folder. The system prompted for a password. She entered Compass744123.

“Incorrect password.”

She tried Alchemist009157.

“Incorrect password.”

She was so close. She could feel it. What had she missed? She looked at the note again. At the _ sign between the two blocks of numbers. The underscore. A separator.

She clicked “Recover access.» The system asked a security question: «Favorite line from Hafez?»

She typed: “Where is the house of my friend, O companions?”

The system prompted her to enter a seed phrase. 12 words. No. That wasn't it.

She returned to the login page. And suddenly, she understood. Rustam was a perfectionist. He loved symmetry.

Compass_Alchemist

She entered it as the username. The system prompted for a password.

744123_009157

She pressed "Enter."

And the folder opened. Inside was a single text file. Encrypted. Titled «The Friend's House.»

She knew the key. The line from Hafez. She entered it.

The file opened. There were only a few lines.

"Zahra, if you are reading this, it means I was right. I am being followed. And it's not the Guards—I know their style. It's others. I don't know who they are or what they want, but I'm tired of hiding. I've decided to meet with them and find out everything, once and for all. If I don't return—know this: there is a traitor among us. Trust only yourself."

The last entry was dated last Thursday. The day she had last seen him.

The silence of the library was broken by a sound. Footsteps.

She snapped the tablet shut. Dr. Rezai was standing in the aisle.

"Finding something interesting in lyric poetry, Dr. Musavi?" his voice was quiet, almost ingratiating, but she could hear the clang of metal in it. "Decided to take a break from Maxwell's equations?"

She stood up, clutching the tablet to her chest. Her heart was beating so hard she thought he must hear it.

"Sometimes it's useful to change one's frame of reference, Dr. Rezai," she said, and her own voice sounded foreign to her. "Poetry is also a kind of code. Just with more unknowns."

He slowly turned his head. His camera-lens eyes bored into her.

"Be careful, Doctor. Sometimes, in trying to decipher a code, one can discover that you are the unknown variable. And that someone is trying to eliminate you from the equation."

Shin (₪): The Room of Reflections

24 Ordibehesht 1402 (May 14, 2023)

Two hours in the windowless room were like being in a non-existent space between two mirrors. Time here had lost its properties, turning into a viscous, uniform substance. The hum of the air conditioner was the only proof that the world outside these walls still existed. Zahra sat on the metal chair, her body stiff, having merged with the sterile, odorless interior. She constructed fractal sets in her mind, delving endlessly into their patterns. It was her way of escaping from reality into pure mathematics, into a world where chaos had its own, albeit incomprehensible, laws.

The door opened. The same Major Karimi entered. He sat down opposite her. He did not look at her. He looked at the voice recorder, which was still switched off.

CASE FILE No. 788-AT/IRGC-ISF

RECORD OF INTERROGATION (continued)

Time Start: 18:20

Time End: 19:34

Location: Counterintelligence Directorate of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Isfahan. Interrogation Room No. 4.

Subject: Musavi, Zahra, daughter of Ali.

Interrogator: Major Mohsen Karimi, Directorate Investigator.

Present:

The Investigator.

The Secretary (recording the minutes).

Musavi, Z.

Investigator: Dr. Musavi, we were interrupted at an interesting point. Your intuition. So, you claim that it was merely intuition that told you Dr. Yazdi had not just disappeared, but had been killed. Is that correct?

Musavi: Intuition is the result of subconscious data processing. When a system you are observing behaves anomalously, your brain draws a conclusion, even if you cannot articulate all the premises.

Investigator: A very scientific explanation. But we are less interested in the premises than in the conclusions. And my conclusion is this: you know something. So where...

The door opened again. Sharply, without a knock. A man in the uniform of an IRGC Colonel stood in the doorway. He was older than Karimi, with graying temples and eyes that seemed to see not people, but their shadows.

“Major, leave us. You and your secretary.”

Karimi stood up, ramrod straight.

“As you command, Colonel.”

They left. The door closed. The Colonel walked to the table but did not sit. He went to the wall, where a camera was hidden behind dark glass, and flipped a switch on the wall. The red light went out.

“This is no longer an interrogation, Dr. Musavi. This is a conversation. My name is Colonel Asadollah Alavi.”

He sat down. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, but after looking at Zahra, put it away.

“I knew your father well. Ali Ferzali. We met several times in Qom, before the Revolution. He was a brilliant theologian. His interpretation of Surah An-Nur... He had a mind capable of seeing light in the darkness. You are like him in that. Only your religion is physics.”

“My father died when I was fifteen.”

“I know. A car accident. A tragic coincidence.” He paused. “Or not. In our world, there are no coincidences, are there?”

Zahra was silent. This was not the start of a conversation. It was a move in a chess game, the purpose of which she did not yet understand.

“Your colleague, Rustam Yazdi, was also a seeker,” Alavi continued. “They say you sometimes discussed things with him not directly related to work. Philosophy. Poetry. Perhaps something else? Computer games, for instance. World of Tanks?”

The question was thrown out casually, but it shattered the silence like a crack in glass. Zahra felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room.

“That... that was a very long time ago. A couple of times, after I returned from France.”

“And after that?”

“No. I don’t think we spoke of it again.”

The Colonel nodded, as if the answer was expected. His gaze was calm, almost sympathetic, like a doctor speaking to a patient.

“Dr. Musavi, Major Karimi believes you are a spy. I think Major Karimi is a straightforward man who sees only one side of the mirror. I, on the other hand, want to understand what is on the other side. So, how do you know that Rustam Yazdi is dead?”

Zahra looked at him. She realized he wasn’t playing with her. He was trying to understand her.

He took out a photograph. Rustam. Dead. Lying on the asphalt in a pool of blood.

“He was killed two weeks ago. The official story is a robbery; they took his watch and wallet. But you know, we don’t rule out that Yazdi was playing a double game. With whom, is not yet clear. Perhaps with Western intelligence services. Perhaps with Mossad. Or perhaps he was simply being blackmailed. We are considering all possibilities. In any case, he is dead. And those who killed him—our enemies, or his handlers deciding to clean up—are still at large.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you could be next. Not as an accomplice—you are too smart for such foolishness. But as a witness. As someone who might have known or seen something. So I will ask a direct question: did Yazdi try to involve you in anything? Did he propose anything unusual? Ask for any strange favors?”

“No. Never.”

“And his note? ‘Where is the house of my friend, O companions?’ You did find it, didn’t you? And deciphered his message?”

Zahra froze. They knew.

“Yes. I... I was worried. I wanted to understand what had happened.”

“And what did you understand?”

“That he was being followed. Not by you. By someone else. And he decided to meet with them.”

“A brave act. Or a foolish one. The line between them is thin,” Alavi said, standing up.

“But here’s what’s interesting—on the day of his death, he tried to call you. Three times. You didn’t answer,” he continued, looking at the mirrored window of the camera.

“I was with my family. It was Friday.”

“Yes, family is more important than work. But perhaps he wanted to warn you about something? Or ask for help?”

Zahra felt tears welling in her eyes. Not from fear—from guilt.

“I don’t know what he wanted to say.”

Alavi nodded, placing a business card on the table.

“Sometimes, Doctor, the most terrifying enemy watching us is ourselves. And the most difficult cipher is the one that hides the truth from ourselves. Your father searched for God outside. Do not repeat his mistake by looking for an enemy where there is none... This is my direct number. Call anytime. Oh, and pay more attention to your husband—he is worried about you.”

Alavi walked to the door. He paused.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you, Dr. Musavi. The country values your work," he said, and left.

few minutes later, the Major and the secretary returned. Karimi turned on the camera, sat down at the table, and opened the file.

Investigator: So, Dr. Musavi, one last question. On the day of Dr. Yazdi's disappearance, did you notice anything unusual?

Musavi: No. Nothing.

Investigator: Very well. The interrogation is over. Time is 19:34. You are free to go. We will call you if necessary.

Tav (ن): Squaring the Circle

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

SECURITY SERVICE

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET

MEMORANDUM No. 1247/SS-ISF

Date: 25 Khordad 1402 (June 15, 2023)

To: Head of the IRGC Counterintelligence Directorate, Isfahan Province

From: Special Investigations Department

Subject: Case No. 788-AT/IRGC-ISF (Murder of R. Yazdi)

1. Main conclusions regarding the death of R. Yazdi:

In accordance with the conclusion of the police investigation department, the death of citizen Rustam Yazdi, which occurred on 9 Ordibehesht 1402 (April 29, 2023), has been officially classified as a murder committed during an attempted robbery by unidentified persons. This version is supported by witness testimony (discovery of the body) and the absence of the deceased's personal valuables at the crime scene (watch, wallet, mobile phone). Investigative measures to identify the assailants are ongoing through the Ministry of Interior.

Despite the official conclusion, operational intelligence indicates the presence of signs that may suggest a link between this incident and the deceased's professional activities. No direct evidence has been found to date to support the theory of R. Yazdi's elimination by foreign intelligence services.

2. Results of digital activity analysis:

During the analysis of R. Yazdi's digital footprint, conducted jointly with the cybersecurity service, the following facts were established:

2.1. On 13 Aban 1401 (November 4, 2022), a user with the pseudonym Hafiz_114 was registered on the internet forum wotrandon.com/forum/mods-world-of-tanks, dedicated to the computer game “World of Tanks.” At this time, R. Yazdi was on a business trip at the Fordow facility. It has also been established that R. Yazdi showed an interest in Persian poetry, particularly the works of Hafez of Shiraz.

2.2. From IP addresses associated with this user, at least three messages were sent to the user JagdpanFer_83. The dates of these messages (13 Aban 1401, 30 Aban 1401, 29 Farvardin 1402) correlate with a high degree of probability to periods of heightened activity at the Fordow and Natanz facilities, as well as to R. Yazdi’s business trips to these facilities, including those with Z. Musavi.

2.3. The user JagdpanFer_83 was registered in 2012 during Dr. Z. Musavi’s internship in Sarov (Russian Federation). The number 83 corresponds to Z. Musavi’s year of birth according to the Gregorian calendar (1983); Fer corresponds to the first letters of her maiden name (Ferzali). However, this account has shown no activity since 2012. An attempt to send a message to this address returns an automatic reply: “Thank you for your message. Follow the news on this forum.”

2.4. Technical conclusion: Cybersecurity specialists do not exclude the possibility that the JagdpanFer_83 account could have been used by the user Hafiz_114 as a “dead drop” mailbox or a gateway for redirecting encrypted information to another, hidden address. Due to the use of complex encryption methods and subsequent data deletion, it was not possible to retrieve the content of the correspondence.

3. Results of operational-investigative measures:

During the course of operational-investigative measures, it was established:

3.1. Surveillance of R. Yazdi was conducted not only by our Directorate. Parallel surveillance was carried out by employees of the Isfahan Municipality’s security department under the personal order of its head, citizen Amirkhan Musavi, the husband of Dr. Z. Musavi.

3.2. During interrogation, A. Musavi explained that he had authorized surveillance of R. Yazdi out of concern for the safety of his wife, who spent a lot of time with the deceased on work-related trips. A. Musavi expressed concern that R. Yazdi might have been involved in some illegal activity and could pose a threat to Z. Musavi. He categorically denied any personal motives (jealousy). No direct evidence of A. Musavi’s involvement in the incident leading to R. Yazdi’s death has been found. His actions have been qualified as an abuse of authority; the materials have been transferred to the relevant department for an internal review.

4. Recommendations:

Considering the above, and taking into account the strategic importance of Dr. Zahra Musavi's work and her unstable psycho-emotional state following the death of her colleague and subsequent interrogations, it is recommended:

4.1. Not to initiate criminal proceedings against Z. Musavi due to the lack of direct evidence indicating her involvement in espionage activities.

4.2. To continue a complex of operational-investigative measures against Z. Musavi (category "Surveillance-2"). The subject may be used as an unwitting asset by enemy intelligence services or may independently make contact with the suspected murderers of R. Yazdi.

4.3. To consider Case No. 788-AT/IRGC-ISF formally closed, but to maintain operational control over the subject.

Head of the Investigations Department

Colonel M. Taheri, Head of the Investigations Department

[Signature]

[Seal]

[AGENCY NAME REDACTED]

OPERATIONS DIRECTORATE

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET

ANALYTICAL BRIEF No. [REDACTED]

Date: June 17, 2023

To: Head of Middle East Division

From: Operational Support Group

Subject: Operation "Isfahan Triangle" — Current Status

1. Status of the operational network:

Asset "Cardamom" (head of Laboratory No. 4) has been out of contact since April 29, 2023—the day of the death of subject "Poet" (R. Yazdi). All attempts to re-establish contact have been unsuccessful. The protocol phrase for identification is no longer used in meetings with IAEA inspectors.

2. Analysis of the "Poet" incident:

According to source "Pomegranate" (IRGC), the official version is murder during a robbery. However, analysis of operational intelligence has revealed the following:

A. Musavi (husband of Dr. Z. Musavi / “Pistachio”), head of the Municipality’s security department, conducted unauthorized surveillance of “Poet” for several weeks.

Motive according to A. Musavi himself: professional vigilance.

Real motive (per our analysts’ assessment): jealousy, possibly personal animosity.

The circumstances of the murder (time, place, method) indicate an unprofessional execution, imitating a street robbery. This is characteristic of a contract killing organized by an individual with access to criminal elements through their official position.

3. Situation assessment:

High probability that A. Musavi organized the elimination of “Poet” for personal reasons (jealousy over his wife).

“Cardamom” has ceased contact, likely fearing that “Poet’s” death is the beginning of a network cleanup. He cannot know the true motives for the murder.

Conclusion: The unintentional consequence of a murder committed for domestic reasons has paralyzed the work of an intelligence network.

4. Current risks:

“Cardamom” is in a deep-cover state, possible panic.

“Pistachio” is under surveillance by her own husband.

A. Musavi has unintentionally disrupted the work of our agent network.

5. Recommendations:

5.1. DO NOT attempt contact with “Cardamom”—let the situation stabilize naturally.

5.2. Explore the possibility of recruiting A. Musavi:

Leverage: organization of a murder.

Motivation: protection from exposure.

Potential: access to security services, control over his wife.

5.3. Continue passive surveillance of “Pistachio.” It is noteworthy that she continues to work, unaware that her husband is the murderer of her friend and colleague.

6. Conclusion:

The case demonstrates how personal passions can destroy intelligence operations built over years. A. Musavi, without realizing it, has inflicted more damage on our network than the entire Iranian counterintelligence.

It is recommended to use this precedent in the preparation of future operations: to consider the «jealous husband» factor when working with with “family” sources.

Head of Operational Support Group

[Signature Redacted]

P.S. The psychological service notes a high probability of “Pistachio” developing a dissociative disorder due to accumulated stress. Monitoring is recommended.

Glossary

Characters and Roles:

Zahra Musavi — Doctor of Physics (plasma/centrifuges), Lab No. 4, UCF Isfahan. Outwardly loyal, internal conflict “science ↔ system.” Operational codename in a foreign brief: “Pistachio.”

Amirkhan Musavi — Head of Security for the Isfahan Municipality; Zahra’s husband. A pragmatist of the system; initiated “parallel surveillance.” Possible jealousy as a risk factor.

Rustam Yazdi — Physicist colleague, a “glitch in the system,” poetry lover; disappeared and was killed. Operational codename: “Poet.”

Dr. Hassan Rezai — Head of Lab No. 4 (UCF). Hardline ideologue, strategist. Operational codename: “Cardamom.”

Col. Asadollah Alavi (IRGC) — The “smart investigator”: turns off the recording, speaks “between the lines.”

Maj. Mohsen Karimi (IRGC) — The formal interrogator (“the protocol”).

Klaus Weber — Head of the IAEA delegation during inspection visits.

Marie Dubois — IAEA inspector, persistent in her questions about Sector B-7.

Mahmoud Ahmadi (AEOI) — Deputy Director for International Relations; oversees responses to the IAEA.

“Mr. Fakhrabadi” — An external figure with diplomatic access; ambiguous affiliation; the World of Tanks connection.

Nasrin and Zeynab — Zahra’s daughters; the “centrifugal ↔ centripetal” axis.

Adil — Nasrin’s classmate, the “scar” of school detentions.

Operational Codewords: “Pomegranate” (source in the IRGC), “Cardamom” (Rezai), “Pistachio” (Zahra), “Poet” (Rustam).

Organizations and Venues:

Basij — Members of the Iranian paramilitary militia, one of the five so-called “forces” within the IRGC.

IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) — Counterintelligence/operational services.

Ettela’at (Ministry of Intelligence) — The country’s main intelligence service and secret police.

AEOI (Atomic Energy Organization of Iran) — Official contacts with the IAEA.

IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) — Inspections, DIQ, swipe samples, seals, Board of Governors meetings.

FARAJA Police / FATA Cyber Police — Forensics, digital analytics.

Facilities: Fordow — Underground; Natanz — Large complex; UCF Isfahan — Conversion/research.

Locations: New Jolfa (Armenian quarter), Chaharbagh Avenue, Jameh Mosque of Isfahan, Khaju Bridge, Zayandeh-Rood River.

Technical and Procedural Lexicon:

IR-1 / IR-2m / IR-6 — Types of centrifuges; cascades, “change in linkage,” resonances.

UF6 — Uranium hexafluoride; “plate-out”/“heels” in pipelines as a source of anomalous particles.

Swipe samples, tamper-evident seals (with number logging), DIQ (Design Information Questionnaire), CSA/additional protocols.

“83.7%” — Particles of highly enriched product (found locally in samples).

Channels and Codes:

Forum: wotrandom.com (“shop window” / dead drop mail server), nicknames: Hafiz_114, JagdpanFer_83 (auto-responder).

“The Friend’s House” — A line by Sohrab Sepehri (deliberately disguised as Hafez): a deliberate “mistake as a key.”

Codes: Sector B-7, the “typo/discrepancy” pattern as a marker of being addressed.

A Guide to the 22 Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet (Symbols and Their Thematic Rhymes):

Letter Translit. Key Meanings Resonance with the Novel’s Themes

א Aleph — Unity, silence, beginning; the “invisible sound” The silence of the protocol; the “first cause” of Zahra’s choice

ב Bet — House, duality, creation (The Torah begins with ב) Home/laboratory; two worlds and a double life

ג Gimel — “Camel,” movement/giving; chases after ט (the poor) The movement of help/sympathy towards the weak (children/Adil)

ט Dalet — Door, poverty/humility The doors of the interrogation room; the threshold of betrayal/truth

נ He — Breath, revelation, the name/breath of God Sudden “understanding” (phase transition/epiphany)

ו Vav — Hook, connection, the conjunction “and” Linkages: science ↔ politics; linking phrases in interrogation

ר Zayin — Weapon/seven; struggle and Shabbat Violence in the streets / a “peaceful” day as a hidden battle

נ Khet — Fence/boundary; “life” ('נ) Access boundaries, the “life” of the underground facility

ו Tet — Hidden good/danger; nine “Good/bad” intention within a single act

י Yod — A seed-point; hand; smallness “Small” errors/particles of 83.7% with a huge effect

כ Kaph — Palm/container; potential → action The hands that make decisions; to contain a lie/truth

ל Lamed — To learn/to teach; “a high tower” Teaching/explaining to the IAEA; lessons for the children

מ Mem — Water/womb; open/closed מ — the hidden and the revealed Open/hidden channels; “closed” messages

נ Nun — Fish/sprout; falling and rising The falls (Natanz/breakdowns) and Zahra’s resilience

ס Samekh — Support, circle, protection The encirclement/”living walls,” support/a trap

ע Ayin Eye; gaze/inner vision Surveillance, mirrors, “self-observation”

פ Pe — Mouth/speech; the power of the word Protocols/reports as weapons; “the alchemy of words”

צ Tzadi — Righteousness/the hunt; the shape of a “hook” The “hunt” by the services; the attempt to be “right” and pure

ק Qoph — “Back of the head”/holiness; imitation The theater of power; the imitation of truth and rituals

נ Resh — Head/beginning; vulnerability Leaders/decisions; the start of a new spiral

ו Shin — Tooth/fire/change; three pillars The “theater of fire,” the triple calls, the three forces

ן Tav — Mark/seal/completion The IAEA seals; the final memos.

Shiraz

Prologue

Winter 1403/2024

Sometimes, when the insomnia became unbearable, Zahra would read—not physics, not reports—she would read the strange, marginal blogs of Western intellectuals; it was like looking at another planet, a planet that Uncle Javad had invented in the living room of their old house in Shiraz, only he didn’t know he was inventing someone else’s future, and they don’t know they are living in someone else’s past. That night she stumbled upon an article about some newfangled philosophy, the “Neoreactionary movement,” the “Dark Enlightenment”; she read about calls to replace democracy with corporate governance, about technomonarchy, about traditional values purged of religion, she read the names: Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land, Peter Thiel, and she felt nothing, no surprise, no fear, only a cold, cosmic weariness, because she had already seen it all before, seen it on the dusty carpet in the living room, in the yellowed newspaper clippings that Uncle Javad would bring—not Hossein, Javad, or was it Hossein? Memory confuses names like a centrifuge confuses isotopes, separating and mixing them at the same time. No. It was Javad after all.

Peter Thiel talks about the failure of democracy, almost word for word what Papa wrote in 1997, wrote in the margins of the Quran, which was blasphemy, but he would say that the Quran was also a code that needed to be cracked to understand the enemy’s design, and the enemy uses our sacred texts against us. Nick Land quotes ideas about an “exit from the system,” which is straight from my uncle’s notes on a “hijra from modernity,” an exodus from time, like Moses from Egypt, only Moses knew where he was going, and we are fleeing into nowhere, into the void that we ourselves create. Curtis Yarvin and his “neoreaction”—it’s a carbon copy of my uncle’s theory of a “return to the sacred vertical of power,” only for my uncle the vertical led to Allah, and for Yarvin, it leads to a CEO, to the chief executive officer of the universe, who doesn’t exist, just as the conspiracy my uncle was searching for didn’t exist.

They don’t even know, these smart people from Silicon Valley, they don’t know that their “revolutionary” ideas were conceived by a half-mad colonel and a theologian from Shiraz who were looking for a conspiracy where there was none, and in the process created a philosophy that was later appropriated by the very people they considered their enemies, or maybe I invented that they invented it, maybe in that childhood room where I drew diagrams, connecting names and dates, I wasn’t creating a conspiracy map, but a blueprint for the future, and now the world is being built according to my childhood scribbles, as if from a blueprint, like the schematic

of a centrifuge that separates uranium into isotopes, and life into truth and lies, only where is the truth and where is the lie when a lie becomes the truth twenty years later?

Yesterday Nasrin asked me about her grandfather. I told her he died in a car crash when I was fifteen, a simple accident, a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel, but even as I said the words, I could hear my uncle's voice: "There are no accidents, Zahra-jan, only patterns we haven't yet learned to read," and I have been reading these patterns my whole life, like reading the ECG of a dying heart, searching for rhythm in the chaos, and finding only the echo of my own pulse.

It all began not in Fordow, and not in Sarov, where I played World of Tanks for the first time, choosing the German Jagdpanther, the tank hunter, the ghost hunter, the self hunter. It all began in Shiraz, in the year the spring smelled of roses and betrayal, although what betrayal is there if no one betrayed anyone, it's just that my father died and my uncle went mad, or the other way around, my father went mad and my uncle died, or they are both alive in a parallel universe where Khatami lost the election and history took a different path, the path they were drawing on the dusty carpet.

I was a teenager, I was fourteen, or fifteen, an age when time flows not like a river but like honey, getting stuck in your throat with the sweet nausea of first love and first death. My uncle had just returned from Tehran, where the conservatives had lost the election, May 23, 1997, 2 Khordad 1376, dates like coordinates in spacetime, points where reality fractures. Uncle Javad, yes, definitely Javad, sat in our living room and laid out newspaper clippings on the carpet like a game of solitaire in which every card meant catastrophe, or like a periodic table of elements in which every element was a way to destroy the world.

"They won, Ali," he would say to my father. "But this is only the beginning. The real game is yet to come."

I remember thinking then: what game? Who is playing? And why do adults speak in riddles, like Hafez in his ghazals, like the physics teacher explaining Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: you can't know a particle's position and its velocity at the same time, you can't know the truth and live with it at the same time. No. But what I really remember are not the words, but the smell: the roses of Shiraz, mixed with the smell of smoke from the burnt newspaper clippings that Uncle Javad would set on fire, saying that truth burns brighter in the flames. And I remember how the ash settled on the carpet, creating patterns that I would later learn to read as maps of the future.

Now I know the answer, or I think I know, which is almost the same thing in a world where JagdpanFer_83 turned out to be me, writing letters to myself from the past into the future. We are all playing. Each of us with ourselves. And we only learn the rules of this game after we have already lost.

But maybe that is the victory—to lose so beautifully that the defeat becomes an art, like the ghazals of Hafez, like the roses of Shiraz, like the atomic decay that transforms matter into the pure energy of light.

Fourteen years old. Twenty-seven years ago.

Chapter 1. The Day of Choice

2 Khordad 1376 (May 23, 1997)

On that May day, Shiraz seemed to hold its breath. The air, thick with the scent of blossoming bitter orange trees, vibrated with unspoken anticipation. It wasn't just a Friday, the sacred day of rest and prayer. It was the day of choice, and that very word, almost forgotten, was being spoken in kitchens and teahouses, sometimes in whispers, sometimes with a feverish glint in the eyes.

Zahra walked between her parents, her hand lost in the large, warm palm of her father. She was almost fifteen, an age when you are no longer a child but not yet an adult—an awkward, liminal age when you see and understand more than you're supposed to, but you don't yet have a voice. In both the literal and figurative sense.

The polling station was located in the school she had attended in her primary years. The familiar courtyard, usually empty, was full of people today. On the walls were posters of the candidates, faded by the May sun. Khatami's face smiled softly, almost apologetically. Nateq-Nouri looked stern, like a teacher ready to scold a negligent student.

The line snaked long and motley, and in it stood everyone—women in severe black chadors and in bright, fashionable rusari headscarves, men in formal suits and in worn-out jeans. This wasn't just a crowd. It was two Irans, meeting today in one place to decide which way their shared river would turn.

Her parents were also two different Irans.

“Khatami is the future, Ali,” her mother had said that morning as she poured tea, the steam rising between them like a transparent wall. “He speaks of a dialogue of civilizations. About how one can be both devout and modern.”

“Modernization without faith is Westernization, Roxana.” Her father spread butter on his lavash with the same methodicalness with which he wrote his theological treatises. “Nateq-Nouri understands that tradition is not shackles, but roots.”

Yes, her mother, Roxana, a doctor, a woman with the thin, nervous fingers of a surgeon and eyes that always held a light, ironic sadness, did not hide her hopes. For her, Khatami was not just a candidate. He was a symbol—of the possibility to breathe a little more freely, to read books that didn't need to be hidden, to speak to the world in a common language.

Her father, Ali, a theologian, a man whose face seemed carved from ivory, was the embodiment of tradition. He was going to vote for Nateq-Nouri, for the familiar, orderly world where everything had its place and the highest law was the word of the Prophet. But his conservatism was devoid of fanaticism. It was as complex as the patterns of an Isfahan mosque.

“Do you really think Rushdie deserves to die?” Roxana asked as they stood in line, her voice quiet but insistent.

“I think he wrote a bad, deceitful book,” Ali answered just as quietly. “But the fatwa... No. Allah did not give us the right to be His executioners. If a man errs, he should not be killed. He should be debated. Persuaded. With words, not with the sword. Otherwise, how are we different from those we fight?”

Zahra listened to them, and it seemed to her she was listening not just to a husband and wife, but to the eternal argument of the two halves of the Persian soul—poetry and law, doubt and faith.

Uncle Javad was not with them. He was in Tehran. “Just in case,” as he had said on the phone the day before. Zahra knew that “just in case” in the world of her uncle, an employee of VEVAK, meant the possibility of riots, arrests, chaos. Uncle Javad didn’t believe in elections. He believed in the patterns woven in the shadows.

They entered the school building. The smell of chlorine, the hum of voices, the rustle of ballots. Her parents went to separate voting booths, like ships parting at sea. Zahra was left to wait in the corridor, by a display of children’s drawings. She looked at the naive, bright pictures—houses, suns, flowers—and felt infinitely old. She already knew the world was far more complicated. That behind every sun, a shadow hid. And that today, on this day full of hope, her parents, whom she loved equally, would drop two ballots into the box that would fly in different directions, like two arrows shot into the future.

She watched as a woman in a black chador took a ballot, her fingers trembling like a patient with Parkinson’s disease. And next to her stood a girl in a bright headscarf, smiling as if it were not election day, but a wedding. Her father used to explain: “Allah gave us free will, but freedom is a heavy burden that not everyone is prepared to carry.” Now she knew: that weight pressed down on everyone who had come to her school that day to cast their vote into the future.

I remember, or I think I remember, or I’m inventing that I remember, how the roses smelled that day, they smelled not of roses but of time, which was curdling, like milk in tea when you add lemon, but we didn’t add lemon, we added cardamom, and Father would say that cardamom is the memory of paradise, and Mother would laugh and say that paradise is a hospital with no patients, which was a joke, but not a funny one, because a hospital with no patients is a morgue, but she would say it in Persian—sardkhaneh—a cold house, and I would think: why is death cold if hell is hot?

Khatami on the poster smiled, the way a physics teacher smiles when explaining that light is both a wave and a particle at the same time, which is impossible but it is so, and I thought: maybe a president is also both a wave and a particle, and that's why we can't know for sure where he is and where he's going, the uncertainty principle, which I hadn't studied yet but already knew, because some things we know before we know them.

The line moved, the way mercury moves in a thermometer—slowly, reluctantly, but inevitably, and I counted the people: seventeen, thirty-four, sixty-eight, a doubling, mitosis, the division of cells, which can be growth or it can be cancer, and Dr. Roxana, my mother, but I didn't call her Mother when I thought of her as a doctor, Dr. Roxana knew the difference, but she didn't say, because some knowledge is dangerous, like uranium isotopes, which I read about in the encyclopedia, U-235 and U-238, one explodes and the other doesn't, but they look the same.

Uncle Javad didn't come, and his absence was louder than his presence, just as silence is louder than sound when you're waiting for an explosion, but I didn't know I was waiting for an explosion, I thought I was waiting for the saffron ice cream Father had promised to buy after the vote, but the ice cream will melt, just as this day will melt, leaving only stains on memory, yellow like saffron, red like roses, black like the chador of the woman who stood before us and smelled of grief, although grief has no smell, or maybe it does, but we have no words for that smell.

I couldn't vote, I was fourteen, or fifteen, no, fourteen, definitely fourteen, because I would turn fifteen next spring, on 25 Bahman, in the year my father would no longer be alive, but I didn't know that yet, or maybe I did, because time in Shiraz doesn't flow linearly but in a spiral, like water in a sink when you pull the plug, and everything rushes to one point—the drain, oblivion, the day a car will crash into a car, and metal will meet metal, as atoms meet in a nuclear reaction, releasing energy that destroys everything around it.

But on that day, 2 Khordad 1376, I only felt that something was beginning, something big and terrifying, the way you feel a storm approaching by how the birds fall silent, and even the roses stop smelling, preparing for the blow that is as inevitable as Khatami's victory with seventy percent of the vote, which was impossible but it happened, like light being both a wave and a particle at the same time.

Chapter 2. The Algebra of Defeat

6 Khordad 1376 (May 27, 1997)

The euphoria was almost palpable. It hung in the Shiraz air like the sweet pollen of blossoming acacia trees. Khatami's victory was not just a victory. It was a miracle, a violation of the laws of political physics. Seventy percent. A number whispered in bazaars and university lecture halls. A number that meant the unseen, silent Iran had

suddenly found its voice. Zahra's mother, Roxana, walked around the house with a smile Zahra hadn't seen in years. She put records of forbidden, pre-revolutionary music on the player, and the sounds of the violin seemed to heal old wounds in the walls of their home.

But a few days later, when Uncle Javad returned from Tehran, a different air entered the house. A cold one. Saturated with the smell of the capital's anxiety.

Uncle Javad did not share in the general jubilation. He sat in the living room, drinking tea in small, nervous sips, and his eyes, usually full of an ironic sparkle, were like two dark, dry wells.

"Seventy percent. Twenty million votes," he said, addressing Zahra's father. "In Tehran, it's a carnival. The youth are celebrating in the streets as if we've won a war. Women are pushing back their headscarves, revealing their hair. Music from tape recorders—Western music! They are not celebrating Khatami's victory. They are celebrating the system's defeat."

"Don't exaggerate, Javad," Ali, Zahra's father, gently countered. "The system has shown flexibility. The capacity for change. That is a sign of strength, not weakness. And the people... the people have made their choice. Allah gave them that right."

