

# *Web Of Faith*

*For a woman forged in faith and betrayal, redemption can only be found  
at the heart of the web she once commanded.*



In 1950s Iran, fifteen-year-old Maryam Amiri's life is shattered when her father, a smuggler of Bibles, is murdered before her eyes. Taken into the fold of the "Spider's Web," a clandestine Christian network, she vows to survive. But survival is not enough. Mentored by two opposing figures—the pious Zahra and the ruthlessly ambitious Farid—Maryam must choose her path. Her choices will lead her from the dusty alleys of Tehran to the corridors of power, transforming her from a frightened girl into a feared leader. But when a devastating betrayal costs her everything, Maryam must discover if the faith she once smuggled is strong enough to save her own soul.

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**S. C. Davis**

# WEB OF FAITH

A Novel of Literary Suspense

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**Author:** Scott Davis

1517 18th Ave.

Columbus, GA. 31901

706-318-5287

[scott@davisplanet.com](mailto:scott@davisplanet.com)

<https://www.davisplanet.com>

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## PROLOGUE

Tehran, 1959.

Farid Nassiri stood in the courtyard's shadow, watching the soft glow of lanterns flicker across Zahra's face as she prayed ahead of the wedding feast. She knelt on the patterned rug, her veil slipping over one shoulder, eyes closed, lips moving in quiet devotion as she whispered blessings for their union. An unimportant clay lamp burned beside her, its single flame wavering in the evening breeze scented with rosewater and cumin from the kitchens.

He studied her carefully, noting the tremor in her hands as she lifted them in prayer, the way her mouth tightened before each exhale, the way she glanced toward the small wooden cross hidden beneath the edge of her shawl. She was beautiful in her simplicity, her faith like a thread

of gold woven through the plainness of her dress. It would be enough, he thought, to make others believe he loved her.

He did not.

The courtyard buzzed with low conversations as uncles and cousins gathered in clusters, their voices rising and falling with the promise of a feast and the cautious optimism of a family aligning itself with a young man of talent. Farid nodded when spoken to, offered quiet words of thanks, lifted his cup when toasting. His dark eyes never stopped moving, marking which men shook hands with whom, who controlled the routes out of Tabriz, who oversaw the family's shipments of saffron, tea, and the small, thin Bibles hidden in crates bound for the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem.

Zahra's father, Abbas Javadpour, approached with the slow, deliberate steps of a man burdened by leadership and secrets. His beard was streaked with gray, his palms thick with calluses earned in the markets and the shadowy roads beyond them. He placed a warm, heavy hand on Farid's shoulder and squeezed with a familiarity Farid cultivated over months of polite conversations and carefully chosen prayers.

"My daughter is precious," Abbas said quietly, his gaze steady, "and our family's mission is holy. We trust you, Farid. You will protect both."

Farid met the old man's eyes and allowed a soft, humble smile to play across his lips. "With my life, Agha," he replied, bowing his head in deference.

The old man nodded, satisfied, and returned to the cluster of elders, leaving Farid in the half-light with his thoughts. He watched Zahra rise from her prayer, smoothing her dress with nervous, hopeful hands before glancing shyly toward him. She did not see the calculation in his gaze, only the quiet young man who spoke of God, of service, of building a righteous family.

She did not see the empire he saw in the curve of her small smile.

Farid's mind moved swiftly, running numbers as easily as breath. Each Bible shipment was a crate unchecked by guards bribed to ignore "religious material." Each contact in Jerusalem was a path to moving opium, guns, and foreign currency unnoticed by the authorities too fearful to question a family known for piety. Zahra's father was respected, and respect was the cheapest commodity to trade if one could turn it into profit.

Farid would be careful, patient. He would learn the routes, memorize the signals chalked on the backs of tea stalls and flour sacks. He would take the prayers they whispered and replace them with contracts signed in darkness. He would use the network they called "the Spider's Web" to build something greater than Abbas or Zahra could ever imagine.

It would start tonight, with a vow.

The call to prayer echoed from the mosque down the street, a sound that washed over the courtyard and reminded Zahra's family to keep their voices quiet when reading scripture by lanternlight. Zahra paused, bowing her head silently, finishing her hushed prayer in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while neighbors outside turned toward Mecca. Farid watched her, noting the small act of defiance disguised as humility, and felt the edges of his plan sharpen.

"Are you ready?" he asked softly, his voice warm, the way he practiced in the mirror.

"Yes," Zahra said low, her eyes shining with the conviction of one who believed she was stepping into a life of shared faith.

Farid smiled, pressing her hand against his chest, letting her feel the steady, calm beat of his heart.

"Then let us begin," he said.

As the guests gathered, prayers were recited and vows spoken, as Zahra slipped the simple gold band onto his finger with trembling hands, Farid's mind was elsewhere, charting shipments across borders, counting coin, tracing lines covering a map of the Middle East with the certainty of a man who knew exactly what he was stealing.

When he kissed Zahra, it was gentle, respectful, enough to draw tears of happiness to her eyes.

When he drew back, the candlelight flickered between them, casting their shadows onto the courtyard walls.

Zahra saw her future in that light, a promise of faith and family.

Farid saw power.

And as the guests cheered, and Zahra's mother wept quietly, and Abbas clapped him on the back with the pride of a father welcoming a son, Farid closed his eyes briefly and allowed himself a small, private smile.

The Spider's Web was his now.

And he would use it for everything it was worth.

## Act 1: The Promise

### Chapter 1: The Execution

September, 1958.

Dawn bruised the sea blue. Salt wind sliced the air. Gulls shrieked over slick black boulders. The village slept—ignorant or pretending. Maryam Amiri, fifteen and all sharp angles, hunched in the sand, fingers wrestling the snarled net. Her father observed, weathered hands dancing through twine. A hymn hummed in his throat, one no Caspian outsider would recognize.

Their home crouched behind them—stone, squatted, windowpanes long shattered, replaced with hammered tin. Winter gnawed through cracks into bone, but today the air whispered of spring.

He paused, lips quirking. “Net, not knot, Maryam-jan.” Her shoulders tightened, heat prickling beneath her scarf. His voice stayed low, sparing the neighbors, her mother already awake, praying for obscurity. “Knots let fish escape. See?”

She kept her head down. “My fingers don’t listen.” The truth burned—her clumsy knots bulged like infections. “Do it yourself.”

Driftwood-rough hands intervened, unraveling her mistakes. His wrist bore a faded cross, inked during the Shah’s fleeting tolerance. A lifetime of hiding it—bandages, bracelets, sleeves rolled up only at dawn.

They worked in silence. Waves slapped. Goats bleated in the distance. Salt crusted her lips, the breeze off the water sharp enough to steal her breath. Sand gritted under Maryam’s nails, the rhythm familiar, almost comforting. He lifted the finished net, inspected it, then set it aside. Cold tea waited in a dented tin mug. He sipped, passed it to her.

Cardamom steeped the air—luxury bartered for cured mullet.

“Next week, we rise earlier.” He ruffled her hair, calluses gentle. “Smugglers doubled their price. No deep line, no food. You need to grow.”

“I’d rather read.” The words escaped. Her hunger was for the New Testament hidden behind the stove, the smuggled Russian novels traded with the Armenian postmaster.

Laughter carved deeper lines around his eyes. “You’ll do both. But we’ve one boat. Remember when I let you row?”

“You slept. We drifted to Baku.”

“Patrol nearly shot us. But you brought us home. My pirate.”

A flicker of a smile. “Baba—”

The gulls fell silent. Wind stilled. His grip tightened on the mug.

Her voice frayed. “Will they come today?”

“God doesn’t reveal the day.” He wiped his hands, reached for her. “But He gives us what we need.”

She clung to his hand—seeking faith, steadiness, the pulse of something unbroken. Last week’s rumor festered: the constable replaced by the Sarbaz-turned-informer, bribes paid in pound sterling and vodka. A Bible smuggler arrested. A house burned in Lankaran. A girl—

Her heart thudded against her ribs, each beat cold, sharp, counting down something she could not name.

His grip crushed her words. “We are not them.”

“What if we are?”

He cupped her chin. “Fear makes us unworthy.” His thumb brushed her cheek, wiping away nothing. “Do you believe?”

She didn’t. Faith came in waves—drowned or deserted her. She nodded without regard.

He stood, knees protesting, net stretched between them. Dawn stretched his shadow heroic. “Tomorrow, you finish the last row. Perfect.”

“Or?”

“We try again. God is patient.”

She bit back questions—about the patrols, the neighbors’ silence, the world’s quiet cruelties. She wanted to believe God would shield them, but the wind off the sea was laden with

the aroma of iron, promises as thin as salt. He had no answers. Only the net, the work, the knots tied in darkness, holding when storms came.

Sunlight gilded the house. He carried the net inside to mend. She stayed, grains of sand grinding in her shoes, tea bitter on her tongue, eyes fixed on the horizon's threat.

#

Sand trembled under Maryam's heels. She spun, sunlight stinging her eyes. Three Soviet-green trucks skidded to a halt at the village's edge, engines snarling. The first man out wore no insignia—black leather jacket, fatigues, a jaw like an anvil. He spat. A flick of his wrist sent boots thudding onto dirt, rifles slung like toys.

Her father emerged, nets draped over his arm. The vein in his neck pulsed.

The leather-clad man marched forward, accent sharp as a blade. "Mahmoud Amiri!" No pause for reply. "Inspection time. Honest men don't fear."

Soldiers fanned out behind him. One wore running shoes. Another flaunted a woman's floral scarf, its fabric mocking the air.

Maryam's muscles locked. Inside, her mother's voice frayed to a shriek. "You can't—my husband—"

Air scraped her lungs, sharp. Her legs twitched, ready to run—nowhere to run.

The man grabbed her father's collar, yanked. The net flew. "Your new routine, old man. Weekly. Monthly. Until Allah remembers your name." Sweat and rot clung to his breath.

"We paid." Her father's voice frayed at the edges. "Check the market."

“The market doesn’t rule here.” A shove sent him stumbling. “Loyalty does. Or should we burn this place down?” The threat curdled between them.

Inside, soldiers rampaged. A table overturned—bread scattered, pickled lemons shattered. Mats trampled. The water bucket kicked. A crowbar pried at the loose floorboard beneath the stove, the childhood hiding spot too obvious for professionals.

A pockmarked soldier crouched, pried the plank free. Others circled, ravenous. Maryam’s mother lunged for the door—a shove sent her crashing into the wall.

The cedar chest gave no fight. Coins clattered. Russian books spilled. One of the Bibles, brittle with age, dangled from the soldier’s grip like carrion. “This your treasure? Pathetic dowry.” Laughter erupted. Pages tore under his thumbs before he hurled it to the ground. It skidded to her mother’s feet.

Cold sweat crept down her spine. The soldiers’ laughter grated, metal against bone. The stink of sweat and rust thickened the air between their laughter.

Maryam’s breath seared her throat. She willed her legs forward—frozen.

Outside, her father stood, surrounded by the soldiers, rifles slung at their sides as they loomed around him.

“We have children!” Her mother clutched the Bible, leather cracked, pages soiled. “Monsters.”

The pockmarked soldier grinned. “Better monsters than traitors.”

The village watched. Shadows flinched behind curtains. The baker peered out, then bolted his door.

The commander strode inside, surveyed the wreckage. “No secrets?” he sneered, his voice sharp as a blade. “Then why the foreign lies?” A kick sent coins and Bibles skittering. “Tehran or the West?”

“God and my family.”

The ring on the back of the commander's hand split his lip. “Not enough.”

Maryam's mother straightened, eyes glazed but defiant. “Take what you want. Leave.”

The soldiers hesitated. No begging. No satisfying tears. Rage condensing.

“The man comes with us,” the commander said. “A night in a cell teaches loyalty.” Two soldiers hauled her father by the collar, his legs buckling, blood smearing his chin. Others looted shelves—vodka, honey, grandmother's silver earrings.

As they passed, Maryam grabbed his hand. His grip crushed her fingers. A whisper, garbled. Then sunlight swallowed him, the trucks growling to life.

Her mother trembled, Bible pressed to her chest. “Just a day. They always bring him back.”

But Maryam knew. The soldiers' eyes had shifted. The line between order and chaos had blurred. Neighbors' faces betrayed fear—and relief it wasn't them.

Dust settled. The sea roared, indifferent. The house stood hollow, its wounds gaping, heavy with the silence of what came next.

The soldiers dragged him past the slumped fig tree, to the rear of the waiting trucks, shoving his face into the dirt. The commander's voice sliced the morning—impatient, demanding—half-threat, half-order to the pack of boys trailing behind, hungry for violence.

Maryam sprinted after them, sand scraping her bare feet. "Stop! He didn't do anything!" Her voice, too young to matter, shattered against the stone walls, brittle as glass.

The soldiers laughed, one mimicking her wail, but their grip on her father never loosened. The pockmarked one shoved him hard, sending him reeling off balance, his feet scrambling for grip on the uneven ground. "Last chance. Where's the rest? You paid, but it's not enough. Liar."

"I told you," her father choked, "there's nothing left. Take the boat—"

Maryam reached the group, her eyes and hands searching for her father. The soldier didn't flinch. He hurled her down, dust filling her mouth, coating her tongue with grit. Maryam flailed against the ground, the world swinging into chaos as her mother burst from the house, hair wild, eyes blazing with terror. Her scream shredded the air, a raw, desperate cry that pierced through the cacophony of shouts and clattering boots.

"Maryam!" Her mother's voice cracked like glass, breaking the spell of paralyzing fear. Maryam spat out dirt and scrambled to her feet, heart pounding a frantic rhythm as she raced toward the knot of soldiers encircling her father.

Her father twisted violently against the men holding him, fists swinging, each movement a fierce declaration of defiance. "Don't touch her!" His roar echoed in the space, a command that seemed to cleave the morning air itself. His eyes locked onto Maryam's, a brief flash of determination and sorrow.

In the confusion, her mother lunged forward, trying to reach her husband, but a soldier intercepted her with rough hands, shoving her back, sending her sprawling to the ground.

Maryam dodged and darted between the shifting figures, her focus solely on her father, on the way his body strained against his captors, trying to shield his family even as his own freedom slipped away.

The first shot cracked—a thunderclap over the village. Maryam's father staggered but refused to fall, his momentum carrying him forward, determined to reach her, to grasp her hand again. The world snapped, splintering around her in a kaleidoscope of sound and movement. Maryam's breath caught, everything raw, edged, the scene unfolding like a nightmare.

Maryam's lungs locked, the scream torn from her chest. "Baba!" Her voice was a primal wail, mingling with her mother's sobs, drowning beneath the soldiers' barked commands and the idling rumble of engines. Her father's hand reached out, trembling.

The second shot dropped him. Blood seeped into the sand beside the Bible spilled from his sleeve.

Her mother's scream split the sky—endless, animal. Maryam crawled forward, grit and blood sharp on her tongue. Warm. Empty. His eyes still held her.

Rage licked at the edges of her fear, bright and useless.

The soldiers stumbled back, confusion reigned, boots skidding on loose rock. One barked a command, voice fraying at the edges.

"Inside—now!" The commander's pistol trembled as he holstered it. Villagers and soldiers scattered, whispers clotting the heat. Trucks roared away.

#

Boots and gunfire faded. Only the sea's hush remained—and her mother's howl.

Maryam dragged herself forward, elbows carving trenches in the grey sand. The world narrowed to three things: her father's body shuddering in the dirt, his blood a dark stain swallowing the dust, the Bible splayed just beyond his fingertips. His chest hitched—each breath shallower, harder won.

She slapped her hands over the wound. Small hands. Useless. His eyes—blue as shattered ice—locked onto hers.

He choked on words. A wet rattle. “Maryam-jan...” Fingers brushed her wrist, cold as winter river stones.

She leaned down, hair curtaining their faces. “I’m here, Baba.” The whisper tasted childish. Empty.

His cracked lips curved. In that broken smile, she saw the future he’d dreamed for her. The one she’d never claim.

His free hand scrabbled through dirt. Found the Bible. Fingers trembled around the spine. He thrust it against her ribs—weak, insistent.

“Continue what I started. Do not be afraid... You... keep...” A gasp. “Your mother... Don’t... let...” His throat convulsed. “You... so beautiful...” The rest dissolved in pink froth.

She nodded. No promises left. Just the Bible, its leather slick, pages bloated with blood. She swiped her cheek—left a crimson streak.

His hand slid from her arm. Thudded against sand.

Cold soaked through her skirt, a bite that climbed her spine. Salt stung her nose, the copper tang of blood thick on her tongue. She pressed her palm to his still chest, willing him to rise, to speak, to promise safety she could no longer find.

Her mother rocked on her knees, wailing loud enough to summon gulls. Neighbors lurked in doorways—some crossing themselves, others staring like mourners at a grave. The baker's wife crept close, draped a shawl over her mother's shoulders. Didn't touch flesh.

The village imam approached, hands folded. He studied the body. Glanced at the book in Maryam's grip.

She bared her teeth, salt and defiance.

Maryam stayed rooted. Sun seared blood into her dress, the moment into her bones.

The Bible sat heavy in her lap. Her father's handprint clung to the cover. She burned the details into her skull—the blue of his gaze, the curve of his last smile, words sharper than pain.

Never forget.

The world collapsed to this: the sea, the book, the vow. She held all three. Knew they'd be her only inheritance.

#

Lantern light claws at the shadows, spitting as her mother feeds it oil. The flame shudders, breathing smoke into the cold, throwing shapes across the walls—two women kneeling, a bundle on the dirt floor wrapped in torn linen. Salt crusts the windows, the curtains hanging lifeless, sea air pressing against the glass with every gust.

Maryam presses her palms into the packed earth to steady herself, breath sharp in her throat. Her father's body lies between them, arms folded over a chest gone slack, the cross on his wrist dark against the pale blue of his skin. Blood has dried at the corners of his mouth, copper

crusting the whiskers on his chin, dark stains swallowing the patterns of his best shirt. The bullet wounds no longer bleed, but they speak of the violence that came, that will come again.

“Help.” Her mother’s voice cracks, dry as the winter wind. No plea in it, only command.

The basin’s water smells of salt and camphor. Her mother dips the rag, wrings it until droplets scatter like tiny glass beads across the dirt. Maryam takes the other corner, their fingers brushing, her mother’s skin rough and cold, her own torn at the thumb, flesh raw from worry. Together they wipe the crusted blood from his cheeks, scrape away the salt, clean the grime beneath his nails. His eyelids hang half-shut, lashes stiff, the lamplight glinting in the hollow between his brows.

Maryam’s breath stutters as she leans closer, catching the scent of him—salt, sweat, old tobacco, the sea that never left his skin. A tremor ripples through her arms, a nail catching his cheek, leaving a bright line in the lantern’s glow. Her mother presses harder, forcing the cloth along the jaw, eyes hard, jaw locked, grief contained in the grinding of her teeth.

They wash him until dawn bleeds pale along the horizon, until the tremors in Maryam’s arms dull to numbness, until the shape on the floor is no longer her father but something heavy, wrapped, waiting. The Bible rests near his feet, bound in a strip of blue-gray scarf, dark with blood, the red cross on its cover nearly black now, whispering a promise Maryam swears she hears in the dark.

Before the sun crests the hills, they move him, wrapping the body in the cracked tarp torn from the fishing boat. The plastic clings to the linen, grief soaking through, darkening it. Maryam’s knees crack as they drag him across frozen mud, every inch a war against the dawn. She bites her tongue, tasting iron, eyes fixed on the fig tree shattered by last week’s storm, jagged limbs scratching at the sky like broken fingers.

They lay him beneath the twisted branches, sea wind cold and sharp on their faces, the surf beyond the rocks restless, a hush between waves. Maryam clutches the Bible to her chest, its weight pressing into her ribs, blood stiffening the leather. Her hands are blue with cold, but she holds on, pressing her father's name, carved inside the cover, against her heart.

The spade breaks on the frozen ground, the handle splintering, and they dig with their hands, clawing at the sand until it clings under their nails, mixing with blood from fresh cuts. The grave is shallow, a wound in the earth barely deep enough to hold him. They lower him in, the linen catching on a root, tearing. A smell rises—salt, old sweat, camphor, something sour beneath it. Maryam's stomach clenches, but she swallows the bile, teeth grinding.

"Cover his face," her mother says, her voice softer now, distant. Maryam folds a scrap of cloth over his jaw, presses his arms to his chest, tucks the shroud tighter. The cold bites through her skirt, freezing her knees as she kneels beside him. She wants to speak, to pray, but words choke in her throat.

They bury him in silence. Each handful of earth lands with a dull thud, dust rising in small ghosts before vanishing into the dawn light. Maryam's breath fogs, the air bitter, and she digs with bare hands, feeling the sand swallow her father's shape with every scoop. Her mother's hands bleed where the spade's splinters pierce her skin, but she does not slow, does not weep, only works until the grave is filled, the mound raw and crooked.

Her mother grips Maryam's wrist, squeezing until pain sparks down her arm. "Forget him," she hisses, eyes bright with fear. "Forget the Book. Forget his words, or they will come for you." But she could not let him go.

Maryam nods, swallowing the promise like ash, her tongue thick, throat burning.

They press the broken fig branch into the mound, marking the grave, and turn back to the house. Maryam looks once, seeing the tarp edge buried, a strip of blue scarf peeking before the wind catches sand and covers it. The sea calls beyond the rocks, endless, patient, carrying the dawn with it.

Inside, the house feels smaller, the air heavy, windows rattling as the wind picks up. Her mother sinks against the wall, sliding to the floor, hands trembling before she folds them in her lap. Her breath catches on each exhale, a jagged sound in the quiet.

Maryam holds the Bible to her chest, the leather warm against her skin, the blood stiff along the seams. She moves across the room, each step deliberate, quiet. She finds the loose board beneath the window, the one her father showed her during lean winters when hiding dried mulberries or coins was survival. She pries it open, the wood groaning in protest, revealing darkness, earth, a single pistachio shell resting on the dirt.

She wraps the Bible in oilskin, careful with each fold, her fingers tracing the cross, the blood-stained cover, the hand-stitched seams. For a moment she presses it to her lips, tasting salt from her tears, the memory of her father's hand steady on her shoulder.

She lowers the Book into the hollow, covers it with a handful of cold earth, and slides the plank back into place. The groan softens, a sigh from the house. Maryam sits back on her heels, pressing her palms to her thighs, breathing slow and deep. She mouths the words her father whispered each night:

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

The words bloom inside her, warm and sharp, an ember refusing to die. In the hush before dawn, she sees a world where nets are heavy with fish, where the sea is a friend, where soldiers and guns are dreams fading with the tide. She sees her father's smile, brief, tired, real.

She rises, moving to the mat, drawing the blanket over her shoulders. The wind hums against the walls, the sea gnawing at the rocks outside, endless, tireless. Beneath the floor, the Bible rests hidden, a promise sealed in the dark.

Maryam closes her eyes. The world outside will come with engines and boots, with harsh voices demanding names and confessions. But here, now, she holds a silence filled with her father's presence, a defiance quiet and fierce.

The boards sigh, the lantern guttering low, shadows dancing along the walls. Maryam listens to the sea's breath, lets it rock her into sleep, the Book safe beneath her, its words a shield against the coming dark.

## Chapter 2: A Friend's Hand

Three mornings pass before hunger breaks the spell.

Maryam blinks at the light slanting in through broken glass, streaking the floor where her father's blood has set into the packed earth. The furniture remains overturned, rice scattered like salt on a wound, every angle of the room twisted by the violence that had come and left them with less than nothing. Her mother hunches at the table, motionless except for the ragged rise and fall of her back under a threadbare shawl. Hair uncombed since the men in uniform dragged her husband out the door; black wisps now snarl around her face, framing eyes that no longer meet Maryam's.

The Bible rests in her lap, leather crusted and dark with the last thing her father gave her. Numb fingers trace the old cross cut into the binding. Its coolness grounds her, a lifeline where her mother's arms have gone cold.

A sharp rap at the door splinters the silence. Her mother straightens, wild in the sudden hush, lips pressed thin. For a second, neither moves.

Another knock—soft, measured. Not a soldier’s impatience. Maryam’s heart scrabbles against her ribs.

Her mother lifts herself from the chair, feet scraping the floor. Uneven steps carry her to the door, clutching the shawl close. One palm presses to the wood, as if she could absorb the knock’s intent. The other tightens around the scarf at her throat, tugging it into place.

Maryam pulls her knees to her chest, the Bible locked between her thighs. Muscles tense, bracing for shouts, boots, and violence—but the voice beyond the door does not bark or threaten.

It calls her mother’s name.

A long exhale. Her mother cracks the door, leaving the chain in place. A line of sunlight slices across her cheek. In that bright stripe stands a woman nearly as tall as her father had been, face shadowed by the hood of her chador. The visitor bows her head, words indistinct, the syllables sliding out in a hush.

Her mother says nothing at first. The chain slides free, the door swinging wider. The woman steps inside, careful to slip off her shoes. She carries a basket, its mouth covered by a square of cloth with blue embroidery—birds, flowers, a pattern Maryam recognizes from the neighbor’s washing line.

Zahra.

Maryam’s pulse surges. The name conjures a thousand rumors, half-truths from her father’s stories: the woman who smuggled Bibles in sacks of grain, who drank coffee with priests and cursed with the fishermen, who once slapped a Soviet officer so hard he wept. Her mother’s old rival. The last guest her father trusted.

Zahra's chador falls away as she enters. Greying hair, streaked with henna, frames a face more lined than Maryam remembers. Eyes sharp, unsparing, but no cruelty in them—only a patience that feels heavier than any threat. Zahra surveys the room, cataloguing the wounds. Her gaze lingers on the dried blood near the stove, the debris, the shattered clock.

Kneeling in the entry, she sets down the basket, and folds her hands in her lap.

Her mother hovers beside her, lips tight, the shawl now strangling her collar. They exchange a volley of glances—grief, accusation, something else. Zahra bows her head once, then opens the basket with precise fingers.

"Bread," she says. "And figs, from the old tree."

Maryam's stomach twists. Zahra tears the flatbread with her hands, the crust crackling. She places a slab on a chipped plate and extends it toward the table. Her mother waits, eyes narrowed, as if the bread might carry poison.

"Eat," Zahra says, her tone dismissing all protest.

Maryam rises from the mat, feet uncertain, the Bible pressed to her chest. Across the room she moves, sensing Zahra's gaze upon her. The bread trembles in Zahra's grip. Maryam takes it, fingers brushing Zahra's. The contact tingles, leaving her colder than before. Warmth from the bread seeps into her palm, battling the cold that clings to her skin. The scent of figs hangs in the air, sweet, bruised, reminding her how trust can cost everything.

She sits at the table, the bread in her palm. Zahra pulls a pouch from her sleeve, shakes out two black olives, and sets them beside the bread. Her movements carry a ritual calm, as if each piece placed on the plate rewrites some unseen law.

Her mother remains at a distance. "You should not have come."

“I am already seen,” Zahra replies. “No risk left, only shame if I let hunger finish what the soldiers began.”

Maryam chews the bread. Hard crust grinds her teeth, but the taste is clean, flour and smoke and salt. The bread is devoured in careful, silent bites.

Zahra turns to her mother. “The men will not return.”

“How can you know?”

“They have new business. New traitors to chase. This house no longer interests them.”

Zahra’s voice flattens. “They always prefer the living to the dead.”

A silence falls, dense as fog. Maryam tears her gaze from the table, meets Zahra’s eyes. The older woman studies her, measuring not weakness but what has survived. Her gaze flicks to the Bible.

“You kept it,” Zahra says, a note of wonder threading the words.

Maryam’s hand clamps tighter around the book.

“He told me to keep it.” Her voice comes out smaller than she wants.

Zahra nods. “He was stubborn that way. Never let a thing die, even when every reason said to let go.”

The words crack something in Maryam. Tears surge, blurring her sight, the taste of bread turning to ash. Nails bite into the leather cover, a futile dam against the tears that keep spilling.

Her mother looks away, as if disgusted by this failure.

Zahra produces a handkerchief, passes it across the table. Maryam takes it, mops her face, and breathes.

Zahra’s tone shifts. “Your father believed in more than faith, Maryam-jan. He believed in you.”

Maryam searches for anger, for any emotion to push back. Instead, she finds only hunger—sharp, endless, not for food but for a world in which her father’s faith could mean something.

“Why?” she asks, the word floating above the clutter.

“He saw what hid in you. The strength. The light.”

Her mother cuts in, voice hoarse. “Don’t fill her head with hope. We have nothing now. Nothing but ghosts.”

Zahra straightens, spine stiff. “Ghosts? They’re the loudest reminders.” Her gaze shifts to Maryam. “Do you want to know why he endured? Why he took those risks?”

Maryam nods, afraid her voice would shatter if she tried to use it.

“He chose every act. He knew the cost, and still chose faith. Every day.”

The Bible warms under Maryam’s hand. Her father’s last words return: the sand in his hair, the way fingers clung to the Book as blood ran out of him. She thinks of the sea, endless, patient, never giving up what it once claimed.

Outside, wind stirs dust through the broken window. The house creaks. Maryam’s mother clutches her scarf tighter, a shield against the world.

Zahra gathers the remains of the bread, covers the basket, and rises to leave. At the door, she looks back at Maryam.

“Your father left you his name, his work, and his faith. Carry them, or bury them. The world is not kind to those who wait for a better time.”

Maryam feels the words settle inside her—rough, unwelcome, but somehow true.

Her mother’s voice shreds the silence as Zahra steps out. “Keep your voice down. If the neighbors hear, they’ll come next.”

The door closes with a dull thud. Zahra's footsteps fade into the wind.

Maryam sits at the table, Bible in her lap, crumbs scattered at her elbow. Hunger pulls at her, but not for food. The world outside the walls hisses with threats, but the memory of Zahra's words stirs something stubborn in her veins. The day crawls forward, light bruised by clouds, time measured by the slow ticking of the broken clock. The Book rests heavy, but she does not let it go.

#

Her mother retreats to the sleeping mat, shawl thrown over her face. The silence yawns, interrupted by the soft tick of Zahra's fingernails tapping the basket's handle.

Zahra waits until the last footfall from the back room. Closer she leans, the scent of rosemary and wool folding in around them.

"Let me show you," Zahra whispers, voice peeled to its thinnest edge.

The fig basket finds its place on the table. With a thumb, she presses a spot beneath the rim. The weave gives, a panel slides sideways. Zahra's hands move with certainty; this is not her first concealment. From the hollow emerges a small, cloth-stained bundle, ties knotted with thread the color of pomegranate juice.

Cloth falls away, exposing a book smaller than a deck of cards. The pages are onion-skin thin, the words printed so small Maryam doubts anyone but her father could read them. The binding is brown leather, unadorned but for a single word, hand-written inside the cover: AMIRI.

A spike of heat pulses through Maryam's arms. Fingers reach for the book, then hesitate, hovering. Zahra presses it into her palm, steady and firm.

“Your father was not alone.” Zahra leans in. “Nor are you.”

Maryam’s breath shudders. The book’s weight surprises her; it feels denser than the one hidden beneath the floor. She expects Zahra to recite scripture, offer comfort. Instead, Zahra’s words sharpen:

“There are others, scattered in the city, in the villages. Some wear the robe and beard, others hide as fishermen or porters. We keep each other alive. We keep the Book alive.”

Maryam blinks, every pulse of blood in her ears a thunderclap. Her mind tears back to her father’s execution: the gun, the sand, the last bloody smile. The little Bible presses against her chest, a dare to the world to take it. Its edges dig into her ribs, sharp, grounding. Fear slithers beneath her breath, but resolve tightens her grip.

“What if they find it?” Maryam’s voice rattles like pebbles in a tin.

“Hide it where no one thinks to look. Learn it where no one can reach.” Zahra’s eyes flick to the ceiling, then the broken window, as if she expects a soldier’s face to burst through at any moment.

She places a hand over Maryam’s. “There is only one rule: Never let them take your mind.”

Maryam thinks of her mother, coiled in grief, and wonders if the Book alone can keep her from drowning.

A long silence stretches. Zahra rises, wraps the basket tight, tugs the chador over her head. At the door, she pauses, scanning the horizon.

“When you are ready,” Zahra says, voice carrying the taste of salt and wind, “come find me.”

The door snicks shut, sealing the words inside.

Maryam sits alone, both Bibles stacked before her: the father's, spattered with blood; the gift, small and deadly as a grenade. The stories crammed inside, the laws and parables, the secret lineage stretching from her father's grave to this kitchen table—she weighs them all. The room tightens around her. The only way to breathe is to act.

On tiptoes, she moves to the loose board beneath the window. The board pries loose, both books sliding into the hollow, spines touching like brothers in darkness. She covers them with a fistful of earth, packs the board flush, wipes dust from her knees.

Kneeling, palms on thighs, she recites the verse her father lived by:

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

She repeats it, voice steadier each time. Eyes remain open, watching the world for enemies, for allies, for signs of what comes next.

In January 1959, Maryam ventures from the village for the first time. Toward the city she walks, the small Bible pressed flat against her breast. When the guards at the checkpoint ask her business, she tells them, “Visiting an old friend.” They shrug, bored by another peasant girl with nothing but a basket of dried figs.

Zahra waits in a café near the market, exactly as promised. Tea is poured, Zahra gestures to a seat, and spreads a handful of pistachios between them. No mention of faith, or loss, or even the Book. Maryam is taught to read the world's maps, to fold messages in a strand of hair, to know which faces are safe and which must never see her.

Maryam learns. Stories fill her: of prophets, martyrs, and those who fought and lost but never surrendered the Book. Listening, watching, waiting, she lets the words and the city grow inside her like a secret organ.

On the coldest day of March, she visits her father's grave. The fig tree whips in the wind, its roots deep and blind. Knees press into the earth as she unpacks the little Bible from its wrapping, and reads aloud. The world does not end. The sky does not crack. Only the wind sharpens, and the taste of salt on her lips.

When she returns home that evening, her mother sits by the window, hands folded in her lap. For the first time in months, her hair is combed and her eyes look outward.

Maryam stands in the doorway, clutching the small Bible to her heart, and waits to be noticed. When her mother finally lifts her head, there is no accusation, only a hunger Maryam recognizes.

She tears bread, sets it on the table, and waits for her mother to eat. The taste is sharp, but the hunger softens.

The Book survives, as do they.

## Act 2: Awakening

### Chapter 3: Crossing the Border

April, 1960.

Morning stamped white light through the bakery's cracked windows, illuminating the dough-flecked floor where Maryam crouched, knees folded beneath her skirt. The room throbbed with the yeasty heat of proofing bread and the dark sweetness of steeped tea. Zahra's son, a stubby-legged toddler with cheeks like rising loaves, wriggled onto Maryam's lap. A giggle burped from the boy as he burrowed for the raisin hidden in Maryam's fist.

Zahra leveled a spoon at him. "If you spoil your breakfast, I'll serve you to the mullahs."

Laughter simmered beneath the spike in Zahra's tone. The boy squealed, snatched at Maryam's

hand, missing three times before nabbing the raisin and shoving it in his mouth, triumphant and wild-eyed.

Maryam pressed her cheek against the child's crown, his hair damp with sweat and flour dust. The scent—warm, animal, innocent—brought a brief, choking ache for her own childhood. The child settled onto the woven mat as flour dust slipped from her hands.

Zahra moved with the measured grace of a woman who had learned to dodge both bullets and rumors. Tea swirled with leaves before Zahra strained it into chipped cups. "Drink before the old man arrives and claims the first pour." Her eyebrows danced above the rim. "He says I pour with a heretic's hand."

Maryam accepted the cup. The steam bit at her lip; the flavor cut sharper than the memory of her father's homebrew. A swallow chased the gallop in her chest. "He knows you're the better trader."

A huff. "He knows I can lie better than he can." Zahra smirked, but her hands never stopped moving—spooning sugar, slicing bread, sweeping up the child's stray raisins. The son, now bored with his treat, built a fortress of bowls and flatbread crusts.

Between mouthfuls, Zahra unfolded a parchment across the battered table. A pencil stub emerged from behind Zahra's ear, circling dots along the Caspian's jagged edge. "You remember how your father mapped the safe trails?" Her voice shrank, low and careful.

Maryam nodded, pulse quickening. Her father's wrinkled, steady hands returned in memory, guiding hers over paper while reciting smugglers' names like saints.

Zahra's pencil moved, sketching branching lines through the mountain passes, tracing a vein to the port at Bandar Anzali. "The new patrol chief bribes in vodka. Three bottles buys you an hour. More than that, you pay with blood." A tap marked another town inland, far from water.

The guards shoot before asking questions. You wear black, you pray loud, you play stupid. Girls pass through, if they remember to keep their mouths shut.”

Maryam followed each mark, hunger sharpening her focus. Zahra’s voice settled inside her, a current stronger than fear. A hand hovered over the map, hesitation breaking before fingertips touched the paper.

Zahra slid the map closer. “You have a knack for this, Maryam-jan. Smuggling isn’t different from fishing. Watch the currents. Sense when it’s safe to cast out. Know when to pull in the net.”

Maryam’s face heated at the praise, and she ducked her head. The toddler wobbled over, dragging a crust the length of his forearm. A piece lifted toward Maryam, the boy’s eyes wide with saintly generosity.

The crust was placed in her hand, a gesture swelling her chest with something sharp-edged, unfamiliar, not pain. A piece broke free, pressed to his lips. Her smile bloomed as he gnawed, eyes bright.

Zahra’s tone softened. “My husband is always gone, trading salt and saffron to men who never give their names. I need another pair of hands, and someone who can keep a secret. My son loves you already.”

The boy babbled, bread crumbs clinging to his chin. Maryam wiped his mouth with a careful thumb. “I’m not sure your husband would trust me.”

Zahra’s face twisted, a flash of bitterness. “He trusts no one. But he knows survival needs more than trust.” A nod passed to the child, who gnawed on his crust like a dog with a bone. “We learn to choose family. Sometimes that means breaking the law. Sometimes that means breaking your own heart.”

Maryam cradled the thought, letting it bruise her. Raw dirt at her father's grave returned, alongside the memory of a mother shrinking further each day. The bakery, with its heat and noise, felt like a sunlit cathedral in comparison.

Zahra leaned in, voice tight. "I know you keep the Book."

Maryam froze. Her fingers tightened on the bread until it cracked.

"No shame in it," Zahra went on. "But keep it safe. I lost three friends to a single careless word. Even in this city, one whisper can bring the men with guns."

The bakery door banged open, and a gust of sea-sour wind pressed inside. Zahra's son scampered to the door, peeking through the gap. A man's voice barked from outside, followed by a crash and a rush of laughter. Zahra's eyes flicked toward the commotion—back to Maryam.

"That's my brother. He runs messages for me—he's reliable, but brash. Learn from his courage, but not from his mouth."

Maryam's lips quirked upward. "I prefer to listen."

Zahra grinned, the lines on her face deepening. "Smart girl."

The bakery's back room thumped with the sound of crates being dragged, sacks of flour landing hard on the wood. Zahra's brother lumbered in, broad-shouldered, with bread crumbs littered across his beard. He dropped a burlap sack near the table and slapped Maryam on the back hard enough to jolt her teeth.

"Zahra, you spoil this girl," he boomed, grinning. "She'll outsmart us all before summer."

Zahra rolled her eyes but smiled, her gaze softening. "If she survives the spring, I'll retire and let her run the routes."

The brother eyed Maryam, half teasing, half testing. "You strong enough to lift one of these?"

Maryam pushed herself up, squared her shoulders, and wrapped her arms around the sack. Muscles in her back screamed, but she hoisted it up and managed to shuffle three paces before it toppled her sideways. The weight pinned her knees to the cool tile as her body crashed down.

The brother roared with laughter. “She’ll survive!”

Maryam looked up, saw Zahra’s smile—proud, tender, real. The pain in her knees faded, replaced by a sweet, aching warmth. A grin escaped, dust streaking across her cheeks.

Zahra clapped her hands. “Back to work, both of you. We have orders to fill. The next batch leaves before noon.”

The morning passed in a churn of kneading, shaping, wrapping loaves in linen. Maryam learned to sling the sacks over her shoulder with a rhythm Zahra called “fisherman’s grace.” The boy trailed after them, burbling and tugging at skirts, content to be underfoot.

During lulls, Zahra taught Maryam to fold parchment into tiny envelopes for messages, to carve wax seals without leaving a mark. Zahra demonstrated how to pack flatbread to conceal a pamphlet or a prayer at its heart, each lesson paired with stories of quiet defiance. Each lesson came with a story—of a priest who survived three regimes, of a fisherman who ferried scripture across the Caspian, of a woman who gave up her children to keep the Book alive.

When the sun finally slanted low through the front windows, Zahra poured out the last of the tea. A cup slid across to Maryam while Zahra cradled her son in the crook of her arm. The child burrowed into her shawl, eyelids drooping.

Zahra’s voice cut through the hush. “I think you’re ready.”

Maryam blinked, sudden terror pooling in her gut. “Ready for what?”

Zahra met her eyes, steady as stone. “Ready to carry something the world wants to kill.”

Maryam shivered. The air crackled. Zahra reached across the table, laid her hand over Maryam's.

"You are not alone," Zahra said.

The world contracted to that touch—the press of flesh, the thrum of shared blood, the baked sweetness of home and risk. Maryam drank it in, heart beating out a new rhythm. Routes, bribes, passwords—each would become hers to learn. Mercy and violence, both required to survive, would carve themselves into her. The Book would travel with her, heavy with the hope of all fathers murdered in shallow earth.

She squeezed Zahra's hand back.

"I'm ready," she said.

#

Zahra arrived before dawn, black chador flapping like a raven's wing as she pounded on the battered door. Maryam's mother recoiled, eyes rimmed red, but Zahra swept inside with a wind's force, dropping a canvas satchel on the floor and shaking the night from her hair.

"Trade trip. We leave in an hour." Zahra's voice carved the hush.

Maryam, still barefoot, blinked the crust from her eyes. The phrase "trade trip" struck her chest like a thrown stone. For weeks, Zahra had spoken of Jerusalem, of the shifting borders, of chaos in Baghdad and Basra as men with more ambition than brains murdered their way to new thrones. Rumor said the routes teemed with opportunists and cutthroats, but also with the desperate—the people who would pay in secrets and gold for a chance to breathe the air outside Iran, even for a day.

Maryam's stomach pinched. Her mother's hand hovered at her shoulder, grip uncertain.

"I'm ready," Maryam croaked.

Zahra's eyes narrowed. "If you want to turn back, say it now."

Maryam shook her head, wiped the sleep from her cheek. "No. I want to go."

Her mother flinched, breath snapping in and out of her lungs. "You're still a child," she hissed, but Zahra met her glare with steel.

"She's grown. You'll see her again. Let her do something worthy."

The words raked over Maryam's skin, but she stood taller, ignoring the tremor in her legs.

Two sets of clothes, a scarf, the handful of money Zahra pressed into her palm, packed tight in moments. The Bible, flat and cold, she tucked into the seam of her undershirt. The boards beneath her feet groaned with each step, as if warning her against flight.

Zahra herded her toward the door, pausing only to ruffle the boy's hair. "I'll bring you figs from Jerusalem," she promised, a wink smoothing her sharp face.

Outside, the car waited. Rust puckered its hood, but the engine throbbed with purpose. Zahra's brother leaned from the driver's seat, cigarette clamped in his teeth. He spat smoke, grinning when he saw Maryam. "Back seat, you two. I want no squabbles."

Zahra settled beside Maryam, knee pressed to hers. The warmth bled through Maryam's skirt, oddly comforting. The city bled past them: white-washed walls, the slumped backs of old men hunched at bakery windows, cats stalking the trash heaps. At each checkpoint, Zahra's brother bantered with the guards—sometimes a joke, sometimes a curse. Maryam kept her eyes on her knees, as Zahra had taught her.

By noon the next day, Tehran's stink yielded to the salt-sour air of the coast near Bandar Abbas. The port throbbed with noise—cranes screeching, gulls brawling over fish heads, the

hollow ring of boots on metal hulls. Zahra's brother navigated the alleys with the ease of a man who'd bribed every dockworker at least once.

They stopped near a battered cargo vessel, black paint peeling from the bow. A giant block lettered in Cyrillic blared from its side. Zahra's brother pointed at the ship. "You'll be cargo from here."

After a quick embrace with her brother, Zahra ushered Maryam to the gangplank. They moved fast, heads down, blending with the laborers. The dockside rumbled with foreign words—Russian, Turkish, a slurred English. Zahra muttered instructions under her breath, the rhythm soothing as a lullaby.

The hold stank of diesel, mildew, and old onions. Bales of rough cotton and sacks of dried beans packed the walls, leaving a crawlspace barely wide enough for two. Zahra's son clung to her hip, dead asleep. Zahra passed the boy to Maryam, who cradled him awkwardly, unsure if she should rock or brace him.

"Settle in," Zahra whispered. "The first night's the worst."

The boy's cheek, pressed to Maryam's arm, radiated heat. A shawl wrapped around him, nose left clear for breath. When she looked up, Zahra pressed something into her hand—a crumbled biscuit. "Eat. You'll need strength."

A shout rattled down from the deck answered by the clatter of feet above them. Zahra tucked her son deeper into the shadows, her own body forming a shield. Maryam's breath jammed in her throat. Voices, harsh and guttural, bounced off the metal walls.

The boy whimpered once and fell silent. Zahra stroked his hair, whispering soft nonsense. Maryam forced the biscuit down, its crumbs clinging to her tongue like ash.

After an hour—or maybe two—the shouting faded. The ship lurched and groaned, engines shuddering to life. Maryam gripped the rough rope netting for balance, stomach churning with each roll.

Zahra laughed, low and throaty. “You’ve never been to sea.”

Maryam glared, cheeks hot. “Not unless you count the Caspian.”

Zahra snorted. A breath later, she softened. “First trip is always rough. Focus on your breathing. It will pass.”

They huddled in the dark, the only light filtering through a rusted grate above. Maryam’s mind spun, counting the revolutions of the propeller, the slosh of water against the hull. Each sway threatened to hurl her guts onto the cargo.

After a stretch, Zahra leaned close, breath warm against Maryam’s ear. “You ever meet a priest?”

Maryam shook her head. “Only the village imam.”

Zahra snorted. “Imams bore me. Priests have better stories.” She tucked her son’s foot under a burlap sack and shifted so her shoulder pressed into Maryam’s. “Once, we smuggled a Jesuit disguised as a rug trader. He could recite the Gospels in Greek, Latin, and French, but couldn’t tell the difference between flatbread and naan.” Her eyes crinkled with the memory. “We crossed three borders before he cracked and tried to convert a border guard. Idiot nearly got us shot.”

Maryam laughed, despite the seasickness grinding her gut. “Did he make it?”

Zahra grinned, eyes bright in the gloom. “He did. He said God owed me a miracle. I told him I’d settle for a good meal and a soft bed.”

Maryam let the story settle into her bones. Knees drawn, the Bible's leather binding presses cold against her ribs. She remembered her father's last day—the way he counted out the fish, his thumb tracing the spine of the Book even as blood mottled the page.

Pressing a hand to her side, she feels the outline through the thin cotton. "I'm afraid," she admitted, voice tiny.

Zahra patted her hand. "Fear is good. Means you're alive."

The boy whimpered in his sleep, a tiny yelp before silence. Zahra pulled him closer, humming a tune Maryam didn't recognize.

The ship rolled on, the days measured by hunger, the cramped ache of thighs, the shiver of nerves each time footsteps rattled the deck. When sleep took Maryam, it dragged her into blackness shot with images of running, always running, through corridors slick with oil and sweat and something darker.

She woke to Zahra's hand on her shoulder. "Port in two hours. You'll carry the boy and the blue case. Move slow. Speak only if spoken to."

Maryam nodded, throat dry. She hugged Zahra's son to her chest, the small heart thrumming against her palm. Her own heart beat double time, but she moved as instructed, matching Zahra's pace along the narrow halls.

Above deck, the sunlight stabbed her eyes. The docks of Haifa sprawled before them—stacks of crates, men in uniforms, the electric tang of anticipation. Zahra took the lead, nodding at the ship's crew, who ignored them in favor of the shouted orders and diesel haze.

At the bottom of the gangway, Zahra signaled with a twitch of her chin. They moved, quick and invisible. The world roared, but no one looked at them twice.

Zahra's brother met them at a street corner, now clean-shaven and draped in a merchant's robe. He scooped the boy up with a practiced swing, ruffled Maryam's hair, and winked.

"Next stop, Jerusalem. You did well, girl."

Maryam tried to smile, but her cheeks trembled. She inhaled, savoring the briny air, the scent of oranges from a nearby stall. She looked at Zahra, who stood with feet planted and chin high, the city's noise rolling around her like surf.

Zahra leaned in, voice low. "You're almost there, Maryam-jan. You did what your father could not."

Maryam's breath caught. For the first time since he died, the ache in her chest loosened.

She was alive. She was here.

#

Noise assaulted her first: the Haifa docks rang with the shouts of stevedores, the grumble of idling trucks, the snap of ropes and curses in Hebrew, Russian, and tongues Maryam could not name. Fish scales glimmered underfoot, mashed into the oily planks. The air pulsed with salt, sweat, diesel, and the sour tang of fermenting citrus. Maryam swallowed the taste, each inhale a punch to the gut.

Zahra pushed her through the crowd, arm locked around her bicep. "Eyes down, ears open," she hissed, "but walk like you belong." Zahra's own gaze never stopped moving, flickering between checkpoints, hunched dock workers, and the sullen, uniformed men who loitered at the edges of the crowd.

They ducked beneath a crane's shadow, the iron giant creaking overhead. Zahra nodded at a cluster of port officials in brown jackets. "These," she said, "smell bribes before you even think to offer them. Show them teeth, nothing more. Don't let them get close."

Maryam nodded, clutching the blue case to her chest. Each jostle and shoulder-check from the crowd sharpened her nerves, but Zahra's grip anchored her. They moved in a zigzag, never straight, never fast enough to draw a line between origin and destination.

They reached a shed wedged between the fish market and the customs yard. A man in a striped shirt waited by the door, hands tucked in his pockets, jaw chewing a toothpick to pulp. His eyes flicked to Maryam, lingered a half-second, then shifted to Zahra.

"Late," he grunted, voice dusted with gravel.

"Traffic on the water," Zahra shot back. "You want it or not?"

He sized them up and jerked his head toward the door. Inside, a single bulb glowed over a cluttered table. The room reeked of onions and cheap cologne. Two battered crates sat against the far wall, stenciled in Cyrillic and sealed with red wax. The striped man stepped behind the table and fished a ledger from the mess.

He scribbled a note and slid the ledger to Zahra. "Sign here. If the cargo is short, you'll pay double next run."

Zahra uncapped the pen, scrawled her name, and handed the book back. She turned to Maryam, eyes glinting. "Lift one."

Maryam bent, fingers scrabbling at the rough splinters of the crate. Her knees shook with the effort, but she hoisted it upright, surprised by the heft. The merchant grinned, a quick flash of gold tooth.

"Not bad," he said. "You hire muscle now?"

“She’s family,” Zahra said, voice iron flat.

The word slammed into Maryam’s chest. Family. She fought the urge to stand straighter, and instead clutched the crate tighter, knuckles whitening.

The merchant leaned in, voice dropping to a whisper. “Customs changes tonight. New captain. Double guards at the checkpoint.”

Zahra nodded, stone-faced. “We’ll handle it.”

He cut his eyes at Maryam—back to Zahra. “She can be silent?”

“She’s never spoken out of turn,” Zahra said. She shot Maryam a glance that was half warning, half pride.

The merchant, grunting, clapped Maryam on the shoulder hard enough to send dust flying. “You hear things, you remember. Some days, information is worth more than spice.” He yanked the second crate off the floor and shouldered it with a practiced roll.

“Come,” he barked. “Fastest way is through the market. Guards eat and gamble. They don’t look hard if they’re fed.”

They snaked through a corridor of stalls. Fishmongers hacked fins from silver trout, women in shawls bartered for oranges, children sloshed buckets of ice melt across the walk. Maryam’s arms strained with the weight, her thighs burning. But each new sound and smell—grilled lamb, burning trash, fresh mint—spooled her anxiety tighter until it snapped, replaced by a blank focus.

Zahra’s voice reached back: “Eyes open, Maryam-jan. What do you notice?”

Maryam gulped air, took stock. “Uniforms are blue, not black. These guards look at hands, not faces. The man with the cigarettes is watching the alley, not the gate.”

Zahra's lips curled. "Good. Next time, notice their shoes. Expensive means bribe, worn means anger. Anger is dangerous. Avoid anger."

They reached the checkpoint, a sagging awning of patched canvas and two guards picking sunflower seeds from a rusty bowl. The Armenian set his crate down, pulled a pack of smokes from his pocket, and handed it to the guards. They grinned, took a smoke each, and signaled for him to move on.

Maryam's heart jittered, throat sandpaper dry, but she mimicked the motion, ducked her chin, and shuffled forward. The guard's gaze snagged on her for a moment—a girl, a crate, a face like any other. He spat a seed at her feet and waved her through.

On the other side, Zahra exhaled a long, silent breath. "You did well," she murmured, not breaking stride.

The Armenian led them into a stone-walled courtyard. He pried open his crate, fished out a jar of saffron, and tossed it to Zahra. "Tomorrow, different route. Rumor is soldiers sweep the old quarter. Don't linger." He locked eyes with Maryam, not unkindly. "Don't lose your courage, girl. It goes fast if you don't use it."

Maryam squared her shoulders, a little proud of the ache in her back. She hoisted her crate, followed Zahra through the narrow lanes, and soaked in the lesson: sometimes the world ran on secrets, sometimes on bribes, but always on the willingness to move fast and keep your head.

The city spun around her, a living engine of survival and opportunity. She inhaled, sharp and deep, letting the salt and smoke and living heat fill her chest.

For the first time, Maryam believed she belonged.

#

The border checkpoint loomed: a rusted fence, coiled barbed wire, and a prefab hut plastered with Hebrew and Arabic warnings. On the Israeli side, soldiers with rifles lounged in the shade, picking sunflower seeds from their uniforms and flicking the shells at stray cats. The air here thickened with the stench of nervous sweat and exhaust, undercut by the coppery tang of fresh-cut rebar. Maryam's tongue dried, her breath catching with each pulse.

Zahra steered her into the line. "Don't fidget. Don't speak unless asked. Let them see boredom." The crates of saffron clunked against Maryam's thighs, the splinters chewing through her skirt. She willed herself to stillness.

Ahead, a bearded soldier leafed through a pile of customs slips, eyes flicking from face to form and back again. His gaze stripped each traveler, searching for the flaw, the nervous twitch, the lie. The merchant from Haifa—now miraculously clean-shaven—stood just two paces ahead, bellowing at a Palestinian merchant about a shipment of dates. He winked at Zahra, and melted into the scrum.

Maryam's skin tingled. She fixated on a crack in the sidewalk, tracing the black veins snaking through the concrete. Zahra nudged her. "Ready?"

A grunt, nothing more.

They stepped up. The soldier's hands, stained yellow by cigarettes, reached for their papers. Zahra produced a folded slip, the money pressed inside so snug it added almost no bulk. "Family business," she said, voice bored as rain. "Here for the olive market. Two nights, maybe three."

The soldier squinted, unwrapping the slip with a practiced thumb. A note peeled loose—American bills, blue and fat, enough to matter but not enough to insult. He slid the cash up his sleeve without blinking. “Any meat or firearms?” he asked, eyes glancing up at Maryam.

“Only spice,” Zahra replied, and allowed herself a smile. “She can barely lift these.”

The guard waved at the crates, a routine glance before waving them to the inspection table. Zahra held Maryam’s arm, steady and firm.

A second soldier—no older than Maryam, his nose pocked with acne—tapped at the lid of the crate. “Open.”

Maryam’s hands shook. Zahra shot her a look, stepped forward and cracked the box. The top spilled with saffron tins, red as wound dressings. The boy dug through, lifting tins, poking the sawdust below. His fingers grazed the false bottom.

Maryam’s breath froze. Her father’s face surfaced—blood-streaked, eyes ice-blue and unblinking. She willed herself not to scream. Her heart drummed a syncopated rhythm; she counted to keep from shaking. Fear pressed against her ribs, but resolve anchored her spine, each breath a choice to remain still.

The guard dug deeper, sniffed a tin, shrugged, slammed the lid shut. “Next,” he barked, turning to the next in line.

Maryam’s knees buckled with relief. She dragged the crate off the table, palms slick with sweat. They moved beyond the checkpoint, shoes scraping across the broken asphalt, each step lighter than the last.

On the far side, Zahra squeezed her shoulder. “You see the trick?” she murmured. “Never too much. Never too little. Always leave them doubting whether you’re worth the trouble.”

Maryam nodded, still trembling.

They climbed the switchback road, Jerusalem rising in tiers: white-washed stone, domes catching the sun, the clamor of bells and calls to prayer echoing up the slope. The city shimmered, dust haloed in the heat. Maryam drank it in, every sight and sound pinning her here, alive and remade.

At the top, Zahra stopped to catch her breath. She looked at Maryam, pride breaking the hard lines of her face. “You did what your father could not.”

Maryam pressed her hand to her ribs, where the Bible pressed back, a hard knot under her clothes.

She grinned, teeth bared in victory. “I did it,” she whispered, voice raw.

From a nearby church, bells peeled over the market. The scent of bread and orange blossoms drifted on the wind. Maryam closed her eyes, soaking in the world as it existed, this moment undiluted by fear.

Zahra squeezed her arm, silent in her congratulations.

Maryam opened her eyes, looked at the shining city, and for the first time, felt herself not only worthy—but called.

## Chapter 4: The Hidden Paths

Sunlight limped down the alleys of the Armenian Quarter, pooling in the potholes and puddling against the base of the old Crusader walls. The city vibrated around Maryam—carts rattling, peddlers bellowing in Aramaic and Russian and a half-dozen other tongues, the air thick with the smell of burnt sugar, rot, and rain-wet stone. Behind Zahra’s sharp silhouette, Maryam moved past a beggar hunched like a broken hinge, through a gate crusted in green paint and up two flights of uneven stairs. Here the shouts of the market faded; only the hush of a distant choir and the clang of bells from the Church of St. James followed.

They reached a battered metal door stamped with faded Cyrillic. Zahra rapped twice, once—a code as natural as breathing. Silence. A scrape from within, and the door creaked open.

A man waited in the gloom, framed by the warehouse’s cavernous dark. A priest’s collar was worn beneath a fisherman’s wool sweater, the sleeves shoved past his elbows, forearms lined

with the palimpsest of old burns and fresh scars. His eyes caught Maryam's: black, flat, unyielding.

"Welcome, Zahra-jan," he said in heavily-accented Persian, bowing his head not in deference but as ritual. "You bring the girl."

Maryam's shoulders squared. That smile—all gums and shadow—earned no trust from Maryam. Zahra responded with a quick embrace, sweeping a hand toward Maryam as though auctioning a prize fish. "She learns fast. She does not scare easy."

"We will see," the man replied, gaze measuring. "Come. Quickly. Time is enemy."

He led them into the warehouse. It was a catacomb of the old city—no windows, only the haze of strip lighting and dust motes spinning like microscopic flies. The space compressed around them, air thick with the funk of cured fruit, oiled wood, sweat, and the high stinging note of vinegar. Rolled carpets towered in columns against the wall. Stacks of olive oil tins gleamed like tiny gold bricks. Smoked fish hung from iron rods, scales catching the light in tiny explosions.

At the center of the warehouse, three crates squatted on the floor, each bound in steel wire and stamped with a Turkish shipping address. A thick candle guttered on a crate lid, wax pooling in the seams.

The priest set his palm on the top of the nearest crate. "Father Grigoris," he introduced himself, voice softening slightly. He nodded at Maryam, who offered a stiff "Salam" and stood as if braced for wind.

Zahra moved forward and set the satchel on the floor. "This is the run," she said.

Father Grigoris lifted the lid. Inside: a nest of balled socks and linen, and, beneath, a seam of slim Bibles bound in blue and red faux leather, each smaller than Maryam's hand.

Grigoris fingered one, opened it, sniffed the paper. He smiled at Zahra and set the book on the crate.

He gestured for Maryam to step closer. “I will show you once. Then you do.” His tone left no room for debate.

He took a carpet from the nearest pile—a cheap Persian knockoff, geometric patterns of sickly yellow and black. He flipped it, exposing the coarse mesh of the backing and drew a slender razor from his sleeve. With quick, precise movements, he slit along the edge, peeled a flap, and exposed the hollow between the fibers and the rug face.

“Always take from the back,” he said, “and never deeper than a thumb’s width.” He slid a Bible between the layers and pinched the backing closed. From his pocket, he produced a needle already threaded with invisible monofilament. His hands, which had appeared swollen and clumsy, became all delicacy. In under a minute, the slit was gone—sealed by a row of tiny, perfect stitches, a mend no inspector would see unless they knew to look for it.

He tossed the carpet on the floor—gestured: “You try.”

Maryam’s breath caught. From the crate, the blue Bible with its cool, slick cover was selected. She fumbled for a carpet, chose one at random and turned it over as Grigoris had done. A thumbnail slid under the mesh, catching and tearing a rough gap. Her face burned. Zahra’s eyes bored holes in the side of her head.

Father Grigoris grunted. “Too rough. You bruise the carpet.” He handed her the razor. “Use this.”

She took it. The blade trembled between her fingers, and when she tried to slice, it snagged on a knot of wool, refusing to give a clean edge. Her palms sweated, breath whistling in her nose. The memory of her father’s hands—steady in death, clamped around the Bible’s torn

cover—flashed behind her eyes. Forcing her rhythm slower, the cuts lightened as she mimicked the priest's grip. This time, the slice came away in a perfect straight line.

Into the hollow, the Bible slid. It fit, but bulged at the edge, a blue lump under the yellow wool. Father Grigoris shook his head, tutted.

"Remove it. Try again, but flatten the pages first." He gestured at the crate lid.  
"Sometimes you must break the spine. The book is still holy, even if the cover is not perfect."

Maryam took the Bible and bent it, pressing the cover until the spine cracked. The sound unsettled her—a book breaking felt like a kind of sin, but she did as told. Pages flattened between her palms. They wrinkled, but the bulge was gone.

Once more the Bible slipped into the hiding place, mesh pressed closed over it. Maryam let out a slow exhale, the knot in her stomach easing.

Father Grigoris handed her the needle and thread. "Stitch. Start left. Pull tight, but not so tight the fabric draws in."

Maryam stabbed the needle through the netting, tugging the thread as the priest instructed. Three stitches passed before the thread tangled, snagging on the wool fibers. Her hands shook. Fumbling, she pulled the knot tight, but now the seam puckered. Tears pricked her eyes.

Zahra stepped in, one hand on Maryam's shoulder. "It takes time," she said, voice soft.  
"Look. Do it like this." Quick, practiced hands took the needle, untangling the thread and coaxing the web flat again. "See how the stitch crosses under? Hide it in the shadows."

Maryam watched, burning the motion into her memory. The needle returned to her grip, stitches slower but cleaner, the thread vanishing into the backing.

After five minutes, the slit was gone. Maryam ran her palm over the carpet, feeling for a bump or catch. It was nearly perfect. Her eyes found Zahra, who nodded.

“Good,” Father Grigoris said, voice lightening. “Next time, faster.”

He piled the finished carpets in a separate stack. “Each shipment gets three. Never more, never the same place twice.” He wiped his hands on his sweater, reached into the crate and drew out a battered silver flask. He uncapped it and splashed a small measure onto his fingers and onto the crate, offering the open top to Zahra and Maryam in turn.

“It is not custom, but blessing is required.” He murmured a few words—Armenian, Maryam guessed—crossed himself. Zahra did the same, and Maryam copied her, a beat behind.

Father Grigoris moved to the next step. “We also use fruit and oil,” he said, waving at the shelves lined with jars. “Some buyers want figs, or dates. They do not notice the weight, or a jar slightly different. But for those, you must be even more careful—oil ruins paper.”

He demonstrated with a jar of preserved lemons. He unscrewed the lid, scooped out half the fruit inserting a Bible wrapped in waxed paper. He replaced the lemons, wiped the rim, and resealed the lid with a blowtorch.

Maryam tried next, her hands less shaky now. A careful pack of the jar, a wipe, and a check against the light. Not a shadow of the hidden Book revealed itself.

Father Grigoris watched, expression unreadable. “You learn. Maybe you do not break as easy as I thought.”

Maryam felt the words as a benediction. No smile came, yet something inside her shifted—a tiny unclenching. This, she could do. Carrying the Book would be possible, even if it meant lying, hiding, and mending what the world wanted broken.

They worked for hours, slicing, stitching, packing. With each completed hiding, Maryam's hands grew steadier. The carpet fibers left yellow stains on her knuckles; the olive oil slicked her skin. But she learned the rhythm: cut, tuck, stitch, bless. There was a liturgy in the process, and in its repetition she found the edge of something like peace.

As they finished the last crate, Father Grigoris gathered them in the center of the warehouse. He motioned for Maryam to kneel.

Zahra knelt beside her, one hand resting atop Maryam's.

Grigoris spoke quietly, his voice lost in the warehouse's stone-and-iron hush. He blessed the shipment, the hands that made it, and the lives at the end of its journey. He sprinkled a few drops from the flask onto Maryam's forehead. The liquid stung, dried. The sour reek of old brandy and incense filled her lungs, and for the first time since her father's death, the memory failed to choke her.

After the blessing, Zahra hugged Maryam—quick, hard—gone. "You did well," she whispered. "He would have been proud."

Father Grigoris opened the door. Outside, the light harsher, the world more dangerous. Maryam felt it: the risk, the weight. But she also felt the Book, not as a burden, but as a charge.

As they walked back into the city, the hidden Bibles tucked inside the carpets, jars, and tins, Maryam's stride lengthened. She glanced at Zahra, who grinned, winked and strode ahead, cutting a path through the crowds as if she owned the street.

Maryam followed, her heart steady. Every step, every stitch, every word would stay with her. She would never let the Book go.

The sun had burnt off the city's morning chill, setting the old stones of the Quarter ablaze. Zahra led Maryam in silence, down alleys barely wide enough for a wheelbarrow, the steps worn concave by centuries of feet. The walls dripped with pale blue graffiti and old Armenian proclamations, patched with clots of cement where bullets or shrapnel had taken bites. Almost every third doorway hosted a child's face, eyes blank with hunger or mischief. Maryam's senses jittered, every shadow a possible informant, every face a cipher.

Zahra stopped at a corner where a slab of limestone jutted from the wall. A finger traced the base before a thumbnail scraped, revealing a faint arc of blue chalk. Maryam squinted, barely making out the symbol: a half-moon, open to the left.

"Here," Zahra murmured. "This means safe house ahead. The mark is always blue. Never white or green. If you see red—" Her hand cut a line across her own throat. "You turn around, or you do not turn at all."

Maryam nodded, her pulse surging.

They pressed on, taking sudden turns—left, right, down a set of uneven steps that stank of urine and old cheese. At a plain wooden door, Zahra knocked twice, hesitated and whispered a string of syllables in Armenian. The door cracked open, revealing a young woman in a headscarf, her face pinched but eyes bright.

Without a word, Zahra pointed to Maryam and tapped the inside of her own left wrist. The woman nodded, pulled a corner of the rug aside, and exposed a trapdoor. A motion signaled Maryam to memorize the shape—the scuffed arc, the bent nail, the curl of cat hair at the edge.

"This is a run route," Zahra explained, voice so low Maryam had to read her lips. "If the police come, or the soldiers, you hide here. Count sixty and climb out the other side." Her hand

slipped under the rug, prying up a loose plank to reveal the gap: barely wider than a child's shoulders, a tunnel lined with dust and mildew.

Maryam's nerves skittered, but she knelt to touch the wood, to mark the way in her mind. Her palms came up gritty. Hands wiped clean against her skirt, drawing a grin from Zahra. "Now you see," Zahra said, and the woman at the door cracked a smile—sudden and fierce, a flare of kinship in the gloom.

They left, winding deeper into the Quarter's heart. The streets grew busier, the air thick with the smoke of roasting lamb and the spit-sweet of pomegranate syrup. Here, the shopfronts bulged with tins of honey, pyramids of dried apricots, piles of pistachios green as new grass. Zahra paused before a spice stall, the awning sagging with sacks of red and yellow powders.

She ducked inside, dragging Maryam with her. The shopkeeper—tall, stork-legged, with a shock of white hair—nodded once at Zahra and set to scooping saffron into a glass vial. The scent slapped Maryam in the face: metallic, sweet, and faintly like sweat.

Zahra ran her fingers through a basin of peppercorns, held up a pinch to her nose and theatrically considered the grain.

"Always use a cover," she whispered—becoming louder: "My niece loves this blend. She says it makes her stew taste of home."

The shopkeeper flashed a row of yellow teeth. "She has excellent taste," he intoned, but his eyes never left Zahra's hands. He slid the vial into a brown paper bag, folding the top twice, slipped in a scrap of folded newsprint.

Zahra accepted the bag, palmed a coin onto the counter—a quick pass, casual as scratching an itch. "Thank you," she said. "Next week I will bring her to meet you. She learns the business now."

