

**KID DEMIURGE (مدبّر جوان),
THE FIRST INSTALLMENT
OF “AN ANON’S ROMANCE
(انون نامه)”, A PERSLABOO’S
TRIPTYCH REVERIE;**

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*To the deplatformed, the dispossessed of
narrative and dialogue.*



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*“In the Name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver
of Mercy!”*

FORWARD FROM THE TESTATOR.

...Thus does this Phrase append the Subject from Itself; surely may this Movement ordain to elaborate its Attributes...

So unfolds the Word, the Tome of the Preserved Tablet, from the Tip of its first Diacritic. From its mysterious Predicate issues forth the Named—It is His very Entity in utter Definition. Its State’s first Generations shall resound sonorously as Himself in twofold Mercy: an Accommodation for His Action, a Sanctuary for His Substantiation. As this Phrase seemingly resides at the Head of that unseen Chronicle, so also does it seem to presuppose the Subsections of its every inked Entry...

(*abridged*)

* * *

*O Beloved, may you execute an overture that's sound—
A vasiyat not of vellum, but of brined cheek be it bound:*

*Say this ancient place subdues me, Akvan's onager beguiles,
Yet caprice's wanton torrents 'cross our aisle deign not hound;*

*Prithee bring my body homeward, early one-third's span a day
Send a hearse, then pour the shots of Irish cream to pass around;*

*'Tis the toast of forlorn soldiers, after I be lowered down—
Once they drape me in our banner, per their articles' expound:*

*A chrysanth, a boutonniere more, could you pelt my casket,
Till the petal-laden vessel breaks its straps and cleaves the
ground?*

*Dewdrops' seep'll leach the Warflag, that palimpsest of paeans,
Of vain lyric writ in bloodshed, thrice renditioned solemn-
frowned,*

*Imbibe spirits, cleanse thy grief through mirthful tears dyed
tannin-brown!
Gházil left to pick blanched asphodels, in Hades dread-
renowned..."*

I

*Sunset over great Araxes' every canyon's yonder chasm
Lavished too its regal spectrum 'pon a terrace west Khwarazm*

*Hexafoliate nacre'd daisies inlaid 'top a borrowed bureau
Glimmered sprays of gilt 'n' turquoise through some musk in
glassy limbo—*

*Irids twain of anise-bay 'roused, a lone basker their possessor;
Eschèwed he salvific Heaven for its written intercessor*

* * *

Vivid textures overcame Gházy's senses, as perfumes toppled off one's vanity do when freed from their broken vials. Swashes penned in his florid hand lay drying on the parchment in front of him, their India ink bleeding into its fine fibers for the ages; with these very strokes, his last will and testament had just been signed. He returned his quill into its inkwell, never to retract it again—so, it had been written at last, the proper way! But something still seemed to be missing...

From where did I even obtain such stationery in the first place, the boy wondered... the answer had long since flitted from his mind,

as had much of the recent past, except recalling thinking that a keyboard proved insufficient for composing such a life-defining document; a nib's friction would do it far better justice than any word processor could.

“—and from a far-afield Anon to all fellow Frens, my dearest Regards,” read the valediction beneath its paragraphs of provisions.

Its thuluth-like cursive twined together over the writing-surface, broad and tortuous like the rose inside the cobalt Murano decanter his hosts had placed next to him. How he would miss those lifelong companions he would never meet... alas, their opportunity was not yet come to be transplanted elsewhere, if ever it hopefully would.

He had likely taken the paper from a drawer, Gházy realized, from the very *escritoire* now serving as his study. His focus shifted to the desktop upon which his testament rested. Ring upon ruffled ring of Honduran mahogany traced their sturdy span across its veneer, their grain melded into the thin vellus-hair growing over his wrists; their tree had enjoyed a succession of auspicious, unrecorded years before its bounteous plies had been summarily harvested—if only its depleted sap could flow through *his* veins somehow, he wished again, that he might

also live long enough to witness his own felling...

The original purchaser of this desk must have left behind the nicknacks Gházy had fished out from its hidden compartments while unoccupied: a brass crab with a magnifying glass for a carapace in its left pull-out column and an onyx letter opener in the right, a fairy-flanked desk plaque under its sorting-shelves, and a collection of dusty ledgers in its bottom drawers. He had been perusing the pages of the latter those past several days, tracing the transactions of surplus grains and precious articles which had been tabulated and stowed away for audits conducted long before his grandfather's birth; the name of the notary signed on each page matched the one engraved on the plaque, that of the dearly-departed Dr. Omid Dehqanfar, an esteemed consultant on international affairs and scribe to the minister of the Qajar exchequer. His great-grandchildren Morteza and Nurah had nightly regaled their guest over the past few weeks with accounts of his exploits: his outmaneuvering of covetous princes to keep his position, his covert benefaction toward his servants and the shopkeepers of his favorite sections in the nearby Tajrish Bazaar, and in particular, his shrewd appeasement of the

British and Russian dignitaries of his day to preserve his country's dignity. What had those ledgers to say of their treasure's fates, he wondered—

"..They went all out with this party, wow. Where's the talent from, anyway?"

"The main headliner for tonight, you mean?"

"Yeah, him and everyone else playing tonight."

"Well, he's the dude staying upstairs—no one really knows him except the family, he hasn't performed here before. As for the others playing now, you know where the art gallery is on Sepand Alley, the one close to Payam-e-Noor's campus in South Tehran?"

"Next to the little theater, right?"

"Yeah, the small gallery, between the university and the headquarters of the national gas company there."

"I gotcha now, go on."

"There's a decent café in the theater's building—I totally suggest the chocolate croissants there, by the way, they're made fresh every day. The gallery held an exhibition on figurative sculpture if I can remember correctly, and that's where they got the musicians—a favor for some artsy friends of theirs, I think."

“Awesome. Sounds like I need to visit that place more often, if the metro schedule allows.”

“Nullsight’s the name of the outfit they hired for tonight’s party, I think they’re based out of Toronto or somewhere—the guy flashing all those crazy lights is a lighting coordinator of theirs. My girlfriend’s bestie knows him personally, from other concerts of theirs she’s helped promote.”

“Wait, that’s his show going on, his equipment?”

“Yep. She says he’s pursuing a doctorate in optical engineering, so the guy must know where to get the hardware and how to use it.”

“Far out! It’s pretty intense, all I can say is anyone who’s epileptic or tripping balls probably shouldn’t be in there. Is there a chance I can speak with her? My cousins are spinning some tracks for a party coming up, and they want something better to light up the living room they’re performing in than the same old disco ball and strobes.”

“I’ll give you her account handles when I get back my phone after we leave here—drop her a DM, she should be able to ask him. I don’t know how exclusive his clientele is though; I can ask her to put a good word in for you if you want, don’t worry.”

“No problem. Thanks, man.”

“While we’re giving out favors, you know if anyone’s holding any bonafide molly? Finals really did me in, damned sophomore year. I just need a little pick-me-up for now, and I don’t trust the bath salts going around at all these events lately. The last thing I need’s for the morality patrol to have me in cuffs tomorrow, or to overdose on accident...”

Just some more pointless chatter from the patio below, an ember-stoking stutter... would the coming inferno be a full-on forest fire, or mere self-immolation?

Gházy could not fully bring his diorama’s destiny to mind among these voices droning on from outside. Instead of being rent apart as kindling for the coming conqueror—as was the custom for most of the heritage belonging to this nation—perhaps his sanctum’s finely-crafted furniture would be spared the refuse-pile.

Gházy arose from his chair and returned to the railing surrounding the rooftop balcony of the Dehqanfars’ villa, his favorite vantage point. He looked out over Darabad, an especially affluent neighborhood of the already-affluent Shemiran district of Tehran, Iran’s capital city; the two siblings granted him lodging here, while their parents vacationed abroad. The Alborz mountain range which formed the city’s

towering backdrop granted him this vista, lifting the northern districts' privileged residents upon its foothills, up and away from the congestion and aridity afflicting the poorer districts in the southern lowlands, ever upwards toward the picturesque hiking trails and ski lodges at its peaks.

Many nations insisted upon basing their embassies in Shemiran, as they had when it was still a complex of royal gardens far to the north of the burgeoning city. Viziers undeserving of their vaunt titles once guided these partakers in Persia's riches on nature-walks there, with many a concession negotiated in their pavilions; these days, such favors were entertained in the hovels of the fork-tongued pious, who laundered policy within the auspices of their magnanimity. Gházy could discern a palace of theirs buffered by its well-manicured grounds among the surrounding urban sprawl, one of several in northern Tehran left standing; the shahs themselves used to retreat there, be the sojourn from ennui or insurrection, leaving the complex open to a gawking public after having fled for good.

The Dehqanfars' sumptuous estate was itself among the last single-family residences remaining in Darabad; developers had bought up the rest of it when Tehran's meteoric growth

began in the seventies, and high-rise apartments smothered its demolished rusticity ever since. Within the elite's secluded compounds, up and above the bustle of the neighborhood's main thoroughway, Gházy could watch its fashionable residents act out their sordid dramas with complete discretion: customers sitting outside ice cream parlors and patisseries with sherbet-lit signs, too preoccupied by errands to savor their pistachio-flavored spoonfuls; builders delivering stillborn structures out of the eddies of trash and sand scouring their construction sites, the contemporary bamboos and alloys commissioned by their young architects jostling the passé egalitarianism of Le Corbusier's reinforced concrete for supremacy over the streets; window washers, caretakers, and other menial laborers returning to their slums after toiling all day for their wages, either inching homeward in another wave of rush-hour traffic or waiting dejectedly for the next packed bus, while Ferraris, Bentleys, and all sorts of cabriolets and convertibles cruised up the neighborhood's ascending alleys, toward temples of self-indulgence where no ramshackle Paykan dared sputter.

My, did Gházy's back ache from sitting in the same position these past hours! He turned

around in his chair to examine the Kashan rug upon which the desk was placed, a faint urge to recline on its lush pile swiftly dispelled. He traced his foot around the carpet's border, watching its motifs unravel and mend back together as his shoe passed over them, conspiring like all the world's sentinels had seemingly done to neglect his passage through their territory and allow his unmolested arrival to this distant place.

The Scythians were the ones who made the first carpet known to man, were they not? Gházy asked himself without confirmation...

At one time, those mounted nomads trod their own path to civilization across this land's treeless tapestries and weaved textiles without rival from the wild rams they had tamed in their wake—and then some young royal hostage of theirs, more adamant to bring his mental world to life than his teacher was to prepare his own burial-mound, had used his loom to abstract their life-gripping hunts into the subtle medallions and paisleys he saw cohere so well into the villa's gentile decor, subduing their marauding avarice for good. Whichever successors preserved their noble seed would soon color that rug's synthetically-dyed field a red of real blood, he was sure of it...

Still more noise accosted Gházy's ears amidst these visions, but from where? Beyond the oversized chaise lounge he had had carried up to his open-air quarters as a bed, its canopy of wisteria enmeshed within the trellises of a sagging pergola, the Moroccan screen separating his open-air living-quarters from the windows of the villa's upper story, cast-iron simurghs glared from their posts flanking the balcony's sliding doors—were their open beaks screeching at him?

While lost in contemplation, an unseen hand had cracked one open to check the balcony for any sign of life without shutting it; the now-uninhibited din of his hosts, their friends and acquaintances had become real again. The regime had abstained from raiding any illegal gatherings in Darabad that summer, and the Dehqanfars would take this strange opportunity to throw the grand rave they had carefully planned and coordinated for months, on a more audacious scale than any of its predecessors; if successful, it would be the pinnacle of the social season and go down as a night to remember. The reception party for this event was now underway downstairs, after which the guests would set off for rave's as-yet-undisclosed location.

As was his idiosyncrasy when restless, Gházy paced a counterclockwise circuit around the railing, passing the high gates and paid lookouts guarding the property's perimeters from passersby.

"... Did you see what our favorite diva posted the other day on her feed?"

"I was up to my eyeballs in papers to grade until early this morning, tell me."

"She bleached her whole hair platinum blond, girl, not just the streaks she already had—can you believe it? She's even started pretending she's a khaleesi from Game of Thrones, I'll pull the post up so you can see."

"Ugh, what a travesty. She's really become a fan of that show since she tormented all the seasons, now she never stops going on about how everyone in her life abandoned her and what not. Too much time indoors, obviously—read it, please."

