

# Jungle of Stars

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He sets out from his apartment in the early morning hours, before daylight has fully broken. Even though it's June, the sky looks icy; its hazy orb glimmers faintly behind the clouds like a goldfish languishing beneath the surface of a frozen lake. He does not need the sun's light—he has taken this path so many times now that he knows it by feel and by count. Seventy-three steps down Ferdowsi Avenue; avoid the cracked asphalt at the corner and turn onto Shemiran Road; walk sixteen paces down Shemiran and turn left; follow the blind alley all the way down to where it dead ends.

This is Hamid's favorite time of day; the only moment when he finds Tehran almost beautiful. In the daylight a thick veneer of grime covers the poplar trees that line the streets, but now, silhouetted against the iridescent sky, their edges look clean. The bakeries haven't opened to the public yet, but the smell of naan fills the air. In the distance he can hear the cawing of crows and the howling of the vagrant dogs that roam through south Tehran. He always feels a kinship with these creatures who are eking out an existence in this hostile city like he is, and who, like him, only come out in the early morning hours.

Nasser is waiting for him outside the fabric shop, squatting beside the curb and smoking a cigarette. He stands up and greets Hamid wordlessly, then motions him toward the side entrance to the shop. Hamid watches as Nasser slips in the key, opens the door, and flips on a switch to illuminate a bare light bulb hanging over a metal table in a tiny room lined on all sides with shelves holding bolts of fabric. Nasser slides his hand between two of the bolts and retrieves a small package that is wrapped, incongruously, in a gaily colored cloth remnant that might be found on a child's quilt. He extends the package toward Hamid on his outstretched palm as though he were making an offering on a tray.

Without removing the package from Nasser's hand, Hamid reaches into it, unfolds the cloth, and gingerly peels back the waxy paper around the object nestled inside. He lifts the opium up, sniffs it, then places it between his palms, rolls it back and forth, and sniffs it again. He holds it lengthwise between his thumb and forefinger as if to measure it: it is a full *lool*, at least 20 *mesghals*. He kneads it and bends it gently in the middle to check its freshness. It should not be brittle, and it isn't. It is roughly the consistency of a piece of toffee.

Nasser takes the opium out of Hamid's hands and raises it up against the light bulb. "Look at the color," he says. "It is very pure. It is worth much more than I am charging you."

"I can see that," Hamid says. "*Mutshakeram*. I appreciate it."

He pulls a roll of bills from the front pockets of his jeans, and Nasser takes the bills without counting them and slips them into his own pocket. As Hamid is turning to leave, Nasser grips his arm. "Be careful," he says. "They are on the prowl lately, you know. I've heard they're even knocking on the doors of people's homes. You can pay them off if they catch you, of course—money is what they're after. But with those Kalashnikovs in their hands, they can ask for whatever they want, and you have no choice but to give it to them."

"If they catch me, they will learn that no matter how hard you squeeze, you can't get blood to come from a stone. But don't worry; I will be careful. I'll see you in a few weeks."

Out on the street the sun has risen to just above the tree line, but a sliver of moon still hangs in the sky. Hamid has noticed this phenomenon before, but has never been able to explain it. The sight of the two heavenly bodies appearing together always moves something in him, even though it makes him feel small. It is as if the sky is showing off its vastness and its mystery, mocking the frenetic activity of the foolish people who live beneath it. Rush hour has not reached its peak yet, but cars have begun to screech and weave down Ferdowsi Avenue, honking their horns as they go. There is no trace of the dogs now, and the crows have retreated to the trees where they sit silently watching as the city awakens.

Inside his apartment, Hamid takes the opium out of his pocket and kneads it and smells it again. Its feel and odor alone are enough to make his neurons start to tingle, the sensation traveling all the way down to his fingertips and even into his legs and toes. He has never studied the anatomical processes by which a narcotic substance works, but his limited scientific understanding tells him that there can't be any physiological sensations in his body until the substance has actually entered his bloodstream. Perhaps the tingling is in his imagination, or some kind of psychological response that comes from the power of suggestion. He knows that the line between addiction and habitual smoking is very thin, and that he is on a slippery slope. The tingling before he smokes is a sign.