The merchant bowed his head. “I look forward to it.”

Maryam caught the exchange—the unspoken recognition, the way the coin passed from hand to hand, how Zahra’s fingers lingered on the bag. A glance at the newsprint caught a flicker of blue chalk at the edge.

They stepped outside. The street had changed; the ordinary crowd was gone, replaced by a dense clot of men in army green. Soldiers. Helmets, batons, a few rifles slung over lazy shoulders. The cluster pressed close, moving in a slow wave up the alley, eyes grazing every window and awning.

Maryam’s lungs seized. The stories she’d heard—raids, random inspections, girls taken for “questioning” and never returning—flared in her mind. A stumble nearly sent the bag tumbling from her grip. Her pulse hammered, breath catching with each step. The bag’s weight dragged at her arm, sweat prickling her spine as fear curled low but did not break her stride.

“Don’t look back,” Zahra hissed. “Walk as if you belong. Now.”

They walked. Zahra’s grip on Maryam’s arm was iron, steering her through the clot of uniforms. A soldier, not much older than Maryam herself, reached for her shoulder.

“Stop,” he barked, in Hebrew-accented Persian.

Maryam froze.

The boy—barely a man—glanced her up and down, nodded at the bag. “What’s in there?”

“Spices,” Zahra replied, voice feather-light. “For stew. She helps at the kitchen.”

He snatched the bag, popped it open. The vial clinked. He sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. “Saffron?” he said, half incredulous. “You know this is worth more than your shoes?”

“Not if you know where to buy,” Zahra shot back, and the men around him laughed.

He fished the paper from the bag, sniffed it, handed it back. “You know, they say this makes a man strong. Is it true?” His eyebrows waggled at Maryam, who blushed and looked away.

“Try some,” Zahra suggested, and before he could refuse, she poured a few threads into his palm.

He tasted one and spat. “Ugh. Maybe I stick to tea.”

The patrol moved on, shoving at each other, barely glancing back. Zahra kept walking until they rounded the corner. A loud, relieved breath escaped her before she mussed Maryam’s hair.

“Lesson two,” she said. “Never show fear. It invites inspection.” Kneeling, her face was level with Maryam’s. “You do not have to enjoy the world, but you must convince it you do.”

Maryam nodded, hand shaking as she gripped the bag. The cross around her neck pressed cold against her skin, and she clutched it, feeling for the outline beneath her blouse.

They skirted the market, winding up a side alley. Zahra pointed out more chalk marks—some tiny, tucked into mortar seams; others bold as flags. Maryam repeated the symbols under her breath as instructed: the half-moon, the broken circle, the two dots side by side (“means danger is close—always look up for men on the roofs”). Maryam recited, voice trembling at first, then growing steadier.

They reached a checkpoint: a steel barricade set across the mouth of the alley, a single soldier sitting atop a crate with a cigarette drooping from his lip. He looked up, disinterested, as Zahra approached.

She held out a customs slip, folded in quarters. “For the kitchen,” she said. “New order, special delivery.”

He took the slip, thumbed it open. A crisp American dollar bill winked from the fold. He smirked, crushed out his cigarette on the crate, and waved them through.

Maryam stared at Zahra as they walked away. "You said bribes were dangerous."

"Only if you use too much, or look nervous," Zahra replied. "A small bribe is a compliment. It tells him you trust him, and he is not so important you fear his wrath. Too much, and you insult his pride. Too little, and you insult his intelligence."

Maryam touched the cross at her neck and tucked it back into her blouse. "How do you know what is enough?"

Zahra grinned. "You learn. And if you do not, you die. Simple."

They ducked into a narrow lane, the houses close enough to block the sky. Zahra reached up and snapped a fig from an overhanging branch, pressing it into Maryam's palm. "Eat. You need strength for what comes."

Maryam bit into the fruit, the sweetness drowning out the taste of fear. Eyes stayed forward, chest rising with each breath. Every wall, every door, every chalk mark burned into her mind. The city settled around her shoulders—a burden, yes, but also a kind of armor.

They moved in tandem now, Zahra's pace quick, Maryam matching it stride for stride. The world no longer a blur of threat; it was a series of codes to crack, obstacles to dodge, allies to find.

At the far end of the Quarter, Zahra slowed to a stop. Knees dropped, a small blue crescent drawn on the wall with a scrap of chalk before dusty hands wiped on her skirt.

"Next time you come alone," Zahra said, eyes narrowed in appraisal. "You think you are ready?"

Maryam straightened her back, chin high. "I am."

Zahra smiled—a real, proud smile, not the barbed one she wore for strangers.

“Good,” she said. “Remember: you belong here. Never let the world decide otherwise.”

Together, they walked into the bright, boiling street, the sun strong as judgment, and Maryam found she no longer shrank from the light.

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Dusk strangled the city in a slipknot of smoke and gold. By the time Maryam and Zahra reached the safehouse, the streetlamps buzzed with mosquitoes, casting ripples of weak light onto the stones. They ducked into the alley behind a shuttered bakery and into a back room that stank of yeast, sweat, and the ghosts of ten thousand loaves.

Inside, the only light came from two oil lamps—one perched on a crate, the other guttering on a shelf. Shadows limned the walls, flickering with each heartbeat. Maryam inhaled, feeling the city’s thrum in her chest.

The work was ready for them: crates stacked two high, each stenciled with fruit company logos; a table sagging under the weight of empty glass jars, stacks of brittle newsprint, and the bright, heretical spines of the Bibles to be sent east. In the corner, sacks of dried figs slumped against a wall, leaking sweet dust onto the floor.

Zahra took charge. Sleeves rolled back to expose forearms corded with muscle before a paring knife passed to Maryam. “We must finish by dawn,” she said, slicing open the first crate of figs. “The driver is greedy, but impatient.”

Maryam set to work, her fingers remembering the lessons of the warehouse: the angle of the blade, the pressure needed to pry open a tin without warping it, the trick of folding a Bible so

it disappeared inside a bag of fruit. At first her hands trembled, the memory of failure too near, but with each hidden volume, her touch steadied. The rhythm began to consume her: the slick pop of glass jar lids, the soft rip of packing paper, the meticulous taping of seams with glue that stank of horse and vinegar.

For every three crates of figs, one hid a Bible wrapped in waxed cloth and nested in the middle, surrounded by the fruit. The jars were trickier: some had false bottoms, built to conceal a Book; others were layered, brine and olive and Bible, more brine on top. Hollowed-out ledgers—their first few pages inked with made-up numbers—became vessels for the smallest Gospels, stitched in by Maryam's own hand.

Single-minded hunger fueled her work, each success layering her confidence. At some point Zahra stopped checking her work, content to focus on her own tasks, the room filled only by the chorus of their movements and the distant bellow of a merchant closing for the night.

At midnight, the bells from St. James echoed through the Quarter. Zahra set her tools aside and stretched, her spine crackling. "We are ahead," she said, smiling. "Enough to rest."

Maryam shook her head. "I'd rather finish. The more I do, the easier it gets."

Zahra laughed, leaned in close, voice dropping to a whisper. "You have the fever. It is not a bad thing, but it burns." A hand pressed to Maryam's forehead, then to her heart. "This is where you must keep it."

They fell back into work, a little slower now, but with a kind of peace. Maryam caught herself humming, a tune she'd learned as a child, the sound so strange she almost stopped in embarrassment. But Zahra joined in, her alto voice weaving around Maryam's. The hymn was old, the words almost lost, but the meaning shone through: courage for the night, hope for the dawn.

When the last Bible was packed, Zahra snuffed one of the lamps and motioned Maryam to kneel. Knees pressed into the cool dirt, palms open to the sky. Zahra knelt beside her, took Maryam's hands in hers—weathered, calloused, ink-stained.

They bowed their heads.

The prayer was short. Zahra spoke in Persian, the words rough but warm: "May these books find the hands that hunger. May they pass unseen. May their words endure, even as we do not."

Her grip tightened around Maryam's fingers, hard enough to hurt. "Your father would be proud," Zahra whispered. "And your mother, if she knew."

Maryam nodded, throat too tight for speech.

They sat together in silence for a while, the work done, the city outside blanketed in dark. In the quiet, Maryam let herself remember her father's face—not the last, blood-smeared day, but a time before, fishing nets spread in the yard, his voice singing her to sleep.

Zahra broke the silence first. "The truck comes at four. We must stack the crates by the bakery door. No sign of struggle, no mark of what is inside. If anyone asks, it is fruit for a wedding feast."

Maryam stood, knees aching, and together they lifted the heavy boxes, one by one. At the doorway, Zahra straightened the tower and swept her hand along the edges, wiping away any trace of their touch.

They waited in the cold, hunched in the shadow of the doorframe, until the growl of an engine shivered the stones. A battered pickup rattled to a stop, its headlights blinding in the dark. The driver—face hidden by scarf and cap—heaved open the tailgate.

Zahra hoisted the first crate, Maryam the second. They loaded the boxes in silence, the driver nodding approval but not speaking.

When the last box was loaded, Zahra pressed a coin into Maryam's palm—a battered lira, nearly smooth from wear. "Keep it," she said. "You will need luck."

The truck shuddered away, tail lights shrinking, and Maryam watched until it turned the corner, until the city swallowed it whole.

The night softened. She leaned against the wall, her breath a plume in the cold.

Zahra nudged her. "What do you think happens to the books, once they reach the other side?"

Maryam imagined the roads, the checkpoints, the hands—rough and trembling, old or young—that would open the crates. In her mind, a girl not unlike herself sat alone in a gray room, clutching the Book to her chest.

"They will save someone," she said, surprised by her own conviction. "Even if just for a day."

Zahra nodded. "That is enough."

They walked back to the safehouse. The Quarter was silent but not dead; somewhere, a baby wailed, and a drunk sang to the stones. Maryam's steps felt light, her back unburdened.

Inside, Zahra poured two mugs of tea, bitter as medicine, and set them on the table. She raised hers in toast. "To survival," she said.

Maryam hesitated, lifted her own cup. "To hope," she said, and the word tasted good on her tongue.

They drank in silence, the lamps guttering lower. Maryam closed her eyes, feeling the warmth bloom inside her.

She had done it. The Book had been carried, not in hiding or in shame, but as a badge, a calling. Her father's last wish, now hers. A small piece of immortality, sewn in paper and faith.

Every box, every stitch, every mark on every wall would remain in her memory. The lessons would remain, waiting to be taught one day to someone else.

And she would never, ever let the Book go.

## Chapter 5: First Shipment

The waiting room sours in the hour after dawn. Paint peels from the walls in flakes the color of old bone; the chairs sweat decades of bodies into their plastic hides. Outside, the city presses close—a stink of fried onions, exhaust, the rot of uncollected garbage ripening in the late spring heat. Maryam sits with her knees together, hands folded so tight her thumb whites out. Opposite her, Zahra reads the room with a predator’s patience, every face a dossier, every cough catalogued.

From the corridor, a shout shivers down the tile: the flat, ugly slap of bureaucracy. Maryam startles—checks herself, willing the tremor from her limbs. Blood, dried in the creases of her thumbnail, holds her steady, evidence of last night’s frantic packing. It anchors her.

Zahra leans close, whispering in the trade tongue—Russian, this time, smuggler’s dialect clipped and sharp. “You see the man at the desk? Watch his hands, not his mouth.”

Maryam risks a glance. The clerk's fingers drum out the pulse of his boredom—flicking at a blue stamp pad, at the sheath of documents beside him. His eyes never lift above chin level. Next to him, a young man in uniform sips tea through sugar cubes, spitting each one into a chipped glass after a single slurp. He's bored, too. Good.

Zahra shifts her weight, adjusting her headscarf so it sits higher on her brow. The move is not for modesty. It is a signal—a code Maryam learned two weeks ago on the warehouse floor, hands slick with olive oil and the blood of oranges. High scarf: wait, but not too long. Lowered: abort, burn the papers, run for the checkpoint at the south bridge.

They wait. Sweat beads in Maryam's armpits, trickles down the hollow of her spine. The noise of the office swells—phones ringing, voices climbing and breaking like badly tuned violins. Each time someone enters the room, Maryam's heart spikes. Sweat itches under her scarf. Each step feels loud. Her mind fractures into prayers and escape routes.

A boy in a postman's vest slips through the door, eyes flicking left, right. His lips move—counting, maybe. He glances once at Maryam, at Zahra, bows his head and speaks to the uniformed man. Maryam catches only the end of the sentence: "delivered, no inspection." The clerk's hand stops drumming. He lifts a single paper, taps it with the blue stamp, and slides it into a folder.

Zahra exhales, almost silent, a hiss like a knife slid from a sheath. "Time to go, little sister," she murmurs, and rises in one fluid movement.

Maryam stands too fast, her knees threatening mutiny. She swallows the bile in her throat and follows Zahra to the hall. In the corridor, the boy in the vest falls in behind them, silent as a ghost. He walks three paces, veering off toward the loading bays, never once glancing back.

Zahra's grip is iron around Maryam's wrist as they move through the maze of offices and storerooms, emerging into the open air behind the customs house. The city hits them again—a hammer of noise, the tang of diesel and meat smoke, the screech of crows fighting over a scrap. Zahra pauses, scans the street and nudges Maryam down an alley clogged with broken crates and the greasy refuse of last night's market.

Maryam stumbles, but Zahra steadies her, voice low. "Eyes forward. We take the river route."

The route is clear in her mind—three lefts, a right, under the pedestrian bridge. Each turn is a test: a chance to see if the tail is real, if the uniforms have decided the paperwork was not enough. Maryam keeps her head down, but her senses flare out, hungry for the signal of threat: a shouted name, a running step, the click of a rifle bolt being drawn back. Nothing, yet.

They pass a woman selling bundles of mint, her fingers black at the tips from dye and dirt. Zahra snatches a sprig, presses it to Maryam's nose. "To cover the nerves," she says, smiling, but her eyes scan the rooftops.

The riverbank swells with the sound of children and the sickly-sweet reek of burning trash. On the far side, a row of half-built houses slouches into the haze. Maryam's feet ache, but she matches Zahra's pace, never faltering.

They reach a market square, the hubbub denser, the smell of human and animal so thick it coats the back of the tongue. Zahra slows, voice nearly invisible: "This is the danger. Many eyes."

Maryam nods, sweat running from her hairline to the inside of her scarf. Close behind Zahra, she weaves through the crowd, past a man hawking cigarettes, past old men arguing politics with the solemnity of mullahs. No one pays them heed.

But a boy—no more than twelve, but sharp-eyed, already a veteran of the bazaar—sidles up. He bounces a ball on his palm—flicks it at Maryam’s hip, hard enough to sting. “Hey, pretty auntie, you lost?”

Maryam ignores him, as taught. The boy’s smile widens. “You look like the kind that gets lost,” he calls, and now heads turn, a small ripple through the crowd.

Zahra pivots, fast, and leans into the boy’s ear. Her words are too soft for Maryam to hear, but the effect is immediate. The boy blanches, shoves the ball in his pocket, and vanishes between a woman’s skirts.

They make the next corner at a near-run, hearts hammering in time.

In the side street, a moped backfires; Maryam jumps. Zahra chuckles, the sound both mean and reassuring. “If you flinch for every noise, you’ll die before fifty,” she says, but her own hand shakes a little as she smooths her scarf.

They walk two more blocks pausing by a crumbling bakery. The sun is almost gone, the windows lit only by the yellow flicker of candles. A faded awning droops over the door.

Zahra glances up and down the street and raps three times, quick, sharp. A beat and the door cracks open. The smell hits first: yeast and hot air, a clean, living scent. The man at the door is old, face battered into a permanent frown by decades of dough and sorrow. He nods at Zahra, at Maryam and steps aside.

Inside, the light is golden. The counter sags under the weight of fresh loaves, and the air buzzes with the sound of the old man’s radio. Zahra moves to the back, nudging Maryam ahead. They pass through a beaded curtain, down a narrow hallway, and into a room the size of a closet.

The air here is cooler. The walls are lined with shelves, holding bags of flour and boxes of dried fruit. In the center: a battered wooden table, scored deep with knife marks and stained by ancient, forgotten things.

Zahra sits, finally relaxing. A glass of water pours from a cracked jug, pushed toward Maryam by Zahra. “You did well,” she says, her voice warm for the first time in hours. “You remembered the steps. You did not lose your head.”

Maryam sips, savoring the chill on her tongue. The boy’s words still tingle against her skin, the threat of exposure, the rush of not being caught. Alive—more alive than in the weeks of hiding and packing, more than in the frantic last moments with her father.

Zahra breaks a hunk of bread, hands half to Maryam. “Eat,” she commands, “before the next part.”

Maryam chews, the taste anchoring her. “What now?”

Zahra grins, teeth stained with tea. “Now, we move the shipment. But first, you rest.”

In the shadow of the bakery, Maryam breathes deep. The city outside roars in her imagination—loud, dangerous—while the world inside this room feels safe and alive. The nerves are still there, but they vibrate now with something other than fear.

Hands wiped clean, she readies herself for what comes next.

#

The back room of the bakery is more crypt than kitchen. The walls close in, sweating with centuries of oil and flour; the low ceiling bows beneath the weight of a thousand secret

burdens. It smells of yeast, old stone, and the sharp, animal note of human fear. In the hush, the scrape of a chair against the floor is a gunshot.

Two men are already there. The older, with arms folded and biceps veined like walnut wood, stands sentry at the door. His skin is the color of burnt crust, the whites of his eyes startling in the dark. The younger, pale and wiry, sits on a flour sack, picking at the scab on his thumb. Both wear the aprons of bakers, but their hands are too clean.

The moment Zahra enters, the older man draws the bolt on the door and slides a heavy tin against the base. The younger one rises, pads across the cracked linoleum, and tugs the curtain over the single window. Dust motes spiral in the shaft of afternoon light.

No words, only a nod from Zahra—Go.

They converge on the crates in the center of the room, plain wood stamped with the sigil of a state-run spice company. Maryam recognizes the stencils—she helped stencil them herself, in a damp Jerusalem cellar, while Zahra told stories of her father’s exploits.

The men work fast, knives flicking through twine, prying the lids. The sound is intimate, a lover’s caress, each splintered edge a secret passed from hand to hand. Saffron spills in golden drifts, a fortune’s worth of spice sacrificed as camouflage. The older man runs his fingers through the threads scooping them into a steel bowl. He smiles, faint and feral.

Next, the tea—kilograms of leaves packed in black foil, the scent so strong Maryam almost gags. The men peel the foil, shaking the bricks free, and set them aside.

Beneath: oilcloth-wrapped bundles, dense as wet bricks, seam-sealed and triple-stitched. The younger man grunts, freeing the first one. He slides a knife along the edge and peels back the cloth.

Bibles. Dozens of them, stacked and pressed flat, covers embossed in gold, red, blue. Maryam's throat tightens. A hand reaches before she can stop it, finger tracing the cross on the spine, the title in Farsi script. The letters pulse with forbidden energy. Never has she seen so many together—not in the priest's storeroom, not even in dreams.

Zahra smiles at Maryam's awe—turns to the couriers. "Count. Check for damp. Then wrap for delivery."

They obey, working in silence. The Bibles are arrayed on the scarred wooden table, spine to spine, some covers still slick with condensation from the journey. The older man flicks through pages, tests the binding, snaps it shut, nods. The younger one measures stacks with a ruler—five packets, then ten.

Zahra gestures for Maryam to watch. She picks up a Bible, careful as if it were an egg, and demonstrates the rewrapping—plain brown paper first, then coarse linen, everything cinched with string. "Always two layers. If the outer is torn, they stop searching." Her hands move with deliberate grace, muscle memory fusing the act with reverence.

Maryam mimics the motion. The texture of the linen is rough, but the paper beneath is cool and smooth. She wraps, knots, and sets each bundle in a basket lined with old newspaper. Side by side with Zahra, she finds rhythm as ancient and sacred as kneading dough.

The process becomes liturgy. The older man recites each count aloud, a holy number; the younger one repeats it, double-checks, records it in a small book. Zahra oversees, her presence both priestly and fierce, ready to correct any slip.

At intervals, the men pause, listening. Maryam tenses, but no knock comes, no raised voice from the street. Only the mutter of the old man's radio in the next room, and the distant thump of a delivery truck shifting gears.

The stacks grow, baskets filling with swaddled gospels. Maryam's hands ache, but she keeps pace. Each time she touches the smooth, embossed cover, she feels her father's grip on her shoulder, the warmth of his last smile.

When the last Bible is packed, Zahra slides a sliver of bread to each courier. The older one eats with two bites; the younger pockets his, eyes darting to the door. "Tonight?" he asks, voice barely above the crumb.

Zahra nods. "The usual route. Use the Armenian quarter first. They expect you."

The older man wipes his lips and stands. Hefting two baskets, he waits for Zahra's signal and slips through the back hallway, silent as fog. The younger one follows, basket tight to his chest, chin down.

When they are gone, Maryam slumps on the bench. Her arms are powdered with flour, her knees sticky with sweat. In the stillness, the only light comes from the window's edge—a pale sliver, trembling with the movement of the city outside.

Zahra sits beside her, laying a hand on her thigh. "You did well," she says, voice stripped of irony.

Maryam picks up one last Bible, the cover pressed flat from the packing. Fingers running over the raised gold, the Farsi letters spelling out the name she had learned to fear. "It feels real, now," she whispers. "More than the hiding. More than the running."

"It is real," Zahra says. "It is the only thing they cannot take, if you hold it here." A tap to her chest accompanied with a rare, unguarded smile.

Maryam smiles back, feeling the fatigue and the thrill of accomplishment settle into her bones. The Bible slides into her waistband, hidden beneath her blouse, as she closes her eyes for one long breath.

When she opens them, dusk has crept in, and the world is new again. The baskets are gone, the men are gone. Only Zahra remains, the high priest of this underground church, and Maryam her latest convert.

Tomorrow the streets will teem with police, the checkpoints will double, and the price of a mistake will be death. But tonight, Maryam has done her work, and the Book endures.

Flour brushed from her skirt, she stands to help Zahra clear the table. Outside, the city pulses with risk and hope, a living thing. The smell of bread, and faith, and fear—so strong it could choke you, if you let it.

Maryam breathes it in, deeper than she ever has before.

#

Night in the Armenian Quarter is a living thing. It slithers up from the gutters and settles in the eaves, thick with the echo of shoes on stone, the distant moan of a saxophone bleeding from a cafe's cracked window. Maryam stands at the edge of the alley, pulse ratcheting in her throat. Heartbeat drums against the package. Sweat beads at her hairline. She forces her feet forward, fear and resolve knotted together. The first package is warm against her belly, tied in a pouch she stitched herself, the weight impossible to forget.

Steps counted, just as Zahra taught. Never stop, never speed up. If someone calls, don't look back. Each turn is a prayer. Shadows thread around her, heart tuning to the city's clock.

Her first stop is a tailor's shop. The sign is faded, letters peeling. The windows are blind with soot. Once, twice she raps—waiting. Inside, a dim bulb flickers to life. The woman who

answers is hunched, hair a wild thatch, glasses thick as the bottoms of jars. Eyes cautious, the woman peers at Maryam and cracks the door open just enough for light to slip through.

Maryam produces the signal—two fingers at her throat, a quiet cough. The woman nods, lips trembling. A gesture beckons Maryam inside before the door bolts shut.

They move to the back room, past a rack of military uniforms waiting for repair. The woman's hands shake as she unties the pouch, revealing the single Bible inside. For a moment she just stares, breath caught. Fingers meet leather. She gasps, like a woman touching the hand of her dead child. Turning, she rummages in a tin before pressing a coin into Maryam's palm. The transaction is ritual, not barter: something old, something holy.

"Thank you," she whispers. Her accent is heavy with the old city. "I prayed for a sign, and you came."

Maryam bows her head. "There will be more."

The woman weeps in silence, shoulders quaking. She straightens—wipes her nose on her sleeve—ushers Maryam out the side door into the alley's web, where lamplight suffocates.

The second stop is harder. The staircase to the apartment is crumbling; each step groans under her weight. She counts out the address: three, seven, twelve. At the door, she knocks in the pattern Zahra drilled into her bones. For a long moment, nothing. After, a face appears behind the curtain—a girl, younger than Maryam, eyes glassy with fear.

Maryam whispers the code. "I come from the baker. Your uncle sent me."

A pause, the door cracks. The girl lets her in, hands fluttering. Inside, the air is thick with mothballs and old cigarette smoke. The Bible in this pouch is heavier, the print larger. The girl stares at it, awestruck.

"It's real?" she asks.

Maryam nods. Unwrapping the Bible, she lets the girl run her fingers along the gilded edge.

“My mother says they will kill us for this.”

Maryam meets her gaze. “Only if you tell the wrong people.”

A rueful laugh. “Who is left to trust?”

“Start with yourself.”

The girl smiles, a new thing—raw, but alive. “My brother will want to read it. He dreams of being a priest, like in the old times.”

Maryam feels the echo of her father’s words: The world begins again in darkness. “Keep it safe,” she says.

On the stairs, Maryam nearly loses her footing. A burst of voices from the alley freezes her in place. Clutching the railing, she strains to hear. The words are slurred, the anger playful—just two drunk men, arms slung over each other, arguing about football. Waiting until the laughter fades, Maryam slips out the back.

Third stop: the basement room through the courtyard. Smell guides her—the pungent odor of kerosene and cat piss leading down the steps. The door is unmarked. Three knocks fall, waiting for the knock-back.

This time, it’s an old man, face collapsed into a beard so white it glows. The door groans open. He blinks at Maryam—waves her in. The room is cave-cold, lit by the sick glow of a single candle.

The old man takes the bundle, turning it in his hands. He opens the Bible, runs his finger down the inside cover—closes it, kisses the spine. He bows to Maryam, motioning for her to sit.

He pours tea—cheap, weak, served in a cracked mug. They drink in silence, the only sound the flick of pages as he leafs through the book. His eyes shine wetly.

“My wife would have loved this,” he says. “She read to me each night. Now I read only to ghosts.”

Maryam reaches for his hand, squeezes it. “It is enough to remember her voice.”

He nods, tears streaming but unashamed. “Thank you, child. You bring hope. Even to old men.”

Left sitting by the candle, the old man keeps his eyes fixed on the print, lips moving in prayer.

Her route winds through the city’s intestines. Patrols are dodged by instinct, as she senses the street’s current. A checkpoint flashes blue lights a block away; she doubles back, cuts through a warren of side streets, head low. Each time she turns a corner, her blood jumps.

At the last address, a door opens before she even knocks. A woman in a brown dress stands in the threshold, arms folded, a baby sleeping against her chest.

“I’ve been waiting,” she says. Her face is plain, but the eyes are sharp. “You’re late.”

“Checkpoint,” Maryam explains, and the woman waves her in.

Inside, a lamp hisses on a shelf. The apartment is bare—no carpet, no decoration, just a mattress and a pile of laundry. The woman gestures for Maryam to sit. Careful not to wake the infant, she does as instructed.

The Bible changes hands wordlessly. The woman cradles it, thumb brushing the corner. No tears. Instead, she laughs—a dry, honest sound.

“My husband is in Evin. They say he won’t come home, but I tell my boy he will.” She lifts the baby, kisses its head. “This will be the first thing I teach him to read. Even if I have to hide it in the walls.”

Maryam feels the truth of it, hard and shining. “You’re brave.”

“No,” the woman replies, “I’m desperate. But tonight I have hope. That is enough.”

They share a mug of water. The baby wakes, scrunches his face—stares at Maryam with impossible solemnity.

“He looks like his father,” the woman says. “He’ll be smarter than both of us. Maybe he will change the world.”

Maryam touches the baby’s hand. It closes around her finger, grip fierce for such a small thing. Words knot in her chest, though she longs to say something wise and lasting. Instead, she sits, the moment building in her stillness before fading.

When she leaves, the woman whispers, “Hope breathes again, sister.”

Maryam walks into the cool night, her tasks done. The city speaks: sirens, the slow hum of cars, a voice raised in distant song. Ache in her legs, sweat cooling on her back—weightlessness, if only for a moment.

The journey home begins—her real home now, not the childhood one lost to blood and silence. The room is small, lit only by a sliver of moon and the streetlamp’s blue wash. Kneeling by the bed, she pulls up the loose board.. The Bible her father died to protect lies there, leather darkened by time, the red cross still visible on the cover.

The cover cracks open. The inside is stiff, a page stained brown-black where his blood dried. A finger runs along the wound, remembering his last words.

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

She folds herself over the book, tears falling but silent. The mission is no longer a burden; it is her own.

The city is vast, the night endless. But Maryam is not alone. As she belongs to the darkness, so the darkness belongs to her.

The Bible closes, tucked back into its hiding place, as she breathes.

The night wraps her in a hush, and hope burns, unkillable, in the pit of her chest.

## Act 3: Rising Flame

### Chapter 6: Zahra's Counsel

Zahra pulled the kitchen door shut behind them, snuffing the riot of voices and bread-smoke, and pressed forward into the dusk. The courtyard sat bricked off from the world, a low-roofed cave of mud and cracked clay. Heat clung to the walls, old sunlight radiating upward as new darkness crowded the sky. In the courtyard's pit, embers twitched under a copper kettle, the fire banked low and slow. Somewhere above, swallows strafed the last slices of daylight.

Maryam stepped into the square of open air, the chill a blade between her shoulders. Satchel clutched against her ribs. Her hands trembled—enough that the strap cut her skin.

“Sit,” Zahra commanded. Not a request. She pivoted, dropping into a squat beside the fire. Her skirts billowed out, half-shrouding the dying coals. The woman’s hands moved with the economy of a market butcher—no wasted gesture, nothing slow for its own sake. Yanking the lid off the kettle, she poured water from a glass jar, and let the hiss of steam fill the silence.

Maryam hovered near the courtyard’s edge, back pressed to the wall. Her mouth soured, nerves scraping her insides raw. Through the open kitchen door she glimpsed the other couriers: men and women crowded around the battered table, voices pitched low as thunder, the news of the day’s drop winding its way through the assembly.

Zahra’s head swiveled, the dark eyes finding her target. “You carry it with pride,” she said, voice mild as vinegar. “But pride will kill you faster than any guard.” A beckoning hand flicked in the air. “Sit. The concrete won’t bite.”

Maryam slid down the wall, spine locked, knees tucked tight. The ground’s cold seeped through her skirt, calming her for half a breath. Despite the cool, sweat beaded at her hairline as she dragged a hand across her scalp.

Zahra set out two glasses—chipped, but clean. Black tea spooned from the tin with such precision Maryam wondered if each granule was weighed. The smell—earth, smoke, a hint of cardamom—soaked the air.

“We have a moment,” Zahra said, voice lower. “Tell me the name of the first courier who died for this Book.”

Maryam blinked, caught off-guard. “My father—”

“Not the first,” Zahra cut in, not unkind. “But close. Who before him?”

Maryam flinched inward. “Arash. He hid three volumes in a pig’s bladder. They caught him at the gate.”

“And?”

“They hanged him. Cut the body down at noon so everyone could see.”

Zahra’s face broke into a smile—sharp as an axe. “Arash was clever, but he wanted to be remembered. He bragged at the coffeehouse. Showed the others how smart he was. That is why we remember his name only in warnings.” Attention turning, her nose hovered over the spout, and eyes slitted against the steam she watched the kettle.

Maryam flexed her toes against the ground, searching for the right retort. “My father never spoke of him.”

Zahra poured the tea, slow and steady, the stream darkening each glass. She handed one to Maryam, her fingers dry and strong as reeds. “Your father had nothing to say about men who burned fast and left nothing behind. He respected men who kept the fire low, who made no noise.” Eyes fixed on the crate visible through the kitchen door, she sipped her tea. The crate was pale pine, stenciled in Cyrillic, a web of rough twine binding the lid.

Maryam followed her gaze. “He started the first run. Hid the volumes in the walls at Bandar Abbas. The police raided the next day. He sat with them, drank their vodka, and sent them away empty-handed.” A smile flickered, pride glinting under the nerves.

Zahra snorted into her glass. “He did not drink. He let them think he drank. That is the difference.” She leaned forward, the fire painting her face orange and shadow. “You learn to hide your courage inside your fear. You wear your weakness as a shield.”

Maryam’s hand shook as she lifted the glass. The tea scalded her tongue, but she drank anyway.

Zahra’s voice softened. “They said your father was the first to use a child as cover. That’s how he ran the shipment to Shiraz. No soldier stops a twelve-year-old girl at the checkpoint.

They pity her. They ignore her.” Zahra’s gaze pinned Maryam, needle-sharp. “You know why he chose you?”

Maryam’s pulse skipped. “Because I was small.”

“Because you were invisible. He loved you, but he trusted you because you disappeared in a crowd. The world looks for monsters, not mice.” Zahra drained her glass, poured again. “When you act like a hero, you die like one.”

The words stung. Maryam pressed the glass to her lips, hiding behind the rim. “If I am a mouse, why give me the drop?”

Zahra laughed, the sound hollowing the air. “Because the world’s grown full of cats. We need more mice.” Glancing at the kitchen again, she watched as two men lifted the pine crate and staggered it toward the back gate.

“Your father’s gift,” Zahra said, “was knowing when to run and when to vanish. He never sought glory.” As she poured more tea, the action became a punctuation. “He understood pride is as dangerous as any soldier’s bullet.”

Maryam’s jaw tightened. Iron pooled under her tongue, her father’s last smile crowding her mind. “If you’re so clever,” she muttered, “why do you risk your son for this?”

Zahra stilled, the question cracking the mask of authority. The silence stretched. For the first time, Maryam noticed the woman’s hands—skin split at the knuckles, nails chewed flat, a yellowed bandage wrapped around one finger.

“My son is the best at running,” Zahra answered, voice a rasp. “He knows how to vanish. I taught him to fear men who want to be remembered. Like Arash. Like Davood. Like you, sometimes.” A smirk curved, the edge returning. “But he has my weakness, too. He cares. That makes him reckless.”

Maryam blinked, confused. “What do you mean?”

Zahra shrugged, her shoulders lifting slow as tectonic plates. “The more you care, the harder it is to be invisible. The world can smell love. It hunts you for it.” A fresh glass extended toward Maryam. “Drink. You’ll need it.”

A scream split the dusk—one of the couriers, maybe a joke or a fight gone too far. The sound ricocheted off the bricks, amplifying the night.

Maryam’s eyes flicked to the kitchen, the crate, the men. The city formed a vast net in her mind, every string a checkpoint, a bribe, a face that might remember hers. How many more times would she pass through that net before someone caught her?

Zahra finished her tea, set the glass on the ground. “Remember: your father never acted alone. He trusted the network. He trusted me.” Scrutiny rested on Maryam, almost affectionate. “You have his eyes. Do not make his mistakes.”

A chill gripped Maryam’s gut. Fingers traced the glass rim, nerves fraying beneath the surface.

In the kitchen, the two men had vanished. The crate lingered by the door, waiting for the next set of hands to carry it onward.

Zahra stood, knees cracking. “Go in, help them. Show me you can be invisible.” Skirt smoothed, scarf gathered, she stepped into the courtyard shadows. “I’ll be watching.”

Maryam stood, knees unsteady, and crossed the square toward the kitchen. The world outside pressed close—a web of danger, history, and hunger for something more.

Into the light, she vanished among the others, the taste of burnt tea on her tongue.

The kitchen sweltered, steam snaking from every pot and bowl, the air cut with the sour of curdled milk and the sweet, animal stink of sweat. Every chair and bench sagged under the weight of couriers: half-starved men with hands burned by rope and gunpowder; women in battered headscarves, eyes bright with adrenaline. The table overflowed with bread heels, bowls of salted cucumber, slabs of cheese dense enough to chip a tooth.

Maryam wove through the press, arms tight to her sides. No one met her gaze for more than a second—everyone here understood the wisdom of forgetting faces as quickly as possible.

A hand darted out, clamping her elbow. “Sit.” Zahra’s voice cut through the clamor, stilling the room for half a heartbeat. Maryam was yanked onto the low stool beside the stove, then ladled tea into a mug chipped on both sides. “Drink.”

Scalding her tongue as she did, Maryam swallowed. The taste snapped her nerves awake. Zahra leaned in, breath hissing between her teeth. “Do you know why I keep you close?” Maryam braced herself—another story, another warning.  
“You remind me of Davood.” Zahra’s words pulled all sound from the room, as if the name alone carried a curse. “He started like you—silent, quick, always hungry to do more.”

Maryam set her mug down, fingers slick with sweat.

“Davood ran the Gilan route. In the old days, before the Shah fell, he smuggled whiskey for the colonels and Torah for the old Jews. He could walk the Caspian in the dead of night and leave no tracks. When the business changed, he changed with it. Took charge of my northern drops. Never failed. Not once.” Zahra’s eyes glittered with pride, or maybe a bitterness that curdled into pride over time.

“What happened to him?”

Zahra grunted. “He got clever. Started demanding double for dangerous runs. Bragged at the teahouses, told every new courier that he was the best. Soon he was running two, three shipments a week. He found new buyers, new routes—told me how I was too slow, too careful.” Zahra’s lips thinned, the lines on her face sharpening like cracks in dry clay.

“Where did he go?” Maryam forced the words out.

“One day he left for Baku, never came back. Some say he drowned in the marshes. Some say the border police caught him. Some say he took the money and started his own network. I don’t care.” Zahra’s hand flattened on the table, the skin puckered and shiny from an old burn. “The moment you believe yourself untouchable is the moment you fall.”

Maryam’s gaze drifted to the room’s only window, the glass cloudy with years of smoke and sweat. Outside, the night grew thicker, streetlights flickering on one by one like prison lamps.

“But what if Davood made it?” she whispered.

Zahra’s hand flashed out, catching Maryam’s wrist in a grip that felt like a steel trap. “You want to end up like him? Vanish? Leave behind everyone who trusted you?” The words bit with all the force of a curse.

Maryam yanked her hand free, the heat of humiliation spreading up her arm. “Maybe he was right. Maybe you are too careful.” The phrase surprised even herself.

Zahra’s laugh rattled the mugs on the table. “You sound like your father when he was young. He thought courage meant doing more, risking more. He died for it.” The words hung in the air, heavy as wet cement.

Maryam looked down at the scar on her own thumb, where a knife had slipped during her first solo run. “If we don’t take risks, the work dies. The world forgets us.”

Zahra's eyes softened, but only a fraction. "If you push too far, you end up a story told to scare children." She refilled the mug, the steam rising between them like a veil.

Maryam gripped the cup tight. "What if we used the mountain passes near Qazvin? I mapped them—no one checks those trails in winter. We could—"

Zahra cut her off. "No. I already lost two couriers on the Qazvin road. The smugglers there care for nothing but gold and blood." A finger jabbed at Maryam. "Don't outthink the mountain. The mountain always wins."

Maryam sipped her tea, jaw clenched. Ambition stirs, a whisper under the fear. The hunger to do more, to matter, to outpace the danger. Through the window, the city hummed with the tension of secrets. The map Zahra had forbidden her to use surfaced in thought, tiny unguarded switchbacks winding between frozen peaks.

Zahra's voice dropped to a whisper. "Faith must guide our hands, not hunger for power or recognition."

Maryam met her gaze. "You have faith. I have work." Tea finished, the burn sliding down her throat, she pushed back from the table.

Zahra let her go, but the warning stayed—a splinter wedged under the skin.

Maryam drifted toward the storeroom, where the scent of yeast and old wood replaced the stink of sweat and milk. The door closed behind her, hush a balm on frayed nerves.

Crouching by the hidden compartment under the floorboards, her fingers trembled as she traced the outlines of the next shipment. Thoughts circled Davood, her father, every courier who'd ever run a risk and paid in flesh or legend.

A palm pressed flat against the boards, as if she could feel their ghosts vibrating beneath.

From the kitchen, Zahra's voice carried—a prayer, maybe, or a curse. Maryam couldn't tell the difference anymore.

Silence settled around her while inside, her mind raced—mapping routes, weighing risks, dreaming of the day she'd outrun both the mountain and the ghosts.

The work would be done, her way.

And if she vanished, at least she'd vanish moving.

#

Night soaked the courtyard, swallowing the bricks in black and silver. The fire guttered, its orange teeth shrinking to embers. Beyond the walls, the city's din receded, replaced by the hiss of the dying flame and the distant ululation of a wedding band somewhere far down the river.

Zahra stood in the doorway, a silhouette rimmed in lamplight, then stepped into the darkness, barefoot. Her feet found the prayer rug laid on the cracked concrete, its colors long since faded by years of dust and sun. Dropping to her knees, together her hands cupped the emptiness.

“Come,” Zahra called over her shoulder.

Maryam lingered at the threshold. The satchel at her side pulled at her spine, heavy with her father's Bible—the cover still mottled from the blood that never washed out, no matter how hard she scrubbed. Her feet ached for movement, to run the route she'd mapped in her mind, but she obeyed.

She knelt beside Zahra. The rug's threads prickled her shins; the cold bit into her knees.

Zahra bowed her head, breath streaming in white ribbons. "Lord," she whispered, "protect the child from her own courage. Keep her heart humble as her father's was. Shield her from ambition's poison."

Maryam kept her eyes on the stars overhead, bright pinpricks behind a haze of smog. Invisible lines traced between the brightest, building constellations mirroring the runs she imagined—Gilan to Tabriz, Tabriz to Baku, on and on into the black.

Zahra's voice ran dry, then caught. "Let her walk unseen. Let her carry the Book as a burden, not a flag."

Maryam's hands curled into fists. She wondered if the God Zahra prayed to cared about ambition, or if He only measured results.

"Amen," Zahra finished.

"Amen," Maryam echoed, the word tasting foreign in her mouth.

Zahra leaned close, hand rough on Maryam's shoulder. "Keep your heart low, child. Even as your courage rises."

Maryam nodded, eyes never leaving the sky. In her mind, the web of routes stretched across the world, silver and endless, each line pulsing with the possibility of escape, or victory, or vanishing.

The lesson would be remembered, but she would write her own prayer.

The fire hissed, the stars blazed, and the city spun on—indifferent, but waiting.

Maryam would be ready.

## Chapter 7: A New Face

Maryam shoulders into the bakery's dim, yeasted air, soles crunching on a crust of ancient flour. The storefront glass smears the city's grime into the rising light. At the back, a mesh curtain shivers and Zahra's voice drags her forward, low and urgent:

“Come, before the flies do.”

The kitchen opens like a throat. Against the splintered counter, crates stack two-high, labeled in Cyrillic, the symbols bloated and blue. Zahra kneels in a mess of flour sacks, bare fingers probing the seams of a wooden crate. She wears her authority draped loose as her chador, but her hands move like a thief's—quick, greedy, delicate.

Maryam stands in the door, the cold sting of her sweat sharpening each rib. “I made good time,” she says, voice at half-volume.

Zahra grunts. “Good. Sit and write the numbers.”

Maryam sets her satchel on the bench. The room throbs with the brine stink of olives, the sweet haze of tea, the faint perfume of saffron. She kneels by Zahra and draws out the ledger, pages cramped with shifting codes and ciphers. She jots the arrival time, her pen catching in the dried spill of honey that veined the last sheet.

“Which crate?”

Zahra’s lip curls. “That one. No, the second.” She jerks her chin at the bottom row—leverages a knife under the lid. With a sick pop, the nails give way. The inside is all careful packing—fist-sized bulbs of garlic, a sub-layer of tinned tea, and at the heart, a bundle swaddled in oilcloth, yellowed and greasy.

Maryam draws it out, the package dense as a bone. She peels back the cloth and reveals a block of Bibles, stacked six deep. The covers are blue, the cross on each dulled by oil and salt.

Zahra’s fingers hover over the stack, almost reverent. She mouths a prayer—too fast to parse—begins to count aloud. Maryam logs the count, her script shrinking to fit the margins.

A creak ripples through the building. Both women freeze.

A moment passes, thin as a razor.

The front door swings wide, and in floats Farid Nassiri.

He cuts the space to ribbons: gray suit, black tie, shoes polished to a mirror. His hair is silver at the temples, but the face is younger than the beard suggests. He radiates easy confidence, but his eyes knife through the room—Maryam, the crates, Zahra—each a target.

“Ladies,” he purrs, voice smooth as buttered bread. “No one told me the morning would be blessed with such diligence.”

Zahra stands, dusting her skirt, smile loaded with teeth. “Farid! We have already counted your shipment. I find two missing, as usual.” Her tone flirts, but the hands knot at her hips betray an edge.

Farid bows, lips pressed thin. “Business is never perfect, Zahra-jan. In Tehran, we take what the sea delivers.”

He steps past Maryam, who shrinks against the crate, clutching her ledger. Farid’s scent—some bitter cologne, sharper than the city’s sweat—hovers in his wake.

“I see the Web’s new courier has teeth,” he says, gesturing at Maryam’s ink-stained fingers. “Did you learn the routes?”

Maryam’s pulse kicks in her throat. “I mapped all three. The Haifa trail is quickest but the checkpoints—”

“Are bribes or bullets,” Zahra interrupts. “She learns fast, this one.”

Farid leans in, his shadow cutting across the table. “Show me,” he commands.

Maryam spreads the hand-drawn maps across the table’s floured skin. Her hands tremble, but the lines and crossings stand crisp—each checkpoint marked in red, each bribe in green, every danger circled, annotated in her careful Farsi.

Farid flicks his gaze across the page, tapping points with a long, cool finger. “Smart. But you risk the water route here.” He drags the finger from Haifa to the northern border. “They patrol by night. Did you account for their shift change?”

Maryam resists the urge to snap back. “Every seven hours, with two off-duty. Zahra says the port chief sleeps during the first hour.”

Farid arches a brow at Zahra. “Did you tell her about the shipment last year? The one that cost your brother’s thumb?”

Zahra's jaw muscles jump. "She knows the risk."

"Good." Farid turns back to Maryam, eyes softening. "Your work is sharp. I would not have hired you otherwise."

The praise glimmers in her chest, acid-sweet.

He lowers himself onto the bench, thighs brushing Maryam's as he settles. "Let's talk solutions," he says, voice dropping to the register of co-conspirators. "If we want these books in the hands of the faithful, we must slip the leash of the Haifa police. The navy there is unpredictable—sometimes they shoot, sometimes they drink with us. The only reliable hand is gold."

Zahra snorts. "Or blood."

He smirks, not disagreeing.

Maryam's mind darts ahead. "If we slip the books through the spice crates—saffron, especially—no one checks the shipments for months. The city lives on black-market saffron. But the customs chief—"

"Loves opera and is allergic to cinnamon," Farid finishes, a smile bending his mouth.  
"You've read the dossier."

"I memorize everything," she says, before the self-congratulation can bloom.

He laughs, sharp and not unkind. "Zahra, your girl is wasted here. She should run the northern route."

Zahra's face pinches—pride and threat, braided. "She runs what I tell her to run."

The table hums with the friction.

Maryam slides her finger along the Haifa line. "If we can bribe the customs chief on the opera nights, and the dockmaster with the saffron, we can shift the route to the smaller

checkpoint at Ashdod. No one counts shipments from Ashdod. The books get buried under five kilos of loose spice and no one's the wiser."

Farid's eyes fix on her—intense, searching, as if he means to peel the plan from the inside of her skull.

He leans in. His voice softens to a hush: "Your young friend has a sharp mind," he says, not to Maryam, but to Zahra.

To her, softer still—"That kind of thinking keeps us alive."

Heat swarms her cheeks. She fidgets with the hem of her scarf, twisting the fabric until it bites her knuckle.

Zahra picks up on the shift, cocks a smile. "Told you she's ready."

Farid glances down at the maps—up at Maryam, gaze unwavering. "Good. You'll take the next shipment yourself. I want to see how your plan fares in the wild."

The words punch the air from Maryam's chest.

"I'll do it," she replies, before she can second-guess.

Farid gathers the maps in a neat stack, presses them into her hands. His thumb brushes the back of her palm—warm, lingering, not quite innocent.

He turns to Zahra. "You trust her?"

Zahra grins, all knives. "More than I trust you."

He laughs, this time with something that could pass for warmth. "That's why we survive, my dear."

The kitchen grows close, thick with the scents of tea and sweat and hunger. Maryam re-packs the Bibles, hands steady now. Heat lingers on her skin, the ghost of his praise heavy.

Beneath it, caution curls sharp, reminding her that approval cuts both ways. She wraps the block in oilcloth—re-layers the garlic and tea until the crate appears untouched.

Farid stands, stretches, and sets a hand on her shoulder. The grip is brief but proprietary. “You’ll need to move quick. They watch the route after dusk. Take the river until the switchback, then the road.” He sketches the path in the air, each point an incision.

She nods, the plan fully mapped in her head.

He offers a parting smile—a slow, deliberate gift. “If you succeed, the network will owe you. And Zahra will have to cede her favorite mouse.”

Zahra swats at him, mock-irritated, but the pride leaks through the scowl.

Farid slides into the street, his shoes leaving no trace.

Zahra kneels again by the crate, repacking with the patience of a priest. “He likes you,” she says, voice low.

Maryam sets her jaw. “He likes anything that helps him win.”

Zahra’s mouth quirks. “He only likes winners. That’s his poison.”

Maryam studies her hands, still trembling a little, the afterglow of approval mixing with a bitter grit.

She stacks the last Bible, covers it with garlic, and logs the finish time in the ledger.

The safehouse settles into a hush, as if the city holds its breath for the next act.

Maryam breathes out, slow and deliberate, and waits for the sun to die.

The lantern hums above the table, yellowing the air and bleaching the world to dusk and shadow. After Farid's laughter ebbs from the street, Maryam collects the maps, her hands quick, methodical. She logs the crate number, double-checks the arithmetic—anything to keep her head from boiling over.

Zahra fusses in the pantry, kneading something into submission, her back to the room. Maryam slips the ledger into her satchel and knots the strap tight.

The door squeals. Farid slips in, shoes brushing the tile. "A moment?" he says. She nods, throat dry. He moves with the hush of a man who's worn out his welcome but will take more anyway. He stands too close.

"You did well, truly." His eyes graze her face, predatory and affectionate at once. She fights the urge to shrink, instead clutching her ledger to her stomach. Farid slides something from his jacket. A package, soft, wrapped in flowered cloth and bound with red thread. He presses it into her hands. The touch lingers—a brush at the pulse, a mapping of veins.

"For the Web's future," he whispers. Maryam's palms prick with sweat. She wants to ask what it means, but the words hook in her teeth.

He leans in, voice honeyed and low. "Read it, next time you doubt yourself. Sometimes the right verse is more dangerous than a bomb."

He steps back, adjusting his cuffs. His eyes flick to the package—to her mouth. "Thank you," she manages. He grins, too sharp. "Make Zahra proud. Make me proud."

He pivots, gliding past Zahra in the pantry. She doesn't turn but mutters, "Farid has a gift for gifts. Sometimes they are poison."

Maryam holds the package tight. The cloth is soft, the corners blunt. She peels it open a finger's breadth. Inside: a book, slender, bound in pale blue leather. Persian poetry. The title burns on the cover: "Ashes and Honey."

From across the room, Zahra calls, "He's still sweet on you."

Maryam flushes. "It's nothing."

Zahra's head shakes, hair catching the light. "To men like him, you are never nothing." Her tone is iron. "You remind me of your father—fearless when it matters."

Maryam's heart sours. She thinks of her father's hands, the way he held the Book as if it might melt, the slow patience in his gaze. Farid's hands are not patient. They squeeze until you answer.

She tucks the poetry book into her satchel, next to the ledger. It rests heavy, a new secret.

She moves toward the exit. The bakery now yawns empty—just the sweep of flour, the low hum of city through cracked windows. She tugs the shawl around her shoulders, the Bible pressing its shape against her ribs.

At the threshold, she pauses.

In the dark, the world is thinner. You can almost believe in other endings.

She cups the satchel to her chest, anchoring herself. The sky outside flickers with the city's fever.

She steps into the night, the poetry and the Bible both thudding against her heart. The thrill of being seen thrums in her blood, tangled with fear. She promises herself to remember the danger hidden in gifts.

The future unspools, unknown.

Somewhere behind her, the city's chorus rises—a call to prayer, a curse, a child's shriek.

Maryam walks on, unwilling to be anyone's favorite mouse.

She imagines a verse from the book. Repeats it under her breath. It sounds almost like a promise.

"Nothing precious escapes the fire, but some things survive."

## Act 4: Entanglement

### Chapter 8: The Unspoken Flame

The city's lights bled into the night, lacing Tehran's hills with sodium glare and pale smog. Maryam slipped through the labyrinth of alleys—her scarf low, her shoes soundless on the cracked stones. Above her, a thousand apartments flickered with the blue pulse of television. Inside the safehouse, darkness seethed under the threshold, alive with the hum of the street and the promise of conspiracy.

She entered through the bakery's rear. The air gripped her at once: yeast and sugar, the staleness of old onions, the sweet rot of the day's heat trapped in stone. Lamps glowed in the

interior, their glass chimneys rimed with soot, casting long and doubled shadows across the walls. She moved past the racks of broken bread and into the central room.

Farid sat alone at the table, haloed in lampglow and the ink-black sweep of his coat. The table—a plank nailed to crates—bowed under the sprawl of maps and ledgers. His wrists gleamed with an expensive watch, the dial faceted with blue fire. His nails, manicured to a fault, drummed on the paper as he read. A fresh handkerchief, starched and white, shone from his pocket.

Halting at the threshold, she adjusts the shawl around her shoulders. Her own arms prickled with sweat; she smoothed the cloth, tugged the sleeves straight, then stepped inside.

Farid didn't look up. In a small show of power, he let the tension build between them—before he raised his eyes, cool and precise. "Maryam." Her name landed heavy, as if he tasted it before speaking.

A nod. "You sent for me?"

A page turns beneath his hand. "You've grown bolder," he said, voice syruped with approval and threat. "Zahra says you mapped a route last week no one else dared."

Maryam pressed her hands flat on the back of the empty chair, bracing. The light made a gold blur of her knuckles.

"It works," she replied. "The south bridge is tight, but the bribe holds if you keep the payment small. The city men get greedy if you give them hope."

Farid's mouth flickered—a smile, then gone. "Come. Sit." A hand lifts as he gestures to the chair across from him. When she obeyed, he slid the map toward her. The parchment bore stains of tea, blood, and the sickly blue of Russian ink.

"Tell me," he said, "how you'd get this through to Baku. With the new checkpoints."

Lines hold her gaze while nerves ring her teeth. “No chance through Tabriz, not after the shooting.” Careful not to let her hand shake, she traced a path north. “You use the Kurd village at Mahabad. Take the old caravan track, follow the border for two nights, slip across just before dawn.”

Cedar, black pepper, orange peel drift from him as he leans in, cutting through the bakery’s yeast. “And the customs men?”

“They drink at the hot spring every Wednesday. If you go on Thursday, they’re still sleeping. The village girls take in travelers that day.”

Farid tapped the table. “How do you know?”

Maryam hesitated. “The last driver I sent made it. He paid a girl to walk with him, so the police would look away. They only check men traveling alone.”

Farid smiled now, slow and appreciative. “You learn fast.”

Maryam felt the words anchor in her, a small satisfaction threading her ribs. Fear stirs low, tempered by ambition. Reath after breath becomes a quiet gamble as she calculates the risk. The skirt smooths beneath her hands as she sits straighter, hiding the tremor in her knees.

Paper whispers sharp and crisp as he pages through the ledger. “We have a problem in Baku. The last buyer reneged. He took the shipment and gave us half. Word is he owes the militia money.” Farid’s hand lingered on the margin, nails bright under the lamp.

“We need a new buyer,” Maryam said. “One with more to lose.”

“Exactly.” Farid’s eyes locked on her, flat as obsidian. “You know anyone?”

Maryam shook her head, but a name bloomed in her mind—one Zahra had cursed, once, for stealing a drop. “What about Davood? He runs the old line from Gilan. No one double-crosses him.”

Farid's gaze sharpened. "Davood is a thief, but he hates the militia. Maybe." Pen striking the ledger under his hand, each stroke decisive.

Sleeves roll up his arms as he shifts, dark blue silk pressed to perfection. The Rolex watch winked again, a planetary flash against his skin.

"Listen, Maryam." His voice gentled, or pretended to. "You're smarter than the rest. The Spider's Web needs more people like you." The table shrinks the gap as he leans closer. "Have you thought about leading your own run?"

The question fluttered her stomach. Orders, maps, pride in so much more trust swirl in her mind as she lets herself imagine it.

"I can," she said, "if Zahra agrees."

Farid's smile stretched wider, creasing the flesh beside his mouth. "Zahra is old. She plays defense, not offense. This business needs ambition."

Reaching for a carafe of tea, he poured two glasses, then slid one to her. His nails, unbitten, manicured and glossy, shone in the lamplight. "You have that, don't you?"

Maryam took the glass, felt the heat singe her palm, and sipped without blinking. "I want to survive," she answered. "Ambition comes after."

A laugh escapes him, soft and private. "That's why you'll do well." The compliment tasted strange—a little like a threat, a little like a dare.

The map slides toward her pushed under his hand, edge crisp against her fingertips. "Show me the route. Mark every risk."

She bent over the paper, mapping out the lines as he asked. Her father's ghost hovered at her shoulder, whispering the names of every safehouse, every checkpoint. Farid's eyes tracked

her hand, the attention both flattering and unsettling. His cologne pressed in on her, more intimate than touch.

They worked in silence for a time, her pen marking the twists and crossings, his gaze never once breaking away. The lamp flame quivered, casting new shadows on the stone. From the courtyard, a dog barked once, sharp as a gunshot.

Maryam finished the map, circled the key crossings. Eyes lift as she forces herself to match his intensity.

“This is how I’d do it,” she said, voice steady.

Farid studied the map, the tip of his tongue resting against his front teeth. After a long beat, he nodded, satisfied.

“You have a future here,” he said, setting the map aside. “The Web will remember you, if you keep this up.”

A flush ran up her throat, hot and unsteady. Fingers rigid, she set down the tea and let herself breathe.

A heartbeat passes, he watched her, then stood. “I have another meeting. But remember what I said: you could be more than Zahra’s shadow. You could run the north, or anywhere you want.”

Maryam nodded, unsure what to do with her hands.

Farid draped his coat over his arm, straightened his cuffs, and padded to the door. Pausing there, he half-turned, cologne trailing in his wake.

“Good work tonight,” he said, softer now. “Be careful who you trust, Maryam.”

Footsteps vanish into the dark as he disappears before the door closes.

Maryam lingered at the table, running her finger over the map, tracing the lines she'd drawn. The world felt sharp and clear, the air tight with possibilities. She smoothed her skirt, breathed out slow, and packed the maps away.

When she stepped into the alley, the city's lights seemed new.

A lifted chin, a tightened shawl, and the night takes her as ambition and fear braid down her spine.

#

Rain hammered the city in fits, washing the gutters but never touching the hunger that prowled its streets. The safehouse stank of wet wool and the latent funk of old yeast, the kind that creeps into skin and never scrubs out. Maryam shuffled in on a trailing edge of night, shoes spattered, scarf damp. Errands carry her through the day—her own, Zahra's, others invented to keep her moving.

Farid waited at the same table as before, sleeves rolled high, bracelets of ink on both forearms. The lamplight glazed his skin in amber; shadows leaned in from every wall, as if the room itself craned to hear him. Beside him, the crates of Bibles bulked in uneven rows—each one stamped in blue ink, each a potential coffin for someone's last hope.

A moment of hesitation anchors her feet until he beckons. "Come. We have time before the next drop."

She slid into the seat beside him, her thigh almost touching his. The oilcloth map sprawled before them, punctured with holes and sticky with glue. Farid's finger traced the mountain passes, looping from Urmia to Duhok and down to the salt plains beyond Mosul.

“You were right,” he said, tapping her corridor. “The Kurd run is best. No border guard cares what moves at three in the morning—least of all if it’s a woman in a headscarf.”

Maryam risked a smile. “That’s what Zahra taught me.”

Farid’s lips curled, the compliment raw and sweet. “My wife means well,” he murmured. “But her old ways limit what we could become.” His tone flickered—both a dig and a dare.

Maryam’s fingers roamed the map, following routes that Zahra made her memorize. But Farid’s version warped the city: he chopped through no-go zones, cut corners, merged contacts from three factions into one seamless track. Where Zahra whispered caution, Farid preached velocity. His world hummed with shortcuts and invisible corridors, a logic of risk and reward.

The air grew tight with calculation. Farid leaned over her shoulder, pointing with the tip of a pencil. His cologne, less pronounced tonight but richer, melded with the acid of rain on brick.

“If you run two crates instead of one, the payoff doubles. Same risk, more reward. But you have to keep the men from the Quarter in line—they get drunk, they brag.” His voice thinned to a razor. “If one more courier dies with his mouth open, the whole line collapses.”

Maryam nodded, her mind working two speeds at once: the plan on the page, the heat in her body at his nearness. The tension made her hands shake. Wrists brace on the wood as she steadies them.

A gust through the vent rattled the lamps. Farid flicked a glance at the crate stack, eyes narrowed.

“We need to prep the next shipment before Zahra comes,” he said. “She distrusts change.”

Maryam stood, anxious to move. “I’ll make tea. It helps me think.”

Farid's smile widened—a little wolfish, a little proud. "Sugar and extra cardamom, if you want to impress me."

She left him at the table, the safehouse's kitchen no more than a nook behind a sagging curtain. As she fumbled with the ancient gas burner, the hiss and pop masked any sound from the other room. After pouring two mugs, stirring them hard, and steeping them, she cleaned under her nails.

From the threshold, she glimpsed Farid at work. He moved with efficiency, no wasted motion, hands as sure as a jeweler's. As he leaned over the Bible crate, he pivots and turns his back to her, shielding her from seeing his efforts.

With a practiced hand, the Bible crate opes and he snaps the end off a block of foam, slipping in a packet—flat, wrapped in blue tape. Two envelopes—one thicker—slide into place before he closes the crate, resealing it with a sliver of glue. A rag sweeps across the box in his hand, erasing all trace.

His face changed as he worked—lips pressed tight, eyes cold, each gesture clean and silent. When he finished, the mask snapped back on, smile restored and posture loose as a lounge singer.

Maryam carried the tea in, careful not to slosh.

Farid greeted her as if nothing happened, voice soft. "Perfect timing." The mug settles between his hands as he accepts it. The ring of steam fogged the glass of his watch.

They bent again over the maps. Farid recited the new plan, layering it with stories from his years running the Caspian: the time he bribed a police captain with a dozen tins of Russian caviar, the night he slept in a brothel to avoid a midnight raid, the time he smuggled Torah scrolls for a rabbi who never paid him a single rial.

Each story ended with a glint of pride or a shake of the head. Maryam drank them in, eager for the next.

“What did you do, when the rabbi stiffed you?” she asked, lips puckering on the sweet.

Farid shrugged. “Told him the next shipment would be Bibles, not Torah. He paid double.” The punchline landed between them, sparking laughter.

Maryam’s heart slowed. Shoulders unknot for the first time in hours as she lets herself relax.

They mapped out the logistics until the candle guttered. At one point, Farid reached for a pencil, and their hands touched. Neither flinched. A finger rests warm and confident on hers, as if she belongs to the blueprint as much as the ink does.

Maryam glanced up. His eyes held hers, unblinking.

“You are the future of the Web,” he said. “You see what others cannot.”

Heat coiled in her chest. Belief tempts her in that moment. His nearness fogs her mind with cedar and sweat. Want and wariness knot tight, each word a thread she cannot untangle. The desire to see the whole board, not just the next step, hums inside her.

The room grew silent except for the drip of water from the roof. Farid finished his tea in one gulp, then clapped the mug down.

“We have work,” he said, voice brisk. “Tomorrow at first light, you run the drop. Alone.”

A cigarette paper with an address scrawled across it slides from his hand to hers.

Maryam folded it, tucking it inside her pocket.

Farid stood, stretching the kinks from his back. The jacket slips over his shoulders as he straightens his cufflinks before turning to her. “Zahra will need you at dawn. Be early. The boys drink late when I’m not here.”

She nodded. "I'll be ready."

A pause grips him at the door. His face softened, eyes hooded in the lamplight.

"Trust yourself, Maryam," he said. "And remember—no one can make you invisible but yourself."

Rain consumes him as he leaves, the front door shuddering in his wake.

Maryam cleaned the table, folding the map with care, tucking the pens and pencils in the rusted can. The crate Farid was working on stands undisturbed as she checks it, the faint scent of glue lingering.

She pressed her hand to the wood, as if she could read secrets through her skin.

Tomorrow, she would run the drop. The question rises whether she can live up to Farid's prediction, whether she can trust herself more than those who trained her.

The scarf pinches tighter under her fingers before she drifts upstairs. Her hands still tingled where his had touched them, the ghost of his praise humming along her spine.

Sleep didn't come, but the night felt full of possibility—a riddle she might solve, if she dared enough.

#

Midnight cornered the city, pressing the light from its windows and squeezing the last bus routes into silence. In the safehouse, shadows grew thicker, the lamps guttered low, and every sound seemed amplified: the rasp of pencil on parchment, the soft crackle of burning oil, the wet click of Maryam's tongue against the back of her teeth.

Farid sprawled in his chair, jacket half-off, shirt clinging to his chest from the heat. He slouched toward the table, one forearm cradling the ledgers, the other hand knuckling his temple as if holding the day's fatigue inside his skull.

Maryam hunched opposite, tracing the lines on the new map—her own invention, a sweep through Kurdish hills and nameless valleys, each stop annotated with a glyph only she and Zahra understood. The fatigue gnawed at her, but Farid's praise kept her sharp. Narrowed eyes track her as she recalculates the drop point for the third time.

"Stop," he said, soft but iron. "You solved it already."

A glance lifts as her heart ticks faster. "I want to be sure."

Satisfaction curls in his smile, revealing the smallest crook in his teeth. "You want to impress me."

A flush crawled up her neck. "Is that so wrong?"

Farid shook his head. "No. But you don't need to. You already have."

Eyes shift away as embarrassment colors her. In the lamp's dying glow, the world contracted to the two of them—the table, the ink, the dust, and the thick silence between.

A practiced motion folds the map under his hand as he leans in. His sleeve brushed hers, the friction a live wire. "Tomorrow's drop is your responsibility. If the new route works, you'll be in charge of three lines by spring."

Maryam tried to picture it: her name on the ledgers, runners waiting for her signal, the Web doubled in a single year.

Their hands met, by accident or design, as they both reached for the folded map. His palm, dry and warm, covered hers completely.

Neither moved for a beat.

Farid's thumb stroked her knuckle, almost imperceptible. "You are the future of the Spider's Web, Maryam," he murmured. "You see possibilities others can't."

She thought her heart might fail her. Her father's warning—do not trust men who claim to see the whole world—buzzed in her ears, but Farid's words smothered it.

He did not let go.

Maryam's skin tingled. Her breath stuttered in her throat. Eyes meet his as she searches for a challenge, a glint of mockery. Instead she found hunger, a mirror of her own.

Her hand withdraws, slow enough to hold the moment.

Farid's eyes glimmered, satisfied. The coat settles over him as he shrugs into it, each motion slow, deliberate. "You'll need rest," he said, lingering by the table. "Tomorrow is the real test."

Feet planted she stood, unwilling to be smaller than him. "I never sleep before a run," she said, voice bolder than she felt.

A smile. "I know."

He crossed the floor, slow and silent, until he stood beside her. For a heartbeat, Maryam thought he might touch her cheek, or cup her chin. Instead, he settled a hand on her shoulder—a squeeze, firm and familiar.

"Don't let anyone dim your ambition," he whispered, low enough to be a secret.

A nod answers as heat threads through her chest.

Farid let his hand linger, then withdrew. "I'll come back soon," he said, "and we can discuss more private matters."

His cologne, all pepper and wood, lingered after he left.

Maryam stood in the hush, the map pressed to her palm, the ghost of his touch burning her shoulder. A slow, shaky breath leaves her as she tries to understand her hunger—for power, recognition, for pepper and wood and the attention only men like Farid offer.

The crates waited in the corner, inert and innocent, each packed with contraband and the hope that tomorrow's run would matter.

She ran her hand over her shoulder, shivering in the dark. Glue and dust were in the air, promise and ruin. Fear sharpens into resolve as ambition prickles against her like a second skin.

No matter what her father warned, she would not look away from the future.

The night waits as she carries the Bibles and the unknown blue-wrapped packet, trusting the new line will hold.

She would make herself worthy of Farid's vision—or she would vanish trying.

## Chapter 9: Crossing the Line

November, 1965.

The last courier slips through the alley door, cap pulled low, hands shaking as he fumbles the latch. The scent of sweat and wool vanishes in his wake, replaced by the thick staleness of a kitchen sealed too long against the city's air. Maryam listens for his footfalls—once, twice, gone—before turning back to the wall. The hidden seam glints in the lamplight, a hairline crack between bricks, nearly invisible under the flour dust caked along the baseboard.

Kneeling, thighs pinched by the weight of her skirt, she unhooks the cam latch from the rear of the shelving. The panel pivots with a small, traitorous squeal. In the back: three crates, each lined in burlap and packed with layered bricks of Bibles, their blue covers gleaming like gunmetal. A finger runs over the edge, careful not to snag a splinter. The scent inside the wall is

dense with the rot of old paper and something medicinal—a preservative rubbed on the bindings to keep them from molding in the city's damp.