"Wait a minute... scrolling through... here it is: 'I said my last goodbye to a boy who said he loved me. A man I wished to care for. And I didn't feel a thing for him anymore. Just impatient to make something of my life. Time to make my own destiny...'—eh, not the worst ripoff I've seen for a status."

"At least it's wavy enough to look the part, her face needs a little less foundation with that

costume though. Looks like she's going to a cocktail party instead of camping in a field somewhere with her dragons.

"Her ex was a complete tool to her, so I'll give her that much sympathy."

"No social life beyond those who enable her bad habits, that's how she got there. You think she'll go further than that, start wearing colored contacts or something? I know we gotta support her as a friend and all, but if that happens, I'm just done with her antics, goodness..."

Just more futile conversation from the lower stories, how trite—he could not help but eavesdrop again, this time on one of the villa's verandas.

Gházy had to keep his objective in sight for their sake, no more distractions... the patricians downstairs had been too abased to surmount their own. What convictions they did share were subsequently expended in insipid conversation and exhaled away by careless drafts from their water-pipes. He watched the vestiges of their ineffectual rebellion waft downhill under night's streetlit shroud and accrete into the grim haze of smog from the distant freeways—oh, how he loathed the smoke more than hellfire, that tepid, strawberry-and-saliva-scented smoke which deposited lethargy's grimy film over all

that tried to live afresh! It permeated the surface of everything in its path as far as the eye could see, begrimed the out-of-code condominiums haphazardly clustered under the villa, brittle the aging taxidermies inside the wildlife museum past the sport complex, further set the crows' feet into these beautiful ones' tired faces—the sooty stuff settled over them all, ashes from a snuffed-out fire.

Gházy could bear it no more and looked upward, to no avail. Sky above city with its adornment of scrapers and satellites, how it petrified his cohort within its earthbound transmissions, which dismembered their captured cadavers into packets of selfies and stories for their consumers on earth—no wonder, then, that those who suffered the curse of being young felt so profoundly burnt out. Every time they opened the ghostwritten horoscopes pinging their notifications, every waking night he kept the secrets of those above he had sworn he would not name, were they not just as complicit as the governments and corporations of the world in stoking this floating electrolier which barred all mankind, even these finer specimens, from observing the mansions of the stars beyond?

From the speakers of a laptop left open inside a nearby bedroom, the algorithm cued a track from an old Caltex CD, a *bandari* singer recorded during the golden nineties half the world away, along that other Gulf of Catalina in California. The villa's inhabitants, cast down to their own devices, grasped for any respite which would chance upon them in this land of the deconstructed lion; their constellations were the LED strips lining their ceilings instead, glossy posters of their culture's token luminaries and better-known celebrities from others their thumbtacked planets. No matter how these poor devils rearranged the zoetrope of posed photoshoots which commemorated their lives, the phosphor which nightly marred their slumber would one day find them expired, wan and passed over for all time.

Under the guise of the defiant nihilism running rampant around the globe, whether known to them or not, the partygoers had condemned themselves to pining after a tangible, all-permissive god, completely pantheistic in both being and non-being, all the world's information harped upon until tiresome and a familiar, shrugged-off nothing—yet none, not the holy men nor the academics who supplied their curriculum, dared warn them that

somewhere above those heavens, some mover between mortal and deity would still be given obedience, from the faithful and unfaithful alike.

A rare, sudden pang of empathy, brief as a far-off pulsar waxing toward the world, rapped the bars of Gházy's ribcage; before its beam rotated back on its uncharted axis into the lee of the cosmos beyond, he promised himself, he would try what he could to escape them from these doldrums, whatever was ordained for his plans—

“—it's about time you came downstairs with me, *azizam*. The guests are wondering why we haven't come down yet,” persisted a timid, most agreeable trill from behind the screen's grating.

A sudden flow of pheromones through Gházy's bloodstream spurred his heart pump fuller. It heralded the presence of his darling—but she was not yet supposed to be with him...

“I am about to start my prayers, Parisa,” Gházy responded, anticipating another ploy to be nearer him. “Stay out of eyeshot for now—and remember, the Accursed is our third if you have entered my quarters with no witness.”

Her voice sounded more reedy and feeble than normal; he knew from their previous audio

chats that another spell of insomnia had dampened its resonance.

“I thought all your exams were graded for the summer, *qashangam*, your voice sounds strained again. Why do you deprive yourself of sleep like this?”

Immediately inside the sliding doors, four of Parisa’s coworkers who had agreed to help prepare her sat two to a cushion on a settee in the upstairs hallway, listening in; they needed no compensation for this task, except to learn why this odd visitor, who had come downstairs only a couple times during his entire stay, had sought a demure specimen like her from among the glamorous guests.

Their whispers still audible from behind the doorframe, Gházy could now peer through the screen to ascertain its secret. An upright cypress from the southwest, Parisa’s Lurish descent betrayed itself through the physiognomy of her almond-half face, its kernel’s pale flesh adorned in skillfully-applied makeup no app’s filter was capable of rendering; cheekbones dampened with bronzer, darting eyelids emboldened with shadow, she had smitten her lover as any courting woman would desire.

A partygoer flipped a wrong switch inside the upstairs hallway and turned off the balcony

light amidst Gházy beholding her; the lacquered teeth which bedecked her overbitten jaw quivered in apprehension through the darkening night, against a silhouette of long, wispy hair as much a part of her veil as the fabric itself—how fortunate was she to have the screen as her support, he thought, lest the breeze topple over her gangly frame.

“You poor soul, are you not yet prepared for tonight? What ails you?”

“It’s my anxiety kicking up again, nothing more. We just need to fit my dress, then I’ll be ready...” she started, trailing off after each point in accordance with her nature. “I came up here to check on you. I’ve felt these last few days that you must be exhausted as I am with all these goings-on... perhaps, perhaps you want to chat alone a bit while you get your outfit ready, holed up here as you’ve been the past two weeks...”

Parisa turned toward the balcony door after perceiving the company of her schoolmates, the illumination from upstairs profiling her lepidopteran lashes as they swooshed floorward in endearing humility.

“Very good, dear—it seems they have prepared you well so far. I’ve been busy rehearsing my songs, you know how

complicated they are; I'll be with you after the reception as we've discussed."

She made meekly to flank their obstacle, to which he drew further back.

"You'll get the release you desire, both of us shall, just be patient and have faith in fate."

Parisa's despairing sigh dispersed like rueseed through his side of the screen. He had displayed the jealousy of a devout husband over his charge, though who he served remained a mystery to her; much as she tried to lure him free from formalities like her past suitors, something held this one back from their creed's customary betrayal, and with a conviction which perplexed her.

"Very well," she relented. "Let's all enjoy the party together as we should, then, us and the others... don't you see how people adore us, love? Not everyone gets lucky enough to live out a night like this... whatever you've done, you must've made quite an impression on them, you should savor it... you hear how the same song has repeated twice? The DJs are looping their setlist until we come down..."

Gházy pitied Parisa that moment as she pitied him, for tonight was no happy accident. Like any lady in an epic legend, she would play her role only after their trajectories came

completely together, as he himself had suffered alone through his prior forgotten life to be there as her paramour, and would again after they united, when the two would almost certainly diverge from each other ever after—fortunately, their fleeting night would soon be fulfilled.

“Come closer for a moment, so they can’t hear,” he whispered to her with an uncharacteristic quaver. “You are more integral to tonight’s proceedings than you presently know. Keep in mind that you’ve stepped out with me into a different reality, more sublime than any which those mutes downstairs deem ‘the present’—don’t worry, you’ll have all the time in the world to flaunt about in the limelight, for all of them to see.”

“But... that’s not what I want—”

“There’s no shame in leaving these wretched times to rot, Parisa,” Gházy assured Parisa, in preemption of her stammering pretenses. “Do you not yet understand? Our destiny has been denied to both of us, after all, did you not agree when we discussed this? That’s why I’m here, to reclaim it—follow my lead tonight, be smart about it, and believe you me, you’ll be the empress of all today’s lovers.”

This first long minute that Parisa had faced Gházy without the distraction of

conversation, she perceived an uncompromising intent smolder from within the vitreous humor inside his pupils—and yes, it kept them constricted amid the seemingly triumphant darkness, a phenomenon she could have sworn ran contrary to modern science.

“Finish your thought, my most-high cradle, go on,” Gházy encouraged her, as if awaiting an anticipated answer.

Her entrails turned to ice at being referred to by this archaic title—or rather to a slow, strong river fit to breach its arteries, she realized, newly thawed after already being frozen... she regained her reply and spoke it again.

“Draw from my waters, my famished traveler, don’t delay...” incanted Parisa from she knew not where within her. “Our messages have taken me through such beautiful realms, where I’d never dreamed of reigning... like the field of saffron-frilled daffodils you saw sprouting from that barren mountainside behind us to pay my visit homage, before I’d even revealed to you that yellow is my color... or the ancient plain which lay fallow until I arrived there, when you saw me sitting on an abandoned plinth there to rest and all the tired turtle-doves found shelter in the tent of my velvet petticoats—we discussed

you staying here beyond your hire, and perhaps more, absurd as that sounds now that I say it out loud... I want to live in a world which actually *affirms* my presence in it, love... but before we reign together, prove yourself worthy of this title I've granted no one else—you *must* assure me that no other pretenders to your loyalty wait in the wings."

Gházy watched a fervid tear run down the crescent of her cheek. This was the most amount of words he had ever heard her speak at once, and with far greater intensity than even he had expected—good, she accommodated his hopeful words as anticipated, things were coming together, and how fantastical their arrangement would be...

"Proof enough will come tonight and to come, this is more than a party—and why belie your dignity with petulance, when your dainty foot treads the pomace of a thousand dalliances into the same fine wine?"

Parisa nodded in sheepish understanding.

"So you see now—you are the sole object of my affections, my true partner, and shall be so for the remainder of my days. But we must remain separate for just a little bit longer, dear—my duties here require my continued sobriety, you see."

As their future together possessed her own thoughts, Parisa seemed too woozy with delight to comprehend his words.

“Splendid, then we can be in each other’s arms, and never part again...”

Gházy’s heart nearly burst its caging at the thought of such an embrace, for he realized he was closer than ever to the proper complement he sought for so long. What restraint each maintained toward the other was fraying fast; Parisa grasped tighter the barrier between the two, and each swooned toward the other.

“Our hour is coming, be patient,” he reminded her for the last time. “Now that I’ve proven myself to you, remind me again—do you place yourself completely into my hands?”

“Yes,” she cooed.

“Good,” he acknowledged. “Return to your attendants and allow me a few more minutes to prepare—but wait—”

The black fern-fronds creeping over her bony fingers had conjured up a notion from his subconscious; in her haste to beseech him come down, she had left henna setting on them.

The evidence, the evidence!

Gházy recalled what he had forgotten: a final, incontrovertible stamp for his testament. It

would not do to come from his own handwriting, which could easily be falsified—no, it needed a biometric signature, the medium of which would come right from his beloved's hands!

Gházy grazed Parisa's knuckles with his fingers, the extent of their impropriety before further commitment. He rubbed the inky paste over his fingertips after sending her inside, until all of them were evenly coated. He then returned to his will and rolled his right index across its bottom margin, under his recently-written signature; middle finger followed index, and then ring, pinky and thumb for both hands, the same procedure he had done to enter the life which had first guided him to this one.

* * *

For some time after concluding evening prayers, Gházy knelt on the carpet in a final moment of indecision, thumbing the two intersecting *waw* engraved on his carnelian index ring before attending to his outfit.

He retreated to the mirror near his bed, where he changed into black trousers, a cerulean bishop-sleeved shirt stamped with a brain-coral pattern, and traditional leather-soled shoes.

He then wet his hands in a basin of fresh water and ran them down his alpinid jaw before drying it, ensuring he had left no stubble from when he shaved them that day, and painted a green mask over his whole face save his jasper lips, forehead to dimpled chin, cheek to full-moon cheek.

He donned a damask cloak with a black weft and swirling panicles of goldenrod as a warp; it swished sheer about his body as he returned to his bureau, like magma from some underwater volcano flowing down a reef to cool into a newborn island.

He then pulled a pair of hand-length bull's horns out of its top-left drawer and tied the string which connected to them around his head; a craftsman commissioned for the occasion had carved delicate spirals around the entire span of each.

And finally, he produced a twine necklace he had fashioned himself from under his pillow; a picture slightly larger than a postage stamp was strung through it, a folk saint of sorts who had taken her fate in her own hands in his old world as he would here—it would be evidence of another sort, he resolved to himself, if those other unseen friends ever chanced upon him wearing it.