Opium is a delicate substance that must be melted, not burned — and melting requires a particular kind of heat source. Hamid has often bent up his best problem-solving abilities to the task of smoking opium in the most frugal way possible. He recently discovered that he could drop a tiny piece of opium — no bigger than a crumb of bread — onto the glowing end of a lit cigarette. But the opium only lasts for a second this way, and the cigarette smoke masks its rich, musky taste. A more effective method is to heat a metal object like a kebab skewer over the stove until it is red-hot, hold it a hair's breadth away from a piece of opium until it begins to melt, and inhale the smoke through a funnel or a cone. Less of the opium is lost this way.

Of course there is no replacement for the full ritual, which is deliberate, exact, and gorgeous in its slowness. Hamid is not in a hurry this morning, so he decides to prepare his *manqal*. He goes outside to the courtyard, fills the *manqal* with lumps of charcoal, douses it with kerosene, and strikes a match. While he waits for the flame to die down, he returns to the kitchen and plugs in the samovar. To avoid nausea, one must always remember to eat before smoking, so he opens the refrigerator and pulls out the box of pastries his mother brought by for him last week. They are a bit stale, but he takes out two of the pastries and eats them quickly. Then he brews the tea, arranges a teapot, a teacup, and a box of dates on a tray, and carries the tray into the living room. By the time he goes back out to the courtyard, the *manqal* is ready — the flame has disappeared and the charcoal is glowing red.

The full opium ritual is much easier when there is a second person to act as an assistant, since it is difficult for the smoker to hold the pipe and the charcoal at the same time. The fact that opium smoking is a joint effort and a shared experience has always seemed beautiful to Hamid — but he has grown practiced at smoking alone. He places his pipe on the corner of the *manqal* to warm, then sticks a piece of opium onto the ceramic bulb just above the pinhole and dangles a piece of charcoal over it delicately, without allowing it to touch the surface. As soon as the opium begins to sizzle, he inhales deeply and closes his eyes.

Almost immediately after inhaling, he is overtaken by a crushing emotion that feels a little bit like sorrow. This emotion washes over him often when he smokes, and it is a feeling that he craves. Perhaps he should not think of it as sorrow, because it also feels a little bit like love — for his family, for his city, for the crows and dogs, for the sun and moon, for Nasser; for the people who live on his street; for humankind in general; for life itself. For years now Hamid has found it hard to shake himself out of a state of

emotional numbness, but under the influence of opium everything takes on a quality that makes his heart swell to the point of bursting. The universe seems like a mystery — like a puzzle that can never be solved — and it seems righteous and meaningful for it to be that way.

Hamid knows that opium is an addictive substance, but it always seems to him that smoking it is going to prolong his life. He has seen the fields of bright orange poppies that are the source of the drug, and nothing could be more natural, more colorful, more simple and truthful. Whenever he pictures the tiny delicate flower that has given of itself — that has sacrificed its life to provide him the gift of opium, he feels immense gratitude

There is a word for the opium high: *khomar*. It is not a mental state; it is a purely physical one. The mind must not interfere at any stage during the smoking of opium; it must shut down most, if not all, of its processes. To be *khomar* is to surrender one's body entirely to physical sensations; to allow every single cell and atom of one's body to be massaged and caressed from the inside.

Being *khomar* also heightens one's senses, and Hamid's senses have grown so sharp that even when he closes the windows and curtains of his apartment he can hear the sounds of the city. It isn't just the constant hum that he hears; he has learned to isolate each dimension of the sound and trace it to what he believes to be its source. In his mind's eye, he pictures the sounds as they are being: the young girls making their way to school with their *maghna'eh* flowing around their nubile bodies; the owner of the fruit stand grinding the metal handle to raise the awning of his shop; the bakers at the *naan-va* patting their loaves onto the sides of their red-hot *tanoors*; the old woman coming down the stairs in her chador to sweep the entrance to her apartment building. He has rarely conversed with any of these people and he doubts they know who he is — but he knows them all so well that he can intuit their innermost thoughts. At times his senses are so sharp that he can almost hear their hearts beating.