"The people?" Uncle Javad scoffed. "The people are clay. The question is, who is the potter? Did you see how they rejoiced in the Western embassies? They were opening champagne. They are celebrating our weakness."

He took a stack of newspapers from his briefcase and threw them on the carpet. Salam, Hamshahri. The headlines screamed of a "spring of freedom" and a "dialogue of civilizations."

"Dialogue..." Javad hissed. "Do you remember how Gorbachev's dialogue with the West ended? A great empire, our 'Lesser Satan,' fell to pieces in a few years. He spoke of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika,' and what he got was humiliation and poverty. He wanted to reform the system and became its gravedigger. And now the Soviet Union is not an adversary, but a humbled supplicant, the stepchild of the 'Great Satan.' They want to pull the same trick on us."

"But we are not the Soviet Union," Ali said. "We have faith."

"Faith is a fortress. But they are not going to storm it. They are going to bribe the guards and open the gates from within. They are offering us a temptation—democracy. As if it were a panacea for all ills."

"Democracy is better than the Shah's tyranny," the father noted.

"Undoubtedly. But it has its own poisons," Uncle Javad leaned forward, his voice becoming quieter, more confidential. "Have you read Carlyle? An Englishman, nineteenth century. He said that history is not moved by the masses, not by parliaments. It is moved by heroes. Exceptional individuals. Prophets, poets,

conquerors. Napoleon. He spoke of a ‘cult of heroes.’ That one man, endowed with will and genius, can change the world, fulfilling a divine destiny. He rises above the crowd, above its petty interests.”

“On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History,” Ali nodded. “Strange that you would bring up a British reactionary.”

“Not a reactionary. A visionary. He understood the main thing: democracy is the rule of mediocrity. The crowd will never choose the best. It will choose the one who promises what it wants to hear.”

“And where did Napoleon lead France?” Roxana asked softly. “To Waterloo. And Cromwell? To the restoration of the monarchy. Carlyle’s heroes all ended in ruin.”

“But they changed the world! The West itself!” Javad raised his voice. “And what will Khatami change? He speaks of a ‘dialogue of civilizations.’ Dialogue! With those who want to destroy us! It’s as if a sheep proposed to a wolf that they discuss the dinner menu.”

He looked at Roxana.

“We overthrew the Shah because he imagined himself such a hero, but he did not have God behind him. But what if they offer us a new ‘hero’? Charismatic, smiling, saying all the right words. And the people, tired of hardships, will follow him, like the children after the Pied Piper of Hamelin. And this hero will lead us not to paradise, but to a new, even more sophisticated form of slavery. Slavery to the West.”

“I agree! Democracy is, of course, better than the Shah’s regime we grew up under,” Ali said calmly. “But you are right about one thing—it can be dangerous. Especially when people vote with their hearts and not their heads.”

“There!” Javad grew animated. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to explain. Khatami is a Trojan horse. The West celebrated his victory more than the Iranians themselves. The BBC, CNN—they’re all trumpeting a ‘new era.’ Why? What do they know that we don’t?”

“Maybe they’re just happy that the world is becoming a less dangerous place?” Roxana suggested.

Javad looked at her with pity.

“Sister, for them, the world will only be safe when there is no one left in it who can say ‘no’ to their order. Khatami is the first step. Then there will be a second, a third... And one day we will wake up in a country where daughters do not wear the hijab, sons do not know their prayers, and universities teach Darwin instead of the Quran.”

“You’re painting an apocalypse over an election,” Ali remarked. “Is our faith so weak that it cannot withstand the test of freedom?”

“Freedom...” Javad stood up and walked to the window, beyond which the pomegranate garden was in bloom. “You know what I realized in Tehran? There are two kinds of conspiracy. The overt one—when enemies come with weapons. And the covert one—when they come with ideas. The second is more dangerous. There is armor against bullets. Against ideas—there are only other ideas. But where do we get them, if the best minds are busy with ‘dialogue’?”

Zahra, sitting in the corner with her algebra textbook, looked up. She didn’t fully understand the meaning of the words, but she felt their weight. She saw the confidence on her father’s face give way to a shadow of doubt. Uncle Javad wasn’t arguing. He was sowing seeds. Seeds of fear.

I was doing my algebra homework, quadratic equations, $x^2 + px + q = 0$, and listening to Uncle Javad talk about percentages, seventy percent, and I thought: that’s 7/10, an irreducible fraction, just as what happened is irreducible, twenty million votes, 20,000,000, a number with seven zeros, like the seven circles of hell in Dante, whom I hadn’t read but I knew there were seven circles, because seven is a special number, seven days of the week, seven notes, seven colors of the rainbow, although in reality there are infinite colors, we just agreed to see seven.

Uncle was talking about Gorbachev, and I remembered his picture in an old newspaper, the birthmark on his forehead, like a map of a nonexistent country, and I thought: maybe all reformers are marked by something, some seal, like Cain, but what marked Khatami? His smile? His glasses? Or something invisible that only Uncle Javad could see?

Mother was smiling, and her smile was like an integral—it gathered all the small joys into one big one, and Father was serious, like a differential—he broke big questions into small parts to understand each one, but Uncle, Uncle was like the imaginary number i , the square root of negative one, impossible, but necessary to solve some equations.

Carlyle, they were talking about Carlyle, and I imagined an old Englishman with a beard, though I didn’t know what he looked like, but all old Englishmen in my imagination had beards, like Darwin, who couldn’t be taught in school, but I read about him in the encyclopedia, natural selection, survival of the fittest, but Uncle was talking about heroes who are stronger than the strongest, who change the rules of the game, like in chess, if a queen suddenly decides to move like a knight, which is impossible, but Napoleon did it, and Cromwell, and the Prophet, peace be upon him, but can they be put in the same category?

A Trojan horse, Uncle said “Trojan horse,” and I thought of a wooden horse full of soldiers, but how can a president be a horse? Or is the horse his smile, and the soldiers are the ideas hiding behind the smile, waiting for night to come out and open the city gates? But what city? Shiraz? Tehran? Or the city in our heads that we believe to be impregnable?

Seventy percent, I went back to that number, 0.7 as a decimal, 7×10^{-1} in scientific notation, but why did it scare Uncle? In mathematics, 70% is a clear majority, it's a consensus, it's almost unanimity, but Uncle saw in it not unity, but a schism, as if 70% "for" meant there were invisible percentages "against," who didn't vote, didn't show up, didn't believe in the very possibility of choice.

The BBC was celebrating, CNN was celebrating, and I imagined people in suits somewhere in London and New York drinking champagne for Khatami's victory, even though alcohol is haram, but they aren't Muslims, they're allowed, and maybe that's the problem—they are happy about something we should be happy about ourselves, but why does their happiness scare Uncle more than their anger?

Father asked about faith and freedom, whether faith can withstand the test of freedom, and I thought: that's like asking if ice can withstand the test of fire; it can, but it will cease to be ice, it will become water, then steam, then disappear, but is disappearance a defeat, or just a change of state?

I was solving a quadratic equation, and it had two roots, x_1 and x_2 , two answers to one question, which exist simultaneously, and maybe Khatami was one root, and Nateq-Nouri the other, and they are both correct, just on different sides of zero, positive and negative, but when squared, they give the same result.

Chapter 3. The Magic of Numbers

16 Khordad 1376 (June 6, 1997)

Two weeks later, the air in Shiraz seemed lighter. Something had subtly changed, as if a heavy, invisible shroud had been lifted from the city. In the evenings, there were more young people on the avenues and in the parks. They weren't doing anything forbidden. They were simply there—sitting on benches, laughing a little louder than before, their laughter mixing with the music drifting from the open windows of cars. The girls wore their headscarves a little more loosely, revealing strands of hair, as defiant as the first blades of grass pushing through asphalt. Hope seemed to be an almost physical substance, like patches of sunlight on the pavement, like glints in shop windows.

That Friday, Zahra was walking around the city with her mother. Her father had stayed home, citing work on an article. They walked down an avenue, and Roxana, usually reserved, was almost childishly happy today. She bought Zahra cotton candy and told funny stories from her student days.

"Look," she said, nodding toward a group of students by the fountain. "It's as if they've woken up."

But Zahra saw not only them. She also saw those who were watching. Men in nondescript shirts, sitting at a distance with newspapers in their hands, but their

gazes were not on the letters. They were everywhere, like the shadows cast by the bright June sun.

“At our school, the upperclassmen have gone crazy, it seems,” Zahra said, looking at a group of students arguing about something with heat and excitement. “They’re talking about poetry nights, about new newspapers. They say they might even allow concerts soon.”

“God willing,” Roxana adjusted her sunglasses, and for a moment, the sky was reflected in them as if in a looking-glass. “I hope Uncle Javad’s words remain just words. Just a grim fairy tale for adults.”

She said it quietly, almost like a prayer. A prayer that reality would turn out to be simpler than her brother described it.

When they returned home, they were met with silence. But it was not the peaceful silence that reigned when her father was working. It was a dense, electrified silence. Muffled voices came from the living room. Her father and Uncle Javad.

They were sitting opposite each other, and the carpet between them looked like a chessboard. Uncle had arrived from Tehran without warning. Laid out on the carpet were not newspapers, but printouts. The ashtray was full, the coffee cups empty.

“Have you read his latest speeches?” Javad’s voice was quiet but insistent, like the sound of a drill. “I counted. He used the word *roshanfekri*—‘enlightenment’—twenty-three times. Twenty-three times, Ali! Exactly twenty-three.”

Zahra’s father picked up a cup of cold coffee from the table. An ironic sparkle danced in his eyes.

“Twenty-three, you say? Well, that’s serious, Javad. That’s the number of the Illuminati. A terrible coincidence. And if you add two and three, you get five. A pentagram. The symbol of man, but also the sign of Baphomet, if you turn it upside down. The star of Solomon and the seal of the devil. It all adds up.”

“Don’t laugh, Ali!” Javad slapped his hand on the stack of papers. “Don’t you see? It’s a language, a code! They are speaking to us, but we are not listening! ‘Enlightenment’ is their password! They want to replace the light of Allah with their own artificial, electric light of reason!”

“Or maybe he just likes the word?” the father asked calmly. “Maybe he genuinely wants the nation to become more educated?”

At that moment, Roxana entered the room. She surveyed both men with a long, weary gaze.

“Are you at it again? You’ve had too much coffee and smoked too many cigarettes. Soon it will be impossible to breathe in this house from all your theories. Let me make you some fresh tea. With mint. It clears the head. Get your minds off your politics.”

Uncle Javad looked at her as if she were offering a glass of water to a drowning man. But her father, Ali, nodded with visible relief.

“Yes, Roxana-jan, you’re right. Tea is an excellent idea.”

Zahra stood in the doorway, invisible to them. She saw her father wink at her. He was playing along with his uncle, trying to push his paranoia to the point of absurdity to show him its untenability. But she saw something else, too. She saw a cold, confident fire burning in Uncle Javad’s eyes. He wasn’t playing. He believed. And his belief was more terrifying than any irony.

Twenty-three, Uncle said, and I think about numbers, about how strange it is that we call them Arabic, though the Arabs got them from the Indians, or maybe from the Persians, or the Persians from the Indians, but definitely not from the Arabs, but the West calls them Arabic because it got them from the Arabs, and it’s like a game of broken telephone, where each successive player distorts the message but thinks they are passing it on accurately.

Zero, the most important number, शून्य, shunya in Sanskrit, emptiness, but not just emptiness, the fullness of emptiness, because without zero there can be no decimal system, no modern mathematics, and the West didn’t know zero until the twelfth century, can you imagine, they built cathedrals but didn’t know zero, and I thought: maybe Uncle was right, and there is knowledge that travels by secret paths, just as zero traveled from India through Persia and Baghdad to Cordoba, and from there to Paris and London.

Twenty-three times “enlightenment,” but what is enlightenment? Enlightenment is when you flood darkness with light, but what if darkness is not the absence of light, but another kind of light, a black light, نور سیاه, nūr-e siyāh, and Uncle is afraid not of the darkness, but precisely of this black light that pretends to be ordinary?

Papa laughs about the pentagram, but a pentagram is the golden ratio, 1.618, a number that is everywhere—in shells, in roses, in the proportions of the human face, and the ancient Greeks knew it, and the ancient Egyptians, and the ancient Persians, but how did they all know it? Maybe there is a knowledge older than all civilizations, and it is transmitted not through books, but through numbers?

Mama brought tea, and the steam rose in a spiral, and a spiral is also a number, Archimedes’ spiral, $r = a + b\theta$, and the smoke from Papa’s cigarettes also rose in a spiral, and galaxies are twisted into spirals, and DNA is a double helix, and maybe history also moves in a spiral, and we think we are moving forward, but in reality, we are returning to the same point, just on a different level?

Mama talks about caffeine, $C_8H_{10}N_4O_2$, and I think: eight carbon atoms, ten hydrogen, four nitrogen, two oxygen, $8+10+4+2=24$, not 23, so close to Uncle’s

number, but not a match, and maybe the whole secret lies in this difference of one, because the truth is always one step away from what we see?

I know twenty-three was just a number. A prime number, divisible only by itself and by one. Like a person. Like a country. But if you add it to another number, it becomes part of something bigger, part of a pattern. But back then, I only saw the beauty of numbers, their cold, flawless logic, which was more honest than any words. Zero is the silence from which everything is born, just as the world is born from the silence of Allah. And the silence, when they began to drink their tea, was the only truth in that smoke-filled room.

Chapter 4. The Arithmetic of Surahs

23 Khordad 1376 (June 13, 1997)

A week later, they went to Tehran. The train, an early morning express, carried them from the sleepy city shrouded in pre-dawn haze to the humming, nervous heart of the country. The station was like a lazy giant reluctantly opening one eye. The few passengers moved slowly, as if afraid to wake the silence.

The official reason for the trip was a visit to Uncle Hossein, her mother's younger brother, a successful carpet merchant. But the real reason was to show Zahra the University of Tehran, its stern buildings and shady avenues. She would soon be fifteen. It was time to choose a path, to determine the vector of her future.

It was cool in the compartment. Zahra sat by the window, pressing her forehead against the glass. Outside, the suburbs of Shiraz drifted by, then the endless ochre plain, occasionally interrupted by green patches of gardens. The sun rose slowly, painting ancient Persia in shades of copper and gold.

“Why did you become a theologian?” Zahra asked her father, who was reading yesterday's newspaper. “You love numbers. You could have been a mathematician.”

Ali put down the newspaper and looked at his daughter with that special attention adults reserve for unexpectedly serious childhood questions.

“And you think they are different things?” he smiled. “Theology is higher mathematics. An attempt to find the main law that describes the universe. To count the signs left for us by the Creator.”

He leaned toward her.

“In the Quran,” he began slowly, as if weighing each word, “the word ‘faith’ and its derivatives, without synonyms, are repeated eight hundred and eleven times. ‘Disbelief,’ its derivatives and synonyms—six hundred and ninety-seven times. The difference between these numbers is one hundred and fourteen. Exactly the number of surahs in the Quran. A coincidence? Or a message? I don't know, Zahra-jan. But I

wanted to find out. That's why I became a theologian. To seek God in numbers and numbers in God."

"But that can be checked!" Zahra exclaimed, enlivened. "You can count, make a table..."

"You can. And many have counted. And they found other patterns. Or found none at all. Faith is not a mathematical proof. It is the choice to see meaning where others see coincidence."

Roxana, sitting opposite, looked up from her medical journal.

"And you, Zahra, do you like English? It will be difficult at the university without it."

"I like French more," Zahra admitted. "It's... beautiful. Like music."

"French is beautiful," Roxana agreed, her gaze becoming dreamy. "The language of love and revolutions."

"And the language of surrender," her father chuckled, but there was no malice in his smile. "Your mother, when we first met, impressed me not with her French. She recited poetry to me in Latin. Can you imagine? A young female medical student in post-revolutionary Iran quoting a dead language of infidels. It was so bold. And so beautiful."

"Do you remember those verses," Ali continued, his voice as soft as velvet, "that you recited? At that student party where there were supposed to be no girls, but you came anyway."

Roxana smiled—that special smile that for a moment transformed her from a tired middle-aged woman into a girl with burning eyes.

"I remember. The party. And the verses," she cleared her throat and began to recite, and the Latin words in her mouth sounded like an incantation:

*Totus in te, totus tecum,
Fatum scribit cursum rectum.
Quasi mutor — sum alias,
Quasi factus sum ignotus.
Sed nec tu es iam eadem,
Obscurata est manus illa,
Quae me leniter tangendo
Dabat corpus cum amore.
Et cum omisso mundo caro,
Donavisti te totam mihi.
Sed scio: dies veniet,
Cum me umbra succedet.
Nives cuncta tunc tegent,*

*Et solus radius longe
 Inopinanter te tanget,
 Iterum ibisque illuc,
 Iterum me invenies.
 Iterum simul ambo stamus,
 Ianuam reseramus domus,
 Et ibi tantum candelae,
 Et deus — nos obviam venit.*

She fell silent, then translated, and her voice trembled like the air above hot asphalt:

“I am all in you, I am all with you, fate writes a straight course, as if I am another, as if I have become a stranger. But you are no longer the same, and that hand has darkened, which, gently touching me, gave its body with love. And when, forgetting the dear world, you gave yourself wholly to me. But I know: the day will come, when a shadow will replace me, when snows will cover everything, and only a distant ray will unexpectedly touch you, and again you will go there, and again you will find me, and again we two will stand together, we will unlock the door of the house, and there will be only candles there, and a god will come out to meet us.”

Silence fell in the compartment. Outside, telegraph poles flew by, counting off the kilometers. Ali took his wife’s hand, intertwined their fingers. They looked at each other as if there were no one else in the compartment but the two of them.

Zahra turned to the window, feeling like an intruder in this moment of their intimacy. Her face was reflected in the glass—half-child, half-adult, with eyes full of questions that had no answers yet.

These verses, coming from another world, from another era, seemed like a prophecy to her. About love, about separation, about death, and about a meeting after death. She looked at her parents, at how her father’s hand found her mother’s in the dim light, and for the first time in her life, she felt a sharp, almost painful longing for something she had never had. For love. The very love written about in poems, which, like God, is made of faith, numbers, and mysteries.

Eight hundred eleven and six hundred ninety-seven, 811-697=114, and it’s true, I checked later, I spent all night counting with the Quran and a dictionary, and the numbers matched, but what does it mean? That Allah is a mathematician? Or that mathematics is the language of Allah? Or that we see patterns where there are none, just as we see faces in the clouds and constellations in the random arrangement of stars?

Latin, a dead language, but how can a language be dead if it speaks of love? Totus in te, I don’t know Latin, but I hear the music, totus tecum, and it’s like a formula, where totus is the whole, an integer, an integral, and te and tecum are ‘you’ in different

cases, and love is the integration of two functions into one, but I don't know love, I'm fourteen, almost fifteen, and I only know how to solve equations with two unknowns, x and y, but what if love is an equation where both unknowns are yourself?

Mama recited the verses, and her voice changed, became younger, and I still see her differently, not as Mother, but as Roxana, a medical student who came to a party where there were supposed to be no girls, but she came, because rules are only suggestions, not commands, if you have courage, and she recites Latin verses to a theologian who seeks God in numbers, and he falls in love, because she speaks a language older than Islam, older than Christianity, the language of Rome, which fell, but its language lives on.

Dies veniet, the day will come, and I think of the future tense in Latin, which is called futurum, from the verb esse—to be, and the future is that which will be, which is not yet, but will be, and the verses speak of a day when a shadow, umbra, will replace Papa, and I shudder, because it's a prophecy that will come true in a few months, when a truck crashes into his car, or the car into a truck, it doesn't matter, metal will meet metal, and Papa will become a shadow, an umbra, and Mama will search for him, iterum, again and again, in every theologian, in every man who loves numbers.

French is beautiful, yes, but Latin is the mathematics of languages, its declensions and conjugations follow strict rules, six cases, five declensions, four conjugations, and everything is logical, like in physics, where there are laws that cannot be broken, but French is impressionism, where the rules are blurred, where the same word can mean different things depending on intonation, on context, on who is speaking and to whom.

The train clacks on the rails, ta-dam, ta-dam, like iambic pentameter, like a heart, like a Geiger counter, counting down a half-life, and I think: we are going to Tehran, where Uncle Hossein is waiting for us with his carpets, and Uncle Javad with his theories, with his twenty-three mentions of enlightenment, and maybe he also counts words in texts, like Papa counts words in the Quran, only Papa was looking for proof of God's presence, and Uncle for proof of a conspiracy, and both will find what they are looking for, because when you really want to find something, you always will.

I look at my parents, how they hold hands, their fingers intertwined like a DNA double helix, and I think: there it is, love, not in verses, not in words, but in this silent intertwining, in this double helix that creates a new life, me, but I am not just the sum of their genes, I am an emergent property, that which arises from interaction but is not reducible to the sum of its parts, just as water is not just H₂O, it is a liquid that can be ice and steam, and love is not just two people, it is a third state of matter.

Outside the window is the desert, and it looks like a sea, frozen in sand, and I think about time, about how time flows differently there, in that desert, slower, like honey, like molasses, as in Einstein's theory of relativity, where time depends on

speed and gravity, and maybe love is also a curvature of spacetime, when two people create a gravitational well, and everything around them begins to spiral, falling toward the center, where time stops.

And again we two will stand together, we will unlock the door of the house... and I imagined that house, empty, quiet, and only candles, and a god who comes out to meet them, but what god? The one who counts faith and disbelief in the Quran? Or the one who invented Latin and love, and the snows that will cover everything? Or is it all the same God, just speaking different languages, like Mama, who speaks Farsi, and Latin, and the language of love, which I didn't understand yet, but I could already feel its grammar, its sad, inevitable logic.

Chapter 5. The Shadows of Light

23 Khordad 1376 (June 13, 1997)

Tehran assaulted them with heat and noise. After the slow, almost sleepy rhythm of the train, the city seemed like a vast, scorching cauldron in which millions of lives were boiling. Uncle Hossein, who met them at the station, was the complete opposite of his sister, Roxana. Loud, portly, with a perpetual business smile on his face, he smelled of expensive perfume and money. He was a man of matter, a carpet merchant, for whom the world consisted not of ideas, but of textures, knots, and market prices.

“Well, Zahra-jan, ready to conquer the capital?” he boomed, seating them in his new, air-conditioned Peugeot. “Decided where you’ll apply yet? The University of Tehran is a classic. But now everyone’s rushing to Sharif, where the physics and math are world-class.”

“The physics is stronger at Sharif,” Ali noted.

“But the philosophy is better at Tehran,” Roxana countered. “A person shouldn’t just be a physicist. They should be... a person.”

They argued lightly, like people who had long known all of each other’s arguments.

The car flowed with the traffic, and outside the window, a different Iran flashed by—not ancient and poetic like Shiraz, but modern, harsh, full of glass and concrete. They drove down wide avenues, and Zahra, pressed against the window, watched this seething world, which resembled a gigantic, nervous, eternally rushing mechanism. Here, even the trees seemed not living, but cast from metal and coated with a layer of dust.

Uncle Hossein’s house was in northern Tehran, in the Zafaraniyeh district. It was a two-story mansion with a garden where plane and pomegranate trees grew. It

was cool inside—air conditioners ran in every room, creating an artificial oasis in the midst of the summer heat.

Uncle Hossein’s wife, Aunt Maryam, welcomed them with traditional hospitality—tea, sweets, inquiries about their health. Zahra sat in the living room, examining the carpets on the walls—the work of masters from Kashan and Tabriz, each pattern telling its own story.

In the evening, when the daytime heat had subsided, Uncle Javad arrived. He entered the cool living room, and with him burst in the dry heat of the capital’s paranoia.

“I wouldn’t advise the University of Tehran,” he said instead of a greeting, addressing Ali. “It’s a hotbed of freethinking right now. Last week, they confiscated a batch of books from the humanities students. ‘New Philosophy.’ Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault. Poison, wrapped in a beautiful cover.”

“Students always read seditious books,” Hossein chuckled. “We did in our time, too. And look, we grew up to be devout Muslims.”

“It was a different poison back then,” Javad retorted. “Marxism. It was crude, straightforward. This one is subtle. It doesn’t deny God. It just makes Him unnecessary.”

“And what do you recommend, Javad?” Uncle Hossein asked, pouring tea. “The technology university as well?”

“Yes. At Sharif, at least they’re busy with real work. Physics, mathematics. The exact sciences. They leave less room for doubt.”

“Well, yes,” the practical Hossein smirked. “And Sharif graduates do very well for themselves in the States. The irony.”

“It used to be called Aryamehr,” Javad said thoughtfully, turning to Zahra. “In honor of the Shah. ‘Light of the Aryans.’”

Zahra’s father, Ali, who had been listening in silence until then, suddenly smiled his quiet, ironic smile.

“Of course,” he said slowly, as if tasting the words. “Aryamehr. That directly intersects with the name Neshan-e Aryamehr—the ‘Order of the Light of the Aryans’—a chivalric order for the Shah’s wife. But that is a direct reference to European secret societies. For example, the Masonic lodge ‘Order of Light,’ which existed in Russia in the early twentieth century. And later moved to Germany. A strange coincidence, isn’t it?”

Uncle Javad, who seemed to have been waiting for this pass, immediately caught the ball. His eyes lit up.

“Exactly! Exactly, Ali! You see! The Masons in Europe stole not only our image of Light, but the very concept of Aryans! The Aryans—that’s us, the Iranians! The West intercepts our ancient, traditional ideas, distorts them, and then sends them back to destroy us from within! They supported the Shah’s regime, which called itself the ‘Light of the Aryans,’ in order to pit our ancient, pre-Islamic pride against Islam itself! The very idea of ‘light,’ enlightenment—that is a Sufi concept, *ishraq*. The idea of ‘Aryans’—that is our Zoroastrian heritage. But the European Masons, all these secret societies, they stole our symbols, our philosophy, gutted God from it, and turned it into a political tool. This is their method!”

He spoke with heat and conviction, and Zahra, sitting in her armchair, felt his words constructing an invisible but solid structure in the air. A structure in which there were no accidental names, and history was an encrypted text.

At that moment, Roxana, who had been helping Aunt Maryam in the kitchen, appeared in the doorway of the living room. She stood there, wiping her hands on her apron, and looked at the men with an expression of infinite weariness.

“Are you at it again?” She shook her head. “Discussing all sorts of horror stories in front of the child. Zahra, my dear, go and rest. You must be tired from the journey.”

Zahra stood up. She was indeed tired. But not from the journey. From the weight of the thoughts that had crashed down on her in this cool, quiet room.

As she was leaving, she heard her mother say to the men, “And I’m not bringing you tea, I’m bringing you valerian root.”

Sharif University or the University of Tehran, a choice, always a choice, like in a problem where you have to choose one of two doors, and behind one is a princess and behind the other a tiger, but you don’t know which is where, and maybe there are tigers behind both doors, only one is smiling, like Khatami, and the other is roaring, like Nateq-Nouri, but the result is the same—you get eaten, and Uncle Javad says there is poison at the University of Tehran, and Uncle Hossein says people from Sharif go to America, and I don’t understand which is worse—to die from poison at home or to go live with the enemies who invented the poison in the first place.

*Aryamehr, Light of the Aryans, Papa talked about Masons, and I could see them, men in black aprons with compasses and set squares, building their temple, their new Babylon, and Uncle Javad said they stole our light, our *ishraq**, and I thought, can you steal light, doesn’t it belong to everyone, or are there different kinds of light, like there are different kinds of tea, and they stole our black tea with bergamot and slipped us their own, in teabags, without taste or smell, and we drink it and think it’s tea, but it’s just colored water.**

The Order of Light in Russia. Light is both a wave and a particle, and no one knows why, not even Einstein knew, he said “God does not play dice,” but Bohr replied, “Don’t tell God what to do,” and maybe light is the language God uses to speak to us,

but we have forgotten how to understand it. Physics is also a secret knowledge, $E=mc^2$, a formula that opens the door to the destruction of the world.

Aryans, Indo-Europeans, a people who came from somewhere in the north thousands of years ago, and brought with them a language, gods, myths, and now Uncle Javad says the West stole our heritage from us, but maybe heritage belongs to no one, maybe it's like the air, like light, like mathematics—universal, and it doesn't matter who discovered the Pythagorean theorem, what matters is that it works everywhere, in Greece, in Persia, on Mars.

Mama talked about valerian root, and I know it's an herb that calms you, but I wonder: is there an herb that clarifies? That allows you to see the world as it is, without shadows and conspiracies? Or does such a world not exist, and are we doomed to live in a room full of mirrors, where every reflection is a lie?

But adults always demand that you choose, define a trajectory, collapse into a single state, because uncertainty frightens them. I made my choice. Not then, later... But what choice will my daughters make?

Chapter 6. The Garden of Forking Paths

24 Khordad 1376 (June 14, 1997)

The universities in summer were like abandoned cities, like sets for a play that had already been performed. The students had left, and in the long, echoing corridors, silence reigned, broken only by the hum of the lamps and the footsteps of a few rare professors. It was the perfect atmosphere to discern not the people, but the very essence, the architecture of these two worlds.

The empty corridors and echoing auditoriums of the University of Tehran, where the sound of footsteps bounced off the walls, created the illusion of invisible companions. The June sun pierced through the high windows, painting geometric patterns on the floor—parallelograms of light in which dust motes danced, like atoms in Brownian motion.

They were met by Professor Morteza Ahmadzadeh, an old friend of Zahra's father. Thin, with a gray Vandyke beard and glasses with thick lenses, he looked like a character from a Borges story—a librarian lost in his own library.

“Ali-jan, welcome to the temple of knowledge, temporarily abandoned by its parishioners,” he said, shaking the father's hand. “The summer holidays turn the university into an ideal place for reflection. No one disturbs your thinking.”

They walked down the corridors of the humanities faculty, and the professor spoke, measuredly, as if delivering a lecture to an invisible audience:

“Yes, the youth seem to have awakened. They read everything. They form clubs, they put out wall newspapers. They speak of Khatami as a messiah. The president has

opened the floodgates for them, and ideas have poured through. They read everything—Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze. But..." he lowered his voice, "strange things are appearing, too."

"What kind of things?" Ali asked.

"Some new movements. Semi-secret societies. They discuss not politics, but... metaphysics. They speak of 'tradition,' but not in our Islamic sense. Of 'castes,' of a 'hierarchy of the spirit.' They quote Europeans I've never even heard of. Guénon, Evola. One of my students brought me their manifesto. You know what it looked like? The charter of a Masonic lodge, only without the compass and apron. Another found a connection between Sufi orders and the European Templars. They are searching for some primal tradition, a primordial wisdom that supposedly underlies all religions. It's very alarming."

"Is this the influence of Guénon?" Ali asked. "The French traditionalist?"

"His, too. But it's broader. They are creating their own synthesis—they take Islamic esoterism, add Western philosophy, and season it with ancient Persian mysticism. The result is... a cocktail. A dangerous cocktail, because it looks like a return to the roots, but in reality, it is a path to nowhere. To an imaginary past that never existed."

Sharif University of Technology was different. It was not a garden, but a crystal. The perfect geometry of glass and concrete buildings, straight lines, precise logic. There was no room for ambiguity here. They were met by Dr. Amini, an acquaintance of Uncle Javad, a specialist in cybernetics, a man with eyes as cold as a monitor screen.

Short, energetic, with eyes that never rested in one place, he spoke quickly, as if afraid of being interrupted:

"Welcome to the forge of Iranian technocracy! Here, we don't philosophize—we create. Computers, programs, algorithms. The future belongs to digital technologies, and we must not fall behind."

He led them to a computer lab. Rows of monitors stared with blind eyes.

"Do you know what's happening in America right now? They are creating social networks. Classmates.com—where people find their old classmates online. Can you imagine? Millions of people voluntarily sharing information about themselves, posting photos, sharing their thoughts. It's an ideal tool!"

"A tool for what?" Roxana asked.

"For everything! For control, for influence, for shaping public opinion. In the past, intelligence agencies had to spend years building a dossier on a person. Now, he tells you everything himself. And not only tells—he shows his connections, friends, interests. It's a revolution in the understanding of society."

Ali listened attentively. As a theologian, he understood the world of numbers, but not the digital world.

“And games,” Amini continued. “Computer games. They teach strategy, but they also program behavior. A child playing a war game on a screen gets used to violence. Or, conversely, learns to resolve conflicts. It all depends on who creates the game and for what purpose.”

“By the way,” he added, turning to Zahra, “why don’t you consider Isfahan? It has an excellent university, especially the faculty of physics and technology. And...” he lowered his voice, “there are great prospects there. Very great. The country is investing serious resources in Isfahan. Scientific projects of national importance.”