Footsteps behind her, slow and heavy. Farid's shoes.

A count to four before glancing over her shoulder.

In the archway, arms folded, face carved from shadow, he waits. The lamplight slashes his cheekbone, his eyes wide and hungry. Silence holds him. Maryam pauses, a strip of fear unwinding in her stomach. Latch fitted back in place, hidden seam secured, she rises, brushing flour from her knees.

"You trust the wall?" Farid's voice comes quiet, but sharp.

A small shrug, masking nerves with the smallest lift of her shoulders. "The bricks outlast us all."

His gaze combs the room: the scarred table, the slumped bags of flour, the ledger still open to her last tally. "You did well tonight." He lingers on the word, as if tasting it.

The air between them thickens—oil on water. Maryam moves to the sink, pumping the handle until rust-clouded water spills into the basin. Hands scrubbed, flour worked from her knuckles, she pretends not to sense him tracking every movement.

"Your hands shake," Farid says.

She lets the accusation stand. "I'm tired."

"You should rest."

Maryam dries her hands on the hem of her blouse, blood jumping at her wrists. "You could have left with the others."

He snorts. "Someone must count the losses."

Mouth set, she turns to him. "Nothing lost tonight."

His lips twist at the edge. “Yet.”

Three steps close the distance. His presence burns away the chill of the stone, charges the room with a static that clings to her teeth and the small hairs on her forearms. Her pulse pummels her temples, sweat pooling under her blouse. Her father’s warnings hiss under the heat of Farid’s nearness, drowned by the thrum of ambition in her chest. A tremor runs from her feet up through her hips to her jaw as she tries to stand her ground.

Farid’s eyes rake her, top to bottom, not predatory but cataloging—a surveyor, mapping new land. A handspan away he stops, close enough that his cologne—smoke, orange rind, sweat—pushes past the yeast and the glue.

“Why do you stay, Maryam?” Voice pitched soft, words landing like stones.

She breathes in the city through the cracked window, dust motes swirling in the lamplight. “The work needs me.”

With deliberate movement, he leans in. “That’s not what I asked.”

She bites her lip, the blood-tinged salt grounding her. “I want something better.”

A nod, lips pressed white. “Ambition is a sharp thing in a woman.”

She bristles. “Is that why you keep testing me?”

A laughs, low and without humor. “I test myself, too.” Hand raised, index finger extended, hovering at her collarbone, not touching. “I could have led this city. I chose the Web instead.”

Maryam forces herself to look at him, unblinking. “You’re not afraid of the city.”

A shake of his head. “No. But I fear the future.”

Silence swells between them. The oven ticks, cooling under its enamel shell. From the street, a distant car horn—angry, short, then gone.

His hand brushing the outside of her wrist, he reaches out. The touch is electric, precise.

Maryam's whole body aligns to the sensation, the line of contact sending pinpricks up her arm.

"Your father's scar," he murmurs, eyes flicking to the white gash along her ulna. "You keep it uncovered."

She nods. "To remind me."

"Of what?"

She swallows. "That men like you always want something."

For a moment the tension shivers into something almost gentle and he grins. "You think I want you?"

Maryam doesn't answer, but the heat in her chest answers for her.

Both hands take hers, the grip dry, authoritative. "You remind me of myself. That is dangerous."

She holds his gaze, nails digging into the pad of his thumb. "Maybe you like danger."

The world tilts a fraction as he lifts her hand to his lips—enough to let possibility in. The kiss lands just above the scar, light but absolute. Released, he turns away as if nothing happened, as if the air hadn't thickened to syrup.

At the counter, both hands rest on pockmarked wood. The muscles in his forearms tense, the veins rising under olive skin. "You could leave, you know. Go north. Start over."

A step closer, hands fisting at her sides. "You know I can't."

A sigh, head bowed. "I knew your father. I know what loyalty costs."

Eyes study the line of his jaw, the way the years have etched anger and disappointment into the set of his mouth. "I'm not him," she says.

Straightening, he nods once. “You’re better.” The words almost break him. “And that terrifies me.”

A thin laugh. “I scare you?”

Farid closes the gap again, faster this time. His hand curls behind her neck, not hard but inescapable. “You should.”

Her heart hammers so loud she can feel it in her tongue.

Pulled into him, their bodies aligning through layers of fabric and sweat and the day’s fatigue. She expects his mouth to find hers, but instead he buries his nose in her hair, inhaling as if to memorize her. Rigid she stands, every muscle tensed for fight or flight, but when his hands slide down her arms, she lets herself lean in.

The wood of the counter presses into her hips. Farid braces her there, his weight a wall against her escape.

“You want something better,” he says again, voice ragged. “So do I.”

Eyes closed—not to hide, but to feel the sensation clean, without filter.

His hands settle on her ribs, fingers splayed, holding her still.

In the lamplight, the flour dust glows around them, a low fog catching in their hair and eyelashes. The city hums beyond the thick brick, but in here, silence. The click of his watch against her wrist, the deep intake of his breath. Nothing else.

Pivoting, her hands press to his chest, and he yields—a slow, careful give. His pulse stutters under her palm, betraying more than his words ever would.

He kisses her, finally, slow and dry, mouth fitting hers in the clean geometry of hunger. Letting the taste of sweat and salt cut through her, the sharpness drives out everything but the present. Not hard but claiming her, he bites her lip.

They break apart, breathing in the same ragged pattern.

Stepping back first, his eyes wild. “You’re dangerous,” he whispers.

Maryam stands alone in the kitchen, lips split from his teeth, the echo of his hands on her skin.

Ledger drawn close, the paper cool under her fingertips, she counts her breaths until the tremor leaves her body.

The safehouse holds them both in its heat, bread and yeast and the inevitability of the future. The next shipment will come. So will the next choice, and the next. For now, she presses her hand to the mark on her arm, feeling it throb with possibility, and lets herself want something more.

#

When the last courier’s footsteps fade to silence, when the bread oven’s warmth has settled low in the bricks, when the dark outside draws every street sound into itself, Farid returns.

Moving through the kitchen like a man wading a river—sure, patient, he watches for the right current. Maryam kneels by the ledger, stacking papers, spine rigid from the contact before. Before he speaks, she senses him; the air thickens, charged, the way it does before a summer storm breaks the plateau.

In the rustle of parchment, she tries to gather her composure, but her hands betray her, smearing ink and sweat across the page. Farid’s breath rasps in the silence.

“You still shake,” he says, voice more accusation than question.

A dry mouth forces her to swallow. “You left.”

“I said I would return.” His fingers drum a slow rhythm on the scarred wood, each tap counting down to something inevitable.

Eyes catching the sliver of lamplight on his brow, she looks up and finds no pity there—only intent, laser-bright, as if she’s a cipher he’s desperate to break.

No rush in his movements, he approaches her, each step a tick on the clock. When he reaches her, he squats, the fabric of his trousers creasing sharp at the knees, his hands folding into a steeple. “Do you regret?” he asks, and the word is so spare it could mean anything: regret the work, regret the night, regret the need that drew them into the circle of each other’s orbit.

A shake of her head answers. Regret never factors. “I don’t.”

Farid nods, satisfied, and reaches out—slow, so slow—to touch her cheek. The callus of his thumb grazes her jawline, rough as sand. Blinking, she waits for pain, but none comes. Tipping her face up with one hand, the other hand undoes the first button of her collar, then the next, until the scarf at her throat loosens and slumps into her lap.

Stillness locks her in place, not for shame or shock, but with the animal certainty that any movement will crack the spell.

A lustful gaze at her neck—swan-thin, the muscle flexing under his grip. “Like a secret,” he murmurs, not for her but for himself. The pressure of his fingers sharpens, and she sways forward, swept up in his gravity.

He kisses her, but not as before. The first contact is nothing—air, a suggestion—but the second is all bite and salt. Reflex, or instinct, opens her mouth, not want, and he slips his tongue past her teeth, tasting her. The flavor is sweat, copper, a trace of whatever she ate hours ago; the taste of survival, worn thin.

A rough pull from him lifts her upright, both hands under her arms, pinning her to the counter. The cold stone bites through her skirt. His lips skim her throat, the edge of her jaw, the pulse that quivers at the root of her ear.

A shiver catches her, sensation trickling down to her fingertips. Her mind whirls with calculation, but none of her training applies. The rules here belong to him.

Farid pops the last button on her blouse, then presses his mouth to her clavicle. His teeth graze bone; she gasps, more shock than pain, but it stirs something in her belly—a need, insistent, new.

A sharp tug from him unfastens his belt in one efficient, habitual motion. His coat brushes her exposed arm, the wool scratchy and damp from the rain outside. Their hands meet as he guides them to his chest, where his heart hammers at a relentless, mechanical pace.

“You want this,” he whispers, more statement than question.

Maryam can only nod.

A pull from him drags her to the scuffed tile floor, bodies dropping into a kneel. The flour sacks topple in the commotion, and he drags her atop them. He spreads her legs with one hand, the other bracing her shoulder. Instinct drives her to resist, but his grip remains inexorable. His mouth finds hers again, softer now, and she lets him in.

A sharp tug from him hitches her skirt past her hips, fingers tracing the inside of her thigh. The rough skin of his palm ignites every nerve. Yeast in the flour, city water in his hair, and aftershave pressed into the hollow of his throat fill her senses.

A hand slides up her thigh and he parts her underwear with a single motion. The contact with his fingers is blunt, shocking. A soft, animal cry breaks from her as his mouth muffles the sound.

A fumble with his fly, frees himself, and presses into her—not hard, not yet, but enough to demand space.

Instinct claws at her resolve as she clenches around him. A pause catches him as he feels it. He puts his mouth to her ear, voice low. “Let go.”

A breath leaves her, head shaking before it nods, body betraying the contradiction.

A slow, inexorable push from him enters her, breaking past resistance. The pain is bright and quick, a tear through soft flesh, then a throb that oozes and echoes everywhere at once.

Maryam’s nails claw into his shoulder, and she hisses between her teeth. The sensation stuns her—a chasm, a rupture, a sudden awareness of herself as something split, expanded.

Farid groans, hips grinding into her, the pressure of his body pinning her to the sacks. Each thrust jostles her spine, grinds flour into the sweat pooling at her lower back.

The ache softens, replaced by a spreading, molten heat. Her body adapts to the shape of him, then demands more. A matched rhythm from him meets her, one hand tangling in her hair, the other clutching the back of her knee to wrench it higher.

Their bodies collide, slick with effort and want. Teeth sink into his shoulder, hard enough for her to taste blood, and his gasp breaks out, guttural and grateful.

Farid makes love to her with the same certainty he brings to every scheme, every map—measured, relentless, single-minded. Attempts to outpace him, to assert her own logic, falter as he anticipates her every move, adjusts, and consumes her resistance before she can respond. For now, she is owned by him.

Another kiss from him meets her, teeth knocking hers, tongue sliding along the roof of her mouth. “Beautiful,” he whispers, “so beautiful,” but she suspects he means the act, not her, but she is not sure.

The collapse of her will comes first, followed by the unravel of sensation, until all she holds is pulse, friction, and the raw scrape of his beard on her cheek. When he finishes, he moans her name, the syllable stretched and ugly, and she feels his body shudder, the heat of him filling her.

Crushing the air from her lungs, he collapses atop her. The taste of flour and sweat merges into a single, searing presence. In stillness she catalogues every hurt, every stinging patch of skin, every spatter of saliva or blood or something less clear.

Farid's weight presses into her, grounding her to the world. For a moment, neither moves. The only sound is their breathing, fast and ragged, the aftermath of a chase neither will acknowledge.

A shift from him pulls out before tucking himself back into his pants. Sweat wiped from his forehead before he helps her sit, the motion gentle—almost tender, but not quite. Legs remain together as her skirt bunches around her waist, the cold sharp against her skin.

A hand cups her cheek, forcing her to meet his gaze. “You’re one of us now,” he says. “Nothing can touch you.”

Want beckons at her to believe him.

Clothes settle on him as he adjusts before striding to the window. Eyes sweep the alley as he scans, paranoia sharp for risk. Satisfied, he returns and kneels beside her.

Fingers linger at her scalp while he smooths her hair.

“You should rest,” he says again.

A flinch catches her under his touch, but not hard. “Is that all?”

White teeth flash as he grins, tongue flicking at blood on his lip. “For tonight.”

A shudder moves through her as pain between her legs radiates to her chest.

His mouth finds hers again, softer now, the pressure gone. “Don’t ever let them make you small,” he says. “Not for anyone. Not for me.”

Laughter builds inside her, but the sound sticks in her throat.

The kitchen holds her in the blue-dark as he leaves, flour sacks fallen, water pooled, the ledger open to a page smeared with blood and ink. Without witness he exits, sliding her panties into the breast pocket of his jacket as he leaves, a trophy.

Eyes close as her fingers press to the fresh bruise on her thigh, mind sketching the routes she will run, the maps she will redraw, the new life torn open inside her.

For a while, she listens to the city outside—the throb of cars, the thin wail of distant prayer, the rising tide of morning hunger.

Pain settles into her as a new marker on her body’s map while she prepares for tomorrow.

#

The sharp scent of snow-melt and motor oil arrives with him before sunrise. In the back kitchen he finds her, curled under a sackcloth, the ledger balanced on her knees. The floor aches from the chill, but she refuses to leave her post, not for fatigue, not for anything.

Hand smoothing her hair as he crouches beside her, he kisses the line of her ear. The contact is not gentleness—nothing about him ever is—but a staking of claim, a brand. “Did you sleep?” he murmurs, voice thrumming against her skull.

“No.”

He kneels, gathering her in. The bulk of his coat envelops her, a tent against the world. His hands travel her back, up the knobs of her spine, down the dip at her waist. When he kisses her, she tastes blood, old sweat, the tang of diesel.

“We’re stronger together,” he whispers, mouth pressed to her temple. “I mean it.”

Tension stiffens her, unsure if she believes him. Her father’s warnings echo—trust is a fool’s currency, love a snare—but Farid’s grip is the only anchor she has left.

Words like pearls drop in her lap as he leans in. “After the next run, I’ll leave Zahra. You and I will build something that matters. No one will touch us. Not the guards, not the old men, not God himself.”

Maryam’s heart rattles her ribs. Belief slips in for her, the alternative too close to despair. She nestles into his neck, draws the warmth of his skin, lets the world recede to the space between his hands.

Stories spill from him—how the route will shift, how the crates will go north through Gilan, how he has a buyer lined up in Baku who owes him more than money. Like an artist, he paints a world for them: safehouses in every city, smuggling lines that run like veins, an empire of their own.

Desperate for a vision larger than the one she’s inherited, she drink it in.

When she dresses, he helps her with the buttons, his fingers gentle, almost reverent. He tucks the scarf around her neck, ties it tight, lingers on the pulse just under her jaw.

“After the next run,” he repeats.

A folded slip of paper meets her palm as he gives her routes, times, passwords. The weight of secrets presses into her as she realizes he has never trusted her with so many. The paper stiff and intimate against her skin, she tucks into her blouse.

A glance upward catches him watching her—always watching, eyes glinting with hunger more than affection. Questions crawl through her, asking if he ever loved Zahra, or if love shadows ambition.

Their mouths meet, slow this time, the kind of kiss that bleeds into her bones. “Don’t disappoint me,” he says. The words chill her, but the need for his approval is a hotter fire.

Slipping out the back door, he leaves, the safehouse colder for his absence.

Maryam moves to the worktable, arranges the ledgers and crates, sets the flour sacks straight. In the silence, she pulls out the poetry book he gave her—Persian verse, the cover smudged with ink and sweat. Pages part to his dog-ear as she reads the lines again and again, trying to draw out their meaning.

Her lap cradles the poetry, the ledger resting before her as the world stills. Running her thumb over the raised script, she lets her lips shape the syllables. Patience holds her, not for Farid—never just for a man—but for the moment she will rise, step into the cold, and run her own line across the world.

In the thin dawn light, she is everything she’s ever wanted: needed, trusted, irreplaceable.

The code inked on the folded note escapes her, the hidden pattern that signals more than a Bible run—guns, maybe, or something else that will matter to men like Farid and their endless hunger. Blind youth shields her from how he has already used her ambition, her body, her trust.

Faith in the Web anchors her. In herself. In the bright, unkillable future she will build.

A breath steadies her as she fixes her scarf and prepares to run.

## Act 5: Betrayal

### Chapter 10: Promises Made

Night pulls the safehouse tight. The city drowns in its own black hum, each window a pinprick, each alley a threat disguised as void. Maryam drifts between the crates, every breath shivering with the aftertaste of adrenaline and sweat. Her body still quivers from the run—she's not used to carrying so much, moving so fast, hiding so well.

Inside, the oven room stretches hollow and cold. Tables sag under ledgers, manifests, and spools of waxed twine. In the farthest corner, under the safehouse's exposed joists, Farid waits. The lamp above him flickers, oil thickening the air with its mineral tang.

He wears the same dark suit from the market, cuffs crisp, hair combed to a silver thread at the temple. His cologne—root, pepper, bitter orange—hangs sharp above the glue and the scorched dough. A glass of water stays in his hand as he drinks nothing.

The gloom swallows her steps, half-shadowed by a stack of Bibles. "You called for me?"

Farid lifts his gaze, eyes razor-bright. "You move like a ghost tonight."

A hand lifts as he gestures for her to sit. Maryam claims the bench across, fingers folding in her lap to mask their tremor.

A packet glides across the table under his hand. A sheath of blueprints, border manifests, and three hand-drawn maps—each lined in red, the crossings and drop points annotated in his neat, slashing script.

"We are outgrowing Zahra's routes," he says, voice low, "and her patience." His thumb traces the Tigris, a slick of ink stretching from Mosul to Baghdad. "If we take this channel, we double our reach in a week. Triple it if we trust the Jesuits to hold their end in Aleppo."

Maryam's eyes follow his finger, mind ticking over the logistics: customs in Qamishli, the Kurdish gangs at the river, the weeks when even the air betrays them. "If the militia is watching Mosul, we'll lose every crate."

Farid leans closer. The lamp throws hard lines on his cheek, the scar above his left eye flaring pale as chalk. "I have friends on the Iraqi side. People who know how to disappear paperwork, reroute shipments, bribe the right hands." His breath warms her ear, the words digging straight through her resolve. "If anyone can do it, you can."

The urge to shrink from him crawls inside her, but her body betrays her. Her thigh brushes his; her hands flatten on the map. Heat seeps through her dress fabric. Desire tangles

with suspicion, her ambition sharpening under each breath. Farid's scent merges with the iodine tang of newsprint and the lingering echo of fresh-baked bread.

"Zahra is risk-averse," he continues. "She won't touch this until it's already safe." His mouth pulls tight, not quite a smile. "But you—you're not afraid of risk, are you?"

Maryam bites the inside of her cheek. "I do what the work requires."

Silence thickens as he studies her, pressing instead of pausing. "I watched you at the checkpoint," he says. "Your face—no fear, no doubt. Like you belonged there."

No flinch comes, but a raw thread of pride unwinds in her chest. "I belong everywhere and nowhere," she answers.

"Good," he whispers. "That's how you survive."

He points at the first map. "Here," he says. "We thread the crates through Homs—avoid the official crossings, use the river smugglers. We pay the gang in cash, not in books. They trust cash."

She considers the path. "We'll need new signals. They're arresting anyone with a Persian accent in that quarter."

Farid nods. "Already planned. You'll take the shipment in, but you won't speak. Let the runner handle the talk. You're invisible."

The word lands heavy. Invisible. The question needles her whether he sees her as a shadow to move, a tool to deploy, a body to take when it suits him.

The next page turns under his hand. "Here," he says, guiding her finger to a crossroads near Deir ez-Zor. "This is the handoff to the Syrian cell. I'll arrange the money, but I want you to watch the transfer yourself."

Maryam follows his touch, the fine tremor in his hand barely registering until he covers hers, palm settling over her wrist.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

She tries to pull back, but his grip is iron. His pulse throbs through her skin, louder than the lamp's hiss.

"You said yourself—trust is for fools," she answers.

Farid releases her, but not before his thumb traces the sinew of her hand. "If we succeed," he murmurs, "we make history."

Lips graze the shell of her ear as he leans in. "But we have to move now. Before Zahra locks down the network, before the city clamps shut for the holidays."

The hunger in his voice tempts her hatred, but a bright, reckless spark lights inside her.

Farid fans the maps across the table. Each line is a pulse, a gamble, a dare. "Will you do this with me?"

A tremor threads her voice as she struggles to keep it steady. "I will."

A grin cuts across his face, baring more threat than pleasure. "Good."

He gathers the papers, hands moving with predatory grace. "Show me," he commands, "how you'd run the first drop."

The route is drawn fast under her hand, bypassing checkpoints, cutting through abandoned rail yards and back alleys thick with rust and piss. Each turn, each contact, each calculated risk accounted in her narration.

Farid tracks her every word, gaze burning a hole through her skull. When she finishes, his approval is silent, but absolute.

"You think like a soldier," he says.

She shakes her head. "I think like someone who wants to live."

Laughter cracks from him before curdling into something sharp. "So do I."

The table becomes a pivot as he circles it, pulling her up with him. His hands grip her waist, the heat of his body pulsing through her clothes.

She waits for the order, the permission, the old game they play. But tonight, he only pulls her close, lips ghosting over her forehead.

"Tomorrow," he says, voice thick, "we start at dawn. No one else will know."

Maryam nods, her body already charting the route of his hands, the map of his hunger. Lips brush her cheek—a benediction, or a warning.

Releasing her, he steps into the corridor, and vanishes, the scent of cologne and revolution lingering behind.

Maryam sags onto the bench, blood roaring in her ears. She presses her hand to the map, grounding herself in the work, the risk, the insane promise of something better.

The city outside boils with menace. Inside, she is already running the line, already racing toward the next impossible crossing.

Failure will not claim her.

She will not be invisible.

Maps fold into her satchel as she prepares for the morning.

The dockside warehouse stinks of diesel, old onions, and brine. Sodium lamps hiss overhead, staining every face a bruised yellow. The cold slithers between the corrugated metal walls, gnawing at the knees, the scalp, the slit where the wind tongues in from the yard.

Maryam paces the length of the loading floor, clipboard tucked under her arm, boots crunching on a crust of spilled grain. Her head throbs from the lack of sleep, but the rhythm of work keeps her body in line. On the far side, two men kneel by an open crate, fingers stiff with the cold as they arrange blue-bound Bibles into a sublayer beneath bolts of cheap cotton. They speak little. Every word is a risk, a marker for the wrong ears.

Breath fogs in the cold as she checks the labels. "Pack tighter," she snaps, flicking the crate with the back of her knuckle. "It shifts, they find it."

The older worker grunts, thumbs still stained with turmeric from the market. Bibles wedge tighter under his hands before cotton folds over, smoothed as if he tucks in a child. The crate reeks of mothballs and the sweet, acrid sweat of men who work by night.

A door bangs somewhere in the dark, and the pulse of conversation dies. Farid's silhouette fills the portal, coat snapping behind him. His shoes echo—deliberate, predatory—on the warped wood.

Three strides sweep him through the warehouse, a nod given to the workers before his focus lands on her. "Show me the progress."

She leads him down the row of crates. Each stamped with a false manifest, destination inked in Cyrillic. A finger marks the sequence as she explains: Istanbul, then overland, then the swap in Gaziantep. Running his finger along the slat, he taps at intervals, as if testing the crate's heart.

He turns to the men. "Out," he says. Not a question.

They vanish, leaving the crate half-packed and the air thick with suspicion.

Farid kneels, pulling a nail from his coat pocket. He runs it along a seam in the crate, finds the invisible slot, and pries free a false bottom. Beneath the cotton, a secondary compartment—smaller, lined in oiled cloth, the interior black as tar.

A grin flashes up at her as the lamp shadows his eyes. "You see?"

Knees bend and her skirt tightens around her thighs as she crouches beside him. The cold from the floor bites through the fabric, through her bones. "How much can it hold?"

He reaches in, palms the space. "Twice the run, same risk." His tone is gospel.

She traces the edge of the hidden cavity, the rough wood gouging her nail. "It's clever."

A snap shuts the compartment under his hand before sawdust wipes onto his pants. "We need clever if we're going to outpace Zahra."

Maryam can't help herself; pride blooms under her skin, sharp as nettles.

Farid stands, hands dusting off his coat. "We start tonight. You will lead the convoy to the border."

A shiver ripples her scalp. "What about the new inspector?"

He shrugs. "Already paid."

A frown creases her face. "They said he couldn't be bought."

"Everyone can be bought," Farid answers. "You just have to find the right currency."

His eyes snag on her, holding her in place. "Do you trust me?"

The question pulses with danger, tempting her to speak. Every fiber in her warns no. She ignores, and nods.

He steps closer, boots bridging the space between them. Both hands cup her face, fingers splayed wide, thumbs hot on her cheekbones.

"Everything we do," he murmurs, "serves the greater good."

His lips find hers—no warning, no hesitation. The kiss bruises her mouth, knocks thought out of her head, leaves her shivering in the cold and the hunger. For a moment the world narrows to the taste of him, the spice and salt, the faint smoke that lives on his skin.

Distance forms as he pulls back, but not far. "You are perfect," he says. "Never doubt it."

Words tangle in her chest as she tries to reply.

He pivots, strides to the loading ramp, and shouts for the men to return. They swarm back, eyes averted, hands shaking as they load the crate into the waiting truck. The engine rattles, gears protesting the cold.

Maryam stands at the door, the wind slicing her ankles. Farid claps her on the shoulder as he passes. "You know what to do."

A nod answers as she watches the taillights blur into the dark. The other workers fade to the sidelines, vanishing into the noise of the port.

Left alone, Maryam breathes deep, the stink of brine and diesel filling her lungs. Touching her lips, she can feel the burn of his kiss still singing on her mouth. The cold wind bites her ankles, but the heat he left in her mouth drowns it. Fear scrapes against want, her pulse ragged in her throat.

For a moment, she lets herself imagine it—her and Farid at the top of the chain, every runner and buyer and border cop dancing on their string. The Bibles, the cash, the muscle, the rumors—all bending to their will.

The vision blooms behind her eyes as she savors it.

Then she closes the warehouse, locks the door, and returns to the city, hunger gnawing at her ribs, the future racing ahead like a convoy in the night.

#

Farid's office sits above a carpet shop, the stairs winding through dust and saffron until the world blurs into the hush of silk. The room itself is another universe—Persian rugs layered two deep, fat leather chairs, a brass samovar gleaming on the credenza. Every surface hums with the vibration of money, taste, and the need to hide.

Tonight the air sparkles with whiskey, forbidden and cold, poured into squat glasses smuggled from Baku. Maryam perches on the arm of Farid's chair, legs bare to the knee, scarf loose around her throat. Her pulse runs hot, the success of the shipment burning through her chest like jet fuel.

The chair cradles him as he reclines, one arm flung back, hair a silver crown in the amber light. A hand flicks toward the report she brought, numbers lining up like soldiers under his gaze. "Three new couriers in Damascus," she recites. "Two in Baghdad. One more ready in Aleppo if you approve."

White teeth flash in his laugh as he tugs her onto his lap. A yelp escapes as she lands, whiskey sloshing from the glass, cold biting her wrist.

"You are perfect," he says, mouth pressed to the side of her neck. "Do you know what that means, Maryam?"

The heat of his words draws her closer as she leans in. "It means we're unstoppable."

His hands skate up her thighs, the touch electric. "It means we are inevitable." He pours more whiskey, the bottle sweating in his grip. "This is only the beginning. Soon we control every route from here to Jerusalem."

Spice, promise, and the heady poison of power kiss her lips as she tastes the future on his tongue. The shop below them thrums with the illusion of innocence, but up here, nothing is innocent.

The carpet blossoms with pomegranate reds and bone-white arabesques as he urges her down. The whiskey pools in her belly, liquid courage, pure and bright. Buttons pop and the scarf flutters down as he strips her fast. Her hands fumble at his belt, the cold metal shocking her fingers.

They fall together, limbs tangling, her skirt bunched around her waist. The rug scratches her back; his mouth moves from her jaw to her chest, then lower. Every nerve blazes.

Hunger braids body and mind as she arches into him.

A single thrust drives him into her, sweet pain shocking a gasp from her lips. The glass knocks over, whiskey bleeding into the silk beneath them. His hand grips her hair, the hard tug sending pleasure knifing through her.

"You are mine," he growls.

"Yours," she echoes, but the word is a claim as much as a surrender.

A cry rips from him, echoing through the hollow above the shop. Fingernails rake his back before laughter bursts from her, giddy and drunk on victory.

After, they lie twined in the heat, sweat pooling in the hollows of their bodies.

Maryam stands to dress and he tosses her panties to her with a playful grin. Catching them, she slips them on while he smooths out his suit, the air still charged with the remnants of their passionate encounter.

Farid props himself on one elbow, eyes searching her face, he changes context with ease. "Next week we take the Van corridor," he says. "New buyers. New risk. I want you to lead it."

Maryam grins, rolling onto her side. "What does Zahra say?"

The last of the whiskey ripples gold in the glass as he pours. "She'll thank us when it's done."

They drink in silence, the night outside muffled by the thickness of the rugs.

On the table beside them, a ledger lies open. Maryam reaches for it, fingers tracing the numbers, but Farid covers her hand with his, smiling.

"Trust me," he says. "Let me handle the books. You focus on the work."

She nods, head swimming, body sore and alive. Pride blooms under her skin, chased by fear. Doubt flickers at the edge, the ledger's secrets pressing like a bruise against her ribs.

Pepper, resin, and whiskey fill her lungs as he folds her into his chest.

Below, the city pulses, hungry and blind. Above, the two of them plot the next move, eyes fixed on a horizon only they can imagine.

In the dark, Farid holds her tight. Over her shoulder, his eyes linger on the ledger, the profits and secrets inked in his own careful hand.

Tomorrow, Maryam will wake to a world remade, certain she is invincible.

Farid will let her believe it.

The night, for once, is theirs.

## Chapter 11: The Revelation

May, 1967.

Light slashed the safehouse table into sharp borders—one side hot with the sodium bulb's syrup, the other in blue shadow. Maryam sat at the margin, legs crossed under a skirt dusted with flour, a pencil wound tight in her fist. Across the expanse, Zahra perched upright, her scarf thrown back to reveal the streaks of iron in her hair. Between them, the battered tabletop bristled with smuggling ledgers, hand-drawn maps, and mugs chipped at every rim. The kitchen's warmth leeched into the room, sponging up the city's cold; outside, night thickened behind the window, a bruise ringed by the city's sodium glare.

The couriers clustered at the periphery. Two men, both bandaged from the week's close calls, hunched over the manifests, whispering in undertones. A girl from the Quarter picked at

her split lip, tongue worrying the scab. Everyone kept their bodies small, as if by shrinking into themselves they might dodge whatever would shatter next.

“Bandar Abbas is blown,” Maryam said, pencil stabbing at the map’s southern corridor. “They watched the dockmaster all week—last night, the patrols doubled. We need to use the Gulf route. Or risk nothing at all.”

Zahra’s expression curdled. “You want to risk the entire network on a rumor? The Gulf is crawling with buyers for every guard. If one bribe fails—”

“It won’t fail,” Maryam cut in, voice thin but iron. “The bribe comes through the church’s cousin in Kuwait. He’s already paid twice—he’s cleaner than any port rat we’ve ever run. The risk is zero compared to another bloodbath at the main terminal.”

Zahra’s hand clamped around her tea glass. The knuckles blanched; her voice did not. “You think you know better than me. You think your new contacts—your shiny little couriers—know the city better than I do, better than Farid?”

The words snagged Maryam. Her lips parted, but she caught herself, biting instead at the pencil’s splintered end. The map under her palm quivered, though she kept her hand flat.

The girl with the broken lip shifted, eyes flicking between the two women. “If the port is compromised, we lose the books. If we switch the route, we lose the money.” She wanted the answer, not the argument.

“Quiet, child,” Zahra said, voice gentler but hollow. She leaned forward. “You were never meant to run these lines. You were meant to count beans, keep the ledgers, and stay out of trouble. Now you come to my table, you tell me I’m a fool?”

Maryam willed her body not to shake, though her insides skittered under the pressure. Her hands tremble, breath scraping dry. Anger rises, sharp and clear, a lifeline against the fear

clawing her gut. She forced her voice steady. “We have to run the Gulf, or we lose everything. The guard on the Abbas route is working for the militia. They’re not taking bribes anymore. They shoot, or they vanish you. Two runners gone this week. You want me to ignore that?”

A beat of silence. A match hissed, someone relighting a stub of cigarette. The tang of burnt paper spiked the air.

Zahra’s eyes glittered wet. “You forget who made this Web. You forget whose husband funded every first shipment, who taught you every code, every rule. Now you think you can rewrite it in a night? You want to leap ahead, and let the rest of us pick through the rubble.”

A courier in the far corner, burly and limping, snorted into his sleeve. “Maybe the girl’s right. Maybe it’s time for the new line. The old one’s bleeding us out.” He immediately dropped his gaze, coloring to the tips of his ears.

Maryam seized the opening. “This isn’t about me, or you. The world moves forward. If we stay—” She stopped, words catching on a bone of pride. “If we stay, we rot. We end up like the rest of them, buried in a gutter for a cause that didn’t keep up.”

Zahra’s laugh was thin, flat. “So you’d risk the whole Web, on your word? You have so little patience, child.”

Maryam inhaled, held it, exhaled slow. She let the anger surface. “Your fear is strangling us. You’re so afraid to lose, you’d rather do nothing and watch us die slow.” The words fell too loud. Faces around the table twitched, a chain of shock. The moment after stretched to breaking.

Zahra’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Who fills your head with this nonsense?”

Maryam didn’t hesitate. “Farid agrees.”

A shifting of weight, a cup rattling back to the wood. Zahra’s face lost color, mouth gone slack. “What did you say?”

Maryam's cheeks burned, but she pressed on. "Farid told me to take over the runs. He said we were done with your way of doing things." The room went still as a photograph.

Zahra groped for words. "You think my husband—"

"He's leaving you," Maryam said, unable to stop the tremor in her voice. "He's been with me for over a year."

A gasp lanced the air. The girl from the Quarter hunched, her hand covering her mouth. The two men exchanged a glance, one of them slipping his ledger into a pocket as if bracing for impact.

Zahra sat so straight she threatened to splinter. Her fingers dug into the table, nails scraping the wood. Tears filled her eyes, rimmed in bloodshot red, but she refused to let them fall.

Maryam fought to keep the quaver from her voice. "He loves me. He's leaving you. We planned everything."

Zahra's shoulders shuddered. The silence around the table thickened, couriers blinking in disbelief or staring into the worn grain of the wood. The plans and maps sagged, losing all structure, overtaken by the weight of what Maryam had loosed.

No one spoke. In the far corner, a tea glass cracked from the heat, fissuring along its side. A tiny leak of brown pooled on the table.

The old woman's tears refused to fall; she wiped them away with the back of her hand, then stood, slow and deliberate. Her jaw clenched, voice drained. "You should run your new Web, then. I hope you choke on it."

She turned, stumbling as her knees rebelled, and pushed through the curtain to the kitchen. Her footsteps faded on the tile, leaving a hush so total that the traffic from the alley returned, louder than before.

The couriers shifted, uncomfortable, not knowing where to look.

Maryam sat rigid, her lungs burning, the taste of defeat bitter as copper in her mouth.

No one reached for the maps, or for the ledgers.

They simply waited, each wondering if the world would survive until morning.

#

The hour stuttered on. No one moved. Maryam sat with her hands pressed flat to the table, every muscle rigid. The only sound: a drip in the kitchen, the slow unraveling of a loaf's crust as it cooled, the soft rub of a courier's thumb against his mug. No one spoke of the route, or the bribes, or the coming dawn. They simply waited, heat and confusion fusing them to the wood and the peeling plaster.

The door bucked under a sudden blow. Every courier flinched, even Maryam. The bolt scraped, the hinges moaned, and Farid swept into the room, coat trailing a black wake, silver cufflinks catching the orange of the lamp.

He paused, reading the tableau with surgical interest. His eyes took in the cluster of couriers, the abandoned manifests, Maryam's rigid back. He registered the absence of his wife, and his eyebrows shot up, a look of polite confusion pasted on his face.

A few couriers straightened in their chairs. Farid's presence always did this—he reeked of command, a cologne stronger than the one slicked on his throat.

“Where is Zahra?” he asked, the voice low but meant to travel.

No one answered. The silence felt deeper than before, charged with the aftertaste of disaster.

Maryam looked up, refusing to blink. Farid’s eyes flicked to hers, cool and unreadable.

From the kitchen, Zahra’s steps returned, slow and heavy. She didn’t bother to dry her face. She came to the threshold, a streak of flour pasted across her sleeve, her hair wild with grief.

Farid’s face shifted—surprise, then a quick, subtle tightening around the eyes. He schooled his expression to concern. “What happened?”

Zahra did not look at him. “Ask your new girl,” she said, voice husked to nothing.

Farid let the words settle, then measured Maryam with a single, long glance. He crossed to the head of the table, hands gripping the back of Zahra’s abandoned chair. “What did you say to my wife?” His tone was gentle, but the intent whistled underneath.

Maryam could taste the trap. She chose to speak, the words scraping raw on her tongue. “I told her the truth. I told her you were leaving her. That you and I—”

She waited for him to meet her gaze. He did, but with a coldness that hollowed her chest. “My dear,” Farid said, the words directed over Maryam’s head and to Zahra, “someone has lied to you.” He let go of the chair and circled to Zahra’s side. “Whatever this child said, she misunderstood.” He placed a hand on Zahra’s shoulder, fingers kneading gently, his body a screen between the two women.

Maryam’s stomach dipped, but she kept her face flat. “You said we’d run the Web together. You told me Zahra was—”

“Stop,” he said, voice cutting across hers. He let silence do its work, then turned back to the couriers, eyes wide and imploring. “I made a mistake. I let admiration become something more. I confess that. But I love my wife. Always.” The confession burned with regret, every syllable weighted for maximum sympathy.

A courier near the stove let out a breath, as if relieved to have someone to blame.

Zahra stared at Farid, shock and hope warring in her expression. “So you didn’t—”

He cupped her face, thumb brushing the tear track. “Never. I lost my head. It happens to old fools. But you—” His voice thickened, expertly. “You are my life.”

Maryam gripped the table harder, pulse thudding in her fingertips. “You told me I was the future,” she whispered, too quiet for anyone but herself.

Farid heard it anyway. “You are brilliant,” he said, not looking at her. “But you’re young. You mistook my words for promises I never made.”

Maryam’s throat filled with acid. The humiliation landed in her bones, a jolt so sharp it lit her scalp with sweat. Breath stutters, shallow and broken. Numbness seeps into her fingers, a slow frost tightening her grip on the table.

The couriers’ faces shifted from shock to pity. One tried to meet her gaze; another looked away, as if the room had gone too bright to bear.

Farid bent and pressed his lips to Zahra’s hand, a gesture so public and final that Maryam nearly retched.

She bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood.

Farid looked up, voice back to command. “The night’s business is over. Everyone out.”

He said it with the air of a man resetting a room, not a life.

Couriers filed toward the door, shoes scraping, eyes darting anywhere but Maryam. Zahra let herself be led, her steps unsteady, her hand still in Farid's.

Maryam sat alone at the table. Her world shrank to the circle of her hand and the lines on the map, now utterly pointless.

She sat in the ruin of the moment, unable to move, unable to hate him as much as she wanted.

From the kitchen, the loaf finally collapsed in on itself, a slow, sad sigh into nothing.

#

Maryam listened to the emptiness swell until it threatened to crush her chest. She gripped the chair, fighting the urge to vomit or weep. Her arms buzzed with static. She stood, numb, hands balling into fists so tight the knuckles gleamed.

She swept the table clear—maps, ledgers, a bowl of stale grapes—sending them clattering to the floor. The violence steadied her, but not enough.

A mug sat on the windowsill. She gripped it by the lip and hurled it at the wall. The cup exploded, fragments pinwheeling through the room. Shards skittered into the flour dust and rolled to rest against the baseboard. The sound echoed, rich and hollow.

She caught her reflection in the bakery's warped display glass. Pale face, jaw clenched, eyes rimmed with salt. The image mocked her: the clever girl who thought she'd won, who trusted a man's whispered promises over the hard math of loyalty.

She straightened her spine, wiped the tears with her sleeve. In the reflection, she watched the old self burn away, replaced by a cold, new certainty. She let her eyes go flat, mouth set. The illusion of love—erased.

On the ground, half-buried under papers, lay the poetry book Farid once gave her. She bent and picked it up, thumbed the cover, felt the cheap leather give under her grip. For a second, her fingers trembled. She set it on the floor, lifted her heel, and stamped. Once, twice, until the spine snapped and the pages fanned out, limp and ruined.

She knelt, palms against the cold tile, and made herself a promise. The tile bites her palms, heartbeat loud in her ears. Grief folds into resolve, cold and sharp as a blade. She would outlast them all. She would take the Web, strip it of sentiment, and run it like a clock.

She stood, smoothed her skirt, and crossed to the door.

Outside, the city waited, hungry and blind. She stepped into the street, closing the night behind her, the plans already assembling behind her eyes—clean, precise, pitiless.

## Chapter 12: The Rejection

Morning splits the safehouse like a prison riot: the night's debris scattered, the air juiced with sour nerves. Maryam enters the main room at dawn, shoulders squared, neck braced for impact. The couriers cluster at the periphery—too hungry to leave, too scared to pick sides. Every one of them glances away as she passes, hands busying themselves with bread, ledgers, old tea. The space brims with tension, but the volume remains so low she can hear the tremble in her own jaw.

She claims a seat at the table, knuckles whitening as she grips her cup. The bench is colder than bone. Across the wood, no one will look her in the eye.

Farid enters ten minutes later—black suit, pressed, the cuffs gleaming. He moves slow, taking the long way around the room, letting his silence choke every corridor behind him. He

ignores the other men, ignores the girl with the bandaged hand, ignores Zahra's lingering perfume. His focus zeros in on Maryam alone.

He circles her like a wolf evaluating a wounded rival. The scrape of his shoe on the floor bites at her eardrum.

He sits, heavy, across from her, hands folded neat on the map. He does not speak.

Maryam keeps her face blank. The heat under her skin stings, but she won't give him tears.

Farid watches her, not blinking. When he finally talks, his voice lands soft, but the impact bruises.

"You will never speak of this again."

The urge to counter sparks inside her. Instead, her mouth fills with cotton, and her tongue glues itself to the roof. A single nod from her loosens the couriers' breath along the walls. But she keeps her eyes locked on his. She will not give ground.

Farid's jaw flexes. "You are clever, but not smart. You lack perspective." He leans in. His cologne—citrus, resin, the bite of arak—crawls across the table. "Do you think your feelings matter more than the Web?"

She grips her cup tighter. Her hands shake, betraying her.

He notices. His lips twitch, a smile without kindness. "You embarrass yourself. You endanger everyone."

A courier drops a spoon; the clatter ricochets off the tile, but no one moves to fetch it.

Maryam grits her teeth. The urge to throw her cup at his head pulses in her wrist, but she holds.

“You think your father’s sacrifice entitles you to everything?” Farid’s voice sharpens, the words like razors filleting her pride. “He built a conduit. He left you a name, not a throne.”

Maryam feels her body retreat. Her vision narrows: the scar on Farid’s cheek, the bead of sweat at his temple, the veins in his hands as he clenches the edge of the table.

She opens her mouth. He holds up a finger—one motion, absolute. “You do not speak.”

A flush crawls up her neck. Metal sharpens against her tongue inside her mouth.

“We will run the old routes, the way Zahra designed,” Farid says. “You will deliver, you will count, you will never make this mistake again.”

Her jaw knots. A nod refuses to come from her this time.

He waits, savoring the struggle.

“The routes, the contacts, the money—they belong to us, me and Zahra” he murmurs.

“You want the mission to survive, you obey.”

The humiliation soaks her skin. A silent battle inside her keeps her upright, chin level.

Farid glances at the couriers, then back. His voice drops to a whisper, so intimate she shivers. “You are brilliant, but replaceable. Never forget that.”

A glare meets him while tears blur the map before her.

He pushes back from the table, stands, adjusts his cuff, and walks out. The couriers scatter, each carrying the words like a fresh bruise.

Maryam stays at the table. Her hands tremble, but she does not let go of the cup.

A swallow forces the tears back down her throat.

The door swings shut behind Farid as she tells herself this is not defeat. This is a lesson.

This is a moment to remember.

The city outside wakes, hunger and hope crowding the alleys.

Will sharpens inside her, piece by piece, as she waits for the next move.

#

She moves to the back room an hour later, pulse cooled but eyes bright with fresh purpose. The space is half storage, half bunker—walls lined in canvas sacks, floor sticky from last week's jam burst. The only light seeps from a high window, illuminating the paperwork like a crime scene.

Maryam bends over the battered table and flips through the manifests. Each page still sweats with the memory of last night's disaster: altered dates, swapped driver names, entire shipments redacted or rewritten in a hand not hers. The ink is heavy and deliberate, the lines pressed too deep, as if someone wanted the sabotage to scar the ledger.

Routes retrace beneath her careful eye. Half the numbers don't add up. The Bibles for Isfahan—marked as delivered, but none of the couriers ever reported in. Two crates for Mashhad, both "lost to inspection," but she knows the inspector on that route—he drinks bribes like water and never asks questions.

Her jaw sets. Manifests stack by date under her hand as she hunts patterns. Fingers twitch as she lays out the lines: someone is choking the Web from within, and the knife cuts clean.

A young courier slips through the doorway, so quiet his shoes barely whisper on the tile. He's the one with the burnt ear, a relic from the chemical fire last summer. He hesitates at the threshold, shifting his weight from heel to toe.

Maryam doesn't look up. "You have something to say, say it."

He clears his throat, the sound nearly lost in the room's damp hush. "The Tabriz drop, miss—it never made it. Three crates. They said the van broke down, but I—" He chokes the words, eyes wide as if expecting her to strike.

An even tone holds her voice steady. "Who loaded the van?"

He shrugs, twisting his cap in both hands. "Not the regulars. Two new guys. I never caught their names."

She snatches the logbook and checks the driver list. The names appear in fresh ink, the signatures unfamiliar. A page crumples inside her fist, fingers digging into the pulp.

"How many times did you run that line?" she asks.

He gulps. "Once, with Zahra. She—she always said the Tabriz route is family. No one else touches it."

Maryam's stomach twists. The words make sense, but the logic galls her.

A flat look lands on the courier as she turns, making him flinch.

"Tell me every shipment that's late. Not just the Bible runs. All of them."

He nods, eager to escape. "Yes, miss." He retreats, but not before glancing at her hands—white-knuckled, the page now a ball of angry fiber.

Paperwork sifts under her hands for another hour. Each new anomaly tugs her jaw tighter, squares her shoulders. She realizes, with a start, that she is angry—not the old, brittle fury of humiliation, but something molten, relentless, a hunger for payback that leaves no room for grief.

The cracked mirror in the corner spits her reflection in fragments as she moves closer. Her hair's loose, face pale, but the eyes—harder, sharper, less inclined to look away. Posture and the line of her mouth hold her eyes as she wonders when she began to look like her father.

The skirt smooths beneath her hands as she tucks hair behind her ear before returning to the table. She makes a list: every missing crate, every late courier, every contact lost in the last month. Names of the trusted, the doubted, the vanished spill from her pen. The page fills fast. A second name joins the list, then a third under her pen.

When the courier returns, she hands him the stack. "Find me every run that missed delivery. I want dates, times, names. If someone asks, you're helping with the ledgers."

He nods, jaw tight with fear but also respect.

His eye catches hers, and she holds it. "Don't let anyone see you."

He bows, then leaves, the door whispering shut behind him.

Maryam stands alone, hands splotched with ink and sweat.

The sabotage is real, the noose tightening. But so is her resolve.

She sharpens the pencil, redraws the map in her head, and prepares to carve her own line through the treachery.

The city outside waits for her next move. This time, she'll make sure it leaves a mark.

#

The safehouse empties by dusk, everyone desperate to escape the fumes of rage and fear. Maryam waits out the departures, listening to the clatter of boots and muffled curses as each man finds his own way home. The quiet thickens, crawling into the gaps between the stones. Night presses through the glass, setting the corners of the room alight with shadows.

A cot in the utility alcove becomes her territory, curtained by canvas. An oil lamp flares to life as she waits for her hands to steady. The flame hiccups in the draft, painting the walls with shivering silhouettes.

From beneath the loose floorboard, she lifts the Bible—her father’s, the binding darkened by years of sweat and city air. The cover flexes under her thumb, the edges fretted raw by her own anxious picking. The first page cracks as she opens it; the smear of dried blood on the flyleaf flashes in the lamp’s uncertain glow.

Leather, old ink, and a trace of iron breathe into her as she presses the book to her mouth. A whispered prayer escapes her, not to God but to her father’s ghost, to every courier who bled for a line in the Web.

The words turn to an oath, spoken so low the lamp itself strains to hear:  
I will not fail. I will take the Web and make it mine. I will turn every route, every name, every risk to my own advantage. I will outlast them all.

The Bible lays flat as she reaches for the ledger and pencil hidden under the cot. With mechanical patience, she writes the names of the loyal—each one spelled out in deliberate, upright script. The list is short, but clean.

On a second page, she sketches a route Farid and Zahra have never run—one she mapped months ago but kept secret, waiting for a moment when trust had no currency. The pencil races, notches and arrows blooming across the paper, every checkpoint a dagger pointed at the old order.

Pages flip to the Book of Daniel, her father’s favorite, the verse he quoted when the world pressed too hard. The route inks into the margin under her hand, her name beside it like a black tattoo in scripture’s whitespace.

Her fingers twitch with need. The urge to start tonight tugs at her, but patience will win the game.

A crude outline of Tehran spreads beneath her pencil, new routes slashing the city like veins. Safehouses, informants, bribeable cops dot the map under her hand. Two black dots mark Farid and Zahra on the map, ringed by the new paths she will use to choke them off when the time comes.

Palms press flat on the Bible's cover as she closes it.

Her tears have dried. The ache in her chest has gone from burn to ember, ready for the smallest breath to ignite.

Darkness engulfs her as she kills the lamp, hunger sharpening her to a point.

The old Maryam—lover, victim, courier—is gone. In her place, the new: cold, deliberate, each word and motion building toward the next strike.

Tomorrow, the Web will belong to her.

By morning, the Spider of Jerusalem will live.

## Act 6: The Shadow Empire

### Chapter 13: The Seizure

March, 1970.

Bandar Abbas reeked of old diesel and desperate men. At the port's southern warehouse, cargo thumped through the thin walls in arrhythmic shocks. Dawn filleted the world in sodium and tar: orange glare from the floodlights, black pools where the sun refused to touch. Maryam stood outside the entrance, collar up against the damp, one hand jammed deep in the pocket of her jacket.

The Bible rode against her ribs—a leather-bound fist, the spine splitting at Exodus. The bloodstain showed faint through the worn calfskin, an arterial burst she no longer tried to scrub away. Her father's book, her old anchor, now reduced to ballast.

At 05:20 sharp, she walked into the warehouse. The air vibrated with generators, gulls, the rattle of men humping crates from truck beds. Pallets of dried fruit and pistachio bristled under plastic wrap, but the real currency—spice, electronics, guns—hid in deeper shadows.

Steps thudded as she climbed the back staircase two at a time. The office smelled of sweat and instant coffee. Behind a battered desk, the customs official dabbed at his scalp with a paper napkin, already damp with fear.

A flinch rippled through him as she entered. "You're early," he said, voice fluting high.

Maryam sat without invitation, spine ramrod, knees canted wide. "The shipment is ready," she said, her Farsi clipped to bone.

Fingers scrolled the ledger's page while his lips muttered. "Textiles from Isfahan, pickled garlic, Christian charity relief—this isn't the usual Zahra drop. Where is she?"

"I run my own lines now." She laid the envelope on the desk. White, bulging, bound in a red rubber band. Her gaze bored into him. "Your name is the only one I gave my client. You lose nothing."

The envelope rustled under his fingers. "The bribe covers the crate inspection. But the chief inspector—he audits the books every week now."

Silence pinned him to the chair while she watched. The man's sweat ran through his sideburns, beading above the collar of his khaki shirt. Maryam flexed her hands on the armrests. "Open it," she said. "Count. You won't see this much again. Not from the next client. Not if you live a hundred years."

Paper tore under his hand as crisp notes passed under his thumb. His pupils shrank to pinpricks.

Maryam leaned in. "You want more?"

Eyes darted from the money to her to the darkness beneath the table. "You're different," he said.

"Everyone changes," she replied.

A tap landed on the envelope, drying his palms with its futility. "I can clear your load, but if anyone checks—"

"No one will check." Rising, she moved to the office window, and pointed to the far dock. "You see the man in the blue jacket? He works for me. The forklift operator, too. In one hour, none of this will belong to the state."

The official stammered. "The guard at the main gate—he doesn't—"

A turn cut her shoulders toward the sound. "Bring him here."

His mouth opened in protest, but she held up a second envelope, thinner but still weighty. One flick from her wrist offered a lazy threat.

"Now."

Sandals flapped as he bolted down the corridor. Tremors rippled through her legs, draining out through her toes, leaving her hollow and calm. Hands stayed visible and out of her pockets: nothing sharp, nothing suggestive, every gesture planned for a camera or a sniper scope.

The official returned in minutes, the gate guard trailing behind. This one—a boy, not yet twenty—wore his uniform like a borrowed suit. Eyes raw with sleep, chin shadowed with stubble. He looked at Maryam and tried for a smile.

A gesture summoned him to the desk as she told him to sit. “You have family?” she asked, voice flat.

A blink flickered across his face, unsure. “A sister. Two brothers. My father is dead.”

The thinner envelope slid toward him under her hand. “Don’t open it. Not here.” A stare gripped him until his hands froze on the paper.

“After your shift, you’ll go home. You’ll forget you met me. If anyone asks, you took tea with the customs man, and you found nothing wrong. If the inspector comes, you will nod and agree. You will not search the van. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded.

Maryam raised her hand, palm out. “Swear on your sister.”

A swallow slid down his throat. “I swear.”

His nervous back retreated down the stairs while she watched.

The customs man waited, all bravado gone.

The sharp scent of his aftershave filled her nose as she bent over the desk. “If you ever speak my name,” she hissed, “I will visit you at home, and I will take what matters most.” Her voice softened to a whisper. “No one escapes their debts. So we’ll have no problems, right?”

“I don’t know. This is very different from Zahra’s shipments. People are used to her. This is going to cause questions and I am going to have to come up with answers. And that may be difficult.” his eyes rolled and his fingers tapped the desk.

All her plans hinged on the success or failure of this shipment, the first of her fledgling empire. Determination surged within her, fueling a resolve that turned her blood to ice and iron. She would do anything to make this work. The choice was clear, and she would let nothing stand in her way.

Maryam straightened. "Let's take care of that," she said, and strode into the corridor. The customs man followed, his footfalls a slur of panic on the tile.

The path she took led him behind stacked tea chests as she guided him past the loading bays. The din of the dockyard muffled here; only the clink of bottles and the distant thump of boots found them.

Maryam stopped between two columns of burlap.

Slipping off her coat, she folded it over a crate, exposing the sweat-washed blouse beneath. The Bible, heavy in the inside pocket, pressed into her sternum.

A hand moved to his chest, steered him into the shadow. "You want more, yes? This is more." The crate creaked beneath her as she laid on top of it, raised her legs and yanked up her skirt. "For you" she said as she shuffled off her panties and stuffed them into his shirt pocket. "Now unzip your pants," she said, not unkind.

He fumbled, face flaming, hands shaking. He dropped his belt, embarrassment beating through his jaw and ears. "This isn't—" he blurted as she hooked her legs around his waist.

He stammered something. A finger pressed to her lips shushed him while her other hand guided him in. The first thrust burned, the second went smooth. Eyes fixed on the ceiling while seconds ticked inside her mind. He tried to touch her breast; she batted his hand away.

His breath grew ragged, hips working desperate. When he finished, he slumped, arms sagging at his sides.

A shove sent him back as she fixed her skirt and slipped on her coat. Her heart hammered—anger, not lust, the fuel. The Bible pressed against her chest, heat seeping into the leather.

Pants fastening under his fingers, he tried to meet her gaze. “Thank you,” he said, voice tinny.

A laugh barked. “I’m not your wife,” she said. “You’ll never thank me.”

Not looking back, she strode past.

On the dock, the blue-jacketed man lit a smoke and flicked it into the sea. He gave Maryam a nod and wheeled the first shipment up to the inspection point. The customs man stood at a remove, clutching his ledger, pretending to care about the paperwork.

The chief inspector, fat and sleepless, lumbered over. He checked the manifests, asked perfunctory questions, and never lifted a lid. Maryam watched as the crates loaded—row after row of “textiles,” the true cargo sleeved deep under a camouflage of spice. She picked out the gun runner’s mark on two boxes, the faintest gouge in the plywood. Her mind ran the full map: the driver, the contact in Shiraz, the switch at Isfahan. Everything threaded tight.

The last crate loaded. Exhaling, she let her breath go, slow and measured.

Once, in Jerusalem, the first time she ran a drop across the southern wall, the rush left her shaking for days. She remembered the ecstasy, the feeling of lightness as she crossed the final checkpoint, Bible pressed to her chest, the world spread open like a wound.

Now, the only feeling left: the satisfaction of a job executed to plan.

A dock worker leaned close to his mate, thinking her out of range. “The Spider’s web grows stronger,” he whispered.

Maryam smiled, a thin, cool strip of muscle across her jaw. Words coiled inside her, a venom richer than fear.

Her watch ticked as hair flicked away from her face before she stepped into the day’s furnace.

#

The desert licked moisture from the air. Wind tossed the date palms behind the roadhouse, sand stippling every surface and tongue. Maryam stalked the line of shadow cast by a corrugated shed, eyes on the lean men lounging against an old Land Rover. Rifles glinted. One watched the horizon, two tracked her advance, reading for threat or false move.

In the heat halo between the palms, the sheikh waited. He wore a pressed suit, a ringed hand dangling on a prayer bead, and dark glasses that hid the measure in his eyes. A slim table, set with brass, groaned under the weight of nothing: a single thermos, three glasses, a tin of sugared dates.

He gestured her forward, lips tight. "The famous Spider," he said, voice thick with Persian and something older.

Maryam eased into the folding chair, knees together, purse on her lap. Sweat crawled her scalp. Keeping her hads visible, she nodded once. "Sheikh Karim," she said.

Coffee streamed into the cup, his wrist steady. "You run books," he said, "for priests and fools. Now you want to move real goods?" A sip touched his lips, no offer given.

Maryam let the slight pass. Unclasped her purse, she spread the map with precise fingers. "I run men, too," she said, "and currency. Guns, if the pay is right. There's no money in books." A thumbnail marked the spot on the page. "This line—Bam to Kerman, then across the plateau. Not a single inspection in three months."

The sheikh scoffed. "The customs chief takes from three other bosses. Why trust your routes?"

A small and mean smile formed. “Because he believes in God. He’d cut open every sack if he thought it was full of heroin, but if he thinks we’re smuggling Bibles—never. We’ve been doing that business for years, they all believe in it. It’s the perfect cover.”

A ripple of interest behind the glasses. He leaned closer. “So what do you want, Spider?”

A fingertip tapped the map while she refused to blink. “I’ll run your opium to the Gulf, your cash to Dubai, your women to the highest bidder. But you pay more. My couriers risk more than any whore or mule you’ve bought before.”

A shake of his head bared the gold incisor. “Everyone wants a cut. How much?”

“Fifteen percent. You lose nothing. My line is invisible.”

He slouched in the chair, the prayer beads twitching. “My rivals pay less.”

Maryam shrugged. “Your rivals end up dead. Or in a pit on the coast.” She let the words settle, slow and cold. “I ran a test for Nasiri’s men last month. The entire shipment made port, untouched. You heard about it. That’s why I’m here.”

The sheikh’s pulse betrayed itself in a vein at his temple, throbbing with calculation. “Eighteen percent, and you guarantee nothing touches my sons when they drive the load. If the police catch one, you take the blame.”

A nod. “Eighteen, and I add a protection clause. You get full deniability.”

His men edged closer, rifles relaxing on their shoulders.

The glass filled under his hand before sliding toward her. “You changed,” he said, voice soft. “Last year you hid behind Zahra. Now you kill her business.”

Maryam sipped the coffee, bitter and laced with grit. “The world only remembers who wins.”

He laughed, not unkind. “Agreed.”

He raised the glass, drained it in a swallow. “We start tomorrow. You run a sample through the plateau. If it works, I’ll double the load. If not—”

The map replaced into her pocket. “It will work.”

He stood, wiped his hand on his jacket, and offered it. She took it, his skin cool and dry as sand.

As she walked back to the highway, the rifles dropped to casual. A guard hissed to his partner in Arabic, not knowing Maryam spoke every dialect. “The Spider has fangs now.”

Words pulsed inside her, weaving a fresh thread through the day’s heat.

Noon’s blue boil swallowed her steps, each lighter than the last.

#

The wind flayed the camp to rags. Tents pressed flat against their ropes; men hunkered low, scarves over mouths, guns slung in the crooks of elbows. At the camp’s outer ring, a black dome shivered, one side staked down with cinder blocks. Inside, smoke grimed the canvas, filtering what little light trickled through.

Maryam ducked into the tent, blinked away grit. A ring of men squatted on goat rugs, boots scabbed with old blood. Centered among them, Sheikh Jasim balanced a cigar in one hand, glass of lemon tea in the other. His beard spilled over his chest, threaded with white and gold. He grunted as Maryam entered, but didn’t offer a seat.

Her knees pressed to the woven mat, tongue pasted to the roof of her mouth; the sand, the journey, the nerves.

Jasim exhaled, smoke curling into the gloom. “The Spider of Jerusalem,” he mused.

“Last year, you ran papers and prayers. Now you want an army?”

Maryam rolled her sleeves. “Not an army,” she said. “A contract.”

The ring of men tensed. One—thin, sharp-featured, with an old Soviet pistol—stared like he could carve her open with thought alone.

Drawing a pouch from her vest she spilled gold coins onto the rug. “Three shipments, three months,” she said. “For each, you get one kilo in payment, up front.”

Jasim’s smile creased deeper. “Gold is heavy. Paper is lighter.”

Maryam shrugged. “The gold brings men. Paper only burns.”

Smoke curled from the cigar before a spit landed in the tin. “We run the border. You want to pay us for what we do already.”

She shook her head. “Not for what you do. For what you don’t.” Her eyes locked with the thin man. “Your tribes intercept trucks, kill couriers, rob whatever moves west. You leave my shipments untouched. You lend me men to collect ‘tolls’ on the roads. If someone crosses me, you collect double.”

Jasim’s face split in a grin. “You want us to be your muscle.”

Maryam smiled back, a careful rictus. “You want my money more than you want my death.”

The tent sat silent a long beat. Jasim drained his tea, set the glass hard on the carpet. “Girls like you,” he said, “used to cry when we raided their fathers’ homes. Now you come to buy us with coin?”

She dug into her other pocket. Produced a pack of cigarettes, the good kind from Lebanon. Set them on the rug between them. “Or guns,” she said. “Or medicine for your

wounded. Or news about the raids from the south. All for three months of safe passage. You lose nothing.”

The man with the pistol hissed, “She wants to own us.”

Jasim rolled the cigar between his fingers. “And if we take your gold and gut your trucks anyway?”

Maryam’s lips twitched. “You’ll never see another rial. And if I live, I will make the roads run red before you do.”

One of the ring snickered; another spat into the corner.

Jasim let the threat hang—nodded to the coins. “We keep these, no matter what?”

She nodded. “Now. The rest, after the job.”

He swept the pouch toward his side. “And the runners you send through?”

“They don’t carry weapons. They don’t talk. They go to Kufa, and they come back empty.”

Jasim grunted. “You’re cold now, girl. I like it.”

He snapped a finger. A guard poured fresh tea into a pair of greasy glasses. Jasim pushed one across the rug.

Maryam took it, the heat filling her palms, the bitterness rooting her tongue.

“You have a deal, Spider,” Jasim said. “Tomorrow, I send five men with you. They will bring your first shipment through. If you cheat me, I’ll bury you alive.”

She finished her tea, set the glass upside-down. “If you do, remember: the whole city knows your name now. Kill me, and the mullahs will curse your sons.”

Jasim’s teeth flashed. “You’re beautiful like a woman, But you deal like a man.”

She stood, eyes never leaving his. “Try me, and you’ll find out.”

Laughter barked from the ring, some at her expense, most at his. The tension broke; men uncurled, lit cigarettes, reached for the coins. Jasim watched her with new calculation—a peer, or a threat.

As she stepped into the storm, a voice from the tent drifted after her: “The Spider has learned to hunt.”

Maryam squinted against the wind, fists in her jacket, and marched toward the waiting riders.

She owned this road now.

#

Tehran clung to night like a burn. Rain slicked the stones in the bazaar, every gutter an artery of runoff, every awning leaking brown water onto the heads of the desperate. In a back room behind the dying glow of a café sign, Maryam and Arash waited for their client.

The merchant arrived with his wife in tow. The man wore his suit like armor, lapels still crusted with last year’s dust. The woman shivered in a scarf two shades lighter than her skin, the fabric not enough to hide the tremor in her hands. They entered like a rumor—half-believing, half-afraid.

Maryam sat at the table, hands folded, face blank. Arash took the seat to her left, fingers splayed on the wood, one thumb drumming slow as a metronome. He scanned the shadows, eyes never settling on the couple for long.

The merchant spoke first. “My wife and I—”

Maryam cut him off. “Speak plain. The more words you use, the higher the price.”

The merchant blinked—tried again. “We need safe passage. Across the border. Armenia, if possible. Before the election.”

Maryam nodded. “You have valuables?”

He slid a velvet pouch across the table. The drawstring sang in his fingers. “Gold. Jewels. Some US dollars.”

She eyed the pouch—the wife. “Children?”

The woman shook her head, almost apologetic. “My husband’s nephew. He is eight. He can walk. He’s quiet.”

Arash let out a low laugh, like a cough. “No child is ever quiet.”

Maryam ignored him. “The route is the same. We use two couriers—one by night, one by day. You will travel in separate cars. If the checkpoint stops you, you use these.” She produced two forged visas, the ink still tacky on the plastic.

The merchant reached for the documents, hands trembling. “Are they...good?”

Maryam shrugged. “They work if you do not look afraid. If you look afraid, nothing helps.”

The woman’s eyes rimmed with water. “How much?”

“Everything in the bag,” Maryam said, voice flat. “Plus you write a letter. You promise to send more when you arrive.”

The merchant’s mouth twitched. “You would trust us to—”

Maryam’s eyes bored into his. “You will send it. Or you will live afraid. And I will know. And you will lose more.”

The merchant looked at his wife. Her fingers worried the hem of her skirt, twisting tighter with each breath.

He cleared his throat. "We agree."

Maryam slid the pouch closer, felt its weight, and nodded at Arash. He collected the envelope, stowed it in his jacket, and resumed his quiet watch.

Maryam turned to the woman, voice softer but unyielding. "You will be safe. If you do not stray from the plan."

The woman's lips wobbled. "Thank you."

Maryam reached across the table, squeezed the woman's hand, and held her gaze. "You don't owe me thanks. You paid."

Swaying slightly as he rose, the merchant bowed his head. "May I ask—why do you do this? You don't believe in God, or family. You have no stake."

Maryam smiled without mirth. "Everyone is running from something. Some of us charge for the exit."

They left into the narrow wet street, the woman clinging to her husband's arm. Maryam and Arash watched from the threshold, tracking the bob of their umbrellas through the fog.

Arash lit a cigarette, the tip a brief flare in the black. "People pay more than gold ever will," he said.

Maryam watched the street, thinking of all the men she'd bought, all the women she'd sold. "Everyone is trying to buy their way out of something."

Arash grinned, showing his ruined teeth. "The Spider is unforgiving."

Maryam stepped into the rain, the weight of the pouch warm in her coat. The call to prayer rippled over the rooftops, sweet and thin. The sound lived in her ribs a moment longer—her face tilting skyward.

Tomorrow, someone else would beg for passage.

Tonight, she ran the city.

#

The bakery's old yeast never faded, not after a hundred shipments, not after the ovens rusted or the city changed flags twice. The stone floor bit into Maryam's heels as she watched the new line of couriers unpack the latest crates.

Their hands shook. Every movement—lifting a Bible, sorting a packet, weighing the next box—telegraphed nerves tight enough to vibrate the air. Where once they would have laughed, swapped stories, these boys kept their heads down, voices clamped to whispers.

Arash sat on a stool near the window, gun in hand, cleaning each piece with the care of a jeweler. He said nothing, but the slap of his cloth on steel rang through the room.

A boy with a scar under his eye broke a bundle, revealing the mesh bags inside—opium, perfectly wrapped. He glanced at Maryam—to the floor—back at the mesh. His fingers slipped; one of the packages spun onto the stone, rolled under the table.

A hush settled. All eyes shifted to Maryam.