Hamid has been living in the apartment for only eight months. He was the last to move out of his childhood home: his sisters have both married and are living with their own families; his older brother is a contractor working for an Italian company in Ahvaz, many miles away in the south. Reluctant to part with their baby, his parents opposed

his move to the apartment, and worried especially about his decision to put off going to university. He argued that a university education was worthless in Iran, that it would only delay his entry into the job market. It is better to embark upon a trade now, he told them, and work his way up toward a stable profession. After all, he is only twenty-three; there is still time to go to university. But so far he has only made a bit of money here and there doing odd jobs: buying and selling cell phones; framing illustrations torn from books and selling them to tourists; delivering pizzas by taxi to wealthy families in the north of the city. He has scraped together enough to buy groceries, but his parents have paid his rent for five of the eight months he has been living alone.

During his last visit to his parents a few weeks ago, Hamid found himself wracked with guilt. A lump rose in his throat when he walked into the kitchen and saw his mother with her sleeves rolled up, bringing a meat cleaver down on a shank of lamb and cutting it into pieces. He didn't know exactly what it was about this scene that made him feel so sad—some combination of pity, nostalgia, and remorse. He couldn't bear the thought that the meal was being prepared especially for him when he was so undeserving.

"I am making *khoresh-e-gheimeh*," his mother said when she saw him in the doorway. "I know it has always been your favorite, ever since you first tried it when you just a baby. I'll never forget how you sucked the meat off the bone when you didn't even have teeth yet!"

"It is my favorite, Maman-joon. But you didn't have to go to so much trouble."

"I worry that you don't eat enough, *azizam*. And I'm sure you don't eat enough meat now that it has gotten so expensive! Agha-Rahman saved this piece of lamb especially for me. I picked it up just this morning."

As a child Hamid had often accompanied his mother when she went shopping, and he had especially loved going to Agha-Rahman's butcher shop. He would watch in fascination as the jolly butcher lifted the huge sides of lamb and beef down from the meat hooks and sliced off the pieces that his mother wanted. There were usually flies swarming around the carcasses, but Agha-Rahman just shooed them away.

"Why don't you buy your meat from the supermarket?" he asked his mother that night in the kitchen. "They have those big packages of frozen lamb from New Zealand. The meat is already cut into pieces, and it's very cheap."

"How do you know where that meat really comes from?" she said. "Besides, I don't trust meat that has no odor."

While his mother cooked, his father sat in front of the television and lit cigarette after cigarette. He had been a chain-smoker for as long as Hamid could remember, but that night, as he watched him in front of the television, he noticed that everything about his father had turned yellow: his teeth, his eyes, his skin and his hair had all taken on an amber hue. Every time his father spoke that night, Hamid detected a faint wheeze behind his voice. Much of what he said was in the form of angry invectives hurled at the television screen.

“You are liars, every single one of you!” his father shouted when the turbaned leaders from the *majless* appeared on the screen. Do you think that those filthy cloths you are wearing on your heads will convince us that you are honest? The people eat like dogs now — we make our *khoresh* with bones. We don’t want your Islamic purity, you bastards! We want meat!”

Over dinner, both parents slipped into their usual refrains.

His mother: “When are you going to meet a woman and get married?”

His father: “If you’re not going to study, you must find a job, Hamid-joon. Otherwise this disgusting regime will eat you alive.”

Both parents urged him to shave his scruffy beard so he wouldn’t look so much like a member of the Baseej or the Hezbollah. And both entreated him to move back home. Not wanting to hurt their feelings, he merely nodded and said, “I might. I’m just not ready yet.” He was lying to them, of course—he couldn’t move back home even if he wanted to. His parents probably thought it was because of pride that he insisted on living alone, or because their behavior annoyed him. He knew that it hurt them to think these were his reasons. But the truth would hurt them more.



After he smokes three *basts* of opium, Hamid turns his attention again to the sounds beyond his window. There is something different about the sounds today, but he can’t quite pinpoint what it is. He leans back against the bed and closes his eyes so he can listen more closely. What he hears astonishes him: it sounds like the hoofbeats of horses on pavement.

His eyes are still closed when above the distant sound of the hoofbeats comes the immediate sound of knocking on the front door of his apartment. At first he thinks he is

imagining this, but then the knocking comes again, this time more insistently. The third time it comes, a voice accompanies it.