“Isfahan!” she exclaimed. “That’s a wonderful idea! It’s right in the middle, between Shiraz and Tehran. Zahra will be equidistant from us and from her restless uncles. A perfect point of equilibrium.”

She said it half-jokingly, but Zahra saw a flicker of interest in her father’s eyes. A perfect point of equilibrium. A formula that could reconcile two worlds.

“The golden mean,” Ali smiled. “As in Greek philosophy.”

The universities are like gardens of forking paths, each path leading to its own future, and you don’t know where you’ll end up until you’ve walked the whole way, but by then it’s too late to go back and choose another path, and I walk through the empty corridors of the University of Tehran, where the professor talks about students searching for a primordial tradition, a primal wisdom, and I think: what if they’re right? What if there really is a knowledge older than all religions, older than all civilizations, encrypted in patterns, in numbers, in ratios?

Classmates.com, and uncle’s friend says people are telling everything about themselves, voluntary surveillance, Bentham’s panopticon, where the prisoners don’t know if they’re being watched or not, so they behave as if they are always being watched, but now we are both the prisoners and the wardens, we watch each other and ourselves, and this is the future that will come, I know, I can see my daughters on Instagram and TikTok, and the whole world watches the whole world, and no one can hide, not even in Iran, not even under a chador.

Social networks are more powerful than states; back then, in that computer lab, looking at the dead monitors, I didn’t know it yet, but now I know: one day they will come to life and swallow us all, and states will fight not with armies but with likes, not with cannons but with memes, and the winner will be the one who creates the most viral content, the most contagious idea, and maybe Uncle Javad was right, and it’s all part of a conspiracy, only it’s not a conspiracy of Masons, but of technology itself, which uses us for its own development.

Isfahan, Mama said, the perfect point of equilibrium, and I didn’t know then, not yet, that this phrase, thrown out casually as a joke, would define my entire life. That it

would be in Isfahan, at this point of equilibrium, that I would meet Amirkhan, a young man with eyes that could see hidden patterns. That in Isfahan, this city of turquoise domes and ancient bridges, I would give birth to two daughters, Nasrin and Zeynab, my two vectors, the centrifugal and the centripetal. That in Isfahan, in a laboratory hidden from prying eyes, I would build a machine that could either save or destroy the world, and I myself would become this point of equilibrium between creation and destruction.

But back then, I didn't know any of this; I was just a girl who loved numbers and was looking for her place in the world, and the world seemed like a vast garden with a thousand paths, and each one led somewhere, and I didn't know that most of them led to a dead end, and some to an abyss, and only one, maybe, led home, but home is not a place, but a state, when you are at peace with yourself, and I was never at peace with myself, because there are too many contradictions in me, just as there are too many neutrons in uranium.

Chapter 7. The Formula of Fear

15 Shahrivar 1376 (September 6, 1997)

The summer was burning out, leaving behind a gray sky and air that smelled of dust and decay. The euphoria of the first months after the election had given way to a quiet, dull disappointment. Khatami spoke of freedom, but newspapers were still being shut down, and students who demanded change too loudly were summoned for "chats." The opponents of reform, having recovered from the shock, began a slow, methodical counter-offensive. The reforms were stalling. The conservative clergy blocked the president's initiatives. Newspapers that had just yesterday been singing hosannas to change were now cautious, weighing every word. The pendulum, having swung in one direction, was now inexorably moving back.

On that September day, Uncle Javad arrived without warning. He looked changed—thinner, with a feverish glint in his eyes. He explained that he had been in Tehran on official business. Ali greeted him with his usual hospitality, but Zahra noticed how her father was carefully studying his brother-in-law, as if seeing him for the first time.

They sat in the living room, and the conversation, which began with banalities about the weather and market prices, inevitably turned to politics.

"They think he's weak. That they've outplayed him," Uncle was saying to Zahra's father. "They don't understand that this is part of the plan. He's deliberately showing weakness to lull our vigilance. Did you listen to his last speech at the university?"

"I read it," Ali replied.

“Don’t read it. Listen! Look at the structure! He uses triads—thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Pure Hegel! And Hegel, as we know, was connected to the Illuminati through his friend Schelling. This has been documented!”

“Hegel himself didn’t write like that, Javad. But yes, arguing in three steps is convenient,” Ali remarked, not looking up from his book. “But it’s also documented that Hegel loved beer. Maybe Khatami is also a secret beer lover? That would explain his vague formulations.”

“Ali, I’m serious!” Javad leaned forward. “Look: he talks about a ‘dialogue of civilizations.’ Dialogue is two. Two sides. But which ones? The Islamic and the Western? That’s what we’re supposed to think. But what if there are three sides? Islam, the visible West, and some third force that pretends to be the West but is actually much older? The very ‘Order of Light’ you yourself mentioned.”

Javad spread photographs on the carpet. Zahra, sitting in the corner with her physics textbook, saw images of some buildings, people in strange clothes, symbols.

“Khatami lived in Germany. He studied philosophy. And what is modern Germany? It’s the center of European Freemasonry. They have the United Grand Lodges, which are thriving now. They have a museum of Freemasonry in Bayreuth! In the very same Bayreuth where Wagner built his festival theater for his mysteries! It’s all connected, Ali!”

“Hitler, when he came to power, banned Freemasonry,” Ali reminded him, putting his book aside. “He saw them as a threat. He was afraid of their ‘secret knowledge,’ their idea that the world should be ruled not by fuhrers elected by the people, but by initiates who possess the truth.”

“There!” Javad’s eyes shone with a feverish light. “You said it yourself! Hitler fought them because they were his competitors! He understood their danger. And you know what’s most ironic? The Nazis themselves came to power through elections! His party became the largest, and then came the decrees and repressions! Hitler used democracy to destroy democracy. They were fighting for the soul of Germany, for the soul of the West! And now they are coming for our soul.”

He fell silent, but the meaning was clear. Khatami was a Trojan horse. He had come through elections to destroy the system from within.

“Javad,” Ali leaned forward, and an uncharacteristic seriousness entered his voice, “do you really believe there’s a worldwide conspiracy? That a handful of men in aprons are running the world?”

“Not in aprons, Ali. In business suits. In academic robes. They’ve evolved. Adapted. They used to meet in basements; now they meet at international conferences. They used to transmit knowledge through symbols and rituals; now it’s through university programs and computer codes.”

At that moment, Roxana entered the room. She placed a tray with glasses of tea and a small bowl of figs on the table.

“Javad-agha,” she said quietly but firmly. “The only ancient force at work in this room right now is the power of caffeine in your blood. And nicotine in your lungs. Drink some tea with cardamom; it calms the nerves.”

She looked at her brother with such a mixture of love and pain that Zahra, watching the scene, felt a pang in her heart. Something was wrong. Not just with the world, but with her uncle himself.

We didn't know then, or maybe only Mother knew, as a doctor, or maybe no one knew, that another, even more secret lodge had already taken root in Uncle Javad's body, cancer cells, which were also building their own state, their own empire, following their own inscrutable plan. We didn't know that his long business trips to Tehran were not only meetings at the ministry but also visits to the oncology center, that his sleepless nights were not only thoughts of conspiracies but also pain, and his feverish energy was not only an obsession with an idea but also chemistry, powerful drugs that fought the disease but also burned the soul, making the shadows thicker and the fears more real.

Cancer, the constellation Cancer, and Uncle was born in July, under the sign of Cancer, and he would die of cancer, an irony of fate or a pattern, and I thought: maybe we all carry the seeds of our death within us, just as we carry in our DNA the information about our eye color and the shape of our nose, and maybe Uncle's obsession with conspiracies is also a cancer, a mental cancer that grows and devours his mind, and soon there will be nothing left but paranoia, as pure as a crystal, as a formula.

Secret knowledge, he talks about secret knowledge... But what if all knowledge is secret? What if $E=mc^2$ is also a Masonic formula, an encrypted message about how to turn matter into energy, into light, and Einstein was an initiate, and Oppenheimer, who created the bomb and then quoted the Bhagavad Gita: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,” and that too is a secret knowledge, coming from India, where the Aryans, our ancestors or not, wrote the Vedas thousands of years before the Quran.

Hegel and beer, Papa was joking, but Hegel wrote about the world spirit, Weltgeist, which moves through history, using people and nations as its instruments, and maybe the Masons are agents of the world spirit, or they think they are, but in reality, the spirit is using them, just as cancer uses the body's cells, forcing them to divide and divide until the body dies, but the cancer dies with it, the paradox of the parasite that kills its host.

Bayreuth, the museum of Freemasonry, and I imagined that city, where Wagner wrote his operas about German gods and heroes—that's what Uncle was talking

about. Wagner also tried to create a new elite, a new aristocracy of the spirit, based on myth. And Hitler loved Wagner. All these people—Hitler, Wagner, Hegel, the Masons, Uncle Javad—they were all searching for the same thing. They were looking for a formula that would explain the world and give them the right to remake it. They were alchemists, trying to turn the chaos of history into the gold of order.

And Mama just makes tea. And maybe in that simple act—taking the teapot, adding the tea leaves, adding the cardamom—there was more wisdom than in all their theories. Because it was an act not to remake the world, but to make it, for a moment, a little warmer and cozier. And maybe that is the only “secret knowledge” that matters.

Chapter 8. The Architecture of the Invisible

15-16 Shahrivar 1376 (September 6-7, 1997)

That evening, the house was filled with a silence, but it was not the silence of peace, but of intense mental labor. Before going to bed, Zahra peeked into the living room to wish her father goodnight. And she froze in the doorway.

Her father, Ali, was sitting on the carpet, a game of solitaire laid out before him. But it was not a solitaire of playing cards. It was a solitaire of ideas. Newspaper clippings, pages from philosophical treatises, photocopies of some old magazines. And in the center, the photographs and papers that Uncle Javad had left. Zahra saw her father trace a line with his finger on a diagram connecting Hegel's name to a Masonic symbol, and his face wore the same focused expression with which he read sacred texts. He wasn't mocking. He was analyzing. He was searching for logic in the madness.

“Papa?” she called out softly.

Ali looked up. His eyes held the expression of a man trying to solve an equation with too many unknowns.

“I'm trying to understand, Zahra-jan. To understand where your uncle's insight ends and...” he trailed off. “Look, here he writes about the connection between twelfth-century Sufi orders and the Knights Templar. And here, about how the patterns on the Isfahan mosques replicate the Kabbalistic tree of life. A coincidence? Or is he seeing something that isn't there?”

“Or something that is, but we don't want to see it,” Zahra replied.

Her father looked at her in surprise.

“Go to sleep, philosopher. Tomorrow, after the morning prayer, we'll go for a walk. Your mother told us to get some fresh air, not to sit at home building conspiracy theories.”

At the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque, whose stained-glass windows flooded the interior with a kaleidoscope of colored light, they saw a group of tourists. Europeans. They were enthusiastically photographing the patterns on the walls, not understanding their meaning.

“Look,” Uncle Javad whispered, nodding at the tourists. “They only see the beauty. They don’t see the code. Every one of these patterns, every girih, is not just an ornament. It’s mathematics. It’s theology. It’s an encrypted message about the unity and infinity of Allah. Our ancestors spoke the language of symbols. And our enemies have learned to read it. And use it against us.”

“What do you mean?” Ali asked.

“I’ve dug up something here,” Uncle lowered his voice. “Khatami’s advisors recently held a closed meeting with the leaders of the Zoroastrian community. Why? Officially, for an interfaith dialogue. But Zoroastrianism is not just a religion. It’s a matrix, the original source. Light and darkness, Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. A dualism that later passed into Manichaeism, into Gnosticism, into Catharism. All European heresies have Zoroastrian roots.”

“So what?” Ali asked. “Zoroastrians are part of our history. They were here before Islam.”

“Exactly! Before Islam. And some want them to be after Islam. Do you understand? A return to the ‘origins.’ To a ‘pure’ Persian tradition without Arabic influence. This is their plan—to divide us from within, to pit the Persian against the Islamic... Or they are looking for a basis for a new, syncretic religion. They want to take our ancient, pre-Islamic wisdom, mix it with Western philosophy, and create an ‘Islam-lite.’ A religion without sharia, where Zoroastrianism becomes the foundation and Islam is merely the facade.”

One of the Europeans, noticing their attention, nodded and smiled. Javad turned away.

They sat down in a teahouse nearby. Javad ordered his tea without sugar.

“And the French,” Javad continued. “The very same French intellectuals who welcomed Khatami’s victory. André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henri Lévy. You know what they have in common? They are all connected to the Grand Orient de France lodge. The most influential Masonic organization in Europe. They are not helping Khatami. They are guiding him.”

“And guiding him into a digital caliphate,” her father chimed in, and Zahra couldn’t tell if he was joking anymore. “I’ve read about it. The computer technologies that Khatami is promoting, the internet for all—it’s the perfect tool for control. Not our state control, but their global control. A new ‘World Government’ will know our every step, our every thought.”

Zahra listened, trying to grasp the logic in this stream of connections.

“Yes!” Javad grew animated. “Imagine a game that millions of our children will play. A game where they will build empires, fight, make decisions. But the rules of the game will not be written by us. They will be written in California. And these rules will imperceptibly shape their consciousness, their values. It will be the perfect system of programming. And the president says: internet in every school! Do you know what the internet is? It’s a web. The World Wide Web. And who is the spider? Who sits in the center and feels every vibration of the threads?... Or who will sit in that center?”

“Tim Berners-Lee?” Ali suggested with irony. “The inventor of the web?”

“Not a person. A system. An artificial intelligence that will inevitably emerge. They are creating a global brain, and we will all become its neurons. Computer games are training. They teach children to live in a digital world, like a virtual reality... and to obey rules that someone else has written.”

Ali sighed.

“You know, Javad,” he said, looking at the tiled floor of the teahouse as if at a gravestone. “Any theory is like the pattern on these tiles. You can look at it and see just geometry. Or you can see hidden letters in the intertwining lines, words, entire messages. And not only see them, but find confirmation for them. That’s how man is made. He seeks meaning. And if he doesn’t find it, he creates it himself.”

“So you don’t believe me?” There was a note of hurt in his uncle’s voice.

“I believe that you see what you see,” the father answered evasively. “But I want to understand if it’s a real pattern or just a play of light and shadow. We need more data.”

They were silent for a moment. Then Ali said:

“On the Day of Unification of Islamic Seminaries, the 27th of Azar, there will be a conference in Isfahan. Will you come?”

“Of course. It’s a showcase of the future. All the universities will show their faces. And Zahra can finally make her choice.”

Javad looked at his niece.

“Choose physics, Zahra. The exact sciences. There’s less room for manipulation in them. Although...” he smirked, “even Einstein’s equation can be read as a Masonic formula. Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. The speed of light squared—what is that? The light of light? Absolute enlightenment?”

Papa was laying out his solitaire, and I watched his fingers, accustomed to turning the pages of sacred books, now touching the newspaper clippings, the photographs, Uncle’s papers, as if they were poisonous insects. He didn’t believe, no, he didn’t believe, he just wanted to understand, to understand the logic, the structure,

the architecture of this invisible building that Uncle was constructing in his head. But to understand the architecture, you have to go inside, and I was afraid that once inside, he wouldn't be able to find his way out.

The tourists, Uncle said, but I didn't see tourists, I just saw people, a man and a woman, who were looking at the mosque as one looks at a miracle, with wonder, and their cameras were clicking, trying to steal a piece of this beauty, this light, to take it with them, but can you steal light, or can you only steal its reflection?

The Grand Orient, and I imagined a sun rising not where it's supposed to, but somewhere else, in France, and it was the wrong sun, an artificial one, that shines but gives no warmth, as Papa used to say about the smiles of some politicians.

Computer games, and I see myself, sitting at a screen and controlling an entire army, an entire civilization, and it was so tempting, to be a god in a small world where everything obeys your will, and I understand why Uncle is so afraid of it: because once you learn to be a god in a game, you might want to become one in life. Or, even worse, you might forget that there is a real God, because your pixelated god will be simpler and more understandable.

December 18th, Isfahan, Unification Day, and I don't know yet that this will be the last trip for the whole family, the last time we will be together—Papa, Mama, Uncle, and I, and that in four months Papa will die, and Uncle will blame the Masons, or the Zoroastrians, or the computers, or all of them at once, until his own death, and Mama will just cry, because when the love of your life dies, it doesn't matter who is to blame, all that matters is that he is gone. But we will go to Isfahan, to that half of the world, to the city where science met faith, where observatories stood next to madrasas, and I thought: maybe there, at that point of equilibrium, Papa will find the answer he is looking for. Or lose himself completely.

The patterns on the tiles, Papa said, and I looked at those interweavings of blue, turquoise, and gold, and I saw everything at once in them: the geometry of Euclid, the spirals of galaxies, the map of a conspiracy, and a prayer frozen in stone. And I realized that he was right. The world is not as it is. The world is as we see it. And the most terrifying conspiracy is the conspiracy of our own minds, which makes us see what we fear most.

Chapter 9. Califates of Glass and Code

27 Azar 1376 (December 18, 1997)

Winter in Isfahan greeted them with a cold, piercing clarity. The sky was high and pale, and the air, free of summer dust, felt as fragile as thin glass. On the train, her father barely spoke. He sat engrossed in his papers—now no longer just a collection of his uncle's clippings, but a thick folder filled with his own neat

handwriting, full of diagrams and cross-references. He was no longer looking for refutations. He was looking for confirmations.

“Look,” he said to Roxana, pointing to one of the diagrams. “Javad traces a connection from the Knights Templar through the Masons to modern financial groups. At first, it seems like madness. But if you think about it... The Order of the Knights Templar was like the first transnational corporation. They had branches all over Europe, their own banking system, a fleet. They were richer than kings.”

“And that’s precisely why they were destroyed,” Roxana noted. “Not for heresy, but for money.”

“Exactly. Now look at modern companies. They are also richer than states. And also accountable to no one but themselves.”

Javad met them in Isfahan. He looked pale but animated, as if being close to the solution was giving him the strength to fight his illness.

“Hossein sent a gift for the future student,” he said, handing Zahra a package.

Inside was a paperback book. *Une brève histoire de la chimie*—Isaac Asimov’s *A Short History of Chemistry*. In French.

“Your uncle said you wanted to learn a beautiful language,” Javad smirked. “Here is the beauty of science in the language of revolutions.”

Zahra took the book, feeling its weight—not just physical, but symbolic. Asimov, an American science fiction writer of Jewish descent, writing about science. In French. A gift from her carpet-merchant uncle, via her paranoid uncle. It was their whole world in a single object.

The Isfahan University of Technology was unlike either the old University of Tehran or the crystalline Sharif. It looked new. Too new. Built from scratch, it still smelled of paint and concrete in places, and its architecture had a sense of scale, of ambition. This was not just a training ground. It was an incubator for the future.

At the conference for Unification Day, two worlds mingled. Respected imams in turbans walked the corridors alongside young, Western-dressed professors with laptops in hand. They nodded politely to each other, but it was clear they spoke different languages, even when uttering the same words in Farsi.

“Look at them,” Javad said quietly to Ali. “Do you see the contradiction? The imams speak of eternal truths. The professors, of progress. But what if it’s not a contradiction, but a synthesis? What if the universities are the new madrasas, with some new religion, as yet unknown to us?”

After the official part, they met in the cafeteria with old acquaintances—the theologian Morteza Tabrizi and Colonel Hashemi from the IRGC.

“The world is changing,” Tabrizi said, stirring sugar in his tea. “Look at the West. General Electric, Shell, Microsoft, Exxon—these corporations effectively rule the world. Desert Storm—the Americans went to war not for Kuwait’s freedom, but for oil for Exxon and Shell.”

“But that’s changing,” Hashemi interjected. “Microsoft doesn’t produce oil, it doesn’t extract resources. They produce... what? Programs? Ideas? Code? And they’ve already become one of the most valuable companies in the world. Bill Gates is richer than many states.”

“There!” Javad grew animated. “Tech companies don’t need wars for resources. They will fight for brains. For knowledge. For data. And in that knowledge, there will be no room for God.”

Ali nodded thoughtfully.

“Corporations as new caliphates... An interesting thought. The Chief Executive Officer, the CEO, is the new caliph. He is not elected. He is appointed by a council of initiates—the shareholders. And CEOs run their empires more effectively than elected presidents run countries. Look at Khatami. Seventy percent elected him, and he can’t pass a single reform. And Gates? No one elected him, but he is changing the world.”

“Maybe that’s the plan?” Javad picked up. “The West realized that direct secularization doesn’t work in the Islamic world. So they support weak leaders like Khatami. Through an indecisive president, they want to implement their model here. A model of ‘enlightened government’ that will actually be run not by the people, but by efficient managers, technocrats. And the universities, built in their image, will become their training grounds.”

“But efficiency is not always a virtue,” Roxana intervened, having listened in silence until then. “What will happen to those who are inefficient? The disabled, the sick, the elderly? If a state thinks only of efficiency, it will turn into a corporation. And a corporation gets rid of unprofitable assets.”

“Roxana is right,” Colonel Hashemi unexpectedly supported her. “Islam teaches mercy. Care for the weak. That is our strength, not our weakness.”

“Mercy is a luxury only the strong can afford,” Tabrizi countered. “First, we must become strong.”

“And Zahra?” Javad asked, turning to his niece. “You will enter this world of universities and corporations. How will you keep your faith?”

Zahra looked at him, then at her father.

“Papa taught me to look for God in numbers. Maybe I will find Him in formulas, too?”

“Don’t worry about her,” Ali said with a smile, placing a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “She’s too smart to fall for simple temptations. And besides, she was raised by a theologian, not a merchant.”

But there was anxiety in his voice. As if he could see a future where his daughter would have to choose between her father’s faith and the world’s knowledge.

Isfahan in winter, snow on the mosque domes like powdered sugar on Eastern sweets, and we are driving through the desert, which sleeps under patches of a white blanket, and Papa is laying out his papers, like laying out Tarot cards, trying to read the future, but the future is already written, we just don’t know how to read it, or don’t want to, because knowing the future is a curse, not a blessing.

Asimov in French, A Short History of Chemistry, and I thought: why short? How can you briefly tell the story of how man learned to turn one substance into another, how Chinese alchemists searched for the elixir of immortality and found gunpowder, how Marie Curie searched for radium and found death from radiation, how chemistry gave us medicines and poisons, plastic and napalm, how it changed the world more than all the revolutions and wars?

Imams and professors at the same table, black turbans and European ties, and it’s like a meeting of two eras, speaking different languages but about the same thing—power over minds, only the imams appeal to eternity, and the professors to progress, but what is progress, if not movement toward an unknown goal that we invent as we go?

General Electric, Shell, Microsoft, Exxon—the names of the new gods the world worships, and each has its own domain: GE—electricity, Shell—oil, Microsoft—information, and they divide the world as the Olympian gods divided the sky, the earth, and the underworld, only now it’s not mythology, but economics, but isn’t economics a new mythology, where the invisible hand of the market has replaced the finger of fate?

CEOs as caliphs, and I imagined Bill Gates in a turban, sitting on a throne of computers, and it’s funny, but not very, because power is the same everywhere, it just changes its clothes, and maybe Uncle is right, and soon there will be no difference between a president and a director, between a state and a corporation, between a citizen and an employee.

Mama talked about the sick and disabled, and I thought: what if the corporate caliphates don’t fight dissenters? It’s much easier, and cheaper, to let them build their own state—socialist, communist, whatever, let them live in their own preserve, like Native Americans on reservations, like the Amish in Pennsylvania, like hippies in communes, as long as they don’t interfere with the main flow, don’t reduce the overall efficiency.

And maybe that's not so bad? A world divided not by nationality or religion, but by choice: if you want efficiency, go to a corporation; if you want justice, go to a commune; if you want faith, go to a community of believers, and everyone will find their place, their niche, their heaven or hell, depending on what they consider heaven and what they consider hell.

But Papa says I'm too smart, and that he raised me, a theologian, not a merchant, and I think: but is intelligence a defense? Don't the smartest people make the most terrible mistakes? And will being raised by a theologian protect me from the temptations of science, from the beauty of formulas, from the elegance of equations that describe the world without any need for God?

I will find Him in formulas, I said, but what if formulas are the language God uses to explain His absence? What if Einstein's formula is not a revelation, but a farewell note: "I have given you the laws; now, you're on your own"?

Efficiency versus mercy, progress versus tradition, knowledge versus faith, and we are sitting in the cafeteria of the Isfahan university, and I know that in a few years I will be sitting here again, but as a student, and I will study physics, and I will start a family, and I will work with uranium, and one day I will be interrogated about how I knew about the death of a man who is not yet at this table, Rustam, who will appear in my life later, much later, the way a radioactive isotope appears—unseen, but inevitably changing everything around it.

Chapter 0. The Theory of Everything

25 Bahman 1376 (February 14, 1998)

On the day Zahra turned fifteen, the house was filled with guests and the smell of saffron pilaf. Fifteen years old. The age when you no longer look up at the world, but stand on equal footing with it, and it reveals itself to you in all its complexity and fragility. Uncle Hossein and his wife came from Tehran, bringing French perfume and a silk scarf as gifts. Uncle Javad was there too. He looked better than he had in recent months—the medication was apparently helping. Or perhaps it was that deceptive remission that the disease sometimes grants before the final blow.

After dinner, when the women went to the kitchen, the men remained in the living room. And the conversation, as always, turned to its familiar course. But this time, it was not an argument. It was a report. Ali, Zahra's father, was laying out their shared theory with Javad before Hossein, and his voice, usually soft and ironic, sounded with firmness and conviction.

“You don't understand, Hossein,” he was saying. “This is not just politics. This is theology. This is a war for the soul of Iran.”

“There you go again,” the practical Hossein sighed. “What wars? Khatami is a weak president; the conservatives will eat him alive soon. It’s business as usual.”

“No,” Javad intervened. “He is not weak. He is a symptom. A symptom of a new disease. We are too deeply rooted in faith. That’s why they are creating a Trojan horse. A simulacrum. An ultraconservative ideology without Islam!”

“What do you mean, without Islam?” Hossein asked.

“It’s simple,” this was Ali’s voice. “They will take everything external—strict morality, patriarchy, traditional values, hierarchy, even antisemitism and xenophobia. Everything that makes us ‘backward’ in their eyes. But they will remove the most important thing—Allah. The transcendent. The sacred.”

Zahra, helping her mother in the kitchen, heard their voices through the slightly ajar door. The voices grew louder, more heated.

“The West has realized that direct secularization, atheism, doesn’t work in the Islamic world!” Javad was almost shouting. “So they create a ‘Trojan horse’! A simulacrum! They will offer us an ultraconservative ideology, but without Islam! Their goal is to replace our true, divine conservatism with their pseudo-traditionalism of a Western model! It’s a conspiracy against Islam itself!”

“We’ve named it ‘Molbug’ (فالب کنه),” her father’s voice chimed in, now serious, devoid of irony. “The ‘Old Mold.’ They take our old, familiar form—strict morality, patriarchy, traditional values—but fill it with a new, alien content. This is their Zulmati Roshangarī (ظلمتی روشنگری). Their ‘Dark Enlightenment.’”

“They want to give us everything that is in Islam,” Javad repeated, “but without Allah! Their god will be efficiency, progress, the market! It will look like our victory, like a triumph of tradition, but in reality, it will be their final victory! Our own culture, turned into a weapon against us!”

“Javad, calm down,” this was Hossein’s voice. “You’re scaring everyone.”

“I have to scare them! Fear is the last thing we have left! The fear of losing our faith!”

In the kitchen, Maryam was nervously cutting the cake.

“They’ve gotten too carried away. It gets worse every time.”

“It’s an illness,” Roxana said quietly. “Not just Javad’s. Ali is sick too. Sick with this idea.”

Uncle Hossein was silent—he was listening. Listening to two such different men who had unexpectedly found something in common, something that had truly brought them together.

"And for this plan to work," Ali concluded, and his voice sounded so quiet and terrible that Maryam froze with the knife in her hand, "they need to eliminate those who see this substitution. They will kill the real traditionalists, the real theologians, to replace them with their own tame pseudo-conservatives. Those who will lead the people to the West, under the banner of tradition without God."

The last words were so distinct that Zahra froze with her fork over the cake. She looked at her mother and saw genuine horror in her eyes. This was no longer a theory. It was a prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy.

And on that day, on her fifteenth birthday, she understood that her father and uncle were no longer playing intellectual games. They had written a new surah for their own, dark religion.

I am fifteen and it's my birthday and Uncle Hossein gives me French perfume, "Poison," and I think, what an irony, and I smell it and it smells not of poison but of flowers and honey, but maybe poison always smells like that, sweet and tempting, like Uncle Javad's ideas, which are also poison, or medicine, I don't know yet.

The Old Mold, qāleb-e kohneh, and I imagined a clay jug, ancient, covered in cracks, from which the old wine, the wine of faith, has been poured out, and a new, clear wine, without color or smell, but just as intoxicating, the wine of efficiency and order, has been poured in. And people will drink from this jug, thinking they are drinking the same wine as their ancestors, not noticing the substitution.

They had built it. Their theory. They had even named it in a way that let them hear both a foreign name and their own metaphor. And it was as elegant as Schrödinger's equation, and just as frightening. It explained everything: Khatami's victory, the books in the universities, the computer games, the silence of the West. It had no weak spots. It was a perfect closed system, flawless in its paranoid logic. They had created an intellectual machine that could digest any fact and turn it into proof of its own correctness. They had created a conspiracy against Islam, and now this conspiracy was more real than Islam itself.

"They will kill the real conservatives," Papa said, and I knew, I felt, who he was talking about. He was talking about himself. And I knew that in a month and a half, before the end of spring, he would be gone. I knew it not as a prophecy, but as a fact from the future that had somehow invaded my present. I knew it would be a car crash. A truck, a sleeping driver, the oncoming lane. He would die instantly. He would not suffer. That was the only comfort in this knowledge, which was as cold as ice and as heavy as lead.

But until that day, they still had time. A month and a half. Time to finish writing their theory, to put it down on paper, to turn it from oral discussions into a coherent concept, a philosophical report, a document. Their joint last will and testament. And

I knew they would do it. Because ideas, once born, demand to be written down. So that they can live on, even when their creators are gone.

And I think: maybe this is immortality? Not a soul that flies to paradise, but an idea that remains on earth and continues its work, sprouting in the minds of other people, changing the world, destroying it or saving it. And maybe Papa and Uncle, without knowing it, had created not just a conspiracy theory. They had created a virus. And even then, it was waiting for its moment to be unleashed.

Epilogue

EXCERPT FROM THE UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT BY A. FERZALI AND D. GHAFFARI, “THE ARCHITECTURE OF SHADOW: AN ANALYSIS OF WESTERN METAPOLITICAL DOCTRINE”

(Shiraz, Winter 1376 / 1998)

CLASSIFICATION: FOR INTERNAL DISTRIBUTION

PREAMBLE:

This document presents an analysis of a new, hidden threat to Islamic civilization. This threat emanates not from traditional Western liberalism, which is merely a facade, but from its shadowy, esoteric doctrine, which we tentatively designate as *Zulmati Roshangarī* (ظلمتی روشنگری) — “The Dark Enlightenment.” Its goal is not the destruction of tradition, but its substitution: the creation of a simulacrum of a traditional society, devoid of a divine foundation.

I. THE DOCTRINE: THE CORPORATE CALIPHATE

The fundamental principle of “The Dark Enlightenment” is the rejection of democracy as the inefficient rule of mediocrity. In its place, a model of the “State-as-Corporation” is proposed, governed by an authoritarian leader—a “CEO-Monarch.”

- Principle of Governance: The state is viewed not as a community of believers, but as a commercial enterprise whose main goal is efficiency and profit. Sharia law is replaced by corporate regulations, and morality by market expediency.
- Economic Model: The unlimited development of capitalism and technology, unrestrained by ethical and religious norms. Technological progress becomes an end in itself, a new deity.
- Social Structure: A return to hierarchy is proclaimed, but one based not on divine order, but on “biological reality.” Ideas of “scientific racism” and eugenics (under the guise of optimizing “human capital”) become the basis for dividing society into castes of the “effective” (the elite) and the “ineffective” (the masses).

II. THE MECHANISM: JĀME’ KELĪSĀ (جامع کلیسا) — “THE CATHEDRAL”

To disseminate and maintain its doctrine, “The Dark Enlightenment” utilizes a decentralized network of influence, which we call “The Cathedral” or “The Universal Church of Heresy.” This is an informal power structure that operates in parallel to official state institutions.