She crossed the floor in four slow steps, boots striking the flagstones. The boy tried to duck, but she crouched and fished the bag out herself. She weighed it in her palm—barely heavier than a fistful of flour—pressed it back into his hand.

“Steady hands save lives,” she said.

He nodded, jaw locked, sweat pricking the scar. Ruffling his hair, she pivoted away, leaving silence to linger in her wake.

When the room exhaled, Arash grinned, mouth full of broken teeth.

Later, as dusk stripped the city of color, Maryam heard the couriers on the back stoop.

They smoked in tight clusters, feet jittering, voices high and raw.

“She sees everything,” one said, thinking the courtyard safe.

The other flicked his cigarette into the gutter. “The Spider watches.”

Maryam stepped into the threshold, let the door swing wide. The boys snapped upright, eyes wide, posture perfect. She smiled—no malice, no warning—just the bare recognition of power earned.

They scattered.

She leaned in the doorway, arms folded. The sun bled out behind the rooftops, setting the smoke alight. She felt nothing but the hum of the city, the old yeast of the bakery, the clean, hard future unspooling ahead.

Once, the Web was Zahra’s. Now, every thread led through her.

She let the night take her, the city hers to run.

## Chapter 14: The Fang

1973.

The bakery sleeps under the moon. Every window locked, streetlights giving nothing but a haze above the alley's trash and rain puddles. Inside, the tiles draw cold into Maryam's calves as she counts the ledgers at the flour table. The day's run left the air scummed with old yeast and the crust of sweat—two things that never fade, not in this city, not in this life.

The ledger snaps shut, ink still fresh on the week's haul. A finger traces the totals: three times the old monthly gross. More routes now, more bribes, more buyers. Even the kids in the Quarter whisper about the new Web, the one run with precision and zero tolerance for debt.

A tight, private smile breaks across her lips. This is what she wanted.

A click rattles the air. The back door, the one only Zahra uses after hours. The older woman's steps strike the stone in flat, unhurried intervals. Maryam doesn't look up, not yet.

Zahra enters under a scarf gone slack, the ends trailing loose at her hips. Her face is all hollows, the eyes inked deep with worry, cheeks stripped of color. She carries a canvas shopping sack, but the heft inside gives it away: not groceries, not tonight.

Zahra moves with the authority of a matron burying her own heart. She sets the sack on the counter and peels the string, her hands unsteady. She produces a Bible, blue cover, then a smaller shape in brown wax paper. She holds the second item up between two fingers.

A lump of opium, hard as a knuckle.

It hangs there between them, a verdict.

Maryam folds her arms, bracing herself against the chill. “You want to count it? Or weigh it?” Her voice splits the room like a wedge.

Zahra’s reply rides the edge of anger and grief. “This is not what your father died for.” Her words wobble, but she swallows the weakness, stands taller. “He bled for the Book, not for your games. Not for this filth.”

Maryam shrugs, letting the accusation glide off her back. “He bled for a cause that didn’t pay its own bribes. That’s why he ended up in the canal.” She gestures at the ledgers. “Now the books run without a single loss. We buy every cop, every customs man. You’d rather I send kids into gunfire, like the old days?”

Zahra’s hand tightens on the opium. The veins in her wrist stand out, blue and shaking. “You make me ashamed to have called you daughter.”

“I never asked for that title.” Maryam sets her jaw, voice cut-glass. “But you know what this buys? Another truckload. Another ten shipments to the provinces. You want to save souls? This is the price.”

Zahra approaches, face inches from Maryam's. She plants the opium on the table, between them. "Your soul is the only one I care about."

Maryam cocks her head, gaze flat. "That's not how the world works." A fingernail taps the opium. "People buy what they want. I give them what they want. In return, I move what we need. Everyone wins."

Zahra's eyes wet. She steps closer, puts a hand on Maryam's forearm. The contact stings—years of trust and betrayal packed into the tremor of a single grip.

"You think you're clever," Zahra whispers. "But you are alone. No amount of money, no amount of success, will warm your grave."

Maryam jerks her arm free. "I'd rather freeze than die in the gutter, like my father."

The old woman recoils, hands fisted. "I see nothing of him left in you." Her words scrape out, hoarse. "You've let greed poison you. Twist you into something hollow."

Maryam's face flickers at the name, a shiver of old anger. "Greed has taught me how to survive. Taught me how to run the Web the right way." A sweep of her hand takes in the ledgers, crates of Bibles, sacks of flour stacked to the ceiling. "You see weakness as virtue. But weakness killed more than the State ever did. I'm building something stronger."

Zahra sags, the mask dropping. The skin beneath runs wet, colorless. Her body—smaller now, the anger spent—replaced by something older. Softer.

The opium returns to Zahra's hand, wrapped again. "You used to believe."

Maryam shakes her head. "Belief gets people shot. Or used. Or worse."

Zahra cups Maryam's chin, forces eye contact. "Power without faith is just another prison."

Maryam laughs, a single bark. "Better a prison of my own making than one built for me."

Zahra steps away, the years in her spine unspooling with each motion. “You will regret this. One day you’ll need something more than your own cleverness. And it will not answer.”

Maryam’s smile never cracks. “You don’t have to watch. Leave if it’s too much.”

Zahra gathers her scarf, reties it in a practiced knot. The Bible and sack lift into Zahra’s arms as she heads for the door.

At the threshold, she pauses. “I loved you like a daughter. I wanted more for you.”

Maryam returns to her ledger, not looking up. “Want something better for yourself.”

Zahra leaves in silence, the door’s latch clicking behind her. Maryam’s world contracts to the scrape of her own pen, the hum of the fridges, the echo of her words still rattling the walls.

The ledger opens again, the count resumed. This is the life her father built: every calculation, every loss, every scar. The job will be finished, no matter the cost.

The moon outside cuts the windowpane in half, black and bone white. Inside, Maryam measures her empire by the column, by the kilo, by the soul.

#

The safehouse drips with opulence now. Gone the mildew, the bare bulbs, the chipped enamel pots. Instead: imported glassware, rugs with thread counts high enough to draw blood from a scarab, velvet benches sagging under the weight of fresh bodies. A chandelier, three tiers of crystal, casts prisms across the ceiling, painting the shadows with delicate violence.

Maryam sits at the head of the table, hair swept up and lacquered, a silk scarf sliding off one shoulder like it has somewhere better to be. Her lips lacquered, nails as sharp as a

magistrate's pen. She drinks from a gold-rimmed tumbler, vodka neat, her tongue so cold it's numb.

Eight couriers ring the table, most in their twenties. All men except for one girl from the Quarter—fat-lipped, sporting a fresh bruise from last week's run. Even with her face bloodied, she sits straighter than the men. Everyone keeps their hands in plain sight, no one trusting the new Web, not yet.

Arash stands against the far wall, broad arms folded, gaze slit to a single black line. He wears black on black, a knife tucked into his waistband, barely hidden. The new couriers give him space, sensing death in his orbit.

Tonight's topic: the container job. Electronics, straight from the American ship, hundreds of VCRs, stereos, early color TVs—each worth a year's wage, all to be ghosted through customs under cover of the clergy shipments.

The plan is simple, but the stakes are absolute. If a single crate goes missing, if a single bribe fails, the line burns and every courier dies broke.

Maryam clears her throat, killing the low hum of men muttering about routes and rotas. "This is a big run," she announces. "I need no mistakes. No one pockets a single transistor. All profits get split after the goods clear Kermanshah."

She lets the words settle. The girl grins, but the men shift, eyes flicking to one another. Rezaei, older than the rest, pushes his chair back an inch, the scrape deliberate. "What about last time? You said we'd get full share. Two weeks later, we see nothing."

Maryam locks onto him, gaze flat. "Last time you lost the Qom drop. Two crates disappeared."

Rezaei leans in, baring bad teeth. "I didn't lose the drop. I followed orders. The customs man said to wait. I waited. When your boy came with the payment, he ran off with the goods."

Maryam cocks her head. "You're saying my man stole from me?"

"I'm saying the Web's changed. Maybe the man who ran off isn't the only one dipping into the load."

The accusation hangs, thick as syrup. Arash uncrosses his arms, but stays put. Maryam waits for the ripple to spread around the table.

Rezaei presses the advantage. "Word is, you're running more than books. That you use the opium and the guns to buy better bribes." He glances at the couriers, appealing to their hunger. "If that's true, we should get a bigger cut."

A beat. The girl from the Quarter speaks, voice cool. "You accusing her of cheating us?"

Rezaei shrugs. "I'm saying she owes us honesty." He fixes Maryam. "Or else."

A line of sweat crosses Maryam's brow, but her hand remains steady on the tumbler. "Or else what, Rezaei?"

He smiles, ugly. "I go to the police. Tell them about the Bibles. The guns. Everything."

Silence floods the room. The other couriers look anywhere but the table.

Maryam lifts her glass. "That's the game, then?"

Rezaei nods, lips curled. "That's the game."

The tumbler meets the table, her hands flatten beside it. "Anyone else want to leave?"

No one answers.

Rezaei pushes back from the table, stands. "I'm going. I'll give you a day to make it right."

Maryam holds his gaze, searching for the boy he used to be, the loyal one. Nothing left but the rot.

A nod passes to Arash. He moves before the air has time to tense. The knife appears, then buries itself in the crease between Rezaei's neck and shoulder.

Rezaei's mouth opens, a wet, puzzled gasp escaping. He drops to his knees, clutching his throat, blood spattering the tile in two quick arcs.

Arash wipes the blade on his shirt, tucks it away, and resumes his post.

No one speaks. The men at the table sit paralyzed. The girl from the Quarter flicks her eyes to Maryam, then to the corpse, then back.

Maryam stands, the movement slow, deliberate. She walks around the table, skirts the pool of blood, and kneels beside Rezaei's body. Hands rifle his jacket, unearthing a slip of paper—an address, a code, the beginnings of his own sideline. The paper disappears into her pocket. Standing, she smooths her scarf.

Eyes fix on the table. "Anyone else have business?"

A single "No, ma'am" breaks the spell.

"Good." A finger extends toward two of the newer boys. "Clean this up. Wrap the body. The morning crew will dump it in the river."

They scramble to obey, relief and terror mingling in their frantic hands.

Maryam turns to Arash, and for a heartbeat, the world narrows to the two of them. She nods. He returns the nod, nothing else needed.

The rest of the night passes in a hush. Couriers speak only in clipped, deferential tones. The girl from the Quarter lights a cigarette, legs splayed, head cocked in admiration.

Maryam drinks her vodka, savoring the sharp burn. The Web belongs to her now, the cost compounding, interest upon interest.

But she also knows she will never be cheated, never betrayed, not by men like Rezaei, not by anyone.

Arash lingers after the room empties, arms crossed.

Maryam approaches, eyes bright with new clarity. "Thank you."

He shrugs. "I follow orders that deserve it."

Nodding, "You'll get your share."

He smiles, blood still drying on his knuckles. "I know."

Footsteps pass him, ascending the staircase to her private office. At the top, she pauses, hand on the rail. A glance back catches Arash's gaze.

In the distance, the city hums with a new current, something raw and electric.

The office door closes behind her, silence wrapping tight.

Tonight, the Spider's Web is spun from steel.

#

Midnight stretches the city tight, every window glinting with secrets, every avenue a canal of hunger. The view from the penthouse burns with it: headlights threading the boulevards, signal towers blinking, shadows moving in lanes between the high-rises.

Maryam sits on the arm of a leather sofa, the room's lines crisp, unsparing. No decoration except a single vase—white lilies, edges browning under the air vent. The table before her reflects the city in precise geometries, the glass unblemished, no handprint or dust allowed.

A tumbler rests in her hand, ice melting slow, vodka still sharp despite the water. Eyes fix on the city, seeing only the darkness behind the lights.

A memory of the evening recurs: the arterial spatter, Rezaei's jaw working in its final moments, the blue ink of his signature on the paper she found in his jacket. Would her blood look so vivid, or vanish into the rug, diluted by everything she's become?

A soft buzz at the door, the coded pulse she'd given only to Arash. The glass lowers to the table. Bare feet cross the marble, cool against her calluses, toward the threshold.

The door opens. Arash enters, shoes off, voice absent. He moves with the precision of a weapon being drawn. His eyes never lift from her.

The door swings closed, the hush of the penthouse swallowing them.

They stand two meters apart. Neither in a rush.

Silence breaks. "You did well tonight."

He nods, says nothing. His hands relax at his sides.

A step closer, measured, distance held. "The Web needs men who can act. Men who don't hesitate when the time comes."

He shrugs. "I said, I follow orders that deserve it."

A flicker of a smile at the corner of her mouth, gone before it lands. Her gaze traces the lines at his lips, the flecks of blood on his cuff. "You ever question it?" she asks. "Doing what we do?"

He tilts his head, as if she'd asked if water were wet. "Only when the orders are soft. Only when weakness comes before logic."

Maryam's pulse quickens, a little. She takes a half-step closer, testing his perimeter. He holds his ground.

"I need more of that," she says, her voice low. "The men, the old guard—they think I'm a joke. Or a whore."

"They won't, after tonight."

She studies the line of his jaw. "Maybe they should," she says, and steps into his space, chests nearly touching.

Arash's hands twitch, not toward violence, but restraint.

A pause to see if he will touch her first. He doesn't.

Lips press to his, firm, claiming. His mouth is dry, breath laced with the sharp aftertaste of cigarettes. He lets her guide the motion. When she deepens the kiss, he parts his lips and takes what she offers, matching her hunger, pulse for pulse.

Breath parts them. Eyes search his for fear, confusion, judgment. Nothing. Only the unwavering heat of loyalty, a kind of brutality with its own gravity.

Hands slide up his shirt, reading the plane of his chest, the hard beat beneath. Buttons slip free, one by one, the shirt falling to the floor. He shivers, just once, the body's reflex to cold.

A palm rests over his heart, his pulse pounding steady as a war drum. Devouring him with her eyes, a whisper asks, "Do you want this?"

He nods, eyes locked on her.

"Show me."

He picks her up, one arm under her knees, the other at her back, effortless as lifting a loaf of bread. He carries her to the penthouse bedroom, the bed made with hospital precision, white sheets against the city's glow.

He sets her down, kneeling over her, hands careful, but not gentle. Pulling him down, she bites at his collarbone, drawing blood, marking him as hers. He doesn't flinch, doesn't fight her for dominance. He lets her claw, lets her bruise, lets her own the act.

When he enters her, she gasps, not for pain, but for the certainty: this is the real currency, the only thing more honest than violence. The weight of him, the sharpness of his hands, the way he fills her—not just the body, but the space inside that no one else has managed to reach.

They move together, a rhythm of surrender and assertion, her fingers laced at the back of his neck, his mouth biting at her ear, her jaw, her shoulder. A moan breaks out, hard, a shudder that cracks the city's spell. Waves of passion break over her body like so many waves, again, and again, until her body is wrung out, empty of everything but the echo of her own name in his mouth.

After, they lie side by side, the sheets damp, the air rich with the tang of vodka, sweat and blood. Arash lights a cigarette, inhales, then passes it to her.

Smoke drags in, filling her lungs. "You ever wonder if we're damned?" she asks, exhaling in a thin stream.

He laughs, quiet. "We were damned before we started."

A nod. "That's why I trust you."

He ashes the cigarette, stands, and dresses. No words of comfort, no promises. That's why she trusts him, too.

He pauses at the door, half-turned. "Anything else?"

She shakes her head. "Not tonight."

He leaves, and she lies back, staring at the ceiling, counting the slow tick of her heart.

Thoughts drift to Zahra, the old ways, and whether regret will ever return to her.

But all she feels is the dull, clean hum of power, and the city beyond, waiting for her orders. All she feels is nothing.

Pulling the sheets tighter, she lets the fatigue roll over her.

For once, sleep comes easy.

#

Sleep doesn't last for the tormented. The rooftop balcony shivers under the night wind. The whole city sprawls below, lights blurring to a halo, traffic crawling like illuminated larvae between towers. Beyond the glare, the mountains loom black and patient, unmoved by the commerce and blood that pulse through the arteries of Tehran.

Maryam stands at the railing, body bare, wrapped in the stained silk bedsheet and the smell of Arash, hair pulled tight, the chill gnawing her skin. In her hands, a notebook—thin, leather-bound, the pages lined in black ink. Pages flick past: schedules, arrival manifests, profit columns. The numbers gleam: ten shipments landed in a week, no losses, bribes prepaid six months out. The city's underbelly has learned her name, learned to pay respect or pay in blood.

The notebook snaps shut.. Underneath, the Bible—her father's, the spine cracked, cover stippled with the bloom of dried blood. The stain never faded, no matter what solvent she tried. It presses to her chest, not for comfort, but for clarity.

She opens to Exodus, the page her father died for. The brownish mark spreads across the margin, blurring a passage about deliverance. A finger drags over the line, skin prickling.

For the first time in years, she feels the book's power—not as magic, not as faith, but as memory distilled to ink and pulp. The words bleed together, become the old man's voice, his

warnings, his hunger to build something that would outlast a regime, a generation, even a daughter's failures.

Farid returns: the lies that hollowed her, the lessons that hardened her into steel. Zahra follows: love curdled when Maryam outgrew the soft, old Web.

A call to prayer floats up from the quarter below, threading with the city's car alarms and cat howls and the distant whine of a police siren. Sound washes over her, unjudged, neither comfort nor threat.

The Bible closes, palm-down on the marble, notebook stacked on top. In the cold, her hands numb, she sketches a new set of routes in her head—north, to the Caspian, then west, to Europe. Maybe the time has come to run the Web past Tehran, past the reach of anyone who thought they owned her.

A gust rattles the railing, dust peppering her forearms. The sting lands, tattooing her with the night's intention.

A whisper to the darkness: "I am the Spider now. My web will never break again."

The wind whips her words away, sends them spiraling over the lights, over the city, over the dark and waiting world.

Her bodies nakedness holds still as the mountain until the cold devours feeling from her.

Tomorrow, she will begin the expansion.

Tonight, she holds the city together with nothing but will.

## Chapter 15: Threads of Power

1975.

The suite perched atop the Damascus Carlton like a crown—marble underfoot, every lamp shaded in gold leaf, a city's worth of silk and saffron draped across the glass. Maryam stood at the window, pulse slowed to a resting hum, watching the city flatten itself against the approaching dusk. A navy suit tailored to the millimeter wrapped her frame, no jewelry except the single diamond Farid left in her wedding band the night he vanished. A thumb brushed the band when she needed reminding that loyalty bought nothing while power bought everything.

The three men waited in the outer room, polite in the way men become when they know a single mistake might end in a knife between the kidneys. The Kurdish logistics magnate—Shaker—smelled of cardamom and uncut oil, his knuckles dense with signet rings, each one stamped with a different clan's crest. The Lebanese financier, Attar, wore white linen in

defiance of the mud and smog outside; his hands fluttered over the crystal dates on the table, never quite settling, as if he feared his own hunger would betray him. The Jordanian arms man, Abu-Rami, dressed for a funeral and looked like he'd rather be at one.

They had spent the past hour jousting over figures and routes, each man dancing around the real subject: who protected what, and what happened when protection failed.

Maryam let them sweat, offering water from a chilled pitcher, declining the sugared tea, her smile a rumor barely glimpsed.

Shaker leaned in, shaking a date loose from the pyramid. "We need the load to cross into Kirkuk by Thursday," he said, tone flat as the plain. "The Turkish corridor is watched. The border patrols bribe high."

Maryam nodded. "We use the Jesuit hospital van. Same as last winter. Your men hide in the false bottom, gold in the lining, rifles beneath the stretchers." Her gaze flicked to Attar. "No one inspects a priest."

The financier smirked. "No one inspects a priest until they bleed. You lost a shipment last month. The city has a long memory, Sister."

Maryam picked a date, split it, extracted the pit. "The van was not mine. It belonged to your cousin, who drank with the police chief." Sweet flesh burst under her tongue before she dropped the pit into a dish. "If you want this to work, you let me run the route my way."

Abu-Rami dabbed at his forehead with a monogrammed napkin, sweat leaking through his hair. "My concern is not the gold," he said. "It's the bodies. You move people, too, yes?"

"I move anything that breathes," Maryam said, voice silk over razors.

He shivered, watching her thumb roll over the diamond. "I heard about the last group. The Christians from Yazd. None made it to the Church."

Hands folded in her lap as she leaned back. "If you want to smuggle refugees, bring more currency. Human cargo costs more than gold."

Shaker laughed, a bark with no humor. "Every man in this room would slit his own throat for a discount, yet you charge double for the flesh of a priest?"

She shrugged. "Priests are easier to replace. But I have no shortage of clients."

Attar bristled, the muscles of his jaw bunching. "You talk bold for a woman with no army. You know this?"

Maryam let the silence bloat the room. Her gaze rested on Attar's manicured hands trembling against the gold stem of his goblet.

"You believe that?" she said, voice quiet.

"I believe in money," he said.

Light caught the suit jacket as she rose. "Follow me."

The men exchanged glances, nervous, before obeying.

The sliding glass doors opened under her lead as she guided them onto the balcony that spanned the length of the building. The air vibrated with muezzin, the call to prayer sharpening the city's angles. Far below, a river of streetlight and neon cut the bazaar into cells; each vendor's tent an island, each alley an artery for the city's black blood.

Maryam gestured to the market below. "You see those two men? The ones by the fig cart and the kebab stand?"

The men peered over the railing. Shaker leaned forward, his bulk pressing the stone lip.

"The one in the grey jacket, and the one with the bad leg. Both work for Nasiri," she said. "Last month, he tried to underbid my rates. Stole two of my best runners." Her eyes followed the crippled man as he limped toward a fruit stand, hands jammed in his pockets.

Attar frowned, eyes narrowed. “You want us to watch your competitors shop?”

Maryam smiled, the muscles of her face barely moving. “No. I want you to see what happens to people who steal from me.”

A pause, then a diamond winked in the dusk when she lifted her hand.

Below, a runner peeled from the shadow of the fig cart and closed on the man in grey. The gun appeared with the neat inevitability of a magic trick. A single shot—soft, almost polite—and the man folded to the asphalt, knees buckling, face pressed to the gutter. The crowd froze, then scattered, a flock broken by a hawk.

The crippled man dropped his groceries, eyes wide, and lurched for the alley. He didn’t get ten paces before a second figure intercepted him. This time, the shot came from a silenced pistol—a whisper, a faint bloom of red on the shirt. The man’s body shivered once, then went still.

Vendors screamed. The market erupted in a panic. Yet within a minute, the shooters had vanished, the crowd’s panic already evolving into the next normal.

Maryam let the tableau sit in the silence, the city’s alarm distilling to a low, nervous drone. Cold air threaded beneath her collar, sweat cooling on her spine. Her breath caught, the balcony’s hush broken by her father’s voice, whispering once about power and its cost.

She turned to her guests. “Protection is not a product. It’s a habit. You either pay for it, or you pay for its absence.”

The Kurdish magnate nodded, mouth dry. Abu-Rami stared at the bloodstain, hands gripped on the railing. Attar said nothing, but Maryam watched a tremor ripple the skin above his cheek.

After a moment, Attar murmured, “What do you want from us?”

Glasses reflected the city's chaos as she faced them. "I want your shipments. Your best cargo. I want to run every line, from here to the Caspian and back. I want thirty percent. And no one tries to underbid me again."

Shaker's tongue flicked at his teeth, weighing the number. "Twenty," he said.

An eyebrow lifted, sharp and questioning. "Thirty."

"Twenty-five and you guarantee every shipment. You lose one, you pay double," he countered.

A diamond-cold smile curved her lips. "Done."

Abu-Rami's eyes never left the alley. "The police will investigate," he said, voice thin.

Maryam shrugged. "The police eat from my hand. If they don't, I send a new police chief."

Attar straightened his lapels, regaining composure. "The Spider's Web can strike anywhere, is that the idea?"

Maryam nodded. "You heard right."

"Enjoy your dates," she said, "and your trip home."

Plush silence left behind her as the elevator doors closed. Her straight spine and eyes alive with the night's promise.

At the lobby, the Kurdish magnate's man sidled up, breath heavy with lamb and garlic. "The National Police have doubled the patrols," he whispered. "They know you are in the city."

Maryam wiped a smudge of date from her finger, glanced at him with all the patience of a queen attending a beggar.

"Let them come," she said. "They're easier to buy when they're scared."

The city's hunger pulled her forward as she strode into the midnight sprawl.

The suite above, the market below, every alley, every bloodstain—a single web, threaded to her hand.

She owned them all.

#

The sun stripped the land to bone and salt. A truck had tumbled down the ravine, the hood peeled open, a black tongue of radiator poking through the wreckage. Two couriers sprawled beside the cab, arms splayed, faces ground into the ochre gravel. Flies matted their wounds. Blood had gone to rust in the sand. The iron scent clung to the heat, scratching at the back of her throat.

Arash hopped down from the ledge, knees bent to kill the drop, and picked his way toward the bodies. He moved with the grace of a hunting cat, his boots leaving no print. Maryam followed at a remove, her eyes on the sky—always scanning for drones, helicopters, anything that would mark her location for the authorities. The air stank of gasoline, copper, and the dry sweetness of death.

Arash squatted beside the first corpse. He yanked up the man's shirt, exposing the latticework of bruises and a bullet hole near the kidney. The entry was clean; the exit blew out a fistful of muscle. He patted the pockets, rolled the corpse, and moved to the next.

Maryam drifted to the back of the truck, where the rear doors gaped. Dust stuck to the sweat on her palms, grit gathering beneath her nails as she climbed. Inside, the cargo had ruptured: crates split and Bible pages scattered like moths on the wind. Everything of any earthly value was gone. A leaf of scripture lifted under her fingers. Red marker annotated the margin, a

line under Daniel, the same passage her father used to quote when the world soured. She folded the page, pocketed it. Its weight pressed against her hip, a quiet pull stronger than the crates or the guns.

Arash called out, “Manifest.” He tossed a clipboard over the truck’s tailgate.

Maryam caught it, thumbed through the carbon pages. Three crates of books, two of machine parts, one of English language pamphlets. All accounted for except a single crate—the one with the hidden compartment, the real prize. The manifest flipped beneath her fingers as she noted how every shipment since February lost a crate at a waystation no one trusted.

She set her jaw, turned to Arash. He had finished with the bodies, found nothing but some small bills and a prayer card. He shrugged, indifferent.

“They were sloppy,” he said, voice flat.

Maryam gave him a look. “Everyone is, in the end.”

He grinned, showing the notch in his canine, and started pulling the intact crates from the truck bed. Each box made a satisfying thud on the dirt, the sound echoing up the canyon. He wiped blood from one crate, careful to keep the label clean.

Maryam watched him work, the economy of his violence, and thought of every lesson Zahra used to teach about loyalty. Loyalty was a story you told yourself to avoid despair. The real currency was fear. Her father’s voice flickered beneath the heat, reminding her fear spent itself faster than faith.

Bullet casings glinted near the road under her gaze. “Who hit them?”

Arash glanced up, squinted. “Angle’s wrong for a sniper. Maybe a checkpoint? Or someone they owed.”

A nod confirmed her filing of the detail.

He loaded the last crate onto his shoulder, walked it up the incline to the Jeep. Maryam lingered, checking the truck for fingerprints, notes, anything that might link back to the city. The stink of failure and a single black hair on the passenger headrest greeted her search.

Before she left, Arash kicked dirt over the bodies, enough to keep the vultures off until a storm. He spat once, a benediction or a curse, then climbed behind the Jeep's wheel.

Maryam slid in next to him. The heat welded the vinyl to her thighs. Silence stretched from her, and he did not expect words.

As they rattled up the slope, she looked once over her shoulder. The ravine swallowed the dead men, the truck, everything they once hoped for.

The loss would remain in her mind only as a number in her ledgers.

Arash flicked a cigarette out the window. "Next time, send better men."

Maryam touched the Bible page in her pocket, words pressed deep into her palm.  
"Next time," she said, "we use no men at all."

#

The office hissed with silence, every surface clean enough to flash back the city's lights. Tehran Tower's top floor, the lair she'd spent half a fortune to design—black glass desk, white leather, the kind of carpet that buried a footstep before it finished.

Maryam stood behind her desk, sleeves rolled, maps unspooled across the glass. Each route—blue for books, red for guns, green for bodies—threaded the city like veins. Every checkpoint, customs stop, and hidden drop on the road to the Caspian lived in her memory. This morning, the lines had changed.

Someone had updated the maps. The ink bled sharper, the handwriting neater than hers. She ran her finger over the altered crossings, comparing each note to the ledger, the daily logs. In the northeast corridor, three crossings gone, replaced by a single, riskier path. The West Road had shifted south, closer to the university district—her least controllable sector. No warning, no request.

The page flipped under her hand while her eyes ticked across the manifests in search of explanation.

A knock at the office door. Maryam kept her attention on the maps. “Come,” she said, the word a command.

The lieutenant entered, her own uniform immaculate, shoes shined, jaw squared for bad news. Maryam caught her reflection in the window—dark hair pulled tight, a scar at the chin from last year’s car bomb. Good soldier, loyal, but never the type to improvise.

“Report,” Maryam said.

The lieutenant placed a sheaf of papers on the desk, one for each shipment in the past week. “Isfahan crates came in light, two boxes less than manifest. The books for Mashhad, three days late. One of the drivers says the checkpoint at Shahr-e Qods is taking more bribes, but I checked—they haven’t increased their staff. The Bibles for Tabriz never arrived.”

Maryam kept her eyes on the page. “Where did they vanish?”

“At the rail yard,” the woman said. “They checked in, but the cameras went dead two hours before. My man thinks inside job.”

Maryam scanned the numbers. Traffic had tripled. Profits had not. She opened her ledger, checked the last month. Expenses up, but the returns stayed flat, or dipped. Sums ran again beneath her pencil, the math betraying her as before.

She pressed a knuckle into her eye. "Who updated these maps?"

The lieutenant hesitated. "I assumed you did. The handwriting is..." Words trailed away as she realized the implication too late.

Maryam looked up. "You think I can't read my own script?"

"No, ma'am. I—"

Maryam let her squirm, then let it go. "Leave the reports. Tell Arash to post two guards at the rail yard. Unmarked. If another shipment disappears, I will hold you responsible."

The woman snapped a salute, pivoted, and left.

Maryam leaned on the desk, maps flaring under her palms. The city outside burned with promise, but the Web inside flickered, strands going slack in places she'd never expected.

Someone clever, someone with a gift for detail, had begun to bleed her from within.

Thoughts drifted to the warehouse boys, the old couriers in the Quarter. None of them had the patience for sabotage. Arash? He'd rather break bones than break trust. Zahra's few remaining loyalists had gone soft, their ambitions too small for this level of treachery.

City lights smeared for a second as her eyes blinked. When she refocused, her own reflection peered back from the glass, thinner than she remembered.

Maryam straightened, sealed the ledgers, and gathered the maps in a sharp stack. The safe behind her desk took the items as she spun the dial in the sequence she and Arash shared.

The next shipment would not go missing. The task would be hers if needed.

Outside, the night crept toward curfew. Sirens braided with the call to prayer, and for a moment, the city's voice sounded almost like a warning.

Maryam rubbed her hands together, knuckles white against the black glass.

She would find the leak.

She always did.

#

The hidden room always felt colder than the rest of the suite, as if the marble sucked every heat from the air. No windows, only a triangle of stone tucked behind a false panel in the library. When Maryam entered, the muscle in her left calf spasmed, warning her against the old ritual. The worn prayer mat accepted her knees as she lowered herself with slow, mechanical precision.

The candle guttered on the ledge, wax spilling down the side in a petrified tongue. A match kept for this purpose flared to life under her shaking hands, sulfur sharp in her nose. Her father's Bible rested beside the flame, cover faded, the brown stain on the margin now more myth than memory.

She used to pray for mercy. For wisdom, or courage. Now the words caught in her throat, scorched by years of unanswered pleas.

Kneeling, her palms pressed to the floor, spine a line of tension from crown to tailbone. The city's noise could not reach her here; only the tick of the candle, the hush of her own breath.

"God," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

Nothing.

The candle flickered, throwing new shadows up the wall. She glared at the flame, daring it to answer.

“You want obedience? You want faith? I have given both. More than anyone in this city.”

Teeth pierced her tongue, blood pooling at the root. Not knowing what she was asking for, she searched for something else to say. Confusion reigned in her.

Silence filled her lungs, expanding her chest until it hurt as she waited. Nothing but her own anger reflected back.

Maryam reached for the Bible, fingers digging into the paper. Pages turned to Daniel, the story her father recited when she cried at night. The verses crawled with years of dust beneath her stare.

No comfort. Only rules, instructions, the echo of a man already gone.

The book slammed shut in her hands, the sound flat and final.

The ache in her knees radiated up her thighs as she rested on her heels. She wondered, for the first time, whether any of this mattered—whether the Web, the power, the city’s fear, could buy her even a second of forgiveness.

The thought made her laugh, low and cold.

A single breath snuffed the candle, plunging the alcove into velvet dark.

As she stood, her muscles protested, joints stiff from months of neglect.

Stale smoke and the unsaid sealed behind her as she left the room.

Back in the corridor, she straightened her jacket, smoothed the hair from her face.

God would not answer.

She would have to answer for herself.

Dawn peeled the docks to steel and bone. The air cut through wool, salt spray knifing across the berth where the fishing trawlers lined up, offloading crates in a ballet of curses and winch cables. Maryam stepped out of the Mercedes, her shoes biting the frost-rimed planks, Arash pacing four steps ahead, eyes already hunting for threat.

They had the run of the pier. Her men formed a perimeter, slickers zipped to the chin, each with a radio and a sidearm tucked under the windbreaker. At the end of the slip, the lead foreman waited, shuffling his paperwork, eager to impress.

“Three boats, all on time,” he reported. “Manifest matches the customs slip. You want to inspect?”

Maryam nodded, walking the line with the foreman at her elbow. The crates stank of brine and diesel; a crate of oranges hid two hundred Bibles beneath the fruit. Another box, marked for the Armenian orphanage, packed tight with sealed vials and a hidden compartment of British-made pistols.

She motioned to the crew. “Sort the books first. Dump the rest.”

They moved with precision, hands numb but practiced. Pages fluttered as the Bibles stacked in rows, covers flapping in the wind. The other goods—contraband, cigarettes, prescription opiates—got carted off to the trucks, headed for the next link in the chain.

A man in an oil-stained coat drifted near, his limp pronounced, face netted with the scars of old burns. He waited at a respectful distance, cap in hand. His eyes, blue as a winter sky, locked on Maryam’s with a strange mixture of awe and regret.

Inspection complete, she turned toward him, wary. Arash drifted closer, arms folded.

The man bowed his head, voice a rough scrape. “Sister Maryam.”

She froze. No one called her that anymore.

He shuffled forward, holding a battered Bible, the cover patched with electrician's tape.

"I ran your father's line. When he fell, they sent me to the mines. I came out different."

Maryam scanned the man's hands, the burn marks, the tremor in his wrist. She recognized him now—one of the few who survived the old guard's purge.

He tried to smile. "You have your father's eyes."

A flash of grief ricocheted up her spine as her body stiffened.

"But not his soul," he added, softly.

The words punched air from her lungs. A glare pinned him while the urge to snap back boiled on her tongue.

Arash stepped forward, hand on the man's shoulder. He squeezed, a gentle warning, then rapped the man's cheek with the back of his knuckle—hard enough to sting, but not to break.

"Don't speak to the Spider that way," Arash said, voice level.

The man dropped his eyes. "Sorry. I only—"

"Go," Maryam said.

He limped away, clutching the taped Bible to his chest.

Arash watched him disappear, then turned to Maryam. "He's useless. Want me to—"

She shook her head, lips tight. "He's already dead."

The work resumed. Foremen barked orders, crates shuffled, paperwork signed and stamped. Maryam walked the length of the pier, counting the shipments, checking the cargo with a surgeon's calm.

When the last truck pulled away, she lingered by the water, the chill clawing through her sleeves. She lifted one of the Bibles, thumbed through the pages. Exodus, Daniel, the Psalms—all there, each verse tight as a drumhead.

Her hands shook, just for a moment.

Arash's narrowed eyes caught her notice from across the room, assessing the new weakness.

The Bible snapped shut in her hands before she wiped the spine on her jacket and set it atop the crate.

The city across the harbor brightened, windows sparkling in the rising sun. Maryam inhaled the cold, the exhaust, the memory of her father's voice, drowned by gulls and the engines of the next ship coming in.

The Web would remain intact under her watch, no matter the loss.

She would answer for herself, alone.

She signaled to Arash. "Back to the Tower."

He nodded, and they left the docks behind, the day opening before them like an old wound, never quite scabbed.

## Chapter 16: Laila's Bond

1976.

The morning crowd knots at the gates of the Armenian school: heads down, voices knifing through the smog, every student in the same blue-gray uniform that camouflages sin as easily as virtue. Across the street, a dark scarf pulls features into anonymity, body wrapped in the dull tan of a house servant's coat. The purposeful shuffle of the city's underpaid and unseen ensures no one meets her gaze.

From this vantage, the school's façade glares with whitewash, the iron fence bristling at the perimeter like the teeth of a predator. Young women file out, their chatter curling into vapor. A discreet move lands her among a cluster of vendors hawking rosewater sweets and cigarettes.

A boy slumps against the corner pillar, toes tracing patterns in the dirt. At twelve, his body has the slack, unfinished quality of a stray cat, bones visible beneath the overlarge shirt and

the crushed velvet of his knockoff Adidas. Two fingers flick—barely a gesture—and the boy shuffles into action, hands already out to pocket the advance.

Past the school gate, he sidles, tracking a lone figure in the uniform. Laila walks with her head down, arms clamped to her sides, expression blank as an empty ledger. The boy “trips,” his shoulder ramming Laila’s with surgical aim. Books scatter, a stifled yelp, the pink of her knuckles shining through.

Flowing into the scene, hands reach to scoop the sprawl of textbooks. “Clumsy,” comes the mutter, a glance sharp as a slap flicked toward the boy. He scurries off, loot secure, mission accomplished.

Laila stands, rubbing her wrist, mouth pressed to a white seam. Blinking, she sees the stranger’s face, and recognition dawns in the slight flare of her nostrils, the micro-twitch at her brow. “Auntie,” she whispers, voice so low it fails to ripple the air.

A grin forms, lips barely parting. A book presses into Laila’s hand, the touch lingering a fraction too long. “You’re late,” chides a mock-scold in the tone.

They fall into step, weaving through the market. Pace set fast enough to keep them at the fringes of every crowd, yet slow enough to blend. Eyes scan every shop awning, every shadow, each intersection where a man in mirrored glasses might log their faces in memory or notebook.

A weaver’s flag snaps from a window—green triangle, then blue. Safe. They duck into a fruit stall, the sugar stink of overripe melon smothering the morning chill. Spice smoke curled near the vendor’s sleeve, sweet and sharp.

Glancing up, Laila studies the disguise. “Is it true you met the Shah?” she asks, the question a dart thrown sideways.

A headshake follows, parsley picked at thoughtfully. “Your sources exaggerate.”

“But you did? At the Cathedral? Last winter?”

Considering, the line between truth and survival weighs heavily. “He wanted to see the gold. Not me.” Parsley tossed into her mouth, chewed with a casual demeanor. “Men are never curious about what matters.”

Laila giggles, the sound fluting upward, out of reach. “Mother says you’re reckless.”

“Your mother is a poet,” comes the wry reply. “She loves words more than facts.”

A silence settles in. Laila’s shoulders round; her hands burrow into skirt pockets. A thumb runs over a lump at the seam, a nervous tic.

The market boils around them—voices barking in a hundred dialects, fruit knives flashing, the clatter of a butcher’s cleaver echoing off tile. Toward the next waypoint they head, a spice vendor with a red scarf tied at her elbow. A wink, then the woman resumes her argument over cardamom prices.

Cutting through a side alley, the noise deadens; damp brick breathes moss and last night’s rain. A shiver, more from nerves than cold, runs through Laila.

“Why today?” she asks. “You said not until my birthday.”

A glance behind reveals emptiness, softening the voice. “Things change. We move when the chance comes.”

Laila’s mouth presses tight. “Does it hurt?” she asks. “What you do?”

A laugh, a single exhale. “Every day.”

“But you keep going.” Her eyes spark with something too old for her face.

Stopping, she kneels to straighten the girl’s collar. “My father hid Bibles in nets. He taught me how to pray under a lantern. He showed me you can break the law, or you can break yourself. Which do you prefer?”

Laila bites her lip. "Mother says faith is for children."

"Faith is for survivors," comes the soft reply. "The rest settle for habit." Zahra's voice echoed in that truth, reminding her faith was risk measured in hope.

They walk, the girl's silence now thick with calculation. At the far end of the alley, a teenage boy paces the curb, hands in pockets. Seeing her, he flashes a yellow handkerchief—new code, new runner. A single nod, and he disappears.

Laila speaks without looking up. "Do you ever get caught?"

A moment of thought. "Not yet." Grinning, the head tilts. "But every day is a new story."

Turning onto the main avenue, the street teems with clerks and merchants, a river of shoulders and frowns. Laila slips her hand into hers, fingers small and bird-boned. A tremor fluttered in the girl's grip, light as paper.

A tremble shudders her voice as she leans in. "I want to be brave, too."

A halt pulls Laila to a stop, bringing them eye level. "Courage is remembering you're always afraid. And walking anyway."

Laila pulls her hand back, embarrassment warring with pride. The cross fumbled out of her pocket—copper, worn at the edges.

She holds it out, palm open. "For you. So you remember."

A hand covers hers, pressing the cross into Laila's skin. "You keep it," she says. "I have a better one." A tap on the spot above her heart, where a hard ache has lived for years.

Across the street, the commotion swallows them. At the next corner, a tug on Laila brings them to a stop, pointing at a group of men in khaki. The police.

"Do you trust me?" she asks.

Laila nods.

“Follow exactly.”

Quickening the stride, pulling Laila into the throng. The hand drops, headscarf adjusted to cover the jaw. At the checkpoint, a bump into a vendor’s cart spills oranges. The police turn, distracted by the mess. Bending down, three oranges are shoved into a tote bag, Laila grabbed, and they hustle past.

No one follows.

On the far side, a breath is released, a smile offered to Laila. “See? Nothing to it.”

Laila beams, the earlier fear erased. “Mother would have yelled at the police,” she says.

“Your mother is loud,” comes the amused response. “But sometimes, soft wins the day.”

A bakery provides shelter, the scent of yeast and honey flattening the air. Laila points at a tray of fresh lavash. A purchase is made, bread torn and shared, crumbs and laughter exchanged.

At the last safehouse, flour is brushed from hands. Leaning to Laila’s ear, voice velvet.

“If you ever need me, walk to the Quarter’s north bridge. Ask for the weaver. Speak the code: ‘Red and blue, always true.’ Understand?”

Laila nods, repeating it in a whisper. “Red and blue, always true.”

Hair is ruffled, pride and dread twisting inside ribs. Spice clung to the street dust. Laila’s small hand, bird-fragile, pressed to hers. Zahra’s lessons echoed: hope was worth the risk.

The crowd pulls them apart. Laila turns once, waving. A return wave, then slipping into the crush, body already ghosting toward the next errand.

A check over the shoulder reveals the market’s chaos swallowing every threat, every old regret. The day’s route, the signals, the faces run through the mind.

Tonight, the Bibles will move north, packed in crates of apricots. Tonight, another prayer will go unsaid, but not unfelt.

The pace quickens, the copper cross hot against the palm, the memory of the girl's bright, hungry eyes refusing to fade.

#

The tea shop hums behind a thin veil of steam and anise. Maryam angles herself and the girl through the front room, past the battered samovar and the shelves stacked with chipped porcelain. The proprietor glances up, recognition flicking in his eyes before he looks away, already translating their presence into code for the next relay down the line.

In the back, the air thickens. Burlap sacks heave against the wall—tea leaves, candied ginger, a slab of dried quince split like an old wound. The table is a plank over two flour barrels, and the single bulb above them throws harsh shadows across the page as Maryam lays the notebook flat.

She pulls a pen from her scarf, clicks it, and writes a word—mercy—in Farsi, the strokes feathered so light they barely imprint the paper. Beside it, she writes another word—bread—but this time bears down, the tip scoring the page. She slides the notebook to Laila.

“Read it,” she orders, her voice so calm it shaves the air.

Laila frowns, brings the paper to the light. “Mercy is the real message. Bread is to distract?”

Maryam nods. “Always two stories. Always two sets of prints.”

She sets her hand over the girl’s, guiding the pen. “Press soft for truth,” she whispers. “Hard for the lie.”

They fill a line: blue, cross, safe, rain. Laila's tongue knots concentration at the corner of her mouth. After each pair, she inspects the groove and the ghost, and a private satisfaction sharpens her profile.

Maryam tears the page, folds it, then burns the edge with a match from the packet hidden in the salt box. The room fills with the acid perfume of scorched ink.

Next: prayer. Maryam pours beads into Laila's palm—amber, the size of lentils, strung on silk so fine it could pass for a broken zipper. “You hold them like this,” she says, threading the beads between the girl’s thumb and forefinger. “Count in your head, not aloud. Never move your lips.”

She traces the pattern on the tabletop: thumb, slide, click, repeat. Laila matches the rhythm, first halting, then smoother.

Maryam bends close, her breath warm with cinnamon. “Your grandmother taught this in a tent near the river,” she says. “Same beads. Same risk. She survived by praying so quietly, God had to lean in to listen.”

Laila grins, proud. “She says you were her best student.”

Maryam feels the lie and the truth fused in the compliment, and something cracks under her ribs. “Not best,” she corrects, but the word lodges in her throat.

They practice the motions—writing, folding, burning; counting, pausing, hiding the beads in a skirt hem. Each repetition burrows the lesson deeper, muscle memory overwriting fear.

Maryam tests the girl with drills: a phrase in code, a verse to memorize, a question about the safe route home. Laila answers every one, no hesitation.

When the lesson ends, Maryam rips a tiny slip from the notebook, writes a single line—"the Lamb walks at twilight"—and tucks it into the hem of Laila's sleeve. "If you get caught," she says, "eat the paper."

Laila stares at her, eyes shining. "And if I can't?"

Maryam shrugs, smile wicked. "Run faster."

A sharp rap on the back door: twice, deliberate. Maryam sweeps the beads into a pocket, presses the girl's hand, and pockets the pen. She checks the alley through a slit in the curtain.

No threat, not yet. But she doesn't risk it.

They file out, eyes forward. At the threshold, Maryam pulls Laila in, plants a dry kiss on the crown of her head.

"Next time, you teach me something," she says.

Laila laughs, the sound so alive it rattles the beads hidden in her sleeve.

Maryam steps into the glare of the alley, heart ticking faster, every sense wired to the city's hunger. The game never ends, but for a moment, she allows herself the grace to believe in survival. Fear pulsed in Laila's fingers as she folded the page, its edges rough against her skin. The voice of her father echoed, steady in Maryam's mind.

They disappear down the passage, two shadows fused in the blue wash of early dusk.

#

In the Tower's kitchen, cilantro mingled with the heat of simmering sweat. Dicing onions, the rhythm in her hands denied the urgency in Zahra's request. The older woman

appeared in the doorway, scarf askew, jaw locked tight, as if the twelve-floor climb had consumed every ounce of resolve.

A brass pot clattered onto the stove, the sound shattering the air. "I saw you," her voice, sharp as the knife in Maryam's grip, cut through the room. "With Laila. Yesterday."

The onion slid into a bowl, eyes wiped with the sleeve's edge. "And if you saw, so did others."

Knuckles turned white against the pot's handle. "I told you not to see her."

Carrot selected, peeled, reduced to coins with steady precision. "You told me many things."

The gap closed with a sudden lunge, her hand clamping around the wrist, arresting the knife mid-motion. "Do you think I'm a fool?" Breath came ragged, heavy.

Calm and unyielding, Maryam met the challenge. "I think you're afraid."

A heavy silence settled, softening the grip but refusing to release. "She's a child," came the vehement reply. "My grandchild. If they catch her, they'll—"

With a swift yank, the wrist came free, sending the knife clattering into the sink. "They won't catch her. I taught her better."

Shoulders slumped against the counter, trembling under the weight of words left unspoken. Hands covered her face, rings etching crescents into the flesh.

The cutting board received a rinse, water running until steam fogged her face. "You think I want her hurt?" The question barely rose above the faucet's hiss.

A head shook, still hidden. "I think you want a legacy. Like all the old men before us."

The water ceased. "If I did, I'd start a school. Or a mosque."

A wet laugh, half snort, escaped. "The difference is faith. Or maybe hope."

Hands dried, she approached, leaning on the counter, their bodies distant yet orbiting the same center. “You taught me to survive,” she acknowledged. “It’s all I’m teaching her.”

The older woman’s head lifted, eyes rimmed with red. “She’s not you.”

Streaks on the wall caught the light, little hands’ faint prints visible near the floor. “No one is,” came the quiet reply. “But she’s close.”

The air cooled, a box of tea slid across the counter, an unspoken command to make a pot. Leaves were scooped into the strainer, boiling water poured, silence stretching as the city pulsed beyond bulletproof windows.

Tea ready, glasses slid across the counter. Both hands cupped the warmth. “If anything happens—”

“Nothing will,” came the interruption. “You have my word.”

Heat anchored her, a reluctant admission. “You always keep your word.”

A smile, the first true one to grace the room. “Someone has to.”

Silence settled, the kitchen’s hum softening into comfort. Breathing slowed, hands steadied. Onions began to caramelize, stirred with a wooden spoon, gesture soft, almost maternal. A glance accompanied a silent question.

A nod confirmed it. “She’s ready.”

A sigh marked the end of resistance. “God help us,” came the mutter.

No answer followed, another glass poured, city lights flickering into dusk. In the Tower’s kitchen, a truce held. For now.

Evening gnawed the city into outlines: highways lit like stitched wounds, radio towers blinking at low clouds, Tehran's haze dense enough to mimic a full moon. The rooftop balcony of the Tower hung above it all, air sharp with ozone and exhaust's bitter tang.

The samovar settled on the ledge, steam unwinding into the dusk. Warmth merged as they sat close, yet a respectful space remained between them.

Silence reigned, the city's din reduced to a low, persistent static. A gentle voice broke the stillness. "She is the best of us. I will keep her safe. Always."

Gaze locked on the horizon, hands clutched tightly around a glass. "I want to believe you," came the whisper. "I want to believe she has a future."

A hand reached over, awkward in its offer, but accepted nonetheless. "You've given her hope," the words barely more than a breath. "I gave her nothing but rules."

A squeeze, brief and affirming. "Rules are what kept us alive."

Fatigue carved into the face turned toward her, lines softening. "Is it enough?" "Never," came the quiet reply. "But it is all we have."

The tea finished, they sat in the quiet, the night offering shelter. Darkness fell, and a prayer was offered, voice quivering yet steady. The ritual was echoed, softer, more muscle memory than faith. Words filled the gap, a thread pulled tight, unbroken.

An empty glass, a lingering presence in the doorway. "Take care of her."

A nod, silence holding the promise.

The shape dissolved into shadows, leaving one to watch the city flicker, the promise of a future to protect echoing in the heart.

Hands pressed against the balcony's cool stone, and for the first time in years, a whisper of a prayer for forgiveness.

The city below answered only in light.

## Act 7: Collapse and Revolution

### Chapter 17: The Bargain

June 4, 1976.

The Mahmudian family courtyard sagged under the weight of celebration. Chairs jammed shoulder-to-shoulder, cheap red ribbon strung from pomegranate limb to cracked brick, the air sour with sugar, sweat, and the dry musk of burning wild rue. At the garden's edge, beneath the gloom of a battered pomegranate, Maryam stood half-concealed, Arash planted at her side—a pair of knives among the cake forks and confetti.

No color was worn for the day, only the black silk shawl with gold cuffs, the one that set the mothers whispering about her pride. Her eyes burned past the sway of lanterns and the blur of lace and bouffant: she saw only Laila.

The girl—no, the bride, as of this hour—not yet 15 years old, perched at the head of the sofreh aghd, knees pressed together so hard the joints might fuse. Candlesticks flickered at the cloth’s border, their drippings hardening in the June heat. Honey, rosewater, flatbread stamped with verses, and a mirror: tradition assembled like a crime scene, every object encoded with its own language of duty and barter.

Ali Mahmudian’s mother approached from behind, her jaw clenched in triumph. The old woman’s hand hovered in the air, lace veil pinched between thumb and index, as if waiting for a cue from God before she crowned Laila’s bowed head. The moment stretched, hot and endless, broken only by the dry click of a lighter as a cousin relit the rue to chase out envy and the evil eye.

Maryam’s jaw ticked. The smoke of burnt rue clung to her tongue, sharp and bitter. The tremor in Laila’s wrists was visible, the way her hands worried the hem of her blue dress—the only blue in a sea of beige and cream. That blue dress, soft as breath, mocked her with its innocence.

As the veil fell, Maryam glimpsed two streaks of raw skin where the tears had washed clean lines down the girl’s cheeks. The onlookers murmured, pleased at the modesty, the humility, the sign of a good match.

Aunties lined up on plastic chairs, the mosaic of their dresses like a scab that refused to heal. Some whispered prayers; others gossiped in Turkish, Armenian, the sharp-edged Farsi of the working class. They praised Laila’s beauty, her mother’s wisdom, the stability of Ali’s

paycheck and the cleanliness of his family name. No one asked if the child underneath the veil could breathe.

Ali, the groom, paced the width of the courtyard in a cheap black suit, sleeves hiked too far up his wrists. He grinned on command and took the mirror when it was passed, holding it before Laila's face so they could see themselves "reflected together, as one." The tradition was meant to sweeten the future. All it did was glare the sick light of the courtyard straight into her pupils.

Farid threaded through the crowd like a shark trolling a school of mackerel, all polished boot and easy laughter. Zahra accompanied him sometimes, but most of the time she stayed by her daughter. Each time a guest addressed him as the "master arranger," he deflected with a modest shrug, but his eyes scanned the perimeter, always watching to see who was talking to who. He nodded at Maryam once, a flicker of acknowledgment and a warning. She did not return it, he moved on.

Beside her, Arash shifted his stance only to keep the tree from gouging his scalp. He'd dressed for the job: white shirt, top button open, the faint ghost of a bruise on his left cheek from a "negotiation" two days prior. To the crowd, he was another distant cousin from the provinces. To Maryam, he was the only person here who would step in if the party became a bloodbath.

Laila's lips moved behind the veil. Maryam couldn't make out the words, but she recognized the shape of prayer. Laila's fingers worked a small cross pendant, the chain hidden in her lap, thumbing it as if it was the only thing keeping her from drifting away. Around the girl's neck, visible just below the veil's scalloped edge, gleamed a gold rose: fine, delicate, utterly out of place among the brassy wedding jewelry. Maryam had given it to her months ago, at a price so obscene even Farid had gone silent when she'd pressed the box into Laila's palm.

The wedding guests interpreted it as a quirk of Maryam's Western ways, a joke or an affectation. No one guessed it was an anchor, a promise, a weapon disguised as child's jewelry.

Ali's mother patted Laila's shoulder, beamed at the audience, and began the first recitation: a poem about doves, honey, and the "joining of two rivers." A cousin dabbed at Laila's cheek with a handkerchief and hissed, "Don't ruin your makeup, child," as if that would fix the trembling.

Maryam's grip on her shawl left crescent marks in her forearm. The fabric felt heavier than armor, a burden she could not set down. Smoke from the rue lingered on her tongue, clinging to her mouth like regret.

Next to her, Arash murmured, "You want me to get her out?"

Her gaze stayed fixed on Laila, voice just above the thrum of music. "She can't run. Not now."

He frowned. "You sure?"

Maryam considered. "If she breaks, they'll bury her. If she bends, she might make it out alive." She dug nails into her palm, the pain a focus. "I'll get her when she calls."

Arash nodded, no judgment in it. He scanned the faces, searching for any sign of a threat greater than what tradition already promised.

Farid drifted closer, swirling a drink in a glass that probably cost more than Arash's monthly wage. He let his gaze settle on Maryam, a smile bleeding slow across his mouth.

Farid leaned against the garden wall, his gaze sweeping over Maryam with feigned admiration. "You know, Maryam, you've transformed beautifully. From those days of scurrying through shadows with dusty Bibles hidden in your skirts to this—an elegant vision amidst the chaos. It's impressive."

He stepped closer, his smile widening, Arash shifted his stance. "I hear your business is thriving. With the Mahmudian family marrying into ours," he clicked his tongue, "Ali and I will soon be the largest movers of goods in this part of the world. Imagine the possibilities! We will dominate every trade route from here to Baghdad to Jerusalem."

"This marriage, a good match," he said, loud enough for others to hear. "Strong families make a strong future."

"She's still a child Farid. How can you allow this?" Maryam strained.

Farid lifted his drink a half toast and a half shrug, "She loves him, what's a father to do?" A small smile escaped the corners of his mouth before he put it to the glass and sipped.

Maryam flashed her teeth in reply. "If you say so."

He leaned in, voice lowered for her alone. "You know, I'm proud of you. Not many would come to the wedding of their—what are you to her, exactly? Confidante? Godmother?"

She bit down on the word he wanted: traitor.

He raised the glass a second time, toasting her with nothing in his eyes but calculation. "Don't worry. I'll keep her safe. Like I promised Zahra."

Maryam's hand twitched. The image came sharp: glass shattering in Farid's face, a red line of blood cutting through his smile.

Instead, she smoothed her shawl, squared her shoulders. "You keep her safe, and I'll let you keep breathing." She didn't say it, but she thought it.

Farid laughed, a soft cough. He clapped Arash on the shoulder, "I take my leave", and wandered back to the center of the crowd, where Ali's mother was now passing around tiny silver spoons and instructing each guest to dip into the honey and feed a mouthful to the bride, "so that every word spoken in this house will be sweet."

Maryam watched as the line formed. Women elbowed each other to reach the front, some cooing, some barely hiding their envy. Laila endured it all, lips pressed tight, the honey catching at the corner of her mouth, shining in the lantern light.

The old woman presented Laila with the wedding ring. It was a massive, overwrought band, studded with a blue stone so large it threatened to dislocate her finger. As it slid on, the crowd exhaled together: relief, envy, perhaps even happiness, depending on which part of the courtyard you stood.

The music switched from classical tape to a pulsing Turkish beat. Guests clapped, and two men rolled out a plastic mat for the dancing. The bride and groom stood for photographs—Ali gripping Laila’s shoulder so tight she flinched, but never pulled away. Farid orchestrated each shot, arranging the crowd, fixing ties and smoothing hair, the ringmaster of his own circus.

Maryam slipped through the outskirts, Arash shadowing her. They passed the perimeter of the party, where teenage boys smoked in darkness, trading filthy jokes and side-eye glances at the older girls. One recognized Maryam, started to approach, then thought better of it.

At the far edge of the lot, behind the kitchen outbuilding, Maryam lit a cigarette, hands cupped against the breeze.

Arash waited until she exhaled. “He’s never going to let you near her again,” he said.

Maryam nodded. “I know.”

Arash turned, watched the crowd. “You want me to—”

“Not yet,” she said. “Let him have his night.”

They stood together in silence, watching the circle of dancers grow, the chaos of the celebration winding tighter and faster.

For a moment, the laughter drowned out the music, the smoke and rue and honey thick enough to fool the heart. For a moment, it seemed like nothing was wrong with the world, that this marriage was the solution and not the next link in a chain of ruin.

But when Maryam closed her eyes, she could see the future—every bruise, every night spent in terror, every slow suffocation under a veil heavier than any fabric could be.

The cigarette fell, crushed beneath her shoe.

“We take her,” she said, “when the time is right. Not before.”

Arash grinned, showing his ruined teeth. “You always have a plan.”

Maryam watched the party, the lights, the lie of celebration. The cross pressed beneath her shirt, sharp with the memory of its twin on Laila’s throat.

She waited.

She would wait as long as it took.

#

The guests sloughed from ceremony to feast, the courtyard shivering with music, plastic plates, and the resinous stink of over-boiled lamb. Maryam moved with Arash to the outer gate, where the echo of laughter dulled against the city’s dark. Breath stayed shallow near the main table, where she had no appetite for false cheer, forced toasts, or the way every neighbor used the word “woman” like a leash.

Arash stood beside her, hands in his pockets, gaze fixed on the unmended concrete where party light gave way to shadow.

Farid found them there, just as the sky bled from blue to bruise. His steps were measured, shoes clicking on the uneven stone, a drink glinting in one hand. He paused, framed by the archway, the city's neon catching in his eyes. He smiled—white, empty, and true.

He raised the glass, a salute or a warning. "A good match for the family, Maryam," he said, voice honeyed, eyes dry. "Sometimes, the right alliances are worth more than gold."

Maryam's heart hammered so loud she was sure Farid could hear it. Fear and fury wound tight, each breath sharpening the silence between them. She locked her jaw, refusing to give him even the tremor of a reply.

Farid sipped, let the silence coil. He glanced at Arash, measuring, then back to Maryam. "You always did know how to pick a winner," he said, letting the words twist. "Just never knew how to keep them."

She stared him down, a stone where her soul should be. Her father's warnings flickered, an ember beneath her anger.

Arash tensed. He shifted half a step forward, his arm grazing Maryam's, the smallest touch—meant to anchor, not restrain.

Farid watched the gesture with the cool satisfaction of a man who'd already calculated every move and won. He leaned in, voice dropping so only they could hear. "Enjoy the party," he said. "Tonight is for celebration!"

He turned, the glass catching the last light, and strode back toward the laughter, the music, the false promise of family. Before he vanished into the glow, he raised his glass again, a final, mocking toast to the woman who would never be welcome at his table.

Maryam watched him go, every muscle taut, the urge to scream or strike or weep locked behind her teeth.

Breath moved in and out until the pulse in her head slowed.

Only then did she unclench her fists and let herself feel the old, pure hatred.

She would wait. She would remember. Hatred buzzed in her teeth, anger coiling low. Her father's voice whispered under the metallic taste of air, crowd noise drumming around her.

One day, Farid would pay.

#

The party died hard, but not quick. After the last old man slumped to snoring under a shroud of rice and shank, after the tablecloths crusted with sauce and the children's laughter faded to a dull hum behind thick doors, the air inside the Mahmudian home vibrated with the aftershock of joy. It was a joy so calculated and mechanical, Maryam felt it as static, an irritant that clung to the throat.

The shadow of the same tree that shielded her that morning cloaked her as she waited in the garden's far corner. She counted breaths, then minutes, until the moon swung high and the only people left outside were the stray cats.

Swift and silent, the old street instinct returned like muscle memory as she moved. The kitchen door hung on its latch, allowing her to slip through barefoot across cold tile, past the tangle of chairs and the mountain of dirty plates. Upstairs, the light was dim and gold. Four doors passed in her count before she chose the farthest, where a faint line of illumination spilled across the hall's battered carpet.

Inside, the room was smaller than she remembered. The ceiling sloped low, blue with water stains. A single oil lantern set on a crate pooled flicker across the walls. Laila sat on the

bed, still in the pale dress, the veil discarded but her hair pinned tight as a bandage. Her hands clutched the Bible, the old blue copy with the split spine and the flyleaf Maryam had inscribed months ago. The cross—Maryam's gift—glittered at her throat, a signal fire in the gloom.

Laila looked up as Maryam entered, eyes swollen, cheeks raw and shining in the lantern. The room carried a coldness—the smell of starch and lavender, a cleanliness so deep it erased any trace of what came before. The lavender's softness tangled with the hush, a fragile shield in the gloom.

In three steps she crossed the floor, dropped to her knees by the bed.

Laila tried to speak, but the words stuttered out as sobs, silent at first, then shuddering, then so loud Maryam thought they would wake the house.

Maryam reached for her, took her hands in both of hers, pressing them until the tremor stilled. Laila's hands were cold, small, and alive, anchoring Maryam to her vow. The skin on her arms was freezing, the bones tiny and light as bird wings. Maryam bowed her head, forehead to their joined hands.

"You are not alone," she whispered, the words so thin she barely heard them herself.

Laila shook, then nodded, tears making a mess of the nice dress, the Bible, everything.

A thud in the hallway—maybe a door, maybe a footfall. Laila stiffened, and Maryam pressed her tighter.

The urge to promise safety pressed at her, to speak the words Zahra had repeated a hundred times: You are protected. But the lie stuck and curdled, unutterable.

Instead, she said, "You are the strongest person I know."

Laila clung tighter, nails digging in, as if to anchor herself in the moment before it could be pulled away. "I want my mother," she half whispered half sobbed.

Another sound in the hall. Louder. Closer.

Maryam let go, but not all the way. A wisp of hair slid from Laila's cheek under her hand, tears wiped away with the sleeve of her own shawl.

"Pray," she said, and saw that Laila already was, lips forming the silent shapes, words known only to the desperate.

A vow sworn behind gritted teeth—silent, searing—whatever it took, whatever it cost, Laila would be free. She would tear down every gate, burn every lie, if that's what was required. Burn the whole city to the ground, if that's what freedom demanded.

The footsteps halted outside the door.

One kiss to Laila's hand, a single squeeze, and she vanished into the dark, lavender clinging like memory. The maze of furniture and dead flowers parted for her as she moved down the stairs, through the kitchen, and into the cold.

Arash waited near the gate, back to the house, hands jammed in his pockets.

Silence thicker than the day's heat settled between them as she joined him.

"She okay?" he asked, voice stripped to the nerve.

A lie and a nod. "She will be."

They walked together, out the gate, past the dying torches and the wilted garlands, out into the waiting, empty city. The call to prayer rolled over the rooftops, distant and unheeded. The sound drifted through her, a pulse of memory and ache.

Behind them, the Mahmudian house glowed soft and golden, as if nothing inside it could ever break.

Ahead, the street was clean and blank, ready for whatever mark she would make next.

## Chapter 18: A New Life

April 14, 1977.

Maryam slipped into the Mahmudian house through the servants' entrance—three rapid taps, a pause, one sharp knock against weathered wood. The door held its breath... then yielded. A wedge of the kitchen maid's face peeked out, features darting between terror and hope, but when she saw Maryam, she opened wide and stepped back with the barest nod.

No words. The rules here: never speak, never risk your voice on the air.

Slipping inside, she clutched her parcel against her ribs. The kitchen's fug of fried onions and cheap sunflower oil was overpowered by the medicinal sting of disinfectant—someone had tried to bleach the memory of old meals from the tiles, but the layers always bled through. A single bare bulb glared in the pantry, revealing an empty cradle of eggs and a hillock of bruised

apricots. The maid pointed with her chin: up, second door on the right. She vanished, apron flapping, into a closet that smelled of bleach and ammonia.

The rest of the house was dead with hush, only the thin, animal wail of a newborn threading through the floorboards. Maryam moved in silence, her feet finding the spots between creaks and loose planks. The corridor's carpet, moth-eaten and balding in patches, muffled even the memory of footsteps. Along the walls, every frame—family portraits, school diplomas, a garish photo of the Shah and Queen—hung askew, as if the house was slowly tilting under the weight of its own disappointments.

At the corner, Maryam paused, pressing herself into the shadow where two doors met. One, lacquered in a dark gloss, hid Ali's father: she could hear the wet snore on the other side, the post-ictal coma of a man who'd never met a drink he didn't marry. The other, white paint peeling, shielded Ali's mother—a woman of weaponized silence. Maryam listened. Nothing. Not even the scrape of slippers, just the tick of a clock and the flywheel squeal of a malfunctioning fan somewhere in the house.

A careful tug adjusted her scarf to keep the wrapped bundle hidden. Sweat cooled under her collar, heartbeat drumming against the bundle she kept hidden. In her palm, the package was heavier than the ledger or the pistols she'd carried on more dangerous nights. It was a simple thing, really: a page of scripture, smuggled out from an old Armenian printshop, the ink still perfuming the cloth with a note of ancient, forbidden hope. It was rough beneath the cloth, its promise sharper than her father's whispered warnings.

Past the parents' doors, the corridor narrowed to a heat-trap—no windows, the air sour with boiled cabbage and the faint, sweet rot of old milk. Each step was a confession, the sweat under Maryam's dress collecting in nervous, salty arcs. She passed a window, the curtain drawn.

On the glass, a sun-bleached sticker of a cartoon lion gaped out at the courtyard. Below, in the yard, two shirtless boys hammered at a pile of bricks, bickering in bored, nasal whines. Maryam ducked out of sight, heart triphammering until the noise faded.

At the end of the hall, Laila's door. The paint here was different—a powder blue, the color of a sky that never belonged to this city. On the lintel, a garland of plastic daisies, cracked and shedding petals like dandruff.

Maryam knocked once, and waited.

Inside: a shuffle, a hush, Laila's voice, thin as a hair: "Who is it?"

She whispered, "It's me."

A pause—a rustle. The door opened a hand's width, and Laila's face appeared, half-shadowed, eyes dark with exhaustion and wild with something deeper—joy or terror, maybe both.

Maryam slipped inside, closing the door behind her with a click so soft it barely counted as sound.

