

*Roya*



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Anahita Spenta

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# Preface

For my husband and my children, the greatest loves of my life.

For Iran and the Middle East

For woman, life, freedom

For man, homeland, prosperity

In 2020, I embarked on this story; a journey that spanned years of writing, rewriting, doubting, and above all persevering. It was an adventure that came from the depths of my soul, driven by the question of how the history of Iran and the Middle East might have unfolded differently.

The main characters in this story are entirely fictional, born from my imagination. The story itself is an action drama, set against the backdrop of recent historical events and figures from the region, but in a parallel reality. While the narrative is inspired by real life, the events and the way they unfold are products of creative freedom. This book is neither a report nor an analysis of political and historical events, but rather a work of fiction that invites you to imagine and to reflect. With that, dear readers, I hope you enjoy reading it and I sincerely hope this story resonates with you.

Finally, I want to express my genuine gratitude to the people who accompanied me on this journey, my father-in-law and Martine, for reading along and providing valuable feedback. Thanks to your support and enthusiasm, I was able to complete this book.

Anahita Spenta, December 2024



# 1

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into, young lady. Do your parents even know about this? I don't think so! Take some time to think it over, and later if you still want to pursue this, come back then. You can always just join the military; women aren't subject to military service, but you can volunteer." These were the indifferent and dismissive words of the sergeant across the table to me.

In 1998, I turned eighteen and I knew one thing for sure: I wanted to join the Iranian Royal Army, specifically the Special Forces. "Why?" my family and friends asked me with wide eyes, often with clear disapproval in their voices and faces, and occasionally with a hint of admiration in their gaze. That last reaction was rare, and it usually came from my younger cousins. "Passion," I always replied to their astonished reactions, "and for the homeland," I added proudly. But no one ever asked me to describe or explain my passion. If it were up to me, I could spend hours debating with them about how amazing, honorable, and devoted such a career is, and how narrow-minded they were to think I wanted to do it because I was a tomboy. But my mother often stopped me, whispering irritably in my ear that I shouldn't be so argumentative for the sake of my reputation. For my parents, a good education was the only thing that mattered; they thought I was too young to have any real passion. What did they know about that? Their fire had gone out in 1979, as I heard them often saying during long evenings at home, surrounded by friends, melancholically singing and playing their setar.

"I know exactly what I'm getting into, Sergeant. Hand me the form; I want to sign up."

"I'm not allowed to register girls," he said firmly, hoping to dismiss me.

"Do I need to explain to you that since 1985, there has been no legal barrier for women in our country to pursue a full career in the military? That includes the Special Forces. It's 1998 now, not 1898, or are you one of our strictly traditional brothers? And I don't need my parents' permission anymore to do what I want!"

He leaned back and crossed his arms demonstratively; I had clearly offended him. That wasn't my intention, but I felt offended too. Still, I smiled at him and looked him straight in the eye.

"What's going on here?" I heard a firm voice asking from behind. When I turned around, I saw one of the officers standing next to me. Judging by the three stars on his shoulders, he was a captain, Captain Kar. Before the sergeant could say anything, I started to explain that I was being prevented from registering for the Special Forces training. Then I waited for the captain's reaction with a serious expression. The captain raised his eyebrows. "Special Forces?"

I nodded in confirmation.

"Special Forces?" he repeated, this time more skeptically. "Do you know what you're getting yourself..." But he didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he gave me a penetrating look for a few seconds, then asked me with a sigh to follow him.

In a side room of the large, bustling hall, he took the time to explain the process to me. He wasn't condescending or overly talkative, but my patience was thin because I thought I already knew everything. "...but I know how the military works, Captain. I also know that civilians can directly join the Special Forces!"

"That's true," he said, stretching his words, "but I still recommend that you first complete the regular military training, master the fundamentals and skills, and then take your time exploring how to transition to the Special Forces. To be honest, you're the first woman in my career who wants to sign up for that, and you're also incredibly determined. Even I feel overwhelmed by this. I don't want to discourage you, but I know those men and their world. It's..." He hesitated, shaking his head doubtfully.

I didn't want to take my time, taking time was for older people. "I know what I want, Captain, and I won't be brushed off. Just so you know!" I wasn't sure what to make of his last sentence and hesitant expressions. Was he patronizing me, or was he genuinely warning me?

My last remark made his gaze harden, and he looked at me with restrained indignation. "You still have a lot to learn, Miss Danesh!" He pronounced my last name, reading it off my name tag, with deliberate emphasis. "So, it's better that you follow the standard route first. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Captain," I said with a settling sigh.

"Welcome to the army, then!"

Just before the next summer, I had already enlisted for military service and felt completely ready. I had packed everything and checked it three times, yet I went through the checklist once more. My mind was already in the barracks, wondering what life there would be like: the rigid routines, the intense trainings, the constant expectation of sharpness. And would I be able to endure that world of men, as everyone had warned me, supposedly out of concern?

"Royal!" my mother called out loudly, pulling me from my thoughts and summoning me for dinner. She stood at my bedroom door, arms crossed, frowning at me. The past few days, she had done everything in a nervous and theatrical manner, her way of showing disapproval.

I walked over to her and looked into her eyes, where her disagreement with my choice was painfully clear, and cupped her face in my hands. "A society doesn't just need doctors, engineers, or mothers!"

"Fortunately, your brother thinks differently. We'll see how far you get," she said, giving me a little push toward the dining area.

Grinning, I shrugged and made my way to the table. My father was already sitting there, in his usual corner, his reading glasses resting on the tip of his nose as he was working in his large notebook. He was a teacher and worked until the very last moment of every day, even during vacations, and our din-

ing table was his desk. I could recall very few moments when he wasn't working, or was spending time with us spontaneously. Work was everything to him, the driving force of his life, a safe anchor in his turbulent existence.

"Iman is gone for gambling again?" I teased my father, trying to get his attention while approaching the dining table.

"No, my son is wiser than that," my father replied in a serious tone, without looking up.

I looked at him, amused. Of course, my brother had gone gambling; he always spent the last few days of summer vacation in Ramsar, the paradise on the Caspian Sea, with his friends. He was a bon vivant, the complete opposite of my father.

"I just hope he's back in time to say goodbye to his crazy little sister," my father continued. He then took off his glasses, placed them carefully on his notebook, and shifted toward the part of the table that was set for dinner. "Tell me, where is your first post?"

"I specifically asked to be stationed as far from Tehran as possible, just so you wouldn't have to deal with the disgrace of having a daughter in the military every day. Imagine me coming home in uniform all the time, the horror! What would the family or the neighbors think?!" I couldn't resist teasing him. "I'm going to Bandar Chabahar, baba, and this is the third time I'm telling you."

My father didn't look amused; the family or the neighbors didn't interest him, it was my choice that tormented him. He saw no honor in it. Of all the things I could have become: a doctor to save lives, an engineer, a lawyer, with endless opportunities to study in Europe or the U.S., I had chosen the military. And not just anywhere, but Bandar – harbor – Chabahar, in southeastern Iran, on the Gulf of Oman, two thousand kilometers from Tehran. Without looking at me, he picked up a piece from the rice cake on the table, his lips curling into a crooked grin, a sign of his inner discontent.

I didn't understand my parents, and they didn't understand me. My mother always said my personality was just like my father's. You'd think that would mean we could at least communicate, but in many cases, that wasn't true. I was fifteen when I came home one day, bursting with excitement, and shouted that I had finally figured it out: I wanted to be an arteshi – military. My mother had laughed out loud. "I thought your silly interest in politics was bad enough, but this, arteshi? Do you even know what you're talking about?" And my father? He had only looked at me for a moment before turning around and walking away without a word. "Yes," I had answered, loud and clear. Then I asked my mother if she had ever really watched those proud national soldiers during the parades. How could she speak of them so mockingly? And that documentary about our takavars – the commandos, it was something in that film that had grabbed me and never let go.

"I'm not mocking! My own uncle was an officer in the army, for God's sake," my mother had responded, visibly shaken. "Takavars? Are you out of your mind? They are men, rough and deadly men! You will not become one of them, estaghfar Allah - God forgive me." She let out a sigh. "My uncle, he thought he was someone important, ordering us around like we were his mi-

nor servants. And those arrogant, drunken officer colleagues of his, always bringing them home uninvited, forcing his mother, my dear grandmother, to cook for them and take care of them night after night." Her voice cracked on that last sentence. "You will not become one of them! Do you understand me?!"

I had nothing to say to that. That uncle had passed away long ago, those were different times and those stories were old. I knew nothing about military life except that, back in the day, being an officer in the royal army was prestigious. And Mohammad Reza Shah himself had been a high-ranking officer, surrounded by all those handsome, dignified generals. I waited patiently until I turned eighteen, when I could finally decide for myself. I went to every army open day and read everything I could find about it. Every brochure and every testimony about the challenges ahead only fueled my curiosity further.

The day I finally told my parents that I had enlisted, my father boiled with rage; he practically exploded. "How could you join those mercenaries?"

"Mercenaries?" I had burst out in shock, barely believing my ears. "What would our country be if those mercenaries hadn't been there to defend us against Iraq?"

What followed was a storm of fiery glares and heated arguments, until my father finally said: "...Well, you are now a grown woman, and you can decide for yourself. But the consequences will be yours alone, young lady! If you go through with this, you are on your own from now on!" And with that, he had walked away, his firm steps meant to drive his words home. What he said was often law in his own mind. But I was already eighteen, and legally, there was nothing he could do to stop me.

My friends' reaction wasn't much better. On my last evening at home, they surprised me with cakes and gifts, as if I was leaving for some distant land and never to return. They were worried that it would be too much for me, that it was too far, too exhausting, a ruthless world of men, unbearably dull and, that in Chabahr people didn't even speak our language. Every year, in Mehr-mah – October – our world began: three girls sitting tightly together on a large school bench for nine months. Our world revolved around studying, getting the highest grades, competing, avoiding the immature, acne-ridden boys, excelling in math, physics and everything related to difficult sciences so we could feel smart. We had a pact to keep studying together until we couldn't anymore. But while they spent their days and nights preparing for university, I chose a different path. They respected my choice, but they saw me as a traitor for breaking our pact. Traitor or not, I had a new world to look forward to.

On the day itself, I stood in front of the entrance to the military academy in Tehran, ready and impatient to go inside. My nervous mother was in tears, and my father stood there, frowning. My brother had just managed to make it at the last moment; half-drunk, he had driven home in the middle of the night, enraging our already frustrated father. I didn't mind, we lived separate lives and had little in common. Iman was three years older than me, attending university and having numerous girlfriends. "It's my uncle's genes," my mother

often said after each of his missteps. But he was attending university, and that made everything acceptable.

The last thing my mother asked me before I left was whether I had forgotten anything. I saw a tear on her cheek as she asked. I hadn't forgotten anything, everything was checked a hundred times. To calm her, I answered gently that everything was fine, then embraced them all, something we rarely did. My mother sobbed and begged me to be careful. My father muttered something muffled, something that sounded like "do your best". And Iman's arms were firm and warm, perhaps an attempt to make up for his late arrival.



They say life is all about choices; that our choices in life, no matter how difficult or easy, shape the path forward. Sometimes it is the course of history that sets the path for us, as some events are so grand and powerful that they seize us and drag us along with an unimaginable force, leaving no space for reflection, understanding, reassessment of our role, or resistance.

What does it take to make the right choices at the right times?

They also say that for every choice we make and for every path we take, the alternative takes place in a parallel universe. Would there be a universe in which the 1979 revolution in Iran didn't take place and all that passion for change, for freedom, equality and justice, all that hatred and anger to overthrow and to seize power, took a different course?

What would that look like?