His outfit complete, the main attraction entered the villa's upstairs hallway through the sliding doors, his steps deadened as a mandarin deliberating on some weighty matter of state.

* * *

Inside a room facing the balcony, Parisa's ladies-in-waiting were attending to the final fitting of her dress, a ballgown borrowed from the Dehqanfars' own wardrobe; the hosts had also been so kind as to donate the many jewels they next clasped around her high-cut neckline, some of them heirlooms and the rest spare keepsakes from a chest in a downstairs closet, while a guest sympathetic to the spectacle had contributed the satin shawl they draped about her sharp shoulders and a diaphanous veil of linen they then pinned around her head—Gházy had chosen the right maiden for his affections indeed, fastidious in her work, intelligent and doeishly beautiful by any standard.

As they continued their work, her attendants continued accosting their friend's fine ears further with their unrelenting questions concerning her bizarre suitor: so what of this rootless chameleon who had been dropped off by a gypsy cab less than a month ago, who had

solicited their services for her as if a larger ceremony was to be performed? Was he actually going to propose to her, after only laying eyes on her twice? Whatever the nature of their compact, she gave them no answer—in fact, she had not spoken to them at all since returning from their last encounter... well, if it made the party better, so be it. For whatever purpose, his pursuit had met its petrifying amber, and tonight's events would run their course...

And there he knocked now—her attendants gathered some mottled marigolds they bought that day into a makeshift bouquet and thrust it into her hands before sending her out the door.

* * *

After much ado, Gházy and Parisa finally grasped the crepe-festooned bannisters of the villa's grand staircase and descended into the great room, where the reception met them with great fanfare.

To think of it—with a mere leap onto their dining-table and a few sweetly-pitched ballads, the opulent had opened their steel gates and siphoned in this errant zephyr, this tonic for their stifled existences. Never before had the

guests witnessed such a cotillion for one couple among any of their peers; it seemed more like a marriage than a prelude for a party. Would a justice of the peace actually be brought out for them, or had the exorbitant dowries demanded by Iran's parents indeed gotten so absurd as to bring on this novel sort of white wedding?

"There we are, here are the guests of the hour now!" exclaimed a svelte voice amplified above the din of the ground floor, that of Morteza Dehqanfar.

A tap on his champagne flute brought all in the great room to quiet attention, save the jangling their accessories when they turned their heads to his table.

"After much anticipation, I now inaugurate tonight's celebrations!"

His sister Nura looked on approvingly after saying so, elated that this hastily improvised affair could come together so splendidly.

"Please, help yourselves to some bubbly—but don't drink it yet, let's make it official!"

The guests each took a glass from the Dehqanfars' servants, and once they all had one, Morteza led them in a toast.

"And here's to Gházy Loon, our headliner for tonight!" he continued. "And that's his lady

Parisa next to him, just look how they sparkle for our show! I'm happy to say that some acquaintances of ours first gave them each other's numbers, and in the past few weeks since, such a delightful romance has blossomed between them—first through text messages, then at their first face-to-face meeting a week ago where it was truly love at first sight, after which they swore to meet each other again only on the night of Ghazy's performance—it truly doesn't happen like this anymore, folks, it'll be one for the books. We couldn't help but give them a proper sendoff for the next phase of their relationship—*beh salâmati!*”

The sole camera allowed in this secretive gala flashed the room, its subjects' unlit faces momentarily dappled in crystal-light from the ladies' diamond earrings and the bottles in the wet bar.

Morteza handed the microphone to Nurah so she could speak.

“We had the honor to sight this bulbul while on our recent vacation—I won't bore you further with the details, but we will post his clip in our next story for those who wish to see it. From the first moment we heard him sing, his voice carried across the venue and into the hearts of everyone who had the privilege of

listening. Our last big party a few months ago went so well, and what we have seen from his performance took us by such pleasant surprise that we rescheduled our next one for tonight, not at the end of summer as originally planned.

“He’ll be our first act for the night and our first-ever live vocalist, for those who haven’t attended our past parties; we’ve always been proud to sponsor local electronic acts, several of which will meet us at the location—and just as a heads-up, for our next event maybe a few weeks from now, we plan to showcase a Kurdish musician who plays the electric tembur. He performs his native village’s compositions accompanied by a techno set, he’s at another party right now; we’ve invited him before and he never fails to dazzle us, so stay tuned for more announcements on that.

“And also, this rave will not take place in some tiny room like we normally do, but outside in the fresh air for once, in the mountains on the outskirts of Pardis. Finalize any arrangements you may need to make in the next few hours; since the metro is closed at this hour, you still have to go by car, so it’ll take about forty-five minutes. As for everyone who signed up for our carpool, we’ll be leaving at ten-thirty from the parking garage two blocks down. Everyone will

meet up at the Block 80 parking lot when they get to Phase 11, then we'll head for the area where the motorcycles and four-wheelers are parked, and our guides will lead you up to the spot from there. If you need the scan-code for our event's chat server, let our doormen know after you get your things back from them—and remember, no phones at the rave either, we don't want to be tracked..”

Some partygoers reflexively groped their pockets; they were not used to being deprived of their cellphones, which had been confiscated upon entry to prevent unwanted disclosure of the event.

Nura, ever the logistician of the pair, ended her address with some parting instructions:

“After Gházy finishes up, our DJs will spin their amazing trance set starting around one-thirty, and the other acts will make their appearances early in the morning—stay limber and hydrated so you can enjoy yourselves until sunrise, and get a staff member if anyone needs any medical attention, they're all first-aid certified. I'd like to thank all our local vendors from Pardis for selling their handicrafts and making this a truly multimedia affair—remember, they don't have much time to devote

to their own passions, so do support them with your business.

“Pay a little tip to our event staff security also, for they were good enough to risk the long way around Latyan Dam to keep us entertained and safe. I heard they evaded some police checkpoints to transport all the audio and visual gear to our staging spot, which has been safely delivered now, so all is well—and as always, let’s hear it for yet another magical Tehran night, and for many more like this!

Applause pulsed through the villa, polite and quiet at first in compliance with their hosts’ wishes, then swelling into earnestness when the couple waved to them. Parisa lowered her head and beamed in the mirth of their admiration—these two were a couple to remember, they just made the scene! Not a single chatroom in Tehran’s underground scene would be deprived of their likenesses once the morning came, that would be sure.

II

Darabad welcomed its new debutants, and the Dehqanfars found new clients for their patronage. For the next half-hour, the great room’s two DJs played the deep-house music

popular for such occasions in the common room; one cued an ambient track into the set with the left platter of his Pioneer XDJ-XZ, while the other built a riff around its scale with his MIDI keyboard, the bassline marking orange time over the pads of their sixteen-step drum machine.

Some gawky young ibises flocked around the DJ's table and bobbed to the beat, their fresh fades crisply delineated between moussed hair and sweat-beaded skin, each one preening over every movement of his courtship dances—but it was all to no avail. They could not stop the partygoers' brief cheer from mellowing back into pensivity.

Nullsight's dazzling strobelights diverged into vertical blinking strips, sliced the room into cross-sections of downcast glances and stark swashes of overexposed fabric, then rotated horizontally to scan the haggard crowd like a barcode. A building choir began to carry the arrangement, which seemed to last for hours before the next transition; as this endless requiem resonated through the dark room, the bolder boys gave up their attempt at spontaneity and assimilated into the mute swaying shared by all who stood together.

* * *

Pirouz, eardrums still atremor from the set's clanging cymbals, retreated from the great room into a parlor which opened onto the dancefloor; Farhad, his schoolmate, English tutor, and close-enough friend, followed suit in observing the desperate scene. The implicit chance of some floozy sleeping over made him skip an evening of sparring practice to keep his companion company, but tonight felt too stolid an affair to be on the prowl. One taste was enough of this easy but boring prey, let alone the many he had already tried, and like many other supposedly tempting vices, chasing after these spoiled brats held little allure for him anymore; not wishing to appear ungrateful that Farhad invited him to this latest diversion, Pirouz kept his dissatisfaction to himself.

Farhad put a hand on his shoulder, having intuited his true feelings—he himself hardly interacted with any of the guests anyway, and had only come when a group message of which he remained an uninteracting part announced the event. The two had met when Pirouz approached Farhad for his tutoring services; though a scholarship allowed him to attend their university and pursue an engineering degree, he

could not afford to pay the rate Farhad was charging, and after Pirouz offered to clean his apartment if his fees were waived, he accepted, the two becoming close ever since. Blessed with a dark sense of humor and ambitious nature, Pirouz had shown himself a more genuine friend to Farhad than most of the people in his own social circle, as well as a solid barometer by which to compare his other acquaintances.

“Get a load of those chucklefucks out there,” Pirouz muttered. “You know the videos they make in those Berlin techno clubs, where everyone gathers around the DJ and pretends to have fun so they can be part of the shot? I can tell that’s what they’re trying to do—look at their eyes all half-shut, as if it’s the most profound thing they’ve ever heard.”

They cut up laughing at the dancers’ disingenuousness.

“I bet they think they’re cool doing that, but they’re trying way too hard to look like they don’t care.”

“Where have the days gone, I wonder, where you got out on the dance floor yourself and staked your own claim, worked on your own moves,” Farhad grumbled, irritated that the social commentators grouped them in with his own generation.

“These kids, sheesh,” he went on, feeling more like an old man by the day. “See how having phones stops everyone from acting naturally now, even when we don’t have them on us? It’s like they connected our brain stems to those things, and if we took them away, they’d be totally untethered from reality. Probably a good idea not to allow them in here, imagine how much more ridiculous this party would be if they were staring into them all night.”

“Besides, for those of us who actually work for a living, there’s not much to dance about anyway. The rumor’s going around my apartment complex that rent might be raised again. Our landlords are trying to blame it on inflation, but I bet they’re making a killing off us.”

Pirouz was again gravitating toward his pet subject of social decline, which usually made their conversation distastefully morbid; tonight, however, still sickened by the melodramatic way in which the state-owned media had been grieving the country’s latest gaffe on the world stage, Farhad actually felt like entertaining him.

“It’s those vultures in the construction firms; they’re clearing out the tenants so they can bring in the higher-paying commuters. Your whole district’s gentrifying, Pirouz, but wages

haven't gone up, how is that even possible? I'm lucky I even got the teaching position I did—I don't really enjoy dealing with the young kids as much anymore, but higher pay sure beats going back to the lock and key of my parents' house."

Pirouz scoffed, as he often did when airing his grievances among others.

"Work abroad in the trades would be preferable at this point, but every subcontinental and his mother's getting an engineering degree, or bugging off to the Gulf countries to clean their gold-plated sewers—not to mention all the fucking Afghans pouring in to snap up what manual positions we could work here. They've started repairing the pipelines in Khuzestan, but guess which boy scouts gobbled up the contracts and put *their* people on it?"

He was referring to the infamous Revolutionary Guards, of course, who used their position in the regime to grant their own construction companies preference in infrastructure contracts; everyone in Iran lived under their scepter, and everyone in attendance had been victim to their hooligans in the Basij, the civil paramilitary pervasive at all levels of society which reported to their high command.

"Hell, these posh cunts in here don't seem to be doing that bad themselves," Pirouz

went on. “They’ve obviously found the right allies in the charitable foundations, just look how police raids have dried up in the northern districts lately—less patrols, less trouble, back-to-back parties nearly every weekend this summer. That’s why I came with you here and not other places: at least the Dehqanfars are smart enough to limit their events to only a few big ones during the year, not like the others who overexpose themselves every weekend like idiots. Everyone’s getting too lax nowadays—it feels like I’m casting a jinx over this party just talking about it.”

“I’ve noticed it too,” Farhad replied. “Last week, I spoke with an employee in the Japanese embassy who knows Morteza, we go to the same place for lunch sometimes—apparently, he has inside knowledge that talks between the domestic manufacturers and execs from Nissan went better than expected during last year’s auto parts exhibition, something about tariffs cuts and a new kind of engine that’ll be licensed here. Maybe the Dehqanfars have something to do with it, gave the right people at the top their piece of the pie...”

While they were speaking, some other stragglers, all college-age or younger, sat on at their feet in makeshift council, opting also to sit

out the vain soap-opera happening around them.

As if to confirm their decision, the DJs began to play B-side disco tracks made before the Iranian Revolution. Over forty years after they were broadcast, the light engineer projected digitized film-reels of *Rang-A-Rang* on a wall across the wet bar; the participants looked on as a girl in a miniskirt, lip-syncing and Pantene hair awl from contrived gyration, danced to the analog Moogs and clavinetts which swan-sang the end of that heady age.