The room was a cell: a single bed, stripped of anything frilly or soft; a battered dresser, its top crowded with lotion bottles, a cracked hand mirror, and a single pomegranate that had started to collapse in on itself. In the far corner, a bassinet—nothing special, a plastic rental from the hospital, lined with an old towel. Next to it, a folding chair, the seat worn shiny from months of use.

Laila perched on the bed, propped by two pillows, her face gray-pale against the dark tangle of her hair. A faded housecoat hung on her, sleeves too long, hem stained from leaking milk. Her eyes were the only part of her that seemed alive: bright, urgent, slightly manic.

Cradling the baby in one arm, her other hand smoothing the blanket. The infant—a boy, Maryam remembered—was swaddled so tight he looked less like a person and more like a package, a shipment awaiting delivery.

Maryam blinked, the sight striking something behind her ribs.

She knelt by the bed, setting the wrapped package at her knees.

Laila's voice was raw. "He's asleep, but he'll wake. He always does."

Maryam smiled, but it came out crooked. "He's beautiful." She reached out, touched the baby's cheek, the skin shockingly warm and delicate.

A shaft of afternoon light cut through the window, catching dust motes in midair, setting them afloat in a golden drift. The air in the room was thick—more from the weight of secrets than from the stifling heat outside.

Laila stared at the baby—at Maryam. "He has his father's ears, but—" She stopped, emotion clamping her throat.

Maryam nodded, understanding without words.

The house was silent except for the soft, wet breathing of the baby and, far below, the faint clang of the kitchen maid setting out the dinner plates.

Maryam shifted on her knees. "I brought something." The package came unwrapped in her hands, paper crinkling softly under her careful touch.

Inside: the page of scripture, rolled and tied with a thread of blue. The fold of the baby's blanket hid it, tucked close to the heart.

"For protection," she whispered.

Laila's eyes glassed, but she said nothing.

The two women sat, heads bowed, the dust swirling between them like the ghosts of old prayers.

Downstairs, a door slammed—silence.

Maryam listened, counting the seconds. When nothing happened, she exhaled, slow and silent—squeezed Laila’s shoulder as if passing along a reservoir of strength.

The baby snuffled, stretched—resumed his tiny, labored breaths.

Maryam memorized the sight: the mother, the child, the cross at Laila’s throat. In another world, this would have been enough.

But here, the danger was not outside—it was in the bones of the house, the taste of the air, the legacy of men like Ali and the families that sheltered them.

Maryam stood, smoothing her dress, and fixed Laila with a look that was both warning and promise.

“I’ll come again,” she said.

Laila nodded, lips pressed white.

Maryam lingered at the door, hand on the knob, her nerves jangling.

In the corridor, the house was a tomb again, all secrets and waiting.

Silent as arrival, she slipped out, the image of Laila and the baby burned onto the insides of her eyelids.

As she reached the end of the hall, she heard the child’s cry—thin, angry, alive—and knew, in her marrow, that the sound would echo long after the sun went down.

The room spun in the golden hush of afternoon. Laila settled back, eyes rimmed with exhaustion and the glassy shine of someone who'd spent more time crying than sleeping. But when she saw Maryam, her face broke into the faintest, tremulous smile—a thing with more fracture than shape. Laila's gaze darted to the door—back to Maryam—mouth opening around unspoken words before sealing shut on a silent plea.

Maryam crossed the floor in three steps, knees clicking as she knelt beside the bed. The baby—a small, flushed tangle of limbs—slept in Laila's lap, one fist knotted into the loose fabric of her housecoat.

"He looks like you," Maryam said, voice the hush of a chapel after the last prayer.

Laila gave a sad, lopsided grin. "Not the parts that count."

Maryam reached out, palms up, an offer rather than a request. Laila shifted the baby into her arms, their hands brushing in the transfer—one set trembling, the other steady as granite.

Reza weighed less than a ledger, less than a bible. His head, barely the size of a lemon, lolled into the crook of Maryam's elbow. She studied his face: the closed lids so thin you could trace the blue of veins beneath, the ears soft and perfect, the down on the scalp like mist in the hills outside Tabriz. His lips worked at nothing, a muscle memory of hunger, or protest.

Maryam rocked him, gentle, the way her own mother had once done before the regime's boot and the city's hunger wiped every good memory clean.

"He has your eyes," she said, and meant it, though the child's were closed.

Laila watched, her fingers worrying the hem of her sleeve, twisting, untwisting, nails bitten to the quick.

"Can I—?" Laila asked, half rising.

Maryam shook her head. "Rest."

The baby's warmth seeped into her bones. As if remembering the purpose of her visit—she slipped the bundle from her coat pocket, careful not to startle mother or child.

The package was small—only a slip of parchment, wrapped in a piece of soft flannel. Maryam unrolled it, exposing the verse in careful, almost monastic hand. The ink glistened, new and secret. She held it for Laila to see.

"A gift," she said. "It's from the old print shop, the one near the cathedral."

Laila's fingers reached, trembling, for the parchment. A pause caught her, fear tightening at the thought that taking it might snap some unseen thread holding her world together.

"It's dangerous," Laila whispered, looking not at the words but at Maryam's face.

"Not more than the world outside," Maryam replied. "You remember the code? If you ever need me—"

"Red and blue, always true," Laila finished, voice wavering.

Maryam smiled, something wet burning behind her eyes. The parchment slid into the baby's blanket, close to the heart, as she bent to whisper—not a true prayer, only words so old they felt like her grandmother's dusk lullabies in the village.

Laila watched, both hands covering her mouth, tears tracking the new cracks in her cheeks.

"He threw a lamp," she said suddenly, voice low, as if confessing to the baby more than to Maryam. "At the wall. The midwife said I needed rest. He said I was weak, that I had made him look like a fool in front of his mother. He—" The rest was a clatter of knuckles against fabric, words caught in the throat.

Maryam stilled, the motion in her arms gone rigid. She looked up, holding Laila's gaze.

"She's always there," Laila said, eyes flicking to the ceiling. "Every time I close my eyes, I see her face. She wants to hold him, but I won't let her. Not until he's older. Not until I know he won't—"

The words died.

Maryam rocked the baby, slow and deliberate, her smuggler's hands enormous against the tiny ribs and birdlike shoulders. The scars along her knuckles stood out, stark and white. The words pressed against her tongue: a promise to protect them, to keep Reza safe, to ensure Laila would never have to fear again.

But she was a poor liar.

"Sometimes the men we love are the ones who ruin us," Maryam said, voice stripped to the core.

Laila blinked, confusion and pain in equal measure.

"But that's not your fault. It's never been your fault." Maryam shifted Reza, smoothing the hair at his temple. "He will never grow up to be like them. I swear it. If I have to burn the whole city to keep him safe, I will."

The vow hung in the room, thick as incense.

Laila stared—nodded, a single sharp jerk of the chin that was fear wearing faith's mask.

Maryam pressed the baby close, the faint, milky breath of him warming her collarbone. Eyes closed, her body remembered what it was to be needed, to serve as anchor instead of weapon. Fear slid beneath the quiet, but so did hope, bright and thin as dawn. In that moment, she let herself hope—for a second—that the promise could hold.

But outside, a door banged, and the baby's face flinched, his eyes fluttering open to reveal a furious, unblinking blue.

Maryam leaned in, forehead to Reza's, and whispered: "You will not be lost to the dark. I promise."

She rocked him until he stilled, until his chest rose and fell with the quiet certainty of the living.

Across the bed, Laila reached out, fingers brushing Maryam's wrist. The touch lingered, a silent plea, a demand for more than faith.

"I will never let you be alone," Maryam said, and meant it.

The dust shimmered in the last rays of afternoon. The two women sat, bound by the child and by the grief of knowing what waited outside the room.

For a long time, they said nothing.

Quietly, Maryam began to hum—a low, minor lullaby, the anthem of women who'd lost more than they'd ever held.

It was enough to keep the baby asleep, at least for now.

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The moment before disaster always tasted the same: a coppery prickle at the back of the tongue, a silence just sharp enough to cut the air.

Maryam was still humming when a boot heel struck the floorboards outside Laila's room. She stopped, the lullaby's last note vanishing into the stifling hush.

Laila's arms tensed around Reza. For a heartbeat, no one breathed.

The knock—sharp, perfunctory. Not Ali; his anger would have slammed the door off its hinges. Not the maid; she never knocked. This was the rap of someone entitled, someone who expected to own the room.

Maryam handed the baby back, her motion so smooth it felt rehearsed. Rising, she straightened the scarf at her chin and crossed to the window, pretending to fuss with the curtain cord.

The door opened. A woman entered, her body wrapped in layers of polyester, headscarf rigid and severe, a sheaf of fresh linens braced against her chest. Ali's sister, maybe an aunt—it didn't matter. They all looked the same once the years had carved their features into a mask of judgment and careful disdain.

The woman's eyes swept the room, taking inventory: the two empty teacups, the rumple of the bed, Maryam's black dress that belonged nowhere in this house. Her gaze lingered on Maryam's hands—fingers stained with ledger ink and old secrets—then darted to the baby, a lightning-check for harm.

"She sleeps, sometimes," Laila lied, voice trembling. Reza settled deeper into the blanket as she tucked him in, hiding the blue thread and the parchment.

The woman sniffed, her lips puckering. "A guest, Laila?" she said, eyes never leaving Maryam.

"Maryam is family," Laila replied, soft but steady. "She's here to help."

The woman set the linens down, eyes sharp enough to make a lie out of any word. She gathered the old sheets, folding with mechanical precision. The room filled with the static of her presence—starched, antiseptic, and cold.

Maryam kept her gaze on the window, but tracked every motion in the glass. The mirror showed her own face first: then the figure behind her, shoulders squared, mouth set in an unyielding line.

Finally, the woman spoke, her voice a slow venom. "It is best for mothers to rest, not chatter. If the child wakes, he will cry for hours. And tonight there will be guests. Important guests."

Laila looked at her lap. "We'll be quiet."

The woman nodded, gathering the linens. Her exit stalled bedside, that slow drag of attention from Maryam to Laila to the crib, where the baby's breath rose and fell beneath her judgment.

"He has Ali's eyes," she said, with something like pity. The door clicking shut behind her.

Maryam exhaled, her lungs burning. She glanced at Laila—cheeks pale, lips chewed raw.

"It's always like this," Laila said, voice thin. "Every hour, someone watches. They count the minutes I'm alone."

Maryam crossed the room, took Laila's hand in both of hers. "They won't hurt you," she lied.

Laila squeezed, desperate. "He says I'm weak. That I'm failing him. I can't—" She stopped, the rest unspeakable.

Maryam's jaw ached. "Listen to me. If it ever gets worse—if you're scared—use the code. I'll come, no matter what."

A scream rose from the courtyard below, followed by raucous laughter—the party gearing up, voices blending with the metallic blare of a cheap radio. The celebration for Ali's son and heir, the hope that maybe this child would be the one to make the family proud.

Maryam stepped back to the window as she'd been trained to do in a thousand safehouses, a thousand moments before the world caved in.

In the yard, Farid stood by the garden wall, a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. He was alone, but the arrogance of his posture made it clear he didn't need protection. He looked up at the window, at Maryam, and smiled—a slow, toothless thing, like a man acknowledging an old partner in a new con.

Their eyes met. For a moment, the air in the room dropped ten degrees.

Farid raised his hand, a lazy salute and turned, vanishing through the garden gate, his black suit flashing once in the sunlight.

Maryam drew the curtain, leaving only a sliver open. Her gaze moved from Laila and the child to the Bible verse tucked into the blanket, its secret safer than anything in this house.

"I have to go," she said, voice brittle. "If they see me again, they'll suspect."

Laila clutched her hand, unwilling to let go. Her knuckles were white. "Promise me," she said. "Promise you won't let them take him from me."

Maryam bent down, pressed her lips to the baby's forehead—warm, soft, infinitely vulnerable. She whispered, only loud enough for Laila to hear: "I will never let you be lost to the darkness we've created."

A kiss pressed to Laila's hand came first before she slipped from the room, closing the door as quietly as possible.

The corridor was empty. Cold air licked her skin, her scarf rough beneath her grip. The stairs creaked under her weight, but she took them anyway, two at a time, head down, body braced for impact. The kitchen was deserted, the maid's absence a final act of loyalty.

Maryam exited through the side door, the same way she'd entered. The heat outside was a living thing, pressing the world flat. The alley led her into a warren of backstreets, the city's chaos swallowing her whole.

Every sense sharpened. She caught the tang of roasting lamb, the vinegar tang of fermenting fruit, the reek of engine oil and sweat. Above it all, the muezzin's call—long and rising—unraveling the afternoon like a wound.

As she moved, the sounds of the house behind her blurred into the city's background hum: a woman's laugh, a child's cry, the click of a door, the hiss of a secret. Every noise a signal, every street a risk.

Maryam kept her head down, her feet finding the quickest path back to the Quarter, back to the bakery, back to the network that had always watched over her.

But all she could see, as the evening swelled and the shadows crowded the street, was the child's face—the eyes, the mouth, the way he slept so unaware of the world waiting to ruin him.

She walked faster, the promise in her chest burning brighter with every step. Anger flared, but so did her father's voice, reminding her who she must become.

The call to prayer echoed off the concrete, off the wires, off the window glass of every home between here and the river.

And Maryam vowed, with every fiber of her being, that this time, she would not fail.

## Chapter 19: The Shattered Routes

January 16, 1979.

Tehran choked on smoke and roar. From the Tower's glass skin, Maryam watched the city convulse: avenue clogged with bodies, banners alive with Khomeini's sneer, rooftop snipers silhouetted against the gray sky. A human river charged the Ministry, breaking against the riot police in blue like surf against rock. Above the melee, government buildings spat flame, and the air crawled with the whine of sirens, the sour stink of gasoline, sweat, and burnt sugar from the bakeries looted at dawn.

Her hands pressed flat to the glass. The pane vibrated from a blast three blocks off, the tremor singing through her bones. Her lips tasted of iron—old blood, new blood, maybe both. The Shah had vanished into exile. In his place, a hundred minor kings had risen overnight, every one hungrier than the last.

She catalogued the chaos. In the north: smoke from the university, where the mullah's sons set fire to textbooks and two professors, burned alive in their office for teaching in English. To the east: hospital in flames, but no ambulances dared the crowd. On the boulevard below, the men marched with clubs and rebar, faces raw with fury, shirts stripped and bandaged around wounds that never stopped leaking. Somewhere in the swarm, her couriers tried to slip messages, but the Web had grown brittle—too many strands cut, too many loyal hands dragged off by the new police.

Behind her, the apartment yawned with silence. Arash had gone to ground two nights ago, last message scratched on a strip of Bible margin: Keep moving. Don't trust the old faces.

A hard blink cleared her eyes before she reached for the radio. Nothing on the preset but propaganda—each frequency now a mouthpiece for a different warlord, each broadcast a fresh threat. Voices faded as the hum of the city eating itself filled her senses.

The marble floor pressed cold through her socks, nerves lit from heel to neck. In the hallway, shadows gathered under the door—a hand, a foot, then the full shape of Javad, her lieutenant. He entered without knocking, face crumpled with sweat and panic, hair already silvered from the week's stress.

"Three of our men gone," he said. "Eastern checkpoint. The guards recognized the paperwork. They're—" He made a cutting motion at his own throat.

Maryam didn't blink. She'd expected worse. "What about the cargo?"

His head shook "Burned. The books, the medicine, everything." He pressed a slip of paper into her palm, his fingers trembling. "They're going house to house. Asking for names. People talk when they're afraid."

The note unfolded under her fingers, read twice before shredding into the trash. She scanned the city again—counted four fires instead of three, a new plume rising from the old police station. Each blaze marked a safehouse lost, a link of her father’s Web cauterized from the city’s living body.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Javad shifted, eyes flicking to the map on the dining table. “The port is sealed. Nobody gets out, not through customs, not through the tunnels. Your contacts at Bandar Abbas—they’re not answering.”

Maryam crossed to the table, her motion measured and slow. The map unrolled beneath her steady hands as a marker dragged through the southern corridor. Black ink bled into the paper as she marked it twice.

“They shot the chief of customs,” Javad said, voice gone thin. “Left him at the docks, for the gulls.”

“Someone always replaces a dead man,” she answered. “The question is, do we own the next one?”

Javad had no answer. With the posture of a man ready to jump at the first whiff of mercy, he stood.

Maryam studied the grid, every route traced in the same hand her father had used—his block script ghosting the page, every pathway a prayer for survival. Now half the map lay defaced: X’s through the Caspian line, the Armenian route, the old rail to Isfahan. Her thumb traced the blackened edge, ink smearing her skin.

“How many men left?” she asked.

“Six. Seven, if you count the girl.” Javad’s voice tried for confidence but found only dust.

“The rest... fled, or were taken.”

Maryam drew three quick X’s, no hesitation. “We pay the families,” she said. “Double the rate.”

Javad frowned. “We have nothing to pay with.”

A glance cut toward him. “You know where the gold is hidden. Use it.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “And the guns?”

She shrugged. “Dump them, or sell to the highest fool. No one’s making war from this side now.”

For a heartbeat, the room hung between collapse and resolve.

Javad wiped his brow, the sleeve sopping up a week of fear. “What do we do?”

Maryam leaned on the table, fingers splayed. “We build a new line. We use the mountains. We move through people no one suspects.” Her voice sharpened, a hard thing without air. “Faith means nothing now. Only leverage.”

Javad bristled, old loyalty flaring up. “Your father—”

“My father died thinking faith mattered. We don’t have that luxury.”

He flinched, but accepted it. “I’ll tell the men.”

The door shut with a dull, final click as she let him go.

Maryam exhaled, every muscle shivering from the effort of stillness. Black smeared on blue as she wiped her hands on the hem of her dress.

She looked back at the window. On the avenue, the mob tore down a billboard, dragged it through the street, and torched the Shah’s painted smile. The heat rose so high that the glass burned her palm. Pressing harder, she felt for the fracture. It refused to break.

She watched the fire until the air blurred and the faces lost all shape. A new route mapped itself in her mind: through blood, through loss, through the ruins of the old world.

Her hands steadied, ready to draw new lines.

The Web would survive, but not as before. She would own it, or she would die with it, hollowed clean of mercy or regret.

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The cave stank of old fires and goat shit. Frost filmed the stone, breath pooling in icy drifts as Maryam braced against the cold.

A padded vest under her scarf, sweaters layered beneath her coat, still the mountain night chewed through everything.

The wind funneled up the gorge and knifed through her boots; her toes lost sensation before the hour finished.

A single lantern burned at the meeting table—a plank balanced on cinder blocks, the surface scarred with knife marks, coffee stains, the black crust of spilled gun oil. Two men flanked the tribal chief, faces blank in the flicker, hands visible above the boards at all times. The chief, Hakim, looked like a biblical patriarch after a hard week: beard striped with gray, eyes the color of burned honey, hands swollen from years in the saddle. The skin at his cheekbones was cracked, the lips purple with cold.

He smiled at her, teeth yellow and perfect. “We missed you last winter,” he said, in Kurdish first, then in Farsi for the benefit of the record.

Maryam smiled back, though her jaw cramped from the chill. “I missed your wife’s baklava,” she said. “But the customs men poisoned half the batch before it reached me.”

He laughed, only in his throat. “No one dies for baklava now. Only for the Book, or for the bullet.”

Gloved hands pressed to the table, palms open. “You know why I’m here.”

Hakim nodded. “You need a new road.”

A paper slid across under her hand, a hand-drawn map of the borderland. “Three nights from now. One truck, no escort, through the sheep gate near Halabja. No one stops at the checkpoint—your men, or theirs.”

Studying the line, his fingers never touched the paper. “You still pay in cash?” he asked. The question hung, damp and predatory.

She matched his stare. “Double, as always. Plus medicine for your cousin’s boy. The one with the leg.” The offer sat between them as she hoped he remembered their last deal, how she had paid in insulin when his suppliers cut him off.

Hakim pursed his lips, then leaned back, coat creaking. “You think it’s the same game,” he said. “But you don’t smell the new air.” He gestured with his chin at the cave mouth. “These men”—he nodded at his guards—“they used to be proud of their faith. Now they keep their prayers in their pocket, like a condom. Only for emergencies. No one trusts anyone anymore.”

Maryam bit back the urge to say: nothing has changed. But she saw his angle. “So you want triple,” she said. “Or maybe you want to keep the load for yourself.”

A snort. “I have no use for your books. Or your God. But the new mullahs pay good for information. Three of your old friends died last week—one in Tabriz, two in Qom. They prayed too loud.”

Teeth ground together, pulse twitching in her wrists.

"What's your price?" she asked, refusing to flinch, her fingers pulled at the top button on her blouse.

Hakim frowned, ran his thumb across his throat, slow and deliberate. "For every box, three times. And not in cash. Gold, or morphine. You pay in what I can use."

Maryam kept her face a glacier. She did the math: her reserves of both were low, her need high. But a week without shipments and her entire operation would bleed out. Her hand slipped into her vest, produced a sealed envelope. "Gold dinar," she said. "Half now. The rest after."

He weighed the envelope in his palm, then handed it to the man at his left. The guard slit the flap, counted the coins, and gave a grunt of approval.

Hakim smiled, more warmth this time. "You always pay on time."

She nodded, but felt nothing in her chest. "So we have a deal."

Dropping his voice to a whisper, he leaned closer. "The checkpoint captain is my nephew. But the real risk is from the sky. Drones, American or Soviet, I don't know. They like to watch this road at night. If you get caught, you say you don't know me."

Maryam flashed a thin smile. "If I get caught, there won't be a road for anyone."

The men laughed—too loud, the noise scraping the cave's stone. Hakim stood, stretched, and clapped her on the shoulder. "Next time, bring vodka. The old kind, not that piss from Azerbaijan."

Rising, she adjusted her scarf. "Next time, bring baklava," she replied.

The guards flanked her to the exit, neither speaking. Outside, the wind flensed the moisture from her skin. The waiting Jeep took her as the driver shivered, her eyes checking the rear for pursuit. Nothing but snow and starlight and the long, black taste of fear.

They took the switchback at speed, tires sliding on the powder. Every kilometer closer to the city stripped away another layer of hope, until only survival and the next transaction remained.

At the edge of the city, she switched cars—protocol, now more necessary than ever. The new driver wore gloves over bandaged fingers, blood soaking through the wool. He didn't look at her, didn't ask questions. The entire run south, neither said a word.

The safehouse had moved three times since the last raid. This one, a mechanic's shed, reeked of oil and scorched rubber. The only heat came from an old space heater, which rattled so loud it masked the sound of nearby traffic. Inside, Javad paced, phone in hand, face lined with exhaustion.

"They burned the villa," he said by way of greeting. "Everything gone. Three men unaccounted for. The rest are in hiding."

Knees raw from the Jeep ride, she settled on the workbench. "Anyone talk?"  
He shook his head. "Not yet. But they're looking for you. The mullahs have a list. Top ten."

She laughed, sharp and bitter. "Do I win a prize?"  
Javad's eyes darted. "We're not safe here. Farid is back in Tehran. He's meeting with the new authorities. Says he wants to 'mediate'."

Maryam's guts curled. "He's selling us. He always was."  
Javad shrugged, too tired for rage. "He sent a message. Offered you safe passage, if you cooperate."

She snorted. "He's softening me up. He'll take the offer, then hand me over."

Javad nodded. "What now?"

The chill rubbed away from her hands, knuckles aching. “We get the books over the border. We deliver the insulin and the morphine to Hakim’s men. We run it as tight as we can. If we lose anyone, we cut the line and torch the trail.”

He nodded, lips tight. “And after?”

Her hollowed face lifted to meet his. “There is no after. We survive as long as we keep moving.”

Javad pulled a flask from his coat, drank, then passed it to her. A swallow of sweet, toxic moonshine burned a hole down her throat.

In the silence, her mind ran the tally: two routes lost, half the men gone, no loyalty left except what she could buy in blood or gold. The city above smoldered, hungry for anyone too slow to adapt.

The old map unspooled as another line crossed under her pen.

In the Tower above Tehran, Farid reclined in his new office. Persian rugs padded every footprint, and the glass windows overlooked a city gone feral. A tumbler of imported whiskey swirled as he surveyed the chessboard.

At the desk, his secretary fanned out the latest route manifests. Each one marked with a new stamp: Revolutionary Authority, Directorate of Faithful Trade. At the bottom, a copy of the same map Maryam used, her old lines now highlighted in red.

He circled the latest corridor, humming under his breath. “Move the next shipment through Qom,” he told the secretary. “Double the opium, cut the Bibles by half. The mullahs want purity, but they love the old coin too much.”

The secretary nodded, already scribbling orders.

Farid sipped the whiskey, savoring the vanilla, the oak, the aftershock of sweet fire. Fingers rolled the gold, sapphire-studded ring on his pinky. It flashed blue as he signed the next page.

“Send a message to the Spider,” he said. “Tell her the new world has no place for nostalgia.”

He grinned, baring perfect, white teeth. The secretary nodded again, acknowledging Farid’s wishes with a slight bow of her head, her eyes flickering with a mix of apprehension and obedience. As she turned to leave, Farid’s hand shot out, smacking her on the butt with a playful grin, asserting his dominance in the room before she scurried out, trying to maintain her composure.

The message went out at dusk. By nightfall, every route on Maryam’s map bled red.

In the mountains, her couriers shuffled forward, carrying their loads under tarps and blankets. She counted the risks, weighted each life against the cargo, and prayed, once, without believing anyone listened.

The wind peeled every word from her lips, sent them spinning across the border.

She never looked back. Not once.

#

The city’s dusk chewed the light to gristle. On the safehouse roof, Maryam braced her spine against the concrete lip, the cold of it grinding into her vertebrae. Below, the whole quarter fumed with smoke and panic. Cars burned on two streets; somewhere to the south, a body

dangled from a lamp post, black shoes swinging like a child's in a playground. The Tower—her Tower—punched a new scar into the horizon, its windows shattered, every pane gone to knives.

From here, the city looked like it always had: hungry, faithless, and loud. Each sound forced into count: distant gunfire pops, shouts ricocheting through alleys, bottles snapping against the curb. She pictured each as a thread in her old Web, now stripped to the bone, every line frayed or cut.

Her hands cupped her father's Bible. The leather cover, once blue, was stippled with the brown blossom of his blood. The corners had frayed to fuzz, the spine kinked and split from decades of use and hiding. She tried to open to Daniel, but the pages stuck together, glued with time and smoke.

The prayer formed in her mouth before she realized it. Words spat into the wind, mechanical and ugly. Each syllable tasted of copper and old toothpaste. When the prayer ended, she snapped the book shut, the click louder than the gunfire.

She wanted to believe that her father might hear her. She wanted to believe in anything at all.

A scrape of feet behind her. The boy—her youngest runner—barely fifteen, cheeks unscarred, eyes slicked with tears and dirt. His jacket hung in rags, both sleeves ripped at the cuff. A hesitation at the threshold held him for an instant before he limped forward, pressing a hand to his side. Red seeped through his fingers.

"They got Yusef," he said. The voice almost broke, but the training held.

Maryam moved to him, fast, so fast his eyes widened with surprise. His wrist clamped in her grip as she felt the blood and judged the wound. "How many?"

He choked it out. "Six. Maybe more. They set the checkpoint at the bridge."

“Did Yusef talk?”

The boy shook his head, eyes wild. “No. He... they did things. But he said nothing.”

Maryam squeezed, hard, until the boy met her gaze. “Did you lose the load?”

Shame corroded his face as he looked away. “They burned the books. Threw the rest into the canal.”

Maryam’s fingers twitched. “And the men?”

“They left him in the gutter. For a warning. I... I ran.”

“You did right,” she said. She took the boy’s chin, forced his eyes up. “Next time, you don’t run alone. You come back here. You know where you belong.”

He nodded, relief swamping his face.

Together, she led him to the roof’s far corner, where an oil drum squatted among broken satellite dishes. A flask dug from her coat found the boy’s lips as she uncapped it. Grimacing he drank, swallowing all of it.

She tore a strip from her own shirt, wound it tight around his wrist. The blood slowed, then stopped.

“Sleep here tonight,” she ordered. “They won’t look for you on the roof.”

He settled into the shadow, knees hugged to his chest, shivering. Maryam let herself study him—every scab, every raw edge of his knuckles, the way he tried not to sob but failed.

Standing, she felt the city’s heat ebb with the sun.

The Web had bled to nothing. Half the couriers fled to the Turkish border. Three safehouses burned to ash. All her cash, the gold, the cars—gone, or claimed by the new regime’s enforcers. The last radio transmission from Arash was a garble of static and code: they were compromised, he was going to ground, “do not look for me.”

In the Bible, she found the note her father had left: a single line, written in trembling script. "Faith is the only weapon they cannot take."

She wanted to laugh, to throw the book off the roof, to let it flutter to the asphalt and be pulped by boots and weather.

But she pocketed it instead. The book was not a weapon; it was a fossil, a relic of what she used to believe.

The city darkened, lights popping in sequence from the hotels, the minarets, the bars still untouched by revolution. In the western sky, a helicopter crawled past, searchlight swinging over the avenue.

Footsteps on the stair. Another runner, older, face scuffed raw, hair buzzed near the scalp. She walked like she owned the roof, and the city with it.

"Message from the tribe," she said, not bothering with a greeting. "The border is open tomorrow. Two hours, nothing more."

Maryam weighed the risk. If the tip was real, they could get a shipment through. If not, every one of her men would vanish into a ditch.

She nodded. "We go," she said.

The woman smiled, something predatory and bright in the teeth. "You're sure?"

Maryam pulled the map from her coat, traced a new line with a borrowed pen. "We use the minority districts. We blend with the pilgrims. Every man carries a different load. If they're caught, they don't know each other."

The woman studied her, then shrugged. "Adapt or die," she said. "That's the only rule now."

Maryam almost smiled. "Always was."

The runner left as fast as she came.

Maryam walked to the roof's edge, the city opening beneath her like a grave. Smoke blanketed the Tower, flames licking from three shattered floors. A chill alone remained.

Thoughts of Zahra surfaced, of days when the Web meant faith, smuggling hope over leverage. The face in her mind had grown pale, the eyes soft and forgiving. She wondered if Zahra would mourn her, if the girls from the Quarter would light a candle in her name, or if they would spit, curse, and forget.

She decided it didn't matter.

Work waited, demanding her hands. A new Web to weave, not from faith, but from necessity. Not to save souls, but to keep the game alive, no matter the cost.

Below, the city screamed. Above, the first stars blinked through the haze.

Maryam pulled her coat tight, gripped the Bible, and descended the stairs—no prayer this time, no hope for mercy. Only the work, and the night, and the knowledge that she would never let herself be caught, or pitied, or mourned.

She was the Spider now, the last one standing.

She would hold the Web together with her own skin.

If the world wanted her dead, it would have to settle for her ghost.

## Act 8: Blood Price

### Chapter 20: The Fading Light

The city had gone blue at the joints—twilight squeezing the alleys, cold collecting at the curbs. Maryam pressed herself into the seam of two walls, knees bent, hands raw from the climb over the last garden fence. Her lungs burned. Somewhere a siren sang, followed by the flat percussion of boots on asphalt. The revolution had replaced nothing but the color of the uniforms and the taste of fear.

Every nerve tuned to the city's pulse, she held her position. Tehran in winter bred a gray light that polished every surface to ice. A dog barked on the next block; a child called for her

brother, voice dry as kindling. The smell of exhaust layered over the old city, thickened by the smoke of fresh propaganda—every block posterized with bearded clerics and the new icons of virtue. The Shah's eyes had gone from every billboard, but the regime's gaze multiplied.

Maryam hugged the shadows, moving when the soundscape allowed. Each gap between patrols, each lazy arc of the flashlight, she counted in silence. The new guards trusted the dark too much, but Maryam had run under every flag: she could time their circuits in her sleep. Boots whispering, she slipped behind the gutted grocer, skirted rebar piles, and moved down the service lane shadowing Ali's street. Fewer footfalls here, fewer eyes—but the ones that watched did so for coin or for God.

Ali's compound bristled with new hunger. The front gate, once ornamental, now wore a coat of black steel bars and double-thick chain. Halogen lamps ringed the drive, their yellow blare washing the stone to sick color. Two men at the gate: one tall, with a white prayer cap; the other short, eyes restless, lips chapped by the cold. Both smoked, the cigarettes bright in the dusk.

Maryam had no use for the gate. Breath shallow, boots silent on leaf crumbs, she moved along the gutter behind the garden wall. Halfway down, she paused—counted three guards on perimeter, plus a fourth lingering at the kitchen door, hunched against the cold. The kitchen man looked up every ten seconds, scanning the wall—dropping his gaze to his hands. He wore a blue apron over his coat; the tie dangled, loose and useless.

Fingers tight on the hidden pouch, she measured the next move. The note inside bore one line, hand-inked in old Armenian script. The kitchen man had once smuggled flour for the Web, back when bread was a luxury. He owed her three debts, none paid. She pulled the pouch free, waited for the kitchen man to glance away, and lobbed the note into the shadow by the stairs.

He flinched at the noise, peered into the gloom. When he bent to retrieve the package, Maryam pressed herself flat, knees flexed for the next sprint. He fumbled the pouch open, read the note, and straightened with a new set to his shoulders. His eyes swept the dark with purpose, searching for her signal. Maryam clicked her tongue—twice, soft, the sound buried in the traffic.

The kitchen man jerked, scanned again—flicked his wrist: a sign to follow. He ducked inside the kitchen. The door hung ajar for two seconds—enough.

Maryam crossed the alley, boots barely kissing the stone. Cold tile pressed her spine as she wedged herself through the narrow gap. The kitchen air slammed her—steam, frying onions, the reek of mop water and disinfectant. Three women worked at the counters, heads down, movements clipped and silent. The kitchen man wiped his hands, kept his face a mask.

He passed her on the way to the pantry. No words, but the half-turn of his head told her where to go. Maryam kept to the edge, ducked behind a pillar, and waited for the two younger women to exit with trays of sweet tea. The last, an older woman with eyes like scorched almonds, watched Maryam with a flicker of recognition. Maryam met her stare, lifted a hand—peace. The woman shifted her gaze to the bread rising on the counter and made no alarm.

The kitchen man returned, apron gone, coat zipped. He wiped his hands again, this time on his pants. “They search the staff now. Every night, sometimes twice,” he whispered, voice brittle.

Maryam nodded. “Who leads the patrol?”

He frowned. “Ali brought in men from Qom. Not like before. These hate women. Hate anyone who reads.”

She smiled, but nothing in her face softened. “Who’s with Laila tonight?”

His mouth worked. "Only the maid. Zahra comes sometimes, but not every week." He flicked a glance at the far door—at the ceiling. "Ali drinks after ten. That's your window."

Maryam ran the math, mind sorting the routes and the risks. "Do you know if she's...?"

She gestured, fingers circling her own wrist.

He shook his head, shame in the motion. "She never leaves the room. Sometimes I take up food, but she won't meet my eyes."

Maryam nodded once, hard, and passed him a folded envelope. "This will pay one debt. For the other two, I might need you again."

He tucked the envelope into his waistband, never breaking the rhythm of his cleaning. "You are the only one left who pays anything," he said, under his breath. "The rest trade in fear."

Eyes locked on his hands, she watched for any tremor as the women returned. No one looked at Maryam; none had reason to mark her face. Steps quick, she ducked into the service stair and climbed two at a time. The air thinned as she ascended, the city's noise replaced by the hush of wealth and fear.

At the top landing, she paused—listened for the tap of footsteps or the bark of a command. Silence. A slim slit of light under the last door. The clock gave her three hours before Ali's window would open.

A single breath steadied her as her palm pressed the wood before entry.

#

The door gave with a whisper, a click barely louder than the breath it interrupted.

Maryam entered on a shift of her heel, body slotted to the wall until the door latched again. The

air inside carried the honey-fat of old carpets, the perfume of fresh tea, and the sourness of bleach.

The room glowed in half-light from a lacquered lamp, its shade cast in gold and blue. Every surface glittered: brocade pillows on the divan, a Persian rug so fine it erased the notion of dust, a cluster of framed photographs arranged with fanatical precision on a shelf above the radiator. Two windows overlooked the back courtyard, bars latticed over the glass, every pane scrubbed to a ghostly shine.

Laila sat in the crook of the divan, knees up, dress pooled around her in blue-grey folds. Months of fasting or grief had sharpened her face and hands to a sparrow's frame. The old Laila—Maryam's Laila—had never walked without a laugh tripping from her lips, never entered a room except to fill it. This Laila held the cup in both hands, head bent, knuckles white with the effort to contain herself.

At the door's click, eyes hollow from sleepless nights caught a live spark.

Maryam knelt, knees to the rug, arms open. Laila crossed the room in three quick steps, knees buckling as she fell into the hug. The contact shocked Maryam—she felt every bone through the cotton, the ridge of each rib. Laila pressed her face into Maryam's shoulder, inhaled the air from Maryam's coat, held it as if the scent itself might restore her.

"You came," Laila said, voice thin as glass.

"I come when I'm called," Maryam replied, wrapping her arms tighter.

The embrace lasted until Laila's breath shuddered out. She pulled away, face raw and bright. "You always know how to find the cracks," she whispered.

Maryam smiled, letting the words glide past her. She straightened Laila's hair, tucked the stray wisp behind her ear, and studied the woman she'd once sworn to protect.

"I thought you'd be in bed," Maryam said, voice feathered for the moment.

"I never sleep." Laila poured two cups from the samovar, the tea's steam haloing her. Her hands shook, the saucer rattling. One cup settled before Maryam, a single drop escaping as she pulled back.

Maryam lifted the tea, letting the heat warm her ruined knuckles. "Your boy?"

Laila's face lit, a pulse of love animating the skin. "Reza is the only true thing here. He's clever. Too clever. He asks why the angels stopped visiting." A smile, but twisted. "Last week, he brought home a kitten and hid it in the linen closet. When the maid found it, he said it was a sign from God, and how could she argue?"

Maryam sipped the tea, the bitterness grounding her. "You taught him well."

Laila's fingers danced along the rim of her own cup, tracing circles. Her sleeves rode up: a bruise, fresh and sickly, ringed her right wrist. Maryam's hands went rigid around the porcelain, but Laila tugged the sleeve down in one fluid move. A brittle laugh escaped her, snapping hard in the room's quiet.

"He still wants to be a pilot," she said. "He draws airplanes all over his copybooks. Once, Ali caught him sketching on a Koran. He—" The words cut, unfinished. Lip caught between her teeth, she drank the tea, its heat blanching her face.

Maryam reached for her, fingers closing over Laila's free hand. The old signals returned, a language of touch learned in kitchens, in back alleys, in the borrowed beds of other girls who never stood a chance. Desperate for contact she squeezed back, but wary of the door.

"How often do you see him?" Maryam asked, voice cut low.

“Every night, before prayers. Sometimes, I hear him pacing the corridor. I know his footsteps from the way he drags his left heel.” Smiling—pride softening her fatigue. “He thinks I don’t notice.”

The two women leaned in, tea and silence holding the space between. Laila’s eyes darted, quick, to the hallway. A footfall thumped on the wood beyond the door and faded. Maryam’s muscles remembered what it was to hide from monsters in the dark.

Without spill this time, she poured again. The saucer rattled against the tray, but her voice steadied. “Do you think it ever ends?” she asked. “Or does the city just eat you, piece by piece, until you’re only the things you never said?”

Maryam set the cup down, folded her hands. “It ends when you leave. Or when they take everything.”

Gaze darting to her lap, she flinched. “I don’t have the courage.”

Bending in, voice at a murmur. “You survived him, didn’t you?”

A single tear streaking her cheek. “Not all of me.”

They lapsed into quiet. Maryam traced the pattern on the tablecloth, her mind mapping every exit, every corridor. In the mirror above the shelf, both their faces reflected: pale, angular, too alike for comfort. They looked like kin—perhaps always had.

“I wish you could see him,” she said again, voice freighted with longing.

“Next time,” Maryam promised.

A clock ticked above the door, each minute precious as gold. Laila, checking the time, leaned in so their heads nearly touched.

“If anything happens—” she began.

Maryam caught her words, pulled them into herself. “It won’t.”

Laila's laugh, dry and perfect. "You never lie well."

Maryam pressed her hand over Laila's, feeling the pulse, the tremor, the proof of life. "If it comes to that, I'll take him myself," she said. "No matter what."

A nod, holding the contact until the last possible second.

Her face changed—fear replaced by the cool mask she wore for the world. Skirt smoothed, cheeks wiped clean, she rose without hesitation.

"I want to give you something, come with me," she whispered, and Maryam obeyed.

They slipped out the servant's door, into the blue twilight. The imprint of Laila's hand burned into Maryam's palm.

#

Laila led her down a side corridor, bare except for a narrow runner and a set of nailed-shut cabinets. The silence thickened. At the end, a door opened onto Laila's prayer room—square, empty except for the blue rug and a shelf of battered books.

Closed the door, checked it twice—knelt at the rug's edge. Fingers traced the border with precision until they found the loosened knot. A tug freed the fabric. A slow, silent pry lifted the floorboard as she drew out the small box.

Maryam crouched close, knees creaking. The box wore a cross, carved shallow into the lid, the lines faded from years of touch. Opening it she lifted out a silver chain—simple, unadorned, the cross itself worn to a dull gray. Both hands cradled the metal, so thin it vanished into the creases of her skin.

"They make you swear on nothing now," Laila whispered. "No book. No faith. Only the word of the man who owns you."

Maryam reached for the cross, but Laila pulled it back, fist closing tight. "I want to give this to Reza. But he won't need it unless—unless you have to take him."

The silence split open. The pulse in Maryam's neck hammered, rage pressing behind her ribs. "I will take him if it comes to that," she said, voice steady. "No matter the cost."

The cross pressed into Maryam's palm as she folded her fingers tight around it. The pressure sent pain through Maryam's knuckles, but she did not break the contact.

"Promise me," Laila said, voice shrunk to a thread. "He must never be like Ali. Not ever."

Maryam nodded, throat closing. "He will be nothing like him. I swear it."

Breath left her in a hush, the fight drained clean from her face. "When you taught me the code," she said, "you said the first rule was to always act like you're already dead."

Maryam smiled, the old pride surfacing. "You remember well."

Fingers locked tight, the cross sealed and soldered between their palms, a buried vow. "If they take me, run. Do not try to save me."

Maryam squeezed back, harder. "You are not dead yet."

A脚步 landed outside the door—a man's weight, measured and slow. Both women froze, breath arrested in the lungs. A pause... and the slow release as it continued down the hall.

Maryam tucked the cross inside her sleeve, the chain rough against her skin. "I will come again, when I can."

A nod, the relief pure but brief. She repacked the box, slid it beneath the board, and reset the rug with the precision of a woman who expects to be searched.

Before Maryam left, Laila whispered a coded prayer, one Maryam had invented for her when they were both younger and hungrier for hope. Maryam answered with the last line, the words a bond neither faith nor violence could erase.

Through the servant's door she slipped, the cross burning against her wrist. Reza would never grow into a world ruled by men like Ali, she vowed.

Each step back to the street and each echo of Laila's prayer sealed her vow.

#

She made the lower hall before Zahra materialized, black scarf askew and eyes burning. The old woman moved with surprising speed—caught Maryam by the sleeve and hauled her into a storage closet lined with ancient housewares and pickle jars thick with salt brine.

Inside, the air sharpened. Zahra shoved Maryam back, hand braced at her collarbone. "Are you mad? What do you think you're doing?" The question bit.

Maryam met her stare, not flinching. "I came for Laila. You knew I would."

Zahra's hand shook, but she did not release her hold. "Ali has eyes everywhere. The staff is loyal to his money or to God—sometimes both. If they find you here, it's not only you who dies. Laila pays. So does the boy."

Maryam peeled Zahra's hand away, thumb digging into the web of bone and tendon. "He's breaking her," Maryam said, voice blunt. "You've seen it."

Zahra's face twitched. Tears pooled in the old cracks, but she blinked them back, the mask reforming. "You always think pain is a contest. You never consider the cost for anyone but yourself."

Maryam laughed—short, dry. “If I thought only of myself, I would have vanished years ago.”

“You always wanted to be the martyr,” Zahra shot back.

Maryam braced her hands against the shelf, breathing hard. “I never wanted this. But I’m all she has left.”

Zahra shook her head, mouth twisted with disgust and sorrow. “She had a future. She had safety.”

“She was never safe,” Maryam countered. “Not from Ali. Not from the men he brings here.”

Zahra looked away, lips whitening under pressure. “You don’t understand the world now. After the revolution, everything is more dangerous. No one is watching the old rules. Women vanish. Children, too.”

Maryam’s voice came low, dangerous. “I know all the new rules, Zahra. I’m the one who taught half your couriers how to survive.”

Zahra’s anger dissolved, replaced by fatigue. She slumped against the wall, body gone heavy. “You think you can save her by defying him? He has the Guard in his pocket. The neighbors are paid to report you. He will find out you were here.”

Maryam softened, leaned in close. “She’s lost hope. You have to see that.”

Zahra pulled a kerchief from her sleeve, dabbed her cheeks. “What do you expect me to do? I am powerless in this house. He holds the purse, the food, the locks on the doors. The same with Farid.”

“I expect you to help me,” Maryam said. “Not warn me away.”

Zahra sagged, exhaustion clinging to her. "I have tried. I bring her food, sneak her medicine. If I protest, he bans me for weeks."

The two women stood in silence, bodies crowding the small space. On the shelf, a jar of old jam had burst its lid, contents run to syrup. The air grew close, and sweat beaded on Maryam's brow.

"Promise me you'll stay away," Zahra said at last, voice breaking.

"No," Maryam replied, clear as glass.

A pause.

"Then promise me you'll be smart. If you put her at risk again, I'll tell him myself."

Maryam reached out, touched Zahra's hand. The contact lingered. "If he hurts her again, I will kill him."

Zahra shook, the threat registering as prophecy or promise. "You always loved her more than you loved yourself."

Maryam allowed herself a smile, something old and sharp. "That is the first true thing you've said in years."

Zahra gathered herself, adjusted the scarf. "You know your way out?"

Maryam nodded. "I always do."

Zahra opened the door, checked the corridor, and signaled clear. "Next time, bring bread. The kitchen boys miss your honey rolls."

Maryam ghosted into the hall, leaving the scent of brine and vinegar behind.

The alley swallowed the house and its ghosts before she allowed herself to look back.

The street spat her out three blocks from Ali's house, the city's neon smeared by the drizzle. Maryam walked head down, scarf pulled tight, every muscle braced for a shout or the slap of boots. The cross at her chest jabbed her with every breath, a weight both holy and profane.

Checkpoint ahead: two boys in Guard black, one barely old enough to shave. They joked with a fruit seller, fingers sticky with orange, rifles propped against the curb. Maryam picked up her pace, hoping to bleed into the pack of old men shuffling home from mosque. The cross dug a groove above her sternum—she pressed it flat, palm sweating.

At the corner, the men fanned out, a sweep designed to catch anyone who flinched or lagged. Maryam adopted the shamble, let her body betray the limp from her old knee wound. A grunt escaped her as the smaller Guard bumped her shoulder. He laughed, spat a pit at her shoes, but moved on.

Down a side street she turned, heart drumming its threat of mutiny. In the distance, a loudspeaker crackled: "Obey the fast, honor the martyrs, keep your women at home." The city's new soundtrack. Above, the lights flickered with power cuts. The alleys glimmered with puddles, each reflecting the parade of martyrs' faces pasted on every wall.

Maryam ducked into a stairwell, used her own code to knock at the basement flat. The door unlatched after three beats, and the boy from the run before last—Shirin's cousin—waved her in, eyes big and rabbit-bright.

"You're early," he whispered, panic ready to bloom.

"I'm alive. That is early enough," she replied, sloughing off her coat and the cross in a single motion. The package landed on the scarred table as she freed the cross and placed it atop.

The flat stank of kerosene, raw onion, and last week's terror. She took the back room, a cold closet with two crates and a crate-lid desk. The Bibles waited, stacked in rows, each wrapped in paper and labeled with a fake customs slip. At the edge of the desk, a snapshot of Laila, probably from before the wedding: hair unpinned, smile soft as the lamplight around her.

Maryam stared at the photo, longing and fury warring in her gut. She wanted to reach into the paper, haul Laila out by the hand. Instead, she traced the photo's edge and set it beside the first Bible in the shipment.

A pen slipped from her braid, uncapped by her teeth, scrawling the codeword—blue for the boys, red for herself.

She thumbed through the Bibles, checked the hollowed-out one with the chain of microfilm curled inside. All in order.

The door rattled—one rap—two. The boy returned, face wild. "Guards are sweeping," he said. "Two streets over. They have dogs."

Maryam flicked the cross into her coat pocket, scooped the snapshot, and shoved it inside the hollow Bible. "Get the shipment out. Use the bread truck if you can. If you're caught, tell them nothing."

The boy swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "And you?"

She shrugged into her coat. "They won't take me alive."

He nodded, respect—or fear—lighting his face.

Alone in the closet, Maryam set her boots to the crate and forced herself to breathe. Memory burned the last hour through her—Laila's words, Zahra's warnings, each decree and vanished friend tightening the threat around her.

The cross pressed cold into her chest, sharp enough to cut the skin. Pain pleased her, proof that blood still belonged to her.

Each Bible she sealed with black tape, the stack growing under her hands. The snapshot peeked from the pages, Laila's face a defiant ghost in the dark.

Maryam cupped her hands around the cross, bowed her head, and spoke the old prayer, half curse, half promise: "Let the next girl remember. Let her hands break the chain."

She slipped out the back, the city already awake with rumors of fire, and vanished into the cold.

## Chapter 21: The Collapse

October, 1987.

The city's cough rose before dawn. Maryam ran the alley by the river, one hand on her coat, one on the knife at her hip. The blue paper in her fist bled sweat and ink into her palm. Light from the bakery spilled across the note as she read: COME NOW —N.

Laila.

Boots slapped cobble as the Quarter swallowed her back, lungs razored by dust and wet. Two at a time she took the Mahmudian steps, hammering the servant's door. No answer.

Inside, the house held its breath. The main corridor yawned, hollow and wrong. Her tongue dried. Old bleach hit her tongue, followed by raw onion's bite. Shoes abandoned, she padded soft toward the stairs. Each riser flexed and groaned—a Morse code for the dead.

At the top, the blue door. Closed, no light leaking out.

One knock broke the hush as she waited.

No answer.

The latch pressed to her palm, squeezed, eased open.

The room chilled her. Curtains drawn, every lamp dead except a faint gold at the baseboard. The air suffocated with lavender and bile. On the bed, Laila lay in her best dress—sky blue, collar tight to her chin, hands folded over her chest. Face blank. Skin already taut. Eyes gone soft.

A tide of heat broke over Maryam, sweat slicking the arch of her back. She measured the scene. Dress zipped backward—Ali's mother's work, too clean for mercy. The bruises at Laila's wrists, purpled and ridged. Neck blued in two thumb-shapes, mostly hidden by the collar. The scarf matched the dress. She'd never seen Laila wear it.

At the bedside, an overturned chair. Tea cup in two halves. A flash of something bright—Laila's ring, the one Maryam gifted, still latched to her finger. Bible nowhere in sight.

Maryam froze for a count of ten, forcing herself to breathe. Air cut raw, ribs caged in stone. She stared at Laila's face. The mouth held a whisper of pain, a bite of surprise, the lips almost mouthing her name. Ali's stench wafted off of her.

Footsteps in the hall. Maryam turned, coiled for threat, but the old maid entered, hands shaking in her apron. "It's you," the maid breathed, and collapsed against the jamb. Maryam caught her, set her upright.

"Ali?" Maryam asked.

"Gone since midnight," the maid rasped. "Took a car. Said not to disturb."

Maryam nodded. The room swept through her gaze once more. Beneath the mattress she found the Bible, cover creased at John, the last passage Laila asked her to read. Pages turned beneath her thumb. The edge was wet. Smelled of sweat and rosewater.

The book settled in Laila's hands as she retied the blue scarf, hiding bruises. Her fingers pressed the cold hand one final time. Cold, but not stiff. She lingered.

The old rules—the Web's rules—drummed in her head. Document everything. Hide nothing. Tracing the line of the bruises, she mapped the fracture at the cheekbone, the swelling at the temple. Fingernails yielded no blood, hair held no torn patches under her scan. No sign of a blade. Only the grip, the pressure, the will to end.

A small blue thread stuck at the collar. Maryam plucked it, rolled it between thumb and forefinger, then set it in her notebook. Hour, date, and room's condition she logged with crisp strokes. Each letter she shaped clear, ready for another to remember.

After, she crouched on the floor by the bed and sobbed into her sleeve. The sound gutted out, dry and full of grit.

She wiped her eyes, wiped her face, pulled the Bible from Laila's hands, and read the passage aloud, the words thick as glue. "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

The old maid knelt beside her, crossing herself, lips moving in a prayer too ancient to parse. Maryam glanced up at her, then at the girl on the bed. "I will keep him safe," she whispered to Laila's ghost. "You have my word."

Dawn shattered gold across the room as she held the cold hand. Only then did she stand, flex her fingers, and set to work.

Sheets stripped, glass cleaned, chair set firm beneath her quiet hands. Laila's body, light enough to float, rose in her arms as she carried it to the parlor where the rituals could begin. Skin washed, nails scrubbed, hair combed straight beneath her steady hands. White linen wrapped from shoulders to knees under her care, followed by Laila's best blue coat. A fresh scarf wound twice around the throat under her precise hands.

The guest divan received the body, hands folded, Bible pressed firm against the chest. Two candles flared as she set the clock to death's hour and opened the window to let the city's cold guard against decay.

Downstairs, a shuffle of voices: the neighbors, already summoned by rumor. The house would soon fill with wailers, with men in black, with the old priest who would say the prayers. Staying meant guarding the body, keeping vultures off until someone braved the mosque to claim it.

She rinsed her hands, dried them on her coat, and sat at Laila's feet. The cross pressed to her lips, kissed once before she began the first prayer in a voice that barely shook.

By the end of the first line, the tears had dried. She had none left.

Laila's blue lips fixed in her sight as she vowed to carry the name of the dead.

To make every one of them pay.

The boy would remain safe under her promise, or Ali and his kind would join her in the grave.

The house filled, the keening started, and the air took on the charge of a storm before rain. Maryam kept her hands folded, eyes open, taking in every movement, every false comfort, every lie the mourners brought.

She would remember it all. She would never forget.

And when the last visitor left, and the house grew cold again, she would wrap the body in blue, sew the mouth shut, and send Laila to God unblemished, the only way the world had left to show mercy.

#

The cypress grove crowded the dead. They buried Laila at the village's edge, where a hundred blue headstones slouched in the winter clay. The crowd came in taxis, in creaking vans, in pressed suits and cheap boots that slid on the slick mud. The wind slapped coats tight to bodies, rattled the rows of plastic chairs, and set the funeral tent rippling like a trapped lung.

Maryam reached the plot first, Reza wrapped to her hip, both numb from the cold. The men from the mosque had the grave dug, square and clean, the earth stacked in tidy mounds. Laila's coffin—plain pine, the blue cross seared on the lid—rested on a scaffold above. The shrouded face peeked out, pale under the thin linen, mouth stitched closed, every bruise vanished by the undertaker's hand.

Reza stood at the head while her hand anchored firm on his shoulder. Zahra approached next, face slit with lines. Words withheld from Maryam, she knelt by the grave, knees soaking through as she stared. The old priest muttered the opening rites, voice whipped away by the wind.

Ali arrived late, ring of cousins around him. He wore a black peacoat, the tie perfect, the shoes glossy, not a fleck of dirt or water on the trousers. He walked the edge of the crowd, made a show of shaking hands with every mourner, pausing to accept condolences from the richest

first. He looked at Maryam twice. The first time, a flick, the second time, a drag—taking her measure, deciding whether she was a threat or a nuisance.

The prayers spun out, verse after verse, the crowd shifting on their feet. Maryam blinked through the ritual, the words trickling past her like the cold sweat on her ribs. Reza didn't move, his mouth locked to a line, cheeks raw from tears already spent.

The burial team set the coffin on ropes, lowered it while the priest recited the last prayers. The casket hung, then settled, a dull thud in the raw air. Zahra wept without sound. Maryam wanted to reach for her, but her hand wouldn't let go of Reza.

Ali lingered at the back, arms folded, face wiped blank. He checked his watch twice—once at the midpoint of the Kaddish, once just before the shovel men returned to cap the grave. Farid sidled up next to Ali, said something low. Both men smiled, a brief mirage.

After the crowd thinned, Maryam felt a tug at her coat. Reza's eyes, feral and wide, glared up at her. "He hurt her," the boy said, voice shredded to splinters. "I saw it before. He'll hurt me too, Auntie."

Maryam's chest iced. She knelt, drew him in. "He'll never touch you," she said, voice flat. "You stay close. You listen to me. Always." The boy nodded, cheeks glossy, a new vow lit behind his stare.

Zahra joined them at the grave, face a frost mask. "He belongs with us now," Zahra whispered, stroking Reza's head. "I won't let them take him."

Maryam gripped Zahra's hand, a pulse passing between. They didn't speak again, but watched as Ali posed at the grave's foot, receiving condolences from the men with cigars and smooth hands, while Farid set his back to the women and laughed at a joke no one else heard.

When it finished, and the grave lay blue and bare, Maryam scooped a fist of mud, let it crumble over the wood. Zahra did the same. Reza mimicked them both, lips pursed in anger. They stood together until the last guest vanished, then walked back through the mud, silent as ghosts.

From the car, Maryam watched Ali and Farid stand by the cypress, Reza's name on their lips, plotting already.

Her palm braced on the boy's back while her stare pinned the men: Let them try.

She would never let them have him. Not in this life, or the next.

#

The courthouse reeked of chlorine and boiled cabbage. Maryam sat on the hard bench, Zahra beside her, both shrouded in black, waiting for the summons. The long corridor pooled with men in military coats and robed clerics, voices thick with the dialect of bribe and bureaucracy.

They called her name, not with respect, but as if reading a disease from the hospital roster. Maryam followed Zahra into the hearing room, hands flexed to keep them from shaking.

Three judges: one ancient, one soft and pink, one with a mole like a second eye on his cheek. The lights flickered, throwing shadows up the lacquered wall. Ali sat across, his father beside him, both in pressed gray suits. Farid leaned in the back, eyes half-closed, smirk floating in the air.

They started with the boy's age, his family lineage. The head judge barely looked at Maryam when he asked, "Your relationship to the minor?"

Words cut from her mouth, clean and precise. "His mother's kin. I raised her. I raised him, when the father left for the Gulf runs."

Zahra's voice rose before she knew she spoke. "The boy needs his grandmother. I am all he has left."

The head judge's mouth puckered. "And you, Sir?" He nodded at Ali.

"My son," Ali said. "By God's law, he belongs to me."

Zahra gripped the bench, voice trembling. "You abandoned him for business. You drank, you hit—"

The judge cut her with a gavel, wood on wood. "That is not before the court."

Maryam interjected, "I have documents. The police—" She slid the paper forward, Ali's record of absences, the report of a neighbor's complaint.

The judges passed the file between them, lips moving in a silent code.

The pink judge coughed. "The law is clear," he said, not meeting her eyes. "Custody to the father, or the grandfather, if the father cannot."

"But the boy—" Zahra pleaded.

The old judge rapped the gavel again. "The boy's welfare is with his blood."

Maryam tried again, voice tight. "He is afraid. He told me—"

Ali leaned in, smile creasing his face. "Your honor, my son is loved. My wife's kin exaggerates for gain."

Farid spoke from the back, calm and clear. "My son-in-law is a model citizen. The boy will have every comfort."

Maryam stared at the line of judges, the way the old one's hand drifted over the prayer beads, the way the mole-man kept glancing at the clock. They'd made up their minds before she entered.

The head judge nodded to Ali, who rose, straightened his coat, and smiled at Maryam.  
"Thank you for your concern," he said, "but my family will handle its own."

The verdict landed: custody to Ali. Immediate. Transfer at the father's request.

Zahra buckled, a moan coiling in her throat. Maryam wanted to claw the table, but Zahra's grip locked her in place.

Ali left with a flourish, his father clapping him on the shoulder. Farid lingered at the door, gave Maryam a long, hungry look.

Aftermath settled around her as she watched judges clasp Ali's hand, the clerk's eyes roll at the women, the corridor empty as if all had known how this would end. Everything was different since the revolution. It was a mans world.

In the waiting room, Reza slouched at a low table, pencil moving in circles on a scrap of paper. The boy's hands trembled, blue ink smearing the pad.

Maryam bent down, brushed his hair. "You are not alone," she said, but the words came out a whisper.

Zahra gathered the boy, held him close. They shuffled out, the doors slamming behind, echoing down the hall like the last breath of someone already half-buried.

Maryam looked back once, burned the faces of the judges into her mind, and swore she'd see every one of them answer for it.

The city blurred past in streaks of steel and yellow. The driver careened through the dusk, horn a steady curse, every pothole knocking Maryam's teeth together. Her hand clamped to the cold door while she watched the skyline stitch itself closed under falling night. Zahra rode silent, chin on her fist, breath fogging the cracked window.

They bailed three blocks from the safehouse, ducked into the side street where two couriers waited, faces pinched by the wind. The younger one, teeth gone in the front, spoke first: "Checkpoint hit the bakery last night. Took three boys. Burned half the stock."

Maryam stared, words sticking in her throat. The older courier, hair slicked to his skull, nodded. "The east drop is gone too. They knew the schedule. Knew who to ask for."

"Who's left?" Maryam croaked.

"Six, maybe. If they haven't run."

Zahra's stare burned along the edge of her face. "Anything from the inside?" Zahra asked.

"Nothing," the courier shrugged. "Lines all dead. Everyone is afraid to move."

Maryam wanted to throw a punch, to break the silence, but her arms wouldn't move. She scanned the safehouse: the walls lined with crates of dry bread and contraband, the tables cluttered with reports, the map above the stove bleeding red ink. Every line crossed out, every passage shut. In the back, a lantern cast wild shadows on the peeling plaster.

Grabbing the logbook, she thumbed through the new entries. Every name had a strike through it, a date and a word: DEAD, GONE, CAUGHT. The page blurred.

The couriers hovered, waiting for her command.

Maryam ground her teeth. "You keep the last route open. You use the bedouin, pay double if you have to. If anyone asks, say the shipment is grain for the mullahs. You say it with your life."

The young courier nodded, jaw set. "We move tonight."

They left with the sack of bread, boots echoing in the hollow stairwell.

Maryam slumped into the only chair that hadn't lost a leg. Zahra moved to the stove, poured two glasses of tea, set one at Maryam's hand.

"It's gone," Maryam said, voice shredded. "The whole thing. Years of work."

Zahra sipped, her hand steady. "You still have the boy."

Maryam shook her head. "Not for long. Not unless—" She stopped, the thought too raw to speak.

Zahra drew close, her face hard as flint. "You listen to me. No matter what you do, you do it smart. You do it for Reza. Not for revenge."

Maryam dragged the Bible from her satchel, the old blue cover glossy with sweat and blood. She traced the gouge in the leather, the line her father's bullet made the night he died.

"He will pay for it," Maryam whispered. "I swear it. Every one of them."

Zahra leaned in, voice a hiss: "Don't die for nothing."

Maryam closed the book, let her hands fall to the table. The safehouse pulsed with silence, every shadow a threat.

Outside, the city howled. Inside, Maryam stared at the map, the lines and the dead names, and made a new vow.

She would take back the Web. She would save the boy.

And if she had to burn Tehran to do it, she'd start tonight.

## Chapter 22: Justice in Blood

March, 1988.

Twilight saws the city in half. Maryam crouches in the lee of a garbage skip, body low, breath ribboned with nicotine and dust. The alley behind Ali's teahouse slices between two blind brick walls, narrow enough to trap the day's last gold. Piss pools in the gutter, sharp and sweet. Two floors above, a radio drips news of another execution, the anchor's voice strangled by static.

She's waited three hours, blood sugar bottoming out, but every sense jacked to needlepoint. She tracks the interval between cups—Ali's ritual: first glass sweet, second glass bitter, third glass a shot of contraband arak. He always laughs loudest after the third. It's the only way to tell he's coming. That and the knife-blade gait he puts on when he's drunk.

Ali runs a full minute late. The regulars exit in clumps—laborers, runners, the lean men with salt in their hair who remember what he did to the city before the mullahs came. Each head

jerks toward the alley's mouth—clocks her—moves on. No one wants to tangle with the Spider tonight.

Finally: the clatter of glass, a shout. Maryam spots him in the blue of the dusk. Ali's neck looks thicker, the jaw splotched with gray; the air around him flexes with threat. His shirt stretches across his gut, buttons gaping, sleeves rolled to reveal the hair on his arms. His hands, soft as a baker's, clutch a gold lighter.

He pauses at the curb, pisses on a dead weed—glances left, no care, no caution. He knows the block, owns the patrols, trusts his eyes. He needs no security here, he owns this block.

She holds until the last second. His silhouette fractures the alley's edge. Then—her body in his path, no escape.

Ali halts, every muscle remembering old fights. The gaze runs down her: face, arms, shoes. His tongue probes a tooth, as if digging out her name.

“Maryam,” he says, voice a knife.

She holds the alley tight. “I told you never to speak my name.”

He smirks. “You never told me anything I didn’t forget.”

She stands ground. Sweat runs behind her knees, cold and precise. She fuses her hands at her back, the right palm slick on the bone-handle knife, its shape molded to her since the Web’s first run.

Ali flicks the lighter, tongue of flame cupped in his palm. “Come to beg?” he asks. “Or to threaten?”

She waits, lets the question rot. The city noise thickens, a swarm of motorcycles growling from the highway.

Ali steps closer. "Too bad about Laila," he drawls, lips milking the sorrow for effect.  
"Tragic, but she was so sick and so fragile."

Maryam does not blink. "You did it," she says.

He rolls his eyes, barks a laugh that bounces off the alley bricks. "You think so little of me? I had no time for her and less for tears. You know this."

"You put her in the ground," Maryam presses. "Now you want the boy."

Ali shrugs, palms up. "He's my blood. The court says so. You were there."

"He is not yours," Maryam fires. "He belongs with Zahra."

Ali's smile flickers—sharpens. "Zahra?" he spits. "Old crow would sell her own teeth for another year of control. You think I'll let her have my son?"

Maryam lets silence curdle between them.

Ali holds up his fingers, counting off: "First, you lost the Web. Next, you lost Laila. Now you come to me with nothing but hate. What did you bring tonight, Spider?" He hisses the old name, lips peeling back.

Maryam measures the gap: three paces, his weight shifted forward, right foot planted.

"Let him go," she says. "Or I'll bury you with her."

He grins, the teeth wet. "You wouldn't risk it. You love the boy. You'd never leave him alone."

"You never understood love," she answers. "Only the threat of loss."

Ali claps, once, sharp as a gunshot. "Now you sound like Farid." His voice slides into a sneer. "But Farid knew when to run. You stand here, making threats in an alley, like the world hasn't passed you by."

Maryam's hand closes on the knife. The tang cold, the balance perfect. She remembers how to open a man from groin to sternum. She remembers what it costs.

Ali tilts his head. "Go home, Maryam. Or join Laila in the dirt. Reza will be my legacy. I will shape him as I choose."

Maryam feels the heat in her bones now, the flood that comes before a kill. "You are hollow," she says. "You have nothing but hunger."

Ali spreads his arms, embracing the insult. "Better than bleeding out in the alleys, feeding pigeons with your name." He steps in, breath loaded with garlic and cheap booze, and leans so close she tastes the rot in his gums.

"Last chance," he says.

Maryam drives her knee into his groin, folds him at the waist, and slams his head against the wall.

He howls, claws at her arm, but she's already behind him, knife at his kidney, she drives it in.

She whispers into his ear, low and clean: "This is for her."

He realizes what is happening and begins to form a scream.

She slices again deep, blood spraying against her hand from his throat as he gurgles.

Shock replacing hate in his eyes.

He collapses, she doesn't stop.

She drives the blade into his gut.

Then again to the chest, over and over.

The liver, the neck, each thrust a release of pent-up fury.

He crashes to the concrete, gasping for mercy.

The knife punctures flesh and bone, stabbing through the rage and grief that have consumed her.

His body jerks beneath her, blood spilling and spurting over both of them.

The street begins to collect Ali's blood as the spatter paints a macabre mural on the alley wall.

She keeps going, lunging, jabbing, twisting, thrusting, lost in a rhythm of vengeance

She steps back, breathing heavily, blood slick against her skin.

Ali's eyes bulge, shock consuming the hate.

Maryam stands over him, spits on his face.

The city's last light painting both their faces in bruised gold.

She says, "I told you not to speak my name."

She turns, backs away. The knife disappears into her sleeve, as seamless as a prayer.

Behind her, Ali lying in the piss and blood, mouthing curses that no longer matter.

He lies still, the last remnants of life fading from his face.

Above, the news anchor proclaims the dawn of a new era.

#

She lets the city's dusk clean her. Blood pools around her boots, warm, sticky, alive. She breathes, a single, long drag, and lets it out in a hiss.

Laila's name dissolves on her tongue.