Wouldn't life then present the same challenges to us, but in a different way, to teach us the important lessons of life?

This is the story of a girl in Iran in that parallel universe, where the revolution didn't happen and history unfolded differently.

## 2

I was about eight years old when a slight vision problem was detected in me. I had just started second grade in elementary school. My teacher had noticed that I kept squinting to read the texts on the blackboard. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in my life. Every morning, she arrived at school impeccably dressed, wearing a light perfume, ready to teach us how to read, write and do arithmetic. All the boys in my class were in love with her, and all the girls wanted to grow up to be as beautiful as she was. Later, I learned that her husband had been a fighter pilot who died during the short war with Iraq. Maybe that was why she disliked Arabic and drilled us, so young as we were, to use as few Arabic words in our language as possible. Work was her escape, a way to avoid being alone in the emptiness left by her handsome pilot, a way to stop herself from endlessly crying over the children they never had. Now, we were her children, a new set of them every year. She saw herself as a loving, yet strict, mother to us. She had asked my father to meet with her, and in a charming way she had suggested that it would be good to examine my eyes. Many men would have fallen for her, except my father. Later, I heard him complaining to my mother that it is inappropriate to hire such provocative teachers in schools. For him, a school was a place to instill young souls with the virtues of life, to stimulate their intellect, and to prepare them to serve the society and the people. Therefore he believed that young girls shouldn't be influenced by outward appearances. The old communist.

My eye tests resulted in me needing glasses, and at the optician I chose a bright red frame with golden sparkles. I thought I could take the glasses home right away, I was over the moon. How could I have known that the lenses in the frame were fake, that the real lenses had to be made, and that I had to wait a whole week? A WHOLE WEEK. Every evening, I asked my father if he had my glasses, and every 'no' was another disappointment. For an eight-year-old, a week is an eternity. The same eternity I felt every day during my military service, every time I got no serious response to my repeated requests to join the Special Forces selection.

"Corporal Danesh!" Captain Kar's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I could recognize his voice among thousands, having spoken to him so often. Even I felt that I had bothered him too much. When he called me, I had been staring out of the large window of the ceremony hall, looking down at the courtyard of our base. We had recently returned from our patrols along the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan border. At first, I had volunteered for border duty out of eagerness and ambition, but I soon found it to be one of the most mind-numbing tasks in my military career. Iran shares long land borders

with seven countries in a region that often feels like a time bomb. But ever since the war with Iraq, where our long-standing border dispute was violently settled once and for all in just two years, alongside political power struggles and intrigues, a relative calm had returned to our borders. Iran had once again become 'an oasis of peace and stability in one of the most problematic regions of the world'. Or at least, that was what we thought, until we were increasingly deployed to the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders. Until a big country from two continents away, decided it was time to wage war in someone else's territory again.

"You're doing well, I see, Corporal," the captain said as he approached me.

"Did you expect otherwise, Captain?"

"No, no," he said, slightly surprised.

An awkward silence immediately fell between us, the kind that lingers because the only topic you really want to talk about is also the hardest one to bring up. He quickly avoided my gaze and stared down at the courtyard with me, twirling the thin stem of his wine glass between his fingers. One of the rare moments when we were allowed to drink alcohol on base. It was a celebration, we were being praised for our efforts at the border.

"I heard things got intense at the border. We've dealt with armed drug smugglers before, but these were different, from what I understand," he said.

I smirked. "Calling them drug smugglers sounds almost romantic, Captain. Since when are drug smugglers this well-trained and armed with modern military weapons? Since when do drug smugglers attack our embassy, take our diplomats hostage, and send their corpses back to us? Since when..."

"Enough, Danesh. I know. The Taliban is a different breed."

At times, I had the urge to be sharp with him. "They're monsters, creatures who fell asleep somewhere between 1400 and 1000 years ago, and now they've woken up again," I said.

"Well, sometimes monsters are deliberately created, to be deployed when necessary." He shook his head. "But they can become unpredictable, follow their own path and things can spiral out of control. Right now, Afghanistan seems doomed." He stared into the distance. "And if we hadn't intervened, our country would have also fallen into the hands of unimaginable monsters."

He was referring to the great unrest of the late seventies. Being in his forties, he had lived through it consciously. Some called it 'the missed opportunity', while others called it 'a great danger'. Whatever it was, it was over now and people rarely spoke about it anymore. Mohammad Reza Shah had passed away shortly after, and the throne had been handed over to his son. I had never experienced any of it myself; to me, his son, Reza Shah Jr., had always been our king, our constitutional monarch.

That day marked more than a year and a half into my military service. I stood in the grand hall, listening to the grand stories of my fellow soldiers and officers. Eighteen months of waking up early, training, following orders, sweating, and enduring. Absorbing every word, every action, every movement, every posture, and every command with absolute focus so that I wouldn't miss anything or make a mistake. I wanted this so badly. I had made friendships and seen young people like myself come and go, like Aram. A

kind, chubby guy I had met on the very first day on the bus ride from Chabaha-har airport to the barracks. Like all the other male recruits, he was there because of the mandatory two-year military service for men. Not everyone shared my passion, Aram certainly didn't. He was only there to fulfill his duty and then return to normal life. He was from Isfahan and wanted to go back as soon as possible, preferably without doing any real military work or even touching a weapon. Eventually, after much pleading, he managed to get transferred back to Isfahan to be with his father. The same father who had sent him to military service in the first place, so they could turn him into a man. But it wasn't for him. Aram struggled through every aspect of military life, constantly complaining and panting through every drill. He was more of a burden to our officers, than a soldier they could be proud of.

However, we could talk, spending long hours reflecting on the meaning and absurdity of this job. He saw it this way: this wasn't a normal life, this fighting and using weapons, making weapons to begin with, labeling groups of people as enemies and attacking them, destroying, and killing. In response, I asked: "What if we face people with malicious intentions? Should we just accept it? Would any nation do that?" And I also told him that life isn't always harmonious; it has its ups and downs, and sometimes very hard downs. Just as my life was planning to make me experience later. I could see that he agreed, I saw it in his eyes, but we never reached a final conclusion; he refused to see any evil in humanity, and I was too young to understand how we, as a whole, truly functioned. But I thought I was more of a realist than he was.

Sometimes, we would sit for hours on the high cliffs along the coast of Chabaha-har philosophizing, our favorite place. Whenever my superiors pointed out that I had gone too long without taking leave, that being overly diligent wasn't necessarily a virtue, I took Aram to the cliffs. High up on the rocks, we would stare into the distance at the sea, watching people walking across the red sand, children jumping through the shallow waves and breaking them with their small feet. The once untouched coastline of Chabaha-har was now swarming with tourists, and with our binoculars we followed the massive cargo ships traveling to and from Mumbai, Jakarta, Abu Dhabi, Nairobi, Hong Kong, and Darwin.

Despite the economic fluctuations and recessions of the seventies and eighties, our economy remained strong, offering young people opportunities for employment and a future full of possibilities. Iran was one of the first industrialized nations in our region, and significant investments both within and outside the country, along with economic reforms by successive governments, had led to great progress. This ensured that our economy remained open, free, and thriving, with extensive trade relations with neighboring countries. It was understandable that many young people, like Aram, preferred a normal life outside the military. After his transfer to Isfahan, I never saw him again. But I wanted to keep going.

A loud burst of laughter in the background of the hall pulled our attention back. I gathered my courage and asked, "Do you have any news for me, Captain Kar?"

He looked at me tiredly, clearly worn out by my endlessly repeated question, and shook his head slightly.

I felt the familiar sting of bitterness rising in me again. "I suppose I need to be patient again? A year and a half is apparently still not long enough?!"

"You're not exactly asking for the easiest thing," he replied.

"No, apparently many things in this country aren't easy when you have two X-chromosomes. Just this month alone, two boys from this base have been selected and approved. Two!" I held up two fingers demonstratively. "And I am just watching how my days slip away for nothing. I could already be training by now. What do they have that I don't? And no, Captain, let's not repeat those dull phrases again, that I'm a woman, that I..." I stopped, boiling inside. It got to me every single time.

He ignored my last words. "Your days aren't slipping away for nothing. You've served at the border, you serve our country, and you continue to develop yourself. I was just speaking with the Major, he thinks you're ready to take the next step. But since this is an unusual case, as you well know by now, the final decision has to be made by General Qasemi, and he's a tough man. Convincing him to allow a woman into his elite units won't be easy." He tried to pronounce the word woman as neutrally as possible.

"How long will this take? How can I make him agree? Should I write him a letter, or go to Tehran in person?"

In his eyes, I read: as long as it takes. "Danesh, no matter how much you want this, no matter how many people agree, some changes just take time. Pushing too hard can sometimes backfire. Your impatience could cost you more than it gains you!"

"Then I'll write him a letter," I said bluntly.

He closed his eyes in frustration, despite being used to my outbursts of pent-up frustration. Over the past year and a half, he had often, and much to his own irritation, tried to make me understand how impossible and overly progressive my wish was. "...We are the military, Danesh," he had often said, "We thrive on conservatism in our personnel policies. There are sparks of progressive changes, but not as fast as you want. Do you think that the people up there are waiting for some young lady to demand something? And don't forget, this is still an Islamic country..." Sometimes, he made me feel the boundaries sharply. I was sure he saw writing to the commander of our Special Forces as another hard boundary: whether I had lost my mind!

But I was no longer paying attention to him. In that moment, I had made my decision and was already writing in my impatient mind. As the captain rejoined the others and became engrossed in conversation, I withdrew into my own world, where only I and my words existed. I started forming sentences, searching for the perfect balance between elegance and simplicity, as if every word could determine my fate. And I wasn't about to let a single opportunity slip away.

Six months crawled by, but nothing came back, no word from the captain, no reply to my letter. The silence wasn't just maddening, it was suffocating. Each day stirred up a new wave of doubt and negative thoughts within me,

and the days stretched longer, growing heavier and harder to bear. I watched with envy as my female colleagues built their careers. One had begun her training to become a military doctor; apparently, no one had to think twice about that. Another aspired to become a general and was preparing for the long road ahead. Her experience during the war near her hometown, Ahvaz, had shaped her profoundly. A third wanted to be a fighter pilot and had already started her training. But I felt stuck, fixated on one goal, convinced that I had seen everything and that nothing else could excite me. In the meantime, I had even expected to receive a reprimand from my officers for sending a letter to the general. I thought their silence was a sign that bypassing my superiors and writing directly to the general was unacceptable. But ignoring issues was not their usual approach; if you did something wrong, they confronted you until you could explain your mistake and how you would handle things differently.

I waited, desperate and restless, my mind circling the same question over and over: 'what will I do if my request is permanently denied?'. My future seemed uncertain, as if everything would collapse, as if my life would be over. The idea of catching a plane and returning to my parents was growing more tempting by the day, but the thought of facing their condescending reaction, 'whether my little adventure was over now, and was I ready to do something better?', was more than I could bear. That would have truly been the end of my world. To avoid those thoughts, I often sought refuge in our barracks' library in my free time, trying to drown my impatience in literary and military books. I read Hafez and Saadi for wisdom, lost myself in Tolstoy's novels to forget time. Russian literature was perfect for that: harsh, tragic and long. Maybe I was just being dramatic, I thought, as I read about Prince Bolkon-sky's near-death experience on the battlefield against the French. What was I really going through compared to him? Or compared to the poverty and suffering of the peasants in old Khorasan, as vividly and suffocatingly depicted in Kelidar. That was how I was raised, my father always expected me to be strong, and my mother responded to my every complaint or sorrow by reminding me that others had it worse. Maybe they wanted to build patience and mental endurance in me, or maybe they simply didn't know how to handle emotions. But their approach left me with a deep sense of resistance and disappointment, because it made me feel like it was always my fault, that I wasn't strong enough, or worse, that I was just being dramatic. Exactly as how I felt during those months of waiting for any response to my letter.