This was what a so-called free man would have taken for granted an era ago—to hell with the free man, they thought secretly to themselves. Damn those sappy old commercials hawking high-heeled shoes and bikinis, the hushed eulogies from their parents about the good old days' death as if they were party to some grand secret by living through them, that static-marred "*qabil-e-enghelab*" incessantly drilled into them since birth to the point of mantra, and damn the defaced, unmended posters pasted over Tehran's grubby walls, done up in doves and debased devils, raised fists holding rifles, colored primary green, red, and yellow with sun-fade and soot-shade their only gradation. Both were bygone simulacra made

only for their makers—yet there they kept living among their flimsy remains, with little more than its geistless nostalgia to contribute back to it. The dissonance was getting too great to bear...

“What are you all thinking of this fine night?” Farhad asked those present, his maudlin mood doubtless in accord with the wistful Dorian scale playing in the background.

The crowd clamored to answer him, each member waiting their turn to say his piece in the conversation.

“I’m dreaming of a time when love can be shown openly, more equally,” one reflected to the group’s approval.

“I wish that more international teachers could come over to our college, some cool teachers from the Italian school in Farmanieh enrolled last year and taught me to play the classical guitar,” recounted another.

“I want to find more indie-type TV shows to play at my viewing parties, I’m tired of the normal ones the torrent sites offer—”

“Trendy slogans, college stories, we’ve been over these things already, lads—this trifling shit’s all you long for, really?!” Pirouz suddenly cut in.

“I feel nothing but disgust guys, for you, all of it! Listen to yourselves, disguising what you want, what we all truly want behind these distractions, don’t you get tired of rehashing them over and over again? I’m done with beating around the bush, try to say it openly for once without some bullshit euphemism!”

No one interrupted Pirouz’s tirade. He did have a point, one they were all too weary to unearth themselves; instead, they watched him work himself into the rant they knew was coming, all the while downing more of the complimentary shots of vodka offered them by the Dehqanfars’ servants.

“Where did our own conceptions as a people go, did they abandon us? We gave the world the toolset to put their metaphysical struggles into words, and now we have none left to express our own misgivings which isn’t mixed up in some other belief system.”

“Damn straight. We had demigods, angels, ceremonies of purification,” spouted one boy from his own spotty study of the subject. “Heaven and hell, even, we taught them about those too.”

“And now *they* call the shots on all that. Did you feel even a twinge of true faith during your theology classes, any of you? Rote

recitation of the scriptures was all that mattered to our teachers, so they wouldn't get the boot—hardly a mention of the stories that define us as a people, just some stupid assessments on how to best snort water into our noses. Serious consideration is saved for foreign theories instead, and the regime tolerates it so we'll let them rule in peace. What good has all this distraction been for us, our self-determination as proud Iranians?"

Farhad listened with detached disdain as Pirouz rattled off more of the same old xenophobic tripe regurgitated from his coaches. While most physically active boys their age occupied themselves with football or mixed martial arts, his companion decided to waste his energies on the *pahlevani* wrestling practiced in his district, taught by potbellied old masters who reeked of tobacco and cheap cologne. He found himself bemused by their preoccupation with nationalism, with its ill-attested myths they could barely comprehend, its lofty traditionalist terminology which cloaked common concerns. They all seemed to him like lost boys from a poor neighborhood in need of identity, who used overplayed heroes to reason through the flaws of their own abusive fathers.

“Hell, all the way back to the Arabs, who went as far as refusing to let us into their cult for the first few centuries of their rule here so they could keep their tax base, did we reject them after all the sacking and pillaging they’d done? No, we welcomed their cube-worshipping drivel with open arms, even kept it after they left because we had nothing more compelling to replace it in our minds—from the Seljuks on to today, we’ve put on the mask our foreign rulers demand of us. Even a legend like Shah Ismail, *pir* of the Twelve Imams, do you think that he really gave a shit about what our people believed in their private lives? No, he spent his time on hunting trips around Tabriz with his boys, playing his ministers against each other to keep the tax revenue flowing, and writing pompous-ass poetry about how important he was, like his batshit nutcase of a granddaddy did. Only when he went off on his hunting parties did these clerics find the balls to impose themselves on us. Let’s see how dearly that half-Turk bastard who calls himself our Supreme Leader, who even today still fancies himself the leader of our glorious revolution, holds our country to him once he’s done thumbing his prayer-beads. So stop talking about foreigners, for God’s sake—

they aren't the answer to everything, like you guys seem to think."

Pirouz calmed down after his opening salvo, giving the group some time to reflect on the questions he had posed.

"Yeah, totally, we need to look to our own heroes..." one glibly cut in.

"Speaking of, has anyone heard a damned thing about this singer guy?" asked another, in part to avoid more incendiary questions.

They all turned to the great room to locate his inquiry's object within the crowd; Gházy, also in witness to the night's proceedings, sat alone and wordless in a plush armchair while his more gregarious companion mingled freely with the guests.

Pirouz snapped his fingers and pointed at him.

"Good example! Look who they're celebrating over there—you see, we take our desires, our dreams from who-knows-where, yet we don't have the gumption to claim what's really important. We always sit on our hands instead, ripe for the taking, and hope that *something* from our past seeps into our conquerors so we don't disappear, like time and time before."

“It just doesn’t add up,” someone else added. “He’s the weirdest, most out-of-left-field of them all, and they hail him like a visiting dignitary—”

“To hell with that painted-face faggot!” Pirouz furtively interjected. “He’s only a side jester for this whole circus. No one knew his name at all until tonight, I can smell the stench of bullshit on him from here—gimme a round in the ring with him, so I can shove some reality up his candy ass!”

His inhibitions now also lowered by alcohol, Pirouz assumed his strongman act for everyone present, and the parlor descended into an impromptu wrestling match, with no contestant able to subdue him.

“He’s the type who’d be tapping out from an arm-pin within the first thirty seconds!” boasted the victor after several bouts.

His biceps’ sinews tensed tight as ship’s cables in the charade of subduing the singer, leaving no doubt in the young men that he could live up to his word.

“Looks like he raided some gypsy’s caravan for his wardrobe too, check out those crazy-quilt clothes and rings on his fingers,” one of the seated boys remarked.

“Eh, who knows—his grandmother probably got shagged by one or a few of them, somewhere back in the bloodline,” a freshman chimed in. “Look how curly his hair is, with those *kâkâ-siâh* features to boot!”

“Heh, and quite the looker he chose out of the whole lot too!” his friend joked. “Three seconds in the spotlight, and that chick’s traipsing around like the belle of the ball, fawning all over this fruitcake because he carries the slightest whiff of elsewhere on him. Why do rick folks do such weird shit, I swear..”

“Wait a sec—I know her,” Farhad recalled upon seeing her. “I should’ve known when they said her name—that’s the Parisa who teaches the upperclassmen in the secondary school I work at; she’s that plain-jane who hangs out with Fatemeh now and then, her and her little clique in our faculty.”

A coworker of his made the connection as well.

“You mean that bookish type, from sheep-herding country out west?”

“Yeah, that’s the one!”

“Oh yeah—now I know who you’re talking about. You should hear about the lengths she goes just to get attention, always correcting people, what a little teachers’ pet!”

They both chuckled.

“Not gonna lie, Farhad, I considered making do with her for a bit during my dry spell, before thinking of the other poor schmucks who’d be thirsty enough to sniff up that tree, much less give in and take the plunge.”

“How do they even find their way there, through the jungle she lets grow free between her legs?” asked his lascivious friend. “Kamran told me that she’s so tightly wound, it doesn’t even occur to her to shave down there!”

“Don’t believe a single word that ponce says about who he’s taken to bed, he’s probably full of shit as always,” another acquaintance of his advised him.

“But aren’t they both instructors for the same headmaster? It doesn’t seem to me like he’s exaggerating, why not mention someone else then...”

“That asshole always goes after the meaner-looking lasses because he can’t hack it with the pretty ones—the unibrow on his last piece should be evidence enough of that. Good chance he struck out with her too and he’s lying to save face.”

Hearty laughter ensued at the thought.

“No way someone’s pried open a clam shut *that* tightly, I’ll put money down on that—

at least not nearly as often as other dorky girls,” Pirouz added. “I usually have a decent read on the quiet ones, and while it’s true they can often be sluttier than the more outgoing girls, something tells me that doesn’t really apply to her.”

“Why would you think so, Pirouz?”

“Yeah—c’mon, tell us!”

With everyone voicing their agreement, Pirouz made a show of observing her mannerisms further by stroking his chin.

“Let’s see... I could be a bit wrong here, just bear with me—there might’ve been a make-out session with another repressed limp dick or two during family functions, behind the broom closet or some other secret place... one thing’s for sure though: she’s daddy’s little princess in her own mind, she thinks everyone should worship her like he does.”

“That’s probably what this guy’s doing for her..”

“Probably, that skeevy simp,” Pirouz agreed. “And if anyone tried to get hitched with her—”

He clucked away the absurd notion as soon as it reached the tip of his tongue.

“Considering the effort you’d need to get there, the overbearing parents, the laughably

steep bribe they'd ask for as a dowry, the constant neurosis and clinginess you'll deal with afterwards, you might as well go for an easier girl. That's probably why she doesn't get that much attention, that and the fact you have to compete with her books for her affections."

"Why do you think she started teaching the gifted classes so early, while the rest of you degenerates are still stuck with the retards and remedials?" Farhad asked them. "She's got dreams, guys!"

"Yeah, sure," someone agreed sarcastically. "She's stuck in that vicious, self-destructive race to menopause all of her kind compete in these days. It's a career woman's game now, look who's getting most of the degrees!"

And so the inane chatter went on...

* * *

While the guests drank from their overflowing goblets of companionship, a more sober pair of young men made their rounds through the crowd in the Dehqanfars' villa.

If those around them had not been too immersed in the night's festivities, they would have noticed how drastically deadened their

motions were, like two cats stalking a dormouse around the plush sofas. The two shared no words between each other or anyone else for their entire stay inside the villa; neither did the music grant them any pause, for one was too busy eyeing the other as they both slinked their way through the crowd, scanning each partygoer along the way with momentary contempt. They dressed in black shirts of cheap cotton, halos of ceiling-light rested on their primly-combed heads, and under the ultraviolet light, their oft-fasted statures disappeared within the other partygoers' screenprint-pattern shirts. Their beards were notably less manicured than those of the young men around them, as if their maintenance been neglected for other pressing matters. Back and forth their eyes swiveled around the room, opaque in their sockets as lightly-jaundiced pearls in their shells, their fine bloodshot vessels pulsing a tense vermilion over their surfaces...

The two were dreamy in their own way, serene inside some internal dialogue, nonchalant toward the few wayward glances aimed at them before being carelessly rescinded—tonight called for especial vigilance, for their premonition that Persepolis' pomp had lured in

another intruding pretender was now confirmed.

* * *

“I guess we can’t trash ‘em too hard though... they *are* the people who’ve been bankrolling these raves, which do keep us just a bit more sane.”

The crowd voiced their consensus with Pirouz about the overall situation, after the subject of women had grown tiresome. Farhad often marveled at how his charisma seemed to take in all those around him, drawing them closer whenever he leaned toward them; he had seen it during numerous gatherings. The musings of jaded young men were a dime a dozen in those parts, but his words always had a way of shaking them out of their languor.

“It’s time we take advantage of the spaces where we can still speak our minds, somewhere that can’t be tracked by *them*. Maybe staging this event in the mountains is the right idea—that’s where this country’s spirit lies, where its outlaws go to hide. Movement confirms the life of a body, and it shows anyone who checking our pulse that we’re not dead yet.”

“Ditto for the diaspora,” someone noted. “I’ve heard so many of them say they wish they could come back here, even the most Westernized ones—looks like shit’s getting expensive everywhere now.”

“You couldn’t be more correct,” Farhad agreed. “We need more Iranians abroad to return and reverse the brain drain, people who have education and experience to help us reshape the ruling institutions to our benefit. We may have our rights curtailed for now, but we’re still a young people; time will be on our side. Remember, no true revolution can come in a nation until its middle class can provide a sufficiently inspiring cause to motivate the lower social strata.”

Farhad was glad that something learned from his political science classes was worth contributing; lessons from long books did not usually remain in his memory.