“Hamid! Open the door!”

Recognizing the voice of his childhood friend Khosrow, Hamid heaves his body up from the carpet. His body feels heavy and sluggish as he moves toward the door, as if he might be swimming through some kind of viscous liquid. The sounds of the deadbolt turning and the door creaking reverberate in his brain, loud and intrusive.

On the other side of the threshold stands Khosrow, and behind him stands his girlfriend Jhaleh. Hamid does not remember Khosrow being so huge; his frame seems to fill the whole doorway and his face seems twice the size of a normal human face. When he speaks his voice explodes in Hamid’s head.

“*Che-kar meekonee, agha?*” booms the voice. “What are you doing inside, man? Get ready! You’re coming with us!”

“Coming with you where?”

“Are you deaf? Don’t you hear the people out there? There must be at least a million of them already, and more are coming. We need to get out there now. I want to take pictures and put them on the Internet.”

It takes a few seconds for Hamid’s mind to come into focus, but then he remembers. People are angry about the election that took place a few days ago, which they say was rigged and fraudulent. There is no doubt in his mind that it was—how could it not be? The government announced Ahmadinejad to be the winner only hours after the polls closed, before they had time to count even a fraction of the votes. Hamid conjures the face of Mousavi, the former prime minister and university professor whose image has been plastered all over the walls of Tehran for weeks now. Mousavi was supposedly the real winner of the election. Hamid doesn’t know much about the man, but at least he looks kind. He certainly seems more human than Ahmadinejad, who has the forehead of a monkey and the eyes of a snake. Whenever Hamid sees the image of Ahmadinejad or hears him speak he feels a sudden wave of revulsion mixed with a stab of fear.

It dawns on him now that the sound of hoofbeats he heard earlier was actually the sound of human feet; of masses of people gathering for a protest. The thought of going out into that crowd right now terrifies him.

“I’m not dressed,” he says. “I don’t want to make you late. You go ahead, and I’ll join you later.”

"You won't," says Khosrow. "I know you. This is a historic day, *daddash*. You're going to be sorry if you miss it. You can smoke your opium tomorrow. Today you really need to get up off your ass and come to the protest."

Khosrow reaches toward Hamid's back as if to physically impel him toward the door, but Jhaleh puts her hand out and stops him. "Leave him alone, Khosrow. He can message you when he gets there and you can find each other."

"Whatever," says Khosrow. "If you come, bring your cell phone. It's really important for as many of us as possible to take pictures today and broadcast them. Everyone is writing about our revolution on Twitter. Do you even know what that is?"

"Yes, Khosrow-joon, I know what Twitter is."

"Well, the bastards are trying to shut down the Twitter feeds coming out of Iran, but there's this young American man named Austin who has figured out how to set up a proxy server so we can bounce our connection through another country. It's brilliant! We can hide encrypted data inside our own government's communications! If the sons of whores only knew how we are tricking them!"

"That's great." Hamid says this with as much conviction as he can muster, but he is skeptical. He finds it ironic that Khosrow has so much faith in an American man he has never met, when Hamid has often heard him deliver extended tirades against the United States, blaming the Americans for every conflict that is raging in the world and for everything that has gone wrong in Iran's history.

Khosrow reads his mind. "People all over the world are on our side right now, Hamid. You can't just sit inside your suffocating apartment and smoke opium all day while history is being made."

"I'll bring my cell phone if I come."

After Khosrow and Jhaleh leave, Hamid sits back down on the carpet and smokes another *bast*. He thinks back on the party the two of them had dragged him to a few months earlier at the home of one of Jhaleh's wealthy cousins in northern Tehran. Hamid had never seen a home that opulent: it looked like the set of an American movie. The compound was enclosed on all sides by a brick wall that was several meters high, and the front gate was guarded by a man wearing a uniform. Inside the walled compound there was a well-groomed lawn and sweeping patio tiled in marble. Beyond this lawn, hidden from view by enormous trees, was a swimming pool where men and women frolicked together in the water. Inside the house Western music was blaring from speakers, and dozens of guests were dancing wildly to it. Some of the women who

were dancing were wearing wet swimsuits that revealed their nipples and pubic hair. Bottles of alcohol and joints of hashish circulated through every room. Hamid peeked inside one bedroom and saw that it had been converted into an opium den, complete with a large ornate *manqal*. He tried to make his way into that room, but on his way in a young woman grabbed him and forced him to dance with her, thrusting her breasts against his torso and bouncing her hips against his. Desire had welled up in him, but doubting his own ability to perform sexually, he resisted her advances.