Until one Saturday morning, the start of the week in Iran. That day, after our early morning training, I walked to the canteen. A new batch of recruits had just arrived. They were loud, playful, searching, bold, and naive. Without paying attention to them, I walked past and sat down at the table next to Ehsan. He was in my unit and had started at the same time as me.

He immediately slid the morning newspaper toward me. "How can they form a Union if they can't even agree on a common currency? That's the foundation. Look at the European Union: shared money. And let's not even start on the Israel issue!" Ehsan shook his hands and widened his eyes. "Do we accept them, or do we pretend they don't exist?" He leaned in and whis-

pered, "The imam at our mosque in Kerman calls Israel the 'little Satan' and prays for their destruction every Friday afternoon. Have you ever heard of it: the great Satan, the little Satan, the smaller Satan, or the old fox?"

Amused by those unfamiliar terms, I picked up the newspaper and read the part where Ehsan had tapped his finger a few times for emphasis. "Negotiations stall over common currency." Yet another exaggerated headline. Apparently, something was always stalling somewhere. If you followed everything according to media logic, nothing would ever move forward because everything had supposedly collapsed at some point. In reality, nothing was stuck; this was just another preparatory meeting about a new idea to form a Union in our region. The discussions were sometimes heated and tedious. I followed the news from the sidelines. Our politicians, along with a few ambitious, idealistic leaders from Jordan, Oman and Turkey, had planted the first seeds of this idea. For a long time, nothing had been done with it, it was quite literally just a dream. Ambitious for our region, to say the least, but that didn't make it any less interesting.

Ehsan, however, was always hard to read. It was often difficult to tell whether he was being serious or just joking, so I tried to get more details from him about what these 'Satans' meant and how he had come up with them.

He swore he hadn't made them up; they were terms used in some mosques. "...they also call our late Shah the puppet of the Great Satan!" he added. My blank reaction and the fact that I had never heard of these terms surprised him. "Do you even know who Khomeini was?" he asked teasingly.

I didn't tell him that I hadn't paid much attention to that either. I had heard of him, his name was occasionally whispered by those who spoke of the past as 'the missed opportunity'. My father thought of him as a dubious man, a potential threat to Iran and our region. I would only learn later how dangerous his legacy was for us.

Deep in conversation with Ehsan, I didn't initially hear my name being called over the loudspeaker. It happened a few times before Ehsan pointed it out to me. I had to report to the staff office, someone had called for me. At the phone, I immediately recognized Captain Kar's voice on the other end of the line.

"Corporal, you've made quite an impression with your persistence and your letter," he said the moment he heard me, emphasizing the word 'letter' with a clear, deliberate pause.

At first, I listened indifferently, having already given up in my mind, but as he spoke, that indifference quickly gave way to a creeping fear of rejection, especially because of that letter.

"What did you write in it? You have some powerful supporters now!" I heard him continue. He was calling from Tehran.

"Powerful supporters? What do you mean? Do you have any news for me?" I asked, a spark of hope suddenly started to flicker between my fear. I hadn't even properly greeted him yet.

"Let's just say it wasn't easy, but even the tough General Qasemi can't ignore the Shahbanou – Queen – and former General Khosrodad forever. You

do know who General Khosrodad is, right? The founder of our commando forces? They personally advocated for you. Don't ask me how, I'm just as surprised..."

It might sound like a cliché to say that I didn't know how to react, but it is true. I was completely stunned, unable to process what I was hearing or whether I was even hearing it correctly. My hands felt ice-cold.

"Hello, Danesh? Are you still there?"

"Yes...absolutely...but I'm...I'm just speechless. Can you please tell me what this is about? I don't understand, what does the Shahbanou have to do with me, with this? Which Shahbanou?"

He chuckled briefly. "Your letter didn't just reach General Qasemi, but also Shahbanou Farah. Don't ask me how. And she discussed it with General Khosrodad, and together they convinced General Qasemi. The Shahbanou wants more female participation in the military, and your request was so unique that, after reading your résumé, file and letter, she made it her mission to support you. This is extraordinary, Danesh. Congratulations!"

"Congratulations?! Are you serious? This isn't some cruel joke?" I sank to the ground beside the table. "This is INCREDIBLE, Captain! I had almost given up."

"Yes, Danesh, this really means your request has been granted. You're now allowed to take part in the selection process for the Special Forces. Your base commanders will receive the official approval from us and will guide you through the next steps. Best of luck, go for it!"

I can't exactly remember how the conversation went after that; my euphoria and the realization that he had kept his promise to help me, overwhelmed everything. I must have thanked him a hundred, maybe even a thousand times over the phone. And I probably sat in shock on the ground for a long time. The tingling excitement and happiness coursing through my body were even stronger than my pounding heart. Later, I found myself breathless and bent over in my unit's room, struggling to tell my comrades the news. But I didn't even need to, they knew it immediately, and our screams and cheers didn't go unnoticed.

A few days later, when I reported to Colonel Mohseni, an old commando and now a recruiter for the Special Forces at our base, he asked: "Corporal Danesh, are you ready? Are you absolutely sure this is what you want? I need to hear it loud and clear from you!"

"Yes, Colonel. I'm absolutely, completely sure."

"Then we'll sign you up for the first round of training and tests. As you've already figured out, the first round lasts ten weeks, during which you'll be pushed to your mental and physical limits. The rest of the training will come later."

"I'm ready for it, Colonel."

"Yeah, tell me about it. If you're not ready, then who at this base would be?!" he said, eased and almost as happy as I was. Perhaps also because from that moment on he was finally relieved from my constant bothering of the officers on base. As he prepared my documents, he continued, "You have two

weeks before the next group of recruits begins their training. You'll then fly to Shiraz, to your new base."

The last two weeks in Chabahar passed in a blur, faster than I could have imagined. By the time it finally happened, all the frustrations of the past no longer mattered; they had vanished like snow in the sun. Suddenly, the moment had arrived. After two years, I had to say goodbye to my comrades and officers on the base. Chabahar had become my home, and now I was about to begin a new chapter. A chapter that already felt like a victory, because I had managed to convince them, had not given in to their resistance, and had passed through the first gates.

### 3

"So, you are Corporal Roya Danesh. I've heard a lot about you. You've caused quite a stir, young lady," said Colonel Majidi to me, his deep, piercing gaze fixed on me from the moment I entered his office.

He was one of the most experienced Special Forces commanders of the Iranian Army, in his fifties, with streaks of gray in his otherwise dark hair and a neatly trimmed medium-length beard. As soon as I arrived at the base in Shiraz, I was ordered to report to him, and now I stood before him in his classically decorated office. A large Persian rug covered the floor beneath his imposing desk, with leather chairs positioned in front of it. For some reason, this setting didn't seem to fit him, yet at the same time, it exuded power.

"Personally, I have nothing against women in the military, but a woman among my commandos, training with the best elite troops of the Iranian Army? That's pushing it. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have allowed it, to be honest. And I honestly doubt you'll make it, Corporal." He sat behind his desk, pretending to skim through my file. "But I have to do this, orders from my superiors, and her." He then mumbled something under his breath, which sounded like: "She dares...should mind her own business...this is my base..." He probably was referring to the Shahbanou. "...Don't you think for a second that we'll make any exceptions, just because you're a woman. We have high standards, and we're not lowering them." His tone grew even colder.

"I don't expect you to, Colonel. I plan to succeed here, and that's exactly what I'll do." I showed no emotion.

He nodded, studying me intensely, then pressed a button to call in his secretary, ordering him to summon Sergeant Ahmadi. The minutes that followed were thick with tension, an odd mix of my excitement and his rigid authority. I stood there, determined and curious, while the harsh features and sharp words of the highest-ranking officer on the base in Shiraz tried to temper my enthusiasm. His reputation preceded him: a strict but fair leader, known for decades of military experience, both in Iran and beyond, with an unwavering sense of discipline and zero tolerance for incompetence. His tireless dedication to our country and his troops had earned him countless accolades. And there I was, at the beginning of my journey to prove myself to him, standing in front of him in his barracks, which he ruled like a lion. Each second stretched unbearably, until I finally heard a knock on the door. Sergeant Ahmadi reported in and stepped inside, his arrival was a welcome change for me.

"Take Corporal Danesh to her own sleeping quarters, yes, you'll get your own space, and then she has to join the rest of the recruits for the introduction," the colonel said immediately to the sergeant, and when everything was said and we were about to leave, he muttered, "Good luck, Danesh."

I saluted the colonel and followed the sergeant outside. He led me along a long route past the outer walls towards the sleeping tents. Along the way, he introduced himself in detail: he had completed his commando training five years ago and, outside of his operational duties, he regularly worked as a trainer and the acting team leader for Captain Azad at this camp in Shiraz.

"You're already quite famous here," he suddenly said with a curious look while walking. "The men have mixed feelings about having a woman training here. You'll face a lot of mixed reactions and you'll have to learn to deal with that. Personally, I don't really mind, but...", he shrugged.

"You're all very encouraging, Sergeant," I replied dryly. As I had noticed from the beginning with the colonel, I indeed had to learn to cope with it and develop an even thicker skin than during my regular military service.

Sergeant Ahmadi simply responded by saying he would be tough on everyone and that I shouldn't take it personally. And if I ever needed anything, I should come to him first.

At the sleeping quarters, he opened the entrance of my tent and gestured for me to enter. Inside, there was a cot with a rolled-up sleeping bag and a simple pillow on top. Next to the bed stood a small table, and on the other side, a camping chair and a storage locker. A single lamp hung from the ceiling, swinging from its cable. He gave me half an hour to unpack and to be at the central square by 09:00.

I didn't need much time, my excitement made it impossible to take long, so I got ready quickly. But to avoid looking like an over-eager child, I made sure to arrive precisely at 09:00. When I got there, I counted fourteen young men standing together, chatting. I immediately noticed that they were all bald. I didn't have to shave my head, short hair was considered acceptable for me. Nodding and greeting them, I joined the group. Some gave me a polite nod in return, while a few others stared at me blankly, their expressions unreadable. Before we had time to exchange any words, a loud "Attention!" rang out. We quickly formed into five rows, standing in perfect formation.

Colonel Majidi walked toward us with his staff. He took his position in front of us, placing his hands behind his back. One by one, he examined us: our posture, uniforms, faces, expressions, and somehow even our focus at that moment. His gaze was just as intense as it had been in his office. By stretching the silence, he heightened the tension in the air. Calmly, he then began to speak; there was no need for a harsh tone, his presence alone commanded respect, and his words spoke for themselves. "Welcome to HELL, boys...and girl. And if you think that's just a cliché, wait until you experience it. You have been selected to become the next generation of takavars in the N.O.H.E.D. brigade of the Iranian Army. But not all of you will make it, we will make sure of that. Because we only want the best of the best in our ranks." He spoke with unmistakable pride when he mentioned his brigade's name. "You already have military experience and have sworn to protect our country, our people, our constitution, and the monarchy at all costs. This brigade also serves our nation, never forget that."

Silence.

He then took a deep, slow breath, straightened his chest, and lifted his chin slightly as if looking down on us, even if just for a moment. "What you are about to go through in the next ten weeks, is one of the toughest military training programs a human being can endure. And once you finish that, we will push you even harder, to strip away every last layer of weakness. Our army ranks among the top five in the world, and we have a reputation to uphold. Understood?"

We all shouted as one, "Yes, Colonel!"

Blood rushed through my veins on that day. His words were meant to intimidate us, to overwhelm us, but I felt nothing but excitement. His words couldn't shake me, and when he finally shouted our military motto, 'we sacrifice ourselves for the people, the people honor the army', I repeated it back with pride.