A commotion disrupts her brief communion with solitude. Around the corner, the rattle of feet—someone's running, someone saw. A child's voice calls, a shriek—a scatter of shoes as the alley becomes a rumor.

Another, a ghostly figure fleeing from the scene as reality splinters into stories half-told.

Maryam spins. A boy clutches a loaf of bread to his chest, his shoes scuffing the dirt as he backpedals making eye contact with Maryam.

Amongst the echoes, another child's voice pierces through—a sharp cry splitting into fragments before vanishing like dust in wind. The long network of street rats and informers has already begun to report the news.

Maryam zips her coat, blends into the oncoming dark. She wipes her jaw on the sleeve, smearing red into the old blue fabric. The city's arteries suck her forward, pulsing her through the afterbirth of violence toward the next den.

Every turn is acid-lit, every alley wired with the possibility of eyes. Her pace is easy, invisible, her mind already sorting the next move, the next safehouse, the next life. She moves fast, but not so fast as to draw attention—letting the borrowed gait of a tired old woman hide the fact of the blood drying on her hem. Tonight, the city's eyes feel different—feral, intent, as if every shadow is a mouth waiting to swallow her story whole.

The memory of Laila's face floats before her, half-formed, the way it looked on the day they first met—sharp and reckless and so alive, always a dare in the tilt of her lips. Maryam cannot fix the shape of her own grief, so she lets it dissolve into muscle, into the churn of her calves, the ache in her left knee, the grind of her teeth as she walks.

She is not five blocks from the scene before the weight of what she's done starts to curdle in her hands. As Maryam moves through the darkened alleys, the weight of her actions presses

down like an iron shroud. Panic begins to weave its way into her thoughts, a foreign sensation that sends her heart racing. She's always been the Spider, weaving pathways of hope and defiance, but now she fears she has spun a thread too fragile to hold.

What will happen to the Web? The thought is a splinter in her mind, digging deeper with every step. Her people have already faced so much—the raids, the disappearances, the constant threat of the authorities closing in. Would this be the final straw? Would her vengeance unravel everything she's fought to build?

Deep breaths come in shaky waves, her mind racing with images of couriers caught, families torn apart, the horror of her past losses. The echoes of Laila's laughter haunt her, mingling with the memory of Ali's blood pooling in the alley, of Reza's tears for his mother, a stark reminder of the cost of survival.

She presses her palms against her temples, trying to steady the rush of fear that threatens to overtake her. For the first time in years, Maryam feels utterly lost, vulnerable in a way she hasn't allowed herself to be since childhood, since her father died. The darkness that has always felt like a cloak now wraps around her like a noose.

"What have I done?" Maryam whispers to the shadows, the words tasting bitter on her tongue. The weight of guilt settles in her stomach, twisting harder with each thought of the repercussions that will surely follow. She can almost hear the whispers of her people, the accusations poised to fly like daggers.

Each step feels heavier, the ground beneath her feet shifting like quicksand. She must find a way to keep the Web intact, to protect those who rely on her. But how? Panic claws at her as she realizes she may have just ignited the firestorm that could engulf them all.

As she navigates the darkened alleyways, more memories tug at her, drawing her away from the present chaos to a time of peace by the shore. Her father, strong and steady, guiding her hands as they mended fishing nets under the sun's warm embrace. Days spent laughing as they cast lines into the glittering water, the rhythm of life simple and uncomplicated. He was her protector, her compass, the anchor in a world that now felt storm-tossed and unrecognizable.

"Baba, If only you were here" she whispers to herself, the words barely escaping her lips. The weight of her father's absence settles heavily against her chest, a reminder of the wisdom lost and the burdens she now shoulders alone.

She pauses for a moment under a streetlight to calm her nerves with nicotine. With shaky hands, she reaches for cigarettes and brushes the Bible hidden beneath her cloak, the familiar texture grounding her in a whirlwind of uncertainty. She pulls it out, fingers trembling as she flips through the pages, seeking solace in the scribblings that bear his careful handwriting. Each note, each underlined passage feels like a thread connecting her to him, a lifeline in the tempest.

As she scans the pages, her heart constricts when she finds it: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." The words glow against the dim backdrop of her memories, illuminating the shadows of doubt that had threatened to consume her.

Tears blur her vision as she clutches the Bible close to her heart, feeling the warmth of his love seep through the pages. In that moment, she understands the truth in his words—she is never truly alone, even in her darkest hours.

"Father," she breathes, the name escaping like a prayer. "I will carry your strength with me. I am so lost, but I will not let your legacy die."

Maryam wipes her eyes, the determination rising within her like a flood. With her father's wisdom echoing in her heart, she knows she must forge ahead, not only for herself but for Reza and all those who depend on the Web she has woven.

Behind each window, behind each screen of laundry, the city watches her. Behind her, the city shudders once, swallows Ali's corpse, and moves on.

Ahead, the alleys tangle, full of secrets and future ghosts. Maryam plunges in, teeth bared, ready to spin the Web anew.

## Act 9: The Retreat

### Chapter 23: The Reckoning

June, 1988.

The night detonates.

You don't kill a man like Ali Mahmudian without repercussions.

Ali was a man of influence, woven tightly into the fabric of Tehran's underbelly. His charm and connections made him a puppet master, dancing through the shadows, pulling strings behind the scenes. He had ties to the highest echelons of power—military officials, corrupt police officers, and rival smugglers who feared his wrath. For years, he leveraged his criminal

empire to manipulate the flow of contraband, opium, and faith alike, his fingers dancing over the pulse of the city.

But now, that empire was collapsing. The loss of Ali sent shockwaves through the network, rattling the delicate balance of power that he had maintained. As his men scrambled to fill the void, and find the murderer, panic rippled through the streets. Whispers of betrayal and vengeance running like fire through the ranks.

The IRGC kicked down doors, not just at Maryam's safehouse, but across her entire network. One by one, safehouses that had upheld the Spider's Web fell to the same violent fate. Each target was marked and struck with brutal efficiency—flour mills turned into blood-soaked ruin, hidden rooms revealed under the weight of their secrets. Couriers caught in the crossfire felt the steel grip of fear tighten around them, the air thick with the scent of smoke and despair.

Chaos began unfolding in the Quarter, the shrieks of the captured, the flash of gunfire illuminating familiar alleyways. All the faces of those who had worked beside Maryam, braving the darkness to keep the Web alive. Now, they were being hunted—her network unraveling thread by thread, the very essence of their mission threatened by the fallout of Ali's demise.

The echoes of screams from across the city resonated in the streets. Each note like a funeral dirge for the hope that had been so hard fought to preserve. The Web was being dismantled, its foundations cracking under the weight of so many enemy's reach. Ali's legacy, a twisted testament to the violence he had cultivated, now sought to extinguish the light of faith and freedom that the Web once was, and the empire into which Maryam had nurtured it for so long.

The darkness pressed in like a storm, heavy and oppressive. As the flames flickered low, the couriers—those brave souls gathering in their own safehouses, their laughter once echoing in

the shadows, now eyes wide with fear and uncertainty, voices replaced by the shouts of armed men.

The news would spread like wildfire through the alleys and marketplaces, tales of the IRGC's onslaught creeping into the hearts of those who dared to hope. With each door kicked in, each scream silenced, the resolve of the network would falter. The very fabric of the Spider's Web was being torn apart, strands of faith and resilience unraveling in the face of unyielding brutality.

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Boots storm the corridor, each impact shaking the building's old bones. Steel door surrenders under a battering ram, the air splitting as splinters fly and the shouts of the IRGC fill the stairwell. Floodlights hit the safehouse with the cold shock of dawn after a blackout.

First through is a captain, rifle clearing the way for his team. Behind him: six men, beards trimmed in the new regulation, eyes glassy with the fever of a raid. They pour in, each one a blade slicing the darkness. The air tastes of gun oil, ammonia, sweat leaching from frightened bodies.

The safehouse had always looked like nothing: a two-room bakery, sacks of flour stacked like insulation, tables set with day-old bread and chipped tea cups. In the back, a dusty cot, blankets folded with the care of someone who knows how to vanish. But tonight, the bakery holds seven couriers: three girls, four boys, all under twenty, all with hands that tremble under their sleeves.

A floodlight beam shoves the shadow back. The runners scatter, feet scrambling across the cold tile, but the men herd them up with shouts and blows from rifle butts. One boy—red

hair, chipped tooth—tries for the back exit but goes down on the first swing, skull cracking tile with a wet clap.

The captain yells a command. His team flips the tables, sweeps flour onto the floor, uncovers the first of the contraband: Bibles, thin and battered, their spines taped with microfilm. Next, a suitcase packed with blue pills, the kind banned for their American scent. Then a crate of tea, double-walled, the inner lining stuffed with crisp US dollars, the outer shell sticky with opium residue.

A girl in a torn pink sweater vomits behind the flour sacks. The sergeant drags her out by the hair, kneeling her in the light. Tremors seize her so hard her teeth clack. One of the guards, face moon-round, kicks her in the thigh, splits the skin. Her scream tears the air in two, a live wire.

A Bible lands open on the floor, its pages blackened with numbers and coded names. The captain grabs the book, flings it against the wall, and grins as the microfilm cartridges spill onto the tile.

"Tell me who runs this," he shouts, voice a whip. The echo bounces off the flour, the blood, the black windows.

No one answers. The couriers shiver in their line, eyes locked on the floor, on their own shoes, anywhere but on the men.

The captain tries again, picking the smallest boy, the one with a stutter. He jams the rifle under the boy's chin. "Is it the woman, the old one? Does she come here?"

The boy's jaw rattles. He whispers, "No. She stays in the Quarter."

The captain spits on the floor, then brings the rifle around, butt-first, into the boy's mouth. Three teeth leap free, blood fountaining down his chin. The boy drops, but the captain yanks him up by the collar.

"Quarter where?"

"Near—" The boy gags, chokes on the teeth. "Near the river. Blue gate."

The captain flicks his eyes to his sergeant. The man nods, pulls a burner phone from his coat, taps out a code with callused thumbs.

The men cuff the couriers, wrists cinched behind backs, faces pressed to the floor while they stomp through the rest of the bakery. In the far pantry, the old woman who owned the bakery crouches behind a sack of rice. The junior guard drags her out by the scarf, knocking the air from her lungs.

Knees crack to the floor, hands clamping in prayer.

The captain levels the rifle at her temple. "Tell me who pays you," he barks.

The old woman stares, eyes milky, mouth frozen in a line of refusal.

He laughs. "Fine," he says, and swings the gun once, hard. Her body folds over, breath gone, the thud flat and final.

The other guards laugh, her corpse a warning to the rest.

They line the couriers against the wall, hoods over heads, wrists bound so tight the skin bruises purple. The sergeant sweeps the floor, scoops up every scrap of microfilm, every sheaf of cash, every stray page.

From the darkness behind the counter, the girl in the pink sweater moans. One guard holds her arms. The other pinches her chin, forcing her to open her mouth for inspection. Two

fingers pry her tongue apart, digging for hidden pills. The girl gags, bites, draws blood from his hand.

His palm cracks her face twice, teeth snapping.

The captain lights a cigarette, surveys the carnage with a chef's satisfaction. A gesture from him lands on the red-haired runner groaning on the floor. "Put him in the truck," he says. "The others too. Burn the rest."

Two men drag the boy by his armpits, leaving a red streak behind. The girl in pink collapses, head hitting the tiles with a muffled thump. One by one, the guards carry the couriers out, tripping over bread and glass. Their boots grind the spilled flour and blood into paste.

When the bakery empties, the sergeant douses the floor with gasoline from a tin under the sink. A match flickers before he steps out, blue-white fire swallowing the bakery. The glass shatters outward, smoke chasing the men into the freezing street.

All night, the city rings with the stench of burning bread.

---

In the Quarter, a battered transistor radio ticks out a faint English broadcast from an Armenian jazz station. In a storage room two blocks from the river, Maryam counts the minutes with her breath. Each inhale is four seconds. Each exhale, six. She watches the blue flame of the Bunsen burner, the slow curl of paper as it blackens and falls into the dish.

On the table: two ledgers, three route maps, a bag of silver coins, and the brown envelope from her last drop. She feeds them one at a time to the fire. Every page crackles, each one a piece of herself. The ledger stinks as it burns, a chemical tang—ink, blood, sweat.

A boy on lookout signals from the window—two fingers, sharp and tight. Maryam nods. The next map lands on the burner from her hand, followed by a notebook of passwords.

Sweat streaks from her jaw while her hands tremble. The battered Bible leaves her pocket, flyleaf torn free to meet the fire. The book rests in her lap, thumb tracing the binding, ritual pressing back panic.

The radio snaps alive: a message in Farsi, tight and cold, the codeword for disaster. Her heart hammers.

Her hand finds the gun, magazine checked—seven rounds, each a promise against mercy.

Next, she flicks on the shortwave set. The voice on the frequency is rough, breaking every third word, but Maryam catches the name Arash. The runner on the far end says, “They have him. They took him alive.”

For a split second, her mind blanks, a chasm opening behind her teeth.

The receiver slams down as she runs protocols: burn maps, scrub with vinegar, flush ashes. She grabs the ledger, fingers digging deep into the spine, and twists it until the glue fails and the cover peels away. Inside, a microfilm capsule taped to the binding. A knife flick frees the page before she tucks it into her bra.

Down the hall, the lookout pounds the wall, one short, one long. Code for “move now.”

Maryam packs the gun, the Bible, and the silver into a nylon satchel. Her reflection in the window shows tight hair, wild eyes, charcoal-smeared skin. A swipe across her brow drags the black wider.

She snaps the radio to life once more. The voice returns, urgent: “Arash gave nothing. But they’re closing in on the blue gate. One hour, maybe less.”

Maryam crushes the radio under her boot, sweeps the broken pieces into her bag. Setting the burner to full, she lets the flame spread to the wood, and steps back, watching the fire for a single beat.

The smoke hits her throat as she slips into the stairwell. The heat of the building prickles her back, every sense bladed for the next strike.

Memory older than fear guides her through the alleys. Houses tick down—three, no, two—each thinner than the last under her count.

The city pulses with the sound of engines, the distant wail of the muezzin, the soft beat of footsteps that never quite vanish.

She thinks of Arash, his hands and the way they steadied her, the way they always held a tremor just at the edge. In her mind, wrists bleed while his smile refuses to break.

She keeps moving, but her chest hollows with every step.

In the next alley, a child runs past with a loaf of bread, trailing the city's rumor of blood and fire.

Maryam watches the child disappear into the blue. The Bible presses to her chest, old pain burning through fresh.

The alleys blur under her as she hunts a future that will not betray.

#

The concrete sweat cold, each drop gathering on the floor until it puddled beneath the chair. Arash blinked at the motion, every muscle singing with pain. His wrists lost all feeling two

hours ago, but the nerves in his face remained sharp. The left eye ballooned shut, the flesh around it pulpy. Lips split, tongue too thick for words. Still, he gave the men nothing.

The room tasted of fear and cigarettes—layers of old panic rubbed into the cement, laced with fresh blood and the acid haze of cheap cologne. The single bulb overhead rocked on its cord, each swing stroking the shadows against the floor.

The interrogator, an IRGC major, paced with the leisure of someone who enjoyed his work. A metal rod spins in his hand—baton, pointer, threat. He clicked his tongue every few steps, a metronome for pain.

“You are loyal, Arash,” the major said. “But even the most loyal men talk, eventually.”

Arash sucked air through his teeth, the sound a hiss in the quiet. He stared past the major, over his shoulder, to the wall scarred with old bullet holes. Each one a lost story.

The major stopped pacing, bent close, breath sour with instant coffee. “You know what I want. The names, the routes, the vault.” He tapped the rod on Arash’s knee. The impact made his leg convulse, fire running up the thigh. The rope cut deeper, flesh grinding against metal.

“The Web is dead,” the major said, softer now. “Your boss is dead, or will be. Why not be a rich man for a day, instead of a dead one for nothing?”

Arash spit at the major’s shoes. Red flecked the black leather, mingling with the dust.

The major sighed, straightened, and nodded to the guard by the door. “Clean him up. Maybe he’ll feel more like talking in the morning.”

The guard moved in, dumped a bucket of brackish water over Arash’s head. The water struck with the force of a slap. Some washed into his wounds, some ran into his mouth, all of it cold as glacier.

The door creaked, the guard stepped out, and for a moment the cell hummed with the absence of threat.

That lasted two minutes.

The door opened again, soft, almost respectful. Farid entered, not in the uniform of the men but in a navy suit, the shirt under it white as a bone. On the left cuff, a spatter of something that might have been coffee, but Arash knew the color by now. Farid walked with the practiced ease of someone used to the power in a room. A glance lands on Arash before he turns to the guard.

“Thank you,” he said. The guard nodded, left the folder on the desk, and stepped out, shutting the door behind him with a snick.

Farid clicked on the reading lamp, its weak cone glancing off the pages. He thumbed through the folder, lips moving in a silent tally.

“Bakery on Ferdowsi,” he murmured. “Armenian church—no, that’s a dead drop. The bakery vault, likely.” A page flips under his hand, eyebrows lifting. “You people have no imagination, you know. Same tricks for years. No one ever thinks to change the pattern.”

Arash shifted, the chair creaking under his weight. He fought the urge to moan.

Farid snapped a photo from the file, held it up for inspection. It showed Maryam, hair tight to her skull, hands on a ledger. Her face cut through the grain with the confidence of command.

“She was always better than you,” Farid said, voice almost fond. “It’s a shame, what happened.”

Arash stared at him, rage and loyalty welding his mouth shut. After a moment, he flexed the muscles enough to croak: “Traitor.”

Farid smiled, more a flex of the jaw than a real thing. "Yes. That's the word, isn't it?" He signed his name at the bottom of a page, penmanship crisp. "Trust is a commodity, Arash. Like morphine. Like Bibles. It's worth what someone will pay for it."

Another page turns under his hand, eyes skipping Arash.

"So. The vault. Tell me, and I let you walk out. Not the front door, obviously, but alive. Maybe with a little gold for your troubles."

Arash snorted, the laugh cracked by blood. "You think you can buy us?"

"I already have." Farid shut the folder, set it on the desk. "You are the last loyal man in the city. But even the last man has a price."

Arash bared his teeth. "We don't die for price."

Farid sighed, shaking his head as if at a stubborn child. "Always the dramatics with you people. The city will move on. It always does. I already own it, she just doesn't realize it yet. And she did the worst of it for me, dispensing of that brute Ali. Fortuitous."

He slipped a pistol from inside his jacket, the grip butter-colored with inlaid bone. The barrel levels at Arash's face, fingers steady.

"Last chance," Farid said. "Where is it?"

Arash looked at him, straight through the lies and the white shirt and the civilized words. "You will never find her," he whispered. "She is already gone. You will ne—"

Farid rolled his eyes, checked his watch, then squeezed the trigger. The gun cracked, the sound hard and dry. Arash's body jerked, head snapping back. Blood bloomed out in a wide arc, painting the wall with the last of his loyalty.

Farid set the gun on the desk, yawned wide to pop his ears, wiped the spatter from his cuff with a handkerchief, and resumed paging through the manifests.

He leaned to the guard, who waited outside, and said, "Next," without glancing at the corpse slumped in the chair.

The guard dragged the body out by the ankles, heels thudding on the wet cement.

Farid continued reading, each page a new line in the city's obituary.

#

Farid liked his study cold. The marble desk, imported from Italy, sent a bite through the monogrammed sleeves of his shirt. The rug underfoot, hand-tied in Isfahan, soaked up every sound. He kept the windows closed, so the world's noise wouldn't contaminate the purity of his work.

The desk overflowed with manifests, auction sheets, and the flat blue folders of the new regime. Each folder carried a hand-written tag: BIBLES, PHARMACEUTICALS, GOLD, WEAPONS, ART. Farid lined them up in a neat column, his pen tapping along the edges as if conducting a silent orchestra.

He dialed the phone, the number coded into his memory from years of clandestine trading. The IRGC captain answered on the second ring, voice clipped and formal.

"Is it done?" the captain asked.

"Finished." Farid pressed a finger to his temple. "Move on the Quarter tomorrow, before the scent goes cold. The woman runs east after a loss. Set a trap near the old embassy."

The captain grunted, scribbling. "Anything else?"

"Double the reward for information on the vault," Farid said. "And burn every safehouse, even if it's empty. The message is as important as the raid."

The captain hesitated, then asked, "What about the boy?"

Farid shrugged, eyes on the manifest. "If he talks, keep him alive. If not, make an example." He clicked the pen twice, signing his name to the bottom of the next auction sheet.

The receiver finds its hook, linen wipes it clean, and he leans back. The walls of the study glimmered with framed certificates—degrees from Paris, Vienna, Oxford. But Farid's eyes never lingered on them. He prized only the now.

He picked up the next folder—ART—and leafed through the photos. A watercolor, likely Armenian. A carved wooden cross, inlaid with ivory, small enough to fit a pocket. He recognized Maryam's taste in these—her habit of smuggling objects of faith, embedding them in the contraband runs as if hope could outlive the bullets.

A quick, slanted note to the auction house scratches from his pen: "bundle religious with currency, move through Dubai, discreet." His handwriting, slanted and quick, had won praise from headmasters and forgers alike.

He checked the map on the wall, red lines snaking across the city, every one a path Maryam had once trusted. Farid traced the routes with the back of his nail, then added a new pin to the Quarter, marking the next planned strike.

He picked up the phone again, this time dialing a lower-level operative. The man answered, anxious, eager to please.

"Split the gold shipment," Farid said. "Half to the mullahs, half to the Army. Let them compete for your loyalty. The web is gone, it's all ours now."

"Yes, sir," the man breathed.

"And leak the runner's name to the opposition," Farid added. "Let them kill each other."

The phone rests with a click softer than breath.

On his desk, a Bible lay open to the Book of Judges. Farid read the page, a habit he'd adopted after seizing the first batch. Stories of blood, betrayal, and redemption's lie hold his interest.

The Bible snaps shut under his hand before joining the shipment stack.

In the glass reflection, Farid caught his own face: calm, eyes flat, hair immaculate.

He smiled, but the smile belonged to the man in the reflection, not to him.

The door creaked open, and Zahra stepped into Farid's study, her face drawn with worry. The elegance of her usual demeanor was frayed, the shadows under her eyes betraying her concern.

"Farid," she began, her voice trembling slightly. "I haven't heard from Maryam in days. I've tried calling, but..."

"Really," Farid interrupted, his tone soothing as he set down the folder and closed half a dozen other notebooks on his desk as quick as he could without looking suspicious. He leaned back in his chair, masking his true feelings behind a practiced smile. "Do not worry so my dove. She's likely off on one of her little adventures with Arash. You know how they are—chasing sunsets and living in the moment."

Zahra's expression tightened, but she forced a smile. "It's just... Maryam can be reckless. I fear for her safety."

Farid stood, moving closer, his hand resting on her shoulder. "You must have faith. I spoke with Arash earlier today. They're fine—probably enjoying a weekend away together, somewhere far from prying eyes. Probably don't want to be found."

"But what if something happened?" Zahra pressed, her eyes searching his for reassurance. "The city is dangerous, and I can't shake this feeling..."

Farid leaned closer, his voice low and comforting. "Zahra, trust me. Maryam is resourceful, and she has Arash by her side. They'll return when the time is right. Besides, you know how much she loves to keep us all guessing."

He gently squeezed her shoulder, his gaze steady. "Keep your heart light. I promise you, I will keep an eye on them. If I hear anything concerning, you will be the first to know. You by chance don't have an idea where they might," he paused, "vacation, do you dove?"

Zahra shrugged, though the worry still lingered in her eyes. "I don't, but thank you, Farid. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Nothing to it," he replied, stepping back and motioning toward the door. "Now, let's focus on our plans for the coming weeks. We have much to accomplish."

As Zahra left, Farid watched her go, the faintest hint of a smirk playing on his lips.

He picked up the next folder, and the work resumed.

#

The safehouse locked the world out. Maryam pulled the metal grate down at dusk, then jammed the old refrigerator against the door. The room shivered in the aftershock of violence, its air staled by days of hiding, its walls scrawled with the last maps of a life already dead.

The candle on the table bled wax onto the wood. Its flame guttered, shadows circling the walls in broken parades. Maryam hunched on a crate, legs pressed tight to her chest, fingers twitching above the book.

The Bible lay open, stained along the binding with the brown trace of dried blood. Her father's thumbprint marked the upper corner, the oil of his skin darkening the page. She ran her

hand along the paper, rough with decades of edits and weeping, every margin scrawled with the script of someone trying to reason with God.

Maryam's hands quaked. Bones lock as the left presses into the right, halting the tremor. It did nothing. The shaking lived in the core of her, unstoppable as a fever. One sharp inhale slices her lungs with smoke and candle soot.

She read the same line, over and over: "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you." The words stung, a salt rubbed into every new wound.

The room lost its heat. She felt the cold as a spear behind her ribs. The shadows inched closer, each one fattened by the memory of failure. In the far wall, the ghost of her father took shape. First in the slump of his shoulder, then in the hard set of his jaw, the way he leaned into his pain as if daring it to win.

He did not speak, but the word lived in the stillness: Remember.

Maryam let her face break. She collapsed over the book, tears wringing from her in silent violence. The sobs rattled up through her arms, her chest, unspooling everything she had kept bound for years.

Her hands shook so hard she lost grip of the Bible. It slid to the floor, pages flapping like a wounded bird. She dove for it, clutching the leather so tight her nails left cuts.

The shadow of her father hovered, neither threat nor comfort, only witness. His gaze drilled through her. It found every lie she had told herself—about loyalty, about mercy, about the possibility of surviving with her soul intact.

Maryam shivered, dragging air through her teeth. "I failed you," she whispered. "I turned the mission into blood."

The shadow flicked, a trick of the candle or the crack in the wall, but the presence remained. The book presses to her face while lips shape prayers older than language.

“Remember.”

The first night after her father’s death replays: body on the floor, Bible slick in her hands, sirens keening like lost children. She remembered the old faith, how it tasted before the violence, before every chapter became a tally of the dead.

She remembered Laila, and the blue of her scarf at the grave. She remembered the way Reza clung to her hand, small and fragile, the last true thing in a world built for breaking.

Maryam rocked on the floor, knees tucked under her chin. The cold did not abate. It thickened, turning the air to glass, until her breath clouded before her.

The Bible rocks in her arms as she moves back and forth. Tears cut tracks down her cheeks, hot against the ice of her skin.

Eyes lift to the place where her father’s shadow looms.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the words burning her mouth.

The shadow did not move. It did not forgive.

The candle died, the room gone black, but the cold and the shame pressed in harder. She crouched there, rocking, holding the last piece of her father to her chest, the city outside already swallowing the next story.

In the silence, the voice returned, a memory but also a curse.

Remember.

Maryam curled tighter, the word carving into her.

She would remember. She would never forget.

She would die with the word inside her, a shrapnel no hand could ever remove.

## Chapter 24: The Escape

September, 1988.

Morning drowned under a ceiling of bruise-colored cloud. The safehouse trapped its own heat—a stew of kerosene, scorched paper, and skin oil soaked into the cinderblock. Maryam hunched at the kitchen table, blue veins crawling the backs of her hands. Every muscle pulled tight; nothing left but sinew and the will to move.

The ledger smoldered in the trash can beside her, pages curling into skeletons. Two pages at a time she feeds the fire: a sheet of courier codes, the manifest for the last Istanbul run, a penciled inventory that mapped every loyalty the Web had ever traded. The fire licked greedily, hissed when she pressed the covers flat. Thin smoke spiraled toward the vent, carrying the last record of half her life.

In the walls, the pipes ticked. The city's arteries clotted with winter. Maryam swept ash from the counter, checked the window slit for movement. The alley below coughed up nothing but puddled trash and two stray cats in a slow-motion duel over a fish head.

Another envelope is pulled form the stack. Blue crosshatch, similar to Farid's hand. Her thumb flicks it open, eyes scan the first line, fingers drop it into the fire. No reaction on her face, but the air in the room thickened. Unknown betrayal rang in her bones louder than the Mullahs' gunfire. Fingers dig into the pile again. The names faded into numbers; the numbers into gray.

A knock bled through the silence. Two taps—three. The Web's pattern.

Maryam froze. Heat spiked in her neck. Her palm finds the pistol taped under the table, thumb pressing the grip until nerves steady. A single knuckle-rap is her answer, her voice stays locked inside her chest.

A shuffling at the door. Zahra. Haunted steps carry her inside, scarf black as cinder, a cold breeze pulled into the oven-hot room. In the entry she pauses, eyes fixed on the scar Farid gave Maryam long ago.

“God keep you,” Zahra croaked.

Maryam smirked, lips splintering. “You come to pray, or to curse?”

Zahra's face pulled together, half-fear, half-relief. Inside she steps, door clicking shut, body pausing at the arc of light. “I thought you were dead. The boys said the bakery burned.”

“They missed,” Maryam said. “Or they wanted me alive. Hard to tell these days.”

Another envelope snaps in her hands, fed to the fire.

Zahra's eyes swept the room—trash can, ledgers, shotgun flat on the sink—each item catalogued in lethal silence. Her shoulders rose. “You should run, Maryam. Every name on your list is ashes now.”

Maryam bared her teeth. "That is how the Web survives. You burn the dead wood."

A silence. Zahra's knuckles blanched as she gripped her own elbow, a gesture older than either of them. "You have nothing left to run with. No boys. No routes. Someone else owns the checkpoints; Mahmudian people haunt the Quarter. Even Arash is gone."

Maryam's jaw ticked. Hands press flat on the grain as she shuts the ledger. "Arash ran because he is a coward. I will not."

Zahra crossed to the table, set both palms on the surface, and leaned in. Her eyes trembled. "They will hunt you like a dog, Maryam. You think the mullahs care about your God? All they want is a show. A traitor to parade on TV. A woman, if possible. You would give them both."

Maryam flinched, but only in the muscle above her left eye. "I will rebuild. From Istanbul, or Jerusalem, or from a dirt cave in the mountains. You know I can."

Zahra's voice cracked: "The world does not need your stubbornness. It needs the memory of you. Alive."

A breath of winter filtered through the cracked window. The fire in the can guttered, choked by too much ash. Maryam poked at it with the butt of a knife, stirring the papers into a black sludge.

"You were always the one who saw the end coming," she said. "Even when we were girls, you knew which tree would snap in a storm. But you never moved to another tree."

Zahra smiled, but the curve of her lips carried nothing up to her eyes. "That is why you loved me."

Maryam shut the ledger for good, forced her hands to unclench. Zahra's face draws her study, crow's feet and pinched nostrils and the mouth quivering between prayer and rebuke. They

had lived three decades inside the same knot of city, every day bleeding into the next, the same arguments stitched into their lungs. Now, nothing but this.

“Do you remember the day my father died?” Maryam said, voice lower. “How you found me in the yard, hands red to the elbow from washing his blood from the stones?”

Zahra nodded, eyes fixed on the fire.

“I remember you said, ‘Some things only water can erase.’”

Zahra’s jaw flexed. “I lied.”

They both stared at the flames until the last page vanished into smoke.

Zahra spoke first. “Run. Leave this place tonight, or you will join the others by dawn.”

Maryam did not answer. Instead, she reached under the table, peeled the pistol free from its tape, and placed it on the surface between them. The gesture had no threat in it—only a sense of ritual, of something being passed down from a dying queen to her last loyal subject.

“If they catch me,” Maryam said, “they will not take me alive.”

Zahra reached across, covered the pistol with her hand. “Coward,” she whispered, voice thick.

Maryam smiled, a crack in a glacier. “You think I have a choice?”

“You always had a choice,” Zahra hissed. “It was the only thing you truly owned.”

A horn blared outside—a delivery van, maybe, or the plainclothes men staking out the block. Both women stiffened, but did not move. The moment stretched thin: then shattered.

Zahra drew her hand back, wiped it on her skirt, and leaned in until her breath clouded the rim of Maryam’s glass. “If you go, take nothing. Burn the rest. They have your picture now.”

Maryam shrugged, voice going raw. “They always did.”

Zahra shook her head, a tremor working its way up from the base of her spine. “You think you are still the Spider, but all your Web is gone. Only a trap now, and you are caught in the middle.”

Maryam pressed her tongue against her molars, refusing the taste of defeat. “Sometimes the spider must eat its own leg to live.”

Zahra laughed, bitter and short. “You are out of legs, habibi.”

The wind outside raised a shiver from the metal grate. Maryam pressed her fists to the table, feeling the grain dig into her skin. Every scar on her hands had a history; every tremor a legacy.

They sat in the chill, counting time in the slow collapse of flame.

Zahra broke first. She rounded the table, crouched beside Maryam, and drew her into a fierce, dry embrace. Neither woman cried, but the air between them ached with the memory of those who once did.

“Live to fight another day,” Zahra whispered into the hollow of Maryam’s throat.

Maryam did not promise.

Zahra slipped out into the corridor, scarf drawn tight. She did not look back. Her footsteps faded down the concrete hall, out to the street, out into a city that never forgave.

Maryam watched the door until it clicked shut. Her face presses to the cold tabletop, breath taking in the ashy trace of her old life as she feeds the rest of the ledgers to the fire.

When the sun bled through the high window, nothing in the room marked her as human. Only the pistol, the charred ring on the table, and the taste of old kinship in the raw of her jaw.

A match strikes, the last ledger scrap catches flame, her body bracing for the next hunger.

#

The carpet shop breathed dust. Every thread held the tang of old sweat, moth poison, ink, and the gray undertone of despair. In the back, fluorescent light threw harsh lines over the counter, warping the colors in each rolled runner to shades never meant for human eyes.

Maryam ducked past the racks, face half-buried in a battered scarf. One hand clamps her satchel while each step negotiates between speed and silence. At the rear, behind a stack of Kurdish kilims, a bead curtain twitched. A pause checks for watchers before she slips inside.

The forger hunched at a folding table, arms stained blue to the elbow. His fingers twitched over a tray of stamps and razors, the nails chewed back to the pulp. A single bulb burned overhead, flickering in sync with the static of his nerves. He greeted her with a grunt and a nod, but kept his eyes on the laminator.

“You’re late,” he said, voice pitched for secrecy. “Twice you make me wait, I don’t do business again.”

Maryam slid the envelope across the table. He snatched it, thumbed the bills, face never changing. Only when satisfied did he push a brown packet her way.

The blue book opens under her fingers, corners soft, eagle stamp lying bold on the cover. Inside, her name: Nahid Hashem. The face looked like hers, but younger, hair lighter, the jaw blurred by retouch. Her fingers test the binding, ridges of drilled and reset data chips under her touch.

“Why Nahid?” she asked.

He shrugged. “The dead travel easiest. Nahid died in the marshes, six years ago. Her father paid double to keep her alive on paper. Now you inherit.”

A nod. “Smart.”

He reached for his tea, fingers jittering. “Not smart. Nothing is smart anymore. Every route is burned. Every port has eyes.” He leaned in, breath astringent with cardamom. “Your courier—the one with the limp—he’s dead. They cut him in half at the checkpoint.”

Maryam’s pulse went thin, but her hands stayed steady. “Who runs the line now?”

He shook his head, a tic in the neck. “No line. Only rumors. And IRGC everywhere.” He whispered it, as if afraid the letters themselves might draw the patrols. “They double the checkpoints. They know about the bakery, the safehouses, the river. You are a ghost, and they want to catch you in daylight.”

She examined the passport again. Every detail perfect. Every lie invisible. Sweat crawled at her temples. The paper cut into her palm, a thin line of blood beading at the crease.

The forger eyed her—the door. “You think you can cross like this?” He snapped his fingers. “Impossible. Not unless you have help from the other side.”

Maryam flexed her hands, trying to bleed out the tension. “Do you know someone?”

He tapped the table, eyes darting. “Maybe. I heard about a place near the border. Old monastery, run by Armenians. They take in the lost. You show them this—” he slid a slim icon, a chipped wooden cross, across the table, “—they let you in. Maybe hide you. Maybe nothing.” He shrugged again. “Better than running blind.”

Maryam took the cross, weighed it in her palm. It held the chill of old wood, the grain worn down to a ghost by the hands of centuries. “What’s the catch?”

The forger grinned, showing a line of gray teeth. “You live. You die. Either way, it’s not my problem.”

The cross slips into her pocket, she snapped the passport shut, and tucked both into her satchel. The forger swept the table for stray prints—rolled the razor tray into its hidden recess. “You never come back here,” he said, not unkindly. “You never mention my name.”

Maryam nodded, throat tight. “Understood.”

He walked her to the back door. The air outside bit cold, iron in the mouth. The city glimmered, alive with secrets and the hum of predation.

At the threshold, the forger paused. “You were the best, you know. The city will forget you, but I won’t.”

Maryam let the words pass. Checking the alley, she moved into the dark, the passport heavy in her pocket, the icon cold at her breast.

Two blocks away, she ducked into a dry canal and sat. Fishing the battered Bible from her pack, she opens it to her father’s scribbled verse, and presses her thumb to the old ink. The paper shook in her hands.

She did not pray.

She held the book until her pulse steadied—wrapped it in plastic, slid it home to the pack.

She cinched the bag shut, wiped the sweat from her brow, and headed east, toward the last shelter the city might give.

#

Dark, then darker.

The escape stretched into a long pain—1800 kilometers of treacherous ground from Tehran across the border into Iraq, following the rugged stretches near Syria before finally

heading south into Jordan, where the monastery awaited just beyond Jericho. Each mile was a battle against exhaustion, fear, and the constant threat of capture.

Maryam found herself crammed in the backs of trucks, jostling with crates and the scent of diesel, later riding on donkeys, their slow plod almost mocking her desperation. But most of the journey was spent on foot, slipping through the shadows, moving only under the cover of darkness. Every step felt like the last thread of the Web unraveling, frayed by the cost of betrayal, loss, and the relentless chase of unseen enemies.

The hour before escape thickened into a single pulse, every nerve tuned to the frost and the rot of garbage bleeding from the canal walls.

Maryam lay flat, chin mashed to the clay, breath leaking slow through clenched teeth. The cold bit, but sweat crawled at her ribs. Her thumb tracks the seconds—four, six, twenty—before she chanced a glance above the rim. The street above had emptied, only the hiss of transformers and the scratch of cats in heat. Somewhere far off, the drone of a military truck, its engine a wolf on the prowl.

A shudder passed through her. The scarf tightens under her chin as she checks the pack for the fourth time in as many minutes. Passport, icon, the Bible wrapped tight. The knife in the boot, the two hundred US dollars in rubber bands. A shiver runs through her as the hood pulls over her hair and her body crawls into the night.

They found her at the edge of the old market, two men in peasant black, faces cratered with old smallpox. One called her “Nahid” and spat on the ground, daring the world to contradict. He led her through rows of canvas tents—out a gap in the fence, where a whip-fast little man leaned on a battered Peugeot. The trunk gaped. She slipped inside, curled between

burlap sacks of onions and pesticide, the air dense with the sweetness of decay and the bite of ammonium.

The car lurched, the suspension groaning under her. Riding blind, each bump telegraphs through her spine. Once, the car stopped; a man's voice, deep and sour, barked for the driver's papers. Maryam tensed, hand sliding to her knife, but the moment passed, the voices receded, and the car rolled on.

They ditched her at a drainage pipe on the city's fringe. The men vanished, replaced by a Bedouin youth in a kaftan, face all bone and refusal. He greeted her with a chin flick—led her into the wadi, footsteps swallowing themselves. They walked for hours—no talk, only the crunch of gravel and the wheeze of her own breath. The rocks tore at her boots; she could feel the wet at her heels, the slow grind of flesh coming loose.

In the first light, they hid in a cave. The Bedouin wrapped himself in a ratty blanket and fell instantly to sleep. Maryam propped herself against a wall, drew her knees to her chest, and waited. The cold invaded her bones, but she refused to sleep. Every time her eyes drifted, the city came back—Zahra at the table, Farid's smile, the forger's warning, the ledger burning in the can.

She counted the coins in her pocket—the matches—the water left in the plastic bottle. One sip touches her mouth, dry enough to feel lined with tin. The thought of the journey ahead made her stomach cramp, but she forced herself to swallow, to stand, to move.

By dusk, the Bedouin roused. He motioned her forward with a sweep of the arm. They scaled the ridge, hands and knees, rocks biting into the skin. Teeth cut through pain as her body obeys. At the top, the world spread flat and dead—miles of salt and nothing, the border an imaginary cut through the heart of the desert.

They crossed at night, following the pale light of a dying moon. The Bedouin whispered a single word—"checkpoint"—flattening himself against the sand. Maryam hit the dirt, lips packed with grit. The ground trembled as the truck approached, its lights carving the dark to bone.

A cluster of Jordanian men poured from the truck. Boots pounded. A dog barked, sharp and urgent. Maryam's pulse hammered. The Bedouin pressed her head to the dirt, hissed a curse, and signaled her not to breathe.

Two guards passed within spitting distance. One stopped, boots planted beside her skull. He kicked dirt, muttered, pissed a dark arc into sand. Ammonia blended with blood-rust and stale cigarettes—Maryam fought the urge to gag; the ammonia mixed with the aftersmell of blood and cigarette. The guards moved on, grumbling. A breath of silence—the Bedouin yanked her up, and they ran, scrambled, crawled, skin shredding on stone.

They made a gully. Both collapsed, lungs burning. The Bedouin fished a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and handed her the first drag. Smoke burns through fear's taste as she inhales deep. Her hands trembled; the filter shook between her teeth. His teeth flashed in the gloom as he crushed the cigarette with deliberate, calloused pressure.

"You keep moving," he said, in an accent thick with riverbed and anger. "No stop until the wall."

She nodded, lips numb. "How far?"

He shrugged. "Far." He flicked a finger at her pack. "Light. You are too heavy."

They kept going. Hours bled together. The desert scoured her face; salt cut into every crack in her lips. Once, she tripped and fell, skinning both palms. The Bedouin yanked her up, voice hard, "No sleep. Sleep is for the dead."

Her body forces upright, blood spat from her mouth before she walks.

At dawn, they reached a barbed wire fence. Beyond, a strip of land scabbed with land mines and the leftovers of war—rusted barrels, old truck tires, the carcass of a goat blasted to pieces by shrapnel. The Bedouin cut the wire with a small saw, fingers nimble. He held it open, signaled her through.

They crawled, belly to dirt, for a hundred meters. Maryam's arms quivered. Twice, she felt the prickle of metal under the sand, a buried grenade or a shell fragment, but she kept her hands steady. The Bedouin never slowed, his rhythm pure confidence.

At the end of the minefield, a second fence. This one higher, topped with sensors. The Bedouin pulled her close, lips almost in her ear.

"Now you go alone," he said. "You find the water, then wait. Someone will come. Maybe. If not, you keep south, never look back. There is no north for you anymore."

Maryam nodded, not trusting her tongue.

He boosted her over the fence and vanished, silent as before.

Knees buckle as her body drops to the dirt. Upright she staggers, eyes scanning the horizon until they catch a half-dead olive tree two kilometers off. She limped toward it, the sun already liquefying the world into white heat.

The thirst grew monstrous. The last water rations down her throat before her tongue licks condensation from the plastic, sucking it dry. Every step sent daggers up her calves; the old bullet wound in her thigh burned like acid. By the time she reached the tree, she wanted to lie down and never rise.

Instead, she slumped at the base, hands wrapped around her pack. She unscrewed the Bible, thumbed the pages, found her father's inscription. The words swam, unreadable, but she pressed her lips to the script anyway.

The world tilted. Half-dream, half-memory envelops her: the old kitchen, bread rising, father's laugh, Zahra's arms, music brightening the air. She almost let herself sleep, but something woke her—a vibration in the air, the sense of being watched.

She blinked. Two shapes approached from the south—men, uniforms, rifles. Her body hunches, ready to run, until a raised palm halts her.

In Hebrew, the voice called out: "At lo tzarich l'hafchid. You are safe now."

She almost laughed, almost cried.

They led her to a tent, gave her water, bread, and a blanket. She ate, drank, shivered. When they asked her name, she gave them the only one left: "Maryam."

The men conferred and left her in the shade. Around the Bible her body curls, sweat and blood streaking skin as sleep finally claims her for the first time in weeks.

The sun climbed. The wind picked up. Somewhere in the haze, she heard the distant clatter of monastery bells.

She did not wake for hours.

#

Heat wakes her, not the city's fire but a slow burn threading every muscle, every follicle, every crack in her lips. Her tongue mapped the ridges of her teeth, found them all chipped and slick with blood.

The blanket wrapped her shoulders, thin wool matted with sweat. Cloth peels from her skin as arms flex, a wince carving across torn knuckles. Her boots had fused to her ankles, crusted with dust and salt. She wrenched them off, pain spiking bright enough to leave her breathless.

She coughed, a wet bark that rattled the tent walls. No one came. The sky outside glared white, the sun already halfway to zenith. Back against the mat, eyes on the roof, she counts each breath, trying to separate them from the ache in her ribs.

After a time—minutes or hours, she couldn't say—a figure stepped through the tent flap. A soldier, young, eyes too soft for the uniform. He carried a mug of water and a chipped enamel bowl. He set them beside her and retreated without a word.

She drank, the water shocking her system, setting her gut roiling. Another slow sip goes down before bread forces itself past her lips. It tasted of nothing and everything; she gagged—finished it anyway.

With food in her, she managed to stand. Her legs quaked, but she refused to fall. The pack opens beneath her fingers—passport, cross, Bible still there. The scarf winds around her neck as the pistol tucks deeper.

The tent opened onto a dry riverbed. A trail of bootprints led north, toward the faint outline of a walled compound on the next rise. The air hummed with bees and the stench of distant refuse. She started walking, one foot dragging behind the other.

Each step sent pain up her shins. She counted off a hundred and let herself stop, knees buckling. Sweat streaked her face, salt stinging her eyes. The world pulsed in and out, a strobe of color and blank.

Forward she pushes. The compound grew, stone walls rising from the desert like the jaw of a buried god. At the gates, a bell tolled—not for prayer, but for the hour. The sound cut through her, pure and cold.

Through the open arch she stumbles, hand bracing against rough stone. Inside, the air changed—thicker, laced with incense and old smoke. Voices rose in chant, not Farsi or Arabic but the low drone of Coptic, or maybe Greek.

The entry hall offered shade, and for a moment, she thought of sleeping there. But the voices called her onward, down a corridor lined with candles, each flame trembling in the crosscurrents of her passing.

At the end of the hall, a cloistered court, its center marked by a cistern. She knelt, dipped her hands in the water, splashed her face. The cold shocked her, but cleared her head.

The chanting grew louder. From a side door, three monks emerged—robes black, beards wild, eyes ancient. The lead monk carried a staff; the others held nothing, their palms open in greeting.

Maryam tried to speak, found her mouth empty of words.

The lead monk nodded. "Peace, sister. You are safe here."

She shook her head, tried again. "I am not your sister."

He smiled, kindness cutting through the authority of his stance. "You will be."

The world tilted. The edges of her vision bled to white. Her body sways before collapsing, stone floor greeting her cheek with a hollow thump.

Around her, monks gather, hands gentle and efficient as they lift, carry, and lay her on a pallet in the dark. They wiped the dirt from her face, dabbed ointment on her wounds, swaddled her in linen.

She hovered in that twilight for hours, sometimes floating to the surface to catch a line of prayer, a snatch of song, the brief sting of alcohol in a cut.

When she woke again, night owned the world. The windows above flickered with candlelight, and the sound of chanting persisted—now a lullaby, now a dirge.

She rolled onto her side, clutched the Bible to her chest, and let herself rest.

At dawn, the lead monk sat beside her. He did not ask for her story. He only offered bread, water, and the silence of the saved.

She took them all.

Outside, the desert wind keened. The world had not forgiven, but it had allowed her to remain.

In time, the brothers would give her a name—Sister Mariam, a relic of what she had run from and what she might become.

But for now, she belonged to no one but the stone, the wind, and the book that had survived it all.

She slept, and in her sleep, the Web rewove itself—fragile, but there.

## Chapter 25: A New Vow

1989.

The cell pressed Maryam to waking: hard stone at her back, rough blanket biting her neck, ribs splintered with every breath. The night's fever had emptied her body, leaving behind the salt of her skin and a stench sour enough to burn her own nose. Beneath the blanket, her arms mapped a terrain of bruises, the left forearm bandaged thick and still damp at the seam.

Above, a slit of gray let in the first light—indifferent, flat, revealing nothing. The line of the wall drew her gaze until the joints blurred, the whole world reduced to corners and the ache that occupied them.

A sound pulsed down the corridor, low and rhythmic, closer to humming than music. It bled through the rock, vibrated the cot—vanished in the next instant, replaced by silence so complete it drilled a hole behind her ears.

Maryam gripped the edge of the cot, pulled herself upright. The movement bent her in half, a wave of nausea breaking behind her eyes. A swallow—feet hit the floor. The cold slapped her awake. The cold slapped her awake.

The last thing she remembered before this box: the cave, the gun, the men with river accents, the border, the mines. After that, nothing—just hands lifting her, carrying her over a ridge—the cold—then this.

No pack. No boots. No cross. Nothing.

Footsteps: a single pair, measured, heel heavy, the tread low and deliberate. The cell door creaked open, hinges resisting.

The monk blocked the light, a dark pillar in the narrow frame. He dwarfed the space, the neck thick as her thigh, his arms wrapped in robes the color of coal dust. A barrel chest, knotted with corded muscle—Ethiopian, she thought, from the cut of the cheek and the shadow under the brow. The beard looked burnished, not gray, and the eyes caught everything.

A bowl and strip of linen balance in his broad hand. The other made a gentle gesture: up—wait.

Knees locked, spine stiffening until upright.

The monk set the bowl on a stool—nodded to her bandaged arm. He unwrapped the gauze, slow, his fingers blunt but careful. When the bandage pulled free, she braced for pain but none arrived—only the surprise of clean skin, the scab neat, the redness faded. He wiped the wound with a cloth, dabbed something cool on it. The smell, medicinal, spiked in her nose: clove, camphor, maybe oil of thyme. Loose binding circles the arm as he rewraps it.

Two fingers tap his lips before pointing at her mouth, a silent sign from him. The language of the deaf, or the exiled. Eat, the sign said.

Maryam stared at the bowl. Broth, thin and milky, a shimmer of oil on the surface. The steam snaked upward, taunting. Hands trembling, she reached for it. Her hunger grew teeth.

The bowl hovered near her lips, breath steaming above the broth, sniffed once and set it back on the stool. A test, a denial. Comfort remained unwelcome. Not yet.

The monk watched, no judgment in his face. A palm presses his chest, beats slow and points to her: rest.

Maryam nodded, heat rising up her neck.

He lingered a moment, eyes scanning her face and withdrew, closing the door with a click so soft it vanished into the air.

Left alone, Maryam bent forward, elbows on knees, chin tucked. Breaths counted in sets of ten. On the third cycle, she drifted—half waking, half dream. In the murk, her father's voice: "The world will grind you down, but do not let it empty you." He never said that, not in life, but her brain supplied it anyway. The warmth of his voice outlasted the words.

A hard blink forced focus back to the room. The stone walls, painted with old soot, held nothing but faint traces of color—once blue, now blackened by years of lamp smoke. A wooden cross, splintered and crude, hung above the cot. Someone had etched a name into the grain: Dawit.

Fingers traced the letters, pulse thrumming under the nail. The action steadied her.

A crack at the door leaked light, sound. Maryam shifted, peering through the seam.

The corridor opened onto a low gallery, arches cut from the same stone as the cell. Monks drifted between shadows, their robes pooling at their feet, hoods drawn up. Their movements—precise, efficient, almost military. Each pair passed with a nod, but never a word.

One carried a clay jug, another a tray of folded linens, two more balanced baskets on their shoulders. The floor, swept to bare flagstone, clicked under their sandals.

Past the first arch, a second hall ran perpendicular. Here, the rhythm shifted—boys in pale linen robes, skin almost blue with the chill, shuffled in pairs, each gripping a book or a candle. Their heads stayed bowed, lips moving in silent recitation. A smell of beeswax and ink tailed them.

At the far end, the Russian. Even from a distance, the beard dominated: a slab of white shot through with black, dense enough to hide a full mouth. His robe sat different, the cut richer, the gold thread glimmering at the cuff. Anticipation, not authority, sharpens him as he watches the corridor. When a novice tripped, spilling a sheaf of papers, the Russian bent to help him—quick, no shame, the correction kind. A quick pat to the boy's head sends him off with the rest.

Maryam tracked this from her cell, body tensed. Every sound, every flicker of movement triggered the old protocols: evaluate, map, remember.

The wound checked: clean, no trace of blood on the new bandage. The arm flexed—soreness, but nothing more.

A new sound: the hum of prayer, this time rising and falling in a long wave. A bell struck once, twice—silence—then voices surged. The air shivered with harmony.

Feet slid from the cot, the blanket falling in a heap. Her feet, bare, numbed on the stone. Pressure against the door, ear close to the crack, sound filling her.

The voices rose, syllables tumbling one atop the next, a mixture of languages—Greek, Coptic, perhaps Slavonic. The melody crept up her spine, summoned something old and raw from her chest.

Retreating, she sat cross-legged on the cot. The heat from the broth had faded, leaving a skin on the surface. The bowl lifted to her lips. The first sip burned, but she drank anyway.

Three pulls emptied the bowl. It settled back as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. The taste lingered—salt, marrow, onion. Food, not mercy.

Through the crack, the gallery brightened. More monks now, gathering near the arch, some carrying buckets, others lengths of rope or brooms. The Ethiopian returned, this time with a sack slung over one shoulder, his other arm wrapped around a large bundle of something—towels or cloth. He moved with a slow economy, never rushing, never stopping.

The Russian monk stood at the arch, waiting for the Ethiopian. When he arrived, they shared a brief conversation—words lost to distance. The Russian reached up, rested his hand on the Ethiopian's shoulder and laughed, a sound like rocks tumbling together. The Ethiopian grinned, teeth sharp as he moved off toward the far side of the hall.

Maryam watched the Russian, the way his body held both power and calm. At the door's crack, he catches her and inclines his head a fraction.

A jerk backward, sudden heat flushing her cheeks.

The next time she looked, the Russian had vanished.

Night arrived early in the cell. The corridor darkened, the only light the faint candle guttering at the end of the hall. Someone had left a pitcher of water and a wedge of dark bread on the stool. Maryam drank, chewed the bread, each bite a struggle against the muscle memory of hunger. Half she finishes, the rest she saves.

Her body ached for sleep, but the mind rebelled. Beneath the blanket she curls, counting ceiling stones, recounting when the number slips. In the absence of noise, her ears replayed the

old sounds: her father's laugh, the pop of gunfire in the street, Laila's voice, Zahra's hissed warnings.

Voces arrived, one at a time, until words lost meaning and blurred into a single note.

Face pressed to wool, inhaling the smell of old soap and dust.

Her dreams that night held no logic. A maze of corridors, voices calling from the end. A step behind she follows until the path vanishes, waking soaked, shivering, every muscle rigid.

At dawn, the Ethiopian monk entered again, this time with a tray: boiled egg, lentils, a mug of thin tea. He set the tray down and sat on the edge of the cot, careful not to touch her.

He pointed to the egg—to her mouth.

Maryam shook her head. "No. Today I do not eat." Her voice came rough, the syllables raw.

Two hands press together, fingers bloom open, a silent sign from him.

"Why do you care if I eat?" she asked.

The monk touched his own lips—his heart—mimed the action of breathing out, arms wide. Live, the sign said.

Weighing the thought, her gaze dropped.

Silence drapes over them as he sits, a breath or a lifetime passing. He rose, bowed, and left.

The corridor offered no echo of his retreat.

That afternoon, the Russian monk returned. A robe of blue trimmed with white drapes him, beard tied with a thin cord. He knocked once at her door, waited.

She did not answer.

The door swings open under his hand as he steps in, size filling the room.

Her posture, her face, her bare feet meet his quiet appraisal.

“You are not a criminal here,” he said, English tinged with the soft R of Moscow. “You can leave if you wish. But you should heal first.”

Maryam replied, “I do not deserve to.”

He nodded, not arguing. “We do not decide who deserves. God takes care of that.”

Laughter cracks out of her, short and bitter. “God hasn’t answered in years.”

The Russian smiled, a glint of real humor in the beard. “He answers. He never says what you want to hear.”

A slow shake of the head answered. “If I stay, it will cause trouble.”

He shrugged. “We live for trouble. Besides, you are among friends here.”

His gaze met hers as she searched for the trick, the angle, and found none.

He turned, leaving her in silence, but at the threshold, he looked back. “Tomorrow, you should join us for prayer. The world will wait for you.”

The door closes behind him, soft as a blessing.

Maryam sat in the dark, hands folded in her lap, the bandage on her arm no longer bleeding.

Waiting not for God, but for the shape of tomorrow.

#

The wounds closed with a sureness that surprised her. Three days passed under the monastic regime: mornings broken by the Ethiopian’s silent care, afternoons spent staring at the

wall, nights stewed in old sweat and the ache of healing flesh. Each morning, the corridor brightened at the same hour, a new bowl, a new gesture, the same mute insistence: live.

On the fourth day, Maryam found her legs less wooden. The bruise at her thigh, swollen and angry, now faded to sick yellow. Hands flexed, grip strong enough to bruise bread crust. Her head cleared. The world returned.

Today, the hunger ran deeper than her shame. Lentils gone, bread torn in precise strips, tea drained to the dregs.

The Russian monk's invitation rang in her ears: "Tomorrow, you should join us for prayer. The world will wait for you."

Maryam pressed her hands together, thumbed the ridges of her knuckles and slid off the cot. The shock of cold on her soles forced a hiss through her teeth.

Bare feet padded to the door, the gap widened just enough for her frame. The hallway flickered with early light. The hum of prayer had already begun.

Her father's Bible pressed to her ribs, cover flaked and torn, margins dark with old blood. The Bible pressed against her chest, a shield for the next hour.

The gallery ran empty. The candle at the arch had guttered out. Silent steps followed the trace of voices. Down the hall, through the blue-shadowed cloister, and into a low vestibule carved from a single slab of stone.

The chapel's door stood open, hinges fixed by age. Maryam crept to the threshold, heart trampling itself.

Inside: two rows of monks, backs straight, knees pressed to the floor. Heads bowed, hands folded at the chest. The Ethiopian up front, the Russian behind, all arrayed in tight formation. The novices clustered on the left, their pale faces nearly translucent in the half-light.

The sound: a river of prayer, voiced in the old tongue—rich, liquid, unbroken by breath or pause. The air thickened with it, the stone walls amplifying every note.

Candles flanked the altar, dozens at least, their flames unsteady in the currents from the vents above. The air smelled of tallow, frankincense, and a faint edge of sour wine.

Maryam hesitated at the door, toes at the line of shadow. Eyes searched for a sign she belonged.

The Russian lifted his head, eyes slicing the space between. He met her gaze and, with a subtle tilt, beckoned her inside.

Pulse hammering, she stepped inside. A circle around the back row ended in a kneel, old knee wound spiking sharp. The stone floor robbed her of comfort, but the pain gave her focus.

Hands folded over the Bible, neck bent, breath matched to the monks' cadence. The sound seeped into her.

The chanting intensified, a slow climb up the scale, the words fusing into a single golden thread. Her mind drifted, slipped free of itself. The anger in her chest guttered, replaced by something lighter. The urge to cry rose, not from sorrow but release.

Grip tightened on the Bible, thumb tracing the smear across Luke's gospel. Pages flipped, eyes stuttering over the lines, and found it: "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away."

Her fingers trembled. The words blurred. Her face burned.

The prayer ended, the room falling into a hush so complete she thought she might shatter it by breathing.

Maryam bowed her head, forehead to the spine of the Bible. Tears pooled on the leather, tiny wet galaxies.

"I am ready now," she whispered. The words, intended for only God to hear, slipped free before she could stop them.

In the silence, the monks rose one by one, every movement deliberate. The Russian passed behind her, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder and continued out the door.

Maryam remained on her knees, eyes closed, letting the echo of prayer settle deep in the marrow.

When she finally stood, the floor left an imprint on her skin, a map of bruises she wore with something like gratitude.

The chapel emptied behind her, Bible pressed to her ribs, heart bruised but alive.

#

The next morning, the routine snapped, replaced by a hush of anticipation. Maryam's cell, usually the end point for daily rhythm, became the epicenter. Footsteps outside, not the usual monk's pace: softer, uncertain, the cadence of boys unaccustomed to urgency.

Two seminarians entered, faces near-mirrored: pale, narrow-jawed, hair cropped to invisible. Each carried a bundle, both wrapped in white linen. They didn't speak. Instead, they laid the bundles on the cot, bowed in unison, and backed out—eyes fixed on her feet.

Maryam stood, unsure what role to play.

Moments later, the Russian monk arrived. He lingered in the doorway, arms folded, beard braided tight to the chin.

He gestured at the bundles. “It is time to become one of us, even if only in name. You will be able to leave to go to market in this.” His voice traded its thunder for something softer, still edged with gravel.

Maryam untied the linen, fingers clumsy. The robe, first: gray wool, hand-dyed, uneven at the seams, the inside lined with rougher fabric than the out. Next, the belt: a cord, twisted from blue and ochre threads, frayed at the ends. Last, a head covering, neither scarf nor hood, but a hybrid—meant to cover the hair and shadow the face.

She held the robe to her chest. The weight reminded her of the blankets in childhood, how she would wrap them tight and wait for her father to check if she breathed. The memory scalded, then cooled, leaving a flat ache.

The Russian entered, closing the door with care. “We use the habit to hide what the world cannot forgive,” he said. “Sometimes to hide from ourselves.”

He pointed to the robe. “It carries the dust of a thousand lives. Some holy, most not. All survived, for a time.”

Maryam’s hands shook as she threaded her arms through the sleeves. The wool stung at the wrists. Letting the fabric settle, she smooths it over the hips.

He took the belt, held it out—tied it around her waist. The knot, a single twist, sat at her left side.

He placed the head covering in her hands. “This is for humility,” he said. “And for the eyes of men who cannot see God in a woman’s face.”

Maryam almost laughed, but the humor dried in her throat. Fabric winds around her head, the end tucked behind her left ear.

The Russian stepped back, surveyed her. "Sister Mariam," he said, voice even. "From this moment, no one here will call you anything else."

In the window's sliver she studies her new reflection. The robe blunted every feature, the scarf erased the old hair, the belt pinched her thin as a reed.

Smaller and larger she becomes, less seen yet more present.

The Russian's eyes softened. "It suits you," he said.

Maryam nodded, unable to find the words.

He added, "This habit carries dust and hope, don't desecrate it."

A hand presses into the rough wool as she nods again.

He looked at her, gaze unyielding. "Your father would have found this funny, no?"

The mention of him cracked something inside her. In memory, his smile surfaces, a joke ready about the world's oldest daughter in the oldest costume.

Tears threaten her eyes, but a blink forces them back, refusing the drama.

The Russian opened the door. "Come," he said. "You belong now."

Maryam followed, every step a new sensation. The robe dragged at her ankles. The cord belt constricted her waist. The head covering itched at the scalp.

Yet as she walked the corridor, the other monks bowed, some with a half-smile, most with solemn grace.

For the first time in years, she moved through a world that did not want her dead or forgotten.

She was not free, not safe, but she belonged.

That afternoon, she caught her reflection in the cistern. The water, disturbed by wind, showed her the new face: hard, clean, unfamiliar. A small smile pulls at her lips, barely curving.

“Sister Mariam,” slips from her in a whisper, as if the name needed practice before it could be real.

It sounded nothing like the name she’d once cursed, or the one she’d spent a life running from.

Air fills her lungs, steady and full, bright with bread and beeswax.

The habit fit, for now.

#

The refectory echoed with the scrape of spoons, the low hum of men too tired for conversation. The meal—potato, bread, thin stew of barley and turnip—sat heavy in the bowl, but the air carried the sting of hunger anyway. Candles guttered on the long tables, their light yellow and weak, throwing more shadow than clarity.

Maryam took her place at the end of the bench, the wool of her habit itching where the skin ran raw at the wrist. On her left, the Ethiopian monk—now named to her as Gabra—ate methodically, never glancing up. On her right, the two seminarians sat shoulder to shoulder, their heads so alike they could have been drawn from the same blue print. Across from her, the Russian, eyes half-lidded, surveying the table as if it held the secrets of the world.

At the head, a new presence: short, wiry, his black beard trimmed with mathematical precision, the voice impossibly gentle for the build. This was Father Chrysostom, the one the others deferred to, the architect of the chapel’s liturgy and, she gathered, of the monastery’s true business.

The meal progressed in near silence. After the bowls emptied, the monks slid into a second phase: a rumble of planning and complaint, each voice pitched so low it bled into the wood. Gabra unfolded a sheaf of paper, spread it on the table: a map, hand-drawn, its surface laced with red and black slashes.

The Russian pointed at a cluster of marks. “Three new, this week. IDF says maybe more.”

Chrysostom leaned in, traced a line with his smallest finger. “Here, the new road. Here, the salt flats. All closed, now.”

The novices leaned in, eyes sharp for the first time all evening. Gabra signed at them: careful, slow. They nodded.

Maryam absorbed the scene. Tehran’s basements return to her mind, places where rumor became plans and plans ended in blood. The difference here: the topic was not smuggling, not weapons, not currency, but mines.

She found the question in her mouth before her brain caught up. “Why is the field so dangerous? Is it the patrols?”

Chrysostom looked at her, not surprised. “The war left the valley thick with death. The world wants to forget it, but the land remembers.” His accent spun Greek and English together, his words bright with fatigue.

Gabra produced a second map, this one a printout—official, topographic. He circled three areas in black ink.

“The authorities want to keep the mines,” the Russian said. “They think it deters the wrong sort. But the right sort also die.”

Maryam scanned the markings, the place names. She recognized most, if only from her years on the border—Jericho, Allenby, the old fortress of Qasr al-Yahud.

Chrysostom explained: “The church wants the site cleared. Pilgrims come each year, hoping for a miracle. Some walk right into the wrong place. The miracle does not happen.”

The Russian added, “The last team—UN, from Austria—cleared one hundred meters, then lost two men to a faulty map. No one has come since. Too dangerous.”

Gabra signed at Chrysostom. The priest translated: “Without new equipment, we cannot go further. The old gear is in pieces, and the army will not lend us any.”

Maryam remembered the taste of dust in a minefield, the feel of static in the air before an explosion. She’d watched three boys lose their lives to an anti-tank shell set as a trap. The picture never faded: the arc of blood, the silence after.

“Where do you get equipment?” she asked.

The Russian smiled, a show of teeth in the beard. “From God, or from the black market. Sometimes the difference is not clear.”

Chrysostom leaned back, cracked his knuckles. “We try every channel. Sometimes a friend in the port, sometimes a bribe, sometimes a favor to the right cousin.”

The novices snickered—checked themselves.

Gabra pointed to another spot on the map, then made a cutting motion across his palm. The Russian said, “Last time we tried, the customs man took the package, and the rest of the funds. The field remains.”

Maryam nodded, the pattern all too familiar.

After the table cleared, Chrysostom approached her directly, hands clasped behind his back. "You are new here, but I see you have old experience. Why else does a woman walk in with her hands still bandaged, and yet stare at every map as if it could be solved?"

Maryam hesitated. A hand hides her face, but the old hunger claws back, craving mastery of the unsolvable.

Chrysostom said, "We need help. We need someone who knows how to move things where they are forbidden. I have no pride. Only a mission."

She ran her thumb along the rough of her belt, weighing the risk.

He waited, letting the silence expand until it pressed at her lungs.

Finally, she answered, "I might know a way. If you trust me."

Chrysostom nodded. "I trust anyone who sits through my sermons and does not fall asleep."

He smiled, and the fatigue dropped away for a moment. "We will talk tomorrow, yes? But tonight, you should rest."

She agreed, but the rest would not come.

Instead, she spent the night mapping the new lines, the possible couriers, the old debts and the new dangers. Her mind sorted the names, the currencies, the exchange rates for bribes in Jerusalem versus Ramallah. Weight of a case of demining sensors, the volume of a coil of detonator wire, how many could be hidden in a crate of olives or a sack of lentils, she calculates it all.

She could build the Web again, this time with a purpose that did not shame her.

By dawn, she had the first plan. She would need the Russian, the Ethiopian, and the two boys. Her own skills, and all the lies she'd ever perfected would be needed as well.

But this time, she would use them for something that might outlast her.

Wrapping herself in the habit, the dust of hope now mingled with sweat and the sharp clarity of a mission.

A real smile breaks across her, first in months.

The taste was salt, and something sweeter.

#

Midnight in the monastery hollowed the air of everything but memory and the ache of unfinished business.

Maryam waited until the novices slept, their breathing a soft chorus beneath the snore of the Russian. She padded down the corridor, each step timed to the shuffle of the night wind in the gallery. At the storeroom, she took parchment, a small bottle of ink, a wooden ruler, and two stubby pencils. A tallow candle slips into her pocket, snapped in half as her robe catches the wax.

Into the empty kitchen she retreats, coals smoldering, air thick with burnt onion and garlic ghosts. Supplies drop onto the oak table as her sleeve clears space and silence fills her lungs.