Remembering that party now, he can't help but wonder how Khosrow and Jhaleh can inhabit that world and at the same time believe in the political processes of the Islamic Republic. They are deluding themselves.

When he was a child, Hamid learned about the tragic death of his uncle Ali-Reza, his father's older brother. He had heard the story of his uncle so many times that he had committed every detail of it to memory. Ali-Reza had been young and idealistic when the unrest first began on the streets of Tehran, and had participated in many protests in support of the revolution. But after Khomeini came to power and installed an Islamic Republic instead of the socialist paradise everyone had expected, Uncle Ali-Reza had turned to radical Marxism. He was arrested while at an underground meeting, and for weeks Hamid's parents had no idea where he was. Then one day, a few weeks after Ali-Reza went missing, they received a phone call saying that he had been executed at Evin Prison and that they could come to the prison to prepare the body for burial. Hamid's father was only fourteen at the time, but he had gone with his parents to help them wash his dead brother's body.

It is no wonder his father detests all political leaders, especially those who wear turbans. No matter how kind his face looks or how progressive his rhetoric is, it is foolish to think that Mousavi will be any different.

And yet, although a part of him wants to stay indoors and smoke opium until he falls asleep, another part of him does want to go out and see what is happening on the streets. Being *khomar* will make the protest seem surreal, and perhaps the protest will also enhance his high. The hoofbeats have grown so loud now that they seem to be right outside his window, and there are voices accompanying them. Whether he likes it or not he is already engulfed in this protest—and anyway, he will not be able to relax and smoke in peace if he stays in his apartment. He pulls on his jeans, splashes water on his face, and goes out the door.

He is not prepared for the daylight—it has been a long time since he has seen such a brilliant sun or such a blue sky. His apartment is only a few blocks from Tehran University, and the crowds appear to be heading there. It is still only about 8:30 in the morning, but already throngs of people are pouring in from every direction; so many people that it is difficult to move forward. He has his cell phone with him, but he knows right away that it is useless to try to find Khosrow and Jhaleh in such a dense crowd.

The crowd is made up of all kinds of people: young men holding children on their shoulders, adolescents dressed in jeans and sweatshirts, businessmen dressed in suits. Although the women are wearing the mandatory *hejab*, most of them have draped their scarves loosely about their shoulders, exposing lots of hair. The color scheme of the crowd is predominantly green. Hamid remembers hearing something about a green sash that is Mousavi's symbol. Many of the young people are wearing green shirts and scarves, and some have streaked their faces with green paint.

Thick black smoke is rising from the center of the street, and he pushes his way forward to see what is causing it. Hamid identifies the source of the smoke by smell rather than by sight: it is the distinct odor of burning tires. He can't get a clear view of the intersection, but he can see several people who look like they are standing on the tops of parked cars. Some of them are shouting through megaphones, but the cacophony around him is so intense that he cannot make out what they are saying. Arms are reaching toward these speakers from all directions—arms ending in fists; arms ending in peace signs; arms that have been dipped in red paint to look like they are covered in blood. He glances up at the balconies of the apartments surrounding the square and sees that they, too, are brimming with people. Everywhere Hamid looks, he sees a veritable sea of cell phones.

The sensation of bodies pressing all around him is making him weak and queasy, and the insides of his veins feel itchy. He is familiar with this stage of being *khomar*, and knows that the only way to make these sensations go away is to sleep or to smoke more opium. He can't do either of these things now—he can barely move. He wishes he had a cup of tea and something sweet to settle his stomach, but that, too, is impossible.

Suddenly the crowd begins to sway, and in the distance he hears the sound of singing. It takes him a few minutes to recognize the song: it is one his mother used to sing to him when he was a child. He is stunned to realize that he still remembers all the lyrics. He cannot bring himself to sing them aloud, but when the refrain comes, he mouths the words to himself silently:

*We have planted the sun in the mountains*

*In our hearts there is a jungle of stars*

As a child he had never paused to ask what these lyrics meant, and he doesn't fully understand them now. But the tune stirs something in him, and he has the sudden desire to cry.