After this short opening speech, he left us in the hands of his staff, our trainers. Captain Azad was on the lead, a sharp but noticeably less intimidating figure. He didn't give off the impression that he would tear you down before even letting you speak. He immediately began outlining our daily training schedule for the coming weeks. I remember him saying that we would wake up at 04:30 every morning and run several kilometers as a warm-up. But by then, I had stopped paying attention, I just wanted to start, my legs were restless with anticipation. Fortunately, he didn't reveal everything at once, or I would have made a terrible first impression by not listening. I caught fragments of his words: "...unexpected situations, improvisation, adaptability...focus, discipline, responsibility...courage, strategy, loyalty, honor, and pride..." Words that would reveal their true meaning later.

Looking back at the defining moments at the beginning of my career, the moment I stood in Colonel Majidi's office was the most certain of them all. At that moment, I felt more than certain, pride and fulfillment surged through my veins, and I was determined to succeed. Sometimes, I wonder what drove me to choose this path. Was it truly passion for my people and homeland? Could I have felt such deep passion at such a young age? Or was it rather an intense longing for adventure and excitement, an escape from an alternative future that threatened to bore and frustrate me? Back then, I had no idea where this adventure would take me, and what challenges, revelations, opportunities and pitfalls it will present to me. But one thing became immediately clear to me: that 'hell' was an understatement for what I had to endure in the first phase of my training.

I had never imagined to experience Shiraz in this way. Where we were and what we were doing, there was no poetry and wine, no Hafez and Saadi, no Persepolis, no colorful stained-glass windows of the Nasir al-Molk Mosque, nor the annual international arts festival. Shiraz became my harsh and literally breathtaking battlefield. The place where we were broken and rebuilt. I would be lying if I said that this grueling training didn't affect me, that I hadn't underestimated it, or that it didn't make me doubt myself. Sleepless nights, enduring the burning sun or relentless rain day after day, surviving the freezing mountain nights, resisting the gnawing hunger, being pushed to the mental brink, losing myself in time and space, the sharp scent of earth

and sweat in my nose, shooting, fighting, navigating, patrolling, enduring physical pain, surpassing the limits of my body and mind, staying sharp... staying sharp...staying sharp, even when every fiber of my being screamed to give up, even when it felt like it was my last breath and my last ounce of strength.

Yes, I doubted. The training pushed me to the point where I deeply questioned myself, my abilities, and my willpower. I cursed my naivety, how could I have thought I could simply become a takavar? That I had envisioned myself in my dreams as one of the best soldiers in my country, serving under our beautiful flag, before even experiencing for a moment what it truly meant to become one. But whenever I could no longer endure it and wanted to give up, I looked around at the boys who were also on the verge of collapse. We were individuals at the limits of our capacity, on the brink of breaking. In the first weeks, three of them had already dropped out due to injuries and sheer exhaustion. I didn't want to be next. I didn't want to fail, for me that was worse than the agonizing pain and total despair I was experiencing. Perhaps it was my fear of failure that kept me going, the fear of the shame I would feel if I couldn't last. I couldn't bear that. I didn't want them to be right, that this was nothing for a girl. So, I kept going, with everything I had in me. And this perseverance became a deep inward journey, leading me to discover that I had more within me than I had ever imagined. Because a human being is not only vulnerable but also resilient and strong. We learn, we grow, and we push our boundaries. This is how we survive, and our trainers were teaching us how to survive. Every time I woke up and was still there, still alive, I was one day closer to my goal. Then I comforted myself with the thought of 'what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger'. And they weren't allowed to kill us.

It is not my intention to lose myself in the details of my training in this story, those are surely better told in the accounts of other soldiers. I only wish to give an impression of how I experienced it and how I endured those first ten weeks of relentless challenges. It was a period of extensive, demanding trials, ending in an intensive survival training in the wooded mountains of Shiraz, where we were left to our fate and had to reach an appointed gathering point in Marvdasht by the fourth day.

I arrived fourth and discovered that, as a conclusion, we were allowed to rest by setting up a camp for an overnight stay in the open air. Exhausted from the long journey, I left my belongings by a large rock, prepared my sleeping spot, and then went searching for wood and stones for the campfire. There was no shortage of large stones in the area. I had a suspicion of where we were; judging by the tall, straight rocks in the distance, we were near the historical ruins of Persepolis, about 70 kilometers northeast of Shiraz.

With the gathered wood, I walked to the place where the campfire was being prepared. The boys' enthusiasm in building a fire reminded me of my father's saying that it was in our blood, that we were ancient pyromaniacs, just like our Zoroastrian ancestors. But at the same time he considered Persepolis as just a pile of old stones, not worth the constant boasting and visits. I placed my wood in the pile near the fire and walked quietly back to my spot. With

indescribable exhaustion, I sank down next to my sleeping bag, leaning against the rock, stretching out my legs, and reclining to rest. It was dusk by the time I sat down. I was a few meters away from the central fire and watched as the group of boys slowly gathered around it.

After a while, I looked up; it had grown darker, and immediately I became mesmerized by the vast, dizzying Milky Way. Until that moment, I had completely missed this breathtaking sight. A tingling sensation filled my stomach, as if I were falling from a great height. It was overwhelming to see so many stars above me. I closed my eyes, letting that image settle in my mind as I relaxed. But my moment of peace didn't last long, I heard footsteps approaching and someone crouched down beside me.

"Are you coming to sit with us? It's warmer there and probably more fun than sitting alone," he said.

My eyes refused to open, but it would have been rude not to look at him. I turned my head toward him, without answering immediately. I needed a few moments to register his words. When I finally understood, I glanced at the group of boys, who, to my surprise, were quite lively. I shrugged with effort, I had no reason not to go, yet standing up felt like a challenge at that moment. Besides, I had no real connection with those boys, and in the past weeks, there had been no time for social interaction.

The boy next to me extended his hand. "My name is Siavash." I took his hand to introduce myself as well, but immediately, he pulled me up. "Come on, you belong with us."

Surprised by his action, I finally agreed and walked with him, calmly taking a seat next to him in the circle with the others. We started talking; Siavash was also from Tehran, three years older than me, and had been in the army for five years. He spoke Farsi in a clear and polished manner. I couldn't tell if it was because of his politeness or if he had a special background. He exuded calmness and a healthy sense of self-awareness. Throughout our conversation, he never once asked what I was doing there, nor did he make any remarks about my unusual choice as a girl. At one point, he simply asked, "How long had you been thinking about this?" while handing me a piece of meat from the fire.

"A long time," I said, not wanting to say more. I didn't ask how long he had been considering this path. Perhaps I assumed that, for a man, deciding to take such a job was a given.

After my response, he didn't ask anything else. We both stared in silence at the dancing flames of the campfire, as if trying to replenish our burned-out energy from the fire. Our trainers came to tell us that they would be easy with us the next day, as long as we didn't stay up too late. The group seized this opportunity to linger even longer; gradually jokes were pulled out, and they laughed as if they had known each other for years. Stories about the past ten weeks and the four-day survival training were told and compared in detail, each of them sharing their own heroic moments. The conversation circle buzzed with lively anecdotes and roaring laughter.

I sat quietly, listening to them while enjoying my exceptionally tasty campfire tea in the cool night of Marvdasht. Even the soot in the tea tasted good to

me. As I sipped my tea, I took the time to observe the group. We were twelve young soldiers, each of us having survived the impossible training and emerged stronger. It wasn't a competition, nor was it teamwork, not yet. As I listened, I could hear that we came from all corners of Iran, but I realized I no longer remembered their names, except for Siavash and Babak, who had poured the tea.

I gathered the energy to ask for their names, but just at that moment, as if he had been waiting for it, one of the boys beat me to it. "So, Roya, that's your name, right? How has it been for you so far?"

I looked at him, assessing his tone. "First of all, what's your name?"

"Kamran."

"It's manageable, Kamran. Just as you've experienced it, I think."

"Hmm, how I experience it? I don't think so! You've come pretty far for a..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"For a girl?" I asked in a playful tone. "Well, assuming you genuinely want to know, I can tell you that I love it and experience it just as well as you do." Suddenly, I was sharp.

"I heard that you have high connections and that's why you're here, thanks to an exception," another boy said.

"And what should I call you?"

"Mohammad Reza, and I don't think you belong here."

I demonstratively curled my lips and nodded, intrigued. "Wow, how remarkable that you've heard such a thing and are so direct about it, Mohammad Reza! Please, keep thinking that; meanwhile, I'll continue with my training. And high connections? I'll remember that, maybe they'll be useful for me later! And what are your names?" I then asked the remaining boys, also to steer the conversation away. Their names were Ali, Ramin, Ahmad, Amir, Reza, Asgar, and Sohrab.

"Seriously, what are you doing here? You're not actually going to do this job, are you? It's not for a woman. I wouldn't approve if my wife did this..." Mohammad Reza continued, and some of the boys in the group chuckled in agreement.

As Sergeant Ahmadi had said, I had expected that at some point I would have to bite the bullet and face this confrontation. If even my own parents and friends had so much resistance and hesitation about it, how could I expect that complete strangers, who suddenly found a woman in their territory, would simply accept it? The group had been suspiciously quiet about it for the past weeks; honestly, I had expected this sooner. The training itself had demanded so much attention and energy from me, that I hadn't noticed how they perceived me. And because it wasn't an issue for me, I hadn't concerned myself with it. That evening, I could have reacted to those boys in many ways; often, I engaged with such remarks on principle, because in my fiery young spirit, I didn't believe that staying silent or ignoring was always the best tactic. The standard response I had learned from my parents for such comments was: let it go. As if all prejudices, accusations, perceptions, deeply ingrained beliefs and opinions, would change on their own if you just let them go. If I had let things go, I wouldn't have made it this far.

"Well, very seriously, I'm here to do the same job as you," I responded. "It's that simple. What are you so worried about? I'm not taking anything from you. And how you talk, you and I are definitely not a good match in real life! So don't worry, I won't be your wife." In my mind, I had already judged him: he must be traditionally religious. The kind of person whose ideas about gender roles had been ingrained in him since childhood and had never changed since.

"Estaghfar Allah! How dare you? You should be ashamed!" Mohammad Reza immediately reacted, and he stood up demonstratively to go to sleep.

I watched him leave. "For what?" I shrugged, not really caring about him.

In the following seconds, the other boys followed him to their sleeping places. Siavash and Babak stayed behind.

"You stayed calm!" Siavash said, amused, when it finally became quiet.

"Their opinion is irrelevant to me. And I have nothing to be ashamed of; I'm not doing anything wrong." I wanted to leave it there and stand up too, but words kept pouring out of my mouth. "What is it with you men, that you want to keep everything in the world to yourselves? It's easy that way, isn't it? The arrog..." My exhaustion was taking over my mind. I had never heard myself talk like this, not even when my free-spirited father gave me a lecture.

Siavash and Babak exchanged amused, but surprised, glances.

"Well, if I don't come across as too arrogant, madam, I'd rather not get into that!" Babak teased. "And don't let them get to you, they just want to assert themselves. You'll get used to it."

For the first time, I heard him speak clearly to me. He had a Western Iranian accent, from Kermanshah. I shrugged and stood up as well, without looking at him or Siavash.

"You might be mistaken, Roya," Siavash said with a slight grin. "We don't want everything for ourselves, and our lives aren't necessarily easier than those of women. It's just different. We have our own struggles too." He also stood up and started walking toward his sleeping area.

Without responding, I watched him go. I couldn't think about what he had said anymore, and I didn't need to, it was what it was, and I felt that Siavash was fine. "Goodnight," was the only thing I said in response.