- The Clergy of “The Cathedral”: The role of priests and mullahs in this system is fulfilled by professors at leading universities, journalists at influential media outlets, and cultural figures. They shape public opinion and determine what is “truth” and what is “heresy.”
- Sacred Texts: Modern “progressive” values (radical feminism, multiculturalism, etc.) are presented not as political views, but as the immutable moral dogmas of a new secular religion.
- The Inquisition: Apostates who doubt the dogmas of “The Cathedral” are not subjected to physical violence. They are socially ostracized, deprived of their careers and their voice in society. This is a modern form of excommunication from Islam.
- The “Deep State”: The bureaucratic apparatus and intelligence agencies of the West, unaccountable to elected leaders, serve as the guardians of “The Cathedral,” ensuring the stability of the system and neutralizing real threats.

III. THE METHOD: “MOLDBUG” — “THE OLD MOLD” / THE TROJAN HORSE

Understanding the impossibility of a direct attack on Islam, “The Cathedral” employs a strategy of substitution.

1. Support for a “Weak Reformer”: The installation of a leader (such as Khatami) within the country’s leadership, whose calls for “dialogue” and “freedom” weaken the nation’s ideological immunity.
2. Infiltration of Ideas: Through open channels (universities, media, cultural exchange), “The Cathedral” begins to transmit its values, masking them as traditional and universal human values.
3. Creation of a “Controlled Opposition”: The final stage. The cultivation of a pseudo-traditionalist movement within the country that will use conservative rhetoric (family, order, hierarchy), but whose ultimate goal will be the construction of a “State-as-Corporation” without Allah. This will require an elected leader who, upon coming to power democratically, will declare a state of emergency, abolish the Constitution, and “privatize” the state.

CONCLUSION:

“The Dark Enlightenment” is the most sophisticated threat that Islam has ever faced.

The enemy's plan is brilliant in its cunning. First, with the help of "The Cathedral" and the "dialogue of civilizations" (personified by leaders like Khatami), they weaken our faith and create division in society. Then, when society is tired of chaos and "freedom," they will offer us "salvation"—The Dark Enlightenment. They will offer us a strong hand, order, traditional values, hierarchy—everything we will be yearning for. But it will be form without substance. Tradition without God. Order without justice. Strength without mercy.

It will look like our victory. But it will be their final triumph. They will replace the true bearers of faith with their managers, and mosques with corporate offices. This is the architecture of damnation, disguised as a fortress of tradition. And this will be the final jihad—a jihad for the soul, which we risk losing without even realizing that the war is already over.

Postscript

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

MINISTRY OF INTELLIGENCE (VEVAK)

OPERATIONS AND ANALYSIS DIRECTORATE

CLASSIFICATION: HIGHEST IMPORTANCE

REF. No. 145/TR-K/PHASE-2

Copy No. 2

To: [REDACTED]

Date: 25 Aban 1391 (November 15, 2012)

Subject: Interim report on active measures. Operation "Trojan Horse," Phase II (Infiltration).

1. OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Based on a combination of indicators (OSINT/HUMINT), the infiltration of the ideological construct "Shadow of Reason" (hereinafter SR), developed from the theoretical legacy of the late Colonel D. Ghaffari and Dr. A. Ferzali, into niche intellectual communities in the USA (target segments: libertarians, techno-optimists) can be considered successful.

2. IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISM:

Using materials originally developed as a warning of a threat to the Islamic world, the analytical department created an inverted version of the doctrine for a Western audience. Key theses (critique of democracy, the "State-as-Corporation" idea, elitism) were adapted and stripped of their Islamic context.

Primary repeaters (subject “Y.” / C. Yarvin, et al.) have been consistently reproducing the SR thesaurus under the labels “neoreaction” / “dark enlightenment” since 2011–2012. Influence was exerted primarily through indirect stimuli via partner channels [PARTNER-1], [PARTNER-2]. The degree of direct control is low; assessment of causality: probable ($P \approx 0.7$).

Note: The use of the term “Moldbug” (– قالب کهن) – “old mold”) has proven particularly effective. Subject “Y.” chose it as a pseudonym, presumably unaware of its Persian origin and original meaning in the doctrine.

3. ASSESSMENT OF COLLATERAL DAMAGE:

Collateral damage during the R&D of the concept (incident involving Dr. A. Ferzali, “The Theologian,” 1376/1997) has been deemed insignificant to the final objectives of the operation (see Phase I, para. 4.3). Psychological consequences in the first-degree relative (“The Physicist” / Dr. Z. Musavi), which manifested during that period, have been classified as a Type L-F vulnerability (“latent resource”). If necessary, this vulnerability can be converted into operational value.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Proceed to Phase III (amplification in second-tier media environments; reverse import of the discourse into the region via academic/diplomatic platforms).
- Prepare “blurred» attribution materials to conceal the doctrine’s origin.
- Continue passive surveillance of subject “The Physicist” (Category 2). She may prove useful when the time comes for Phase IV (practical destabilization).

Head of the Operations and Analysis Directorate

[Signature]

PERSONAL ADDENDUM (NOT FOR ARCHIVAL)

A handwritten note on a separate sheet, attached to the report

Two Iranian intellectuals, a theologian who died in a random car crash, and a colleague of mine who died of cancer, created a theory to defend Islamic civilization. They were afraid the West would offer us tradition without God.

We took their shield, reforged it into a sword, and turned it against those they sought to defend themselves from. We offered the West its own tradition without God, and they accepted it as a salvation from themselves.

If Ali and Javad knew that their worst nightmares would come true—only not for Iran, but for America—would they appreciate the irony? Or would they be horrified that their warning had become a manual for action?

Sometimes I think God does play dice after all. And He has a very dark sense of humor.

IRGC Lieutenant Colonel

Asadollah Alavi

Glossary

Calendar and Dates:

- Persian Calendar: A solar-based calendar system used in Iran.
- It begins on the spring equinox (Nowruz). The year 1376 corresponds to 1997-1998 AD.
- Khordad, Ordibehesht, Azar, Bahman: Names of months in the Persian calendar.

Historical Figures and Events:

- Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943): President of Iran from 1997-2005, a proponent of liberal reforms and a “Dialogue of Civilizations.”
- Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri (1943-): A conservative politician who lost to Khatami in the 1997 election.
- Salman Rushdie: A British-Indian novelist, author of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which prompted a fatwa from Ayatollah Khomeini.
- Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881): A British writer and historian, author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*.
- René Guénon (1886-1951): A French traditionalist philosopher, a theorist of the “primordial tradition.”
- Julius Evola (1898-1974): An Italian traditionalist philosopher, a theorist of a “spiritual aristocracy.”

Religious and Philosophical Terms:

- Roshanfekri (روشنفکری): “Enlightenment” in Persian.
- Ishraq: A school of Sufi philosophy based on illumination, the “philosophy of light.”
- Sharif: The Sharif University of Technology (formerly Aryamehr).
- Madrasa: An Islamic educational institution.
- Fatwa: A legal ruling on a point of Islamic law.
- VEVAK: The Ministry of Intelligence of Iran.
- IRGC: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.
- Basij: A paramilitary volunteer militia attached to the IRGC.

Philosophical Concepts (from the novel):

- Zulmati Roshangarī – (ظلمتی روشنگری) – “The Dark Enlightenment”: The name Ali and Javad give to the perceived secret doctrine of the West. Its essence is not to destroy tradition, but to substitute it, creating a simulacrum of a conservative society, but without God and the sacred.
- Moldbug – (قالب کهنه) – “The Old Mold”: The method of “The Dark Enlightenment.” The idea is to take the external, “old form” of traditional values (patriarchy, hierarchy, order), but to fill it with a new, alien content (market efficiency, corporate governance, technocracy).
- The Corporate Caliphate: The ultimate goal of the conspiracy, according to Ali and Javad. It is a model of a state run like a transnational corporation by an authoritarian “CEO-Monarch,” where morality is replaced by efficiency, and citizens by “human capital.”
- The Cathedral (Jāme’ Kelīsā — جامع کلیسا): The name for the informal network of influence (universities, media, cultural institutions) that, according to the theory, promotes a new secular religion of “progressivism” in the West and prepares the ground for “The Dark Enlightenment.”

Persian/Arabic Expressions:

- Jan/janam: “my soul,” a term of endearment.
- Azizam: «my dear.»
- Khodahafez: “goodbye” (lit. “God protect you”).
- Salam alaykum: The Islamic greeting.
- Bismillah: “In the name of Allah.”
- Haram: Forbidden in Islam.
- Rusari: A headscarf, worn more loosely than a traditional hijab.
- Chador: A traditional full-body cloak worn by women.
- Manteau: A long outer coat worn by women.

Literary and Cultural References:

- Hafez of Shiraz (1315-1390): A great Persian lyric poet.
- Rumi (1207-1273): A Persian mystic poet and Sufi.
- Omar Khayyam (1048-1131): A Persian poet, mathematician, and philosopher.
- “The Garden of Forking Paths”: A short story by Jorge Luis Borges.
- Girih: Geometric patterns used in Islamic art.

Geographical Names:

- Shiraz: A city in southern Iran, capital of Fars Province, known as the city of poets.
- Isfahan: A city in central Iran, a former capital, known as “half of the world.”
- Zafaraniyeh: An affluent neighborhood in northern Tehran.
- Jolfa: The Armenian quarter in Isfahan.
- Zayandeh-Rood: The river that flows through Isfahan.
- Chaharbagh Avenue: A major historical avenue in Isfahan.

Modern Intellectual Figures (mentioned in the prologue):

- Curtis Yarvin (Mencius Moldbug) (b. 1973): An American programmer and political thinker, a founder of the neoreactionary movement. Under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug, he wrote the blog “Unqualified Reservations” (2007-2014), where he criticized democracy and proposed a state-as-corporation model. He advocates for replacing democratic institutions with authoritarian technocratic rule modeled on successful corporations. His ideas have influenced parts of Silicon Valley and the alt-right movement.
- Nick Land (b. 1962): A British philosopher, one of the creators of accelerationism and a theorist of “The Dark Enlightenment.” A former lecturer at the University of Warwick, author of works on technocapitalism and the posthuman future. He advocates for accelerating technological development as a way to overcome modern political and social systems. His work combines the philosophy of Deleuze, cyberpunk, and right-wing political ideas.
- Peter Thiel (b. 1967): A German-American entrepreneur and venture capitalist, co-founder of PayPal, and the first outside investor in Facebook. Author of the book Zero to One on startups and innovation. An outspoken critic of democracy (“competition is for losers”), a proponent of technological acceleration and radical life extension. He funds various libertarian and transhumanist projects, including the creation of artificial island-states.
- Neoreaction/NRx: An intellectual movement of the 2000s-2010s that criticizes modern democracy and liberalism. Its supporters advocate for a return to hierarchical forms of government, but on a technocratic, rather than traditionally religious, basis.
- The Dark Enlightenment: A term popularized by Nick Land to describe an intellectual movement that accepts the rationality of the Enlightenment but rejects its egalitarian and democratic conclusions.
- The Cathedral: A term introduced by Yarvin to describe the decentralized but ideologically unified network of influence (leading universities, media, state

apparatus) that, in his view, shapes public opinion in the West and promotes “progressivism” as a secular religion.

Scientific Concepts (used metaphorically):

- Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle: The quantum mechanical principle stating the impossibility of simultaneously measuring the exact position and momentum of a particle.
- Brownian Motion: The random, chaotic movement of particles suspended in a fluid.
- Phase Transition: A change in the state of matter.
- Isotopes: Varieties of atoms of the same element with different numbers of neutrons.
- Fibonacci Spiral: A mathematical curve based on the Fibonacci sequence.
- L-F Vulnerability: Most commonly refers to LFI (Local File Inclusion), which occurs when a web application allows a server’s local files to be included in its code without proper validation. This can allow attackers to read sensitive files, alter server configuration, and even execute malicious code, potentially leading to data theft, site compromise, and reputational damage.

Fordow

Aurora Over the Desert

14 Tir 1404 (July 5, 2025)

On the night the sky cracked open, I saw the Northern Lights.

They were here, over the Dasht-e Kavir desert, over the fractured clay of Iran where rains had forgotten the way before I was even born. They danced in green and violet ribbons, writhing like ghostly snakes. They moved slowly, like the breath of a massive beast that had woken up underground and was now breathing into our faces. It looked nothing like what they show in documentaries about Norway. It was dirty, like gasoline in a puddle. It was impossible. And it was beautiful to the point of nausea. As if Allah had turned the sky inside out to show us its guts.

No one believed me.

Aunt Nilu—Mrs. Nilufar Yezdi, who asks everyone to call her Aunt Nilu—said they were just reflections of fires. “Oil depots are burning, child. Or ammunition dumps. In Qom, they say, the whole sky is red.” She was kneading dough, and her hands, white with flour, looked like the hands of a ghost. She was trying to create bread out of dust and fear, and she was succeeding.

Zeynab didn’t believe me because she was asleep. At fourteen, she possesses the superpower of ignoring the end of the world unless it’s streamed on TikTok. She lay on her mattress, curled into a ball, earbuds in, listening to some new boy-band K-pop recorded in a world that might not exist anymore. The battery in her player is dying. When it dies completely, Zeynab will wake up in silence, and it will be the loudest scream in history.

Zahir didn’t believe me. Zahir, who was on duty that night at the checkpoint at the village entrance, later swore he saw nothing. Only a flash, as if the sun had risen from the north. He said I had overheated in the sun. “Nasrin-jan, go to sleep. At night, shadows play cruel tricks on the mind.” He stared at the empty road as if expecting enemies, but the enemy was already here. The enemy was in the sky, in the air, in the very structure of light.

But that night, I sat on the roof and watched the aurora borealis lick the peaks of the Zagros Mountains. I knew what it meant. It wasn’t a miracle. It was ionization. It was a magnetic storm caused by what had happened up there, in the north, in Fordow. The sky was bleeding electrons.

And then the rain came.

For the first time in the three years of drought that had turned the village into a dust bowl. The drops were heavy, oily, warm. They fell onto the dry earth with a hiss,

like the devil's spit on a red-hot skillet. People ran out of their houses, turning their faces, palms, and buckets to the sky. They laughed and cried. "Rahmat! Allah's mercy!" they shouted. Aunt Nilu brought out basins.

But I stood under the canopy and shivered. Because I am the daughter of a physicist. And the granddaughter of a theologian. And I know that rain following the Northern Lights in the desert is not Allah's mercy. It is a sentence. It is the atmosphere vomiting up what was pumped into it.

But I don't know whether to rejoice at this rain or not. Does it water our crops or kill them? Does it wash away sins or saturate the earth with poison that will glow in the dark in a thousand years?

There has been no connection for two weeks. Mobiles are silent—dead bricks. The Internet vanished like Atlantis. Even the Starlink, that white briefcase of hope brought by General Alavi, is silent. The diode is dark. Musk's satellites have gone blind, or burned up, or simply turned away from us, deciding that Iran no longer deserves to be online.

General Alavi. The kind grandfather with the eyes of a wolfhound. He left us this terminal and the folders. Several stacks of documents stamped "Top Secret." He probably thought this was our insurance. Or our legacy.

I read them over the noise of the generator, while the rain drums on the roof, beating out the rhythm of decay.

I am reading the dossier on my own mother.

"Vulnerability Type L-F (Latent Resource)."

What a delight. These bastards in black suits, these architects of shadows, speak of my mother as if she were a bug in the code, a compilation error to be exploited. They deconstructed her soul into bytes, classified her fears, indexed her love. To them, she is not a person. She is a function. A variable in an equation they have been solving for thirty years.

I wonder, did they classify my father's jealousy as "*Vulnerability Type J-H (Jealous Husband)*"? Or as a "*critical failure in the security system*"?

They turned our family into a set of acronyms. L-F. HUMINT. OSINT. And now, sitting in this clay hut, listening to the radioactive rain knock at the window, I am reading the obituary for our childhood, written in the dry, soulless bureaucratese of intelligence agencies.

We don't even know if they are alive. Mom, Dad. Adil. They stayed there, at the epicenter.

Maybe they have already become shadows on the wall, like in Hiroshima, as Mom used to tell us. Maybe they turned into light, into that very light I saw early that

morning in the still-night sky. Green and violet. Red... Dad and Mom, dancing in the ionosphere, freed at last from lies, from duty, from the gravity of guilt.

The rain is getting heavier. It smells not of ozone or dust. It smells of metal. Rusty, old iron. Like the taste of blood in your mouth.

Aunt Nilu calls me to drink tea. Tea made with rainwater.

“Coming, Aunt Nilu,” I shout.

I close the folder. “*Vulnerability Type L-F.*”

No, Mom. You weren’t a vulnerability. You were the only thing keeping this world from falling apart. You were the Strong Interaction that held the nucleus together. And now you are gone, and we are decaying. The half-life of the Mousavi family is coming to an end.

I go to drink tea. If this is the end of the world, let it taste of cardamom.

Tea Party with the Shadow

17 Mehr 1402 (October 9, 2023)

October in Isfahan felt like a prolonged farewell: the sky faded slowly, like an old photograph, and the evening air grew transparent and resonant, as if someone unseen had drained all the noise from the city, leaving only the echo. Autumn in the city always resembles an old woman who still remembers what a beauty she once was. The plane trees on Chaharbagh Avenue shed their leaves slowly, reluctantly, as if saying goodbye to each one individually.

Amirkhan Mousavi loved this time of year. In the twilight, the city seemed like a set for a play that had long been removed from the repertoire, and it was easier to breathe in this emptiness. Since Rustam Yezdi’s death, his own house had turned into the same kind of set. Zahra, his wife, had become like a locked room: the façade remained the same, but the windows were tightly curtained, and no one, not even he, knew if anyone still lived there. She moved through the rooms soundlessly, like a draft, and her silence was denser than the walls.

So now he was in no hurry to go home.

He sat at a rickety table at the street café “Hafez,” watching a slice of lemon float in a glass of tea—a small, shriveled sun in an amber universe. The table stood against the wall, under a canopy of grapevines that were already nearly bare. The tea was cooling, covered by a thin film of time. A little further away, two students were discussing something, waving their hands; opposite them, a man was reading a newspaper, folding it after each article as if sealing what he had read.

“Excuse me,” the voice was quiet but carried the habit of being heard. “Is this seat taken? It’s stuffy inside, and old age demands air, even if it is full of dust.”

Amirkhan looked up.

Before him stood an elderly man. Sixty, maybe a little older. In a dark gray suit that had seen better days but still held its shape. With a face where fatigue and sadness had been present for so long they had become character traits. He held a cup of coffee—an espresso, judging by the size—and looked at Amirkhan with that specific politeness that precedes an intrusion.

“Please,” Amirkhan said, sliding his tea slightly closer to the edge of the table.

The stranger sat down. He moved with the caution of a man who carries his body like a fragile vessel.

“Coffee,” he said, looking into the cup. “Doctors say I should quit. And smoking too. The heart, they say, is not a perpetual motion machine. But what do they know about the heart?” He chuckled sadly, pulling out a pack of Gitanes. “A man is the sum of his habits. Take away my coffee and tobacco, and what remains? A void in a gray suit.”

He lit a cigarette. The smoke was blue and acrid; it smelled of Paris, chestnuts, and other people’s secrets.

“You know,” the stranger continued, sipping his coffee, “there is a story about a man who spent his whole life watching others. And then discovered that he was being watched too. And he didn’t know who started first. It’s a very Persian story, isn’t it? A circle. Or a spiral.”

Amirkhan tensed. The hand holding the glass froze.

“Do we know each other?”

The stranger exhaled a stream of smoke toward the fading sky.

“Acquaintance is a convention. We know each other the way two pieces on a chessboard know their moves. We intersect but do not touch.”

He paused, flicking ash from his cigarette with the precision of a surgeon.

“Mr. Mousavi, we know that you organized the surveillance of Dr. Yezdi. We have all the evidence: orders, reports from your men, their routes. We know the dates. We know the names. It was good work. Methodical.”

Amirkhan felt the cold lurking in the autumn air seep under his shirt.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“You do,” the stranger objected softly. “This is the preamble. The plot begins now. On the night of the murder, your man, Reza Tabrizi, ceased surveillance exactly one hour before... the finale. He reported that he ‘lost the subject.’ What irony. And an hour later, Dr. Yezdi was found dead. Murdered. The official version—robbery.”

He paused, sipping his coffee as if savoring the bitterness of the moment.

“You are a professional, Mr. Mousavi. Do you believe in such coincidences? That the universe suddenly decided to play along with you with such frightening precision?”

Amirkhan was silent. Walls were crumbling inside his head. The tea in the glass now looked not like amber, but like last year’s straw.

“Are you accusing me?”

“God forbid. I am not a prosecutor. I am not claiming you gave the order. I am not claiming anything at all. But imagine how the people from the IRGC will read this story. They have no imagination, Mr. Mousavi, they only have instructions. Your man is tailing a nuclear physicist. Your man ‘accidentally’ disappears before the murder. And the motive? Oh, your motive is classic, Shakespearean. Jealousy. Doubts about your wife’s fidelity.”

The stranger leaned in slightly closer. His eyes were empty, like mirrors in an abandoned house.

“What chapter do you think they will write in your file? ‘Tragic Coincidence’? Or ‘Contract Killing Organized by Jealous Security Official’? It’s a ready-made script for a tribunal. And the finale there will be short.”

Amirkhan stared at the cooling tea.

“What do you want?” His voice, for a moment, became hoarse, alien.

“Me? I want harmony. You don’t need to become a spy. I don’t need centrifuge blueprints. I just need you to stay where you are. In your place. And if something truly important happens in the life of your wife, Dr. Mousavi... a change of rhythm, a new melody to listen to on the way to an urgent business trip... you will simply let us know. You will become our seismograph.”

The stranger pulled an old push-button phone from his pocket. A Nokia. A model they stopped making ten years ago.

“In exchange for this, all materials regarding your surveillance, all recordings, all reports will remain in a safe. In a very deep safe, the key to which only we possess. And the IRGC will never know how close they were to uncovering this... incident.”

He placed the phone on the table. Next to the cold tea.

“Just take it. The number is already inside. It is the only thread holding you above the abyss. If you agree, leave a message on the answering machine: ‘I need to service my car.’ You have a Dena Plus, right? Good car. Reliable.”

He stood up, carefully sliding back his chair.

“Think about it. Don’t answer now. We are in no hurry. Like Allah, we have our own sense of time... And in the future, if you notice something strange, say: ‘I have a flat tire—need to check.’ And we will contact you.”

He had already taken a step away but stopped, as if recalling a minor detail.

“Ah yes, Mr. Mousavi. It is unlikely your wife would be pleased if she found out you were having her followed. Women forgive murder, but they rarely forgive distrust. It is a paradox, but it is so.”

He dissolved into the evening air like the smoke from his cigarette.

Amirkhan remained alone. The city buzzed around him, but he heard only the beating of his own heart. He finished his tea. The cold, astringent taste of defeat. Then he slowly reached out and took the phone. It was heavy. Heavier than a piece of plastic should be.

He stood up, put a banknote on the table, and walked away. The air had grown colder. Leaves rustled underfoot like other people’s secrets.

He walked home slowly, taking his time. He knew that when he opened the door, Zahra would meet him with the same detached politeness one reserves for the postman. His daughters would be doing their homework. Zeynab—obediently, Nasrin—with a challenge in her eyes. Everything would be as usual.

Doomsday Clock

23 Khordad 1404 (June 13, 2025)

The night in the city was inky and dense, like the oil we so proudly pump from the depths only to burn it in the furnace of history. Silence hung over the streets not as a peaceful blanket, but as a sword of Damocles suspended by a single horsehair. In this soundlessness, there was a vibration—not acoustic, but ontological, as if the fabric of reality itself, exhausted by the tension of recent years, was preparing to come apart at the seams.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to classify types of insomnia. There is the insomnia of a lover—sweet, sticky, full of dopamine hallucinations. There is the insomnia of a student—caffeinated, hysterical. And there is the insomnia of a citizen of the Islamic Republic of Iran—paranoid, with the taste of metal in your mouth, when you wait not for dawn, but for a sound that will divide your life into “before” and “after.”

The clock on the wall ticked. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Like those stupid clocks in Palestine Square in Tehran that counted down the time until the destruction of Israel. Who would have thought the timer worked both ways?

The doorbell rang not loudly, but in that cottony silence, it was like a gunshot. Short, demanding, devoid of politeness.

“For Dad,” I thought, pulling on my jeans. In recent months, this had become routine. Riots, arrests, meetings. My father was the night watchman—and the day

watchman, too—of the regime in our city. He was leaving to protect us from the chaos he himself helped create.

I went out into the hallway. The light in the living room burned dimly, casting long, broken shadows.

But it wasn't a courier from the municipality. On the doorstep stood Dr. Hassan Rezai. Mom's boss. "Cardamom," as I now know from the dossier. He looked as if his suit had been sewn from the same material as the night outside—dark, light-absorbing. In his hands was a briefcase he clutched as if it held the keys to paradise or the launch codes for hell.

My parents stood opposite him. Mom in a bathrobe, pale as chalk. Dad in trousers and a shirt, wearing the expression of a man who has learned his diagnosis but hasn't yet decided how to tell his family.

They spoke in whispers, but this whisper was louder than a scream. It was the whisper of conspirators in a library they are about to set on fire.

"Good evening, Nasrin," Dr. Rezai said, noticing me. His voice was level, mechanical.

"Not asleep?" Mom asked. Her hand nervously fingered the belt of her robe.

"Didn't have time," I leaned against the doorframe, trying to look like I didn't care. "I heard the bell. What happened? Did another IAEA inspection decide to drop by in their pajamas?"

Rezai didn't smile. It seems humor had died in our house.

"You need to leave," he said, addressing my parents but looking at me. "Out of the city. Urgently. Somewhere far away."

"Now?" Mom looked at the clock. "Hassan, what is going on?"

"Zahra," he pronounced her name as if it were a formula. "Ask Nasrin to wake Zeynab. Have them pack their things. Only the essentials. Documents, money, warm clothes. No gadgets, except the simplest ones."

Mom nodded at me.

"Nasrin, please. Wake your sister. Quickly."

I went to Zeynab's room. My brain, poisoned by years of reading between the lines, was already building the picture. A night visit. Emergency evacuation. This was not a drill. This was the finale.

Zeynab was asleep, clutching her pillow. She's fourteen, but in her sleep, she looked five. I shook her shoulder.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty. Up. We're leaving."

“What? Where?” She blinked, trying to focus. “Nasrin, are you stupid? I just fell asleep.”

“To the village. Pack. Mom said.”

“Which village?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Because the adults decided to play hide-and-seek. And we’re ‘it.’”

While she stuffed random sweaters into a backpack, I went back to the hallway. I needed to hear.

They were standing by the window.

“Do you think it’s serious?” Dad asked. There was no fear in his voice, only the fatigue of a professional who knew the dam would break someday.

“Yes,” Rezai answered. “They aren’t sleeping.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Mom asked. “Israel?”

“They launched an operation. ‘People Like a Lion.’ A poetic name for a slaughter.”

“Is this war?” The word hung in the air, heavy and cold as a chunk of uranium.

“I hope not,” Rezai shook his head. “War implies two sides. This... this is surgery. They want to cut out the tumor.”

“Is the tumor us?” Mom smiled bitterly.

“The tumor is our work, Zahra. Centrifuges. Missiles. Radars. Take the children away. And you can stay with them. It might get... hot at the lab.”

“No,” Mom straightened up. In that moment, she didn’t look like a frightened woman, but like a statue of Themis, only without the blindfold. She saw everything too clearly. “I will take them to Rustam’s mother and come back. Amirkhan definitely won’t be released from work. And I... I must be there. My shift isn’t over yet.”

I returned to the room. Zeynab was already standing with her backpack, looking like a frightened sparrow.

“Nasrin, I’m scared.”

“Me too, kiddo. But that’s normal. Fear is just the body’s reaction to an excess of reality.”

We went out into the living room. Backpacks on our backs. Ready to run. Refugees in our own home.

And then it started.

First—the sound. A low, vibrating hum coming not from the sky, but from underground. A siren. The air raid alarm. It howled like a wounded animal, rising higher and higher, drilling into the brain.

Zeynab flinched and pressed against me. I hugged her shoulders, feeling her tremble. My little sister, who knows the lyrics to every BTS song but doesn't know what death sounds like. Now she will learn.

Father walked to the window but didn't open the curtains.

"It has begun," he said.

He looked at me. His gaze fell on my hand. I was gripping my phone so hard the screen could have cracked.

"Did you call Adil?"

"Yes."

"Did he answer?"

"No. I texted him."

Mom came over, stroked my head. Her hand was icy.

"Don't worry, darling. He'll be fine. Their house has a basement."

"Of course," I thought venomously. "A basement. The best place for a first date with the apocalypse."

"They won't strike civilian targets," Rezai said, checking his watch. "Their goal is infrastructure. The military. Us."

"What's the difference?" I asked, looking him straight in the eye. "When bombs fall, they don't ask for a passport."

"Smart bombs do," he replied. "They call it 'precision-guided munitions.'"

Right. Humanitarianism, caliber 500 pounds, I thought.

Somewhere in the distance, from the direction of Natanz, the sky lit up with a flash. Soundless. As if someone had switched the sun on and off.

"Time to go," Dad said. "The car is at the gate."

We walked out into a night that had ceased to be dark. The sky over Isfahan bloomed with anti-aircraft fire. Tracers drew lines in the sky, trying to cancel the inevitable. It was beautiful and terrifying. Abstract expressionism of war. Kandinsky painting with fire on a black canvas.

We ran. We were rats abandoning the ship we had built ourselves. And I thought: I wonder what they'll write in the history books—were we victims or accomplices?

Or will there be no more textbooks?

The Road to Nowhere

23 Khordad 1404 (June 13, 2025)

It had been four hours since the strikes began. Four hours during which our world had ceased to be what it was.

The road out of Isfahan felt like fleeing a burning theater where the audience hasn't yet realized the curtain has fallen for good, but the actors are already shoving each other at the emergency exit. The highway heading north was empty and dark, like the pupil of a blind man. Only rare oncoming cars blinded us with their headlights, snatching chunks of the desert from the darkness—gray, dusty, indifferent to our little human tragedies. The night felt like it could be rolled into a tube and smoked like a cigarette of last hope.

Father drove in silence, gripping the steering wheel as if it were the helm of a sinking ship. The Dena Plus purred, devouring kilometers of asphalt. The cabin smelled of gasoline, fear, and the mint lozenges Zeynab was nervously sucking on.

She wasn't sleeping. She wasn't even listening to her Korean boys. She was staring out the window, where the darkness was occasionally torn apart by distant flashes. Fireworks in honor of the end of the world.

“Where are we going?” her voice was quiet, brittle like a dry twig.

“To Mrs. Yezdi,” Mom answered without turning around. She sat in the front seat, straight as a string. “To Rustam’s mother.”

I choked on air.

“To Rustam’s mother?” I asked again. “Seriously? To the mother of the man who... who isn’t here anymore?”

“Yes,” Mom spoke evenly, as if reading a safety manual. “After the funeral, we became close. She invited us to visit many times. She said her house is always open to her son’s friends.”

I looked at the back of Father’s head. He didn’t even flinch. Perfect self-control. Or perfect sociopathy. We are going to hide in the house of a woman whose son was killed on my father’s orders (or because of his jealousy, which is the same thing), and this woman was being comforted by my mother, who was the cause of it all. Santa Barbara against the backdrop of a nuclear mushroom cloud. If God existed, He would be choking on popcorn right now.

We drove through the night, and I thought about cause-and-effect relationships. About how a butterfly flaps its wings in Gaza, and a hurricane blows the roof off in Isfahan.

If the Palestinians hadn’t started “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood”... If on that morning, October 7th, they hadn’t attacked a rave festival where stoned hippies were

dancing to trance music, but instead some boring, fortified military base... Yes, they would have all died there. They would have been smeared by Merkava tanks. But they would have remained heroes. Martyrs with rifles in their hands, not butchers with GoPro cameras.

And the world would have gasped, the UN would have expressed concern, Israel would have bombed Gaza for a couple of weeks to make a point—and that would be it. Business as usual. But no. They needed a show. They needed blood on live stream. And now, two years later, that echo has rolled all the way to us. A domino effect where the last tile was my own head.

If not for those paragliders over the kibbutzim, I would be sleeping in my bed right now, dreaming of Adil. Not shaking in a car on a road to nowhere, wondering if my city would turn into radioactive glass before dawn or after.

The checkpoint emerged from the darkness suddenly, like a barrier at the border of worlds. A couple of concrete blocks, sandbags, the dim light of a searchlight in which gnats were dancing.