“It’s weird how time goes,” Pirouz commented. “We spent our whole lives as teenagers observing those around us blame each other on TV and on the campaign trails; we picked a side to reassure ourselves we’d be ready to act when our time came, then *boom*—here we are in the driver’s seat; *we’re* the ones letting the program stay the same, wondering how to act or

not in a meaningful way, and then *we're* left blaming those who came before us on their inaction, bitching and moaning the whole time how we can't do our part in moving the wheels forward. Our turn has come to take the torch and run with it—we can't be stuck honoring old martyrs forevermore, as our fathers have done. We *must* take stock of what long-term actions need to be taken.”

Assents reverberated around him, as the entire room was now a participant in the discussion.

“Just look at the way we conduct ourselves back home!” Pirouz observed. “We’ve perfected our act so well as a country, that the whole world, ourselves included, believe all of us here are always in mourning!”

“It’s like that general who broke down in parliament this weekend, when he said he wished he could take the victims’ place in that airliner they shot down,” Farhad said, airing his original grievance for the group. “I almost believed his sincerity, you know that? I could feel the tears welling in my own eyes—I wanted to smoke a cig in the shower after watching it, I was so ashamed of myself...”

Some guests lesser inclined to this part of the conversation rotated back out to the dance floor, though most of them remained.

“What an apology—you gotta give him credit for sticking it out the whole way through,” one said. “When the latest old preacher to line his pockets croaks and his processions pour into the cemeteries, they use what little strength they have left to shoulder his casket while ignoring the one they’ve left us buried alive in.”

“And not only that either—they also browbeat all of us whose eyes aren’t red from crying along with theirs.”

The other partygoers in the parlor began to tell their favorite conspiracy theories, a craft for which people of their nationality display a particular genius.

“Yeah, and meanwhile, those *bazaari* wives live off the fat of the land over at their condos in Darrous, prayer beads and chador held in one gnarled fist whenever they go out, the other shaking at the poor vendors who don’t have seniority in the market, like disobedient dogs. They take all the discounts they can from them, and if those poor fellows don’t kiss their cottage-cheese-looking asses, then they whine to their hubbies until he kicks them out. It’s all a big pyramid scheme, gentlemen.”

“And we only see a tiny, tiny part of it. That’s how this all started, you know—when rich Indian pilgrims used to make their pilgrimage to Karbala, the Brits would subsidize their tithes to keep the Iraqi clerics on their payroll, then launder part of that money to their students in Qom to do their bidding here. Those connections remained in place after World War II, you think that connection ever ended? Where were the clerics when we got skewered, and why did they only come out of their holes after Reza Shah was deposed, when Iran was clearly on the way to becoming a developed country?”

“It’s the oldest trick in their book, I’ve heard that one—that business has been going on since the Safavids came and went, to counter the Portuguese who were raiding the Gulf at the time. How do you think our brave imam was able to pay for his flight from Najaf to France in the first place? Bankrolling and bribery, hundreds of years’ worth.”

“The same thing can probably be said about that tosser over there—good chance he’s looking to become famous, and accepted some money the Dehqanfars laundered to get here and do whatever they’re wanting him to do. Someone becomes an artist, another a revolutionary, others make themselves their

patrons so they can play both sides, and everyone gets their ego polished or gets paid for the favor.”

“I bet that’s what’s going on right now—they buttered him up with flattery and hooked him up with his new woman as a consolation prize, so he can keep doing more tricks for their amusement.”

“But again, why, and why *him*? Don’t they have a ton of other people they know better who could be their trained seals?”

No answer could be given to this essential question.

“Could be a number of reasons—” Pirouz started before perking suddenly up toward the vestibule.

“Speaking of a dog and his bitch, check out what’s going on at the door..”

III

A distressed lookout interrupted the reception, warning the guests that someone with authority was at the gate of the premises and that anything incriminating should be hidden away; his call brought events to a halt, like the shattering of a fine porcelain vase does when it falls to the floor.

A raid was coming! The guests downstairs began to find what hiding-place they could inside the villa; the considerate among them went through the upstairs rooms to break apart friends and strangers in embrace or more. The boys wiped off the lipstick smeared on their faces, while the girls rifled through the coat rack for their modest pea-jackets and pulled out the head coverings stuffed into one pocket or another. Veterans of the police raid mitigated any trace of intoxication with the air of a well-practiced drill, distributing breath mints to the drunk first-timers still stunned in shock then setting their faces into blank docility. The servers packed the entire wet bar into wholesale boxes and brought them down to the basement. The musicians had the worst lot of them all; their bulky equipment and its jumbled wires proved too cumbersome to disassemble in its entirety, so the keyboardist threw a blanket over the whole setup as a last resort. Other partygoers too inexperienced or unprepared to take such measures went outside to get their arrest over with.

Fifteen minutes from the first warning, the threat remained eerily absent, and no others had been issued. Neither policeman nor *basiji* had made his appearance in the great room, the

topiary surrounding the villa's backyard had not been damaged, and the front gate remained closed; the only sound which broke the siren-free tranquility of the night was the rushing of blood in the partygoers' own ears.

* * *

It was not until the entire party had been thrown into fracas and back again that the cause could fully come to light: a single individual, a sage-looking man well past his sixties who was now speaking with the lookouts outside walls of the Dehqanfar compound. Those of the guests who were native to Darabad recognized him with surprise as Hojjatoleslam Mohsen Nimvari, the Friday prayer-leader of the neighborhood's main mosque.

The front pathway lights shone a translucent periwinkle through the vestments which trailed behind him, and a neatly-wound turban wrapped his scraggly scalp, miraculously white throughout his time strolling the sullied halls of the seminaries.

A former colleague of the Supreme Leader himself, Hojjatoleslam Nimvari spent the years preceding the Revolution in a jail cell, while most of his other peers went into hiding or

exile; less than two years after being released, he put his pastoral duties on hold and went to the front during the country's Holy Defense during the eighties, where he helped hold Abadan's redoubts against the invading Iraqi armies with distinction. Once finished, he refused every political post offered to him except that of Friday prayer leader, a less contentious position he could administer from his beloved mosque.

Hojjatoleslam Nimvari's bearded face effused a tired, long-suffering forbearance which diminished his frightfulness as he walked through the front door and into the great room. He recognized quite a few members of his congregation in attendance, a lesser evil in their eyes than the others; most of them came for Friday services and left before the sermon, some only for feast-days, and many did not come at all. He considered these stray souls as his own children and wished them to see him as an elder they could trust, but unfortunately, the youth he sought so diligently to deliver into his Lord's embrace had since stolen away to the alleys and the rooftops, rank and hidden inside their chafing sepulchers.

When two celebrated academics who are rivals to one another convene to debate a meddlesome subject, their students' clamor

ceases in the lecture-hall—such a suspense stifled the Dehqanfars' guests when they realized the night's scheduled headliner had not only remained the great room, but even faced the intruder head-on, almost as if the two were expecting to meet one another.

The jade features of his unperturbed antagonist peered out from under the potted strangler fig shading his armchair, like an Olmec mask newly unearthed from the far-off jungles. Even at this fateful juncture, it emoted neither the fear nor affected contempt of his companions toward this myrtle bloomed among barbed wire; instead of hiding with the others, he rose from his seat, called Parisa to his side, and together, they approached the old man.

Inquiries circulated among the crowd, having reemerged out of fascination upon seeing these two antitheses draw closer; they wondered why the good cleric had come alone, without the entourage expected of a man in his station, or the basijis of the resistance base entrusted to his command. Had he any understanding for their problems, is that why he had come in person? What could he possibly care for his children, save to make them his regime's own again?

"As-salaam alikoum," he said in greeting to Gházy.

“Wa alikoum as-salaam ya sayeedi, wa rahmatullahi wa burakatu,” came the customary reply, in a diction which preserved the phrase’s intended enunciation.

“Some students of mine told me this is where you’ve been staying,” he continued. “They claim that you’re an entertainer of some sort—and your Persian sounds far too rigid and formal to be natively acquired as told to me, but we’ll get to that in a minute. For now, I’m here to find out where you’ve come from, and why.”

“All expected questions from someone of your station, your eminence,” Gházy affirmed in a confident voice. “I am from no place and unworthy of any place, a lowly pilgrim who has traversed the painted deserts to visit his shrine of devotion. I came here to find paradise everlasting on earth, however vain such an attempt may be.”

“A vain attempt indeed, and woefully misguided, but let us proceed,” the cleric went on. “As a guardian of my nation’s faith, it my duty to intervene in a public gathering when it is found to be salacious, and I deduce from your current surroundings that you have no basis for being so close to the young woman now next to you.”

Hojjatoleslam Nimvari turned away from him for a moment and looked around the great room. “I ask all of you here tonight: are you all not avowed believers? I guided you through your first Quran recitations as toddlers, led you girls through their first formal prayers when you reached nine years of age—what ailment has befallen you to err so in your lives?”

Not one person raised their voice in response; somehow, they knew it was Gházy’s turn to speak on their behalf.

“Tonight is no error, and it may also please your eminence to know that I have had no improper relations of any kind with the young lady—this can be verified by every participant present, if you wish to make such an effort. Besides, I have intended a proper consummation with this woman from the very start—why else would you be aware of my presence here to begin with?”

So it would be a real wedding then—no apology yet, no mealy-mouthed excuses!

“What is it you want from me, to wed you two?” Hojjatoleslam Nimvari inquired. “I find it implausible that stands as your only purpose, to have come from nowhere just to marry a penpal.”

“With all due respect to your position, who are you to assume my intentions? Reckon my whereabouts another time, which I have all confidence you shall—I’ll stand to assume the consequences of my actions, whatever they may be. Until then, I request your services for a show of faith to this woman next to me.”

“For what it’s worth, I can attest that nothing untoward has occurred between them under my roof,” Morteza volunteered, the implications of this testimony now becoming clear to him. “They mostly interacted with each other by phone and were accompanied by chaperones the few times they met in person.”

The villa’s other residents and frequent visitors confirmed the same.

“Duly noted, all of you,” Hojjatoleslam Nimvari acknowledged them, turning to the boy. “It appears you’ve taken your prospects with this girl seriously enough—do you actually believe yourself able to wed, my child?”

“Well, and for what other purpose does the institution of marriage exist but to partake in it?” Gházy tried him. “And say I indeed *was* from other parts as you suspect—did your Prophet not himself take spouses from the other various nations and tribes, that they could live in peace together? I state again my desire to wed

this woman, as surely as a true believer wishes for the *nur of wudu'* to illumine his body's appendages on the Day of Judgment."

Was this man really asking for marriage, while everyone in the room would likely be thrown in prison or worse?

"If I recall correctly, your eminence, no secular law need be considered to sign a *halal* contract of union. Need you any superior's assent for such a perfunctory duty as this, one assumed before even the second year of seminary?"

"Of course not, my word will suffice," the cleric confirmed to him. "But to perform a marriage? Without entertaining other considerations, I think not. Where are her parents, do they even know who you are? Do you possess the proper generosity or presence of mind to fulfill your end of the contract? Or do you plan to leave her while still betrothed, when your obligations as a pilgrim are over and you pack up your tent again?"

"All good questions, your eminence—I admit that you are correct about the temporary nature of my stay; I am here on pilgrimage, after all," Gházy admitted. "As my time in this place is temporary, so too must my own commitment be—therefore, this very evening, with guidance

from God Almighty, I wish to sign a *mut'a* marriage with this woman."

Bated astonishment stirred the villa's great room. *Mut'a*—a temporary marriage? No aristocrat present would dare involve themselves in such a humiliating arrangement! This sort of matrimony belonged to the disaffected: dumb bumpkins from the countryside, prostitutes who used it to ply their trade, poor hawkers with no prowess in seduction who resorted to religion for their needs, old decrepit widows who had no better means with which to sustain themselves—the discreet flash of house keys while circling a shrine, a contract quietly and hastily signed by some shady cleric, then a romp with the lights off in some dusty tenement, after which a wad of cash was thrust into the woman's handbag and she was cast back to the curb to prowl again.

Within closed doors and encrypted chat rooms, such an arrangement was often the butt of jokes as the path of the defeated. They would rather sin in their overlords' eyes and maintain some dignity than surrender in that fashion—and this boy wanted to enter into one?

If the room had fallen quiet before Gházy's request, the quietest stir could be heard now. Even the partygoers who had been hiding themselves upstairs poked their heads through

the barley-sugar columns of the second-story arcade to witness the proceedings—the juxtaposition of these two figures and their dialogue were too fascinating to miss.