The next day, our trainers woke us up at 08:00; it felt like a royal treatment, as if we had been allowed to sleep for days. After a short warm-up and breakfast, we departed toward the barracks. There, we were given time to freshen up before being addressed by the officers in the canteen.

For the first time in weeks, I could finally see myself in the mirror again: thinner, dirty, and exhausted. I took a well-deserved shower and felt a little better. Then I quickly got dressed and walked to the canteen to sit with Siavash and Babak's group. They looked better too. While waiting for our officers, we got engaged in conversations across the hall, gradually smelling a pleasant, appetizing aroma. No one expected to get anything special to eat after our experiences of the past weeks. But that day, we were suddenly served Abgusht – Iranian stew. Our officers believed we had earned a hearty, nutritious meal. And that was the best Abgusht I had ever eaten in my life.

As we eagerly indulged in that delicious meal, Colonel Majidi entered the canteen to address us. I had rarely seen him in the past weeks. "Congratulations on completing the first phase of your training. I see that twelve of you remain, eleven men and one lady. I expected fewer. I'm impressed!" he said, after observing us for a moment. "You will have the next two days off to rest. After that, the next level of training will begin. What those trainings will be and how they are structured, you will see in the coming weeks. Keep in mind, just because you've made it this far, doesn't mean you can't still drop out. Good luck, gentlemen...and lady." His gaze carried a hidden compliment. Then he left immediately. He never stretched out his time or used unnecessary words; his messages were always brief and to the point. It was up to people to quickly understand what he meant.

My thoughts returned to the group and to the upcoming free days. I had forgotten the concept of free time over the past weeks and wondered what I would do in the next two days. It suddenly felt like an ocean of time. One of the boys called out that he was going to sleep for the entire two days because, after such intense training and eating Abgusht, it felt inhumane to stay awake. Everyone agreed, and conversations continued in groups as we enjoyed our meals. Our trainers then left us to ourselves.

Satisfied with my delightful meal, my eyes grew heavy and my legs felt like they could barely take another step. It was either walk back to my tent right away or collapse and fall asleep right there in the canteen. As I later walked down the hallway outside, I suddenly heard my name being called.

"Do you have a moment, Danesh?" It was Captain Azad.

"Yes, Captain."

"I wanted to check how you're doing?"

"I'm doing well, Captain!"

"You have made a good impression on us, and the Colonel, so far. I must say, we're quite curious to see how you will continue. And I mean that positively."

"That's good to hear, Captain, and I hope the same for the others."

"Yes, yes, I'm asking them too, don't worry!" he responded with a meaningful smile. "Get some rest, Danesh. You need it, because the next trainings won't be any less intense."

I still remember how those words echoed in my mind as I walked to my tent, proud that I had endured the first phase of my tough training and the predicted harsh remarks. I took off my shoes inside, crawled under the blanket on my cot, and only woke up the next afternoon.

And after that? There was no more doubt in my mind. More determined than ever, I embraced every new challenge, whether it was the physical trials, the mental battles, or the verbal attacks. The ups and downs came and went, but I stood my ground, refused to be distracted by doubts, and kept my focus on what I wanted to achieve and the people who positively influenced me. Step by step, week by week, training after training, I moved forward, no matter what came next...

## 4

2003

"Wake up, Roya jan...Roya, wake up, my darling, this is so terrible!" Roya felt her mother shaking her repeatedly. She was finally home after months. Her mother's voice sounded sorrowful; she was sobbing. "They have attacked Iraq. It's war...My God, it's war again," she said as soon as she saw Roya open her eyes. "Come, this is terrible. What should we do?!"

Roya had expected a few peaceful weeks at home. It was Norouz, the Iranian New Year. The drums of war had been beating for months; it was in the air. Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the last socialist stronghold in the region, and the U.S. had been at odds for years. Iraq could have easily been just another Soviet state if they weren't Arabs and if racially they weren't much different from the Russians. Under Saddam's rule, Iraq was a troublesome neighbor for Iran and a difficult country in the region. He obstructed regional talks whenever he could; he didn't want a Southwest Asian Union, but sought a strong Arab Union and a powerful socialist Iraq. He was against the Jews and Israel, against the Persians, against the Kurds, and against the Turks. But no one started a war against him. No one invaded his country just because he was difficult. From the ashes of a war-torn nation, something new will eventually be built, but only after it has been paid for with the blood and tears of its people. The goal was to build a peaceful, prosperous region where old wounds from colonial times and wars could heal, where sectarian, religious, ideological, and nationalist conflicts would give way to prosperity, cooperation, industrialization, trade, cultural and social exchange.

Saddam Hussein was often ignored, tolerated, and even regularly invited to participate in discussions about the Union. The weapons of mass destruction he had used against the Kurds, had been dismantled by neighboring countries and the UN. For Saddam, it was either accepting this or suffering another defeat. But a convinced despot doesn't stop there, perhaps he had even become too much of a problem for some countries in the region.

Roya followed her mother into the living room, where the TV was blaring. Her father stood in front of the screen, his reading glasses perched at the tip of his nose, hands behind his back, watching the images of the invasion of Iraq. "They got him, those bastards."

At that moment, it wasn't clear who he meant by 'bastards', Saddam and his regime or the U.S. and the Europeans. Her mother sat at the edge of the couch, crying as she watched the footage. Roya glanced between her mother and the images on the TV.

"They want his oil and cannot tolerate such a strong man. They want to take us all and rule over us again. Why can't they leave us alone?" her mother sobbed.

A heavy atmosphere hung over the house, so early in the morning. To escape the scene, a nightmare in the making, Roya asked if she should make tea. In the kitchen, the samovar was already gently steaming. Roya poured three cups and carried them back to the living room on a tray with some food. Her father was still standing in front of the TV, and her mother was crying and cursing. Roya sat beside her on the couch with two cups of tea and a small plate of food. The images were intense: large buildings engulfed in flames and smoke, the sky still dark, yet Baghdad glowing red. There were no images of ordinary Iraqis on TV, ordinary men and women who had nothing to do with East versus West or the so-called weapons of mass destruction, who stood still, breathless, powerless, fearful, and angry as they watched their country being taken over. Only the overwhelming military display of the invading coalition was shown.

A press conference by the Iranian prime minister was announced on TV. A few minutes later, he appeared on the screen. According to him, Iran would take a neutral position in this war and would not provide political or military support. "...A war like this is not what we need here and now. We do not want to reopen old wounds in our region. We cannot afford chaos and stress once again. We want a..."

"Hear him talk! Bold words for such an Amrikai – America lover! If he really meant it, he would have prevented this invasion. Don't believe him; he'll soon go and obediently follow Bush and his other masters," Roya's father said bitterly, whereafter he immediately turned his back to the TV. For him, the matter was settled, and this puppet show, as he called it, was over. "Those Westerners are still living in their megalomania. They think they can attack, exploit, and drain countries whenever they want. Sowing unrest and division is their export product. What does our prime minister think he has to say here? Nothing! Everything is decided by them; he has no say, otherwise, he would have stopped it..." He continued muttering as he walked away, gripping his reading glasses tightly in his fist.

"First, they turned him against us, and now that they no longer need him, they attack him," her mother added.

Roya calmly nibbled on some nuts and her rolled-up flatbread with sheep's cheese, sipping her sweet tea. She was trying to organize her thoughts amidst this chaos. She had never consciously experienced a war before. According to her mother, she had been born during the brief war between Iran and Iraq, when Iraq attacked Iran in the turbulent early 1980s. It seemed that Saddam wanted to resolve the old border dispute between their countries and his defeat in the Algiers Agreement in his own way, and preferably also take Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province. It escalated into an intense border conflict, but was quickly suppressed again. After that, the two countries remained distant, and interactions between them were limited. Iraq viewed Iran as a capitalist, outdated monarchy, whose people seemed to have been bribed by the West, while Iran saw Iraq as too socialist and Russophile. Two strong, opposing viewpoints from the Cold War era.

"Saddam is not a little child who can just be turned against us; we've been obstructing each other for years," Roya said, just to have something to say in response to the continuous, strange sobbing and negativity of her parents.

Her mother dismissed her words with a gesture, stood up, and walked over to the Haft-Seen table to busy herself with it.

"The fall of Saddam's regime will usher in a new era in Iraq, and the surrounding region. A disaster is coming. That man knew how to keep a difficult country in line," her father responded from the dining table.

Roya listened quietly, without replying. 'Keeping in line' didn't sound like a positive thing, and Saddam hadn't even fallen yet, he was still somewhere in Iraq. She figuratively shrugged, thinking her father must know better, and turned her gaze back to the TV. The harder their prime minister tried to explain on TV that this was an unwanted war, the more her parents turned against him. They showed little trust in him; apparently, he had to choose a side, and preferably, he should immediately condemn the war and the Americans. It was a strange experience for Roya to see her parents react this way, as if the names 'America' and 'Saddam' together triggered something terrible, something furious and mysterious within them. Something from a distant past that she had not yet experienced.

The TV remained on, and the images of bombings and burning buildings in Baghdad were repeatedly shown. Roya's father had withdrawn to his workspace, and her mother, at times, acted as if her own father and home had been attacked. The silence between her mother's tears and moans, the disturbing images on TV, and her father's passive-aggressive reactions felt heavy. Roya stood up, walked over to the Haft-Seen table, and deeply inhaled the scent of the white hyacinths and daffodils that her mother had arranged on it. The table was beautifully set, with carefully arranged items in crystal bowls with golden edges. At the head of the table stood a large mirror and two candlesticks. Her mother had lit the candles to, as she said, bring some light into these dark times. The mirror and candlesticks, part of her bridal dowry, had also stood at the head of the table on her wedding day, as symbols of light, honesty and warmth.

Roya gazed at the beautifully set table for a while. She had been looking forward to spend a few weeks at home, to celebrate Norouz with her family. A few months earlier, she had successfully completed her training and had been placed in an operational team alongside Siavash, Ali, Ramin and Babak. They had earned the title of takavars, five elite soldiers serving in the Army, trained for special operations. The completion of their training had been celebrated at the base, in the presence of their families. Standing in formation, in their formal uniforms on the central square, they were each appointed by Colonel Majidi as commandos of the Special Forces of the Royal Iranian Army. In his closing speech, the colonel, with his characteristic flair, spoke about the hardships and challenges these young soldiers had endured to reach this point. He praised their perseverance, intelligence and dedication, urging them to act fearlessly but wisely. He emphasized that their work, contrary to what many believed, was not just about violence and warfare, but about intelligence, precision, honor, courage, and servitude.

Through that training, challenge and perseverance had taken on an entirely new meaning for Roya. She closed her eyes and, with a slight grin, recalled the final march back to the Shiraz base. By then, she had thought that she had built up good endurance and that nothing would feel too difficult anymore, but that final march had been a test in itself. The pride in the colonel's voice when he said he trusted them to protect the nation and its people, still echoed in her mind, drowning out that pain. Together with Major Nikan, he had personally congratulated them one by one. Roya could still feel the pride she had felt at that moment, standing firm in her place, having reached the finish line, overcome her weaknesses, and now standing as a proud member of the Special Forces, against all expectations, disapproval, and obstacles.

The most remarkable part of that day was revealed at the very end; before they would reunite with their families for a small celebration at the base, the colonel had a surprise for them. Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi had come to the base, specifically to attend the ceremony and personally congratulate the new graduates. It was a rare honor; since the death of her husband, she had not attended any military ceremony. Roya would never forget the moment when the elegant, intelligent and kind Shahbanou walked toward them, shook their hands one by one, and exchanged a few words with each of them. When she reached Roya, the pride in her eyes was even greater than Roya's as she spoke to her: "It's wonderful to meet you in person, Corporal Danesh. I've heard a lot about you!"

