Vida

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CHAPTER I

She forced her eyelids open. A crushing weight pinned her to the earth, stealing the air from her lungs. Somewhere close, a faint moan shuddered through the dark. She wanted to scream, but the sound died in her parched throat.

"Look around carefully."

"There is no one!"

As the words were spat into the night, the cold gleam of a dagger flashed inches from Vida’s eyes. The man with the raspy voice plunged the blade into the shadow beside her, then wrenched it free. Vida squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed her breath. Copper flooded her mouth. The slightest tremor of her limbs meant the blade would find her next. Gunfire shattered the silence, scattering like jagged hail. Shouts bled into the revving of an engine, and then, nothing but the wind. Summoning the last reserves of her strength, Vida dragged herself out from under the crush of bodies. Something soft and yielding shifted beneath her foot; she lost her

balance and fell. In the pale moonlight, she saw Saeid’s glassy eyes staring upward. She screamed, the sound tearing her throat raw. When she finally came to, the night had leached the warmth from her bones. She forced herself upward. The earth was no longer earth; it was a topography of the dead. Crawling over the soft, blood-slicked bodies, she reached the bare dirt. She had lost track of time. Minutes and hours had dissolved into the stench of copper and void.

A low rattle broke her trance.

"Who’s there?" she rasped, pushing a heavy limb aside.

Her clothes clung to her, stiff with freezing blood. A violent tremor shook her frame, but the sheer impossibility of another survivor pulled her forward. Her fingers brushed skin that still held a fragile, lingering heat. With agonizing effort, she hauled the wounded man out of the pile.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The man groaned, his eyelids fluttering. "Where are we?"

Vida scanned the horizon. In the distance, the jagged, ink-black silhouettes of the Zagros Mountains loomed against the sky. The stranger exhaled a wet, heavy rattle. His head lolled to the side, and his chest stopped moving. Vida lay down beside him, curling herself around his fading warmth, desperate to steal whatever life he had left behind. Suddenly, a digital trill pierced the dark. She jolted upright, her heart hammering against her ribs. She crawled toward the sound and dug a glowing phone from a dead teenager’s pocket. The screen illuminated the blood on her hands. It read: *Mother*. The ringing stopped, hovered in silence, then began again. She couldn’t bring herself to answer. She slid it back into the boy’s pocket and crawled back to Saeid, taking his cold face in her hands. She did not weep. The scream had simply turned inward, howling through her hollow chest. Looking toward Isfahan, she saw the horizon glowing a bruised, violent crimson. *They set the city on fire,* she thought. She gasped for air, but the tears refused to fall. A sudden crunch of gravel froze her. The sweeping beam of a flashlight danced through the distant trees. Predators scavenged these forests, both animal and human. Feeling phantom fangs already sinking into her flesh, she scrambled into the sparse woods, leaning her weight against a tree trunk. The beams were scanning the corpses now. Pushing away from the bark, she surrendered to the dark and began to run.

CHAPTER II

By the time she reached the outskirts of Isfahan, the city was unrecognizable. A woman materialized from an alleyway, grabbing Vida’s arm. Only half of her face was visible beneath a tightly drawn black chador. "Go home!" the woman hissed, the words stumbling out in a panicked rush. "Isfahan, oh, Isfahan. There is no Isfahan anymore."

She vanished into the smog. Vida checked the street, then looked down at her hands. The blood had dried into dark, flaking webs across her skin. She drifted toward Chaharbagh Avenue. In the central park, pools of blood had begun to congeal under the winter frost. Remembering the sniper fire that had rained from the rooftops just twenty-four hours ago, a violent shudder ran down her spine. "Don't linger here!" barked a soldier, thrusting the barrel of his rifle into her line of sight. Vida pulled a stolen veil over her face and hurried away. Peering around the corner of her own street, she froze. Two unmarked vehicles idled outside her front door. The Revolutionary Guard. A man with a rigidly twitching beard was interrogating her neighbor. Vida turned back, her feet carrying her mindlessly down Nazar Street. It was a ghost town. Shop shutters were locked tight. Following the barrage of bullets, the city had been plunged into a suffocating, terrified hush. *How did they slaughter us so easily?* she thought, the sheer scale of the violence crushing the air from her lungs. She collapsed onto a stone slab. The barrels of sniper rifles still peeked over the parapets of the surrounding buildings. Isfahan could no longer bear her weight, and she could no longer bear its gaze. Leaving the city, she realized she hadn't just lost a home; she had lost her anchor to the world. Isfahan was never truly hers, it was only where Saeid was. Now, Saeid was buried under a pile of corpses in the Zagros foothills, and the road back to her native Baku was severed by borders and blacklists. She was stateless. And statelessness, she discovered, was not merely the absence of a passport. It was the realization that when freedom vanishes, the earth beneath your feet turns inherently hostile. Moving north was not a plan; it was a biological imperative. Movement was the final, nameless shape of hope. When she reached the desolate streets of Shahinshahr by nightfall, the metallic stench of gunpowder and earth still clung to her clothes. It was the only proof she was still alive.