The first map she drew from memory—Jerusalem to the Jordan, through the old Bedouin tracks, past the blighted fields and the gutted checkpoints. Known patrols, bribe points, camel paths hiding contraband mark themselves under her hand. In the margin, she drew a crescent with an arrow through it, the old code for safe crossing.

On a second sheet, she mapped the valley around the monastery, every minefield, every rumored cache of lost arms, every streambed that filled with spring and vanished by summer.

Rivers etch in blue, danger in red pencil. Her hand trembled at first, but the work settled her; soon, the lines flowed straight.

Thoughts of her father return: his hands, ink-stained, showing her how to draw the city's arteries, how to measure the width of a smuggler's tunnel by eye. "If you are caught," he told her once, "never give them the true map. Always carry the lie."

This time, she would give them only the truth.

She traced the saffron routes—how shipments moved through the Armenian kitchens, how the caskets of spice masked the scent of books. Neat numbers tally beneath her pencil. How many Bibles could fit in a crate meant for figs, or between sacks of rice. In the margins, she wrote the cipher for each contact, the price in currency or favors.

The return plans line up in her mind: the way demining wire could be packed inside lengths of rope, how the detectors hid best among car batteries, how the clerks at the border could be counted on for a kilo of pistachio or a week of bread.

Each annotation became a prayer, each line a vow to the ghosts in her past.

For Zahra, she mapped the alternate routes—the ones that snaked through the back alleys of Tabriz, where old friends still traded secrets for the cost of a poem. For Reza, she wrote his name into the ledger: a codeword for hope, to be used if she ever needed to remember why she started this work at all.

A final sputter of the candle ends her work. The maps, stacked and folded, held the sweat of her hands and the imprint of her thumb at every corner.

Wiping the ink from her skin, she cleaned the table, and replaced the pencils and ruler. The kitchen, now truly empty, seemed to accept her sacrifice.

Maryam tucked the maps inside her robe, pressed the Bible to her chest, and walked back through the dark.

In her cell, she placed the maps under her mattress, the way she'd once hidden the first Bible her father gave her.

Rough fabric scratches her skin as she lies back, waiting for dawn.

When it came, she would begin the work.

She would give the world the truth, and maybe find a piece of herself unbroken.

## Chapter 26: The Monks' Misadventure

Dawn drills into the chapel like a needle. Stone sweats with cold and incense, and the slow creep of sun paints the altar in bruise and gold. Maryam kneels hard, bones grinding through wool, hands braced to the stone rail. Her father's Bible props open at the spine, pages scored with old blood and newer ink, every margin a battlefield of prayers and corrections. In the blue static before speech, she sets her vow against the silence: never again the old Web, never for profit or vengeance, but for faith, for the mercy she doubted still survived inside her.

From the dark behind the iconostasis, Gabra moves first. His bare feet slide without sound, but the air vibrates with his presence—barrel chest filling the small vestibule, hands already locked in prayer. He kneels beside her, close enough that their shoulders brush. The thick cords of his arms tense, pressing palm to palm until the joints threaten to pop.

The Russian's stride follows: boots whisper over the flagstones, a fist of beard and bone. He genuflects with a single, iron motion. Folding down on the other side of her he becomes a wall of wool and pipe smoke and sweat. His voice cracks the silence, velvet-smooth and graveled. "O Lord, we arrive without credentials," he murmurs, "but with the paperwork of hunger."

Gabra grins into his sleeve, the laugh stifled but alive. Maryam lets the tension out in a hiss, nostrils wide. "We come as the desperate do," she says, "with nothing but our hands and the debt in our mouths."

The ritual begins: the slow liturgy of dawn, call and response, words ground down to the syllables that survive centuries. They pray for peace, for rain, for the sick and the failed crops and the old men buried in the minefields at Qasr al-Yahud. For the boys lost to the wars. For the ones who go missing without rumor. "We start today," she says.

The Russian nods, beard wagging. "Father Chrysostom will be waiting," he says. "He expects miracles, but perhaps a miracle with more firepower."

Gabra's sign: a flick at his ear followed by a broad sweep across the chest, palms upward—now or never.

They file out, Gabra brushing the stone with two fingers as he passes, the Russian trailing a cloud of smoke from some hidden cigarillo. In the corridor, the light sharpens. A handful of novices shuffle past, their linen robes threadbare, eyes fixed to the flagstones.

Father Chrysostom waits in the briefing room, already hunched over a folding table scored with old scratches and map edges. Two more monks—Armenian twins, grim and indistinguishable—shadow his elbows. The table sags under the weight of topographic printouts,

a scale model of the valley, and a battered shortwave. Chrysostom's robe looks slept-in, the black faded to dust at the seams.

He waves them to the table, fingers quick. "We have a problem," he says. "The field behind St. John's is active again. Someone—Bedouin, maybe?—walked straight in. A child. They lost both legs before anyone heard the boom."

Maryam flinches, a flash behind the eyes, old pain realigning the spine. Sliding into the chair, she cuts a glance to Gabra—the Russian.

"We need the gear," Chrysostom continues. "Metal detectors, defusal kits, at least a dozen more flares. The Army promised it. The Army also took last week's shipment for themselves."

Maryam lays her map flat, clears her throat. "We'll get it," she says.

The Armenian twins shift, their distrust alive in the arch of their brows. "How?" asks one. The accent bites.

Maryam unrolls the route. "There's an IDF depot at Abu Tor. They have the sensors, the detectors. We intercept the courier at the market—Yaffo Road, near the bakery. The shipment comes in late, around four, before the guard change."

The Russian's lips quirk. "And if the courier does not cooperate?"

Maryam shrugs. "We encourage him."

Gabra's hands fly: two fists, a snap, a palm at the mouth—no killing, he signals.

"No killing," Maryam says, voice flat. "Just a redirect."

Father Chrysostom's hands drum the tabletop. "You will need a truck," he says. "Something with clearance, for the rough. We have the delivery van, but the transmission—" He slices his hand in the air. "It will die before the Jordan."

“We will fix,” the Russian says. “If it moves at all, it moves far enough.”

Maryam pulls a folded sheet from inside her robe, sets it beside the map. “We build a false compartment. Hide the kits under olive oil and dates. If the checkpoint stops us, they find nothing. No one will steal them from us once we have them.”

The Armenian twins exchange glances—uncertain, but less sharp. One snorts, “If checkpoint opens crate, they find vodka, too?”

The Russian laughs, a rolling, low thing. “We only bribe with the best.”

Gabra nods.

Chrysostom leans back, eyes narrowing. “So be it. Take Gabra and Alexei, and the van. I will cover the evening prayer—no one will know you are gone.” He dismisses the twins with a jerk of his chin. “Let the others know nothing. The fewer who remember, the fewer who must lie.”

The room dissolves into movement: the Russian (Alexei) bundling the maps, Gabra rolling the compartment blueprints, Maryam folding the sheet tight. They leave the Father with his hands pressed to his forehead, already deep in next week’s worry.

In the refectory, the air pulses with the heat of bread and sweet coffee. Gabra loads his plate with hard-boiled eggs, eating two at a time. The Russian dunks his in brine before swallowing whole, eyes never leaving the route map Maryam now traces with her fingernail.

“We’ll take the back road to Mar Saba,” Maryam says. “Avoid the first checkpoint, swing south, then cross up through Silwan. The van can handle the drop if we lighten the load.”

Alexei nods. “Gabra and I make the compartment in an hour. We use the false bottom from the potato crate.”

Gabra lifts his egg, points it at Maryam like a threat. He signs, quick: hurry, hurry, hurry.

Maryam cracks a rare smile. “Eat, Gabra. We have a long day.”

By midmorning, the three of them kneel under the body of the old Ford Transit, Gabra’s bare feet splayed on the oil-stained tiles, Alexei cursing as he bends the sheet metal with a tire iron. Maryam brings the wire and the glue, hands steady, each step practiced. She remembers her father’s hands guiding hers around a screwdriver, telling her the secret of every engine in the city.

The compartment finishes ugly but functional: a shallow grave for the detectors, the wire threaded through the van’s steel ribs and padded with old rags. Gabra shoves the last plank into place, pounds it flush with his palm.

Alexei wipes his brow, grease streaking the beard. “You sure you can drive?” he asks. “Gabra’s license revoked, and I—” He flexes his wrist, the old break still crooked.

Maryam shrugs. “I grew up driving with no license. We can outrun any checkpoint.”

Alexei shrugs, not quite convinced, but he doesn’t argue. Gabra produces the forged delivery slips, hands them over. The ink still shines wet, but the paper looks real.

Maryam takes her seat behind the wheel, flexes her hands on the plastic. The crucifix slips from her habit, cold against the skin. She tucks it in, a private armor.

Gabra slams the back doors. Alexei climbs into the front, whistling a hymn out of tune.

At the gate, Father Chrysostom waits, hands folded in his sleeves. He bows his head as the van pulls away, but his eyes track them long after the wheels scrape gravel.

Outside the wall, the world spins awake: street kids dragging plastic bags, olive vendors hawking brine, the call to prayer already peeling through the valley. Maryam drives in silence, the road climbing and falling in endless switchbacks. The sky glints pale, the wind sharp with dust and pollen.

At the first checkpoint, two IDF boys—barely out of school, rifles heavy on their hips—wave them over. Maryam rolls down the window, smile ready.

“Delivery for the monastery at St. Onuphrius,” she says, brandishing the slip.

The taller boy leans in, eyes flicking over the crate manifest. He glances to the back, sees Gabra grinning, mouth full of bread, hands raised in a pantomime of prayer.

The boy shakes his head, not buying it but not caring enough to dig. “Open the crate,” he says.

Maryam obliges. As she pops the hatch, the boy climbs in. Gabra helps, hoisting the first olive crate, cracking it open to show nothing but fruit and the sharp stink of brine. The boy gags, snaps the lid closed, and jumps out.

Alexei offers him a cigarette. The boy takes two. “Have a good one,” he says, waving them on.

Once past the checkpoint, Gabra throws both hands in the air, silent victory. Maryam drives on, knuckles white on the wheel, the city of Jerusalem a bruise in the heat haze ahead.

In the mirror, the monastery shrinks to nothing, and for the first time in months, she feels the old Web knotting around her, but this time the silk is clean.

“We leave at midday,” she’d said, and the sun proves her right.

The truck barrels toward Jerusalem, faith and old criminal instinct welded together, the world for once giving them a clear road.

Checkpoint flares hot against the morning. Orange plastic barrels, sandbags, razor wire, a prefab hut where two guards cradle rifles across bellies. The Ford Transit rocks to a halt, brakes squealing; silence swallows the cab except for the engine's dry cough.

Maryam rolls the window, flashes her best smile. "Jerusalem delivery. Monastery of St. Onuphrius, Abu Tor. Supplies only, nothing fancy." Her voice, all honey and sorrow, but the guards don't bite. The taller one—buzzed scalp, acne scar stitched along his jaw—waves a clipboard like a sword.

He points at Gabra. "Everyone out. All of you. Hands where I can see."

Alexei's mutter slides under his breath. "We bring charity, they treat us like suicide bombers." He throws the door open, boots hitting gravel. Gabra follows, hands up, grinning like an idiot. Maryam's feet hit dirt, the heat already raw through her sandals.

The second guard, baby-faced, circles the van, dragging a German Shepherd on a tight leash. The dog plants all four paws, ears knifing the air, eyes glued to Gabra's ankles. Gabra pivots, faces the animal, bowing in a slow-motion curtsy. The dog cocks its head, confusion dampening the snarl.

Clipboards, passports, endless repetition of the words "Not Arab? Not Arab." Maryam hands over the manifest, nerves dancing in her wrists. The tall guard flicks through, lips moving. "You got permit for this van? Where's your supervisor?"

"Father Chrysostom is our boss," Maryam says, "but God is his supervisor." She flicks a look at Alexei—try not to die, please.

The handler, bored, lets the leash go slack. The Shepherd's nostrils quiver. Gabra, watching, rips a hunk of bread from his sleeve, cradles it in both palms. He shuffles two steps closer, squats, and dangles the bread between knees.

The Shepherd, laser-locked, inches forward. Gabra flicks the bread, a perfect spiral, landing it at the dog's feet. The Shepherd pounces, chews, gulps. Gabra claps, delighted, and bows again. The dog, sensing performance, barks once, tail wagging.

Handler yanks the leash, annoyed. "He's not your pet. Stand clear."

Gabra nods, bows again. Behind his back, he unspools another bread chunk, holds it up, winks at the dog. The Shepherd drools, jaw trembling.

Maryam's patience shears thin. "You want to search the van?" A step forward, and the tall guard lifts his clipboard, halting her with a glance. "I can open the back if you—"

A sudden clatter: Gabra's bread lands inches from the Shepherd's nose. The dog lunges, handler stumbles, leash snaps from his hand. The Shepherd blasts forward, teeth bared, Gabra yelps—no, not a yelp, more a silent-film shriek—rockets across the yard, robes flapping like ship sails.

The chase detours around a pile of tires, up onto a sandbag embankment. Gabra leaps, canine at his heels. The guards shout, one tries to cut off the path, trips on a brick, faceplants into dust. The baby-faced guard dives for the leash, misses, eats gravel.

Gabra runs a perfect oval around the van—doubles back—dodges the Shepherd with a last-second pirouette. The pup skids, paws flailing, regains, barrels after him. Maryam catches the blur—Gabra, Shepherd, guard—all three in a cloud of dust, curses, and flailing tongue.

Alexei yanks the van's side door open. "Here! In here!" Gabra sprints, vaults the running board, lands inside, slams the door. The Shepherd slams the metal with a thud, yelps in stunned outrage, dizzy, tail battering the ground.

The tall guard tries to reclaim authority, but his radio slips from his belt, drags on the ground. “Stay put!” he shouts. Fumbling the handset he curses in Hebrew. Behind him, the Shepherd circles the van, barking at every window.

Maryam, unamused, taps her foot. The guards regroup, confab behind the hut, one massaging a sprained ankle, the other scratching his head.

Alexei cracks the window. “We apologize for our friend, he is simple. A product of too much incense as a child.”

The guards ignore him. After three minutes, the handler marches up, furious, the Shepherd now muzzled and sulking. He glares at Gabra, who offers an apologetic prayer-hands gesture and blows a kiss at the dog. The Shepherd growls, but the handler yanks him away.

“Take your paperwork. Go!” the tall guard says, hurling the manifest through the window. “Next time, the dog bites.”

Maryam thanks him, feigning deference, but the van wheels peel out, spraying pebbles and humiliation behind.

A mile up the road, Gabra pokes his head from the cargo bay, bread in hand, triumphant. Alexei laughs so hard he chokes on his own spit.

Maryam shakes her head. “You two are impossible. I hope you enjoy the next minefield.”

Gabra grins, waggles his eyebrows, and passes bread forward. Alexei snags it, winks. “For the journey,” he says. “And the dog, should we meet again.”

Sun sharpens above, Jerusalem sprawls ahead, and the world, once more, delivers the old Web its punchline.

They park the Transit in the shadow of a junked bus, half a block from the Army depot.

Concrete barriers line the street, crowned by razor wire and two-story towers punched with slots for rifles. Guards lean on the parapets, bored and sunburned, boots propped on the rails.

Maryam yanks the keys, palms them. "We split. You two take the east gate. Look useless—easy for you. I check the fence out back. We meet here at the trash pit in ten minutes."

Alexei fingers his beard with ceremonial gravity. "If you do not return," he says, "we tell your grandchildren heroic stories."

Gabra signs: She has no children.

Alexei shrugs. "One day. Perhaps. Maybe not after today."

Maryam stuffs the pistol under her robe, checks the magazine. "If you get caught, bite your tongue and remember nothing." She locks eyes with Gabra. "Especially you."

Gabra pantomimes zipping his lips and throws the invisible key over his shoulder. Alexei bows, flourishing like a circus ringmaster. The monks hustle off, cutting between the shadows of battered olive trees and abandoned bike racks.

Maryam walks the perimeter, slow, head down, like she's lost or drunk. Each step between cameras she measures, every guard's post committed to memory with ruthless precision. The back fence slumps under a run of barbed wire. On the far side, a drainage culvert gapes—big enough to crawl, but maybe not big enough to fight.

Crouching, listening. No voices. No dogs. Slithering into the pipe, her breath scraping raw. Eight meters in, she twists upward, shoulders bruising against corrugated iron. At the end, a hatch: locked, but a hard push of the boot pops the rusted catch. Maryam hauls herself into a maintenance alley behind the barracks. No alarms. No one.

Pistol secured against her ribs, hands scrubbed clean on the habit's folds, she glides along the cinderblock wall toward the main building.

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On the east gate, Gabra and Alexei lurk behind a stack of old tractor tires. Gabra fishes in his sleeve for a bent cigarette, offers it to Alexei. Alexei waves it off, gestures: "Later. I need to think."

A chain-link fence divides them from the yard. Alexei tests it—loose at the bottom. He kneels, signals Gabra to boost him over. Gabra bends, offers two palms. Alexei steps up, robe hitching, and launches over, beard sailing after like a white comet.

His beard snags on the fence's top wire. The rest of Alexei lands on the other side, but the beard, trapped, yanks his chin back. He hangs, crucified by facial hair, eyes and chin skyward, robes tangled, only toes touching ground.

Gabra chokes on his own tongue, convulses with silent laughter. He wipes his eyes trying to help. But the fence panel shudders as Gabra tugs, and his own robe, too long and too loose, snags on a metal spike. He stumbles, flails, and slams into the pile of tires. Tires topple, spiral, and roll—first two—a dozen—the whole stack, bouncing down the slope.

At the bottom, three tires leap the curb, careen into the main road, and roll straight for the base's front gate.

"No!" Alexei yelps, voice pinched by pain.

Gabra, robe shredded, yanks a small bread knife from his waistband. He climbs the fence—tearing the habit further—and hacks at the beard, slicing it free in two brutal strokes. Alexei collapses, hands shaking, beard now half-mast, face pale.

The tires hit the guard hut in perfect succession. First guard shouts, second guard trips over the first, third guard sprints to radio for help. Sirens wail, alarms blare. The front gate's guards abandon their posts, chasing tires as they bounce toward the highway. All hell fractures loose.

Gabra and Alexei, stunned, gawk at the chaos. Alexei touches his jaw, mourns the half lost beard. "Years of patience," he mutters, "gone in two seconds."

"Two and a half," Gabra signs, fighting a smile.

They scuttle across the now-unguarded lot, ducking behind dumpsters and moving vans and into the barracks through an unlocked side door.

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Maryam scans the windows—main gate clear, no one in the towers. From the alley she bolts, crosses twenty meters of exposed yard, and dives behind a generator. Two guards stand at the entrance, arguing over some tires. Scurrying towards the next cover, she crab-walks to the stairwell, slips inside. Her body and mind feel alive again, back on the job again.

A corridor runs empty, fluorescent lights buzzing. At the end, Gabra and Alexei wait, hair wild, robes in shreds, both wide-eyed and breathing hard.

"You look like the aftermath of a bar mitzvah," Maryam says, catching her breath.

Alexei blinks, lifts a hand to his jaw. "I have suffered worse. But never for so little reward."

Gabra points at the doors, signs: Let's go, before they come back.

Maryam leads the way, checking corners, pistol drawn. Behind, Gabra makes a knife of his hand, slits the air: hurry.

They slip into a storage room, slam the door behind. For a heartbeat, silence.

Maryam turns, scans the monks. "Did you two notice the entire yard was empty? The guards ran off as soon as the siren went up."

Alexei shrugs, eyes innocent. "Sometimes God offers us unexpected gifts."

Maryam smirks, but the corner of her mouth twitches. "You cut your beard," she says to Alexei. "You look—less holy."

Alexei considers this—grins, the new bare spot on his chin blinding white. "Perhaps it will regrow by Vespers."

Gabra signs: Never. Not in a thousand years.

Alexei's eyes narrow at him. "I liked you better when you could not make jokes."

Maryam shakes her head. "You two are going to get us killed. Or I'll do it first."

Alexei straightens, bows low, beard stubble scraping his own knees. "After you, Sister."

Maryam checks the corridor. "Follow me. And this time, try not to set off another war."

They ghost through the hall, three misfits now indistinguishable from the chaos that spawned them.

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Down the stairwell, storage looms ahead.

Behind them, the alarm dies, replaced by distant laughter as guards collect the last of the runaway tires.

In the dark, Alexei smooths the cut half beard, leans to Gabra. "You did not have to hack so much."

Gabra grins, signs: You should thank me, next time it all comes off.

They move as one, the Web reborn, every strand of disaster making the silk stronger.

#

In the storage room, shadows coil around military-grade crates and yellowed ledgers.

Maryam checks the route to the target door, every footstep measured. Gabra and Alexei shuffle after, dripping anxiety (and, in Gabra's case, a slow trail of blood from a scraped ankle).

Rows of olive-green boxes lead to a steel door marked SUPPLIES. Maryam signals for quiet—two fingers to the lips, two to the door.

"Okay, we need a distraction," she whispers to Alexei, her brow furrowed in thought. "I'll create a noise near the back entrance to draw the guards away. While they're busy, you slip in through this door and grab whatever you can find."

Alexei nods, his eyes narrowing with focus. "I'll keep an eye on the guards' movements, and if anything goes wrong, I'll find a way to create a diversion of my own." He clenches a fist, determination etched on his face.

Gabra, not watching, steps on the tail of his own robe. He pitches forward, arms windmilling, and catches himself on a red metal lever. Alarms erupt, shrieking through every cinderblock and pipe.

Sprinklers spit in unison, cold as sin, drenching them in two breaths.

Alexei scans the corridor, his eyes catching on a door at the far end of the hallway marked "SUPPLIES" in Hebrew, if only Alexei knew Hebrew. "There!" he calls, urgency in his voice. "Follow me!"

He leads the way, pushing the door open and ushering Gabra and Maryam through the narrow opening. "Hurry!" he urges, glancing over his shoulder as footsteps echo closer.

They slip inside, and Alexei follows, pulling the door shut behind him. The lock clicks into place automatically, sealing them within the cramped space.

Maryam blinks at the mop buckets and rolls of paper towels stacked around them, realization dawning. “Great, we’re in a closet.”

Gabra signs with mock exasperation: Not the escape plan we needed!

Alexei chuckles, leaning back against the door. “Well, at least we’re out of sight... for now.”

Maryam pushes a mop bucket away from her feet, soaks in the reality: supply closet, two stunned monks, water pooling at the door, alarms braying like demented goats.

Alexei locks the door, muttering, “We wait. We dry off. No one finds us.”

Gabra sits cross-legged on the floor, wrings water from his robe, signs: Next time, you go first.

Maryam frowns, rattles the knob—solid, iron. “We’re stuck,” she says. “Unless you want to try the mop handle.”

Alexei sighs. “We wait for the chaos. In twenty minutes, nobody will remember the alarm. They’ll blame the wiring, or the dog from the checkpoint.”

Maryam scans the ceiling. An air vent grilles above. Too small for a person, but the panel beside it wobbles under her push. She stacks a bucket on top of a crate, climbs up, and uses the mop to pry the panel loose. Metal shrieks, but nobody outside cares; the alarms mask every noise.

The gap opens to a crawlspace thick with dust and old insulation. Maryam pulls herself in, elbows screaming. Gabra and Alexei watch from below, offering not help but commentary. “You will never fit,” Alexei says, eyeing her hips.

Maryam grunts. "Better than praying for a janitor."

She slides above the closet, shimmies to the next room. The drop is two meters, a mess of wire and dust, but she lands soft behind a rack of chemical drums.

Creeping to the hallway, she traces back to the supply closet, and pops the lock from outside.

Alexei tumbles out first, relief raw on his face. "Our deliverer," he says, voice hoarse.

Gabra bows, signs: Stronger than you look.

Maryam points at the monk's ruined robe. "If you trip again, I'll leave you for the guards."

Gabra mimes contrition, but the wink says otherwise.

They move on, dripping, half-frozen, but intact.

Down the hall, the floodwaters from the sprinklers wash into the open, carrying an empty wine bottle and a battered mop head with them.

"Next time," Alexei says, "we send Gabra through the vent."

Gabra sticks out his tongue, mimes: Too fat, like you.

Maryam, already two doors ahead, shakes her head. "You two are children."

Gabra flashes a wet, saintly smile. Alexei scowls, beard stump bristling.

Wet footprints trail after Maryam, marking a path straight to the prize.

#

Equipment storage yawns ahead: reinforced door, digital pad, no guard in sight. Water puddles at the threshold, but the only sound is the tick of distant alarms winding down.

Maryam drops to her knees, fishing hairpins from the sleeve. Two pins wedge into the lock beneath her fingers, each motion sharp with precision, her focus unbroken. Alexei and Gabra plant themselves behind, eyes everywhere but on her hands.

The lock clicks. She rises, ready to swing the door—Alexei clamps a hand on her shoulder.

“We cannot,” he whispers. “Not this way.”

Maryam blinks, shakes his grip off. “What? You want to pray about it?” She tests the handle, gentle. “We came this far.”

Gabra signs: Not holy, this.

Maryam scowls. “You said the world needed clearing. You said the dead walk every field in Jordan.”

Alexei’s gaze drops, voice thick. “We cannot take what is not given.”

Maryam’s mouth splits in a harsh smile. “Since when do monks draw lines?” She shoves the door—it gives, barely.

Alexei’s head bows. “To take is one thing. To sanctify theft with a mission—worse.”

Gabra’s hands: Light, not darkness.

Maryam stands, fists on hips. “You expect a miracle? You want to wait on God and hope for help?”

Gabra signs: Yes.

A laugh, brittle. “None is coming. We’ll be dead, or gone, or in a cell by sunrise.”

Alexei looks up, eyes cracked and raw. “If we are caught, what do we answer? That our end was holy enough to make every means clean?”

Maryam clenches the handle. Her body remembers how to order men, how to ignore the small voice, the ache in the jaw when you kill for cause.

The words that rise next are not her own. "The world will grind you down, but do not let it empty you."

Gabra steps forward, places a hand on the door, next to hers. His hand is scarred, wide, trembling a little.

Gabra shakes his head as his eyes meet hers: No, not this way.

Maryam stares at his palm, at the way it dwarfs hers. She wants to curse, to break the moment, but cannot.

"Alright," she sighs as her hand pulls away.

The corridor freezes. Gabra signs: Amen.

Digging her fingers into her pocket, she presses the battered Bible flat against her ribs. The cover is soft, edges turned furred and brown from years of clutching. Inside the cover, her father's note: "Do not fear. You are never truly alone." The words scald her tongue and she lets them.

Something sparks in Maryam's head, "I have an idea."

#

They zigzag between open doors, through half-lit offices and showers stinking of disinfectant. Toward the base's admin annex she guides them, the air thick with cigarette smoke and squabbling voices that echo the chaos of any monastery kitchen.

She knocks on the blue-labeled “Humanitarian Liaison” office. Inside, fluorescent tubes burn the air to wire and shadow.

Esther sits at her desk, elbows deep in paperwork, hair pinned up in a battered twist. A face unapologetically beautiful—lips compressed, eyes burning holes in the ledger’s top line. A gold cross on her wrist, hands shaking like a nervous gambler’s. Both monks eyes go wide at the sight of her.

Maryam leans in the doorway. “Long time,” she says, in Hebrew. “Didn’t know you still had the post.”

Esther glances up, one brow arched. “I didn’t know you were alive. Or in a habit.”

“Occupational hazard” she shrugs, and elbows Alexei to stop staring.

Esther motions them in, hands trembling. She scans the monks. “What is going on out there and who are your—friends? You’re not involved are you?”

“Pilgrims,” Maryam says. “On a suicide mission for God and orphans.”

Gabra bows. Alexei tries to cross himself, in his boyish nervousness, fails, and instead waggles his fingers like a lunatic.

Esther smiles, small and sharp. “Sit.” She gestures at the two rickety chairs.

Maryam refuses the chair, stands with arms folded, chin high. “We need the demining kits in your depot. The Israelis hoard them for PR, but children lose legs every week in the valley.”

Esther’s smile hardens. “You know how many requests I get every day? Do you have a letter? A permit? Maybe a bribe?”

Maryam grins. “I have a habit and an empty threat of a hunger strike. In other words, I have nothing to give.”

Esther snorts, scribbles a note. “This is not a good time. Three NGOs are waiting, and I have a press conference at four.”

Maryam drops her voice. “If we walk, you know what happens. The field goes uncleared. Pilgrims bleed, children die. Next time a reporter calls, they name the dead after you.”

Esther rolls her eyes, but not far enough to hide the flinch. “Always with the drama, Amiri.”

“I learned from the best.”

Esther studies her—taps a number on the phone. “I will call someone, but only because you used to make me Turkish coffee and tell lies about your father.”

Maryam’s jaw cracks in a crooked smile. “The coffee was always honest.”

Esther waves her silent launching into rapid Hebrew on the phone—urgent, clipped, a ping-pong of negotiations and accusations. At one point, she slams the desk. “No, not tomorrow—today, or I feed your number to the American media.”

Gabra sits, fiddling with a paperclip. He carefully twists it into various shapes—a fish, a cross, a star—and connects it to the next clip, and the next, with quiet concentration. Exhausting the supply, he admires his creation: a three-foot chain of interlocked designs. His chest swells. A masterpiece.

Alexei snoops in the supply cabinet, delighted to find grape juice and stale pita. He devours half a sleeve of crackers, crumbs dusting his tattered robe and half beard.

Forty minutes later, Esther slams the phone down after her third call. She sweeps papers into a pile, then grabs the empty paperclip box and shakes it. Nothing. Her eyes dart to Gabra—now a slumped statue—as his chain vanishes into his robe. With a snarl, she yanks the

stapler and punches it through the receipts. The crack jerks Gabra upright, his pride unraveling faster than his stolen supplies.

Handing the collection of paper to Maryam she says, “You have it. One kit, one set of detectors, one roll of cord. You sign for it. If you lose it, or sell it, I never knew you.”

Maryam holds out her hand. “No Deal.”

Esther straightens, “What?”

“I’m not leaving here with just a single kit. We need proper supplies to make a real difference.”

Esther shakes her head, the weariness creeping into her voice. “You stroll in my office after what, ten years, soaking wet, in a sisters habit with two—priests—and just casually demand demining kits from the Army? Are you delusional?”

Bowing her in a whisper, “I’m desperate.”

Hesitating, Esther’s fingers tap the desk, weighing the inconvenience against the lives at stake. Finally, with a resigned sigh, she picks up the phone again, dialing a familiar number. “I’ll try, but don’t expect miracles,” she mutters. “I will make another call, but it won’t work. The Army is stretched thin; they won’t part with any more than the bare minimum.”

“Try,” Maryam insists, her voice firm. “For the children out there, for the ones stepping on landmines. For an old friend.”

Maryam leans in closer, tension coiling in her stomach. Murmured negotiations drift from Esther’s side—tones rising, frustration bleeding through each clipped word.

“What do you mean you can’t spare more?” Esther snaps, her voice rising. “We’re talking about lives here! If you can’t help, then what’s the point of this operation?”

Maryam's heart races as she exchanges glances with Gabra and Alexei, their expressions mirroring her hope and anxiety.

Finally, Esther freezes, eyes widening as she listens. "You're serious? Truckload?" She blinks, disbelief washing over her face. "You're sure?"

Maryam bites her lip, praying for the answer they need.

"Fine," Esther concedes, still sounding incredulous. "I'll have it prepared. But if this goes south, you're on your own."

Receiver clacked into place as her gaze cut to Maryam, astonishment tangled with irritation. "I can't believe it, they went for it. In 13 yeras here I've never—You got lucky. Now, let's get to work."

Maryam beams, relief flooding through her. "Thank you, Esther. This will save lives."

Esther rolls her eyes but can't hide a small smile beneath her frustration. "Just remember, I'm not risking my job for your romantic ideals about heroism."

Esther shoves a clipboard across the desk. "You always think you get what you want," she says, but the words are soft, not bitter.

"I never get what I want," Maryam replies, signing the form.

They load the gear into the van, Esther watching from the steps. The monks chant "Hallelujah" under their breath, treating every bag and box as if it holds fragments of the cross.

Esther pauses at the curb. "You're different," she says, eyeing Maryam. "Last time, you would have taken it and run."

Maryam shrugs, shoulders light. "Maybe I have a better boss now."

Esther nods, crosses herself. "Do not get killed. I won money on you surviving this long."

Maryam bows. "Tell your mother I pray for her."

“She doesn’t pray. But I will.”

They drive out under the checkpoint flags, the guards wave them through without a glance. In the mirror, Maryam catches Gabra signing, over and over: miracle, miracle, miracle.

On the road, Alexei hums a hymn, softer now, almost tuneful.

Maryam rests her hand on the Bible, feeling the sun warm her wrist.

She thinks of Zahra, and Reza, and all the Web that ever was.

Maybe this time, the silk holds.

## Act 10: The Last Mission

### Chapter 27: Hassan's Plea

May, 1991.

Sister Mariam kneels on the chapel's cold flagstone, the dawn slicing her habit in stripes of iron and honey. Each syllable of prayer tightens her chest, but her hands work the beads with a mechanic's precision, callused thumb flicking one to the next.

Click by click, she tracked the tension—each Hail, each ghost pain flaring through weathered knuckles. The years inside this cell have carved her sharper: skin shriveled to a rind, hair retreated to a silver halo, but the hands remember what the mind refuses.

On the altar, the candles tremble. Last night's wind left grit in the wax and a film over the icon's painted eyes. Mariam lights the fresh wicks one at a time, sparing the matches, coaxing the flame to catch. The smell of tallow and incense thickens, layered over the musk of sand and sweat.

At her left, Gabra Manfas Qeddus lowers his bulk onto the bench, knees popping, chin dropped to his chest. He folds his mitts and bows, a mountain at rest. On her right, the Russian—Alexei, beard spilling down like the mane of a prophet—murmurs a psalm in a burred river of Slavic vowels.

The chapel, less a room than a hollowed chunk of the mountain, catches every whisper and grinds it into the stone. Above the altar, a rough timber cross hangs from two bent nails. The morning sun pries through the slit windows, dragging the dust motes into columns that ring the space with silent bells.

Mariam tracks the rhythms: Gabra's muted bass hum, Alexei's rolling consonants, her own dry rasp. The years have not given her grace, only the habit of persistence.

Finishing the last bead, she closes with the sign of the cross, and remains kneeling as the men rise, ducking their heads on the way out.

Alone, she touches the crucifix at her throat. The steel cools her skin, the weight familiar as her own name. Fingertips grazed the catch—an old reflex—before she released it and rose.

Outside, the monastery shivers in the shadow of its own walls. The wind, salt-brined from the Dead Sea and sharpened by the desert, sandblasts the mortar to glass. The refectory waits: tables scrubbed to bare grain, benches painted with the scuff of old boots, bread and dates set in chipped ceramic bowls.

Mariam crosses the yard, boots grating on the crushed gravel. Two novices sweep the walk with palm brooms, their arms goose-pimpled against the morning chill. She glances at them—boys, both—and they stiffen, unsure if today she will be kind or the old Spider.

In the kitchen, the sourdough cracks in her hands. She slices it with a bayonet-blade knife, portioning equal loaves for the day's work crews. A dusting of salt, a cloth laid over—she moved on without pause.

Down the back steps, the minefield unfolds—kilometers of dry scrub and outcrop, a patchwork of warning stakes and red twine. The UN team's painted signs warn in six languages, but the desert eats everything: the letters fade, the posts tilt and rot, the caution tape peels like a sunburn.

From the far shed, Gabra and Alexei haul the gear. The metal detector, taped and soldered from seven different models, whines when Alexei tests the coil. Gabra lays the shovel, the probe, the padded kneeler on the ground and grins at her: a flash of white teeth and the stub of a missing canine.

"Today, we finish the third line," he signs, fist to chest and three fingers raised. Mariam nods, throat tight.

They suit up: vests, goggles, the old Army gloves from the Jerusalem surplus. The straps dig into her collarbone, but she buckles them in memory of the dead boys at Qasr al-Yahud, each one evaporated by a shell hidden under stone.

Map flickering in her hand, she moved between flags with the precision of a field commander. Every ten meters, she stops, marks the ground, signals Gabra to sweep. The detector's whine goes from shrill to silence, then spikes as it hits a live wire. Alexei steps in, probes the dirt with a chopstick, clears the brush, exposes a corroded disk: Soviet, 1963. The

mine pops out with a flick, dead after so many seasons, but she feels the ghost of the old blast in her heel.

They repeat this dance for an hour, until sweat paints her ribs and the sun climbs over the roofline.

By the time they reach the far flags, she's catalogued three mines, a tangle of wire, a Turkish coin, and the pawprint of a jackal smudged into the sand. The men work in silence, never asking for praise. Gabra makes a mark in the log, Alexei wraps the finds in rags and hauls them to the burn barrel.

Back in the chapel, she peels off the gloves, hands throbbing. The ache in her fingers spreads up the arm, a neural map of every break and burn since childhood.

She stops by her cell to wash. The water, siphoned from a caked cistern, chills her skin and leaves a taste of rust. Grime lifted with firm strokes, she dries herself on a towel sewn with her father's blue thread—remnant of a time untouched by mines or prayers.

On the desk, the morning mail: five envelopes, two marked urgent in slanting English, one with a Jerusalem return address, the other three in coded scripts only she would decipher. Paper crackled in her palm as she judged the price of now against the safety of later.

Unlocks the bottom drawer, she pulls out the lined notebook, and sets the envelopes in a fan across the cover. From left to right, her scalpel split the seams, fingers lifting each folded truth free. The first is a manifest of medicine, the second a bank transfer, the third—ciphers from the Armenian quarter.

Mouthing the route—Amman, Jericho, the monastery, a stop cloaked as “rest and prayer,”—she landed on Jerusalem, its entry stamped and sterile. The code is not subtle, but it

doesn't have to be. The authorities read every letter, but they never understood how faith camouflaged itself as business, or how the old Web outlived the wars.

She replies in kind, drafting two responses in neat script, the phrasing designed to bore or confuse anyone who opened it. "Thank you for the update on the festival bread," she writes. "We will ensure the proper number of candles for your return." In the margin, a series of dots and dashes, a timestamp, a ciphered direction to wait out the next checkpoint for three nights before crossing.

Letters folded, glue thumb-smudged, she prepared the lies to travel.

At noon, the bell tolls. The courtyard bakes under the sun, every shadow sharp as a razor. The monks gather for midday prayer, Gabra leading the chant this time. His voice, deep and unhurried, fills the air with the comfort of a father's blessing.

Mariam listens from the gallery, arms crossed, the mail clutched in her fist.

She feels the pull in her chest—old, familiar, almost pleasurable now. The Web survives. The mines shrink each week. The Bibles reach their waystations, the insulin vials keep the kids alive, the old faith knits itself into the cracks of the new regime.

Her hands, knotted with old pain, close over the crucifix. Head dipped—not yielding, but claiming a private triumph.

For a moment, she is happy.

Cell door clicked behind her, and she let the afternoon soak through bone and memory.

Out the slit window, the city hums with a thousand possible futures.

She keeps her own map—hidden, encrypted, alive.

She will wait. She will watch.

She will spin the Web until her hands rot off.

#

The knock comes at vespers.

Sister Mariam sits hunched over the ledger, fingernails blacked with ink, mind tuned to the intervals between the convent's clock and the arrivals of the evening bread truck. On the stone windowsill, the candle gutters, its flame half-drowned in a pool of grease.

At the archway, Gabra hovers, waiting his turn. The Ethiopian never interrupts her unless the matter bites at his bones.

Gabra signs, Visitor. Urgent. At the gate.

Mariam blinks twice, lets the numbers in her head finish cycling, then closes the book. She follows Gabra up the corridor, the hush of feet on ancient stone loud as a warning.

At the threshold, the wind batters the cloister. In the shadows beyond the gate, a figure leans into the crosshatch, body braced against the cold. For a moment, Mariam expects the ghost of a long-dead runner—one of her own, come to settle a score. But this man stands upright, even as the wind tugs at his coat. Under the lamp, the face reveals itself: Hassan Rahimi, cheeks caved in, lips blue, eyes ringed with more dark than white.

Moveing to the gate, she snaps the lock, swings the door with the muscle memory of someone who has done this under fire. Hassan enters, his coat already spackled with road salt, beard crusted with the white of a sleepless trek.

“God keep you,” she says.

“Not sure He remembers me,” he answers, voice coarse as split timber.

Gabra closes the gate, fading into the yard, silent as dusk.

Mariam leads Hassan down the refectory hall, ignoring the looks from the few monks who linger over their tea. She offers him the bench nearest the stove, gestures to the pot.

Hassan sits, arms stiff, knees pressed together. He takes the mug in both hands, cups the heat as if it could save him.

For a minute, neither speaks. The tea scalds the air between them. Hassan sips, winces, sips again.

Mariam watches the lines in his face. The city's memory etched every one, but this new set—crow's feet splintered to the temple, the slack around the mouth—she reads as something worse than famine.

Across from him, she folds her hands on the scarred wood, body still as flint.

"Border?" she asks.

He nods. "Jordan side. Three days on foot."

Thought measured, she let the silence fall. "You look like you skipped more than a few meals."

He manages a smile, or the ghost of one. "Didn't want to look too rich when the checkpoints search the bags."

They laugh, the sound cracked, but real.

He sets the mug down, wipes his nose on the back of his hand, and draws a paper from his coat. It's a torn sheet, the corners thumbed and limp, stained at one edge with something that might be blood.

He spreads it on the table, smoothing the wrinkles. The map: the borderlands between Iran and Iraq, inked in blue and red. Old school, nothing digital, each mark a death or a hope. Hassan points with a dirty fingernail.

“This is the old line—here, through Kermanshah, then Mosul, then west. You remember it.”

A nod. Every crossing, every bribe point, every name in the chain. She could trace the routes blind, the same way she could field-strip a pistol in the dark.

Hassan’s hand trembles on the map. He draws a shaky line across it, not the old route, but a new, jagged cut—through towns she’s never trafficked, valleys she knows only from history books.

“They’ve closed the roads, everywhere,” he says. “New checkpoints, new patrols. IRGC on both sides, and the peshmerga in the gaps.”

Mariam keeps her face steady.

“We lost the last five runners,” Hassan continues. “Not dead—vanished. The ones who made it to the river ended up face-down, stripped to the skin, no papers. They think one of them turned.”

Breath drawn deep—copper tang on the air, sharp as blood.

He taps the map again. “These people—they’re not like us. They kill whole families if the paperwork doesn’t match. They burn the safehouses, sometimes with the runners inside.”

He draws a cross over the nearest border town. “The Christians—our people—are stuck in the middle. The Shia hate them for being western spies. The Kurds treat them as currency. The army wants to kill or ransom, either way.”

glancing at the sheet, she counts the blue dots along the new route. Each one a camp, a hiding place, a promise of food or safe sleep.

Hassan lowers his voice. "The network died, Mariam. They squeezed it dry. The only thing left is here—" he taps the monastery's mark on the map, next the line of dead towns—"and maybe Jerusalem, if you're a believer."

She sits back, arms crossed, nails digging into the soft of her bicep.

He looks at her, the real ask pulsing in his eyes. "You're the only one left, Mariam. The Spider of Jerusalem. No one else can weave a route from nothing."

She considers the map, the places she once ruled. For a moment, the years inside the stone walls wash away, and she's back in the alleys, pulling the threads, turning the city to her own.

"I'm retired," she says, but the lie lands hollow.

Hassan shrugs. "You always said the Web never truly died."

One finger traced the crooked line—every turn familiar, every bend a ghost. "How many?"

He licks his lips. "Three families. Ten kids. Some old women."

"And time?"

He looks at the door, at the window, always scanning for listeners, the paranoia now part of his bones.

"They say the next sweep is in five days. Maybe less."

A breath, she lets the silence settle.

In the lamplight, Hassan's hands quiver, but the rest of him stays still.

"Do you still have the codes?" he asks.

Sharp as a fishhook, she smiles. "I never forgot a single one."

Hassan's shoulders collapse, the relief near-collapse.

Tracing the route again, she makes the plan in her mind.

“Tomorrow,” she says. “We start tomorrow.”

He stands, knees shaking, and bows his head.

Map, mug, notebook—each tucked away like relics before battle. When he leaves, she follows him to the guest cell, watches as he stumbles into the cot, too tired to care who sees.

Back in her cell, she laid the map on the desk, drawer unlocking with a practiced flick.

Inside, the codes. Old, but alive.

Knuckles cracked like punctuation; the work begins.

#

Dawn razors the sky, every vein in it blue and angry.

Sister Mariam paces the cell, slippers worn through at the toes, skirt snagging on the splinters of the doorframe each circuit. Her hands fight for stillness; she knots the left into the right—breaks them apart to flex and count. At the window, the world blooms: dust lifting off the tilled earth, Gabra coaxing onions from their rows, the Russian raking grit from between the stepping stones.

She tracks their movement, absorbs the rhythm. These men live in the peace she bought for them with a lifetime of lies and danger.

Tracing the window’s edge with a thumbnail, she pivots, crossing to the desk in three strides. The old Bible waits, the spine cratered and patched, margins thick with the handwriting of her father. Palms flat, body pitched forward, she leaned in like a verdict was coming. The

scent of the book, fusty and sharp, pulls the years up through her nose, floods her with the heat of memory: the day in the courtyard, the crowd, the bullet's echo against the wall.

"I left that life behind," she whispers. "The Spider died with him."

A knock on the door. Not a novice, not Gabra—Hassan's rhythm, three knocks—a pause.

Door opened wide—her face rigid, no tells, no warmth.

Hassan fills the gap, eyes hollow but shining with purpose.

"You're up early," she says.

"Never slept," he answers, and enters without waiting for permission.

He takes the seat at her desk, boots tucked under, back straight as a fence post. The map lays splayed beside the Bible, the new route scored with red pencil.

Arms crossed like a shield, she stood her ground, refusing the intimacy of sitting.

Hassan studies her. "You never belonged here, you know."

A brittle snort slips—no warmth, only warning.

He continues, "You have the prayer, but not the surrender. Not in your bones."

The insult passed. "You have a point?"

He nods, gestures at the map. "The route will kill you, Mariam. But it's the only way.

And those families, those kids—they don't last a week if you don't move."

Turning, she opens the armoire, rifles for a clean scarf, keeps her hands busy. The fabric slides through her fingers, rough and forgiving.

Facing him again, she wound the scarf tight, knotting it with the precision of memory. "I won't die, Hassan. Not for this."

He shrugs, a slow ripple down the spine. "The Spider always said the web outlives the spider."

She smiles, weak but growing.

He stands, pushes the chair in. "Three days, you said. I'll wait."

He leaves, closing the door soft behind him.

At the desk, she studied the map, the Bible, and finally her own hands—knuckles bruised, nails ragged, skin scored with old flame. Drawer sliding open, the crucifix lands in her palm, chain coiling like a living thing.

She presses the cross to her lips, the chill of metal icing her teeth.

Pages turned until the note surfaced—her father's trembling script: If you cannot live for faith, live for the children.

The Bible shut with finality.

From the wall behind the desk, she removes the small icon, the paint worn thin over the face of the saint. With her thumbnail, she pries the nail loose, and works the stone block at the seam of the floor. The tile grinds up, gritty and stubborn, but yields.

Inside: the flat black box, the relic of her old life. She opens it. The cache: contact lists, a roll of microfilm, a passport in another dead woman's name. The last stub of the codebook. She scans the first page, muscle memory lighting up: the old code still holds.

Lists, codebook, box—each placed into the bag with surgical control.

Outside, the bell calls for prayer.

She ignores it.

Surrounded by relics of damnation and deliverance, she breathed both lives at once.

Codebook swaddled in Scripture, crucifix locking it tight, she pressed the bundle to her chest like a secret prayer.

Three days, she promised.

Three days to resurrect the Web.

Coat looped over one arm, she stepped to the door, spine drawn straight as steel.

Death held no claim, but she'd kill if that's what faith demanded.

From cell to corridor, she stepped out into the hush of vows and stone, war quiet in her breath.

This time, she walks into it open-eyed, every nerve tuned for what must come.

## Chapter 28: Resurrection of the Web

June, 1991.

The cell's air chafes her skin—dry as flour, laced with the salt of centuries. Prayer has shaped her body to this chamber: callus on knee, a notch in the wooden cot where her elbow fits, a thin crescent worn in the stone beneath the window from fifty months of watching the Dead Sea shift colors at dawn.

She kneels, back rigid, the habit's seam digging a trench across her collarbone. The crucifix cuts the flesh at her sternum, each movement grinding it harder into the bone. At her feet, the ancient Bible—her father's, the margins scored with his crabbed script—gathers the dust of another lost night.

Chanting drifts through the gap in the stone, a tide that crests and breaks without ever reaching the cell's hollow heart. The words blur, their meaning sloughed away by repetition, but

she marks time by the cadence: Gabra's heavy drone, the sharp slap of Russian consonants, the whisper of the two young novices desperate to match the men. These are the only voices that matter now.

Beads turn between thumb and index, the rhythm an old friend with a taste for blood. Every click echoes in the skull. Every click remembers.

Father Hassan's plea roots itself deeper each day, the ache of obligation fusing with the spine until it threatens to topple the whole fragile architecture of surrender she built here. His words, raw from the road, replay with every circuit of the rosary. "The network died, Mariam. They squeezed it dry. The only thing left is here—and maybe Jerusalem, if you're a believer. You're the only one left, Mariam. The Spider of Jerusalem."

Prayer severed mid-breath, her hands knotted at the jaw. The cell vibrates, the dawn's light sharpening to a blade through the slit window, cutting dust into perfect geometries. The habit clung, steeped in sweat, bitter as gunpowder.

She removes the crucifix. The chain leaves a raw stripe down her neck. Cross rotated in her palm, she finds the hairline seam in the silver. With a thumbnail, she pops the hidden latch: inside, the transmitter, the pulse of her old world. The battery, a wafer thin as a fingernail, slides into place with a click that stings the air.

Still as ash, she held her breath beneath the weight of the choice.

June 18, 1991. The day she decided to become her father's daughter again.

Thumb brushing the wine-dark scrawl in the margin margin where his last note sits, scratched in wine-dark ink: "If you cannot live for faith, live for the children." Book shuts like a tomb, her breath caught in its echo.

The code etched into her hand years ago, she dials the number, each press a bruise layered on scar.

Nine digits. A breath between each. The soundless prayer, lips moving in tandem with the dial:

One—Lord, forgive me.

Three—May this be for mercy.

Seven—Deliver them from evil.

The transmitter stutters to life, a red diode pulsing through the cross. A sequence—dot, dash, dot, silence—ripples into the night, leaping from the stone to the invisible lines spanning every border she ever crossed. The awakening flared in her mind: pagers on Turkish freighters, beeping into coffee-drenched dawns; the long-distance line in Jerusalem, ringing with the fury of a resurrected ghost; a fax machine in Beirut coughing out a single page, the image of a spider web inked in black, all routes converging on the heart.

She waits for the old fear to return, the electric shimmer at the base of the skull, but what comes is not fear. Her hands shake, not from terror, but from the old thrill, the first taste of purpose after so many years of salt and silence.

“The Spider weaves again,” she rasped. Her voice grinds the words into the dust, baptizes the cell in new intent.

The crucifix warms against her palm. The pulse bleeds through her veins, ignites the bones of her fingers. Fingers trace the sign of the cross in the air, slow and absolute.

Outside, the monks’ chant rolls higher, the octave climbing toward the unrepentant blue of sunrise. Memory of Gabra’s hands in the dirt, the Russian’s laughter rumbling down the

refectory corridor, the novices hunched over their ciphers in the gallery. None of them know yet, but by nightfall the world will rattle with her signal.

Transmitter slid beneath the cloth, its heat branding her chest. Bible, the rosary, the old coin she keeps for luck, all gathered. Rising, she felt the fabric trace each old fracture.

One breath taken—deep, grave-deep—and she moved into the corridor. The smell of baking bread licks her nose. The stone under her feet cold and honest.

A final look over her shoulder—stone and shadow,  
“Hassan said I had the prayer, but not the submission,” she murmured.

In the refectory, a candle waits for her on the table. The new world coat her tongue like ash as she eats the bread, drinks the tea.

When she leaves, the transmitter glows steady against her heart.

The Spider lives.

#

The city never sleeps, but at sunrise, Amman’s streets hold a moment of animal stillness, the predators not yet gone and the prey not yet confident. Mariam moves with the pack: layered scarf, thrifted wool skirt, the hunched posture of a woman intent on her errands and nothing more. Left foot dragged in practiced deceit—the smugglers’ limp designed to confuse pursuit..

Steps led her straight to the tea shop, memory navigating what names never marked. The awning, once green, sags in defeat. The windows sweat with condensation. Inside, plastic chairs and battered metal tables fill the room, each surface patched with the residue of decades: tea,

spit, cigarette burns. The walls shed strips of paint, yellow over blue over the original cinderblock. Each layer tells the city's story—first hope, then the slow rot of compromise.

She chooses a table in the back, back to the wall, facing the exit. A boy brings a chipped cup, the saucer already ringed with old sugar. Steam curled from the untouched cup, her fingers never lifting it. Her hands grip the crucifix under the table, the metal still warm from the morning's work.

The Kurdish leader arrives at seven oh three, right hand tucked in the crook of his left elbow, the sign for pain or perhaps patience. He wears a suit meant for a larger man, the cuffs swallowing his knuckles. His beard is salt and pepper, the face beneath mapped with a lifetime of sleepless nights.

He sits without greeting. The bench groans.

A nod—small, sharp, enough to buy silence or deference.

He says, "The desert has long memories." The code.

"And it buries its mistakes in shallow graves" she answers. The countersign.

They let the silence run. In this city, time breeds suspicion, so they let it grow thick.

He breaks first, lifting his hand so the sleeve slides back to expose a battered watch. "You need a path," he says, not a question.

"Three families" she answered. "Border by Friday."

He drags a cigarette from his pocket, taps it on the table. "The old routes are gone. Syrians claim the north, the Army closed the bridges, and the Bedouin...they trust no one."

"You still have friends in the Wadi Rum."

He grants her this with a grunt. "I have debts. But my friends have shorter memories than the desert."

A napkin unfurls, lays it on the table. "Show me where it's safe."

He snorts. "You think I trust you with a map?"

She meets his eyes. "You will show me anyway."

He bends, stabs the cigarette filter through the napkin, and uses the blackened tip to mark the town: Azraq. He draws a line, broken, up through Mafraq, cutting across the salt flats. "One road, unguarded for five kilometers. But the Army sweeps it twice each night. You have an hour at dawn."

Her fingernail traces the line. "And water?"

He shrugs. "None. The salt eats the canteens. If you get lost, you die. Or worse, the Bedouin find you and sell you to the Syrians."

Folding the napkin, she memorizes the pattern, the shape of the road.

He leans close, breath hot with cardamom. "I have done my part. You owe me nothing." "Not true," she replies. "This debt is older than either of us."

He straightens, jaw tight. "You could have left it buried."

A slow shake of her head. "I don't know how."

He finishes the cigarette, grinding it into the table, then wipes the ashes into his palm. "After this, never contact me again." He starts to rise, but her voice halts him.

"There are those who will hunt for me," she says, repeating his own words back.

He drops his hand to her wrist, a clamp of bone and tendon. "The Spider should have stayed dead. Some memories do not want to be awakened."

His grip lingers a moment, a warning and a benediction. He stands, shrugs the suit into place, and leaves without another glance.

She waits for the boy to collect the cups. Cash left behind with a tip bold enough to be remembered, vague enough to vanish. The napkin, damp with sweat and grime, clung to her fingers as she steps into the alley. A match flares, flame fed the paper; the map surrenders in black curls. Grinding the ash into the gutter, she counts the seconds until the last fiber collapses.

Wrist throbs beneath her touch, still pulsing from the man's grip, the old Web tightening. Every route is a gamble. Every favor owed, a snare set for her return.

Crowds thickened around her as she angled toward the souk. She vanishes among the mothers and shopkeepers, the men in their oily overalls, the refugees with faces stripped bare by the wind.

The city forgets her in minutes. The road will remember.

#

The storeroom smells of bleach and beeswax, sweat pressed into the wood by decades of monastic habit. The monks never intended this place for war, but tonight the air crackles with the charge of imminent disaster.

Maryam spreads the map across the battered table, its surface gouged by the careless knives of old brothers. Corners pinned beneath chipped mugs—one filled with dull water, one catching the ashes of the day's last cigarette. The room flickers, lit by a single bulb caged in a wire frame, the rest of the light crawling in from the hall.

Memory spun the first draft of the Web; new borders, new dangers shaped the rest. Chalk lines run the borders—blue for river crossings, red for known patrols, white for the ancient goat paths still used by smugglers and the desperate.

Every checkpoint on the Iran-Iraq border radiates a kind of sickness. Circles drawn in tight ink, remembering the bribe required, the man in charge, the last rumor of who controls the road this week. Beside the map, a notebook records the price of safe passage in five currencies and three languages.

Her hands do not tremble. The world's old disorder returns as muscle memory.

She forges the documents herself, the stamp for each regime loaded into an old toolbox salvaged from the abbey's years as a British field hospital. Ink stains her fingers, blots her sleeve. The photos, clipped from school yearbooks or mug shots, are glued in place with flour paste. Every name scrawled in unique practiced disarray, careful to never repeat a pattern. Each identity must look forged by a different hand.

She builds the kits: a slip of local currency, a ration card, a wrapper for aspirin or toothpaste, a vial of insulin for the one diabetic child. For each, she includes a Saint Christopher medal, dipped in wax to hide the metal's shine.

A knock at the door, soft and rhythmic—three, pause, two. The novice, barely eighteen, brings her tea in a clay cup that sweats a ring onto the table. He bows, leaves. Tea sits forgotten, bitterness sharpening with every cooled degree.

The cache sites next. A pencil dot for each, circling the spot three times, as if to build a hedge against the world's intent to destroy. The food goes first: dried flatbread, protein paste, beans. Blue tape tags the water caches, the bottles buried deep under ancient stones or in the shadow of the monastery's own cisterns. Medicine caches, most precious, are hidden in the old bullet holes lining the north wall—craters from the time the British and Ottomans bled each other for control of this strip of salt and dirt.

With every cache, she breathes a line from her father's Bible: "He who walks through the valley of death, fear no evil." The words ring in the dust, settle over the map as a second layer of hope. She traces the path with her finger, the movement slow and deliberate, blessing each dot with the rough edge of her nail.

The hours knife by. The candle in the corner guttered and died hours ago, leaving only the bulb's electric stutter. Her back knots with fatigue, but she pushes on, the act of planning its own anesthetic.

Twice more, the novice enters with tea. Twice more, she lets it go cold. The room grows thick with the scent of dried mint, and the whisper of the wind through the broken pane.

At three a.m., the plan is complete.

Folding the map, she ties it with string, and places it in the hollowed-out spine of a disused breviary. The codebook follows, sandwiched between false pages. The Bible shut and she binds it with a strip of leather, the way her father once wrapped his own at the start of every mission.

Sweat cooling her scalp, she sits back and waits for the shiver that always comes at the end of such labor. It never arrives.

Instead, a numb peace settles in. Eyes sweep the table: the ink, the cold tea, the wads of spent cigarette, the scuffed faces of the saints on every makeshift passport.

Folding her hands, she presses them to her lips, and prays—not for safety, but for the strength to walk the route she just designed.

Joints sparking pain as she rises and kills the light.

The first bell for morning prayer tolls before she reaches her cell. The old world is ready. The new one is built.

She will walk them both.

#

Farid likes to keep the windows closed. Tehran's summer morning—heat already thick as syrup—presses against the glass, but the office air remains cold enough to numb the hands. The marble desktop, hand-cut and shipped from Italy, beads condensation beneath his knuckles.

He holds the decrypted cable between thumb and forefinger, savoring the heft of the paper and the precision of the ink. The code is old, its shape as distinctive as a fingerprint: the Spider's touch, resurrected and splashed across the border frequencies like a dare. He reads it once, then twice, tasting the delicious shock of the signature.

He presses a button on the intercom. "Majid," he says. "Bring the map. And the good glasses."

The lieutenant arrives in forty seconds, uniform immaculate, face set in permanent apology. He lays the map on the desk, rolls it flat with the edge of his palm. The scotch appears beside it—Dalmore, twenty-four years—poured in two squat crystal tumblers.

Farid gestures for Majid to sit. The man perches on the chair's edge, all tension and suppressed misery.

"Our old friend has emerged," Farid says, voice smooth as the liquor. He slides the cable across the desk. "Tell me how she does it."

Majid scans the text, brow furrowing at every line. "The relay is encrypted with a sequence we broke in eighty-six. She must not know we own the key."

Farid smiles. "She knows. She simply doesn't care."

Majid nods, understanding the layers. “Should I activate the route intercepts?”

“All of them. West to east, and north if you suspect she might double back. Use the black network, not the Army—they’re too slow, and too greedy.”

Majid traces the red overlays on the map, his finger pausing at each point circled in heavy ink. “These are ambushes?”

“Insurance,” Farid answers. “We do not need her dead. Not yet. If we press too hard, she’ll disappear. Let her run the line a week, draw out the rest of the Web.” He sips the scotch, savoring the bite. “When the time is right, we close the hand. This will be fun!”

Majid’s eyes flick to the glass, then back to the map. “She still has supporters among the tribes. The last time, we lost two men to Bedouin interference.”

“Good,” Farid says. “Let her gather her flock. The larger the web, the easier it is to burn.”

He tops off the drinks, pushes one across to Majid. “You underestimate the pleasure of this,” he says, voice low, almost confidential. “For years, the Spider haunted this city—every route, every runner. Now, after so many false alarms, she returns in person. Do you know what this means?”

Majid dares a sip. “You will finally have her.”

“No,” Farid says, savoring the word. “We will finally make her obsolete. She does all the work for us—routes, contacts, smuggling lanes. Once she’s exhausted the last of her old loyalties, we harvest the Web entire.”

He lets the silence breathe, enjoying the lieutenant’s discomfort.

At last, Majid sets the glass down. “And if she learns of the intercept?”

Farid shrugs. “Then the game resumes. But she is old now, slow. Her runners grow more desperate each year. There will be no next time.”

He stares at the map, thumb tapping on each ambush point in sequence. The overlays glimmer in the cold office light, blue for controlled assets, red for traps, green for the neutral paths they will poison with rumor and betrayal.

He raises his glass to the empty room, toasts an absent opponent. "To the Spider," he says. "May her timing always be perfect."

Majid raises his glass, touches it to Farid's, and drinks.

Farid holds the flavor in his mouth, lets it roll over the tongue and vanish.

Already, he senses the Web tightening. The next move will be his.

He glances at the cable, the code a thread of old rivalry reborn.

The hunt has begun, and he means to win.

## Chapter 29: The Betrayal

The desert pressed them flat, each body scraped to nerve by the moon's enamel.

Maryam's habit, traded for canvas and wool, bruised her neck with sweat and salt. The crucifix rode under the shirt, chain cutting raw each time she shifted the rucksack or signaled a halt.

The wind had died an hour ago. Nothing filled the world except the crunch of dry sand under foot and the pulse between her teeth.

Compass gripped tight, she leads from the front, her palm open for silent commands: go, hold, double back. Behind her, the line staggered—twelve in all, four children, three old women, two men with wounds still leaking. Hassan kept close, his shadow thick at her right shoulder, every breath in sync with the pace she set.

Each time the moon vanished behind cloud, the children faltered. Maryam waited, breath held, for the next whimper or the slap of a mother's hand smothering a sob. They moved in single file, but panic traveled sideways, sparking down the line in shivers and jerks.

They had abandoned the main track before dusk, Hassan's idea. The old route held every checkpoint Farid or the Army could rent for the price of a sheep. The new route meant crossing dunes, dry wadis, the long stench of saltpeter and rot. Worse, it meant exposure, the moon hounding them every kilometer.

Still, the night kept most of the border's monsters asleep.

She risked a look back. Hassan's face barely registered in the gloom, eyes sockets under the brim of a battered cap. He whispered, "Two hundred meters. Next ridge." His voice, all parchment and fatigue, still carried hope in it.

She nodded, angled them down the slope. The sand gave way under her boots, pitching her forward. Tucking the compass, she braced her knees and rode the slide. At the bottom, a basin of hardpan, thinly crusted with white. Mariam counted the steps, eyes darting to the shadows where the wind had sculpted a thousand hiding places.

The basin muffled the sound. In the open, every footfall ricocheted off the rim. Dropping low, she signals silence, scanning the line as it collapses behind her.

The youngest, a girl with a leg brace, tumbled at the drop but never cried out. Her mother dragged her upright, hands white on the child's arm, lips pressed flat.

They reached the far side. Hassan passed the word up: Rest, one minute. The mothers sank to their knees, unbuckling the canteens, checking each child for blood or scorpion. The men stayed upright, eyes glued to the rim above.

Mariam scraped the sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist, checking the compass by moonlight. Five degrees off, but no margin to correct now.

Hassan crouched beside her, breath sweet with the lemon pastille he rationed for the children. "You think they'll send a car?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "Not at night. Maybe a mule, maybe nothing. If they're alive on the other side, they'll wait."

He pressed the pastille into her hand, a gift. "You should eat."

She pocketed it—motioned to move.

The next kilometer went faster. The children found rhythm in the stride, the adults too exhausted to fret. Hassan moved up the line, checking for injuries, murmuring the same half-prayer in each ear.

At the top of the next ridge, the land dropped away in stages. Far off, a haze of city—light pollution bent over the curve of the world, neither east nor west, belonging to no country.

Closer, the checkpoint. Not a building, not a road, only a sliver of tin roof and a patch of dark, hinting at men and the possibility of rifles. No movement, no signal. They skirted wide, ducking below the line of sight, every body low to the ground.

Once past, the nerves dulled. The line loosened, mothers letting their children run a step ahead, men limping less, heads rising to the sky. Mariam let herself breathe, once, twice, before locking her jaw again.

Ahead, the sand leveled, crisscrossed by the ancient skeletons of olive trees and the last scraps of a barbed wire fence. The route cut through here—across the flats, under the bones of the old trees, to the final hill where the light waited.

She paused at the edge, signaled to hold. Scanned for the telltale spark of a scope, the flick of a cigarette. Nothing but the wind, the smell of sour resin from the snapped tree limbs.

Behind her, a boy began to cough, the sound dry and splintered. His mother clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes wild. The cough doubled, rattled up from the chest, nearly splitting the silence in two.

Hassan moved to them, his body shielding the child. He spoke, low and measured: "Breathe through your nose. Count to five. You are stronger than the cough." The boy fought it, eyes screwed shut, face the color of stone, but the body gave in. Three more coughs—it stopped.

The group went still, all ears straining for reply from the world around. When none came, Mariam waved them on.

They pressed through the trees, ducking under wire, boots catching on roots and the loose coil of forgotten fence. The sand reeked of old animal, the stench amplified by the humidity pooling under the canopy.

At the end of the grove, a small rise—a dune held in place by years of wind and nothing else. On the other side, the extraction point.

Mariam slid up first, body flat, hands out to break the line. She scanned: to the west, two points of light, wavering in the air. Not headlights, but the glimmer of a kerosene lamp. The signal.

She felt the relief tumble down her spine, a cold wash. She signaled to the group, two fingers splayed, pointing to the lights.

Hassan took it from there, gathering the children, hoisting the limp, corralling the elderly into a tight pack. He whispered the old word—"Almost"—in each ear, a mantra to keep the hope from breaking.

They crossed the last hundred meters in a shuffle, every head bent low. The sand bit at their heels, but the line held.

At the base of the dune, Mariam hesitated. Her skin crawled, every instinct screaming the trap, the wrongness in the wind.

One knee hits earth as her stare locks on the horizon. Danger unnamed—no movement, no sound—only the air, heavy and arrested, as if the world forgot to breathe.

She scanned for Hassan, found him at her side, hand at her elbow. He whispered, “What do you see?”

“Nothing,” she hissed, “and that is the problem.”

Hassan nodded once. He signaled the group to ground, every body pressed to earth. The lights ahead no longer flickered. They burned, steady as eyes.

Maryam waited, counting heartbeats, but the silence held.

Every pore sharpens, arm hair lifted in revolt against the mind's plea for calm.

Her thumb grazes the crucifix before burying it beneath her shirt, a vow clutched in silence.

She waited for the world to move.

#

Light detonated the night, all at once: floodlights punched through the black, burning the faces and bodies of the group into wax and shadow. The world erased itself, replaced by a field of white so raw it blinded the mind before the eyes.

Gunfire began as a rumor—three shots, followed by a whole magazine poured out in a single gulp.

Hassan shouted, “Down!” but the noise drowned him. Mariam felt the sand buck under her as she dove, rolled, arms over the head, compass smashed under her rib. The air thickened with the reek of cordite and scorched bone.

The refugees scattered, a flock splintered by a hawk’s dive. The mothers clutched their children, some flat to the sand, some crawling, some standing upright in pure animal confusion. The two wounded men sprinted for the nearest cover, a rock outcrop, but a second line of fire from the left pinned them. One man hit, spun like a rag, vanished into the dark behind the ridge.