With these beautiful memories etched into her mind, Roya took a deep breath of the fragrant air and looked around the room. The dramatic atmosphere at home and the horrific images on TV stood in stark contrast to her thoughts. So, she decided to go for a run, to breathe in some fresh air. Quickly, she changed into her sportswear and rushed outside. The streets were still wet from the rain of the night before, and she enjoyed the scent of damp earth and the moist air. She picked up a fast pace, choosing the long, green boulevard toward the mountains, running farther and harder until her pulse reached 180 bpm. The soft, crisp spring air felt like a drug, allowing her to maintain her high speed effortlessly. But her mind was racing. The war was a problem, what awaited them might be an even greater problem. Roya had only been deployed operationally a few times before, in Afghanistan, where, after the U.S. invasion, the Taliban had to be kept at bay by any means necessary, ensuring that none of their ideology spilled over into Iran. Now, a new war was looming. Major Nikan's words echoed in her head: "With this war, they are opening Pandora's box. There are grim forces simmering in Iraq, that have remained invisible until now. This will destabilize our entire region!" Yet, the real question: how the United States could justify doing something like this in someone else's region, was conveniently avoided by everyone, from the major to the prime minister.

When Roya returned after an hour of running and some outdoor exercises, she noticed that their apartment door was suddenly surrounded by ten pairs of shoes. So many visitors this early in the year was unusual. Such gatherings typically happened after the New Year, when, according to tradition, the younger family members visited the elders, wearing their best clothes and

shoes, while children eagerly awaited their Eydi – New Year's gift. Roya's father was now the eldest uncle in his large family line. He was the only surviving child of his parents, the youngest among two brothers and three sisters. Every Norouz, for two weeks their home became the stage of warm, formal, and lively well-wishes for the new year. But what Roya saw now felt too early. She hesitated for a moment before deciding whether to go inside. Her mother always wished she would mingle more with family and visitors, but under these circumstances, she felt uncomfortable facing a large crowd. Sitting for hours, drinking tea with cousins, uncles, aunts, great-uncles and their children was never really her thing. She stood behind the door for a while, staring at the shoes. With a sigh and reluctance, she finally inserted her key into the lock and opened the door. As soon as she stepped inside, and as if everyone had been waiting for her, a brief silence fell over the room. Then, all at once, came a loud cheer: "Our corporal is here, we need to talk to her!"

All eyes immediately turned to her, and before Roya knew it, she was greeted, hugged, and pulled inside. This was exactly what she had wanted to avoid because she knew what it meant. She would have preferred to go straight to her room and disappear from sight, but that was no longer an option. Now, she had to put on a smile and politely join the guests, pretending to be happy. This could last for hours, maybe even days. No one could say for sure if their guests would stay overnight, but often, they did. Reluctantly, Roya walked with the guests into the seating area. Her young nephews ran toward her, attempting an awkward military salute, while her father, standing with his arms behind his back, observed everything. In the background, the television was still blaring with war reports. Roya had no time to freshen up, she had to sit down immediately and endure the storm of questions. No one asked how she was doing, they only wanted to know her opinion on the war: would Iran get involved, would they bomb and invade their neighboring country? The flood of questions was so overwhelming that Roya could barely finish her answers.

"Are we blindly going to follow those Yankees into battle?" Roya suddenly heard a new voice among the others, coming from somewhere behind her. When she turned around, she saw someone sitting alone at the dining table. She hadn't noticed him before, and even then, she didn't immediately recognize him. It took her a moment to realize who he was: her uncle, or rather her mother's cousin, but he was considered an uncle.

It had been a long time since she had seen him; he led a busy life as a successful businessman in the energy sector, constantly traveling for work inside and outside Iran. Over twenty years ago, he had founded his own company when the government introduced policies to gradually reduce Iran's dependence on oil. Roya noticed that he looked much older; his once thick black hair was now streaked with gray. She walked toward him, arms wide open for an embrace and greeting. Since childhood, Roya had shared a warm bond with him, filled with memories of sitting on his lap, singing songs, playing endlessly in his vast house and garden, and regularly going camping in the mountains with him and his family. He had taught Roya how to fish in the wild riv-

ers of the Alborz mountains, how to hunt, and how to survive cold mountain nights.

Warm, yet sharp and serious, he looked at Roya. However, his weak embrace felt uncomfortable to her. She pulled back in surprise, though she made sure not to show it.

"So? What does my sweet little bunny think?" He still called her that.

"I don't know, uncle."

His gaze became suspicious. "You don't know, Corporal? How remarkable!"

Roya looked into his dark eyes, searching for a glimpse of his own thoughts. He was a sharp-minded man, who never asked questions without reason; simply saying she didn't know wouldn't be enough. Still, Roya preferred not to talk about the war. Whether he would believe her or not, was irrelevant. There were other things she wanted to know, and she wanted to tell him about her training and experiences. He searched her gaze as well, his eyes examining her. As she held her ground, his expression slowly softened, and his grin became more natural. With genuine warmth, he finally asked how she was doing and invited Roya to sit beside him and talk about everything they had experienced in the past months, until the evening slowly fell.

Roya's mother had prepared an elaborate meal for the guests, as every Iranian woman of her generation was accustomed to unexpected visitors and was capable of cooking for a large crowd on short notice. The Norouz celebration would take place early the next morning, and it was now clear that they would be celebrating it with a house full of guests. Everyone sat in small groups, some engaged in casual conversations about daily life, while others still debated the war and the forces at play behind the scenes. Although the gathering wasn't as overwhelming as Roya had initially feared, she realized that day that it might be time to find her own apartment if she wanted to avoid such situations in the future. Almost twenty-three years old, she felt it was time for a life of her own, independent from her family. With these thoughts in her mind, she occasionally smiled at the guests and answered their questions politely while helping to set the table. However, their curious glances lingered on her, some even suppressing an eager urge to question her about the war, as if she were a military officer instead of family. Because of this, Roya felt like a stranger in her own home, no matter how hard she tried to answer their questions calmly and thoughtfully. Time wasn't on her side either, it was as if the minutes had a will of their own, dragging themselves painfully slowly forward. Until suddenly, she heard the faint sound of a message arriving on her phone: "Do you want to get out of your house, too...now?" It was Ali, like a guardian angel.

In their traditional hangout café in the heart of Tehran, near the large Farah Park, Roya and Ali found each other; both grateful for a much-needed escape from home. While waiting for Siavash, Ali had started to vent his heart: ever since the war news broke, his mother had been crying non-stop, and praying to all twelve Imams for it to end. "...sometimes, she still seems trapped in her own bubble. What can the twelve holy Imams do about this from their graves? I pray every day too, I know the Quran by heart. I have all the respect

in the world for our Prophet, for Imam Ali, for Imam Hussein, but I have no illusions about the reality of life, about cause and effect..." Ali shook his head while telling.

He was the same age as Roya, and came from a long line of Shi'a clerics on his mother's side. His mother was a strict Muslim; strict with herself and even stricter with her children, more than her husband. She always felt Ali was too much like his father, not religious enough. She had hoped Ali would follow in her father's footsteps and study theology in Qom.

"My father died in the war against Iraq," Ali continued. "My mother was both shattered and proud, being only twenty-one at the time. She had his funeral posters printed with big, bold letters, saying he was a true martyr in the righteous fight against evil." Ali gestured in the air, as if mimicking the grand size of the posters. "They were plastered all over our neighborhood, and his funeral was packed, everyone from our district and beyond came. My father was loved in our community." He grinned briefly, as if picturing his father in his mind, before continuing. "And now, my mother won't stop crying, holding my father's old funeral poster in her arms. I don't know if it's because she's thinking about his death again, or if it's for the fate of her fellow Muslim brothers in Iraq. Only the Shi'a ones, of course...you get what I mean?!"

Roya nodded with a smirk, amused by his sarcastic tone.

Ali took a sip of his soft drink and leaned back in his chair. "She's inconsolable. For the first time, I couldn't calm her down. And honestly, I just couldn't stay home any longer, listening to her endless wailing. I know, I know...don't look at me like that. I should have stayed, but I just couldn't take it anymore." He let out a deep sigh.

Roya had remained silent, just listening. His unfortunate combination of despair and guilt wasn't invisible. Ali stopped speaking and looked around the café. There was literally no place left to sit, and the deafening noise made it hard to hear one another. The café had been fully booked for the Norouz celebrations. Nothing about the place hinted that a war had just begun next door. Carefree guests, young and old, stretched out the last hours of the year with dining, drinking, singing, and dancing until they were too exhausted to stand. Roya and Ali sat at a small table with three hard-earned chairs in a dimly lit corner, a favor from the café owner who knew them well. Whenever they were on leave, Roya, Ali and Siavash would often meet there, training together in the park before coming to this café for breakfast. It was in this very place that, piece by piece, they had uncovered the deep, beautiful, and sometimes dark sides of one another and their families.

Siavash arrived an hour later, apologizing, after quickly hugging Roya, for making them wait so long. He lived in northern Tehran, in an upscale but 'unbearably dull neighborhood, far from the heart of the city and far from anything fun', as he liked to put it. There was nothing dull about Niavaran, it was one of the most beautiful districts in Tehran. He explained that he had been stuck in heavy traffic on his way there. New Year's Eve traffic in Tehran was brutal, thanks to street markets and frantic last-minute shoppers.

Ali immediately pulled Siavash into his complaints about his situation at home and why he'd rather be at the café than stuck there. Siavash listened

with his usual calm and patience. Every now and then, his eyebrows would raise in amusement, and sometimes he let out a deep laugh. "...I'm jealous of you two, to be honest. At least you're escaping the chaos of your homes. I'm running away from the silence of mine. I'm glad you texted me to come here," he said, then explained that his mother and older sister, along with her husband and kids, had left the country again for two weeks. In recent years, Siavash had stopped traveling with them. He had seen enough of the world, and besides, he preferred to celebrate Norouz at home, in his own country.

Roya listened to them, fascinated. Their worlds were foreign to her, two extremes, and she wasn't even somewhere in between. Where she grew up, religion was rarely spoken of positively, let alone Islam, and spending money on travel or life's pleasures was considered a waste. Their rare trips were always domestic and spontaneous, driven by a sudden craving for rest. They never lasted more than three or four days, then it was time to go back to work and discipline. She caught fragments of Ali and Siavash's conversation, about traveling to Europe, about swapping families to escape, about faith, piety, and of course about the pretty girls in the café, whom she ignored and left for the guys to enjoy.

Siavash tapped her hand, pulling her out of her thoughts. "Before I forget, I have good news and not-so-good news. I'll start with the good one. Babak called me today from Kermanshah. He sounded a bit worried, Kermanshah is really close to Iraq! But he also had great news: he's getting engaged! We'll be all invited to his engagement party in Kermanshah soon."

Babak's engagement was no surprise. If there was one person he never stopped talking about, one person he wanted to buy everything for, one person he was willing to give his life for, it was Sima, his girlfriend and the love of his life. The less exciting news was exactly what they had expected from the moment rumors started spreading in their base, and from the moment that Roya had seen the images on TV: they had to be on standby for potential deployment to Iraq, despite all the official statements and political promises.

To celebrate their readiness, they ordered dinner, and in the long wait for their food, as expected on New Year's Eve, they kept talking about their hopes for the new year. Time flew by, and if Ali hadn't checked his watch, they would have missed the chance to get home before the turn of the year. And on that time of the year, you were supposed to be with family. Therefore Ali insisted on taking Siavash to his home; he couldn't accept the idea of Siavash spending that time alone, and he wouldn't take no for an answer until Siavash finally gave in.