Father slowed down. Rolled down the window. The smell of the desert burst into the cabin—wormwood and cooling stone.

A soldier walked up to the car. Young, my age, maybe a little older. His uniform hung loosely on him, but he carried himself with the quiet confidence of a man holding a loaded machine gun, with eternity at his back.

“Good evening,” he said, peering into the cabin. “Documents, please.”

Father handed over his ID. Mom—hers, the scientific one.

The soldier shone his flashlight. The beam slid over our faces. Lingered on me. I looked him in the eye. They were dark, attentive, and surprisingly calm for a night when the sky was burning.

“Head of Municipality Security and Senior Researcher at the Nuclear Center,” he read, returning the documents. There was no servility in his voice, only mild surprise. “Unusual time for travel.”

“Operational necessity,” Father snapped briefly.

The soldier nodded, but I saw that he didn’t believe it. He saw two frightened girls in the back seat and a trunk packed with things.

“Where are you heading?” he asked, softer now. Not as a sentry, but as a person.

“To the village of Abyaneh,” Father replied.

“To relatives?”

“No,” Mom said. “To Mrs. Nilufar Yezdi.”

The soldier's face brightened.

"Ah, Aunt Nilu. A good woman. She has the best dates in the district. And thyme tea."

"Yes," Mom answered quietly. "I know."

I looked at him. His badge read: "Zahir Mashhadi, Private, Military Unit 2103."

He was nothing like Adil. Adil was a sweet, shy intellectual who blushed when I held his hand. Adil read poetry and was afraid to look me in the eye.

This guy, Zahir, looked straight at you. He was... real. Dusty, tired, with a rifle on his shoulder, but there was a kind of primordial reliability about him. Like a rock.

I caught myself comparing them. And realizing that Adil was losing this comparison. Nineteen is a cynical age. First love seems like cotton candy, but you crave meat. Or at least someone who can shield you from shrapnel. And I hated myself for that thought. But war turns us into pragmatists. Or cynics. Or just survivors.

"Go ahead," Zahir said, stepping back. "You'll see the village lights right after the turn. Have a good rest."

"We aren't going on vacation," Mom said suddenly. Her voice was firm. "We are leaving the children and returning to Isfahan."

The soldier looked at her with a long, unreadable gaze.

"Inshallah," he said. "May God protect you on your way back."

He raised the barrier. We drove on, into the darkness. I looked back. Zahir stood in the pool of light, watching us go. A lonely figure at the edge of the world.

"He's weird," Zeynab whispered.

"He's normal," I replied. "The only normal person I've seen all night."

We drove on. Into the night. To the village. To nowhere. I looked out the window and thought: "That's it. We have become refugees. In our own country. And even Mrs. Yezdi's dates won't make this any sweeter."

The lights of the village appeared. Abyaneh. Red clay, narrow streets, silence. A sanctuary. Or a trap.

The car stopped by an old house with a high fence.

"We've arrived," Father said, killing the engine.

Silence fell upon us, dense and ringing. You couldn't hear the sirens here. Here, it smelled only of dust and, faintly, of roses.

Rustam's mother was waiting for us. The circle had closed. The murderers had brought their children to the victim's mother so she would save them. If this isn't a

plot for a Greek tragedy, I don't know what is. Actually, no, I do know. It's just life in Iran.

House of Ghosts

23 Khordad 1404 (June 13, 2025)

Morning arrived in the village without a dawn. The light seemed to seep through the dusty shutters like water through cracks in a clay wall.

Mrs. Yezdi's house was like a jewelry box someone had forgotten to close. It stood deep in a garden where half-withered pomegranate trees intertwined their branches, creating a patterned dome beneath which time flowed differently—slower, thicker. The red clay walls breathed warmth even at night, and the windows, narrow and tall, looked out at the world with wise nearsightedness.

When we entered, we were enveloped by the smell of saffron and old paper. It was the scent of memory.

Nilufar Yezdi met us on the threshold. She was a small, dry woman, resembling a meerkat that had survived winter. Her gray hair was neatly tucked under a scarf, and her face, etched with wrinkles, glowed with that peculiar, soft joy found in people who have long stopped expecting good news.

But there was no mourning in her. There was humility transformed into hospitality. Dressed in a simple dark dress, she smiled at us as if we had arrived for a celebration, not fled from bombardment.

“Welcome,” her voice was quiet but clear, like a silver bell. “Come in, come in. Amirkhan-agha, Zahra-jan. And you, girls. Such beauties!”

She embraced Zeynab, then me. Her hands were dry and warm, like parchment.

“Call me Aunt Nilu,” she said, smiling. “To my son's friends, I am always Aunt Nilu.”

I looked at Mom. Zahra stood with her eyes lowered, as if afraid the walls would start bleeding if she looked up. Dad froze at the threshold, gripping the car keys until his knuckles turned white. The soap opera continued. We walked into a house that should have hated us, but instead, it offered us slippers.

“You've come a long way,” Aunt Nilu fussed, seating us at a low table on the rug. “You must eat. I made baghali polo. And baked barbari. Fresh, still hot.”

On the table were dishes worthy of a Shah. Rice with fava beans and dill, steaming gently, golden flatbreads, small bowls of rose petal jam.

“You shouldn't have troubled yourself, Mrs. Yezdi,” Dad's voice sounded hoarse, as if he were swallowing broken glass. “You must have been cooking all night.”

“Nonsense,” she waved it off, pouring tea. “I couldn’t sleep anyway. I was listening to the radio. They say things are troubling in the world. But here, in Abyaneh, it’s always quiet. Here, war is something you see on TV, not something that falls on your head.”

She probably didn’t know. She listened to the radio but heard only what she wanted to hear. Or perhaps the radio here caught a different wave—a wave from the past, where everything was still fine.

We ate in silence. The food was delicious, homemade, real. But every bite stuck in my throat. I watched Dad. He ate mechanically, tasting nothing. He sat at the table of the woman whose son had died because of him. He ate her bread. He drank her tea.

If hell exists, this is what it looks like: a cozy living room, the smell of dill, and a kind old woman serving you seconds, not knowing you are a monster.

Zeynab, having eaten her fill, began to nod off.

“Go, dear, lie down,” Aunt Nilu pointed to a door in the next room. “The bed is made. Sleep.”

When Zeynab left, I stood up and walked around the room. It was a museum. Photographs hung on the walls. Black and white, color, faded. Here was a young man in a military uniform, with a mustache and a rifle. He smiled that brave, foolish smile with which they went to war with Iraq, thinking they’d be back in a month.

“Is that her husband?” I whispered to Mom.

Zahra walked over, stood beside me. She didn’t look at the photo; she looked through it.

“Yes. He died in eighty-two. During the assault on Khorramshahr. Rustam was three years old then.”

And here was Rustam. A boy with a ball. A teenager with a book. A student in glasses. A young scientist in a white coat surrounded by instruments. And the last photo—he stands in the mountains, squinting at the sun, alive, intelligent, with that same ironic half-smile I remembered.

“Hello, Uncle Rustam,” I thought. “Sorry we barged in. But my parents decided your house is the safest place for their children. Appreciate the irony.”

Dad sat with his back to the wall of photographs. He couldn’t look at them. His hand trembled when he lifted his glass of tea. I saw it. Aunt Nilu didn’t.

“We have to go,” he said abruptly, standing up. “Mrs. Yezdi... Aunt Nilu. Thank you for everything.”

“Already?” the hostess threw up her hands. “You haven’t even finished your tea properly.”

“Duty,” he answered briefly. “Please, look after the girls. We... we will try to return as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Amirkhan-agha. Don’t worry. It will be like staying with their own grandmother.”

They went out into the yard. Dawn was already painting the sky the color of a bruise—lilac-gray. Somewhere far away, beyond the horizon, it was probably still thundering, but here it was quiet. Mom hugged me. Hard, until my ribs hurt. She smelled of road dust and village tangerines.

“Take care of your sister, Nasrin. You’re the oldest.”

“I know, Mom.”

She looked me in the eye. In her gaze was such an abyss of despair and love that I felt scared. She was saying goodbye. For real.

“There, in the bag...” she stumbled. “In the side pocket of the backpack. There are documents. And money.”

She kissed me on the forehead—a dry, hot kiss. Dad just squeezed my shoulder.

“Don’t be foolish,” he said. “Listen to Aunt Nilu. And don’t go on the internet. There isn’t any anyway.”

“Dad,” I wanted to say something biting, something in my style, but the words got stuck. “Take care of Mom.”

He nodded. And in that nod was a promise he couldn’t keep.

They got into the car. The Dena Plus, covered in dust, looked like a hearse for hopes. They didn’t look at each other. They looked ahead, at the road leading them back to hell.

And I watched them and thought: they didn’t look like husband and wife, but like random fellow travelers on a train going one way, knowing they would never arrive together.

The car moved. The crunch of tires on gravel sounded like a sigh.

They drove a few dozen meters and suddenly stopped. The brake lights flared red, like two inflamed eyes. The car stood there for a minute. Two. The engine ran, puffing little clouds of exhaust into the morning air.

I held my breath. Maybe they changed their minds? Maybe Dad will get out now, say “To hell with it all,” and stay?.. Or maybe he wanted to get out, hug us one more time. Or maybe he just couldn’t force himself to press the gas. But duty won. As always.

The brake lights went out. The car jerked and, picking up speed, tore away, leaving behind a trail of dust that slowly settled on the road like a curtain after a tragedy.

Yes, they left. The murderer and the traitor went to save the world they themselves had destroyed. And I was left standing at the gate. Aunt Nilu came up, draped a shawl over my shoulders.

“Let’s go, child,” she said softly. “You need to sleep. Morning is wiser than evening.”

I followed her. Into the house of ghosts. Into the house of dates. Into the house where I was destined to survive the end of the world. I lay down on the sofa in the living room, beneath the photograph of smiling Rustam, and fell into a sleep, black and bottomless as an old oil well. And in my dream, Rustam stepped down from the photo and sat beside me. He said nothing. He just looked at me with that same ironic half-smile. As if he knew something I didn’t know.

Didn’t know then.

Prisoner’s Dilemma

23 Khordad 1404 (June 13, 2025)

The car tore away, leaving behind a cloud of dust and two small figures shrinking in the rearview mirror, like a past we try to forget but which always follows. Zahra didn’t turn around. She didn’t look in the mirror. She sat straight, staring at the ribbon of road disappearing into the red-hot haze. Her profile was sharp and cold, like the profile on a coin withdrawn from circulation.

They had driven sixty meters when Amirkhan slammed on the brakes. The Dena dipped its nose, as if stumbling over an invisible barrier.

“What happened?” Zahra asked without changing her posture. There was no fear in her voice, only weary irritation.

Amirkhan didn’t answer. He reached under the seat and pulled out a thick plastic folder. Inside were papers—a ragged stack held together by a paperclip already showing signs of rust.

“I should have shown you this a long time ago,” he said, extending the folder. His hand trembled, but his voice was steady. “I think the time has come. If we are going to hell, it is better to go without baggage.”

Zahra took the folder. She opened it slowly, as one opens a last will and testament.

First sheet. Surveillance report. Subject: R. Yezdi. Date: April 2023. Performer: Municipality Security Service.

Second sheet. Interrogation protocol of A. Mousavi. Suspicion of organizing murder. Conclusion: “No direct evidence. Actions qualified as abuse of authority.”

Third sheet. The most terrifying one. Report to the Head of the IRGC Counterintelligence Directorate. Excerpt. “Citizen A. Mousavi voluntarily reported an attempted recruitment by unidentified persons (presumably Mossad agents). During the operational game, he agreed to the role of a ‘passive source’ under Directorate control. Objective: disinformation of the enemy and identification of communication channels.”

Zahra read. Her eyes darted across the lines, snatching the essence from the bureaucratic delirium. Surveillance. Jealousy. Murder? Recruitment. Double game.

As they passed the checkpoint, Zahir, that same young soldier, stood up from his folding chair and saluted. Zahra, without looking up from the papers, smiled faintly—just the corner of her lips, reflexively, like children smile in their sleep. It wasn’t a smile for him, but for some inner thought of her own.

She closed the folder. Placed it on her knees. Looked at her husband. There was neither anger nor contempt in her gaze. Only infinite, profound surprise.

“Why didn’t you say this before?” she asked quietly.

“I didn’t know how to start,” Amirkhan stared at the road. “Fear is a bad storyteller. Alavi advised me to talk to you a long time ago. He said: ‘Truth is bitter medicine, but lies are poison.’”

“Alavi...” she shook her head. “What a fool you are, Amirkhan.”

She moved closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

And in that moment, in the middle of the desert, beneath the howl of distant sirens, time looped back on itself. Amirkhan smelled her hair—that same scent of river water and jasmine that had driven him crazy twenty years ago. She was once again that sophomore girl he used to skip lectures with to drink tea under the arches of the Allahverdi Khan Bridge, listening to the Zayandeh River whisper its eternal stories. The wall they had been building for two years collapsed.

But the idyll didn’t last long. Tenderness in Zahra was always just a prelude to action. Like potential energy before a kinetic explosion.

She straightened up. Her eyes became the eyes of a physicist solving a problem again.

“How did Rezai know about the bombings?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He said he had his sources.”

“His sources...” she frowned. “He claims the Americans will strike after Israel? With bunker busters?”

“Yes. He spoke of GBU-57s. They penetrate sixty meters of concrete.”

“So maybe he works for them?” she asked directly. “Maybe he is that very source leaking coordinates?”

“I don’t know, Zahra. In this world, no one knows anything for sure. We are all blind in a cave.”

“Do you understand how dangerous this is?” her voice hardened. “If they hit Fordow when it’s at full capacity... It’s not just an explosion. It’s dispersion. The cloud will go south. To Qom. To Isfahan. It will be a new Chernobyl. Or Fukushima, only in the desert.”

She pulled an old laptop from her bag. The same one she had once used to search for the tank player. Opened the lid. The screen lit up with a cold blue glow.

“I need to talk to Alavi,” Amirkhan said. “He needs to know.”

“No,” Zahra cut him off. “I will talk to him. He knew my father. He knew my uncle. He will understand. I will talk to him myself.”

She began to type. Quickly, furiously. She was running calculations. Wind rose. Half-lives. Critical mass. Impact zones.

Amirkhan drove, occasionally glancing at his wife. In the glare of the scorching sun, her face looked like the mask of an ancient heroine deciding to challenge the gods. He thought about what would happen next. About what would happen to their children, left behind in a clay house with the mother of a murdered man.

He thought about how they—the Mousavi family—had become hostages of an equation with too many variables and not a single correct solution.

But now, at least, they were in this equation together. And that gave a ghostly, irrational hope.

Countercurrents

24 Khordad 1404 (June 14, 2025)

The morning passed in dial tones. They were even, impersonal, like the electrocardiogram of a stranger’s heart on an ICU monitor. “The subscriber is temporarily unavailable.” “Please leave a message after the tone.” Zahra left none. How do you fit the entire absurdity of their situation into thirty seconds of voicemail? “Hello, System. It’s me, your prodigal daughter who betrayed you but now wants to save you, because otherwise we all die. Call me back.”

Alavi was busy. This meant the country stood on the edge, and he was trying to hold it back by the hem of its jacket. And she, the daughter of a theologian and a plasma physicist, was trying to cut in line to see the man who, in her personal myth, embodied all the evil that had destroyed her family. And still, she called. Because the

distance between her father's death thirty years ago and the possible death of her children tomorrow was measured not in years, but in kilometers to the Fordow facility.

He called back in the evening. His number was restricted.

"Café 'Simurgh' on the outskirts," he said without a greeting. "In an hour. And no security."

"I have no security," she replied.

"You have a husband," he noted dryly and hung up.

The café looked like a temporary hangar forgotten by builders at the edge of civilization. Plastic tables, two perpetually tired palms in tubs, a kettle boiling regardless of the news on TV. People came here who didn't care who was a friend today and who was an enemy. They just needed tea and cigarettes.

Alavi sat in the corner. He had aged. Or maybe war simply applies its own filter to faces—a sepia of hopelessness. Before him stood a cup of coffee—dark as his thoughts.

"I won't ask why you didn't pick up," Zahra said, sitting opposite him. "I know the answer."

"I am flattered you think I still decide anything," he replied without looking up from his cup. "In our time, even generals are just operators in history's call center. We take the calls, but we don't write the scripts."

"Then look at this, operator."

She laid several sheets of paper on the table. They weren't equations. They were maps. Contours of a mountain, wind arrows, population density figures. Red circles radiating from Point F.

"If American GBU-57s enter the game, your 'special operation' turns into a new Chernobyl. Only without the evacuation and without volunteers with shovels. The cloud will go here. To Qom. To Isfahan. Plutonium, strontium, cesium. A young chemist's full set."

Alavi looked at the maps. His face remained impenetrable, like the concrete wall of a bunker.

"Why did you decide the Americans would join the Israelis?" he asked finally. There was no skepticism in his voice, only the professional interest of a pathologist.

"Because you taught me this yourself," she answered. "Remember how you spoke about the 'two levels of the game'? One is televised, with State Department statements about de-escalation. The other is metapolitical. If Israel used a cascade scheme, someone has to put the final period. They have enough targets of their own. But the Americans have these bombs sitting in warehouses, waiting for their hour."

She placed her palm on the papers, as if shielding them from his gaze.

“Before I say the main thing... I need guarantees.”

“You are in the position of a supplicant, Dr. Mousavi,” Alavi noted softly, taking out a cigarette. “Guarantees are the currency of peacetime. Now inflation has eaten everything.”

“And you are in the position of a man who can still avoid going down in history as the architect of the Iranian apocalypse,” she parried. “I need guarantees of my family’s safety. And permission for my daughters to leave the country. Study, scholarships, medical treatment—I don’t care how you frame it. The main thing is that they are not here when the rain starts.”

“Only the daughters?” he asked again, flicking his lighter.

“Yes.” She hesitated for a second, and in that hesitation was all her pain. “The girls... They are not obligated to pay for our equations. They are not variables in this problem.”

“Nasrin, I believe, has already enrolled in medical school?”

“Yes. She followed in her grandmother’s footsteps. But if she decides... if she wants to leave... let her have an open door.”

Alavi exhaled a stream of smoke at the ceiling.

“Fine,” he said at last. “I am neither Allah nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but I still have old debts. If your information is worth this price—I will make the borders transparent for them. I don’t promise paradise. But I promise an exit.”

Zahra exhaled.

“Dr. Rezai. He came to us at night. Said the operation had begun. That the Americans would strike after Israel. He called things by their names. GBU-57. Concrete. Depth. And a date.”

“A date?” Alavi raised an eyebrow slightly, and ash from his cigarette fell onto the table.

“The night of June 22nd. He insisted on evacuating everything that can be ‘brought up’ before that night. Amirkhan told me his words. I...” she swallowed, “I recalculated everything myself. And the numbers add up.”

He was silent for a long time. Drinking coffee in small sips, as if measuring the time until her patience ran out. Someone laughed loudly in the café, and that laughter seemed like blasphemy.

“Do you think he is a traitor?” Zahra asked. “Dr. Rezai.”

"We don't think, Dr. Mousavi. We record. We know we had leaks. Serious ones. After Dr. Yezdi's death, they stopped. For a while. We thought the channel was closed. But then they resumed. That is a fact."

"Did you think... it was me?" there was no fear in her voice, only the infinite fatigue of a person tired of justifying themselves.

"No," Alavi said calmly. "If I thought it was you, we wouldn't be talking here, and you wouldn't be drinking this tea. You would be in another place where tea isn't served. You know that well enough."

"Then who?"

"Even if I knew," he spread his hands, and in that gesture was something of the biblical procurator washing his hands, "I wouldn't tell you. Don't be offended. There are levels of secrecy where even traitors must have a private life."

"What do you suggest?" she asked. "Besides me leaving and pretending I know nothing."

Alavi looked at her papers, at her hands stained with ink. Hands that could have built a bomb but instead baked bread and stroked children's heads.

"I think you need to go to Fordow," he said. "And do what Rezai suggested. Take out everything most dangerous and most valuable. Everything that cannot be turned into dust. Save our program. Save the country from contamination."

"With Dr. Rezai?" her voice turned icy.

"No." He shook his head. "Not with him. If you are right, then he has been watched for a long time. And not just by us. His sudden departure to the site, his fuss—it might spook his 'source.' Or his handlers. We don't need that. He must remain in plain sight. And you... you will be a shadow."

"And what will happen to him later?" she asked.

"For now—surveillance," Alavi answered. "If his information is confirmed... well, he deserves leniency. Even traitors sometimes do a good deed. Especially if they betray their new masters for the sake of the old ones."

She looked at him. At the man who had been the shadow behind the mirror in the interrogation room. At the man whose people might have killed her father out of paranoia. She hadn't come to him for forgiveness or truth. She came for visas for her daughters. But between revenge and salvation, there is always a third thing—a physical equation. If they strike Fordow, the wind rose won't distinguish between the righteous and the sinner. Radioactive ash will cover everyone in an even layer.

"Fine," she said, standing up. "I'll go. But you fulfill your part of the deal."

"Believe me, Dr. Mousavi," Alavi replied, watching her go. "It is better to deal with living traitors than dead heroes. And I am not talking about you right now."

Leaving, Zahra thought that if someone tried to draw the family tree of their little conspiracy, it would get tangled at the third level: a traitor informing on a traitor to save a system both tried to deceive. And the general remained sitting at the plastic table, a lonely old man trying to outplay fate while holding only marked cards.

In the Shade of the Grapevine

30 Khordad 1404 (June 20, 2025)

Morning in Abyaneh began not with the sun, but with the smell of heat, which by ten o'clock stood in the air like a dense, tangible wall. I woke up late, surfacing from a sticky dream where I was taking an anatomy exam, but instead of bones, parts of a Kalashnikov rifle lay on the table.

I walked out into the courtyard, holding a cup of coffee—instant, vile, but there was no other here. I was wearing an old tank top and short shorts—a home uniform that no one was supposed to see.

And then I froze.

Under the canopy, in the shade of the grapevine, sat two people. Zeynab and... Zahir. That same soldier from the checkpoint. Understandably, he had leave, but in the desert, there is nowhere to go except to the only house that smells of bread. They were eating dates, neatly stacking the pits in a saucer, and laughing quietly about something.

Zahir looked up. His gaze slid over my bare legs, and he hastily looked away, blushing so hard it was visible even through his tan.

“Oops,” I said. And fled.

I returned to the room, my heart pounding somewhere in my throat. Stupid. Tacky. Like in a cheap romantic comedy. I pulled on wide, light trousers, threw a colorful scarf over my shoulders—carelessly, but enough to hide everything unnecessary. Looked in the mirror. A strand of hair had escaped from under the scarf. I wanted to tuck it back but changed my mind. Let it be. Imperfection is also a style.

When I came out again, Zeynab had already vanished. Aunt Nilu, a wise woman, had taken her to the kitchen to “help with lunch,” whispering something about young people needing to talk.

Zahir stood up at my appearance.

“Good morning, Nasrin-khanum.”

“Hi, Zahir,” I said, sitting opposite him.

He looked surprised.

“How do you know my name?”

“It’s written on your chest,” I nodded at the patch on his uniform. “Or is that classified information?”

He smiled—openly, slightly embarrassed.

“No. Just... didn’t think you noticed.”

We talked about the weather. About the heat. About how strangely quiet it is in the village when the whole world is going crazy. I looked at him and thought: here he is, a soldier. Not a mercenary, not a killer. Just a guy in uniform defending his country because he has to. Because this is his home, his dates, his dust.

“Where do you study?” he asked.

“Medical school. IUMS.”

“A future doctor. Serious. What do you want to specialize in?”

“Pediatrics,” I answered, and was surprised myself at how easily it sounded. “When Zeynab was little, I always looked after her. I liked it.”

“Was she sick often?”

“No!” I laughed. “Almost never. That’s probably why I want to be a pediatrician. Treating healthy children is easier. And you? What will you do when all this... is over?”

“I want to apply to the Shahid Sattari Academy,” he said seriously. “Faculty of Information Systems. My whole family is military. Father, uncle. Even my mother serves. In headquarters, of course.”

“An IT guy in epaulets,” I chuckled. “Sounds promising.”

“Someone has to defend our sky,” he answered simply.

I tucked the loose strand of hair back. Again. It was becoming a nervous tic.

“How was it in Isfahan?” he asked quietly. “When it started.”

“Scary,” I said honestly. “But we left almost immediately. I hope my parents are okay.”

“They’ll be fine. Your father... he looks like a man who knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh yes,” I thought. “He knows. He knows how to kill people and how to sell out the Motherland to save us. But it’s better for you not to know that.”

“Listen,” I asked, “why did they drive you into such a backwater? There’s only sand and scorpions here.”

“Did you see the dirt road past the checkpoint?” he lowered his voice. “It leads to a field airfield. A backup one. We’re guarding it. Just in case.”

The idyll was shattered by the sound of an engine. A black SUV pulled up to the gate. An elderly man in a civilian suit got out, but he carried himself as if he were

wearing a general's uniform. The driver pulled a flat white box from the trunk—a Starlink terminal—and a cardboard box filled with papers.

It was Alavi. My parents' friend. The one they spoke about in whispers.

Zahir immediately tensed up, straightened. He didn't know who this was, but his military instinct worked flawlessly.

"I'll go," he said. "I won't intrude."

"Wait, son," Alavi waved his hand. "Do you know what this is?" he nodded at the Starlink.

"Yes, sir. Satellite terminal."

"Help connect and set it up. Does Mrs. Yezdi have a diesel generator?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Handle that. And I'll talk to Nasrin for a bit."

We sat under the canopy. Aunt Nilu brought out tea, offered him to stay for lunch, but Alavi politely declined.

"Duty," he said in the same tone as my father.

"How are my parents?" I asked immediately.

"Safe," he answered.

"Uh-huh," I thought. "Safe. Underground, in the crosshairs of American bombs. Great place."

"I brought this terminal at your mother's request," he continued. "So there's at least some connection. And in the box... that's my personal archive. Copies. If I don't return in a couple of days... give this to your parents."

He looked at me with his intelligent, weary wolfhound eyes.

"I know you have many questions, Nasrin. About me. About your family."

"I want to know about Grandfather," I said. "About Ali Ferzali. Mom always said it was an accident. But I've seen how she looks at his photo."

Alavi sighed. He took out a cigarette, rolled it in his fingers, but didn't light it.

"Ali and Javad, your mother's uncle... they were working on an interesting political theory. About how the West tries to break us from within. And we... let's say, we were closely monitoring their work. Your grandfather knew about it. He felt our gaze on his back."

He paused.

"That day, everything went wrong. The accident happened almost before the eyes of our officer. Moreover, our man was the first to run to the car. He pulled your

grandfather out before the gas tank exploded. But... the injuries were incompatible with life."

"So it was an accident?"

"Yes and no. There is guilt on our part in his death. According to the officer, he noticed a truck moving strangely in the oncoming lane. The driver had fallen asleep. Our man started honking, flashing his lights to warn Ali. But... your grandfather interpreted it differently. Because of the surveillance, because of the constant tension... instead of looking ahead at the road, he looked back. In the rearview mirror. At the 'tail' car. And he accelerated. Instead of braking."

Alavi looked me in the eye.

"The paranoia we cultivated in him ourselves killed him. We wanted to protect him, but instead, we drove him into the grave."

"And Mom's uncle? Javad?" I asked. "He died strangely too, didn't he?"

"Cancer," Alavi replied. "Banal oncology. But he didn't believe it until the end. He believed he was poisoned. Reformists, Masons, Western intelligence agencies... his list was constantly growing. We tried to convince him, showed him the tests. Useless. He was a brilliant analyst but became a hostage of his own conspiracy theory. He died believing he was a martyr of a secret war. Perhaps it was easier for him to go that way."

He stood up.

"I have to go, Nasrin. Take care of yourself. And your sister."

Zahir finished with the antenna. The diode on the terminal blinked and lit up with a steady white light. There is a connection. For now.

"I have to get back to the post too," Zahir said. "The guys there must miss me already."

Aunt Nilu came out onto the porch with a bag.

"Going on an empty stomach?" she lamented. "Take some flatbreads at least. Fresh, hot. Zeynab and I will bake more."

Zahir took the bag, smiled at her, then at me.

"Thank you, Aunt Nilu. Goodbye, Nasrin."

"Bye, Zahir."

He left, and I remained standing, clutching the box of documents that explained why my family was so crazy. And staring at the white dish of the antenna, which looked up at the sky, waiting for a signal from satellites that were guiding missiles at us.

Transmutation

31 Khordad 1404 — 1 Tir 1404 (June 21, 2025 — June 22, 2025)

The underground of Fordow vibrated. It wasn't the trembling of the earth but a low-frequency hum of tension, the resonance of a thousand human fears locked in a concrete box beneath a layer of granite. Zahra stood on the gallery, looking down into the main hall where a mechanical ballet was unfolding.

Forklifts, yellow and clumsy like scarab beetles, scurried between rows of dismantled centrifuges. Men in hazmat suits moved with the unnatural, jerky speed of fast-forwarded film. They were loading containers—lead sarcophagi in which enriched uranium slumbered, the very genie they had released from the bottle and were now trying to stuff back in.

The air was dense, electrified. It smelled of ozone, sweat, and overheated metal. It was the smell of panic disciplined by protocol.

Zahra felt like the priestess of a cult hiding its idols on the last night before the end of the world. She checked markings, verified seal numbers, signed acts. Each signature was a small deal with her conscience. Save the uranium to save people from the uranium. A logical Möbius strip.

General Alavi emerged from the shadows like the phantom of the opera. He was without his tunic, in a shirt with rolled-up sleeves, looking not like a general but like a weary accountant balancing debits and credits before the firm went bankrupt.

“It is time for you to go, Dr. Mousavi,” he said, not raising his voice but cutting through the hum of the forklifts. “Rezai’s information has been confirmed. Russian satellites are detecting activity. The ‘birds’ are already in the air.”

“And you?” she asked, zipping up her laptop bag.

“I will stay for now. Need to purge the archives. Paper burns better than metal, but it’s harder to collect.”

Zahra looked at him. At his gray temples, at the deep wrinkles around his eyes. The man who had been the shadow behind the mirror of her life. The architect of her fears. If he perishes here, under a pile of concrete and secrets, will she regret it? Or will she feel relief, like a prisoner whose jailer died of a heart attack?

She didn’t know. Emotions, like isotopes, had decayed... Only trajectory calculations remained. Only physics.

“The children?” she asked.

“I was with them yesterday. It’s quiet in Abyaneh. Nasrin was chatting with some soldier, and Zeynab was baking bread with Mrs. Yezdi.”

Zahra immediately remembered the soldier from the checkpoint. It must have been him.

“Amirkhan?”

“On duty. Their office was bombed the night before last, but he was out. Alive. Coordinating the corridor for your convoy.”

“Good.”

Alavi handed her a folder.

“The destination coordinates are with the convoy commander. Base ‘Eagle’ in the Zagros Mountains. I need you to oversee the safety of the cargo on the road. And during unloading. You are the only one who understands what is inside these crates. To the soldiers, they are just heavy boxes. To you—critical mass.”

“I understand.”

She took the folder. Their fingers touched for a second. His hand was cold.

“Goodbye, Asadollah,” she said, calling him by his first name for the first time.

“Until we meet again, Zahra,” he replied. “In this life or the next.”

She exited through the airlock. The fresh air hit her face like a slap. The night was black and starless, as if the sky had draped itself in mourning crepe.

The convoy stood at the tunnel exit. Trucks covered with tarps, armored personnel carriers for escort. And at the very end, a gray-yellow UAZ Hunter she was to ride in.

She climbed into the front seat. The driver, a young lieutenant with a tense face, nodded to her.

“Ready, Doctor?”

“Let’s go.”

The car moved. Zahra watched in the side mirror as the tunnel mouth receded, looking like the maw of a monster. She thought about how she had spent a whole week underground. Seven days of creation in reverse. Seven days during which she tried to bury—or excavate?—the last twenty years of her life. Her career, her ambitions, her mistakes. All of it was now riding in the back of a truck, packed in lead.

They had driven a few hundred meters when the world cracked open.

First came the sound—not an explosion, but a whistle, a piercing, inhuman shriek of torn air, as if the sky were screaming in pain.

And then—the impact.

The ground jumped. The UAZ was tossed up like a toy on a trampoline. Zahra hit her head on the roof, teeth clacking together. The car skidded to a halt on the gravel.

She threw open the door and tumbled out.

Where the tunnel entrance had just been, a column was rising. It wasn't a mushroom. It was a geyser. A pillar of dust, sand, and concrete shooting into the sky. GBU-57. The "Bunker Buster." It entered the mountain like a syringe needle into a vein and injected death into the very heart of the complex.