“Did Imam Sadiq himself not exhort his followers to follow this tradition before they passed from the world?” Gházy insisted to the cleric as he pondered. “Yes, he did—and are we not approaching you willingly to do so?”

The old cleric’s brows furrowed in continued contemplation over this extraordinary request; none like this had ever been asked of him, much less in these circumstances. His hesitation should not have loomed so—nothing this young man wanted was out of the question, legally speaking.

True to Gházy’s assertion, temporary marriages were quite an informal and unregulated affair in Iran, which only needed a mullah’s verified approval—if even that—to be considered legitimate in the eyes of the state. They could last hours or even decades if so desired; besides, as the curious faces of the local guests betrayed to him, had many clerics not campaigned vehemently, publicly for this type of union? They had indeed, as a solution to the modern epidemic of eternal boys who strived for

nothing and the soon-to-be spinsters who had no young men of means left to call on them.

Hojjatoleslam Nimvari himself was prominently outspoken on this matter, having had led a fairly prominent campaign for some years to increase public acceptance of temporary marriages. Many of the local periodicals and video clips of his sermons featured his editorials on the matter—all the youth needed was divine approval, he promised to his faithful listeners, this simpler and more responsible insurance policy than the fraught hookup Western propaganda had tricked them into deeming acceptable, and their perfectly natural urges could be realized in a healthier, more sound fashion.

The absurdity of mulling this stranger's request despite his own positions had now gotten to the cleric—besides, by granting temporary marriage to partygoers, might he be on the threshold of a new strategy in his occupation's never-ending struggle against sin?

A few minutes passed in reflection like hours—then, pursing his lips, he relented.

“I have no counter—I do understand the despair which gathers all of you here tonight, and I truly hope the best for everyone in this room; since your conduct shows respect for the

authority I must exercise, my son, I choose to assist you.”

Gházy solemnly bowed his head in gratitude toward the cleric, then turned sprightly again toward the crowd.

“You heard the good man—now that we’ve secured the authorities’ full cooperation, let’s prepare an antidote for our predicament! Gather ‘round, everyone! Wait no more, my love’s lovelies, bring down the effects of union!”

* * *

Parisa’s petite attendants struggled under the weight of the plate-glass floor mirror they brought down from his balcony; that is, until some hopeful groomsmen offered their assistance in lifting it to the bottom of the grand staircase, finding their wishes fulfilled as each met his counterpart’s consenting gaze. The other partygoers scrounged the villa to cobble some more items together into a wedding table: a pier-table taken from the foyer to the mirror, a gold-plated edition of the Rubaiyat found on a bedroom bookshelf, then candles, pomegranates, and sweets to place upon it.

Struggling to maintain an august demeanor amidst the commotion, Hojjatoleslam

Nimvari requested paper and a writing instrument, Parisa's attendants fetching him a notepad and a ballpoint pen; with everything set up and everyone waiting, he rattled off the catechism oft-prepared for such an occasion:

"You are about to enter into a temporary marriage, one which preserves your honor as believers and helps achieve inner tranquility. What are your names, my children?"

"Gházy Loon," said the groom.

"Parisa Latifian," said the bride.

"Parisa-*jan*, as befits a servant of God, I see you as my own daughter and wish you success, in whatever form it manifests. I will respect the choice you make rather than chide you, which is a common error made among my peers and leads your generation to scorn the good this institution provides. Now that you stand with your groom before us, there are a couple of questions I must ask of you. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Parisa confirmed.

"Are you undergoing the process of your natural cycle, or in any period of waiting after a previous union?"

"No, your eminence."

“Good. I recommend that the next question be posed in private, unless you permit me to ask it amongst all these witnesses.”

Both knowing the subject already, Parisa found courage in Gházy’s smile.

“Ask me what you like, your eminence; I have nothing to hide anymore.”

“Strictly as a formality, I must inquire of you then: are you a virgin as of this union? As you might not be aware, if this is the case, and you have no parental permission, I will not enter you into this marriage.”

“No, your eminence, I am not a virgin,” she answered, fully dispensed of shame.

“Likewise for me, dear uncle—we are both fornicators,” Gházy added. “Life has scourged us with its own lashings for our former transgressions, deeper than even those that God prescribed for this *dunya*; we therefore seek redemption in each other, as recommended by your tradition.”

“This is acceptable—let’s continue,” the cleric resumed. “What do you agree upon as a proper dowry?”

“I have no money any longer to give her, because I spent it all to be here; thus, following the example of tradition, I offer my services in teaching her the language of the noble scriptures

and the collateral of my library and wardrobe, all that I own in this life, and a wedding present purchased for her which carries a brideprice's worth."

"Is this acceptable to you, my dear?" the justice asked.

"More than anything in the world," Parisa replied.

Upon hearing her assent, Gházy reached inside his cloak, pulled out a delicate shock of silk, and draped it over the pier-table for her examination; Parisa examined it a moment before picking it up, its hemless fringe and vegetal dyes betraying its handmade nature. The patterned cloth spooled sheer around her spindly fingers, almost slipping out of her hands; it was the finest scarf she had ever handled, the likes of which she had never seen in any of Tehran's bazaars.

The crowd was too captivated by the etiquette the three actors showed each other to speak; Hojjatoleslam Nimvari was dispensing his duties splendidly.

"What is the time you wish allotted for this union, my son?"

Gházy contemplated this question longer than the others asked of him. "Forty days sounds appropriate," he fatefully concluded.

“Is this agreeable to you, Parisa?

Remember that when this period is over, you must wait two completions of your natural cycle to strike such a contract again, provided the time of termination is not re-negotiated before it expires.”

“Yes it is, your eminence.”

“It’s settled then—follow my instructions, if you may.”

Hojjatoleslam Nimvari dictated the proper declaration to the girl, who recited it for all to hear.

“I, Parisa Latifian, wed myself to thee, Gházy Loon, for the so-determined dowry during the so-determined period,” repeated the bride.

“I accept,” Gházy responded without prompt, already knowing his part of the formula.

“By the authority vested in me by the *fuqaha*’ of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the custodians of the Imam-in-Waiting—*radiullahu ‘anhum*—and in witness to God Almighty—*subhanahu wa ta’alla*—you are now husband and wife for the time allotted; fulfill your obligations toward one another, and accept as righteous children of Adam the responsibility of any circumstance which results from this marriage.”

After the ensuing applause abated, Hojjatoleslam Nimvari proceeded with his customary post-betrothal sermon:

“When the Prophet and his brave warriors—peace be upon him, all his virtuous companions, and his sacred family—set out on their journey to conquer holy Mecca, he allowed them to enter into temporary marriages to fulfill their needs as men, like one might eat food or breathe air. A companion of the Prophet once offered a cloak as dowry, much like the young man offered that scarf; he did this to show his contracted spouse he respected her, and that would be steadfast in his commitment.

Detractors associate it with the lowly act of commoditizing one’s body for a worldly pittance, but this is simply not the case; in much the same way, those godless *takfiri* in Iraq tried to paint us as whoremongers for observing this tradition and tried to use it as a pretext for exterminating us, before our brothers-in-arms drove those vipers back into their dens and saved many a young girl from their own sham marriages. In the same way charity properly dispensed disincentivizes the thief from stealing, temporary marriage will help these two protect each other against sin. When a man can discipline himself enough to legitimize even his

basest instincts though an easier, less respectable recourse is available, he can stand strong to produce a healthier, less lamentable society, the one for which I'm confident all of us here yearn today in one form or another. This religion is a complete and practical solution for the believer's life, my children—follow its precepts, and it will save you from the chaos those your age now face here and the world over.”

It was time to finish this now—Hojjatoleslam Nimvari again addressed the newlyweds, hopeful that the partygoers absorbed some wisdom from his message.

“Whatever transpires tonight, wherever you may find yourselves the next forty days, I will vouch for you as long as the Merciful allows me the ability—for now, provide me your signatures on the slip of paper now I am now giving you; present it to any authority in this land, and I will personally verify its contents if need be.”

After all three parties signed the makeshift certificate, the cleric bid them well and turned toward the front door.

“One moment, please, before you go—”

Gházy delivered his own address to the crowd after arresting him: “My fellow revelers in

nightfall, why else are we here, except to know and admire each other? Should we not take the example of this holy man and stand justified before our Creator, our nation? Ought we not hold his duly-appointed office to account by performing its function to serve our own purpose, which is to find love and acceptance amidst this callous world? Tell me anyone, can you repudiate what I say?"

No response, save the renewed excitement of the crowd.

"Is the further exercise of your powers beyond your capability tonight, your eminence?"

"I wouldn't dare complicate any attempt to draw closer to the Straight Path, my children," the cleric answered. "My capabilities are entirely at your disposal, provided you resolve to remain sincere."

"Then come now, everyone, find a spouse amongst yourselves, and let us all bond in temporary matrimony, each to one another as God intended," Gházy mandated with the authority of a sovereign. "For any woman left unpaired, let a husband accept her as another wife—may no one go unmarried in this house tonight!"

Timidly at first, Parisa's attendants drew nearer their beaus, and then everyone else

sought a partner, lovers their sweethearts, secret admirers their infatuations, total strangers each other; once all were accounted for, the denizens of Gházy and Parisa's new court formed an orderly line in front of the cleric. With the completion of every brief ceremony, a fervor of true understanding, no longer subjugation unspoken and unjust, excited them to hope what was once thought impossible—something different really would happen this magical night! What sweet protest they voiced through their acceptances, one this official, for reasons unknown to them, had finally taken to heart...

* * *

“I thank you, your eminence,” Gházy said to the cleric, once all partygoers were married off to one another. “May your divine Sponsor grant you safe return to your lodgings.”

Hojjatoleslam Nimvari closed his eyes to him in confounded courtesy, placed his outstretched hand on his chest while bowing, then finally made his way to the door.

“My friends, be sure not to let this gentleman leave our premises empty-handed, for he has been just in exercising his office,” Gházy implored the partygoers. “Just look how

his open heart has made well-guarded, oath-bound spouses of us all, the lechers that we were before! Be so kind as to toss him a few thousand *toman* for services rendered, and bid him godspeed.”

Cash of coin and bills came showering down around the cleric’s feet amidst their ovation, collected by Parisa’s attendants and handed to him as he walked; while blessings facetious and genuine descended upon him from all sides, Hojjatoleslam Nimvari wiped the youths’ offerings clean with his skirts and placed them inside the wool satchel attached to his belt.

“This is a party no longer, but a wedding reception,” Gházy declared. “As newlyweds, we must celebrate the fortune of our matrimony. May we set out as afore planned, and let’s hail the remaining hours till daybreak as consorts to each other!”

The reception now commenced, and no punishment for their pact anticipated at that point, the partygoers left the Dehqanfar villa and proceeded with their preparations for the rave; the good cleric returned to his cell to prostrate through the morning after over the course of his own judgment.

While the Dehqanfars and their guests headed for Pardis, the couple stayed behind to undress from their ornate costumes. Gházy removed his cloak and facepaint then joined his new wife in her upstairs room.

“Truly, you are the most beautiful thing I have ever beheld, bar none,” he told her upon entering.

Gházy gestured for her to sit by his side on the room’s loveseat.

“Now, dear, before we go on, we must discuss what happens next—though I’m able to be with you for now, we won’t see each other again until tomorrow morning, when I finish the rave. Are your parents back from their business trip yet?”

“Wait a second,” Parisa interrupted him, still confused by what had just occurred downstairs. “That cleric said he’d deal with you later—do you know what that means? What if he sends his basijis to do something to you? What if one of us gets arrested, or both?”

All her veils came undone, allowing him to see her hair spill over her shoulders for the first time. Its chestnut burnish scattered under the slow-turning rotors of the ceiling fan like strong tea diffusing into simmering water under

the summer sun... too transfixed for a moment to respond, Gházy found his place again and went on.

“Then we’ll find a way to contact each other,” he reassured her. “I’m fairly certain he’ll keep up his promises regardless, he seems like an honorable man. And if the worst comes—which hasn’t happened yet—then it was worth it; but I need to know when your parents return.”

“In a few days, probably...”

“Good then—as your husband, I ask that you get in your car the moment I leave and return to your parents’ house in Arak. I plan on joining you there after the show’s over, and together, we’ll break the news of our marriage to your parents; at that point, they’ll be able to help if something happens.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

“During our conversation a few days ago, you said you’d gone on a trip to Abu Dhabi earlier this year—I figure your father gave his permission, seeing that you traveled alone?”