## 5

Besides what I personally experienced at home on the day of the American invasion of Iraq, I remember countless other gatherings at our home or with family, where political conversations and discussions about our country and the region took center stage. In those discussions, the West, especially England or America, was often blamed for many of our problems, and people spoke tirelessly about their (neo-)imperialism, colonial exploitation, the coup against Dr. Mossadegh's government in 1953, the manipulation of our country during the Cold War, cartel formations and the betrayal of our king in the late 1970s. They criticized their ruthless capitalism, the imposition of their dollars on the entire world, and even their possible intrigues against our potential Union. When Iraq was invaded, many were even convinced that the U.S. had aggressive and deceitful motives to create chaos in the Middle East and even across the entire Eurasian continent, all to maintain their global hegemony. With a solid knowledge of history, we can say that there is some truth in all these claims, but to what extent should we let ourselves be carried away by them? Should we allow these claims and theories to completely dominate our thinking, leaving no room for alternative perspectives on complex geopolitical issues?

The century I was born in, witnessed profound events: the Russian Revolution, the rise of communism and its totalitarianism, two world wars and the collapse of the old order, the end of colonialism and the arrival of modern life as we know it. We can also add to that the large-scale discovery of oil in areas that had long been neglected due to colonialism, despotism, and incompetent local rulers. The geopolitical forces behind the discovery of oil are undeniable, and geopolitics is by nature about self-interest, influence, and power. Every player and every empire participates in this game, some playing it with greater cunning than others. The impact of this geopolitical game is still felt in my country today: the desire for nationalization and control over our oil, and the heavy political events that followed in Iran. I have heard endless discussions about these events, power struggles and the path we chose; each side of the discussion convinced they hold the ultimate truth and that the other is entirely wrong.

As I grew older, gained more experience, and became less influenced by my parents and their views, I began to question whether we truly perceive things as clearly as we think. Whether the reality is as black and white as we believe, or are we sometimes deliberately misled? What role do we play in these events ourselves, are we passive observers or active participants? And when things go wrong, are we willing to critically examine our own role, rather than simply pointing fingers at others, especially those in power? I often witnessed how people I knew, either idolized or condemned someone, some-

thing, a group, or an entire country. Take the Americans for example, they were constantly blamed for everything, absolutely everything that happened in our region. But I never heard anyone ask: what would have happened to our sovereignty after World War II, if they had not intervened? Without their help, could we have transformed ourselves from a weak and crushed country, under the heavy weight of two greedy colonial powers, Russia and England, into a strong, industrialized, developed and powerful nation in our region?

Because of my upbringing, I grew up with a certain image of Americans and the West. Apart from occasionally seeing American tourists or students in our cities, I had never had any serious encounters with them. That changed when I had to work with them. Later, I even learned that the relationship between my country and the U.S., though outwardly friendly and something that my father even saw as dependent and weak, had experienced many ups and downs, with the lowest point being in the late 1970s. Due to their role in the unrest of that time, our diplomatic and military cooperation temporarily declined as our trust in them weakened. It wasn't until over a decade later, after our internal unrest was brought under control, that our relations with the U.S. and also England were gradually restored. Yet, despite my prejudices about Americans, reinforced by criticism of their war in Iraq, I saw how their soldiers helped us when we asked for assistance, even at the risk of their own lives.

It took four months before my team was deployed to Iraq for the first time. In the meantime, we had taken a wonderful trip to Kermanshah and celebrated Babak's engagement. Due to the war, part of our command center had been relocated to Kermanshah province, which meant that my team was constantly moving between Shiraz, Tehran, and Qasr-e-Shirin. This historic city in Kermanshah province, located near the Iraqi border, is famous for the beautiful Armenian princess Shirin from antiquity, whom the Persian king Khosrow fell in love with and for whom he built a palace. But Qasr-e-Shirin had often been the scene of modern unrest. And now, once again, we had to guard our border with Iraq, not because of Saddam and the Ba'athists, but because of the unknown consequences of a war waged in the name of freedom, peace, and democracy. A war that would awaken demonic forces in our fragile, hard-earned stability, and create chaos. Iran was preparing to receive hundreds of thousands of refugees. Refugee camps were set up in the neighboring provinces, and additional military forces were deployed.

On the day of our deployment, Colonel Majidi summoned us to his simple yet meticulously organized office in Qasr-e-Shirin. Papers and files were scattered everywhere. The room had no plants or signs of life, yet he himself looked more alert and sharp than ever before. He was in his element, the war zone was his natural habitat. In the early 1980s, he had served as a young soldier in the Iran-Iraq war. Born in Abadan, not from a military family but, as he often said himself: 'from a simple working-class family, with military blood running only through my own veins', he had gone to the military academy in Tehran. After that, he had traveled a rough, harsh, brutal, and thrilling path to the rank of colonel. He had served in the green zone between Syria,

Lebanon and Israel, trained in the United States, instructed the Indian Special Forces, and fought alongside the Mujahideen in Afghanistan against Soviet troops, only to return shortly after to defend our borders against the rising Taliban threat. He had seen a lot, and I didn't even want to know what he had experienced. He was a ruthless man, evident in everything he did. On my first day in his office, he had walked up to me, looked me straight in the eyes, and said: "I wonder if you'll ever be able to do what I've done, and still sleep peacefully at night". I could see in his eyes that he was holding back because I was a woman. I was never sure if he was especially harsh on me or if he treated everyone that way. I always comforted myself with the latter. But once he realized I had the potential, he let me pass his tests and eventually accepted me as a full member of his unit. The question of whether he could enjoy anything in life, or if that ability had completely faded in him, always lingered in my mind. I had never heard him talk about a wife or children.

On that day, I stood in his office again, this time at the Iraqi border. He wanted to personally brief us on our first mission in Iraq before we left. "...This is not our war, no, but believe me, it will become our war. That's why we are here. That's why you are standing here. As you have already heard, your mission is a special arrest operation. You will bring them back to Iran!" He then pointed to a board on the wall with four pictures pinned to it. "Perhaps we should see this as a positive outcome of this war: we have been looking for these bastards for a long time, and now we have found them. We already suspected that they were hiding in Iraq, plotting against us, but for a long time, due to tensions and the fragile peace between our countries, we couldn't act. As long as they remained in Iraq, it was politically acceptable. But now, we have seized the opportunity and asked the Americans for a favor. After all, if they expect us to take their side, they should be willing to offer something in return." He smirked at his last sentence. "They assisted with intelligence and locating them. This operation will be a targeted raid and arrest for you, nothing more."

That we were going there to arrest Iranians was remarkable to me. For this mission, we had only brief information about the suspects, but their faces and the colonel's short explanation meant nothing to me.

The colonel then placed his hand on a point on the map of the region, near the border area between Syria, Iraq and Jordan, the city of Al-Rutbah. "As discussed, you will fly to Baghdad today and from there take a helicopter to Rutbah. It is a remote, dusty city in the desert, but don't be mistaken, this city was a strategic paradise for them..."

The presence of an intelligence officer indicated that this was a sensitive matter. The officer handed an envelope to Siavash and emphasized that they wanted the targets captured alive.

"Amiri, you and your team have permission to cross into Jordan and Syria if necessary," the colonel continued, addressing Siavash. "The Americans also know that you have full authority over these men. Do not waste time there, under these circumstances, no one can guarantee how long they will remain in that location. Bring them back before they disappear again and cause more problems." His last sentence had a touch of melancholy and venom.

"Yes, Colonel. That has been made completely clear to me," Siavash replied.

"Iraq is now an extremely hostile environment, as if a pit of hatred and violence has been unleashed. Stay extra sharp, I have full confidence in you. Go get it done!"

After saying farewell to the colonel, my thoughts were mostly occupied with what awaited us and who these suspects really were. At 13:00, we flew to Baghdad. What Siavash had received in that envelope, contained more detailed information about the suspects: four militant men of Iranian origin. Two of them were under thirty, and two were in their early sixties. One of the older men had a photo showing him wearing a white turban. Nothing in their appearance justified the term 'militant men', yet that label gave me a dark hunch to be prepared.

The flight to Baghdad was short, followed by a direct transfer by helicopter to an American military base near Rutbah. There, we were immediately taken to the American Special Forces' operations room and introduced to Major Stevens. Together with his team, we thoroughly reviewed our mission and all possible scenarios. Local intelligence had reported that our wanted men were in the city and had recently gathered there. The house they were in had been under constant surveillance at Iran's request. The Americans called them terrorists; that word sounded harsh in my ears, my own countrymen, terrorists?!

Soon the decision was made to first scout the house at night together with an American team. From what we saw, it looked like an ordinary house in a quiet street of the city. The city itself made more of an impression on me, deserted and lifeless, where the remaining inhabitants seemed to live only to survive, staying silent, observing the war and terror around them from behind their windows. At night, the city was so quiet that for a moment you could almost forget that a brutal war was raging in the country.

Based on our observations and exploration, we quickly planned a raid, in which we would take the lead. The following evening, divided into two groups, with two snipers positioned on the rooftops of surrounding houses, we surrounded the target house. Siavash, leading the operation, along with Babak and Ali, positioned themselves at the front door and breached it shortly after with a small explosive charge. They were the first to storm inside, followed seconds later by a team of two American soldiers, Ramin and me.

The front door opened into a long hallway with three doors on each side. As we pushed deeper into the house, we searched every room. But just before reaching the last door at the end, gunfire erupted on us. To the left of the rear door, there was a staircase leading both upstairs and downstairs. The leading group took cover in the stairwell going down, while we provided cover by firing at the upper floor. As far as we could see, two men were shooting at us from above.

We split into two teams, one going up, the other down. Eventually, we managed to force the two attackers on the upper floor to surrender, but only after they had wounded one of our men.

In the midst of the gunfight, while scanning the ground floor and first floor, I realized that the house seemed too small for the heavy traffic that American

intelligence had reported to us. After my team declared the upper floor clear and secure, we went downstairs to provide support. It was there that I saw the basement was unexpectedly spacious: a long hallway with five doors, completely different from what the small house above had suggested.

Again divided into two teams, we began searching all the rooms. The first room contained a table and three chairs resembling an interrogation room, gloomy and eerie. Another room had a seating area with a long couch and two chairs around a table. An ashtray full of cold cigarette butts sat on the table. We pushed the furniture aside, looking for a hidden hatch in the floor or anything that could explain the emptiness, but we found nothing. In the remaining rooms, we found only chairs, simple beds, kitchenware and food, but no signs of life. Empty-handed, we gathered in the hallway at the end of our search, puzzled by the emptiness we had encountered. The silence and abandonment of the house, except for the two shooters, felt suspicious.

"Let's go back to the interrogation room," Babak suddenly said to Siavash. "I think I saw a rug under the table there. A room like that shouldn't have a rug!"

Almost immediately, they returned to the room together. I followed them to the door and stood there. There was indeed a small gray rug under the table, just as gray as the floor. Babak had sharp eyes. With Siavash's help, he moved the table and lifted the rug. A small hatch, just big enough for an average-sized person, was immediately revealed.

Siavash gestured for me to call more men to the room and prepare for action. Babak positioned himself by the side with the thick metal ring of the hatch, hooked his finger into it and on Siavash's signal, he slowly opened it. The room was dead silent.

As soon as the hatch was lifted to about a 45-degree angle, Siavash called down, "You are surrounded! Come up, or we will throw a smoke grenade down."

From above, he could see a narrow staircase leading down, but there was no response. Siavash signaled Babak to prepare a smoke grenade. Babak got it ready, but just as he was about to drop it, I heard a gunshot. The smoke grenade fell from his hands, creating a thick cloud of smoke, and immediately after Siavash and Babak were being shot at from below.