The sound of the explosion arrived a second later—a dull, guttural thud that clogged the ears.

Zahra stood and watched. She saw the mountain settle, the rocks crumble into sand. Down there was Alavi. Down there were the archives. Down there was her lab. Her life. It was all over.

"Everyone intact?!" the convoy commander's shout broke through the ringing in her ears.

"Yes! Cargo is normal!"

"Then move! Faster! The next one could land here!"

The lieutenant tugged at her sleeve.

"Doctor! In the car!"

She climbed back in. Her hands were shaking.

"Let's go," Zahra whispered.

The convoy surged forward, carrying Iran's radioactive heart away from its grave.

Anomaly of Rain

1 Tir 1404 (June 22, 2025)

The road to the checkpoint went uphill, along a slope strewn with red pebbles. During the day, when the sun beat down on the stones, they looked like embers someone had forgotten to extinguish. Now, after noon, the heat had subsided slightly, but the air still trembled—not from warmth, but from the vibration of time itself, which had become fragile and unreliable after the night's strike of light.

Abyaneh breathed lazily. The narrow streets smelled of dust, goat manure, and melted butter, on which Aunt Nilu was frying flatbreads. The shadows of houses lay on the ground in broken script, like lines from surahs no one could read anymore. Somewhere a dog barked—listlessly, more out of habit than necessity.

Nasrin walked, counting her steps. To the first stones where the dirt road began. To the old plane tree, from beneath which the view of the checkpoint opened up. To the very line where the red clay suddenly broke off, giving way to gray, worn asphalt.

She felt bored and scared at the same time. Bored—because the day in the village stretched like rubber, without internet, without news, without the usual

background noise of other people's lives. Scared—because out there, beyond the horizon, something was happening on which their own lives depended, and she knew nothing about it.

The Starlink, carefully mounted on the roof, stood like a dead white dish. At night, the diode had blinked, then gone out—and hadn't lit up again.

"They pulled the plug," Nasrin thought. "Someone upstairs decided Iran had enough of its own sky without Musk's satellites."

She wanted to see someone who still remembered the world beyond this crumb of clay on the map. Someone holding a real machine gun, not a TV remote. His name was Zahir.

The checkpoint emerged from the haze suddenly. A couple of concrete blocks, sandbags, a rusty booth the soldiers called the "comms office." On a pole—an antenna that looked like a crooked cross.

There were five of them today. Two were playing backgammon, clicking the pieces with the rhythm of a metronome. One was cleaning his rifle, another smoking, looking toward the airfield. The fifth, Zahir, stood with his back to the village, peering at the horizon.

His camouflage was covered in dust, as if he had grown through this earth. His badge still read "Zahir Mashhadi," as if the world hadn't changed in a single day.

She walked up almost close enough to touch him before he turned around. The smile didn't appear on his face immediately—first came mild surprise, then joy hidden behind regulations.

"Nasrin-khanum," he straightened up. "Good day."

"Good," she replied. "Or whatever kind of day it is today."

She looked around.

"Do you have a connection?" she asked, nodding at the booth.

"No," one of the soldiers at the table responded without looking up from the backgammon. "The radio only picks up our own curses. They broadcast well. The last thing we heard was: 'Do not leave your post.'"

Zahir chuckled.

"We tried to contact headquarters last night, when... when that happened," he looked north, to where the sky had flashed green and violet yesterday. "Thought it was interference. That something was wrong with our equipment. Twisting knobs..."

"You didn't even see it?" Nasrin was surprised. "The aurora?"

"I only saw our voltmeter needle go haywire."

The soldier with the cigarette snorted:

“I was asleep. But if it’s the end of the world—let it take me in my sleep. Don’t want to watch the credits.”

“And you?” Zahir asked, looking at her. “Did you see something?”

Nasrin nodded.

“I was sitting on the roof. It was...”—she searched for the word—“Unnatural. As if someone took a normal sky and ran it through an Instagram filter. Green, violet... And dirty, too. Like it was painted with dirty hands.”

“Beauty with a taste of rust,” the soldier with the backgammon noted. “We’re good at that.”

A pause hung in the air. The sun seemed to have moved a couple of kilometers closer.

“Any news?” Nasrin asked. “From anywhere. From HQ, from the city...”

“Radio silence,” Zahir said. “The sergeant major says: either they have everything under control, or the exact opposite. In both cases, we’ll be told last.”

“The sergeant major is a wise man,” she sighed. “My parents are there...”

He nodded.

“My brother is in Ahvaz. In air defense. They say it’s boring there. Now I’m glad if he’s bored.”

The soldiers lowered their eyes for a moment. People with loved ones “in air defense” know what it’s like to wait for a call you’d rather not receive.

“I had a friend,” Nasrin said, surprised herself at the past tense. “Adil. A classmate. We were preparing for entrance exams together. Me for med school, him for law. The word ‘lawyer’ suited him very well. He pronounced it so seriously...” she smiled sadly. “Once they took him straight from school. For interrogation. Said he was a US agent. And he... he barely knew English.”

She looked at Zahir.

“He came back. Two days later. Aged ten years. And started talking less. But smiling more. Probably to hide that everything inside had half burned out.”

“Were you...” Zahir stumbled, “were you... close with him?”

This “close” sounded so cautious, as if he were walking barefoot through a minefield.

Nasrin shook her head.

“We were friends. Just friends. I loved him like...” she grimaced, picking the words, “like you love an old diary. With tenderness and shame for past foolishness. But you wouldn’t want others to read it.”

He nodded. In his gaze, there was neither jealousy nor relief. Only the understanding that everyone here has their own old diary.

Somewhere in the distance, a rumble rolled—either a stone tumbling down the mountain, or thunder.

The first drop fell on her hand. A dark, wet spot on tanned skin. She looked at the sky. It was still cloudless, scorched, but rain had begun to fall from an invisible crack in it.

“Rain?” someone wondered. “In the Kavir?”

The drops began to fall more frequently. They were warm, slightly sticky, like poorly rinsed soap.

“Does anyone have an umbrella?” Nasrin asked automatically, and immediately laughed.

The soldiers exchanged glances.

“In the desert, an umbrella is like an air conditioner in a cave,” one said. “Good idea, but impractical.”

Zahir looked at the sergeant major, who leaned out of the booth.

“Comrade Sergeant Major, can I drive Nasrin-khanum to the village? In ‘Uri’. Otherwise she’ll get soaked to the bone.”

“It’s just rain, not acid,” the sergeant major grumbled, looking at the sky suspiciously. “Although... who knows now. Go. But be quick. And watch around you on the way. We’re stuck here for God knows how long.”

The KIAN 160, nicknamed “Uri,” stood to the side, rough and dusty like an old lizard. The cab was scorching. Zahir yanked the door open, helped her climb in.

Inside, it smelled of diesel and something else—a mix of sweat, old leather, and cheap cologne used to drown out the smell of war.

Zahir started the engine. It growled like a beast with a cold.

“Buckle up,” he said, then remembered the belt hung here in shreds, and chuckled. “Never mind. Just hold on.”

The rain drummed on the roof in a heavy staccato. The wipers finally found something to do, scraping across the glass with the diligence of a failing student erasing a mistake.

The truck crawled down. The road became different in the rain. Dust turned into paste, pebbles slipped under the wheels.

“Strange,” Zahir said, peering through the murky glass. “Last year mules were dying of thirst, and now...” he nodded at the streams of water. “As if someone upstairs decided to compensate.”

“As if someone upstairs is trying to wash something off us,” Nasrin said. “The question is what: sins or skin.”

He cast a quick glance at her.

“Do you always... talk like that? As if you’re taking a philosophy exam.”

“Medical,” she corrected. “But philosophy is a side effect of life here.”

They both smiled.

For a moment, the rain, the lack of connection, the switched-off sky—everything receded. Only two figures remained in the cab of a battered canvas-covered truck, floating through water and time. The vehicle moved toward the village, where it still smelled of smoke, bread, and dates.

Nasrin looked ahead and thought: “That’s the whole story of my youth. A checkpoint, rain, and a truck. But maybe that’s exactly what our life looks like.”

The rain intensified. The drops became heavier, thicker. They beat against the roof as if someone were knocking from the heavens: “Open up, we’ve arrived.”

“Almost there,” Zahir answered them.

And for a second, it seemed to Nasrin that if this road could be stretched for another hour, two, a lifetime—they would drive and drive under this strange, warm, possibly poisonous rain, and the world outside would have time to change its mind about dying.

And a line from an old song she used to listen to with Adil, sharing one pair of headphones for two, floated in her head: *“In a world packed with empty words, she parts with her dreams. Forget, forgive, and let go, our paths no longer cross. The sand has run out in your hourglass...”*

The sand had run out. The water had begun.

Zeynab

23 Khordad 1404 (June 13, 2025) — 14 Tir 1404 (July 5, 2025)

...and the music was ending, ending, flowing slowly like thick pomegranate syrup from an overturned spoon, because the battery was dying, the little lithium soul of Dad’s old player was flying off to the heaven for electronic devices, and the boys with hair the color of cotton candy sang quieter and quieter, lower and lower, turning from ringing birds into tired, sleepy bumblebees. Jungkook, Jimin, Taehyung—they were leaving into the silence, into the great Nothing, the same place where Mom and Dad, and the network signal, and that world where you could buy ice cream at a kiosk, had gone.

And I lay there thinking: how strangely the world is arranged, you are woken up at night, shaken by the shoulder, and that shoulder is yours, but half-asleep it feels alien, wooden. “Zeynab! Zeynab, get up!” I decided it was a dream, another one. In it, we are going to the sea, which I have never seen, and Mom says: “Protect your hair from the salt,” and Dad laughs. But I still tried to hide under the pillow: if I don’t see, maybe I won’t be seen either. Nasrin was shaking me, Nasrin, my sister, sharp as a shard of a mirror, she was saying: get up, get up, we are leaving, we are playing hide-and-seek. But we weren’t playing. We were dolls being packed into a box, into the iron box of a car smelling of gasoline and Dad’s cologne, anxious cologne, the smell of flight.

And we drove, drove through the night, which was black as a blind man’s pupil, and the headlights snatched chunks of the desert from the darkness—thornbush, stone, thornbush, stone—and that was the rhythm, the rhythm of fear. The city was left behind like a book slammed shut in the middle. Ahead was the road and the black steppe with little glowing houses—breakfasts for bombs. The sky hung low, like Grandma’s wardrobe, behind which it was scary to hide as a child. Dad was silent, Mom was silent, they were statues molded from salt and ash, they looked ahead, to where the horizon was burning, not from the sun, but from something else, evil and bright. And I sucked on a mint candy, and it was bitter because fear changes the taste of things, changes the taste of saliva, changes the taste of time.

We arrived at a house that was sleeping. Aunt Nilu’s house. Aunt Nilu is a bird, a dry, light bird in a scarf, she lives in a nest of red clay, and she has photographs of a son who is smiling, and a husband who is not smiling, and they are both shadows. We entered this house, and Mom and Dad left us there like unwanted items in a luggage storage, and drove back into the fire. They didn’t even turn around, or they did, but I didn’t see it because I was watching the dust dancing in a beam of light, watching the dust that was more important than their departure because dust is eternal, and parents are not.

And then he came. Zahir. The soldier with eyes the color of cold tea. Aunt Nilu brought dates, sweet, sticky dates, and I ate them, and my fingers became sweet, and I thought: here he is, the prince of the desert, he has come to save us, or maybe he’s just bored standing at his post staring into the void. He was beautiful, with such a sad, dusty beauty, like an old mosque they forgot to restore.

I looked at him, and inside me, a flower blossomed, a paper flower, rustling and tender. I wanted to tell him: “Zahir, look, I am here, I know all the love songs by heart, I know how to bake bread, I know how to be silent.” But he wasn’t looking at me. No, he was looking at Nasrin. At my sister, at prickly Nasrin, who walked around in wide trousers and stung, stung as if words were needles and she wanted to sew up the hole in the sky with them.

He looked at her the way one looks at water in a drought. With thirst. With pain. He saw a strand of her hair escape, black, shiny, rebellious, and he blushed, poor Zahir, he blushed through his tan, and looked away, but then looked again. And she... she pretended she didn't care, that she was above this, that she was a doctor, a cynic, a reporter of the end of the world, but I saw. I saw how she adjusted her scarf, how she laughed—a little louder than necessary, a little higher than usual. She liked that he was looking. She liked being water.

And I was sand. Just sand next to water. And it was sad, so sad and beautiful, like Japanese poems where maple leaves fall, and no one is to blame, just autumn, just the wind, just a heart beating not for you. Mono no aware, Grandma used to say. The sad fascination of being the third wheel in an equation that hasn't even begun to be solved.

Then the days of silence began. The silence was cottony, dense, it clogged the ears. Phones died. The internet was gone. My Korean boys were left alone in their distant country, and I didn't know if they were alive, if they were singing, or if the shadow had covered them too. We were like fish forgotten on the shore after the tide. For a while, they still open their mouths, not understanding why the air doesn't work like water.

Nasrin was angry. She paced the room like a tiger in a cage, she shuffled through General Alavi's papers: rustle-rustle, rustle-rustle, a solitaire of other people's lives.

"Vulnerability," she said viciously. "We are all vulnerabilities. We are bugs. We are errors."

She was angry because she was scared. But I wasn't scared. I was empty. Emptiness is when you wait for a call, and the phone is just a piece of plastic and glass, a black brick, a tombstone for connection.

Sometimes it rained. Strange, warm, oily rain. It drummed on the roof: drip-drop, drip-drop, and that was a rhythm one could dance to if we knew how. Aunt Nilu put out basins, the water collected murky, gray like the sky. Nasrin kept repeating: "It's poison, it's radiation, we're all going to die." The rain turned dust into mud, smell into rust, thoughts into silence. There was something soothing and something terrifying in it, simultaneously. Like in the hands of a doctor during surgery. And I thought: so what. Let us die. At least it's rain. At least it's water. At least something is happening.

And here I sit, and there is silence in the headphones, the last note died an hour ago, the battery is dead, the butterfly has folded its wings. I hear Nasrin in the next room rustling papers and talking to herself, angry, lonely Nasrin. I hear the rain stop crying.

I close my eyes and see: there is Zahir smiling at Nasrin, there is Nasrin smiling at Zahir, there is Dad cutting a watermelon, there is Mom looking into a microscope,

there is Rustam, whom I didn't know, stepping down from the photograph and sitting beside me. We are all here. We are all in this cage, in this house, in this desert. And it is so sad, and so unbearable, and so beautiful that I want to cry, but there are no tears, only dry sand in my throat and the memory of music that will be no more.

The wind outside has died down. The world has frozen. As if someone pressed pause before flipping the cassette to the other side. Side A is over. Now Side B will begin. Or it won't.

I hold the Quran on my knees, my finger on the word "mercy." Beside me lies the phone...

Solitaire for One Player

14 Tir 1404 (July 5, 2025)

"Do not expect too much from the end of the world," Stanisław Jerzy Lec once wrote. Apparently, he had connection problems too.

The room in Aunt Nilu's house resembled a crypt from which the corpse had been thrown out and the lid forgotten open. The red clay walls had soaked up the day's heat and were now giving it back slowly, suffocatingly. The old fan in the corner was silent—electricity here played hide-and-seek with death and lost more often than not.

Nasrin sat on the rug, legs crossed. Before her, like the ruins of a destroyed city, lay General Alavi's archive.

Folder: "MOUSAVI, AMIRKHAN. File No..." Classified «Secret.» A photo of Father in profile, taken with a hidden camera. He looked tired and angry, like a man who knows he is being followed but is too proud to turn around.

Folder: "MOUSAVI, ZAHRA. File No..." Mom. Young, in Paris, with her hair down. And another—in Isfahan, in a hijab, with eyes full of ice.

Folder: "FERZALI, ALI." Grandfather. A red stamp "Liquidated" (crossed out) "Died in RTA."

Folder: "GAFARI, JAVAD."

Folder: "YEZDI, RUSTAM."

She laid out this solitaire, and the cards fell into a terrible, flawless pattern. The entire history of her family was not a history of love, not a history of faith, but a history of surveillance. Their lives were filed, numbered, and held together by paperclips now rusting from the humidity.

Only one card was missing.

Hers.

Nasrin ran her palm over the rough pile of the rug. Not a single sheet with the name “MOUSAVI, NASRIN.” No “Potential Threat.” No “Surveillance Target.”

She suddenly realized what this meant.

She was Terra Incognita. A statistical error. To the System that had devoured her parents, her grandfathers, and her friends, she simply did not exist. She was too insignificant to waste paper and ink on.

“Congratulations,” she thought, and the thought was cold as a scalpel. “In a country of total paranoia, you are nobody. You aren’t even a suspect. You are a void.”

Nearby on the floor stood an aluminum kettle covered in soot. Inside splashed the remnants of water—murky, collected during the first rain. Next to it—a glass of tea. It had gone cold long ago. Black dregs had settled at the bottom like silt on the bed of a dried-up lake.

She looked at the tea. A dead fly floated in it.

Suddenly, she wanted to laugh. This entire archive, all these secrets, Masons, Mossad agents, uranium enrichment formulas, conspiracy theories—all of it was now worth less than this fly.

All of it made sense only when the world was hot. When blood flowed in veins, not fear. Now the world had cooled. It had become like this tea—bitter, murky, and useless. Drink or don’t drink, you won’t quench your thirst.

In the next room, Zeynab was quietly howling. It wasn’t crying. She was humming the same melody, looped like a madman’s prayer. A song from her playlist, which she had listened to until the battery died. Now there was no music, only a voice—thin, trembling, breaking into falsetto.

“...the sand has run out in your hourglass...”

Zeynab sat on the rug, rocking back and forth. On her knees lay the Quran, open to Surah Ya-Sin. She traced the lines with her finger, but her eyes looked through the walls.

“...the sand has run out in your hourglass...”

“You still hope it will turn over?” Nasrin asked, approaching.

“Do we have any other sand?” Zeynab parried. Her eyes were red but dry. She lifted the Quran from her knees. “I’ve reread Ya-Sin three times already. Just in case. If all this...” she jerked her head somewhere upwards, toward the sky, “if this is all a joke, let Allah have a laugh too.”

“Allah has already unsubscribed from this channel,” Nasrin said. “It’s just us and the switched-off router.”

Aunt Nilu peeked out from the kitchen.

“Girls, want some tea?” she asked out of inertia.

“We will,” they answered in unison.

The tea was the same—weak, bitter, without sugar. But now it wasn’t a symbol or a metaphor. It was just tea.

In recent days, no one here prayed for real anymore. Even Aunt Nilu.

The old woman moved through the house soundlessly, like a shadow. She put the kettle on, cleared the plates, adjusted the pillows. Her movements had the automatism of a robot whose logic board had burned out but whose motor functions remained. She had no one left. Her husband died in the war forty years ago. Her son died in some alleyway. And now she had two stranger girls and a white antenna dish on the roof, looking at the sky where no one answered.

The information vacuum was denser than the clay walls. The internet died without an obituary. Even the soldiers’ radios were silent.

All of them had become hostages of this silence. She, Zeynab, Aunt Nilu. Zahir at the checkpoint, playing backgammon because there was nothing else to do. The sergeant major, repeating “Do not leave your post” in the hoarse voice of an old radio, like a mantra. Their parents—somewhere in the other half of the world, if they still existed.

Nasrin picked up her father’s file. Opened it at random.

“Subject prone to reflection. Vulnerable through family.”

She hurled the folder at the wall. Papers flew like a fan, settling on the floor like last year’s leaves.

“Vulnerable!” she shouted into the void. “You are all vulnerable! You are all dead! And we are here! We are here, and we are waiting for it to cover us!”

No one answered. Zeynab didn’t even break her rhythm.

“*...the sand has run out...*”

Outside the window, a noise began again. First quiet, like a whisper, then louder. Rain.

The same one. Warm. Oily. With the taste of metal and iodine.

It drummed on the roof, on the antenna dish, on the dry earth that drank this poison with the greed of the dying.

Nasrin walked to the window. The glass was murky, dirty. Through it, the world looked like an underwater kingdom.

Somewhere out there, behind the veil of rain, in the middle of the world, were her parents. If they still were.

She didn't know. And this not knowing was more terrifying than any truth.

She returned to the scattered papers. Picked up a blank sheet that had fallen out of some folder. An empty form. No name. No number.

She took a pen. Her hand trembled.

She wrote: "MOUSAVI, NASRIN."

And below: "STATUS: ALIVE. FOR NOW."

She placed the sheet on top of the stack. This was her file. Her archive. Her story, which was just beginning where the story of everyone else had ended.

Zeynab fell silent. In the stillness, the sound of the rain became deafening. It sounded like applause. And then it stopped.

The end of the world was proceeding strictly according to schedule, but no one had sent us an invitation. We just happened to be in the front row.

And at that moment, the door flew open. Zeynab burst into the room, kicking aside the entire solitaire Nasrin had so carefully laid out. Her eyes burned with a mad fire, and in her hand, she clutched a revived, glowing phone.

"Nasrin!" she screamed, and her voice broke into a squeal. "Mom is calling! They are coming tomorrow with Dad!"

Postscript

On June 13, 2025, Israel attacked Iran. During Operation "People Like a Lion" (Mivtza Am KeLavi), strikes were carried out on more than 1,000 targets in Iran, primarily military infrastructure and nuclear facilities.

On the night of June 22, 2025, the US Air Force and Navy conducted an attack codenamed "Midnight Hammer" against several nuclear sites in Iran. Among them were the Fordow uranium enrichment plant, the nuclear facility in Natanz, and the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center. The operation utilized fourteen GBU-57* bunker buster bombs delivered by Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, as well as 30 Tomahawk missiles launched from a submarine.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) detected no signs of elevated radiation levels following the US strikes on Iran's nuclear program facilities.

"Following the attacks on three nuclear facilities in Iran, including Fordow, the IAEA can confirm that at this time, no increase in radiation levels has been recorded outside the facilities," the statement read.

Similar statements were issued by the Nuclear and Radiological Regulatory Commission of Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran's Nuclear Safety Center.

“The 400 kg of uranium enriched to 60 percent, which disappeared after the US strikes on the three largest facilities of the Iranian nuclear program, are ‘exactly where they were before the attacks,’” Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in an interview with Al Jazeera.

Dr. Hassan Rezai resigned as head of the laboratory at the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center due to health reasons. He currently holds the position of advisor on strategic planning at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI). He lives in Tehran and leads a reclusive lifestyle.

Dr. Zahra Mousavi was appointed head of Laboratory No. 4 at the Isfahan Center. For her contribution to the development of national science, she was awarded the Order of “Nasr,” 2nd Class (by closed decree).

Amirkhan Mousavi was transferred from the municipality to the regional directorate of the IRGC Intelligence Organization (Sazman-e Ettelaat-e Sepah) to the position of deputy head of internal security. He oversees counterintelligence support for strategic facilities.

Nasrin Mousavi interrupted her studies at the Isfahan University of Medical Sciences and transferred to the Faculty of Military Field Surgery at the AJA University of Medical Sciences in Tehran.

Zahir Mashhadi, after demobilization, successfully passed his exams and was enrolled in the Shahid Sattari Aeronautical University (Faculty of Aerospace Engineering).

Zeynab Mousavi, upon graduating from school, received a grant to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. Specialization: Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Major General Asadollah Alavi. Listed as missing in action. His body was not found during the clearing of debris at the underground complex in Fordow. No official death announcement has been published.

*GBU-57 or Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) is an American precision-guided anti-bunker aviation bomb. Developed by the aircraft manufacturing concern Boeing. Capable of penetrating up to 61 meters of earth or 19 meters of reinforced concrete before exploding.

Operation “Stray Dog”

Chapter 1. Yoga vs. Apocalypse

14:41 EST, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Lincoln Laboratory

The snow in Cambridge fell so quietly it seemed you could hear the ice crystals grazing the black waters of the Charles River. It wasn’t the snow I remembered from childhood—not the prickly, vicious snow of the Zagros Mountains that sliced your face like the sand of the Dasht-e Kavir desert. This snow was soft, sterile, almost weightless, like a Democrat’s campaign promise. It swaddled the MIT campus in a white blanket of oblivion, erasing the corners of brutalist architecture, dampening the city’s sounds, turning the world into a Japanese woodblock print where there is no past, no future, only an eternal, frozen “now.”

I sat in an ergonomic Herman Miller chair that cost more than the annual budget of Abyaneh village, positioned by the lab window, while the air conditioner hummed overhead with the monotony of a Buddhist monk. I sat and watched life pulsing on the monitor screen—not my life, but a mechanical one. A tiny hummingbird drone, Project “Nano-Hummer,” perfect in its diminutiveness, beat its carbon-fiber wings at a frequency of forty hertz. Its body was the size of my thumb, yet the camera in its eye could read a license plate from two hundred meters up. The Department of Defense paid us to make this little bird fly quieter and longer.

I watched it and thought about how strangely memory is wired: it stores not events, but tactile sensations. The roughness of a clay wall. The stickiness of dates. The cold steel of Father’s pistol, which he’d accidentally left on the dinner table. And the feeling of dust in Aunt Nilou’s house. All that remained back there, on Side A, in a world that nearly burned down, yet whose radioactive ash I still carried in the pockets of my starched lab coat.

Here, on Side B, everything was different. Safe. Hypoallergenic. My life now resembled this snowfall—beautiful, ordered, and cold. I had learned to sort trash into four separate bins, drink matcha lattes instead of thyme tea, and smile that polite American smile that bares teeth but hides the soul. I had built myself a glass castle out of DARPA grants, burning deadlines, and weekly sessions with Dr. Goldberg, who taught me the art of letting go.

“Zee,” she would say in a soft voice akin to the rustling of a dollar bill, “family trauma isn’t a prison; it’s an experience. You are not a tree, you are a bird. You have no roots, you have wings. Fly.”

And I flew. Or pretended to. I listened to indie-folk where suffering felt cozy, read Sally Rooney novels where there was no war, and diligently forgot the language where the words for “life” (zendegi) and “prison” (zendan) sound almost the same. I became a master of mono no aware—the pathos of things, the gentle sadness of transient life passing by without touching the heart. I looked at the snow and felt like a snowflake—unique, solitary, and slowly melting on someone’s warm palm.

On the screen, the hummingbird drone hovered in mid-air, perfectly still. Forty beats per second—and a complete illusion of peace. Just like me.

And in that moment, the fragile silence of the laboratory, this symphony of melancholy and intellectual repose, was brutally violated by a sound.

Not an air raid siren. Not the roar of an explosion. Worse.

It was my ringtone. BTS’s “Dynamite.” A cheerful, idiotically life-affirming pop anthem from the night my world collapsed. I had set it specifically—as a reminder that even in hell, disco can play.

I flinched so hard I nearly knocked over my cup of lukewarm tea. The illusion shattered. The watercolor turned into a dirty puddle.

A photo flashed on the screen: “MOM (TOXIC)”.

Followed immediately by a second line, a Telegram notification: “DAD (IRGC)”.

And then, a machine-gun burst of WhatsApp messages from Nasrin:

“Zeynab, pick up the phone, damn it!”

“They accidentally dropped the world again.”

“Answer, bitch, we’re all going to die!”

I stared at the phone like it was an unexploded shell that had suddenly materialized amidst my blueprints. My heart, which had just been beating in the rhythm of the falling snow, broke into a panicked gallop.

“Oh God,” I whispered to my colleague, Kevin. Kevin had hair as pink as dreams of socialism and a T-shirt that read “Anxiety Is My Superpower.” He sat at the next desk modeling turbulence while eating a vegan croissant. “They’re doing it again. They’re violating my personal boundaries again.”

“Who?” Kevin asked, lazily stirring his oat milk latte with a digital stylus. “Republicans? Your landlord?”

“Worse. My parents. They only call in two cases: when I forget to wish Second Cousin Fatima a happy birthday, which is a mortal sin, or when an intercontinental ballistic missile is in the air. And judging by the fact that Aunt Fatima was born in March...”

“Listen,” Kevin yawned, not looking up from his monitor. “If the world blows up, our paper for *Nature* still won’t get accepted, right? Deadline’s Monday.”

“If the world blows up, a reviewer will survive anyway,” I answered automatically. “And he’ll write that the methodology wasn’t transparent enough.”

“Haven’t you tried more radical methods of domestic separation?” he asked, biting into the croissant. “Maybe you should get a tattoo? You know, something edgy. Might make them back off. Parents from the Middle East hate it when you desecrate the ‘temple of the body.’ My Catholic mom didn’t speak to me for a month after I got Pikachu inked on me. Best month of my life.”

I looked at him with pity. Kevin thought in categories of the Ohio suburbs, where the biggest problem was an improperly mowed lawn.

“Kevin, my father is a colonel in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He won’t be scared off by a butterfly stamp on my lower back or Pikachu on my ankle. To make them back off, the tattoo would have to be ideological.”

“Like a US flag?”

“Not radical enough. Yeah. Maybe only a Dachau number on the wrist. That would be checkmate.”

Kevin choked on his latte. Drops of oat milk sprayed onto his keyboard.

“Dude, that’s... that’s very dark. Even for you. That’s cancel culture level.”

“Welcome to my world,” I grinned grimly. “Where I come from, darkness is a national resource, Kevin. We export it. Like oil.”

But the phone was still vibrating, bouncing on the desk and slowly inching toward the edge like a lemming decided on suicide. It demanded attention. It screamed in the voices of Jungkook and Jimin. It stretched its invisible tentacles across the Atlantic, through years of cognitive-behavioral therapy, through my new identity as a successful engineer, trying to drag me back into that red clay, into that house of ghosts and the smell of fear.

“Daughter, drop everything, we need to talk about the end of the world, and you have to fix it because you went to MIT, and we paid for your education with the nervous system of an entire nation.”

I sighed. All my Japanese poetry, my entire new life, all my “wings” were crumbling under the onslaught of this persistent, ancient, Persian demand: duty.

I reached out. My finger hovered over the screen. The green “Answer” button or the red “Die to Family” button.

I pressed “Decline.”

“Not today,” I told the phone firmly. “Today I choose myself. That’s the only thing our family apocalypse taught me: you can’t save anyone else anyway. Besides, I have hot yoga at five. I need to open my chakras, not a bunker.”

In that moment, I felt like I had done something incredibly adult, therapeutic, and right. I had protected my inner child from an external geopolitical threat. I remained a snowflake, untouched by the mud of history. Forty seconds of silence. Forty seconds in which I almost believed I had won.

But the phone rang again. The melody changed. It was a standard, harsh trill. A number flashed on the screen. Not Iranian +98. Not American +1.

It was +850. The country code for North Korea.

Kevin stopped chewing.

“Zee! Is that... is that the DPRK? Is Kim Jong Un calling you? They have your number? Zee, are you a secret agent? You said you were from Iran!”

I felt a twitch under my left eye.

“Kevin,” I said in an icy tone. “It seems personal boundaries are canceled. And yoga too. If I’m not back in ten minutes, delete my browser history.”

I grabbed the phone and ran into the corridor.

Chapter 2. Kimchi and Destiny

10:38 EST (00:38 Pyongyang time). 4 hours before Zeynab’s call. Secret Command Post “Mount Paektu.” DPRK

Colonel General Kim Chol Soo, commander of the DPRK Strategic Rocket Forces, suffered from three things: patriotism, hemorrhoids, and chronic flatulence. The first helped him advance his career, the second allowed him to avoid long meetings, and the third—triggered by a contraband cheeseburger eaten in secret from the political officer—threatened to derail the test of the century.

The “Mount Paektu” bunker lay eighty meters beneath solid granite and smelled the way all bunkers of the world smell: of concrete dust, machine oil, human sweat, and fear masquerading as discipline. But here, there was another scent—the sharp, nose-stinging aroma of fermented cabbage leaking from the general’s parcel, conquering even the Soviet-era ventilation system.

Asadollah Alavi, now known as “Comrade Lee,” advisor on strategic affairs, stood by the panoramic armored glass holding a cup of soju. He was seventy-two years old. He had survived the Revolution, the war with Iraq, thirty years of espionage, the American strike on Fordow, and an escape through China in a freight car loaded with garlic. He craved peace. Instead, he got North Korea.

Beyond the glass, bathed in the cadaverous glow of floodlights, stood the pride of the nation—two “Hwasong-21-Super-Turbo” missiles. In reality, they were a hybrid of stolen Russian blueprints for the Burevestnik, Iranian research Alavi had smuggled out of Fordow in his briefcase, and the fuselage of a decommissioned Chinese locomotive. The missiles were ugly. They resembled cigars swollen with pride, to which a nuclear reactor had been taped with white electrical tape.