A woman screamed, wordless, as the bullets chewed the ground at her heels. Her daughter, the one with the brace, tripped and fell, arms splayed in the sand. Mariam kicked herself up, sprinted on hands and knees, reached the girl as another burst scythed through the air. dragging the child by the collar, she rolls them both behind a shallow dip, body pressing tight to the cold earth.

Next to her, Hassan crawled on elbows, herding the second family with every ounce of his voice. He moved with no fear, body a wall between the shooters and the children, eyes never once leaving the ridgeline where the lights glared.

Mariam fumbled for her gun, remembered she hadn’t brought one, not this time. She scanned for alternatives—a loose rock, a tangle of rusted fence, the crucifix if it came to that.

The shooters swept the dune with fire, bullets tearing up the air in a dirty, relentless hiss. Sand peppered her face, the grains stinging in every cut and crease. Her arm tightens around the girl, no words offered—just breath meted out like prayer.

A lull—a pause to reload. The world hung on the click of a magazine.

Hassan shouted, "Now!" and pushed the family ahead. Mariam broke cover, dragging the girl up the rise. They sprinted across the open, every step a new chance at dying.

Halfway, the shooting resumed. The sand kicked up in black fans around them. Mariam dropped, rolled, pulled the child under her. A thud slices the air—Hassan down, limbs flailing, searching for earth and finding none.

Everything else vanishes but the space between her body and his crumpling form.

Knees grinding through raw sand, she reaches Hassan in five strokes. He looks up, face calm, lips already the wrong shade.

"Go," he whispered, but the word came with a cough, wet and low.

She hooked her hands under his arms, pulled. The weight doubled in an instant, his legs unresponsive, the bulk of his chest dragging a furrow in the sand.

The lights danced above, shifting as men advanced over the ridge. Shouting in Farsi, the commands sharp, military. A burst of fire sprayed the ground to her left. Mariam jerked, ducked, shielded Hassan as best she could.

The boy—the frozen boy, whose mother had run ahead—stood upright in the open, face blank, hands limp at his sides. The shots bracketed him, dust exploding at his feet, but the boy never moved.

Hassan, with the last of himself, lifted an arm and flung it across the boy's waist, pulling him down into the sand. The two tumbled together, a tangle of limbs and blood.

Mariam crawled to them, wrapped her arm around the boy, yanked him hard. He whimpered, face streaked with tears and grit.

"Go to your mother!" she screamed, "Run!" The boy obeyed, crawling first, then running, vanishing into the dark where his mother waited, hands outstretched.

Mariam rolled Hassan onto his back. The blood poured from his chest, bright as paint, pooling in the hollow below his rib. Palms clamp the wound, fingers slick and hot, the pulse of blood strong at first, weakening with every beat.

Her hands and fingers become cord and promise, gripping his life with all that remains. “Stay with me,” she said, voice breaking under the strain.

He tried to laugh, but the blood caught in his throat.

“Faith,” he managed, the word thick, “is not in comfort. It’s in the pain.”

She shook her head. “Don’t talk. Save the air.”

He gripped her hand, the fingers bone and wire. “You never learned to surrender,” he said, a flicker of smile on the lip.

More shots, closer now. Shadows ran down the far slope, the IRGC men closing in. Mariam felt the heat of fear in her neck, but she would not move. Not yet.

Hassan’s grip loosened. His eyes locked to hers, the old light in them shining for another second, but fading.

“Finish the Web,” he whispered.

A bullet snapped past her ear, the air rippling with the shock. Ducking, she pulls Hassan’s body into the shallow ditch, laid him down with the care you give to saints.

Tearing the sleeve from her shirt, wrapping it around the wound, she pressed hard. The blood runs, but slower.

She checks his pulse, but the line has gone silent.

The world left no room for the cry she needs to release.

The shooting slowed. The IRGC men advanced with caution, rifles up, voices barking. They swept the line of bodies, kicking the wounded, binding the wrists of those still alive.

Mariam reached for the crucifix, pressed it to her lips, tucked it into Hassan's collar.

"Rest," she murmured.

A boot slammed into her ribs, flipping her onto her stomach. Hands jerked her arms behind her, bound the wrists with plastic wire.

Sand scours her cheek as the world yanks her forward, lungs hollowed of breath.

She counted the survivors: three mothers, all weeping; the boy and girl, huddled together; the two wounded men, both alive but silent; and herself.

They threw them in a heap, guns at their backs.

One of the guards—young, maybe twenty—shouted at them, demanded the name of the leader.

Mariam kept her head down. None of the others spoke.

The guard paced, angry, the muzzle of his gun darting from face to face. He pointed at Mariam—at the others. "Who?" he yelled. "Who runs this?"

No one answered.

He walked the line, stopped at the boy. The mother tried to shield him, but the guard shoved her aside. He pressed the gun to the boy's chest.

Mariam felt something inside her snap.

She raised her face, locked eyes with the guard. "I run it," she said, voice flat and cold.

The guard stared—laughed—barked an order over his shoulder. Two more guards moved in, pulled her upright, marched her away from the group. They beat her, once in the stomach, once in the jaw, but she refused to go down.

In the sand behind, she saw Hassan's body, arms flung wide as if blessing the dead ground.

The guards dragged her over the ridge, toward the waiting truck.

The desert, now empty, swallowed the blood and the secrets.

#

Time shrank to the heat of Hassan's blood on her hands and the sound of his lungs working against the sand. Mariam pressed the cloth tighter, desperate to force the life back in. She called his name, not as priest, not as brother, but as the last witness to what they'd tried to save.

Hassan's eyes fluttered, the old humor there, but thinner now. He rasped, "Faith endures," his breath trailing. "Even when you do not."

She shook her head, refusing it. "You're not finished," she lied, cradling him close.

He coughed, a bubble of blood painting his lip. "The Web lives, Mariam. You are proof." His hand, slick and trembling, found her wrist. "It is worth the price."

Gunfire slashed the air above, closer every second. Mariam tensed, checking the ridgeline, but stayed with him, waiting for the last word. He said, "Do not lose yourself." He smiled, a flare of old light, before the eyes glazed.

She rocked him for a beat, arms locked, the blood soaking into her sleeve.

Boots thudded the sand behind, snapping her back to the present. Fingers close around the knife at her belt, the handle warm from her skin. She whipped it free, but the soldiers—three, maybe four—were already on her. They pinned her arms, wrenched the blade away, drove a rifle stock into her side so hard the world whited out.

She gasped, doubled over. Hands jerked her upright, forcing her to her knees.

A guard—face invisible behind a balaclava—yanked her hair back, spat a curse in her ear. Another bound her wrists, plastic cutting into the skin.

They shoved her forward, feet dragging, the sand scalding through the torn knee of her jeans. Mariam lifted her head enough to see the children and mothers huddled at the base of the dune, hands over faces, bodies shuddering in silent, endless terror.

A man behind her drove the butt of his rifle into her kidneys. She collapsed, vision painting black stars. They dragged her again, each jerk a new agony.

Gunfire. Two more shots—screams—one sharp, one swallowed before it finished.

She saw the wounded men slumped on the ground, faces in the dirt, blood pooling under the chins.

The guards corralled the rest, forced them into a squat by the truck. They beat the mothers who wept too loudly, silenced the children with threats or blows.

A hood, thick and sour with the stink of old sweat, dropped over her face. Darkness smothered the world. The plastic cord dug deeper into the skin of her wrists, burning hot at the pulse.

Rough hands shoved her into the truck bed. She landed hard on metal, jarring every bone. The bodies of the living pressed in around her, every breath a struggle in the stinking black.

She listened for Hassan's voice, for any sign of him. Only silence answered.

The truck rumbled to life. Gears grated. The road turned, the motion throwing her into the others, a tangle of fear and bruised flesh.

Mariam pressed her face to the canvas shroud, forcing herself to breathe, to count, to remember.

She pictured Hassan as he'd been, face raised to the sky, hands guiding the lost through the salt and the heat.

In the darkness, she mouthed a prayer—not for mercy, not for peace, but for the memory of a life spent pulling hope from the jaws of a world that hungered for oblivion.

When the truck stopped, the guards hauled her out by the arms. The hood came off. She blinked, face raw with blood and sand.

They lined the prisoners up, guns at their backs, nothing left but the discipline of fear.

Far in the distance, the sun cracked the horizon, gold slicing through the blue.

On the ground, Hassan's body rested in the sand, arms still outstretched, as if he embraced the world in death.

Mariam would carry that image to the grave.

Bracing for what would come next, the old vow burns in her mind: the Web would outlive them all.

The guard jammed the hood down again.

The world collapsed to black, and in that silence, nothing remained but faith and the shape of the Web she must someday rebuild.

## Act 11: The Reckoning

### Chapter 30: Prisoner of the Past

The cell, carved from a single block of concrete, pressed water from its pores. Cold needles prickled the skin of Maryam's arms and back where the habit stuck to her. Her wrists, lashed tight behind the iron chair, throbbed with the pulse of old injuries. Each hand bled from the abrasion of rope, crust forming along the knuckles. A fresh stripe of pain sizzled across her cheek where a boot had snapped the jaw against the floor. The body, she decided, was a kind of ledger. Each injury a line, each day another column filled.

A bare bulb swung from a wire overhead. Its light flickered at intervals, painting the cell with shadows that crawled up the walls and pooled in the corners. Water ran in thin ribbons from a crack above, streaking the surface in runnels of mold and iron rust.

The cell's air crawled into her lungs, thick with urine, detergent, and the sweet, sour afterbirth of blood. The stink of her own sweat mixed with the rot in the walls.

Somewhere above, boots trampled a metal grate. The sound rattled the bulb, which swung harder, the light bouncing in sick ellipses.

Maryam hunched forward, cradling the ribs with her knees. Every breath scraped the raw patch at her sternum, the crucifix grinding into the bone with each tremor. She tongued the split in her lower lip, tasted the iron of the wound, the bitter aftershock of a stranger's fist. Her teeth, all present, rang with a new sensitivity at the root.

She rolled the tongue, forced herself to spit. The blood splashed the floor in a slow, syrupy arc.

The door at the far end shrieked open. Twin arcs of light flooded the cell, scraping across the concrete to settle on her face. Two guards filled the doorway, IRGC in the new black, pistols slung low at the hip. The first carried a plastic clipboard, the second a length of green hose. Their haircuts matched. Their eyes had nothing in them but sleep deprivation and the pale indifference of men who cleaned their teeth with the rags of the dead.

The guard with the clipboard strode in, flicked a glance at the ropework on Maryam's wrists. "Awake, finally," he said, Farsi crisp as an accountant's ledger. "We worried you'd bleed out before your appointment."

Maryam's voice, when it came, sounded like gravel in a cup. "I would have enjoyed the rest."

The second guard, thicker in the neck, snorted. Breath laced with mastic and whatever meat passed for dinner here as he leans in. The clipboard man set his file on the table, opened to a page thick with color ID photos and hand-written notations. A sheet rustles as he props it in her view, faces frozen on the page as he sets it before her. Some she recognized, some not. All men, all with the blank, unchosen stares of those already scrubbed from the world.

“Let’s begin,” the guard said. “Your name, for the record.”

She supplied it, slow, eyes fixed on the seam in the desk. “Nahid Hashem.”

The page tears free under his hand, crumples and falls like trash to the floor “Not funny,” he said. “We have your real name, old woman. We know your history, the years in the monastery, the children smuggled to Europe, the dead Christian priest. We even know the color of your underthings.”

A chill, dark amusement caught in her throat. “Then why ask?”

The second guard, the hose man, wrapped his knuckles against the back of her skull. “Protocol,” he said, soft as a lullaby. “Everyone has to confess at least once.”

The first guard leaned in, voice gone hard. “We want the names of your runners. The safehouses in Kermanshah. The phone numbers you used to arrange the border crossing.”

Maryam watched the bulb swing, counting each rotation. She moved the lips in a slow-motion recitation of the Psalms. “You have the wrong woman,” she said. “I sweep floors for the church. I know nothing.”

The clipboard man pushed the folder aside, looked at the second guard and back at her. “You know nothing, and yet you lead a line of refugees across a minefield?”

“I took a wrong turn,” she replied.

A backhand cracks across her face, skull echoing with the blow Her jaw sang. The crucifix dug into the bone, a small, icy anchor.

The hose man circled, flicking the length of plastic against his palm. “We can wait all day. But for you, we have only hours. Your file says heart trouble. Maybe a few cigarettes too many. You want a doctor?”

She laughed, the air hot and raw in her mouth. “If it’s a priest, I’ll talk to him.”

The clipboard guard dropped the act. Chair legs scrape as he matches her gaze, leveling their line of sight. “You are not leaving this cell, Spider. You know how this ends.”

She met his gaze, let the stare hold for a beat. “Then I don’t see why I should help you hurry.”

A pause, an unreadable glance—and he rises. “When you change your mind, call for us.” Fingers flash a sign—index and pinky crooked, the old prison signal for ‘liar’—and swept from the room.

The hose man lingered, trailing his fingers along the crucifix at her collar. Pressure carves hard against the skin, grinding it into the wound until the blood ran anew. “You like pain?” he whispered. “We’ll give you plenty.”

Chin clamped in his hand, her neck wrenches as he tosses the cross aside. She tensed, but let her neck go limp, refusing him the pleasure of a struggle.

A crooked smile flickers as he lets go and trails after the departing guard.

The door slammed. The bulb swung once, twice—stilled.

Maryam let the pain leak through her, every pulse a wave breaking against the wall. She focused on the rhythm of her heart. Slow, methodical, as she’d trained in the monastery.

She prayed, lips a bare whisper. Not for rescue. Not for death. But for the discipline to outlast them, the clarity and knowledge of when to speak and when to remain mute.

She dug the fingers into her palm, gouged the skin until the pain grew brighter than the ache in the ribs or the cross on her chest.

She would give them nothing. Not yet.

She would outlast the men with clipboards and hoses and the men who came after.

When the next question came, she would be ready.

The darkness returned, thick and total, but Maryam held herself upright in it, spine a single iron bar.

In the silence, she felt the Web tightening.

She waited for the next test.

#

The cell door clanged open on a scream of unoiled hinges. For a moment, the hallway beyond shimmered with light, sharper than the bulb above. In strode Farid, the suit pressed so tight it threatened to split the seams. The shoes—black leather, mirror-bright—hammered the cell with each step. Jaw shaved to blue-black, he carried himself like a man immune to weather or enemies, hair greased flat, the whole skull shining with health and money.

A cigarillo, its tip orange and feral, rode the crook of his hand. Sweet, toxic smoke spiraled around his face. His eyes, dark with the promise of mischief, locked on Maryam's. Grin sharp as a blade, he condenses the room to the heat between them.

Behind him, the guards stiffened, spines ironed straight by the arrival of real authority.

Farid made a small gesture, flicking two fingers, and both men snapped from the room. Their retreat left only the trace of their sweat and the clatter of boots against tile.

Farid advanced, slow and savoring, every motion calculated for her discomfort.

Balancing the cigarillo in the ashtray, he stopped at the edge of the table, and dusted invisible lint from his cuff. The wrist glittered: gold and diamond in a lattice of custom links. Maryam's eyes registered it with the dull resentment reserved for men who accessorized cruelty.

Measured footsteps trace a circle, first once, then twice, head tipped back as if admiring a work of art. Smoke blooms from his lips, in a plume that coated her skin.

"Maryam Amiri," he said, drawing the syllables out. "Sister Mariam, in exile. The Spider of Jerusalem. I admit, you have not aged as poorly as I expected."

Nothing spoken, she shifts the chair to track his orbit.

A too-perfect grin stretches his face, each tooth a sculpted menace. "You were always beautiful, but age sharpens certain edges. I like what it has done to you."

Maryam flexed her hands against the rope, letting the pain focus her. "Get to your point."

Chair groaning beneath him, he sprawls wide, elbows planted on knees. "You want honesty? Of course you do. You always demanded it. That was your problem, you know—never learned to live with a lie."

Knowing it agitated him, she let the silence stretch.

Farid picked up the cigarillo, tamped the ash, and inhaled. "I ran this city with your father once," he said. "You remember the old days—the tunnels, the radios, the little games of cat and mouse. You thought you were so clever. But in the end, we all ran for the same reason: survival."

"Some of us survived with souls intact," she spat.

A low, full laugh rolls from his chest, warm as oil and twice as slick. “Morality, from the Queen of Contraband. You always did have a sense of humor.” His breath grazes the air between them as his voice dips low. “I watched you run your little games. I admired the way you built your little Web, the couriers, the codes, the rescue missions. The priests loved you. The children loved you. I might have loved you myself, if not for your taste in martyrs.”

Rising, he pushes the chair back so hard it rattled the floor. Circles tighten, his presence pressing closer with each silent revolution. The cologne in his wake stung her nose—oud, tobacco, the faint afterscent of crushed mint.

“What you did to me,” she said in a hush, her voice barely more than a whisper, but it held a weight that echoed through the darkness of the cell. The memories surged like a tide, flooding her with the sharp edges of his betrayal, the sweetness of whispered secrets that had turned bitter in her throat.

Each flash of remembrance was a dagger in her heart—those stolen moments in the shadows, the way he’d made her feel alive and desired, only to leave her exposed and vulnerable. She could still recall the warmth of his laughter, the promise of a future they’d woven together under the stars, and the moment it all shattered, leaving only the jagged remnants of trust.

“How could you? I was young. I was in love.”

Eyes lock on his, searching for the man she once knew—the one who made her heart race with possibility. But all she saw now was a stranger, polished and twisted, cloaked in arrogance and cruelty. The betrayal felt as fresh as the first day, a festering wound that had never truly healed.

The fire in her chest burned hotter, fueled by the realization that he had taken more than just her trust; he had robbed her of her sense of self, leaving behind a ghost of the woman she had been.

“Do you remember?” she pressed, needing him to acknowledge the depth of his treachery. “Do you remember what it felt like to destroy everything we built?”

Forward she leans, rope cutting deep, yet the bite fades beneath the sharper ache of his betrayal.

Farid’s smile faltered for just a moment, a flicker of something unrecognizable passing across his face, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

“I will tell you how this ends,” Farid said. “You give me the names. The tunnels stay open, the money flows, and I see to it that those who want you dead, make it quick so you die with your dignity. Or you make me work, and trust me Maryam, they will hang the children from the arches in the courtyard. They will make it a public affair, with photographers, a statement to the world. That is who you have run afoul of my dear.”

Maryam’s mouth went dry. Breath draws in through her nose, her chest held still to deny him the rattle waiting beneath.

Knees splay as he lowers into a crouch, eyes aligned with hers. “You do not believe they would do it. You think they have some kind of heart, some old loyalty?”

She clenches both fists, nails biting deep into her palms. The pain kept her from collapse. Farid’s voice softened, almost caressing. “You think you are strong, you think the world will remember you as a hero. But the world forgets. Always. It will forget you.”

One finger traces the crucifix, slow and deliberate, where the rope exposes it. "A relic," he said, thumb rubbing the cross until the skin creaked. "You never let go of the past. That is your curse."

A sharp jerk wrenches her arm back, peeling skin as the rope seares her wrist.

Laughter erupts, sharp and suprised. "So you are not broken yet. Fine. Let us see what tomorrow brings."

A final glance crests his shoulder as he pauses at the threshold. The light caught the edge of his smile, a shark in the act of feeding.

A flick of his hand signals to the guard outside. "Let her stew. No food tonight." he said outside of earshot of Maryam.

Door shut behind him, smoke and venom linger in his absence.

Maryam slumped in the chair, the sweat on her body cooling to ice.

Tears spilled not for herself, but for Hassan, for the families stranded at the border, for every runner who'd placed faith in her and paid the price.

But as the tears burned her cheeks, she also felt the new fire: the old hatred, the engine that once drove the Spider across every checkpoint in the Middle East.

She would make this right and kill whoever it was that betrayed her, if it meant dying for the privilege.

She prayed again, not for salvation, but for the patience to endure.

The cell returned to darkness. The bulb flickered and died.

She waited, plotting her next move, the line of Farid's smile branded on her mind.

She would never lose.

#

Drifted in and out, she counting the seconds between each shudder of pain, each throb from her wrists and jaw. The cell's concrete pressed cold into her bones, anchoring her to the only certainty left: survival.

Farid returned in darkness, silent as a priest at the confessional. Italian leather shoes creak as he settles into a crouch, face too near. His aftershave and the rot in the walls combined into a new chemical that burned the sinuses, tickled the memory of every soft bed, every shared bottle, every joke that turned to violence.

Lips ghost along her ear as he leans in.

"Do you remember the night in Jerusalem? The storm on the roof, the smell of the bakery below us?"

Maryam's pulse flared, skin stinging with a thousand old ghosts.

"I remember," she croaked.

His hand cupped her chin, rough, squeezing until her teeth bit the inside of her cheek. Eyes sweep over her, the way a butcher surveys a carcass before the cut.

"You were the wildest thing I'd ever tasted," he said. "All muscle and hunger. I thought I'd never get enough of you."

Gaze locked to his, she crushed the old instinct to blink, to flinch, to yield.

Tongue almost feline as he licked his lips. "And now look at us. The Spider of Jerusalem, bound and spent. The mighty smuggler of faith and hope, reduced to a sack of bruises in a government shithole. Do you see how the world turns, my love?"

A rope of blood and spittle arcs through the air, striking his cheek with unrepentant force. Wiped it away with the back of his hand, he smiled, then licked the residue with theatrical flourish.

"You never lost your taste for the fight," he said. "That is why you lost."

He rose, dusted the knees of his suit, straightened the tie. "I will tell you what you crave, Sister. I will give you your story, because you have earned the right to know the truth before you die."

He paced the cell, fingers drumming on the crucifix at her throat.

"In the beginning, I observed you and Zahra from a distance, allowing you both to construct your mission, nurture your hopes, and circulate your little Bibles. I was patient, watching it flourish, contributing to its growth. My shipments of dates and silks served as perfect cover. Every transport, every child you smuggled—I took note of the routes, the connections. I had my runners tailing yours, learning the codes you believed were sacred. I capitalized on the very web you wove to transport my own illicit goods—arms, opium, currency—masterfully concealed beneath the layers of your righteous cargo. If any shipment were intercepted, it would be you and Zahra who bore the blame, never me. My enterprise thrived alongside yours, expanding into a shadow empire that eclipsed your precious web."

"I watched your ascent, Maryam, I did. Observing from the shadows, mapping every thread of your web after our... parting. Did you truly believe your rise was solely your own doing? No, my dear. I allowed you to thrive. I was the unseen hand that guided your success, nurturing your precious network until the moment was right for me to claim it back."

"After you vanished, the Web grew fat and lazy. The couriers took bribes, the priests bought girls for sex, the border runners got stoned and wandered into minefields. I inherited the world you abandoned, and it was a shitpile. So I cleaned it."

He stopped, studied her with the gentle sadness of a parent killing a favorite pet and squatted next to her. "I turned your old friends, one by one. The Armenian with the glass eye? My man, for six years. The Cypriot baker? In my pay since '89. I learned all your signals, all your codes. Every time you blinked, I knew it."

Maryam's breath came ragged, her chest hitching with the urge to scream. She bit the tongue, held it in.

Farid went on, voice softer now, almost fatherly. "When you came back, you could have started over. Found a new city, built a new network, maybe even outsmarted me for a while. But you wanted to save the world. The children, the refugees, the idiot priest Hassan who never once paid you a true compliment."

"You know, my heart died a little the day I watched your friend Hassan blunder into a shell trap and decorate the sand with his insides. I knew he would, I just couldn't believe he fell for it all. Did you know that was my order? I arranged the whole affair. I had the checkpoint moved, had the border guards pull back, so your man could walk the families straight into my line of fire."

Maryam recoiled, stomach spasming. "You killed him."

Relishing the confession, he nodded. "Of course I did. Hassan was a fool, but he was loyal to you. I could not allow that."

Rising, he strolled behind her, placed both hands on the back of her chair. His breath, moist and sweet, touched the nape of her neck.

"I have read every message you ever sent, Sister. I knew when you resurrected the Web, how many children, which priests, the passwords you thought so clever. I have always known."

He sighed, almost in pity.

He crouched again, face so close she could see the pockmarks, the thread of old acne beneath the beard, the white scar at the corner of his eye—her handiwork, from the night with the whiskey bottle and the broken glass.

"Arash," he said, the word tasting like a curse. He thought of telling her the truth, but why tell the truth when a lie would do more damage. "Did you know I strangled him myself? In the old bakery, where you used to hide the codebook in the flour sack. He screamed for you, begged it probably more like it. Called you his queen. And you know what? He was right. You are a queen. Only the crown is made of lies and the kingdom is built on ashes. A pity you so easily spread your legs for men of such filth."

Chair legs shrieked against concrete, wrists tearing against the rope until fresh blood slicked her palm. Farid flinched, but only to savor the outburst.

He continued: "You want the masterpiece? The great victory of my life?" He smirked, hands wide in benediction. "It was not the Web. It was not the border. It was Laila."

He watched her face, every muscle.

"You see, I arranged for Laila's marriage. Not for love, not for religion, but for business. I needed the Mahmudian pipeline, and that beast of a man Ali was the only man who could run it without drinking himself to death. But he wanted a woman. And your dear Laila—so sick, so weak, so desperate for meaning—fit the bill. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever marry her off, so I gave her to him. And when she gave birth, I got my legacy. Reza."

Maryam gasped, all air leaving the lungs.

“Yes,” Farid said, gloating. “That boy is my masterpiece. He is the union of the two greatest crime families in the Near East. He will inherit everything: the ports, the runners, the loyalty of both sides. He is the future, and he does not know it yet. And I have you to thank too really for it all turning out so well. You see I despised Ali, well hated it the more appropriate word. Not for what he did to Laila—she was merely a pawn in this game—but because he was born into his wealth and privilege. Stupid man took it all for granted. He never had to grind and claw his way to power like I did. I really must thank you for killing him, Maryam my dear. You saved me the trouble of having to do it myself.”

He bent lower, lips so near her face she felt the nicotine on his breath.

“You thought you could protect him. You thought you could keep the old world alive by passing the baton to a priest, or a scholar, or some stupid, honest child. But you bred a wolf, Sister. You bred a killer.”

Maryam let out a sob that scraped up from her very core, rage igniting within her like a wildfire demanding to be set free. As Farid's words settled in her mind, the truth unfurled before her like a dark banner: he was the puppeteer weaving through every thread of her existence, twisting her moments of triumph into traps.

The faith she had held so dear—her network, the children she had rescued—had all been manipulated by him, just as easily as her losses had been orchestrated. Each act of kindness she had once cherished now was tainted, a bitter reminder that she danced unwittingly to his tune. The sting of betrayal cut deep, igniting a fierce determination not merely to survive, but to dismantle the empire he thought he had built from her ashes.

Farid wiped the tears from her cheek with his thumb, then sucked it dry.

He whispered: "You never understood. To survive here, you must betray everything.  
Including yourself."

He straightened, paced the cell again, savoring his own words.

He turned at the door, face gone hard and final. "The Spider is dead. I will bury you in  
this cell. And I will teach the world to forget you."

He left, closing the door with a heavy click.

Maryam waited for the footsteps to fade. Pressing chin to chest, she clutched the crucifix  
between raw, trembling fingers.

Fingers skim the hidden seam at the back, the hidden latch. Pressing it, she felt the faint,  
electric warmth pulse through her palm. The transmitter, alive and waiting, its signal already  
reaching out across the dark.

She prayed, lips moving without sound.

She thought of her father.

She would not let the world forget.

She would build the Web again.

She would send the signal, and watch it burn the old city to the ground.

She smiled through the pain, through the blood.

In the darkness, the world waited for the next move.

So did she.

## Chapter 31: The Signal

The cold soaks her spine through the habit, pinning Maryam to the stone like a beetle on a scholar's card. Bruises ring each limb. Her knees, still blue from the last fall, grind into the slab with each ragged breath. Overhead, the bulb in the hall guttered through another cycle—light, shadow, light—until her retinas burned with afterimages. The cell shrunk with each pulse, the air thick as plaster.

Fingers numb but certain, hands press flat to her chest. The crucifix, smeared with sweat and blood, bites into her palm. The chain links cut a ridge across her knuckle. The habit's collar, ripped open by last night's search, leaves the skin raw and exposed. She welcomes the bite.

Her nails trace the crucifix's back, searching for the seam. At first, the muscle memory betrays her—she fumbles, misses, swears under breath. The chain slips, cold metal slapping the

chin. She tries again. This time, the thumb finds the groove, the hairline fracture, the place Zahra taught her to look for in every talisman, every tool.

A single bead of sweat traces the jawline, finds her mouth, brings with it the taste of salt and old defeat.

Metal meets her lips—cold, absolute—and she breathes it in like truth. The pressure on the back panel builds, the thin metal flexing under thumb.

She hesitates. Every nerve in the right hand screams to finish it, but the left refuses—remembers the last time, the flood of calls, the betrayals that followed. Holding her breath, she lets the doubt circle once, twice, before killing it.

She presses, hard.

The panel gives with a click—too quiet for the hall, but sharp in the skull. Underneath, the button waits: gray, recessed, no larger than a seed of cumin. She lines the nail to the plastic, hovers, recites the old code in silence. Three, pause, two. Three for Jerusalem, the old web. Two for now.

She taps the sequence. The plastic creaks. With each press, a tiny current ignites, a pulse racing down wires thinner than hair, buried in the core of the crucifix. The signal, short-range, would leap to the nearest relay—maybe a bread truck, maybe a runner in a priest's habit, maybe no one at all. She cannot know. All she can do is trust the signal will travel.

The cross does not glow, does not heat. Only the faintest tick—a ghost of a noise, lost even to her.

She repeats the pattern. The words in her head align with the rhythm, a metronome to memory: “Save me, save the children, save what remains.” A wish that she had time for a proper prayer rises, but time is the one thing the cell does not yield.

Panel snaps closed as her fingers lift from the button—ritual complete. Her hands tremble, a spasm that runs from elbow to wrist and back again. The pulse in her neck thunders, the crucifix jumps with each beat.

Clutching, she presses it to the breastbone, and lets the stone's cold absorb the heat.

Silence. No confirmation, no click or reply. This is not a phone, not a conversation—only a cry in the dark, answered by the mercy or malice of the Web.

Cross sinks beneath the collar, tucked against tender, bruised flesh. The metal draws the last of the warmth from the body, settling there as a counterweight to fear.

Breath clouds in the dawn light slicing through the cracked windowpane.

The corridor stays empty. No one comes. The world, for a breath, pretends nothing changed.

She rolls to her side, arms curled tight, knees locked to her chin. The cot holds her this way—fetus, seed, grenade—waiting for detonation.

A hard squint as lashes blink back the rising flood.

Her mind wanders for a second. To Laila, dead a decade but living in every outline of sorrow; to the boy, Reza, who would inherit the world if she did her job well enough; to Zahra, old and dying in some Jerusalem alley, but more alive than anyone else. The Web outlasts the spider. Always.

The bulb flickers, stutters, dies.

Dust, blood, resolve—all of it fills her lungs with purpose.

The world will answer, or it will not.

Pulse throbs beneath the cross as she waits, still and sure.

#

The morning comes in knives. Light slaps the stone, pours through the slot in the door, rakes the sleep from Maryam's bones before she can conjure a single word of prayer. The guards enter without warning—no knock, no bark, only the scrape of boot and the rattle of steel. The taller one, the one with the beard like sandpaper, cuffs her by the elbows and jerks her upright. A second pair of hands bind her wrists, rough cord gnawing the blue flesh above the vein.

They haul her to the yard, knees buckling on the first step. The air bites harder than any cell, the sun already high, heat boiling from the tarmac. Rows of prisoners fill the space, each one hunched over a pile of crates or bags, all faces turned to the ground. At the perimeter, rifles hang slack from bored hands, but the eyes behind the shades miss nothing.

A crate labeled with Cyrillic, heavier than it looks. The chain at her wrists restricts the lift, so the whole upper body absorbs the shock. Teeth locked, she grunts, shoulder screaming. Blood trickles from a split at her thumb, but she does not drop the load. Two stumbling steps carry the crate to its mark—then she turns back for another.

The routine consumes her. Each lift, each step, a ritual: grip, breathe, haul, drop. The dust gets into her lungs, thickens the spit to paste. Once, the guard with the cord yells at her for moving too slow. He calls her Spider, always with the sneer. She lets him. She has no time for petty shaming.

By noon, the sweat beads at the jaw, pools behind the collarbone, slicks her belly. The line of prisoners moves in dumb rhythm, each face the mask of the dead.

The boy's presence announces itself in a shift of air before his shadow forms. He moves with more caution, less weight in the boot, less hunger in the hands. His face, still boyish beneath

the buzz cut, darts glances in her direction but never holds the look. Once, she catches him staring—a flicker—then his eyes drop. He spends his shift at the back, near the bins where the guards take their tea, but she notes how his gaze tracks her every time she approaches the pallet.

On the sixth pass, her hands fail. The crate skids, slams her shin. Down she crumples, left knee crunching on gravel, both palms flayed by the landing. The chain slackens enough for her to catch herself, but the sting rockets up the arm.

The boy-guard materializes at her side, kneels, offers a hand. “Stand. Now,” he says, voice too soft for the moment.

Grabbing the wrist, she lets him haul her upright. His grip is strong, fingers cold against her fevered skin. He steadies her, holds the touch for a second longer than protocol allows.

“My mother read from your books,” he says in a breath, so low the sound blurs with the wind.

He releases her, steps back, voice returned to authority: “Move faster next time.”

Numb, she stands for a moment. The heat, the sweat, the ache—all recede. Only the echo of his words remains.

Movements blur into muscle memory, each one stitched with veiled intent. Each time she circles back, she checks for the boy. He keeps to his place, always near, never obvious.

At the end of the line, the prisoners file back through the gate. Shuffling forward, her head stays bowed, mind reeling through every phrase the boy used—how he phrased it, whether it meant what she needed it to mean.

At the checkpoint, he pats her down. His hands, quick and clinical, scan her for contraband. He whispers, barely moving his lips: “They listen at night. All night.”

A whisper escapes, laced with old code: “Does the spider have children here?”

His eyes flick to hers—fast, electric, then gone.

“Yes,” he says, “but some are afraid.”

Heart stuttering, she slips through the doorway.

In the cell, she collapses on the cot, lets the old pain roll through her. The habit, heavy with dust and sweat, clings to the body like a second skin. Fabric tears as she inspects the new wounds, using a strip from the hem to bind the thumb.

Sleep eludes her, but the words circle. The boy’s voice returns, the press of his hand, the way he risked everything for a moment of contact.

As dusk creeps through the slit window, the slot in the door squeals open. A guard—an older one, different from the morning—slides a bowl of gruel inside. The bowl is chipped, the food gray and inert.

Fingers close around it. Under the rim, a small folded scrap. No stamp, no seal, just a triangle of thin paper, creased and finger-smeared.

Bringing it to the cot, she unfolds with care. The ink is smudged, but legible: three columns of numbers, a grid with Xs and Os, a single phrase in Farsi—“Midnight, south wall.”

Eyes devour the pattern—once, twice—it sinks into memory. The grid shows the guard schedule, the weak point in the patrol. It tells her more: which guards are loyal, which can be bought, where the yard opens onto the access road.

A sharp fold and the note vanishes beneath her tongue. The taste—bitter, metallic—fills the mouth.

One bite. A second. Down it goes. The paper sticks halfway, so she chases it with a mouthful of brackish water. The lump slides down, sits cold in the stomach.

On the cot, hands quiet, she lets the plan bloom in the dark.

A prayer takes shape: that the boy-guard survives the night.

The cell door rattles. The air thickens, alive with the possibility of escape.

Crucifix pressed tight to her chest, she waits.

#

Night coils around the cell, thickening the dark to velvet. Moonlight slits the window, scraping a pale ladder down the far wall. The air cools, but Maryam's skin burns under the sweat dried to a crust at the collar and hairline. The habit, now stiff with salt and dust, refuses to yield comfort or warmth.

Knees sink into the mattress, the old foam sagging like a ghost of Soviet barracks. It never forgave the old springs, and the sharpest one needles her calf through the cloth. Body settles into the familiar pose—knees firm, spine taut, hands folded at the sternum. The bread beads, rolled by thumb and forefinger from last night's crust, loop her palm—fifteen in all, strung on a thread unraveled from the hem.

Beads slide between fingers, lips moving in a dry whisper, the words snatched from the air by the draught that licks the floor. "Agnus Dei, miserere mei..." Discipline guides each whispered word, the ritual a way to carve order from the chaos. Each prayer binds the day's failures to the next morning's possibility.

Her mind drifts to the boy-guard, to the mapped schedule now embedded in the skull, to the sliver of hope that someone, somewhere, remembers the Spider's old web. The city pulses in her mind, a living thing, arteries still throbbing with secrets, every route a gamble, every safehouse a memory of what she once dared.

A tremor runs through the left leg, a clutch of lactic acid from the day's forced labor.

Teeth clench together, grinding out another Ave, another plea. The pain keeps her focused, keeps the urge to lie down and sleep forever at bay.

The moon climbs, twisting her shadow across the cot, flattening her to a silhouette against the cracked wall. The silver of the crucifix, now etched with the dirt of her own fingernails, catches the light and throws it back in a scatter of halos. Metal meets flesh at the chin, she inhales and tastes the tang of a thousand old prayers.

Eyeliods fall shut as she lets the darkness fill her. In it, she conjures her father—not the martyr, not the legend, but the man: fingers like river rock, voice low and certain, laugh bright as sunrise. The hands at her shoulder, heavy with the stink of diesel and brine, calloused to an honesty the world never rewarded.

He says nothing—never did in dreams—but the comfort of his presence swells behind the sternum, a pressure that pushes out all other ache. Memory conjures his voice again: “Finish what we started. Save what you can. The rest is dust.”

A grin tears through her lips, blood brightening the crusted edge.. She relishes the pain.

She whispers to the dark: “I will finish it, Baba. I promise.”

The hour drags. From the yard, a new sound—the grind of rubber on gravel, the cough of diesel engines. Headlights rake the stone through the yard's far gate, throwing shadows in weird angles across the ceiling. Guards shuffle outside, their voices hushed, urgent. Radios click on, hiss, click off. Once, a shout, quickly stifled.

She sits taller on the cot, every nerve alight. Rehearsing the guard schedule, she matches each face to the memory of his gait, the way he smokes or how he laughs at the end of a shift. Counting the seconds between the rounds, she knows the blind spot the boy showed her.

The air now stinks of exhaust, the perfume of change.

Thumb pressed to the hidden panel, she holds the crucifix and wills the next code to broadcast itself into the night.

Kneeling, her spine aligns with the moonbeam, shadow split between stone and dream.

Outside, the world prepares for violence or for rescue—she does not care which.

Footfalls echo on the stairs—heavier now, rhythm dragging a breath too late.

A smile. A spider's smile—thin, patient, unbreakable.

The Web is awake. Let them come.

## Chapter 32: The Final Confrontation

The world convulsed.

The first explosion rattled the cell, spraying grit from the ceiling onto Maryam's upturned face. Every bone in her back snapped to attention, the prison garb grinding raw against her clavicle. A siren cut the air, high and thin, accompanied by the percussion of a second blast—closer, sharper, hammering the lungs.

Smoke bled through the hall, blue at first, next gray, followed by a choked, chemical white. The bulb in her ceiling flickered red, casting the cot's shadow across the walls in the shape of a broken star.

Seconds tick—one, two, three. The guards at the end of the row yelled to one another, words blotted out by the rising alarm. Boots pounded the tile. Somewhere beyond, a voice tried to rally order, but chaos bred too fast to smother.

Maryam flexed her wrists against the chain, muscle memory aligning each tendon to the old break. Her clothes, now stinking with the juice of her own sweat, caught fire in the brain—her skin prickled, every hair upright.

The next explosion came not from outside, but within: a concussion in the corridor, blowing the cell door inward. The hinges sheared, the slab of steel tumbled, catching her knee and spinning her onto the floor.

Grit rasps against her skin as she lies still for one taut heartbeat. The alarm's pitch stung the eardrum, the smoke thickened, and the taste of blood from her split lip returned, iron and sugar on the tongue.

The corridor erupted. Prisoners—barefoot, uniforms shredded, eyes wild—poured from their cells, some armed with metal pipe, some nothing but the will to murder or flee. The first wave trampled one another, driven forward by the knowledge that every delay might be their last.

A guard lunged into the gap, AK leveled at the chest of the first runner. He fired a burst, three rounds snapping the man's spine and spraying the wall in a hot fan. The body slumped, but more filled the space.

Maryam dragged herself upright, back pressed to the collapsed door. The second explosion had blasted the locking mechanism from the frame, leaving the row of cells gaping like broken teeth. Eyes cut through the haze, hunting for the crescent-and-arrow etched in blue chalk.

Down the hall, at the elbow before the kitchen, the crescent waited. It glimmered through the smoke, a promise written in the hand of the old Web.

Each shuffle down the wall trembles through knees close to collapse. A woman in a stained hijab crashed into her, both of them tumbling into the wreckage. The woman's left eye ran with blood, but her grip on the kitchen knife at her hip never loosened. She raised the blade, recognized Maryam, and in a flicker of old code, sliced two fingers in the air before hurling herself into the fray.

Maryam reached the end of the corridor, ducked the wild swing of a guard's baton, and pressed herself flat to the wall. The current drags her, feet skating on pooled water and slicks of filth. Gunfire stuttered above, the echo rolling through the stairwell.

Blue chalk—two lines, a dot—waits beneath her fingers as she skids to a stop. The code said: down, fast, two levels.

The stairwell had become a trap. Bodies choked the landing, some writhing in panic, others stilled by the accurate shot of the snipers above. Eyes scan fast: three shooters—windows left and right, one on the rail.

Wait for the break in the rhythm, the reload, go.

When it came, she ran.

Her feet hit the first corpse, skidded on the exposed rib, tumbled her forward. Momentum flings her down the stairs, pain blooming fresh where the shoulder never healed right. Hands quake at the landing, eyes watering with the sting of powder and adrenaline.

Crouching behind a stack of crates, the reek of bleach and bleach-washed blood mixes in her nostrils. The siren had split into two tones now, the higher one signaling internal lockdown, the lower warning breach at the perimeter.

A shape resolved from the smoke: the boy-guard. Not in uniform now, but in civilian black, shirt open at the neck, hair matted with sweat and grit. He pressed a finger to her lips, his own face a palette of fear and fierce purpose.

He leaned in, whispered the next move in flawless code: “You have one minute. The door’s soft at the end of the old hall. Once inside, follow the light. The blue will guide you.”

He palmed something into her hand: a small, oily pistol, so cold the metal burned her palm. Weight of metal presses the small of her back like a second crucifix.

“Don’t die in the main hall,” the boy said. “They expect that.”

She nodded. He turned and sprinted into the blur.

Maryam skirted the edge of the melee, head low, breathing shallow. Prisoners ran past, some shrieking, some laughing, some with faces carved into masks by the razor of old grievance. Guards rallied at the far end, rifles raised, but too late to stem the riot.

A side door once used by kitchen staff gapes open, now unguarded except for the body of a man who had bled out onto the tile. Ducking through she hops the corpse, boots landing square in the crimson puddle—down the hall to the old freezer.

The blue chalk here: spiral, arrow, dot. Enter and turn. Another door.

A hard slam of the shoulder jars the rusted hinges. The steel bent, frame weakened by a blast somewhere else. One more kick splits the silence—the door groans, swinging wide. Cold hit the face, the shock a reprieve from the smoke and fire of the upper levels.

The freezer, long ago emptied by budget cuts and neglect, held only the rows of shelves and a drain at the center. At the far wall, the panel had shifted, revealing a crawlspace. Maryam dropped to hands and knees, body screaming at each movement. Ammonia singes her sinuses as she plunges into the crawlspace.

Chalk lines guide her crawl—spiral, left, up, breath shallow. One red bulb flickers overhead as she crawls into the narrow corridor of rust and shadow.

Gunshots still hammered the air, but muffled, distant.

Crossed chalk leads her forward, lungs bracing for the last sprint.

At the turn, two guards stood, backs to her, rifles pointed at the cafeteria entrance. They sprayed rounds in disciplined bursts, each shot meant to kill and not to warn.

Maryam drew the pistol. The grip oiled, unfamiliar, but the mechanism identical to the old CZs she'd used in Jerusalem. Safety clicks off—barrel raised and steady.

Breath flows out, slow, narrowing the world to one thread of action. Two shots, fast. One caught the first guard in the base of the skull, the second dropped the other at the shoulder, spinning him to the tile. Advancing, she grabs his collar, wrenching the rifle from his dying hands.

He gurgled, but she finished him with a heel to the larynx.

Pockets yield keys, rations, cigarettes—just enough to matter. Wallet stays behind—useless weight. Time had taught her what mattered in a riot.

Hitting the next door—old, scarred wood—she burst through into a utility corridor lined with ancient fuse boxes. The smell of ozone and burning plastic bit at the nose.

The floor rumbled—an explosion under the building, this time more a pressure wave than a shock. Doorframe steadies her just long enough to push onward.

At the next junction, a group of prisoners, all men, circled an old guard and stabbed him again and again, the knives rising and falling in religious rhythm. Cries blur to background as her path continues forward, unbroken.

The blue chalk: up, ladder, hatch. Finding the ladder, slick with grease, she climbs, one rung at a time, each muscle crying for reprieve. At the top, a hatch: locked, but she used the keys from the dead guard. On the third try, it turned.

Arms strain as she pulls herself into the new space. Airless, close, lined with cables and dust. At the end, a light: not red this time, but white, pure, promising.

Elbows dig as she inches toward the mark.

Halfway, the radio at her waist—lifted from a body—hissed.

“...repeat, target may be moving to sub-basement. All units converge on Section Six...”

A grin splits her face. Farid expected her on the main level, in the heart of the riot. He'd underestimated her love of escape routes and old utility tunnels. He knew a lot, but not everything.

At the hatch, she paused, listening. Voices, low and urgent, traded in Farsi. Farid's voice drifts in—calm, dispassionate, unmistakable. The voice that once promised her the world.

Pistol slips into the waistband, weight settling like a promise.

This ends here.

Dropping through the hatch, boots slam concrete, the impact reverberating in a descending echo. Eyes adjusted to the blue-white glow of the corridor.

#

A century of water leaked from the ceiling, each drop magnifying the hush of the tunnel. Maryam pressed her spine to the damp concrete, breath raw from running. Pipes overhead rattled

with the rhythm of distant generators, the air itself pulsed between dead chill and the exhale of hot electric current.

Reaching down she grips a length of iron scavenged from the last crawlspace, knuckles bone-white against the black. Her shoulder bled steady, drenching the sleeve, but the pain brought focus. The tunnel curved ahead, the light bending with it—an arc of blue and gold that promised either sanctuary or death.

A shoe scrapes in the dark. The sound came slow, deliberate. Farid emerged at the bend, suit perfect, face untouched by the riot or the world burning above. He fixed the cuff at his wrist, the ring on his finger catching a glint from the overhead. Smoke swirls around his head.

He spotted her. A flicker of real surprise, followed by the old smile.

“Maryam,” he breathed. “I wondered how long it would take you.”

She leveled the iron into both hands, feet planted, but her voice faltered on the intake.  
“You’re not running?”

He stepped closer, hands visible, palms open. “My Spider,” he said, soft as prayer. “You always think in terms of chase and trap. But we could be free, you and I. We could leave the world to its cinders and begin again.”

A scoff escapes, but the old ache shot through her gut—an emptiness she’d spent half a life drowning.

Farid’s gaze swept her, top to toe, lingering at the wound in her arm. “You never learned to take care of yourself,” he said, smile edged with something sharp. “But you do make a beautiful ruin.”

Muscles coil for the strike, but he only shook his head and drifted to the wall. The sound of his steps, slow and even, synced to the pulse in her neck and the drip of overhead leaks.

He gestured to the pipe in her hand. “You mean to kill me?”

“You earned it,” she spat.

He drifted closer, the scent of him cutting through the ozone: oud, tobacco, the faint ghost of the bakery on that night in Jerusalem when nothing mattered except the war of skin and the salt of their bodies.

He dropped the briefcase, hands up.

“We have a choice, you and I,” he said, voice dipping to the register that always drew her back. “Up there, the world is dead. The West will never return, the Web will never be what you want. But down here—” he pointed to the earth, to the artery that ran beneath every regime—“we could build something eternal. Like before. Like the safehouse. Remember?”

She remembered. The night in Jerusalem, the flicker of candle on the map, the taste of the city, and him, on her tongue. The way she’d let him in, and loved him, even when the world said to lock every door.

She remembered, too, the next morning—how he left her without a word, and the next time she heard from him, it was to set the dogs on her.

Farid took another step, one pace from the swing of the pipe. His voice, now a breath: “You are the only one who could ever match me.”

Her grip loosened. The iron drooped, weighted by all the years she’d carried it in her heart.

He closed the distance, thumb stroking the hair from her brow. “Let it go,” he whispered. “Let’s walk away.”

The urge to break, to fall into him, swelled up and nearly suffocated her. Eyes shut tight—the smell of him and the old warmth in her lungs.

Her fingers uncurled.

The pipe fell, clattering on the concrete, echoing down the long artery of the tunnel.

The sound lingered, the choice reverberating in her bones.

Farid's hand traced her jaw, soft, almost worshipful.

He leaned in, lips grazing her ear. "There is no heaven for us, Maryam. Only this. Only now."

Still as stone, her heart a grenade with the pin nearly out.

In the dark, the world waited for her to decide.

#

The spell broke.

Maryam's hand hung at her side, blood still dripping from the sleeve. Farid's palm cupped her jaw, thumb stroking the bruise under her eye. For a moment, she let him touch her, the world compressing to the tremor of his skin on hers.

He leaned closer. "I loved you more than anything," he whispered. "Zahra clings to myth, Hassan peddled martyrdom, but you, Maryam, you gave the world meaning."

His words twined around her throat, but she forced breath through the knot in her chest.

In his eyes she saw the same emptiness that once ruled her own: hunger for legacy, fear of the void, the refusal to let the world spin without a thumb on the dial.

Lips part, salt and iron coating her tongue as she speaks: "Everything you love, you destroy."

Farid blinked—and for a heartbeat, the mask cracked. Blue shadow pooled in the hollows of his face before the old fury surfaced, quick as the blade he drew. The steel glinted once, wicked and narrow.

Movement—lightning and perfect—the blade lancing toward her gut.

Maryam's arms snapped up—not blocking, but seizing. Her fingers locked his wrist, twisted, drove her palm heel into his elbow. A hyperextension, brutal and precise. Farid howled, but he came again, both hands clawing for her throat.

A sharp kick folded his knee, sent him crashing down—but he dragged her with him. They rolled, limbs tangling, grinding into cement. Blood made their skin slick; his grip slipped, hers held. The tunnel's chill bit where sweat didn't shield them, amplifying every gasp, every curse spat between teeth.

Farid clawed at her neck, eyes wild. "You think you're different," he hissed, nails scoring her skin, "but you are me. You were always me."

Maryam's knee drove up—into his ribs. Cartilage snapped, wet and final. Farid yowled, lost grip, scrambled to trap her wrists—but she slid an arm under his, twisted, wrenched his shoulder half from socket. His free hand found her hair, yanked back so hard the roots screamed.

"Everything I did was for us," he spat, teeth grazing her cheek, his own blood staining his lips. "You were my mirror. My match. My only worthy—"

Her forehead cracked into his nose. Bone shattered, spraying red. Staggering him, she rolled away, boots skidding on slick cement.

The lunge came, telegraphed—she welcomed it. His shoulder slammed into her diaphragm, breath bursting from her lungs—but she was already twisting, hands vise-locking his

arm. One wrench. The elbow popped, tendons snapping like overstrung wire. His fingers jerked open, the blade clattering toward the tunnel's dark mouth.

Pivoting, he tried to reverse—but her grip hardened. No more words. No more second chances.

The riot above screamed through the pipes, the world's violence echoing their private war.

Farid went limp for an instant—defeated, or faking it. He gasped, “I would have made you my queen,” voice hoarse, hands up in supplication. “Zahra is a relic. Hassan was a ghost long before I gutted him. But you—my magnificent spider—”

Bile floods the throat at the name—acid and fury.

Dead weight. Before she could adjust, he rolled into the lock, sacrificing the shoulder's pop to wrench free.

For a heartbeat, they faced off—bull and matador, both bleeding.

He edged closer, slow, predator reanimating itself. His hand brushed her cheek, the tenderness colder than any slap. “You cannot kill me,” he whispered. “You would lose yourself.”

Maryam, face streaked with grit and blood, looked past him to the long artery of tunnel—future or grave, it made no difference.

Eyes shut, skin prickling under his breath, words sliding in like knives. For a moment, she did nothing, letting the world narrow to the pain and the throb of blood in her ear.

In the silence between breaths, her eyes closed and chin elevated making the nape of her neck available to him, she spoke. “There was never an us, Farid. There will never be an us.”

His mouth shaped a curse, or maybe a plea, but she never let him finish.

Her chin levels and eyes flashed open, wide.

Thier gazes meet.

His filled with surprise and disbelief, hers with hate and vengeance.

Pistol teats free from the waistband, jamming the muzzle into his gut, she squeezes.

The first shot thundered, the bullet burrowing through cloth, flesh, organ, and out the back.

Farid doubled, hands pawing at the wound, face an x-ray of betrayal.

He staggered—rallied, bloodied hands rising—a man clawing out of his own grave.

Another shot erupts.

The sound boxed the skull, echo piling on echo until the world was nothing but white noise and copper taste.

Farid wavered, but did not fall.

His face twisted, teeth bared, every ounce of will refusing the verdict.

Maryam fired a third time, a fourth, a fifth, the recoil bruising her palm. Farid crumpled to his knees, arms out, like a priest at prayer.

The tinny sound of brass casings hitting concrete filled the chamber and ceased.

Boots slapping the blood-slicked floor, she walked to his gasping body.

Eyes meet for a final time.

The barrel kisses his brow.

A breath—

“Goodbye, my spider.”

“The Spider dies with you.”

The final shot erased the past.

Farid pitched backward, heels drum a final staccato "no" against the concrete.

The gold of his cufflinks sparkled in the ruined light—polished vanity outlasting the man who wore them.

Maryam stood over the body, every muscle shuddering. The heat in her hands, the stench of powder, the echoes in the corridor—all that remained of the old rivalry. She knelt, gathered his head—the way she'd cradled her father's, all her dead.

One rock, two—his head finds rest against the cold stone.

No triumph. No regret.

Only an ending.

Above, the riot crescendoed: boots, gunfire, a scream that might have been prayer. The stink of burning oil crept down the stairwell, the world of men consuming itself in sound and flame.

Maryam wiped the blood from her hands on the hem of her shirt, stood, and pocketed the spent pistol.

One limping step after another, up the tunnel, past the body, past the old lies and the new blood. At the ladder, she climbed, rung by rung, the pain in her shoulder and thigh nothing next to the numb clarity in her mind.

Hatch creaks open as she steps into the blue night, the world strange and empty.

The city would reset itself, she knew. Another regime, another hunt, another web.

But tonight the Spider slept, and the world spun, just a little, in her favor.

Steps stretch into silence, Farid's ghost left to rot with the others.

Ahead, the monastery waited.

She would rebuild, or she would vanish.

But for one hour, the world belonged to her.

## Act 12: Redemption

### Chapter 33: Dawn Over Jerusalem

The world cracks into daylight, the supply truck's brakes cutting a shrill line into the valley hush. The monastery's side gate squats in the shadow of a cypress, its limestone warped by centuries of sand and sun. A curtain of birds hangs overhead, sparrows and the last shrikes of night fighting for the right to call down the dawn.

Sister Mariam drops from the truck's running board, boots punching grit, her calf tensing to keep the knee from folding. The habit, borrowed from a Greek driver somewhere near Beit She'an, cinches her ribs like a tourniquet. The cloth sours with diesel and road sweat, the hem a

colorless stripe two shades darker than the dust that cakes her shins. Her palm finds the hood of the truck for balance, the steel so cold it singes the skin.

She breathes, deep as the world allows, and studies the monastery's face. Three stories of pitted stone, crosshatched with cables and flagpole splinters, the old Greek and newer Russian domes arguing about which will win the roof. Above the east wall, the sun plates the sky with gold, but the yard below stays blue and frozen, a second world that resists the day.

Each step cinches the pain tighter, her body limping toward the gate with stubborn resolve Her left hand cups the crucifix, thumb riding the channel where the back panel sits flush. The transmitter's battery, two days dead, pinches at her hope, but she carries it anyway. In the habit's inner pocket, pressed to the breast, her father's Bible—pages swollen with blood and rain, the cover slashed by shrapnel from a shell she never saw.

A monk in a Coptic skullcap meets her at the threshold. He bows, arms open. "Merhaba. Selam." He glances down at the crucifix, his eyes widening before he snaps them back to neutral.

Behind him, a blur of Ethiopian blue, the monk Gabra Manfas Qeddus, fills the archway. His beard splits into two braided cords, each decorated with a plastic bead the color of bruised plums. He says nothing, but his hands flutter a greeting, thumb stroking the old sign for 'safe passage.' The next in line—a Russian, face mapped with rosacea, beard yellow as millet—sniffs the air as if verifying her identity by the cocktail of old wounds and unwashed clothes.

She nods to each, but keeps walking. The gate crunches under her palm, the stone's cold spreading through the habit sleeve, up the arm, and into the back of her skull. She pushes inside, body shivering under the muscle memory of every checkpoint, every border.

The cloister's air bristles with incense and cleaning vinegar, the scents at war but neither yielding. In the chapel yard, blackbirds rifle the gravel for the last of yesterday's bread. A Greek novice sweeps the walk, his broom a bundle of reeds wound tight with surgical tape.

A man in a torn windbreaker steps out from the refectory door, blinking into the brightness. He approaches, arms wide, hands empty. "Shalom aleichem," he says in Hebrew, then switches to Russian: "Miloserdie." His eyes never quite meet hers, instead tracing the outlines of her wrists and neck, registering the bruises beneath the road dirt.

She waits for the ritual. The men fall in around her, a procession with no music, only the drag of sandals and the clatter of the broom behind. They lead her to the refectory porch, where a battered tin basin sits on a bench. The blue of the paint flakes into the water, tinting it the color of morning sky.

The Russian gestures for her to sit. She obeys, perching on the edge, knees pressed together. The Ethiopian sets a towel on her lap, hands quick but gentle, then pours the water slow over her hands. The pain from her knuckles—raw, split, ringed with purple—flares, then dulls as the warmth seeps in. Eyes blur until water clouds with brown and red, basin swallowing what the body sheds

The Russian dips a cloth in the basin, dabs it across her cheekbone, careful to avoid the worst of the split. The first touch stings, but she grits the teeth and holds his gaze, letting him clean the blood without flinching.

He whispers in Russian, "You are safe now, Spider." He glances at the crucifix, then away.

The Coptic pulls a cup from his sleeve, fills it from the basin, and offers it up. Salt and iron coat her tongue, but the raw burn in her throat eases with every swallow. She drains it, then wipes the mouth with the back of her hand.

The sun scrapes the top of the eastern wall, lighting the world in gold for a moment. The blue fades, the yard glows. The birds return to their song, undeterred.

She stands, wincing as the knees lock in place. The monks part for her, heads bowed.

A flick of her eyes catches the novice, broom shivering over ancient stones in broken rhythm “You clean well,” she says in English.

He shrugs, mouth set in a flat line. “No dirt lasts forever,” he says, the accent thick but words exact.

She walks toward the chapel, her shadow knifing ahead. The crucifix hangs heavy in the hand, the Bible heavier at the heart.

Every step away from the gate peels another layer of the old world from her skin. The cell, the riot, the tunnel, Farid’s hand on her jaw—all dissolve in the heat of the new day.

She stops at the chapel door. Inside, a row of icons, faces flattened by the years, stare into the dark. Cool metal kisses her lips before vanishing back into the folds of her habit

She breathes the air—olive oil, beeswax, the incense now ascendant over the vinegar. Torn skin pulls tight as fingers flex, healing slow but sure.

For the first time in decades, she feels the absence of pursuit.

Behind her, the monks settle into their morning. The Russian lights a cigarette, the Coptic leans against the rail, Gabra fetches the kettle from the kitchen.

The world spins, slow and sure, toward something like peace.

She sits on the chapel step, lets the sun warm the bones.

Today, the Spider's Web belongs to no one. Not to Farid. Not to the regime. Not to any who would claim her.

Dust and sweat cling like cloth as the habit tightens around her—she waits

#

Sun climbs the limestone, warmth seeping through the mortar to bake out the night's sweat. The stones pulse with a pulse of their own, throbbing from blue to gold as the angle shifts. The porch where she sits vibrates with the rustle of sweeping, the low debate of crows on the chapel roof, and a wind that snags the hem of her habit, lifting it away from the scabbed knee.

The monks return in twos, silent but for the soft patter of sandals. They bring the tools of healing: clean cloth torn from a Greek flag, a jar of something lemon-yellow and bitter, a spool of thread thinner than hair. The Russian, face set, threads the needle with a surgeon's care, then kneels to her level. He works the suture through the skin below her eye, each prick a flare, each knot a bead on the old rosary of pain.

She does not flinch. The body, now a map of old and new injuries, accepts the pain as rite.

Gabra, the Ethiopian, wraps her left wrist in the blue gauze. His fingers linger at the pulse, counting. He hums, a syllable at a time, a song older than the monastery.

The Coptic monk brings a bowl of honeyed water and a wedge of stale bread. He breaks the bread, hands her half, and sits beside her, the two of them munching through the silence as if it were sacred.

Maryam swallows, the sweetness coating her throat. The old world—the prison, Farid's voice, the gunshot echo—shrinks with every swallow, replaced by this simple communion.

She sits taller, feeling the Spider's skin begin to slough away.

A pair of swallows darts under the eaves. One dips to the step, grabs a thread of her hair, and vanishes into the rafters. She tracks its flight, pulse quickening at the precision of the theft. To build a new nest, something must be torn from the old.

The Greek novice, finished with the walk, leans his broom against the wall and kneels at the step's end, three paces from her. He dips the head, eyes fixed on the stones, as if awaiting a signal to move.

Crumbs fall with the flick of her hand, each movement a flare of bruises, stitches, and tender skin the ache at the stitched cheek, the rawness of new skin under the gauze. She flexes her hands, finds them steady.

Pages stick to her fingers as the Bible emerges, edges crusted with her own dried blood. The cloth cover, long ago reduced to burlap and tape, scratches her thumb as she opens to the first page. The ink—her father's hand, the loops and slashes of Farsi and Latin—blurs where sweat and years have run together. In the margin, a newer line: a child's script, her own from the time when she believed in angels.

One finger finds the line and lingers—"Forgive everything. God is love."

She closes the book. The sun now full on her face, she lifts her chin and lets it strip the last of the chill from her bones.

The monks drift away, each recognizing the liturgy of silence. The Russian packs the needle, the Greek lifts his broom, Gabra disappears into the kitchen for the midday bread.

The porch empties, and the world holds its breath.

Bible rests in her lap, fingers interlaced across the cross like a seal. The habit—once a disguise, now a truth—clings to her ribs, but the pressure no longer strangles.

The old war is gone.

The morning birds turn up their song, as if to fill the void left by violence.

Sister Mariam breathes, deep, the lungs open as the desert sky. The weight of her past shrinks to a stone at the base of the neck, something she can carry, but never again be chained by.

She makes a vow—silent, simple, complete.

The sun climbs, the shadows shrink.

The Spider is dead.

What remains is Sister Mariam, and the world she must now build.

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She rises on knees stiff from the chill, back arched to snap the joints into service. The habit, washed now of blood and dirt, molds to her with a second-skin intimacy—no longer armor, no longer disguise, but the body's true witness.

The courtyard, washed in morning, hisses with the gossip of birds along the gutter. Sister Mariam rolls her shoulder, checks the stitch at her cheek—tender, but dry—and crosses to the chapel, sandals gritting out a slow, regular pulse on the stones.

Inside, the nave hums with dust. Pillars thick as olive trunks crowd the aisle, and above, in the penumbra, icons gaze down in judgment or mercy, depending on the angle of the light. As she inhales, the air sharp with incense and beeswax, a sweetness that hooks the base of the skull, refuses to let go.

She kneels, slow and deliberate, on the runner at the first pew. Her knees imprint the pattern of age-dark wool, and her hands fold over the open Bible, the tissue-paper page crumpled and half-glued to the next by the scab of her own blood.

The passage she finds by instinct: Isaiah, the comfort to exiles. “You shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.” She mouths the words, lips moving but the voice held back, the old discipline of prayer now a contract with her own body.

Twice she reads it, the first time a penance, the second a map.

Her back straightens, bones aligning, shoulders drawn back to full span. The hands—swollen at the knuckles, trimmed by scabs—no longer tremble.

Pages flip to another passage her father quoted: Joshua, a choice we all must make. “Choose this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

She closes the Bible, palms it to the breast, and bows her head.

The past unspools, but with each breath, it floats lighter, less real. The children lost, the men who died for her vanity, Farid’s corpse cooling in the sewer of his own ambitions—these linger, but no longer infest.

Resolve hardens: the Web will rise again, not from pride, but from purpose. Books will be sent where bullets go, hope where the world expects only loss. No more bargains, no more lies, no more conscription of the innocent.

She lifts her head. Light blades through the stained glass, cutting the space into mosaics of sapphire and gold. Her eyes, once salt-bleached and red from weeks of despair, now water only from the glare.

Voice low and steady: “I am ready now.”

The words taste of honey and iron, equal measures of strength and peace.

She stands, feeling the joints settle into place, the habit swinging free around her calves.

The world outside the chapel flares, a white corridor pulling her into the day.

She steps through the door, the sun laying a fresh stripe across the face. Her hands, empty but for the cross, swing loose at her sides.

In the yard, the monks begin their work: Gabra and the Coptic hauling water, the Russian at the bread oven, the Greek raking the leaves. Each nods as she passes, but none interrupt.

Steps angle toward the north wall, where the tools are kept and the world can be watched without being seen.

She does not look back.

The Spider is gone.

Only Sister Mariam remains.

And from the high ledge above the yard, the new Web begins to grow.

## EPILOGUE

Reza grew under his grandmother's watch and care in a Tehran restless with revolution, the memory of his mother's soft prayers and his father's belt shaping the man he would become. From the age of ten, he devoured books with a scholar's hunger. Copying verses from hidden Bibles and the Quran side by side under the glow of a single lamp, He searched for truth when the world around him offered only fear.

Unseen, Sister Mariam watched over him. When he needed shoes, they arrived, wrapped in brown paper, "from a friend of the family." When he struggled to afford tuition at the clerical school, the bursar called him in, explaining expulsion would be unavoidable if he couldn't find a way to pay. He went home in silence as prayers caught in his throat, preparing to plead for more

time. Returning the next morning to petition for a delay, the bursar smiled. The account had been paid in full by “a donor who wished to remain anonymous,” and the bursar returned the overage to him in neat bills, enough to buy the notebooks and pens he needed for his studies. When he told his grandmother, she only said, “God provides, child,” while the shadow of the Spider moved quietly across borders to place these mercies in his path.

By fifteen, Reza had scrubbed Mahmudian from his skin like a stain. The name belonged to the man who split his mother’s lip against a kitchen tile, whose shadow still choked the alley where he’d bled out—knifed by a rival, so far as he knew, unmourned by God. He dared not take his grandfather, Farid’s name. His reputation was tarnished beyond repair not long after his death. His grandmother whispered of Maryam’s web, his uncles shrugged over halal and haram, but he carved his own justice: ibn Mahmud, son of the grandfather who’d at least died silent. Not Ali the butcher. Not Ali the bastard. Not Farid the gangster. Not Farid the liar. Let the clerks ink Mahmudian on their papers. The streets knew him by the name he’d stolen back.

On his seventeenth birthday, Zahra called him into the kitchen and placed a small, worn crucifix on a thin chain in his hand. She told him it was “a way to contact very special friends” if he was ever in grave danger, but it was to be used for emergencies only, and if he ever used it, everything would change forever. Nodding, he slid the crucifix under his shirt, the cold metal resting against his chest, an object he could not forget if he tried.

It troubled him. As he grew into an up-and-coming Islamic scholar, reciting verses and writing commentaries to satisfy his teachers, the crucifix’s quiet weight against his heart became a constant reminder that the faith he was praised for mastering felt hollow to him. The rituals and doctrines, the memorized phrases and correct recitations—it all felt like an empty shell he wore to survive in a world demanding conformity. At night, by candlelight, he continued to read

scriptures of other faiths, searching for a truth that would breathe life into the words everyone around him spoke without conviction.

And while he stood before classrooms and later auditoriums and cameras, parsing doctrines with the precision of a scholar, Sister Mariam watched from afar, knowing the boy she once knelt beside in the shadows of Tehran would grow into a man who could carry the light she had tried, in all her failures and sins, to protect.

She never let him see her face again, but sometimes, when he closed his eyes in prayer, he would remember the warmth of a hand on his shoulder, the whisper of a promise that he was never truly alone, and the soft certainty that somewhere, in the shadows, the Spider was still watching.