CHAPTER III

Tehran did not offer sanctuary; it offered only a vast, indifferent maze. The people on the streets did not speak. Their terror was communicated through the white-knuckled grips on their bags and the darting paranoia in their eyes. In the gold market, Vida watched a mother standing paralyzed, clutching her wedding jewelry. No vendor would buy it. Instead, strangers quietly pressed crumpled banknotes into her palms so she could afford the extortion fee required by the state just to retrieve her son's bullet-riddled corpse. Vida rented a windowless room and listened to the city bleed. Morning broke with the *Adhan*, but the call to prayer no longer sounded like a spiritual summons. It echoed over the smog like a bulletin of death. Tehran breathed brutality. Fear was no longer an emotion here; it was a living entity, crawling into beds and being reborn every morning with the crackle of the mosque loudspeakers. Stepping outside, she found herself

caught in the current of a massive crowd marching behind two wooden coffins. In the cemetery, before the youths could even be lowered into the earth, someone began to clap. A forbidden protest song rippled through the mourners, a desperate wave of defiance. The response from the rooftops was immediate. The summons to death came from the barrel of a gun. Panic erupted. A young man in a white jacket caught a teenager whose legs had just buckled. Hoisting the boy onto his back, he sprinted desperately toward the alleyways. But the sniper's math was absolute. The first bullet tore through the young man's shoulder. The second severed his spine. They hit the dirt together. The white jacket stained dark at a single spot, the crimson blooming outward, devouring the fabric. Vida felt the phantom impact in her own flesh. The gunfire ceased, leaving behind a ringing, breathless silence. The water a mother had just poured over a fresh grave was now mingling with her own lifeblood. Tehran was drowning. Vida turned and ran, desperate not to let the crimson tide swallow her feet.

CHAPTER IV

When she finally reached Tabriz, the air was different. The grief here wasn't isolated; it was a collective, heavy fog. In Tabriz, the language of the streets was her native tongue. The words she heard whispered in the alleyways were the sounds of her childhood in Baku. This familiarity offered a fleeting illusion of comfort, but the regime's shadow was just as absolute. The city didn't belong to its people; death held it hostage.

On Imam Khomeini Avenue, the silence shattered.

The scent of gunpowder washed over the crowd before the cracks of the rifles even registered. Blood hit the cobblestones. An invisible line had been drawn down the center of the avenue: on one side, shields and automatic weapons; on the other, empty hands. No orders were shouted. A finger twitched. A man in the front row jolted backward, sinking slowly to his knees. But the tide of people did not retreat. A woman stepped forward from the throng. She ripped her black chador from her shoulders, letting it pool in the dirt, and stared straight into the eyes of the riot police. She stood as a glitch in their brutal order. There was no plea in her gaze. No panic. The street held its breath. The soldier squeezed the trigger. The impact threw the woman backward, time fracturing in the split second it took for the blood to bloom across her chest. She hit the asphalt, her hair tangling in the red pooling beneath her. A sickening satisfaction settled over the soldier's posture. But as the woman's blood ran into the storm drain, another woman stepped out from the crowd. She let her chador fall to the ground. Then another. Then another. Vida's phone vibrated in her pocket. *Mother*. Drawing a ragged breath, she turned away from the avenue where weapons ruled and blood had not yet dried. She walked north.