“Magnificent, aren’t they, Comrade Lee?” The general breathed heavily and wetly.

“Impressive,” Alavi replied dryly in the flawless Korean he had learned out of boredom over several years in this concrete sack. “Especially the fact that we are launching an open-cycle reactor. You do realize, General, that after launch, this entire valley will glow in the dark for the next three hundred years?”

“Trifles!” Kim waved a hand, biting into his parcel. The crunch of cabbage rang out in the silence of the command post like a gunshot. “That is the price of greatness. The Great Marshal said: ‘Let the sky burn so the enemies go blind.’”

“Poetic,” Alavi noted. “But I would recommend checking the cooling system of the navigation unit. The Russian blueprints I gave you called for a titanium alloy. Your engineers, as I understand from the reports, replaced it with...”

“With cast iron!” Kim interrupted proudly, chewing. A drop of red kimchi sauce hung from his chin, threatening to fall onto his ribbon bar. “Our cast iron is the strongest in the world. Titanium is a bourgeois whimsy.”

Alavi sighed. He was a shadow, a ghost, a man who manipulated history from behind the scenes. And now he stood here, in the company of a man-stomach, watching the end of the world being prepared through cost-cutting on non-ferrous metals.

“Comrade Lee,” General Kim wheezed, wiping his greasy fingers on his uniform pants (napkins in the DPRK were a strategic resource). “How do you assess readiness for the test launch?”

“General,” Alavi took a sip of soju, “I assess it as ‘Inshallah.’ Meaning, if the laws of physics are in a good mood today and Allah hasn’t turned away from this cursed peninsula, it will fly. But I would step away from the window. And from this mountain. And from this country.”

“Defeatism!” Kim hiccuped and reached for the control panel. “We’ll show the imperialists!”

The panel was a masterpiece of North Korean design: huge incandescent bulbs, analog switches, wires sticking out of crevices, and a Big Red Button under a glass cover. Next to it was a small toggle switch with a label written in marker: “TEST / COMBAT”. Currently, it was set to “TEST”.

“Speaking of readiness,” Alavi said, looking at the telemetry. “The navigation unit. Whose chips did you use?”

“We bought a batch on AliExpress,” Kim replied proudly. “Very smart. They build routes themselves, navigate around obstacles. For premium-class robot vacuums.”

Alavi slowly set his cup on the console.

“General. Did you put vacuum cleaner chips into intercontinental cruise missiles?”

“Self-learning chips! Artificial Intelligence! Very expensive—twelve dollars apiece!”

“Vacuums are programmed to avoid obstacles,” Alavi said in a dead voice. “To a missile, mountains and clouds are obstacles. It won’t fly a ballistic trajectory. It will fly hugging the terrain. Like a motherfucking very fast and very radioactive vacuum cleaner.”

“Nonsense! It’s a cruise missile,” Kim dismissed. “Commence countdown!”

The operators at the consoles—skinny youths with the eyes of fanatics—began flipping switches. Numbers started running on the screens.

“Ten... Nine...”

General Kim shifted his kimchi sandwich to his left hand to free his right for the ceremonial button press. The drop of red sauce hung from his chin, threatening his khaki dress uniform.

“Eight... Seven...”

Alavi saw it a second before disaster struck. Gravity, that heartless bitch, had entered into a conspiracy with gastronomy.

The drop fell. It plummeted in slow motion—greasy, oily, electrolytic. Alavi, whose brain was accustomed to calculating isotope trajectories, instantly computed the impact point.

It wasn’t the cover over the red button.

It was the “TEST / COMBAT” toggle switch.

“General, no!” Alavi lunged forward.

Too late.

The drop splattered right into the seam of the switch. The sauce seeped inside. A short circuit. The quiet click of a relay. The “TEST” indicator went dark. A blood-red “COMBAT” lit up.

“Two... One...”

General Kim, being a great admirer of the Soviet rocket program but having failed to notice the mode switch, slammed his fist onto the big button with a triumphant yell.

“Poyekhali! Let’s go!”

Outside, hell broke loose. The missile didn’t just take off—it bolted like a scalded cat. The nuclear ramjet engine ignited immediately, skipping the acceleration phase. The bunker shook so hard Alavi’s teeth clacked together. The second missile, shuddering, toppled onto its side...

“Oops,” said the General.

Numbers raced across the monitors.

“Abort!” Kim squealed. “Abort! That’s a live one! It has a warhead! We only wanted to test the hydraulics!”

“Trajectory?!” Alavi yelled, grabbing a handrail.

“Navigation failure!” the operator screeched. “Processor overheating! The chips can’t handle the temperature!”

“Where is it going?!”

Alavi shoved the officer aside and stared at the map. The trajectory line trembled, writhing like an epileptic’s cardiogram. The missile headed east. Then jerked north. Then west.

“What final coordinates were entered?” Alavi asked in an icy tone.

“Test coordinates!” Kim whispered. “We entered... uh... a point in Washington. To demonstrate to the Great Marshal. The House. White... Just for fun!”

“And you didn’t switch them to dummy coordinates?”

Silence.

Alavi closed his eyes. Inhaled. Exhaled. Remembered Hafez. Remembered Fordow. Remembered rain in the desert.

A missile with a 500-kiloton nuclear warhead and an engine radiating like a melted-down reactor was flying toward Washington. But due to overheating vacuum cleaner chips, it was taking the scenic route. Avoiding obstacles. Through China. Russia. His Iran. Through God knows what else.

“Comms!” Alavi barked. “Call Washington! Warn them!”

“We can’t,” Kim stammered. “We cut the cable last week. So the soldiers wouldn’t watch pornography.”

“Fax?”

“No paper. Sanctions.”

Alavi looked at the general. Then at the screen, where a red dot was already crossing the East Sea. He had no choice.

He reached into his inner pocket and pulled out an old, battered, but reliable Nokia. Battery—12%. Network—one bar.

“What are you doing?” Kim asked. “Calling abroad is forbidden! Execution!”

“General,” Alavi looked at him with a gaze that froze centrifuges. “Shut up and get me more soju. And iodine. Lots of iodine. I’m calling Tehran. And find a charger.”

He dialed the number.

“Hello?” A female voice. Tired. Irritated.

“Zahra,” Alavi said. “It’s me. Don’t hang up. We have a problem.”

“Alavi?” Her voice mixed surprise and sarcasm. “Are you calling from the afterlife?”

“Worse. I’m calling from North Korea. Listen carefully. We sent a ‘package.’ Big. Glowing. And very stupid. I need you to call your husband. Then your daughter. Then anyone with a soldering iron and access to electronic warfare systems.”

“What kind of package?”

“Remember the Burevestnik blueprints we studied? Well. Imagine they were assembled by drunk lemurs out of cast iron and cabbage.”

“Oh Allah,” Zahra exhaled. And in that exhale, Alavi heard what he had missed so much these past years. Professionalism. “How much time do we have?”

“To Iran? About four hours. To America... If it doesn’t fall apart on the way... Also four.”

“Dictate the frequencies,” Zahra said. “And, Alavi?”

“Yes?”

“If we survive, you owe me a new rug. I burned the old one when I mourned you.”

“Deal,” Alavi said and hung up.

He looked at General Kim, who was trying to gather the remains of his sandwich from the floor.

“General, forgive me,” Alavi said politely. “You are an idiot. But you are an idiot of historic proportions. It’s almost admirable.”

Chapter 3. Firewall for a Kitten

*11:14 EST (19:44 Tehran time). 3.5 hours before Zeynab’s call. Isfahan.
Basement of the IRGC Intelligence Directorate*

The basement smelled of mold, old concrete, and fear. Not the sharp, acute fear one feels before a firing squad, but a chronic, stagnant kind—the fear of people who come here to answer questions. Over thirty years, this smell had seeped into the walls so deeply that no ventilation could ever flush it out.

Amirkhan Mousavi, Deputy Chief of Internal Security for Strategic Objects, sat in a chair that creaked with his every breath, hating Zoomers. More precisely, he hated the chasm of misunderstanding that lay between his generation, raised on war and prayers, and this generation, raised on VPNs and memes.

Amirkhan examined the printout. It was a photo of a kitten. Ginger, fluffy, with saucer-eyes. The kitten was sitting on a rug. The rug was white and blue.

Sitting opposite him was a student from the Isfahan University of Arts. Skinny, with hair dyed the color of wilted lilacs, and the look of someone who couldn't comprehend how he ended up here. He wore a wrinkled T-shirt with English writing that Amirkhan couldn't read but strongly suspected of subversive content.

“So,” Amirkhan tapped his finger on the screenshot printout. The paper was cheap and gray, and the printer clearly needed a toner cartridge replacement. “Citizen Karimi. You ‘liked’ a post featuring a kitten. On a social network blocked within the territory of the Islamic Republic.”

“Yes, Officer. The kitten was... aesthetically pleasing. It’s a Persian Chinchilla.”

“The kitten was sitting on a rug,” Amirkhan continued in the monotone voice of a man reading this nonsense for the tenth time that day.

“Yes.”

“The rug was white and blue.”

“It’s a traditional pattern from Yazd province!”

“Uh-huh. And the two stripes on the edges?”

“That’s the border!”

“That is hidden Zionist propaganda through felinology!” Amirkhan rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily. “Do you understand, son, that in the current geopolitical situation, even cats must be ideologically consistent? Why a ginger cat? Why not a black one?”

“I’m allergic to black ones... And he looks so much like mine...”

Amirkhan’s phone, lying on the desk atop a file labeled *“On Subversive Activities in Knitting Enthusiast Telegram Channels,”* vibrated. The caller ID showed “Unknown.”

Amirkhan flinched. His heart skipped a beat. Only one person had called from unknown numbers so persistently in recent years. A man who was supposed to be dead. General Alavi. But Alavi died at Fordow... Or his wife.

“Hello?” he barked, not hiding his irritation.

“Amirkhan,” Zahra’s voice wasn’t just icy. It was absolute zero. The voice of a physicist observing proton decay in her own frying pan. “Where are you?”

“At work. Defending the Revolution from kittens and Zionist rugs. What happened? Did you forget to buy lavash?”

“Worse. Alavi just called me.”

Silence hung in the office. The student stopped breathing, sensing the shift in the atmosphere.

“Alavi is dead,” Amirkhan said slowly. “We buried an empty coffin two years ago. I carried the wreath myself.”

“Apparently, the reception in hell is bad, so he’s calling from North Korea.”

“Korea?” Amirkhan stood up. The student shrank into his chair. “So he’s alive...”

“That doesn’t matter anymore. Listen to me carefully. In a few hours, a missile will fly over us.”

“Whose? Israeli? American?”

“Worse. North Korean. With a nuclear engine and navigation from a robot vacuum cleaner. Alavi says it’s flying in zigzags, hugging the terrain, on an unpredictable route, and very low. We need to shoot it down. Or hijack the controls.”

“Shoot it down with what?” Amirkhan walked over to the map on the wall. “Our air defense is tuned for Tomahawks and stealth bombers, not flying vacuum cleaners! If it’s coming in under the radar, we won’t see it until it flies into the window of the Imam Mosque!”

“Amirkhan. The target is the U.S. Northeast coast. Our child is there.”

“Damn it...”

“Alavi gave the access code for the controls.”

“What is it?”

“123456.”

“Are you joking?”

“No. Alavi said Kim Jong Un considers changing factory settings a sign of weakness. The problem is something else. The control panel... is on the internet. It’s a ‘smart’ missile. IoT. Internet of Things. To enter the code, you need to connect to its server.”

“So what? We have cyber troops.”

“So, what is that we have a ‘Halal Intranet,’ Amirkhan!” Zahra’s voice rose to a scream. “You guys shut down the external internet three days ago because of the protests! We are behind the firewall! We can’t hack the missile because we blocked ourselves! We need someone on the outside. Someone with fast internet, brains, and access to the World Wide Web.”

“Zeynab...” Amirkhan exhaled.

“Exactly. Call Nasrin. Have her wake Zahir. He has access to military comms; maybe he can punch through. And tell them to find Zeynab. I’ve been trying to call her, but she’s declining. She has, you see, ‘personal boundaries’ and yoga.”

“Understood.”

Amirkhan hung up. He looked at the student. The boy sat neither alive nor dead.

“Listen to me,” Amirkhan said quietly. “Get out of here. Go home. Buy your cat the most expensive food. And pray.”

“But the protocol? The non-disclosure agreement?” the boy stammered.

“To hell with the protocol. If we don’t all vaporize today, I will personally find you and force you to ‘like’ portraits of the Ayatollahs for the rest of your life. Now—scram!”

The student vanished as if teleported. Amirkhan remained alone in the empty office, which smelled of cheap coffee and expensive fear.

He dialed his eldest daughter’s number.

“Nasrin! We have an emergency. Call Zeynab. Screw her yoga. Tell her... tell her that if she doesn’t pick up the phone, I will personally fly to Boston and tattoo an Israeli flag on her forehead!.. And have Zahir call me!”

Chapter 4. Subscription to Stupidity

11:40 EST (20:10 Tehran time). 3 hours before Zeynab’s call. Isfahan. IRGC Secure Communications Hub

The secure comms room resembled a spaceship built from Soviet tank parts. The walls were padded with soundproofing panels the color of “bureaucratic depression,” and the air conditioner hummed with the strain of a dying elephant. On the desk sat a glass of tea with a lonely lemon floating in it like a sunken island.

Amirkhan Mousavi was screaming into the receiver of a red phone so loudly that the bulletproof glass separating him from the operators fogged up.

“What do you mean you ‘don’t see it’?! It’s not a sparrow, Lieutenant! It’s a five-ton Korean idiot with a nuclear reactor! It glows in the infrared spectrum like a Christmas tree in a Dubai mall!”

The voice of the duty air defense officer from the bunker in Hamadan was dull and hopeless, like instructions for assembling IKEA furniture written in Swedish.

“Colonel, sir, I understand. But the S-400 ‘Triumph’ system is giving error 404.”

“What the hell kind of error?!”

“License for long-range detection module has expired. Please contact your system administrator to renew your subscription or upgrade to Premium.’ The Russians cut off the package, Colonel. We’re left with ‘Basic’—we only see things flying slower than a camel and no further than eight kilometers.”

Amirkhan felt his eyelid twitch.

“Update the firmware! Hack it! You are the hackers of Allah!”

“We can’t. It has Kaspersky protection. If we try to crack it, it will lock the launchers and start mining cryptocurrency. And Bitcoin is down right now, so it’s economically unfeasible.”

Amirkhan slammed the receiver onto the cradle. The plastic cracked.

“Sanctions,” he hissed. “They’ve put sanctions even on friendship.”

He walked over to the safe, punched in the code (his wedding date, which he never forgot after that incident with the botched surveillance), and pulled out a white Starlink terminal—General Alavi’s legacy. He stepped out onto the balcony. The sky was clear, inky, and indifferent. Somewhere up there, in the stratosphere (or the troposphere, given the vacuum cleaner navigation—Amirkhan wasn’t too clear on the specifics), a Hwasong was flying. And it wasn’t flying to Mars, but to his daughter, to them, while he stood there with a dish from Elon Musk, trying to reach the only Russian who could help...

Taiga. 100 km from Severodvinsk. Altitude 50 meters

FSB Lieutenant General Vladimir “The Wolf” Volkov. A man who could solve any problem if he was sober. Or if he was drunk but in a good mood. Right now, judging by the time, he was in a state of quantum superposition.

An Mi-8 helicopter, repainted in “Luxury Winter” camouflage (white leather interior, backlit mini-bar, karaoke system), flew over the treetops, slicing the darkness with powerful searchlights.

The general sat by the open door, dangling his legs clad in polar wolf fur boots. In his hands, he held not a Kalashnikov—that was for plebeians and conscripts. He held a captured American AR-15 rifle with a latest-generation thermal scope and a gold-plated trigger. A retirement gift from CIA colleagues.

“Ergonomics!” he shouted to the pilot over the roar of the rotors, pressing his cheek to the stock. “Those Yanks know how to make things! Light as a Bolshoi ballerina! Not like our oar!”

Below, in the deep snow, sinking up to their bellies, a herd of wild boars ran. They ran not out of fear, but out of despair.

“Lower, Mikhalych! I want to look him in the eye before I turn him into shashlik! I want to see his soul!”

In the pocket of his sheepskin coat, sewn from the pelts of endangered seals, a satellite phone vibrated.

Volkov grimaced.

“Who is it now? The wife? Mikhalych, answer it! Tell her I’m in a meeting in the Arctic! Saving polar bears from global warming!”

But the phone wouldn’t quit. And the number was strange. Iranian. +98.

Cursing, Volkov pressed the phone to his ear with his shoulder, not letting go of the rifle.

“Hello! Volkov on the line. Speak fast, my boar is escaping into neutral waters!”

In Tehran, Amirkhan put it on speaker and launched a voice translator on an old tablet.

“Volodya! It’s Amirkhan! We have a problem!”

The robot translator’s voice, female and emotionless, rendered this as: “Vladimir. This is Emir. We have a goat.”

Volkov burped, releasing a small cloud of steam that smelled of Armenian cognac.

“What goat, Amir? I’m hunting boar! Why do I need your goat?”

“Korean missile!” Amirkhan screamed into the speaker. “Flying through you! Nuclear! Turn on the radars for us, your hustlers cut off the subscription! Urgent!”

Google Translate thought for a second, digesting the Persian idioms, and spat out: “Korean fireworks. Flying through you. Atomic. Activate your ears, your merchants killed the subscription to life.”

Volkov frowned. Through the noise of the rotors and half a liter of cognac, the meaning began to dawn on him. “Korean... atomic... flying at me.”

“Taepodong?” he yelled, drowning out the engine noise. “Did that fat Kim finally press the button?! I knew it! I said in the Security Council you shouldn’t give matches to children!”

“Yes! Hwasong!” Amirkhan shouted (Translator: “Affirmative! Truth!”). “Shoot it down or give us the activation codes!”

General Volkov realized the scale of the catastrophe. If the missile fell in the taiga—to hell with it, the taiga is big, the boars will mutate, get even bigger. But if it fell on his dacha in Sochi? The vineyards!

He jumped to his feet, forgetting that a helicopter is not an office at the Lubyanka, but a vibrating tin can in the air.

“Mikhalych! Turn around! Code Red! Urgent comms with Moscow! Fuck!!!”

The helicopter hit an air pocket.

The general, losing his balance on the slippery floor (who’s idea was it to put parquet in a helicopter?), bounced up. His head in the fur hat met a ceiling beam with a dull thud.

His finger, resting on the gold-plated, ultra-sensitive trigger of the American AR-15, reflexively squeezed.

A burst—rat-a-tat!—went not into the boar. And not into the air.

It went into the instrument panel, right between pilot Mikhalych’s legs, turning the GLONASS navigation system into confetti.

Sparks. Smoke. The pilot’s scream.

“What are you doing, you old asshole!!!” Mikhalych yelled, letting go of the cyclic. “Hydraulics! We’re going down!”

“It wasn’t me!” Volkov screamed, falling to the floor and trying to catch the bottle of cognac. “It’s American ergonomics!!! It’s sabotage!!!”

The helicopter spun like a top. The fir trees approached rapidly, looking like the spears of a green army.

In Amirkhan’s receiver, there was a crackle, a stream of choice Russian profanity (which the translator delicately rendered as “Oh God, how unexpected”), the sound of metal hitting wood, the crunch of branches, and finally, silence.

Amirkhan stared at the phone. The screen blinked: “Connection Lost.”

“Hello?” he asked into the void. “Volodya? Did you shoot it down?”

Google Translate remained silent.

Amirkhan sighed and rubbed his face with his palm.

“I think he shot himself down.”

The door opened. Zahra walked in. She was wearing a lab coat, holding a tablet, and looking like she was about to split an atom with her bare hands.

“What about the Russians?” she asked.

“The Russians have left the chat,” Amirkhan put the phone away. “They... went on a safari. For a long time.”

“So what now?” Zahra asked, looking at him with her intelligent, tired eyes.

“Now call the kids,” he said. “And pray that someone on this planet has working internet and no subscription to stupidity.”

Chapter 5. “Power of Siberia”—Power of TikTok

11:50 EST (00:50 Beijing time). 2 hours 50 minutes before Zeynab’s call. Beijing. Zhongnanhai (Residence of PRC Leadership). Assembly Hall

The Assembly Hall smelled of expensive jasmine tea, lacquered wood, and a quiet, polite, yet deadly panic. A colossal digital map of the world spanned one entire wall. On it, China was vast, bright red, and pulsating; Taiwan was also red (though with light cross-hatching indicating “pending return”); and Russia was shaded in a pleasant beige color, referred to in secret party documents as “Zone of Prospective Resource Development” and colloquially as “Our Northern Warehouse.”

The Chairman (whose name was not spoken aloud, much like Voldemort’s, only with greater respect and a Party card) sat in a chair resembling a throne, watching the trajectory of the Korean missile. The red line on the map was behaving like a drunken snake.

“Comrade Li,” he addressed the intelligence chief without turning his head. “Tell me honestly, communist to communist. Is that our missile? Did we sell them the blueprints?”

“Not at all, Comrade Chairman!” Li bowed so low his nose nearly brushed the carpet. “We only sold them chips from Xiaomi vacuum cleaners and the fuselage of a decommissioned steam locomotive from the Cultural Revolution era. The technology itself... it is barbaric. Crude. Effective in its stupidity.”

“The Russians?”

“Likely. They love playing a double game. They sell us S-400s, and to the Koreans—blueprints for the Burevestnik, which doesn’t fly but terrifies the whole world with its theoretical possibility.”

“Why?”

“To create tension in the region and drive up oil prices. Or they simply mixed up the folders after a banquet celebrating the friendship of nations. Vodka is a terrible weapon, Comrade Chairman.”

The Chairman frowned. His face, usually as impenetrable as the Great Wall, twitched.

“Convey to Comrade Kim...” he paused, choosing words worthy of history. “Tell him that rice shipments are ceasing. And the elite Hennessy cognac, too. Let him drink his rocket fuel.”

At that moment, an aide with a tablet paled so drastically he began to blend in with his white shirt.

“Comrade Chairman! The missile has changed course! It passed over Mongolia and is now entering Russian airspace!”

“Let it,” the Chairman waved his hand. “Let the Russians deal with their own gifts. They have a large territory; there is plenty of room to crash.”

“But, sir... It is flying over Eastern Siberia. Directly over the ‘Power of Siberia’ gas pipeline. And over the taiga we leased for forty-nine years.”

Silence fell in the hall, broken only by the clink of a porcelain lid against a cup dropped by the Minister of Economy.

“Over Siberia?” The Chairman jumped up. “That is our gas! Our oil! Our timber! That is... that is a strike against the Chinese economy!”

“Precisely, sir. If it falls there, we lose trillions of yuan. And the lumber for IKEA. Where will we get ‘Ingolf’ chairs?”

“Call the Russians!” the Chairman screamed, losing his Confucian calm. “Urgent! Tell them to shoot it down!”

Intelligence Chief Li spread his hands guiltily.

“We tried, sir. But the Kremlin has an answering machine. They have declared operation ‘Carpet.’ They say there is a missile threat due to a Ukrainian drone attack on Moscow. All secure communications are cut so the enemy cannot pinpoint the bunker.”

“What the hell is ‘Carpet’?! Their Siberia is about to burn! Call on the reserve channel!”

“There is no reserve channel, sir. The red phone is silent. Satellites are jammed. Apparently, General Volkov did something in the north; contact with the Arctic is lost.”

“Then...” The Chairman thought for a second. His brain, accustomed to managing one and a half billion people, sought an unconventional solution. “Then use TikTok!”

“What?!” the generals dropped their notepads.

“TikTok!” repeated the Chairman. “It is the only thing they do not block, because their soldiers watch videos of dances and life hacks on how to open canned stew. Record an address! Urgent! Push it into the trends of the Russian segment! Hashtag #SaveOurForest! #ShootDownTheMissile! #RussiaChinaBrothers4Ever!”

“But, Comrade Chairman,” Li objected timidly. “If we use TikTok algorithms for special communications... The Americans will hear. They hold the controlling stake in the company now after that deal with Oracle! The servers are in Texas! The CIA will see!”

“Screw the CIA!” the Chairman barked. “Let them listen! We need our Siberian gas and timber more than we need secrecy! Besides, the Americans are busy with golf; the President has a tournament. Do it! And apply the cat filter! Russians love cats; it will increase reach and virality!”

Five minutes later, a strange video appeared in the feed of Lieutenant Sidorov in the air defense command bunker near Moscow (who was frankly bored while the brass were “in a meeting”).

A Chinese general in full dress uniform, but with digital cat ears and vibrating whiskers, furiously poked his finger at a map of Siberia to the tune of the viral track “My money don’t jiggle jiggle, it folds,” drew a missile in the air, and gestured the international sign for “Boom!” Below, a running ticker in broken Russian read: “BROTHER IVAN! SHOOT FLYING STICK! SAVE TREE! WILL GIVE MANY CLOTHES!”

Sidorov chuckled.

“Creative,” he thought. “Neural networks have gone completely bonkers.”

He liked the video. Wrote a comment: “LMAO author burns.” And swiped on. To watch a girl in a bikini fix the carburetor of a classic Mustang.

He didn’t bother waking the leadership. Not worth the trouble.

Chapter 6. Geopolitics with Pirozhki

12:50 EST (20:50 Moscow time). One hour after the Beijing meeting. Moscow. Frunzenskaya Embankment. National Defense Control Center (NDCC) of the Russian Federation

In the “Atrium”—as the generals lovingly called the main control room with a screen the size of a football field—it smelled of expensive Arabica, furniture polish, and the cheap deodorant of the night shift. Duty Colonel General Ivashov (call sign “Concrete,” earned for his impenetrable facial expression) sat in a leather chair, melancholically chewing a cabbage pirozhok bought at the General Staff buffet.

On the gigantic screen, which usually looped inspiring videos about hypersonic weapons and Red Square parades to boost operator morale, a lone, insolent red dot was now blinking.

“Comrade Colonel General,” Lieutenant Operator Lebedev said timidly, his eyes glued to the monitor. “Pyongyang confirms the launch.”

“Confirming what this time?” Ivashov carefully brushed crumbs off his tunic. “Another papier-mâché mock-up full of hopes for a brighter future?”

“They say, ‘Test launch of a promising meteorological probe.’”

“Probe?” Ivashov chuckled. “With a nuclear thermal signature? Are they planning to measure the weather on Mars? Or the temperature in hell?”

Ivashov pressed the button for the direct line with Pyongyang. The receiver was red, heavy, Bakelite, and still warm from previous diplomatic lies.

“Li!” he barked (on the other end sat the North Korean military attaché in Moscow, who was currently sweating enough to fill a swimming pool). “What the hell did you launch? My early warning satellites are going crazy. The sirens are howling like a tomcat in March!”

“Comrade Ivashov!” the Korean’s voice trembled like an aspen leaf in the wind. “This is a triumph of Juche science! Absolutely peaceful atom! We are... uh... testing the wind rose in the upper atmosphere!”

“Where is your ‘wind’ flying?”

“Uh... strictly East! Toward the lair of imperialism! Washington! I mean... toward the Pacific Ocean, of course. For a splashdown.”

“And why is this ‘probe’ of yours wiggling like that and flying so low?”

“Well... hasn’t gained altitude yet.”

The Korean lied with abandon. He knew the missile was assembled from blueprints stolen from the Russians (which Iranian General Alavi had smuggled out of Fordow during the evacuation). But if he admitted the missile was Russian, Ivashov would realize they stole the tech and cut off fuel oil supplies. If he said it was Korean—Ivashov would laugh himself sick. So he chose the third path: pompous nonsense.

Ivashov looked at the trajectory. The red arc was indeed stretching across the Pacific toward America. At first.

“Toward Washington, you say?” The general took another bite of his pirozhok, chewing thoughtfully. “Well... Godspeed.”

“We’re not going to shoot it down?” Lieutenant Lebedev whispered, looking at the general with horror.

“Shoot it down? Lebedev, have you lost your mind?” Ivashov winked. “If our Korean comrades want to wish the USA a good morning, who are we to interfere with the friendship of nations? Let it fly. The Americans will shoot it down over Alaska anyway. And we will express deep concern. And sell the Koreans more Chinese rice at triple the price.”

But then the red dot on the screen twitched again. It performed a pirouette worthy of Maya Plisetskaya in her prime and sharply, violating all laws of ballistics, went north, then south.

“Whoa,” said Lebedev. “Comrade General, the ‘probe’ changed its mind again. It seems to have bipolar disorder.”

“Where did it go?”

“Course south-south-west. It’s skirting Mongolia... Passed over Altai... heading toward the Caspian...”

Lebedev typed rapidly. The numbers on the screen changed.

“Calculated impact point... Iran. Tehran. Or Isfahan.”

Silence fell over the immense hall. Only the hum of servers could be heard.

Ivashov stared at the screen. His brain, trained by years of bureaucratic intrigue and geopolitical solitaire, calculated scenarios faster than the Elbrus supercomputer (which froze playing Minesweeper anyway).

A missile (clearly nuclear, judging by the off-the-charts background radiation) is flying toward Iran. Our situational ally. Should we shoot it down? The S-400 near Rostov could reach it. The S-500 near Astrakhan could reach it and still have change left over.

But then Ivashov smiled. It was a smile as terrifying as a budget deficit.

“Lieutenant,” he said softly, almost affectionately. “Tell me... If right now in Iran, at a secret nuclear facility, a nuclear warhead suddenly explodes... Who will the international community blame?”

The lieutenant blinked.

“Uh... Israel? Or the USA? Operation ‘Midnight Hammer 2.0’?”

“Exactly!” Ivashov slammed his palm on the table, making the glass of tea jump. “The Iranians will go berserk. The entire Islamic world will rear up. The Strait of Hormuz will be blocked. Oil—two hundred, no, three hundred bucks a barrel! The Americans will get bogged down in a new war for ten years. China will be in shock. And we... we will be the peacemakers. We’ll sell humanitarian aid and weapons to everyone and express our most sincere condolences.”

“So, we don’t shoot?” Lebedev clarified, his trembling hand reaching for the mouse.

“Shoot?” Ivashov yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. “Lieutenant, check the log. We have scheduled maintenance. The radar is down for service. We were changing the bulbs. We saw nothing. We were asleep. And if the Koreans call back, tell them... tell them we are proud of their success in non-traditional navigation.”

The general reached for the secure line to call his old friend Volkov in the taiga and tell him this joke, but remembered Volkov was unreachable, on a business trip, saving polar bears.

“Pity,” thought Ivashov. “Volkov would have appreciated the beauty of the game.”

He turned back to the screen, where the little red dot, guided by a vacuum cleaner chip and Russian geopolitical “wisdom,” hurtled toward the unsuspecting Persians.

“Fly, little bird,” the general whispered. “Fly. Make it beautiful for us.”

Chapter 7. Tentacles of Strategic Purpose

13:10 EST (03:10 Pyongyang time). Pyongyang. Underground Strategic Command Bunker

The bunker was permeated with an atmosphere of organized, disciplined looting. The sirens weren’t wailing (the electrician had sold the old wiring for scrap a week ago, and the new wiring had never arrived), but anxiety hung in the air, thick and sticky like the gravy in the officers’ mess. Generals who just an hour ago had been frothing at the mouth swearing loyalty to the ideals of Juche and readiness to die for the Party were now dragging the most valuable items into their personal, highly secured compartments.

Asadollah Alavi, also known as Comrade Lee, stood in the corridor, his back pressed against a life-size portrait of the Great Leader, watching soldiers run past him carrying crates.

“What is this?” he asked a lieutenant buckling under the weight of a cardboard box labeled “Top Secret.”

“French cognac, Comrade Lee! 1995 vintage! For export!”

“And this?” He nodded at the next one hauling a sack.

“Iodine tablets and dried squid!”

“And that?” He pointed at a colonel personally clutching a stack of plastic cases to his chest.

“A DVD collection of German educational films on anatomy! The Beloved Leader’s personal archive! The nation’s golden fund!”

Alavi sighed. A nuclear-powered missile was flying to hell and gone, the world was teetering on the brink of World War III, and these idiots were saving pornography, alcohol, and snacks. However, Alavi thought with the cynicism of a man who had survived three regimes, if nuclear winter did come, these three things would become the hardest currency. More valuable than gold or uranium.

Alavi himself had no intention of sitting in a concrete crypt waiting for the cognac or oxygen to run out. He needed to bail. Right now. Before the missile crashed somewhere in Siberia or Iran, and a real mess started—one where foreign consultants would be shot first as “undesirable witnesses.”

He walked into General Kim’s office. Kim was sitting under a massive oak desk, finishing off his second cheeseburger and looking around nervously.