After the song ends, the crowd begins to chant in unison: "MARG BAR DIKTATOR! Death to the dictators!" Again Hamid is not able to lift his voice to shout along with them. Instead he looks up at the sky, which is bright blue and cloudless, and closes his eyes.

When he opens his eyes again they are fixed on a woman who is standing beside him, her body almost touching his. He can tell at once that she is from a well-to-do family: she is dressed in a *roopoosh* that looks expensive, she is wearing lipstick, and the hair that peeks out from beneath her headscarf has been highlighted. He guesses that she has come here out curiosity, not out of a belief in the green movement. She is not chanting either.

She takes off her sunglasses and looks into Hamid's eyes. Her own eyes are deep-set, long-lashed, and unusually light for an Iranian woman. He wonders if they are green, or if this is a reflection of the green sash that is tied around her neck. The corners of her mouth turn up in a smile, and she lifts her voice above the din and addresses him.

"I'm Neda. Who are you?"

"Hamid. Are you a student at the university?"

"Economics. Second year. You?"

"Not yet, but I live right here, near the university. So, why did you come here today?"

"Same reason you did. Because this is our country. And because Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are a *madar-sag*, sons of dogs."

Her face is so luminous that it is making him feel faint to look at it. He casts his eyes down toward her feet, whose delicate shape he can see beneath her open-toed shoes, then upwards toward her shoulders, then down again toward breasts, the contours of which are visible beneath her thin *roopoosh*. Perhaps it is the effect of the opium that is making his imagination so keen, but in his mind he is able to conjure her in the nude, to picture each curve and angle of her body.

A hush now falls over the crowd, indicating that the speakers are about to begin. Hamid does not even attempt to listen to what they are saying—he is far more focused on the sensation of Neda’s hips touching his each time she shifts her weight. He isn’t sure whether she is pressing herself into him or whether he is the one pressing into her, but soon so many parts of their bodies are touching that it feels like an embrace. If anyone were to ask him tomorrow what the leaders of the green movement had said in their speeches, he would have no idea.

He cannot calculate how long they remain standing that way, but all too soon the crowd begins to disperse. Neda turns to him, gives him a smile, and leans in to kiss him on the cheek. Then, without saying goodbye, she moves away from him and into the crowd. For a split second he wonders if she might have been a supernatural being or a vision created by his morphine-drenched imagination. But he can still see her up ahead, walking on the pavement just like the other members of the crowd. He decides that she is real.

He does not know what impulse it is that makes him pull out his cell phone and begin to film her, but he follows her now on the screen as she pushes her way through the crowd. He watches her on his phone as she moves to the center of the intersection. He keeps his cell phone trained on her body as she raises her fist and chants “Death to the dictators!” He films her as she hoists herself up onto an upturned barrel and continues chanting, now more loudly and more angrily. He films her when, still standing on top of the barrel, she rips her headscarf, tosses it into the crowd, and shakes her long auburn hair in the wind.

He films her when, seconds later, she falls to the pavement, and he films the loud tattoo of the machine gun that accompanies her fall.

The crowd surges forward and Hamid is thrust forward with it. A space opens up around Neda, and he moves his cell phone downward until the screen frames her body, which is now splayed on the asphalt. He films her head lolling to one side. He films the blood that pools around her head. He films the sunlight as it glints in the pool of blood and illuminates her face.

He closes his eyes and surrenders himself to the crowd that is now stampeding like a herd of enraged animals. He feels the dying effect of the opium as he moves with it: the familiar sensation of emptiness accompanied by nausea. He cannot see Neda any longer, and he wonders again if she might have been a hallucination.

The phone is still in his hand, but he does not scroll back through the videos he has taken. Instead, he moves over to one side of the crowd, searches for Austin's proxy connection, and sends his video upward. He feels it rising into the air, above the trees full of cawing crows, above the bakery and the school and Nasser's fabric shop, above the mansion of Jhaleh's friend, and above his apartment with the *manqal* he now realizes he has forgotten to put away.