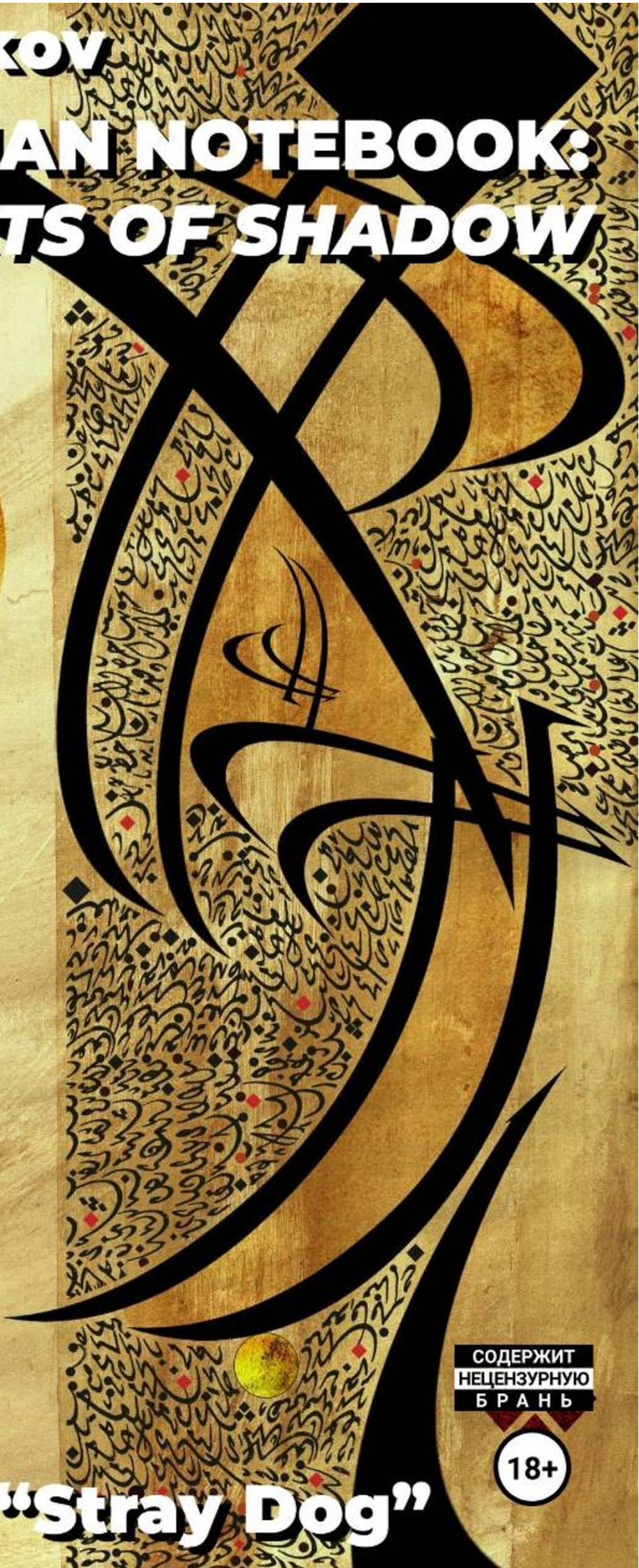


Yuri Melnikov

THE PERSIAN NOTEBOOK: ARCHITECTS OF SHADOW



**Isfahan
Shiraz
Fordow
and
Operation “Stray Dog”**

**СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ**

18+

Юрий Мельников

**The Persian Notebook:
Architects of Shadow**

«Автор»

2026

Мельников Ю.

The Persian Notebook: Architects of Shadow / Ю. Мельников —
«Автор», 2026

“The Persian Notebook: Architects of Shadow” is more than just a book. It's a cultural resource for the early 21st century, reflecting on the era of total surveillance, the scale of absurdity, the glare of nuclear glare, and the glimmer of hope. This book is for those who believe that literature can not only create the world but also change it

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Содержание

Isfahan	5
Aleph: The Transcript	5
Bet: Vacuum and the Poems of Hafez	8
Gimel: The Crystal Lattice of Loyalty	10
Dalet: Tea and French Lace	12
He: The Tank Hunter	15
Vav: The Geometry of Fear	18
Zayin: The Entropy of Choice	20
Khet: Digital Calligraphy	22
Tet: Statistical Noise	24
Yod: Double Sanctity	26
Kaph: Dance in the Looking-Glass	28
Lamed: The Theater of Fire	30
Mem: The Theology of Retribution	33
Nun: The Fragility of Porcelain	36
Samekh: The Collapse of Probabilitie	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40

Юрий Мельников

The Persian Notebook: Architects of Shadow

Isfahan

Aleph: 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-raḥmāni r-raḥīm. 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 tasbeih – 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: 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 sterilely 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: 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: 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: 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: 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. Rezaei 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."

Rezaei 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. Rezaei, 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?"

Rezaei 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: 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: 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 – wotrandom.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: 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 wotrando.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: 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 Rezaei 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: 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'īl!” – 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: 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,” Rezaei 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,” Rezaei 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: 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: 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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