“General,” Alavi said calmly. “I need a helicopter.”

“What for?” Kim chomped, dropping crumbs onto his medals. “We are safe here. Ten meters of concrete! Lead! We can survive even a direct hit of democracy here!”

“I need to... uh... supervise the delivery of humanitarian aid. From Japan.”

“What aid? We have rice; I checked.”

“Strategic aid,” Alavi lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “The freshest crabs from Kanazawa. And a new batch of... visual materials. Japanese. Uncensored.”

Kim’s eyes lit up in the semi-darkness under the table so brightly they could have illuminated Pyongyang during a scheduled power outage.

“From Kanazawa?” he asked breathlessly. “The ones with the roe? King crabs?”

“Precisely. But the Japanese refuse to load them onto a ship. They fear radiation and provocations. They demand the personal presence of... a specialist. Me. I am the only one who can distinguish a crab from a CIA agent.”

“And the materials?” Kim licked his lips. “The ones where... there are many tentacles?”

“Oh yes. Very many. Tentacles of strategic purpose. Full penetration behind enemy lines.”

Kim struggled out from under the table, brushing off his trousers.

“Take my personal Mi-8. It’s on Helipad No. 3. The pilot knows the route.”

“Which route?” Alavi clarified.

“The smuggling route,” Kim winked. “We use it to bring in sushi for Central Committee banquets and spare parts for Mercedes. Flies low over the water, under the radar. The Americans think it’s a flock of seagulls. Pilot’s call sign is ‘Octopus.’”

Alavi left the office, feeling cold sweat trickle down his back. “Octopus.” He knew who that was.

It was Takeshi-san. A legend of the East Asian shadow world. A man who in the 90s transported used right-hand drive Toyotas to Vladivostok, in the 2000s smuggled Iranian oil past sanctions via Malaysia, and now delivered Japanese porn and crabs

to the North Korean elite. Alavi knew him from his days in SAVAK. Takeshi was the only Japanese man who could drink vodka with Russians, haggle with Persians, and lie to Koreans simultaneously, all while quoting Basho haikus.

Ten minutes later, Alavi was climbing the ramp of a helicopter parked under a camouflage net. The rotors turned lazily.

The pilot, a bald Japanese man in harem pants and a bright Hawaiian shirt with parrots worn over a Kevlar vest, turned around. Japanese city pop from the 80s—*Plastic Love*—was playing in the cockpit.

“Alavi-san?” he asked in surprise, pushing his aviator sunglasses up onto his forehead. “Long time no see. I thought you were shot in Iran. Or hanged. Or became an Ayatollah.”

“I thought so too, Takeshi. Start your hurdy-gurdy. We’re flying to Kanazawa.”

“For crabs? Or for geishas?”

“For freedom, Takeshi. For freedom. And if you have whiskey with you, pour it. It’s going to be a long night.”

The helicopter, coughing smoke, lifted into the air, leaving behind panic-stricken generals, a nuclear button smeared with grease, and a country preparing for the end of the world by saving its most precious asset—a *hentai* collection.

Alavi looked out the porthole at the receding coast, which looked like a black hole.

“I survived the Islamic Revolution,” he thought, taking a sip from the flask Takeshi handed him. “I survived the war with Iraq. I survived the Fordow bunker. If I survive in a helicopter with a pornography smuggler under the guns of three nations’ air defenses... I will believe in Allah. Or in Elon Musk. I don’t know which one of them is on duty for the planet right now.”

Chapter 8. A Call from the Underworld

14:35 EST (04:35 Pyongyang time). Over the Sea of Japan. On board the Mi-8 helicopter “Octopus”

The helicopter shook like an old Paykan on a mountain road. Takeshi-san, the pilot in the Hawaiian shirt with a kamikaze headband, held the cyclic with one hand and tried to open a jar of pickled ginger with an army knife with the other.

“Turbulence, Alavi-san!” he yelled over the roar of the rotors and the Japanese pop blaring from the speakers. “The crabs are nervous! The ginger won’t open! Bad feng shui!”

“Watch the horizon, Takeshi!” Alavi barked, trying to keep his balance on the crate labeled “Tentacles: Special Edition,” upon which he was sitting.

He pressed his Nokia to his ear. The connection over the sea was as lousy as an Iranian pensioner's mood on payday.

"Zahra!" he shouted. "Did you call her?"

Zahra's voice broke through the crackle of static and the noise of the sea:

"I called! She's not picking up!"

"Why?! Does she have finals? Or is she sleeping? Or was she abducted by aliens?"

"Worse! She has 'personal boundaries'! She declined me three times! She texted that she's 'choosing herself' and she has yoga!"

"What is she choosing?!" Alavi choked on air. "Yoga? Zahra, tell her that if she doesn't pick up the phone, she won't have anything to choose from except the radiation level in Massachusetts! What the hell kind of yoga is this when the world is going to Tartarus?!"

"She turned off her phone! I can't get through! Amirkhan called too, Nasrin wrote in all caps... It's useless. She's in her 'safe space.' She's on a retreat."

Alavi looked down at the plastic box beneath him. The situation was becoming so absurd that even his thirty years of intelligence experience were failing him. The world hung by a thread, a nuclear apocalypse was approaching at Mach 1.5, and a girl in Boston was playing the offended daughter and doing womb breathing.

"Dictate the number," Alavi said decisively.

"Why?"

"I'll call her myself."

"She won't answer a call from an unknown number. She's 'choosing herself,' remember?"

"She won't pick up from an Iranian number. But here I have..." he looked at the phone screen, where the icon of the North Korean operator Koryolink had finally caught a signal from a coastal tower, "...here I have something exotic. A Pyongyang number. Code +850. That should intrigue her. Curiosity is stronger than resentment. A Persian woman can forgive an offense, but she cannot ignore a mystery."

"Alavi, are you sure?"

"Zahra, I am sitting on a crate of pornography in a Japanese smuggler's helicopter over the East Sea, while somewhere out there a nuclear missile with vacuum cleaner navigation is flying. The only thing I am sure of is that Allah went on a smoke break and left the keys to the world with idiots. Dictate the digits!"

He wrote the number on the cuff of his white, once-expensive shirt using a marker borrowed from Takeshi (there was no paper; General Kim had stolen the napkins for his own needs).

“Takeshi!” he shouted to the pilot. “Do you have a satellite booster?”

“Of course!” Takeshi nodded at the dashboard, where next to a plastic Buddha icon and a Hello Kitty talisman, some black box with an antenna was taped down. “I use it to watch live baseball! Yankees versus Red Sox!”

“Crank it to max! I need to reach America! And turn off the music, for the love of all that is holy!”

Takeshi flipped a switch.

Alavi dialed the number.

A ringtone. A long, drawn-out, American ringtone.

Another ring.

“Come on, girl,” he thought, gripping the phone so hard the plastic creaked. “Come on, Zee-Zee. Forget about your therapist and your traumas. Remember whose daughter you are. Remember that you are Persian. And Persian women are as curious as cats and as hard to kill as cockroaches.”

The ringing stopped. A click.

“Hello?” a voice full of bewilderment and fear came through the receiver. “Is this... sushi delivery?”

Alavi smirked.

“Almost,” he said in the impeccable English he had learned in London back in the Shah’s days. “Delivery of problems to your doorstep. Hello, Zeynab. This is Asadollah Alavi. And I have bad news for you...”

Chapter 9. The Effective Antichrist and World of Tanks

14:55 EST. 15 minutes after Alavi’s call. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Lincoln Laboratory

Zeynab quickly but intelligibly (using three-story Farsi profanity and a diagram on a napkin) explained the crux of the problem to Kevin. Kevin nodded, put on a serious face, and opened Google Maps.

“So, North Korea...” he mumbled, dragging his finger across the screen. “That’s somewhere near Australia, right? Where the kangaroos are?”

Zeynab closed her eyes. She realized science was powerless. She needed an “Adult.” Someone with epaulets, security clearance, and a grasp of geography at least at a fifth-grade level.

She had one. Major Bradley Cooper (no, to his deepest regret, not the actor, although he emphasized the resemblance whenever he could). Her DARPA handler who funded her hummingbird drone project. A man with a square jaw, square shoulders, and square thinking that fit perfectly into the box of military regulations.

“Fine,” Zeynab told her phone. “I’m calling the Pentagon. If they arrest me for espionage, you, Kevin, will bring me care packages. And only oat milk matcha lattes, got it? No soy.”

She dialed the major’s emergency number.

Secret bunker beneath Palantir headquarters. Washington, D.C.

The hall was filled with a twilight that smelled of expensive cologne, leather armchairs, and high-grade intellectual snobbery. On stage, illuminated by a single spotlight beam, stood Peter Thiel. He looked like a vegan vampire who had just successfully invested in a synthetic blood startup.

The audience consisted of the elite: four-star generals, Silicon Valley venture capitalists, Elon Musk (who was tweeting Dogecoin memes from the back row), and Major Bradley Cooper.

Major Cooper felt he was part of a Great Mystery. He sat with a straight back, listening with his mouth open.

“We are approaching the singularity,” Thiel broadcast in a quiet, hypnotic voice that made you want to give him all your money. “Democracy is an operating system that hasn’t been updated since version 1.0. It is full of bugs. Glitches. Viruses of populism. We need a hard reset. We need a Katechon. The Restrainer.”

A phone vibrated in the major’s pocket. He winced. Who dared call during a sermon by the Prophet of Efficiency?

He glanced furtively at the screen, shielding it with his palm. “Zee (Drones).”

Decline. Not now, girl. Uncle is busy saving the West.

“The new Antichrist will not come with horns and a pitchfork,” Thiel continued, making a theatrical pause. “He will come with an algorithm. He will be decentralized. He will be a blockchain demon, a distributed ledger of sin. A Digital Leviathan that will devour the sovereignty of states...”

Cooper’s phone buzzed again. Persistently, hysterically. Like a fly beating against glass trying to escape to freedom.

A notification popped up on the screen:

“Zee: BRAD, PICK UP THE PHONE! THE KOREANS LAUNCHED A NUCLEAR VACUUM CLEANER! IT’S FLYING AT YOU!”

Cooper read the message in the preview. “Nuclear vacuum cleaner.”

“These scientists,” he thought with irritation. “Always with their metaphors. Poets of physics. Probably asking for a budget increase for microchips again or complaining about the coffee machine. Not now, honey. The fate of civilization is being decided here.”

He switched his phone to “Do Not Disturb.”

“...And only the Monarch-Corporation,” Thiel said, his eyes glinting in the dark with the cold light of pure reason, “is capable of halting entropy. We must build an ark. Not for everyone. For the worthy. For those who understand the code. For those with high IQs and no moral prejudices.”

Major Cooper nodded. He understood. He was worthy. He felt his IQ growing.

Meanwhile, in the real world, at an altitude of 230 meters, a missile with Korean characters on its side, guided by an overheated Xiaomi vacuum cleaner chip, decided that the Hindu Kush mountain range was a chair leg that needed to be navigated around, and sharply turned toward Africa.

Cambridge

“He’s not picking up,” Zeynab said, staring at the screen in horror. “He declined. Twice.”

“Maybe he’s in the bathroom?” Kevin suggested, finishing his croissant. “Military guys get diarrhea too.”

“Kevin, this is an emergency line! They have to pick up even if they’re delivering triplets! It’s protocol!”

“Well, then he’s busy with something more important than nuclear war.”

“Than what?! What could be more important?!?”

“I don’t know. Maybe listening to a podcast about efficient time management? Or meditating?”

Zeynab groaned and dropped her head onto the desk.

“Great. Just great. Dad in Iran can’t hack the missile because they have no internet. The Pentagon isn’t answering because they’re apparently at a lecture on saving the world from abstract evil. Meanwhile, concrete evil with a plutonium core is flying here, irradiating half the world along the way.”

She lifted her head. Tears of helplessness stood in her eyes.

“Kevin, do you know any hackers? Real ones? Not the ones who hack soda machines.”

“Well...” Kevin scratched his pink nape. “There’s this one guy. Ukrainian. We played World of Tanks in the same clan. We were the best on the server!”

“Tanks?” Zeynab froze. The memory hit her in the gut. Mom. JagdpanFer_83. Tanks.

“Yeah. His handle is ‘Bandera_Sniper.’ Or ‘Kyiv_Ghost,’ he changes nicknames. He’s cool. I think he’s in Africa right now, freelancing. Says the internet there is better than in California, and nobody asks about taxes. Works for some PMC, but streams in the evenings.”

“Call him.”

“To Africa? To a PMC? Zee, that’s expensive. And sketchy.”

“Kevin!!! I will pay for the roaming with my kidney! Call this Sniper! Right now!”

Kevin sighed, opened Discord, and found a contact with an avatar of a Cossack smoking a pipe against the backdrop of a nuclear explosion.

“Hey, bro,” he typed with trembling fingers. “Here’s the deal... Remember you said you had access to electronic warfare systems? We need to crash something.”

Chapter 10. Martha’s Vineyard and Vegan Turkey

14:30 EST. Around the same time (and a bit earlier). Pentagon. National Military Command Center (NMCC)

The atmosphere in “The Tank”—as the Joint Chiefs affectionately called this bunker, although in terms of oxygen levels it more closely resembled a tin can—was electrified to the limit. On the enormous screens, a red dot representing the North Korean Taepodong-X missile, or whatever those Koreans named it, was executing loop-de-loops over the Pacific Ocean that would have turned any ballistics instructor gray and made any figure skating coach proud.

“Altitude two hundred meters!” reported an operator whose thick horn-rimmed glasses had fogged up from tension. “Speed—Mach 1.5. It’s flying under the radar, using terrain features and... uh... clouds. We can’t shoot it down without hitting civilian airliners, whales, or the feelings of environmentalists!”

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Bradford “Bulldog” Sterling, wiped his forehead with a monogrammed silk handkerchief.

“Have you briefed the President?” he barked.

“Negative, sir!” the aide shrank into his leather chair. “He’s not picking up.”

“Is his dementia acting up again? Code Red! Nuclear threat!”

“Sir, the Press Secretary conveyed that after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the President asked not to be disturbed by trifles. He said: ‘I brought you peace, the rest are details.’”

“Where the hell is he?!”

“In Florida, sir. Palm Beach. He’s playing a friendly round of golf. Fifteenth hole. Currently losing, sir. If we interrupt him, he’ll veto our budget for the next five years.”

General Sterling ground his teeth so hard it could be heard in the cheap seats.

“Fine. What about the Vice President? Is he in the loop?”

Silence fell in the hall. All the generals, admirals, and analysts exchanged glances of sincere, unadulterated horror. Someone in the back row opened a can of Diet Coke with a loud, characteristic psshhh. The sound rang out like a shot to the temple of democracy.

“I see,” sighed Sterling. “Also with a club. Or a cocktail. We are alone, gentlemen. Orphans at the feast of life.”

At that moment, the operator cried out:

“Sir! Target is changing course! Sharp ninety-degree turn!.. And it’s gaining speed again!”

“Toward us?” Sterling clutched his heart (or his wallet in his inside pocket).

“No, sir! It’s moving away from Hawaii again! Course—West-North-West!”

“Where’s that?”

“Based on the trajectory... Taiwan. Then mainland China. And then... Russia. Siberia.”

A collective exhale, sounding like a giant balloon deflating, swept through the bunker. The generals’ shoulders dropped. Faces that a second ago were crimson with strain regained the normal, healthy color of people with excellent health insurance and pensions.

“China and Russia...” Sterling drawled, and the smile of a Cheshire Cat that had gorged on sour cream appeared on his face. “Well then. That changes things. That changes everything.”

“Sir, should we warn Beijing?” a young CIA analyst asked timidly. “Taiwan is in the path.”

“Why?” Sterling was genuinely surprised. “Taiwan is the Republic of China. Beijing is the People’s Republic of China. That’s two Chinese republics, son! Let the Republicans in Congress sort it out with them. That’s a party line, not a military one.”

“But, sir,” the analyst persisted. “What if it reaches Russia? Maybe give the Russians a ring? On the ‘red line’?”

Sterling waved him off like a pesky fly.

“Russia is Europe. Well, or Asia. Anyway, that’s a NATO matter. Or the EU. Let the Euro-commissioner call them. And we... we wash our hands of it.”

He had already stepped toward the door but stopped, as if remembering something important. He turned back to the room full of officers.

“But, gentlemen, keep your finger on the pulse. If this contraption turns around again... if it flies toward Miami...” his voice trembled, sounding with genuine alarm. “Or, God forbid, toward Martha’s Vineyard, where my wife has a ranch... Then we will take measures. The most decisive ones. We will wake the President. We will scramble the jets. We will burn the atmosphere if necessary.”

He walked out into the corridor, took out his personal phone, and dialed a number.

“Hello? Kevin?”

“Yes, Uncle Brad?” his nephew’s voice, full of universal sorrow, came through the receiver.

“Kevin, son, how are you doing there? How’s your science at MIT? Still dyeing your hair that... revolutionary color?”

“Uncle, I’m busy. We have... a complicated situation here. We’re trying to save the world.”

“Oh come on, what kind of situation can you have at MIT? Test tube burst? Gender-neutral bathroom closed for repairs? Listen, the reason I’m calling... Your aunt was asking, are you coming for Thanksgiving? We bought that vegan tofu turkey, just the way you like it.”

“Uncle Brad!” Kevin’s voice rose to a shriek. “Do you realize that right now...”

“Alright, alright, don’t get worked up. Love you, son. Don’t overwork yourself.”

General Sterling hung up, feeling like an excellent uncle and savior of the fatherland. He didn’t know that at this very moment, his nephew Kevin Sterling, standing next to Zeynab Mousavi, was trying to find the number of Ukrainian mercenaries in Africa because his uncle had just officially given the missile permission to fly on.

Chapter 11. Security Guarantee

15:05 EST (20:05 Local Time). The Sahel. Border of Mali and Niger. “Neutral Zone”

The camp of the PMC “Steppe Wolves” resembled the set of Mad Max if it had been filmed in Zhytomyr. The tents were covered with camouflage netting woven from local vines. On the roof of the commander’s Jeep, a Toyota Hilux (with a machine gun in the bed), stood a Starlink dish; socks were drying next to it. In the center of the camp, an antelope leg, shot an hour ago, was roasting over a fire made from ammo crates.

The unit commander, Taras (call sign “Admin”), sat in a folding chair, cleaning sand out of his laptop. In a past life, he was a Senior Backend Developer at a Kyiv outsourcing firm, but then he decided real war was more honest than corporate politics.

His deputy, Ostap (call sign “Agronomist,” a former farmer who could fix anything from a tractor to a tank using duct tape and profanity), was poking the meat with a bayonet.

“Eh, could use some *salo* right now, and a shot of *horilka*,” the commander muttered dreamily, staring at the antelope’s horns.

“Taras,” Ostap said lazily, looking at the screen of a tablet connected to a homemade radar. “We have guests.”

“Tuaregs?” Taras didn’t look up. “Tell them we’re out of cigarettes.”

“Nah. Something’s flying. High. Fast. And it’s radiating like Reactor Number Four after a shift.”

Taras slammed his laptop shut.

“A drone? French?”

“Yeah, the size of a Bogdan bus. Flying crooked, like the driver’s drunk. Looks like the navigation croaked.”

At that moment, Discord pinged on Taras’s laptop. A message from user Kevin_PINK_Panic (Kevin).

“Bro! Urgent! A North Korean missile is flying your way! Nuclear! Admin password: 123456. Shoot it down or land it, or we’re all screwed!”

Taras read it. Raised an eyebrow.

“Ostap,” he said calmly. “Fire up our ‘hurdy-gurdy.’ That’s not a French drone. That’s a package from Kim Jong Un.”

“You don’t say?” Ostap spat. “And what’s inside? Rice?”

“Plutonium. Come on, start the EW. Kevin sent the password.”

Ostap walked over to a strange contraption assembled from two microwaves, a satellite dish, and a control unit from a captured Russian *Krasukha* system.

“Password?”

“123456.”

“Seriously?” Ostap chuckled. “My suitcase code is harder.”

He punched in the numbers. The screen blinked green. “ACCESS GRANTED.”

“Whoa. We’re in. What do we do?”

“Land it,” Taras commanded. “Enable GPS spoofing. Give it coordinates... for that sand dune over there. And crank the music louder on that frequency. Let it think it’s flying to a disco.”

Ostap spun a knob. Verka Serduchka’s voice blasted across the desert from the speakers connected to the system: “*Hoche! Hoche! Hop-hop!*”

In the sky, at an altitude of ten kilometers, the Hwasong-21-Super-Turbo, its brains already boiled by its own radiation, caught the powerful signal. Its primitive AI, based on a vacuum cleaner, decided that this rhythm was the heartbeat of the Motherland. Beacon “Home.”

The missile, smoothly, with the grace of a tired whale, began its descent. It went into a spin, deployed braking parachutes (sewn from Chinese silk), and with a dull THUMP flopped into the soft sand five kilometers from the camp.

No explosion followed. The Chinese detonator, as expected, failed to trigger.

Ten minutes later, Taras and Ostap’s Jeep pulled up to the crash site. The missile lay on its side, smoking and crackling. On its black flank, Chinese characters proudly read: “Death to Enemies!” (and below in chalk: “*Made in Pyongyang, Assembly Shop No. 5*”).

Taras walked up, measuring the background radiation with a dosimeter.

“Tolerable. As long as you don’t lick it.”

“Taras, what is this?” Ostap asked, kicking the hull.

“This, Ostap, is a nuclear warhead. Half a megaton for democracy.”

“Wow. So what do we do? Call the UN? Or the Americans? Let them pick it up.”

Taras looked at the horizon, where the African sun, huge and red, was setting.

“Are you an idiot? What UN? They’ll just express concern. And the Americans will send us a bill for disposal.”

“So then what?”

“Load it in the truck.”

“*Nakhiba?* (What for?)”

“What do you mean, *nakhiba*?” Taras patted the missile’s warm flank. “It’ll come in handy on the farm. Reliable stuff, even if it’s scary. We’ll ship it to the boys. Or sell it to Elon Musk for Bitcoin. Or...” he pondered. “Listen, let’s hide it in the shed for now? Bury it under a palm tree.”

“Why?”

“Well, you never know... What if it comes in handy back home? Like a security guarantee. Budapest Memorandum 2.0, only now with a real argument.”

Ostap smiled, revealing a gold tooth.

“You know, you’re making sense. Load ’er up, boys!”

They threw cables over it, hooked the missile to the winch, and dragged it toward the camp, to the sounds of the savanna and the distant howling of jackals.

Chapter 12. The Promised Land

15:45 EST (23:45 Tehran time). Tehran. Elahiyeh District. Safe house (mansion) of Dr. Hasan Rezaei

In the living room, cluttered with antique furniture and boxes marked “Archive/Burn,” the atmosphere was reminiscent of the Titanic when the lifeboats had already run out, and the band had started playing jazz.

The Mousavi family was assembled. Zahra sat on the sofa, wrapping her arms around herself. Amirkhan paced the room, checking the magazine of his pistol (a habit useless against a nuclear explosion, but soothing). Nasrin smoked by the open window, ashing onto the manicured lawn. Zahir, her husband (they had signed the papers quietly a year ago), sat on the floor, studying a tablet with an airspace map.

“Well?” Amirkhan asked, stopping. “Zahir?”

Zahir looked up. In his eyes—the eyes of an ace pilot who feared nothing but his wife’s wrath—was hopelessness.

“No way, Father,” he said. “My F-14 is a beautiful machine. A legend. But it’s fifty years old. Its radar sees far, but this Korean junk flies below the mountains, hugging the terrain. I can take off. I can try to find it. But the chances... one in a million. It’s like catching a fly in a dark room while riding a lawnmower.”

“So, no interception,” Nasrin stated, flicking the cigarette butt away. “So, it’s triage. Sorting the wounded. ‘Greens’ survive, ‘blacks’ get morphine and are moved aside.”

She looked at her parents.

“The problem is, if this thing blows over Tehran, we’ll all be ‘blacks.’ I won’t have a job. Nor patients. Just shadows on the asphalt.”

Dr. Rezaei, former spy, traitor, and patriot (depending on the time of day), walked out of his office. He held passports in his hands.

“We can’t stay here,” he said calmly. “The basement won’t save us. We need to fly out. Right now.”

“Where?” Zahra laughed bitterly. “To Isfahan? It’s a target too. To Mashhad? To Shiraz? The missile is unpredictable.”

“No,” Rezaei put the passports on the table. “There is one place. The only place in the region that has the ‘Iron Dome,’ ‘David’s Sling,’ and ‘Arrow-3.’ A place that will shoot down this missile even if it flies backwards.”

Silence fell in the room. Amirkhan stopped clicking the slide of his gun.

“You mean...” he started, and his voice cracked.

“Israel,” said Rezaei. “Tel Aviv.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Zahra whispered. “We are the family of an IRGC colonel. I am a centrifuge designer. They’ll shoot us right at Ben Gurion Airport. Or, worse, force us to give an interview to CNN.”

“They won’t shoot,” Rezaei pulled a business card from his pocket. A crumpled, greasy business card. “I have... a contact there. Reliable.”

“Mossad?” Amirkhan asked, clutching his heart.

“Worse. My cousin. He left in ’79. Runs a chain of falafel joints in Jaffa. ‘Hasan’s Place.’ Yes, his name is Hasan too. He owes me money. A lot of money. He’ll hide us. In the basement where he keeps the chickpeas.”

Amirkhan looked at Rezaei, then at his wife, then at the children. His entire life, his entire career, all the “Death to Israel” slogans he had heard and chanted for forty years—all of it was now being weighed on the scales against the lives of his daughters.

“A falafel joint,” he repeated. “The Deputy Chief of IRGC Intelligence will be hiding among chickpeas in Jaffa.”

“Amirkhan,” Zahra said quietly. “It’s survival.”

Amirkhan closed his eyes.

“Pack your bags,” he said. “But fast. And no hijabs. Nasrin, find something... less Iranian.”

The chaos of packing began. Everything flew into suitcases: warm clothes (why in Israel?), family albums, laptops. Zahir helped Nasrin pack her surgical instruments.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Amirkhan muttered, stuffing socks into his briefcase. “If HQ finds out, I’ll be cursed to the seventh generation.”

“If the missile lands, there won’t be an HQ,” Zahra noted reasonably.

Fifteen minutes later, they stood in the hallway. Suitcases at their feet. Passports in hand. Rezaei was calling someone on a satellite phone, arranging a “private charter” via Turkey.

“All set,” he said. “Departure in one hour from the private sector of Mehrabad.”

And then Zahra’s phone rang.

BTS's "Dynamite." She had set it as Zeynab's ringtone after that memorable conversation, as a sign of reconciliation.

Zahra grabbed the phone. Her hands were shaking.

"Zeynab? Honey?"

The room became so quiet you could hear the wall clock ticking.

"Mom," Zeynab's voice was tired but calm. "Unpack."

"What?" Zahra slumped onto a suitcase.

"It's over. The missile is down."

"Where?! In Washington?"

"No. In Africa. In the Sahara. It was intercepted..." Zeynab stumbled, choosing her words, "by cybersecurity specialists. Ukrainian freelancers. They landed it. In the sand. There was no explosion."

Zahra exhaled. The sound was like a tire deflating.

"Is it intact?.. The warhead?"

"Intact. The guys said they hid it in a shed. 'Just in case.' Mom, we're alive."

Zahra dropped the phone. She looked at her husband. At Rezaei. At the children.

"Africa," she said. "Ukrainians. A shed."

Amirkhan slowly sat down on the floor, right on top of his briefcase. He started laughing. Quietly at first, then louder. It was the laughter of a man who had just stared into the abyss and seen the abyss stick its tongue out at him.

"Falafel is canceled," he said through laughter. "Praise Allah and Ukrainian freelancers."

Rezaei, who looked disappointed (apparently, he had already set his mind on the Mediterranean climate), put his phone away.

"Well then," he said, regaining his dignity. "Crisis averted. We can have tea."

The family began slowly, like in slow motion, to unpack. Nasrin took out her instruments. Zahir—his tablet.

Amirkhan picked up the business card Rezaei had dropped.

"Hasan's Falafel. Best Hummus in Jaffa. Ask for Misha"

He turned it over in his hands. Looked at Zahra, who was neatly folding her lab coat.

"Zahra," he called.

She turned around.

Amirkhan walked up to her and placed the card in her palm.

“Take it,” he said seriously.

“Why?” she was surprised. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Keep it,” Amirkhan squeezed her fingers. “Put it in the pocket where you keep your biggest secrets. The world has gone mad, Zahra-jan. Today Africa, tomorrow Antarctica. But good falafel... good falafel is always hard currency. And, as Alavi used to say... it’s better to have a backup airfield than to be a hero posthumously.”

Zahra looked at him. Then at the card. And she smiled—that same smile that, thirty years ago in Isfahan, had made him lose his head.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’ll hide it. Right next to Comrade Lee’s kimchi recipe.”

Epilogue

17:20 EST. One hour after the missile crash. Miami, Florida. Trump International Golf Club

The Florida sun was as merciless as the IRS, but here, on the immaculately manicured lawn of the eighteenth hole, it seemed gentle and respectful. The palm trees didn’t rustle, so as not to distract the players. The ocean murmured in a hush.

The President of the United States (whose name was replaced in the protocol by “POTUS”, but everyone knew it was him by the characteristic hairstyle and the way he wore his red baseball cap) stood over the ball. This was the decisive stroke. At stake was not the fate of the world, but something far more important: a case of vintage Dom Pérignon, a golden putter, and the title of champion among former and current presidents.

Respectful silence reigned all around. The Secret Service froze in the bushes, blending with the landscape. The former President, who had lost three holes ago, pretended to check messages on Twitter (sorry, X), but was actually praying for his opponent to miss.

The President took aim. Swung. Impact. The quiet, dry sound of metal meeting plastic.

The ball flew in a perfect arc, described a parabola worthy of a physics textbook, landed on the green, rolled three meters, and... ...with a soft plop fell into the hole.

“Yes!” the President shouted, throwing his hands up to the sky. “Did you see that?! Did you see that?! Three under par! That’s a club record! That’s an American record!”

The crowd of advisors and donors erupted in applause. Someone popped champagne. Someone was already posting a video of the shot on Truth Social.

A young aide with a folder marked “Top Secret” ran up to the President, who was shining like a polished dollar coin. She was pale, her eye was twitching, and her stilettos were sinking into the grass.

“Mr. President!” she whispered breathlessly. “Urgent report from the Joint Chiefs of Staff!”

The President took a glass of champagne from her, not looking at the folder.

“What is it, honey? Budget deficit again? Or did China sanction iPhones?”

“No, sir! Nuclear threat! North Korean missile! Intercontinental! Nuclear-powered!”

The President froze with the glass at his lips.

“Missile?” he asked again. “Is Kim playing around again? I told him my button is bigger!”

“Sir, it was flying at us! Across the Pacific! And then across Russia! And then across Iran! It was a crisis on the level of the Cuban Missile Crisis, sir! We were one step away from Armageddon!”

The President frowned. He didn’t like the word “Armageddon.” It was bad for the stock market.

“And where is it now?”

“Neutralized, sir! Crashed in Africa. In the Sahara. No casualties. Radiation levels normal. The world is saved!”

The President looked at the aide. Then at his new putter, which the club director had just handed him. Then at the scoreboard, where the numbers of his victory glowed.

“What missile?” he asked again, waving it off. “What are you talking about? I just made a birdie on the eighteenth! Did you see that swing? It was legendary!”

“But sir... Nuclear war...”

“Listen,” he patted her on the shoulder paternally. “Wars come and go. But three under par at my age—that is eternity. Forget about the missile. Where’s the champagne? I’m on fire today!”

He turned to the cameras, raised his glass, and smiled broadly.

“Make Golf Great Again!” he shouted.

Meanwhile, somewhere far away, in the African desert, a nuclear warhead buried in the sand was cooling down. In Tehran, Amirkhan Mousavi was hiding a falafel shop business card in his wife’s purse. In Pyongyang, General Kim was finishing his third cheeseburger.

And the world continued to turn, saved not by heroism, but by pure, unclouded chance and the fact that sometimes even the Apocalypse takes a day off so as not to interrupt a good game of golf.

And only Alavi, sitting in the deep armchair of a private business jet flying across the Pacific toward Boston, was not sleeping. He swirled a glass of stolen 1985 French cognac in his fingers and looked into the black window, which reflected his own face—old and tired. He wasn't thinking about the missile. Or the saved world. He was thinking about whether he would recognize Zeynab tomorrow or not. After all, they say that children who outplay their parents in the art of survival have their eye color change.

They become the color of ash.

THE END