The seriousness with which he asked the question frightened Parisa, who had just realized that what they discussed on the balcony could prove more than a vapid fantasy.

“Yes, but why is that important...”

“That means you kept a notarized letter of permission somewhere—where is it now? Where is your passport?” he insisted, deflecting her inquiry.

“Somewhere in my room...”

“Find them both, tonight,” he bid her sternly. “Promise me you will, right here.”

“You still haven’t given me a chance to weigh in,” she protested. “What was that all about? What’s going on?”

“What did I tell you before the reception?” he asked her, that same, barely-restrained gleam emanating from within his pupils. “Our fate doesn’t belong to this reality anymore, but that of myth, of the royal lineages. Hojjatoleslam Nimvari’s assent to my pronouncements has confirmed to me what will likely transpire by morning—word is out, my queen. Everyone he married off is part of our reality now; any of his men who come out of the woodwork to suppress it will be part of it as well, whether they want to be or not. And if nothing comes of our little play, then there was nothing worth reigning over to begin with except each other—how many other rulers get such an absolute mandate over their kingdom?”

The crushing dread of becoming legendary rendered Parisa helplessly mute.

“Much still needs to be fulfilled during tonight’s performance which still may not make sense to you, especially as to why you must stay away, but you’ll know how to act when your turn comes. I’ve never been more certain of anything in my entire life—now promise me you’ll do as I say.”

Gházy stroked his hands against the burning cheeks of his rightful beloved, completely unobstructed by barrier for the first time.

“I promise,” she said, placing her hands over his.

“Delete our chats, keep any screenshots or photos you have of them on a device which stays disconnected from the Internet, memorize my phone number, and dispose of that burner I gave you like I taught you. After I depart for Pardis, secure the parchment I have sitting on my writing-desk upstairs and keep it on your person—it’s my final will and testament.”

They drew closer to one another on the couch until the tips of their noses touched. Would this be their one and only time to experience pure, requited love?

“...that’s all I can process from the outside world for now,” he said, holding her head

in his gentle hands while tears of transfixion
welled in his eyes. "Let's retire for a while."

* * *

Needless to say, the lovers found their
first true solace together in dusk's arrival,
speaking that ersatz dialogue relayed in copious
couplets, those timeless rhymes which breathe
life into a nation's heroes when illocuted.

IV

After the reception, those partygoers who
had driven their own vehicles returned to their
houses or those of their friends, packed
refreshments for the coming journey, and
changed into outfits more conducive to outdoor
activity, while the carpoolers passed time in the
parking garage until they had all arrived;
together, their combined convoy drove off at
ten-thirty as planned. They headed east along
Babaei Highway, circumnavigating the green
spaces, condominiums, and water treatment
plants which comprised Tehran's northeastern
city limits, blaring their stereos for each other as
they drove like the old-school ravers did while
rounding the halcyon highway of London's M25.

After fifteen minutes or so, the convoy bore onto the largely undeveloped freeway which guided them the rest of the way out of Tehran and toward the city of Pardis some twenty miles away; aside from a couple of tunnels, a cement bridge over the shallow, polluted Jajrud River, and a shabby factory town which manufactured low-end furniture and shoes, the passengers encountered few distinctive landmarks on the road to their destination.

* * *

Pardis was the Iranian government's attempt to siphon both the destitute and the enterprising from the country's overcrowded capital and create an ideal new city, with mixed success. Several miles past the interchange which would take the convoy to the rave's staging location, the city's core residential districts were built in phases around the newly-constructed technology park and university complex which formed its epicenter.

* * *

A small group of visitors in their teens and twenties finished their nighttime prayers

inside the Imam Ali Mosque in Phase 1. The young men had spent the past three nights in its main sanctuary, snatching sleep on mats and sharing little conversation with each other; under the stars shining through the building's glass ceiling, two of the young men supplicated to the graves of five unknown martyrs of the Holy Defense which occupied a place of honor at the room's center, kissing their gladiola-strewn headstones with especial reverence and spreading fragrant oils over their marble surfaces.

* * *

All the partygoers had now arrived at their designated parking lot. Nestled into the foothills forming Pardis' periphery, the bare apartment towers of Phase 11 were dormitories for commuters to Tehran rather than a community in its own right. The dream its planners had of founding a city where piety determined prosperity had died, and the youth who failed to land a big-city job found themselves castaways in this strange suburban desert, driven by necessity to become craftsmen, vendors, and laborers. Though the organizers who sought them as artists and event staff

belonged to a higher socioeconomic class, they felt an empathy with their transient society, they too seeing themselves as afterthoughts of the parents and elders who brought them into a world which had vanished before their adulthood—as a result, they encountered no difficulty in finding trustworthy workers among the residents, for they were also ready to risk their freedom for fun they could rarely have otherwise.

* * *

The partygoers would be safe to rave there while the wageslaves slept away their lives below—the neighborhood’s policemen had been given their tea money to stay away, and the stage had been constructed much farther distance from civilization than any honest lawman could travel without their notice.

The Dehqanfars decided to hold the event in an uninhabited mountain ridge abutting Phase 11. Its central summit, known by the locals as Ara-Kuh, reached its mile-and-a-half-high peak more than two miles northwest from where they parked. The shallow draw which ensconced the grounds offered a clear view of the entire surrounding area, and its surrounding

spurs shielded it from sight while preventing sound from reaching the populated areas below; in any event, a patrol of four lookouts with push-to-talk radios were posted at prominent places, one for each cardinal direction, and two escape routes had been indicated by marking-paint, one back to Phase 11 which was painted in green, and an alternate route toward the villages surrounding the northern slopes in pink.

Around the time the partygoers embarked toward the ridge, another convoy of box-trucks and pickups drove the backroads around Latyan Dam to the pink trailhead, carrying gasoline-powered portable generators and the last of the audio equipment; from there, farmhands from an adjacent pistachio orchard then guided the stagehands up the ridge's north side to the six-by-five-meter platform. A film student friend of the Dehqanfars had snuck out a set of floodlights from an unused sound stage and installed them in two rows on an aluminum truss along the platform's upstage and downstage; to avoid detection, all of it had been transported piecemeal to the site well in advance.

The partygoers soon made their ascent from Phase 11 to the nearly-completed grounds, in full regalia; the ridge's new lords dressed in

loose-fitting T-shirts and sweatpants, while their ladies, giggling on the backseats of the dirtbikes and four-wheelers rented for the occasion, donned sun dresses, tank-tops, and jumpsuits, and held parasols as they rode.

Their escort detoured at a waterfall to grant the staff some more time to prepare the grounds; the riders replenished themselves in this fountain of youth, aiming their vehicles' headlights at the water, getting into splash fights to cool off, and taking selfies on its bluffs before continuing up the ridge.

Their leader notified the event staff of their arrival by radio, and the DJs cued their initial set when their headlights became visible; with all the equipment up and running, the rave had now begun.

* * *

The massive sound system blared an electro mix through the twilight, more lively in tempo and scale than the reception's dour repertoire. The fire-dancers requisite for such an event took their places among the audience and gyrated inside their hoops' embraces; movement was far less restricted now, and marijuana smoke filled the draw. Servants carried

bottomless serving-bowls of *zoolbia*, saffron-infused doughnuts glazed in amber hash oil and rosewater. The light-polluted sky palled the guests in a soft indigo while a quandary instilled itself in the back of their minds: after the farce which played out in the Dehqanfar villa, was there too much serendipity in the air? Although they loved cavorting together to spite the somber city below, what was to come next? It made no difference now, prison and real life were the same regardless; partaking in this extraordinary pageant was all that concerned them at that juncture...

And there came Gházy with his retinue of well-wishers and technicians, fashionably late as always! He took the stage without delay, a braided red-and-green cord binding a yellow headdress to his head, its cloth billowing around his neck and over his shoulders to form a thick mane around his now-unpainted face; a long black scarf wound around his neck, and a cuirass of white embossed leather wrapped his strapping chest—what a harlequin piper he was, how delightful!

Gházy swayed back and forth to the rhythm, his trance-like circuit of the stage garnered the crowd's energy until they all joined with him in joyous rapture, then came to a

standstill while the sound mixer crossfaded his accompaniment into the music. He crooned a soft arpeggio into the progression while the instrumentals faded out from the set, and man and machine sounded a most exquisite harmony together. The crowd on the mountainside stood transfixed as their duet took the semitoned scales of a traditional *dastgah*—something long-unsung freed itself from those stifled lungs, on behalf of everyone who listened. He had lived up to their expectations as a performer and exceeded them; with a suspenseful pause and a dramatic flourish to the keyboard player, the techno rhythm resumed once more, to which almost no one could listen without dancing—that is, except one loner in the crowd...

A silhouette shadowed the crowd, clad a visceral black against its peals of loud neon. One of the pearl-eyed boys had hiked up the ridge along with the partygoers, leaving his companion to await him in Phase 11 until the duty which lay ahead had been done.

Too young and inexperienced to have broken up such parties before, the boy was taken aback by the unbridled lunacy he had never experienced firsthand from his peers. The speck of apple-green which stained his catlike irises ignited at their folly, and his pupils contracted in

rancor—sacrilege! Treachery at the hands of these ungrateful hedonists who refused any quarter no matter how often it was offered them, with not an iota of respect for those who actually tried to mend their souls! And *this* was the monkey his teacher had permitted to continue their debasement, this charlatan from God-knows-where was allowed to walk free and mock a sacred ritual after defying him to his face—no more, he thought.

He pulled a white headband from his pocket, inscribed *ay shir-e-khoda—o Lion of God*—in red broad-tipped marker, and tied it around his head before reaching into his waistband; a floodlight which had been swiveled toward the crowd glinted off the chrome-plated barrel of a service pistol, a domestically-manufactured variant of the SIG Sauer P226, standard issue for the *pasdaran* of the Revolutionary Guard which trained his resistance base and supplied its armory.

If anyone from the crowd had been sober enough to notice him, they could have caught him redhanded during his moment of decision—but it was not to be. At no more than fifty meters away from his target, it seemed an almost sure shot, but he needed to be certain... he turned on the laser pointer mounted to its

accessory rail, brought the borrowed firearm closer to his cheek, and aimed it at the singer's body.

Gházy noticed a red blip appear in his sightline, though it remained imperceptible to those transfigured by him. He knew from his research who it could be—so, his time had come as he figured it might! Like a predator savoring its prized carcass, he refused to end his performance.

Something about the situation bugged the soon-to-be assailant enough to relinquish his aiming-position, a feeling that something greater than his will awaited his action, before dispelling the notion... headshots were too risky, center-mass would be enough... he hadn't zeroed his laser sight properly, and besides, they would want to take him alive so he could give them information—what was he thinking, of course he had... he then remembered his superiors' advice to concentrate on his breathing as a way to ignore his nerves.

Before he resumed his aim, the boy could not help but consider the ramifications of his actions. His target was worth more alive than dead anyway—a death would be harder to deal with when his superiors found out the next day, no need for unnecessary bloodshed. Would he

be attacked here? No, these people had no loyalty to anyone—all he had to do was fell this cankered tree, and the termites inside would disperse.

Gházy abruptly ended his aria and dashed to the stack of speakers behind him; he seized the microphone stand and climbed them to the top, threw out his chest, and lifted it over his head, a sword of sound drawn over its battlefield of silence.

The boy had a fair shot at this demon now that he had bared his entrails—do-or-die had come. He placed the meat of his finger around the trigger as he had been taught.

The crowd's appreciation had risen to a fever pitch at this point; shrieks of ecstasy rang out all around as the floodlights captured him in their convergence, illuminating his entire figure. All their angst had been vindicated by one deft gesture, and how strangely resonant it was with the collective consciousness of all in attendance—a new era had come, they could feel it! Hands rapping the platform's edge and palms open toward its towering pinnacle, Gházy glowered at the dot's aimer with all the lust remaining inside his body—my, was he something regal!

*Mic-stand, throbbing violet 'neath the light-truss,
Raised up, drove the aest'val fête delirious*

*Crowdward flashed his staunch, world-wresting leer so
feline—hailed they well its stark albedo!*

* * *

All precaution and pretension were now lost in the partygoers; all of Ara-Kuh had become one outstretched mass of adulation. Gházy thrived amidst this eternal moment like figures on a bas-relief, his limbs carved slabs of muscle, his retinas the drab rock of the escarpments which immortalized them, when his cuirass cratered suddenly inward and his face contorted in pain—their hero had been shot!