CHAPTER V

Her hands did not shake when she bought the bus ticket to the border. But just as the engine turned over, plainclothes officers boarded the bus. They dragged the driver away into an unmarked car. It happened with terrifying, bureaucratic efficiency. No one protested. The passengers simply sat in the suffocating quiet, their eyes fixed firmly on their laps. By evening, she managed to secure a ride in a battered sedan heading toward Khoy. The driver’s voice was laced with a quiet, trembling caution. Vida did not lie down when she finally secured a room in a border-town motel. She did not take off her coat. She sat on the edge of the mattress and stared at the cracked plaster. The walls were silent, and their silence felt infinitely safer than the streets. The streets interrogated; the walls did not care who she was. The next day, traveling in the back of a smuggler’s transit van, she listened to an older woman whisper to her husband. The woman caught Vida’s eye.

"We are from Tabriz," the woman murmured in Azerbaijani. "They killed our daughter in the protests two years ago. She was going to be a doctor."

"I am from Baku," Vida replied, her voice cracking like dry wood.

"There is an Azerbaijani consulate across the border. Go there. Claim asylum."

Vida nodded, though she knew the truth was far heavier. Her name was already on a dissident blacklist in her own country. To say, *I have nowhere left to go,* felt too cruel to voice in the presence of a grieving mother. Home was no longer a geographic coordinate on a map. Home was simply the absence of fear. Bazargan was a desolate border crossing. Darkness swallowed the streets early. Vida gravitated toward the unlit alleys, but as she rounded a corner, a police cruiser idled in her path. She froze. Two officers stepped out. Their eyes slid over her face, devoid of humanity, settling on her stolen, ill-fitting headscarf. "Haven't you covered your hair properly?" one snarled, his hand shooting out to yank a fistful of her hair. The jerk snapped her neck back. She didn't scream. She had nothing left to give them, no name, no country, no terror. There was only this exact, brutal moment. The officer leaned in close, his breath reeking of stale tobacco and copper. They shoved her roughly against the brick wall. One reached for his heavy leather belt, unbuckling it with a sickening metallic clink. Then, from the absolute darkness of the alley behind them, a jagged brick sailed through the air. It caught the first officer squarely in the temple with a dull, wet crack. He dropped instantly, folding into the dirt like a cut puppet. The second officer spun around, reaching for his holster, but two shadowed figures surged from the gloom. There were no heroic slogans shouted, no cinematic grace, just the desperate, chaotic violence of survival. A heavy pipe swung in an arc, connecting with the guard's collarbone. He collapsed, groaning into the dust. The two youths stood over the fallen men, chests heaving. One made a frantic, upward jerk of his chin: *Run.* Vida didn’t look back. She fractured the frozen

tableau, sprinting toward the edge of the town.

CHAPTER VI

She walked toward the border checkpoint. She did not rush. Her body had found its safest, most invisible rhythm. She knew that crossing the barbed wire without documents was virtually impossible. Yet, she kept moving. Walking was no longer an act of hope; it was simply the final habit of the living. The border post loomed ahead—a fortress of iron, harsh floodlights, and a terrifying, bureaucratic hush. The moment she stopped, the sheer scale of the void crashed down upon her. She turned to look back at the country that had swallowed her husband and shattered her soul. In that instant, the stolen phone vibrated deep in her pocket. The screen lit up the darkness.

Mother.

She didn’t answer. She didn’t reject the call. She just stared at the glowing letters. And suddenly, the truth of her statelessness crystallized. It wasn't the loss of land. It was the absolute inability to answer this call. It was the agonizing knowledge that if she heard a voice from her past, a voice of love and safety, her fragile psychological armor would shatter completely. There was no homeland waiting for her on the other side of the wire. Both sides of the line were hollow. Her breath hitched. Her knees buckled under the phantom weight of the corpses in the Zagros, the blood in Isfahan, the white jacket in Tehran, and the falling chadors in Tabriz. She collapsed into the dirt. The weeping started as a dry, suffocating heave before tearing its way out of her throat. It was not a protest. It was not a prayer. It was the pure, distilled sound of absolute helplessness. In the shadow of the razor wire, she realized that what ultimately breaks a human being is not the violence of the state, but the terrifying realization that the world will let you be forgotten. The darkness remained silent. The phone finally went dark. The border did not move. And for the first time in her life, Vida felt not just fear, but the total, crushing absence of the world.