We immediately rushed to assist them. As the first to reach them, I saw Babak collapse to the ground, moving strangely. I leaped toward him, grabbed his bulletproof vest, and dragged him away from the hatch to a safer spot in the room. His neck was red, he was coughing and gasping for air. I kept speaking firmly to him, desperately searching for the source of the bleeding. He kept pulling at his collar, as if he couldn't breathe. Another soldier rushed over to help me tend to him. It was difficult to see where he had been hit. It didn't look good, and with each passing moment, Babak grew weaker and more breathless. We called for medical assistance and carried him upstairs as quickly as possible. Outside the house, he was immediately loaded into an armored vehicle, and we sped off. The street was sealed off, and all surrounding houses were kept under tight surveillance. Inside the vehicle, I kept checking Babak's pulse, as if my own life depended on it. As long as his heart

was beating, I was alive too. I begged him to stay with me, not to fall asleep; we had found his wound and tried to stop the bleeding. "...You're going to be okay," I kept telling him.

"Sima?" he weakly muttered into the air.

"Sima is in Kermanshah, she's waiting for you. We're taking you back to Sima." I smiled at him as calmly as I could, though I felt nauseous inside, as the armored vehicle was speeding back to the base like a mad beast.

Ramin and I were packing our belongings. Babak's bloodied gear was laid out on his bed. I couldn't bear to look at it, yet my eyes kept drifting toward it uncontrollably. When we arrived at the base with him, Babak was immediately airlifted by helicopter to a military hospital in Jordan due to his condition. From that moment on, I knew nothing about his status. Letting him go alone felt wrong; one of us should have stayed with him, but I wasn't allowed to go. I don't even remember how many times I scrubbed my hands afterwards to remove his blood, hoping that if I no longer saw it, he wouldn't be bleeding anymore.

Worried and waiting, I sat down on his field bed. Everyone had returned, and Siavash and Ali had gone to Major Stevens to debrief the raid. They believed our assignment was still incomplete, because we had only found two of the wanted men. Besides Babak, two American soldiers had also been injured. It felt like a failure. A large bunker had been discovered beneath the house, and eventually, four people were pulled out of it, including the two younger Iranian men we had been looking for. But the two older men were nowhere to be found. The bunker also turned out to have an underground tunnel leading far away. If the two escaped men had been in that house, they had fled long ago, leaving the others behind to buy them time. Up until that moment, the search for the escaped men in the surrounding area, even across the border into Jordan, had yielded nothing. With Babak's condition, the question was whether we should stay in Rutbah or return to Iran?

Ramin, now done packing, sat down in front of me, exhausted and dusty. "Babak will be fine, Roya. He has to be...he's getting married."

We stared at each other for a while, troubled by the uncertainty gnawing at us. Ramin forced a weak grin and started talking about Babak's engagement party in Kermanshah, trying to distract us from our grim thoughts. But his version of that party didn't match my own experience. He had spent most of his time there drinking, dancing, and flirting with girls. I didn't need to know how many girls he had charmed that night or how many he had gone through since, but I let him talk. That was just who he was; he was a few months older than me and an unrestrained charmer. Wherever there was a beautiful girl, he would find his way to her. Even during our short stay at the base in Rutbah, he had managed to charm a few female soldiers. With his smooth talk, he always drew people's attention, but his charm had a sharp edge too: he spoke his mind without a filter and sometimes pushed the limits of bluntness when he disagreed with something.

I had experienced Babak's party as an exceptionally joyous celebration in a large garden, where no effort or expense had been spared, and countless

guests were present. It could have easily been a wedding, except that then the guests would have been dressed more extravagantly, wearing heavier makeup and bringing even more expensive gifts. With his sparkling eyes and enthusiasm, Ramin transported me back to that night. I focused on his words, listening intently, laughing with him at times. Even if I hadn't been there myself, his description would have painted the whole scene for me. But suddenly, he fell silent, and his expression darkened. "Who's going to tell Babak's family and Sima?"

"You don't have to worry about that," Siavash said as he stepped inside, having overheard us. "There's an official protocol for that." Then with a serious look, he continued, "But we're not done in Iraq yet, get ready to fly to Basra tomorrow morning. We'll be deployed there with another team from Iran."

When we asked, surprised, whether this was a continuation of the same mission, Siavash didn't give a direct answer. He had received orders from Iran. But I could see the worry on his face, just as concerned and tense as we were about everything that had happened. A face that told me we were about to be thrown into an unpredictable storm. But he didn't let it show, with a few more years of experience, he was our team leader. Then, he quickly left us again to work with Ali on officially identifying the two detainees and arranging their transfer to Iran.

I put my uniform jacket back on to go outside. My sleeves still felt damp from the washing, and for a brief moment, it was pleasant in the warmth of the tent and the chaos in my mind. Outside, in the twilight, I tried to keep my eyes open because when I closed them, I kept seeing the blood pulsing from Babak's neck. I hadn't said anything about this to my team. It was bad enough to have to see it myself, to cover his neck to stop the bleeding, and to feel his warm blood flowing over my hands. I checked my hands again, they were clean, but still shaking.

Basra had come under British control a few months before our arrival. Complete chaos was the only way to describe the situation in this city. The streets lay in ruins from the fighting; buildings showed significant damage, and debris from collapsed structures and abandoned vehicles littered the area. The resistance against the coalition forces had caused more destruction than anticipated. Although most of the fighting had stopped, the city was still scarred by the brutal, massive devastation.

There, at an American camp, we were received by an Iranian commando unit that had assisted in the city's capture. If we had any illusions until then that Iran wouldn't involve itself in this war, those were now completely gone. The commander of the unit looked around fifty years old and appeared to be someone who had fought and survived for weeks. In his eyes, I saw the same fire as I had seen in Colonel Majidi. He had also fought in the short Iran-Iraq war, and for him, this was about finishing something that had been left unfinished back then. He told us that this was not the only Iranian unit; there were several others spread across Iraq. Their mission in this area was to identify

and eliminate Iraqi hostile groups that posed a risk to Iran, specifically the Ba'athists and the Fadayeen. But that wasn't all.

"...We've gathered information during interrogations of certain individuals we have captured, about a previously passive, but highly driven and militant cell in Basra," he said. "Our fellow countrymen, unfortunately! Like the people you were sent to Rutbah to deal with. I understand that your operation there was only partially successful," he paused for a moment, "I don't mean to be disrespectful, I am aware of Corporal Sarra's serious condition." He then stood up and walked toward us. "You can see this operation as an extension of that one. We need to act quickly because this chaos here means two things: one, taking advantage of the situation, the risk is high that these people will become more active and carry out their plans. Two, using the same chaotic situation, they could easily disappear again."

As he continued explaining and discussing the details of the work with us, he looked at us intensely. It was as if he wanted to see if we understood what he meant, if we were grasping who we were up against. But we were still too young and inexperienced at that time to comprehend who these people were and what awaited us.

## 6

A rock the size of a tennis ball flew through the window and landed on the conference table. The woman nearest to it jumped out of her chair and stumbled a meter backward. Everyone stared at her in shock, looking around in disbelief that such a large stone had reached them. The guards stationed outside the room, securing the delegation, rushed in, shouting for everyone to stay away from the window and take cover under the tables. With their weapons drawn, they cautiously approached the shattered window.

The protesters had pushed forward, the anti-Union demonstrators. They had stormed the large courtyard of the organization for Joint Interests of Southwest Asia in Ahvaz. From above, the courtyard looked like it could turn into a battlefield at any moment. Those inside carried wooden sticks and machetes, determined to seize the building. Their chants of 'Traitors!' were so deafening that no one inside could ignore them.

The riot police blocked the entrance and quickly surrounded the demonstrators in the courtyard. Through his megaphone, the police commander ordered them to stay calm or face severe action. The crowd paid no attention and instead tried to force their way in; they pushed and pulled at the officers, threatening them with their sticks and machetes. The commander fired a warning shot in the air and repeated his order. At the second shot, a few men dropped to the ground. The officers had not yet received orders to intervene and were trying to control the situation peacefully.

Then suddenly, the sharp sound of shattering glass rang out, and the legs of two officers burst into flames. The crowd near the entrance screamed and scattered away from the fire. A man standing close to the officers also caught fire and ran in panic, flailing wildly. It was unclear from which direction the Molotov cocktail had been thrown. The flames on the officers were quickly extinguished and the commander immediately gave the order to intervene and arrest everyone in the courtyard before the chaos could spread into the building. Beyond the gates of the complex, other groups of peaceful demonstrators watched in horror. They quickly moved aside to make way for emergency vehicles as they raced toward the courtyard.

Since the start of the war in Iraq, the organization for Joint Interests of Southwest Asia in Ahvaz had repeatedly been the target of violent attacks and protests. The anger stemmed from frustration over the war in the region and what people saw as a weak and cowardly response from their own governments. Many said that if things continued like this, they no longer wanted a Union at all, they wanted a clenched fist and a united front against the U.S..

What made their reaction even worse, was a rumor about Israel's presence at the next conference on the Union. As always in Iran, with its long history of vague but persistent rumors, the source was unclear. Such rumors spared no

one, kings nor courtiers and statesmen, Jews nor Armenians or Bahá'ís, women nor foreigners. No one. In some mosques in Ahvaz, fiery sermons were once again being delivered against the admission of the 'little Satan' into the Union. It was seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian brothers and of Islam. The fact that the Palestinians themselves were also at the negotiating table did not matter to them.

Israel had not yet submitted an official request for membership, and apart from diplomatic talks behind the scenes, no public discussion of the matter had taken place. Not all potential Union members would welcome their inclusion. Despite the fact that since the Tehran Conference, following the Oslo Accords, affairs between Israel and Palestine seemed more settled than ever, there were still countries that preferred to avoid Israel. At the same time, there were those who believed it was long past time to heal the painful past and look toward the future; for the era of taking sides and being held hostage by one-sided narratives was over. However, that did not mean that things were going smoothly, because in the Middle East, things rarely go smoothly.

A few streets away, the imam of the Grand Mosque in the center of Ahvaz sat once again on his lofty pulpit that day. "...Our Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and our holy book have said it enough times, loud and clear: the Jews cannot be trusted! How can we distinguish a good Jew from a bad one? For there are those who are open to the truth and faith and take in the verses of God; they are just like us, true Muslims. But would a true Muslim be so cruel and merciless toward his fellow Muslims and claim our holy Quds – Jerusalem – for himself, the very place where our Prophet, peace be upon him, ascended to Allah?! Jerusalem is the city of Muslims! The foundation of the state of Israel was a crime against Muslims. That our state recognizes and accepts this Satan is a disgrace, a crime against Muslims and humanity. But we will not allow this to happen! We will continue to resist. Let this reach the ears of those incompetent, corrupt, servile politicians in Tehran! We will reclaim our region, Insha'Allah! The Americans will pay for their violence in our land, and the Jews? They will never sit at the same table with us or have a role in our region..." His voice thundered through the mosque.

The crowd erupted, shouting 'Death to America! Death to Israel! And Allahu Akbar!'. The imam let them continue, he needed a moment to think of his next words. He was on a roll; it just needed to be darker, harsher. The crowd needed to smell blood, that was what he thrived on. He had missed this. Five years in prison had been meager and soul-killing for him. He took a sip of water, straightened up, and smoothed his robe over his chest with his thick fingers.

"Those corrupt politicians have turned Ahvaz into a corrupt center. Look at the beaches along our Karun River, look at the remnants of their depraved Western dog lives: hotels, cinemas, clubs. Men and women are tangled together in our streets, in our parks and in the water. They steal our oil and spend their money in our cities on corrupt businesses. We don't need their money, we want our dignity back, according to our Sharia, and we will continue to fight for it until we have our Islamic state. We claim our land and our region back...Allah is with us!" he roared at the end, raising his clenched fist