Gházy fell from the speaker stack and lurched laboriously forward onto all fours; the corner of one of its cabinets snagged his headdress on the way down, unveiling the horns still affixed to his head from the reception.

For one atemporal moment, amidst the screaming partygoers fleeing for their frail lives, assailant and victim locked eyes with one another, two fanatics fulfilling each other's purpose in their own orthogonal eternities...

Gone was any protection he would have from his cadre, the shaken shooter thought—he and his crew had taken retribution into their own hands, and they alone would answer to God, maybe even the Guard for their actions. He mumbled petitions under his breath while the track replayed its endless loop, mindless for a moment to the call he still had to make to prepare his getaway.

Gházy felt that his mission was done as well—no more did he fear the machete held to his throat, the burn of his own noose around his neck, the self-inflicted sickness with no cure, the walk of the pathetic perpetrator through contemptuous crowds which haunted him his many deaths past!

The singer had transmogrified into a half-butchered bovine, his snout flexing wider with every labored breath, his heaving chest straining its punctured hide while a crimson blacker than the stage's pitch-varnished floorboards trickled onto the unillumined soil—there was no need to behold the scene any longer, for whatever die he had anticipated during his weeks of preparation had now been fully cast. His arms now gave out beneath him, rolling him on his back where he curled into a fetal position, strangely serene now that stupor had overtaken his suffering.

It was then that a neglected character reentered this unfolding drama—Pirouz had emerged from under the stage to pounce on the distracted shooter. Both men tussled about on the ground; the wrestler, having more experience and indignation than the other, pinned his opponent's arm and relieved him of his pistol with expert technique.

“Hands on your head!” the victor bellowed with gun in hand, giving action to his deeply-held anger at last.

Terror fixed his victim to the spot, while his pursuer's shadow loomed ever larger over him.

“I said hands on your head! Get on your knees now, you sanctimonious bastard!”

The boy slowly complied, still in awe of all that he had wrought.

While the shooter was being subdued, two courageous guests returned to rescue Gházy's body from being disappeared by the authorities, and upon finding that he was still alive, they administered what first aid they could to him, one pouring a nearby bottle of vodka into the laceration on his abdomen while the other wrapped his dress shirt around his chest as a pressure bandage. A lookout who had been alerted to the incident soon arrived on his four-

wheeler and climbed onto the stage with an abandoned picnic blanket to assist the other two; each guest holding a corner of the makeshift litter, they moved his body onto the vehicle's front rack, secured it with ratchet-straps, and rushed down the pink path toward the pistachio farm, leaving the other three men alone to their own fates.

Pirouz was not the sort of man to sustain dramatic suspense; neither this provocateur he had caught in the act nor his larger disgust with the world helped him entertain any notion of clemency. He grabbed a cushion from the ground, pressed it over the would-be assassin's head and fired a bullet into it with curt decisiveness, leaving his prey in lifeless prostration by his own weapon.

"My God, Pirouz, you killed him! Why the hell did you do that?"

For a few seconds, he racked his brain for a logical answer to his friend's question, which had not seemed particularly pertinent until now—he scoffed at himself for even making the effort, kicked the shooter's corpse, and fired into it again.

"You saw what he did to that poor schmuck, he left him writhing in his own blood up on that stage! What the fuck did he do wrong

besides try to hobnob and get laid in this godforsaken shithole, before they got him like they got to all of us?”

Farhad, who had stayed with by his side through the dustup, could hardly recognize the murderer now before him.

Pirouz, half-formed aspirations of chivalry overtaking his thoughts, channeled the street vigilantes he had always admired from the old movies.

“Those fuckers didn’t make an arrest like they usually do, they just shot at people they didn’t like because they could! Someone had to do something, man, and you know it. They couldn’t continue with impunity.”

Seeing that Farhad was not processing what he was saying, Pirouz shook his friend back into lucidity and kept his hands on his shoulders.

“Are you with me or not? Don’t think for a moment that this piece of shit deserves to be called a human being—they’re bloodthirsty apes, Farhad, all of them; I’m sick and fucking tired of having to justify my actions while *they* get a pass.”

Farhad looked at the shooter’s corpse again, imagining the terror his ilk had wreaked upon him, his friends, and his family.

“Come on, make it clear right now—whatever you decide to do, I’ll never say anything about you being here to anyone, I give you my word. Hitch a ride with someone else if you don’t want any part of this, but you need to catch up with them fast if you do.”

Tragedy would always continue with people like this, it appeared, the cycle would go on and interminably on—he could recuse himself no more from this dirty business.

“I’m with you, man, don’t worry,” Farhad assured him.

“I know you have little patience for the ramblings of a backward *dehâti* like me,” Pirouz said. “But as everyone still does in my neighborhood, I place great importance on loyalty to friends, especially ones who’ve proven themselves in turn like you’ve just done. Stay by my side tonight, and I swear on my honor that we will do everything in our power to defend what you hold dear, as honorable men do for an honorable friend.”

The friends embraced for a minute, then began their walk down the ridge.

“Alright, then—let’s think this situation through,” said Pirouz, secretly relieved. “You and I both know why he showed his face here; they must’ve had a mole in the party before we left.

My brother took part in the big protests a few years ago and told me how these *basiji* operate, the infiltration, betrayal, and all the rest of it—these are conniving worms, trust me. I bet you money this dude has a buddy or two back in Pardis who are standing by to act on any orders their cadre gives them.”

They both listened for any approaching reinforcements, but none seemed to be on the way.

“Odd the whole group hasn’t showed up already,” Pirouz noted. “Something must not’ve gone according to plan—oh well.”

“We need to get moving, before they do come up here,” Farhad said, having regained his senses.

“If you’re with me, stop freaking out and listen,” Pirouz told him. “Let’s start with some good news: first off, we were smart enough to park in the town near the waterfall, not in Phase 11 with everyone else where they could be on the lookout, and second, this prick’s got his phone on him—does he have a password set for it?”

Pirouz asked fished the device out of the shooter’s pocket and threw it to his friend to keep his mind moving.

Farhad snapped out of his shock and opened up the phone, an older flip model.

“No, it doesn’t have one.”

“Great,” said Pirouz. “Check for any messages his buddies sent him, and if someone calls, don’t answer, shoot back a text saying you’re waiting on the partiers’ rides to show up or something.”

The two friends continued walking cautiously down the ridge.

“Whatever sort of truce that’s going on’s been broken for sure today; since the Dehqanfars threw the party where their guy was killed, it’ll be *them* they’re going after tonight. Also, knowing *his* lot—and I’ve spoken to the guys they’ve done this to—they’re gonna want a body in exchange for this one, either dead or alive so they can torture them in prison. Tell your friends in Darabad that all their compounds need to be locked and under guard; tell them also to hit up their contacts in the police and private security to see what they can do for damage control.”

Farhad could hardly believe his ears.

“Wait a minute, now—you don’t really think they’ll react *that* way, do you? The Dehqanfars had nothing to do with what just

happened, and they're rich, *connected* for God's sake—"

"Do you think the more radical members give two shits about that?" Pirouz asked him. "Hell no, they want blood for all the life they've wasted acting out their pathetic power trips on us; these are *not* rational people. They could even call up to their unit commanders in the Revolutionary Guard, who knows..."

Once they were within eyeshot of their car, Farhad snapped the shooter's phone in half, wiped the pieces with his sleeves, and threw them into a bush.

"Don't let all this stuff scare you, man, be brave," Pirouz urged him. "We'll soon be in our fucking thirties, not far from being middle-aged, spent men, and what do we have to show for it? How could you possibly accept death or exile now, unless you know you've done something to better your lot in this life? How often have you found your fate put squarely in your hands like this, where you can actually feel it change every which way you think about it? There's no turning back now—there shouldn't be anyway, that's not for real men to do."

"I agree," Farhad responded, ever in want of words when those more decisive made their maneuvers. "I'll get back on my phone once we

get to the car and contact all the people I know in north Tehran, like you said.”

Pirouz continued speaking as they started up the car.

“Give me the addresses of those people too, if you can. I haven’t told you this yet, but now that we’re in this together... me and the guys at my gym have contingencies for a moment like this—”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘contingencies,’ Pirouz?”

“Never mind that,” he ordered, with the air of an officer commanding his troops. “Like I said, if those guys are your people, they’re mine too. Let them know the cavalry’s coming soon—in the meantime, tell them to lock all their doors and shutter their windows; if they live in a gated compound, they need to shut them up and park their cars across their gates from the inside as barricades. Anything that can be made into a weapon, kitchen knives, tennis racquets, whatever, they need to gather it up—same with the first-aid stuff. They need to get in touch with their armed security or make a patrol with their own people.”

“What are you and your guys gonna do, exactly? I’m with you now—tell me, so I at least know what to expect.”

“Don’t tell a soul what I’m about to say, you promise me?”

“Got it,” Farhad assured him.

“Remember me telling you about the last protests that went off in my neighborhood, when they burned down the block next to our gym? During some meets we did out in the countryside, we smuggled in some rifles and ammo, in case the security forces went too far again—this is definitely one of those times, they won’t mind coming up to Darabad to help..”

Pirouz stopped speaking for a moment.

“You still with me, man? Shut off that huge clumsy brain of yours and let adrenaline take over!”

He grabbed his friend’s wrist and put his fingers to its radial artery before starting the car.

“You feel that? That’s how blood feels when it flows back into your balls—we can live now! Quick, let’s go Farhad, back to Tehran!”

* * *

A few hours before sunrise, a policeman occupying a checkpoint on the road to Tehran waved at a passing panel van, as was his custom every week when it transported its shipment of pistachios to markets in the capital. He vaguely

noted how its driver was not the one he normally saw and that he was going to town earlier than expected, but dismissed the anomaly offhand as some new farmhand working an irregular schedule, allowing the vehicle to pass without incident.

Little did he know that the lookout who rescued Gházy was at the wheel, and that in the back, his other two companions were attending to the wounds of who would soon become one of the country's most wanted fugitives. Too wary to return to Phase 11 and in need of a vehicle which could hold a supine body, they had hot-wired the van from a garage in the pistachio orchard and used it to escape. Once past the checkpoint, they turned onto the Tehran-North Freeway, which took them out of Tehran's metropolitan area and up the steep gorges of the Chalus River through Mazandaran Province.

Fortunately, one of the passengers in the back had remembered that his cousin was working as a seasonal laborer in a village some fifty miles from their current location; although the two guests had left their cellphones inside a friend's car, the lookout used his to make contact and prepare him for their arrival.

In order to continue the trip, however, they needed gas and medical assistance. The

travelers found both in a town along the way, so dead at this hour that their van was the only vehicle passing through; near the end of its main strip, they spotted a small clinic on their left and a twenty-four-hour gas station further on the right.

While one passenger left to fill up some jerry cans stashed in the back, the other two trawled through the clinic's parking lot until they spotted a young orderly taking a smoke break during his slow graveyard shift; having no other recourse, they approached him and asked for his discreet assistance, flashing enough cash for several months' wages worth of cash.

He saw an excitement in their plight which was absent from his own sordid attempt to earn clinical hours for medical school, with its drudgery of endless inventory checks and binging comedy shows in the on-call room. The orderly agreed, and to their surprise, he even asked to go with them, an offer which they hastily accepted; he snuck out a spare trauma kit from the first responders' office and joined the guests in the van.

The orderly took the singer's vital signs and began treating him while the four travelers stole away into the mountains, unfastening his cuirass, cutting through the shirt and rags

underneath with trauma shears, and sterilizing the wound with isopropyl alcohol; although Gházy had been untreated for nearly four hours, it appeared that decent enough first aid had been administered for him to pull through.

Before proceeding with the exploratory laparotomy which would cut open his abdomen, the idea arose of taking his picture, as proof that he was still alive and that his existence was not a fabrication. When they had pushed aside Gházy's clothing to make his wounds visible, a necklace remained around his neck, a picture of a bob-haired woman strung onto its thin cord; the passengers stopped a moment at the sight of her unsettling stare, confirming with each other that it did not portray the girl he had married last night, nor anyone else they knew—but his condition was too urgent to stand around wondering, so they laid it back on his chest before taking the snapshot, in case someone in their circle might later recognize her.

As the van veered off the freeway toward their destination, the lacerations to Gházy's liver had been sutured, the incision closed up, and his pulse had again become stable. The four fugitives continued deep into the mountains through the dawn, thrilled that Iran's discontented masses had a new ally on their side

—no matter how badly the imminent fury would display itself in Tehran's streets, at least one rebel could not be captured anymore.